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RABINDRANATH TAGORE IN TRANSLATION AND THE POSTCOLONIAL READER

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> "Languages are jealous. They do not give up their best treasures to those who try to deal with them through an intermediary belonging to an alien rival."
> Rabindranath Tagore (quoted in Das 587)

More than once, Rabindranath Tagore expressed his reservation on the effectiveness and the possibility of the act of translation. Even then, he himself undertook to translate some of his poems and plays in the beginning of the 20th century. Even though he declared that the English *Gintanjali* was a chance product of an exhausted mind and that "it was mere accident that set me translating these poems in English" (quoted in Chakraborty 5), the fact was, as many Tagore scholars have pointed out, that Tagore's attempt at English translation was a deliberate choice. After the publication of *Gintanjali,* Tagore continued to translate some of his plays himself and encouraged some of his friends and acquaintances to the act of translation of his writings.

Now the questions that engage the mind of any Tagore reader are— Why at all did Tagore undertake to translate his Bengali writings into English, the language of the colonizer? Why were certain texts translated and not others? What was the kind of policy he adopted in the process of translation? Was it at all necessary for a poet of Tagore's stature in the realm of Bengali literature to transcribe some of his best writings into an alien language with which he came in contact as a result of British colonialism? What was the agenda behind translation?

The answers to these questions should not be as naive as to say that Tagore, by translating himself, was attempting to win the western acceptance and recognition. There is no denying the fact that it is only through the English language that one can communicate with the West and it is a historical truth which is even valid today. The colonial history of the past has left

its legacy in the world- wide acceptance of the English language as a common medium of interaction. Tagore did receive fame and name, to a great extent, through his English translation. But was it merely for winning popularity that Tagore translated his writings?

In point of fact, translation, in the colonial context, was a complex activity that involved so many factors— linguistic, political, social, economic and cultural .Translation which was not simply the transference of the content from one language to another, opened up a site for cultural negotiation between the colonizer and the colonized. Translation in the colonial context initiated an Orientalist-anti-Orientalist discourse. Tagore's translation destabilized the western notion that "O East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet."(Kipling 01-02). This exclusivist-imperialist outlook, as articulated by Kipling, summed up the binary opposition between the East and the West, between the Orient and the Occident, between the Self and the Other that existed at the time. According to Edward Said, Orientalism was a discourse by which European culture was able to manage and even produce the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. Orientalism was the European representation of the Other in terms of contrasting images, ideas, and experience. It was a concept based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and the Occident. A large mass of writers—poets, philosophers, political theorists, Indologists, and imperialists had accepted the basic distinction between the East and the West as a starting point for elaborating theories and various kinds of writings concerning the Orient.

Orientalism was a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. It was not a structure of European fantasy and myths. Rather, it was a sign of European power over the Orient .It was a system of knowledge—a collective notion identifying "us" Europeans as against all "those" non-Europeans. Indeed, the concept of cultural hegemony was certainly at work in Orientalism. It was nothing other than this cultural hegemony that believed in the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures. I wish to mention here Macaulay's infamous put-down of Indian culture in his Minute of 1835: "A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia."(quoted in Evans)

Considered from this perspective, during the British rule in India the cultural hegemony of Europe was imposed upon the indigenous, the colonized and the subordinate through a variety of means-political, educational and administrative among others. It initiated a cultural interaction and from the point of view of the colonized, it posed questions of cultural identity vis-à-vis the dominant culture of the West, especially the English. In the post –colonial context, the coming closer of two cultures started the process of negotiation in which the western culture was neither rejected nor accepted wholly or outright by the colonized .The culture of the oppressed , Homi Bhabha argues in his seminal book, *The Location of Culture*, was not silenced or rendered mute by the grand narratives of the colonist authority ,but rather participated in the formation of an identity that was neither purely that of the colonizers nor that of the colonized. It was the third space that was mutually forged .This is not to say, however, that the powers in play were equal. It is to say emphatically that colonial relations never involved the simple imposition of one culture on another. They involved rather a struggle in constantly shifting space that results in all kinds of dominations, but at the same time created the possibility of displacements and subversions.

To elaborate this point further, here I would like to refer to a fascinating anecdote Homi Bhabha referred to in an interview by W.Mitchell in March, 1995. In the early phase of the 19th century, Hindu peasants in northern India were approached by some "native "catechists who sought their conversion into Christianity. The dialogue ensued an exchange between a muscular colonial Christianity that was keen to convert and an indigenous religious tradition that resisted conversion. That said, what was most fascinating in the process of dialogic contradiction was the way the peasants dealt with this colonial antagonism to produce supplementary discourses as sites of resistance and negotiation. They would say, for instance: We would be happy to convert so long as you convinced us that these words of the Christian god do not come from the mouths of meat eaters. These words are very beautiful, but your priests are a non-vegetarian class. We cannot believe that anybody who eats meat can transmit the word of God.

Now there was nothing in the logic of the Hindu/Christian theological dialectic or in the master/peasant dialogue that required the construction of this incommensurable site and sign of negotiation: the vegetarian Bible. Give us the vegetarian Bible and we will convert. Something opened up, however, as an effect of this dialectic, something that would not be contained within it that could not be returned to the two oppositional principles. And once it opened up, the colonizer and the colonized were in different spaces, were making different presumptions and mobilizing emergent, unanticipated forms of cultural negotiation.

The cultural context of Bengal in the wake of the solid foundations laid by the East Indian Company and the introduction of the English language was marked by an interaction between the Western and Indian cultures and though we may have doubts about the extent to which the European culture shaped the contours of the Bengali Renaissance, the profound impact of the European ideals as filtered through the English literature upon the historical moments of the Bengalis' reawakening can hardly be overestimated. In the essay "Real," included in his collection of essays, *On the Way to Literature (Sahityer Pathe*, in Bengali) Tagore unequivocally admits this: "English education has touched our life like a philosopher's stone and it has awakened our inner soul/reality",(Tagore,21). Although Tagore's political positions on the issues of Indian nationalism as well as on the policies adopted by the Indian National Congress were constantly revised with the passage of time commensurate with his changing attitudes towards the British Empire, his faith in the unique greatness of English literature, however, remained unshaken.

What I mean here is the obvious—that the Bengali Renaissance, both in its conception and manifestation, created sites of cultural hybridity and Tagore's education was nurtured along these sites created in the historical interactions between the cultures of Sanskrit, Bengali and English. A case in point here was the formation of Brahmo Samaj—a liberal spiritual society founded by Rammohan Roy and avidly championed by Keshab Chandra and Maharshi Debendranath Tagore. Since his childhood days, Rabindranath imbibed the tenets of this unorthodox philosophical school which took as much inspiration from the Upanishads as from the Bible. It was the third space that was forged as result of the negotiation between the Indian culture and the Western culture-something which is attested by what Pratap Chandra Majumdar, one of Keshob Chandra's closest disciples said: Christ and his religion will have to be interpreted in India through Indian antecedents and the Indian medium of thought. I am suspected of trying to bend Christianity down to heathenism. So we must either renounce our national temperament, or renounce Christ, or reembody our faith and aspirations under a new name, and form, and spirit. **We have taken this third course.**(Choudhury 121, emphasis added)

In the colonial text and context, this 'thirdness' was a part of an unceasing process or movement that was at once in-between and beside the assumed 'polarities'—East is East and West is West, Orientalism and Occidentalism, the self and the Other, 'they' and 'us.' This 'thirdness' unsettled any essentialist or foundationalist claim to the 'originary' of positions and destabilized the presumed binary polarities between cultures of the colonizer and the colonised. This process of cultural intersection displaced the ahistorical nineteenth century polarity of the Orient and the Occident, which in the name of progress and civilization, constructed the exclusionary imperialist ideologies of self as superior and Other as inferior.

As a humanist and artist par excellence, Rabindranath Tagore was never tired of articulating the basic salience of civilization—that since time immemorial, people with different cultural attributes had always met, that cultural exchange is the *raison d'être* of human progress— "give and receive; thou shall not go back empty from the sea-shore of India's vast humanity." His idea of international brotherhood did not admit of Kipling's version of Orientalism and he famously said in 1912: East is East and West is West-God forbid **that it should be otherwise** –but the twain must meet in amity, peace, and understanding; their meeting will be all the more beautiful because of their **differences.**

In the essay, **"**Exaggeration" (the Bengali "Atyukti," *Rabindra Rachanabali*, 2: 742), Tagore dismissed Kipling's writings about India as examples of Occidentalist exaggeration. Now the question worth exploring is: Was not Tagore exploding the myth of rigid, monolithic Western culture fabricated by the proponents of imperialism? Was not his stance emerging from the 'third space,' from the overlap and displacement of domains of difference?

A better way of understanding these issues at stake would be to reassess Tagore as translator of his own Bengali poems and plays into the language of the colonizer-English. Translation is as much about the translation of cultural, political, and historical contexts and concepts as it is about the transference of ideas from one language or sign-system to another language or sign-system. Translation must be seen as a form of cultural dialogue, as a process of cultural negotiation which, in the colonial context, became all the more evident and inevitable. A translator is always an interpreter, a negotiator mediating between two different languages or two different cultures, which have formed a 'contact zone,' to borrow an oft-quoted phrase of Marie Louise Pratt at a particular time and space in the colonial history of a nation.

Translation is, as Homi Bhabha says, is "the temporality of negotiation" between the source language and the target language—a process in which difference and contradiction ,common points and associations are articulated .This negotiation is, perforce, political in resonance in the sense that translation sets in motion a discourse –a discursive narrative in which the translator or the colonized writer engages in a dialogical enterprise not through his own lingua franca, but through the language of the colonizer in order to persuade, to put across and to form his identity. The fact that Tagore as a translator chose to write in English was itself a political choice bespeaking his aspiration to take on the cultural hegemony of the colonizer by expressing his national, colonized points of view, which were hitherto represented or misrepresented by the colonizer to serve its imperial interests. Tagore subverted the notion of Orientalism which believed, according to Karl Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (quoted in Said xii)

The apprehension that Tagore accepted the political and cultural dominance of the colonizer by submitting his creativity to the English language, to the hegemonic authority of the colonizer can be brushed aside by taking into account the fact that Tagore remained a Bengali

writer till the last days of his literary career—a writer of prodigious output constantly in the process of positioning and repositioning his attitudes —cultural, political, literal-towards the West and more specifically, to the English. Just as he was immensely sensitive to the indigenous culture of his country, he was not immune to the culture of the West. He kept his Bengali-Indian sensibility, to the fullest degree. Tagore never wore the 'White Mask', to use Franz Fanon's phrase, to conceal his identity as a Bengali. Rather, he negotiated with the colonizer's culture, altered it, and restructured it to create space to reveal his Indian identity and to accommodate his indigenous culture in his English translation.

Tagore's translated texts exist in the liminal space—a space provisionally created in the process of translation, of negotiation between two languages and/or two cultures. His translated works may be compared to a stairwell that connects the attic and the boiler room of an architectural building that serves as a pathway, as a connective tissue that constructs and admits the difference between the upper and lower areas. The moving to and fro between the source language/culture and the colonizer's language/culture, the hither and thither of the stairwell that his translation allows ,prevents identities at either end-one Bengali/Indian culture, another English/European culture- of it from settling into primordial polarities. This in-between space between identifications-this process of cultural engagement entertains difference existing between the two cultures and articulates antagonistic elements without subsumption or sublation. In his translation activities, there is neither the One, nor the Other, but something else besides, which contests the terms and territories of both.

The poetics of Tagore's translation is difference and ambivalence. Tagore's English *Gitanjali*, for instance, is markedly different from his Bengali *Gitanjali* **.**Even while Tagore seeks to create an image of the divine in conformity with the Biblical idea of God—an attempt which Lawrence Venuti might call "domestication"—in order to come closer to his English readers of *Gitanjali***,** the divine image is neither similar to the Christian God nor akin to the Upanishadic-Baishnavite conception of God, as projected through his Bengali *Gitanjali* .The Bengali verse drama, *Chitrangada* is transcreated into English *Chitra***.** The rhythmic flow of melody and dance which suffuses the text of *Chitrangada* becomes a prosaic rendition of a mythological story rich with symbolic and feminist connotations in *Chitra***.** Tagore's translated texts oscillate between the source language and the target language, between the domains of Bengali culture and English culture, questioning the solidarity and essentiality of any given language or culture. The search for any absolute meaning to be found in any text-original or translated is thwarted and the notion that a single, unalterable truth is posited in the text is dislodged in translation which is once produced by the author ,but may be edited, amended and retranslated by other translators and hence different interpretations may be constructed in the process. This ambivalent, open-ended status of the translated texts under erasure rejects the singular authority of the author and establishes truth not as something absolute, but as a trope, as a possibility of stating a proposition.

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