

# Modern Bengali Poetry: Desire for Fire

SINHA, ARUNAVA. (trans.). 2021. *Modern Bengali Poetry: Desire for Fire*. Kolkata: BEE Books.

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*Modern Bengali Poetry: Desire for Fire* is a captivating anthology of contemporary Bengali poetry translated into English by Arunava Sinha, one of the most prolific and accomplished Bengali to English translators. This comprehensive volume of poetry celebrates with all earnestness the rich, vast and diverse Bengali poetry, featuring works by some of the most celebrated poets of the two historically significant Bengals – the eastern Indian state and the country of Bangladesh. Comfortably traversing the spectrum of life, ranging from tropes of love and longing to political and social issues, this collection offers a beautiful portrayal of the nuances and complexities of Bengali life and culture. Sinha's translations are classy and masterful, seamlessly capturing the essence of the original Bengali poems while making them accessible to non-Bengali readers from different cultural backgrounds. This review explores the various themes and styles of the poems in this collection, with a focus on the translator's remarkable ability to convey aesthetically elegant and complex Bengali poetry through English. While doing so, it delves into the significance of these works in the larger context of 'modern' poetry and the Bengali literary tradition, closely examining how this volume could be of relevance to readers of poetry from all over the world.

How does a translator, who is an interloper between two language-worlds, attempt to accommodate the creative voices of one on the imaginative canvas of another? If it involves translating poetry, what are the additional mitigating challenges a translator faces in order to temper the task at hand? Arunava Sinha's anthology attempts to seek answers to these crucial questions not directly but

through a discursive engagement with the craft of poetry first and then to come to a conscious understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the translator, especially in a linguistically vibrant and diverse society such as India. As it is a commonplace now, translating poetry is a complex and challenging task that requires not only a deep understanding of both the source and the target languages but also a sensitivity to the cultural and social contexts in which the source work is located. In fact, one of the foremost challenges of poetry translation is capturing the essence of the poem, which includes not only the meaning of the words but also its sound, rhythm, and imagery. In addition, the translator must also be able to convey the emotions and cultural references that are present in the source work while trying to adapt the poem to fit into the linguistic and cultural fabric of the target language.

In the case of Bengali poetry, the challenge is even greater, as the language is rich in metaphor and imagery, and the cultural context is deeply rooted in the history and traditions of Bengal. Sinha keeps the magic alive in each poem by keeping intact the intertextualities in his translations. Intertextualities “deepen the target reader’s understanding of the norms and beliefs of the source culture” (Singh & Komalesha 169). For instance, while reading “Bonolata Sen” by Jibananda Das, a curious reader would search for unfamiliar words, leading them to the *Mahabharata*. Translating poetry involves not only word-to-word translation but also the nuanced interpretation and effective communication of the poet’s intended meaning and emotional expression. In this regard, Roman Jakobson writes: “Only creative transposition is possible: either intralingual transposition—from one poetic shape into another, or interlingual transposition—from one language into another, or finally intersemiotic transposition—from one system of signs into another, e.g., from verbal art into music, dance, cinema, or painting” (Jakobson 1959: 118). The historical and cultural context of a source language might not always be readily familiar to native English speakers. In such cases, it may be necessary for translators to furnish supplementary text or annotations to facilitate readers’ comprehension of the cultural and historical importance of the poem. However, the concerned collection does not provide any endnote or

footnote on understanding any poem. Nonetheless, Arunava Sinha's translations in *Modern Bengali Poetry: Desire for Fire* are a testament to his skill as a translator, as he is able to capture the essence of the original works while also making them accessible to a wider global audience.

As the "Translator's overture" indicates, Arunava Sinha as a translator is conscious of the challenges involved while bringing out a massive anthology of 'modern' Bengali poetry spanning more than a century with inclusion of more than fifty major Bengali poets such as Rabindranath Tagore, Nazrul Islam, Jibananda Das, Shankha Ghosh, Nabarun Bhattacharya, Humayun Azad, among others. While the term 'modern' as a temporal category in the title of the volume is in itself problematic, the translator resolves it by alluding more to its discursive value than to its historical one. However, the introduction to the collection serves as a comprehensive guide to the readers on modernism in Bengali poetry and the tenets of the movement and enlists modern Bengali poets— including the poets who fail to make their way into the collection. As if answering methodological questions concerning the selection of poets and poems in this volume, Arunava Sinha writes: "Consider this book something like a concert, in which a musician sings cover versions of their favorite songs, whose originals were written and performed over a vast span of time" (Sinha 2021: xv). What is truly remarkable in the volume and its choice of poets and poems is the way in which the translator captures "a diverse selection of voices, rhythms, idioms and styles in a way which allows every poem to breathe a life of its own" (Holborow 2021).

Aptly, Sinha begins his "manifest concert" with "Camellia", one of the most remarkable poems of the greatest Bengali poet, Rabindranath Tagore. This translation is indeed a testament to Sinha's genius as a translator because the translator's skillful word choices successfully evoke the hysteria, agony, and desire of a psychotic *amore*:

"I tell myself, what if there's nothing between us  
She's a fellow-passenger at least.  
A pure intelligence

Seems to shine through her appearance  
The hair swept back from her young forehead  
Her bright eyes fearless.” (Sinha 2021: 2).

In the poem, Tagore writes about a beautiful flower named Camelia, which he later compares to his love lost to the passage of time. In fact, the poem is a meditation on the transience of life and the pain of lost love. Sinha’s translation of the poem is highly remarkable for its ability to capture the emotional depth and beauty of the original poem and how it manages to convey the sense of longing and pain present in the original work. While retaining the metaphorical language, symbolism, and imagery of the original work, the translation succeeds in capturing the emotional resonance of Tagore’s original poem.

Continuing to capture the beauty of a woman who acts as a symbol of a bygone era that has faded away, Sinha turns his gaze on “Bonolata Sen” by Jibanananda Das. Here the poet describes a woman named Bonolata Sen, who he imagines living in a remote village in rural Bengal. The poem is a deep and engaging reflection on the transience of life. Sinha’s translation of the poem is remarkable for its ability to capture the beauty and melancholy without losing the musicality of the original poem; through deploying repetition and alliteration, the translator beautifully recreates the poetic genius of Jibanananda Das.

In contrast to the poems of Tagore and Das that invoke the beauty and elegance of love and women, Sinha translates the radical poetry of Kazi Nazrul Islam, whose poetry instills revolutionary zeal in the young masses, especially among the students during India’s struggle for Independence:

“When the revolution comes  
We will lay down our lives  
Within us weeps liberation  
Of the centuries  
We have all shed tears of glory  
To fill our mothers’ hearts  
We are students, all” (Sinha 2021: 12).

As is evident through these lines, Sinha's translation of Nazrul Islam's poetry captures the raw energy and passion while retaining the sense of defiance and individuality that is present in the original poem. In order to build a sense of momentum and urgency the original poem encapsulates, Sinha retains and engages the repetitive structure of the source poem.

While it is said that much is lost in translation, the scope of the original text is significantly more extensive than what is lost. Translating Bengali poetry into English can present a formidable challenge, and translators may encounter a range of issues and difficulties, as "poetic language could be defined as the *non-translatable* language" (Nikolaou 2010: 130). The Bengali language possesses intricate and multifaceted characteristics culturally and linguistically distinct from English, lacking a direct counterpart in the latter. Bengali poetry frequently employs wordplay, idiomatic expressions, and figurative language, posing a challenge for translation. To effectively communicate the intended meaning and significance of the source poem, translators need to exercise their creative faculties and make strategic decisions. Translating a poem may also require translators to exercise subjective judgment in their interpretation and communication of the text, leading to the possibility of multiple translations and interpretations. Similar to what A K Ramanujan in his "Translator's Note" of *Speaking of Shiva* writes: "A translation has to be true to the translator no less than to the originals... Translation is choice, interpretation, an assertion of taste..." (Ramanujan 1973: xii-xiii).

Sinha's translations are occasionally hampered by the untranslatability of certain Bengali words and feelings as "the original text never reappears in the new language (this would be impossible), yet it is ever present" (Paz 1992: 155). In the first poem, "Camellia". Sinha interprets *sal patha* as the leafy box; in Bengal, the leaves of the *sal* tree or *Shorearobusta* are commonly used as a dish. The only way to convey it in English is to reduce it to a generic "leafy box" (Sinha 2021: 7), leaving it open-ended and up to the reader's interpretation. These omissions can only be comprehended by a reader who has a working knowledge of Bengali and English. Another example of untranslatability is the poem

“Come Back, Wheel: June 22, 1962” by Binoy Majumdar. The source text in Bangla is titled “Phire Esho, Chaka”. and “chaka” may be easily translated as “wheel.” However, Majumdar’s objective behind using “chaka” was quite different. “Chaka” makes a brief reference to the surname “Chakraborty” and relates to the poet’s adoration and devotion for Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Therefore, the literal translation of “chaka” as “wheel” completely deviates from the poem’s original meaning and intent.

Despite a few shortcomings in translation, it is noteworthy that Sinha, in the majority of instances, retained Bengali proper nouns and did not domesticize Bengali-specific terms; for example, when translating Mandakranta Sen’s poem “The Story of Arjun and Krishnachura”. the names of the trees were retained. Through his selection and translation of each Bengali poet and their poems, Sinha enviably brings together their distinct voice and perspective to the collection, creating thus a rich tapestry of themes and ideas that reflect the complexities of modern Bengali life and culture. From the deeply personal and intimate to the political and social, the poems in this anthology capture the essence of modern Bengali poetry and provide a glimpse into the ongoing literary tradition of the region. Arunava Sinha’s translation of these works is exceptional, as he skilfully navigates the nuances of Bengali language and culture to create an English version that maintains the depth and complexity of the original works while maintaining sight of how it is received in English. He does not shy away from capturing the essence of the Bengali ethos, and his translations are true to the essence of the poems, making them accessible to readers from different cultural backgrounds. Unambiguously, *Modern Bengali Poetry: Desire for Fire* is a collection that speaks to the universality of human experience while celebrating the unique perspectives of Bengali poets. Sinha’s translations, in particular, capture the essence of these works in a way that resonates with readers from all over the world, making it an essential read for readers interested in contemporary poetry in general and the literary traditions of Bengal in particular.

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