

# ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF TAGORE'S WORK: A STUDY

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**Abstract:** Rabindranath Tagore is indeed the poet of the world. It would be injustice if we use the term *Indian Poet* for him. His poetry in the form of pearls has always inspired the arid and restless souls. Tagore is responsible for bringing the Indian English Literature on the global platform. His *Gitanjali* is indeed the masterpiece of art and aesthetics. His contributions to Indian literature span over a vast body of writing which includes novels, dramas, short stories, poetry and essays. Almost all of his work has been translated into many languages, including English, French, German, Arabic, Italian, Sanskrit, Serbian, Hindi, Russian and Urdu. His translations attracted many Western readers to be a part of beautiful Indian culture. This paper will try to debate about the English translation work of Tagore's literature.

**Keywords:** Poet, Literature, Gitanjali, Translation, Aesthetics, Western.

**Introduction:** Rabindranath Tagore is a poet who doesn't need any introduction; this world famous poet is responsible for bringing the Indian English Literature on the table of global literature. His *Gitanjali* is without any doubt the masterpiece which has stimulated many great Western poets. One of the great Western poets W.B. Yeats couldn't stop himself from writing an introduction for Tagore's *Gitanjali*. Rabindranath Tagore, whose vision, scholarship, universal outlook and profundity of feeling won him accolades from East and West. His contributions to Indian literature span over a vast body of writing which includes novels, dramas, short stories, poetry and essays which manifest his relationship with Indian philosophic traditions, and also reflect the influence of modern thought and philosophy on his writings and worldview. Developing a cautious and visionary balance between tradition and modernity, Tagore appeals to one and all through his humanistic musings and characters that he takes directly or imitates from the real life around. The profundity of his thought with a global humanistic vision could be very easily traced and referred to in many of his poems from *Gitanjali*, as for example, in this visionary poem about the freedom of India:

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;  
Where knowledge is free;  
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;  
Where words come out from the depth of truth;  
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;...*

**(Where the Mind Is Without Fear)**

Almost all of the Tagore's work has been translated into many languages, including English, French, German, Arabic, Italian, Sanskrit, Serbian, Hindi, Russian, Urdu and many more. In a letter addressed to William Rothenstein, Tagore conveys the intentions for the translation of his poems which largely include Bengali poems into English:

*At least it is never the function of a poet to personally help in the transportation of his poems to an alien form and atmosphere ... To the end of my days I should have felt happy and contented to think that the translations I did were merely for private recreation and never for public display if you did not bring them before your readers.*

**26 November 1932.**

The lines above very clearly convey the nature of Tagore, who was not among those running after the false fame and honor. The inspiration behind the translation of his work was something noble and true.

The poets like Tagore is an inspiration for all those who could feel the life in the lifeless and at the same time make the world realize the importance of what is being often overlooked and neglected. It was Tagore's this artistic insight which fascinated many foreign writers and readers who wanted to imbibe the poetic work of

Tagore but were not able to ensue because of the linguistic wall between them and Tagore's work. Thus what inspired Tagore to translate his own work into English was his willingness to share his thoughts and ideas at the global platform with the global audience. English being the universal language is welcomed in almost every parts of the globe, as such it became easy for his thoughts and beliefs to spread and reach his readers across the world. Regarding the translation of his own poems Krishna Kripalani very aptly summarizes the birth of Tagore's translation works:

Tagore was due to sail from Calcutta, on March 19, but suddenly fell ill on the night before his departure and the doctors forbade an immediate voyage. His luggage, already on board, had to be sent back from Madras where the ship halted next. Disappointed at this unforeseen postponement of his voyage, he sought consolation and strength, as of old, by retiring to Shelidah on the bank of his beloved river Padma. It was here that he began to translate, for the first time, some of his *Gitanjali* songs into English.

(Kripalani, 2011, p.122)

With the passage of time Tagore's interest in translation of his work increased and he keenly started to translate songs form *Gitanjali*. In one of his letter written to his niece Indira Devi, Tagore shares:

So I took up the poems of *Gitanjali* and set myself to translate them one by one. You may wonder why such a crazy ambition should possess one in such a weak state of health. But believe me, I did not undertake this task in a spirit of reckless bravado. I felt an urge to recapture through the medium of another language the feelings and sentiments which had created such a feast of joy within me in the days gone by.

The pages of a small exercise-book came to be filled gradually, and with it in my pocket I boarded the ship.

(Radice, 2011)

In the meantime a lot of his work was translated by his followers and admirers in order to bring his work into limelight outside the Bengal. It was not only his poems but the short stories and drams were translated as well. It is worth mentioning here that around 1900's Tagore's translations were not accepted for publication by the British in their journals keeping in view their lack of interest in oriental style as depicted in Tagore's stories. The following piece from the letter written by Bose to Tagore aptly explains the interest of translators in stories rather than his poems proving ultimately a wrong decision:

I shall not let you languish in obscurity for long in the countryside. Why do you use such an idiom in your poems that they cannot be translated? I shall get your stories published in this country so that people here should have some idea about your creative writings" (my translation).

(Bose & Tagore 44)

While Tagore was translating his songs he could have never envisaged the fact that the same could bring Noble Prize in his lap. It was the year 1913 when Tagore's *Gitanjali* won the Nobel Prize in Literature and transformed Tagore into a star with eternal luminosity. These translations made him the poet of the world. Yeats acknowledges the universality and greatness of *Gitanjali* in these words:

I have carried the manuscript of these translations with me for days, reading it in railway trains, or on the tops of omnibuses and in restaurants, and I have often had to close it lest some stranger would see how much it moved me. These lyrics -which are in the original, many Indians tell me, full of subtlety of rhythm, of untranslatable delicacies of colour, of metrical invention - display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long. The work of a supreme

culture, they yet appear as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the rushes

(Yeats, 1920).

It is very important to note that Tagore started his translations long before he was awarded the Noble Prize. One of his friends namely Ramananda Chatterjee published a literary journal titled *The Modern Review* in the year 1907. This journal was published from Calcutta having large number of readers both in America and England. *The Modern Review* played a significant role in promoting Tagore's translations to the people of the West thereby stimulating interesting discussions among them. As time passed the number of translators translating Tagore's work increased among which include some of the distinguished personalities like Debendranath Mitra, Sister Nivedita, Jadunath Sarkar, Lokendranath Palit, Ajit kumar Chakraborty and Tagore himself (Chakravarty, 1961). Pertinent to mentions here that Amiya Chakravarty was the close associate of Rabindranath Tagore and his literary secretary from the year 1924 to 1933. He accompanied Tagore during his tours to Europe and America. During Tagore's third visit to England around nine poems, fifteen short stories and three essays appeared in *The Modern Review* which began to give place to his works on the tables of the West. While Tagore's work was being translated by many of his admirers however, the difficult task was the translation of his poems. Keeping the fact of difficulty in translating Tagore's poems Ramananda Chatterjee's requested Tagore to translate his own poems into English. At the same time Tagore felt the emptiness in the translations of his poems by translators which gradually ignited a desire in him to translate his poems seriously. According to Chatterjee these are "the first English translations by him [Tagore] of his poems [that] appeared in the February, April and September numbers of *The Modern Review* in 1912.... These are, to my knowledge, his earliest published English compositions. Their manuscripts are with me... (Chatterjee.X). All his seriousness towards his translations paved the path for his greatest achievement in the form of *Gitanjali*.

Of the many forms of translation like word-for-word and literal translation, Tagore opted for his English version of *Gitanjali* a form that retained the true essence and beauty of the original text, 'arhythmically free' [and] 'slightly biblical style of prose-poetry' (Radice, 2011, p.282). Tagore confesses in his letter to Dinesh Chandra Sen about the injustice done to any work being translated by others, he remarks, "I feel translation can never be satisfactory unless done by myself. Since the melody of Bengali language and Bengali rhythm cannot be transferred to English, the rendering of ideas in simple English can only bring out its inner beauty. I can easily do this work without any mistake (my translation)." Thus it reflects the sincere attitude of Tagore towards his original text the originality of which could have lost if he would have not taken the task of translation by himself. This honest attitude preserved the essence and aesthetics of his original Bengali *Gitanjali* poems even after translating them into English. Reviewing the poems after the publication of *Gitanjali*, Ezra Pound wrote: "It is a little over a month since I went to Mr. Yeats' rooms and found him much excited over the advent of a great poet, someone 'greater than any one of us.' It is hard to tell where to begin...We have found our new Greece, suddenly. As the sense of balance came back upon Europe in the days before the Renaissance, so it seems to me does this sense of saner stillness come now to us in the midst of our clangour of mechanism...I am not saying this hastily, nor in an emotional flurry, nor from a love of brandishing statement. I have had a month to think it over...There is in him the stillness of nature. The poems do not seem to have been produced by storm or by ignition, but seem to show the normal habit of his mind. He is at one with nature, and finds no contradictions. And this is in sharp contrast with the Western mode, where man must be shown attempting to master nature if we are to have 'great drama'. It is in contrast to the Hellenic representation of man, the sport of the gods, and birth in the grip of destiny...When I leave Mr. Tagore I feel exactly as if I were a barbarian clothed in skins, and carrying a stone war-club." (Kripalani, 2011, p.125-126).

It is a fact that *Gitanjali* bought fame to Tagore but it is not only what could be considered his contribution to the world literature. His other literary work is equally beautiful and worth reading and that is why the translation didn't stop even after the publishing of English *Gitanjali*. The scholars and many poets like William Radice, Ahanda Lal, Shyrnasree Devi, P. Lal have translated many poems and other literature of Tagore even after his death. The translation works by William Radice's *Selected Poems* in 1985 of Tagore and Ananda Lal's *Three Plays* in 1987 opened a fresh new chapter in Tagore's translations as imagined by Piere Fallon, Buddhadeva Bose and Edward Thompson (Dasgupta, S.C., 2014). Thus it won't be wrong to say that the treasure house i.e. Tagore's Literature is the store house of rare gems and pearls, each line and word has a deep meaning as such there is no choice in limiting the translation work of his vast literature. There is much that is unsung; his literature has much more scope for fresh translations which would certainly untie many knots overlooked and untouched by the scholars and philosophers.

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