

Debt to Soil: Dyson's Translation of Tagore's Poems

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Abstract

Lahiri attempts to highlight how the poems of Tagore have been translated by Dyson, keeping in mind the subtle Indian nuances. It is with "contact with the soil" that Tagore's poems "Antaeus-like grew strong". Dyson's translations preserve the typical local essences: the contours of the country-side, the seasons and the months, thoughts and philosophy. One recognizes the preference of the rural over the urban. The names of musical instruments, trees, fruits, and fictional characters of Indian origin are deliberately retained. Indian myths and symbols help to strengthen the notion.

Keywords: Translation, Indian, Myths, Translator, Poetry

Rabindranath Tagore's poems cover an extraordinary gamut of themes and emotions. Ketaki Kushari Dyson has the rare prerogative of choosing from the poet's prismatic spectrum. As a translator, she has to keep in mind the readers of the target language. Though she covers a certain range, she deliberately picks on the poems that are deeply rooted to the Indian soil, those that breathe an easily discernible sense of "Indianness". Through Tagore, she attempts to pay her debt to the soil.

Tagore's poems are not easily translated. To convert the mood often proves too much for the translator. Dyson tries easy methods of decoding from the source language and rewording them in the target language. At times that, too, becomes difficult. Dyson uses the combination method at such junctures. The names of fruits, flowers and trees are translated to equivalents in certain contexts, but the Bangla ones are retained in others. "By the Pond" describes how *kolmi* and *helancho* grow in abandon on the edges of the pond. Alongside are the white rongons, *shiuli* and *shajina* trees. The speaker also finds oleanders (*korobi*), tuberose (*rajanigandha*), henna (*mehendi*), banana (*kola*), guava (*peyara*), coconut (*narkel*), shaddock (*batabilebu*) and dates (*khejur*). The arhar daal is translated as Cajan and Khashkhash as vetiver. In "A Sudden Encounter", the speaker meets the lady in a train compartment, "her face as fair and comely as the *dolonchampa*".¹

Images from the countryside are strewn in Dyson's work. The ten-year old unnamed orphan is the protagonist in 'The Boy'. Like his pet dog, he is 'very much a native of the soil'. His pranks and unflinching attitude are not to be easily tolerated. The manner in which he steals into the Buxy orchard for jaams, nicks the Pakrashi boy's glass tube

1 Ketaki Kushari Dyson, *Selected Poems*, New Delhi, United States Book Publishers, 2003, p. 208.

show his arrogance and innocence at the same time. It is only Sidhu, the milkwoman, who can tolerate his whims and tantrums. The poignancy of the Indian child comes across in the 'Last Letter'. Amala's doting father, over protective and over concerned, began to look after the little child when she lost her mother at the tender age of seven. Her aunt from Bankipore wanted to save Amli from her father's 'loving excesses'. She wanted Amli to have a decent education. Therefore, she got her admitted to a boarding school in Benaras. To get away from the haunting sense of alienation, the estranged father set out on a pilgrimage to *Badrinath*. Unable to find solace, he moves from one place to another. After four months he rushes to have a look at his dear daughter, but it is too late. The pining little Amli passes away, leaving behind a heart-rending message 'I want to see you so much. In another context, Dyson brings Bhajia with silver bangles on her wrists, grinding wheat between stones and singing in a monotonous drone. Girdhar, the doorman, sits near her and appreciates her work. Beneath the old neem tree, the gardener draws water from a well with a bullock's help. It is a typical Indian image. The wife who grinds wheat is a recurrent symbol. In 'A Person', with fat brass bangles on her wrist, she is the wife of the skinny; tall, oldish man from India's north. The mustard field is another recurrent symbol. Song No.12 celebrates a large tract of land devoted to the cultivation of the mustard plant. The field, in flower, is a sight to behold. There is the image of the huge buffalo being bathed in the river on a warm afternoon. The man affectionately calls the animal, 'come, Puturani, come'. On a lazy afternoon friends and cousins enjoy a mixture of green mangoes, 'shulpo greens and chillies'. The women wearing red-bordered sari, the braiding of hair on a lazy afternoon, the grinding of wheat, the hands filled with fat, brass bangles, the vermilion-smearred forehead, the Baul standing in front of the kerosene shop, the seller of green mangoes and the men carrying goodies of all kinds are wholesome Indian constructs of Tagore that have been retained by Dyson fullscale. They are the colonised, non-elite 'subalterns'. These people of inferior rank, without any class consciousness, these oppressed and the silenced achieve a kind of self-legitimation in Dyson's translation.

Many of Tagore's myths have been preserved in translation. *Akaashpradeep* or Sky-Lamp refers to the Indian custom of lighting a lamp for the spirits of ancestors and for the Gods, atop a bamboo pole, every evening on the month of Kartik. It is a custom that is supposed to keep away evil spirits, gratify the Gods and ancestors. Dyson does not allow any of the associations to wane in her rendition. Song No.19 refers to Parijaat, the celestial flower of Indian mythology. Parijaat-pollen here serves as a metaphor for moonlight. 'Farewell to Heaven' contrasts Heaven and Earth. The 'happy celestial land' with the Nandan garden, the *Mandakini* flowing blissfully, and famous beauties like *Menaka*, *Urvashi*, and Sachi proves to be a 'heartless, indifferent' land. It is a contrast to the 'pauperised, afflicted, tearful, tarnished' Earth which holds out her arms like a mother.² The warmth of the motherland is an important Tagorian concept that has been preserved by Dyson. Lord Krishna's conch-shell finds a place in Radice and Dyson. This mangal-shankha is a part of Indian sensibility. These culture-specific

2 *Ibid.*, 97.

concepts have particular implications in the source language, but not necessarily in the target language. Dyson follows a few procedures in translating these culture-specific-concepts. She explains the meaning of the source language expression in lieu of translating it. Sometimes she keeps the source language term intact. At others, she opts for a word in the target language which seems similar to or has the same 'relevance' as the source language.

The Indian terrain is well preserved. Tagore's cartographic impetus is strongly retained in the individual translations where the river occupies a singular position. The Kopai river is a strong symbol in the *Punashcha* (1932) collection. On its bank is the Rajbangshi settlement, where their goats graze on cracked fields. A granary with a tin roof stands by the market place. During the rains, "her limbs are touched with ecstasy/ like a village girl drunk on mahua wine/ she does not break or cause to drown,/ just twirls and twirls the eddies of her skirts,/ give little pushes on both her banks,/ and laughing loudly, races along".³ In contrast, her waters become limpid post rains, her flow becomes thinner showing the sand below. Yet the pallor of that shrunken state cannot shame her: "for her affluence is not arrogant, nor is her poverty a disgrace; she is lovely in both". The river *Mayurakshi* fascinates the speaker in the *Dwelling*. The sal and mahua trees are on friendly terms, but there is rivalry between *jarul*, *polash* and *madar*. A footpath skirts the river over red soil. Paved with red stones, the steps of a modest ghat descend to the river. The pleasant ambience includes the floating swan and the grazing of the russet milch-cow with its brindled calf on the sloping banks. The sound of the Santhal flutes coming from the dense forest on the other side completes the picture. The poem takes an abrupt change towards the end where the speaker admits that "this dwelling of mine/ I have never built, nor ever will/ Never have I even seen the *Mayurakshi*".⁴ It is his soul that yearns to rush off by the river and feeling hollow inside, he can only be indifferent to his surroundings. The image is thus a haunting one. The red soil and the red stones are reminiscent of particular districts in Bengal. *Kopai* reminds the speaker of the *Padma* that "meanders away under far skies". In the first stanza, Dyson takes liberties in translation. *Beter Jongol* has been translated as jungles of rattan.⁵ The *Ganga* glitters in the distance in another poem called *Memory*. Glimmering in evening's colours, Jhelum's curved stream fades in the dark "like a sheathed, curved sword".⁶ In *Dream*, the speaker goes to find his "first love/ from a previous life" in a dream world, "in the city of *Ujjain* / by river *Shipra*".⁷ The river *Rupnarayan* is pregnant with meaning. It flows through Bengal and is a compound of two words: *Rup* (appearance / beauty/ form) and *Narayan* (another name for Vishnu). The river is symbolic, both by virtue of its geographical location and its name. When

3 *Ibid.*, p. 153.

4 *Ibid.*, 157.

5 *Ibid.*, 152.

6 *Ibid.*, 136.

7 *Ibid.*, 119.

one wakes up on its bank, it is a kind of enlightenment, knowing or apprehending what the world really is. Just as this river meets the sea, life meets death. In No.14 from *Sheshlekha*, the poet feels assured that the sea, signifying death, is near. *The Last Letter* mentions the aunt from Bankipore and the pilgrimage to *Badrinath*. Both these places firmly root the poem to the Indian soil. Dyson allows her readers to hear River Baruni's liquid purr from afar".⁸

It is interesting to note how Dyson retains music and musical instruments from Bengal. The Shahana ragini's tenderness sometimes hangs in the air,⁹ in a far neighbourhood in a house of wedding a Shanai plays to the tune of *Sarang*,¹⁰ a lady sings on the open roof-terrace to the tune of *Sindhu Kafi*.¹¹ She introduces Saraswati's Bina and the rural music of the Bauls too. She avoids transliteration in her use of Bangla months as well. In the 23rd Song, Dyson speaks of *Srabon-Song*.¹² In No. 03 from *Shesh Saptak*, she suggests that the "days of Poush are coming to an end". The speaker in "Getting Lost" finds himself on the "roof terrace / on that night of Chaitra, full of stars".¹³ On moonlit Chaitra evenings when the henna perfumes the air, the lovers sit close to each other in "Straightforward".¹⁴ In contrast is the bitter night of Aghran. Bitten by the cruel frost, all the lotuses die, except one in the garden of Sudas the florist. Therefore, in *The Realization of Value*, the king and the traveller vie with each other to get that flower. They wish to place it on Lord Buddha's feet. Sudas, however retains the privilege of placing the flower on His 'Lotus-feet' himself, so that he may be granted a trace of dust from His feet. The Identity speaks of how "on a Srabon night / the woods, hit by a cataclysm, had wept". An important question posited in Translation Studies is whether absolute equivalence is possible? Dyson tries to achieve this equivalence in the straightforward manner by the retention of names from the source language. It is the easiest way out that she finds for herself.

Names refer to particular setting, social positions and nationality of characters. They play an essential role in a literary text. There are two strategies for translating proper nouns. Either the noun can be taken over unchanged from the source language to the target language, or it can be adapted to conform to the phonic / graphic conventions of the target language.¹⁵ Fictional characters like Bami in *Getting Lost*, Bhajiya and Ghirdhari in *Memory*, Sidhu in *The Boy* and Kamala in *Camellia* jostle together. Dyson instinctively adapts the former of the two strategies. This is generally known as 'exotism'. It is tantamount to literal translation and involves no cultural

8 *Ibid.*, p. 216.

9 *Ibid.*, 191.

10 *Ibid.*, 204.

11 *Ibid.*, 190.

12 *Ibid.*, 236.

13 *Ibid.*, 139.

14 *Ibid.*, 124.

15 S. Hervey and I. Higgins, *Thinking Translation*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 29.

transportation. She also avoids cultural transplantation. That is, a procedure in which the source language names are replaced by target language names that are not their literal equivalents, but have similar cultural connotations. In this process Bami may become Rosy and Sidhu may become Jerry. Only in a few cases she brings in a change. In *The Victorious Women*, she uses the term 'Love-God' to refer to Anangadev or Madan. Similarly, she refers to Mahendrea as 'Great Indra' and Apsara as 'Nymph' in *Farewell to Heaven*.

The poem *Byakul* from the collection *Sishu* has been translated as *An Offer of Help*. The young boy feels distressed at his mother's state of mind, pining for her husband's letter. The postman is regarded as *peyadata bhari dustu, sheyana*. Dyson translates it; "the postman's very smart, a crafty beggar!"¹⁶ It shows how untranslatable Tagore can be at times! In "Hide and Seek", the boy looks in wonder at the mother who enters the Pujorghor or the prayer room, conveniently translated as "*chapel*", cutting across religious barriers. The oft-quoted lines from "*Utsargo*" *Jaha chai taha bhul kore chaai, jahapai taha chaina* becomes incredibly: "What I want / I want by mistake / What I get / I don't want at all".¹⁷ The nuance of the Bangla cannot be retained in literal translation. *Tyag*, the original, ends with a statement, but the translated poem "Renunciation" ends with a question. When the king's son was riding past the room, the speaker asks, "What could I do but fling the jewels of my breast / before his path?". "Endless Death" asks in the first line, *jototuku bortoman, tarei ki bolo pran?* The answer comes in the second line, *shey to shudhu polok, nimesh*. Dyson combines the two lines to form a single question, "Should only the present be called life / Just an instant, a wink?"¹⁸ In the next two lines the S.L. text gives a statement *atiter mrito bhab prishtete roeche tar/na jani kothaytar sesh*". Dyson asks a question yet again, "On its back sits the dead weight of the past / who knows where that ends?"¹⁹ The last line should have been, "None knows its end". "Invocation to Sorrow" declares that sorrow will "sleep in Peace" in the speaker's "heart's nest cosily". The source language expressions are *nirobeyand nibhritey*. That is, noiselessly / silently and secretly / solitarily. "Sneho" is definitely "affection", but Dyson simplifies it to "love". "Hater Din" cannot be "market day", for it fails to bring in the noisy atmosphere that is associated with a "Haat" or a rural market place. At times she seems to grapple for the correct expression or word in the target language. The star that commits suicide is mocked at by the other stars. Tagore asks the other stars- "*Keno go, tomra joto tara / Upohas kori tarey hashicho omondhara... (eto gorbo achilo ki taar)*.... Dyson translates "Why, stars, why do you / mock him and laugh like that... (he wasn't that arrogant)..The word *Gorbo* could have been translated as Pride. Arrogance carries along with it the association of "*Owdhyoty*". In the poem "I Won't Let You Go", Dyson translates "darpo" as arrogance. But "*Darpo*" and "*Garbo*" are not synonyms in Bangla. They have different associations conveniently she misses or

16 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

19 *Ibid.*

drops certain lines in the middle of texts. After the puja vacation, the lady of the house is busy packing for the husband. The husband expresses his disapproval at the pile of pots, jugs, bowls, casseroles, bedcloths, bottles and boxes. He exclaims; "Rajyer bojhai, kikoribo nie". That is, "what shall I do with this excessive luggage". Dyson omits this line to move on to the next, where he decides, "kichu er rekhe jai, kichu loi sathe" ("let me take / a few and leave the rest behind"). Dyson tries very hard to find equivalents for *toltol*, *jhilmil*, *tolmol* etc., for onomatopoeia or echoism is an important aspect of the source language. In "Songs" No. 9, the poet gazes with wonder: "All around me on branches of dead trees / *tarum tarum* it dances in rhythmic beats". How can one expect to find an equivalent for *tarum tarum*!

Radice's translations of Tagore concentrate upon the meditative aspect of the Renaissance poet. The deep philosophical content is stressed. Dyson claims to cover a wide canvas in her translations, but unlike Radice, she seems to hold on to India like the fictional child in Tagore and to cry out, "I won't let you go". As a translator Dyson makes an effort to showcase those poems of Tagore in which the essence of Indianness is distinctly felt. Like Tagore, Dyson tries to assert "...indebted to the soil I am", and it is from this contact with the soil the poems "Antaeus-like grew strong".²⁰