

Book review

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**Siri Nergaard: *Translation and Transmigration*,
Routledge, London and New York, 2021**

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The issue of migration has recently captured considerable media attention, particularly since the 2015 European migrant crisis. Against the backdrop of today's world, marked by migrations, mobility and unstable political climate, the book *Translation and Transmigration* presents an interdisciplinary scholarly discussion of migration as a cultural, social and political phenomenon, which provides a valuable and more than welcome contribution to our understanding of translation as a human activity that surpasses narrow views of translation as an exclusively language activity. Written by Siri Nergaard, a Norwegian Translation Studies scholar and former student of Umberto Eco, the book offers valuable insights into strong and complex correlations between migration and translation. Nergaard's book is particularly relevant because her arguments and theoretical discussions of the links between migration and translation are grounded in the author's personal experience of migration, because she left Norway as a young girl to study in Italy, where she remained and taught at the University of Florence before returning to Norway. Currently, she lectures at the University of South-Eastern Norway.

For Nergaard translation does not entail merely the conversion of linguistic content from a source language to a target language. Rather, translation is a metaphor for a range of processes, not necessarily linguistic, which involve movement, narration, transaction, understanding, misunderstanding etc. In other words, for migrants, translation is a condition of life that extends beyond the boundaries of language use. Far more two or more different languages; it is about to integrate into a certain "target" society and to share one's personal narrative

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while retaining “source” culture as part of one’s identity to a greater or lesser degree. However, as the author also acknowledges, the tension between two different cultures and identities is considerably greater than one might assume. It is irreconcilable in many ways, but this precarious state needs to be recognized as an epistemological condition of modern-day migrants’ identities and become embraced as such. Therefore, migrants (or *transmigrants*, if you wish) can be viewed as “subjects in translation”, while translation denotes tension, ambivalence, and the continuously ongoing process of cultural mediation and personal transformation that characterizes the lives of migrants.

The book is divided into two parts, preceded by an introduction. In the first part of the book, the author elaborates on three fundamental notions – the migrant, hospitality and borders - that constitute the conceptual framework for her theorization of translation and migration. Thus, the first part prepares the stage for analyses of concrete situations and works presented in the second part. Discussing the relationship between migration and translation, Nergaard points out that both words have etymological Latin meaning connected to movement (*migrare* = to move from one place to another; *traducere* = to bring across). Drawing on Thomas Nail’s kinopolitics, i.e. the politics of movement, Nergaard argues for a new perspective on the figure of a migrant. Migrants are viewed as an exception or as the Other, Nail claims, because the Western mindset is immersed in the concept of *stasis*, a sedentary way of life, which is perceived as natural. By inverting the perspective, one can see that migration is a historically constant phenomenon. For Nergaard, this opposition is similar to the way people see translation. Translation often occupies secondary position to an original text and is associated with inauthenticity, movement and the loss of unity, instead of seeing both the original and the translation as texts in flux. Further, the concept of “transmigrant” is introduced to denote a person who lives in constant tension, in an ambivalent condition of translation, in fluid migration patterns on a transnational level, typical of our time. Tension arises between two opposite forces: “nation-state’s model of exclusion and inclusion” on the one hand and the migrants’ “translative movement in and among (...) transforming identities” on the other.

Although acknowledging that borders are epistemic devices used to classify the world in human minds, Nergaard debunks the myth that they are

fixed and natural and claims that they are socially constructed and used for filtering, in a process that she calls translational because of its connection to motion and transformation. While the postmodern era continues to dissolve binary categories in favour of fluidity in all areas of human existence, it would be difficult to address differences without some form of borders — there is no translation or migration without them. They are dual, but still heterogenous, plural, open to interlapping. Thus, they do not necessarily need to be perceived as “obstacles to cross”, but “spaces of encounter”, border zones, contact areas of negotiation and translation. They may also be understood as a sign that signifies the relationship with the Other and the unknown, since they encompass the familiar and the known, leaving out the obscure. Nergaard maintains that translation also involves crossing a border from source language to target language; it is marked by filtering and selection, inclusion and exclusion of elements. Therefore, living in border zones means living in an ongoing process of translation and self-translation.

The second part of the book focuses on the issues of global migration, its dynamics, and policies towards it, as well as on concrete events, real-life people’s experiences and activist projects related to the phenomenon of migration. For example, Nergaard extensively analyses the Vlora refugee ship episode to concretize her conceptualization of the links of migration and translation understood in its broad sense. Before the 1991 exodus to Italy, Albanians living under the Communist regime illegally watched Italian TV for years, creating a translative projection in which Italy became a utopian space of luxury and high standards of living. The photographs documenting this humanitarian crisis, which show migrants hanging from ropes between land and the ship in Nergaard’s interpretation, represent people’s navigation through an “almost no-space zone”, a liminal space where translation took place although the authorities did not permit it, symbolizing ambivalence which haunts both the phenomena of migration and translation. Nergaard’s analysis of the role of plurilingualism and language acquisition in migrants’ lives on the example of Jhumpa Lahiri’s book *In altre parole (In Other Words)* is of special interest for scholars interested in the issues related to Translation Studies and intercultural communication. Although for adults the process of learning a new language is often intimidating because it represents an encounter with something new,

unknown and unnatural compared to their native language, language acquisition can also be a liberating way to leave the trauma behind and construct a new identity, as Lahiri's experience shows. Lahiri grew up bilingual in the USA; as a child, she learnt Bengali from her parents, and in school she had to learn English. Perceiving this transition as a traumatic experience, Lahiri could not identify with either of the two languages anymore: after some time, she developed a foreign (American English) accent which could be clearly heard when she spoke Bengali, while her appearance and name instantly revealed she was not American. Lahiri, therefore, decided to move to Italy, where she studied and despite not being fluent in the language, wrote her book *In altre parole* in Italian, which enabled her to recount how she resolved the tension between her native and acquired languages by learning a third one. This space of imperfection became a new home for Lahiri, an innovative expression of uncertainty between different languages and identities, a skilful navigation through marginality. The case of Lahiri enables Nergaard to return to her key concepts of ambivalence and living in translation. Throughout the book, Nergaard exposes duality that forms the basis of negative perceptions about migration experiences. However, she does not deny the existence of duality, but strives to harness the space between the two extremes as a source of cultural dialogue and deeper understanding of migrant issues. She is interested in border zones, fluidity and motion. Translation is a method of juxtaposing two different realities (home land vs. new land, mother tongue vs. acquired language...) and creating plural belongings and identities, not replacing one with another. Moving beyond the notion of translation as a strictly linguistic process, she sees it as a survival mechanism and transformative force that extends to ontological and political matters in the postmodern world. Simply put, to translate as a migrant is to live, transform yourself and interact with the world around you in perpetual movement.