From *Raktakarabi* to *Red Oleanders*: Rabindranath Tagore as a Harbinger of East-West Confluence

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Abstract

Translation of a written text often signifies several meanings and in the case of Rabindranath Tagore the very idea of translation reflects multiple shades. The present study, therefore, aims to establish Rabindranath Tagore as a harbinger of East-West Confluence with reference to the translational nuances of his renowned play *Raktakarabi* or *Red Oleanders*.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, translation, culture, confluence, society

Translation, ‘in Christianity’, referred to ‘relocation of human bodies from one world to another’, thereby, in the context of communication, ‘in English, an act of translation involves in communicating ‘an idea by means of gesture, sign, voice or movement’, and in relation to this, ‘in English’, ‘the word customarily used is ‘interpretation’”, therefore, translation with reference to cultural dynamism, involves, ‘human beings and their doings, crossing continents’, thus, it possessed ‘a complex cultural process and not simply the literary and linguistic’. Rabindranath Tagore’s emphasis on ‘the Bengali words tarjama, anubad, bhasantar and rupantar’ suggest ‘a sense of rendition and interpretation in translation’, as a result, ‘Tagore’s work involving his own texts in Bengali suggests transcreation and transculturation to make the content accessible in English’. Therefore, ‘remembering the rich and interconnected ideas’ of ‘interpretation, rendition, transcreation, transculturation, tarjama, anubad, bhasantar and rupantar, or, taking the word ‘translation’ in a truly comprehensive sense’, the paper aims to establish Tagore as a harbinger of East-West confluence with reference to the translational nuances of his acclaimed play *Raktakarabi* (1926) or *Red Oleanders* (1925).
Tagore was ‘keen to communicate with the world’ and translating *Red Oleanders*, a drama of one act, in to English, ‘is one such work’ which carries an ‘unresolved debates’, ‘since its publication’, in its ‘title, story, allegory’ or its ‘meaning’, enables Tagore to ‘reach out to a larger humanity’. The translation of the drama from *Raktakarabi* to *Red Oleanders*, thus, welcomed particularly by the non-Bengali readers ‘for its simplicity of language and expression’ because in Tagore’s genre, this is one of those plays, which is considered allegorical in character and thus seems obscure in making the meaning out of the text and interestingly, it is translation which helps in breaking through this aura of mystery, and thereby, moves at finding a wide range of readership. Through his translational venture Tagore was keen in bringing such expression vis-à-vis truth of this play, i.e. *the widening of the scope of readership*. Thus, the translation of the play from *Raktakarabi* to *Red Oleanders* provides ‘the penetrating pen’ of Tagore an ample scope to widen its (the play’s) interpretative community who can go through, engage themselves in a critical argument, and find out a rational conclusion from its contents.

As the central idea of the play revolves around such principle that the oppressor and the oppressed, must fight with each other, legitimately; and the translation of *Raktakarabi*, thus, communicates to its readers that Tagore did not have any intent of preaching on any moral issue rather he endeavours to depict the battle between evil versus good, human greed versus human sympathy. In the book *Introduction to Rabindranath Tagore’s Red Oleanders* Rama Kundu mentions, ‘It may seem interesting that the English version of the play came out before the original Bengali version was published in book form. *Red Oleanders*, the author’s own translation of his *Raktakarabi*, was published in 1925, and the Bengali book was published in 1926(…).’, therefore, it is needless to say that while writing vis-à-vis translating the play, Tagore, from the very beginning, was well- aware about the fact that to disseminate the gist of the text in a large scale the barrier of language needs to be omitted; as a result, he chooses the widely spoken language of the West to translate vis-à-vis transcreate his ideas of *Raktakarabi* to *Red Oleanders* particularly into English that undeniably shifts the play from local to the global. *Red Oleanders*, therefore, turns as an exemplary translational text which proves the fact that Tagore himself wished to make his works accessible to the West so that the readers who have the inability in comprehending the Bengali can go through the subject-matter of the Bengali vis-à-vis source write-up of *Red Oleanders*, having a scope of self-interpretation of the storyline, as the play depicts the character of a Raja or ruler, one of the major characters of the play, unfeelingly abuses nature as well as all
conceivable human assets, of intellect, of science, in arrange to create an exceedingly centralised bureaucracy and include to his riches. He sits interested as he observes how his whole entourage proceeded mechanically to watch his post and his ever-growing riches. After a few times into this dormant post enters the central character of the play, Nandini, summoned from her town by the heartless lord who works continuously from behind a screen. Unflinching by the ruler, Nandini strolls in with her touch of life (love) and bliss and cherish, symbolizing the most noteworthy truth within the human world. A truth for which men and ladies, in all times and nations, have been willing and enthusiastic to form the preeminent give up from a conviction that behind this soul in man is God and to them God was love, in actual sense. The theme of mechanisation versus the spirit of love, therefore, pervades the entire text; and it is needless to say, that publishing the English version of Raktakarabi first, was a deliberate stance for Tagore in making the people of the West aware about the mechanising society of 19th century England, similar to the societal depiction in Charles Dickens’ Hard Times (1854). Tagore’s translational technique, moreover, enables both the readers of the East and the West to give a contemporary touch to their thoughts in contextualising the burning social issue of all time like class struggle, and this very argument, thus, lays bare the significance of this study, as it (the study) reflects bridging of two-part (the East and the West) of this universe which undeniably was the basic intent of Tagore.

Tagorean strategy of translation thus becomes a process of merging the East and West and by translating Raktakarabi to Red Oleanders he materialises his planning as his translation ‘transformed and streamlined’ the Bengali version of the play with ‘fresh, lucid and comprehensible English’ and a deliberate elimination of few characters as well as plots, compressing melodies and dialogues to form the play more modern and straightforwardly open to the readers, marks the play, undeniably, a Tagorean masterpiece. Thus, through translation ‘Tagore uses the idea of freedom’ in a broader context where the portrayal of Nandini’s embracing nature not only melted the cruel-heartedness of the ruthless king but also reflects Tagore’s self-emancipation as his confluences intent indicate his nature of surpassing the boundary of self and the other in the context of a colonial language like English, and the binary of East and West omits thereby; which results in bringing the two-part at a same point. It is worth mentioning that the translation of Raktakarabi ‘constitutes an important part of his total oeuvre’ as translation, for Tagore, becomes a medium to cross the barrier of the narrow political construct of nation to a broad philosophical idea of universalism. Therefore, an observation by Dr. M. Kalaiarasan from his article Concept of Machine and Human Freedom in Rabindranath Tagore’s
**The Waterfall and Red Oleanders** can rightly be paraphrased in this regard, he observed that Tagore’s Bengali write-ups recognises him as the father of modern Bengali literature and his works in English as well as his translations successfully earned a world-wide fame for him; and needless to say, **Red Oleanders** substantiates this very observation. The thought of translation vis-à-vis interpretation, in this way, makes the play highly relevant in relation to present day, particularly at a time when the unending wrangle about between terms like ‘tolerance’ and ‘intolerance’ has taken an overwhelming toll on person and collective freedoms within the democratic system of the East as well as of the West and here, lies the triumph of **Raktakarabi**– the time and the setting making the play more significant than it was when Tagore first composed it. Tagore’s deliberate stance of translating the text from Bengali to English thus widens the discursive space not only for the Western readers but also for the Eastern readers which has been reflected from the portrayal of such character like Nandini, the of symbol of the universal-woman, born free and sustains her freedom with her one and only ornament being her jewels designed of red oleanders or raktakarabi, she wears it as a tribute to Ranjan, the person she is in love with, and by this example Tagore endeavours to lay bare the different layers of the continuous repression of the weakest section of our society by the powerful or the authoritarians, and simply, it is of the labour by the capitalist. Translation, therefore, bring out one of the unique qualities of the text where Tagore’s idea of creating a confluence of the East and the West reflects his universal approach of strengthening the ‘interaction of human relationship’. Therefore, ‘the play, on the whole, focuses on the strength of the eternal human spirit against monstrous organizations and soulless commands and thus we find (a) clear evidence of discontent against the administration and monarchy throughout the play’; and it is Tagore’s translational technique which helps him to disseminate this very essence of the text at a large scale. At the end, the symbolic essence of the translation of play from **Raktakarabi** to **Red Oleanders** in ‘breaking down of the prison’, hence, becomes nuanced not only in the context of voicing against the ‘repression’ but also moving beyond the linguistic dichotomy of the colonise and the colonised which ultimately marks Rabindranath Tagore as a harbinger of East-West Confluence.
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