

Reviewing Sohini Sen's *A Drop of Golden Sun: Re-presenting Tagore's Gitanjali*

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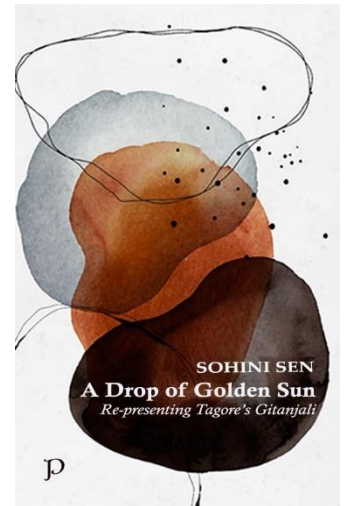
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The enterprise of translation is loaded and problematic. It is simultaneously a technical act or a skill, a linguistic process, a semiotic and cultural activity as well as a philosophy. The translator is in a constant tug of war between their responsibility to the source text and its author as well as to the readership. Susan Bassnett in an interview with Nazry Bahrawi vouches that “the primary duty of the translator is to create a text in the target language that can be appreciated by readers and at the same time demonstrates respect for the source. But how to interpret respect is an interesting question. I do not see that a translator has to follow an original slavishly. Indeed, I believe that it is the duty of the translator to rewrite and to recontextualise whatever it is that he or she is rendering.” The challenge is to reconcile the complex dynamics involved in translation through a delicate balance required between fidelity to the original language and the stubbornness of the target language. It is the elan in negotiating that precise synapse that decides whether the creative act of translation has been successful. The endeavour becomes exceptionally onerous when there is an available, celebrated, Nobel-acclaimed – no less – translation by the author of the source text. And that is the task that Sohini Sen courts in her new *A Drop of Golden Sun: Re-presenting Tagore's Gitanjali*.

Even though Sen claims in the foreword that she 're-discovered *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*' without any academic pursuit in mind, in her role as the translator, Sen seems to be cognizant of the issues in literary translation. Her translation is unapologetic and makes no efforts at all to render the original verses 'palatable' to cater to the tastes of any niche, Western or liberal. This is most obvious in her renditions of particularly the well-known verses. Her translation of "Chitta jethā bhayashunya, uchcha jéthā shir" reads thus:

Where the mind is fearless and the head held high
Where knowledge is free, the earth
Not fragmented into tiny walled compounds,
Where speech gushes forth from the depths of the heart,
Where streams of labour boundlessly flow
From all nations all directions to fulfill a thousand dreams –
Where the vast sands of insignificant rituals
Have not swallowed the stream of justice,
Nor fragmented manliness into a hundred bits;
Where it is you who constantly leads all actions,
thoughts and joy –
Strike mercilessly with your own hands, Father
And awaken Bharat into such a heaven.

These lines are resplendent in their unabashed devotion to the motherland, not vapid, or ambiguous.

To the uninitiated, the translation of literary texts may appear a deceptively innocuous venture. Given that translation is transactional between texts and cultures, the mediation is invariably political. Tagore's own translation of the *Gitanjali* is sufficiently problematised by Orientalism. The Yeats who lauded the translations and edited and compiled them would go on to opine later that Tagore wrote 'too much' of God. In May 1935, Yeats wrote to Rothenstein, "Damn Tagore. We got out three good books, Sturge Moore and I, because he thought it more important to see and know English than to be a great poet, he brought out sentimental rubbish and wrecked his reputation. Tagore does not know English, no Indian can know English" (Wade 834-835). Whether it was indeed "wise imperialism" on the part of Yeats or not, Tagore seems to have accepted the "patronizing yet promotional" fêting from the West (Boehmer 224). Therefore, it is inevitable that his own translation was not unaffected by the expectations and the composition of his circle of Christian, Western admirers. Tagore's original Bangla poems, truncated in his own translations – like the ideas, are now

presented in their complete form in this rendition. It is in this context that newer, decolonial translations of the Bangla magnum opus such as that of Sen need to be read.

The merit of *A Drop of Golden Sun* does not lie only in its academic value but also in its aesthetic of ease. Verse 81 reads thus:

At the heart of all beings
Hidden, in some leisurely hour
You nudge the seed to sprout,
Tinge buds with the hues of blossoming,
Turn the flower to a honeyed fruit
Pregnant with seed. Numbed by sleep
I idled on the bed, exhausted
Thinking all work was left undone.

The lines' lyrical quality and the musicality in word selection testify to Sen's superior craft. Each verse is an exquisite poem in itself, positioning her more as a co-creator than a translator. Tava ravi kar āsé kar bārāyiyā becomes "Your sunbeam stretches out its arm" and "Niyé jāye bahi mégh-āvarankhāni,/ Nayanér jalé rachita vyākul vāni/ Khachita lalita geeté" alchemise into

I know that it carries my veil of clouds,
Woven from tears and words of longing
That create a haunting song.

In praxis, what Sen's translation, or re-presentations as she calls it, seems to establish is that the true touchstone of translation consists in whether the successful translatability of *Dhvoani* and *Sthayibhava* has been made possible.

Sen's translation is a testament to her close relationship between the theory and the practice of translation alongside her linguistic prowess, and deep appreciation for the source material. It is a must-read for those seeking to experience the poetic brilliance of *Gitanjali* in a new, accessible light. In the style of blank verse and evolved English, this translation aims to resonate more with the contemporary youth, emphasising the enduring relevance of its thoughts even as language metamorphoses. *A Drop of Golden Sun* deserves extensive and wide-ranging readership: from academics, especially from the fortes of translation studies, decoloniality, and Indian aesthetics to those who wholeheartedly take succour in poetry without prejudices. In addition, as an academic, I believe this work merits a place within the realms of Translation Studies, Indian Aesthetics and English Literature.

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Reviewer's Details:

Currently pursuing her post-doctoral stint at CISTS, IIT Bombay, Dr Lalitha Sarma was formerly an Assistant Professor of English with multiple organisations including the INA and SSSIHL. Her doctoral thesis investigated the nature and locus of the feminine as represented in the aesthetic universe of the Shakespearean oeuvre. She also supervised four doctoral projects on themes of choice, consent, and complicity in gender studies. Having had traditional training in Vedanta since her childhood, Dr Sarma is an avid researcher and storyteller with a deep admiration of timeless Indian wisdom. Her current research is around Indian epistemes in pedagogy and research methodology as well as culture studies and decoloniality.