

The 'Introduction' as Translation: A Critical Study of William Radice's 'Introduction' to *Gitanjali* (2011)

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Abstract

*An introduction to a translation is a necessary part of modern (literary) translation practice. Without a proper introduction, translations cannot be understood clearly. Introduction is necessary when a text is rendered into another language, time and space and moreover to a different culture to make the target readers understand the context. But at the same time, introductions can also problematize a translation. It could violate, mutilate, and deviate from the original text before the actual translation is done i.e., the text. It could change the 'discourse' which is there in the original text. The proposed research paper questions the role and significance of an introduction to a translated text. The paper primarily looks at the long introduction by William Radice in his translation of *Gitanjali* (2011) in reference to two other introductions---one by W. B. Yeats in *Song Offerings* (1912) and Tagore's own (rather a 'foreword') in the Bangla original *Gitanjali* in 1911 and compares and analyzes them to understand the role an introduction plays in a translation.*

Keywords: Translation, Introduction, Footnotes, Appendix, Politics of Translation, Understanding as Translation

Introduction

'Translation exists because men speak different languages'¹ and the importance of translation will never decline as long as man continues to exist in this world. Every era requires updated translations to accommodate the evolving nature of language and align with the

¹ George Steiner, *After Babel* (1975), P. 49

linguistic needs of the time. Rabindranath Tagore's (1861-1941) works are one of such instances where his poems were greatly sought after by the British and westerners at large in first half of the twentieth-century England, especially before the First World War. It is for the English translation of *Gitanjali* that Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1912. However, this self-translation of Tagore went through many hands and editions before it was published by Macmillan in 1912. Apart from George Sturge Moore's² recommendations to the Nobel committee, the introduction written by W. B. Yeats too played a significant role in helping to grow Tagore's recognition in Europe and America. A century later, William Radice, a renowned scholar of the Bengali language and literature brought out another translation to celebrate the sesquicentenary³ of Tagore in the year 2011. The introduction that Radice wrote is perhaps one of the most complex and comprehensive introductions to Tagore that exists in English translation.

Introduction, preface, foreword, afterword, footnotes, appendices are integral parts of a modern text. Particularly, a translated text cannot be imagined without an introduction or footnote. Greek and Latin classical literature have tremendously impacted European literature and have been in circulation through translation since the renaissance. They have been translated and retranslated numerous times and each time with a long introduction divided into sections informing the readers about ancient Greece or Rome, their language culture, authorship, historicity and orature-literature intermission. A modern translation of the Iliad or Odyssey cannot be understood properly without an 'introduction' per se. Thus, Gerald Genette in his essay titled *Seulis* (1987) termed introductions, prefaces, forewords as *paratexts* and argues that they are equally important in a translated text. He called illustrations as *peritexts* and reviews, interviews with the author and literary criticism as *epitexts* (Gil-Bardaji 7).

If understanding is a translation, as George Steiner would have put it in his seminal book *After Babel* (1975)⁴, then an

² 1870-1944. a British artist and a poet. He nominated Tagore to the Nobel Prize committee.

³ i.e., One hundred and fiftieth birth anniversary of Tagore

⁴ Introduction, *After Babel* (1975)

introduction to a translation is also an 'understanding' and in turn a translation in itself. Therefore, if we are to take the original text or the conceptual framework as a unit of understanding, then introduction in a translation becomes another unit of understanding and thus it goes on to act like a double to its original text. It violates the understanding or conceptual framework of the main text that the readers are supposed to read. The 'introduction' in a translation provides many details about the author, context, background, significance, analysis, and with different approaches, problems of equivalents, and problems of translation that it already provides the reader with a detailed conceptual framework of the text. Nonetheless, this makes an introduction to a translation a necessary part. What happens when an introduction is excessively long and too informative? Ideally, the 'actual' or 'original text' is the sole target of the readers to read. Thus, when a translator decides to put a long introduction to the translated text then it creates a problem. Most of the time the authors summarize the text briefly and as a result, it violates the concept of the original text. If we consider the original text as a 'unit' and if this unit is an understanding that one constructs after reading the text and if there are several units in a book including introduction, acknowledgment, forward, epigraph, footnotes, glossary, endnotes, critical comments, appendix, etc. (referred to as *paratexts* by Gerald Genette), then each of these units add up to the understanding of the text given. Therefore, the introduction which comes before the 'intended' text i.e., the original text the readers intend to read, gives a partial understanding of the text. In a book of translation, the introduction acts as a violation of the original body of the text. It mutilates, dissects, and turns the original text upside down both literally and conceptually.

Introductions have evidently become important in a modern published text. The introduction features more in the books of eminence and importance which carries a cultural or political significance with it. Especially in the works of (academic) scholarly translation, the introduction is made a mandatory part. Moreover, translation as an independent literary practice demands more explanation as it has to be understood by the readers of the target language. To make the readers understand the significance of each

word with cultural, political, social, and linguistic significance, the translator has to add an introduction only to give a primary understanding of the text the readers are going to read. Apart from the introduction, the translator has to add many footnotes and appendices containing the meaning of transliterated words (which could not be directly translated into the targeted language), an index of names and places, notes in the text, pictures of the author(s), facsimiles of the original manuscript, etc. But what comes after the text and before carries a paramount significance as understanding is the key approach to reading a text. If the information regarding the text is detailed before the text (which is a practice followed by all standard publications) then it gives the reader an idea before the reader could reach the original text. In many publications like the Penguin classics⁵, in the introduction, the translators give a summary of the text, which is again a violation of the original text. Interestingly at the same time, footnotes, endnotes, appendix, etc. come within or at the end of the text and therefore, do not affect the understanding of the readers.

Hitherto, the role of an 'introduction' in a translated text has not been much in the limelight of discussion in terms of its relationship with the source language text. Gerald Genette, in his French essay titled *Seulis* (1987), termed introductions, prefaces, and forewords as *paratexts* in a translation. Similarly, he termed illustrations as *peritexts* and reviews, interviews with the author, and literary criticism as *epitexts* (Gil-Bardaji 7). These *paratexts*, *peritexts*, and *epitexts*, have not been looked at through the lens of a translator's visibility or invisibility as proposed by Lawrence Venuti in his book *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995). It is true that translators play a pivotal role in a translated text and a translator can make himself/herself visible or invisible through the translated text through adaptations of various politics of translation and mechanizations such as domesticating or foreignizing. However, an assessment of the translator's role in a translated text has been done on the translated 'text' itself and not on any of the *paratexts* or *epitexts*. Then what happens when a translator makes oneself

⁵ Such as the translations of Homer's *The Iliad* and *the Odyssey* by Edward V. Rieu or E. V. Rieu could be taken as examples where the authors give a short summary to the text they have translated.

excessively visible in the introduction itself? What happens when a translator offers a full *understanding* (in a George Steinerian manner) of the text in the introduction? The proposed research proposes to unravel theoretical underpinnings associated with the 'introduction' and the role an introduction can play in a translated text.

The author possesses sole right over his or her written text, not the translators. When an author publishes a book, an introduction may or may not be necessary. It is normally an acknowledgment or preface that follows and so is the case in the original works of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the famous Bengali poet of the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Most of the books he published had a very short and precise acknowledgment or sometimes a brief introduction which in Bangla is known as 'Mukhobondho' or 'Bigyapon' and this does not talk in detail about the text that the readers are going to read. Interestingly, the Bengali *Gitanjali* of 1911 opens with a short 'Bigyapon' or 'advertisement':

Some songs in this book have been published elsewhere before. But the songs composed within a short span of time, later on, having a similar kind of tune, have been put together in this book and published.⁶

William Radice in his introduction to *Gitanjali: Songs Offerings* (1911)⁷ has deconstructed the whole concept of *Gitanjali*---both textually and conceptually by talking about the format and its formation in relation to many manuscripts and the whole process through which *Song Offerings* (1912) came into being. He begins by stating that his translation will be like a 'Zeitgeist' (Introduction xv)

⁶ The 'foreword' or 'introduction' (as this paper considers it) to the Bengali *Gitanjali*. P 5, Vishvabharti Prakashani. It must be noted that the 'foreword' to the Bengali *Gitanjali* does not have the merit to be termed as an 'introduction' technically. What this paper tries to argue is that forewords or 'mukhobondhos' in Bangla or prefaces Tagore's original Bangla were simple and never complex in comparison to the 'introductions' that appeared in the later translations.

⁷ The original Bangla *Gitanjali* was published in 1911 consisting of 157 songs and poems. In the same year, Tagore started translating it after receiving many requests from his friends and acquaintances. After some time in the year 1912, Tagore completed the translation and published it from London as *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* with an introduction by W. B. Yeats.

and from the very onset he started drawing the attention of the readers by claiming to do something new. Radice goes on to state that what makes the English *Gitanjali* so special is its precise lack of the ‘original’ (Introduction xvi). By this statement, Radice is referring to the Bengali *Gitanjali* of 1911 consisting of 157 songs and poems. Moreover, Radice’s introduction is filled with intricate analysis of the formation of the text. The introduction questions the authority of the author over the text, by putting in many details how Tagore collected poems from ten different books of verse starting from *Naivedya* (1902) to *Gitimalya* (1912)⁸ (Introduction xvi). It is indeed true that the self-translated *Gitanjali*, for which Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize (in 1912), is not the actual and complete translation of the Bengali *Gitanjali* of 1911. Whereas some translators chose to translate the Bengali *Gitanjali*, Radice chose to translate the English *Gitanjali* which is a ‘re-translation’ of the English ones. Here Radice argued that in the work for which Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize, Tagore was not serious about the translation, and it was rather a part-time practice.

Radice thoroughly studied the changes between the published *Gitanjali* and the unpublished manuscripts⁹ and he went on to describe in full detail how those changes took place (Introduction xxxiv). By analyzing various sources, Radice concluded that poem no. 83 in the *Song Offerings* intended to be the concluding song of the sequence (Introduction xxxiv) but this is not the case as we see a different version. According to Radice, *Gitanjali* as “conceived” by Tagore consisted of 83 poems (Introduction xxxv). Before the reader actually reads the translation, Radice started mentioning poems from different manuscripts with references to different styles of translation (Introduction xxxv). Radice assumed that the readers have a knowledge of Bangla *Gitanjali* and he is informing the readers about the changes which are there in the English *Gitanjali*. This intervention is a kind of violation that deviates the readers from the text.

⁸ In the same year the English *Gitanjali* or *Song Offerings* was published from London. Radice here means to say that Tagore even included songs from the book of verse published a year later than the Bengali *Gitanjali*.

⁹ Such as the Rothenstein MS and Crescent Moon Sheaf MS, kept in the Harvard library or Houghton Library, Harvard University USA.

Again, while talking about the 'paragraphing' in the translation¹⁰, Radice brought forth examples from *Naivedya* (1901), another book of verse by giving many details about the kind and nature of poems. He states "In Bengali, these are fourteen-line sonnets, though rhymed in couplets rather than following a Shakespearean or Petrarchan pattern. All of those are translated in the manuscript as single pieces of prose with no paragraph and breaks at all" (Introduction xxv). Such descriptions give us a glimpse of the original text even if one does not look at it. It is the translator speaking with an intention of translating a given text but not the author who can at least talk about the challenges s/he faces while writing the whole set of poems. Again, Radice quotes poem no. 73 from the Manuscript (i.e., poem no. 36 in *Song Offerings*) to show us the difference between the published *Gitanjali* and the Rothenstein Manuscript (Rothenstein MS)¹¹. Thus, the translator throws an imminent question at the readers: are they reading a scholarly article or a comparative study of two translations like a Comparative Literature article?

William Radice disapproves of the order of the poems in published *Song Offerings*, rather he has created his order and goes on to reconstruct the whole sequence of poems in his translation. To support his arguments Radice quotes:

Personally, I disagree that there is logic in the order of the poems in the published English *Gitanjali*. Table 2 shows---at a glance---that songs and poems, the different books from which the translations are made, and the 23 that were added to 80 from the main sequence were jumbled together in an utterly random way¹² (Introduction xli).

The quotation above is very crucial to our understanding of the intention of the translator as well as the intention of the readers. As if the readers are well-aware of the original works of Tagore along with

¹⁰ Because there is a clear difference of paragraphing between published *Song Offerings* and the manuscripts.

¹¹ Manuscripts of *Song Offerings* which Tagore translated were given to Sir William Rothenstein (1872-1945) an artist and a lifelong friend and admirer of Tagore. They are now collected at the library of the University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware.

¹² In his book, Radice has created different a set of Tables by categorizing the poems of *Gitanjali*

the different genres and poetic styles. As if Radice had already assumed that this translation is intended for the scholars who are quite familiar not only with Tagore as an individual but also with the corpus of the work he had produced. By keeping a particular set of readers in mind, Radice stuffed so much of information in the introduction that by default the readers (the educated, well-versed in Tagore studies) are informed all about the pros and cons of Bengali *Gitanjali* and its English translations. This particular proposition of Radice evidently brings into our mind the theory of 'learned *prekshaka*' in Bharat Muni's *Natyashastra*. In *Natyashastra*, Bharat argues that not everybody can comprehend and enjoy a play. Because a common audience (the *prekshaka*) would not know the meaning of various *angikas* and *vachikas* (acting such as the movements of the eyes, fingers and limbs, and speeches in Sanskrit) therefore he will not decipher the meaning of the play in any sense which is meant to be watched for spiritual purgation. Therefore, Bharat's conclusion is that a play (which includes all nine forms of plays in Sanskrit theater) can only be understood by the Brahmins who read and understand Sanskrit. And, there is no need to state it separately that in ancient India only the people who belonged to the upper caste could access Sanskrit, particularly the Brahmins.

Although Radice continued to talk about the order of the poems in published *Song Offerings*, he quickly turned to criticism and went on to give the readers his own judgment, which they would have discovered while reading the translated poems. Radice states, "Notice all the calls for pain and exhaustion. This leads naturally into the group of poems from *Naivedya*, for pain and exhaustion are among the emotions they describe" (Introduction xlv). This sentence once again proves the hypothesis of the research that it gives an *understanding* of the poems of *Gitanjali* in general, if 'understanding' is a translation as it is argued by George Steiner, then this introduction is a translation. Because it enables the readers to comprehend the conceptual framework of the poems of *Gitanjali* which in turn, is a violation of the original text. A major point to be noted here is that this introduction is not complete, which means it has not given the readers a complete picture of all the poems of *Gitanjali*; rather, it has

enabled them to understand the modes of poems Tagore was writing between 1902 to 1913.

Interestingly, Radice claims:

...to the order and selection of poems, to paragraphing, to the punctuation, and above all to Tagore's choice of words and phrases---would have contributed to Tagore's growing feeling over time that in the English *Gitanjali*, as presented and edited by Yeats, he had betrayed his true self (Introduction lvi).

The statement above presents another set of problems. By expressing such a thought, Radice claims authority over the English *Gitanjali* and thus it denounces the text's existing form. This denunciation could fulfill his purpose of translating it in a completely *bizarre* way¹³. Radice wants the readers to understand what Tagore had in his mind while he was in the process of writing and publishing *Gitanjali* through his 'introduction' and not by reading the text itself (Introduction xix). What Tagore had to say through the songs of *Gitanjali*, Radice had already narrated them in detail in his Introduction. In this particular case, the original text becomes irrelevant that comes after the translation (of Radice), and this is how this introduction violates the sanctity of the original 'text' that the readers intend to read.

In the introduction, Radice notes too many details of history about the composition and translation of *Gitanjali*, which is another political element of translation. Such as Radice quoting letters like this by the Rev. C. F. Andrews¹⁴ to Tagore on 25th March 1914:

"I cannot tell you how indignant I was to hear from him (Rothenstein) about Chirol's utterance concerning Yeats and your poems. It is hateful and miserable and contemptible...There is not a breath of a rumour of it over

¹³ Such as unnecessary repetitions of lines, italicization of *Antara* and *Abhogas* i.e., italicizations of lines in between. The problems of Radice's translation of *Gitanjali* I have discussed in my M.Phil. dissertation titled "Translating *Gitanjali*: A Comparative Study of Tagore and William Radice", submitted to the Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi; December 2017.

¹⁴ Was a principal of Calcutta Arts College and a lifelong admirer of Tagore.

here and there never will be. I wonder where Chirol¹⁵ picked up” (Introduction xxx).

This letter is quoted when Radice is talking about a rumor that spread immediately after Tagore receives the Nobel Prize that the translations are by the Irish Poet W B Yeats and credit goes to him only. This quotation seemed unnecessary considering the length of an already long existing introduction.

Along with Radice’s introduction, W. B. Yeats’ introduction to *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* (1912) too is a violation of the original text. Whereas Radice’s translation carries too many details about the poems, Yeats’ translation bears superfluous detail. Both are equally responsible for the disruption of the understanding of the poems in *Gitanjali*. Radice’s introduction is critical and expository, and Yeats’ Introduction is more of hero worship. According to Radice, the *Song Offerings* of 1912 are profoundly influenced by Yeats’ passionate introduction (xvii). Interestingly, the same case could be argued about Radice’s introduction. He seems to have overshadowed Tagore and *Gitanjali* with this heavy Introduction as well as with the translation, though he is not passionate in his Introduction, unlike Yeats. According to Radice, even it would have been impossible for Thomas Sturge Moore to recommend *Song Offerings* without Yeats’ introduction. Yeats sees a ‘great man in making’ through (Appendix C 166)¹⁶. He projected Tagore as a Rishi or an ancient sage-like figure. He quotes his friend while describing Tagore, “He was first among our saints who has not refused to live, but has spoken out of Life itself...” (Appendix C 166). Further, Yeats states that the poems of *Gitanjali* come from a tradition “where poetry and religion are the same thing” (Appendix C 168). The descriptions Yeats produced in his Introduction are based on his Indian friends and colleagues who already had huge respect and admiration for Tagore. Yeats’ approach is more as an admirer than as a critic.

Radice’s introduction is 70 pages long and divided into ten sections making it one of the most comprehensive introductions to Tagore’s

¹⁵ Sir Valentine Chirol, journalist, polyglot, member of the royal commission on the Indian Civil Service.

¹⁶ Radice added the introduction by Yeats in Appendix C in his translation

work in English translation. In this introduction, Radice is seen criticizing the role of another Nobel laureate, W. B. Yeats, beginning from his intervention into Tagore's translations as well as for this (in)famous Introduction to the English *Song Offerings*. However, on the other hand, it must not be forgotten that Radice's introduction falls into the same category. All these elements in an introduction give a knowledge or understanding of the original text before a reader proceeds to read the text. The introductions by Yeats and Radice function like a pre-translation where through the Introduction the translator comments, criticizes, and appropriates the original text in his/her own way. It must be acknowledged without debate that, in a work of translation, the focus of the translator as well as the reader is always on the original content of the author. If too much criticism is infused within the introduction, it may mislead the readers into understanding the text from the perspective of the translator. Whether the introduction should be removed in a literary translation, after all, is not the concern of this article but when the same violates the conceptual framework of a given text the reader is going to read should be another subject of debate by Translation Studies scholars. But it must be acknowledged that whether Introductions like those of Radice (or those like Yeats') should be added at the end of a translated book in such a way that does not harm the reader's understanding should be posed as an open question.

Conclusion

William Radice's introduction to his translation of *Gitanjali* is one such example that not only overshadows Tagore's original *Gitanjali* but throws *Gitanjali* into a pit of endless debates about its composition, publication, and translation. In his excessively long and critical introduction, Radice delved into minute details that would likely interest Tagore scholars more than general readers who are merely curious or enjoy reading Tagore. Radice's complex and lengthy introduction not only diverts and bores the readers but also violates the sanctity of the original text. As the readers are informed about the emotions and moods of *Gitanjali* well enough in the introduction the introduction presents itself as a 'free translation' of the original *Gitanjali*.

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