The Translator:

Distance as a Multidimensional Concept

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English 100: Freshman Composition
"Altitude itself is a powerful thing. When travelers are in space, looking at our small planet from a distance where borders and flags cannot be seen or imagined, this also, I am told, bends one toward a peaceful view" (30 - 31).

The preceding quote appears in The Translator when Hari finds himself in an airplane on his way to Chad after being deported from Egypt. As he flies high over lands that he has traversed before, he gains a new perspective on them. He finds himself pondering the lack of visible borders between nations, and seems to come to the conclusion that it is ultimately boundaries that are created by humankind, not nature, that cause so much misery and pain. He is certainly not the first to echo this sentiment, and will most likely not be the last.

The literal distances that Hari describes are quite immense. Egypt, Sudan, Chad, Libya – none of these are small countries, and it takes a considerable amount to travel through any of them, be it on foot, by car, or by plane. Literal distance can translate into metaphorical distance quite easily. Emotional distance, mental distance – the creation of space in order to look back upon where a person came from is a phenomenon that promises to offer solutions.

There are several metaphorical distances that Hari could be invoking with his thought. The first could be the emotional distance he now has from his natal home; after having spent years living and working abroad he is now once again observing his home, but from a different perspective.

Hari makes a poignant point when he mentions how neither flags nor political borders can be observed from space. The reality is that there are no true boundaries between people unless they are politically and/or economically created by people themselves, and this is a truth that is constantly forgotten. He writes that “because (he) had already seen something of the larger world, ...(he) counted among (his) friends the people of many tribes and races, and this makes a difference in our hearts” (30-31). Because of his ability to transgress boundaries (literally and metaphorically), he had gained knowledge and insight that led him to a more peaceful mindset himself.
Space offers an excellent, literal perspective because anyone out there can just look out and see Earth – the beautiful globe – for what it is. It is a seamless entity, a body with no boundaries itself. There are no sharp corners, no hard and fast lines in the ground. The only borders that hurt us are the ones we create. In determining states and nations, we alienate one another. This view from above – this God view – is one that offers us a perspective that human beings cannot observe in any other way. Ever since the development and codification of the scientific method, people have striven to reach objectivity in order to gain impartial views of subjects.

There is a saying that echoes the sentiment that Hari expresses on page 30. The quote says “one cannot see the picture until they step outside of the frame.” This refers to not being able to take in an entire situation until the participant(s) is outside of it. This is true for anything – if someone is involved in something, than they cannot be impartial, they will not be able to see all sides of the issue. This is why mediators – impartial third parties – are extremely helpful in resolving conflict of any kind. It is only until someone is emotionally and physically removed from something that he can really see it for what it is. Someone cannot fully appreciate a monument if he is sitting right under it, nor can he be an accurate judge of someone’s character if he is infatuated with someone.

Hari uses the word “distance” at least eight times in The Translator (29, 35, 49, 51, 59, 66, 93, 100, 177). He invokes the various significances of that word, referring to physical as well as emotional or even political distance. It is a curious motif that rises and falls throughout the memoir, so often reminding the reader of what it means for something or someone to truly be “distant.”

Hari uses the word “space” at least twice in The Translator. As with his use of the concept of distance, here also the word “space” has its multiple meanings examined. Physically, space is made for jotting down notes in a journalist’s notepad (97), space is made for equipment to be shipped, and space is observed as helicopters and trucks close in. Metaphorically, space is observed when a journalist needs time to think and recuperate, when an army officer tries to
maintain control over an emotional situation, and when countries back away from genocide to keep their reputations and affairs unsullied.

Ultimately it takes a mature human being to step back and be able to take in everything without being frightened. It takes kindness and patience to be able to really listen to someone else’s opinion while still being able to be comfortable with their own. The difficulty in life is that there are rarely any answers to the questions that really matter – there are only paradoxes, and the spaces between different interpretations. Part of the challenge of being human is being able to live with the irreconcilable tensions that exist between and within different stories of reality, both individual and group. History is not neat, and interaction on all levels – personal, national, international, and beyond – may never be particularly easy, but if we can just keep our fingers off of the triggers and red buttons, than we will reap the greatest rewards possible.