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Karna-Kunti Sambahad: Tagore's Politics of Translation and Transcreation

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Karna Kunti Sambahad is a dramatic poem based on an episode in the *Mahabharata*. It was published in 1900 in Tagore's collection *Kahini*. Tagore retains the basic situation as it is in the original, but reworks it according to his poetic imagination. Kunti introduces herself to her long-forgotten and disowned son Karna and tells him the extraordinary story of his birth. It is a very significant episode where Kunti reveals to him that he is her eldest son and was conceived when she was an unmarried virgin. The all-powerful Sun God is his father. She begs him to unite with his brothers, the Pandavas, and fight on their side in the Great War and claim his rightful share of 'majesty' and kingdom. But Karna turns down his pleading mother and gives his own arguments for not doing so.

Tagore's lyrical drama in Bengali is a transcreation of the classical text. Translations and transcreations of these classical texts had been prevalent. Madhusudan Dutt, too, in keeping with the demands of his time, had transcreated the Meghnad episode of the *Ramayana*. Ketaki Dyson, who translated Tagore's text at the request of Bithika Raha of London, for a dance performance, gives in the translator's note the *raison d'être* behind such reworkings. Stories from the *Mahabharata* or from the Buddhist lore were reworked with a view to re-interpreting them so that they resonate in modernity with new meanings. These were artistic tasks that Tagore took very seriously in his poetry and drama, opines Dyson. It is, therefore, important to examine how Tagore has reworked this episode and how he has even transformed the character of Kunti and Karna according to his own artistic needs. It is also important to analyze why he has done it. In this respect a comparison of Tagore's own translation into English of his own work and Dy-

son's translation of the same is necessary.

Roman Jakobson has rightly said that poetry by definition is untranslatable. So what goes in the name of translation is nothing but transposition. Transposition may be either intralingual, that is, from one poetic shape to another, or interlingual, that is, from one language to another, or, again, intersemiotic, that is, from one system of signs to another, e.g., from verbal art into music, dance, cinema or painting. Tagore's *Karna- Kunti Sambad*, which is his own creative episode of the event in the *Mahabharata* falls in the first model of Jakobson, the intralingual, that is, from one poetic shape into another. His own translation into English sticks to Jakobson's second model or the interlingual, that is, from one language into another. Dyson's translation, however, was done to achieve an intersemiotic transposition.

Let us now examine how Tagore's work is different from the *Mahabharata* episode or how he has transcreated the episode. For the *Mahabharata* episode I will refer to P. Lal's translation of 1980. In the *Mahabharata*, we find a third voice, the voice of Karna's father, the Sun God, who tells him to obey the advice of his mother. But Karna remains adamant:

Karna heard a loving voice issue from the distant disc of the sun
Surya speaking out of parental affection:
Kunti speaks the truth. Follow your mother's advice, Karna.
Great good will come if you do so. (P. Lal, 205)

Tagore's work does not have a third character. He has focused exclusively on the mother-son dialogues. Probably a third voice would loosen the tautness of the whole drama. An exclusively mother-son discourse makes the whole thing more effective. Now if we compare the dialogues of the two Karnas we will see how Tagore's own inclusions have totally changed the character of his Karna from the original Karna of the *Mahabharata*. The same has happened with Kunti. The Karna of the *Mahabharata* is more ruthless and fierce in his condemnation of his mother. He uses direct hard-hitting words. He does not want to pass for a coward. He directly tells Kunti:

Born a Kshatriya,
I was deprived of Kshatriya rites
Because you treated me as you did.
What enemy could have done worse?
When I needed help,
You gave me none.

You have deprived me of my samskaras.
Now you need me
And so you come to me. (205)

Then when Kunti tells him to join the Pandavas, he says

Who does not fear
The alliance of Arjuna and Krishna?
If I defect to the Pandavas,
Will they not say I did so out of fear? (P. Lal, 205)

Moreover, he explicitly expresses his wish for a duel with Arjuna. He promises Kunti that he will not kill her four other sons. But he would surely kill Arjuna, or Arjuna would kill him, and this is one of his most important reasons for declining Kunti's offer.

Tagore's Karna is much more mellow and his softness makes him a solitary and a desolate figure, foregrounding an otherness from the original in the *Mahabharata*. Indeed, Tagore has omitted all the above attributes found in the original. On his mother's revelation about his being her son, he says:

I do not understand: but your eyes melt my
Heart as the kiss of the morning sun melts
The snow on a mountain-top, and your voice
Rouses a blind sadness within me of which the
Cause may well lie beyond the reach of my
Earliest memory. (Das, 304)

We also find in Tagore's Karna an element of temporary submission whereby he wants to go away with his mother without asking any questions: "the struggle for victory and fame and the rage of hatred suddenly becomes untrue to him" (306). It is not that he does not hold his mother responsible for making him homeless and a subaltern. But he does so in a softened manner and when the mother entreats the son to accept her forgiveness, he says "Mother, accept my tears".

Ketaki Dyson in the translator's note says:

Tagore's takes details from two contiguous sections of the 'Udyogaparva' of the *Mahabharata* a dialogue between Krishna and Karna and a dialogue between Karna and Kunti to make a new composite story of an encounter between a fostered son and

a long lost natural mother.... Tagore's treatment is more psychological: Karna is humanized to suit the tastes of Tagore's own time. (1)

In the *Mahabharata* Kunti goes to meet her son in the morning. Tagore gives a much softer setting. Here Kunti meets her son in the evening. Moreover Tagore has made his Kunti much more shy. She is embarrassed to tell Karna, how he was conceived out of wedlock. But in the *Mahabharata*, according to the mores of the time, Kunti tells Karna of his birth in a matter -of- fact manner. Moreover, in the earlier episode Krishna had already told Karna of his birth and the information from Kunti is only a confirmation.

Now let us compare the two translations of the Bengali version of *Karna-Kunti Sambad*. One has been translated by Tagore himself and the other by Dyson. It is also important to know that Tagore's translated version is in prose, whereas the Bengali version is in poetry. Dyson's translation is a word-for-word translation and is quite a good one. She has retained the poetic form. So it gives us a greater feel of the original. Strangely, Tagore's is a mere summary in fewer words than it is in his original version and has in the process lost all essences of the beautiful poetic form and idiom of the Bengali original. We can consider the following example, taking up Dyson's translation first:

This quiet, unruffled hour
From the infinite sky a music drifts to my ears:
Of effort without victory, sweat of work without hope-
I can see the end, full of peace and emptiness. (5)

Now let us see how Tagore translates it:

Peaceful and still though this might be,
my heart is full of the music of a hopeless
venture and baffled end. (308)

Dyson in her translator's note mentions that her target audience is Bengali. She says that she has given "a slight tilt towards the original Bengali sound-waves by making them end-stopped when they are so in Bengali pronunciation". For example, instead of writing Arjuna, she writes Arjun, instead of writing Yudhisthira, she writes Yudhisthir and Duryodhan instead of Duryodhana. So it is very clear who her target audience is. But Tagore does not do so. He retains the sanskritized names, for example, Duryodhana, Yudhisthira, etc. So Tagore's target audience may not be only Bengali. Moreover Tagore's translation looks like nothing but a

summary of the Bengali version. He has not only translated it in prose, but has also considerably shortened it, so much so that sometimes there is only a single line translation of a whole five-line speech. For example, when Kunti tells Karna that he is her eldest son and must claim his share in the family, Karna says, (Dyson's translation):

Karna:
By what right
Would I enter that sanctum? Tell me how
From those already cheated of empire
I could possibly take a portion of that wealth
A mother's love, which is fully theirs
Mother's heart cannot be gambled away
Nor be defeated by force. It's a divine gift. (3)

Tagore's translation of the same is a single line:

Karna: But what right have I to take it? (305)

This is only an example. He has done it throughout the translation. Now the vital question that comes to our mind is why has he done it? My guess is that his target audience being the West, he was afraid that they would not understand the essence of his poetry if he insisted on details and nuances. The message that he wanted to disseminate would also be lost in the process. He was indeed more concerned with conveying the message of his poetry than the poetic beauty of it. So he chose to considerably prune the original. The same reason could account for his writing it in simple prose. He was probably trying to make the task of the Englishman easier. Mahasweta Sengupta in her essay "Translation as Manipulation" quotes Tagore's letter to William Pearson where he comments on his understanding of the demands of an English audience:

I believe that in the English version some portions of it may profitably be left out, for I find that English readers have very little patience for scenes and sentiments which are foreign to them: they feel a sort of grievance for what they do not understand - and they care not to understand whatever is different from their familiar world. (166)

But at the same time we also have to reckon with the politics of Dyson. She is

translating it for a Bengali audience in England. She makes the names sound Bengali. Why the need at all? The Bengali original would have been sufficient for the audience. But of course Bengalis in a foreign country do not have the same competence of the language. Yet it can be said that Dyson's intervention is nothing but one serving the marketing strategy. She is actually proclaiming that she is translating an essentially Bengali text written by none other than Tagore.

Another important aspect that should be examined on reading *Karna-Kunti Sambad* is Tagore's representation of Karna and Kunti. Nirad C. Chaudhuri says that Rabindranath's portrayal of Karna places him in the Eurocentric tradition. He has introduced an element of self-conflict in his Karna, unlike the Karna of the *Mahabharata*. He at one time almost wants to resign to his mother's entreaties and follow her to the camp of the Pandavas:

Yes, I will come and never ask question, never doubt. My soul responds to your call; and the struggle for victory and fame and the rage of hatred have suddenly become untrue to me, as the delirious dream of a night in the serenity of the dawn. Tell me whither you mean to lead? (306)

Karna of the *Mahabharata* was much more stern, outspoken and unambiguous in his condemnation of his mother. Probably what Tagore was trying to project through the character of Karna (it is only my conjecture) was nothing but Indian values like devotion, respect, love and modesty. Karna is so modest that he says:

By what right
Would I enter that sanctum? Tell me how
From those already cheated of empire
I could possibly take a portion of that wealth.
A mother's love, which is fully theirs. (Dyson, 3)

Probably Tagore is trying to project a relationship which is very unique, probably very Indian, where brothers fight on the battle field yet retain the love and respect they have for each other and where promise and devotion is more important than anything else. An Indian culture is being represented which is in demand in the West.

In the same way, Kunti's portrayal is also significant. Ketaki Dyson in her translator's note says that "Tagore's Kunti is more of a Victorian aristocratic matron, who is too embarrassed to reveal the actual details of how she had conceived Karna" (Dyson, 1). Tagore probably thought that if his Kunti starts speaking of her son conceived out of wedlock in a matter-of-fact manner, the English audi-

ence will misunderstand Indian women and their virtue. He was also writing at a time when the reform movements were striving to improve the conditions of the women in India. A new concept of “cultured woman” was emerging in Bengal. Kunti conforms to this concept of a cultured woman. Tagore makes an effort to make Indian women much more respectable to the West by making Kunti, the representative figure here, shy and modest. And he does that not only for the West but also for the Indian audience, because even the Bengali original represents Kunti in the same way. Tagore being a political figure was probably taking part in the nationalist project which at that point of time was very consciously defining its culture, with women playing a vital role as being the seat of culture. As a result, when Kunti goes to meet Karna her eyes are lowered and she tells him about the mystery of his birth only “when the lids of darkness come down over the prying eyes of day” (304). He makes her as aristocratic as any Victorian Matron by endowing her with the correct behaviour. Hence he does not allow her to speak of Karna’s birth in as matter-of-fact a manner as does the Kunti of the *Mahabharata*, which he was afraid would throw a bad light on Indian value system. His representation of Indian women in the figure of Kunti is further corroborated in his later works like *The Home and the World* where even though the ‘world’ invades the ‘home’ and women enter the public sphere and become modern, yet home, the spiritual and cultural sphere, remains inviolable. Kunti an aristocratic woman retains all the spiritual and cultural values. The cover page of the book speaks volumes of his approach where Kunti, standing under a tree, dressed like a Bengali woman, is ready to meet her son.

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