

**WRITING THE SELF ON THE THRESHOLD:
CULTURAL HYBRIDITY AND (SELF-)TRANSLATION
IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *IN OTHER WORDS***

**ESCRIBIR EN EL UMBRAL: HIBRIDEZ CULTURAL
Y AUTOTRADUCCIÓN EN *IN OTHER WORDS*
DE JHUMPA LAHIRI**

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Abstract

This article deals with Jhumpa Lahiri's *In Other Words* (2016) as an example of ectopic literature and translanguaging writing. Lahiri decided to move away from her mother tongue in 2014 to start a new literary career as a writer in Italian. Thus, this study examines how decisive the ongoing act of translation is in this author's literary production. While Lahiri's preoccupation with cultural translation is a central theme in her English fiction, the author's wish to translate herself into Italian is more oriented toward an ontological translation of the self. According to Lahiri, metaphors are the cornerstone of this book, as they account for how the author's thinking unfolded while writing this work. I will also analyse the role of this rhetorical device in this so-called linguistic autobiography. In doing so, I contend that metaphors drive the author's self-translation into Italian. Finally, I will tackle the fictional thematisation of translation in Lahiri's first fictional story in Italian, "The Exchange", as an instance of transfiction. In turn, I will explore how both the author's self-translation into Italian and transfiction can relate to forms of life-writing.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, translanguaging, world literature, transfiction, ectopic literature, life-writing.

Resumen

El presente artículo aborda la obra *In Other Words* (2019) de Jhumpa Lahiri como un ejemplo de literatura ectópica o escritura translingüe. Como consecuencia de

un deseo de abandonar la lengua inglesa como cauce de creación literaria, Lahiri decidió *mudarse* a la lengua italiana en 2014. Así, este trabajo analiza cómo concibe la autora el acto de *traducirse* a otra lengua. En este sentido, el hecho de adoptar la lengua italiana como lengua de expresión literaria se plantea como una necesidad identitaria y ontológica. Esta *mudanza* a la lengua italiana se sostiene sobre la base del dispositivo retórico de la metáfora, piedra angular de *In Other Words* según Jhumpa Lahiri. Por ello, este artículo también tiene en cuenta el papel decisivo de la metáfora en esta *autobiografía lingüística*. De este modo, se puede afirmar que la metáfora encauza y facilita la *autotraducción* a la lengua italiana llevada a cabo por Jhumpa Lahiri. Finalmente, se aborda la tematización ficcional de la noción de traducción en la primera historia de ficción que Lahiri escribe en italiano, “Lo scambio”, como ejemplo de transficción. A su vez, se analiza cómo la autotraducción y la transficción dialogan con los textos englobados dentro del género autobiográfico.

Palabras clave: Jhumpa Lahiri, translingüismo, literatura mundial, transficción, literatura ectópica, literaturas del yo.

1. Introduction

Scrutinising the effects that migration has on an author’s literary work has become a focal point in the field of comparative and world literature in recent decades (Kellman 2000, 2017; Siskind 2012; Ibáñez 2016, 2020; Albaladejo 2019; Damrosch 2020; Bergantino 2023). According to Mariano Siskind, “world literature produces new genres [and] new generic formations [...] defined in accordance with new needs and new critical and aesthetic desires” (2012: 346). These needs and critical desires demand a profound re-examination of the potential that world literature has to adumbrate new generic formations which may require new critical discourses and theoretical approaches. One such theoretical framework has been proposed by Tomás Albaladejo, who first defined the term ‘ectopic literature’ in an article titled “Sobre la literatura ectópica” (2011). This term is used to describe, analyse and explain “[the] literary production that is [...] written outside an author’s place of origin [...] by authors who have moved to another place [...] where they are living and writing” (Luarsabishvili 2013; cf. Amezcua Gómez 2014, 2016; Hellín Nistal 2015; Albaladejo 2019: 401; Amezcua Gómez and Martínez Moraga 2022). This new literary production, which is written outside the author’s place of origin, may imply in most cases adopting a new language of literary expression, as occurs with Jhumpa Lahiri’s first book in Italian, *In altre parole* (2015). Jhumpa Lahiri’s work in Italian might also fall within the rubric of a special form of literature that has been referred to as translation literature, that is, writing in a non-native language

as an act of translation (Gong 2014; Ibáñez 2016, 2020). As a result, it could be claimed that the author's use of the Italian language becomes a migrant writer's *homeland* of sorts, to use the term the Chinese author Ha Jin employs in his essay *The Writer as Migrant* (Jin 2008: 61-86). Thus, Lahiri's bilingual creativity (Zhang 2002: 306; Ibáñez 2016, 2020) seems to allow her to rethink her own hybrid identity as cross-cultural, as it is the case of other so-called hyphenated authors such as Vladimir Nabokov, Eva Hoffman or Aleksandar Hemon, to name but a few of a long list (Vidal Claramonte 2014).

A bestselling Anglophone writer, Lahiri left New York for Rome in 2014 and decided to move out of her mother tongue to start a new literary career as a writer in Italian. Thus, her decision to write in Italian is the culmination of a compounded journey of identity (Lutzoni 2017). Lahiri's first book in Italian was translated into English in 2016 by Anne Goldstein. *In Other Words* (2016) was published with the Italian text appearing on the verso page, and the English translation on the recto page. As Lahiri pointed out, the brief "Author's Note" that opens the English translation constitutes "the first formal prose I have composed in English since my last book, *The Lowland*, was completed, in 2012" (Lahiri 2016: xiii). The fact that this US writer of Bengali descent decided to adopt the Italian language as an adult also allows us to examine her work in the light of translanguaging and exophonic writing (Kellman 2000; De Donno 2021). Hence, I will examine *In Other Words* (2016) through the lens of ectopic literature but also as an illustration of translanguaging writing (Kellman 2000; De Donno 2021; Bergantino 2023).

According to Lahiri, *In Other Words* is a book sprinkled with metaphors. In the words of the author, this book "began with a metaphor that led to another, and then to another" (Lahiri 2022: 11). Given Jhumpa Lahiri's reliance on this rhetorical device, I will tackle the metaphorical fabric underpinning this work. I contend that this book's metaphors channel Lahiri's self-translation into Italian. This self-translation plays a decisive role for a writer who claimed that "I was a translator before I was a writer" (2). In light of Lahiri's reliance on translation as one of her "primary heuristic key[s]" (Lahiri 2022: 5), I will also analyse the fictional thematisation of translation as an instance of 'transfiction' in her first fictional story in Italian, "Lo Scambio" ["The Exchange"]. The figure of the translator has been a pervasive presence in Lahiri's work, both in English and in Italian. In this sense, it may be argued that the author seems to project her own life events into the realm of fiction through transfiction (Bergantino 2023: 947). Thus, following Bergantino, I will finally consider how both the author's self-translation into Italian and the notion of transfiction can relate to forms of contemporary life-writing (Bergantino 2023: 947).

2. Living in Other Words. Writing in Others' World: Ectopic Literature

The term ectopic literature was first proposed in 2007 by Tomás Albaladejo in the “Working Papers of the Research Group Communication, Poetics and Rhetoric” at Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. This concept was later developed in an article titled “Sobre la literatura ectópica” (Albaladejo 2011). The article established Edward Said’s memoir *Out of Place* (1999) as a prime example of this kind of literature. In his memoir, this American-Palestinian literary critic offered the following reflection on his own exile experience: “More interesting for me as an author was the sense I had of trying always to translate experiences that I had not only in a remote environment but also in a different language” (1999: xv). As shown in the case of Said, writing in another place often implies adopting a different language other than the writer’s mother tongue, which reinforces the fact that ectopic authors not only can move to a new country but also to another linguistic context.

Literature is a hybrid activity, as it has the capacity of travelling through different countries and cultures (Albaladejo 2019). Albaladejo has referred to the foundational myth of the rape of Europa by Zeus “as a symbol of the hybrid nature of a European culture that was fed by Eastern cultures, which offered it techniques like writing, as well as literary forms and topics” (2019: 397). Thus, literature’s hybrid nature and the travelling subjects that produce it account for the notion of ‘transnation’ proposed by Bill Ashcroft:

So the concept of ‘the’ transnation I am proposing is composed not only of diasporas but of the rhizomic interplay of travelling subjects within and between nations. The transnation exists within, beyond and between nation states. It is a collectivity comprised of communities, who may be drawn in one way or another to the myth of a particular nation state, but who draw away perpetually into the liberating region of representational undecidability [sic]. (2010: 22)

Nowadays, transnational networks reshape our understanding of world literature and adumbrate new cultural mappings which can be interpreted more thoroughly through the lens of ectopic literature. The literature that is produced in a country other than that of an author’s birthplace coexists with other languages and literatures, and that concurrence paves the way to several forms of cultural relationships such as multiculturalism, cross-culturalism, transculturalism and interculturalism (Albaladejo 2019: 399-400).

There are several reasons why writers move to other countries. Exile and diaspora are causes of displacement as well as the search for better living conditions or simply moving to a country where a given author feels that her or his literary production might thrive more fruitfully (Albaladejo 2019: 400-401). As for the several criteria that must be considered in order to explain ectopic literature,

Albaladejo highlights “the age of the writer when she or he moved from the place of origin”, if the author “was a literary writer before changing location” and whether the author has emigrated willingly or forcibly (2019: 402).

As the title of Edward Said’s memoir suggests, ectopic literature is written “out of place” and as such it takes root in new soil where it may flourish. Far from being a deterritorialised literature (Deleuze and Guattari 1990; Ruiz-Sánchez 2005), ectopic literature’s nomadic and hybrid nature turns an initial “ontology of rootlessness” (De Donno 2021: 106) into a new existential condition. Hence, ectopic literature is fertilised and nurtured through contact with other languages and literatures and it ultimately becomes reterritorialised. In this sense, Julia Kristeva’s notions of geno-text and pheno-text prove very useful when we consider the hybrid nature of ectopic literature. Thus, the multicultural foundation of the ectopic author’s culture of origin is active and manifests itself in the language of literary expression adopted by the ectopic writer (Kristeva 1974: 95; Kristeva 1976). In other words, to use Kristeva’s terminology, the geno-text crystallises as a pheno-text in the ectopic author’s literary work, as the latter appears to sprout from the culture of origin (1976: 281).

Place and language possess, then, an axiomatic role in the open typology of types of ectopic literature proposed by Albaladejo (2011, 2019). Jhumpa Lahiri would fall within the first type of ectopic literature, which is that of ectopic authors who have moved from their birthplace to another country and have adopted the official language of that country. Authors such as Joseph Conrad, Kazuo Ishiguro, Eva Hoffman, Ha Jin, Andrei Makine and Jhumpa Lahiri herself, to name but a few of a long list, would fall within this first type of ectopic literature.¹

Even though Albaladejo initially proposed four main types of ectopic literature,² it is worth noting that he claims to have offered a tentative and open typology of ectopic literature and encourages us to consider “the many possibilities of ectopic literature” (2019: 404) such as how these circumstances contribute to the ectopia of his or her own writing (2019: 404). In Jhumpa Lahiri’s case, Italian was adopted as an adult after the author became a bestselling Anglophone writer. In light of this particular situation, I will also analyse Lahiri’s translation into Italian through the lens of translingual literature.

3. Translingual/Exophonic Literature: The Case of Jhumpa Lahiri

It can be argued that ectopic literature is both an encompassing and capacious concept that delves into the effects of migration and geographical displacement in the work of the so-called ectopic authors. However, there are other fruitful

concepts such as translanguaging or exophonic writing that shed light on those ectopic writers who have adopted a new language of literary expression, particularly when that language was adopted as an adult. In this sense, it can be argued that an author like Jhumpa Lahiri is a prime example of translanguaging writing, a term coined by Steven Kellman (2000) to refer to authors who use more than one language of literary expression (Kellman 2000; De Donno 2021: 106). Jhumpa Lahiri decided to use Italian since the publication of *In altre parole* in 2015, having produced so far three more books in the language: *Dove mi trovo* (2018) [*Whereabouts* (2021)], *Il quaderno di Nerina* (2021) and *Racconti Romani* (2022) [*Roman Stories* (2023)]. Thus, Lahiri's translanguaging experience embodies an existential condition, which clearly crystallises in her *oeuvre* in Italian (De Donno 2021: 106).

Born in London in 1967 to immigrants from Calcutta, Lahiri moved with her family to Rhode Island, in the US, when she was three years old. Before moving to the Italian language, Lahiri had already authored four acclaimed works of fiction in English such as *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003), *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and *The Lowland* (2013). Her literary production in her dominant language received some of the most prestigious prizes in the Anglophone literary world such as a Pulitzer Prize, a PEN/Hemingway Award and a National Humanities Medal. As mentioned above, after moving to Rome in 2014, Lahiri experienced the desire to migrate into Italian in literary terms. In Rome she completed *In altre parole* in 2015, her first book in a language that Lahiri discovered at around the age of twenty-five. According to the author, "there was no need to learn that language. No family, cultural, social pressure. No necessity" (Lahiri 2022: 153). When asked about this desire to start a literary career as a writer in Italian, she has responded that "it was born from the realization that I am a writer without a true mother tongue; from feeling, in some sense, linguistically orphaned" (10). Thus, even though Lahiri counts Bengali and English as her mother tongues, it is in Italian where she has found her new linguistic home. In her essay "Why Italian?" (2022), Lahiri has tried to respond to the question of why, after having become a successful writer in English, she moved to the Italian language. According to the author, a short answer to this question could be that she writes in Italian to feel free (11).

However, Lahiri has also resorted to metaphors to shed light on her decision to move out of her mother tongues. Lahiri contends that one of those metaphors is that of the graft, a capacious and comprehensive botanical term that describes the author's experiment in Italian. In the words of the author, "My life is a series of grafts [...]. As the child of immigrants, I am myself the fruit of a risky graft that is geographical and cultural. [...] A graft explains and defines me. And now that

I write in Italian, I myself have become a graft” (Lahiri 2022: 20). Moreover, migrancy, errancy and belonging were recurrent themes explored in Lahiri’s work in English. Actually, most of the characters of her Anglophone production are portrayed “in a thick mist of human displacement, nostalgia and identity loss” (Lutzoni 2017: 111). While this thematic concern also surfaces in *In Other Words*, it may be argued that Lahiri’s *oeuvre* in Italian crystallises more explicitly her struggles to find a new linguistic home — an existential quest that has shaped the narrative drive of her work:

Because of my divided identity, or perhaps by disposition, I consider myself an incomplete person [...]. Maybe there is a linguistic reason — the lack of a language to identify with. As a girl in America, I tried to speak Bengali perfectly, without an accent, to satisfy my parents [...]. But it was impossible. On the other hand, I wanted to be considered an American, yet, despite the fact that I speak English perfectly, that was impossible, too. I was suspended rather than rooted. I had two sides, neither well defined. (Lahiri 2016: 111)

As mentioned above, Lahiri has described *In Other Words* as “a sort of linguistic autobiography, a self-portrait” (2016: 213). This language memoir provides a detailed account of how Lahiri acquires a new language (Kellman 2017: 121). The Polish writer Eva Hoffman approached this theme in 1989, when she published *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*. In her autobiography, Hoffman described how her native Polish and her adopted English harmonised through what she called her translation therapy:

[...] in my translation therapy, I keep going back and forth over the rifts, not to heal them but to see that I —one person, first-person singular— have been on both sides. Patiently, I use English as a conduit to go back and down; all the way down to childhood, almost to the beginning [...]. I begin to see where the languages I’ve spoken have their correspondences — how I can move between them without being split by the difference. (Hoffman 1989: 273-274)

In Eva Hoffman’s memoir the act of translation is depicted as a conduit that connects Hoffman’s life and experiences in another language —Polish— and the ‘I’ of her current new life in English. It could be argued that this translation of the self that “keeps going back and forth over the rifts” is a *tópos*, the place where Hoffman seems to reside (Amezcuá Gómez 2014). Switching languages and translating the self in other words play a decisive role in Jhumpa Lahiri, as I will explain later. Both Lahiri and Hoffman produce an insightful account of their lives in a new language. Yet Lahiri’s move to Italian represents an unprecedented and unique example of an author who decides to publish her work in a language that she did not master. According to Lahiri, her linguistic romance with Italian dates back to 1994, when she and her sister decided to give themselves a trip to Florence (Italy) as a present (Lahiri 2016: 13). From the start, Lahiri felt both a connection

and a detachment, “something physical, inexplicable [...]. An exquisite tension. Love at first sight” (15). Later on, Lahiri decided to write her doctoral thesis on how Italian architecture influenced English playwrights of the seventeenth century, which gave her another reason to study Italian (21). But it was in the spring of 2000, after receiving an invitation to the Mantua literary festival, that she realised how limited she was when expressing herself in Italian, despite having studied the language intently. According to her, visiting Italy as a writer gave her a turning point: “In Mantua [...] I finally find myself inside the language. Because in the end to learn a language, to feel connected to it, you have to have a dialogue [...] however imperfect” (25). As Lahiri has declared, “imperfection inspires invention, imagination, creativity. It stimulates. The more I feel imperfect, the more alive I feel” (113). Hence, Lahiri’s decision to write in a language other than her primary one, English, implies that she can also be considered a translingual author because as a result of her love affair with Italian, she wilfully decided to write solely in this language (Kellman 2019: 342). In addition, following Albaladejo’s criteria, she is also an ectopic writer since a considerable part of her work in Italian has been produced in Italy. Lahiri is currently Millicent C. McIntosh Professor of English at Barnard College in New York but also spends part of the year in Italy. Arndt, Naguschewski and Stockhammer (2011) have coined the term ‘Exophonic’, “from the Greek *exo*: moving out; *phony*: sound/voice” (De Donno 2021: 104), to refer to “translingual writing that takes place in a newly adopted or secondary language — a language often learned as an adult” (De Donno 2021: 104). Thus, moving out of one’s mother tongue gives way to a compounded relationship between linguistic attachment, identity and creativity (De Donno 2021: 106), which Lahiri has accurately described as being “suspended rather than rooted” (2016: 111). In this sense, *In Other Words* is a compelling illustration of how translingual writers can “translate the ontology of rootlessness and the dilemmas of identity into narratives of self-discovery, creative freedom and linguistic romance” (De Donno 2021: 106).

Moving to the Italian language problematises Lahiri’s hybrid and fragmented identity. In the chapter “The Triangle”, she refers to the arrival of Italian as the third point on her linguistic journey, a point that creates the figure of a triangle. Italian seems to piece together a new sense of self that mirrors this hybrid identity (De Donno 2021: 107). In “The Triangle”, Lahiri discloses what this figure means for her: “I think that this triangle is a kind of frame. And that the frame contains my self-portrait. The frame defines me, but what does it contain?” (Lahiri 2016: 157). More than a mere language, Italian is rather a home where Lahiri hopes to fix her fragmented self as an Anglophone author of the Indian diaspora in the US (De Donno 2021: 107). An emblem of Lahiri’s self-begetting linguistic home, the triangle embodies the negotiation that takes place in Lahiri’s translingual writing.

It is in the interstices of this in-between space that Lahiri struggles to dwell in. Hence, when Jhumpa Lahiri introduces a third language into her life, she delves into an uncharted territory that nurtures her creative impulse.

Lahiri's *In Other Words* opens with a quote from Antonio Tabucchi's *Requiem: A Hallucination* (1994) that reads "I needed a different language: a language that was a place of affection and reflection". It is worth noting that this quote echoes Lahiri's own quest for a language adequate enough to fully express herself (Pireddu 2021: 899). Tabucchi's words encapsulate Lahiri's own problematisation of "language and country as dwellings and spaces of belonging" (899). In fact, Tabucchi seems to describe language as a *tópos* or space of residence, which is even more compounded in Lahiri's case. Thus, I endorse Nicoletta Pireddu when she argues that "Lahiri dwells in a nomadic homelessness" (899). This nomadic homelessness accounts for an existential condition which results from her multifaceted identity. Thus, the Italian language constitutes one more layer of Lahiri's multifarious hybrid identity (Lutzoni 2017), a place where Lahiri's nomadic homelessness strikes its roots. The issues of language are, then, issues of identity (Lutzoni 2017: 116), as Lahiri herself reminds us: "Ever since I was a child, I've belonged only to my words. I don't have a country, a specific culture. If I didn't write, if I didn't work with words, I wouldn't feel that I'm present on the earth" (2016: 87). Thus, in an autobiographical article "Trading Stories: Notes from an Apprenticeship", published in 2011 in *The New Yorker*, she refers to this idea in the following terms:

When I became a writer, my desk became home; there was no need for another. Every story is a foreign territory, which, in the process of writing, is occupied and abandoned. I belong to my work, to my characters [...]. My parents' refusal to let go or to belong fully to either place is at the heart of what I, in a less literal way, try to accomplish in writing. Born of my inability to belong, it is my refusal to let go.

Having a desk of one's own seems to be all Lahiri needs to belong. In this sense, the desk could be seen as the very emblem of the ectopic and translingual writer. Thus, it seems that Lahiri's sense of belonging is accomplished through literature and that literary creation becomes the site where her nomadic homelessness fades away (Pireddu 2021). Not belonging to any specific place is, then, one of the main thematic concerns in Lahiri's work and as such it is widely explored in *In Other Words*. Interestingly, in this linguistic autobiography, Lahiri resorts to the image of the desk as the only site which can provide a certain sense of belonging: "Those who don't belong to any specific place can't, in fact, return anywhere. The concepts of exile and return imply a point of origin, a homeland. Without a homeland and without a true mother tongue, I wander the world, even at my desk" (Lahiri 2016: 133).

4. Liminal Spaces: Translating the Self into (Trans)fiction

It can be argued that the rhetorical device of the metaphor is used as a preferential form of expression in this book (Amezcua Gómez and Martínez Moraga 2022). In fact, when Jhumpa Lahiri published *Translating Myself and Others* (2022), a collection of essays that addresses the importance of translation in her work, she included an essay on the role of metaphors in *In Other Words*. Hence, in that essay she claimed that “If *In Other Words* needs a key, it’s the book itself. I began with a metaphor that led me to another, and then another. That was how my thinking unfolded. In the book, my slow but stubborn learning of Italian is a lake to cross, a wall to climb, an ocean to probe. A forest, a bridge, a child, a lover, a sweater, a building, a triangle” (2022: 11).

Drawing from Lahiri’s words, the book itself seems to be a metaphor, as its title suggests. As such, Lahiri’s migration into Italian is in itself the overarching metaphor on which this autobiography relies. However, the title of this book not only suggests an implicit metaphorical interpretation, but also every one of the titles of the twenty-four chapters of *In Other Words* are open to this interpretation. The role of metaphors as posited by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their seminal study *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) establishes that “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (2003: 3). As a result of this cognitive process (Indurkha 1992, 2007; Arduini 2007) which takes place in speakers, writers and recipients, metaphors connect vehicles and tenors as both the present and absent features of this rhetorical device (Richards 1986: 85-86). Thus, metaphors are granted a central place in the construction of our reality, which is always rhetorically constructed (Pujante 2016, 2017).

In what follows, I will examine the role of metaphors in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *In Other Words* in order to gauge the extent to which this book hinges upon this rhetorical device. Metaphors prove useful for language learners when trying to convey their personal experience (Kramsch 2009: 99), as can arguably be appreciated in Lahiri’s book. Accordingly, I contend that metaphors propel Jhumpa Lahiri’s self-translation into Italian. In light of Lahiri’s reliance on metaphor, it is worth noting that both ‘metaphor’ and ‘translation’ have a common etymology due to the fact that Latin used both the terms ‘metaphora’ and ‘translation’ to refer to this rhetorical trope (Albaladejo 2023: 4). Actually, as Hutton has aptly noted, “the prefix ‘meta’ in the Greek noun *μεταφορα* [...], as well as the Latin ‘trans’ in *transfere* and *translation*, suggest both movement across and change” (2023: 509). Both this movement across and change account for Lahiri’s metaphorical migration into Italian and signal the central role that translation plays in Lahiri’s own conception of writing. It comes as no surprise, then, that Lahiri has referred

to translation in the following terms: “I translate not so much to survive in the world around me as to create and illuminate a nonexistent one [...]. I translate, therefore I am” (2002: 120). Thus, given the central role of translation in Lahiri’s literary and essayistic production, I will also tackle the fictional thematisation of translation, i.e. transfiction, in her work.

As a book sprinkled with metaphors, many of which are connected with overarching conceptual metaphors such as “Life is a Journey” (Lakoff and Turner 1989; Lakoff 1993), “Quest is a Journey” and a “Story is a Journey” (Forceville 2011), Lahiri uses multiple metaphors that resonate thematically with these conceptual metaphors. This is the case of “The Dictionary”: “[The dictionary] becomes both a map and a compass, and without it I’d be lost. It becomes a kind of authoritative parent, without whom I can’t go out. I consider it a sacred text, full of secrets, of revelations. On the first page, at a certain point, I write: “provare a=cercare di” (try to=seek to). That random fragment, that lexical equation, might be a metaphor for the love I feel for Italian” (2016: 9).

Thus, the dictionary is a map and a compass, a mother and a father, a sacred text and a lexical equation. Lahiri writes on the first page of the dictionary the Italian words for “try to” and “seek to”, which, she says, might be a metaphor for the love she feels for Italian. The linguistic romance metaphors pervade the whole book, as De Donno has aptly observed (De Donno 2021). Lahiri’s linguistic romance with Italian is widely channelled through this rhetorical device. Thus, in the first chapter of the book, “The Crossing”, the author describes the beginning of her linguistic journey in the following terms: “I want to cross a small lake. It really is small, and yet the other shore seems too far away, beyond my abilities. I’m aware that the lake is very deep in the middle, and even though I know how to swim I’m afraid of being alone in the water, without any support [...]. On the other side you can see a cottage, the only house on the shore” (2016: 3).

In “The Diary” Lahiri uses another metaphor to describe the new direction her writing has just taken: “A second metaphor comes to mind: it’s as if, poorly equipped, I were climbing a mountain. It’s a sort of literary act of survival. I don’t have many words to express myself — rather, the opposite” (2016: 57). Similarly, she refers to the metaphor of literature as a mirror of reality. She is aware of the fact that a pure representation of the real through fiction is a literary mirage that is ultimately unavailable: “Even a novel drawn from reality, faithful to it, is not the truth, just as the image in the mirror is not a person in flesh and blood. It remains, that is, an abstraction, no matter how realistic, how close to the facts” (2016: 227). As mentioned previously in the chapter “The Triangle”, the metaphor of the mirror proves also effective to elucidate Lahiri’s hybrid identity.

The chapters that compose this book are fragmentary and short and can be read as stand-alone pieces. As Lahiri states in the “Afterword”, her book “originated in the fall of 2012, in a private, fragmented, spontaneous way [...]. I had a notebook in which I took notes in Italian, on Italian [...]. Gradually the notes became sentences, and the sentences paragraphs. It was a sort of diary, written without forethought” (2016: 209). Following the author’s words, we can identify two axiomatic themes that pertain to the genesis of this book. First, the fact that *In Other Words* sprouts from her fragmentary diaries. Second, that while writing this book, Lahiri seemed to embrace the poetics of another ectopic writer, James Joyce, when he famously claimed that “a book should not be planned out beforehand, but as one writes it will form itself, subject, as I say, to the constant emotional promptings of one’s personality” (Power 1974: 95). It could be argued that the writing of this book was subject to Lahiri’s “emotional promptings”, yet this does not imply that the book lacks a narrative arc. As the author has claimed, the central subject of this book is language — both as a tool and as a theme (2016: 211).

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I have argued before that metaphors drive the author’s translation into Italian. Accordingly, both metaphor and translation implicitly suggest the idea of movement and change. It could also be claimed that the metaphorical fabric underpinning this book paves the way towards fiction. Every chapter of this book can be read as a journal entry embroidered by a common thematic thread, that is, a life in a new language. Yet, despite the fact that the book is described as a linguistic autobiography, a fictional drive surfaces occasionally in its warp and weft.

In the chapter “The Renunciation”, Lahiri refers to the two-faced Janus, “the ancient god of the threshold, of beginnings and endings” (2016: 39), a Roman god that represents a moment of transition. As already explained, the book itself is a metaphor of the author’s self-translation into Italian. Yet, transition no less significant takes place in this book when the author produces her first piece of fiction in Italian. It comes as no surprise that the first fictional chapter in this book, that is, “The Exchange”, follows two chapters named “The Diary” and “The Story”. In “The Diary”, Lahiri tells us that the second night after their arrival in Rome they could not open their house’s door. Since the door was opened by a locksmith, a symbolic gate was also unlocked since that very day the author decided to start writing a diary in Italian. In turn, in “The Story” Lahiri sheds light on this transition towards fiction that is already taking place in this book:

The diary provides me with the discipline, the habit of writing in Italian. [...] What I express there remains a private, interior narration. At a certain point, in spite of the risk, I want to go out. [...] I try to focus on something specific: a person, a moment, a place. [...] such fragments are the first steps to take before constructing a story. I think that a writer should observe the real world before imagining a nonexistent one. (2016: 61)

This passage can be read as an instance of Lahiri's own poetics, as it sketches the author's ideas on the craft of writing. It is worth noting that the author prioritises the observation of the real world in order to illuminate an imagined, non-existent one. Surprisingly, this imaginary world created by a writer echoes the non-existent world the author aspires to illuminate through translation, which reinforces Lahiri's conception of "writing and translating as two aspects of the same activity" (Lahiri 2022: 8). Moreover, as Bergantino has aptly noted, "The Story" thematises the transit from diaristic and self-referential writing in Italian to her first narrative attempt to write fiction in this language. Hence, we can gradually observe how the transit from autobiographical writing to fiction takes place. In turn, "The Exchange" not only signals Lahiri's first narrative attempt in Italian but can also be considered as an instance of transfiction (Bergantino 2023: 941).

The fictional thematisation of translation in literature was widely explored in the collection of essays that compose *Transfiction* (Kaindl 2014: 4). The term transfiction was defined as an "aestheticized imagination of translatorial action" (Spitzl 2014: 364). The pervasive fictional representations of translation and translators in literature saw a boom in the 1980s (Kaindl 2012: 145). According to Pérez-Carbonell (2018: 614), the increase of this portrayal of fictional translators and interpreters in literature can be explained by the fact that translators and interpreters epitomise a certain kind of 'in-betweenness' (Bassnett 2002: 3). In this vein, Kaindl's definition of translators and interpreters as "individuals who are constantly in motion [...] due to their constant movement between languages and cultures" (Kaindl 2014: 3) resonates strongly with Jhumpa Lahiri's literary trajectory. Lahiri has claimed that "almost all my characters are translators, insofar as they must make sense of the foreign in order to survive" (2002: 119). It could be argued that this in-betweenness does not only apply to Lahiri's characters but also to the author herself, as her first book in Italian exemplifies.

Whereas Lahiri's work in English aspires to offer a cultural translation of India (Lahiri 2002), her work in Italian is more oriented toward an ontological translation of the self (Frigeni 2020: 107; Bergantino 2023). This is particularly evident in Lahiri's first fictional story in Italian, "The Exchange". As an example of transfiction, this story amplifies what she narrates in the non-fictional chapters of *In Other Words* (Bergantino 2023: 941). The protagonist of "The Exchange" is a female "translator, who wanted to be another person" (Lahiri 2016: 67), someone who considers herself imperfect "like the draft of a book" (67). Admittedly, the story has an autobiographical imprint and addresses one of the main thematic concerns of this book, namely, the desire to be another person via translation. The story further provides a portrayal of a fictional translator which is easy to identify

with Lahiri herself (Bergantino 2023: 941). As the story develops, a third-person narrator tells us that the protagonist has lost her black sweater during a private clothes sale in Rome. According to Lahiri's own analysis of this story, "the sweater is language" (2016: 65). At the end of the chapter the female translator recovers her black sweater, yet when she puts it on she feels that "This sweater was no longer the same, no longer the one she'd been looking for. When she saw it, she no longer felt revulsion. In fact, when she put it on, she preferred it. She didn't want to find the one she had lost, she didn't miss it. Now, when she put it on, she, too, was another" (Lahiri 2016: 81).

The black sweater is one more instance of how metaphors channel Jhumpa Lahiri's self-translation into Italian. The sweater both stands as a metaphor of language and symbolises her desire to be another person through the act of translation. It is worth reminding both metaphor and translation's common etymology since they inextricably drive this story's narrative arc. Moreover, this symbolic representation of loss and renewal through translation that is conveyed in "The Exchange" echoes Walter Benjamin's notion of 'afterlife' (*Fortleben*) in the very terms he used in his seminal essay "The Task of the Translator" (1923): "in its afterlife — which could not be called that if it were not the transformation and renewal of something living, the original undergoes a change" (Benjamin 2004: 77). Admittedly, the afterlife of Jhumpa Lahiri's fictional translator lives on *in other words*, which actually mirrors the author's genuine aspiration throughout this linguistic autobiography. Thus, as an instance of transfiction, "The Exchange" propels the author's life events and ambitions into the realm of fiction (Bergantino 2023: 947).

"The Diary", "The Story" and "The Exchange" epitomise the kind of (trans) fictional turn that takes place within Lahiri's autobiographical writing. In other words, they outline a key transition in Lahiri's book, one in which the author gradually ventures into uncharted fictional territory. This fictional turn occurs only twice in *In Other Words*. Surprisingly, the closing chapter of this book, "Half-light", is the second short piece of fiction that the author produces, a "formidable door [...] that remains ajar" (Lahiri 2022: 14), foreshadowing a new literary path which has crystallised to date in three more books in Italian: *Dove mi trovo* (2018) [*Whereabouts* (2021)], *Il quaderno di Nerina* (2021) and *Racconti Romani* (2022) [*Roman Stories* (2023)].

5. Concluding Remarks

Both ectopic and translingual authors reshape our understanding of world literature and adumbrate new cultural mappings. Thus, Lahiri's switch from English to Italian stands as a prime example of both ectopic and translingual

writing. In the words of the author, “the arrival of Italian, the third point on my linguistic journey, creates a triangle” (2016: 153). An emblem of Lahiri’s hybrid identity, the figure of the triangle embodies the negotiation that takes place in Lahiri’s self-translation into Italian. Hence, the Italian language may be seen as a *third space* (Bhabha 1994; Lutzoni 2017) where Lahiri’s linguistic and identitarian journey seems to culminate.

Lahiri’s literary production manifests a translative consciousness. In her 2002 essay “Intimate Alienation: Immigrant Fiction and Translation”, she claimed that her English fiction staged a dialogue between Bengali and English (Bergantino 2023: 937). Thus, Lahiri’s “perplexing bicultural universe” crystallised in stories that aspired to offer an ongoing cultural translation of India (Lahiri 2002: 114). However, while Lahiri’s preoccupation with cultural translation is a central theme in her English fiction, the author’s wish to be translated into Italian is more oriented toward an ontological translation of the self.

Concomitantly, in this article I have examined the role of metaphors in Lahiri’s *In Other Words*. According to the author, metaphors are the cornerstone of this book, as they account for how the author’s thinking unfolded while writing the work (2022). Thus, I contend that metaphors drive the author’s self-translation into Italian. In light of Lahiri’s reliance on metaphor, it could be argued that she deals with translation metaphorically. Hence, Lahiri’s metaphorical migration into Italian marks the decisive role that translation plays in the author’s poetics.

Finally, I have analysed the fictional thematisation of translation in Lahiri’s first fictional story in Italian, “The Exchange”. Admittedly, by means of transfiction, this fictional piece amplifies the translanguaging experience that is narrated in the non-fictional chapters of Lahiri’s linguistic autobiography (Bergantino 2023: 941). Lahiri’s projection of the self onto the realm of fiction lets us consider “The Exchange” as an example of self-transfiction (Bergantino 2023: 947). Thus, the interplay between Lahiri’s self-translation and transfiction forges a new understanding of the existing links between translation, transfiction and life-writing. Moreover, “The Exchange” enacts the symbolic rendition of loss and renewal through translation that drives Jhumpa Lahiri’s linguistic journey. Yet, the author’s wish to be translated into Italian “cannot dissipate awareness of an unavoidable untranslatability” (Pireddu 2021: 898) as Lahiri herself states in her book: “This Italian project of mine makes me acutely aware of the immense distances between languages” (2016: 91).

Jhumpa Lahiri claims that “to be a writer-translator is to value both being and becoming” (2022: 7). As a writer-translator, Lahiri epitomises a certain kind of ‘in-betweenness’. It is in the interstices of this in-between space where she struggles to dwell. According to the author, she has always lived on the margins

of countries and cultures: “a peripheral zone where it’s impossible for me to feel rooted [...] the only zone where I think that, in some way, I belong” (2016: 93). In Lahiri’s *In Other Words* the wish to become another person via (self-)translation is a consequence of this author’s “nomadic homelessness” (Pireddu 2021: 899). Thus, through the act of translating herself into Italian, Jhumpa Lahiri trespasses on an elusive and uncharted territory and lets us glimpse the workings of that act of self-translation while writing on the threshold.

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Notes

1. It is worth noting that Conrad’s case has been cited by the Chinese-born American writer Ha Jin as the founding father of the so-called migrant-writer literary tradition (Jin 2010: 461; Ibáñez 2020: 84).

2. Albaladejo has proposed the following open typology of ectopic literature based on authors and works: “1. Ectopic literature written in the language of the target place by authors who have moved from their place of origin. [...] 2. Ectopic literature written in their own language by authors who have moved from their places of origin to places where their language is usually spoken. [...] 3. Ectopic literature written in their own language by authors who have moved to places whose language is different from their native one. [...] 4. Ectopic literature by authors who have moved and write in a language that is different from their own native language but which is also different from the usual language of the target place” (Albaladejo 2019: 403-404).

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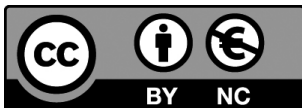
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