Crossing Borders and Challenging Rules. Challenges in Translating Geetanjali Shree's Hindi Novel *Ret Samādhi*

ALESSANDRA CONSOLARO

Abstract: This article highlights the subversive use of the Hindi language in Geetanjali Shree's writing, which creates an experimental, fragmented and dreamlike narrative, full of language games and invented words, with a constant play on the Hindi/Urdu lexicon. *Ret Samādhi* is a novel about the permeability of borders – between countries, religions, genders, languages, ages, life and death – so it also transcends language barriers. The melodic curve of the sentence, which largely depends on the use (or non-use) of written punctuation and other stylistic strategies, allows for the deconstruction of all identities, linguistic-cultural and religious. Through examples of Geetanjali Shree's 'difficult' 'ungrammatical' 'disobedient' language, I discuss some challenges related to the task of translating this polymorphous language into Italian, comparing the different translation strategies and choices in the English and French translations that were available at the time of the Italian translation.

Keywords: *Hindi Literature, Translation, Geetanjali Shree, Modern Standard Hindi*

1. Introduction

Geetanjali Shree [Gītāñjali Śrī] is a renown Hindi writer, whose career as a writer started while she was doing her PhD, when her first short story *Belpatr* (The wood apple leaf) was published in 1987 in the prestigious literary magazine *Haṃs*.[1] In 2000 the English translation by Nita Kumar of her novel *Māī* (The Mother, 1997; Eng. tr. 2000) made her internationally famous. Besides numerous short stories, she has also published the novels *Hamārā śahar us baras* (Our City That Year, 1998; Eng. tr. 2024), *Tirohit* (*Vanished*, 2008; Eng. tr. 2013) and *Khālī jagah* (*The Empty Space*, 2006; Eng. tr. 2006).

When Geetanjali Shree's novel *Ret samādhi* was released in India in 2018, it was received with little enthusiasm and sales were modest. Some hailed it as a masterpiece of literary experimentation, others found it too difficult to read and to decipher. The story, whose protagonist is an octogenarian woman with her family –actually, we should say her families–, unfolds in three parts. In the first part, the matriarch of an Indian family, whose name is Chandraprabha Devi but is always addressed as Ma or Amma (Mom, Mother), grieves the death of her husband and will not get out of bed. One day she disappears, starting a journey in search of herself. In part two, the missing old lady is found. She moves in with her unmarried daughter and deepens her friendship with a *hijṛā*[2] named Rosie. She finds a new youth and unexpectedly decides to leave for Pakistan. In the concluding part, mother and daughter travel in Pakistan's restricted areas without a permit and the readers come to realize just how much about Ma they did not know: she relives her childhood and the sorrow of separation from loved ones during the Partition, her past is slowly unveiled and she rediscovers herself as Ali Anwar's wife Chanda.

The story changes perspective without warning, gives voice to animals and inanimate objects and includes invented words and grammelot. The text is peppered with popular references to Bollywood films and songs, to prayers and chants, but also highly literary references to Sanskrit, Hindi and Urdu

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1 As there is no universally accepted method for the transliteration of Hindi, I have chosen to follow the system utilized by McGregor (1993).

2 A person whose gender identity is neither male nor female, typically a person who was assigned male at birth but whose gender expression is female.

classics. The melodic sinuosity of the sentence, which largely depends on the use – or non-use – of written punctuation and other stylistic strategies, allow for the deconstruction of all identities, linguistic-cultural and ideological-religious.

In 2022, the Booker prize awarded to the American translation of the novel by Daisy Rockwell catapulted the Hindi writer onto the international scene, and in 2024 the Italian translation by Veronica Ghirardi and me was published. This article is a collection of thoughts highlighting some aspects of the subversive use of the Hindi language in Geetanjali Shree's writing, which creates an experimental, fragmented and dreamlike narrative, full of language games and invented words, with a constant play on the lexicon and other language structures. Referring to the 'difficult,' 'ungrammatical,' 'disobedient' language of Geetanjali Shree, I will discuss some challenges related to the task of translating this polymorphous language into Italian and some solutions we have adopted. In order to compare the different translation strategies and choices, I will quote extensively the Hindi text as well as the English and French translations that were available at the time of the Italian translation.

2. Standard Hindi and the Language of *Ret Samādhi*

As most writers active in so-called regional Indian languages, Geetanjali Shree has often been asked to justify the fact that she does not write in English, as if the choice of her own mother tongue were a bizarre inclination towards a medium that is vaguely perceived as archaic, or smacking of revivalism, or dusty, or naive, something like a folk jargon, preventing who writes in it from participating in the global dialogue of cultures and belonging to the real web of global history.

The standardization of the Hindi language is a recent phenomenon, linked to historical-political dynamics triggered by the process of decolonization and the formation of an idea of an Indian nation that is still debated today. The standardization process brought about a shift from «one language two scripts» (King 1994) to two antagonistic languages, each connected to a religious community and its cultural and literary heritage (Consolaro 2003). This made it necessary to 'purify' both languages, making them rather rigid.

At an institutional level, this was performed by associations like the Nagari Pracharini Sabha, by the University departments where the syllabuses were fixed, by the State institutions that designed linguistic policies. Yet, most people continued to utilize an eclectic language with a cosmopolitan vision. Overall, the Indian linguistic ecosystem is so polyphonic that no language is used in a 'chaste' form, but it is always blended with other speeches. Even the most prominent protagonists of the Hindi literary field came from a mixed background. Suffice to mention the relevance of Punjabi for Krishna Sobti –to whom the novel is dedicated– and Krishna Baldev Vaid, the connection with Urdu for Premchand and Rahi Masoom Raza, or Nirala's hailing from a Marathi speaking milieu. To this one has to add the presence of other linguistic varieties linked to subaltern, marginalized and silenced groups: women, Dalit, Adivasi, laborers, farmers, hijras, etcetera (Consolaro 2011).

Despite the fact that South Asia boasts a very ancient tradition of grammatical and linguistic studies, the language policy of the past two centuries has led to a progressive Sanskritization of standard Hindi, in the name of an alleged purity. This contrasts with the ideas on language expressed, for example, as early as the 5th-6th centuries, by the great Sanskrit philosopher and grammarian Bhartṛhari, who emphasized that language must be dynamic and constantly evolving. According to his view, words do not have fixed meanings, but rather change and evolve over time and it is the *dhvani* or sound – an echo, a vibration, a resonance, an order of sounds – that arbitrarily assigns meanings to words, determining their fluency and generating a meaning that is more meaningful than words: an alliteration, assonance, a particular order or rhythmic pattern of words also clarifies the hidden layers of meaning of what can be heard or understood and cannot be expressed with words. Finally, despite similarities, each word is unique and there are no exact synonyms. In short, Bhartṛhari saw language as a living entity, constantly redefined by its user, with the capacity to evolve. These ideas seem to have enormous relevance in Geetanjali Shree's use of language and mode of writing.

Ret Samādhi is a novel about the permeability of borders – between countries, religions, genders, languages, ages, life and death – so it also transcends language barriers. Geetanjali Shree's writing contravenes the English culture that has become the mainstream, along with the modernist/westernized cogni-

tive framework, as it constitutes a magic circle and excludes the masses. At the same time, it includes a few linguistic variations of the Neo-Aryan languages subsumed under the 'Hindi' label (e.g. Bhojpuri, Urdu), but it also poses a challenge to the 'desi tradition,' arguing that it is never a true creation and becomes a sterile reshaping of traditional codes if it is not constantly and reflexively enriched by dialogical competition with English-speaking (sub)cultures.

3. *Ret Samādhi*'s Multiple Meanings

Geetanjali Shree's style of writing has always been characterized by nonlinear sentences, intellectually stimulating conversations, colloquial words, paradigmatic shifts of the idioms, slang, and poetry/music-like words and phrases which hit emotionally rather than intellectually. In *Ret Samādhi* these features are brought to their limits and challenge translators in any language.

Somebody declared that this novel is not translatable, but I don't agree with such a claim: everything can be translated, even if in the translation process choices have to be made that sometimes leave the translator disappointed and frustrated.

Let us start with the title. The Italian translators were not happy with the English translator's choice to put the title *Tomb of Sand*, for a series of reasons. First of all, a tomb is a sepulchral structure, something that is for the burial of a corpse. It can also denote a mausoleum, or a monument for housing or commemorating a dead person, which is one of the meanings of *samādhi*. But this culture-specific term has a more complex semantic spectrum: first of all, *samādhi* refers to the highest state of meditative consciousness that can eventually lead to the abandonment of the physical body in the state of ultimate absorption in the absolute, which is the act of 'taking *samādhi*.' The body of such a realized guru who has attained Brahman is then buried, as it is believed that a perfected body should not be cremated but rather should be preserved as a «localised instantiation of sacred power radiating forth from the mortal remains left behind by the realised sage» (McLaughlin 2021, 16). This burial site is a Hindu *samādhi*, meaning the shrine that marks the final resting-place of the realized sage. As Mark McLaughlin has argued, this burial practice «has pre-dargāh roots resonant with the Buddhist stūpa and relic

worship tradition» (McLaughlin 2021, 9) and eventually developed into a full-fledged worship tradition, in part by coming into contact with the Sufi *dargāh* tradition. In common understanding, though, the term 'tomb' in India is associated to a cemetery where the dead of the Muslims or Christians are buried and a tomb, or mausoleum, is built in their memory. The Hindu heritage connected with yoga and meditation is left in the background, contradicting what is found in the novel.

When Veronica Ghirardi and I were working at the Italian translation we had the English and French translation at disposal. We were definitely unhappy with the English title, also because putting the word 'tomb' on the frontispiece created an immediate reference to death, while we felt that, even if death is present starting from the very first page, the novel is very much about life and the reader was not to be led to think it was a noir or necrophiliac tale. Annie Montaut's choice to maintain the original title adding a subtitle that suggests the crossing of borders: *Ret Samadhi – au-delà de la frontière*. We liked the idea to maintain the Hindi term *samādhi* that can be somehow familiar to the many people who practice yoga or some kind of meditation, or who have some knowledge of Indian philosophy and culture – a considerable group in contemporary Italy. The novel is full of borders – age, gender, country, speaking/non-speaking creatures, breathing/non-breathing parts of the cosmos, etcetera – that are constantly challenged, crossed and transmogrified into bridges for the circulation of knowledge, truth and joy. Therefore, we decided to title the novel *Ret samādhi – oltre la frontiera*, espousing Montaut's choice.

The meaning of the expression *ret samādhi* remains fuzzy, but the reader can guess it while enjoying the story. As for the presence of sand (*ret*), the old protagonist is described as turning into sand, as if dissolving into it, and then emerges from the sand like a person who rises from the concentration of *samādhi* (RSH 65); the Buddha statue that is kept as a treasure in the family house lied for centuries into the sand and remained in meditation until it was accidentally dug out; Gautama Buddha himself had withdrawn to the riverbank, onto the sand, and practiced meditation and austerity for such a long time that the sand covered him and he remained immersed in meditation within the sand: *ret samādhi* (RSH 84-85). Sand is the desert where Mother and Daughter wander in a wonderful landscape in their new-

conquered intimacy (RSH 298); the girls running in the desert of the new formed Pakistan were caught in a sand storm (RSH 304-308); and at the end of the novel there is an exhortation to cover up with sand all griping (RSH 376).

The term *samādhi* appears 26 times in the Hindi text. I will briefly examine these occurrences.

1. The first time it occurs in this sentence: «ret meṃ samādhi hilī hai» (RSH 31).

The English translation is «The tomb of sand has shifted» (RSE 57). Reading «ret meṃ samādhi» (lit: in the sand the *samādhi* has moved) as the compound 'ret samādhi' translated as «tomb of sand» erases the semantic complexity of the term, reducing it to the architectural manufact.

The French translation is «Le samadhi s'est ému dans le sable» (RSF 41), maintaining the Hindi term.

In the Italian translation we decided to suggest to the reader the different levels of meaning forcing the image: «La concentrazione della samadhi si è mossa nella sabbia» (RSI 50) Literally «the concentration of *samādhi* has moved in the sand». This way we suggest that *samādhi* is concentration but we also let open the other, funeral architectonic, interpretation.

2. The same happens in the expression «janmajanmāntaroṃ kī samādhi meṃ bhi» (RSH 45).

The English translation stresses once again the sepulchral meaning: «In endless trances that evolved into tombs, surviving from one lifetime to another» (RSE 83)

I would like to point out here that the English translation does not re-produce the use of italics that the author adopted in many sections and chapters in the original Hindi text. On the contrary, the Italian version – as well as the French one – respects the authorial choice. Unfortunately, our request to maintain the entire structure of the original text went unheeded. Three details of the paining 'Gertrude Divided' by Atul Dodiya that is used as cover picture for the first edition of the novel –the ribbon, the crow and the mountain– are used as icons that mark the three sections of the novel, and we had requested to maintain them also in the Italian edition. Unfortunately,

we had to accept the publisher's decision to numbers the chapters mimicking the English edition, effacing the visual reference.

In the above-mentioned passage, the French version maintains the untranslated term:

Dans le samadhi qui passe de naissance en naissance. (RSF 63)

In Italian it was expanded into a much-elaborated sentence:

Anche nelle samadhi, *gli stati di meditazione e silenzio spirituale che si succedono nel tempo ma non sono ancora attivi e in movimento*. (RSI 69)

Literally: «Even in *samadhi*-s, the states of meditation and spiritual silence that occur over time but are not yet active and moving».

This way we tried to give the reader a hint of the philosophical complexity of the term, even if we are aware of the dangerous effects of clarification.

3. In the next passage the subject is Amma's back: «itnī halkī ki vo ret ke bhītar se tṭhne lage. jaise samādhi se. ret ke kaṇ ke saṃg uṛne lage» (RSH 65).

For the first time the English translation introduces the notion of mental absorption. Yet, it comes only after the term 'tomb': «So light, she'll start to rise from the sand. As from a tomb. As from a trance. As from a tomb-like trance» (RSE 123)

The French translation uses this passage to introduce the expression 'ret samādhi' followed by a French translation of the term as 'sand meditation':

«Si légère qu'elle pourrait être née du sable. Comme une renaissance après la grande méditation du sable – ret samadhi» (RSF 96)

Lit: So light that it could have been born from the sand. Like a rebirth after the great sand meditation - ret samadhi.

In the Italian translation we maintained the expression «*concentrazione della* samadhi» (concentration of *samādhi*): «*Tanto leggera che cominci a sollevarsi da dentro la sabbia. Come dalla concentrazione della* samadhi» (RSI 99).

4. A long passage from page RSH 84 to page RSH 86 delves on the notion of *samādhi*, with 14 occurrences of the term. The passage is about one of the main characters of the novel: the broken Buddha statue that is kept in a cupboard as a family relic. Everybody thinks it is an antique found in an archaeological excavation that Papa (Daddy) acquired when he was a

District Judge. With the passing of time the emaciated renunciant becomes a member of the family («dekhte dekhte ve uske ādī ho gae jaise kisī apne ke») and in the end of the novel the deep bond between Amma and the statue is revealed. The fasting Buddha – or more precisely 'fasting Bodhisattva/Siddhartha', since it depicts an incident before the enlightenment – is described as a very precious and ancient manufact. It looks exactly the same as the one kept in Lahore Museum, with his caved-in stomach and skeletal body and bones and veins so finely carved that they cannot be distinguished from the long veil that covers the image. This is a work from the Kushan period (2nd to 3rd centuries) excavated in 1894 by Colonel HA Dean from the ruins of a monastery in Sikri, Peshawar («Khaībar Pakhtūnkhwā») that is considered not only as the finest specimen of Gandhara Art and a treasure of Pakistan, but also as one of the rarest antiquities of the earliest world. The original statue measures 84 x 53 x 21 cm, but some old reduced-size replicas and fragmented variants can be found in various institutional collections, from the Peshawar Museum to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It is such a small statue, measuring '5 inch high or even less' (RSH 301), that was found by the young Chanda in the ominous time when she had to leave her country and her husband, before starting a new life as Chandraprabha Devi, who will keep it as her secret «patthar dil» (heart-of-stone).

The statue shows Gautama meditating to attain self-realization, when he was practicing extreme forms of fasting for a very long time, which led to his emaciation. He is well known for forsaking this path of renunciation before his profound awakening, accepting an offering of rice milk by Sujata. Following this, he realized that certain realization could arise from a simple shift in mindset, given the right timing and conditions, and that ascetic hardships were merely self-imposed boundaries.

Adding to the grotesque body, the statue is described as broken, mutilated: a shoulder and one ear are missing, lost somewhere in the sand of the desert. When inscribed into the frame of partition and decolonization, this statue is a colonized body that speaks, uttering its wounds, negating the imposed dumbness of its muted condition and transforming it into self-expression. In the whole novel there are references to bodies that change, grow or lose parts, and it is not necessary here to remind the reader about the relevance of embodiment in postcolonial literature or about the subtle

connection between the representation of broken bodies and fragmented identities (Duncan and Cumpsty 2020). It is important to emphasize that also in independent India the narrative about the nation state requires that 'minority' cultures and practices – small-scale religious and caste groups, tribal communities, workers, activists, women's groups – that is the 'fragments' of Indian society, «have been expected to fall in line with the 'mainstream' (Brahmanical Hindu, consumerist) national culture» (Pandey 1991, p. 559).

That's why another very important suggestion that can be gathered from the reference to the Buddha statue in Lahore's Museum regards multiculturalism. It reminds us that for a very long time in antiquity Lahore was a Jain city, a Buddhist city, and a Hindu city. After the arrival of Muslims in 1021 it was a mixed Hindu-Muslim city, slowly to become a Hindu-Muslim-Sikh city. So, statistically, Pakistan's heritage became Muslim only after 1947. To sum up, the *murti* is an epitome of the individual condition of the protagonist but also of the collective history of South Asia. In the above-mentioned passage, we find for the first time the expression *ret-samādhi* connected and contrasted to *jal-samādhi*. The passage describes Buddha totally absorbed in ascetic practice and meditation, so emaciated that he becomes a «pasliyoṃ kā ḍhāṃcā» (skeleton of ribs), so still that he gets gradually covered by sand. Yet, he is not dead: he breaths, and his consciousness is completely concentrated. This is the *ret-samādhi*. Until one day he emerges from the sand and immerses into the river, therefore the *ret-samādhi* becomes a *jal-samādhi*, that is the meditation of sand/in the sand becomes a meditation of water/in the water.

In the English text these expressions are translated as «the tomb of water» and «the tomb of sand», once again interpreting *samādhi* as the place containing the remains of a dead person, which emphasizes an idea of death, that is actually only apparent, and diminishing the notion of deep, living consciousness, which is crucial to get the relevance of the *sādhanā* process.

On the contrary, the French translation «méditation dans les eaux et dans le sable» stresses the aspect of meditation. In the Italian translation we opted for an open interpretation maintaining the Hindi word, *ret-samādhi*, but we added a different rendition: in the first occurrence we translated 'immerso nella meditazione dentro la sabbia, *ret samadhi*' (lit: immersed in meditation into the sand, *ret samādhi*') while in the second occurrence we

used 'la *samadhi* di sabbia e la *samadhi* di acqua' (lit: the *samādhi* of sand and the *samādhi* of water), so that the reader can guess the various semantic levels.

As for the term *sādhanā*, it is relevant that it appears five times in the analyzed passage. Its meaning refers primarily to 'an action done to achieve a goal'. But in reality, it is a spiritual activity, and in religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism etc., different types of *sādhanā*-s are done to achieve goals. Religious and spiritual disciplines such as worship, yoga, meditation, chanting, fasting and penance are called *sādhanā*. Merriam Webster defines it as a «religious training or discipline through which an individual attains samadhi».

This is why we translated «gaḍḍhā gaḍḍhā āṁkheṁ, sādhanā meṁ baṁd lagne lagīṁ, aur lagta ki acānak khulīṁ to usmeṁ se tej phuṭegā» (RSH 84) as «Gli occhi infossati sembravano chiusi nella meditazione profonda della *samadhi* e avevano l'aria che se si fossero aperti all'improvviso avrebbero emesso una luce folgorante» (RSI 125), lit "The sunken eyes seemed closed in in the deep meditation of *samādhi* and looked as if they would suddenly open and emit a dazzling light"

The original text contains only the term *sādhanā*, but we introduced the word *samādhi*, that appears in the next sentence (lit: in the deep meditation of *samādhi*).

5. Another occurrence of the term *samādhi* has a strong philosophical overtone, as it connects this condition at the same time with the notions of *suṣuptāvasthā* and *ilhām*.

The passage reads: «thakī māṁ ye gahrī bāt soc saktī hai. kyoṁki thakan bhī suṣuptāvasthā hai, samādhi man hai, jahāṁ ilhām ugāte haiṁ» (RSH 124).

Suṣuptāvasthā is defined as a dormant state, like hibernation, the dormant state of some animals during winters in which they lie quietly in one place without eating or drinking anything. It contains the Sanskrit word *suṣupti*, meaning 'deep sleep', that refers to one of the four states of consciousness in Hindu and yogic philosophy, sometimes called 'deep sleep consciousness.' *Suṣupti* is sometimes referred to as dreamless sleep, when the mind ceases activity, having withdrawn from both physical and mental activities, objects

and desires. In this state the self continues to exist, though it is bereft of all experiences. The consciousness is continuous and the mind has absorbed into itself. This state is the one preceding the state of 'pure consciousness', called *turīya*, the true self (*ātman*) beyond the three common states of consciousness that according to many traditions is equal to *samādhi*.

Crossing the border between religions, in this sentence *suṣuptāvasthā* is connected to the Islamic concept of divine inspiration and knowledge transmitted through dreams. *Ilhām* is an Urdu/Hindi term derived from the Arabic word *ʔilhām*, meaning the Word of God, the Divine voice. To be precise, *ilhām* is distinct from Revelation (*waḥy*), the direct transmission of the specific words of revelation (not simply the ideas) by means of an angel, which is specific only to the prophets of Allah, whom he has chosen as his messenger. In Sufism, *ʔilhām* is the blowing in of the divine inspiration and intuitive perception or knowledge into the purified heart which has been sanctified through the remembrance of Allah. It is revelation to the *awliya* –the saints or 'friends of God'– without the intermediation of an angel, and need not be promulgated, even if it prompts the work of creative inspiration through which they speak their words of wisdom, write their books of knowledge, sing their songs of Divine Love.

Aware of the fact that the intercultural reference would be definitely lost, we translated this sentence as follows, rendering *samādhi* as 'transcendental concentration':

«La Mamma spossata può pensare queste cose. Perché anche la stanchezza è una sorta di sonno profondo senza sogni, uno stato di concentrazione trascendentale nel quale sorge la rivelazione» (RSI 180) Lit: The exhausted Mother can think these things. For even exhaustion is a kind of dreamless deep sleep, a state of transcendental concentration in which revelation arises.

Here are the English and French renditions:

«Exhausted Ma could think all these things, because exhaustion is also a state of slumber, **a trancelike state**, where revelations are born» (RSE 239) [emphasis added].

«Parce que la fatigue aussi catalyse l'état de supraconscience, c'est **une forme de méditation**, propice à la révélation» (RSF 186) [emphasis added].

6. In the next occurrence, *samādhi* is connected to the terms *nirvāṇa* and *sādhanā* in a Shaiva context.

«Yā phir śiv jī kā dahkatā kiṃgam pārvatī ne apne bhītar khīṃc liyā thā ki śītal jal meṃ ḍudo ke uskī jalan bujhā deṃ? Śśś śāṃti yoni ne irādon par pānī pher diyā, sthir raheṃ, nirvāṇ, sādhanā samādhi, jaise har śiv maṃdir meṃdekh lo.

Yoni aur yogī». (RSH 222)

The Italian rendition maintains the terms used also in English version «nirvana, meditation, samadhi» (RSE 449), while the French translation is «nirvana, ascèse et meditation» (RSF 334).

«O si trattava dell'ardente *lingam* di Shiva che Parvati aveva accolto dentro di sé per immergerlo nel suo fresco umidore e spegnerne il fuoco? *Shhh*, *shanti shanti*, pace...

La *yoni*, la matrice, ha versato acqua sull'ardore del desiderio affinché tutto si plachi: nirvana, meditazione, *samadhi*, come puoi vedere in ogni tempio di Shiva.

La *yoni* e lo *yogi*». (RSI 332)

7. The next passage – «Har bār aur khāṃsne lagtī jaise kuch uṛegā bāhar, samādhi toṛke» (RSH 255) – focuses on Amma who falls into a state of depression and illness after the death of her friend Rosie, a hijra with whom she has a strong bond, beyond the rules of social acceptability. She keeps on coughing, «as though something might fly out, breaking her samadhi». (RSE 514).

The Italian and French translation too maintain the original Hindi term:

«e ogni volta inizia a tossire come se qualcosa dovesse volar fuori, infrangendo la sua *samadhi*» (RSI 382).

«toussant à chaque fois comme si quelque chose allait s'extraire et s'envoler et l'arracher à son samadhi» (RSF 382).

8. In a subsequent passage we find Amma and daughter in Pakistan, with Amma about to reveal that she had a life before becoming Mother, even before becoming Chandradevi. She has crossed a border and has arisen from *samādhi*: the Italian, French and English versions maintain the Hindi term,

only the French creates a compound joining the Hindi and French words – «*méditation-samadhi*». In the next sentence, the term is in the plural form, claiming that religious fanatics and authoritarian governments do not like whatever does not comply to imposed rules, either in artistic expression, social and gender conventions or inner freedom and consciousness. All these are epitomized in the terms *samādhi*, *kahānī* and Bhupen Khakkar, the painter who innovated the Indian painting scene through his unique figurative style that combined high and low, popular and painterly aesthetics, and expressed incisive observations of class and sexuality.

«Jaise Māṁ. Jaise bār bār. Phir beṭī ke saṃg. Sarhad lāṁghkar. Samādhi se uṭhī. Kaṭṭartaṃtr ko samādhiyāṁrās nahīṃ ātīṃ na kahāniyāṁ, na Bhūpen Khākhar» (RSH 289).

«Come Mamma. Più e più volte. E ora con la Figlia. Valicata una frontiera. Sorta dalla meditazione, dalla samadhi. Fanatismi e regimi autoritari non apprezzano le samadhi, né i racconti, né Bhupen Khakhar» (RSI 429).

«Like Ma. Over and over. Now with Beti, spanning boundaries. Arisen from samadhi. Religious fanatics and governments do not care for samadhis, nor stories, nor Bhupen Khakkar» (RSE 577).

«Comme Maman. Plusieurs frontières. Cette fois en compagnie de la fille. Franchissant la frontière. Quittant sa méditation-samadhi. Ni les espaces de méditation, ni les histoires ni Bhupen Khakhar n'ont la faveur des régimes réactionnaires ou des fanatiques» (RSF 430).

9. The last occurences of the term *samādhi* are found in the passage about partition that narrates the terrible escape in the desert of the girl who was then Amma with the little girl who was then Rosie. They move forward in the sand storm as if swimming in a rough sea, and they see mutilated bodies: a person's half-eaten body, a disembodied arm, innards. There is also something that looks like a «a holy man seated in samadhi», like Amma's statue. Yet, it turns out to be a decapitated man in this confused ocean of sand, so Amma muses that it cannot be *ret-samādhi*, nor *jal-samādhi*, but it must be a new form of *samādhi*: *dhaṛ-samādhi*.

«Koī r̥ṣi samādhi meṃ baiṭhā? Merī murti kī tarah. Par r̥ṣi kā śīṣ kaṭā huā. dhaṛ-samādhi. (RSH 307).

This is rendered in English as «Headless samadhi» (RSE 612). In French and Italian as «Méditation-tronc. *Dhar samadhi*» (RSF 458) and «*Dhar-samadhi*, tronco in meditazione» (RSI 454-455). In both these latter versions it is retained the meaning of torso, 'upper part of the body without the head and limbs', and 'truncated', from the verb meaning 'cut off', and there is also a second meaning as trunk, the main stem of a tree, suggesting an image of solidity and stillness. The English version describes the body as having the head cut off, possibly also suggesting a secondary meaning as 'foolish; stupid'.

4. Other Terms Connected to *Samādhi*

In the novel we notice a few other expressions connected to the semantic realm of *samādhi*.

First of all, the *tatsama*[3] word *samādhisth*, a Sanskrit compound consisting of the terms *samādhi* and the suffix *-stha*. It creates an adjective meaning 'absorbed in meditation', 'abiding in contemplation' (*Śivapurāṇa* 2.3.24; *Pañcatantra* 162, 23). It refers to 'one who is positioned in *samādhi*' and, according to the *Netratantra* of Kṣemarāja – a Śaiva text from the 9th century – is used to describe Buddha.

In *Ret Samādhi* this term appears only once:

«*Choṭī hotī aurat sīṭī aisī hī bajātī hai jaise registān meṃ havā bahtī hai, binā kahīṃṭakrāe aur dhīme dhime ret kī parteṃ uḍtī haiṃ* **samādhisth ākār** *ubharte haiṃ*» (RSH 261) [emphasis added]

«*Una donna che si sta rimpicciolendo fischia come il vento che soffia sul deserto, senza incontrare ostacoli, e a poco a poco strati di sabbia si levano rivelando* **forme in meditazione, assorte in samadhi**» *(*RSI 390) [emphasis added].

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3   The native grammatical taxonomy of the Indo Aryan lexicon for Middle and Neo Indo Aryan languages lists three categories: 1) *tatsama* are the terms 'same as that', loanwords that generally belong to a higher and more erudite register than common words and retain the Sanskrit form at least in the orthographic aspect; 2) *tadbhava* are words with an Indo-Aryan origin (and thus related to Sanskrit) that evolved through language change in the Middle Indo-Aryan stage and were eventually inherited into a modern Indo-Aryan language; 3) *deśi* (local) words have a non-Indo-Aryan source, typically Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, or Tibeto-Burman. For a discussion of this classification see Drocco 2012.

«*La femme qui rapetisse siffle comme le vent souffle sur le désert, sans obstacle, et peu à peu se lèvent les couches de sable, et émergent* **les formes des méditants en samadhi**» (RSF 390) [emphasis added].

«The growing-smaller woman whistles like the wind in the desert that flows without colliding with anything, and slowly the layers of sand fly up, and **forms meditating in samadhi** are revealed» (RSE 526) [emphasis added].

A *tadbhav* form of this term, *samādhist*, is more frequent in the novel.

In modern standard Hindi this term is commonly used in the expression '*samādhist hai*', meaning 'rest in peace'. In Marathi it is a synonym of *samādhisth*. In the novel we find four occurrences of the term in three different passages. The first one is the passage that I discussed in the previous section where the adjective is used to describe the Buddha statue.

Purānī **samādhist** buddh murti khaṃḍit thī (RSH 84) [emphasis added].

The ancient **meditating** Buddha was cracked (RSE 162) [emphasis added].

La vieille statue du Bouddha **en méditation** était ébréchée (RSF 127) [emphasis added].

La vecchia statua del Buddha **meditante** era mutilata (RSI 125) [emphasis added].

The second one is referred to storytelling and the narrative structure of stories.

«Āge bāt itnī ki saṃg calte rahte haiṃ, baṃd hokar bhī baṃd nahīṃ hote, samādhist rahte haiṃ, aur koi jhoṃkā unheṃ phir hariyātā hai» (RSH 196).

As I have earlier observed, the English translation stresses the funerary meaning also in this passage, linking it with the notion of being spellbound or possessed, and maintaining also the original Hindi term. «And going forward, incidents keep occurring; even when they're over, they're not over, they remain **entombed, entranced, in samadhi**, and it may only take a puff of breeze to bring them back to life» (RSE 397) [emphasis added].

The notion of meditation is more poignant in the French and Italian rendering, that treat the term as a synonymous of *samādhisth*.

«Disons juste que les chapitres vont sans fin, même finis ils ne sont pas finis, **ils restent en méditation**, jusqu'à ce qu'un coup de vent leur redonne du vif» (RSF 294) [emphasis added].

«E portando avanti la questione, i capitoli continuano ad andare avanti, pur essendosi conclusi non sono conclusi, **restano in *samadhi*, assorti in meditazione**, finché un soffio di vento non li riporta in vita» (RSI 291-2) [emphasis added].

5. Translatability between Meaning and Rhythm

The final passage where the term *samādhist* occurs allows me to highlight the notion of linguistic inventiveness, that is a main feature of the novel, but becomes a challenge when translating Hindi into other languages.

In the final part of the novel dealing with Amma's journey to Pakistan and referring to the partition there is a challenging passage where the same adjectives –two of them rhyming– are repeated, referring them first to the government's mood and then to Amma's elder son who is compared to a border. The adjectives are *dhāvit*, *plāvit* and *samādhist*.

«Deś baṁṭe to duśmanī nibhatī hai dostī ke sāth, aut vīzā aur bārḍar mūḍpeḍipeṃḍ rahtā hai — **kabhī dhāvit, kabhī plāvit, kabhī samādhist**.

Vāghā tak sāth āye baṁṭī- baṁṭī nazar se ammā ko bahan ke sāth dekhye hue, khud koī bārḍar hoṃ jaise — kabhī dhāvit, kabhī plāvit, kabhī samādhist» (RSH 264) [emphasis added].

The translating choices are quite different in the three translations into European languages, and they are all original, obviously trying to recreate sound and rhythm in each target language: any language is about words and there is something magical in the live, ephemeral, polyvalent, dynamic quality of words.

The English translation maintains the rhyme in three adjectives (slighted, delighted, far-sighted) and adds an elaborate rendering of *samādhist*, translating it differently in bosth sentences: The first occurrence is «Or meditative. In a state of samadhi», while in the second occureence the original Hindi term is maintained, adding two clarifications: «Entranced. In a trance. Samadhist». Here is the full passage in the English rendition:

«When a country divides, enmity jostles amity and visas and borders depend on the mood – be it slighted, delighted, even far-sighted. Or meditative. In a state of samadhi. Bade came as far as Wagah, dividing his attention between

Ma and Beti as though he himself were a type of border – slighted, delighted, far-sighted. Entranced. In a trance. Samadhist» (RSE 532).

In French, the choice was to maintain three rhyming adjectives in both sentences, with a slight change of meaning: «tantôt éruptive, tantôt effusive, tantôt meditative» (literally: sometimes eruptive, sometimes effusive, sometimes meditative).

«Le pays s'est coupé en deux, et depuis c'est un mélange d'hostilité et d'amitié, et l'obtention des visas et l'ouverture de la frontière dépendent toujours de l'humeur du moment – tantôt éruptive, tantôt effusive, tantôt méditative. L'Aîné les accompagna jusqu'à Wagah, le regard partagé à la vue de sa mère avec sa soeur, frontière lui-même – tantôt éruptive, tantôt effusive, tantôt méditative» (RSF 394).

In Italian the idea was to create a variation, with assonance in the first sentence referred to mood (fe**rito**, somm**erso**, ass**orto** - lit: wounded, submerged, absorbed), maintaining the Hindi word *samādhi*, while creating a rhyme in the second sentence (volit**ivo**, opposit**ivo**, meditat**ivo** lit: strong-willed, oppositional, meditative).

«Quando un paese si divide ostilità e amicizia si mescolano, e visti e frontiere dipendono dall'umore del momento, a volte ferito, a volte sommerso, a volte assorto in samadhi. Il Grande andò fino a Wagah dividendo le sue attenzioni tra la Mamma e la Sorella, come se lui stesso fosse una frontiera, a volte volitivo, a volte oppositivo, a volte meditativo» (RSI 395).

It is impossible to list all instances of the defying power of Geetanjali Shree's language in *Ret Samādhi*, therefore I will just add here a couple examples of the way-out we found in Italian when we got stuck in some music and rhythms that were particularly challenging to be transposed into our language.

1. The following passage contains a list of names that create rhyme, assonance, and a poetic rhythm.

«Havā bahurupiyā hai. Smr̥ti dard i**cch**ā yaq**īn** jal**vā** has**īn** kalpa**nā** aṃbar**īn**» **(**RSH 158) [emphasis added].

The original rhyme scheme is abcdcdcd. In Italian we altered the original word order into «smr̥ti dard icchā yaqīn hasīn jalvā aṃbarīn kalpanā» in order to create the scheme abcbdbeb, to recreate rhyme and rhythm in Italian:

«Memoria, affli**zione**, desiderio, convin**zione**, bellezza, attra**zione**, profumo, immagina**zione**» (RSI 238) [emphasis added].

2. Another passage gives is an example of *enumeratio*, that, together with its sub-figure of speech called *accumulatio* – a succession of words or groups of words or sentences – is often used in the novel with the aim of making the description, narration and argument more effective.

«Ye samādhi-līn prāṇī hī haiṃ jo īṃṭ, khopḍī, haḍḍī, bāsan, ābhūṣaṇ, murti, moṭi, sīpī, svar, sāṁs, paṃkh, pukhrāj, dānā, dil, kahānɪ, rūhānī, kaṃkaḍ, kaṇ kaṇ, kān, āṃkh, kuch bane paṛe rahte haiṃ» RSH 85.

Here is the English translation, that appears to translate the text literally: «Each of these are beings absorbed in meditation, and are comprised of brick, skull, bone, vessel, jewellery, idol, pearl, shell, sound, breath, feather, topaz, grain, heart, story, romance, pebble, bits and bobs, ears, eyes, and so on and so forth» (RSE 162).

The passage, though, has a peculiar sound, alliteration and rhyme-scheme. The French translator declared: «Then I chanced upon three words whose rhythm I felt could be of use to me. So I put them together – œil orteil oreille (eye toe ear). Other words, which are otherwise popular and standard grammar were transformed into an index of exceptions – caillou genou hibou bijou joue (pebble knee owl jewel cheek). The sequence changed with rhythm, some with humour, and some in play. This was necessary, for *Ret Samadhi* could not be a simple translation». (https://scroll.in/article/1024899/how-annie-montaut-tough-translated-the-international-booker-winner-ret-samadhi-into-french).

Here is the result: «Ce sont les êtres de méditation qui sont échoués là transformés en brique, crâne, os, plat, compotier, statue, perle, coquillage, voix, souffle, aile, topaze, grain, coeur, histoire, pur esprit spiritualité, oeil orteil oreille caillou genou hibou bijou joue» (RSF 127).

In Italian we tried to maintain the sematic value of the words, but also allitterations, assonances and rhymes:

«Ciascuno di essi è proprio un essere vivente assorto in meditazione, che se ne sta lì trasformato in qualcosa, ma**tt**one, **t**eschio, o**sso**, va**ssoi**o, gi**oi**ello, statua, perla, conchiglia, suono, respiro, piuma, top**azio**, gr**an**o, cu**ore**, racconto, am**ore**, ciott**olo**, bric**iolo**, ore**cchio**, o**cchio**» (RSI 126) [emphasis added].

3. Another example of the difficulty to recreate *dhvani* in Italian is shown in the long sequence in the novel that appears as a sort of updated version of the Persian poem *The Conference of the Birds* by 12th-13th century Sufi poet Farid ud-Din Attar, commonly known as Attar of Nishapur (Attar 1984). In a long passage, the crows are observing Elder Brother, who has climbed a tree in front of his sister's apartment as he wanted to spy Amma, who has moved there for her convalescence. Yet, he has fallen asleep and he is dreaming of the numerous kinds of saree that he bought for Amma, finally comparing Amma's elegance to his sister's shabbiness.

«Phir bahin le gayī jise vaise hī dehātī beḍaṃge kapṛoṃ kā śauk hai, kuch paidal hai...

Paidlī. Kauvvoṃ ne noṭ kiyā

Paiṭhnī. Kauvvī ne sa<u>kh</u>tī se kahā» (RSH 192).

The pun is based on the words *paidal/ paidlī/ paiṭhnī*. «Paidal» refers to the sister, «paidlī/ paiṭhnī» to the long enumeration listing the names of sarees that the young crows are learning under the guidance of an old and expert 'crowess'. The meaning of «paidal» is 'who walks on foot', but it has a derogatory meaning when used to connote something banal, mediocre, mundane or prosaic. This is the connotation that the brother is using to describe his sister, whose lack of style and elegance he deplores. «Paidlī» is a feminine noun related to the pawn in chess. The name «paiṭhnī» cannot be translated, being a culturally specific term. It denotes a traditional type of saree from Maharashtra, renowned for its intricate design and ornamental *zarī* borders and *pallū*, which is handwoven using fine silk and gold threads.

The English translation reads as follows:

«and then my sister, who only likes unstylish villager-type clothing anyway took it away—but, of course, she is patently ridiculous...

Patently, the crows noted.

Paithani, Crowess said sternly» (RSE 391)

Here is the French translation:

«Après la soeur l'a pris, celle qui de toute manière aime se fagoter dans des vêtements informes comme une paysanne, la demeurée...

"Paysanne", notèrent les corbeaux.

Paithni, corrigea Dame corbelle avec sévérité. (RSF 288).

In the Italian pronunciation «paiṭhnī» sounds more or less like *pètani*: Italian has no retroflex sounds and does not mark aspirations, therefore the syllable *ṭha* is reduced to an unvoiced dental. The problem in finding a rhyme is that most common Italian words are stressed on the penultimate (second-to-last) syllable and it is not difficult to find 'rima piana'. Yet, in this case we needed to find a word stressed on the third to last syllable (rima sdrucciola), which is more complicated. Moreover, the matching word had to make sense: a rhyming word would be, for example, plàtani (plane trees), but it was hard to create a meaningful pun with it.

We investigated various possibilities and we finally opted for an assonance, utilizing the term pèttini as an imperative form of the verb 'pettinare' (to comb), as it appears in an idiomatic sentence that is used in central Italy 'chi ha lana cardi e chi ha lino pettini'. This literally means 'those who have wool should card and who have flax should comb'. This suggests that, according to what one has, one chooses the suitable behavior. To untangle and make it soft, wool requires carding, an energetic operation, with a tool made up of two opposing hooked teeth; the linen is combed with iron tooth combs to make it uniform and clean. Both verbs have a metaphorical sense in popular language: 'cardare' means, especially in Tuscan dialect, giving an energetic lesson of scolding and beatings to a naughty boy or to a person who has committed a serious fault; 'combing' means the same thing, but the action is toned down. Therefore: depending on who you are dealing with, you take different measures.

So finally, this is the Italian translation of the passage:

«e poi mia sorella, che comunque ha questa passione per vestiti informi l'ha portata via, ma che ci si può fare? Chi ha lana cardi e chi ha lino pettini.

Pettini. Annotarono i corvi.

Paithani. Corresse severamente la corva.» (RSI 287)

Literally: «and then my sister, who has this passion for shapeless clothes anyway, took her away, but what can I do? those who have wool should card and who have flax should comb

Comb. The crows noted.

Paithani. Corrected the crowess sternly».

In conclusion, we took the liberty to change the text creating a pun in Italian where assonance is maintained. Even if it is just a pale shadow of the

original, as long as it conveys something we reached a somewhat satisfactory solution for a very hard challenge.

6. One Language, Many Languages

Geetanjali Shree chose a colloquial register for *Ret Samādhi*, but without systematic dialectal inflections. The author takes full advantage of the lexical richness of the Hindi language, alternating synonyms and prefixes of various origins, interspersing the narrative with onomatopoeias and alliterations to reproduce an intimate and familiar atmosphere and an everyday life involving all senses. Through the repetition of prefixes and words, or the reproduction of the same sentence structure, she gives to many passages of the novel a particularly poetic tone and creates unusual images that punctuate the narrative. At the same time, she adopts a whole series of expedients to recreate the oral dimension, inserting a large number of interjections and exclamations in the dialogues, fragmenting, compacting or leaving unfinished sentences to allow the reader to imagine the speaker's tone and expression.

The language used by Geetanjali Shree is very elaborate and can be analyzed on two levels. On the one hand, she frequently resorts to elements typical of orality, creating in the reader the impression of witnessing a direct recording of scenes from everyday life; on the other hand, she makes unusual juxtapositions, plays with concordances, assonances and synonyms in a refined and evocative manner. A colorful and colloquial Hindi, endowed with a rich lexicon, mixed and hybridized with languages and dialects of the subcontinent, is bent to the poetic and expressive needs of the author, who dismantles and reconstructs it at will.

This operation, which makes Geetanjali Shree's writing exceedingly interesting for those who know Hindi and other South Asian languages in depth, complicates the task of translation and it is inevitable that in the target language a whole series of nuances, associations and implicit meanings are lost. We tried to make up for losses, for example, recreating dialectal inflexions in an ungrammatical or coarse use of standard Italian – the choice of any real dialect would have suggested localizations that would distort the narrative.

Here is an example:

«Maiṃ bhaiyā ke pāṃu dabāi rahau ho lekin binne dhyānnāeṃ ho. Binkī āṃkheṃ muṃdī hīṃ aur mhoṃ meṃ jaiseṃ kuch phaṃso bhao hai, nikāri raye hoṃ. Tanhai Cimpū akhbār laikeṃ darbajje pai. Bhayyā jī uchle aur bāī mhoṃ se bake sāmne. Bū tau daiyā re, akhbār phaṃki kaṃ bhāgo. Bū kahtu hai ki bhayyājī roj jai kattaiṃ. Unaiṃ kuch hai gaau hai» (RSH 46).

«Una volta io **ci stavo massaggiando** i piedi, ma lui **non ci faceva mica** caso. E **c'aveva** gli occhi chiusi e nella bocca **è come se ci aveva** qualcosa di chiuso dentro che stava uscendo fuori. E allora è arrivato Chimpu con i giornali, lì sulla porta. Il Signorino ha fatto un salto e si è piantato là, davanti al suo naso e ha aperto la bocca. **Quello là ha fatto** Oddio!, **ci ha buttato addosso** il giornale e è scappato via. **Quello là** dice che fa così tutti i giorni. C'è qualcosa che non va!» (RSI 71) [emphasis added].

Composition is in Hindi a very productive system for generating new lexical elements. Word composition is also used for stylistic purposes by Geetanjali Shree, who uses compounds of all kinds and coins new ones. The lexical richness of the hybrid linguistic variant chosen by Geetanjali Shree also plays a key role here. The author also coins compounds with more than two terms, exploiting a tendency to 'compact' elaborated concepts typical of the colloquial register, not only in Hindi but also in Italian and other languages. Conjunctions, prepositions, verbs and nouns are merged and pronounced all at once as if they constituted a single lexeme. For example, the above quoted expression «mūḍpeḍipeṃḍ» is constructed as a Hinglish adverb deriving from the expression «mood pe depend» (to depend on [Hindi postposition *pe*] the mood).

As for the syntax, the order of the constituents of a sentence in Hindi is not rigid, but there are rules that must be respected if one wants to construct a sentence in which none of the complements is in a 'marked' position. The verbal form is usually found in the last position while the subject is placed at the beginning of the sentence, possibly preceded only by the space-time expressions. Adjectives and the complement of specification always precede the noun to which they refer and the adverb of negation is always found before the verb. On the other hand, in its spoken variant standard Hindi tends to dislocate whichever constituent of the sentence one wishes to emphasize, usually at the end of the sentence, after the verbal form. These kinds of marked constructions are very frequent in the novel and constitute

perhaps the most frequently used expedient to reproduce the vividness of the spoken language. This distortion of the canonical order of constituents gives the Hindi sentence an idiomatic character that often does not result as intense in the Italian translation. In Italian, however, we can insert elements that reproduce the redundancy typical of the colloquial register, such as the repetition of the personal pronoun.

As much as it tries to simulate orality, the language variant chosen for a novel remains a written language and consequently there is a reduction in the elements that characterize and accompany human communication, such as facial expressions, hand gestures, intonation and pauses. However, some of these phenomena can also be reproduced in writing; the author of *Ret Samādhi* strives to reproduce the immediacy and vividness of Hindi in the construction of the sentences of her novel recurring to phraseology and speech figures: interjections, accumulations, repetitions.

Another element of disobedience to standard language rules is in the lack of punctuation. In order to reproduce a speech delivered quickly, all in one go, the author sometimes deliberately omits punctuation marks, creating a verbal flow that is like a stream of consciousness. This is particularly visible in one long passage, that is worth emphasizing (RSH 77-79): it consists of almost two pages in one go without stopping, i.e. neither a semicolon nor a full stop anywhere, without punctuation, nor any exclamation marks. As far as I know, this is a pioneering experiment in Hindi literature. In the English translation of these two pages, however, punctuation marks have been used extensively. We decided that it was important to maintain the flow of the original text, as in any case the readers read at their own pace, breaking long sentences into pieces according to their individual rhythm.

Within the novel, the transition between direct speech and narrative context is often not indicated in any way, nor is the exchange of lines between the two interlocutors; the content of the dialogues in any case allows the reader to identify the speakers and the context. In Italian we marked the beginning of direct speech using an upper case, even if Devanagari script does not have upper and lower case, as it would have been too hard for an Italian reader to read a text completely in lower case script, adding to it a kind of experimental challenge that is not really present in the Hindi text. Otherwise, in the translation, we have tried to maintain the author's usage,

even though in Italian the lack of punctuation sometimes may cause a loss in expressiveness and it is more effective to emphasize the excited tone by inserting question marks and exclamation marks.

7. Challenging the Rules of the Language

The Hindi language is undoubtedly characterized by a great lexical richness. In addition to terms derived from Sanskrit, words of Arabic-Persian origin abound, the origin of which can be traced back both to the cultivation of Persian as a scholarly and literary language at the Mughal court, and to the trade relations that Arab merchants entertained with the western coasts of the subcontinent, in times well before the military conquest of northern India. Also noteworthy are the so-called *deśī* words, derived from ancient dialectal forms not attested in classical Sanskrit and the non-Indo-Aryan languages (Dravidian and Muṇḍa) and a few borrowings from Portuguese, the first European language with which the inhabitants of the subcontinent came into contact. Loans from English abound for obvious reasons in all vocabulary related to objects (and concepts) of Western origin, and in westernized circles, there is a frequent tendency to insert English terms and entire sentences into discourse of all kinds.

The presence of lexemes of different origins constitutes a great resource for Hindi writers, who can exploit at will the potential of the Hindi language to make a surprising number of synonyms available to indicate the same term. Language hybridization is a common process. Historically horizontal language contact is attested as a profound and widespread reality in India. Contemporary language hybridization is visible in unmarked code-switching (alternating between two or more languages in a single conversation) between different Indian languages, and between English and regional Indian vernaculars.

The Hindi used by Geetanjali Shree is not excessively Sanskritised: terms of Arabic-Persian origin are abundantly used in all semantic fields and are in principle interchangeable with synonyms of Sanskrit origin. Geetanjali Shree pushes the possibilities of playing with vocabulary to the extreme, going so far as to construct expressions that are a real pain for the translator.

Here is an example of pun with homonymous terms:

«Par khudāī to khudāī hai. Khudā bhī, khodnā bhī. Sab kuch aur bhī vo nikālnā hai. Ret aur miṭṭī se, jal aur havā se, purānī haḍḍiyāṁ aur kahāniyāṁ, khudāī meṁ aur khudāī meṁ, avatarit hotī haiṃ» (RSH 85).

In this passage we find a series of terms that result to be homographic terms due to the fact that the *nuktā* (dot) is no longer marked in Devanagari.

खुदाई	خُدائی	xudāī/<u>kh</u>udāī	Persian: divinity, divine
खुदाई		khudāī	Sanskrit: excavation
खुदा	خُدا	xudā	Persian: the supreme being
खुदा		khudā	Sanskrit: past participle v. i. खुदना (khudnā, to be excavated)
खोदना		khodnā	Sanskrit: v. t. to excavate

The pun between divinity and digging is difficult enough to recreate in Italian. In the end, we opted for a solution where we used the verb 'scavare' (to dig) and 'scovare dio' (to find god).

«Ma scavare è arrivare al Creatore. Scavare è scovare Dio. Tira fuori tutto e di tutto. Di sabbia e terra, di acqua e aria, vecchie ossature e storie imperiture emergono scavando e scovando il divino» (RSI 126).

The pun is repeated at the end of the chapter (RSH 87, RSI 128) and the language play continues in the passage, introducing a new pun with <u>khudāī/ khud/ khudī</u> where *khud* is the reflexive pronoun, <u>kh</u>udī is 'egotism, self-respect, pride, ego', and in the nuqtaless form khudī means 'dug up'.

खुद /खुद	خود	xud/<u>kh</u>ud/khud	Persian: reflexive pronoun : oneself
खुदी	خُودی	xudī /<u>kh</u>udī	Persian: egotism, ego
खुदी		Khudī	Sanskrit: past participle : dug up, carved out

The pun develops into a critique of the colonial epistemological violence that imposed the European knowledge system as the only valid one, universalizing the historical and scientific methods that had been created in connection with the imperialistic conquest of the world by European powers. The commodification of the colonized knowledge, spirituality, art and culture, is the result of this overlapping of digging, researching and egotism (*khudī/ khudī*) (RSH 86).

The colonial encounter is also responsible for the presence of the English language in India. With 135 million English speakers – around 10% of its population – India boasts to be the world's second-largest English-speaking country, second only to the United States. The 1961–2011 Indian censuses report a sharp increase in Hindi/English bilinguals, suggesting that English is on the rise in India. Moreover, besides monolingual Hindi speakers and Hindi/English bilinguals there is an emerging class who do not have full bilingual competence and switch between Hindi and English, communicating via a code popularly known as 'Hinglish' (Parshad *et al.* 2016). Hinglish is used in advertising jingles and Bollywood movie titles and this strengthens the impression that it is a recent phenomenon, but it is actually a couple of centuries old.

For the Italian translators the presence of English in the text does not pose a real challenge, as it is easily left in the Italian text creating a distancing effect. The following passage, though, shows a very complex mix of languages, with Hindi sentences sprinkled with a few English words and other instances where the core sentence is in English with a few Hindi words or phrases included. Either way, the meaning is not obvious unless one understands the Hindi references.

«**Poz** to phir **foṭo**. Kaun khīṃce? **Yors siṃserlī**! To **mobāil** nikālā **biyar** kā gilās kise dūṁ, Siḍ ko diyā. To Siḍ ne apnā gilās **grainī** ke hāth meṃ rakh diyā. **Nāṭī garl ḍriṃkiṃg biyar**. Jaldī **foṭo** lo. Nain ai, Siḍ kī dādī ne kuch nū nā kī aur muskurā dī aur vah uchlā— **renbo**. Maiṃne khud dekhā. Pataṃg meṃ se raṃg lapke ki titliyoṃ se, **renbo** uchlā aur **grainī** ke gilās meṃ **ḍāiv** karke tair gayā. Aur vahāṁ e dādī kī āṁkh meṃ bhī jhilmilā gayā. **A renbo camkoḍ hiyar, ênḍ a renbo camkoiṃg deyr**. āṁkh vālā aur bhī mast. **Foṭo** meṃ sab **kaipcarḍ** hai. Kahīṃ **renbo**, kahīṃ uska mast. Yakīn na ho to **foṭo** dekh leṃ, aur isse zyādā kyā kahūṁ?» (RSH 52) [emphasis added].

I have highlighted in bold the English words in the passage. Some are part of the common Hindi lexicon (*foṭo, mobāil, biyar*: photo, mobile, beer) some expressions are in English (*grainī* : granny; *Yors siṃserlī*: yours sincerely; *Nāṭī garl ḍriṃkiṃg biyar*: naughty girl drinking beer). Other expressions can be considered 'standard Hinglish' (English words in the Devanagari script inserted in sentences that are structured according to standard Hindi grammar (*ḍāiv karke*: to dive; *kaipcarḍ* hai: is captured). One sentence is a less common form of code-switching and translanguaging as Hindi lexicon is inserted and morphologically adapted to the syntax of English (a renbo camkoḍ hiyar, enḍ a renbo camkoiṃg deyr; a rainbow chamakoed here and a rainbow chamkoing there, where the Hindi verb *camaknā* -to twinkle is congiated as an English verb). Last but not least, Amma – who in this passage is called both Dādī, Hindi for Paternal Grandmother, and Granny – speaks in a childish way, pronouncing the negation *nahīṃ nahīṃ* as *nai nai*, which is a relevant and recurrent pun in the first section of the novel (I'll come back to this in the next section).

For the Italian audience it is impossible to grasp all these layers of linguistic subtlety, also because it is impossible to recreate them exactly in another language. We could not reproduce the Hinglish effect in all sentences, but we used Macaronic English reproducing the core sentence in Hinglish mixed with Italian words with an Italianized orthography: «A raimbo scintilled here, and a raimbo scintilling dere». Here the verb 'scintillare' (to twinkle) is conjugated as an English verb. Amma's language is reproduced as we did in the first pages of the novel, where the challenge was to shift from 'No' to 'nuova' (Nuu! noo! nuu naaa) –I'll come back to this in the next sections.

Here is the passage in the Italian translation:

«Se c'è una posa allora c'è una foto. Chi l'ha scattata? *Yours sincerely*. Allora io estrassi lo smartphone, a chi posso dare il bicchiere di birra? Lo diedi a Sid. E Sid mise il suo bicchiere in mano a *Granny*. *Naughty girl, drinking beer*! Su presto, fai una foto!

Nuu! noo! La nonna di Sid fece un po' di versi tipo nuu naaa e una specie di sorriso e lui spuntò: l'arcobaleno! Io l'ho visto con i miei occhi. L'arcobaleno spuntò dai colori che erompevano dall'aquilone o dalle farfalle, e con un tuffo andò a nuotare nel bicchiere di birra di *Granny*. E di là scintillò anche negli occhi della nonna. A raimbo scintilled here, and a raimbo scintilling dere.

Quello negli occhi ancora più estasiato. È tutto catturato nella foto. Qui l'arcobaleno e qui il suo riflesso. Se non ci credete venite a vedere la foto, che altro posso dire?» (RSI 79-80)

It should be pointed out that in the above quoted passage the defiance of rules is pushed to the limit, as there is also a very non-standard use of the Nagari script. Neologisms abound in the novel. For example, in the above quoted passage at page RSH 192 there is the non-standard word *kauvī* denoting a female crow, but also other related terms are coined, such as *kauvīhṛday*, *kauvāniyat*, and *kauvākāhilī* (RSH 185), that we recreated in Italian with neologisms such as «corva, corvitudine, corvessenza, corvindolenza» (RSI 276) – but a creative use of the script is also introduced. In the sentence «A renbo camkoḍ hiyar, ênḍ a renbo camkoiṃg deyr» the English word 'and' is transliterated as ऍन्ड.

The initial vowel is the Devanagari non-standard vowel ऍ 'candra e' (transliterated as ê), reproducing the British English vowel [æ], used in the pronunciation of 'and' [ˈænd]. The second part of the word is a compound syllable, that breaks the rules of Devanagari. In Indian languages, there are two entirely distinct sets of coronal plosives: one dental and the other retroflex. Native speakers of Indian languages prefer to pronounce the English alveolar plosives sound as more retroflex than dental, and the use of retroflex consonants is a common feature of Indian English. Retroflexion is a well-known areal feature of South Asia, and the alveolar stop English /d/, /t/ are often retroflex [ḍ], [ṭ], especially in the north of India. When English is written in Devanagari script all alveolar plosives of English are transcribed as their retroflex counterparts. The consonant cluster used by Geetanjali Shree creates the syllable «nḍ» (न्ड), contravening the rule that in a compound the nasal is homophonic, which means that the syllable should either be «ṇḍ» or «nd». The spelling rule of contemporary standard Hindi, moreover, replaces the nasal with the anusvār, thus creating the non-attested * ऍ ंड. In fact, if one types the word 'and' in a standard transliterating keyboard, the result is एंड. ऍन्ड is a 'neographysm' that once again shows the disobeyance and rebellion of *Ret Samādhi*'s language.

8. Breathe and Read it Out Loud!

Ret Samādhi is an experiment in writing the music of breath. Its language flows with the sound of nature, sentences shortening and expanding in circles, spiraling from one image to the other.

The language is silence and peace nestled in a radiance of light and sound. It becomes breeze and carries the reader away. The reader must learn how to breathe in harmony with it. It's a novel to breathe. Breathing, the events keep happening. This is a breathing novel that takes the reader's breath away with the questions it raises.

Ret Samādhi is also a novel to be read aloud. This is not a new thing in Hindi literature. How many times, while reading Renu, Rahi Masoom Raza, Krishna Sobti, Qurratul Ain Haider, the reader stumbles, stops, then reads aloud and is enraptured by the music of the passage that has just read? Something similar happens while reading *Ret samādhi*.

Let's consider, for example, the following passage, showing the old Mother like a babbling child that is experimenting with language acquisition through pre-linguistic production, and the daughter metamorphosing into a mother.

«Use tarah tarah se bajāne meṃlage, yoṃ māṃapnī sāṃs ke saṃg karne lagi hai. Lambī lambī śvās niḥśvās. Gahrātī. Aur dhvaniyāṁ unmeṃ joḍti.

Aā āahāahā aāāho. Jamhāī meṃ muṃhphaḍte hue.

Ūū ūū īīīimā uīummā. Kamar jhulāte hue.

Hisssaṃg ehhhhhch. Chaḍī uṭhā ke dīvār par dhūp aur havā chalakte hue.

Whīīī īīīī īī īī [...]

In nae svaroṃ ke bīc meṃ māṁ jāne pahcāne śabd bhī kabhī ḍāl detī hai. Aāhaacchāhissaeko nahīṃphurrraai muṃhewhīe ūūohknaṭop iīpalasṭarūī» (RSH 134-136)

The passage is rich in onomatopoeias and exclamations, cries, babbling. The written page calls for someone to recite it, for the sound to become embodied in the reader's breath, vibration and voice. This is not the only instance of the grammar of the body. There is, for example, also the character of the Australian / Serious son, who does not know how to laugh and who makes sounds trying to produce laughter, with a body that does not obey.

Onomatopoeias and onomatopoetic verbs (often nominal verbs constructed with an onomatopoeia and the verb *karnā*) are a recurring element on almost every page of the novel. The intention is undoubtedly to engage the reader from a sensory point of view: in addition to onomatopoeia, continuous references to smells, tastes and tactile sensations abound. It should be borne in mind that onomatopoeia plays a central role in the genesis of the lexicon of all South Asian languages, including Hindi, where we find many terms that reproduce not only sounds (e.g. khaṭkhaṭ, knock on the door) but also other types of perceptions, such as tactile (e.g. ḍagmag, shiver) and visual (e.g. jhilmil, shimmer). Knowing that onomatopoeias and onomatopoeic verbs are a feature not only of the lexicon of *Ret Samādhi*, but of the Hindi language as a whole, is useful for translation purposes, as, apart from futurist experiments, they are not very frequent in Italian-language literature. The Italian translation has tried to recreate Amma's body language and babbling:

«Lei cominciò a fare musica di ogni tipo, cioè la Mamma ha cominciato a farlo con il suo respiro. Lungh**issi**me **ins**pirazioni ed **espi**razioni. Profonde. E ci aggiunge un suono.

Aaaa aaaaaaaaaa aaaaaaaaho…. La bocca spalancata in uno sbadiglio.

Uuu uuuuu iiiiiii iuummaaa… Dondolando da una parte all'altra.

Hisssaaaannng ehhhhhhchcì ….Brandendo il bastone, schizzando sole e aria dul muro.

Uuuuhhiiiii iiiiii iiiiii iiiiii….. […] In mezzo a tutti questi suoni ogni tanto a Mamma scappa qualche parola riconoscibile. **Ahahhhaaavabbé hisssparte nonfurrr facciafffuuu uuuhcopriorecchie iiiiicerottoooiiii**. (RSI 135- 136) [emphasis added].

The novel has numerous passages that can be fully enjoyed only if they are read aloud. Just to mention a couple examples more, in the beginning section of the novel there is a long passage that plays with the slow and continuous shift from «nahīṃ» to «nayī», that goes on for almost thirty pages and whose translation is a challenge for every language. The rhythm changes little-by-little and it keeps changing, in different contexts.

«Ab to maiṃ nahīṃ uṭhūṁgī. Abb to maiṃ nai uṭhūṁgī. Abb to maiṃ naiī uṭhūṁgī. Abb to maiṃ nayī uṭhūṁgī. Abb to maiṃ nayī hī uṭhūṁgī» (RSH 12).

Daisy Rockwell recreates the shift from 'no' to 'new' as follows: «Noooooo, I won't rise nowwww. Nooo rising nyooww. Nyoo riiise nyoooo. Now rise new. Now, I'll rise anew» (RSE 21).

Both in Italian and French the problem is that one has to add a syllable: in French one shifts from 'non' to 'neuve' and in Italian from 'no' to 'nuova'.

Annie Montaut recurs to a play with the expression 'ne veux' that sounds similar to 'neuve' and adds a similarity between 'je ne veux' and 'jeune' (young). «Non, non, je ne me lèverai pas. Maintenant je ne me lèverai plus. Je ne veux plus me lever. Maintenant jeneveupamelever jeneveujeneveu je neuve jeune je je veux je vais me lever. Maintenant je me lèverai neuve. Maintenant, je vais me lever, toute neuve» (RSF 16).

For the Italian translation we focused on the childish language of the mother. Therefore, we used the variation of 'no' into 'noo', suggesting the rhythm that children use when they mispronounce words when they throw tantrums. This is progressively distorted into nuu, noo, naa and can finally become 'nuova'. Of course, all this can only be appreciated by reading the passage aloud, interpreting the text with its various nuances of sound.

«No, no non mi alzerò. Io ora non mi alzerò più. Nuu, nooon mi alzerò. Ora nuuu nuoooo naaaa mi alzerò. Ora mi alzerò nuu nuooo vaaa. Ora mi alzerò nuova!» (RSI 23).

It must be noted that the Italian text does not translate the final sentence «Abb to maiṃ nayī hī uṭhūṅgī». This is because the shift from «nuu nuooo vaaa» to «Ora mi alzerò nuova» has to culminate in the word «nuova». In our perception, a repetition would have weakened the climax.

The importance of reading aloud the text is clear also in the mixed language used by the character of Sid, for example in the passage he is singing and teasing *Granny*. Both the original and the Italian translation make sense only if the reader reads aloud and bursts into singing along with the impetuous character of Amma's grandson. The reading should be expressive, conducted with modulations of tone and rhythm, observing occasional pauses to achieve dramatic effects.

«Grainī, nāṭī garl, ap ênḍ abāuṭ. Dādī kī nahnāh nahīṃ calegī. Pīṭh kyā kare? Havā ke is jhoṃke kī

phahar kā? Kunmun, magar dulār kī. "baut ṭhaṇḍ hai". Phusphusbudbud, thoḍī pyārī hārī.

Bahānā. Par sac thā aur kahte hī aur satya ho gayā. Acchī bhalī kaṃkaṃpī razāī ke bhītar yoṃ chūṭī jaise aṃdhere meṃ cuhiyā dauḍ gayī aur māṁ kas ke apne ko dubkātī hai, par siddhārth to siḍ, to zarāmurā kośiś to karnī hai. To apnī ammā kī kahī kah detī hai, cillā jāḍā din cālīs, pūs ke paṃdrah, māgh pacīs.

Cupkī ke bād bolo aur laydār muhāvrā bolo to avāz gā jātī hai. Kuch pīṃ pīṃ pīṃpīṃyātī. Kuch lahrīl lahrātī. Ki cc cilallā jjjāḍā din cacālīs, pūs ke papaṃdrah mmāgh papaccīs.

"ôsam grainī, graimī avārḍ meṃ ham donoṃ ki eṃṭrī, vicṭrī, pakkī"!

itnā kah potā siḍ bhāgā gayā giṭār lene aur gale meṃ laṭkā ke dādī ke bistar par kūd caḍhā. Apne vakt aur umr ke hisāb se tār ṭunṭun karne lagā phāḍ gāne lagā— jast cill cill jast cillā jāḍā da jāḍā, ḍez cālīs cālīs, fifṭīn da pūs, o pūs, o pūs, Enḍ māgh paccīs pacīs, yo yo yo...» (RSH 15-16).

«*Granny, naughty girl, get up! Up and about!*

I nonono della nonna non funzionano con lui. Che può fare la schiena ora? A questa folata di aria? Piagnucola, ma affettuosamente "Uff, fa freddissimo" Borbotta, bofonchia, cedendo un po'.

Una scusa. Ma era vero, e una volta detto divenne ancor più vero. Rabbrividì dentro la trapunta, un fremito come un topo che corre al buio, Mamma si acciambellò su se stessa, ma Siddharth è Sid, ci deve almeno provare. E così sussurra quello che diceva sua madre: *chilla zara din chalis, puus ke pandrah, magh pachis. Freddo da lupi quaranta dì, dal quindici di* puus *al venticinque di* magh.

Se si parla dopo un lungo silenzio e si recita un proverbio melodioso, la voce si mette a cantare. Un cinguettio cipcipcip, un'onda ondeggiante. *Frfrfreddo da luuuupi quaraaanta dì, dal quiquindici di* puus *al venticiiinque di* maaaagh. "*Awesome, Granny!* Noi due dovremmo concorrere per il Grammy, vinceremmo senz'altro!"

Detto questo il nipote Sid corse via a prendere la chitarra, con un balzo fu sul letto della nonna, con la chitarra al collo. Battendo le corde della chitarra in base al gusto del suo tempo e della sua età, si mise a cantare a squarciagola: *Just chill chill... Freddo becco, freddo da lupi ... quaranta days, quaranta, fifteen di puus, ooh puus, ooh puus, e magh venticinque, venticinque yo yo yo...*» (RSI 26).

Ret samādhi reminds us of the importance of listening to the sound. Read-aloud is a structured method that involves reading a story directly from a written text. Moreover, this novel suggests also a taste of storytelling, that is a more dynamic and interactive form of sharing stories that relies on oral tradition and creativity. Both methods are effective in engaging audiences and fostering a love for literature. They emphasize the value of sharing one's experience with others.

9. To Conclude

The examples cited and commented on in this article represent only a part of the elements characterizing the linguistic variant and the stylistic features chosen by Geetanjali Shree for *Ret samādhi*. The novel is complex and it is not an easy reading. Yet, as Geetanjali Shree asked in an interview, «Why must a book be easy to read?» (Atelier CESAH, *L'œuvre littéraire de Geetanjali Shree: l'art de transmettre pour s'émanciper*, 23 May 2024).

The novel opens announcing a self-telling story: «Ek kahānī apne āp ko kahegī. Mukammal kahānī hogī aur adhurī bhī, jaisā kahāniyoṃ kā calan hai» (RSH 9), that is «A tale tells itself. It can be complete, but also incomplete, the way all tales are». (RSE 11)

When reading a novel, it is easy to become engrossed in the plot and overlook the actual act of reading. *Ret samādhi* is sophisticated both in plot and style, it has a huge cultural range and literary culture. In order to translate it, it is necessary to have the same, and sometimes my confidence was shaken. Yet, reading this novel made me understand the importance of savoring the process of reading as much as the narrative, in order to fully appreciate the pleasure to recite the prose like a poem. I hope the Italian translation can allow a wider audience to enjoy the beauty of Geetanjali Shree's words.

Abbreviations

RSI: Shree 2024b.
RSF: Shree 2023.
RSE: Shree 2022.
RSH: Śrī 2018.

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