

# Anglophone Interventions: A Post-colonial Analysis of Translating Tagore's *Gitanjali* Poem "Aji Jharer Rate Tomar Abhisar" in English

Asif Iqbal\*

**Abstract:** *I intend to study three translations, which includes Rabindranath Tagore's prose-translation in Gitanjali: Song Offerings (1912), Brother James Talarovic's Christianized translation in Show Yourself to My Soul (1983) and William Radice's contemporary initiative in Gitanjali: Rabindranath Tagore(2011), of Tagore's poem "Aji Jharer Rate Tomar Abhisar" to analyze the relation of the translations with the original. Identifying them as Anglophone translations, I have tried to analyze the rationale behind these translations. By incorporating Naomi Seidman's viewpoints in Faithful Renderings: Jewish Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation, I have traced the colonized, Christian missionary, and capitalist motives of the translations. Seidman's analysis of the strategic ambivalence Jewish translators adopted to confront the hegemony Christian discourse uses postcolonial theory to understand the unequal relation between the source language and target language. In my analysis of the translations of "Aji Jharer Rate Tomar Abhisar," I have identified an unequal transaction between the original Bengali poems and the translations, which also illustrate the translators' colonialist strategy to make an unfamiliar culture resonate with the sensibility of English-speaking poetry-lovers.*

This paper is a study of three different translations of Tagore's poem "Aji Jharer Rate Tomar Abhisar" to analyze the cultural and political implications of the translations. The three works of translation I have decided to analyze includes Tagore's own translation published in 1912 in *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*, James Talarovic's translation in *Show Yourself to My Soul* (1983), and William Radice's translation *Gitanjali: Rabindranath Tagore*(2011). All the translations as part of Anglophone translation projects offer interesting insights into the different cultural decisions taken by the translators to negotiate modern Bengali culture and language, which has links to European colonization. Listed as poem number 20 in the Bengali *Gitanjali* published in 1910, "Aji Jharer Rate Tomar Abhisar" is essentially a love-poem manifesting the speaker's longing for the beloved on a stormy night. The poem is listed as number 23 in the English *Gitanjali*, a collection of Tagore's prose-translations and is listed in the same order as in the original Bengali in Brother James Tavarovic's book. William Radice, the most contemporary of the Anglophone translators, lists it as number 43 in his collection.

One aim of this study is to take into consideration the close contact between the flowering of Bengali literature and culture and British colonialism in the eighteenth-century. European colonialism is considered by scholars as the harbinger of an incredible flourish of literature, culture and erudition, widely known as the Bengal Renaissance, among elite and middle-class Bengali Hindus in British-ruled India. Of several prominent figures of the era and the century following that, Rabindranath Tagore is the epochal figure. Because of this incredibly close alliance between

---

\*Graduate Instructor/Student, Department of English, University of Maine, ME, USA

European colonization and vernacular literary flourish in Bengal, Naomi Seidman's *Faithful Renderings: Jewish Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation*, which studies Jewish translation discourse under European/colonial seize, is pertinent to my analysis. Seidman's emphasis on the history of strategic maneuvering of Jewish translators to confront colonial/Christian hegemony will inform my analysis of the translations of Tagore's "Aji Jharer Rate Tomar Abhisar" from a post-colonial perspective. I will refer to post-colonialism to argue how the translations of the poem reflect the Anglophone translators' often colonialist and misguided translation strategies to make an unfamiliar culture resonate with the sensibility of English-speaking poetry-lovers.

The attempt to familiarize a non-European literary culture to the minds of a European readership is fraught with the danger of an unequal transaction. Translation discourse in Seidman's viewpoint is also problematic since it has historically attempted to interpret the colonized culture to the colonizer as exotic. Expressing her profound indebtedness to post-colonial scholarship, Seidman argues that "translation cannot be understood outside of the trajectories of capitalism, Christian missionary movements, and European imperialism . . ." (Seidman 7). While the confrontation between Jewish translation discourse and European colonization is fraught with all sorts of ambiguities and double-bind, as Seidman's analysis tells us, what is relevant to my discussion is her identifying the colonizer's insatiable desire to translate the conquered culture, to understand the irreducible "other" as the mirroring of the colonized culture.

Because Seidman emphasizes that "[h]istorically, translation has . . . accompanied imperial conquest, enabling colonial control or channeling cultural spoils," she is intent on understanding the problematic dynamics between source language and target language "in which the dominant culture of the target language exerts what is often felt to be a disproportionate advantage over that of the source literature" (Seidman 100, 250). Despite Eugene Nida's prescription of cultural equivalence, Seidman believes that there is a greater disparity between target language and source language. This assessment of Seidman's can facilitate understanding of the cultural inadequacies of the Anglophone translations of "Aji Jharer Rate Tomar Abhisar."

To understand Tagore's prose-translation of "Aji Jharer Rate Tomar Abhisar" in *Gitanjali*, it is necessary to briefly discuss Yeats' fascinated intervention into the culture of the colonized. While making Tagore more accessible to Western readers is a legitimate premise for this sudden interest, Seidman's analysis tells us this desire to make the colonized culture familiar to the colonizer by translation is never free of colonial, commercial and religious stakes of the colonizer. Moreover, Bengali culture's inextricable connection with English colonization makes the English publication of Tagore's *Gitanjali*, welcomed with gusto in the Western world when published, even more interesting.

The English version was hailed as a work of profound mysticism. Since the Enlightenment, mysticism has been considered in European intellectual discourse as profoundly un-European, and hence dismissive, because it is devoid of the rigors of rationalism. Projecting Tagore as a mystic is a political move as it would relegate the rise of Bengali culture, of which Tagore was then a representative figure, to, as Edward Said has argued "a sort of surrogate or even underground self" (qtd. in Bayoumi and Rubin 70). The Introduction Yeats prepared for Tagore's *Gitanjali* ensured the poetry-collection embraced the fate of exoticization, an "Other . . . that is almost the same, but

*not quite*” as the translation is touted as representative of Eastern spirituality (Bhabha 86). While it is true that Yeats’enthusiastic Introduction played a key role in familiarizing Tagore to a Western audience, and eventually earn the Bengali litterateur the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, it had failed to make a genuine critical assessment of Tagore’s work.

According to Adam Kirsch, the introduction was “the booster rocket that launched Tagore’s name into worldwide orbit, and its whole premise was that Tagore’s poems were more than literature” (*The New Yorker*). In an eruditely-executed Introduction to his own translation of *Gitanjali*, William Radice also argues that Yeats’ Introduction was so immensely influential that it may have been the sole reason for establishing Tagore’s glory in the Western world in a very short time, earning Tagore the coveted Nobel Prize. Radice is of the opinion that Yeats “played a highly active role in the preparation of the book for the press, making changes and adjustments to Tagore’s drafts and taking possessive control of the books” (Radice xviii). Yeats’ role, Radice’s analysis tells us, was to take possession of Tagore’s work, and to interpret them as representative of a homogenous Eastern civilization.

Since Tagore in Yeats’ view is endowed with the capacity to capture “the civilization of Bengal . . . unbroken” and his poetry was reflective of the “common mind,” he is singled out as the one to capture “the fluctuating status of *two* competing sign-systems, one of which lays claim to an undeniable store of political, cultural, and aesthetic power and another that holds exclusive title . . . to a literature with ultimate religious value” (Yeats xiv; Seidman 102). Tagore’s fluctuating status of “occupying two places at once,” that of a propagator of mysticism of an alien non-European literature and an individual familiar with the colonizer’s language-codes, is what makes Tagore’s translation of his own poems an attractive proposition to Yeats (Bhabha 62). Drawing distinction between Tagore’s Eastern mind, and its ability to find a place in the Western tradition, Yeats sees Tagore’s works as mesmerizing.

Tagore is interpreted as a Saint whose exuding of Eastern spirituality has long been lost in the West: “We had not known that we loved God, hardly it may be that we believed in Him; yet looking backward upon our life we discover, in our exploration of the pathways of woods, in our delight in the lonely places of hills, in that mysterious claim that we have made . . . on the women that we have loved, the emotion that created this insidious sweetness” (Yeats xix). Yeats’ Tagore is telling his Western readers the significance of discovering God in a culture whose insistence on secularism has deprived the people of the light of spirituality. Even Tagore had flirted with this imposed image of saintliness to gain access to the Western literary market.

Tagore’s desire to gain recognition in the West can be linked to Seidman’s assessment of Aquila’s translation strategy in her book. While analyzing Aquila’s translation of the Hebrew Bible, Seidman argued, it “can be clearly counted as symbolic capital transferred from the Greek to the Jewish community, and particularly valuable symbolic capital, since he is a member of the ruling class” (Seidman 93). Seidman’s Aquila, being a member of the privileged social order, finds it easier to subvert the dominance of Eurocentric culture by a non-hegemonic space in which “Hebrew is inscribed into the Greek . . . circumcised on it, as a mark that signals both Jewish affiliation and divine mimesis” (Seidman 94). Tagore, however, does not subvert the dominant culture but capitulates to the symbolic capital of the target language by placing himself within the trajectory of Victorian poetry. Kirsch writes “[i]f spiritual

sustenance was what Europeans and Americans needed from Tagore, that is what he would give them; it was a way of serving mankind and his own ambitions as well” (*The New Yorker*). What is to be noted from Kirsch’s viewpoint is Tagore’s role as that of a native informant who caters to the colonizer besides creating an advantageous position within the dominant culture.

While Aquila and Tagore as translators are both familiar with the colonizer’s culture, and its insistence on assimilation, they adopt dissimilar methods to counteract it. Aquila’s response to Christian/European dominance is a mutinous subversion but Tagore attempts to achieve equivalence by adhering to the colonizer’s cultural assumptions through his translations. The “old-fashioned diction and Biblical echoes,” evident in Tagore’s prose-translations, greatly diminish the finesse of the original poem in Bengali (*The New Yorker*). It can thus be said that the translation of “Aji Jharer Rate Tomar Abhisar,” one of the major poems of the English *Gitanjali*, is characterized by Victorian poetic diction and style.

The translation of the word “Abhisar” is significant to capture the context of the original poem. The Bengali word “Abhisar,” which has sexual connotations, is translated as “love” to suit the Victorian mindset of the English readers. The word “Abhisar” attempts to capture the sexual longing of the speaker in the poem. While the very first line in the source poem “Aji Jharer Rate Tomar Abhisar” is connotative of a possible romantic union on a stormy night, the translation “Art thou abroad on this stormy night” becomes a hackneyed sense-for-sense translation. Thus the entire prose translation renders obsolete the sensuality of the original poem:

Art thou abroad on this stormy night  
on the journey of love, my friend? The  
sky groans like one in despair (Tagore 18)

The above lines destroy the romance of the original poem by translating the longing for the beloved as “the journey of love, my friend.” Particularly significant is the omission of “Poranshoka” in Tagore’s translation. “Poranshoka” gives the word “Abhisar” of the first line an intensely personal imagery of sexual longing for the beloved. Perhaps there is also an element of *Vaishnava* tradition in the speaker’s asking his beloved for a tryst. Tagore also leaves this untranslated. To ensure that his English readers are not offended by the sexual suggestiveness of the poem, and to fit into the imposed representation of a saint, Tagore must have dismissed traces of sensuality in the translation.

The prose translation also diminishes the lyrical melliflence of Tagore’s poem in Bengali. While Nida argues that “a lyric poem translated as prose is not an adequate equivalent of the original,” it should be noted that Tagore’s prose-translation, perhaps because of Yeats’ editing and authorial intervention, becomes lifeless prose (Nida 154). Yeats’ intervention can be easily identified if we consider the insipid opening lines and the near-poetic closing lines of the poem:

By what dim shore of the ink-black  
river, by what far edge of the frowning  
forest, through what mazy depth of  
gloom art thou threading thy course  
to come to me, my friend?(Tagore 19)

This is a unique example of an effort to replicate the poetic diction of the original. Thus, the image of the river is depicted as “the ink-black river” and the forest imagery is translated as “far edge of the frowning forest,” and the darkness of the path is recreated as a “mazy depth of gloom.” While these last lines are poetically rendered, the plain prose of the opening lines fails to make an indelible impression. Thus, that Yeats’ ignorance of Bengali has contributed to the insipidity of the poem can be premised here. Colonialist hegemony is evident in Yeats’ editing and Tagore’s adhering to a language suitable for his Western audience imposes limitations on the translation of “Aji Jharer Rate Tomar Abhisar.”

Seidman’s opinion that the discourse of translation cannot be separated from capitalism, colonization and Christian missionary exploits is evident in Talarovic’s Christianized translation of Tagore’s poem. Part of a collection titled *Rabindranath Tagore: Show Yourself to My Soul*, in which James Talarovic attempts to capture the essence of the original poems by translating all the One Hundred and Fifty-Seven poems of the Bengali *Gitanjali*, the translation of “Aji Jharer Rate Tomar Abhisar” is approached from the missionary concept of divinity.

That Talarovic’s effort is part of a project to identify Tagore as votary of a monotheistic God can be deciphered from David E. Schlaver’s Introduction to Talarovic’s translation: “Tagore expressed confidence in an omnipresent God as he sat by the rivers of Bengal, managed his father’s estates and cared for the tenants, watched the rice shoots sprouting in the water-logged paddy fields, followed the flight of birds and the sway of trees, and delighted in children at play” (Schlaver 13). Schlaver’s discovering the presence of a Christian-God amidst nature and the people of Bengal depicted in Tagore’s poems also delineate Talarovic’s translation strategy to render the poems Christian.

Also, Talarovic’s awareness of the song-like qualities of some of the Tagore poems, “Aji Jharer Rate Tomar Abhisar” being one of them, prompts him to capture the melody of the poem by attempting a faithful translation. Since “[u]nfaithful translations sin against originals, while faithful translations acquire their sacred aura,” Talarovic seeks to capture the paeans of profound religiosity word-for-word in his translation (Seidman 38). It might be tempting to draw similarities between Talarovic and Aquila. But unlike Aquila, Talarovic belongs to the dominant culture, armed with the political power of the target language. Thus, the “theological lens” of the translation “threatens to expose the faithfulness” of his labor as a “religious rather than an ostensibly neutral linguistic judgment” (Seidman 38). Consequently, the images of nature and lovers’ longing in “Aji Jharer Rate Tomar Abhisar” are translated as the speaker’s desire to become connected with the divine.

The beloved who is expected to lighten up the lover’s cottage is a personification of the divine. Addressed in the poem as “Beloved,” “Companion of my soul,” and “my Friend,” the beloved of the original Bengali is deified while the speaker becomes a votary longing for an epiphany and spiritual transformation. Talarovic’s translation, while seeking to capture Tagore’s poem faithfully, betrays the romanticism of the poem. Talarovic’s translation fails to capture the speaker’s longing for the beloved by presenting him as a voice asking for a reverential co-existence of the One and the many:

The sky weeps in despair  
There's no sleep in my eyes.

I open wide my eyes, Beloved.  
I look about again and again,  
Companion of my soul, my Friend. (Talarovic 38)

The speaker and nature both in Talarovic's version long for the Beloved. Hence romantic lyricism of the original is disrupted by the imposed divination of the translation. The last lines of the poem, instead of capturing the paean of the lovers of the original, makes a frantic search for the divine, and tries to locate God amidst "distant river," "dense forest," and "thick darkness":

I wonder,  
where Your path lies,  
what distant river You are crossing,  
what dense forest You are passing through,  
what thick darkness envelops You,  
Companion of my soul, my Friend. (Talarovic 38)

Radice's translation of "Aji Jharer Rate Tomar Abhisar" is a radical shift from Tagore's prose-translation and Talarovic's faith-inspired rendition of the poem. Aware that "...translation performances ... demonstrate the asymmetrical relations between languages ...," Radice seeks to "reduce linguistic and cultural differences" to achieve equivalence (Seidman 7; Venuti 113). In an attempt to go as close as possible to the original translation and to undo colonialist approaches of Tagore's prose-translation and Talarovic's faithful rendering, Radice traces "areas of difference and different differentiations" (Spivak 380). He argues that Tagore considered "three different spheres: that of the perfect poem, the perfect woman and the perfect soul" to create poetic "harmony" in *Gitanjali*, which consists of three types of poems, songs or song-like poems, sonnets and the poems of *Kheya* that are "most definitely poems rather than songs and are intricate blends of narrative, character, imagery, metre and rhyme" (Radice lxvi, lxvii). This intricate analysis is that of a scholar painfully aware of the limitations, if not the colonialist overtures, of previously undertaken Anglophone translation projects.

Moreover, Radice's proximity to Bengali language and culture contributes to his extra-linguistic sensitivity in translating Tagore's poem. Referring to an article by Buddhadeva Basu in his Introduction, Radice argues that Tagore's mode was one of *rapture* when he created the original Bengali poems besides translating in English almost at the same time. Radice is intent on capturing equivalent rapturous ambivalence: "The 'real' *Gitanjali* that I am trying to arrive at in the present book must take account of that rapture, and never forget that it combined poetry with song" (Radice lxviii). It can be said that Radice is trying to achieve what Nida has called *dynamic equivalence*. Roman Jakobson's idea of inter-semiotic translation can also be found in the British scholar's attempt to capture the "rapture" and the rapturous framework, since "*bhava* or feeling" is integral to the song-like poems, combining "poetry with song" (Radice lxvi; lxiii). In translating "Aji Jharer Rate Tomar Abhisar," Radice focuses on the performativity of the poem since he intends to preserve "the

repetition of lines that occurs when the songs are sung” (Radice lxvii). Radice’s translation can be identified inter-semiotic because of its mimicking of the performance of the poem as *RabindraSangeetor* Tagore song.

Acknowledging his indebtedness to “performance tradition” which has “established which lines to repeat and how many times,” Radice translates keeping in mind contemporary song rendition of “Aji Jharer Rate Tomar Abhisar” (Radice lxvii-lxviii). The repetition of the first two lines sets up the repetitive tonality of the poem:

You have a tryst somewhere this stormy night,  
O my close companion  
You have a tryst somewhere this stormy night,  
O my close companion (Radice 59)

While it is very difficult to capture the melody of “Aji Jharer Rate Tomar Abhisar” as song, Radice makes a tenuous attempt to capture the essence of the song-like poem for readers unaccustomed to the intricacies of Tagore’s songs due to cultural differences. Perhaps, one needs to listen to Rupa Ganguly or Kalim Sharafi’s musical rendition of the poem to get a sense of Radice’s philosophy of maintaining repetitions in translation. The most intricate aspect of his translation is his attempt to capture both *antara* and *abhog* and *sthayi*, or “chorus,” of the song. Radice decides to appropriate *antara* and *abhog* “in italics, as a way of indicating that the melody of these two sections is always the same” (Radice lxviii).

While *formal equivalence* enables Radice to adhere so faithfully to “the linguistic and cultural values of the foreign text as to reveal the translation to be a translation,” Fakrul Alam in his essay “Translation Viewed as the Territory of Unending Differences” rhetorically asks, “. . . is it possible to read poems as songs and hear the song in the poem . . . without being distracted and even irritated by the repetition and italicization?” (Alam 12) Acknowledging Radice’s labor to attain “[f]idelity,” Alam argues, “For sure, the English reader of *Gitanjali* will be disturbed if not put off by the techniques employed” (Alam 12). For Alam, translation of Tagore poems cannot really capture the song for the reader and vice versa. Thus, the translator should not distract the readers with inessential textual information.

Seidman’s critique of the colonialist nature of European translation can help explain the repetitions and italicization of Radice’s translation of the Tagore poem. Seidman identifies “modern English-translation practice” as carrying the legacy of “British imperial conquests of foreign texts” which functioned under the guise of translational transparency to appropriate “a foreign-language author” according to English cultural and social values” (Check quotation marks placement (Seidman 118). Radice’s rationale that the repetition and italicization of the song-elements of the poem would create a more nuanced understanding of “Aji Jharer Rate Tomar Abhisar” caters to the doctrine of domesticating a foreign text, thus, can be identified as colonially motivated.

Finally, the Anglophone translations of “Aji Jharer Rate Tomar Abhisar” are replete with Eurocentric assumptions. While Tagore’s early twentieth-century translation conforms to the image Yeats creates of the poet as an Eastern mystic in the influential Introduction to the English *Gitanjali*, Talarovich’s translation, since it is part of a missionary project, finds a divine voice in the speaker’s quest for the beloved and invokes a Christian world-view in the translation of the poem. Radice’s translation,

while it tries to appropriate the contemporary song renditions of the poem, appears to domesticate the poem for the English readers, a method Seidman views as colonialist. It is imperative that in the post-colonial translation scenario, which is again the globalized space of unequal transaction between nations, a translator needs to “turn the other into something like the self in order to be ethical” (Spivak 372). And what can be more ethical than considering “[t]he history of the language, the history of the author’s moment, the history of the language-in-and-as-translation” alongside “correct cultural politics” when translating texts from formerly colonized spaces? (Spivak 375) Because of the historical complicity of translation with colonialism, missionary exploits and commercialism, if it were to sustain the ethico-political parameters, the translator must clear the ground littered with traces of colonized, sexualized and gendered works of translation impervious of its hegemonic grip on the “other” spaces.

### Works Cited

- Alam, Fakrul. “Translation Viewed as the Territory of Unending Differences.” Khulna University, Khulna, Bangladesh. 2 April 2014.
- Bayoumi, Moustafa and Andrew Rubin (eds). *The Edward Said Reader*. New York: Vintage Books, 2000. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Kirsch, Adam. “Modern Magus.” *New Yorker* 30 May 2011: 75. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 7 Apr. 2014.
- Nida, Eugene. “Principles of Correspondence.” *The Translation Studies Reader*. Ed. Lawrence Venuti. New York: Routledge, 2002:153-167. Print.
- Radice, William. *Gitanjali: Rabindranath Tagore*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2011. Print.
- Schlaver, David E. Introduction. *Rabindranath Tagore: Show Yourself to My Soul*. Trans. Brother James Talarovic. Notre Dame, Indiana: Sorin Books, 2002: 9-16. Print.
- Seidman, Naomi. *Faithful Renderings: Jewish Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri. “The Politics of Translation.” *The Translation Studies Reader*. Ed. Lawrence Venuti. New York: Routledge, 2002: 369-388. Print.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *Gitanjali (Song Offerings)*. New York: MacMillan, 1916. Print.
- Talarovic, Brother James. *Rabindranath Tagore: Show Yourself to My Soul*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Sorin Books, 2002. Print.
- Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translation Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Yeats, W.B. Introduction. *Gitanjali (Song Offerings)*. Trans. Rabindranath Tagore. New York: MacMillan, 1916: vii-xxii. Print.

