**Literature in small languages must be translated**

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November 16, 2023

[Opinions](https://www.nation.com.pk/opinions), [Columns](https://www.nation.com.pk/columns)

Last week I wrote about the 9th Islamabad Literature Festival (ILF) held from 3-5 November 2023, also drawing attention to the Nobel Prize in Literature, this year awarded to the Norwegian writer of drama and prose, even some poetry and children’s books, Jon Fosse (64). I emphasised that he has written in the minority version of the Norwegian language, called New Norwegian or Rural Norwegian (‘landsmål’), different from Standard Norwegian, earlier called National Norwegian (‘riksmål’), dominant in the cities where the Danish language influence had been massive during the country’s 400 years under Denmark.
Fosse writes in a language used by less than a million people, still good enough to explore all kinds of intricate and simple philosophical and existential issues. That should not be a surprise, although perhaps it is, since we easily think that the big world languages, such as English, French, German, yes, and Urdu and Chinese, too, have better vocabulary and earlier literature on a wider variety of issues. But Fosse has proven that even a small, rural language is not inferior. That encourages us all to use own languages and dialects more, the argument being that we think deepest and best in the mother tongue, or another language we command fully. I believe this is true, but not the whole truth.
A am grateful to Ingrid Eide, a Norwegian Sociologist and Educationist, who reminded me in an email that Jon Fosse would not have reached his current wide readership and recognition, and becoming one of the world’s most performed dramatists in our time, unless he had been translated to more than two score foreign languages, big and small, including Swedish, the language of the members of the committee that awarded him the Nobel Prize in Literature.
Norway is a small country with a total of just about 5.5 million people, and development came later to the remote land in the north than to the most of the rest of Europe; today, though, it is a highly developed country, thanks to shipping, fishing, oil and gas production, and other things. Still, the Norwegians have some inferiority complex, which is sometimes called cotter or peasant mentality. True, Norwegians are not the only ones harbouring doubts about themselves. It is also a class issue and many working class people in all countries often feel inferior. Until our generation, women were not given the same status as men; there still is discrimination on the basis of gender, creed and colour.
Sometimes, it is only after a writer has been translated and become appreciated abroad that Norwegians at home ‘discover’ him or her. That happened with the poet Olav H. Hauge (1908-1994), whom I also mentioned in my article last week; he, too, wrote in New Norwegian, living on his orchard farm in the beautiful Hardanger Fjord on the West Cost of the country, some kilometres from Fosse’s village, where the spoken dialect is close to New Norwegian. Fosse moved to the nearby city of Bergen, Norway’s second largest, where he studied philosophy and literature. Later, Fosse worked and lived in European cities and smaller towns. About his background, it is useful to know that he grew up in a family of Quakers, making religion an aspect underlying his thinking and literary work, although he has personally not embraced faith, well, perhaps until recently when he converted from Protestantism to Catholicism. At family level, Fosse was first married to an ethnic Norwegian nurse, then to an Indian-Norwegian translator and author, and since 2011, his wife is Anne Fosse, a literary professor from Slovakia. The couple have a home in Hainburg and der Donau in Austria and on the Norwegian west coast. In addition, the Norwegian government has allocated the prestigious ‘Grotten’ to Fosse, a residence offered to top artists, situated on the outskirts of the Royal Palace Park in Norway’s capital Oslo. Thus, Jon Fosse is both a rural and an urban man, a citizen of both worlds, yes, and a world citizen.
A few more words about Olav H. Hauge, who saw the whole world and existential issues that everyone faces, from his small village, sitting there thinking about small and big issues, learning foreign languages, reading Japanese ‘haiku’ poetry and more. Had he and Fosse been born and lived only in big cities, being part of the cultural and language elites, they may not at all have become the thinkers and writers they did become, with universal appeal. And then, I must be careful not to discriminate against city writers, even those from upper class backgrounds and lives; in the end, the main existential and most other struggles are the same for all of us, although for the wealthy, money struggle is not there. A writer takes up all kinds of issues, indeed such about the less fortunate in life and thinking. Fosse belongs to the social realism tradition, founded by the famous Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906).
The Norwegian bestselling author, Maya Lunde (48), did not grow up in a small town but in central Oslo, and that has not been a disadvantage to her literary acievements. She continues writing about and for adults and children, focusing on the essential contemporary issues, especially environmental and climate change issues, in books like her trilogy ‘The History of Bees’, ‘Blue’, and ‘Przewalski’s Horse’. She has been widely translated and is perhaps more appreaciated in Germany than in Norway. So, then, even coming from Norway’s capital, she too must be translated to big languages to be noticed, read and become famous.
A young Norwegian-Croatian man of 19, turning 20 on Friday this week, Oliver Lovrenski, is this autumn the country’s bestselling writer. Last Tuesday, he received the Booksellers’ Prize, the youngest ever to do so, from the hand of the Norwegian Minister of Culture, Lubna Jaffery. Lovrenski uses the youngsters’ Oslo-slang as his language in his debut book. He writes without a single full stop or capital letter, yet, according to critics and reviewers, he communicates in an effective and powerful written language. However, his book may need to be translated to a more standard language version, or at least have an explanatory list of words which are otherwise only familiar to a small group of Oslo youth. To Norwegians, perhaps such a book can be ideal as an audio book. To translate it to foreign languages would be a special challenge.
Oliver Lovrenski’s book is entitled ‘When We Were Younger’ (‘Da vi var yngre’, in Norwegian), where he describes life and living on the edge of society among young teenage drug addicts and substance abusers. He has himself managed to leave that sub-culture, although he still has a soft spot for the camaraderie and belonging he felt there. He doesn’t quite know why he landed in that sub-culture, having had a good Oslo home with a caring, single mother and grandmother from Croatia, and an absent ethnic Norwegian poet father, with whom he has now established contact. He has in interviews said that he believes his grandmother’s passing contributed to his difficulties in his early and mid teens.
Finally today, I have in this article stressed the importance of translating literature, especially from small to big languages, but I have also drawn attention to the importance of the writers’ backgrounds and lives. To be a human being is after all much the same irrespective of outer factors, how and where we live, we dress, speak, write, or do for a living, growing fruits or teaching philosophy and literature.