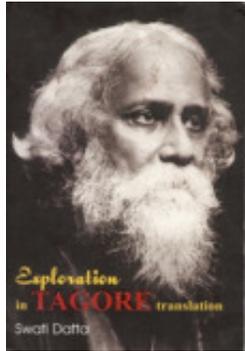


BOOK REVIEW

Problematising Tagore Translation



Exploration in Tagore Translation

Swati Dutta

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Swati Dutta's book titled *Exploration in Tagore Translation* looks at translation as a phenomenon in general and explores the English translation of Rabindranath Tagore's short stories in particular. The author has carefully examined the short stories from the volumes which are originally titled as *Galpaguchchha* and *Tin Sangi*. The author, in a novel way, has tried to analyse the need and demand of these translations in the present day scenario. She has also attempted to evaluate the rationale behind selecting these stories for translation in English with special reference to pre and post independence periods, the influence of colonialism on translations, so on and so forth.

The book opens with interesting questions like to what extent can a translator successfully negotiate a particular passage from grammar, syntax, and lexicon of one language; the world view or mindset of such structures and then transfer those to another language.

For a long time linguists and literary historians were intrigued by the capability with which Polish-born Joseph Conrad was able to compose narratives in his adopted language, English, and by the complexity of the inter-lingual games played by novelist Vladimir

Nabokov, whose earliest texts were composed in Russian, who also wrote in French and after escaping the Russian Revolution, turned to English. Rarer still are cases like Irish-born Samuel Beckett who appropriated for his adopted language French, the pattern of the English-language in his breakthrough play, *En Attendant Godot*, before translating his highly successful French text into English as *Waiting for Godot*.

This brief introduction helps us to contextualize the need of translation creating the notion of global literature. With such examples abound, it is no wonder that a prolific and versatile writer like Tagore would be translated to critical acclaim.

Taking her cue from George Steiner, the author agrees that the functional importance of translation is explicit in the coexistence and mutual contact of the thousands of languages spoken on earth from the literary point of view. Translation not only plays a vital role in the field of trade and commerce, but it also plays a major role in establishing, delineating and transferring cultural codes. The spatio-temporal constraints have been possible to bridge due to the important role of translation; where translation help create a shared, and therefore, a pluralistic literary culture. And especially in a multilingual country like India, translation also works as a unifying force. According to the author, Tagore's idea of universal harmony and humanism can find a way of becoming a reality through translation.

The author observes that Literature Studies and Translation has complemented each other where the practice and influence of the above mentioned has given rise to disciplines like Comparative Literature, Culture Studies, Post Colonial Studies and more emphatically Translation Studies. She maintains the point that in studying the phenomena of translation, one learns to appreciate and acknowledge the complexities of the languages concerned. She implicates her point by stating that the dimensions of Tagore's language—the innate subtleties that are his signatures—unveil only when one attempts to translate it from Bengali.

The author further adds that a native speaker might not easily understand how deeply rooted the language is into its source culture because of her proximity to the language. She explains her point by quoting one example: 'mathar kapor'. This simple term finds an expression 'the obligatory end of her sari over her head' in Kalpana Bardhan's translation of the story "Shasti". Obviously, this is neither a correct nor a happy equivalent of 'mathar kapor'.

Next she goes on to explain why examining the English translations has been a focal point in her book. She argues that as English has become established as the link language in the country, it becomes beneficial to translate into English in order to address a wider readership. She further argues that English being the legacy of colonialism, translations in English also offer a post-colonial perspective to the reading. She defends her cause of focusing on short stories as a genre. Apart from the obvious reasons which are generally the motives for studying short stories as a genre of literary importance, Tagore, who wrote almost 100 short stories, has a marked influence on Bangla literature. He was the first Bengali writer to elevate the short story to a serious art form. Tagore easily mingled stark realism and poetic idealism in his stories which reflected the contemporary life in rural and urban Bengal. Many of the stories portray conflicts or tensions between the new and the old, cruelty and sensitivity, solitude and crowd, male and female.

Chronologically documenting the progress of the publication of the translations of Tagore's short stories into English, the author tries to focus on the point that to the non-Bengali readers, the translated stories of Tagore present a vista of new cultural and social perceptions. According to her, translations of Tagore's short stories function as a 'viable medium of cross linguistic and cross-cultural encounters' and help the non-bilingual or non-multilingual readers discover such experiences. She also says that Tagore's short stories play a crucial part in Culture Studies. Reading translations of Tagore's short stories could be edifying for post-Tagore generations. Through translation,

the author hopes to convey Indian culture to multilingual, multinational and multicultural readership.

The author details the happenings of the era in socio-political and economic terms. She shows how Tagore was engrossed in the nationalist movement, his discontentment about the same and several other important incidents that bear a major influence on his writings and consequently reflected in his short stories. She shows how the changing times find its way in various forms in the stories and how these changes are reflected in a variety ranging from landlord-tenant relationship to shifts in occupations like farmers, land labourers, deputy magistrates, judges aka statutory civilian, college professors, etc. Various diseases like malaria, TB, plague; social evils like poverty, dowry system, caste system, untouchability, child marriage, polygamy, patriarchy—almost everything is mirrored in the stories. She correctly points out that, ‘many of the stories, if considered in a progression, portray the various segments of society and tell of the life and attitude of people living there’. According to the author the greatness of Tagore’s short stories lies in the fact that they ‘out live the age that produced them even while being strongly representative of it’. This uniqueness itself stresses the importance or validity of translating Tagore’s stories; especially when his greatness lies in the fact that though his stories attempt at capturing a particular time at a particular space through a particular language, his perception and capability both appeal to the sensibilities that are essentially human truths, beyond any boundaries. The author feels that the mature and adept handling of the ‘form’ (short story) through the ‘content’ has given Tagore’s short stories a flavour that goes beyond the regional, and therefore, stands every reason to be translated, to be transported beyond the linguistic and geographical boundary.

The author painstakingly maintains a chronology in which she documents that some of Tagore’s initial short stories received strong criticism since the non-Bengali readers had to rely on poor translations. She claims that translated short stories of Tagore led to the belief in West that he was an idealist and a mystic rather than a realist. She

further her claims that Tagore himself was one of the reasons for such (mis)conceptions. Though some of his short stories were translated and published into English during the beginning of the twentieth century, translation of noble winning *Gitanjali* changed the scenario as the *English Gitanjali* is laced with philosophy and mysticism unlike his short stories that mostly deal with realism. However, Tagore's genius as a short story writer was not recognized for years. Mary Lago in her work *Imperfect Encounter* searched for the reasons for these unsatisfactory translations. C. F. Andrews did not maintain Tagore's relations with the English publishers very correctly. Due to poor interpersonal relations managed by Andrews, very many potential competent translators turned away from the process.

Tagore himself weakened some of his powerful stories in translation by leaving out details of Indian life that he thought would be too foreign to non-Indian readers. Edward Thompson, an English poet and critic having long association with Tagore and a number of other luminaries of Bengali culture, wrote in Tagore's obituary in 1941:

More and more he toned down or omitted whatever seemed to him characteristically Indian, which very often was what was gripping and powerful. He despaired too much of ever persuading our people to be interested in what was strange to them. His work will one day have to be retranslated and properly edited. I am sure that then there will be a revival of his reputation.

His mystic image also added to the poor reception of his short stories. The author makes an informed remark that this particular 'mystic' image was cultivated and propagated by the West in their interest and substantiates her point by quoting from several sources. She established the fact that *English Gitanjali* fell into the customary stereotypical perception of the East by the West, and therefore the mystic Tagore got more represented in the western mind than the realist

Tagore. Tagore as a receiver of Noble Prize for literature was already a question for political considerations of Britain and therefore Britain's greatest colony, India. Looking at Tagore as a mystic rather than a realist helps the coloniser's cause as his stories would not have supported the projected image of Britain with respect to India. The mystic image was a 'safe other' which of course is a manipulated image of the Orient. Translated short stories of Tagore helped change this misconception to a great respect.

In this context, the translated short stories of Tagore encounter the imperial gaze and thereby establish its re-presentation of Tagore as a writer from the East. Translation of Tagore's short stories into English, thus, was a deliberate political move to manipulate the language of the colonisers to express the lived experience of the colonised. Apart from this logic, the author elaborates the role of English in India where it not only plays the active role of a major language as defined by Prof. Sisir Das to establish connection both internationally and intranationally. Through English translations, Tagore's short stories succeeded in achieving readership both at home and outside.

The book is an enjoyable reading. It has thoroughly researched documents and a rather exhaustive bibliography to justify the claims made in the course of the book. It is a pleasure to come across such a meticulous research work; especially in the portion where she outlines the details of the translated texts starting from 1901 to 2000. Painstakingly she has shown how over the century, Tagore's short stories had been translated into English and published by Indians and foreigners, how they have opened up new vistas to explore and study.

A couple of things to be noted though! The way the author mentions the problems, the intricacies and possibilities of Tagore translation leads the reader to ponder if those points are related specifically to Tagore translations only. The points noted by the author can be and are generally applicable to most literary works. There have also been assumptions where Bengali culture specific notions have

been termed as Indian. Take for example the term, 'mathar kapor'. The reader is made to understand that this term means a way of dressing that is common for 'Indian Hindu women'. 'Mathar kapor' is not at all common to women from southern parts of India. One also wonders about the author's claim that Tagore's stories gains significance as they represent 'the then Bengal/India' or that his stories represent 'realistic image of India'. Such claims give rise to a sense of discomfiture which partly stems from the Marxist observation that, time and again, has blamed Tagore for being in his ivory tower and observing life from a distance beneath the protection of social security and financial stability. He has been heavily critiqued that though his stories are laced with human philosophy and a kind of intellect which can be best defined as elite and urban, the true sufferings of common mass had not been captured in its entirety. Under such circumstances, equating Bengal with India seems a bit inappropriate. In today's scenario, where conscious efforts are being made to represent identities in their all-round correctness, these types of slips do create a jarring mental impact. Another thing to be noted is that the book permeates the smell of a dissertation throughout. Though the author confesses in the preface that it had been her doctoral work which has been given the shape of this book, it needs further adjusting to be able to read as a book, not a thesis. It is also worth mentioning here that the author could have analysed the editorial policies—the presence or absence thereof—and its ensuing affects on the translations itself.

Apart from these few drawbacks, however, the author, in summary, must be congratulated for an excellent effort. There is no denying the fact that this book has been a product of rigorous hard work. We would hope that this volume would regenerate interest in Tagore's works and re-introduce to the world the multi-faceted genius of Tagore, who is among the greatest Indian writers ever.

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