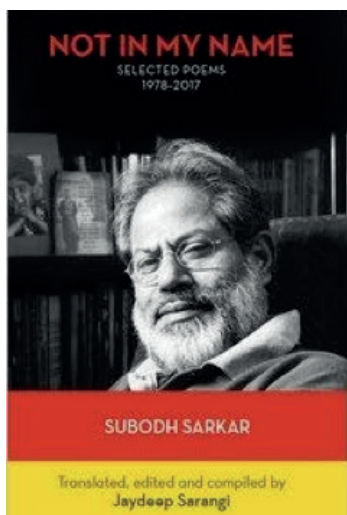


 This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0

Amit Shankar Saha

Not in My Name: Selected Poems 1978-2017 (Subodh Sarkar)

Subodh Sarkar. 2018. Not in My Name: Selected Poems 1978-2017. English trans., ed. Jaydeep Sarangi. New Delhi: Authorspress, pp. 220, INR 395, ISBN 9789386722256



http://www.authorspressbooks.com/book_detail.php?preference=1367

Quoting poems of Rabindranath Tagore, in his book *An Acre of Green Grass*, Buddhadeb Bose writes about the difficulties of translating poems from Bengali into English. He writes that often a language may give in to be translated when it is in the prose form but the difficulty to do so in poetry form is always greater. This is especially so in the case of a language like Bengali which is sonorous and has certain words which are repeated to convey a sense. Also the source language may have certain expressions that will have no equivalence in the target language. While translating poetry the translator also has to keep a keen ear for sound – the rhyme and rhythm of a poem. So, to take up a task of translating the poems of Sahitya Akademi Award winning Bengali poet Subodh Sarkar was no mean challenge but Jaydeep Sarangi successfully took it up and produced a fine collection of English translation of Sarkar’s selected poems written between 1978 and 2017 titled *Not in My Name* published

by Authorspress, Delhi. But to be true, not all the translated poems in the volume are by Sarangi. Although he is the principal translator and compiler and editor of the book, other translators of the poems in this volume are Fakrul Alam, Swapan Chattopdhyay, Carolyn Brown, Sanjukta Dasgupta, Ashesh K. Chatterjee, Subho Chatterjee, Kalyan Dasgupta, Sharmila Ray and Subodh Sarkar himself, all of whose translations have earlier appeared in *Route Map 25*. The book also consists of an essay "Poetics of Resistance: Locating Subodh Sarkar's Poetry of Power" by Koushiki Dasgupta, and a conversation between Subodh Sarkar and Jaydeep Sarangi.

In the foreword to the volume Professor Sanjukta Dasgupta writes that Subodh Sarkar's poems are "pleasantly translator friendly as the minimal use of ethnic literary idioms, metaphors and a scholarly vocabulary, deliberately avoided give the poems a free flow, like everyday colloquial speech that Robert Frost, the American poet had described as the 'spoken rhythm' in poetry" (10). In fact she points out at the onset a special quality of Sarkar's poems due to which I believe they yield easily to English translations. Dasgupta writes:

In an interview Subodh had stressed that many of his poems were anecdotal, but just because they tell a story is no reason why one should regard them as falling short of the poetic. After all the story-poem since the beginning of the oral tradition and even during the early time of scripting and publishing, prioritized the telling of an anecdote, in a particular style, with particular use of rhetoric and prosody. The epic poem tells a complex story that has universal significance, the poems that do not have an epic scale however can also have a significance that bridges the home and the world, addressing the macro and the micro real politick, in a holistic and aesthetic crystallization of ideas and imagination (7-8).

It is this anecdotal quality of Sarkar's poems that yields them successfully to translation into English. In fact one of Sarkar's poems titled "Story" translated by Jaydeep Sarangi speaks for itself where he acknowledges the anecdotal nature of his poems thus the poem itself can be used to augment the argument further:

Young poets exclaim: Why are you telling a story?
Who has not written a story? Isn't 'Banalata Sen' a story?
Such levels of adjustment are not decent for a poet
I claim, stories are there, throughout our lives, stories will be there (48).

In his translator's note Sarangi writes that most "of his poems are collage of ideas effortlessly streaming from lived moments of creative zeal [...]. He reminded me the literary, social and political tradition of Pablo Neruda, Nicanor Parra, Roberto Bolaño and other leading Chilean poets" (13). Perhaps it is this Latin American tradition of writing poetry that influenced Sarkar more than anything else and which gave him the anecdotal quality of his verse writing. So, writing within the tradition of Bengali poetry but with the influence of literary traditions of far off shores Sarkar makes a kind of poetry that is accessible and meaningful not only in Bengali but equally in its translations in other languages including Eng-

lish. That is why Sarkar says in one of his poems that a poem is for everyone. Sarangi writes that the plan to translate Sarkar's poems came to him in one of their frequent meetings in Kolkata and he first selected fifty of Sarkar's poems from the volume *Srestha Kavita* for the purpose. He started following a pattern and later some more new poems were translated by him on Sarkar's suggestion. Sarangi also acknowledges that some of the poems in the collection "I found not easy for translation because of Bangla idioms which are culture and language specific. I made drafts and then revised at least for three four times to remain faithful to the text" (16). The realization for a translator that no translation is complete and final is crucial because poetry is about possibilities and that is what Sarangi points out importantly.

If we analyze Subodh Sarkar's poetry then it is quite clear that his poetry can be classified into two phases – the Mallika Sengupta phase and the socio-political phase. Subodh Sarkar was a lover and the advent of Subodh Sarkar and Mallika Sengupta in the Bengali poetry scene in the late 1970s was nothing less than phenomenal. The kind of poetry he wrote in this phase is distinctly different from the kind of poetry he writes now. Obviously, when we say this as a general statement we say this with exceptions. Subodh Sarkar lost Mallika Sengupta after twenty-five years of marriage. Take a poem like "Blind" translated by Sarangi:

If does a blind see
 I can see.
 If does a deaf hear
 I can hear.
 I open up the casket of my life
 I open up
 I open up
 &
 I continue to unlock two locks of your hair all my life (36).

It is both anecdotal as well as cryptic but the mystery is not in the language which is easily accessible and not a code to be deciphered in terms of *langue* and *parole*. There is definitely transcendence from the narrative to the abstract but this abstraction is done at the level of thought itself without any use of cultural idiom or linguistic symbolism. It is this ease of conveying certain ethos of life at the level of thought that marks Subodh Sarkar's poetry. It is not that he never uses symbolism. Take the poem "Something Happens" which employs the symbolism of the boat, the cloud, the womb and others culturally significant objects but these symbols are not obtrusively used and do not become impediments to the understanding of the poem. If there is any complexity in the poem it is at the level of thought itself. Let me quote the entire poem translated by Jaydeep Sarangi here:

Why do I feel strange when I come near your body?
 What happens?
 Like lightning, cloud gathers, a boat comes of the womb of cloud
 And the boat starts descending on the earth.

I moved out of your bode for several miles
 Even then I feel like something
 What happens?
 How can I describe that, everything cannot be put in words?
 Like lightning, cloud gathers, a boat comes of the womb of cloud...
 And the boat starts descending on the earth (80).

Even when he is intensely personal he is not abstruse. A few lines from the poem "Mourning and Honeymoon" translated by Sarangi will make it clear how Subodh Sarkar's poetry has a clarity of thought, simplicity in expression and yet convey a depth that is essential for good poetry. He has mastered the art:

We, the father and the son have lost a river
 We are unable to find a home
 The room we knew as kitchen
 Is now a drop of tear? Papers that we thought as rubbish
 Are Life Insurance (99, ll. 13-17).

The question that may arise naturally is whether it is the translator who is able to convey the thoughts in a simple manner which was not so in the original tongue. So, a few poems that are translated by other translators should also be taken as examples to prove the point. Let us take a Fakrul Alam translation from *Route Map 25*. This stanza from "How to be a Good Communist" conveys in all its simplicity a satirical truth that can be understood in any language:

Listen to birds sing – too many slogans
 Have clogged your left ear!
 Lower your Voice when you sing –
 You can make sense even if you speak softly.
 Don't worry about taking care of thousands of young men.
 Time for you to take care of your own young one! (111, ll. 8-13).

Another poem which can be compared with Sarangi's translation is the one translated by Swapan Chattopdhyay, "Blind", which conveys much the same without losing the original Bengali essence. It is very interesting reading the two translations together because I believe the Bengali original has certain idioms peculiar to the language and will not yield to translation easily. Perhaps the readers will be the best judge but there is no complaining in having multiple versions of the same poem in translation:

If a blind can see
 so can I
 If a deaf does hear
 So do I
 Now I am letting down your hair.

I'm letting it down
All my life (139).

It is a great advantage for Subodh Sarkar that most of his translators are themselves poets in their own right and thus they have the poetic temperament and understanding. Sarkar writes for the society and speaks for the people and raises issues of women, censorship, political callousness, and mocks the classes. He has a voice that is more attuned to the oral tradition than to being astute. But that does not mean he is simplistic and matters only at the surface. These lines from the poem "Mr. Sorrow" translated by Sharmila Ray deliver a profound depth of expression:

At times a girl comes and stands in my room
whether she is a tree or a sky-woman I cannot understand
She shows me a miniscule tablet and says:
eat it up, sorrow will vanish (164, ll. 6-9).

No doubt, that Subodh Sarkar is a poet who excels in reciting his poems and perhaps writes his poems with that intention too. He is a quintessential scop, a typical oral poet who will leave the audience wondering with what he says. Sanjukta Dasgupta translates a very colloquial poem "Hey You, Shut Up, Saala" and it ends thus:

Our mother
Is not a mother
Our Son
Is not a son
As if when we die it will not be called death (188, ll. 108-112).

But the discussion on Sarkar's poems in English translation cannot be complete if we don't take at least a few lines translated by Subodh Sarkar himself. Here is the middle two lines from the poem "Not in My Name" which becomes the pivot of the poem:

I will never again be in Delhi to buy [a] new shirt.
Delhi, my selam (202, ll. 8-9).

One does not need any knowledge of languages or linguistics to feel the pathos in these two lines. A poet is also someone who reacts to the injustices in society through his or her words and that is what Sarkar is doing here. Subodh Sarkar is a poet who needs to be heard because he has a voice and for those who cannot understand Bengali a translation of his works into English was much needed. It is this necessity that produced this fine book. This book will help poets from around the world experience his poetry better – poetry of the common people and of a poet who has the self-effacing temerity to say as translated by Sarangi:

I used to worry about poetry earlier, not now
Let me say a big word through my small mouth:
A poem should remain a poem at the end
[...]
I have realised, I am not a poet.
I am a cockroach ("Petty Words through a Petty Mouth", 71, ll. 119-127).

Amit Shankar Saha is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Seacom Skills University. He is also a widely published award-winning short story writer and poet. He has won the Poiesis Award for Excellence in Literature, Wordweavers Prize, Nissim International Runner-up Prize for Poetry, Kavi Salam Award amongst other awards. He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Griffin Poetry Prize. He is the co-founder of Rhythm Divine Poets and the Assistant Secretary of Intercultural Poetry and Performance Library. He is also on the Editorial Boards of many publications like *Ethos Literary Journal*, *Journal of Bengali Studies* and *Virasat Art Publication*. He has been a delegate poet at Apeejay Kolkata Literary Festival, Ethos Literary Festival and Sahitya Akademi. He has co-edited a collection of short stories titled *Dynami Zois*. His debut collection of poems is titled *Balconies of Time* and his second volume of poetry is titled *Fugitive Words*.
saha.amitshankar@gmail.com