Chapter 3
Translating Tagore: Shifting Paradigms

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Abstract This essay deals with the question of translatability and Tagore's own ambivalence and anxiety of adequate translation of his works from Bengali. Exploring the theoretical problem of mimesis as expressed through the relation between "original" and "copy," it construes translations as interpretations and temporally situated renewals, performative and political, and as with all textual products, original in their own right. It makes its points through a variety of different translations, often of the same text.

Keywords Translation · Cultural politics · Mimesis · Bengali literature · Literary history · Civilization studies

When we speak of translating Tagore, it is worth remembering that it was primarily for his works in English that he won the Nobel Prize in 1913. Yet Tagore's letters reveal his anxieties about the risks that translation can entail, and the flaws in his own English translations.[1] In a letter to Edward Thompson, he says: "In my translations I timidly avoid all difficulties, which has the effect of making them smooth and thin. I know I am misrepresenting myself … to the Western reader" (February 2, 1921). He acknowledges the "cracks and gaps" in his translations, (August 5, 1921), and declares: "I have come to the conclusion that translating a poem is doing it wrong, specially when the original belongs to a language which is wholly alien to the medium of its translation" (April 16, 1922). Tagore's letters also betray his insecurity about his ability to translate into English, for he writes despairingly: "I have done gross injustice to my original productions partly owing to my incompetence and partly to carelessness… I should have to rely upon my

[1] See, for instance, Thompson (1993), Trivedi (1993) and Das Gupta (2002).

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English friends for the revision, for I never can trust my own English" (April 10, 1935).

Tagore's self-doubts are based on certain assumptions about translation which I will examine, and challenge, in this paper. For he assumes that the acceptability of a translation depends on its fidelity to the source text, that the translated work is subordinate to the authority of the original, that it is "wrong" to translate into a language that is culturally far removed from the original, and that only an Englishman understands the proper use of English. These assumptions are not unique to Tagore; they represent some commonly held views about translation that have formed the traditional basis for judging and evaluating literary translations. Traditional theories of translation vest primary authority in the source text, which is regarded as not only prior to, but more powerful than, the translation. The translator's voice is therefore assumed to be inferior, secondary, and derivative—in fact, the translator is not supposed to possess a voice at all.[2] The translation is supposed to be a mere echo of the original. This attitude is related in part to theories of language, for until recently, language was studied for its coherence rather than its disruptive potential. But contemporary theory looks at language as a site for contestation, where the interactants are aware of the power of words. This paradigm shift is visible in the domain of translation, where a translator can now challenge the authority of the source text, in search of a voice of her own. For Tagore translators today, this search for a voice can be both liberating and creative, but it also has interventionist potential. That is my argument in this paper, illustrated with references to my own practice in the field of Tagore translations.

For decades, Tagore translations were confined in the straitjacket of "fidelity," as long as copyright remained the exclusive privilege of Visva-Bharati, where the "house style" decreed that accuracy, or close adherence to the original, was the only "permissible" approach. Yet this overlooks the fact that a preoccupation with "fidelity" or "authenticity" was not part of the tradition in India before colonial times. Ours was a polyglot culture with a strong oral tradition, and linguistic and regional borders were fluid; in this scenario, it was inevitable that texts should travel in translation. Authorship and copyright did not signify much in a context where the mutability of texts across time and space was more or less taken for granted. As Sujit Mukherjee points out, "*Rupantar* (meaning 'changed in form' or 'in changed form') and *anuvad* ('speaking after' or 'following after') are the commonly understood senses of translation in India, and neither term demands fidelity to the original" (80). It was with the introduction of print culture, and as a result of exposure to the Western tradition with its notions of authorship and authority, that concern with copyright, ownership of texts, and authenticity became part of the Indian publishing scene. A market-oriented publishing scenario also gave added

[2] Canadian critic Sherry Simon points out the images of dominance, fidelity, and betrayal in most translation theory. To counter this, Simon (1996) speaks of a committed translation project: "For feminist translation, fidelity is to be directed toward neither the author nor the reader, but toward the writing project—a project in which both writer and translator participate" (2).

impetus to this paradigm shift. The concern with fidelity in the field of Tagore translations needs to be interpreted in terms of this historical context.

This explains Tagore's own anxiety about his works in translation and also Visva-Bharati's attempt to preserve Tagore's works in their "pure" form, even in translation. Yet as Tagore himself was aware, the rapid decline in his international reputation shortly after he won the Nobel Prize was to a great extent due to faulty translations of his work. Tagore often felt out of step with the literary and political establishment in his own country and therefore longed for international recognition. He wrote to Edward Thompson on September 20, 1921: "All along my literary career I have run against the taste of my countrymen, at least those of them who represent the vocal portion of my province" (Alam and Chakravarty 2011: 114). Tagore knew he was controversial in India, and his public image mattered to him greatly. Hence his concern about the quality of his works in translation, and his distress over translations that he felt had failed to do justice to his writings in Bengali. In his own translations, he often tried to please his Western audience by diluting the cultural specificity of the Bengali originals. Edward Thompson complains: "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."[3] As he became busy with his travels and lecture schedules, Tagore began to leave the task of translating his works to friends and associates whose competence was questionable. "Ill-judged selection and unevenness of translation styles conveyed little of the vigour and beauty of his Bengali stories and his experiments with Bengali prosody" (Lago and Warwick 1989: 19). There were of course other reasons for the decline in Tagore's reputation. His anti-imperialist stance in the *Nationalism* lectures, for instance, made him unpopular in the West. Nevertheless, translation, which had played a major role in his meteoric rise to international fame, also had much to do with his fall from grace in the eyes of the western world.

Although Tagore's fame began to fade, he always had admirers in different parts of the world, and his works continued to be translated, in his lifetime and afterward. Yet these translations often did him a disservice. Macmillan's *Collected Poems and Plays of Rabindranath Tagore* (1936), the first collection of Tagore's writings in the English language, remained in circulation for a long time and was responsible for creating many misconceptions about his work. Although it was an inadequate selection, it projected the impression of a complete collection of Tagore's writings in English and also did not acknowledge that many of the pieces were translations from another language, and not originally written in English.

In 1961, the Tagore birth centenary gave a new impetus to Tagore translators. Apart from translations of individual works, *A Tagore Reader*, edited by Amiya Chakravarty, and *Toward Universal Man*, published by Asia Publishing House in New York, are two notable attempts to anthologize Tagore's works in English translation. Even after the centenary, publications of Tagore's writings in translation continued to appear. *Boundless Sky* (1964), published by Visva-Bharati, is a

[3] Edward Thompson, *Time and Tide*, 16 August 1941, cited in Thompson (1993, p. 25).

selection of Tagore's stories, poems, and prose writings. These translations, many either done by Tagore himself, or approved by him, are likely to strike today's reader as dated. *Poems of Rabindranath Tagore* (1966), commissioned by the Tagore Commemorative Volume Society and edited by Humayan Kabir, is a selection of 101 Tagore poems in translation. *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, published by Sahitya Akademi between 1994 and 1996 and, edited by Sisir Kumar Das, are a monumental effort to anthologize Tagore's works in English, including those in translation. *Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology* (1997), edited by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, though published much later, includes many of the older translations produced during Tagore's lifetime. Everywhere in these translations is the specter of authenticity, the fear of the translations being labeled "unfaithful."

With the lapse of copyright in 2001, there has been an unprecedented spurt in Tagore translations by diverse hands, in diverse modes, a trend that gained added momentum on account of Tagore's 150th birth anniversary. *The Oxford Tagore Translations* represent, for instance, a collaborative, scholarly effort to publish Tagore translations in a series of edited volumes. The fourth volume of *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, published by the Sahitya Akademi in 2007 and edited by Nityapriya Ghosh, is another massive and erudite miscellany. In contrast to the academic framework of the Oxford and Sahitya Akademi volumes, popular publishing houses in India, such as Penguin, Rupa, and Roli Books, have also been publishing Tagore's works in translation, intended for the general reader. With the sesquicentenary, the number of anthologies and omnibuses of Tagore's works has also been on the rise.

Today, the Tagore translator enjoys a freedom that is as full of creative possibility as it is fraught with danger, for it has become impossible to evade a host of challenging questions about authorship and authority, text and context, source and target cultures, and the very status of translation itself. Now that Tagore's works are out of copyright, who owns the source texts? Does the authority rest with the author, the translator, the publisher, or the reader? Where, and to whom, does the translation belong? Should a translation be domesticated or foreignized? What are the politics of language and location that come into play when a Bengali text is translated into English? What are the market forces that come into play in determining the circulation and reception of a translated work? Does the translator have the right to alter the original? Where does liberty end and license begin?

These are some of the issues that I find myself compelled to negotiate in my own practice as a translator. These questions were central to the choices that my co-editor Fakrul Alam and I had to make, for instance, as we worked on *The Essential Tagore*, our anthology of Tagore's writings, featuring in a single giant volume the work of thirty translators across ten literary genres. To an extent, therefore, it is useful to treat this project as a case study in the present discussion of contemporary Tagore translations. Breaking away from the conventional mold of uniformity, our collection aims to demonstrate the widely divergent ways in which Tagore can be translated today. In a significant change of stance, it was Visva-Bharati that first commissioned this project, a collaborative venture involving

editors and translators of Indian and Bangladeshi origin that would take Tagore out of the coterie culture of Kolkata and Santiniketan, and reinstate him as a South Asian writer of world stature. Later, with Harvard opting to publish the world edition, the project acquired a wider international dimension, bringing with it the added challenges of addressing a multiple audience.

In our attempt to explore the heterogeneity of the field of Tagore translations, we encouraged our contributors, located in different parts of India and abroad, to express their individual perspectives and practice their own methodologies, which are too varied to dovetail neatly with each other in a clearly demarcated "house style." In fact, we have even carried two translations of the same song, to indicate the spectrum of possibilities inherent in this inclusive and broad-based approach. The crux of the song "*Akash bhara surya tara*," lies in the refrain, which Ratna Prakash translates as "I wonder, and so I sing" and "I marvel, and so I sing," while Amit Chaudhuri renders the same line as "so, surprised, my song awakens." Ratna Prakash's translation reads:

Starts fill the sky, the world teems with life,
And amidst it all I find my place!
I wonder, and so I sing.
I feel in my veins the ebb and flow of Earth's eternal tides
Pulling this Creation
I wonder and so I sing.

Walking along the forest's grassy paths,
I have been entranced by the sudden scent of a flower,
Around me lie strewn the gifts of joy
I wonder, and so I raise my song.
I have seen, I have heard.
I have poured my being upon the breast of Earth,
Within the known I have found the unknown.
I marvel and so I sing.

Amit Chaudhuri's rendering of the same song is rather different:

The sky full of the sun and stars, the world full of life,
in the midst of this, I find myself—
so, surprised, my song awakens.

Wave after wave of infinite time, to whose ebb and flow earth sways,
the blood in my veins courses to that measure—
so, surprised, my song awakens.

I've pressed upon each blade of grass on the way to the forest,
my heart's lifted in madness, dazzled by the scent of flowers,
all around me lies this gift, outspread—
so, surprised, my song awakens.

I've listened closely, opened my eyes; poured life into the earth,
looked for the unknown in the midst of the known,
so, surprised, my song awakens.

In the different versions, the same Bengali word "bismaye" is translated, variously, as "wonder," "marvel," and "surprise," altering the meaning of the entire song. Ratna Prakash's translation is premised upon an understanding of Tagore as a nature poet who responds to the universe in a Romantic vein. But Amit Chaudhuri's understanding of Tagore's worldview is different; calling the song a "paean to coincidence," he explains that he uses the word "surprise" because "the speaker in the song is not just transfixed by the beauty of the universe but by the happenstance that's brought him to it" (Alam and Chakravarty 2011: xxvii). Are these multiple approaches "permissible"? What meaning did Tagore really have in mind? What is the right word, then? These questions are actually irrelevant in this context, because, for practitioners who regard translation as a form of activism, the focus is not on what is translated, but on why it is translated.

The juxtaposition of different translations of the same source text underscores our conviction that translation is not a mere echo of the original, but an act of interpretation where the translators' voices can be heard, in dialogue with, and sometimes in conflict with, the voice of the original. For non-Bengali readers, the presence of multiple versions of the same original would draw attention to the "translatedness" of these texts. For even in the realm of Tagore translations, there is a canonicity that needs to be problematized, emphasizing the contingent nature of all translations.

Both source text and translation are historically situated, after all. When Tagore uses the word "Bangladesh," for instance, he is referring to pre-partition undivided Bengal; but it would be a naïve historical erasure to retain the term in a contemporary translation, because in today's context, "Bangladesh" signifies the independent national entity that did not exist in Tagore's lifetime.

Tagore himself is aware of the mutability of texts and translations. In a letter to James Drummond Anderson dated April 14, 1918, he writes, referring to *Gitanjali*: "one should frankly give up the attempt at reproducing in translation the lyrical suggestions of the original verse and substitute in their place some new quality inherent in the new vehicle of expression" (Alam and Chakravarty 2011: 107). As an author translating his own text, he made extensive changes to the Bengali poems, rendering them as prose poems that defy classification. Commenting on the impact of the English *Gitanjali* upon its international audience, Sujit Mukherjee observes: "Its unique quality was the result of the author endeavouring to be his own translator, in which process he went beyond the bounds of translation and achieved something which should be regarded as transformation" (Mukherjee 5). Yet, as Mukherjee acknowledges, "[t]he very process which makes the English *Gitanjali* such a literary miracle is its greatest disqualification to being regarded as a normal work of translation" (Mukherjee 5). In other words, translators in general would not take such liberties with the original, or their works would not count as translations at all. This anxiety underlies the rather literal, uninspiring quality of the English translations of Tagore that followed his death in 1941. It has taken decades for Tagore translators to emerge from the stranglehold of the demand for authenticity, although Tagore himself had broken the shackles of conformity very early in his career as a translator of his own works.

The translator's search for a voice can also be gendered, demonstrating, as Sherry Simon (1996) says, "how contemporary feminist translation has made gender the site of a consciously transformative project, one which reframes conditions of textual authority" (167). *Boyhood Days*, the title of my English translation of Tagore's memoirs *Chhelebela*, deliberately invokes issues of gender difference that the more inclusive title *My Childhood* would have erased; for as Tagore's text demonstrates, boys and girls were brought up very differently in his time. The title *Boyhood Days* also ironically echoes Taslima Nasrin's *Amar Meyebela*, translated as *My Girlhood*, but of course only informed readers would recognize this. Such deliberate manipulations of the text, regarded by purists as "distortions" of the original, are intended to interrogate the analogy between gender and translation; for translations, like women, are traditionally expected to be subordinate, and faithful, and critiques of translation are often couched in the language of betrayal.

In a sense, of course, every translation is a betrayal of the original. Some local, culture-specific nuances are inevitably lost in translation, for every language has some irreducible cultural terms that do not transfer across linguistic boundaries. The very act of translation thus involves a degree of textual violence, a violation of the source text. Some theorists compare this to cannibalism, a devouring of the original. But translation after all is not merely a verbal transference from one language to another. The operations of language and power are embedded in specific social contexts, and spill over beyond the written page. Theorists recognize now that translations must be seen contextually, in relation to the conditions that govern and surround their production and reception.[4] The cultural border-crossings enacted by translation are never smooth, but the textual violence they entail may have constructive underpinnings, if we regard this as a process of cultural interaction or interpretation, an act of reaching out to others. The destruction of source text paradoxically gives it a new and altered life, in its translated avatar. Translation becomes a test, not only of the elasticity and flexibility of the target language, but of the cultural relations implicit within the process. For interventionist translation does not seek to erase differences. It raises the question, in Satya P. Mohanty's words: "How do we negotiate between my history and yours? How would it be possible for us to recover one commonality, … the imbrication of our various pasts and presents, the ineluctable relationships of shared and contested meanings, values, material resources?" (Mohanty 1988: 130). Such questions are crucial, for they preclude the creation of what Mohanty describes as "debilitatingly insular spaces": "Could we, in other words, afford to have *entirely* different histories, to see ourselves as living and having lived – in entirely heterogeneous and discrete spaces?" (Mohanty 1998: 130).

When Tagore translated the poems in *Gitanjali*, he made some major modifications. In many cases, his poems underwent substantial revisions when they were

[4] Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere look beyond linguistic theories of translation to focus on the interaction between translation and culture, "the larger issues of context, history and convention" (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990, p. 11).

converted into songs. Two such examples figure in *The Essential Tagore*: we have carried double versions of "jibon jakhan shukaye jaye" and "aj jharer ratey." The difference between poetry and song can be seen in the two versions of "jibon jakhan shukaye jaye," translated by Fakrul Alam. The poem reads:

> When life dries up
> Come in a stream of mercy.
> When everything graceful is covered,
> Come in a shower of songs.
>
> When work is overwhelming,
> Creating a din that hems me in,
> In soundless steps, O silent one,
> Come to the outskirts of my heart.
>
> When I have made myself poor
> And my cornered heart lies languishing,
> Open the door, O great-hearted Lord,
> And come in all your Majesty.
>
> When dust storms of desire blind me,
> And I lapse into forgetfulness,
> O Holy one, O ever watchful one,
> Come to me in a blaze of light!

The song version is markedly different:

> When the sap of life shrinks, seek the showers of mercy.
> When all that's lovely is hidden, come sweetly as a song.
> When work overpowers and imprisons me
> Within the frontiers of the heart, O Giver of life, tread softly!
> When denying all pleasures and restricting itself
> My mind droops, freeing it, O Bounteous One, come regally.
> When dust storms of desire blind and make me forgetful,
> O Holy and Vigilant One, come as a fiery, overwhelming light.

In structure, sound, and sense, the different versions affirm Tagore's awareness that texts are not reified, but changeable. The inclusion of these variants is an unconventional editorial move. It gestures at our conviction that although the translator's voice must be recognized, the voice of the original remains of crucial significance and should not be suppressed.

There is a paradigm suggested here, which awaits fuller theorization. It is an interactive model, based on the idea of a productive dialogue between the voices of source text and translation. It is premised on the idea that the spirit of the original should animate the translation, but without overriding the unique quality of the translation itself. Here, the "translatedness" of the translation remains in view, its cultural difference from the source text is not obscured, and the translator's role as cultural mediator is not rendered transparent. Dialogue recognizes difference, but also articulates the desire to communicate across the divisions that has separate self and other, culture from culture. It represents the will to negotiate.

In carrying a text across the border separating one culture from another, the translator is faced with many questions: how much to concede to the target

audience, how much of the cultural context of the source text to convey through paratext—explanation, annotations, and other supplementary material—and how to negotiate untranslatable cultural terms. The answers to these questions entail choices that depend on the translator's agenda, the intended readership, and other factors concerning the production and reception of the translated work. In my own translations, I try to capture the spirit and flavor of the original as closely as possible, but in a modern English idiom that would appeal to the contemporary reader. For as G. N. Devy declares, "Translation is … an attempted revitalization of the original in another verbal space and temporal span" (Devy 1999: 156).

While Tagore is timid and unsure about the "correctness" of his English, contemporary translations appropriate and Indianize the language in ways that have transformed the English lexicon. At work here is the history of postcolonial translation, which resists the old colonial perception of translation as hegemony, a way of exercising power through consent. Today we are familiar with the narrative of the Orientalist attempt to render the colonized culture transparent through the translation of "native" writings into the colonizer's language, and the Anglicist endeavor to coopt the "native" elite by training them to ape the colonizer's tongue (Bhaduri 2008: xxiv). The interventions of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Tejaswini Niranjana have alerted us to the idea of translation as resistance, where the "native" from the colonized culture appropriates the colonizer's tongue with subversive intent. As Niranjana says, "The post-colonial desire to re-translate is linked to the desire to re-write history" (Niranjana 1992: 172). She proposes "a practice of translation that is speculative, provisional, and interventionist" (Niranjana 1992: 173). Tagore translators today no longer try to "domesticate" their translations to make them palatable and accessible to a Western readership, because they are aware of a double audience, in India and abroad. The translators' challenge, here, is to walk the tightrope between using English for a wider audience, and preserving the local nuances that give the original Bengali texts their rhetorical force. For this, they use strategies of foreignization, what Venuti also calls "resistancy" or "minoritizing," a political act that draws attention to the "translatedness" of the text, instead of trying to render the translation transparent. In my translations, I generally avoid italicizing Bengali words, and sometimes use variants of Bengali spellings. Culture-specific terms such as names of days, months, seasons, family relationships, food items, and items of clothing are often left deliberately untranslated, allowing the context to make their meaning clear. In my translation of *Chokher Bali* for instance, I have tried to retain the intricate nuances of Bengali family relationships by using Bengali kinship terms, often with a brief explanation worked into the translation, as in "he used to address Mahendra as Dada or elder brother" (Tagore 2012: 5). Instead of reverting to *Binodini*, the working title that Tagore eventually rejected, I keep the Bengali title *Chokher Bali* because in the text, it is used as a proper name, a form of address; then meaning of the phrase emerges from the translation itself, in the chapter where it first occurs in a dialogue between Asha and Binodini. In a sentence such as "Outside, the cold Magh afternoon was fading," I use the Bengali name of the month "Magh," but insert the adjective "cold" to indicate the season (Tagore 2012: 127). Sometimes I

add a Glossary, but I strive to keep it to a minimum. Variations in spelling Bengali words are significant, because they draw attention to the ruptures that exist between local, national, and global interpretations of Tagore's writings. It is not the source texts that are marked by this textual violence, but the target language itself, which is altered, and thereby enriched.

One of the toughest challenges for the Tagore translator is the problem of negotiating wordplay in the original texts. I encountered this with a vengeance while translating *Shesher Kabita* (*Farewell Song*) for the verbal effervescence of this text is almost impossible to capture in any other language. In some cases, it was possible to find an English approximation of a Bengali pun, as in a passage where the pun on "two-footed, three-footed four-footed, and fourteen-footed gods" works in both languages (Tagore 2011). But in many cases, such puns are inevitably lost in translation, and the translator must find other ways of rendering the wit that is intrinsic to the original. Often, the literal English equivalent does not carry the nuances of a word in the Bengali original. While translating *Gora* for instance, I realized that the term "India" was inadequate to the complexity of Gora's vision of the emergent nation. Hence, I retained the Bengali word "Bharatvarsha." The Bengali word "Khristani" I chose to keep in passages where the term carries overtones of social prejudice; in other places, I translated the word as "Christian" (Tagore 2009: xxii). Such strategies must be invented by the translator in handling cultural nuances for which there are no easy equivalents in the target language.

Tagore is doubtful about the advisability of translating into English, a language alien to Indian tradition; there are others today who question the political correctness of translating into what was once the colonizer's tongue. Certainly, it is imperative to move beyond the dominance of English in the publishing scene, to promote translations of Tagore across modern Indian languages, and there are now some heartening changes taking place in this direction. Tagore's works have also been translated to many other languages across the world, and the sesquicentenary will, it is hoped, give a new lease of life to his writings in these translated avatars. Yet, as Sujit Mukherjee argues, translating into English remains worthwhile in post-Independence India, because English provides a link language in our multilingual culture, and also grants international visibility to writings from our world. It is imperative to bring Tagore out of the coterie culture of the Bengali literary establishment and to draw attention to his extraordinary complexity and versatility, which the Western stereotype of Tagore as the mystical Wise Man from the East, and the Bengali adulation of him as the sanctified "Gurudev," fail to adequately reflect. Seen in this way, translation becomes not merely a linguistic exercise, but an active attempt to imagine into being a diverse community of imagined readers. For as Venuti argues, "translating is also utopian." He says: "The communities fostered by translating are initially potential, signaled in the text, in the discursive strategy deployed by the translator, but not yet possessing a social existence" (Venuti 2000: 498). In this imagined community, as Benedict Anderson says, "the members will never know most of their fellow-members… yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1991: 6). It is in this sense that translating Tagore today can be interventionist, transformative, and even utopian.

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