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Analyzing Sukumar Ray's nonsense verse 'Haans Chilo Sojaru' as a political instrument and the relevance of its transcreation to English

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Abstract: Owing to their unique word plays and idiosyncrasies, nonsense poems written in a vernacular language are thought of as 'untranslatable' by several critics and writers. This paper foregrounds the subversive political potential these verses exhibit, in particular discussing Sukumar Ray's 'Haans Chilo Sojaru,' and how a literal translation is neither required nor appropriate to relay the writer's core motivations. Additionally, this paper locates the natural intersections of two different English translations of 'Haans Chilo Sojaru' and analyses their social and political implications within colonized India.

Keywords: Translation, Transcreation, Nonsense Verse, Colonial Literature

M. H. Abrams typifies nonsense verse as a kind of light verse and while defining the term, unflinchingly prefixes it with the word "children's." As evidenced by this, nonsense verse has often been considered loosely

synonymous with children's verse, a subgenre of children's literature. As the term nonsense implies, a straightforward reading of these verses affords them a limited scope wherein they are characterized solely by an absence of sense or logic. A close reading with reference to the socio-political milieu of the time, however, is capable of uncovering for and hence, alerting the reader to the preoccupations such a poem deals with in its entirety. In this paper, I will seek to explore Sukumar Ray's "nonsense" poems politically as a parody of sense and convention within the context of colonialism. Further, this paper will attempt to analyze 'Haans Chilo Sojaru' from Ray's 1923 collection of poems titled *Abol Tabol* as a nonsense poem and argue why, owing to its contextual elements and objective, a transcreation of the original would've served more suitably in comparison to its literal translation in English.

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In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Abrams defines light verse as “a term applied to a great variety of poems that use an ordinary speaking voice and a relaxed manner to treat their subjects gaily, or playfully, or wittily, or with good-natured satire,” and places within this great variety a subvariant now recognized as a Victorian specialty- the nonsense verse. This “apparently meaningless ramble [1]” with topsyturvy creatures and invented words serves as an imagination builder for children but seeks to achieve a wholly different purpose when looked at through an adult’s lens. Carrying immense power of subversion by its ability to evoke laughter, nonsense verse naturally disrupts traditions by plunging one into new, dynamic and never before imagined realities. The genre favors the development of the improbable and irrational, challenging the Enlightenment idea of the thinking being as the sole possessor of truth. By introducing absurd and mythical creatures navigating through their own struggles, nonsense verse offers an alternate space where voices that do not belong to the mainstream can be heard and the rational approach of the rational being can be questioned.

As the style of writing is approached in different ways by different writers, the latter part of Abrams’ definition which

notes “The subjects need not be in themselves petty or inconsequential; the defining quality is the tone of voice used, and the attitude of the lyric or narrative speaker toward the subject,” is key to specifically understanding Sukumar Ray’s take on nonsense poetry. Unlike Carroll’s gibberish and Shakespeare’s mad talk, what makes Ray’s verse nonsense is not its unintelligibility but rather its treatment of the struggles of its characters-- lightly, as if they were nonsense. It highlights and ridicules the futility of human endeavors by dissolving the seriousness of identity in both, his poems that are loaded with hybrid creatures, and his readers laughing as a collective.

Though having acquired a Western education himself, Ray’s writing is notably pregnant with anti-colonial sentiments. He is extremely critical and weary of the *Babu* culture that had resulted as a by-product of the Bengal Renaissance, most of the creatures in his poems displaying an overt sense of dissatisfaction due to their new hyphenated identities. Satyajit Ray’s English translation of ‘Haans Chilo Sojaru’ titled ‘Stew Much’ presents the formerly “nice contented cow” now in “frightful shock” while the newfound unhappiness of the whale is “obvious.” Detached from their roots by the

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creation of an unfamiliar divided self, both the animals become anxious to find a sense of belonging. Conflicting desires prevail throughout and the poem uses fantastic creatures to provide an oblique lens of viewing reality as opposed to one that “takes away from its sense,” as nonsense literature is commonly accused of.

Departing from the classical methods employed by Carroll in his poems like ‘Jabberwocky,’ Ray’s nonsense universe is rather defined with an identifiable political motivation governing it. By introducing his own invention of a “Porcuduck” as the “beastly conjugation” of a duck and a porcupine, the writer plays with the idea of the arbitrariness of nomenclature. But rather than promoting a space for the reader to immerse and therefore lose himself in this fluidity of language, a distraction from one’s political investment, he directs them by illustrations and sharply outlined character traits. His portmanteaus are explicit and unambiguous, and lack the scope for subjective interpretation as they differ vastly from Carroll’s “brillig” and “mimsy.” It would therefore, have been more accurate for anyone trying to translate Haans ChiloSojaru to try and communicate its underlying political sentiments rather

than getting lost in trying to do it linguistic justice.

According to Amira Osman’s definition, translation is the mental activity of transferring the meaning of linguistic discourse that exists in a source language to the target language. This definition of translation, in addition to most others, inherently relies on the presupposition that there *exists* some meaning within the source material which must be passed on. But that is hardly, if ever, the case with nonsense verse, making it incompatible with these attempts at “transference of meaning” via translation. The very underlying principle, or a lack thereof, driving nonsense verse which dictates its construction in a way to derive pleasure out of the absence of sense (or meaning) is by definition misaligned with the ultimate objective of the act of translation.

It was therefore that Satyajit Ray consciously opted for a transcreation of his father’s poems rather than translating them exactly. The writer with a nuanced literary and linguistic sensitivity towards both languages would’ve well understood how a precise translation of the nonsense poems might lead to the destruction of their essence. The internal rhymes, rhythms and idiosyncrasies in *Abol Tabol* were part

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of a larger Bengali culture which couldn't, and in the writer's opinion shouldn't, have been transmitted into a foreign language. The focus therefore, was necessary to have been placed on trying to intimate the English reader with the writer's message, but in a language and context he was acquainted with.

Sukanta Chaudhari on the other hand, attempted an ambitious literal translation of the Haans Chilo Sojaru into English. On reading this translation, one can't help but wonder what purpose it serves. Filled with words like "savannah" and "usurped" Chaudhari's 'Hotch-Potch' is exactly that- hotch-potch. Owing to its complex vocabulary and certain concepts such as "schizophrenia" young readers must necessarily be unfamiliar with, it ceases being a children's poem. Additionally, by dismantling the pieces of Ray's carefully constructed puzzle and trying to *explain* its workings and meanings to the English reader, the translation also does a disservice to the spirit of poetry itself. It runs the risk of exposing Ray's subtle play on words and ideas to an excessive degree, and remains wanting in revealing the political ideology that lies at the core of the poem.

But it becomes interesting to note the points where the translations intersect

almost naturally and exactly. For the English reader with no knowledge of the original sentiment conveyed in the source language, the imagery and underlying emotion of dissatisfaction that is shared by both translations becomes telling. Ultimately, each animal considered more valuable by convention seeks to change its form, "refusing to roam in its ancestral savannah." This also signifies a questioning of the status quo, heavy in phrases like "Why should I go for walks in grassy fields, now that I can fly?" with the coming of the British and Western education. The "noble" cow, an age-old religious symbol of peace in India, has now been "usurped" by some designing cock- a clear analogy where the cow (that is noble, contented and morally superior) signifies the Indians overthrown by the British. The violence expressed by the word "usurped" too is in direct contrast with the cow as a symbol of ahimsa.

"Stewing" into merged identities, which evidently "is too much" for them, even the novel creatures of 'Stew Much' do not seem to lose their essence in Satyajit Ray's version of the poem- it's very title serving as a pun. Loaded with wordplay that relies on the neural correlations a reader is capable of making due to his vocabulary of the language it is originally written in,

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nonsense verse is typically thought of as “untranslatable.” But Sukumar Ray’s verse, though filled with alliteration and Bengali idiosyncrasies, seems to transcend this linguistic border in its English translation by Satyajit Ray. It successfully maintains its irreverent attitude towards the characters, which as discussed above is paramount to its distinguish ability as nonsense poetry, without losing its immediate charm as a children’s poem. With a disjunction of head and body, Ray’s “Stortle” and “Whalephant” flip the idea of the Gods seen in Indian mythology, satirizing the sacrosanctity of the established and the accepted.

Additionally, each of the new entities that materialize in ‘Stew Much’ must be understood as a combination of a weaker, more wanting beast finally unified with one of superior qualities. The more conventionally majestic, towering giraffe paired with a grasshopper- known to operate furtively in the thick of the night seems to be one such aware (and alerting) choice. Previously “going for walks in grassy fields,” the giraffe with its newly developed limbs of a grasshopper now finds itself too proud to maintain its former bond with the land it has always tread and thrived upon, its false sense of complacency stemming from the fact that “it can now fly.” The stork is seen

to call the turtle “pretty” along with itself, trying to flatter and establish within the latter a feeling of solidarity and oneness so as to gain its own selfish cause. It is no coincidence that popular for its scheming and deceptive nature through the Panchatantra tale of ‘The Stork and the Crab[2],’ the writer picks out a stork to articulate these manipulative ploys- the choice seeming so yet far from arbitrary. Laid out consciously by the writer, the descriptions of these newly formed “corporations” can be read as a sardonic critique of the Bengali Intelligentsia which has forgotten the glory of its own nation and values and in its stead desperately seeks an illusionary status by becoming the loyal employees of the exploitative (and culturally inferior) colonial administration[3].

Sukumar Ray’s nonsense therefore, with “no factor of magic or marvel to justify its impossibilities [4]” is unapologetically and successfully serious literature. His writings emerge to parody the falsity in contemporary society and puncture the seriousness with which it is viewed, all through the medium of light-hearted laughter made accessible to him by the inherently nonsensical tone of his poems. His power as a political writer is both the cause as well as effect of the style of

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writing he employs, his nonsense verse itself acting as a site for resistance.

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[1]Maiti, 2016, 444;

[2]<https://www.tell-a-tale.com/stork-crab/#:~:text=The%20stork%20laughed%20and%20pointed,the%20stork%20fell%20down%20dead>.

[3] Chakraborty, 2015, 103;

[4] Bhattacharya, 2015, 513;