

The Language of *Gitanjali*: the Paradoxical Matrix

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In his essay 'The Imagination' I. A. Richards points out that in a poem impulses are organized by a poet in two ways -- by exclusion and by inclusion. In the structure of poems where impulses are organized by inclusion one comes across a unique 'equilibrium of opposed impulses' (197), a gift of the poetic imagination. Paradox is one of the verbal manifestations of this singular balance of heterogeneous impulses. As ordinary language is generally marked by what Shklovsky calls habitualization (12), the contradiction inherent in a paradox belies our expectations and comes to us at first as a shock. But as we probe deeper and look at the expression from a new angle, the familiar semantic horizon of the words used gets extended resolving in the process all apparent contradictions. This is what Cleanth Brooks theorizes as the 'disruptive' function of the language of literature:

The tendency of science is necessarily to stabilize terms, to freeze them into fixed denotations; the poet's tendency is by contrast disruptive. The terms are continually modifying each other, and thus violating their dictionary meanings. (9)

When Eliot writes 'April is the cruellest month'(51) we feel bewildered because the line rudely shakes all positive bliss and grace associated with the first month of the spring. Gradually as we take into account the story of the Fisher King of the fertility myth, we discover the truth embedded in the paradox. The return of the spring at the end of the long spell of winter is a punishment to the impotent waste-landers because they cannot partake in the rejuvenation of nature. No wonder that April, however sweet to others, would strike them as the cruellest. Paradox always throws a challenge to us because it invites us to shift the paradigm and look at things from a different perspective. Minus the change of perspective, poetic truth inhering a paradox cannot be grasped. What happens is akin to the experience of G. K. Chesterton who in his essay 'The Architect of Spears' narrates how he once discovered the secret of Gothic beauty when he had looked at a Gothic architecture from an unusual angle:

I suffered an optical illusion which accidentally revealed to me the strange greatness of the Gothic architecture. (212)

Incidentally, the very expression that the truth of the Gothic was revealed to the viewer at a moment of optical illusion is itself a fine example of paradox, for any illusion rather than revealing it generally confuses our vision of truth.

Rabindranath Tagore's Bengali anthology *Gitanjali* comprising 156 Bengali poems/songs was published in the Bengali year 1317. With the addition of '*divas yadi sāmga halo*' the number increased to 157. The English *Gitanjali* (*Song Offerings*) was published on 1 November 1912. Although the title is the same, all the poems of Bengali *Gitanjali* have not found their way into the English translation. Out of 103 poems of *Song Offerings* only 53 are from Bengali *Gitanjali*. The remaining fifty poems have been translated from titles like *Naibedyā* (Oblation) *Kheya* (Boat/Boating/Voyage), *Gitimalya* (Garland of Songs). Although for *Gitanjali* Tagore translated songs / poems from different collections, the translations are threaded together by a common theme. Most of them express different moods and feelings of a devotee whose Lord enchants him as a lover, a singer, a flutist, even as death. The relationship has been viewed from a numbers of

angles -- pang of separation (Poem 84), preparation for a tryst (Poem 93), waiting for the beloved (Poem 41), failure to recognize (Poem 26), the necessity to do off ornaments impeding perfect union (Poem 7) and so on and so forth. These themes are well-known to all readers of Tagore's poetry. But what has probably escaped the notice of critics is that the language of some of the best lyrics of *Gitanjali* are soaked in paradox. Incidentally, the life of Tagore at the *Gitanjali* phase itself is an example of supreme paradox. Or else how can the bereaved heart of the poet lacerated by the death of his wife Mrinalini and his daughter Renuka (in 1902), of his father Debendranath (in 1905) and his son Samindra (in 1907) in a span of just six years sing so ecstatically of joy? :

Mirth spreads from leaf to leaf, my darling,
and gladness without measure. The heaven's river
has drowned its banks and the flood of joy is abroad. (Poem 57)

Indeed, no serious reader can afford to miss the importance of this trope in a book that begins with the stroke of a paradox:

Still thou pourest
and still there is room to fill (Poem 1)

and also ends with a paradox-embedded prayer about sound flowing into silence:

Let all my songs
gather together their diverse strains
into a single current and flow to a sea of silence
in one salutation to thee (Poem 103).

An idea that is rationally comprehensible can easily be couched in a language that is straightforward. But paradox or similar type of linguistic obliqueness seems unavoidable where the proposition cannot be grasped without new orientation of outlook. This happens when in Donne's 'The Canonization' the speaker-lover makes his point of getting canonized by immersion into sensuality. This is true of many poems of *Gitanjali* marked by an extra-ordinary fusion of the religious and the amorous. For example, in Poem 96 the speaker's heart brims with joy at the taste of the 'hidden honey of this lotus that expands in the ocean of light'. The ineffable rhapsody is akin to the feeling of a mystic and naturally has taken verbal form as paradox:

My whole body and my limbs have thrilled
with his touch who is beyond touch (Poem 96)

Here the paradox consists in the proposition that the intangible is tangible, that is, amenable to tactile sensation. In Poem 29 the paradoxical idea that name does not reveal our identity but conceal our true self has been articulated through an excellent paradox. Our name, our egocentric identity, is like a wall erected to secure our self. But the more we direct our attention to it, the more we lose sight of our 'true being':

and for all the care I take
I lose sight of my true being (Poem 29)

Paradox initially comes to us as a jolt, for the stated proposition at the first blush strikes us as flatly contradictory. It is only when we contextualize it and judge it in the correct perspective that the inherent truth flares up like the flash of lightning, smoothening in the process what struck us before as contradictory. For example, plucking can hardly be a good luck to a flower. Yet in

Poem 6 the speaker in the persona of a flower makes a fervent appeal to the Lord for granting him the favour of getting plucked from the stem:

Pluck this little flower and take it, delay not!
I fear lest it droop and drop into the dust.
It may not find a place in thy garland, but
honour it with a touch of pain from thy hand
and pluck it. (Poem 6)

If the flower wilts before plucking, it will be deprived of the fortune of finding a berth in the Lord's garland. Hence the paradox that plucking is an honour to a flower. Another instance may be cited from Poem 14 where refusal is not a frustrating experience but a grace to the person whose desires have been nullified:

My desires are many and my cry is pitiful,
but ever didst thou save me by hard refusals. (Poem 14)

Refusal apparently involves heart-break and, except in a mode of irony, no one ever shows gratitude to anybody who has declined to grant his prayer. No such tone of irony is audible here. The speaker's point is that God has given him unasked great gifts 'of this sky and the light'. Yet, far from being contented, he has harboured in his heart 'over much desires'. Hence by declining to fulfill his desires God makes him worthy of the 'simple great gifts' of nature. 'Hard refusals', therefore, are not at all to be taken as punishment; they really save him 'from perils of weak, uncertain desire'.

The God of *Gitanjali* is seldom a Superpower whose abode is in distant heaven. Rather than that He is a close kin of man. He incarnates Himself in man and He has 'joyfully taken upon him the bonds of creation' (Poem 11). So seeking deliverance by praying to God in the 'lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut' is bound to be futile. In Poem 73 the idea has been voiced in a master paradox:

Deliverance is not for me in renunciation,
I feel the embrace of freedom
in a thousand bonds of delight. (Poem 73)

Our sense of the relation between the means and the end gets terribly shaken as the speaker claims to have the taste of freedom in fetters. But as we reflect on the paradox we can discover the truth of this apparently preposterous utterance. As even the phenomenal objects are a manifestation of the divine, as the 'delights of sight and hearing and touch' bear the stamp of divine 'delight', the poet is reluctant to mortify his senses. He would rather keep open the doors of his senses to commune with his Lord and thus feel the thrill of flight 'in a thousand bonds of delight'. Paradox here has proved an effective figurative device in forging equipoise of antithetical ideas almost impossible to achieve by any other means. One advantage of paradox as a trope is that here two apparently unrelated standpoints cohere in a proposition. For example, in Poem 28 the speaker complains that he is unable to part with what he knows to be trash and inessential:

Obstinate are the trammels, but my heart aches
when I try to break them. (Poem 28)

What is trammel-like is to be snapped, what is worthless is to be discarded. But the speaker is so deeply enamoured with the material world that he firmly clings to what he knows to be a 'shroud of dust and death': 'I hate it, yet hug it in love'. It is the paradox that has best captured the dilemma that perplexes the speaker and forged a unity of antithetical feelings of hate and love.

The last few poems of *Gitanjali* are about death -- a death that is not annihilation but a fulfilment. Small wonder that the poet-speaker is the least perturbed at the approach of death. He rather woos death as his beloved and prepares to welcome the loved one indoors. If anyone comes to rob us of our most precious possessions, rather than passively resigning to his power we try to resist it. But if the end of life be a devoutly craved for consummation, one must meet death with all the passionate excitement that marks a lover when he meets his beloved in a tryst. Hence in Poem 100 the poet uses a paradox figuring out death as deliverance, a step to immortality:

And now I am eager to die into the death less.
 Into the audience hall by the fathomless abyss where
 swells up the music of toneless strings
 I shall take this harp of my life (Poem 100)

Translating literary language, especially that of poetry, has always been the toughest challenge to translators and often it is claimed not without reason that poetry is literally untranslatable. As poetry shows a unique cohesion of sound and sense, of form and content, in translating poetry one must murder to dissect, that is, one must dismantle this cohesion in order to abstract the embedded idea for translation. Translation is both Tagore's supreme strength and singular weakness. While it is his translation of *Gitanjali* that made him world famous and earned him the Nobel prize for literature, some of his hurriedly done and less successful translations subjected him to scathing criticism. Even W. B. Yeats who had previously rhapsodized over the sweetness of Tagore's translation, later came to be sceptical about Rabindranath's competence as a translator. (For an unbiased critical discussion of why Yeats' response to Tagore's translation changed afterwards one may look up 'Rabindranath O Yeats' by Ajay Ranjan Biswas, published in *Sahitya O Sanskriti*, Tagore Volume, 1983, 27-48)

Be that as it may, what we want to examine here is to what extent the flavour of the original paradox has been retained or improved, got diluted or lost in the translation of *Gitanjali*. A close study of the poems will reveal that in some poems the original paradox has been omitted in translation. In a majority of cases the original has been rendered satisfactorily and occasionally the force of the original has been enhanced in translation. For example, in Poem 27 the paradox 'duhkha diye rākhen tor mān' -- which may be rendered in English as 'honours you by making you suffer' -- has been dropped, although the other line of the stanza 'niśithe ghana andhakāre/ dāken tore premavisare' has been faithfully reproduced in the expression 'he calls thee to the love-tryst/ through the darkness of the night'. In Poem 75 the speaker reflects on how the life of a river or a flower, a creation of nature, does not end in meeting human needs -- 'its last service is to offer itself to thee'. There is a superb paradox in the second stanza of the original poem, 'sampūrṇa kariyā tavu sampūrṇa nā hay'. This paradox, which in translation would read 'ends (its task) yet it remains to be completed', has not been retained in the English rendition. Again, in Poem 26 there is a charming paradox in the Bengali original -- 'kena āmāra rajanī yāy/ kāche peye kāche nā pāy' which Tagore did not care to retain in the English version.

In some cases the force of the original paradox stands attenuated in translation. There are two paradoxes in the following lines from Poem 12: 'savār ceye kāche āsā/ savār ceye dūr/ baḍa kaṭhin sādhanā, yār baḍa sahaj sur'. The corresponding lines in English read:

It is the most distant course that comes
 nearest to thyself and that training is the most intricate
 Which leads to the most utter simplicity of a tune (Poem 12)

The flavour of the original paradox, admittedly, is missing here, for in the English version the stated closeness is more spatial than emotional and does not indicate how close the Lord is to the speaker. Another example of dilution of the force of the original paradox may be given from Poem 32. The speaker here contrasts God's love with the love of one's human kin. While human love is like a chain and binds the object of love, God's love always keeps us free:

By all means they try to hold me secure
who love me in this world,
But it is otherwise with thy love
which is greater than theirs
and thou keepest me free. (Poem 32)

Since in real life those who love us would not slacken their grip on us, the idea that God does not bind but rather keeps the object of His love 'free' is essentially paradoxical. The translation seems feeble on account of the phrase 'hold me secure'. The phrase is positive and fails to reproduce the negative nuance of '*kathin pās*' or a hard and tight chain that, like a straitjacket, robs us of our freedom. In Poem 100 the line '*sudhāy evār taliye āmār haye rava mari*' has been translated as 'And now I am eager to die into the deathless'. This is good but the beauty of one getting drowned in an ocean of nectar and breathing one's last, yet, as it is an ocean of nectar, getting simultaneously resurrected, is missing from the phrase 'die into the deathless'. Incidentally, this is also true of the translation of the line '*samasta prāṇ uḍe caluk mahāmaran pāre*' rendered in Poem 103 as 'let all my life take its voyage to its eternal home'. 'Eternal home' is a positive attribute implying that dying is a homecoming. Although it is in harmony with the poet's attitude to death, it lacks the beauty of the original which finely juxtaposes the antithetical states in the image of life flying to death.

Such examples are rare; but in most cases the flavour as well as the force of the original has been retained in the translated paradox. Take for example Poem 3, where the spill of melody all around overwhelms the speaker. The original line is '*āmāre tumi phelecha kon phā(n)de / caudike mor surer jāl vuni*'. The idea has been finely retained in the translation:

Ah, thou hast made my heart captive
in the endless meshes of thy music, my master ! (Poem 3)

Similarly, the line 'the joy that sits still/ with its tears on the open red lotus of pain' is a faithful reproduction of the original which reads '*ye ānanda dā(n)ḍāy ā(n)khi jāle / dukkha vyāthār rakta śatadale*'. But what is most interesting is that in quite a number of poems the beauty of the original paradox has got enhanced in the translation. For example, the lines '*rātri yeman lukiye rākhe / ālor prārthanāy / temani gabhūr moher mājhe / tomāy āmi cāi*' have been translated in Poem 38 as:

As the night keeps hidden in its gloom
the petition for light
even thus in the depth of my consciousness rings the cry
I want thee, only thee. (Poem 38)

The paradox consists in looking upon night as the womb of dawn, the source of light. The word 'gloom', its Bengali counterpart not found in the original, adds additional flavour to the paradox. The translation is better in the sense that it tells us not only who hides 'the petition of light' but with what (with the wrapper of 'gloom'). Analogously, in Poem 41 the destitute speaker has nothing but her poverty to offer to her lord:

How could I utter for
shame that I keep for my dowry this poverty. (Poem 41)

In the corresponding line in Bengali the speaker finds poverty better than riches, for she wants to be wealthy only in her lord's company. The use of the word 'dowry' in translation has fine-tuned the paradox, not only because it is offered to win a lover but also because dowry, having association of wealth, creates an apparent contradiction when the speaker seeks to offer her poverty as dowry.

Whatever be the content, the beauty of *Gitanjali* is essentially poetic beauty, which springs from the expression of spiritual experience in terms of felt human experience, from an expert translation of ideas into images. Tagore translated creatively and did not always care to capture the original melody by using corresponding phono-tropes or rhythm. Of course, there are glorious exceptions like the opening lines from Poem 45: 'Have you not heard his silent steps? He comes, comes, ever comes?' or from Poem 57: 'Light, my light, the world filling light, the eye-kissing light, heart-sweetening light!' But in his translation of *Gitanjali* Tagore has tried to faithfully reproduce the paradox probably because it is a figure of speech based on meaning not on sound. As the language of *Gitanjali* is so saturated with paradox, much of its poetic beauty will certainly escape our notice if we fail to identify the paradoxical matrix of its language.

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