Who Speaks, Speaks, Speaks?

By *Lena Müller*

Translated from the German by *Jonathan Becker*

For weeks, I have been trying to write this text. For weeks, I have collected my thoughts, sought input from others, and I still cannot figure how all of it should come together in one text. My thanks goes out especially to Marion Kraft who in our conversation encouraged me to consider questions of translation not only in personal terms, not only in terms of an individual sense of language, of my experience as a translator—I am able to translate because I am have the necessary language skills, because I can read and feel my way into the text—, but to also consider these questions in terms of societal power dynamics.

Full-contact and Contact Anxieties

If I think about it, I have encountered questions of language and politics since the very beginning of my work as a translator—or to put it differently: It became apparent that issues of translation and politics always present in conjunction and interlaced with one another. That pure literary moment, it never really existed. From the very beginning, literary translation proved to be a discipline that, while requiring serene and patient dedication to the text, poses challenges on the page, and to the mind, that go beyond the literary realm.

My first literary translation was Shumona Sinha's *Erschlagt die Armen!* (*Assommons les pauvres!* [*Let's bludgeon the poor*!]), a poetic and painful novel recommended to me by a bookseller in Paris. As I read it in the original French, it touched me because it tells the story of an interpreter working with asylum seekers who struggles against becoming completely absorbed into the stories of those she interprets for— precisely because, through the act of interpreting, these stories inevitably pass through her mind, her body. She also grapples with feeling her own identity reduced to that of "immigrant" in the eyes of white French people, time and time again, much like the people she interprets. Even though she herself has already arrived in France, has already made the French language her language. It is a novel that features a protagonist who—as a woman of colour in France and as an intellectual—is confronted with intersectional experiences of discrimination, with questions of class, gender, and race that cannot be resolved in the text; questions which at no point resolve into solidarity, questions which remain gruelling, and which are the source of an intense heat that is felt throughout the text. While I enjoyed the book when I first read it, translating it affected me deeply and in uncomfortable ways. In a sense, I found myself butting heads with the protagonist, I would empathise with her, and then suddenly want to keep her away from me—and I could only appreciate her longing for a place of tranquility all too well, a place where all overlapping narratives and contradictions fall silent.

Shumona Sinha's novel had originally appeared in France in 2011. By the time I had

completed my translation and it was published in Germany, it was the summer of 2015. That meant: Thousands of people were fleeing the war in Syria and arriving in Germany, hoping to exercise their right to asylum. In some respects, German society successfully managed to project a culture of welcoming, in others, it held onto defensive reflexes, which became progressively more radicalised. As early as August 2015, this culminated in scenes of racist unrest in Heidenau, Saxony, where, over the course of several days, residents of the city and violent right-wing extremists attacked a refugee shelter that had been set up in a former hardware store.

It was into this atmosphere that *Erschlagt die Armen!* was released in Germany. Until this point, Shumona Sinha and I had not met in person. Together, we went on a reading tour of the book. We drove through smaller and larger West German cities, we read in Dortmund, in Hamm, in Aachen, we read in front of an engaged audience, we read in front of an audience that was almost exclusively white and over the age of fifty. It was Shumona Sinha's first time in Germany. In the evenings, we would sit together in different hotels in different cities and tell each other about ourselves.

She recounted her childhood in Kolkata, West Bengal. I told her about the years I had spent living near Paris. She told me of her path to becoming a French-language novelist.

I told her that I had spent some time as a volunteer interpreter for refugees, accompanying them to meetings with lawyers, therapy sessions, appointments at government agencies. She told me that just now, by herself, at a restaurant in the mid-size town we were currently in, she had tried to order food and been ignored by the staff and denied service, until she eventually demanded to speak to management.

We sat together with our minibar drinks, got to know each other, discovered points of contact, and yet found ourselves in different positions that affected our encounter and our journey together—author and translator, older and younger, woman of colour and white woman.

I told her about the heated national debate on the subject of accepting refugees, fueled—in the streets and in the media—by an assorted cast of right-wing and populist voices. I related to her my concern whether this political climate would affect her novel's reception in Germany. Shumona Sinha listened intently, drawing some parallels to French politics.

A year later, in the summer of 2016, we both received the International Literature Prize at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, awarded to us for *Erschlag die Armen*! and its translation. German newspapers were still debating—loudly and often with racist undertones—the admission of refugees from Syria. Under these circumstances, it should have been no surprise when an article about the award appeared in the daily *Die Welt*. In the article, the editor of the opinion section remarked that the novel offered a more accurate examination of reality than the political landscape, because it showed that asylum seekers "lie through their teeth". The literary text had been co-opted for political purposes, cheap propaganda, for inciting resentment, for the reduction of complex questions to supposedly simple truths, all to be instrumentalised in service of a political agenda. As I read the piece a few hours before the award ceremony, I alternated between feeling hot, then cold, with rage.

Nothing remained of the text's intersectional entanglements. What does an appropriate

reaction look like in such a case? What is my responsibility towards a text which I, as the translator (and in collaboration with others), launched into the discursive space? At the ceremony, I tried objecting to this interpretation, was indignant, struggled to find the right words. Which voice does the translator speak with in this situation? After all, her reading is also an interpretation. The novel manifested as a picture puzzle that reveals different meanings dependent on the position of its observer: lying asylum seekers, an asylum process designed to deny people a fair chance; an interpreter's mental breakdown.

What slid out of focus was the fact that, after all, *Erschlagt die Armen!* was not a contribution to Germany's refugee debate. What slid out of focus was the novel's literary representation of the protagonist's precarious position within racist and sexist structures, the constant shifting back-and-forth between belonging and marginalisation she is subjected to by a majority-white society. Images of this experience are interwoven throughout the text's language. One of these images: The heavy green doors of Paris, which no longer budge beneath the hands of the narrator, which she can no longer push open.

It is not unlikely that this particular, important dimension of the text slid out of focus because the German readership was very much absorbed in itself and its internal debates, eternally recurring along a similar path. It is not unlikely that this dimension slid out of focus because most of those who engaged in these debates, including the translator herself, the opinion-page editor, and so on, did not share in that particular experience of othering, had not been exposed to it.

Had they not read enough? Or did they only retain what seemed familiar, what correlated with their own perceptions?

Postcolonial Writing and Literary Translation

I would always contend that in my translation work—aside from linguistic and literary abilities—I employ a lot of social competencies like empathy and cognizance. But where does this empathy stem from?

After *Erschlagt die Armen!*, I translated several other novels by Shumona Sinha, novels in which the protagonists moved between Kolkata and Paris. While I am familiar with Paris and its periphery, where the first novel is set, I have never been to Kolkata. This raised the obvious question: What difference does that make? Would I translate Shumona Sinha's work differently if I had been to Kolkata, if I'd walked along College Street myself? Is there anything in the text that I'm missing because I don't understand it, because I don't know it?

But as I contemplated this, another question came to me: Would I translate Shumona Sinha differently if I myself, in Paris or in Dortmund, had experienced the feeling of marginalisation, of being othered through the looks and actions of those around me?

What does it mean, then, for a white translator to engage with the texts of an author with a postcolonial orientation, to be receptive to its effect, and then reconstruct it? What does it mean, in doing so, to summon my own experiences and knowledge of the world? When are my own experiences sufficient, when am I missing important nuances within the text? Where are the blind spots, or *white* spots, in my knowledge of the

world, in my sense of empathy? And: how honest am I being with myself? How honest are authors, translators, editors being with each other about any of these insecurities?

In her 1999 essay "Post-colonial writing and literary translation", the American literature and translation scholar Maria Tymoczko determined that, even in their own writing, postcolonial authors themselves are already engaging in transcultural translation; that analogies can be found between translating a literary text for foreign-language readers and writing from the perspective of a lived postcolonial experience. But she also points out the differences: „Unlike translators, post-colonial writers are not transposing a text. As background to their literary works, they are transposing a culture – to be understood as a language, a cognitive system, a literature (comprised of a system of texts, genres, tale types, and so on), a material culture, a social system and legal framework, a history, and so forth.“[1]

How conscious am I of these processes of translation, which occurred before my own translation process, and exist—as subtexts—inside the work that I am translating? Am I fully aware that narratives of postcolonial power structures and racial exclusion are in themselves a part of the subtext that was translated into the text for the reader? And will I notice if I have already careened past this very subtext?

Translation in a Society of the Many

In the foreword to their issue titled *Übersetzbarkeit* [Translatability], the editors of the journal *Jalta. Positionen zur jüdischen Gegenwart* write: "Processes of translation, as well as their limits, are questions central to any radically diverse society."[2]

The society in which we live, write, and translate is de facto a diverse society. And it could be a radically diverse society, an open and equitable *society of the many*. In her book *Erinnern stören. Der Mauerfall aus migrantischer und jüdischer Perspektive*, Hannah Peaceman, co-editor of *Jalta*, describes her conception of a *society of the many*: "It is not simply about a diversity that must be actualised. Such a diversity is always contingent on society-wide emancipatory processes and social shifts. Diversity cannot simply mean placing narratives and perspectives next to one another. It has to be about connections, about negotiating contradictions and creating shared relations. It has to be about shaping society, together.“[3]

I would like to be part of a literary community that serves as a venue for such negotiations. In which more women, people of colour, and Black people are translators and authors, hold influential positions at publishing houses, literary venues, and newsrooms, or occupy already existing and newly created faculty positions in literary and translation studies; where they can influence the education and career paths of future authors, translators, editors, and journalists, equip them with the tools of critical analysis, provide them with the necessary encouragement and motivation. And with an enthusiasm for always challenging and questioning, not least yourself.

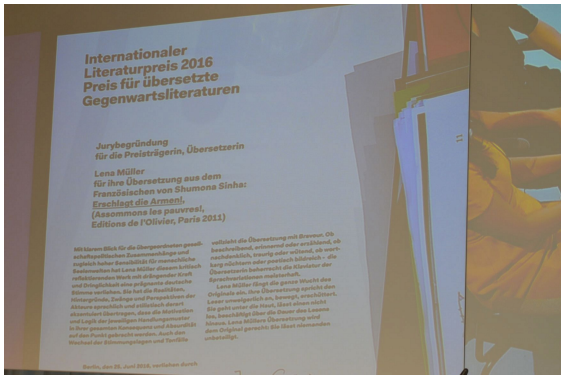


Photo taken at the award ceremony for the International Literature Prize 2016 at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt.

Juni 2021

Endnoten

1 Maria Tymoczko: Post-colonial writing and literary translation, in: Post-colonial Translation. Theory and practice, New York 1999
2 Jalta. *Positionen zur jüdischen Gegenwart.* Volume N°7 Übersetzbarkeit, Berlin 2020
3 Lydia Lierke, Massimo Perinelli (eds.): *Erinnern stören. Der Mauerfall aus migrantischer und jüdischer Perspektive*, Berlin 2020.

#Gender, #Intersektionalität, #race



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Lena Müller, born in Berlin in 1982, studied literary writing and cultural studies in Hildesheim and Paris. She translates literary texts from French, including the works of Shumona Sinha, Nicolas Mathieu, and Fiston Mwanza Mujila, among others, for which she has received multiple awards. She was co-editor of the French-language feminist journal *timult*. She has authored several radio plays for the RBB, NDR, SWR, and other broadcasters. Her debut novel *Restlöcher* was published in March 2021 by Edition Nautilus.

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