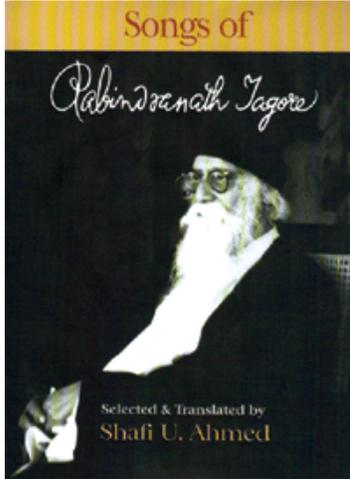


Book Received and Reviewed

Songs of Rabindranath Tagore

Selected and Translated by Shafi U. Ahmed



Sahitya Prakash,
Dhaka:, 2010
Hardback (printed on heavy Art paper), xvii, 220 p,
Price: 800 Taka
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Review by
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Translating Rabindranath's songs into English is a daunting task by all means, but is a worthy effort because they contain some of the most profound of his ideas. Tagore had himself confessed that his songs were his passport to eternity and the gamut of his songs cover issues like spirituality, ecology, love, patriotism and human emotions. Shafi U. Ahmed's finely produced book brings a selection of 220 songs of Tagore in translation with a glossary attached. Before one looks at the translations, the aesthetic production of the book deserves special mention. The quality of the paper and the beautiful illustrations are complemented by the presence of the Bengali original and the English translation. This allows us enjoyment of the lyrical original and a critical assessment of the translation.

The translations are reasonably competent. The author notes the difficulty of translating the verses into prose, breaking the lyrical appeal and rendering much of the imagery and pattern as abrasive. The author also correctly problematises the breaking down of single lines into different sections as per the demands of the Target language.

Certain translations appear awkward primarily due to the choice of syntax. 'Sakhi Bhavana Kahake Bale' is translated as 'You, all my Dears, what is unhappiness.' 'What is known as the aching of the Heart' could probably have been rendered more freely as "Dearest, what is unhappiness like? What is the pain of the aching of the heart like?"

Aguner Paroshmoni (rendered as “Let the fire of your forge / touch upon my heart) would sound better as “Let your fire / Touch my heart. However the bulk of the translations do successfully capture both the depth and the beauty of the songs.

Ahmed's book has its values both for readers who are aware of Bengali and situated outside it. For foreign readers, it provides a glimpse of the range of Tagore's creative genius. The randomness of the selection is a problem though. Classification under certain broad themes could have made the process of reading easier and would have alerted the reader of the various nuances of the same theme in Tagore's songs. For Bengali readers the translations offer critical perspectives to reading Tagore's songs and therefore interpreting the songs differently.

Shafi Ahmed's book is a valuable addition to the corpus of Tagore's translations. Aesthetically produced, it reflects the sensitivity and deep commitment of the author to engage with the appeal of Rabindrasangeet. My little daughter has monopolized this book- she admires the pictures, hums her favorite songs and wonders whether Tagore's songs could ever be sung in English translation!

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