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Transcultural Translation Experience:

On Translating Yasunari Kawabata's *Snow Country* into Bengali

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1. Introduction

This paper reflects on my experience as a Bengali translator of Yasunari Kawabata's novel, *Snow Country*.¹ I would like to share the extent to which a translator's awareness of being a bearer of Bengali identity impacts on his or her choice of a work which he or she intends to translate.² Literary works have been translated in Bengal since the time English was introduced here by the British colonial rulers in the middle of the nineteenth century. English is still taught as a compulsory subject in primary and secondary levels of education. Therefore, translation from non-English sources has been relatively rare. So, what prompted me to translate Kawabata's *Snow Country*? And what issues have I encountered while translating the novel? Further, what implications of my translation do have for the Bengali readers, especially female readers? In this paper, I have attempted to answer these questions from the experience that I gained during and after translating the novel.

Literary exchange between Japan and Bengal is considerably old. The culture and literature of these two nations got particular visibility to one another with the visit of the first Asian Nobel laureate in literature, Rabindranath Tagore to Japan. Tagore (1861-1941), a Bengali poet, novelist, essayist and lyricist, first visited the country in 1916—altogether he visited Japan three times. Yasunari Kawabata (1899-1972) was sixteen-year old when he saw Tagore in Japan. He was fascinated by the appearance of the “sage-like poet” who gave him the impression of “some ancient Oriental wizard”.³ Tagore was able to form a literary circle with a number of Japanese writers. He frequently exchanged letters with his Japanese friend Yone Noguchi (1875-1947); the two writers debated Japan's status as the most promising country in Asia, its role in the continent and the world, and even Japan's rising nationalism. Tagore put his Japanese experience in his famed travelogue, *Japan Jatri (A Traveller to Japan, 1919)*, and also in many essays and letters. He was impressed by the immense progress made by Japan, a country that was pursuing modernization vigorously without

¹ Yasunari Kawabata. *Snow Country*. Translated into Bengali by Mamunur Rahman. Dhaka: Kobi Prokashani, Feb. 2023.

² Bengali is spoken as a mother tongue in Bengal encompassing Bangladesh and India's state of West Bengal, also in some parts of India's Assam and Tripura.

³ <https://twitter.com/NobelPrize/status/1390197896268627973>. Access: 2 March, 2023.

losing its ‘Oriental’ root. Tagore wrote: “And Japan, the child of the Ancient East, has also fearlessly claimed all the gifts of the modern age for herself.”⁴ He saw in Japan a model for the rest of Asia.

Since that interaction initiated by Tagore, the Bengali literary circle has demonstrated an immense interest in Japanese culture and literature. Most of the Bengali educated people are familiar with the names of Japanese Haiku and Noh drama. Bengali poets often took attempt to write poems after Haiku structure. Tagore himself translated several Haiku into Bengali, which evoke “a queer reaction among the general reading public in either West Bengal or Bangladesh.”⁵ Modern-day Bengali educated people are more or less familiar with the names of Ryunosuke Akutagawa, Yasunari Kawabata and recently Haruki Murakami among others.

However, books by the Japanese authors are relatively rare in West Bengal and Bangladesh, and not many people have command in the Japanese language. Facilities for learning Japanese are limited—there are a few institutes, or programmes at universities, that offer basically elementary Japanese courses. It is seen that Bengali students who go to Japan for higher studies learn Japanese as part of their programmes or from personal liking. Resultantly, Bengali readers often come to know Japanese literature through English translations, which too are not that much available. Besides a few translations directly from Japanese, a few other Bengali translations of Japanese literary works via English translation have recently been published by some academics.⁶ Selected short stories of Ryunosuke Akutagawa and a couple of novels such as those of Haruki Murakami have been translated and published. As for Kawabata, apart from my translation of *Snow Country*, there is no known published Bengali translation of his novels, although he is one of the best known Japanese authors in Bengal and, by now, *Snow Country* in English translation has been included in the syllabuses of the literature departments of several universities.

Noticeably, incorporation of Kawabata into the syllabuses is part of the recent trends of decolonising English studies. In the Indian subcontinent, introduction of English was part of an ideology building project by the British colonisers.⁷ The syllabuses, featuring Shakespeare, Milton, and other mainstream British writers, were designed to inject colonial values. The scenario persisted even in the post-colonial period. However, several decades after the British quit the Indian subcontinent, there has been a paradigm shift in the literature departments, resulting in the modification of the syllabuses with the inclusion of courses on postcolonial literature and world literature. As part of this initiative, Kawabata and, in some cases, Natsume Soseki found their place

⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, “The Message of India to Japan.” Lecture. The Imperial University of Tokyo. Taisho V (1916). <https://www.u-tokyo.ac.jp/adm/utindia/content/000001665.pdf>. p. 7. Access: 9 Apr. 2023.

⁵ <https://terebess.hu/english/tagore5.html>. Access: 9 Apr, 2023.

⁶ Khaliqzaman M. Ilias, for example, published Bengali translation of Akutagawa’s selected short stories under the title *Rashomon* in 2006.

⁷ See Gauri Viswanathan. *The Mask of Conquest*. Eds. Bill Ashcroft et al. *Postcolonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 1995. p. 435.

in the syllabuses of some literature-oriented university departments.

2. The background of my translation of *Snow Country*

I went to Japan as a Monbukagakusho: MEXT research scholar in October 2007. During my Osaka stay, I collected both the Japanese version of *Snow Country* (雪国) and its English translation by Edward G. Seidensticker.⁸ I also studied criticism on Kawabata and his works, along with the history of Japanese literature. On my return to Bangladesh, I intended to translate the novel into Bengali. I had studied Japanese first at Dhaka Japanese Language Centre, then at Osaka University. I had to read and write essays in Japanese under the supervision of Professor Yoshio Ise of the Graduate School of Language and Culture at Osaka University. I embarked on translating the novel based on whatever knowledge of the Japanese language I had mastered during my stay in Japan, along with Seidensticker's English translation of *Snow Country*.

3. Issues involved in translating *Snow Country* into Bengali:

While translating *Snow Country* into Bengali, I have encountered a few issues that seem to be typical of the translators whose mother tongue is Bengali. The first issue lies in tense identification. Both Japanese and English narratives use clearly recognisable past tense, but Bengali narrative usually uses present tense to indicate the event of the past. For example,

		English translation
Japanese	「国境の長いトンネルを抜ける と雪国であった」	The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country.
Bengali as I translated	ট্রেনটা বিশাল সুড়ঙ্গের ভেতর থেকে বরফের দেশে বেরিয়ে আসে।	The train comes out of the long tunnel into the snow country.

The next issue is finding exact equivalence. In my search for the Bengali equivalence of Japanese expressions, 'word for word' translation did not prove practically feasible because of the gap in signification system between the two languages, and, therefore, 'sense for sense' translation proved to be an option. Often I have faced problem in finding a Bengali equivalence to correspond to the exact meaning of the word of the source language. For instance, I have translated the Japanese word 杉 as 'দেবদারু', in Japanese Katakana, 「デブダル」. I am quite aware that the Bengali word does not express the exact image of what the Japanese word signifies, as no Japanese cedar is grown in this part of Bengal, while its close equivalence 'দেবদারু', which is also a species of cedar (*Polyalthia longifolia*), is quite familiar to the Bengali readers. Therefore, the dynamic equivalence

⁸ Edward G. Seidensticker, trans. *Snow Country*. New York: Knopf, 1956.

of the word seems feasible to me as it stands close to the original. Similarly, I have translated 芸者 as ‘বাইজি’, in English, ‘baijee’. To the Bengali readers, a baijee is traditionally familiar as a dancing and singing girl, she is:

. . . a professional dancing girl and singer of olden times. Bai means a specially groomed artist girl and jee is the honorific suffix. Baijees arrange cultural parties at their own households or are invited to darbar-mehfils (courts) on different festive occasions to entertain audiences with dances and songs for remuneration. In the past, emperors, nawabs, kings, princes, zamindars and high officials were patrons of baijees who were invited to their family parties, garden house parties, private pleasure cottages, and pleasure trips.⁹

Baijees had to learn Indian classical dance and songs. There were many baijees who were influential in court circles. Therefore, the word ‘baijee’ meaning a female dancer and singer is a near-equivalent of Japanese 芸者. In this way, the aim of my translation practice has been to make Bengali readers go closest to the original.

Again, Bengali speakers frequently use English loanwords in Bengali expressions—many of them are so frequent that they become part of the Bengali lexicon. While translating *Snow Country*, I have appropriated many such English words within the Bengali expressions. The following table shows instances of this appropriation:

Japanese	English	Bengali translation
駅長	Stationmaster	স্টেশনমাস্টার (Stationmaster)
信号所	Signal stop	সিগন্যাল স্টপ (Signal stop)
髪結い	Hairdresser	হেয়ারড্রেসার (Hairdresser)

4. Reception

In recent years, foreign books in Bengali translation have considerably dominated the annual Ekushey Book Fair that takes place in Dhaka for the whole month of February—study shows that the demand for translated books has increased by 50% in the last five years.¹⁰ The general readers, many of whom do not have access to the original books in foreign languages, see it as a gateway to the world literature. However, choosing a literary work from a non-English source for translation purpose is a matter of self-choice from the part of the translator. In my own case, I started translating

⁹ <https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Baijee>. Access: 16 Apr, 2023.

¹⁰ “Translation works big hit at Amar Ekushey Book Fair.” *Dhaka Tribune*. 20 Feb, 2023.

Snow Country from my conviction that many Bengali readers knew about the popularity of the novel along with the novelist. Also the experience told in the novel corresponds to a certain extent to the experience that might be found in many Bengali novels.

Snow Country tells the story of Shimamura, a wealthy Tokyo resident, who has inherited a lot of money. He neglects his wife and family, and travels to the north for adventures. There, he forms a relationship with Komako, a hot-spring geisha. However, Shimamura does not believe in any deep relation, he can appreciate anything including women, literature or mountains on the surface only. Initially, Komako is employed in exchange of money to give company to Shimamura, but later she happens to love Shimamura genuinely. Shimamura sees another girl Yoko first in a train on his way to the hot spring. Komako and Yoko seem to be locked in a jealous competition over Shimamura's love. The novel ends with an accident in which Yoko is fatally burned, and Komako braves the fire to rescue her.

Shimamura's extramarital relation with Komako bears some resemblance to many other works in contemporary Japanese literature—*The Wild Geese* by the novelist Mori Ogai (1862-1922) and Kawabata's another novel *Thousand Cranes* deal with the subject of a married man maintaining and supporting a mistress. Also, it has its resemblance to the one-time baijee culture of Bengal. Baijees were originally a part of the north Indian urban culture, but they happened to show up in Kolkata (Calcutta), the then capital of British India, by the second half of the nineteenth century when British colonial policy produced a class of wealthy and pleasure-loving gentlemen. In Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, the baijee culture flourished in the 16th century Mughal period and continued till the first quarter of the 20th century.¹¹ There was a general perception among people that baijees were responsible for the ruin of family relation and family wealth—"Excessive attachment to baijees marred the family life of many elite people. They drained their wealth on them."¹² Bengali literary works and films often portrayed a wealthy businessman from a remote part of Bengal who left his home on 'business' errand and spent time in the city with a kept woman who was often baijee. Therefore, stories of extramarital affair with courtesans are not unknown to the Bengali readers.

While baijee culture is essentially urban in nature, in West Bengal and Bangladesh there is a folk art called 'yatra' or 'jatra' which is primarily rural. It is an open air night-time theatre staging religious or folk themes and alternates between acting and dancing.¹³ Jatra is performed by a group of actors and dancers who virtually form a troupe, travelling in different places of rural Bengal on hire. Known for its elaborate costumes, jatra is "the most popular regional theatre form in the rural

¹¹ <https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Baijee>. Access: 16 Apr, 2023.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ <https://www.britannica.com/art/Jatra>. Access: 22 March, 2023. However, the appeal of this art form has been on the wane since the 1990s due to the rising popularity of satellite TVs and internet-based entertainment.

areas of Bengal”.¹⁴ The dancing part is performed by professional female dancers—many of them are also called ‘bai’ or ‘baijee’. These dancers usually hail from the lower rung of the society and remain vulnerable to the amorous approach of some wealthy man. Komako in *Snow Country* primarily corresponds to this second type of rurally-oriented dancers and singers. To find Yoko’s resemblance in Bengali culture, thousands of Bengali poor girls work as housemaids either in the house of wealthy persons or in hotels, doing daily household chores or odd jobs. These women are also vulnerable—news of their suffering and oppression often appear in the Bengali dailies.

Therefore, what do the Bangladeshi female readers think about the novel after they get acquainted with it through this Bengali translation? The answer to this question seems to rest partly in the social tradition of Bengal. Once polygamy was permitted in Bangladesh—here polygamy means having more than one wife, mixing outside marriage was usually frowned upon or often socially punished even if it happened by mutual consent. However, at present polygamy is legally restricted, with monogamy taken as the norm. This factor seems to be reflected in the Bengali female readers’ perception of Shimamura’s relationship outside marriage. I happened to contact several Bangladeshi female readers who I knew had read this Bengali translation of *Snow Country*. They seemed to detest Shimamura’s extramarital relationship, finding in it the typical male behaviour in a patriarchy. I am quoting here one such response by a female reader who posted her comment in Facebook in Bengali which I have translated with her prior permission:

The love triangle between Komako, Yoko and Shimamura is the main thrust of the novel. Both of the female characters hail from marginalised social position, they come out with their distinguished traits and are driven by the delicate emotion of their heart. Their aesthetic attitude and taste would certainly attract any reader. Yet the policy of monogamy of the present social system and the modern value system contradict the flow of events in this novel. The female characters are passionate but lack the sharpness of personality. The central male character of this novel is nothing but a member of the traditional male-dominated society. Shimamura enjoys both at home and outside but does not have deep feelings for anybody. He is responsible for the indescribable sufferings of the female characters.¹⁵

In other words, Komako and Yoko become pawns at the hand of the patriarchy represented by Shimamura. Other female readers I have contacted seem to hold the same opinion about Shimamura’s relation to Komako and Yoko, which brings about tragic outcome in their lives. Bengali female readers certainly know many such situations from their reading of Bengali novels.

¹⁴ James R. Brandon, ed. *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre*. Cambridge University Press, 1997. p.89.

¹⁵ Ismet Jerin Khan. Facebook post. <https://www.facebook.com/ismetjerin.khan>. 15 Apr, 2023.

For instance, in the novel titled *Vishabriksha (The Poison Tree, 1873)* written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894), the father of modern Indian novel, Kunda the housemaid has to respond to the approach of Nagendra who is the head of the family. However, unlike Shimamura's, Nagendra's wife Suryiamukhi is assertive and careful. She clearly states that she will not tolerate this liaison, and she abjures the house in protest. The stalemate is settled only after the suicide of Kunda. This type of situation involving a vulnerable girl approached by a male, which finally ends up in her expulsion or suicide features in many Bengali novels.

5. Conclusion

Japan's first Nobel laureate in literature, Yasunari Kawabata saw and admired Asia's first Nobel laureate in literature, Rabindranath Tagore who was a Bengali with genuine interest in Japan. *Snow Country* is recognisably Kawabata's masterpiece which has been translated in many languages. Bengali people have deep interest in Japanese society, culture and literature. Through this translation of Kawabata's *Snow Country*, I have endeavoured to acquaint Bengali readers with Kawabata's worldview which has been deeply ingrained in traditional Japanese landscape, people, art, culture and philosophy. I have got spectacular responses from the female readers of this Bengali translation, who find in the novel a patriarchal world that is not significantly different from the one-time social reality of their own.