

Shining light on power

Dina Leifer reflects on a new collection of writings that bring us face to face with some assumptions that run deep in the world of translation

When I first heard about *Violent Phenomena*, the new anthology of essays about decolonising translation edited by Kavita Bhanot and Jeremy Tiang, I was intrigued. Did translation – that noble human endeavour we're all engaged in, which breaks down barriers, crosses borders and promotes cultural exchange – really need decolonising? How could it be a force for bad, or a perpetrator of violence, as the title of the anthology seemed to imply?

After reading this eye-opening collection, I realised that the very fact that I was unaware of the extent to which language and translation are tangled up with colonialism shows what an important publication this is, for literary translation and the wider translation profession.

Beyond representation

I've been working as a freelance translator and dipping into the literary translation scene in the UK for around six years. I had noticed that the profession was overwhelmingly White and very focused on the major European languages. But as a White, native English speaker, working from French and Italian, it was possible for me to notice this and move on. And things seemed to be improving, with more non-European literature being translated and more translators from non-White backgrounds coming on the scene.

Violent Phenomena challenged me to stop, think about the inequalities in the translation sector and face some uncomfortable truths. I was shocked and saddened at the accounts of prejudice experienced by colleagues of colour, in what I thought was an enlightened and equitable industry. I was troubled by the reports of the damage done to languages and cultures around the world by the dominance of colonial languages, particularly English. The cosy idea of translation as a cultural exchange between equals collapses when we acknowledge that certain languages have far more power and influence than others.

The book is challenging in places, but it also offers a rich, fascinating insight into the wonderful complexity of human language and the ingenuity with which people speak, write and

move between languages. I was particularly touched by the pieces which explore the emotional, intimate aspects of language. In *Preserving the tender things*, Ayesha Manazir Siddiqi highlights, with regret, the increasing use of English over Urdu among the 'so-called progressive elite' in Pakistan. She confesses that she only speaks to her cat in Urdu, using 'sweet and tender terms of endearment for him that I can't recall where I know from' and wonders whether she has become ashamed of using Urdu in other settings. Sandra Tamele describes how she was raised in Mozambique by parents who only spoke to her in Portuguese, which meant that she had no common language with her grandmother.

Mother tongue and multilingualism

Several of the pieces celebrate the joy of multilingualism, which is common in many countries outside Europe and the US and doesn't fit the Western model of a 'native' or 'mother' tongue. In her piece 'Freed from the monolingual shackles', Lúcia Collischonn questions the prevailing idea in Western countries, particularly English-speaking ones, that translators should always translate into their native language, or L1. She points out that in Brazil, where she is from, 'trained translators are able to translate in both (or more) directions', and that there are many countries where multiple languages are spoken, and the L1 and L2 hierarchy and monolingual norm do not apply. 'English has many more L2 and L3 speakers than native speakers,' she writes. 'Who holds the power?' These questions are relevant beyond the literary sphere, and challenge the foundations of the Western translation industry.

The particular power imbalance in literary translation is highlighted by Mona Kareem in 'Western poets kidnap your poems and call them translations'. She examines the condescending practice of Western poets using a so-called 'bridge' translation (a rough or literal translation, by an often-uncredited translator) of poetry from languages and literary traditions they don't know, such as Chinese, or Arabic, to 'ease them into English'. Kareem highlights the 'unfaithful renditions' ▶

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that have resulted, some featuring basic translation errors, which, she points out, would never be tolerated for translations from French or Spanish.

The personal is professional

Other essays offer powerful accounts of personal experiences of discrimination in the literary translation field. Sawad Hussain, in 'Why don't you translate Pakistanian?', describes how a publisher assumed she would need mentoring from a White, male translator, for no particular reason other than 'I just thought that, you know, someone like you might benefit'. Gitanjali Patel and Nariman Youssef, in 'All the violence it may carry on its back', list a whole series of quotes from translators from non-White backgrounds who have had such experiences, including one who was told: 'give me a story more typically Indian, you know. Caste. Women's stuff. Poverty.'

There are also fascinating perspectives on Welsh, Kashmiri, the languages of Singapore and many others. Each of the 21 pieces highlights a problem, but also offers solutions. As Gitanjali Patel and Nariman Youssef write: 'Only by continuing to shine the light on the power dynamics inherent in the ways we translate and the ways we talk about translation – until the questioning of the norms of the practice becomes the norm – will the private, complex, layered subjectivities of translators find places to flourish.' This book made me confront some

uncomfortable feelings, but it also left me optimistic for the future of the profession, particularly if we listen to the voices and experiences of its contributors.



***Violent Phenomena: 21 Essays on Translation*, edited by Kavita Bhanot and Jeremy Tiang, is published by Tilted Axis.**



Dina Leifer translates from French and Italian to English, specialising in culture, art, social sciences and health. She began translating professionally in 2015 after completing an MA in Translating Popular Culture at City, University of London. Her short story translation 'Journey at Dusk' was published by Alma in 2017 and her book translation, *Progress or Freedom*, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2019. She was longlisted for the 2020/21 John Dryden Translation Competition. Dina previously worked as a journalist and editor. She has a BA in French and Italian from Manchester University and a postgraduate diploma in Journalism Studies from Cardiff University.

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