



## Tagore's "Akraatri" in English: Translations of a Dialogueless Story of Solitude

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### Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore's short stories very often deal with the hopes, aspirations, apprehensions, agony and frustration of ordinary people delving closely into the psychological realms of individuals in their circumstances. "Akraatri" (1892) is, in a way, a different kind of story, not because it is in the first person with very scanty space for any other character's point of view to come to the surface, but for the fact that *there is not a single dialogue in the entire story* (emphasis mine). To the extent anything is said, it is spoken to oneself and in the climax, it is silence that speaks beyond words and time. It is the challenge of the translator to recapture this prevailing atmosphere of solitude, the exclusive perspective of the first-person narrator, the reality of separation, reflection, regret, lack, failure and not the least, the final taste of infinite joy albeit transitorily. The transference of the culture-specific phenomenon of child marriage in late nineteenth century Bengal and one's thought-processes associated with it can be equally demanding. Here we compare the efforts of the Englishman, William Radice (1991) and the Bengali, Palash Baran Pal (2000) to demonstrate the range of choices available, their application, deviations and errors, certain principles of decoding which might be the strength of the latter rooted in the culture of the source text and ways of recoding, the potential strength of the former, whose mother tongue happens to be the Target Language. In an age where cultural transactions have become more frequent than ever before, the strengths and limitations of the translators overlap as frequently and do not appear along predictable lines and preconceived notions; hence, there is greater cause to explore the richness and depth of cultural understanding that the two translators come up with.

### Keywords

Tagore, short story, translation, culture, comparison

The comparative study of translations of the same text by translators belonging to different cultures offers a fascinating prospect of exploring the dynamics of cross-cultural transaction of literary wealth. Here we choose Rabindranath Tagore's short story "Akratri" (1892) to probe into the nuances of translating one with an overwhelming focus on the first-person narrator's perspective and *complete absence of dialogue* (emphasis mine). Besides, the culture-specific phenomenon of child marriage in late nineteenth century Bengal and the thoughts associated with it, the conglomerate of ambitions, aspirations, disillusionment, agony, regret, failure, lack and frustration expressed entirely in isolation can be equally challenging for the translator to communicate to culturally alien readers. The Englishman, William Radice and the Bengali, Palash Baran Pal, in their own ways, interpret, decode and recode this reflection in solitude of the protagonist and certainly his taste of infinite joy at the climax, albeit ephemeral. The strengths and limitations, deviations, suitable or otherwise, mistranslations and omissions, do not appear along predictable lines; juxtaposition and analysis yields a rich variety of possibilities out of a privileged interlingual exercise.

Chronologically, the earlier of the two translations is that of the English poet, translator and teacher, William Radice, who selected for translation thirty short stories from the most prolific period of Tagore's creative efforts in this genre and published his work in 1991. Palash Baran Pal's translation of the same story was part of the selection for *The Oxford Tagore Translations* edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri and published in 2000; in this series, renowned academicians joined hands to make an informed selection of Tagore's corpus available to a wider reading public. Pal, being a Professor at the Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics, Kolkata, stands out as the only translator in this selection working outside the stream of literature, arts and social sciences. Both of them begin in the same vein as they render the title of the story as "A Single Night" (Radice 92) (Chaudhuri 59). The attempt to be more specific can be seen in Pal's translation of "*paathshaalaa*" as "primary school" whereas Radice leaves it as "school". "*bou-bou kheliyaachhi*" (RR 307) is communicated better by Radice's "'getting married' games" than by Pal's "played house". "*baro jatno*" as "great fuss" may be appropriate in its external manifestation but Radice's choice also retains a somewhat unwanted negative connotation which Pal's "very good care" does not. Radice's "would treat us both as her own" makes a mess of "*duijonke akotro koriya*", which could simply have been 'got us together'. Likewise "*aapnaa-aapni balaabali koriten*" is conspicuously reductive in his hands as "saying". Although this is taken care of by Pal, "sit" and "whispered" are words which are inserted as they do not correspond accurately to any

expression in the original. “*aahaa, dutite besh maanaay*” is interpreted by Radice as “How well you get on!” and by Pal as “These two are made for each other”; without being misleading both suffer from a bit of inaccuracy as the original meant “Good heavens, the two of them make a perfect match!” “*kathaataar artho akrakam bujhite paaritaam*” is transposed by Radice as “I understood what she was hinting at” and clearly better by Pal as “I roughly understood what it meant”; ‘I could in a way understand its meaning’ would have read the pulse more accurately than both. Radice has an interesting take on “*adhikaarmade matto hoiyaa*” as he recodes the expression as “became so puffed up with this feeling”; “intoxicated by that sense of right” by Pal, however, is closer. “*shaason ebong upodrob*” too is well interpreted by Radice as “boss her about”; ‘torment and bully her’ might have been more faithful but Pal’s “tease her and tyrannise over her” falls away a bit particularly due to needless repetition of the pronoun. There is some deviation again in the rendering of “*kono gourab*” by both; Radice writes “meant nothing” and Pal “little effect” whereas ‘there was no pride/glory’ could have hit the nail on its head. There is a virtually similar take on “*aamaari probhutto swikaar*” by both translators; Radice’s “acknowledge my lordship” and Pal’s “acknowledge my overlordship” are not erroneous but they miss out on the exclusivity of the narrator which “*aamaari*” points towards and ‘only my’ or ‘and mine alone’ after what they wrote would have been apt. “*pitrigrihe*” (literally, ‘father’s house’ but stands more generally for one’s ancestral home) is left out by both. “*bisheshroop abahelaar paatro*” as “inconsiderate behaviour” by Radice is somewhat off the mark; “I treated her with a special kind of contempt” by Pal is closer but the voice changes to the emphatic active for no compelling need. It could more accurately have been ‘she was singled out for my negligence’.

“*aamaar haattaa paakilei*” (‘as soon as I acquired the skills’) is evaded by both the translators. “*kintu aami monemone taahaate naaraaj chhilaam*” is rendered by Radice as “But I didn’t like that idea at all” and by Pal as “But I was not so enthusiastic about the plan”; ‘But my mind was not in agreement with that idea’ could have been closer to the original. Radice, quite unnecessarily inserts “son” to introduce Nilratan when the original has none. Pal’s “I had high ambitions for myself” comes earlier than the point at which it was required through comparison with Nilratan. His “*monemone nishchoysthir*” is clearly reductive as “thought” and Radice’s “determined” a bit less so; ‘certainly set my mind to it’ would have retained semantic accuracy. “*chhoto*” is not quite so extreme as Pal’s “lowliest” nor so neutral as Radice’s “court employees”; ‘lower’ would have sufficed. Pal omits “*naanaa*

*upolokhye*" but does well with "*peyaadaa*" as "doormen" and "*tetrish kotir*" as "330 million gods in the scriptures" with a note added. He renders "*chhoto chhoto nutan sanskaran*" fairly well as "new miniature additions" except that the last word could have been 'versions' or 'incarnations' or 'manifestations'. Radice misreads this part completely to write "in thousands of reproductions" although "venerated deity", just before, is a decent rearticulation of "*pujyodebotaa*". He leaves out "*baishayik*" (material/worldly) but comes up with interesting choices in the form of "bountiful" for "*siddhidaataa*" and "tribute" for "*paaonaa*". Pal's "good old Lord" fails to stick to what Tagore wrote and he reverses the sequence in the last sentence of the paragraph which has some connection with where the emphasis is laid. He translates "*baishayik siddhilaabh*" as "If one wants to succeed in a worldly way"; 'realization of worldly/material prosperity' would easily have been more focused.

"*aalaapiloker*" (RR 308) is translated as "acquaintance" by Radice and incorrectly as "someone I knew" (Chaudhuri 60) by Pal; 'sociable person' could have been precise here. However, Pal makes up for this blemish with his rendering of "*bishesh subidhaajoge*" as "at an opportune moment". With Radice, "*graamer*" could have been better off as 'from my native place' or simply as "from our village", as rendered by Pal than "from my home village". "*jathaaniyame*" is overlooked by Pal while Radice re-dresses it as "along orthodox lines"; 'took its own course' would perhaps have hit the bull's eye. Pal again leaves out "*aashu*" but does much better than his British counterpart with his interpretation of "*sabhaasamiti*"; "political meetings and discussions" may seem to waver literally, but given the context in which the original is used, such an inference is not only correct but also sits perfectly well in the target language. Radice's "student society" (93) is pale in comparison. "*duhsaadhyo*" could have been more accurately rendered as 'uphill' or 'arduous' compared to Pal's "difficult" and Radice's "momentous". "*nishthaa otyonto driro*" is off the mark in Radice's "our faith was strong" as well as in Pal's "no question about our sincerity"; 'very strong commitment' appears to be a suitable substitute. "*keho dristaanto o dekhaaitona*" is re-presented by Pal as "no one provided me with an example"; Radice's "no one to look to for an example" sits better with the word 'either' at the end of it. "*inchare-paakaa*" as "smart" by Radice misses out on the sarcasm while Pal's "precocious" is too congratulatory to be accurate; 'oversmart' or 'upstart' could have qualified the characteristic better. The latter also stumbles with "*parihaas*", rendering it as "lightly" while Radice is more to the point with "ridicule". Although Pal inserts the word "only" without requirement, he handles the next sentence fluently with choices like "receipt-books", "subscriptions" and "handbills";

he also rectifies Radice's error in rendering "*dalapatir name keho aktaa kathaa bolile*" as "at the slightest word from our leaders". His reading is clear through the expression "if someone said anything uncomplimentary about our leader"; only "*maaraamaari korite udyato hoitam*" should have been 'were about to get into fights' instead of "got into fights". The word "*Baangaal*" yields itself to interesting varieties in translation; Radice renders it as "rural naivety" and Pal as "foolish yokels". Both recapture the connotation of unrefined rusticity appropriately; yet a note explaining the literal meaning of the word as 'a native of East Bengal' would have made it complete for the cultural alien.

Both Radice and Pal miss out on "*udyogi hoilen*" ('took initiatives'); the former misreads "*bibaaher bayas krome uttirno hoiya jaaitechhe*" as "fast approaching marriageable age", while the latter gets somewhat closer through "getting almost too old to marry". Fidelity would have demanded something like 'gradually going past one's marriageable age'. Radice inserts "completely" without cause and translates "*otyonto tuchchho*" as "attached no importance"; alongside it and Pal's choice "inconsequential", 'most trivial/insignificant' could have been more objective. "*koribona*" is 'will not' instead of Pal's "did not want", while "free" is inserted without drastically altering the sense though. He could have retained the designation "second master" given in the original instead of going for the far-fetched "second teacher". "It gave me a perfect opportunity" too is Pal's addition and not for the first time, without compelling need. He does splendidly to render "*upodesh ebong utsaaho diya*" as "rouse my students with advice and inspiration"; Radice's "guidance and encouragement" is not bad either. He could have retained expressions like "Entrance Pass" and "First Arts" unchanged instead of going for other possible equivalents; such terms enable the translation to remind us of the time in which the original story was written and by what names the big exams were called *then* (emphasis mine). His spelling "Naukhali" fails to recapture the pronunciation of the place-name and "District" is not there in the original; here Pal achieves precision through his "Noakhali Division". Radice also changes "*entrance schooler second masteri*" to "assistant master in a secondary school"; 'second master in an entrance school' would have sufficed here.

Pal does better with "*dekhilaam, bhaabi bharatbarsho apekhya aasonno egjaaminer taaraa dher beshi*" as he renders the sentence as "I discovered that the imminent exams were more pressing than the dream of a future India"; Radice is a bit flat here, as he writes, "I found that the coming exam exerted greater pressure than the new India". "*raag kare*" too, is more appropriate in Pal's translation "would be angry" than in Radice's "objected". The latter

overinterprets "*kono katha bolile*" as "breathed a single word"; "spoke to the students of anything" by Pal is just what the original says. "*nistej hoiyaa aasilo*" is recaptured well by both; Radice reads it as "faded away" while Pal decodes it as "petered out" (Chaudhuri 61). "*pratibhaaheen*" is less accurate in Radice's "wretched" than in Pal's "Talentless"; likewise, the former's "brood" sways in its negative connotation from the positivity of "*nana roop kalpanaa kare*" while Pal's "daydream" catches the sense aptly. "*kaarjokhetre naamiyaa*" as Radice's "when working" (94) is not good enough; Pal's "when they enter the real world and have to work" is certainly purposeful, but 'once he gets down to work' would have retained the sense without the need of additional reinforcements. The rest of the paragraph is fluently done by Pal with words and expressions like "yoke", "twisted like bullocks at the plough", "obtain a bellyful of fodder", "leap and prance". The first couple of sentences in the next paragraph are entirely misunderstood by Radice and here there is hardly any excuse for not being culturally rooted to the place of origin. Pal's "One of the teachers of the school had to stay..." is lucid; only, 'single' could have replaced "unmarried" in the second sentence. "*lokaalay hoite kichhu dure*" is translated as "rather isolated" by Radice and as "somewhat far from the rest of the village" by Pal; the latter feels the pulse better, though 'at some distance from where people lived' would have been more in tune with the original. Incomplete sentences corresponding to the same in the original can potentially retain the pace and ring of the narrative; Radice's "it stood" and Pal's "it was near" happen to be added only to make complete sentences where the original has none. The rest of the paragraph is dealt with adeptly by both with Radice's "intertwined" for "*sanlagno*" being a noteworthy choice.

Pal adds "chiefly because" to the opening sentence of the next part of the story. He translates "*ullekhjogyo*" as "important"; Radice's "worthy of mention" certainly fares better here. "*anatidure*" in Pal is "fairly close" and in Radice, "quite near"; 'not far' might have captured the sense quite closely. The passive "*taahaa aamaar jaanaa chhilo*" becomes the active "I knew" in both the translations; 'it was known to me' could have done away with the change of voice. Again, both translators omit "*nutan parichaye*" (RR 309); "*uday*" is not "bother", as Radice renders, but more appropriately, "occur clearly", as Pal does. But Pal unduly decorates "*jaaninaa*" as "I was not sure", when "I don't know" suffices, as Radice comes up with. But the latter writes "Ramlochan's house", missing out on "babu" in the original; his "present plight" for "*durabasthaa*" is inadequate. A suitable alternative would have been 'wretched/pathetic state'. Another mistake on Radice's part here is "well-informed" for "*mriyomaan*"; 'dejected' or 'morose' would have been just fine. The rest of the



paragraph and the next in the original are recoded with brilliantly chosen words by both striking a perfect balance between fidelity to the original and spontaneity for the monolingual reader.

“*moner bhaār*” is inappropriately rendered by Radice as “distraction” and by Pal as “pain”; ‘weight’ or ‘burden’ for “*bhaār*” could have served better. “*likhipori*” is omitted by Pal; “of my breast” by Pal and “in my chest” by Radice are too literal for “*buker*” in context and ‘of my heart’ was needed to recapture the feeling of the narrator strongly. “*dulite*” is not “thudding” but ‘swinging’ or ‘oscillating’ and here Radice does not hit upon the right word; Pal’s “suspended”, though not literal, preserves the total sense of the original sentence in the way he reframes the rest of it. “*se ki chirokaal aamar janyo bosiaa thaakibe*” is wrongly translated by Radice as “Is she still waiting for me?” (95) and somewhat better by Pal as “Why should she wait for me all her life?” (Chaudhuri 62); ‘Will she forever remain waiting for me’ would have been more faithful. Radice’s “drove yourself to the death” for “*maathaa khnuriyaa morileo*” is nearly as inadequate as Pal’s “no matter what you do”; ‘even if you die burying your head’ reflects what Tagore wrote. Both come up with “if you had wanted” for “*ichchhe korilei*”; they miss out writing the word ‘only’ before. Both render the rest of the paragraph quite well.

“*Surabala aamaar ke*” is translated more accurately by Radice’s ““who is Surabala to me?”” than by Pal’s “She means nothing to me”. “*Surabala aaj tomar ke hoi noy, kintu Surabala tomar kina hoite parito*” is messed up by Radice’s ““Surabala is not yours today, but she could have been yours””; Pal does slightly better only in the second half through ““She means nothing to you today. But imagine how much she could have meant to you.”” A more focused rendering could have been one such as, ‘Surabala is today yours nobody-at-all, but what not could Surabala have been to you’. Radice repeats this error in “Surabala could have been mine”, whereas Pal does distinctly better by bringing in the negative in “What could she not have meant to me!” The rest of the paragraph gets a rich translingual response from both, with Radice’s “whisked” for “*chhno maariyaa*” deserving special mention. Pal here comes up with two consecutive error-free paragraphs except the addition of the word “ancient”. He does better than Radice with “*samaaj bhaangite*” rendered as “rupture society”; Radice’s “break convention” fails to carry the meaning across. Likewise, the latter’s “restrictions” does not catch the meaning of “*bandhan*”; Pal’s “bonds” does justice. However, Radice makes up in the remainder of the paragraph with informed choices; “reigned behind

Ramlochan's portals" for "*Ramlochaner griho bhittir aaraale je-Surabala biraaj koritechhilo*" stands out.

"*akhon hoite*" ought to have been 'from now on' and both translators miss the mark; both render "*jhnaajh naa korito*" quite well. Radice recodes it as "shimmered" and Pal as "blazed under the sun". "*ichchhaa*" is rendered accurately by Pal as "wished"; Radice uses two verbs "yearned" and "want" instead of retaining the original's repetition of the same verb. Pal's "droned" for "*goon goon*" is more perceptive than Radice's "whispered"; the former leaves out "*classe*" while both add "rest of" to the last sentence of the paragraph. Both sway away from the original's "*mon tikitonaa*" (RR 310) by opting for "hated"; 'my mind could not rest alone' would have preserved "sense for sense" (Bassnett 44). "*asojhyo*" is better as Radice's "couldn't bear" than Pal's "hated"; the visitor's gender is crucial here and what made it unbearable for the narrator was the arrival of a *male* (emphasis mine) visitor in that state of mind. This subtle element is not attended to by either Radice or Pal. The former does brilliantly with "*jotil bhromer jaal*" as he re-dresses it as "a baffling tangle"; "an intricate net of error" by Pal is not too bad either. Radice needlessly converts the very next sentence of the original in the third person to one in the first person; Pal does not deviate in this regard. He translates the following paragraph quite closely except that "*Surabalari swami*" should more accurately have been 'only Surabala's husband and no one else's' instead of merely "Surabala's husband" (Chaudhuri 63), the exact reductive expression found in Radice (96) as well. The latter is off the mark in laying emphasis on "*he*" when it ought to have fallen on Surabala, his could-have-been wife. "*buraabayas porjonto*" changes a bit through Radice's "lived out my days", but not in Pal's "to a ripe age"; the former also leaves out the hypothetical character Bhabashankari, which the latter, quite rightly does not. However Radice's choice of "ticked her off" for "*tiraskaaar kare*" is interesting with words like 'scolded', 'rebuked' and 'reprimanded' at one's disposal. He reduces "*dibyopnaachtaakaa rojgaar koritechhe*" to "earning nicely" with a superfluous "thank you" added. Pal's "acquiring a decent income", like Radice's, catches the general sense but the particularity could have been retained through 'having a nice five-rupee income' and an explanatory note added outside.

Coming to the final part of the story, Radice errs in writing "rained throughout the night" when there is no such thing in the original. His "began to patter down gently" scores over Pal's "started raining" for "*tiptip koriyaa bristi porite aarombho korilo*". Pal adds "town" and ignores "*khandokhando*". He renders "*aakaasher bhaabgotik*" as "sensed



danger”; it becomes the expression of a possible consequence and not a proper interlingual transference. ‘Radice’s “Seeing the look of the sky” is too literal; ‘inclement weather’ would have hit the nail on its head. Pal writes “propose the idea to her”, which again, is not in the original; Radice’s “But I could not bring myself to do this” is satisfactory. “*mojboot*” is translated by Radice as “sturdier” and by Pal as “much more solidly built”, both fair enough. The time after midnight is rendered as “in the morning” by both translators; while this may be an internationally accepted norm, culture-specific sensitivity tells us that it remains the night of the previous day until sunrise, as it is here at one or one-thirty a.m. Thus it could have been approached differently with a note added. Pal’s “made my way towards Surabala’s house” is more precise compared to Radice’s “made my way to Surabala’s house”. However, writing “tidal wave” and “every fibre of my being” enhances the latter’s output. Pal leaves out “*pathe aamaader*” which Radice does not and writes “on my way”; the latter even adds “from the other side” to describe the direction of the other wave. “*dash-agaarohaar*” is mistranslated by Radice as “six or seven feet”; Pal does well here, recoding it as “ten or eleven cubits”. “*seo*” is not gender-specific and Radice’s “she” takes away the element of suspense; it is retained in Pal’s “the other person”. “*haat-pnaachchhay*” is again incorrect as Radice’s “three or four feet”; Pal’s “a few feet” (Chaudhuri 64) is evasive as he could easily have continued with his earlier-chosen unit of measurement. “*duti praani*” is preserved more through Pal’s “only two creatures” than through Radice’s “We stood alone”. “*pralaykaal*” offers variety through Radice’s “end of the world” and Pal’s “cataclysm”; the rest of the paragraph is translated well by Radice except for changing a part in the third person into one in the first person. Pal leaves out “*khoti chhilonaa*” and is not up to the mark in his response to “*prithibir samasto pradeep nibiyaa gechhe*”. His “no light on the earth” does not match up to Radice’s “all earthly lamps extinguished” (97). Besides, the unforced change to the first person is even more in Pal. He leaves out “*kebol*”, “*gaarho*” and “*lokporipurno*” and adds “Instead” and “all around”. “*janashunyo pralayaandhokaarer madhye*” (RR 311) is “amidst this desolate apocalyptic darkness” and “in this terrifying, deserted, apocalyptic darkness” in Pal and Radice respectively; both give the original its due. “*prithibir eipraantotuku hoite bichchheder ei brintotuku hoite khosiyaa*” too gets its richly deserved response from both translators – “from this edge of the earth, snapped from the stem of our separated lives” by Pal and “shed from our slender, separate stems of existence” by Radice. Radice’s deviates slightly by placing the conditional in the past; the original places it in the immediate present. He leaves out “*dhanjan*”; Pal gives due coverage by writing “possessions” and “kinsfolk”. The latter’s “The storm abated, the water began to recede” puts behind the Englishman’s “The wind died

down; the waters subsided”, at least for the monolingual reader. Both render “*bhaangaa*” laudably – Radice as “run-down” and Pal as “derelict”. “*samasto ihojibane*” is “entire life” in both the translations; the adjective ‘corporal’ or ‘earthly’ is essential here to recapture the sense. The word “*paramaayu*” is difficult to translate – this and the word “*charom*” are left out as Radice finishes off this transcultural endeavour with “Only on that one night, out of all my days and nights, was my trivial existence fulfilled”. Pal does not skip any part but “sole” is not the English for “*charom*”; ‘height/zenith of fulfillment’ could have felt the pulse of Tagore’s climactic part more skillfully.

Radice compresses two or more paragraphs into one quite frequently whereas Pal preserves the original paragraph divisions. Content-wise, the proposition of rendering the thoughts and tendencies that were socially prohibited yet inescapably there in an individual can be quite daunting as social values are different for different language-speaking communities. The two translators in question – their errors and inadequacies notwithstanding – show a commendable level of competence in decoding cultural currents for semantic transmission. As “Indo-English literature which addresses to a double and divided readership” (Mukherjee 30) of Indians (who do not know/understand the original and its language) and foreigners, such efforts certainly pave the way for memorable cross-cultural literary voyages.

## Note

The portions under double inverted commas not backed up by the source within brackets are from the same source text, translation and page no. last cited; this has been done to avoid unbearable repetition of the source. The portions within single inverted commas are possible alternatives in the target language that I offer without claiming to be prescriptive.

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