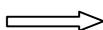


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Luces fóra!

Manjula Padmanabhan
A Coruña, Biblioteca - Arquivo Teatral
Francisco Pillado Mayor, 2006
Trad. Antía Mato Bouzas

There are many reasons why a book can be a real rare bird. It may be because of innovation in the topic it deals with or, more likely, because of the way in which it is addressed. Or it may be because the voice behind it or inside it is so unique that it cannot be compared to any other. There are so many other reasons. However, *Luces fóra!* can be singled out as a rare bird even before opening the cover. This is an analysis we rarely carry out/perform but it has, however, proven important. In the end you can really judge a book (some aspects of it) by its cover.

The cover of this book already claims its status of difference. The words “Edición bilingüe” bear witness to the fact that it is a translation, and translations into Galician are still somewhat rare. Galician is a language with a small readership and with difficulties of different kinds in undertaking translation projects. Efforts in recent years have been made, especially in the fields of novels and, more remarkably, children’s literature. But the translation of a theatre play (several, in fact) is usually unheard of. Generally speaking there are very few collections of theatre plays in Galicia despite the fact that theatre (performances, that is) has traditionally been a preferred medium of expression. And finally, of course, this is a play written by an Indian woman, a voice usually not heard in Galician.

All these reasons are already enough to praise the efforts of the Biblioteca-Arquivo teatral Francisco Pillado Mayor. Besides, two more works by women playwrights have been recently published, those of Hélène Cixous *A conquista da escola de Madhubai* (also a translation) and those of Teresa Rita Lopes’ *Coisas de mulheres!*

Whenever a translation is published, there are always complex cultural negotiation processes at stake and that is why we must acknowledge this effort of bringing together different peripheries in *Luces Fóra!* The study of such cultural negotiation processes is usually seen in feminist translations (more remarkably in those by the Canadian school) and one of their most important landmarks is the use of introductions to state their position as mediators. This does not usually happen in texts translated by other (i.e. mainstream) translators who may or may not be aware of their position in

this political act that is translating, but who are, nonetheless, intervening in the text.

The translation of *Luces fóra!* also includes some paratexts that are worth reading in detail. The first one is by Marga do Val. Her *Limiar* is precisely that, a threshold, leaving us on the verge of the text, with a clear reference to the particularities of a text that is created to be performed and on the most important reading of such text: a critique of violence against women.

The introduction by Antía Mato Bouzas, the translator, is an interesting contextualisation of the play. This first intervention by the translator is not just an effort to bring the readers closer to a vast and culturally diverse country (where some writers such as Padmanabhan have adopted English as their mother tongue) such as India, but also to the position of women in theatre. More often than not Western audiences tend to create a commodity of women elsewhere and use them as the Other, as the one who is oppressed (as if they were not) and does not have a voice. But this introduction by Antía Mato speaks against this belief with a clear voice. It is, however, a pity that she did not include a reflection on her interpretation and strategies when translating the play. For a Galician speaking audience this would have been enlightening, especially, as I have already underlined, because the actual approach to the text by the translator can make a world of difference for its final readers. Readers have the right to know where they stand with a translation, from which point of view it has been written. Most of the time this is not possible, as publishers are not fond of introductions (especially in novels), but this would have been a perfect occasion to do it.

In my opinion, however, these two texts should be read after reading the play. The most important reason for it is that maybe one can preserve the actual mastery of Padmanabhan in writing her play – keeping silent about the actual “event” the play revolves around until almost the end. For me this is the most remarkable achievement of *Luces fóra!* This is a terribly violent play, a play that speaks about the very foundations of the most generalised violence in all societies –gender violence– and it does so in such a surprising way that it leads to our own discomfort, and thus to reflection and maybe in the end to action.

Action is one of the keywords in this play. Action and seeing. In the play, a middle-class Mumbai couple is trying to decide whether to act or not to act. There is something going on outside (out there, where the Other lives) that is disturbing and above all, annoying. There is some noise, some screams, something unknown and dangerous. Close and at the same time far away. This quest for action is the beginning of the play, but from the very beginning, action has been devolved, first by Leela, the wife, who hears the noise and is upset by it but who does not want to do anything –not even look– herself and then by all the characters who in one way or another give up their responsibility for that “something” that is happening outside.

This play is actually very much in line with Laura Mulvey's theories of "visual pleasure", or rather with her efforts to distort that "pleasure" by the male gaze in cinema and theatre. Here seeing has too many implications, seeing is being part of what is happening. Seeing is getting involved. And the characters strive to give all sorts of excuses in order not to acknowledge this fact. The male gaze is present too in the interest that Bhasker has to "share" his "show" with his friend Mohan as if it were (and here we have another interesting and involving game presented by the writer) a theatre play.

Nevertheless, there is far more to *Luces fóra!* than a mere challenging of theories of visual pleasure. The complex relationships between gender and class are presented in this play with complete accuracy. It is this otherness at different levels that finally justifies this lack of action in the face of atrocities. The first and most obvious otherness (gender is not seen so easily) is maybe that of class, whatever is happening out there does not touch and must not touch the world of the middle class family. It is "these people" who have to deal with their own issues without interfering and annoying the well-to-do. But once they have, once they have entered the lives of the middle class, this otherness is used as an excuse not to act in different ways.

The first argument Bhasker, Leela's husband, uses not to act is that it may be part of a religious ritual. Everyone agrees that respect for other religions hinders action and there is even a ridiculous affronted tone in this part of the play, as if religious tolerance were some kind of nuisance as well. Of course it comes in handy in this case, showing how religion is used to suit the needs of the patriarchy.

Later on, all the characters agree that that woman who is screaming must be a whore and the line is drawn between "women" and "whores". They are the Other to middle class women, the image of honour and respectability. Anything is justified if the voice is coming from a whore. This section of the play is crucial to understand the way in which "honour" rests on women and how rape and prostitution are socially understood by the patriarchy. Men, of course, live in a world of different standards, they do not have to be protected (alas, they are the perpetrators, though this fact becomes invisible to their eyes) because respectability does not rest on their shoulders. The final logical conclusion of this argumentation is that "men are whores" as Naina asked, showing again the irrationality and absurdity of such arguments.

However in the end, the most important underlying otherness is seen in all female characters in the play, even those who are drawing the line between themselves as respectable middle-class married women and the woman screaming outside. Both Leela and Naina are silenced as the Other by their husbands. Naina was meant to be the voice of reason and hope but in the end she is also silenced, isolated and threatened by her husband. Leela is presented as hysterical all the way, her words are worth nothing

(Mohan has to come to compare Leela's version with "the real thing") in the discourse of the patriarchy. They are also trapped in their roles.

All the female characters in this play are enclosed in violence. Silence is the first violence perpetrated against them. Frieda, a really interesting character, does not utter a single word in the whole play (she is the maid) but is, however, present and makes us aware of the awkwardness of the situation. There is also a friend of Leela, Sushila, clearly an activist, who is scornfully described as an intellectual (=madwoman). And then we have Leela, too sensitive and in need for protection and Naina, finally convinced by the reasons of patriarchy.

This discourse on violence against women basically rests on the clear-cut distinction between the public and the private. At some point the characters mention that if it is something going on inside the home there is nothing they can do. And furthermore, there is always a dichotomy between that violence that can happen to anyone, i.e. men, ("murder", "theft") and that "other" violence, sexual violence, which is only supposed to happen to women. This second type of violence has to be denied and hidden, never acknowledged because it questions society as we know it. The only response the patriarchy could accept is that of male violence once again (this is Surinder's reaction), creating a net in which the values are never altered (respectable women have to be protected, the lower classes can continue with their business unless they become annoying, women can get beaten and raped as long as it is not visible).

Before I conclude let me also add a few words about the translation. The text in Galician reads generally well, though there are some awkward sentences under the influence of English (for example the use of the passive voice in Galician is rather rare, while in English and in this translation, it is everywhere; false friends such as "articulate", etc). There is, however, a particular controversial choice in the text I would like to briefly mention. I am sure that the choice of "crime" for "murder" is based on some argument by the translator (that is why I insisted on the need for an introduction in this sense) but in my interpretation of the text there is a clear line dividing the violence that can be experienced by anyone such as "murder" and "thefts" and that experienced by women. This is the argumentation of patriarchy to continue with its discourse of violence against women, that which happens to women is not *a crime*. Translating "murder" as "crime" erases this for me relevant emphasis on such dichotomy.

To conclude, what is really disturbing about this play is that it manages to create an atmosphere of complicity with what is happening outside that crosses the borders of the stage. The audience can at the beginning feel some sympathy for Leela; they can think that this is just some discussion about a bunch of "hooligans" making noise outside. But later on that sympathy turns into disgust and discomfort and questions our very sympathies and loyalties.

Lectora 13 (2007)

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This play is definitely a masterpiece, leading the way inside our participation in violence when we do not do anything about it; presenting silence as the first violence, and the use of otherness as an excuse to claim no responsibility for what happens around us. Arguments are laid bare to the bone; they are stripped off of their usual appeal and finally show the very foundations of a society (all societies) that crushes women to survive. Reading this play is a gift and the stepping stone of a new building altogether.

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