



A NEWSLETTER FROM JENNY BHATT
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WE ARE ALL TRANSLATORS

FOCUSING ON THE ART & CRAFT OF LITERARY
TRANSLATION & THE TRANSLATING LIFE.

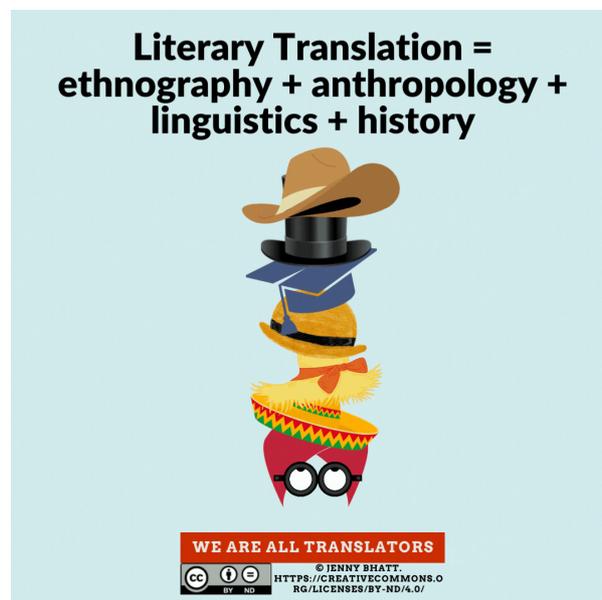
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Dear Reader,

Yesterday, I attended an online ALTA panel on how literary translation is also an act of curation. This is true, right? We choose our projects carefully and, because such work still doesn't pay nearly enough, we do it because we believe that it deserves more time and attention from us and from a wider readership. I talked a bit about this in an [earlier newsletter](#).

The panelists (Anton Hur, Chad Post, and the translator who subbed for Julia Sanches and whose name I didn't catch because I was late on audio) also discussed how a translator also has to be a good salesperson and publicist for their book. Getting any book published at all is tough but translators have to work harder to sell and promote our books to publishers and readers in another language who may not know the significance of a work in its original language/culture. More on this another time because it does merit a lot more debate.

There are a few other hats a literary translator also needs to wear.



As we'll all agree, there's no such thing as a word-for-word or sense-for-sense translation. Contexts vary across cultures. Biases come into play due to lived versus understood experiences. And even a functionalist approach, where we put the requirements of the designated reader before our desire to be faithful to the original, requires a strong understanding of both source and target cultures.

When I was translating [my first story collection](#) by the Gujarati short story pioneer, Dhumketu, I had to research many of the places, processes, participants (human and nonhuman) within the worlds he had created. He wrote during an

earlier era with a very different sensibility. Immersing myself in the early-twentieth century history, culture, and politics of his places and people helped me ensure that my own contemporary biases and prejudices against them didn't manifest on the page (to the extent that I was self-aware enough to spot them myself.)

Even when we're translating contemporary works, we're going to run into challenges where we're unsure of the original writer's meaning. Unlike readers who can skip over sentences they don't quite get, translators cannot. We have to make informed guesses. Those guesses can only be good enough if we've cultivated a certain "archive and ecology of the mind" (a phrase I'm borrowing from the scholar and translator, Rita Kothari) where all of these disciplines are interwoven.

For me, this cross-disciplinary approach is a large part of the fun and satisfaction of being a translator. It's not enough to be bilingual/multilingual because, to state the obvious for some of you, translation isn't just transposing text from language A to language B. (OK, strictly speaking, ethnography is a branch of anthropology but it's important enough that it needs to be called out specifically.)

Of course, if we're doing all of this diligently, we run up against another hurdle. Given what we learn through all our reading "around" the text we're translating, where do we draw the boundaries or find that balance between freedom and constraint? Where we're somewhere between the two polarized positions of 'translator as slave to the original' and 'translator as creator of a new original' (see Susan Bassnett's book, [Translation](#))? A topic to dive into with another newsletter.

In the meantime, feel free to hit reply to let me know your thoughts to all or any of the above. Or you can share on social media and tag me (links below.) I check in once a day there and will be happy to respond.

Best,

[Jenny Bhatt](#)

My upcoming translation, [The Shehnai Virtuoso](#), was recently given a lovely thumbs-up by [Kirkus](#), a pre-pub trade review. If you're interested in interviewing me for a US publication, please let me know? A fun, casual, two-way conversation about some of the topics we're exploring through these newsletters? Just hit reply to this newsletter.

NOTE: All the books mentioned or featured in this newsletter are listed at the Bookshop below. I earn a tiny affiliate fee if you buy a book from the list. It goes towards funding this otherwise free newsletter. Thank you.

[JENNY'S BOOKSHOP \(US\)](#)

Some interesting links

READ: The Ever-Shifting Challenge of Promoting Literature in Translation (Publishers Weekly).

LISTEN: How meanings get words and social sciences get broken (ep 106 of Clearer Thinking podcast by Spencer Greenberg).

WATCH: Negotiating Literary Translation Contracts (Authors' Guild).

APPLY: PEN August Women in Translation Readings - Call for Literary Translators (closes 6/17/2022).

BOOK RECO: Catching Fire: A Translation Diary by Daniel Hahn

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