

## On the Wings of Hummingbirds, Rabindranath Tagore's Little Poems: An Invitation to a Review-cum-Workshop

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**Ketaki Kushari Dyson** was born in Calcutta in 1940 and educated at Calcutta and Oxford. She has been based in England since her marriage to an Englishman in 1964. She writes in both Bengali and English, and in a diversity of genres, including poetry, fiction, drama, essays, criticism, literary translation, and research-based works. She has published six full-length collections of poetry in Bengali and four in English. Her first play was premiered in Bengali in Manchester City of Drama 1994 and toured England and Wales in 2000 in her own English translation. Her *Selected Poems of Rabindranath Tagore* (1991)

### ONE : INTRODUCTION

William Radice's translations of Rabindranath Tagore's brief poems in a collected edition is a welcome addition to the new wave of translations from Tagore into English that we have been witnessing in recent years. The volume contains complete translations of *Kanika* (1899), *Lekhan* (1927), and the posthumous *Sphulinga* (1945).

Literary translation, moving between the need to achieve as much fluency as possible in the new texts, and the need to retain as close a relationship as possible to the originals, resisting the temptation to yield to wholesale 'domestication', is always a juggling act. The translation of poetry into poetry, where the translator hopes that the new texts will impact into the reader's consciousness as poetry rather than as prose paraphrases, involves an extra degree of complication, requiring further delicate balancing, as the translator attempts to create equivalent poetical forms in the target language. Readers who cannot access the original texts, or can do so only haltingly, will necessarily receive the translated poems as independent texts, except as and when alerted by the critical apparatus provided. When to draw attention to a point and when to move along without comment are to some extent subjective decisions of the translator, but will also be dictated by an overall editorial policy.

Radice, himself a practising poet, believes in the creative translation of poetry and strives to give a poetical form of some sort to each piece he translates.

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Theoreticians of translation are often polarized between those who support 'fluency' and those who are in favour of offering 'resistance' to this tendency and following the originals more closely. Practitioners know that such polarization is futile. **Resisting to the hilt will deliver a wooden text from which little literary pleasure can be obtained.** A total focus on fluency, on the other hand, may rob the text of that flickering gleam of alterity or 'otherness' which we prize in a text translated from another language and

culture. Good translation is a craft skill that strikes a balance.

Readers who are obsessed about ‘accuracy’ and are not themselves practising translators often fail to grasp why a translator has taken this or that decision, especially in the translation of poetry. . Currently there are Bengalis both at home and abroad, from literary as well as non-literary backgrounds, who are trying to translate. They have the advantage of an advanced bilingualism, but may not always be sharply aware of the desiderata of literary translation, the why’s and how’s of the discipline. I hope such people may learn something from a review-cum-workshop. For my own convenience, I shall deal with the three collections translated by Radice one by one. Being brief, these poems lend themselves especially well to the focus of a workshop.

## Next

### TWO : KANIKA

First, Kanika, Radice’s Particles. Radice does succeed in re-creating many of the poems of Kanika in a pithy, witty, didactic English style. There is a good match, so to speak, between the spirit of these poems – their dry humour, their rhetoric – and the translator’s genius. One can hear the spoken voice, how the lines need to be read, the points of emphasis – sometimes indicated by the translator by means of added italics. Let me quote two examples where the translator’s gifts and a happy serendipity combine to make excellent translations. The original poems of Kanika are not numbered, so I have not assigned them any.

### ভক্তি ও অতিভক্তি

ভক্তি আসে রিক্তহস্ত প্রসন্নবদন—  
অতিভক্তি বলে, দেখি কী পাইলে ধন ।  
ভক্তি কয়, মনে পাই, না পারি দেখাতে ।—  
অতিভক্তি কয়, আমি পাই হাতে হাতে ।

### 39 Faith versus Zeal

Though her hands are empty, Faith is serene.

Says Zeal, ‘Please show your riches to me.’

‘They’re within,’ says Faith, ‘there’s nothing to see.’

‘Just look,’ says Zeal, ‘at the wealth I gain.’

ভালো মন্দ

জাল কহে, পক্ষ আমি উঠাব না আর ।  
জেলে কহে, মাছ তবে পাওয়া হবে ভার ।

57 Good and Bad

Says the net, 'I'm not lifting mud any longer!'

'Then you won't,' says the fisherman, 'catch fish either.'

Radice has a penchant for constructing good rhyming couplets that conclude poems, clinching the point:

স্পষ্টভাষা তব কণ্ঠে থাক্ বারো মাস  
মোর থাক্ মিষ্টভাষা আর সত্যভাষ । (স্পষ্টভাষী)

'Be free to speak plainly all the year long.

I'm happy with the truth of my own sweet song.' (From no. 18, Plain Speaking)

গিরি কহে, সব হলে সমভূমি-পারা  
নামিত কি ঝরনার সুমঙ্গলধারা ? (উচ্চের প্রয়োজন)

'If all,' said the mountain, 'were flat and even,

How could rivers bring manna from heaven?' (From no. 22, The Need for Height)

Now let us look at some examples of how in the translation of poetry into poetry the exigencies of maintaining a formal structure in the new text, including a scheme of rhymes/assonances, can cause ideas/images to move away from the original.

বিধি-পায়ে মাগি বর জুড়ি কর দুটি  
ছঁচ হয়ে না ফোটাই, ফুল হয়ে ফুটি । (নিন্দুকের দুরাশা)

Let me be a flower, dear God, in your kindness,

And pierce with beauty instead of sharpness! (From no. 12, Assailant's Ambition)

Here the original rhetoric is modified, and this new rhetoric is fine in its own way, except that in the original poem the garland-maker's needle did wish to be released from the

hateful role of piercing altogether! Is there any way we could accommodate the original idea better? Keeping Radice's first line intact, we could write:

Let me be a flower, dear God, in your kindness,  
a flower that opens, not a needle that pierces!

I would say that kindness/pierces will be good enough as a rhyme or near-rhyme, allowing us the advantage of getting closer to the original idea. Another person may not agree.

Let us look at the last four lines of another poem, where the bee is speaking to the butterfly:

অলি কহে, আপনি সুন্দর তুমি বটে,  
সুন্দরের গুণ তব মুখে নাহি রটে ।  
আমি ভাই মধু খেয়ে গুণ গেয়ে ঘুরি,  
কবি আর ফুলের হৃদয় করি চুরি । (গুণজ্ঞ)

'You are,' said the bee, 'lovely indeed,

But you have no hum to make yourself heard.

When I gather nectar, who doesn't know it?

I steal the heart of the flower and the poet.' (From no. 14, Speaking Up for Yourself)

Again, this is fine as it goes, but could we perhaps get a little closer to the point that the bee was originally making? Because the bee was making a subtle point – that we should not just make our own voices heard, but give praise and thanks where they are due. Staying reasonably close to the structure Radice has built, and adding some 'lateral thinking' to our task, we could write:

'You are,' said the bee, 'lovely in yourself,

but you have no hum in praise of loveliness.

When I gather nectar, I go singing its praise,

and thus I steal the hearts of flowers and poets!'

Again, I feel this much of rhyme/assonance is quite adequate for the sonic patterning required. It is my impression that in this book Radice has depended a great deal on consonant-dependent assonance (as in indeed/heard). But assonance dependent on vowel-sounds (as in yourself/loveliness) can be very effective too and is a much-used technique of sonic patterning in contemporary English poetry. This way we do not sacrifice the magic of sound, but still capture some of the moral high ground of the bee's position.

Let us look at the conclusion of the poem where Radice leaves the word Bápú intact (as I have already mentioned) and has to gloss it as a ‘somewhat patronising endearment’:

মেঘ কহে, ওহে বাপু, কোরো না গরব,  
তোমার পূর্ণতা সে তো আমারি গৌরব। (দানরিক্ত)

The cloud says, ‘Bápú, don’t be so haughty.

Your watery depth redounds to my glory.’ (From no. 17, Emptied by Giving)

The exhausted cloud is speaking to the rain-fed lake. I myself would have gone for an English equivalent of Bápú, and one could even angle for a neater end-rhyme, thus:

The cloud says, ‘My dear fellow, don’t be so haughty!

Your watery fullness is but my bounty!

The first line can take the extra syllables without any problem, I think.

The rendering of the following poem I find a little problematic:

নদীর প্রতি খাল  
  
খাল বলে, মোর লাগি মাথা-কোটাকুটি,  
নদীগুলো আপনি গড়ায়ে আসে ছুটি।  
তুমি খাল মহারাজ, কহে পারিষদ,  
তোমারে জোগাতে জল আছে নদীনদ।

44 Canal’s Grievance

‘Why, to make me, must labour be large,  
when rivers dig themselves as they run?’

A courtier speaks: ‘But you are the one

Who is served by the rivers, O Maháráj.’

The last word is then glossed in the foot-note as ‘Great King’. I think that in the first two lines here the meaning has really moved away from the original more than is necessary. And the translation of the title too is misleading. The canal hasn’t got a grievance: it is actually congratulating itself. The error arises from a misinterpretation of the idiomatic expression matha-kotakuti. This phrase does not mean large labour. It means bashing the head in an act of desperate supplication, a gesture of submission and frantic pleading from a social inferior towards a social superior. The canal foolishly imagines that it is receiving this homage from the rivers that feed it, and the flattering courtier strengthens

this illusion. In reality, the canal wouldn't exist without the bounty of the rivers, just as a king is nothing unless his subjects and vassals pay taxes and tributes. One could give a stronger tilt towards the original meaning by writing:

The canal says, 'The rivers – how they fall at my feet!

They roll and run to me of their own sweet will!'

'Because,' says a courtier, 'you are the King-Emperor,  
streams big and small supply you with water!'

Here is an oft-quoted poem all Bengalis will recognize:

মার্বারির সতর্কতা

উত্তম নিশ্চিত্তে চলে অধমের সাথে,  
তিনিই মধ্যম যিনি চলেন তফাতে ।

64 Prudent Mediocrity

The finest are happy to walk with the lowly,

Those in between are not so friendly.

Again, this is one way of doing it, but the strong rhetorical nature of the original is not maintained. The punch of the last line has been sacrificed. How about this? –

The highest are happy to walk with the lowest.

Those who keep their distance are just the second-best.

Or consider this two-liner:

উপলক্ষ

কাল বলে, আমি সৃষ্টি করি এই ভব ।  
ঘড়ি বলে, তা হলে আমিও স্রষ্টা তব ।

66 One-upmanship

'I am,' says Time, 'this world's Creator.'

'Then I,' says the clock, 'am Creation's maker!'

Does this deliver the punch? Why not the following? –

‘I am,’ says Time, ‘this world’s Creator.’

‘Then I,’ says the clock, ‘am the Creator’s maker!’

I am puzzled by Radice’s tackling of the opening of no. 90, which is a four-liner:

নর কহে, বীর মোরা, যাহা ইচ্ছা করি ।  
নারী কহে জিহ্বা কাটি, শুনে লাজে মরি । (সৌন্দর্যের সংযম)

Says Man, ‘Come on, be brave, go for it!’

Says Woman, ‘Really! Whatever next?’ (From no. 90, Beauty’s Discipline)

I quite like the second line, but in my view the first line needs to be a blustering assertion of collective male identity rather than an exhortation to the other camp. It should not be too difficult to translate closer to the poet’s original intention. Readers can have a go at making up their own alternative versions.

The last poem of Particles that I shall discuss is no. 105, another rendering that I find problematic.

বস্ত্রহরণ  
‘সংসারে জিনেছি’ ব’লে দুরন্ত মরণ  
জীবন বসন তার করিছে হরণ ।  
যত বস্ত্রে টান দেয়, বিধাতার বরে  
বস্ত্র বাড়ি চলে তত নিত্যকাল ধ’রে ।

105 Disrobing

‘I’ve vanquished the world,’ cries fearsome Death.

Life keeps trying its best to disrobe him.

Whatever the stripping, God still protects him:

Increases non-stop the supply of cloth!

Though the English poem as it stands makes sense as an independent piece, that is not how I understand the original poem, where the roles of Death and Life are, I think, reversed. I would paraphrase the original poem thus: ‘Saying “I’ve won this world”, fearsome Death tries to rob it [i.e. the world] of Life, which is its robe. The more he pulls at the cloth, by the grace of God the cloth goes on increasing for ever and ever.’ Though Radice does not provide a note to alert readers, the disrobing is, of course, on the model of the attempted disrobing of Draupadi in the Mahabharata. In that context it is clear that the force of jinechhi is ‘I have won’ rather than ‘I have vanquished’. Death thinks he has

‘won’ the world, just as the Kauravas had ‘won’ Draupadi at the game of dice, and proceeds to take off the world’s robe, which is Life itself, just as Duhshasan had tried to pull off Draupadi’s sari. But thanks to God’s blessing, this cloth is for ever renewed, just as Draupadi’s sari had been augmented by Krishna. Though the struggle between Life and Death can be viewed either way as a no-win situation, yet the image of Death as the persistent disrober who is persistently foiled in his attempt, is far more logical in our creaturely context. I wonder if Radice’s interpretation stems from a misinterpretation of the word bole in the first line. This is not present indicative, but a verb of incomplete action, a present participle, the contracted chalit bhasha form of boliya, as indicated by the apostrophe, which exists in both the editions which I have at hand. There is no stop after the first line, which flows directly into the second, and it is only with karichhe haran that Death’s action in the sentence spread over two lines is completed. We need to read the lines thus:

‘সংসারে জিনেছি’ ব’লে [= বলিয়া] দুরন্ত মরণ  
জীবন (বসন তার) করিছে হরণ ।

The sheer brevity and tautness of construction can be a trap in some of these aphoristic poems.

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THREE : LEKHAN

ঘুমের আঁধার কোটরের তলে স্বপ্নপাখির বাসা,  
কুড়ায়ে এনেছে মুখর দিনের খসে-পড়া ভাঙা ভাষা ॥

Dreams are nests that birds  
In sleep's obscure recesses  
Build from our talkative days'  
Discarded bits and pieces. (4)

বসন্ত, তুমি এসেছ হেথায়—  
বুঝি হল পথ ভুল ।  
এলে যদি তবে জীর্ণ শাখায়  
একটি ফুটাও ফুল ॥

Spring, you've come to this place in error,  
It seems to me.  
If so, please leave at least one flower  
On the wizened tree. (54)

দুঃখের আগুন কোন্ জ্যোতির্ময় পথরেখা টানে  
বেদনার পরপার-পানে ॥

Fiery the path that grief must burn  
To a place beyond all pain. (86)

The following poem is not unlike some of the poems of Kanika in its spirit, and I admire the ingenious way it has been tackled in

English, the two lines of the original being re-shaped into four :

গোয়ার কেবল গায়ের জোরেই বাঁকাইয়া দেয় চাবি,  
শেষকালে তার কুড়াল ধরিয়া করে মহা দাবাদাবি ॥

By twisting it too hard,

The bully spoils the key.

In the end he must use an axe

To assert his authority. (75)

And here is a sample where a poem of two long lines has been re-designed into six short lines full of verve:

মোর কাগজের খেলার নৌকা ভেসে চলে যায় সোজা  
বহিয়া আমার অকাজ দিনের অলস বেলার বোঝা ॥

Off it goes!

Away it floats!

The lazy load

Of my idle hours

In my playfully made

Paper-boats. (79)

If anyone wants to understand what is meant by ‘creating afresh in the new language’, then this act of comparison should elucidate the process. The poetic skill behind this act of ‘creating again’ can be fully appreciated only by those who can compare the two pieces, the original and its transformation.

ভক্তি ভোরের পাখি  
রাতের আঁধার শেষ না হতেই ‘আলো’ বলে ওঠে ডাকি ॥

Faith is a bird at dawn

Whose song says, ‘Light, light!’

Before night’s dark is gone. (117)

I would say the transformed piece almost has the edge on the original here! And I believe that is exactly how bilingual readers

should feel from time to time when comparing source-poems and their re-incarnations - if that is to say, they have some training in the poetics of the two traditions. It is, after all, one poet answering the challenge set by another, which should make the second poet's adrenaline to flow, and there will be occasions when skill and luck come together to deliver a firework of meaning. Other analogies are a tabla 'replying' to a sitar, or an actor on form delivering his lines in such a way that the meaning that had been sleeping 'on the page' is suddenly woken out of its sleep 'on the stage'. Indeed, I would be tempted to apply the message of one of these poems to this very process of emulation:

O flock of ducks in the wind in winter,  
The wine of flight inspires your wings!  
Ecstatic with dreams of remoteness,  
Drunk with the sky's blueness,  
Tell me, how can I fill my songs  
With that same liquor? (146)

This is indeed what the translating poet tries to do, to fill his or her songs with the rasa of another poet's flight.

It follows that it is the bilingual reader versed in the poetics of two cultures who will notice when the actor fluffs his lines, so to speak. Most people watching a play do not notice the slips and near-misses of actors, or realize where they are improvising to cover up something that has gone wrong. These things are only noticed by someone who knows the play very well.

By comparing the English texts with the originals I have noticed how Radice, like an actor, slips in an 'ours' or 'your' which is not in the original text, or for some mysterious reason omits a 'my' that should have been there. 'May love, like the sun's brightness' (9) should really have been 'May my love, like the sun's brightness' -

আমার প্রেম রবি-কিরণ-হেন .....

There is really no stylistic reason why 'my' has to be omitted. But such omissions often come about because of the genuine human difficulty of maintaining focus on two texts, one given and fixed, in front of the eyes, the other in the process of being built by oneself. Apart from the intellectual rigour involved, the sheer physical strain of shifting the eyes from one text to the other can generate

omissions/additions in the translated text.

নিভৃত প্রাণের নিবিড় ছায়ায় নীরব নীড়ের 'পরে  
কথাহীন ব্যথা একা একা বাস করে ॥

In a nest, silent and shadowy,

That is ours alone,

Speechless, secret agony

Dwells on its own. (39)

The idea that the nest is 'ours' has been interpolated. The original poem suggests that there is really only one person occupying this nest. The second line could have been written: 'Where the soul is alone'. Similarly, there was no need for 'your' in 'When I wandered into your garden' (48), because the original just says:

যখন পথিক এলেম কুসুমবনে .....

A very interesting consequence flows from this kind of deviation in poem no. 47, the original of which will be familiar to many Bengalis:

পথে হল দেরি, ঝরে গেল চেরি—  
দিন বৃথা গেল প্রিয়া !  
তবুও তোমার ক্ষমাহাসি বহি  
দেখা দিল আজেলিয়া ॥

Delay on my journey:

This cherry-blossom fell

Before I could give it to you.

But your gift, how it cheers me!

This azalea's smile

Shows I have not upset you. (47)

This is a very special interpretation of the meaning of the poem. Until I read this translation, I had never interpreted the poem quite in this way. There is no mention of an exchange of gifts in the Bengali text. It is not explicit. Could it be implicit? To some readers

perhaps, but not to everybody. As I interpret it, not one particular blossom, but all the cherry-blossoms have fallen because the traveller has taken too long to reach his destination. I have always associated the traveller's regret with the Japanese spring ritual of 'viewing the cherry-blossoms together': because all the blossoms are gone, he can no longer view them on the trees in the company of his beloved. It is like arriving too late to play with colours for the Holi festival. Yet, though the season of cherry-blossoms is over, the azalea is now in bloom, incarnating, as it were, the forgiving smile of the beloved. Though he is late, the traveller knows from this signal that he is forgiven. The interesting point is that I can say these things only because I can compare the two versions. If I could not read the original poem, I would see nothing amiss in the English poem; it works perfectly well as it is, as an independent poem with its own logic.

It is important to understand this: a collection like this book works for its target audience because of its intrinsic overall strength. Each English piece has been given a reasonable poetic shape and internal logic, and aligned with English euphony. Overall, it is a good 'show', and should please the audience. Having said that, what I am trying to do is to peep behind the scenes, look at the script to understand what cuts and additions have been made, imagine what went on at rehearsals, what 'fixes' were made in the greenroom. This for me has an educative value, the value, as I said, of a workshop. We complain that not enough translations are done from the Indian languages, or that there are not enough competent translators to do these jobs. But so little is actually done to 'train' prospective translators. Some of us are already practitioners in the field of literature and have been writing and translating for years. But there are others from other backgrounds, from the other branches of the humanities, or even with backgrounds in science and technology, who have the sensibility to contribute to the literary arts, are advanced bilinguals, and are already budding writers. Some of them could indeed become skilled translators if given some training and made aware of the technicalities involved. Translation is a specialized form of writing, and while every good writer in the other genres cannot become a good translator, to be a good translator one needs to be a good writer in the target language.

This is a broad socio-cultural matter and should have a special interest for those of us who are in diaspora. The energies and talents that went into the literary arts in previous generations are so often diverted nowadays, because of the exigencies of earning a living, into other branches of human activity. Yet from what I see around me, many fellow-Bengalis in diaspora, when pursuing engineering or IT or whatever else that will earn them a living, have a hole in

their hearts filled with a longing for their culture. Many of them are advanced bilinguals or trilinguals; quite a few already have some experience of writing. Competent translators could be recruited from their ranks, working in either direction between the languages in which they are grounded, enriching our own literature or making our literary works better known to those who cannot read our language. The dissemination and appreciation of the literary arts, and the arts in general, are of great importance in our times - globally - as it is through these processes that many of those human values with which we desperately need to be in touch for the world's well-being can be properly inculcated: they are being grossly neglected, with dire consequences. Tagore himself, if we care to remember, strove hard to bring the arts to education. The hole-in-the-heart longing for our cultural roots that I have just spoken about - isn't this phenomenon itself to some extent derived from our shared Tagorean heritage? Somewhere along the line, his thinking and his works have shaped us, influenced us, made us aware, deep down, however overlaid we may be with other concerns, that the arts do matter, that they are not about easy entertainment or about making money: they are about making us fully human. They matter for a community, for all humanity, and at the deepest level. We cannot leave them to the mercy of market forces: we need them to achieve all our human potentialities in a harmonious manner.

Training, of course, can only be given if we are prepared to focus on details. The advantage of the Internet is that space is not at a premium, and a detailed discussion can take place which many can access but which need not annoy the editor 'because it is taking up too much space'. I appreciate the hospitality of Parabaas in facilitating the possibility of a discourse like this. Being short poems, the poems in the book being reviewed lend themselves well to a focused look for an educative purpose. As Radice himself says in his Introduction, 'The friendliness of Tagore's brief poems can, I believe, be conveyed in translation, but only if it is done as a reciprocal act of friendship. If the translator is grudging, thoughtless or impatient, he will not be able to capture their sparkling yet tender spirit' (p. 26). It is because his 'reciprocal act of friendship' has been successful in large measure that a closer look at the 'mechanics' of these brief poems becomes rewarding for apprentices in the craft of poetry translation. Needless to say, we approach this task in a 'reciprocal act of friendship' too. With this 'recap' of my aims in this article, I shall now continue to move through Jottings in search of examples that could be educative for us.

স্বপ্ন আমার জোনাকি,  
দীপ্ত প্রাণের মণিকা,  
স্তব্ধ আধার নিশীথে  
উড়িছে আলোর কণিকা ॥

My dreams are gems of sparkling life,

Fireflies flitting;

In the still depths of the dark night,

Light's particles darting. (1)

This is OK as an independent poem, certainly, but not quite as powerful as the original poem. There is a whiff of the effete in it, partly induced by the rhyme flitting/darting. How can we improve it? By going back to the original and looking at it closely. By looking at it closely, by speaking and hearing the lines again and again, we realize that though the ordering of the images is not so crucial in lines 3 and 4, they are very important in lines 1 and 2. It would be an advantage for the translator to stick to the order in which the images are introduced in the first and second lines of the original poem.

The poem is a little dance in four steps, each step concentrating on an image. The first step is crucial. 'My dreams are .....', begins the poet, and as he does so we as the audience begin to strain our ears to hear the rest. What is it that his dreams are? We want to know, we care, because we share his humanity. His dreams concern us, because maybe they are our dreams too! 'My dreams are -' says the poet, with a minute break in the rhythm, a mini-caesura, to hold our attention, and then delivers, with some panache, ' - fireflies':

স্বপ্ন আমার— জোনাকি,

and that is the image that I would say needs to be evoked first, no matter into which language we are translating. It is the image of the firefly that generates the next image,

দীপ্ত প্রাণের মণিকা,

and not the other way around. Radice translates this second image well - 'gems of sparkling life'. This step is well executed, but needs to be the second step of the dance, not the very first. This change would affect the sonic patterning of the new piece, of course, but

that can be tackled. Skirting close to what Radice has written, one could re-write the English poem in a number of variant ways.

My dreams are fireflies,  
gems of sparkling life;  
light's particles darting  
in the still depths of dark night.

My dreams are fireflies,  
gems of sparkling life;  
light's particles darting in the  
still depths of dark night.

'The' can be omitted before 'dark night' without any loss. Breaking lines 3 and 4 in the slightly unconventional second manner, along with the cutting out of the word flitting and the rather effete rhyming of flitting and darting, gives the poem a face-lift that makes it a more satisfactory English poem for a contemporary audience. The vowel-dependent assonance in -flies/life/night is quite adequate. Lines 3 and 4 could be re-written in a number of other ways:

in the still dark night they fly -  
the darting specks of light.  
they fly in the still dark night -  
the particles of light.

And so on. Readers can imagine them. But I think the first line really does benefit from being the simple 'My dreams are fireflies'.

Now let us look at no. 21 of Jottings:

ভাসিয়ে দিয়ে মেঘের ভেলা  
খেলেন আলো-ছায়ার খেলা,  
শিশুর মতো শিশুর সাথে  
কাটান হেসে প্রভাত বেলা ॥

Clouds of the morning floating,  
Light and shadow playing,

Like somebody passing the time

With a smiling childish game.

But it is not any old 'somebody' who is playing out there. It is clear in the original poem, from the verb-forms in the honorific mode, that it is God who is being talked about. The subject 'He' is omitted, but the verbs leave us in no doubt about who the subject of those verbs is. The poem could be paraphrased thus: 'Setting afloat rafts of clouds, [He] plays a game of lights and shadows. As a child with children, [He] spends the morning smiling/having fun.' So in a poem-version is it important to indicate that the player is God? I think yes. God being the player in the morning sky, not only setting clouds afloat, but also perhaps sailing on them, smiling, playing a game with lights and shadows, like a child with other children - this is what gives the images of this poem a very characteristic, very recognizable Tagorean stamp, and I think being faithful to that would give the poem more 'dignity'. I am sure it can be done without too much hard work. We can do it 'like a child playing with other children'.

My next choice for comment is no. 27:

মোর গানে গানে, প্রভু, আমি পাই পরশ তোমার,  
নির্ব্বিধারায় শৈল যেমন পরশে পারাবার ॥

In my songs, O Lord,

Your touch I feel,

Like a mountain's touch on the sea

Through a waterfall. (27)

Here it is the third line that perplexes me. 'Like a mountain's touch on the sea'? I would have said: 'As a mountain touches the sea/ Through a waterfall [or stream, or fountain, whatever].' The only way a mountain can know the sea, glimpse the sea, is through the medium of water that issues from itself, flows over its own surfaces, trickles as a stream at first, then gathers force and volume, cascades as a waterfall, perhaps eventually even goes hundreds or thousands of miles to meet the sea. Similarly, the only way we can discover God, suggests the poet, is by means of our own creativity, through the creations that issue from us.

It is instructive to look at no. 30:

হে আমার ফুল, ভোগী মূর্খের মালে  
না হোক তোমার গতি,  
এই জেনো তব নবীন প্রভাতকালে  
আশিস তোমার প্রতি ॥

O flower of mine, do not become

A foolish fop's possession:

Receive instead at your life's dawn

My benediction. (30)

Of the several meanings of maal available, Radice has chosen one. Personally, I would have chosen the meaning of 'garland': this is sanctioned by the dictionary in a poetic context. But I would not single out this decision for comment. We all make personal choices of one kind or another, and if it works reasonably well in the new poem, no harm is done. More important than the translation of this or that noun are the sinews of rhetoric that hold a poem together. So I would prefer to follow the original and write 'may you never become', expressing a wish, instead of the command 'do not become', and I would clarify that this wish itself is the poet's benediction. 'Know that this is my benediction towards you at your life's dawn': that is what is being said. There is nothing corresponding to 'Receive instead' in the original.

My comments on no. 32, however, do concern name-words!

বিলম্বে উঠেছ তুমি কৃষ্ণপক্ষশশী,  
রজনীগন্ধা যে তবু চেয়ে আছে বসি ॥

O crescent moon,

Late is your rising;

But the perfumed flowers of the night

Are still longing. (32)

There is nothing wrong with 'crescent moon' as such, as in English the phrase refers primarily to the sickle-shape, without reference to whether the moon is waxing or waning. But the original does refer explicitly to the moon in its waning phase, and such contexts and their associations are paramount in the imagery of Tagore's literary language. Etymologically, the English word crescent means

‘growing’ (from Latin crescere, to grow), and there is actually an adjectival use of this word meaning ‘increasing’ (such as ‘crescent fortunes’). I would therefore avoid using it in this context and go for ‘waning moon’, which would match better with the wistful mood of ‘Late is your rising’. And I would name the flower, as Tagore has done. The tuberose is an important flower in Tagore’s floral imagery, and in this night-poem it does need to be named, to link it with other famous lines of the poet where it is named. These two points in the poem are places where what the theoreticians call ‘resistance’ is called for. The translation will benefit if the translator ‘resists’ simple urges towards ‘fluency’ and ‘domestication’ and moves closer to the specificities of the source language. That way he or she will capture the Bengali ‘otherness’ of the poem for those who are reading it in English.

I am not sure what is happening in the third line of no. 33:

আকাশে উঠিল বাতাস, তবুও নোঙর রহিল পঁাকে—  
অধীর তরণী খুঁজিয়া না পায় কোথায় সে মুখ ঢাকে ॥

The wind is up, the sails tug,

But the anchor is stuck in the mud.

Ashamed at being unable to find it,

The boat wants to hide its head. (33)

There is nothing in the original to suggest the third line. The boat is not searching for its anchor. It knows the anchor is stuck in the mud. And that is its shame. The wind is favourable, but the moored boat cannot get away without another’s help and therefore does not know where to hide its head in shame. It is ashamed of its inability to set sail on its own, its lack of agency. As so often in Tagore, these simple images are charged with spiritual meanings. The boat is man, stuck to the ‘mud’ of samsara, unable to start his spiritual journey without the grace and assistance of the boatman (God).

Speaking of God, I am not sure if He should really be referred to in line 2 of no. 52! -

যবে কাজ করি  
প্রভু দেয় মোরে মান ।  
যবে গান করি  
ভালোবাসে ভগবান ॥

I receive for my work

God's fair estimation.

I receive for my songs

His tender affection. (52)

My personal reaction to the Bengali poem is that prabhu in the second line stands for an earthly master. Others may not agree with me. I doubt if Tagore thought that we get 'honour' (maan) from God for our 'work'. Doing work is a mundane thing, for which we get praise from our bosses on this earth. It is only when we sing, and give praise, that God notices us and gives us His love. Again, this is a very Tagorean sentiment.

I would like to make a stylistic comment on no. 57:

লাজুক ছায়া বনের তলে  
আলোরে ভালোবাসে।  
পাতা সে কথা ফুলেরে বলে,  
ফুল তা শুনে হাসে ॥

The timid shadow deep in the wood

Adores the light.

When the flowers are told this by the leaves,

They smile with delight. (57)

The poetry and the humour get somewhat muted and need to be gently brought out. The passive voice in the third line does not help. We need the active voice here. Sticking to the overall framework Radice has constructed, the poem could be re-shaped as:

Shy shadow, deep in the wood,

is in love with light.

Leaves report it to the flowers,

who smile with delight.

The question of bringing out the poetry is relevant also to no. 61:

একদিন ফুল দিয়েছিলে, হায়,  
কাঁটা বিধে গেছে তার।  
তবু, সুন্দর, হাসিয়া তোমায়  
করিনু নমস্কার ॥

When once you gave me, Beauty,

A sharp-thorned flower,

I smiled and thanked you gladly. (61)

‘Beauty’, as used here, immediately suggests a female figure in the English context. However, as the original makes it clear, there is no such necessary association with femaleness in the poet’s mind, and *sundar* is indeed masculine. If Tagore had really wanted to evoke a female figure, he would have said *sundari*, but he doesn’t, because gender is not the point here. The point is the connection between beauty and pain - beauty pleases, but when we establish a relationship with it, it also hurts. Beauty is not just physical beauty. In Tagore, *sundar* in the masculine form tends to be a shorthand for the ‘terrible beauty’ of our emotional lives, of human love, of our surrender to God. All these are gifts with double values, flowers with sharp thorns. We have to accept the pain along with the pleasure. The other point to note is that *sundar* is not introduced till the third line. As in the opening poem of *Lekhan*, we need to pay attention to the dance of the four lines, which unfolds the poetical logic; reducing the poem to three lines does not, in my opinion, help it. In fact, it becomes rather like one of Tagore’s own much-maligned paraphrases. I would get closer to the Bengali and re-cast the English version:

Once you gave me a flower:

its thorns pricked me, alas!

Yet, beautiful one, I smiled

and gave you a namaskar.

In other words I would offer ‘resistance’ to domestication - to Beauty with a capital B which can be abstract (‘Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty’) but can also mean ‘beautiful woman’ in an individual and collective sense (‘Beauty and the Beast’), and to a very English phrase like ‘thanked you gladly’, which takes us away from the real intended meaning of the line. It is not a question of low-key thanking in return for a bunch of flowers. Giving a

namaskar is not thanking, but acknowledging the presence of ‘terrible beauty’ in our lives, greeting it and welcoming it with a smile, saying, ‘Yes, you exist, and I accept you.’ Normally, in a longer poem I would have looked for a suitable English equivalent for namaskar, but the exigencies of form in such a short, tightly bound poem call for a word that will give us some help with the patterning of sound. This word, namaskar, is dignified - in fact, Radice himself uses it in no. 139 - and it does the trick, giving us a vowel-based assonance with ‘alas’, and also a consonant-based assonance with ‘flower’. So using this original Bengali word becomes a good strategic choice at this point.

In poem no. 74, has the translator fallen a victim to a misprint?

নরজনমের পুরা দাম দিব যেই  
তখনি মুক্তি পাওয়া যাবে সহজেই ॥

When we’ve paid in full for a new existence,

We are free to enjoy it, without any hindrance. (74)

This does not really make good Tagorean sense. In the original poem it is nara-janam, not naba-janam, in two separate editions I have at hand, and only the former makes sense. The poem means: ‘When we have paid the full price for our human existence, only then shall we gain liberation [in the spiritual sense].’ I wonder if there was a dot missing in the edition Radice consulted, turning nara-janam into naba-janam. I am surprised that none of those whom he consulted noticed the problem.

In no. 80 I understand why Radice uses the word ‘freeze’ -

When Spring appears in Winter’s yard too early,

It soon withdraws.

The mango-buds that rushed to greet it gladly

Are left to freeze.

He needs an assonance with ‘withdraws’. Yet I cannot but feel that ‘freeze’ is a little too strong in the tropical context. An untimely spring that comes too soon and then withdraws may nip the buds, but renewed winter will not cause ‘freezing’ in the ‘northern’ sense. The original simply says that the mango-bud that rushes out prematurely without a thought does not return: it just dies.

The message of the following poem of Lekhan is after my heart,

because I have often pondered this very issue:

সকল চাঁপাই দেয় মোর প্রাণে আনি  
চিরপুরাতন একটি চাঁপার বাণী ॥

Radice translates:

Each champak-flower brings

A message unchangeable

From time immemorial! (85)

I think that as in the original, the name of the flower needs to be repeated, underlining the unity of the one and the many. All champaks bring to the poet a message from the very first champak, the ur-champak from which the rest have descended.

No. 89 is worth a glance, in the context of that comment of Radice's to which I have already referred: the 'friendliness of Tagore's brief poems'.

শিশির রবিরে শুধু জানে  
বিন্দুরূপে আপন বুকের মাঝখানে ॥

To dew, the sun

Is only knowable

Deep within

A droplet's spherical. (89)

I would say the English version is a little 'precious' and does not capture the 'friendliness' of the original poem. This is a case where I would just translate simply, quietly, faithfully:

The dew knows the sun only

As a drop within its own breast.

And I would leave it at that, not worrying about rhyme or assonance, because the message is so simple and at the same time so big that it can carry itself without any other sonic embellishment.

Two poems not so far from each other have intrigued me because of Radice's omission of the same word in each case.

দিনের কর্মে মোর প্রেম যেন  
শক্তি লভে,  
রাতের মিলনে পরম শান্তি  
মিলিবে তবে ॥

Let my love, in my work by day, find energy;

Then, in the night, find deep peace and harmony. (119)

মিলননিশীথে ধরণী ভাবিছে চাঁদের কেমন ভাষা—  
কোনো কথা নেই, শুধু মুখ চেয়ে হাসা ॥

The earth looks up at the midnight moon and muses,

‘What language is this she speaks,

When she wordlessly smiles and gazes?’ (124)

The word not represented in each case is milan. I think an equivalent is needed in no. 119 because the idea of love gaining strength by day’s work is balanced by the idea of love finding its ultimate peace in night’s union. And it is also needed in no. 124, because there is an erotic cast in this poem. It is not any old midnight, but a midnight of union. Between whom? Between the earth and the moon! Radice has problematically turned the moon into a ‘she’, when it is the earth which is always a ‘she’, both in Indian lore and in Tagore’s own imagery, and it is the moon which is a male god in Hindu mythology. I think this is another instance where the cultural specificity of a poem needs to be restored.

Comments can be made on some other poems, but I fear this discussion is growing too long even for the Internet, and I have not even begun my discussion of the last book in this collection! In no. 147 the meaning gets garbled; readers can find it out by comparing it with the original. In this section I shall comment on two more poems only.

ভালো যে করিতে পারে ফেরে দ্বারে এসে,  
ভালো যে বাসিতে পারে সর্বত্র প্রবেশে ॥

One who would do good is never asked to stay.

One who just is good is never turned away. (179)

The phrase ‘One who just is good’, though balanced against the previous line’s ‘One who would do good’, is nevertheless not a satisfactory rendering of what in the original is plainly ‘One who can love’. One who can love is obviously a good person, but the two phrases are not identical. Tagore is saying that a do-gooder is not welcome in people’s homes, but a person who is capable of love is always welcome everywhere. I shall conclude this discussion of Jottings by looking at one last poem:

ধনীর প্রাসাদ বিকট ক্ষুধিত রাহু  
বস্ত্রপিণ্ড-বোঝায় বদ্ধ বাহু ।  
মনে পড়ে সেই দীনের রিক্ত ঘরে  
বাহু বিমুক্ত আলিঙ্গনের তরে ॥

This sumptuous palace is a ravenous demon  
Whose arms are tied by the weight of possessions;  
I recall how its rooms were once empty and poor,  
And arms were free for the heart’s affection. (154)

The problem here is in the word ‘its’ in the third line. In the original, the poet is not recalling how the rooms of the sumptuous palace itself were empty and poor once, but standing in the rich man’s palace, is recalling a poor man’s sparsely furnished dwelling which was nevertheless warm in its welcome. Again, I am not sure how or why this transformation of meaning has occurred, but it is not necessary for the sake of form. The third line could be easily rendered more faithfully without upsetting the overall structure.

The END