

Chapter – 5

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Translation activities on a major author like Rabindranath Tagore open up the possibility of a multi-dimensional research project. The present thesis which was postulated on the proposal for a comparative study of the different English versions of five selected novels of Tagore tried to understand the imperative of Tagore translation by approaching it through the methodological paradigm of contemporary theoretical development in the study of translation activities. Translation of a multi-faceted genius like Rabindranath Tagore is in itself a daunting task, but it has not prevented a plethora of translators trying their hand in it. Each translator brought his / her ideological formulations and agenda for translation. The first chapter studies the history of Tagore translation with a special reference to his novels. An important aspect of the survey was whether such translations could convey the philosophical depth and the vision that was integral to Tagore's work. That Tagore was himself involved as an overseer to some of these translation projects only adds to the complexities of the problem.

Tagore translation received its fillip from the author's own desire to see his works in English. The publication of the Nobel Prize winning English *Gitanjali* (*Song Offerings*) must have occasioned this enthusiasm which was only apparent in a muted and sporadic manner as evident from his own translation in 1890 of his poem *Nisphol Kamana*. *Gitanjali* (*Song Offerings*) marks a watershed in the

evolution of Tagore from a Bengali writer to an international literary figure and subsequently to an Indian icon. The publication of *Gitanjali (Song Offerings)* was followed by a plethora of translation activities with Tagore becoming more and more involved in the act of seeing his creation in the English language. Yet he was alive to the possibility of inaccuracy and distortion. This was all the more accentuated by other people getting involved in the debate. For example, William Rothenstein's comment on Rajani Ranjan Sen's translation of Tagore's short stories as "Monstrously ill done" (See Ch. 1, Pg. 19) added to the controversy on Tagore's translation. Such criticism of translations by others was also quite frequent.

This could be accounted for as a case of the idiomatic incompatibility in the use of English language by native speakers like Rothenstein and Earnest Rhys on one hand and the acquired English of the Indian translators whose language, though English must have sounded terribly un-English to a native speaker. Another factor determining the remarkable increase in translation activities of Tagore's novels was to cash in his growing fame in the west. However, one fact comes out very clearly from the research; Tagore's role in the translation of his novels had a definite influence in the end product. This is amply clear in the translation of Tagore's 1934 novel *Char Adhyay* which never saw the light of the day because of the author's indecisiveness. He had requested both Surendranath Tagore and Amiya Chakrabarty to translate it but after the latter's version was almost finished in 1934, Tagore stalled it (See Ch. 1, Pg.25 to 27).

That translation is in itself a critical act is an interesting fact that influences the present research. Novels that have occasioned multiple versions in English can be seen as a part of a dialogic process of revision, improvement and an attempt to conform to the cultural mores that goes into the original. Each subsequent act of translation, thus, can be seen as a critical engagement with preceding versions. However, the need for such revisionist translation is almost insatiable as evident from Sujit Mukherjee's opinion that, "he can withstand any amount of translation into any language of the world" (See Ch. 1, Pg. 29). Early approach to Tagore translation does not reveal a theoretical engagement with the act of translation. Translator like Sujit Mukherjee has even gone as far as denouncing the act of theoretical grounding of the act of translation (See Ch. 3, Pg. 79).

It is this point that the present study is particularly engaged with. Tagore's creation has a large hinterland of cultural, political and ideological significance. To understand how well they are represented in translation needs an active engagement with theoretical postulations. Moreover, Tagore's experimentation in form and modes of narration makes it imperative to understand his work beyond the mere act of story-telling. *Chokher Bali* is a novel that is particularly challenging as it has five versions in English with widely varying treatment. A novel that deals with the working of the mind, the translator is particularly challenged to present the workings of a highly complicated character like Binodini. On the other hand, a novel like *Gora* has interfused ideological and political concern in the study of an Irish orphan and these preoccupations are a great challenge to the translator(s). The novel has Tagore's personal response to the

developments that were taking place in the social and cultural spheres of Bengal. The clash between reform and tradition, the local and the universal finds its expression in subtle and understated mode that often escapes the translator's notice. *Ghore Baire* is grounded in a context that still leaves a scar on the Bengali psyche : the partition of Bengal. The flip side of the nationalistic awakening in India is portrayed in its narration with the 'Swadeshi Andolon' affording the immediate backdrop of the novel. The challenge for the translator(s) is to capture the essence of the clash between nationalistic aspiration, individual orientation and human values in the characters. *Chaturanga* explores the dark world of apparent religious piety and the dark world of sexual depravity that plagues the likes of Purandar and Harimohan. An essentially dark novel, it explores the failure of religion and the hypocrisy of its practitioners. However, Tagore who so carefully understates this point presents a problem for the translator. Behind the apparent facade of a love story *Shesher Kabita* is a flight into the world of ideal love and a metaphysical yearning. The limiting nature of familial bonds is contrasted with the liberating influence of love that transcends the mere physicality of human bondings. Essentially rooted in the Indian philosophical context, the muted and ambivalent philosophical groundings pose a challenge to the translator.

It is the contemporary 'cultural turn' in Translation Studies that affords us with the wherewithals to understand the complex world of Tagore translations. The evolution of Translation Studies from its earlier linguistic and English language teaching paradigm to contemporary post-colonial and cultural studies turn affords an interesting trajectory to understand the world of Tagore translation. As

translation studies co-opted the creative appraisal of the expressive mindset of the former colonies, a whole new set of evaluative yardstick came into play in the understanding of authors like Rabindranath Tagore. The work of Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak and Tejaswani Niranjana (See Ch. 3, Pg. 64, 65) gave new direction in the understanding of the relation between the *bhasha* literature(s) and its English renditions. Thus, translation becomes suspect of engendering the colonial dogmas with its antecedents in the enlightenment ethos, and at the same time as a voice of the colonized. The irony of this 'voice' is the most difficult part to come to terms with as the tongue is of the oppressor. The whole gamut of such debate is evident in the evolution of the appreciative approach to the world of Tagore's translation.

Contemporary appreciative approach views translation as an opening up of possibilities in a relationship of equals where the translator and the author are engaging with each other in equal terms. Questions of 'fidelity' to the original in terms of lexicon on one hand and the liberty of the translator's license are being increasingly mediated in a paradigm of negotiation; thanks to the work of Homi Bhabha who affirms his faith in the "cutting edge of translation and re-negotiation ... that carries the meaning of culture" (See Ch. 3, Pg. 66). This idea has its own backers in India where scholars like Sukanta Chaudhuri stress on the point that 'the circle can never be squared', in the journey from 'one expansive verbal system into another' (See Ch. 3, Pg. 77).

Tagore himself is representative of the ambivalence in the act of translation. He was even hesitant to employ the epithet 'translation' to his rendition

of *Gitanjali* where he discerned “faded meanings” of the originals and denied them the status of translations (See Ch. 4, Pg. 82, 83). This is very interesting for Tagore was clearly alive to the fact that the translated products are clearly different from the originals. He himself was embarking on an exercise that did not have a one to one relationship with his original Bangla poems. Tagore was also often translated at the incompatibility of Bangla and English in reflecting the nuances and the cultural significance of the Bangla text (See Ch. 4, Pg. 86). Thus, there were large scale alteration and modification in the English rendering of Tagore’s original text in order to make them familiar to the English reader:

The reader of a translation principally belongs to another language and cultural community. Therefore, a gap may occur between the pragmatics of the SL (Source Language) text on one hand, and that of the TL (Target Language) on the other. The translator then has to bridge the gap between the pragmatic differences that are reflected in the broad and general system of the languages concerned, as well as, between the more specific and immediate pragmatic contexts (Oberoi, 2007 : 53).

If Tagore’s indecisive supervision marks the early phase of Tagore translation, the contemporary phase is one that has been enabled by the expiry of the copyright rules from the 31st December 2001. Newer and newer translations with widely varying methodology and theoretical moorings are hitting the market.

The study takes into consideration both the textual and Para-textual features that are so important in the light of contemporary theoretical approaches. It is thus interesting to undertake a comparative analysis of translations done under Tagore’s

supervision and contemporary translations done by the likes of Nivedita Sen, Sreejata Guha, Radha Chakravarty and Sukhendu Ray. The analysis of the translations of *Ghore Baire* by Surendranath Tagore (1919) and Nivedita Sen (2004) and Sreejata Guha (2005), reveals interesting facts on the process of translation. The omissions that were there in Surendranath Tagore's version have been reincorporated by Sen and Guha. Moreover, there is clearly an urge to explicate as evident by the detailed introduction and notes that accompanies the text as the Para-textual segments. Moreover, Nivedita Sen and Sreejata Guha conform to the original structure of the text in order to reflect the original organization. It is interesting to note the treatment of culture specific lexical item in the three versions. For example, Sreejata Guha prefers to use the term *Sindoor* over 'Vermilion'. One cannot help but notice the fact that an English reader of a non-Indian origin would need equal explication of both the words and its cultural significance to a married Hindu woman. Thus, the choice of the word 'sindoor' would help in retaining the cultural significance as well as the feel of the original (See Ch. 4, Pg.94). Similarly, the translation of the act of touching an elder's feet undergoes significant changes over the years. While Surendranath Tagore tries to stick to the literal meaning of 'taking the dust' of the elder's feet, Sen and Guha makes it more amenable to contemporary feminist orientation by trying to reduce if not negate the effect of taking dust of a man's feet by replacing it with 'touching his feet respectfully' or 'touching his feet reverently'. This is perhaps inevitable as the translator's own ideological orientation is bound to intrude into the translation process. Similar pattern is seen in *Gora* where W.W. Pearson (1924), like Surendranath Tagore, translates the act of touching the feet as 'taking the dust of

feet'. In a later translation by Sujit Mukherjee (1997) it was translated as 'bent low and touched his feet in *pranam*'. Likewise Asok Mitra (1961) translates the act as touching the feet 'in a salutation' (Tagore, 2005 : 62). Such apparently minor details are important in understanding the translation process. Tagore clearly wanted a literal translation as Pearson's and Surendranath's translations were done under Rabindranath Tagore's supervision. However, later translations help in revealing contemporary cultural ethos towards traditional practices like touching of feet in *pranam* (See Ch. 4, Pg.107).

The colonial / post-colonial dialectics clearly come across from the comparative analysis of the translated versions of the novel *Gora*. E.F. Dodd's translation can be ranged against those done by Indian translators. Dodd's version expunges passages that shows the British in poor light and highlights those that reflects on the orthodoxy, superstition and fanaticism of the Indians. Thus, the manipulative role of the translator is a fact that should be borne in mind in the appraisal of translated versions.

.... The need to look into how power gets *translated*, is how translation plays a role in imposing power, making power hegemonic or acceptable to the one it is intended for, and also in subverting and resisting power. However, one needs to first of all position one's theorization of the phenomenon of translation such that it allows for differences and slippages in the place of the possibility of absolutely certain, inviolable and transparent renderings from one language to another. This is so because the

nature of power, or at least, the only way in which power can be theorized about while cherishing some possibility of resistance, lies in foregrounding differentials (Bhaduri, 2007 : 49).

Sujit Mukherjee's translation practice is based around the retaining of culturally specific terms in their original in order to convey their feelings. He prefers to retain terms like *Shravan* instead of 'rainy season' or *Kolikata* instead of 'Calcutta'. *Bharatvarsa* and *ma* find favour over 'India' and 'Mother'. In spite of Sujit Mukherjee's denial of any theoretical mooring, it is clear that the approach of translation being more of a negotiation than a definite representation is covering into play. In a negotiative paradigm, encountering culture specific words would make the target language reader actively involved with the process of unraveling an alien cultural scenario and can be essentially seen as a negotiation between the readers' cultural mooring and that which engenders the source language text:

In translation, two ages and cultures – more strictly, two groups or conglomerates of culture – are held in tension, each reworked in the light of the other and further refracted by a range of other forces. We are finally left with the continually shifting interplay of amassed forces around two foci, the source and target cultures, focused in their turn upon two text that are also one (Chaudhuri, 2002 : 10).

Chaturanga is an interesting novel in the sense that the very title of the novel affords the greatest challenge to the translators, and one feels that there is still scope for a more appropriate representation. Going through Asok Mitra's

rationale (See Ch. 4, Pg. 29, 30) for using the title *Quartet* for the translated version, one feels that it does not reflect the structural logic expounded by Mitra. However, Mitra's practice of retaining lexical items from the Bengali language set a precedent that was followed by modern translators like Sujit Mukherjee, Radha Chakravarty, Sreejata Guha and Nivedita Sen. Sukanta Chaudhuri says:

All intrusions of a second language in the original text, all passages standing out in relief, represent a significant phenomenon of non-translation in the discourse of the original. They are rightly left un-translated in translations of the original --- as traditionally with the French passages in Tolstoy and Mann In an English rendering, the only course seemed to be italicize these words, with a note to the reader explaining the practice. (The same device was earlier adopted by Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak in translating from Mahasweta Devi). But a printing convention like this makes for a signpost, not an integrated utterance. In the new (English) verbal milieu of the translation, the English words acquire a different relation to their context, perform a different function. We might render, quite literally, the letter of the original, but not the cultural interface on which it was located (ibid : 13).

During the course of the work, one could discuss that the basic motive of repeated translation of Tagore's texts was to negate the cultural inaccuracy of the past and to profess a 'fidelity' to Tagore's philosophy and vision of life that went into the formation of his creative genius. The success or the lack of it is open to

debate and the act of translation is not to generate a definitive version but is a part of the larger cultural and theoretical context of a given time and the essential urge to look anew. The act of translation is in itself an act of criticism and re-translations only add to the critical mass:

There can no more be the ultimate translation than there can be the ultimate poem or the ultimate novel, and any assessment of a translation can only be made by taking into account both the process of creating it and its function in a given context (Bassnett, 2003 : 19).

The early translation of Tagore's work is a very interesting phenomenon in the sense that it was a collaborative act. Collaboration as a method of translation is of recent theoretical vintage, thanks to the works of Denis Tedlock, Arnold Krupat and Jerome Rothenburg in the field of folklore and cultural studies in the United State of America. It is held up as appropriate to uncover latent cultural significance that a native informant is privy to. Thus one cannot discount or dismiss early Tagore translation but look upto them for an understanding of socio-cultural reality of the times and the relationship between those who were born into the English language and those who acquired it. This could provide directions for future research. The present work obviously suffers from limitations; but it is hoped that in opening up future avenues for debates the thesis is making a humble contribution in the continuous evolution of Tagore scholarship.

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