Lost in Translation:

Empathy, Language and the Impact of Migration

ELISABETH HANSCOMBE

Abstract

In this paper I consider the experience of a number of migrant writers and therapists, and also draw on my own personal experience to form a link between psychoanalytic work and the literature of migration. In the work of both writer and therapist there is a need to bridge the gap between the actual experience of one’s country of origin, the need to move some distance from that country and also the need to maintain a connection to it through memory and imagination. I choose not to use clinical material but instead I write from the dual perspective of writer and psychotherapist about the ways in which my experience as a second-generation migrant has influenced my work as a therapist. I also draw on the experience and literary work of writers such as Salman Akhtar, himself a psychoanalyst and a migrant, to reflect on the degree to which the migrant experience impacts on both sides of the therapeutic divide for both therapist and patient.

We become therapists for personal reasons, often to overcome the wrench and pull of the past, and that of distance from homelands, our own or those of our parents.
In the process we must learn to translate, if only at a symbolic level. The impact of one’s mother tongue, and the ways in which language can be distorted through a forced assimilation of another language through migration, as well as the ways in which language with its links to identity can get lost in translation, is central to the success or otherwise of the migrant experience. It is also central to the therapeutic endeavour when working with migrants, particularly from within one’s own experience as a migrant, however many generations back.

The need to develop a new language makes it more difficult for migrants to feel sure-footed in conversation. Therapists who work with migrants must struggle not only with their own migrant backgrounds, which in Australia exist to varying degrees for all of us, but they must also find a means of accommodating to the new language and the culture of their migrant patients. Herein lies the work of the therapist, which applies irrespective of migrant status, but is exacerbated in the face of migration. It becomes a struggle for understanding between two minds, as the psychoanalyst Michael Eigen writes, across the ‘void’ of our differences (Eigen, 2007, p. 44). At best we try to understand via empathy, identification, logic and reasoning, with our theoretical frameworks as a backdrop, but often we fall short in bridging the gap of our differences, however hard we try.

There are multiple levels of translation, from one language to another, from the present to the past and back again, from the private and personal to the public. There are also translations from the written and spoken word to performance in theatre and mime and in psychoanalytic terms from trauma and unconscious experience into symptoms and dreams (Mahoney, 2001, p. 837). The experience of migration adds to the layers of complexity here and makes even greater demands on our therapeutic capacity for empathy.

The psychoanalytic psychotherapist helps others to give voice and understanding to their experience within the consulting room, while the writer seeks to give voice to experience through the telling of stories, their own and those of others. There is already a large body of writing on the experience of migration, however the literature on multi-lingualism in psychoanalysis is surprisingly sparse given the fact that many analysts were analysed in languages other than their mother tongue. Most have only read Freud’s writing in translation, and many go on to conduct analyses not in their own tongue, but little has been documented about the experience from a psychoanalytic perspective (Akhtar, 1995, p. 1068).

Perhaps the failure to recognise multilingualism in psychoanalytic sectors comes about as a consequence of the migratory process itself—with its loss of confidence in one’s origins that might lead therapists and analysts to look to their new country for ideas, and avoid too many references to their own countries of origin. The experience of migration, whether in itself, or as that of a second-generation
migrant, can have profound effects on the therapist and on the person in therapy. In so far as an ability to tolerate doubt is an essential ingredient in psychoanalytic work, the therapist needs to operate with a degree of uncertainty and distance. However, as Akhtar argues, the therapist's insecurity might also be heightened in working with migrants and this can give rise to the development of a sort of linguistic façade (Akhtar, 1995, p. 1075).

I once asked a colleague who had migrated to Australia from India and her ancestry seemed obvious. In Australia, she was foreign. Did her nationality and her appearance have any impact on her work? I asked, thinking to myself that if I went to see her, her ancestry would have meaning for me.

‘No,’ she said, ‘not at all.’

‘No,’ she said, as if to say her physical appearance, the accent with which she spoke and the culture of her past would have no impact in the room. This cannot be so. Even in the case of so-called ‘hidden migrants’, those who come from English speaking countries, whose appearance is Caucasian, they bring their origins with them into the consulting room. We all tend look for differences in others to reassure ourselves that we are not so different, that we belong, and also to figure out how we fit in.


A World Without Seasons

In the greedy flimflam
For two worlds, we have lost the one in hand
And now,
Like the fish who chose to live in a tree,
We writhe in foolish agony
Our gods reduced to grotesque exhibits.
Our poets mute, pace in the empty halls of conversation
The silk of our mother tongue banned from the fabric
Of our dreams.
And now,
We hum the national anthem but our
Pockets do not jingle with the coin of patriotism.
Barred from weddings and funerals,
We wear good clothes to no avail.
Proudly we mispronounce our own names,
And those of our monuments and our children.
Forsaking the grey abodes and sunken graves of
Our ancestors, we have come to live in
A world without seasons (p. 1077).

Akhtar wrote his paper twelve years after he wrote the poem. There are two different voices or tongues in the telling here. In his paper Akhtar speaks with the voice of the academic: objective, concise and at one remove. The poem on the other hand evokes the experience of the mute infant, at a time of helplessness and vulnerability, before words. It thereby reflects the pain and confusion of Akhtar’s early experience as a migrant. Whereas his prose represents the integration of that experience—the two voices that emerge from the old world and the new. These issues of linguistic fluidity do not only apply to migrants, they apply to all of us, but they become exaggerated through the experience of migration.

During the symbiotic phase of an infant’s life there is no distance between infant and mother, but gradually and necessarily the infant attempts to break away. The immigrant, too, needs to rediscover acceptable limits of interpersonal space, as Akhtar suggests ‘from near or far, to optimal distance’ (p. 1062). This is akin to rapprochement, and is aided by the migrant’s fantasy of being able to return home some day and even more so by the experience of actual return. In cases of exile, such as occurs for asylum seekers, this is more difficult because access may be totally blocked. In such instances the exiled migrant is like an orphan. Migrants in this sense must develop a new ‘imaginary home’, which is neither here nor there.

In bringing together the academic voice and the voice of the poet, Akhtar highlights the complexity of language at a metaphysical level, beyond the words themselves to their emotional tenor and communicability. Although he does not use the language of mother tongue and father tongue, it is implied in his writing.

Father tongue, the language of the academies, is as Ursula Le Guin writes, the language of public discourse, the language of power, the language of the outside world. Such a voice is essential to the development of technologies, science and the humanities. It presupposes that a common language can be spoken in laboratories, in business and governments everywhere. And ‘those who don’t know it or won’t speak it are silent, or silenced, or unheard’ (Le Guin, 1992, p. 148). Mother tongue, on the other hand is ‘always on the verge of silence, often on the verge of song’ (p. 153). It is ‘an excellent dialect,’ Le Guin writes. Father tongue is ‘The language of thought that seeks objectivity’ (p. 148). Our public systems, the political and
legal, our education and culture depend on it. Its ‘essential gesture … is not reasoning but distancing—making a gap, a space between the subject or self and the object or other’ (p. 148). It can be ‘immensely noble and indispensably useful, this tongue, but when it claims a privileged relationship to reality, it becomes dangerous and potentially destructive’ (p. 149). It is the voice that suppresses the mother tongue.

Mother tongue the language that greets us at birth reminds us that we are human. The mother tongue, that we unlearn in the academies, is conversational and inclusive, the language of stories, ‘inaccurate, unclear, coarse, limited’—mother tongue breaks down dichotomy and refuses splits. ‘It flies from the mouth on the breath that is our life and is gone like the out breath, utterly gone and yet returning, repeated, the breath the same again always, everywhere, and we all know it by heart’ (p. 149).

Mother tongue is the language of story telling, the language of children, the language of women. Mothers speak and teach it to their children as they in turn learned it from their mothers. Mother tongue is binding. It does not contradict but seeks to affirm. It repeats, it explores in its very subjectivity the nature of our lives but it is not generally an acknowledged language. It is a language reserved for playful times, chaotic times or desperate times when life cannot be taken too seriously. It is the language we meet in infancy on our mother’s lap. It is the language that migrants hold closest to their hearts, especially on arrival in a new country.

Neither mother tongue nor father tongue alone are enough. We need to integrate both voices into what Le Guin calls our third language—‘native tongue’, which involves ‘a marriage of the public discourse and the private experience’ (p. 155). Le Guin wrote her paper in 1986 as a plea to a group of young women from Bryn Mawr University to value their perceptions and their own voices and not to adhere to the privileging of father tongue, as it exists in literary canons. These days the English language itself tends to be privileged above all other languages, another factor which can all too easily be ignored in our efforts to deal with those from migrant backgrounds.

Akhtar lists eight factors that affect the outcome of migration. These include: whether the decision to migrate is one of choice; whether there are real opportunities available to return to one’s country of origin; the age at which migration occurs; the reasons for migration—whether as an escape from personal or political turmoil, ethnic unrest or purely to better one’s prospects in a new land; the extent to which the migrant has developed an intrapsychic capacity for separateness; the warmth of the host country’s reception; the level of cultural differences, linguistic and otherwise from those of the host country; and finally the extent to which the migrant can continue in his or her chosen profession (Akhtar, 1995, pp. 1053–6).
These variables, largely external in nature, influence the outcome of migration to varying degrees, particularly for those who migrate as children. Children have the advantage of intellectual fluidity, they pick up new languages and routines faster than their parents, but in so far as the decision to migrate is invariably made for them by someone else, they have the added burden of anyone forced to move. Even adults, however, including those who choose to migrate under optimal circumstances, who plan their transfers well on the basis of getting a better job elsewhere, still suffer some degree of traumatic dislocation. The cultural theorist, Homi Bhabha describes this dislocated position of migrants as ‘in between’ (Bhabha, 1994). He argues it can give them a kind of ‘double vision’, which enables them to see their own country and culture from both the inside and the outside. It allows them a type of ‘border crossing’ that can facilitate creativity, but such creativity usually takes time to emerge.

Before such creativity can emerge, the migrant must endure a process of development akin to that of separation and individuation as described by Mahler. The immigrant like the infant is ‘vulnerable to splitting of self and object representations’ (Akhtar, 1995, p. 1058). For any of us, major changes to our external environment challenge our adaptive capacities and our responses are prone to fluctuate. This is more so for the migrant whose sense of the familiar and the safe is so destabilised they can at times feel like abandoned infants. On one day the migrant’s country of origin might be idealised and her host country denigrated, the next day vice versa.

The failure of mourning can lead the migrant, like an abandoned infant to search in vain for their idealised lost object and through an inability to love the new people in their new home they might devalue those in their current life. They prefer to immerse themselves in their memories and nostalgia at the expense of their present experience. They might also invest in the memory of places from the past as a means of coping with the pain of leaving, refusing to abandon fantasies of return, even when it is impossible. They continue to hope for burial in their old land. Such struggles can lead to a temporal ‘fracture of psyche’ (p. 1065).

With the progressive de-idealisation of lost objects, meaningful living in the present becomes possible. Through transitional areas within the host culture, through such things as films, museums, art spaces and literature, the migrant can find a ‘zone of mutual interest with foreigners in their new country.’ In this sense our thoughts about the past and future do not replace living in the here and now of today, they enrich it (p. 1068). One important means of establishing a sense of ‘we-ness’, true multiculturalism, comes through the acquisition of and increased fluency in a new language, in the journey from speaking one’s mother tongue to bilingualism.
By way of contrast, Akhtar describes the defensive response of some migrants who lapse into either ‘ethnocentric withdrawal’ or ‘counter phobic assimilation’. There are some who become more nationalistic about their home country outside of it than when they lived there, and others, the ‘counter phobic’ ones, who renounce their original culture, by a magical identification with their host culture. In either case such migrants are in Akhtar’s terms either too close or too far.

Akhtar offers a series of guidelines, which therapists can bear in mind when working with migrants, particularly in relation to the therapist’s own use of language and their sensitivity to differences in cultural expectations. To begin with it is important to be mindful for possible variations in the frame. For example, punctuality varies across cultures. For some it is a strict requirement, for others less so. Also, therapists need to be aware of a degree of defensiveness that might exist more noticeably in migrants along with particular difficulties in negotiating a fee. The value of money and time differ across cultures. It may also be more difficult to help patients disengage from a focus on the external world to an inner reflexiveness in order to help them to deal with intrapsychic conflict, when they have come from a country wracked by external conflict. It is important that the therapist consider the ways in which cultural differences can affect the transference. It may also be necessary for the therapist to take a more empathic position in order to validate the immigrant’s sense of dislocation from the mainstream culture, especially in cases of racial prejudice. In such situations, Akhtar recommends more Kohutian-type mirroring and more use of affirming interventions. Therapists need to recognise the degree to which the process of mourning carries greater significance in migration through the loss of historical continuity and restoration. Therefore therapists need respect the migrant’s lapses into nostalgia, by offering more space to reflect on their lost culture (p. 1075).

Akhtar’s comments about migrants could apply equally to any person visiting the therapist’s consulting room. Culture spreads beyond narrow boundaries. The notion that the past is a foreign country and that we all have pasts that need be explored within the consulting room suggests that we all come from different and foreign countries and that others might share similarities with us or might appear completely different, especially in Australia where our multinational and indigenous origins are so pervasive.

Julia Kristeva, who migrated from Bulgaria to Paris in the 1960s and eventually became both an academic and a psychoanalyst, reflects on the linguistic pain of migration:

Not to speak your own mother tongue, to live with sounds…that are separated from the nocturnal memory of the body, from the sweet-sour sleep of childhood …[is] to carry within yourself like a secret crypt or like a handicapped child—loved and useless—that language of once-upon-a-time that
fades and won’t make up its mind to leave you ever. You learn to use another instrument, like expressing yourself in Algebra or on the violin. You can become a virtuoso in this new artifice that provides you with a new body, just as false, sublimated—some would say sublime. You have the impression that the new language is your resurrection: a new skin, a new sex. But the illusion is torn apart when you listen to yourself—on a recorded tape, for example—and the melody of your own voice comes back to you in a bizarre way, from nowhere, closer to the grumble of the past than to the [linguistic] code of today … Thus, between two languages, your element is silence (Kristeva, 1988).

The experience of migration silences, at least in those first few days and months, even years, when newly arrived migrants must learn to find another means of negotiating a language through their adopted lands. In her book, Lost in Translation, Eva Hoffman writes about her difficulties as a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl arriving in Canada, faced with the task of learning a new language. ‘The problem is,’ she writes, ‘that the signifier has become severed from the signified. The words I learn now don’t stand for things in the same unquestioned ways they did in my native tongue.’ Hoffman’s native language was Polish. She writes from her second language English, and longs for a return to her mother tongue (Hoffman, 1989, p. 106).

Similarly Ien Ang writes about her difficulties ‘On Not Speaking Chinese’ (Ang, 2001). The precariousness of her identity comes from her sense of national hybridity. Born in Indonesia, from Chinese parentage, then spending the rest of her childhood in Holland, Ang calls herself Dutch. But when people ask the usual question, ‘Where are you from?’ they refuse to believe her. ‘Where are you really from?’ And so she must tell her story and all the permutations of her origins, her mixed nationality, and her travels across continents. Her ‘cherished Indonesian identity got lost in translation’ when as a ten year old she ‘started a life in a new language’ (p. 29). She started again in Holland, speaking Dutch for over twenty years and never learned Chinese, despite her appearance and her ancestry. Ang’s story demonstrates how much our identities are bound up in language, the language to which we are born, and the languages we adopt, especially in childhood.

I was born in Australia to Dutch parents, both of whom were born in Holland and whose descendants reach back in that country for centuries. Somewhere in my ancestry I have a German born grandparent but otherwise as far as I know my ancestors are Dutch. My children, born to me, this Dutch Australian and to their father who is a fifth generation Australian, call themselves Australian, but they are aware of their multinational past. On his father’s side, my husband’s great great great grandfather came here from England as a convict in 1822, while his maternal great great grandparents arrived from Ireland in the early twentieth century. My grandson emerges from this mix, to my first-born Australian daughter, and to his
father who was born in Germany of African American parentage on the paternal side and German on his mother’s. I identify these basic personal details to encourage readers to reflect back on their own ancestry and consider the extraordinary racial and cultural mix from which we are descended. To this extent I would argue that in Australia, apart from those descended from our aboriginal predecessors, we are all migrants. And thousands of years before their time, the aborigines were too. In emerging into this world at birth we are all migrants from the mother-land.

When I was a child, I imagined the land of my parent’s birth as the most desirable place in the world. This set up an acute longing in me for a past to which I did not belong. Marianne Hirsh calls this ‘post memory’. She writes, ‘to grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation’ (Marianne Hirsh, 2008, p. 107). This is the burden of the second-generation migrant.

Although born in Australia, I feel the weight of my parents’ migration throughout my childhood in my memories. I feel the business of living in two lands, of being in between, of feeling neither here nor there. For me as a child Holland could only exist in my imagination. It was not real for me. It was my mother’s home and I spent much of my childhood flooded by the feeling that Holland was where she wanted to be, not here with me, with us her family, not here in Australia, not in my home country.

It added to my own personal cultural cringe. People write about Australians in general as suffering from a type of cultural cringe, which goes back to the days of colonisation and convicts I suspect. Most locate it in our colonial past, though more recently historians have begun to consider the degree to which the dispossession of this land from its indigenous people may have left all those who have come since with a sense of migrant status, bystanders, not really belonging, not of the land, not with the land, not close to their ancestors. How much of ourselves, our sense of ourselves is located in our physical surroundings and how much is located in our language?

I remember such fluctuations in my own childhood. My mother at first tended to idealise her country of origin, while my father preferred this brave new land. Over time the pattern was reversed.

My mother’s optimism is reflected in her memoir. She writes:

The roads were very dusty in summer, full of potholes and muddy in winter, but that did not worry us much and I remember I had a strong
sense of freedom in those years. There was not much bureaucracy compared to Holland and although we had to struggle, we still had our hope for a better future. I did not have time to be homesick but every now and then, at night and especially when we were at the beach I felt that ache while thinking about friends and family and wondering where they are now and how are they all (Bury, 1995, p. 82).

The migrant’s sense of identity can also suffer under the weight of such necessities as name changes. In Australia the anglicising of foreign names is commonplace. Some cultures cope by having two names, two identities, while others anglicise and assimilate. My father did not use his name Jan, the Dutch equivalent of John. He could not use his first name comfortably in Australia because Jan on paper becomes Jan, a female name. This is but one example of the means by which my father’s identity shifted through migration. He had arrived in Australia after the Second World War full of hope and optimism for a new life in this new land. Sadly over time he lost his sense of potency and confidence.

Other migrants tell a different story. Their experience of migration, although difficult and painful in the first place, even for a number of years, becomes something else. This was my mother’s story. She too in the beginning missed her home. But she could adapt. She has been back to Holland several times since the late 1970s and every time she returns to Australia she reasserts her desire to stay here, to be buried here. Her home is no longer Holland. Her home is here.

For me as a child growing up in Australia I was torn between two countries. My mother in the early days had decried Australians their lack of culture. To her they seemed ill educated, uncouth. No theatres, few bookshops, few cafes on the street, none of the bustling city life she remembered from her life in Haarlem, Holland. I thought of my mother in those days as a snob, but I also took pride in the foreign.

As a child I also observed the cultural differences among the children who went to my school. I felt the hostility directed at the ones who seemed most different, the Greeks and the Italians, their language and funny ways. As the daughter of Dutch migrants with blonde hair and blue eyes I fitted in but still the foreignness of my parents’ ways singled us out. The strangeness of my second name, too long, too hard to pronounce, singled us out as well. In those days in Australia most names were Anglo Irish in origin. By the time my children were at school other nationalities came in for the criticism. The Italians and Greeks by then had joined with the Asians who have since become part of the mainstream in Australia. More recently, the refugees, the Muslims, from the Middle East, the dark skinned people from the Sudan, the Hindus from India are relegated to this position of difference.
The psychotherapist, Paul Valent asks in his book, *In Two Minds*, why do we conceal our traumas from ourselves? (Valent, 2009) Why, too, do we attempt to blend our otherness through migration into the dominant culture? It happens almost seamlessly day-by-day, for most of us, a slippage between the old world and the new. Migrant writers attempt to bridge this link through their written words, while migrants generally maintain the link through spoken words, through language. Therapists, both as migrants themselves and also in their work with migrants, must develop new ways of developing a shared language, through a greater awareness of the impact of the past on countertransference and transference, reaching across the therapeutic divide. We need to draw heavily on our empathic capacities and be sensitive to the impact of the ‘trauma of geographical dislocation’ for all in the business of ‘leaving, arriving, moving and becoming’ (Hooke and Akhtar, 2007, p. 165).

As the Indian writer, Salmon Rushdie argues, we cannot revisit our past; we can only imagine it (Rushdie, 1992). As therapists, migrants and the children of migrants we cannot reclaim our lives and places lost through migration, we can only imagine them—our invisible homelands, our countries of the mind. This imagining and working through during the psychoanalytic process requires an empathic sensitivity in the therapist not only to the experience and language of our migrant patients, but also to our own struggles with language and our migratory dislocations.

**References**


**Elisabeth Hanscombe**

326 Riversdale Road
Hawthorn East, Vic 3123