

From *Gitanjali* to *Song Offerings*: Interrogating the Politics of Translation in the Light of Colonial Interaction

Urmi Sengupta¹

In English prose there is a magic which seems to transmute my Bengali verses into something which is original again in a different manner. Therefore, it not only satisfies me but gives me delight to assist my poems in their English birth....Fundamental idea is the same, but the vision changes. A poem can only be relived in a different atmosphere (Mitra 390)

The above mentioned lines quoted from a letter of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) addressed to D. J. Anderson spell out beautifully the nuances of the role played by Tagore as a translator of his collection of Bangla *geeti-kavita* titled *Gitanjali* (1910) into English prose. *Song Offerings* (also containing a few selected poems from nine of his earlier collections of poetry *Gitimalya*, *Kalpna*, *Chaitali*, *Kheya*, *Naivedya*, *Shishu*, *Achalayatan* , *Utsarga* and *Swaran*) which was first published by Indian Society, London in November, 1912 and later by Macmillan and Company, London in March, 1913 received unprecedented appreciation in the West and had already been reprinted ten times within a span of a few months before it was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in November, 1913. Of the two main standpoints that strive to explain this high acclaim for *Song Offerings* in the target language-culture , one is enunciated clearly by the Nobel Committee of 1913 in their citation which declares “Because of his profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful verse, by which, with consummate skill, he has made his poetic thought, expressed in his own English words, *a part of the*

¹ Urmi Sengupta is working as a Junior Research Scholar in the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, Kolkata and pursuing PhD from the same.

literature of the West” (Tagore 301), a statement that postulates that the target-language readers were able to identify with it to such an extent that it was almost considered to be a part of their own literary tradition. The other view put forward by certain contemporary English poets and scholars like W.B. Yeats, Mary Sinclair, Mary Lago and Rothenstein is that its popularity lay in upholding a worldview different from that of the West- thereby being “solicitous of the orientalist expectations of the English reader” (Thompson 321). Caught between his attempt to remain loyal to the original Bangla text by retaining its “fundamental idea” and his desire to make it more readable for the English reader by changing its “vision”, *Song Offerings* emerges as an exemplary of Tagore’s personal approach towards translation, and particularly literary translation, as a practice. What prompted Tagore to take certain liberties with the translation of his own work that transforms it into something which is “original again in a different way”, in terms of form as well as content? Were some of the culture specific nuances and poetic intricacies of *Gitanjali* lost in the process? To what extent was this approach adopted by the poet/translator Tagore, governed by the dynamics of power that existed between the source-language (Bangla) culture of the colonized and the target-language (English) culture of the colonizer in the early twentieth century British India? These are some of the issues that I would like to address in this paper.

In order to look into these questions, it is necessary to understand the act of translation as “a complex negotiation between two cultures” (Trivedi, “Translating Culture vs Cultural Translation” 191), a realization that was first articulated as “The Cultural Turn in Translation Studies” by Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere in *Translation, History and Culture* (1990). Moreover, language itself is not a mere combination of lexical entities (words). It embodies the values, beliefs, morals and practices of an entire cultural community at a particular

historical juncture. Therefore, the translation of *Gitanjali* into *Song Offerings* needs to be understood and analyzed in the light of a complex maze of relationships governed by colonial interactions between the target readership and the source language culture, the translator and the source language culture, the translator and the target language culture and finally that between the writer of the original text and the translator, who in this case (to complicate matters further) is one and the same person.

It is interesting to note that in the early years of his literary career, Tagore was apprehensive about translating his works into a foreign language. He feared that translation might distort and thereby “betray” the original text and fail to capture its underlying *rasa*. Translation, he felt, was nothing but a “tiresome business of cold-blooded literary craftsmanship” (Lago, *Imperfect Encounter* 119), as he says in a letter to his friend William Rothenstein as late as 1911. He was somewhat weary of the initiatives taken by the ardent admirers and connoisseurs of his works like Ananda Kumar Swami, Ajay Kumar Chakraborty and Loken Palit to translate them into English. In fact, the only work that he is known to have translated into English all by himself before *Gitanjali* is the poem “Nishphal Kamona” from his collection of poetry *Manasi*, in 1888. Repeated requests from Jagadish Chandra Bose (who himself took initiative to translate Tagore’s short stories into English for the journal *The Modern Review* as early as 1900) for more such translations had been of no avail. So, what had finally prompted Tagore to take up the magnanimous project in question?

In his Nobel Acceptance Speech, Tagore posits *Song Offerings* as a response to the culture of deafness of the British colonizers, one that subscribed to the hierarchical binary construct of the Western worldview which extolled the culture and civilization of the colonizer for being “superior” to that of the colonized. This was one of the strategies that highlighted the “civilizing mission” of the British to be one of the chief justifications of

colonization. Taking a cue from T.B. Macaulay's infamous statement about "a single shelf of a good English library" being worth "the entire body of Persian and Arabic literature" (Minute on Education, 1835), that had somewhat institutionalized this cultural hegemony, Western scholars/translators like Edward Fitzgerald had been taking complacent liberties while translating the literary works of the colonized, since the mid nineteenth century². This cultural hegemony continued to govern the approach towards the translation of Indian literatures into English (facilitated by the likes of T.W. Clarke, Edward Thompson and other translators who hailed from the "superior" culture) well into the twentieth century. For Tagore translation of *Gitanjali* was an act of patriotism, which would uphold the merits of his own language-literature in front of the colonizers and restore the faith of his countrymen in their own culture and civilization:

We lost our confidence on our own civilization for over a century .Thus we did not only lose touch of the great which lay hidden in our own inheritance, but also the great honour of giving what we have and not merely begging from others, not merely borrowing culture and living like eternal school boys....That welcome (the Nobel Prize) has its own meaning, that the West has need of the East, as the East has need of the West, and so the time has come when they should meet.(Tagore 296-297)

But even within this apparent spirit of cultural-nationalism, lay the signs of the internalization of the dominant colonial discourse of the West that posits the East or the "Orient" as "the mother of spiritual Humanity" (Tagore 295) as opposed to the materialistic "Occident". He openly declared to have "represented the East" by evoking "deeper feeling of

² Edward Fitzgerald , had justified the act of taking liberties with the translation of Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* as early as 1859, by stating (in the context of the poetry of Attar) that Persian poets were "not poets enough for his taste until he made them so" (Bassnett 3)

rest, serenity and love for the eternal” (Tagore 294) Thus, we see that he preferred not to disturb or disrupt the popular image of the “Orient” that colours the minds of the contemporary Western readership, an image that finds voice in W. B. Yeats’ Introduction to *Song Offerings*. He lauds Tagore precisely because “like the Indian civilization itself, [he] has been content to discover the soul and surrender himself to its spontaneity” (Tagore 266). Moreover, the fact that he posited a literary product of the Bangla language-culture as the representative of the ‘East’ harps upon his reluctance to force the target readership to look beyond the East/ West binary paradigm and go deeper into the specific nuances of the heterogeneous language-cultures that the colonizers had coercively subsumed under the broad category of ‘East’.

Though Tagore took serious pride in having been “an instrument to unite the hearts of the East and the West” (Tagore 298), one cannot deny his awareness about the unequal distribution of political and cultural power between the two. As a colonial subject belonging to the upper class Bengali intelligentsia who was not only well versed in his own (and several other) *bhasha-sahitya* and deeply rooted in Indian philosophy but also had had a wide exposure to Western literature, philosophy and civilization through his (mostly informal) education, self-study and travels , he had genuine respect and appreciation for the colonizers’ literature and culture (a feeling that by no means would be extended to the context of their political domination and exploitation of his country). By 1911, Rabindra Sahitya had already reached a section of the international readership through the publication of the English translation of some of Tagore’s short stories in the literary journal *The Modern Review*. In fact, it was one such story, “The Postmaster”, that first evoked Rothenstein’s interest in the literary creations of Tagore. It was he, who not only got in touch with Indian Society and later Macmillan to get *Song Offerings* published, but also introduced him to eminent Western

scholars and literary personalities like W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Sturge Moore, Evelyn Underhill and Robert Bridges whose association took his already existing appreciation for Western civilization a notch higher. The encouragement and assurances of cooperation and collaboration from these friends during his visit to London in March, 1912, where he was welcomed as the esteemed guest of Rothenstein, proved to be a path-breaking experience for him:

I felt a great desire to come out and come in touch with the Humanity of the West, for I was conscious that the present age belongs to the Western man with his superabundance of energy. He has got the power of the whole world, and his life is overflowing all boundaries and is sending out its message to the great future.... And so I came out (Tagore 294)

Thus the project of translating *Gitanjali* seems not only to have been undertaken by a colonial subject as an act of patriotism towards his own language-culture, but also driven to some extent by a desire to be accepted, lauded and recognized by his target-readership, who represented the colonizers' culture. The fact that he took unmistakable pride and pleasure in being "accepted by the West as one of their own poets" (Tagore 294), considering it nothing short of a "miracle" (Tagore 294), seems to have coloured the *anuvad-bhavna* (approach towards translation) that has shaped *Song Offerings* for what it is. As Harish Trivedi puts it in "The Politics of Postcolonial Translation": "If it was not a direct affair of imperialism, it was at least a high degree of voluntary assimilation, facilitated by that notably anglophile and anglicized dimension of Tagore's personality" (47)

While translating *Gitanjali*, Tagore seems to have given up much of his initial apprehensions about "betraying" the original text. He openly admits in a letter written to

Hariette Moody, dated March 6, 1913 that he would not like to call *Song Offerings* a “translation”, because while translating his own Bangla *geeti-kavita* into English prose he almost had to write it afresh; or else “the poet-composer would come to haunt the poet-translator, thereby hindering his activity” (Pal 371). A poet/translator, according to him, should only aim at capturing the inherent “idea” within the original text and then use “some new quality inherent in the new vehicle of expression (English)” (Sarkar 81) to articulate it. In order to achieve this, he should feel free to introduce some changes within the translated text and edit some portions from the original one. He goes as far to say that presenting the original text in a new way to the target-language reader provides the poet/translator with an opportunity to relive “the first fine careless rapture” (Sarkar 73) experienced while composing the original text. This turns the activity of translation from a stringent exercise to a pleasurable one for him and enriches the “reborn” or “recreated” text with a literary merit independent of that of the original. This *anuvad-bhavna* of Tagore has been instrumental in shaping *Song Offerings* not as a mere paraphrase of *Gitanjali* (and the selection of poems taken from his other collections of poetry mentioned above), but perhaps as something which comes closest to the Indian poet, publisher and translator P. Lal’s concept of “transcreation” defined by the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (5th ed. 1996) as “creative translation seen as producing a new version of the original work”. Tagore deals with the question of “translatability” of certain culture specific concepts and language specific poetic styles in such a manner that the contemporary English readership does not consider it to be a “translation” but a part of their own literature.

“The term ‘translatability’ refers to the scope and possibility of reproducing the source text in another language, keeping as far as possible, its content and context, its formal features and functional roles intact.”(Dutta 106) The very fact that the source-language and

the target language represent societies that have a starkly different historical background, cultural heritage and worldview, complicates the issue of “translatability” of *Gitanjali* into English even further. Tagore is plagued by the problem of finding suitable cultural equivalents for certain terms and concepts that are firmly grounded in the source language culture experiences. But whether he chooses to use those equivalents (if at all available) in his translation, or whether he prefers changing them into something more familiar to the target-readership, is an issue which is mainly governed by his *anuvad-bhavna* and the historical and personal conditions that has shaped it. He takes the issue of “cultural palatability” (Talgeri 30) of the target readership very seriously, often resorting to an act of “domestication” that according to Friedrich Schleiermacher (as he defines it in the essay “On the Different Methods of Translating” first published in 1813) “leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him” (Lefevere 67) making the translation text extremely readable as the cost of its fidelity to the original work and the source-language culture. One cannot but deny that such an approach was liable to hinder the cause of upholding the source language culture in its true light in front of the target readership, something that Tagore aimed to achieve (as discussed earlier) by positing his translation as an act of patriotism.

One of the major culture specific concepts which undergo a transformation in the English translation is that of nature of the divine entity that the poems are addressed to. Much of the poetry of the pre-Balaka period (that begins with the publication of *Naivedya* in 1902 and ends with the publication of *Balaka* in 1914) of Tagore’s poetic career has been devoted to an exploration of his relationship with the divine. In *Naivedya* this divine entity is a *nirakar* (formless) omnipotent omniscient Supreme-being, the Brahman of the Upanishads, who had become an integral part of Tagore’s spiritual psyche through his early exposure to

the vision of the Brahma-Samaj. But *Gitanjali* (also *Gitali* and *Gitimalya*) gives expression to his love for his *jivan-devata* (Lord of Life), a personal god whom the poet has “realized within his intimate self” (Ayyub 60). In *Modernism and Tagore*, Ayyub describes the *Gitanjali* to be “nothing but a conversation between the poet and his Lord of Life” (60). *Jivan-devata* is not a distant entity like the Upanishadic Brahman; but a lover, a friend who reciprocates the love of the *bhakta*. This relationship has its roots in the rich legacy of bhakti-poetry in India that dates back to 5th century AD. Tagore himself acknowledges the influence of Kabir’s philosophy of *bhakti* in shaping his relationship with his Lord of Life. But such sentiments of *bhakti* have no equivalence within the Western paradigm of “devotional poetry” of Dante, Newman and Walt Whitman where “there is a gulf fixed between a common human heart and the Transcendental Being” (Sinclair 662). The Christian God is an authoritative entity. Other than the few poems included from *Naivedya* and *Kheya*, the use of the second person singular number pronoun “thou” of old (Elizabethan) English to address the divine entity in *Song Offerings*, introduces an element of lofty grandeur that destroys the tone of intimacy encapsulated within the Bangla pronoun “*tumi*” that has been used to refer to the personal god in the Bangla poems. An ideal example would be poem 23, where the lines: “(Aji) *jhorer raate tomar abhisar / paransokha, bondhu he amar*” has been translated as “Art thou abroad on this stormy night on thy / journey of love, my friend?” (Tagore 46-47)

The decision of not translating “*abhisar*” as *tryst*, seems to be a conscious one. Though that word would have been the closest English equivalent of “*abhisar*”, it would not have been able to convey the full implication of a word replete with culture-specific connotations of Radha-Krishna love as found in the *Vaishnava Padabali*. The phrase “journey of love” somewhat sublimates the passionate desperation of the lover (divine

entity) to meet his beloved in secret in spite of the unfavourable climatic conditions, for this is possible only in the case of a reciprocal and equitable relationship between the *bhakta* and his personal god. Such a display of passion would bring the Christian God down from his high pedestal. Thus the confidence of the *bhakta* about his own power over his Lord of Life loses its vigour in translation. Repeated use of the word “master” further highlights the hierarchical “lord-slave-dependent-relation-syndrome” (Ayyub 77) of Christian piety that goes completely against the spirit of *bhakti* poetry: As we seen in Poem 3: “*Tumi kemon kore gaan koro he guni / ami obak hoye shuni*” which is translated as “I know not how thou singest, my master! / I ever listen in silent amazement” (Tagore 6-7)

The replacement of the word “*guni*” (which means “the talented one”) by the word “master” almost turns the spontaneous appreciation for the singer into an act of obligatory adulation. Tagore also has a tendency to underplay the intensity of the devotee’s passionate love which often borders on intoxication and madness. The line “O master poet, I have sat down at thy feet” of poem 7, can never express the passion of offering oneself completely and unconditionally to the *Jivan-devata* that is present in the Bangla original, “*Mohakobi, tomar pa e dite chai je dhora*” (Tagore 14-15) No doubt Mary Sinclair lauds Tagore for his restraint and subtlety, for the translation is hardly able to capture the intensity of the emotions of the original verses:

His simplicity, restraint and austerity will be a little disconcerting to those who are accustomed to think of Oriental poetry as a thing of ungovernable efflorescence....But as the East is subtler than the West, and as of all Eastern races, the Bengali is the subtlest, so an extreme subtlety of feelingis the finest quality that strikes you in the songs of this Bengali poet. (Sinclair 662)

The Bangla third person singular number pronoun “*se*” does not denote a particular gender – thus the identity of the person referred to as “*se*” remains shrouded in mystery – this chiaroscuro nature of “*se*” is an important and integral aspect of Rabindra-Sahitya. English as a language calls for the end of this obscurity, for it necessitates the specification of the gender of the person being referred to by the third person singular number pronoun as he/she. When “*se*” refers to the divine being Tagore generally translates it as “He”. This practice has its root in the notion of god/God present in the religious faiths Tagore has been exposed to. Though the Upanishadic Brahman is beyond any gender specification, the holy trinity who occupy the position of authority within the Hindu pantheon are male, and so is the Christian God. Therefore Tagore automatically refers to the divine entity as “He” in translation. The use of words like “Lord” and “master” further substantiates this point. Only when he is referring to some “idea” within himself which is difficult to grasp does he bring in the pronoun “*se*” as we see in Poem 66 where: “*Jibone ja chirodin roye gache abhashe / probhater aloke ja phote nai prokashhe*” has been translated as “She who had remained in the depth of my being, / in the twilight of gleams and of glimpses”. (Tagore 174-175)

This “idea” which is referred to as “*Sokha*” (male friend) in the original poem becomes a female entity in translation. This “she” is an integral part of the poet’s self that is waiting for recognition from God. Here again we encounter the culture specific nuances of the Sufi metaphor of “*nazar*” in the words “*ki mohon rup e nikhil noyon hote dhaka chilo*” which is quite naturally not communicated properly through the words “There was none in the world who ever saw her face”. (Tagore 174-175)

It is interesting to note that at times Tagore also changes in his translation, words and concepts that are by no means culture specific and therefore eminently “translatable” in the target language. Such attempts bring out all too clearly his conscious and deliberate attempts

to contextualize his *Song Offerings* within the colonizer's literary and cultural paradigm, through "domestication". Needless to say, this could not be possible unless if the translator had a sound understanding of the target-language culture. An ideal example would be the way in which the lines from Poem 29, "*Amar naam ta diye dheke rakhi jare /morche se ei naam er karagare*" are translated as "He whom I enclose with my name is weeping in this dungeon". (Tagore 60-61) While the word "*karagar*" could have easily been translated as prison, the use of the word "dungeon", with its cultural associations of medieval European feudal castles, is a deliberate attempt to place the poem within the Western cultural paradigm. It is this practice of "domestication" that is instrumental in turning the translated work, into something that is "original in a different way". In fact, the very use archaic (Elizabethan) English invests it with certain nuances and legacy associated with the same. One of the most prominent sites for "domestication" in the *Song Offerings* is the celebration of the beauty of nature, more specifically the description of seasons and landscapes, which draws heavily from the tradition of English Romantic poetry. An ideal example would be Poem 23, where the description of nature and landscape in the following lines:

"Sudur kon nodir pare

gohon kon boner dhare

Gobhir kon ondhokare

hotecho tumi par" (Tagore 46)

transforms (in the English translation) into one which is akin to that found in the Romantic imagery that invests the poetry of Wordsworth or Shelly:

"By what dim shore of the ink black river,

By what far edge of the frowning forest,

through what mazy depth of gloom art thou

treading thy course to come to me my friend?" (Tagore 47)

This is a description of nature that the English reader can readily identify with. It also adds an element of lyrical cadence to the poem that is typical of English Romantic poetry. Such deliberate cultural re-contextualization at times almost renders the translator "invisible", as Lawrence Venuti would put it, creating an illusion of transparency by looking at the source culture through the target culture. As Edward Thompson himself writes to Tagore in a letter dated April 28, 1935 - "The publication of *Song Offerings* is an event in the history of English poetry and world poetry. It is... a new book and not a translation, and a permanently lovely one. (Thompson 321).

And this induces us to look more closely into Tagore's decision of choosing to translate his *geeti-kavita* into English prose. Why does he prefer prose over verse? Tagore believes that it is not possible to reproduce the rhythm and the *alankara* of his *geeti-kavita* in English verse. An attempt to do so would only hinder the proper articulation of the inherent "idea" or essence of the original poem in the target language, something which according to Tagore (as mentioned earlier), should be the main aim of the translator. Therefore, simple lucid English prose which is not overburdened by ornamentation (Pal 302) is considered by him to be the most suitable mode of expression to recreate the *rasa* of the original poems. But how does this formal innovation affect his translation? Most of the *geeti-kavita* lost much of their "lyrical suggestiveness" (Sarkar 81) in their prose translation. I would like to quote Poem 16 as an example:

Jogot er anando yag e

amar nimantran.

I have had my invitation to this world's festival,

and thus my life has been blessed. My eyes have seen

Dhonyo holo dhonyo holo

and my ears have heard. (Tagore 33)

manav janam.

Nayan amar ruper pure

Sadh mitae berae ghure

Srobon amar gobhir shure

hoyeche magan. (Tagore 32)

The translation almost degenerates into a summary of the original lines – one that articulates the inherent “idea” accurately but fails to recreate its appeal. The depth of emotions that is encapsulated within the rhyme scheme, rhythm and the lyrical expressions of the *geei-kavita* loses its poignancy in the translation. It is interesting to note that very few among Tagore’s target readership (most have no access to the source language or the source text) come to realize or lament this loss of *geeti-moyota* (lyrical quality) of the original poetry, in translation. One of these selective few is Mary Sinclair who had met Tagore personally in Rothenstein’s residence during his visit to England in 1912:

I am told by those who know these poems in the original that this prose rendering, apparently so unerring in its sense of phrasing, of sound values and vibrations, fails to give the slenderest, most shadowy idea of the beauty of Bengali.....its glamour and musical quality, the plasticity, subtlety and the variety of rhythms. I have heard some of the songs of *Gitanjali* being sung and recited by the poet himself and others. At the first hearing the rhythms were strange, almost unseizable to the Western ears....On the second and third hearings their music and magic was apparent (Sinclair 663)

But one cannot deny that some poems of the *Song Offerings* are characterized by the “clearness, strength and the suggestive music of well balanced sentences” (Sarkar 81) of English Prose. They have a lyrical quality- much of it being a contribution of the Romantic poets- which is manifest especially in the description of nature’s beauty and the emotions for the Divine being that it evokes within the lyrical “I”, as has been seen in the case of Poem 23. This “lyrical cadence” enriches these poems lending them not only a musicality but also a picturesque quality.

Before I conclude the paper, I should take cognition of the fact that though Tagore has been credited with the English translation of *Gitanjali*, *Song Offerings* was published only after being scrutinized and edited by his advisors and collaborators, the most notable ones among them being Yeats and Robert Bridges (who had reportedly translated poems 31, 67 and 91). This testifies to the presence of certain other nuances of translation which is beyond the scope of my discussion.

Tagore’s *anuvad-bhavna* shaped by his subject position vis-a-vis the power-equation existing between his mother tongue Bangla and the language of the British colonizer led him to translate his *geeti-kavita* in such a way that *Song Offerings* emerged as a work having literary merits independent of the original text. Though *Gitanjali* loses much of its culture-specificity (including the intricacies of the *bhakta* – personal god relationship) in translation, the self-realization and self-discovery of the lyrical “I” facilitated through the changing dynamics of his relationship with the Supreme Being strikes a chord with the Western readership. Though as a translator of his own work, Tagore often succumbs to the cultural hegemony perpetuated by the contemporary colonial discourse, his attempt to reach out to the Western readership through his *Song Offerings* remains an event of paramount significance as

it creates a much needed platform for cross cultural exchanges and interactions between the colonizers and the colonized in a crucial juncture of Indian history:

The ideal of unity never rejects anything, any race, or any culture. Now, when in the present time of political unrest the children of India cry for the rejection of the West, I feel that it is a lesson which they have received from the West. The feeling of resentment between the East and the West must be pacified. I must do all that I can. (Tagore 298-299)

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