

# The Unrecognized Work of Tagore as Translator: An Assessment of *Red Oleanders*

Basudeb Chakraborti  
*University of Kalyani, India*

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## Abstract

In the vast volume of Tagore criticism, only a few sentences are devoted to the translational linguistics Tagore has followed in translating his Bengali *Rakta Karabi* into English *Red Oleanders*. Tagore journeyed from *Rakta Karabi* to *Red Oleanders*, and was constantly careful of the fact that he was not only transferring a system of linguistic symbols, often arbitrary in nature, into another but also conveying and delivering the cultural significance of one language community to the other, which is culturally different. This journey from *Rakta Karabi* to *Red Oleanders*, i.e., transtexting the cultural significance of one text into another is a difficult job. This paper explains how Tagore's work as a translator of *Red Oleanders* has remained unrecognized still today.

[**Keywords:** Red Oleanders, translation, criticism, western media; politics]

Raja Rao on one occasion said it was very difficult for him to translate the rhythm of Indian life and society into the medium which was not his own. He was a novelist who articulated his experience of Indianness in English in which he was more comfortable than in his mother tongue for communication. In spite of his ease in English, he was very much aware of its obvious limitations. He felt natural handicaps in creating the right texture of Indianness in an alien language, English. The problem of mismatch between the content, his Indianness, and his expression in English is finally resolved by the successful harmony he brings about between the two and by establishing the Indian English as an independent variant of Standard British English. Rabindranath Tagore had also a problem like this though it was slightly different in dimension from that of Raja Rao.

In the vast volume of Tagore criticism, only a few sentences are devoted to the translational linguistics Tagore has followed in translating his Bengali *Rakta Karabi* into English *Red Oleanders*. Tagore journeyed from *Rakta Karabi* to *Red Oleanders*, and was constantly careful of the fact that he was not only transferring a system of linguistic symbols, often arbitrary in nature, into another but also conveying and delivering the cultural significance of one language community to the other, which is culturally different. This journey from *Rakta Karabi* to *Red Oleanders*, i.e., transtexting the cultural significance of one text into another is a difficult job. Nowhere in Tagore criticism is this problem raised.

It is surprising that no critical comments are made on these two texts separately. All the comments made to date are applicable to both the Bengali and the English texts. Even Tagore in his Introduction to *Red Oleanders* hardly says anything about translation. Tagore was not certainly unaware of the

problems of translating the songs he employed in *Rakta Karabi* into the English version. In every living language, certain words, certain symbols, certain imagery may be untranslatable in another framework of language. Tagore wrote *Rakta Karabi* in the framework of the Bengali language. The linguistic framework of *Red Oleanders* is English. Moreover, they are theatre texts and translation of one theatre text into another theatre text is indeed a difficult task. Translation is an independent literary process and Tagore's success needs to be carefully examined in this context.

An eminent Tagore scholar R. N. Roy, in his comprehensive study of Tagore's plays, makes some significant notes on Tagore's *Red Oleanders*:

Some critics found fault with the construction and characterization of *Red Oleanders*...The story arises out of a conflict between Nandini on the one hand, and the King of Yaksha Town and his men on the other. Nandini falls in love with Ranjan who is a tunnel digger there...The murder of Ranjan is the crisis of the play. When the King realizes what his henchmen have made of his people, he comes out of the hiding and joins Nandini and her followers to fight against the network. The Governor comes with his troops to fight against the king. In this fight, Nandini is killed. The play ends when the network of Yaksha Town is shattered to shreds.<sup>2</sup>

What R. N. Roy observes here in the context of *Red Oleanders* may be relevant to *Rakta Karabi*. In the preface to his *Rabindranath Tagore The Dramatist* R.N. Roy states:

The title of the play indicates its purpose -- to provide a survey and a critical appraisal of Rabindranath dramas.<sup>3</sup>

Nowhere in his preface does he say that he surveys Tagore as an Indian playwright in English. In this connection Nirmalendu Bhowmik's book, *Rabindranath: Rakta Karabi* needs clear mention. Nirmalendu Bhowmik, towards the end of his study on *Rakta Karabi*, shows the nature of metaphor and imagery Tagore used in this drama. The author also studies stylistic implications of the theme – the songs of *Rakta Karabi*. Here he does not include his examination of *Red Oleanders* as a translation text.

Nabanita Deb Sen in her book, *Iswarer Pratidwandi*, examines the character of Nandini and shows that Nandini at the beginning of the play is what Nandini is at the end. She finally establishes that Nandini is an instrument of bringing about the complete change in the character of the King in *Rakta Karabi*. Nowhere does Nabanita Deb Sen refer to the English version of the play, *Red Oleanders*. Shambhu Mitra in his *Natak Rakta Karabi* presents some unique problems of staging this play as a director. As he was a master artiste, Shambhu Mitra tackled the problems of presenting *Rakta Karabi* on the stage in his own way as a director and an actor of the play. At the outset, he shows how it is difficult for a director to introduce Kishore on the stage shouting three times "Nandini! Nandini! Nandini!". According to Bengali relational pragmatics, a man

cannot address an elderly person by his/her name only. One usually suffixes 'da' with the first name in case of a male one and 'di' in case of a female one. Nandini is senior in age to Kishore. In the dramatic text of *Rakta Karabi* Tagore as a playwright could perhaps afford to ignore this problem but Shambhu Mitra as a director and an actor had to face the problem and to solve it.

This particular direction problem is not applicable to the staging of *Red Oleanders*. The pragmatics of the Western social relationship allows a younger member to call an elderly person by his/her first name. A stage-director of *Red Oleanders* will have the least problem in presenting Kishore on the stage calling Nandini three times by her first name. Shambhu Mitra had no occasion to refer to this advantage of staging *Red Oleanders* for the Western audience in his *Natak Rakta Karabi*. But nowhere in India and abroad has any problem pertaining to the staging of a translation text *Red Oleanders* been examined till date though *Red Oleanders* was staged in Edinburgh sometime in 1926, immediately after its first publication by the Macmillan Company. Hirankumar Sanyal in his article, 'The Plays of Rabindranath Tagore', published in the *Rabindranath Tagore: A Centenary Volume 1861-1961 comments*:

Indeed, it was not till 'Bohurupee', a theatrical group of Calcutta, staged the play a few years ago that one realized its tremendous power as a drama of real life, a moving parable of contemporary civilization in which the machine is allowed to dominate man to a much greater extent than pictured in *Muktadhara*...But the realism of the play, as long as it lasts, is searing. More than in any other works of his, in prose or verse, Rabindranath succeeds in *Rakta Karabi* in representing the actual world, in this case a word of greed and unscrupulousness, in such a way as to give an immensely heightened sense of it.<sup>4</sup>

Nowhere in this article does Hirankumar Sanyal refer to Tagore as a translator or as an Indian playwright who has written in English.

Pravat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, in his *Rabindrajiban O Rabindrasahitya Prabeshak*, says that Tagore being disgusted with the 'Machine age' of the West revealed himself through *Rakta Karabi*. He writes that Tagore had minimum pressure of work during the year 1924 and so he himself undertook the task of translating the play into English and named it *Red Oleanders*. This is the only reference to *Red Oleanders* we find in his study.

In his book on Rabindranath Tagore, Sisir Kumar Ghose makes certain comments on *Rakta Karabi*, not on *Red Oleanders*. His awareness of the distinction between Tagore's *Rakta Karabi*, a play written in Bengali and its translation made by Tagore himself, *Red Oleanders* is reflected in his comment:

*Rakta Karabi* looks more ambitious and complicated. The conflict between machine and life ends with another death. How far this enhances the drama is not clear. ... The play has been produced but rarely at Santiniketan. The response has not been encouraging. The avant-garde productions in Calcutta

have failed to give it a long life. It is, like *Muktadhara* a play to read rather than to act...<sup>5</sup>

Here all is said about *Rakta Karabi*. But no pretension of any critical appraisal of Tagore's *Red Oleanders* is made here. In the preface to his book, *Rabindranath Tagore*, Sisir Kumar Ghose argues that "the problem, hard to avoid, is that the Englished Tagore is not the same as the Bengali Rabindranath".<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, Tagore in *Rakta Karabi* and Tagore in *Red Oleanders* are two different playwrights. The reference to 'the avant garde production in Calcutta' specifies the 'Rakta Karabi context' of the comment Sisir Kumar Ghose makes in his book. The author makes no remark on the 'Englished Tagore' or any comparison between the two Tagores in the context of his study of *Rakta Karabi*.

Asit Bandyopadhyay in his *History of Modern Bengali Literature* makes an evaluation of *Rakta Karabi* in English for the English speaking/reading public. He does not refer to *Red Oleanders* in his examination of *Rakta Karabi*. He says:

Rakta Karabi (1926) of Rabindranath is an outstanding symbolic play and is comparable with any great play of the world. The play is concerned with a deplorable aspect of modern life, the wretched sub-human life in the factory and the cruel consequences of greed. The theme is presented in a very powerfully constructed symbolic structure...<sup>7</sup>

Asoke Sen in his book *Rabindranath-Parikrama* shows how Rabindranath with the help of his deep insight reveals the degeneration and decadence of modern civilization in *Rakta Karabi*. There is not even a single reference to *Red Oleanders* in Asoke Sen's book. Upendranath Bhattacharya, in his book, *Rabindra-Natya-Parikrama* does not refer to Tagore's *Red Oleanders*. He interprets the symbolic meaning of *Rakta Karabi* in his book. Niharranjan Ray is one of those Tagore critics of national repute, who thinks that *Rakta Karabi* is "thin and unconvincing as a drama. An amalgam of realism and reason, mysticism and symbolism is woven into the texture of a situation that has hardly any movement".<sup>8</sup> Krishna Kripalani thinks that the main conflict in the play is "more suggestive than convincing"<sup>9</sup>. Whether these views are superficial or penetrating may be a suitable area of investigation, but the fact remains that neither Niharranjan Ray nor Krishna Kripalani has shown any interest in examining how Tagore translates *Rakta Karabi* into *Red Oleanders* or what parameters of translation Tagore has followed in transtexting *Rakta Karabi* into *Red Oleanders*.

K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar includes Tagore as one of the Indian writers in English and records his observations on *Red Oleanders* in his *Indian Writing in English*. He interprets *Red Oleanders* as an Indian drama written in English. Though in his comments on *Red Oleanders* he acknowledges that the play is a translation of Tagore's *Rakta Karabi*, he carefully distances himself from evaluating the play in the framework of translation theory. His emphasis is on the

interpretation of the theme of the play. He begins his comments on *Red Oleanders* thus:

Another unclassifiable play is *Red Oleanders* (1926). The English translation of the play is not included in the one volume *Collected Poems and Plays*. There is the inevitable King again, though there is here no Queen; but there are numerous functionaries like the Governor, Assistant Governor, Deputy Governor, Doctor, Professor, Headman, Wrestler, etc....The soul of the play, however, is the girl Nandini is the challenge of virgin beauty to the world of the male...<sup>10</sup>

Srinivasa Iyengar categorizing *Red Oleanders* as an Indian Drama, written in English, studies the theme and the characters of the play. In his comment he characterizes this play as 'unclassifiable' but at the same time he says that *Red Oleanders* is a translation version of Tagore's one Bengali drama. If it is a translation of a literary text (as Srinivasa Iyengar admits it is), this literary translation is then a particular literary genre and this genre naturally demands the formulations of certain critical canons with the help of which this needs to be assessed. Srinivasa Iyengar has not made any comment on the necessity of any contrastive examination of the two texts written in two different languages.

Pratapnarayan Biswas in his article, "Rabindranather Rakta Karabi: Tattwa O Tathya", published in a Bengali journal, *Anustup* (Spring Issue, 1989) attempts to explore the possible source of the theme and the ideology of *Rakta Karabi* in Strindberg's *A Dream Play* and finally he arrives at the conclusion that Tagore's *Rakta Karabi* is an original creation. But what is interesting in this article is that in the earlier part of his observation he has referred to some of the peculiar English expressions which Tagore has used in his English translation of *Rakta Karabi*. The peculiarities of those English expressions in *Red Oleanders* were perhaps due to Tagore's mother-tongue interference in transferring connotations of certain lexical items like 'Parasmani' into English (It should be philosopher's stone but Tagore translated it into Touchstone which is actually a real stone black jaster with the help of which jewellers examine the 'Purity' of gold). Pratapnarayan Biswas's comment is one of those few observations on the translational linguistics of Tagore's *Red Oleanders*.

Radhiga Priyadarshini in her "The Royal Metaphor in the Plays of Rabindranath Tagore", comments on the thematic aspect of Tagore's *Red Oleanders*:

*Red Oleanders* is an apocalyptic play that deals with the conflict between liberty and tyranny.<sup>11</sup>

Nowhere does she refer to *Red Oleanders* as translation text in her article. Shankha Ghosh in his book, *Kaler Matra O Rabindra Natak*, observes how Tagore delineates the main characters of the play realistically; the main characters are, according to him, life-like and complete. With the complete portrayal of the characters, the completeness of the cycle of the seasons of Bengal runs beneath the surface text of *Rakta Karabi*. To him, the completeness

of the season's cycles identifies itself with the completeness of the life-like portrayal of those main characters of the play. Nature and Man are interwoven in *Rakta Karabi*. There are certain intrinsic limitations of translatology with which Tagore was perhaps familiar. Apurba Kumar Ray in an article on Tagore in English translation says:

Rabindranath was much conscious, and for a considerable period of time, he remained undecided about translating his novels like *Char Adhyay* and *Sesher Kavita*, for their exuberant and richly coloured style. In a letter to Amiya Chakraborti, he says that the language in which he has expressed the emotion and pathos of Ela and Antu, is lively, and is sure to lose the appeal in translation.<sup>12</sup>

William Radice's dilemma in translating Tagore's lyrics is pertinent in this connection. He has translated a good number of Tagore's poems in a volume, the title of which is *Selected Poems*. However, not even a single lyric from *Rakta Karabi* he accommodated in that translated volume. He comments, "I do not believe that lyrics can be translated".<sup>13</sup> Tagore's lyrics once translated will miss the flavour of the SL text.

As an author, Tagore in his interpretation of *Red Oleanders* in The Visva-Bharati Quarterly introduces his reaction to the response of the English readers when it was published in England in 1926:

Some few criticisms of my *Red Oleanders* that have appeared in the English papers have convinced me that to a considerable portion of my readers in England this play of mine seems obscure in meaning. Such a fact, I believe, usually comes as a surprise to an author, because generally a work of this nature springs from a vision that is vivid to himself and a feeling that belongs to his direct experience. It is not for me to discuss the literary qualities of this book, which, being a mere translation, can have no pretension to a permanent place as literature in a language not the author's own. However, I think, in justice to myself, I should make it clear that it has a definite meaning which legitimately claim literary expression.<sup>14</sup>

What is important in Tagore's reaction is that *Red Oleanders* is his own vision and a feeling of his direct experience which he first translates into the form of a play in his mother tongue, and then to familiarize the same to the Western readers and audience he translates the play into English. The criticism, made by the Western reviewers was biased and unsympathetic to Tagore's *Red Oleanders* not perhaps because of its lack of literary merits but because of the Westerners' political assessment of Tagore in the context of Indian Freedom Movement. Tagore has rightly pointed out that *Red Oleanders* "has a definite meaning which legitimately claims literary expression".

The response of the Western critics, particularly in England and America, to Tagore's *Red Oleanders* is primarily confined to the study of the theme of the play. Western reviewers of the play make an effort to examine the allegorical overtones and the symbols Tagore used in the play. The fact that most of the

symbols and their implications in the context of Indian literature remain unintelligible and inaccessible to Western readers characterizes the writings of those reviewers in the west. The unkind comment on *Red Oleanders* by Western critics shocked Tagore so much so that after this translation, Tagore never ventured to publish anything in English for the West. Perhaps Tagore realized that it would be futile to make the Western reading public familiar with the imagery and the symbols, which are interwoven with the themes of his writings, until the people of the West internalize the composite understanding of Indian life, religion and philosophy, which are intrinsically connected with one another. Perhaps Tagore realized the problem of an unhappy mismatch between the theme of his plays in Bengali and the rendering of those into the linguistic framework of English. Ananda Lal's comment in this regard seems to be pertinent here: "Understandably, Tagore never published any other play in English translation in the West after this disaster."<sup>15</sup>

Tagore went to Shillong in the summer of 1923 and there he wrote a play, which he first titled *Yakshapuri*. After repeated revisions, he changed the title and the play appeared in print with the title *Rakta Karabi* in *Prabasi*, a Bengali journal, in 1924 and the same year the translation of the play, made by Tagore himself, was published in *Visvabharati Quarterly*. Within a year of its publication, the *Times Literary Supplement* of July 1925 wrote the following:

It is frankly difficult to make anything of the symbolism...Tagore seems to depend on the very vagueness of his style for whatever meaning the drama can support. For the greater part of the time; it is quite impossible to discover what is happening...There is not the faintest attempt to present the few scattered and mysterious events in a logical sequence...The characters of the play are sufficiently lifeless to compel one to wonder what intellectual or moral purpose they can possibly serve. ...The most acute of Tagore's literary failings is perhaps a rather unbridled passion for metaphor. In *Red Oleanders*, the profusion of metaphor is particularly trying...Tagore has been far more occupied with mere words than it is the business either of the dramatist or the poet to be. The entire dialogue is persistently sententious. But it is not profound.<sup>16</sup>

The *Saturday Review of Literature* of 18 September 1926 commented:

We confess to a steadily growing sense of baffled bewilderment as we read page after page of *Red Oleanders*. There were times when Truth did seem about to poke its head out of the maze and Reality to be just around the corner, but never once did either come out and stand fairly and squarely in the open for all to see. This does not seem to be playing quite fair with readers... Why write in the play form if one never expects to make one's people real enough to be able to appear on any stage...<sup>17</sup>

*The Dublin Evening* of 2 July 1925 wrote almost in an identical tone the following:

It is drama in which no action takes place: a drama in which vague, shadowy figures indecisively male or female, meander through pages, uttering pseudo-Maeterlinckian platitudes.<sup>18</sup>

Had all those reviewers understood the meta-theme of the play, the cultural significance of the Bengali language, the realistically delineated characters pitted against the cycles of the season of Bengal and the vision and the feeling Tagore experienced, they would not have made comments like these. It might also be a fact that those reviewers did feel the excellent literary merit of the play, knowing fully well that the *Red Oleanders* was a translation of *Rakta Karabi*, but they had to decry Tagore and his literary work for some political compulsions. Contemporary Western criticism on Tagore's *Red Oleanders* was unanimous. The *Sheffield Telegraph* of 23 July 1925 wrote the following:

Mr. Tagore is too serious a writer to be suspected of publishing absolute nonsense on purpose. So one must suppose that he did it by accident. Presumably he is able to follow the workings of his brain, and it would be very interesting to hear him just what it is all about.<sup>19</sup>

This taunting remark no doubt attests to the bad taste of the book-reviewer of *The Sheffield Telegraph*. The unanimity of the remarks made by the Western critics on the demerits of *Red Oleanders* is irrelevant to the context of my present article that only aims at establishing the importance of *Red Oleanders* as a unique literary translation text. The appropriate evaluation of a translation text is possible when the evaluator has sufficient command of the language of the source language text, i.e., *Rakta Karabi* in Bengali, as well as that of the target language text, i. e., *Red Oleanders* in English.

In addition to this, an evaluator of a translation text needs to be a little bit sympathetic to the translator. Without this sympathy, his assessment of the translation text will be dry and lifeless. An evaluator of a translation text should always remember that there is every chance for poetry or any innermost realities of life expressed in any literary form to be lost in translation. Etienne Dolet (1509–46), a French humanist who was one of first writers to formulate a theory of translation, pointed out five principles of translation:

1. The translator must fully understand the sense and meaning of the original author, although he is at liberty to clarify obscurities.
2. The translator should have a perfect knowledge of both SL and TL.
3. The translator should avoid word-for-word renderings.
4. The translator should use forms of speech in common use.
5. The translator should choose and order words appropriately to produce the correct tone.<sup>20</sup>

The principles of translation formulated by Dolet emphasize the translator's ability to understand the SL text as the first requisite. Tagore is aware of the cultural significance of the framework of the Bengali language. It is undoubtedly Tagore's major advantage in translating *Rakta Karabi* into *Red Oleanders*. However, a translator who is confident in both SL text and TL text has also certain problems while he engages himself in the act of translation. There is every chance for



some poetry or some innermost realities of life expressed through any form of literature to be lost in translation. If the translator can anticipate that possibility, he is then at liberty to 'choose and order words appropriately to produce the correct tone'. Here again, a problem crops up. What are the parameters a translator employs to consider which tone is correct and which one is not? On an occasion like this, a translator has to take the absolute decision of his own.

The other side of this problem is that readers and audience need to be familiar with the cultural significance of the languages of both the original and the translated versions. Most of the Western critics took to Tagore's *Red Oleanders* as a dramatic text written in English by an Indian playwright. The adequate understanding of the character of 'Nandini' or 'Ranjan' or the minor character 'Kishor' will be incomplete or even distorted if critics do not know the suggestive meanings of these names in the Bengali language. The mythological denotation as well as the connotation of Yakshapuri is an important pre-requisite for the appropriate assessment of the theme of this translation text, *Red Oleanders*. To appreciate a target language text, one requires the knowledge of the language used in the source language text. In this connection the name of one Western critic of Tagore's writings, Alex Aronson who was at Santiniketan from 1937 to 1944 as a lecturer in English and later on joined the University of Dhaka from 1944 can be referred to here. He was in a position to study Tagore in depth; for he knew the Bengali language, breathed in the atmosphere of Indian culture for a considerable length of time. A critic like Alex Aronson can rightly make such a remark as the following:

Millions of Westerners saw, read and responded to Rabindranath. A few great and unprejudiced minds responded whole-heartedly and unhesitatingly. Many failed either because they admired Rabindranath in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons or because they could never attain the degree of cultural aloofness which has enabled them to give a meaningful response to so extraordinary and overwhelming a figure as this poet who had come to them for Bengal.<sup>21</sup>

To 'attain that degree of cultural aloofness', one requires to be in possession of a mind that enables one to know the language and culture of a different linguistic community. Had it not been so, he would be like that Western critic who, after seeing *Red Oleanders* staged in Edinburgh, made the following comment:

But its characters come on and go off the stage without doing anything that forms a plot with exposition, development and denouement.<sup>22</sup>

A callow comment like this is unfortunate. Western reviewers did not understand Tagore's *Red Oleanders* because they knew nothing about the cultural significance of the linguistic framework of the Bengali language. Could they feel the subtle influence of the Bengali seasons represented through the characters of the play? Could they distinguish between the autumn and the late autumn, which are known as 'Hemanta' in Bengal? If Kishore represents autumn, then

Bishu represents 'Hemanta' and the Professor represents winter. Nandini is the eternal spring. Sankha Ghosh's understanding of Tagore's *Rakta Karabi* in the background of the cycles of seasons in Bengal may be one of the highlights Tagore tries to foreground in *Rakta Karabi*, which the dramatist himself translates for Western audience. The task is stupendous. Western reviewers of Tagore's *Red Oleanders* missed the point of the difference between the cultural significance of the linguistic framework of Bengali language and that of the English language. Being aware of this natural difference in the pragmatics of two linguistic communities, Tagore successfully translates *Rakta Karabi* into *Red Oleanders* with all possible literary excellence.

Edward Thompson, known to be the first Western authority on Tagore observed thus:

*Red Oleanders* has been published in England as well as in India, but made no permanent impression in India.<sup>23</sup>

This decisive judgment on Rabindranath, made by Edward Thompson, appeared in the first edition of his book, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist* (1926). It is surprising to note that the second edition of this book, which appeared in 1948, does not accommodate even a single reference to *Red Oleanders*. The careful investigation of the index of the second edition of this book reveals an alphabetic inclusion of Tagore's major plays except *Red Oleanders*. How does a critic who makes such a disparaging remark on a play, *Red Oleanders*, remains silent about the same play in the second edition of the same book? It is mysterious. Nevertheless, in the second edition of *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist* Edward Thompson seems to be enthusiastic about the translational skills of Tagore. On *Chitrangada*, he comments:

Rabindranath's translation of *Chitrangada* provides an interesting study of his method, and is the best example of his insight into another language, an insight which is one of the most astonishing sides of his many-sided genius.<sup>24</sup>

This comment made by Edward Thompson is an evidence of the fact that he is convinced of Tagore's translational skills. According to him, Tagore developed an insight into the English language. However, surprisingly Edward Thompson passes no remark on *Red Oleanders* in the second edition of his book on Tagore. This silence provokes modern readers of Tagore to be suspicious about Thompson's knowledge of the Bengali language and his understanding of the theme of *Rakta Karabi*. Otherwise, he could not say in the first edition of his book on Tagore (1926) that *Red Oleanders* after its first publication 'in England as well as in India made no impression' at all. This suspicion is reinforced when it is found that he translated the title of Tagore's play, *Arup Ratan* as 'The Ugly Gem'. Edward Thompson learnt Bengali as a second language. Perhaps he read the Bengali word 'Rup' as 'Beauty' and when he got the word 'Arup', he accepted it as something 'lacking', for the prefix, 'A' in a Bengali word often means something in the negative. Thompson readily found its antonym, 'ugly'. This way

he processed the translation of *Arup Ratan* as 'The Ugly Gem'. It will not be unusual if someone questions Thompson's credibility.

What prompted most of the Western critics to make such undesirable comments on Tagore's *Red Oleanders* was neither their sincere approach to the play as a masterpiece of a particular literary genre nor their recognition of Tagore who had revealed a superb mastery over English. Some of the contemporary critics did not even know the language of *Rakta Karabi* and the cultural significance of the Bengali language. What made them impatient was Tagore's vehement protest against the Jalianwallah Bagh massacre and his subsequent renunciation of the Knighthood conferred by the British Empire in 1919. The historic letter to Lord Chelmsford written by Tagore after he decided to renounce his Knighthood needs to be referred in this context:

The enormity of the measures taken by the Government in the Punjab for quelling some local disturbances has, with a rude shock, revealed to our minds the helplessness of our position as British subjects in India. The disproportionate severity of the punishments inflicted upon the unfortunate people and the methods of carrying them out, we are convinced, are without parallel in the history of civilized governments, barring some conspicuous exceptions, recent and remote. Considering that such treatment has been meted out to a population, disarmed and resourceless, by a power which has the most terribly efficient organization for destruction of human lives, we must strongly assert that it can claim no political expediency, far less moral justification.<sup>25</sup>

Hiren Mukherjee comments:

For the so-called 'eclipse' of Tagore's reputation in the west there were also other reasons which were by no means aesthetic and were, as a matter of fact, somewhat reprehensible. From his earliest youth Tagore had shared with his people the agonies of foreign servitude. He had not hesitated in his poems to aver that those 'who, centred in self, were aloof from the wide world had not learnt to live'. He was a proud and ardent patriot and had earned early in life the British government's disapproval as a likely 'seditionist'. His school at Bolpur, at Shantiniketan, set up in 1901, was suspected as a 'disloyal institution, almost a hotbed of sedition. During the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, the first big phase of India's struggle for freedom, Tagore had thrown himself into it, heart and soul, and offered it his magnificent talents.<sup>26</sup>

The British rule was doubtful about Tagore's setting up of the institution at Bolpur from the very beginning. Tagore's association with the Indian National Congress leaders irritated the colonial masters. In 1917 Tagore read 'at a public meeting his famous political paper *Kartar Ichchhay Karma* (As the Master Wills): staged *Dakghar* (*The Post Office*); the audience included Annie Besant, Tilak, Lajpat Rai, Malaviya, Gandhi and many other prominent leaders'. During this time, Tagore composed a song, "Desha Desha Nandita Kari" that arrested the attention of the Congress leaders and in the same year, the song was sung at the Congress session. The song became very popular overnight among the

Congress people. The Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore became the hero championing the spirit of nationalism. In 1916, Mrs Annie Besant formed Indian Home Rule League and she was brought under detention. Tagore showed much enthusiasm in the activities of the League. This event added fire to the fuel. The song is nationalistic in effect. The song is an evidence of Tagore's involvement with the activities of the League. Let me quote the song:

Thy trumpet sounds from land to land  
 And around Thy seat stands the heroic band.  
 The day is not far, but is India at par?  
 Does she fall back and lag behind  
 And won't she take charge of all mankind?  
 Oh Almighty, our presiding God, send us  
 Thy thunderous call Oh Lord! <sup>27</sup>

(Translated by Professor Jagan Nath Chakravorty)

In 1916, Rabindranath wrote 'an article entitled "Chhatra Sasan" (Student Discipline), published in *Sabujpatra*, protesting against the repression of students after the Oaten episode in which Subhash Chandra Bose was involved at the Presidency College'. Tagore also "endorsed Gandhiji's programme on non-cooperation at Nagpur Congress", held in the year 1920. Deshabandhu Chittaranjan Das passed away on 16 June 1926. Tagore joined the move to raise a permanent memorial to him. In the year 1927 Tagore toured Italy and met Mussolini on two occasions. Alex Aronson in his book on Tagore makes certain observation on how the 'political West "saw" Rabindranath regardless of his political writing'. He comments:

Politicians in England never felt very happy about Rabindranath's success in Germany. And in 1926, they retaliated by means of hints, vague rumours, and Reuter's message. When Rabindranath landed in Hamburg, the same scenes of enthusiasm took place as in 1921. The English press got worried, and the correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* suggested "that the ovation accorded to the poet at Hamburg was propagandist in origin contrived by German industrialists to cultivate a good opinion among Indian intellectuals as a steppingstone towards the capture of the Indian markets...The gradual deterioration of political life in the West is reflected in the attitudes of the various countries to Rabindranath. What has been said with regard to England and Germany can be applied in even greater measure to political relations between Germany and France. French people were even more than Englishmen suspicious of Rabindranath's success in Germany and looked the possible political implications. Henri Massis's *Defence of the West* analyses only the cultural aspect of a problem, which vitally concerned the French nation as a whole."<sup>28</sup>

British politicians could not trust Tagore at that point of time. Tagore had sent a message to Professor Rudolf Eucken, the German philosopher before he left Germany. When the content of Tagore's message crossed the border of Germany and reached France, the French Newspaper, *L'éclair* (Paris, 20 June, 1921) gave an account of the popular feeling about Tagore in France:

Rabindranath Tagore is a kind of Hindu Tolstoy. As one might have expected, Germany uses him for propaganda purposes; and he exalts pan-Germanism in a wholehearted and painstaking manner for which the press beyond the Rhine, for the last few days, pays him unanimous homage. 'German civilization alone is capable of saving the world,' proclaims Tagore during his tour of lectures across the Reich. "This Germanic civilization conforms in its details as well as in its general outline to oriental civilization, and from it alone can one expect a rejuvenation of the modern mind." And yet, during his recent stay in France, Tagore has abstained from making statements, which would have shown him to be insensible to the charm of our country, to its artistic beauties, and its innate sense of courtesy.<sup>29</sup>

The fact is that Tagore was under no circumstances associated with so-called pan-Asiatic ideologies. Nevertheless, the West misinterpreted him and attacked him unnecessarily. A careful examination of his political writings reveals that Tagore was not a chauvinist. Tagore had no hard line and illogical belief that his own country i.e., India was superior to all other countries. In *Crisis in Civilization*, he makes the following comment that glorifies the British literature and thought:

In those days, the type of learning that was served out to us was neither plentiful nor diverse, nor was the spirit of scientific enquiry very much in evidence. Thus, their scope being strictly limited, the educated of those days had recourse to English language and literature. Their days and nights were eloquent with the stately declamations of Burke, with Macaulay's long-rolling sentences; discussions centred upon Shakespeare's drama and Byron's poetry and above all upon the large-hearted liberalism of the nineteenth century English politics.<sup>30</sup>

Nowhere in his tour of lecture, did Tagore emerge as a champion of aggressive nationalism. He had that finer artistic sense that always led him to appreciate anything good found anywhere in the world. He had that openness of mind. Tagore in his Hibbert Lectures delivered in Oxford, at Manchester College in May 1930, concluded with a straight reference to the Upanishad:

And therefore it has been said by the Upanishad: 'Thou must know that God pervades all things that move and change in this moving world; find thy enjoyment in renunciation, covet not what belongs to other.' ... He who is one, and who dispenses the inherent needs of all peoples and all times, who is in the beginning and the end of all things, may he unite us with the bond of truth, of common fellowship, of righteousness.<sup>31</sup>

Tagore's visit to Europe and his overwhelming reception by the people perhaps alarmed the British Imperialism, infuriated the British minds that resulted in the unbridled expression of insanity over the publication of the dramatic masterpiece, *Red Oleanders*. Tagore's enthusiastic visit to Italy on the invitation from Mussolini in 1926 gave a wrong signal to the British Imperialist. The British rulers doubted Tagore's love and respect for the people of Italy. Later on, Romain Rolland introduced Tagore with 'some eminent Italian victims of Fascism living in exile'. This contact with those Italians in exile helped Tagore to experience the ugly face of Fascism. This experience moved him very much, and

in a fit of grief, he wrote a letter to his friend, C.F. Andrews. The following excerpt of the letter is relevant in this context:

My mind is passing through a conflict. I have my love and gratitude for the people of Italy. I deeply appreciate their feeling of admiration for me, which is so genuine and generous. On the other hand, the Italy revealed in Fascism alienates itself from the ideal picture of that great country which I should love to cherish in my heart.

The methods and the principles of Fascism concern all humanity and it is absurd to imagine that I could ever support a movement which ruthlessly suppresses freedom of expression, enforces observations that are against individual conscience and walks through a blood-stained path of violence and stealthy crime. I have said over and over again that the aggressive spirit of Nationalism and Imperialism, religiously cultivated by most of the nations of the West, is a menace to the whole world. The demoralization, which it produces in European politics, is sure to have disastrous effect especially upon the peoples of the East who are helpless to resist the western methods of exploitation.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed the theme of Tagore's *Red Oleanders* is a challenge to the growing Fascism immediately after the end of the First World War under the leadership of Mussolini and afterwards of Adolph Hitler. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar aptly comments:

Nandini is the challenge of Beauty and Love to a world dominated by mere money and power values, and she is able to make men out of slaves and unnerve brute authority. It is astonishing that Tagore should have so correctly portrayed in a play written in 1923 the features of the Fascist dictators of the thirties and of 'Big Brothers' despotism in the forties and fifties. *Red Oleanders* is the image of terrifying probability that has alas! proved more than possible in recent decades.<sup>33</sup>

The assessment of Tagore as a translator of his own play *Rakta Karabi* is yet to be completed. Very recently, M. K. Naik refers to Tagore's translation plays in a book on the history of Indian English literature and comments:

In examining the plays of Rabindranath Tagore, a distinction has once again to be made, as in the case of his verse, between translations done by the author himself and those produced by others...Since, while translating from his original Bengali, Tagore made extensive changes in the text (as in the case of his verse also) these plays are virtually redone in prose, rather than being simple translations. Thematically, the plays fall into two broad groups: thesis plays and psychological dramas. In the first group may be included *Sanyasi*, *The Cycle of Spring*, *Chitra*, *Malini*, *Sacrifice*, *Natir Puja* and *Red Oleanders*. To the second belong *The King and the Queen*, *Kacha and Devayani*, *Karna and Kunti* and *The Mother's Prayer*.<sup>36</sup>

M.K. Naik's observation on Tagore may be the humble beginning of the examination of Tagore's self-translation. Self-translation is unique in a sense that the translator is well aware of the linguistic as well as the semantic aspects of the source language text. Moreover, a self- translator has the moral freedom to bring

about certain omission, alteration, rejection and addition to the usage of symbols, allusions and imagery from the source language text. Indeed, Tagore has made some changes in *Red Oleanders* from *Rakta Karabi*, particularly in songs and certain symbols to contextualize the theme of the source language text into the culturally different linguistic framework of *Red Oleanders*. However, these changes do not affect the literary merits of *Red Oleanders*.

A translator under compulsions has to make certain changes in the target language text. And the extent of change or the nature of change is governed by the translator's extent of the familiarity and contact with the languages of SL text and the TL text. George Steiner in his book, *After Babel*, outlines his opinion that a successful translator requires to be competent enough in using fluently both the languages as his mother tongue. The study of Tagore as a translator, in general, and of *Red Oleanders*, in particular, has not been systematically made in India and abroad till date.

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