

# Critical Reflection

## On The English Translation of Nava Ebrahimi's *The Cousin*

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¶<sub>1</sub> In her Ingeborg Bachmann Prize-winning short story *The Cousin*, Ebrahimi imagines how stories of migration might be translated across languages and through art. The two characters, Iranian cousins of similar age, are like Doppelgänger who meet again to deduce how their twin has remained familiar and grown foreign after their separate journeys Westward. With their shared past of matching red-white-and-blue sweaters and sleepovers far behind them, they now occupy positions of relative success and admiration in their respective circles. This occasion of reconnection, however, is an uneasy encounter with an unspoken past, one that the artists finally decide to bring to the surface.

¶<sub>2</sub> *The Cousin* is a continuation of a thread of translation woven throughout Ebrahimi's other works. Her first novel *Sixteen Words* is framed by the protagonist Mona's desire to translate sixteen Farsi words and phrases that have stuck with her throughout life. This act of translation, Mona believes, will disarm the words, destroying the mysterious power they possess. Each word forms the title of a chapter, and although some are directly translated, most are inserted within the German-language narrative without explanation. Rather than translating directly from Farsi to German, she introduces the contexts in which these phrases first attached to her, persuading the reader to become similarly bound to these phrases, and to share her love and sorrow for a

childhood that is bookmarked by terms like *Oil Companies*, *Grandmother*, and *Shit Stick*. In the novel, to understand each word is to understand and accept Mona's story of her life.

¶<sub>3</sub> While winning the prestigious Ingeborg Bachmann Prize for *The Cousin* is a great accomplishment in itself, it is the nature of what qualifies a text for this award that makes *The Cousin* particularly intriguing. To be considered for the prize, authors must be recommended by one of the jury members, of which there are 7-12 each year. Each author must submit a short story which has never, in any capacity, been published. The authors then personally debut their work by reading it live on German television. Ebrahimi wrote *The Cousin* intending to share it with a wide, and specifically German, audience.

¶<sub>4</sub> Locating the reunion of these cousins at Lincoln Center in New York City was thus a decision with layers of meaning. Immediately, the German audience is positioned in an unfamiliar, intimidating place, feeling perhaps just as disoriented as the Iranian-German cousin as she steps out of the cab. Because she is not named, I refer to her as "the cousin", and the other cousin by his name, Kian. The cousin is apprehensive as she gazes at this building that represents the pinnacle of sophisticated performance in the United States, and though she wishes to remain in the cold, she is ushered inwards by Kian. As the cousin describes the crowd of elites around her, full of chunky

necklaces and old men with sidecuts, her internal monologue reads like that of any European in the US who enjoys critiquing the fake “authenticity” of the upper crust. The cousin appears plain and humble compared to the American crowd, who seem to obviously perform an act of sophistication. It is the cousin’s foreignness, perhaps German-ness, in this space that allows her to identify the very performance happening around her, even outside of the auditorium, as the theatre-goers, and Kian, don fake smiles and exaggerated body language.

¶5 By choosing Lincoln Center, with its social architecture of performance, Ebrahimi forces readers to consider the multiple meanings of *performance*. Throughout the short story, performative words enact the unveiling of secrets. The cousins and onlookers perform and create American, German, and Iranian identities. Dances, readings, and appreciation are each performed.<sup>1</sup> But beyond centering the presence of performance in these artistic spaces, Ebrahimi blurs the lines of where such performances begin and end. If at all.

¶6 Their entrance into the auditorium is sparked by an invitation as Kian insists, “I want to show you something” (2). As Kian and the cousin face each other, one on stage, the other in the audience, a border is formed by the fourth wall. For the cousin, this is not a performance, but a private space, an opportunity to discover a family secret that only Kian holds. For her, the act of *showing her something* means to reveal the truth of his past. At the same time, the dance that Ebrahimi choreographs repeatedly reaches the edges of the stage, sometimes curls around the edge of it, but never leaves it. Similarly the cousin moves closer to the stage, but never mounts it. For Kian, *showing her something* means to translate his history into dance, to tell a story informed by his experience

of migration, but a story which is nonetheless adapted to the stage.

¶7 There are times in this scene where it feels like Kian is jumping in and out of his performance. It can be difficult to track where it feels choreographed and where it feels “authentic.” He switches between reciting a monologue about his grandfather and asking his cousin about her book as if occupying an in-between space of public and intimate visibility, between performance and authenticity, and between his Iranian past and American present.<sup>2</sup> He reveals that for him, such a performance has always been a ritual of survival-entertainment for the prisoners in Bangkok, but self-preservation for young Kian. This revelation suggests that perhaps the cousin herself, although distanced by the medium of the novel she is writing, also turns herself into a spectacle as an act of self-preservation in a hostile environment.

¶8 The question of authenticity is thus brought to the fore. If the cousins perform the story of their migrations to guarantee acceptance and success in their Western homes, can they differentiate between what is authentic and what is performative in themselves? One’s identity is performed each day, a performance which is historically informed and which will continue into the future.<sup>3</sup> The cousins perform their migrant identities differently in that they translate their Iranian past into literal performance for the consumption of Western audiences while simultaneously conforming to ideals of German and American self-presentation when offstage. For the German reader, as for the cousin herself, Kian’s Americanized persona seems inauthentic, too cliché, to be who he really is. Yet the cousin, herself aware of the European

1—See Sandra Bermann and Diana Taylor for discussions of performance.

2—See Bandia, Paul F. “Translocation: translation, migration, and the relocation of cultures,” 279–280, for in-between space.

3—See Butler, Judith. *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, 521.

persona she assumes, smiles her crooked, imperfect, European smile to the guard (5).

¶9 What of their Iranian identities? These seem equally as performative. They repeat that their “grandfather cultivated pistachios in his region” (2), a familial claim to a location which neither cousin has occupied since early childhood. Just as their Western audiences are connected to Iran through the stories they tell, so too are the cousins tethered now only by stories, and by each other. Perhaps this is why the cousin wills Kian’s disclosure of the family secret, that is, his imprisonment in Bangkok. Maybe by revealing this traumatic history, she will feel closer to her cousin and thus to her homeland. Kian describes how, while imprisoned as a young boy in Bangkok, he was forced to perform for a fearsome inmate he called Stihl. He began by mimicking the gaits of the other inmates, in a way learning and rehearsing the various forms of masculinity seen around him, and eventually wove their gaits into dance. He describes that performing both ensured his relative safety as well as his freedom of movement.

¶10 Of course, the truth of this revelation becomes murky when Ebrahimi reveals that the audience of Americans, who the cousin thought had gone home, were watching Kian’s dance live on a screen outside of the auditorium. What the cousin believed to be a private conversation was in fact a performance that only she was unaware of. Moreover, the authenticity of this self-disclosure is no longer guaranteed. Who was she reading her book for? Who was her cousin dancing for? And did the story in Bangkok really even happen?

¶11 This dilemma uncannily mirrors Ebrahimi’s predicament in writing *The Cousin*. Notably, she shares that the unknowing and unwilling staging of the cousins’ interaction within *The Cousin* should be seen, to a certain extent, as a critique of the book market and literary scene’s constant de-

mand for authenticity from its writers.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, conversations surrounding the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize and short stories written by authors with migrant backgrounds have found that such authors continuously find themselves in an impossible predicament—while, as Turkish-German author and winner of the 1991 Bachmann Prize Emine Sevgi Özdamar has stated, works by migrant authors are automatically registered as foreign (or other than German) by the jury and public, recent Bachmann Prize controversy surrounding author Deniz Utlu has revealed that authors with migrant backgrounds cannot experiment with stories of migration freely, but rather are expected to conform to expectations of what migrant-German literature should look like.<sup>5</sup> Participating in the Bachmann contest in 2021, Ebrahimi knew that she would be writing and performing for a jury of German elites. She also knew that, due to the pandemic, she would be reading her story live and alone from her own home, streaming over video call to the judges and to the country. Her intimate, safe space suddenly became a stage upon which the German people hoped to view, potentially, a tale of migration. Thus, she gave them this. But she also challenged their infatuation with authenticity. Her story poses the question: In calling for artists, especially artists with migrant backgrounds, to perform the stories of their past, do you want the truth, or do you want a good story?

¶12 In the last year, a new layer of performance has been added to the short story by Ebrahimi. An extension of *The Cousin*, titled *The Cousins (Die Cousinnen)*, with text by Ebrahimi, will be performed at the Volkstheater in Vienna in 2025. The per-

4—From an interview with Nava Ebrahimi by deutschlandfunkkultur.de, titled *Bachmannpreisträgerin Nava Ebrahimi: “Alles kann eines Tages gegen dich verwendet werden”*.

5—See *Debatte über migrantisierte Literatur: Die Rückseite der Worte* by Maha El Hissy and Ela Gezen in *Taz*.

formance is not merely a stage adaptation of the short story, but is rather a meta-performance in which three female actors with various migrant backgrounds audition for the role of the cousin in a stage adaptation of Ebrahimi's 2021 short story. This performance, according to the Volkstheater's description, explores amongst the actors the question of "who has which privileges, who has experienced how many and which traumas and who is the most 'authentic.'"<sup>6</sup>

¶13 The call for authenticity carries over well into translation. While the insistence upon the value of the primary, authentic text over the secondary translation has been contested, translators still struggle with preserving the quality of the text while carrying it into a new language, new context, and towards a new audience. Translating Ebrahimi's *The Cousin* into English means to remove the foreignized German reader from the American setting, and to distance the context of the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize. Yet what might the translation offer? A familiarity with the background of East Coast elitism, a different understanding of migration and foreignness, and a sympathy with characters like Kian who want to "make it" in New York. Thus perhaps the meaning of the ideas in *The Cousin* are not lost, but rather alternatively found in a different interpretive area.<sup>7</sup> Through calling for a reassessment of the Western literary market's desire for authenticity in migrant literature, Ebrahimi's text insists upon its own translation, challenging others to carry it to other audiences and observe the effect of the narrative.

¶14 Perhaps fulfilling the desire for authenticity in migrant art is impossible, but that does not mean the stories are not worth telling. Just as migrant artists negotiate their own identities in the bor-

derlands between homes, so too does art allow for the movement and freedom of expression and (re)interpretation. Audiences must thus grow comfortable with the knowledge that the dance and the memory might never be twins, but maybe they can at least be cousins.

6— Translated from German from [volkstheater.at](http://volkstheater.at)

7— From Bandia, Paul F. "Translocation: translation, migration, and the relocation of cultures," 283.