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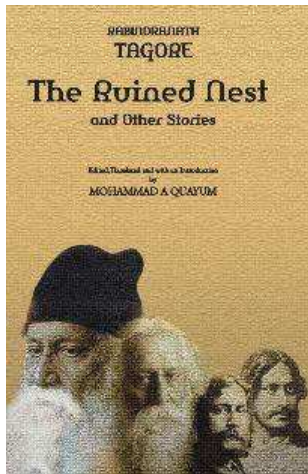
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Book Review

Rabindranath Tagore: The Ruined Nest and Other Stories

Trans. By Mohammad A. Quayum



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Reviewed by
Angshuman Kar
University of Burdwan, West Bengal, India.

Mohammad A Quayum's Translation of Tagore's Short Stories: Mangoes for Mangoes

The renewed interest in Tagore after the celebrations of his 150th birth anniversary across the globe has produced a treasure house of works on Tagore. *The Ruined Nest and Other Stories*, a collection of the translations of the twenty short stories of Tagore, by Mohammad A. Quayum, is a new addition to that treasure. The book not only has twenty of the representative stories of Tagore but also a brief biographical essay and a very insightful introduction, both written by the translator-editor Mohammad A. Quayum. In international academia, short stories of Tagore have not yet received proper attention, if compared with his poetry, novels and essays. This timely publication fills in a vacuum in Tagore studies and underlines Tagore's contribution in shaping what was an infant genre at Tagore's time in Bengali literature.

The book begins with a biographical essay on Tagore. When researchers have written volumes after volumes on the life of Tagore and yet have not been able to capture such a great life in its totality, it is understandable how difficult it is for anybody to capture Tagore's life in ten to twelve pages. Seen from this context, Quayum's biographical essay on Tagore is a remarkable achievement. It has been able to provide the readers with a few important lenses through which Tagore could be seen. The essay could also be a very good introduction to a new reader of Tagore. Quayum has focused on some important events of Tagore's life in order to re-situate him not simply as an author but also as a philosopher-cum-activist. The essay has rightly pointed out the many-sidedness of Tagore's personality as well as the paradoxes and the inconsistencies which were the hallmarks of such a personality. The best thing about this essay is its attempt to read Tagore's life not as the life of a sage but that of a human being. Tagore's mysticism and his indebtedness to the spiritual heritage of India have been duly mentioned but have not been

overemphasized. In fact, Quayum's mention of Tagore's mysticism and spirituality, in no way, overshadows Tagore's *karmodyog* (activities). Quayum has consciously tried to re-construct the image of Tagore as a *karmodyogi* (a man of activities), which he indeed was. In a life of eighty-one years, Tagore did so many things which a government or an institution, and not an individual, is expected to do. Quayum has rightly highlighted Tagore's establishment of a university, *Visva-Bharati*, at Santiniketan and his decision of introducing a chair of Islamic studies and a chair of Persian studies at *Visva-Bharati* to strengthen Hindu-Muslim unity. Tagore, indeed, was one of those intellectuals of his time who knew that lip service could not change the reality—ideation must be properly backed up by action.

The introduction to the book is equally well written. Quayum has briefly mentioned the causes and the circumstances that led Tagore to write short stories, addressed the debates amongst the critics on these stories and has also identified some of the basic features of Tagore's short stories. Tagore wrote his first short story "Bhikharini" in 1877 and then continued to write stories in a slow pace. As a short story writer, he got a momentum during what is known as the 'Shelidah period' of his career (1890-1901), the time which he had to spend in looking after the family estate in Bangladesh (then a part of undivided Bengal) to comply with his father's order. In fact, Quayum has also rightly pointed out that the introduction of a new monthly magazine by the Tagore family, *Sadhana*, of which Tagore was initially one of the chief contributors and later the editor, and famous scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose's consistent encouragement helped Tagore in writing as many as fifty-nine short stories during the Shelidah phase. Most of these stories are realistically set in rural background and are about the hopes and miseries of the poor rural people. Quayum is also right in pointing out that Tagore's stories are realistic in nature and in rejecting the claim of those critics who questioned the authenticity of Tagore's representation of rural Bengal in his short stories. Tagore's realism, however, Quayum does not forget to mention, is not derived from the Western models of realism; his realism, rather, is tinged with a shade of impressionism—it goes beyond photographic descriptions and factuality. As a writer, Quayum also emphatically states that Tagore could not be pigeonholed. Tagore's concern for the common people, for the social, economic, psychological, cultural, economic and political issues of the then Bengal, is quite evident in his short stories and is well noticed by Quayum. Quayum has also rightly highlighted Tagore's use of humour in his short stories, a feature of his writing which often remains overlooked.

The twenty stories chosen by Quayum are all well-known stories, some of which have been translated by some other well-known translators of Tagore. The task of translating these stories was not easy for Quayum. But one must admit that he has done a fairly good job. Nirendranath Chakraborty, one of the leading poets of post-Tagore Bengali poetry who began his literary career in the 1940s, often uses a narrative to prove the validity of the old Latin dictum *traduttore traditore*. Chakraborty says that once, someone, by placing an order for a basket of mangoes in home delivery, received a basket of apples. Translation is like this. It will always deliver a basket of apples, if the reader asks for a basket of mangoes. In Quayum's translation of Tagore, however, the readers do not get apples in place of mangoes. This does not mean that Quayum has gone for a word-for-word translation and has not taken any liberty as a translator. As a translator, he has taken that much freedom which makes those readers (like me) who have read these stories in original feel that they are reading Tagore (and not Quayum) and those who are reading these stories for the first time feel that they are tasting good quality fresh mangoes. As a translator, Quayum has indeed done justice to some of the great short stories of Tagore like "The Postmaster" (*Postmaster*), "Assets and Debts" (*Denapaona*), "Kabuliwala" (*Kabuliwala*), "Subha"

(*Subha*), “Punishment” (*Shasti*), and “The Ruined Nest” (*Nastanirh*). These stories are as enjoyable and impressive in Quayum’s translation as they are in their original forms.

In his translation, Quayum has retained a few Bangla words in their original forms and has also used footnotes wherever needed. This has definitely helped him foreignize the stories and maintain their culture-specificities. The footnotes used for the names of the main characters in “The Ruined Nest,” however, look odd. This even looks inconsistent with what Quayum has done elsewhere. There are stories (such as “Assets and Debts” and “Subha”) where the meanings and significances of names are appended to the names themselves in such a natural way that these appendices look very much parts of the main stories. Thus, in the beginning of “Assets and Debts”, Nirupama becomes “Nirupama, the inimitable one” and Subha in the beginning of “Subha” becomes “Subhashini—‘she who speaks pleasantly.’” Something of this sort could also have been done for “The Ruined Nest.” Footnotes for names like ‘Bhupati’ and ‘Charu’ really look odd and as notes added not by a translator but by a critic. Similarly, since Quayum has retained a lot of Bengali words in his translation, one wonders why he has replaced ‘Baba’ by ‘Father’ in “Kabuliwala,” particularly when in the same story he has retained a lot of other Bengali words? One might also ask whether it would have been better to retain the original title of the story “Shubhadrishti” and to add a footnote on the word instead of translating it as “The Auspicious Sight”? The translation of the very famous last word—*moron*—uttered by Chandara in the story “Punishment” as “Hell” might also not satisfy those readers who have read the story in the original. The book is almost free from the printer’s devil. There are very few printing mistakes indeed, but, one of them has become costly. In the footnote against the title of the story “Punishment,” *Shasti* has become *Shasta*! There is also no explanation for the change of the font in the beginning of the story “Sacrifice.” Finally, one last word on Quayum’s selection of the stories. Quayum has indeed chosen some of the best stories of Tagore and has also let us know the criteria for selection. Other than “Kabuliwala” and “The Ruined Nest,” he informs us, “the stories selected for this book are set in rural Bengal and delineate the humble life and circumstances of the rural folk living their commonplace life, often plagued by hardships and poverty.” Despite this logic, one wonders whether any collection of Tagore’s short stories—particularly a collection in which a significant number of stories have focused on not only the plights of the poor rural people of Bengal but also those of the women folk—is complete without *Strir Patra* (“The Wife’s Letter”), the story that gave a new direction to the issue of women’s emancipation. Inclusion of *Strir Patra* in this collection could really have been the jewel in the crown.