

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Rabindranath Tagore, *The Ruined Nest and Other Stories* edited, translated and with an introduction by Mohammad A. Quayum (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2014)

Rabindranath Tagore is by far the best-known Indian writer. Apart from his formidable reputation as the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize in literature – in fact, the first Asian Nobel laureate – Tagore stands out prominently for his astonishing output of enormous fecundity. He wrote primarily in Bengali and enriched its literary canon with his multi-generic gifts. His genius was essentially poetic but, nonetheless, he has left his mark on a variety of art-forms. Tagore also tried to render some of his works into English in response to their growing demand fuelled by the Nobel Prize, but these attempts at recasting a part of his corpus may be taken as substantial rewritings or rearrangements for the bilingual/international reader, rather than exact translations. As Sujit Mukherjee puts it, ‘I always think of him as a monumentally monolingual writer who occasionally ventured into English.’¹ Tagore himself realized that he was falsifying his ‘own coin’² by rushing English renditions of his original Bengali writings. While translating his short stories, as Edward Thomson notes, ‘More and more he toned down or omitted whatever seemed to him characteristically Indian, which very often was what was gripping and powerful.’³ Tagore’s lack of competence in recapturing his feelings and sentiments in another language has been met in varying measures by a flourishing number of recent translators of his short stories, such as William Radice, Ketaki Kushari Dyson, Andrew Robinson, Krishna Dutta and Mary Lago, and Sukanta Chaudhuri. As an equipollent and eminently accessible English version of Tagore’s twenty short stories, the book under review passes the test with flying colours.

The translator, M.A. Quayum, is a distinguished Tagore scholar. In his textual transmission of Tagore we are assured of the collaboration of a native speaker of Bengali with an efficient user of English. Further, a biographical essay on Tagore and a comprehensive introduction offer a well-researched account of Tagore’s personal and literary journey with salient features of his versatile creativity. Tagore wrote most of his stories – 59 out of total 95 – in a little over 10 years (1890-1901), during an immensely productive period known as the ‘Shelidah period’. At the time, he was managing his family estates in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) while also editing magazines, namely *Hitabadi*, *Sadhana* and *Bharati*, and turning in poetry, plays and non-fictional prose. Fifteen stories in Quayum’s collection were originally written during this period and are representative of Tagore’s abiding themes, such as his espousal of women’s education, the peasant’s intolerable situation, and the complexities of human relationship, as well as his secular outlook and liberal stance on public issues. They also evoke the milieu of the Bengal Renaissance influenced by bilingual cultural collision.

The opening story, ‘The Postmaster’, is one of Tagore’s widely acknowledged short masterpieces, with multiple translations. It is an embodiment of the writer’s empathy for a poor, illiterate, young country girl, Ratan, who is faced with the creeping shadow of loneliness after a spell of solace in the company of the postmaster whose job brings him from urban Kolkata to Ulapur, a village in the back of beyond. The stirrings of colonial modernity in the form of an indigo factory and a post office have set the stage for the urban-rural encounter in this story, originally written in

¹ Sujit Mukherjee, *Translation as Recovery* (Delhi: Pencraft International, 2009) 127.

² Letter to Edward J. Thomson, 2 February 1921.

³ Edward J. Thomson, cited in Amit Chaudhuri, ‘The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore’ in *A Concise History of Indian English Literature* ed. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008) 126.

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1891. The Indian Post Office was established on 1 October 1837 and by 1861 (the year Tagore was born) a total of 889 post offices had been opened. However, the story unobtrusively suggests that the Postal Service in British India was part of the imperial penetration.

Tagore's passionate realism in this story is punctuated by poignant scenes of rude emotional wrench when Ratan hears from the postmaster that he has been transferred and is returning to Kolkata for good. Let us see how Quayum's version of the Bengali original relates to another rendering of this story in English. Here is a passage as translated by Krishna Dutta and Mary Lago, where the destitute girl, realising that she has become attached to the lonely person, looks forward to a lasting human relationship. But the postmaster's direct disapproval disappoints her hope:

After the postmaster had eaten his meal the small girl asked abruptly, 'Dada Babu, will you take me home with you?'

The postmaster laughed, 'What a notion!' He did not consider it necessary to explain to the child why the proposal was so absurd.

All night long, sleeping and waking, the orphan girl was haunted by the laughing reply, 'What a notion!'⁴

Here now is the same passage as rendered by Quayum:

On completion of his evening meal, Ratan asked the postmaster, 'Dada Babu, Will you take me with you?'

'How could I do that?' said the postmaster with a laugh. He never bothered to explain to the girl why it was not possible.

Throughout the night, in her dream and wakefulness, the girl heard the cackling laugh of the postmaster and his curt reply, 'How could I do that?' (56)

In Quayum's notion of the verbal function and equivalence, the paradigm of Tagore's mind for delineating the emotionally deficient man needs to be scanned and hence his use of 'cackling' and 'curt' in the postmaster's response to the pre-adolescent girl's innocent expectation. On the other hand, in their discreetly purveyed version, Dutta and Lago have eschewed creative deviation.

The eponymous novella-length story in this collection, 'The Ruined Nest', also deals with a sensitive woman's feelings of abandonment and unrequited love. The narrative revolves around Charulata, an intelligent and gifted woman left to fend for herself because her husband, Bhupati, is excessively addicted to printer's ink as the editor and publisher of his own English-language newspaper. Charulata enlists the intellectual companionship of Amal, Bhupati's younger cousin. Their mutual spell develops into a tender bond. However, Charulata's fragile nest of happiness breaks when Amal gets married and leaves for London. Due to financial reasons, Bhupati is forced to fold his newspaper business but, with his wife emotionally distraught in Amal's absence, the ruined nest sours his solace. The story is a moving portrayal of the emerging modern woman in upper-class Indian families and its piquant triangle is without any trace of prurience.

The five stories in this collection written by Tagore in his 'post-productive' phase, including the posthumously published, 'A Woman's Conversion to Islam', also resonate with the writer's

⁴ *Selected Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore*, trans. Krishna Dutta and Mary Lago (London: Macmillan & Kolkata: Rupa, 1991) 30.

principal concerns, such as rigid gender hierarchy, love of nature, indictment of social orthodoxy, and sectarian divide. Finally, in addition to their fine characterisation, Tagore's stories are replete with social and psychological observation. Quayum has transferred the quantum of signification in the semiotic frame of the target language with formal annotation for enhanced understanding of the original without distancing effect.

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