

On the 'Otherness' of Tagore's Karna

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When a creative writer draws on a parent text, the chief interest of the descendant text lies in its departure from the source-material, primarily because the deviations result in 'transformation' as 'transcreation'. The present paper aims to see how Rabindranath Tagore, in his dramatic poem *Karna-Kunti Sambad*, reworks the very decisive discourse between Karna and Kunti on the eve of the great battle of Kuruskhetra. The crucial difference that surfaces in Tagore's, however, is not widely acknowledged but rather marginalised as an offshoot of the romantic poet's lyricism. Nevertheless, there are some critics who focus on the novelty and modernity of Tagore's Karna. Severally, they detect in the hero's utterances (i) an analogue of the European heroic spirit, (ii) the melancholy that smacks of Hamlet, (iii) the essential traits of Camus's Absurd Man. The paper collates these views as well as looking in passing at Tagore's own and others' English translations of *Karna-Kunti Sambad*, in order to re-read his reworking of a very significant episode in the *Mahabharata*.

The classical sources have always been for modern writers realms of gold to travel in. Shakespeare's use of his sources, Camus's treatment of the Oedipus story, Madhusudan Dutt's inversion of the canonical *Ramayana* - and a great many others - show how deviations become so crucial in transcreations. Harold Bloom would trace what he calls 'anxiety of influence' behind such transcreations; others might view them as products of cultural politics. I personally think that transcreations will go on for ever primarily because that is one way whereby the presentness of past can be made to surface in the face of the stern fact that 'poetry by definition is untranslatable', as Roman Jakobson puts it. If translation is unattainable, what then really goes on in the name of translation? Jakobson has a very perceptive answer: 'Only creative transposition is possible: either INTRALINGUAL transposition - from one poetic shape to another; or INTERLINGUAL transposition - from one language into another; or finally, INTERSEMIOTIC transposition - from one system of signs into another, e.g., from verbal art into music, dance, cinema or painting' (Jakobson: 238) (emphasis added). It may be argued that Tagore's treatment of the *Mahabharata* episode is an example of the first two Jakobsonian models rolled into one; his own English translation of the Bengali work is that of the second model; and the latest English translation (Kushari Dyson: 2002) of it answers to the second, although the translation was done to help achieve an intersemiotic transposition of Tagore's Bengali material.

In his dramatic poem, Tagore retains the basic situation as it is in the *Mahabharata* : Kunti, mother of the Pandavas, in a secret meeting, entreats her long forgotten and disowned son Karna to side with the Pandavas. Karna was the first born she bore the Sun God in her maidenhood and was soon abandoned by her for fear of shame. But as the mystery of life would have it, Karna is now a formidable ally of the Kauravas. The son - who is otherwise famous as a 'Great Giver' - turns the begging mother down, and he has his own arguments. Even so, Tagore's metatext has utterances given to Karna that mark him off from the Karna of the epic. The crucial difference that surfaces in Tagore's, however, is not widely acknowledged but rather marginalised as an offshoot of the romantic poet's lyricism. Nevertheless, there are some critics who focus on the novelty and modernity of Tagore's Karna. But before going into the critical opinions, it is necessary to take a look at some of the relevant passages in both the *Mahabharata* and Tagore's dramatic poem. For the English version of the epic I am falling back on Prof. P. Lal's translation (1977) which he himself ^{has} called 'transcreation'. In the original as well as in Lal's rendition Karna remains steadfast enough even to disobey the oracular voice of his father, the Sun God :

Karna heard a loving voice
issue from the distant disc. of the sun,
Surya speaking out of paternal affection :

*Kunti speaks the truth.
Follow your mother's advice, Karna.
Great good will come if you do so.*

But neither the words of his mother
nor the voice of his father
swayed firm-in-truth Karna from his resolve.

(Lal, 42-3)

Tagore left these sections out probably because he did not want to bring in a third voice in the mother-son discourse. He was writing a dramatic poem, and the generic difference necessitated the exclusion. But Tagore has made an inclusion as well, which is not there in the *Mahabharata* : the inner conflict that momentarily engulfs Karna. Let us first listen to the classical Karna's expostulations :

"Ksatriya Lady," Karna said,
I do not agree with you
that to do what you say is the door to dharma.

The way you behaved with me was highly objectionable,
Because of it,
I suffered, my dignity suffered.

Born a Ksatriya,
I was deprived of Ksatriya rites,
because you treated me as you did.
What enemy could have done worse ?

When I needed help,
you gave me none,
you deprived me of my *samaskaras*.
Now you need me,
and you come to me.

(Ibid., 43)

Further, Karna says he does not want to pass for a coward :

Who does not fear
the alliance of Arjuna and Krishna ?
If I defect to the Pandavas,
will they not say I did so out of fear ?

(Ibid., 43)

His being a sudden renegade may sound rather mystifying to others :

Till now, I had no brother.
If, on the eve of battle, I join the Pandavas,
What wil the Ksatriyas say ?

(Ibid., 43)

Finally, he says he cannot quit the Kauravas on grounds of loyalty and gratitude :

The sons of Dhratrastra have accepted me,
even offered me their puja.

* * *

How can I abandon them
Who have no other hope ?

Now is the time for Duryodhana's dependants
to show their loyalty ...

* * *

I have chosen the side of Duryodhana.
I will fight your sons
to the best of my ability.
I will not be untrue.

(Ibid., 44)

The 'otherness' of the canonical Karna tends to submerge in his community existence ; and, quite in keeping with the epic sweep, the collective gets the better of the individual.

It is interesting to note that Karna's final semi-satirical words to Kunti contained in the original *Mahabharat* are omitted in Tagore's transcreation. Karna, in the original, ironically consoles Kunti saying that she will always remain the mother of five because either he or Arjuna will die in the battle, and because he promises not to kill her other four sons. Karna's desire for a duel with Arjuna is a very important part of the reasons why he declines Kunti's invitation. Let me quote a couple of relevant lines from Lal's *Mahabharata* :

... I cannot obey your advice now,
But your request will not go in vain.
I promise not to kill on the battlefield
any of your sons whom
I have in my power to kill.

* * *

I will kill Arjuna, and enjoy
the fruit of success ;
or Arjuna will kill me,
and that will be a glorious end too.

(Ibid., 45)

Basically, then, the classical Karna has four reasons to decline Kunti's ardent call (Sengupta : 1993) : (1) she abandoned him to hide her marks of shame, (2) to join the Pandavas at this hour might be misconstrued by people, (3) the Kauravas have honoured him, and now it is his turn to repay, and (4) to kill Arjuna or to be killed by him would be equally heroic. And this four-fold argument is advanced in a language which is rather ruthless.

Now, let us see what happens in Tagore's *Karna-Kunti Sambah* which he himself later translated under the title *Karna-Kunti*. It must be mentioned in passim that Tagore's English prose translation fails to catch the poetic nuances of the Bengali dramatic poem. Nevertheless, both the Bengali original and the translation do present a Karna who is rather unlike his epic counterpart. Even random samples from Tagore's poem vindicate the difference. Upon Kunti's cryptic self-disclosure, Karna softly says -

I do not understand : but your eyes melt my
heart as the kiss of the morning sun melts the
the snow on a mountain-top, and your voice
rouses a blind sadness within me of which the
cause may well lie beyond the reach of my
earliest memory.

(Das : 304)

When Kunti says that he has his own God-given right to his mother's love, an infantile emotion overtakes Karna :

... your voice leads me back to some primal
world of infancy lost in twilit consciousness.
However, whether this be dream, or fragment of
forgotten reality, come near and place your right
hand on my forehead.

(Ibid., 305)

An inner conflict, absent in the epic, follows :

... why should the voice of the mother of my
opponent, Arjuna, bring me a message
of forgotten motherhood ? and why should
my name take such music from her tongue
as to draw my heart out to him and his brothers ?

(Ibid., 306)

Novel indeed is the way Tagore subjects the son to a temporary submission :

Yes, I will come and never ask question, never
doubt. My soul responds to your call; and the
struggle for victory and fame and the rage of
hatred have suddenly become untrue to me,
... Tell me whither you mean to lead ?

(Ibid., 306)

Whereas the Karna of the *Mahabharata* takes great umbrage at Kunti's invitation, Tagore's Karna gropes for a lost matrix. It is not that Tagore's Karna does not hold his mother responsible for making him homeless and sub-altern; but he does so in a rather mellow voice :

Then why did you banish me ... ? Why set
a bottomless chasm between Arjuna and myself...?
You remain speechless.... Only tell me why you
have come to-day to call me back to the ruins
of a heaven wrecked by your own hands ?

(Ibid., 306)

The mother entreats the son to forgive her :

Let your forgiveness burn her heart like
fire and consume its sin.

(Ibid., 307)

Look at the transposition here - especially the image of consumption by fire. (Fire as purifier is typical in Tagore : 'আগুনের পরশমণি - ছোঁয়াও প্রাণে, এ জীবন পুণ্য করো দহন-দানে')
More importantly, Karna's immediate reply is replete with sympathy :

Mother, accept my tears !

(Ibid.)

This is a different Karna for whom the quest for identity suddenly supersedes other community concerns like friendship, loyalty, gratitude and cowardice - the things that the Karna of the *Mahabharata* values so much.

The critical debate that Tagore's portraiture of Karna has occasioned primarily centres round Karna's final words to Kunti. We may note that the sombre beauty of those words as they are in the Bengali original are greatly lost in Tagore's own prose translation. The crucial passage in Bengali is as follows :

... এই শান্ত স্তব্ধ ক্ষণে
অনন্ত আকাশ হতে পশিতেছে মনে
জয়হীন চেষ্ঠার সংগীত, আশাহীন
কর্মের উদ্যম - হেরিতেছি শান্তিময়
শূন্য পরিণাম ।

(Tagore : 403)

as specimens of Camus's Absurd Man. If it is, then we must agree that the voice of the Absurd Man was first heard in the *Mahabharata*, and that Tagore was giving us only an intralingual transposition of that by-gone voice. And not only Camus. The myriad-minded man's Karna and Kunti can perhaps be subjects of Freudian, Women and Subaltern studies.

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Was reading your books. Your mythical poems are really superb. When are you going to complete the series ? Draw on the Mahabharata a few more. Once I requested you to write about Karna. We are awed by the divine figure of Vishma, but we sympathise with Karna's imperfect life. We are naturally driven to a character whose life remained rather accidentally incomplete, a character in whom the fire of the battle between magnanimity and pettiness never quenched - a man who might have been hailed as a god - a warrior whose defeat is nobler than triumph itself.

(quoted in Pal : 239) (my translation)

Tagore probably did not forget Bose's lyrical prose. The fact that another master-mind of Bengal at the turn of the last century was keen to see Karna transcended perhaps supports my contention that Tagore's Karna may be viewed as a product of a post-colonial consciousness.

Another point I would like to make is that the final glimpse that we have of Tagore's Karna does not add anything unique to his oeuvre. *Karna-Kunti* was the last of the series which included *The Mother's Prayer*, another well-known dramatic poem. It is indeed interesting to see how the Mother, that is, Gandhari, dips into futurity with a prescience not unlike Karna's :

Darkness will shroud the sky, earth will tremble,
wailing will rend the air and *then comes the silent
and cruel end, - that terrible peace, that great
forgetting, and awful extinction of hatred -
the supreme deliverance rising from the fire of death.*

(Das : 282) (emphasis added)

Finally, one might argue that the putative modernity of Tagore's Karna's prescient utterance fades away once it is recalled that in the *Mahabharata*, the Karna-Kunti discourse is preceded by the Krishna-Karna discourse wherein Krishna tells Karna of the latter's buried past and requests him to join the Pandavas. But despite the disclosure, Karna declines Krishna's invitation as firmly as he does Kunti's. There, too, Karna repeatedly reveals his prescience of the abysmal futility awaiting him and the Kauravas. It is important to remember that many of the great characters in the epic do possess the faculty of prescience and are aware of the great waste to come. I am not sure, whether their prescient awareness of hopeless venture, triumphless endeavour or peaceful nothingness alone is enough to show them up

is finishing his late morning prayers by the Ganges Tagore transfers the meeting to the glow of twilight deepening into a starlit night. The softer setting is more appropriate for Tagore's purpose of highlighting the human emotions. Also in the epic, Karna does not really learn about his birth for the first time from Kunti. Krishna has already told him the details before Kunti has had a chance to do so, and in any case, Karna seems to know the essential facts already, what Krishna says being merely a confirmation. Tagore, interested in making a different kind of audience impact, makes Karna hear about who his natural mother is from her own mouth, thus making the encounter much more meaningfully dramatic. At the same time, Tagore's Kunti, more of a Victorian aristocratic matron, is too embarrassed to reveal the actual details of how she had conceived him out of wedlock, whereas in the *Mahabharata*, both Krishna and Kunti relate them to Karna in a matter-of-fact manner in keeping with the mores of the old epics.... Tagore's treatment is more psychological : Karna is humanized to suit the tastes of Tagore's own times' (Kushari Dyson : 1).

✓ In 1993, Prof. Bhabatosh Dutta writes in *Desh* (the most popular fortnightly in Bengali) - "There is not much difference between the Karna of *Karna-Kunti Sambad* and that of the *Mahabharata*, despite the subtleties of Rabindranath's poem" (quoted in Sengupta : 13) (my translation). This view has been forcefully challenged by Ranjit Sengupta (1993) a couple of months later. Before we discuss Sengupta's view, let us refer to the other extreme, namely the opinion of Nirad C. Chaudhuri. In his 1991 article on Tagore, he holds that Rabindranath's *Karna-Kunti Sambad* is entirely different from the source material. Of the last words of Tagore's Karna, Nirad C. Chaudhuri remarks - 'No warriors of the *Mahabharata* or the *Illiad* could have uttered such words. What Rabindranath gives to the lips of Karna is in fact the utterance of the European heroic spirit - from Charlemagne ... to Napoleon...' (Ibid., 14) (my translation). Chaudhuri's idea is novel in that it locates Tagore in Eurocentric tradition. Unfortunately, however, he does not go into details enough to support his point.

Prof. Pramathanath Bishi (Ibid.,) detects in Karna's final words a kind of melancholy that smacks of Hamlet. Bishi probably has in mind the rather fatalistic Hamlet of the 5th Act, who has now come to believe that 'There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow... ', 'The readiness is all...', and finally, 'The rest is silence'. But it should be recalled that in the long mother-son discourse in the closet scene, Hamlet does not at any moment look like Tagore's Karna. This apart, the religious undertone of Shakespeare's play needs be taken into account while venturing to compare Hamlet with a pagan warrior, however filtered through a modern mind.

Tagore's English paraphrase of the lines is rather bland :

Peaceful and still though this might be,
my heart is full of the music of a hopeless
venture and baffled end.

(Das : 308)

I am yet to get around to looking at Aparna Sen's and Mukul Sharma's transcreation of Tagore's *Karna - Kunti Sambad* (see Lal's dedication in 1977), but I am sure Kushari Dyson's translation gives us a greater feel of the original :

This quiet, unruffled hour
from the infinite sky a music drifts to my ears :
of effort without victory, sweat of work without hope -
I can see the end, full of peace and emptiness.

(Kushari Dyson : 5)

And so does Ranjit Sengupta's unpublished one :

In this still and silent hour,
comes to me from the ethereal sphere
the music of triumphless endeavours and hopeless labour,
And the end is revealed in peaceful nothingness.

Nevertheless, the ultimate feeling that Tagore's *Karna* gives vent to is wholly absent in the *Mahabharata*, but is central to Tagore's re-working of the episode.

Edward Thompson (1948 : 168-71) was indeed one of the first critics to highlight the difference between the canonical figure and Tagore's re-working of it : 'There it was a tale, here it has become very much more Nothing can surpass the tenseness of this picture, of two souls, one agonizing for the love which her act had forfeited, and which she would give everything, even her reputation, to recover, the other poised and prepared for the finish he knows at hand He is Achilles knowing that his doom must be accomplished' The latest commentary on Tagore's re-working comes from the well-known bilingual writer Dr. Ketaki Kushari Dyson who in 2000 translated (published in 2002) in full Tagore's dramatic poem written exactly a hundred years ago. This is how she in the "Translator's Note" notices the differences between Tagore and his source : '... Tagore takes details from two contiguous sections of the "Udyogaparva" of the *Mahabharata*, a dialogue between Krishna and Karna, and a dialogue between Karna and Kunti, to make a new composite story of an encounter between a fostered son and a long-lost natural mother In the *Mahabharata*, Kunti meets her first-born son when he

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A very illuminating appraisal of Tagore's Karna comes from Mr. Ranjit Sengupta of Raiganj College, West Bengal. According to him (1993), Tagore's Karna in fact reveals the essential traits of Camus's Absurd Man. Sengupta concludes that Sisyphus' 'Hopeless Labour' can be equated with Karna's prescience of 'hopeless venture and baffled end'. Because Tagore's Karna is an Absurd Man, his strength lies in his refusal, and his 'triumphless endeavours' become 'music' and the end peaceful. 'One must imagine Sisyphus happy', writes Camus. Sengupta too wishes us to imagine Tagore's Karna happy. Basically, then, Sengupta's contention is that in Tagore's re-working of the *Mahabharata* episode, Karna's ontological quest should be considered very crucial.

In collating these views, I have tried to support the generalisation that deviations constitute transcreation. It should be noted that Tagore was writing in a different genre altogether - a NATYA-KABYA or 'dramatic poem'. This is a genre where the dramatic and the lyrical are fused into one. The inner conflict we see in Tagore's Karna is mainly due to the pressure or demand of the dramatic narration or, in other words, due to the way the dramatic episode has got to get told. The sombre yet peaceful prescience of Tagore's Karna answers to the lure of the lyricism which is part and parcel of the kind of genre Tagore was handling.

It can also be argued that Tagore's re-presentation of the canonical Karna typifies the post-colonial tristesse during the Raj. Just remember what Bibhutibhusan writes in *Pather Panchali* (1929) about how Apu's romantic imagination responded to Karna's predicament :

Of all the characters in The Mahabharata Apu liked the character of Karna most. The reason was probably that he always had a great but unexplainable compassion for Karna.... He would often gaze at the far-off solitary banyan tree dimly lit by the hues of the setting sun, and suddenly a causeless, nameless sadness would engulf him. Apu would somehow sense that somewhere under the sky far beyond that banyan tree, Karna was still trying his best to lift up the sunken wheel of his chariot - everyday and always Apu saw him doing the fateful act.

(Banerjee : 29) (my translation)

Viewed from the angle of post-coloniality, Madhusudan's Meghnad and Tagore's Karna may be grouped together. It is perhaps worthwhile to remember that how Tagore should depict Karna was suggested to him by his friend the scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose. I reproduce here a part of Bose's letter to Tagore written on 20 May, 1899 :