

“Translating Bangla Nonsense: A Vindication”

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Language in general and a word in particular inevitably bear around and within them some socio-cultural associations. And again, one-to-one equivalence between languages is almost non-existent. Naturally, the art of literary translation (not to mention the translation of the Nonsense verse), essentially a process of semantic as well as stylistic transfer across languages, communities and cultures, provides us with immense scope to ponder on.

This paper, firstly, gives an account of how Nonsense might probably help us to deal with the nonsensicality of this world in a rather light and humorous way. Then it approaches some of the English translations of Sukumar Ray's Bangla Nonsense verse in *Abol Tabol* by his son Satyajit Ray, Sukanta Chaudhuri and by Sampurna Chatterjee and assesses the acceptability of these translations as children's literature to the monolingual English-speaking people. This paper also studies whether the spirit of whimsy and the genial humour along with the graver subtext of the original have been adequately transcreated. How and to what extent do the translators overcome the hindrances of culture specificities?

Finally, this paper makes a comparative study of these translations and glances briefly at the Nonsense verse of Edward Lear and thereby tries to vindicate the Sukumar

Ray's role in enunciating, or rather, canonizing Bangla Nonsense in an aesthetically rather rigid and traditional country like India.

Today, so many Nonsense works from various regions of India have been trans-created and anthologized successfully, among which the most notable is *The Tenth Rasa: An Anthology of Indian Nonsense*, a fervent attempt at canonizing literary Nonsense, edited by Michael Heyman, Sumanyu Satpathy and Anushka Ravishankar. Heyman, in his introductory essay *An Indian Nonsense Naissance*, to this anthology, refers to Mangesh Padgavkar, the Marathi poet, according to whom Nonsense is 'intuitive' rather than 'intellectual'. Padgavkar uses the epithet 'genuine' while dwelling on the genesis of Nonsense probably to hint at its purity and, even, sacredness. Nonsense works naturally "like a tree that simply 'is'" (xxiii); it grows spiritually like the relationship between mother and child. And here, it would be worthwhile to glimpse at what Kabir Suman has to say about lullaby. The poet-artist in his article⁴ under the column "Sumnami" at "Robibasariya" elucidates the often untuned / informal lullabies of a mother, which she 'sings' in private to lull the little one to sleep, as 'pabitra besur'⁵ and asserts that even the greatest musical tunes could not probably equal that ardent non-tune. We are to recognize there what Sahana Devi⁶ calls 'surer bhetarkarsur', i.e. the undercurrent of a deep, sacred musicality.

Nonsense as a genre too invites interpretation though in a rather unconventional way. Nonsense does not mean mere 'lack of sense', rather it's 'a kind of symbolic language that can be reconciled into meaning' (Pendlebury 4). However, literary Nonsense can never afford to be as informal, at least stylistically, as the lullabies for it involves an unresolved tension and has to maintain an equilibrium between "the presence and absence of meaning"⁷ (Quoted in Pendlebury 2), between the 'sense' side on the one hand and the essential paradox, ambiguity and amicable nonsensicality on the other.

To laugh at or to laugh off is, perhaps, the best way to deal with absurdity. In Karnad, the peculiar incongruity in *Hayavadana* makes Padmini's son laugh and, thus, proves instrumental in curing the boy of his taciturnity, and in turn, Hayavadana himself gets rid of the absurdity of being. Ray's Nonsense along with its strange inhabitants makes us laugh and allows us a view of life which enables us to deal with the eccentricity, illogicality, irrationality and nonsensicality of life. The topsy-turvydom of the non-real Nonsense may symbolically serve as a referential body to judge the distorted value

system and upside-down moral state of contemporary world. Sukumar's Nonsense, in particular, being inherently pleasurable and integrally connected to humour shows that 'serious business need not always be serious' (Heyman, xx).

Substantially, translating Nonsense is a worthy act to be involved with for "nonsense, in a funny way, is true to life" (Pendlebury⁵) and almost unavoidably corresponds to the personal, social and cultural ambience of its genesis. So, let us enter into the trans-created world of tuneless musicality and mad songs of 'meaninglessness' where we are to taste what Sukumar Ray calls 'asambhaber chhanda'⁸.

The first Nonsense we will deal with is "Bombagarher Raja"⁹. We have two translations of this verse at our disposal - one Sukanta Chaudhuri, included in the volume *The Select Nonsense of Sukumar Ray* (1987) that titles "The Customs of Bombagarh"¹⁰ and the other by Satyajit Ray, published in *Nonsense Rhymes: Sukumar Roy* (1970) entitled "The King of Bombardia"¹¹. Satyajit Ray's title seems innovative and subtle, and it is more likely to be accepted by the target readers, i.e. the monolingual target language (here English) receptor. Though both the words 'Bombagarh' and 'Bombardia' actually name a place from nowhere yet it's 'Bombardia', rather than the other, that creates through its phonetic effect an impression of familiarity in the collective memory of the target readers. However, when Chaudhuri titles the poem "The Customs of Bombagarh", he mainly thinks in terms of the subject matter of the verse.

To come to the body of the verse, the original Bangla goes -

Keu kijanosadai keno Bombagarher raja

Chhabir frame-e bandhiyeraakheamsatwabhaja?

- and ends like this -

Emon keno ghotchhe ta keuboltepaaromore(?).

Now, this poem poses a series of questions - child-like, curious, absurd sometimes, yet innocent. Chaudhuri, in keeping with the rhythm and prosodic pattern of the original, translates -

'Have you heard of the monarch of Bombagarh's orders ...'

-and finishes thus -

'But what does it mean, could we please be informed(?)'.

Thus he retains more or less the mode of curious questioning towards the peculiar and absurd behavior of the people of Bombagarh in his version, while Satyajit Ray's version goes like this -

'In the land of Bombardia

The customs are peculiar: ...'

-and finishes with the lines -

'All of which though mighty queer

Is natural in Bombardia.'

Evidently, Ray deviates from the original prosodic pattern and above all throughout the poem the poetic persona depicts the peculiarities of the Bombardians in an assertive mode, and thus, his translation lacks the charm of the original that is generated there through constant questioning.

It's interesting to note that Ray uses the word 'chocolates' for the Bangla phrase *amsatwabhaja* while Chaudhuri translates the idea as - 'to fry mango jelly and frame it with boarders'. Now if translation means to reproduce 'the closest natural equivalent of the source language message'¹²(Quoted in As-Safi 1) then the latter's translation of the same seems to convey more adequately the favour of *amsatwabhaja* which is very much culture specific and essentially Bangla. On the other hand Satyajit Ray's selection of the word 'chocolates' for *amsatwabhaja* implies a degree of manipulation that may secure social acceptance among the English-speaking readers.

In translating the line - *Keno sethaysardiholedigbaajikhayloke (?)*, Sukanta Chaudhuri writes - 'There people turn cartwheels to cure their catarrhs', while Satyajit Ray's lines go - 'And if by chance he catches cold / He somersaults (if not too old)'. Putting the two side by side Ray's translation sounds far more lucid and lively, quite in keeping with the illogicality of the 'Bombardian' activities and the spirit of whimsy of the original verse. Here he seems to adhere to the aesthetics of creative transcreation that, at times, requires a degree of adaptation and modification for the sake of effectiveness. To the contrary, the word 'cartwheels' sounds harsh and the use of the word 'catarrhs' appears to be deliberate and does not quite go with the nonsensicality of the source text.

Susan Stewart describes nonsense as 'humour without context'¹³ (Quoted in Pendlebury 1). And the original Bangla line "Ostaderalepmudidey keno maathayghaade(?)" creates a similar impression. Here, it is actually the lack of coherence, the lack of reason and the lack of any context that provokes our laughter. But, SatyajitRay is, in fact, providing the idea of musicians wearing wrappers with a context when he translates it as - "Musicians there - a sturdy lot / Use woolen wrapper when it's hot". Here we feel amused because wearing wrappers when it's hot is sheer nonsense and funny, but in consequence we tend to lose the whimsicality of the original. However, Ray's translation of this poem in particular is free-flowing and lucid, while Chaudhuri's translation appears at times sketchy.

The next translation we will deal with is that of "Raamgodurer Chhana"¹⁴. Once again SatyajitRay shows novelty when he entitles the poem "The Son of Rangaroo"¹⁵. But this may not be as adequate and effective as calling 'Bombagarh' 'Bombardia'. The nomenclature of the peculiar animal must enable the English readers to relate to the illustration provided by Sukumar, where it is portrayed as a hybrid creature with the face of a cynical old man, ear, probably of an elephant and the body of a four footed animal with a tail. Here SukantaChaudhuri's title "The Griffon's Grouse"¹⁶ seems far more effective because Griffon is a hybrid animal from Eurasian myth with the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion. And thus, Griffon, though partially, resembles Sukumar's 'Raamgorud'. Chaudhuri's translation of this poem is remarkable. We read about the 'Griffonling' who from his birth 'Is indisposed to mirth' such lines:

"He won't go near to wood

Because he's understood

The tipsy breez

Among the trees

May cheer his solemn mood."

("The Griffon's Grouse")

This transcreation reads like 'an original' rather than an imitation of 'the original'. But in Ray's translation of this poem the use of the words and phrases like 'laughter is taboo', 'foaming cumuli' etc. almost mars the possibility of it being enjoyed thoroughly by the English reading children. The lyrical quality of the final four lines in Ray's

version is impressive:

"The Rangaroosian lair
Bereft of sun and air
Is doomed to be a monastery
Of permanent despair."

("The Son of Rangaroo")

But, here, the idea conveyed is self-contradictory as monastery is associated with solemnity, not with despair. Again the words 'doomed' and 'despair' seem to breathe an air of depression, annoy and explicit negativity which is never there in the original.

Next to this we have a Nonsense "Narod! Narod!"¹⁷. This is essentially a Bangla expression. Far removed from his mythical stature of 'Deborshi', Narod in popular belief and in folk-tales is associated with cunning and contrivance leading to quarrel. The words 'Narod- Narod- Narod- Narod' are uttered like a mischievous mantra to tease or irritate one involved in childish brawl. Evidently, this expression is very much culture specific and to communicate its meaning through translation is almost impossible. Quite naturally, SampurnaChattarji and SukantaChaudhuri titles their translations as "Blow Hot Blow Cold"¹⁸ and "War and peace"¹⁹ respectively keeping in mind the subject matter of this poem.

"Narod! Narod!" is really difficult to translate because of the idiomatic expressions like 'Ghughudekhechho, fanddekhoni', 'kaanakodi' etc. and the cross-breed, amalgamated words like 'speak-ti-not' etc. that this poem contains. Chaudhuri translates 'I don't care Kaanakodi' almost literally and writes 'I couldn't care two pewter pence' while Chattarji takes the essence of the idiom and translates - 'I couldn't care less either way'. Chaudhuri simply omits the idiom - 'Ghughudekhechho, fanddekhoni' while Chattarji tries to compensate the missing flavor with an almost equivalent English idiomatic expression - 'You've seen the smoke, but not the fire'.

In the translator's preface to the 1987 volume *The Select Nonsense of Sukumar Ray*, Chaudhuri maintains that people 'might debate whether nonsense can be translated; but I reassure myself that at worst, the result will still be nonsense', but it appears that a considerable part of these translations, in spite of bearing the colour of a skilled and creative mind, will not be as instinctively relished by the monolingual English-speaking

children in particular as our children relish the original Bangla Nonsenses. The difficulty in communicating some intractable culture specific words, phrases and idiomatic expressions proves to be a major block in this case. However, the significance of all these attempts at trans-creating Nonsense is undeniable, as these translations unquestionably serve the purpose of unfolding and showcasing the invaluable treasure of Bangla Nonsense to the gaze of the world and making Sukumar Ray known to the English readers both in India and abroad.

Gita Bandopadhyay, in her article *Bengal's Nonsense Rhymes* has divided Bangla Nonsense literature broadly into three categories - Ghumparani Chhara i.e., the lullabies; Chhela Bhulano Chhara i.e., the nursery rhymes; and Meyeli Chhara i.e., the feminine rhymes related to agriculture and magic. And all these have their origin in the rich heritage of Bengal's folk literature and rhymes that has been lived and relived orally through the ages. Tagore was a pioneer in the field of rhyme collection and wrote exhaustively on the subject. Later on Jagindranath Sarkar published an excellent collection of nonsense rhymes called *Khukumonir Chhara*. Ramendra Sundar Trivedi, in his introduction to this book made a significant observation on the 'unadulterated' nature of the ancient folk literature of Bengal:

"Judging from the uniqueness of quality of Bengal's folk literature and rhymes which has lived through the ages in the oral recitation of its people, has never been considered worthy of being printed though it is in every way incomparable..." (Quoted in Bandopadhyay 263)

Upendra Kishore Ray Chaudhury too contributed a lot to this field. But, in India, none before Sukumar Ray did ever practice this particular type of Nonsense writings.

We may trace the influences of the two great proponents of English nonsense, Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, on Sukumar Ray but Ray's subject matter is timely and 'culturally specific' (Heyman xxvi). "He seems a combination of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, but incomparable in his specially Bengali ambience", observes Shyamasree Lal (437). It's quite natural that the elements Sukumar had recourse to, are typically Indian, or, to be more precise the components he drew for his amazing creations are evidently from Bangla culture, society and folklores. The following section of this paper makes a comparative study of Lear and Ray in the light of their approach to life.

In Lear's Nonsense the romantic attitude is unmistakable. Sometimes they are nostalgic, sometimes melancholy; sometimes they pose refreshing assault against

Victorian propriety; sometimes there's a sense of invasion, a hint at a 'suspended hierarchical relation'²⁰ (Rieder 50) that might suggest some social interpretation so far as the English class structure goes; and sometimes, as it is there in the narrative verse "Miss Maniac", there's a deep sense of pathos undercut only by the hyperboles and the funny illustrations used by Lear. "Certainly", writes James Rother, in his article *Modernism and the Nonsense Style*, it is a rare occasion when Nonsense as literary discipline ... impresses us as simply amusing, without serious aspects or consequences." (187) And this is perhaps most true with Lear. Many of his limericks from *A Book of Nonsense* contain some threatening, frightening, and even, violent elements, actions or events. In the final lines of many of his limericks we see the protagonist due to his eccentricity and queerness is drowned or choked or smashed or, even, killed. However, ultimately those dangerous possibilities are somehow disconnected from the real world by virtue of their factual irreferentiality or rather, in words of J. Rieder, 'suspended referentiality'²¹ (49).

Sukumar's Nonsense too, takes us into a world of romantic, fanciful non-reality, but his nonsense is predominantly whimsical and humorous. It's true that in poems like "Bombagarher Raja", "Khudor kol"²², "Gandha Bichar"²³ etc. Ray's humour bears mild touch of satire and at times that of irony but it is absolutely free from malice. Again, violence is unknown to Ray's world. Here no one hurts others. There is, however, an apparently scaring creature in "Bhoy Peyona"²⁴ with his wife, nine sons, horns and a cudgel, who makes a show of threat. But he threatens to bite or, grab by the leg (which he actually never does) only those who, in spite of his constant pleading, are scared of him or, refuse to accept his hospitality. Again in "NarodNarod" there are two neighbours who pose a 'come and fight' look against each other. But they too ultimately 'shake hands and call it quits' (Chattarji 34). In addition to this we have a gallery of a-historic / meta-historic creatures with strange binominal nomenclature, portrayed so magically that we wonder that they are real and look around in search of them or, at least, 'feel quite shocked not to find their fossils in the museum' (Satyajit Ray, Introduction).

Nonsense was not merely fun or an 'artistic expression of play' (Heyman xx) for Lear. For him it was as an escape from the 'hustle and strife' of life. He considered himself a 'misfit' like many of his nonsense protagonists and cried: "O dear! How disgusting is life(!)"²⁵ (Quoted in Pendlebury 22). Thus, Lear's limerics are confessional or, at least, self-revelatory, if not autobiographical. But for Sukumar, we may assume, nonsense was the way to live life, or rather, life itself. He baptized one handwritten

notebook with seven different names - "FaltoKhata" ("Unnecessary Notebook"), "Hizi-BiziKhata" ("Nonsense Notebook"), "UdoKhata" ("Fanciful Notebook"), "KhasdaKhata" ("Notebook for Drafts"), "EmniKhata" ("Just-like-that Notebook"), "BaajeKhata" ("Wasted Notebook") and "JaabedaKhata" ("Collections Notebook")²⁶. "AbolTabol - II", the final poem of the volume with the same name, is Sukumar's last composition. By that time he was actually living in the shadow of death. Here are some of the lines in SukantaChaudhuri's translation -

"There isn't any menace here,
 No rule or ban or threat or fear.
 Here underneath the starry beams,
 The breezes rock my nest of dreams", ("Dream Song")

'The mingled strain of fancy and humour' (Satyajit Introduction) in this poem is simply wonderful. No indication of regret, no despair is there in this poem, if there is anything like the use of the words - 'rule' or 'ban' or 'threat' - it is there only to negate the negatives. But a deep sense of pathos mingled with his child-like playfulness is almost unmistakable in the final few lines:

*"Aadimkaalerchandim him
 Today bandhaGhodar dim.
 Ghoniyeelohumerghor
 Gaanerpalasangomor."*

Satyajit Ray seems to echo our voice when he writes - "I do not know of any other humorist who could jest in this spirit at the meeting point of life and death" (Introduction).

Ruskin Bond, in his introduction to SampurnaChattarji's *Wordygurdyboom*, maintains: "What Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll did with English, Ray could do with Bengali" but it's less than enough; it's far from being the entire truth. It is because of the magnetism of Ray's wonderful world that we even attempt at modifying the age old Indian aesthetic theory by including with the nine rasas a new one, 'the Tenth Rasa' - the rasa of Whimsy.

NOTES

¹In this paper, I have spelled 'Nonsense', the literary genre, with a capital 'N'.

²All the relevant books and articles cited here (except the title of Satyajit Ray's book *Nonsense Rhymes: Sukumar Roy*) spell 'Ray' with an 'a'. This paper too prefers 'Ray' to 'Roy'.

³Heyman writes, 'He (Padgavkar) told us, first, that nonsense should ideally be intuitive rather than intellectual. He said that if he wrote ten poems, six should be intellectual and only four intuitive, or, to use his word, "genuine". Then he grinned, rethought for a moment and revised his claim. Out of ten poems, perhaps only one was genuine, the remainder intellectual.' A moment later he threw his hands in the air: "No! May be of these ten, or of all my poems, none is genuine!" pp. xxiii.

⁴ For this very insightful article by KabirSuman, see *AnandabazarPatrika*, 20 Jan. 2013

⁵ the phrase may be translated as 'sacred informality of music' (translation mine)

⁶ KabirSuman's article refers to an interview given by Sahana Devi to SangeetacharyaGyanprakashGhosh. The quoted words are from that interview.

⁷ Pendlebury refers to *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense* by WimTigges when he writes: '... my central concern is with how best to apprehend the paradoxes inherent in literary nonsense, which inevitably raises interpretative questions. Because nonsense is a "basic type of communication" whose essence is "unresolved tension... between [the] presence and absence of meaning" (Tigges *Anatomy* 51), we are called upon either to "make sense of" that which claims to offer up no meaning or to surrender ourselves to meaninglessness.'

⁸ The words may be translated as the 'beat of impossible rhyme'. See Sukumar Ray, 'AbolTabol - I', *AbolTabol*(Kolkata: S. B. S. Publication, Kolkata, 2012.). p. 3. The Volume *AbolTabol* contains two title poems and they constitute the first (p. 3) and the last (p. 56) poem of this volume. And in this paper I would like to call them 'AbolTabol - I' and 'AbolTabol - II' respectively.

⁹ See Sukumar Ray. p. 30

¹⁰ See Chaudhuri. p. 22

¹¹ See Satyajit Ray. pp. 10 - 11

¹² Nida & Taber, in Chapter Two ("The Nature of Translating". pp. 12 - 32) of *The Theory and Practice of Translation* writes: "Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style". p. 12

¹³ See Stewart. p. 38

¹⁴ See Sukumar Ray. p. 42

¹⁵ See Satyajit Ray. pp. 14 - 15

¹⁶ See Chaudhuri. pp. 30 - 31

¹⁷ See Sukumar Ray. p. 40

¹⁸ See Chattarji. pp. 33 - 35

¹⁹ See Chaudhuri. pp. 24 - 25

²⁰ Rieder writes: "The suspended hierarchical relation between adult and child suggests social possibilities that move the limericks' fun beyond the formalistic aspects of play as understood by Huizinga and applied by critics such as Sewell and Ede"

²¹ Commenting on the 'distance' achieved in Lear's limericks from the commonsense world Rieder maintains: "... Lear's limericks direct themselves to a specific audience and function precisely by actively refusing to work as conventional communication. This is not to say that the language of the limericks falls out of referentiality altogether, but rather that the truncated or suspended referentiality of Lear's nonsense is what makes the limericks peculiarly appropriate for children."

²² See Sukumar Ray. p. 13

²³ See Sukumar Ray. pp. 45 - 46

²⁴ See Sukumar Ray. p. 49

²⁵ See Edward Lear's *Diary* 1987

²⁶ The translated names of Sukumar's hand-written notebook, in the brackets are taken from the English subtitles of Satyajit Ray's documentary *Sukumar Ray* (1987).

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