

**A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE TRANSFORMATION IN TRANSLATION OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S  
GITANJALI POEMS**

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**Abstract:**

Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*, or *Song Offerings* (1912), achieved international recognition and a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, translated by the author himself from Bengali to English. However, the English version is more prosaic and differs significantly from the original Bengali verse. The translation process underwent significant challenges, in translation of the beautiful and distinct work to cater to the taste of the western audience. This paper examines the three primary problems faced in translating *Gitanjali*, mainly the loss of intrinsic musicality and metrical structure, problems in conveying specific cultural and philosophical ideas and Tagore's self-translation in a colonial context. By analyzing the "two *Gitanjalis*"—the original Bengali and the English *Song Offerings*—this study focuses on the "untranslatability" of certain poetic elements and the impact of translation on the work's global recognition and interpretation.

**Keywords:** Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*, Translation Studies, Cultural Translation, Self-Translation.

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Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* stands as a landmark in Bengali literature as well as in world literature. It was the first work by a non-European to win the Nobel Prize. The story of its translation into English by the poet himself, and the introduction by W.B. Yeats, is well-known. This miracle in translation took place in 1912 with lots of translational compromises and challenges. The English version, a selection of 103 poems drawn from various Bengali collections (not just the original 157-poems Bengali *Gitanjali*), is a work of prose poetry that is aesthetically different from its original texts. When Tagore began to discuss his own translations, there was no separate discipline either in the East or in the West known as Translation Studies. Nobody could even dream of such a separate discipline at that time because translation was still considered a 'secondary' activity. Hence the question of studying translation or of discussing it was not considered worthwhile either in India or elsewhere before the publication of *Gitanjali* (1912). This paper explores the

core difficulties faced in this transition from Source Language (SL) to Target Language (TL) here Bengali to English.

Tagore was a pioneering figure in Translation Studies though it was limited to his own works. Firstly, despite being a creative writer, he had to translate his own poems so that he could reach out to his foreign friends and acquaintances in English translation. Secondly, while discussing his self-translation in response to the queries and / or request of his friends and admirers he seems to have unconsciously laid down the foundation of what is known today as Translation Studies in India where the tradition of theorizing about translation did not flourish as it did in the West.<sup>1</sup>

Tagore concentrates only on 'interlingual' translation, making a distinction (in his letter to Rothenstein dated 31 December 1915) between 'rewriting' and 'translating': "Macmillans are urging me", writes Tagore "to send them some translations of my short stories.... They require *rewriting in English, not*

*translating.*<sup>2</sup> Tagore suggests that *rewriting* is the other name for translation. It is concerned with 'creative translation.' "I cannot translate, I have to write almost anew", he is reported to have written<sup>3</sup> and 'one cannot translate one's works', he once wrote to Ajit Kumar Chakravarty.

### **The Problem of Poetic Form: From Song to Prose**

This paper argues that the primary challenges in translating Tagore's *Gitanjali* arise from the loss of intrinsic musicality and rhythm, the difficulty in conveying specific cultural and philosophical references and the intentional alterations made by Tagore for a Western audience, ultimately creating a distinct literary work from the Bengali original. The most profound challenge in translating *Gitanjali* is the radical shift in poetic form and rhythm. The very title, *Gitanjali*, translates to "Song Offerings," indicating that the original poems were designed to be sung, with specific *ragas* and *tals* (meters/ rhythms) and complex metrical patterns. It covers various themes like devotion, love, nature, nationalism and social consciousness, noting that the English version is more selective in its focus. The language used is highly imagistic Bengali taken from Sanskrit traditions.

### **The Loss of "Geeti-moyota" (Lyrical Quality):**

The Bengali poems rely heavily on a unique rhythmic structure and musical metre. The translation into English prose poetry by Tagore removed its very beauty. Tagore chose simple, clear prose to ensure the philosophical message and emotional core of the poems were accessible to a Western audience unfamiliar with Bengali prosody. This strategic decision meant that the "elasticity, subtlety and variety" of the original sound was lost. For a work that defines itself as a collection of "songs," this is a significant translational sacrifice. The English reader experiences a deeply spiritual text but is deprived of the rhythmic energy and pleasure central to the Bengali experience.

### **The Role of W.B. Yeats and Western Editorial Influence:**

W. B. Yeats's involvement as an editor further shaped the English version's tone, introducing sometimes "quasi-Biblical diction" and specific punctuation in the work. This editorial intervention tried to smooth the text for the Western modernists and further erased the poet's original voice in Bengali.

### **Culture-Specific Terminology and Imagery :**

One of the basic problems faced by a translator while rendering a text from one language to another is that of equivalence. Tagore was well aware of this basic problem of equivalence in translation from his first-hand experience of self-translation. Language is not just a set of words; it embodies the values, beliefs, morals and practices of an entire culture. Translating across the significant cultural void between early 20th-century Bengal and the West inevitably led to the problems in conveying subtle meanings. Certain Bengali terms and concepts lack direct English equivalents. For example, A central poem begins in Bengali with the image 'Amar matha nato kore dao he tomor charandhular pore.'<sup>4</sup> The sonic quality of 'matha nato' and 'charandhular pore' has a specific flow and alliteration lost in the English 'This is my prayer to thee, my lord—strike, strike at the root of beggary in my heart.'<sup>15</sup>

The concept of *Baul* philosophy, central to many of the original songs, is barely mentioned in the English version. The term 'Jiban-devata' (Life-God) used by Tagore is a complex philosophical idea that the English version often simplifies to 'my lord' or 'thee,' losing the very naturalistic idea of God.

Terms like "Prabhu" (Lord/Master) or references to specific flora and fauna carry connotations that cannot be fully replicated with simple English substitutes like "God" or "master." Devotion (Bhakti) conveys the specific flavour of Hindu or Baul devotion. Images like

"the lotus," "the *chatak* bird," or specific rural life depictions that carry deep cultural connotations are completely lost while reaching the Western reader. The English translation is often read as purely sacred or mystical, whereas the Bengali original often blurs the lines between divine love and human love or nature. The rich matrix of cultural associations of the original imagery is lost in translation. The translator faces the dilemma of either providing long explanations or sacrificing a degree of the original meaning.

Tagore, as a self-translator, took significant liberties to make his work appealing to a European audience, which led to a different presentation of his work.

Tagore catered to Western expectations of Indian spirituality, emphasizing themes of mysticism and devotion while downplaying other aspects of his work, such as social commentary or specific nationalistic sentiments.

Editors like W.B. Yeats made extensive changes to punctuation, which further altered the rhythmic energy and pace of the poems, giving them a "self-conscious lull" unintended by the poet in the original.

There is no 100% synonymy between words in every language, and specific Bengali terms, images, and metaphors (e.g., certain references to Indian birds, trees, or specific cultural situations) lose their rich matrix of philosophical and aesthetic connotations in translation.

#### **Spiritual Abstraction and Concrete Imagery:**

Some scholars argue that the English translation led to abstract and generalized spiritual concepts whereas Bengali version had rich and concrete imagery. The original Bengali had a profound humanism and a connection to nature that is philosophical and grounded in the physical world. The English version was designed to highlight an abstract spirituality, which matched with the prevailing Western perception of the East as a home to spiritual humanity. Tagore's translation was not a purely linguistic exercise; it was a

"complex negotiation between two cultures" in a colonial context.

#### **The "Two Tagores":**

The translational choices created two distinct images of the poet: the versatile Bengali genius and the "stereotyped mystical man from the East" known to the West. The global fame achieved through *Song Offerings* was built on a version of Tagore that was received by the colonizers with an Oriental perspective. Faced with the problem of untranslatability the translator, Tagore feels the need to 'rewrite' or 're-create' the original poems drawing on their feelings and sentiments. This is how poems acquire a new 'incarnation' in the receptor language and this causes a great 'divergence' between the original and its translation.

#### **Agency and Audience Adaptation:**

Tagore was quite aware of all these dynamics. His translation was a deliberate strategy to reach a global audience, an act of "cultural-nationalism" to uphold the merit of his literature in front of colonizers. By adapting his work and selecting specific poems, he engaged in an "audience-oriented" translation, which meant prioritizing the TL reader's understanding over the SL form. This highlights the translator's vision in shaping the translated text for a specific purpose and market.

#### **Conclusion:**

The translation of *Gitanjali* presents a fascinating and complex case study in Translation Studies. The challenges were not merely linguistic but artistic, cultural, and political. The loss of musicality, the alteration of tone and structure, and the negotiation of cultural stereotypes are all integral parts of the *Gitanjali* translation narrative. While the English *Song Offerings* stands as a beautiful and powerful literary work in its own right, it is essential to recognize it as a re-creation, a different text from the original Bengali *Gitanjali*.

Consequently, his poems are re-born in the English language attaining a dynamic character of their own. A translation, as required by Nida, must be 'natural' and should not sound like a translation. According to Tagore, a translation, on the other hand, needs to be essentially creative and at the same time an independent work in its own right.<sup>6</sup> Understanding these challenges allows for a richer appreciation of both the original work's depth and the complex dynamics involved in bridging literary and cultural division.

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