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Problems of Translation: A Critical Assessment– with Particular Reference to Alokranjan Dasgupta’s Translation of Emily Dickinson’s poem ‘There’s a Certain Slant of Light’

Susmita Chakraborty

Research Scholar, Dept. of Bengali, Assam University, Silchar, Assam, India
Asst. Prof., Dept. of English, S. K. Roy College, Katlicherra, Assam, India

Abstract

In this age of globalisation, translation plays the all-important role of a medium which is trans-lingual, trans-literary, trans-cultural, trans-historical, trans-national, and trans-continental. Both as process and as product, translation shuffles amidst various disciplines, genres, literary conventions, and authors belonging to different languages of the world. It performs the onerous task of winning writers foothold and popularity in particular foreign nations or far removed lingo-cultural groups. Poetry translation in particular is a difficult task even for translators who are themselves practising poets either in source or target language. Alokranjan Dasgupta (born on October 6, 1933) is well-known in Bengali literature for his contribution in studies of translation and Comparative Literature in Bengali. A world citizen, he has written scores of original as well as translation poems and has thus provided some signposts on the way to be traversed by future aspirants of a challenging enterprise like translation. The present paper tries to analyse Alokranjan’s endeavours through translation in ushering in Bengali language the windy rustles of American literature, particularly Emily Dickinson’s poetry, her unique poetic language and punctuation, and the difficulties involved in introducing before the Bengali intelligentsia a woman poet far removed lingo-culturally and spatially-temporally.

Keywords: Medium, Trans-lingual, Source Language, Target Language, Translation of Poetry, Challenge and Difficulty, Dickinson’s Hallmark, Untranslatability, Endeavour against Difficulty.

In this open age of globalisation readers with a cosmopolitan mind, who deal with multi-culture, cross-culture or hybridity, post-colonialism and interdisciplinary studies, etc. feel an increased urge and attraction for crossing lingual, cultural and national barriers and becoming acquainted with literatures belonging to foreign or unknown languages. And for the said purpose – since it is highly unlikely that a person would know or learn all the languages of the world – translation may be considered as an important medium. It is undeniably true that literature finds a fresh lease of life in the consistent and intimate

readings of newer readers. Translation not only brings honour and popularity for great works of literature, it also creates a field for comparison amongst such great works belonging to a variety of lingo-cultural domains. In his essay “The Art of Translation” in *Comparative Literature: Method and Perspective* (pp. 98 – 121) Horst Frenz, the renowned critic and scholar of translation studies opines,

Throughout the centuries grave doubts have been raised over the feasibility of translations of literary works. Again and again it has been maintained that it is not possible for anyone to combine in another language the thoughts, the emotions, the style, and the form of an epic, a lyric poem, a poetic drama, or even a prose novel. Yet the fact remains that the art of translation has been practiced everywhere in the world. Through this art many of the literary achievements of one country have found a hearing and even become “naturalized” in other countries. Their people have been able to share the experiences and emotions expressed in foreign works, and men of letters have been stimulated and even profoundly influenced by them.

Most readers must depend upon the translator if they are to know and appreciate the literature of the world. His role is more important than is often realized.ⁱ

Alokeranjan Dasgupta (born on October 6, 1933), a pioneer of Bengali comparative literary studies, has translated works of English, Italian, Spanish, German, French literatures into Bengali, and thus has not only opened the expansive horizon of world literature before the readers of Bengali literature but also worked as a catalyst in breathing an air of internationalism in the vibrant stream of Bengali literature and, at the same time has expanded the field of literary adaptation and assimilation.

In case of poetry translation, the translators, while remaining faithful to the original work, try to bring in their own creativity so as to uplift their work to the level of the original source language text. “Considerable agreement exists that poetry should be translated into poetic form, but there is less agreement on the question whether or not the same verse form, rhyme scheme, etc., should be used in the translation.... The translator as well as the writer must be sensitive to the mythological, historical, and social traditions reflected in a language and must use words to convey not only sounds but also rhythm, gesture, expression, melody, color, and association.”ⁱⁱ It remains as a major objective of poetry translators to successfully and lucidly transfer the personal or subjective aspects of the source language poet into the target language and thus make them available to the new readers. Stress, accent, alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, simile, metaphor, repetition of sound, allegory, archetype, archaism, euphony, rhyming, rhythm, cadence, imagery, myth, symbol, etc are elements artistically and essentially embedded in the deep structure of a poem. Translating all these elements together into another language, that too if the target language belongs to a culture comparatively far removed from that of the source language, is a task highly difficult and complicated and almost impossible. Besides, inadequacy of target language vocabulary, untranslatable aspects or specialties of the source language poet, genre-specific features, extra-linguistic features (for instance, the poet’s notions

regarding life and literature), the stylistic effects of the original poem, etc. make translation very difficult; and translating them with proper correspondence and equivalence into the target language is indeed a rigorous and uphill task. Following Roman Jakobson it may be said that “all poetic arts are technically untranslatable”ⁱⁱⁱ. Each language is unique and special in terms of its lexis, syntax, denotation and connotation of words, semantics, phonetics, morphology, structure, associated cultural-moral values, conceptual presuppositions, historical antecedents, topographical and non-transferrable associations, linguistic and extra-linguistic considerations, and grammatical usage. According to American linguist and anthropologist Edward Sapir, who is the formulator of the concept of ‘linguistic relativism’, “...no two languages could ever represent the same social reality, as each language creates its own world and world view.”^{iv}

The significant responsibility of a translator is to make intelligible to the target language readers, the feelings, atmosphere and mood inherent in the soul of the source language work. Alokeranjan Dasgupta, who himself is a poet of great merit and fame, has said,

Our minds are turned to the subtle, demanding, baffling, even occasionally exhilarating activity of translation: of rendering not simply words and phrases and clauses, sentences or stanzas – though all these call for respect to be paid to their individuality – but centrally and essentially to meaning and message, at whatever levels they are present in the original. And isn’t the import of the veiled message or intent often charged with the private and aesthetic mythology of the author?^v

Alokeranjan has translated American poet Emily Dickinson’s poem ‘There’s a Certain Slant of Light’ into Bengali with the title ‘Tirjak Roddur’ [‘তির্যক রোদ্দুর’]. In view of the aforesaid discussion Dickinson’s poem and Alokeranjan’s translated Bengali version of it may be taken up here for comparative and critical assessment and analysis.

Exhaustive and varied use of the punctuation mark dash (‘–’) is Dickinson’s hallmark or signature style. In this connection, Kamilla Denman may be quoted from her “Emily Dickinson’s Volcanic Punctuation” in *Emily Dickinson Journal* (1993):

Dickinson’s transformation from a dominant use of the exclamation mark to a preference for the dash accompanied her shift from ejaculatory poems, which seem outcries aimed with considerable dramatic effect at God or others, to poems where energies exist more in the relationships between words and between the poet and her words... it is clear that in the early 1860s Dickinson conducted her most intense exploration of language and used punctuation to disrupt conventional linguistic relations, whether in an attempt to express inexpressible psychological states or purely to vivify language.^{vi}

Alokeranjan, however, has not employed Dickinson’s signature style in his translation and has thus kept readers of Bengali poetry in dark about the inherent suggestiveness of her style. Not only that, the translator has taken liberty in not following the convention of rendering poems in common measure that generally equates the title and the beginning line

of the poem; the title of Dickinson's poem which is written in common measure, is the same as its first line. Moreover, Dickinson capitalises some words in her poem in order to convey their heightened importance. Bengali as a language does not place this favour at a translator's disposal, and hence readers of Alokaranjan's version of Dickinson's poem do not come close to realising this intensifying of meaning.

For readers' convenience, both the original and the Bengali translation of Dickinson's poem are given hereunder:

There's a Certain Slant of Light^{vii}

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –
We can find no scar,
But internal difference –
Where the Meanings, are –

None may teach it – Any –
Tis the seal of Despair –
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air –

When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death –

Tirjak Roddur

Sheat ele ek tirjak roddur
Bikelgultey jharey
Nirjita karey, jeno girjer sur
Hridayke chepe dharey.

Soura aaghaatey se avasanna karey;
Kintu dekhi na jato,
Paarthakyataa aachhe abhyantarey
Sanket guhaayita.

Eke toe shekhaatey paarbe na kono jan,
Jaatanaa, abhigyaan
Amader dikey vaayuprerita se je
Santaap maheyaan.

তির্যক রোদ্দুর^{viii}

শীত এলে এক তির্যক রোদ্দুর
বিকেলগুলিতে ঝরে
নির্জিত করে, যেন গির্জের সুর
হৃদয়কে চেপে ধরে ।

সৌর আঘাতে সে অবসন্ন করে ;
কিন্তু দেখি না যত,
পার্থক্যটা আছে অভ্যন্তরে
সংকেত গুহায়িত ।

একে তো শেখাতে পারবে না কোনো জন,
যাতনা, অভিজ্ঞান
আমাদের দিকে বায়ুপ্রেরিত সে যে
সন্তাপ মহীয়ান ।

Se jakhan aasey, drishya neeravey shoney,
Chhaayaa ruddhashwaas,
Jakhan se jaay, mrityur chokhey jeno
Drishti dur, udaas.

সে যখন আসে, দৃশ্য নীরবে শোনে,
ছায়া রুদ্ধশ্বাস,
যখন সে যায়, মৃত্যুর চোখে যেন
দৃষ্টি দূর, উদাস।

In the first stanza of the poem, Dickinson suggests that, just as the ‘Heft / ...Cathedral Tunes’ are heavy and strong and painful for the ear, so also the ‘Slant’ of sunlight reflected from the evening snow of winter because it pains a sensitive heart. Alokerañjan has translated “the Heft / Of Cathedral Tunes” simply as “Girjer sur” [“গির্জের সুর”]. Since translating the term ‘Heft’ was not possible and since the term is outside the common parlance or knowledge of Bengali reader community, the emotive suggestion of the first stanza of Dickinson’s poem does not reach them through the present translation. Lingo-cultural distance has posed this insurmountable barrier before the translator.

The first line of the second stanza of the original poem runs: “Heavenly Hurt, it gives us–”. Alokerañjan translates the line thus: “Soura aaghaatey se avasanna karey;” [“সৌর আঘাতে সে অবসন্ন করে;”]. Evidently the translator has utilised his artistic liberty and changed Dickinson’s punctuation (he has omitted the comma, and has replaced the dash with a semi-colon). But what is not evident is that, whether ‘avasanna’ [“অবসন্ন”] suggests physical or mental exhaustion. But the English poem probably tells us clearly that “Slant of light” hurts the tender heart and as such awakens it. Thus the translated version has manifestly taken a different, and almost opposite, direction in terms of emotive meaning from the original Dickinsonian vesture: in that, the former through its use of the term ‘avasanna’ suggests fatigue or tiredness, the latter whispers of awakening. Moreover, Dickinson’s use of comma after “Heavenly Hurt” allows her readers a brief while to take stock of the situation and become inquisitive to know the significance and effect of “Hurt”. Alokerañjan’s omission of the comma abolishes such opportunity for the translation readers.

In the source poem, the notions of “Heavenly Hurt” and “internal difference” (both of which have been introduced in the second stanza itself) are expanded further in the third stanza. The poet has connected each part of the stanza with one another and with those of the previous stanza through her use of dash (‘–’). The word ‘Any’ in the first line of the third stanza is preceded as well as followed by dashes. In this connection, we may quote:

Perhaps the speaker is indicating “Any” refers to the idea of any internal difference that may exist. No matter who it belongs to, that “difference” can only be understood by the person who holds it. And even then, the meaning may be difficult to understand.^{ix}

The translator, however, has not included ‘Any’ in his rendition of the English poem into Bengali. Moreover, he has translated only the first half of the first line of the stanza. In the original poem, the extended metaphor of “Slant of light” gets intermingled with the metaphoric effect of “seal of Despair”. It is so because the poet’s inability to acquire clear insight of “Heavenly Hurt” and “seal of Despair” and thus to solve her inner conflict precipitates into despair. Alokerañjan’s use of the word ‘abhiñyan’ in his translation,

therefore, may be looked upon as an example of his trans-creation. Dickinson, after that, expresses “Slant of light” as an “imperial affliction”. Here, ‘imperial’ perhaps implies exhaustive or comprehensive or complete, which further suggests the inter-dependency or inter-connectedness of the external world and the inner state of a person. Just as the “Slant of light” of the snow-clad cold external world may produce a feeling of despondency in the observer’s mind, so too is a person’s state of mind that usually determines their attitude or outlook towards human life and world around. Hence, a happy mind is likely to discover joy in nature, landscape or people; and a mind harbouring ‘Hurt’ feelings would find even the soft sunshine of a winter afternoon to possess *oppressive* unbearable harshness. Readers, who would read only the Bengali translation of Dickinson’s poem, would not perhaps find such explanations and interpretations dawning upon them; because, translator Alokerajan has rendered ‘imperial’ as ‘maheeyaan’ (meaning great). Consequently, the target language readers might get the impression that “Slant of light” produces a glorious pain in the heart – a pain that engenders mental transcendence and inner transformation.

The process of translation embodies a deeper reading of the original or source-language text, and it largely depends upon the personality and mental make-up of the translator. It is precisely for this that on many occasions the complex psychological expressions and overtones of the original poet, get transmuted in the target language owing to the translator’s own way of reading and interpretation.

The personification of ‘Landscape’ and ‘Shadows’, that we come across in the final stanza Dickinson’s poem – personification accomplished through capitalisation – is absent in the Bengali translation, obviously because of language difference. Excessive use of dash sign (‘-’) is perhaps a pointer to the poet’s obstructed and ceasing or fragmented stream of thoughts. The translation, on the other hand, employs no use of dash. Dickinson compares the departure of the “Slant of light” probably to the ‘Distance’ the ken of the gaping eyes of a dead person travels. Alokerajan, in his turn, has made an additional inclusion in the word ‘udaas’. This slight change in the translation has resulted into significant divergence of meaning and message from that of the source poem. Whereas Dickinson’s comparison echoes of the speaker-poet’s despondent mood, Alokerajan’s description shows the impersonal distant look of death which is indifferent to human suffering.

The dash sign after the last word of the last line of Dickinson’s poem gives rise to a feeling of unsolved incompleteness or lingering waft of the deep thought of the poem; it makes the readers think of the unfinished and ever newer openings of possibilities for the thought thus hovering. Alokerajan, on the other hand, ends his translation with a conventional period; the ending clearly indicates a departure from Dickinson’s open-ended closure of the poem.

Dash sign in Dickinson’s poetry functions both as period as well as parenthesis. Owing to absence of a similar function of the sign in the translated Bengali version by Alokerajan, the target language readers remain unable to grasp, at least partially, the original intent of the source poem. Here lies the limitation of translation. Nevertheless, one cannot deny the

fact that it is through efforts of efficient translators that all great works of literature find a hearing, footing, and even popularity and acclaim among readers of distant and various languages of the world. Among many chosen poets for Alokranjan's highly enthralling enterprise of translation, Dickinson also gets a hearing and introduction before the Bengali intelligentsia and poetry readers of the contemporary age and times to come. His enterprise of translation has rendered both into and from Bengali, and has thus made the stream of the language ever expanding with the protean characteristics of flux fraught with suggestive currents entering from divergent language pools at the surface, and simultaneously sputtering efferent sprays for those pools from its placid depth. This give and take has in process given birth to a holistic sense of literature at large. Like all other great translators, Alokranjan has thus contributed towards unifying the world and the world of literature, and, finally, has expanded, through creative adaptations of varied literary and lingual aspects, the horizon of comparative literature.

Note: Alokranjan Dasgupta's translation of Dickinson's poem appears in the Bengali anthology of translated poems *Sapta Sindhu Dash Diganta*, a book which he himself and his poet-friend Shankha Ghosh jointly edited and brought out in 1963. The book contains translations by a large number of Bengali poets and translations from more than nine languages/literatures including French, German, English, American, Russian, etc. Having to translate quite a bulk of poems into Bengali, Alokranjan, with a view to avoiding excessive repetition of his own name as the translator, adopted a pseudonym– Suparna Sen (সুপর্ণা সেন)– and carried out his task with diligence. His translated version of the Dickinsonian American poem, too, appears under his pseudonym.

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