

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT LITERATURE

Space in confinement

Adrian Grima talks to the much-travelled Nepali poet Itisha Giri

The pandemic has made us more aware of our complex, often difficult relationship with space. The space that we revel in, the space that is denied us. We're perhaps more aware than ever that space is a fundamental human right but for many, it is a luxury that they cannot afford. I ask Itisha Giri how the restrictions imposed by such an invasive virus have affected her space.

"I suppose, this virus made me realise how fortunate I am to have a place that feels safe and is free of any potential threats to my body or general well-being. This is in stark contrast to many who are confined in spaces that are potentially violent. Many did not even have the choice to stay at home. Daily-wage workers were forced to put their lives at risk in order to provide for their families. For them, the pandemic was more than just a health scare – it was also a threat to their lives and livelihood."

Giri tells me she "can't unsee the images of migrant workers making long and arduous treks on foot to get back to their villages in India".

"Growing up, we were told mastering the English language meant social mobility and social capital"

Neither can she "unsee photos of a daily-wage worker in Nepal who was found dead on a sidewalk. So, the notion of space cannot be detached from those who inhabit or lay claim to the benefits offered by that very place – whether that be a home or a country."

Poems and place

On a personal level, while I was grappling with restrictions on movement and lockdown-induced anxiety, I also thought a lot about how being restricted in a space can change the very nature of that space. There were days when the space I was most familiar with would turn on me, become hostile.

Talk about space inevitably leads to reflections on place. Giri feels she has never belonged to a place. All places have offered her a certain level of intimacy – Nepal, Hong Kong, London and now Spain. Although her poetry tends to engage with the wider world and the stories of people she meets, it also deals with her personal struggle to make sense of her "identities and the purpose they serve in different locations".

Poetry has offered her "the stability that one would otherwise find in the rootedness of a place or the comfort of kin. It is perhaps distance and alienation that lends me the courage to question, reject or even rebuke the visible social realities that confront or affront me."



Nepali poet Itisha Giri

Here's a stanza from *I Have Created*:
"I have created – a country for you where your fractured self lives by multiple names – and no pen can pin you down to be the one that belongs to someone else."

And yet, in her poetry she often chooses not to mention places. How has the pandemic complicated her relationship with place?

"I think all of my poems emerge from a place, whether that be a specific location or fragments of memory tied to a more fluid sense of place. The virus made me realise how I have always considered distance from a beloved place or people as something concrete that can be measured and consequently traversed or conquered, but that is no longer the case."

English, Nepali

Inevitably, I ask Giri why she writes her poetry in English.

"Growing up, we were told mastering the English language meant social mobility and social capital. English was a language of promise, aspiration. Many of my peers will tell you stories of being punished for speaking in Nepali in English medium schools."

It is evident, she adds, that the privileging of English language has come "at the cost of suppressing and castigating indigenous languages", what she describes as "a continuing act of colonisation".

"It also meant privilege and access that is intrinsically linked to one's

socio-economic status. We are the products of our education and the quality of education we receive is a product of our family's economic standing – especially in a country where the state of public education is dismal."

Giri left Nepal when she was 17 and did not go back for an extended period until she was 30.

"This is a long time to be away from a language and its traditions. My relationship with the Nepali language strained over time and English became my sole language of expression. English won in the end and I became estranged from Nepali and Hindi.

"When I write in English, I'm acutely aware I will never be able to reach a large section of the Nepali population but it is something I have come to terms with. I'm also aware the act of writing in English and not in Nepali is one of exclusion on my part, but I have come to terms with that as well."

At the poetry translation workshop on the tiny island of San Simón in Galicia where we met in September 2019, she was translating into Nepali.

"I see translation as an act of recuperating the distance between myself and the voices and traditions that were sidelined by English. It is an act of personal labour and an act of repentance even.

"But, at the same time, the Nepali language has imposed its own dominion over other languages from Nepal. Nepal has always been multilingual but the state has forced its people to sideline their difference in favour of a single language, a single 'ideal' identity. When I

think about this, I find comfort in the 'neutrality' of English as a *lingua franca*, but this might be a more selfish self-affirmation of sorts."

Giri tells me that "Nepal's literary scene is very much dominated by Nepali. It was officially declared as the national language in the late 1950s and since then, the country has imposed a single language policy on its multilingual people. So translating other languages spoken in Nepal into Nepali and vice versa is critical to challenging the hegemony of a single language and its literary tradition.

"Writer Manjushree Thapa writes about the constant need to 'uncouple the adjective 'Nepali' from the language 'Nepali'. She writes, 'Nepal's literature is a much vaster body of work than Nepali literature'."

With regard to translating international poetry into Nepali, she says: "I think we are still very much drawn to the Western 'canon' or we privilege the 'canon' and, to be honest, we do not have a large output when it comes to poetry translations in general. So, there is a lot of work to be done for poets and translators but that also means that readers from Nepal have a lot to look forward to!"

Itisha Giri was invited to Malta by Inizjamed to take part in this year's XVth edition of the Malta Mediterranean Literature Festival. Because of the new restrictions on outdoor events, this has now been cancelled and Giri will be recording a reading which will be available online in the coming weeks.