Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Short Stories translated and introduced by Mohammad A. Quayum (New Delhi: Macmillan, 2011)

Amidst a number of publications commemorating the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore, Asia’s first Nobel Laureate in Literature (1913), Mohammad Quayum’s translation of Tagore’s short stories from the Bengali original deserves especial mention. Quayum’s brief, succinct biographical essay and comprehensive introduction set up the context to these nineteen stories of myriad variety, written across a range of time (1891-1941). Quayum’s careful selection confirms that Tagore was indeed the ‘Master Poet’ (Kaviguru) who virtually pioneered the short story genre in Bengali literature during the late nineteenth century.

The predominant context of the selected stories is late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonial Bengal. Tagore’s patriotism is evident in his vivid portrayal of the landscape of rural Bengal, its sights and sounds, culture and custom. However, the selection is also significant in illustrating the ways in which Tagore subtly transcended the bordered context of Bengali life and culture to articulate his humanist philosophy of the fundamental values of self-respect and co-existence of humankind. Written with a tinge of pathos, or subtle humour and irony, the stories assert Tagore’s empathy for the poor and the downtrodden, his disapproval of gender hierarchy and caste discrimination, and his opposition to the narrow utilitarian pursuit of the material at the expense of truth, creativity, morality and spirituality. Consequently, characters such as Ratan (The Postmaster), Nirupama (Assets and Debts), Hemanta (Sacrifice), Chandara (Punishment), Balai (Balai), Kamala and Habir Khan (A Woman’s Conversion to Islam) exemplify Tagore the reformist who relentlessly argued against societal inequalities and injustices.

Though written more than a century ago, Tagore’s stories could not be more relevant to a twenty-first century readership. His vision of synthesis and intercultural alliance offers a panacea to our contemporary world riddled with factionalism and fundamentalism. In Quayum’s words:

Tagore believed in a dialogic, interactive world, in which communities and nations would bear a deep sense of sympathy, generosity and mutuality towards one another, and shun exclusivity, parochialism and idolatry of geography for a centrifugal outlook, principle of universality and reciprocal recognitions. (xxiii)

Translations are often criticised for failing to transport the delicate cultural and linguistic nuances from the source language to the target language. One of Tagore’s creative innovations was to change the literary medium from formalism to living speech, to experiment with the natural rhythms of spoken Bengali. Quayum’s translation of Tagore’s stories is exceptional in its retention of the subtleties of Bengali expression. It not only transfers the colloquialisms commonly used in a daily Bengali household but brings alive the minutiae of the rural milieu, be it the innocence of Ratan (The Postmaster) and Mini (Kabuliwala), or the quarrelsomeness of the poor, illiterate housewives, Radha and Chandara (Punishment).
The other outstanding feature of this volume is Quayum’s success with translating what is more complex – the intricacies of human relationships. We particularly note, for instance, the delicacy of the translated script that suggests the understated relationship between the child Ratan and the Postmaster in Tagore’s gem-like story, The Postmaster. It is with quite unusual craftsmanship that the inner radiance of this story is retained in the translation, in the poignant revelation of a child’s innocent longing for love and belonging against adult (ultimately, life’s) indifference.

Generally, the stories read almost as though they had been written originally in English. At no moment does the reader get lost in the translation, either linguistically, culturally or psychologically, and this surely is the ultimate test of a translation. Footnotes that explain Bengali cultural mores, customs and habits enhance the value of this volume for a wide global readership. This is a book that deserves a secure place in local/international, community/tertiary libraries as well as in private collections.

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