The Problems of Translating the Nonsense of Sukumar Ray

Riya Dutta

Research Scholar, Rabindra Bharati University

Abstract: *This paper explores the challenges of translating the nonsense literature of Sukumar Ray, a prominent Bengali writer, into English. Before delving into the specific issues of translation, the paper first provides an overview of the characteristics and definition of nonsense literature, which is often associated with children's literature but disrupts traditional conventions and logic. Drawing from the works of literary critics such as Sir Edward Strachey and Susan Stewart, the paper examines how nonsense literature achieves a deeper harmony of life by subversively playing with common sense and creating new ways of making sense. The paper then discusses the influence of English nonsense writers such as Lewis Carroll on Sukumar Ray and the development of a hybrid genre of nonsense literature in India. Finally, the paper examines the challenges of translating Sukumar Ray's nonsense literature, which often contains cultural references and wordplay that do not easily transfer to English. Overall, the paper highlights the complexity and nuance of translating nonsense literature and suggests potential strategies for addressing these challenges.*

Keyword: Nonsense Literature, Translation, Sukumar Ray, Bengali Nonsense, Language

This paper is about studying the problems of translating the nonsense of Sukumar Ray in English language. Before going into that discussion we would like to see what nonsense in literature is. There has always been an inclination to put nonsense within the bigger domain of children's literature. Nonsense literature generally introduces a different world altogether and in that world all the impossible and improbable occurrences take place. But those occurrences cannot be explained with logic. Actually, the fact isthat nothing in the land of 'nonsense' has the intention of making any rational 'sense'. Rather, nonsense disrupts the traditions and conventions of all sorts completely. Several critics have tried to define nonsense and there is not a single definition of literary nonsense. It is often the case that something can best be defined when it is compared to something contrary. The opposite of nonsense is 'sense'. Sir Edward Strachey in *Nonsense as a Fine Art* writes, "Sense is the recognition, adjustment, and maintenance of proper and fitting relations of the affairs of the ordinary life" (515). Sense indicates the five senses that help an individual grasping what is happening around him. But Sense also gives to man a consistent advisement of understanding, and so it is also often termed 'common sense'. But if the 'sense' can be defined thus, then the 'Nonsense' can be defined as well. Strachey did precisely this when he wrote that "In contradiction to the relations and harmonies of life, nonsense sets itself to discover and bring forward the incongruities within and without us" (Strachey, 515). In other words, if sense can explain the world rationally, nonsense indicates all the kinds of confusion and chaos that can be brought into the rational explainable world by making it upside down by "bringing them into all sorts of unnatural, impossible, and absurd, but not painful or dangerous combination" (Strachey, 515). But as Strachey notes, by doing so, Nonsense brings out "a new and deeper harmony of life" (Strachey, 515) through its contradiction. Now, let us explore how the "deeper harmony of life" is achieved through the contradictions offered by 'Nonsense' in a bit more detail. According to the structuralists, everything in this world has a particular structure—fashion, education, institutions, traffic signals, language, rituals, and even the society. Jacques Derrida first challenged this point of view

of the structuralists and used deconstruction to "play" or to throw away the structure / center. In doing so, he allowed ambiguities to enter and the structure/center concept is left with as many holes as a sponge. Susan Stewart in her *Nonsense: Aspect of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* states that the society needs nonsense because a structure can never be static since the society is a living, breathing entity and is even growing. She goes on to distinguish between nonsense and common sense and says that nonsense is a "decontextualized context" and so it is a language coming from, or lifted from common sense. Hence, nonsensical texts are a playful fiasco of games that usually subvert common sense. In order to explain the concept of game/play, Stewart also states that there are two levels of this theory of play. These are, firstly, common sense, and secondly, nonsense. She says that nonsense gets broken with common sense, "the absence of order and order respectively" (30). Nonsense is actually an activity of the disorganization and the reorganization of common sense. Michael Heyman also expresses the same view in*The Tenth Rasa*as he says that nonsense works not neglecting the rules and regulations of sense, but by subversively playing with them and this play goes on and on and in the end we discover ourselves walking in circles, realizing finally that the 'meaning' is in the journey, not in the destination. He also says that nonsense is a genre that is creative and destructive at the same time- meaningful and yet meaningless and he compares it to the god Shiva performing 'anandatandava' in his iconic manifestation asNataraja. Nonsense in this sense destroys sense and through this destruction comes the creation of new types of sense and new ways of making sense. This 'play' is not like some structured activity; it takes the responsibility of teaching rules even by breaking them. This is in contrast to what is reasonable and natural.

Literary nonsense carefully mixes the aspects of rationality and irrationality and in this way creates a jigsaw puzzle of language that is absurd in nature and is essentially illogical by using proper semantics and the rules of grammar but without any recognizable meaning. Language is something through which we perceive our reality. In the mid-nineteenth

century, English literaturebecame popular in India, especially in the English-influenced areas, like West Bengal and Maharastra. Writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Sukumar Ray and others read the English nonsense of Lear and Carroll and other English nonsense writers. It is for this reason thatSukumar Ray's *Haw-Jaw-Baw-Raw-Law* has a number of similarities with Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books. Influenced by Tagore and Ray, there came a host of writers who imitated Tagore and Ray. So, it became sort of impossible to segregate the English-influence from the native influence and the genre has developed as hybrid. But there are some characteristics which are common to both Indian and English nonsense and those characteristics are the characteristics of this genre in general. One such characteristic is its complex sense of subject matter and the audience. Indian authors of nonsense made their nonsense verses typically Indian by using references to Indian foods, festivals, family structures, culture, etc. For example, we can take a look atSukumar Ray's poem 'Indirections':

> Here's Jagmohan! Splendid! I'm all in a mess
> In looking for Adyanath's uncle's address.
> You couldn't have met him, but Khagen you know—
> Well, ShyamBagchi, Khagen's own uncle-in-law,
> Has married his daughter to Kesto, you see,
> Whose landlord's wife's cousin, whoever he be,
> D'you know where he lives? For I simply must run
>
> ('Indirection', 1-8)

Yet while some nonsense texts rebel against the English models, some of them show their Indian nature not through reaction but rather through assimilation. Satyajit Ray for example has observed a keen difference between Carroll, Lear and Sukumar Ray (and by extension, other Indians). He noted that whereas English nonsense has the tendency to keep its characters at a certain distance from the real world and real people, Indian nonsense, in the most cases, places its characters closer to the real people -- our own known world. But the question may be asked whether in India, which is a multi-linguistic country, can there be anything identifiably 'Indian' about the nonsense written in different Indian languages? SumanyuSatpathy in an essay titled*Tradition and Modernity in Indian Nonsense* has addressed this question perfectly. According to Satpathy, this question can be answered in two different ways, firstly, by analyzing how the genre of literary nonsense accommodates Indian realities because nonsense lives on the reality although sometimes by making fun of it, and secondly, by discussing what was there before the British nonsense influence came along and how that has changed. In using the first way, we need to understand what Indian reality is, as reality in India has been dismissed through the ages as 'maya' or the illusion. To many Indians, the unseen worlds of 'swarga'(heaven), 'narak'(hell), 'paataal' (underworld) are as much real (or unreal) as 'martya'(earth) with its sky, sun, air, changing season, people, animals, and a caste-bound society. Everything coexists alongside each other. "It is these signifieds which typify pre and post modern subcontinental realities and invite the description 'Indian'" (Satpathy, xliv).

WimTigges writes that the genre of nonsense is characterized by the "playful creation of a suggested reality from language and its logic, […] and the maintenance of an unresolved tension between meaning and non-meaning" (254). Sukumar Ray was obsessed with the word-play and language-games. In a letter to Edith Rex, Lewis Carroll expressed his views on the purely arbitrary nature of language and meaning thus:

> My view of life is, that it's next to impossible to convince anybody
> of anything [because] one of the hardest things in the world is to
> convey a meaning accurately from one mind to another.
>
> (Qtd. in Blake, 68)

there are several uses of puns and over-literalness of language in Sukumar Ray's *Haw-Jaw-Baw-Raw-Law* and in *Abol-Tabol.* In *Haw-Jaw-Baw-Raw-Law,* the narrator has a conversation with the Raven. The Raven asks the narrator to multiply seven by two. The narrator answers that two sevens are fourteen. But the Raven says that this is wrong, for: "Saatdugunechoddornaame char, haateroilo pencil" ("Seven times two is fourteen with four below and the pencil carried over as one") (Ray, 115). He mentions the pencil in his hand as if that is the right way of doing the multiplication correctly. The name of the goat here is said to be 'Byakoron Singh'. Byakoron means grammar in Bengali, but here the name is given to the goat only because he can call 'Ba'. The goat says that when he writes in English, he writes B.A. after his name, but it is not the Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) certificate that he means. Even the surname of the goat is 'Singh', is meaningful in a certain way. It is not only typical Punjabi surname, but also because 'singh' means horns in Bengali, and the goat has big horns. Here similar audible signs are used to create the nonsensical effect. Even the nonsensical songs of Nyara are full of puns and over-literalness of language. He sings the same line ten times before the narrator asks him whether there is any more 'pada' in the song. The narrator here means by the word 'pada' another line of the song but Nyara takes the word's different meaning as 'leg', and tells him that there is a different song with legs which he doesn't sing any more. After another song of Nyara, Hijibijbij comments that the song is very hard but the Goat only says that only the bottles in that song seemed hard, nothing else. Here Hijibijbij means difficult by using the word 'hard' whereas the Goat is thinking in terms of eating and for him hard means something not soft.

Nonsense somehow challenges the system, hierarchies, and binaries. In microcosm, it interrogates the binaries of sense and nonsense, meaning and non-meaning and in macro, it reflects the binaries of self and other, man and woman, nature and culture. Here I want to site an example from *Haw-Jaw-Baw-Raw-Law*: "Boyosh 26 inchi, joma 2 sher, khoroch 37 bochor" (209). These measurements at once suggest that everything going to take place hereafter would not maintain the statuesque. In translating nonsense, it is necessary to find the exact objective correlative in the target language; otherwise the translation would make no sense. If we look into the translation of SampurnaChatterji, we would find that she has translated only one song of Nyara. Other songs are not translated as they are non-translatable. There is a trial scene at the end of the book where a Crocodile is an advocate and he sheds tears. It is mentioned that he uses his nails to bring out the tears from his eyes. His tears are fake

tears- 'crocodile tears' is a figurative expression to signify fake tears. He begins to explain what type of suit is it. He says that this is a 'maanhaanirmaamla' and goes on to relate 'maan' to 'kochu' (arum) and goes on to tell that how many different types of 'kochu' there are and explains that the root of an arum tree is called 'kochu' and hence one should go to the root of that subject. The 'maan' used for its similar audible sound to signify respect on one hand and then a type of arum on the other hand. The root of the tree is related to the root of the subject of discontent. But if we look into the translation of SampurnaChatterji, we see that this part is translated thus:

> Therefore we must understand what a suit is. A suit is a case. Cases
> are very useful things. You get them in different kinds--- suitcases,
> briefcases, glass cases, spectacle cases, bookcases, etcetera! Suits
> are kept at the bottom of a suitcase; therefore it is essential that we
> get to the bottom of this case. (Chatterji, 32)

So, we can see that the translation is often getting totally different from the original text as the culture associated with the source language is often different from the culture of the target language. But in this case, we may say that the translation is acceptable because it has restored the ambiguity which was the purpose of the pun used in the original text.

Another example of translation between two different cultures can be addressed in the translation of "GanerGuto". In the original text, we find the line "Gaanjurechegrishmokaale Viswalochan Sharma." In translation of SukantaChowdhuri, we find,…. The problem is summer in Europe is not the same as grishmo is Bengal. So, it is impossible to perceive the irony intended here.

Ray's playfulness with language is also manifested in *Abol-Tabol.* For example, we can talk about the poem "Sabdakalpadroom" in *Abol-Talol* in which there is a line, "Phoolphotey? Tayee bolo, aamibhabipotka!" (Is it a flower blossoming? I thought it was a cracker). The word 'photey' in Bengali can mean both the blossoming of a flower as well as the sound produced by an exploding firecracker. Then comes the line: "Hurmur, dhupdhap---o kisunibhai re! dekhchona him porey, jeonakobaire" (Ray, 18). One is here cautioned against going out because the dew is falling in such a manner that it seems that the dew (heem) is something heavy that will hurt someone if he goes out. But the pun stretches to mean that one will catch cold by going out into the chilly weather. The continued use of onomatopoeic sounds is a special feature of this poem: "Durdar, churmar---ghumbhange koi re! (Ray, 18) Here 'ghumbhange' means to wake up from sleep but the word 'bhange' with the onomatopoeic sounds 'durdarchurmar' signifies breaking something solid like a glass door. In the same way, the moon goes down ('Chand bujhidubegelo') or drown with the sound "jhupjhapjho-paas!"(the sound of something sinking), pain rings ('kotobyathabaje re!') with the sounds "Thungthangdhongdhong" (the sounds of bells), and the heart breaks ('bukfatey') with the sound "fotfot" (the

sound of balloons bursting). When SampurnaChatterji has translated this poem, the essence of the playfulness of the language is lost.

We can see that though several translations of the nonsense of Sukumar Ray have been made, there has always been a gap and there will always be some gap because the politics of nonsense in the source language cannot always find the same room and relevance in the target language.

References

[1] Bharatmuni.*"On Natya and Rasa: Aesthetics of Dramatic Experience".* Trans. G. K. Bhatt. *Indian Literary Criticism: Theory and Interpretation.*ed. G.N. Devy, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2002.
[2] Heyman, Michael. "An Indian Nonsense Naissance". In Michael Heyman, Sumanyu Satpathy and AnuskaRavisankar, eds. *The Tenth Rasa: An Anthology of Indian Nonsense.* New Delhi:Penguin Books, 2007.
[3] Ray, Sukumar. *SukumarSamagra*. Sunil Jana ed. Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2014.
[4] ---, *The Select Nonsense of Sukumar Ray.*trans. SukantaChoudhuri. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987