

On a Personal Note: Meditations upon Care while Translating “The Management of Grief”¹

Isabel Alonso-Breto
University of Barcelona

I cried when translating into Spanish “The Management of Grief”, the story by Bharati Mukherjee which narrates the tragedy of the families destroyed by the Air India 182 attack occurred in 1985 (Mukherjee 1988, 177-197). It happened near the end of the story, as I reached the sentence “I heard the voices of my family one last time,” which I translated as “Escuché las voces de mi familia por última vez” (Alonso-Breto 2018, 625). This is the moment when Shaila Bhave, the main character, begins to see some light at the end of the dark tunnel she has inhabited since the death of her loved ones, the infinite tunnel of grief, the deep pit of mourning. This is a relatively positive moment for her, yet as I translated, I found it unbearable that her family should stop talking to her for good, that they wouldn’t be with her any longer soothing her pain as they had done since their death in the attack.

It was just my eyes getting wet, my heart hardening. It happens like that sometimes, that your heart suddenly hardens like a rock, it goes impervious, as if it couldn’t go on absorbing unfathomable emotions. In this case it was sadness, that quiet grief which assaulted me every time I sat at my computer to work on the translation of that particular short story, and which suddenly had become immense. I stopped there, unable to stand the thought of such loss, the loss of Shaila’s entire family for good. And, I wondered, if the mere *thought* of this feeling is unbearable, how must her pain *feel*? After a short while my heart went back to its ordinary texture, fragile and porous. But I kept—I keep—being horrified by the magnitude of Shaila Bhave’s tragedy.

Again I wondered why I was translating that story, how could I just be doing something which, while so necessary, was so trivial as deciding what word to choose, what turn of phrase, so that the translation be more readable and accomplished. I felt an intruder who downplayed the unbearable grief felt by a woman who has suddenly lost to death her two sons and her husband. Do language trifles (or are they?) mean something when put next to Shaila’s experience? And next to those of Kusum, Dr. Ranganathan and the hundreds of persons who, like them, lost those they loved best in the attack... Do I have any right to meddle with their feelings in such manner, putting them at the service of an exercise in translation?

I first considered translating “The Management of Grief” at a conference celebrated at the University of Zaragoza. I was contributing a paper about this story in Spanish, and

¹ A previous version of this essay was published in Spanish in *Hermeneus: Journal of Research in Translation and Interpreting* Vol. 21, 2019, pp. 609-625.

while doing so had to translate some passages, and of course the title. I then realized that many in the audience could not have read the story even if they wanted, since they could not read English. In any event, I opened my presentation saying what I actually want to repeat in this text: that I am sorry, that I am apprehensive of daring to take those persons' sorrow as a motif for academic discussion. In the paper, which later turned into an article (Alonso-Breto 2017), I compared Shaila Bhave's tragedy and that of "the relatives" (as Shaila refers to those who, like her, by a twist of fate have become the unexpected members of a torn community) to the way diasporas usually crystallize in their new locations. I symbolically equated the deep grief that brings "the relatives" close to each other with the grief for the loss of the place of origin which often characterizes the lives of displaced peoples. I also found a clear parallelism (and I still do) between the neglect that Shaila and the relatives perceived in the Canadian society at the time of the attack, and the multiple forms of disaffection, from open hostility to meek indifference, that host societies often show to immigrant or refugee communities. As is often the case with diasporas, the community of relatives in the story is condemned to live their bitter experience in a sort of limbo between the ancestral place of origin and the host society. The fact that the Air India 182 explosion should have occurred in the ocean, and that the relatives had to travel to Ireland in order to identify the few retrieved corpses, corroborates this parallelism. In Ireland they are, literally, between America and Asia, that is "between worlds," as Shaila herself formulates in the story (Mukherjee 1988, 189). But they are also alien to both places, self-absorbed in their own indecipherable sorrow. Together with these parallelisms, in the paper I read at the University of Zaragoza, I concluded that the final moment when Shaila feels that her husband and sons leave her for good (after months of having felt them around herself, allaying her grief with their invisible presence), the moment when she finally finds the energy to take some command of her life—which marks the end of the toughest phase of mourning—metonymically signals the access into the political tissue of Canada for non-white immigrants, those who arrived in the 1960s and 70s. That moment symbolizes those former immigrants' uncontested self-proclamation as full Canadian citizens, and their access to a sense of 'belonging' and 'agency' which until then had not been altogether *real*. These were the points about Shaila Bhave's and the relatives' grief I made at the conference in question, and would then go on to write in the article. That is why I had to begin my intervention, and the article later on, apologizing somehow, and asserting that nothing was further from my intention than trivializing the sorrow of all those persons into *mere* (and I'm purposefully using this term here) academic endeavour.

And to add to the pain that I felt and, more importantly, that was revived in that presentation and article, I decided to translate the story into Spanish. I still wonder why, as I wonder why the paper, why the article. I guess this is another reason for writing this personal note right now: to apologize, but also to investigate my reasons to undertake such painful experiences.

The first reason which crosses my mind is the author, the late Bharati Mukherjee, may she rest in peace. If she was courageous enough to write this story, which is so important but also so difficult, why shouldn't I be just a bit bold too and translate it, only that, such a

modest enterprise in comparison to the audacious gesture of writing it? Well, Bharati Mukherjee did something that I did not: she met Shaila Bhave. She met dozens of persons who lost their families in the attack, talked to them for hours, shared their sorrow. In the end she even wrote a book about them, with her husband, Blaise Clarke, so as to call the world's attention over the detached reaction of the Canadian society and government, and to expose those persons' grief and vindicate their category of human beings (Blaise and Mukherjee 1997). And it was worthwhile. It was a gesture of courage because she said what nobody else dared saying, or at least not with the same energy and resolution. That gesture, those hundreds of hours of talk sharing silences and quiet sobs and perhaps also resigned smiles gave Bharati Mukherjee the right to write Shaila Bhave's story. She earned that right.

But that is not my case. I haven't earned that right.

Or have I?

Perhaps those reasons: calling the world's attention over the uncaring reaction of the Canadian society and government, and exposing those persons' grief and vindicating their category of human beings, are also enough to justify my intrusion, in all its forms. Certainly with the passing of time Canadian society has become more consciously multicultural, and the Canadian government already offered a public apology to the relatives in 2006 (more than twenty years too late!) for the inappropriate institutional and societal treatment they received back then, when the catastrophe happened. Yet, although after such gesture and the passing of time this may seem a paid-off debt (surely not for everyone), it is always good to remind ourselves of past errors so as not to repeat them. And perhaps it is not redundant either to remind ourselves that the other's sorrow is always sorrow, and is always human, regardless of filiations or affiliations. Hopefully these justifications can become reasons for my insistence on revisiting pain as well.

The point is, perhaps we need to keep reminding ourselves of the other's humanness, which too often we tend to overlook.

I still don't quite understand why it is that, while we live in multicultural societies, we so often treat each other as complete strangers—one must say, polite and politically correct strangers, most of the time. It is as if the fact of having a different skin hue or hair texture, or speaking different languages, made us belong to different species. It is a feeling I get much too often, and I wonder whether something as routine as translating a story (even if the story is as grand as this particular one) can somehow contribute to diminishing this fictive distance. Perhaps it can work, again, as a gesture. After all, gestures are the only thing we can really make.

Another reason which comes to my mind to justify my insistence on approaching this story, is the harrowing thought that the plane explosion was not an accident, but a purposeful attack. Human minds ideated that improbable narrative of destruction and sorrow, human hands fabricated the bombs which exploded in the suitcases travelling in the plane. We live

in a world daily ransacked by terror (bombs not only explode in Europe or in the west; in Syria, Palestine, and dozens of places, terror is a daily occurrence, although it seems hard for us to believe it and we cringe at the occasional explosion within our comfort zone). Yet, although terrorism has become a nearly routine matter worldwide, I cannot reconcile myself with the idea that human minds engineered the bombs which exploded in the Air India 182 flight, that human hands brought those suitcases inside the plane. How can we possibly inflict so much harm on one another? And then, is there any remote possibility that awareness of other persons' pain could make us more caring? Perhaps that is the main worth of translation, of talking pain once and again in as many languages as possible: bringing closer to more and more readers the other's humanness and the other's capacity for love and sorrow, none of which are far from our own.

I guess that here lies the sense, if there is any, of deciding to work in the area of Postcolonial Studies, with all the pain such a choice entails. Colonial aggressions, so gratuitous and deadly; slavery and trade, which go on existing in many forms around the world; massacres; genocides... we keep revising and discussing all forms of barbarization of humans on humans. Perhaps that is the sense of it all: to constantly remind ourselves of our humanity in spite of our tendency to forget. It is surely a form of care, a singular way of taking care of one another, this reminding ourselves of our lurking capacity to harm.

I am not sure whether these spare ideas justify my undertaking, in spite of the pain I felt when approaching it from an academic perspective, of the translation of "The Management of Grief," but perhaps they do. I go aghast at the thought of Shaila Bhave's pain for the loss of her husband and children in an explosion produced by human will. The mere thought of the attack makes me feel something for which I don't have a name. And of course, it brings to my mind the thousands of corpses the victims would meet in the frozen water. To begin with, those of the multitudes who lost their lives over the Atlantic slave trade for centuries. We know how it was possible to eventually put an end to that massacre: enacting laws which outlawed the institution of slavery. But those corpses of one time also bring to mind, it cannot be otherwise, the ones of the many who, in our epoch, die at the sea every day in small boats, launches, *balsas*, *pateras*, *cayucos*. Which hands fabricate these bombs? Where are the suitcases hidden which lead to the loss of so many precious lives? Who hides them? As compared to the Atlantic Trade or the terrorist attacks, when it comes to those lives lost at seas around the world everyday while men, women and children try to reach a better life or, simply, a safe one, the question of guilt turns ever more insidious, less easy to elucidate. And the feeling is again of absolute distress. The hemorrhage of migrant and refugee lives lost to the world's oceans has grown so ubiquitous and abundant that we don't really know how to contain and heal so much pain. Is it really out of hand?

The idea also crosses my mind that translating "The Management of Grief," like devoting my efforts to researching rough issues such as those dealt with in Postcolonial Studies, like the ones in Bharati Mukherjee's story, is perhaps a form of penance. Not just a way to revisit history so as not to repeat it; not just a way reminding something as obvious as the other's humanity. I am beginning to understand that translating this story, like

choosing to work on matters related to Postcolonial Studies, is a form of purging sins which are also my own: In more ways than one, like everybody else, I also engineer those bombs, take them into the plane in their suitcases, allow those women, men and children to die in oceans every day.

I hope that, eventually, Shaila Bhave and the community of “the relatives” may forgive my academic and linguistic intrusion and condone my good intentions (as we know, the road to hell is paved with good intentions). I can only say that I pity those unfortunate men and women from the bottom of my heart. It may not be much or help them in the right direction. But I would like to think that through my interpreting, writing, and translating that story about them written by Bharati Mukherjee, I have succeeded, at least, in briefly accompanying their inconsolable grief.

REFERENCES

- Alonso-Breto, Isabel. "Homing Sorrow: Bharati Mukherjee's 'The Management of Grief' as Metadiasporic Narrative and Inscription of Political Empowerment". *Miscelánea*. Vol. 56, 2017, pp. 13-31.
<https://www.miscelaneajournal.net/index.php/misc/article/view/351>. Access 18 March 2021.
- . "La traducción del dolor: sobre 'La gestión del dolor', de Bharati Mukherjee". *Hermeneus: Journal of Research in Translation and Interpreting*, Vol. 21, 2019, pp. 695-701.
<https://revistas.uva.es/index.php/hermeneus/article/view/4078>. Access 18 March 2021.
- Clarke, Blaise, and Bharati Mukherjee. *The Sorrow and the Terror*. Viking, 1997.
- Mukherjee, Bharati. "The Management of Grief". *The Middleman and Other Stories*. Grove Press, 1988.
- . "La gestión del dolor". Translated by Isabel Alonso-Breto. *Hermeneus: Journal of Research in Translation and Interpreting*. Vol. 20, 2018, pp. 609-625.
<https://revistas.uva.es/index.php/hermeneus/article/view/2419>. Access 18 March 2021.