

Translation and Reception of *Death of a Salesman* in Bengali: A Case Study

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Modern drama, rendered in different languages of the world through translation, finds itself relevant in newer lights, perspectives, and dimensions across the globe. Arthur Miller's (1915–2005) masterpiece *Death of a Salesman* (1949) has been translated into more languages than records could count if one considers the stage adaptations it has had in European and non-European languages. In India, stellar translations of the play exist in major languages like Hindi, namely *Salesman Ramlal*, *Ek Sapne ki Maut* and others, Urdu, Gujarati, Marathi and many others. However, the highest number of translations of this play is in Bengali, with translations by Ashim Chakraborty (*Jonoiker Mrityu*), Rudrapsarad Sengupta (*Feriwalar Mrityu*), Anjan Dutta (*Salesman er Songsar*), and 10th Planet (*Ekti Salesman er Mrityu*) and many more. This anecdote would seem a little unsettling at the onset since English and Bengali are placed at the two furthest corners in the tree of languages shown in Figure 1 (Young), making it more difficult than usual to translate from one language to the other. This distance is also significant for other Indian languages, but for Bengali, it surpasses the limits hitherto set by Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati and so on.

Therefore, one must begin with understanding the implications of translating any text from English to any Indian language, especially Bengali. Miller's *magnum opus* *Death of a Salesman* is no different. In a Bengali review of the play published in the April–May 1998 issue of the Bengali magazine *Proma*, Dilip Kumar Chattopadhyay takes free liberty to employ English quotations within the review, with an assumption that the readers who are reading a review of

an English play, would not require lines such as “the tragedy lies in the fact that he is crushed because of conformity” (52). This assumption allows us to understand the acceptance of the play in twentieth-century Bengal¹ (in English) and subsequently question the requirement and applicability of translating the play into a language whose linguistic tools, cultural capital, and social context are a far cry from the Source language (SL). Why were so many translations of the play done by stalwarts of the genre in Bengal?

MARXIST CONTEXT OF THE PLAY IN THE USA AND BENGAL

Death of a Salesman presents an uncompromising image of twentieth century America², informed by Capitalist discourse and its share of necessary evils. Willy Loman, the protagonist of the play, tries his wit's end to make ends meet, but to no avail. In the process of selling commodities in his daily routine as a salesman, it takes him the length of the play (catalysed by conversations with Biff and Linda Loman) to understand that society has commoditised him. His epiphany snatches from him his already dwindling will to live, and he submits to the Capitalistic trait of never having enough. Although it can be argued that the Loman family's resources were not enough to run a family in a world wrought with inflation, two decades had passed since the Great Depression of 1929. He aspired to sustain and never flourish, allowing him to perish away like weed or wildflower against the harsh, unkind wind of Capitalism. In the subdued submission, however, Miller inserts a caustic attack against such monopolisation of resources. Undoubtedly, the untimely death of Willy would allow the readers to wonder if Marx was right. Is the only way for mutual sustenance an upheaval that would overthrow the consumerist, capitalist set-up, to make way for a Socialist, Marxist way of life, where the reasonable redistribution of property, land and power to the likes of Willy would prevent them from giving up all hopes of prosperity, peace and providence?

Therefore, it is no surprise that this play would be utterly relevant in twentieth century Bengal, especially in the later decades. Marxism was booming as the dominant ideology of the time, with the rise of

the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which came to the throne in the Bidhan Sabha of West Bengal in 1977 for thirty-four years. To further illustrate how the ideologies of the United States of America and West Bengal were similar, in the essay "Mulling over Miller: The common man's crucible", Sudeep Ghosh envisages how "the common man seems to have the intimate knowledge of what it means to 'search' in the face of relentless oppression. Miller's common man is organically close to Indian sensibilities. Indian adapters of Miller have always been drawn to the common man" (n.p.). It was primarily during the years of the CPI(M) rule that two of the most significant Bengali translations of the play took place by Ashim Chakraborty and Rudraprasad Sengupta. Ashim Chakraborty's translation of the play, *Janaiker Mrityu*, performed only on a few occasions by the troupe Chaturmukh³, has been seemingly lost to time. Moreover, it is a matter of great concern that no record of the play's translated text exists with the troupe or in archives such as Natya Sodh Sansthan, Academy of Fine Arts, Bangiya Sahitya Parisad, and so on.

On 7th November 2015, *Anandabazar Patrika*⁴ published an article on Ashim Chakraborty entitled "Trivuj", where his translation of *Death of a Salesman* finds a mention:

Ashim wrote *Janaiker Mrityu* based on Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. It took the theatres by storm, as the tickets sold like hotcakes. The intelligentsia was taken by surprise as well. Basanta Cabin and the Coffee House murmured with praises of Ashim. Stalwarts like Sunil Ganguly, Shakti Chattopadhyay, and Purnendu Patri swarmed to recognise this talent. Be it Tennessee Williams' play or Neil Simon's, or that of Camus or Genet, Ashim owned it within a week.⁵

From this, it is clear that Chakraborty's rendition of the play was famous. Why was it then not carried forward for decades at length or archived in a book like Rudraprasad's work? One possible reason was Chakraborty's controversial lifestyle, which took away the last shred of his dignity and livelihood, according to the newspaper mentioned above article. Another reason could be the lack of commodification of this particular version of the play. Compared to

Nandikar's translation, one does not come across a single dedicated review of the play in any of the leading theatre-based magazines available at the Natya Sodh Sansthan. *Jonoiker Mrityu* fails to become a commodity in the Marxist sense of the term that would transcend the boundaries of space, time and context to stay relevant in a Capitalist society for decades.

RUDRAPRASAD SENGUPTA'S TRANSLATION AND ITS EFFECT

Translation as the tool of commodification in twentieth-century Bengal can be seen from many perspectives. Unlike *Jonoiker Mrityu*, *Feriwalar Mirtyu* succeeded in becoming a significant text outside the purview of the stage, making its way to the book *Collected Plays: Volume One* by Rudraprasad Sengupta. This book, available on the free website archive.org, was published by Saptarshi Prakashan in December 2002. The subtitle of the book, as shown on the copyright page, reads *A Collection of Five Adopted Dramas by Rudraprasad Sengupta*. The foreword to the play brings to the forefront a fascinating and compact summary of the history of translating this play into Bengali. As Rudraprasad Sengupta notes:

This play by Miller has been translated for the Bengali stage about three decades ago. Our friend, the late Ashim Chakraborty, had staged *Feriwalar Mrityu*. Towards the beginning of the 1960s, I had been to one of its productions, though I cannot recall much of it now. Currently, the subject matter of the play, in its innate sharpness and relevance to the current age, becomes more important than ever. That's why, we are doing it again. (190)

This increased relevance of the play has its roots in two facets. Firstly, the increased number of translations of European/American plays to suit the intelligentsia of late-twentieth century Bengal, which was going through a cultural Renaissance. In his book *Awakening: The Story of the Bengali Renaissance*, Subrata Dasgupta gives us a distinct and superlative history of this movement, from the likes of Raja Rammohan Roy to the twentieth century stalwarts like Satyajit Ray. In the later half of the twentieth century, the cultural interchange

between Bengal and the rest of the world had increased by leaps and bounds due to the improved standards of communications in terms of the popularisation of air mail, telegram, and instances of travelling to occidental countries. Therefore, one can notice more weekly or fortnightly magazines in West Bengal like SASS, Proma, Bohurupi, Gono Natya, Natyadal, and many more. These magazines had regular updates and reviews of plays translated from English and other European languages in their issues. Miller was no exception.

A Bengali essay entitled "After the Fall o notun Arthur Miller" (2005) gives us a list of Miller's plays that had been translated into Bengali till date. They are:

(*All my Sons*)—*Kalboishakhi*—Prantik Projojona—Bharatiya Ganamatya Sangha

(*Death of a Salesman*)—*Janaiker Mrityu*—Chaturmukh Projojona—Transcreated by Sadhana Mitra, Direction: Ashim Chakraborty

(*After the Fall*)—*Janaiker Mrityu*—Chaturmukh Projojona—Translated and directed by Ashim Chakraborty

(*The Crucible*)—*Aagsuddhi*—Chenamukh Projojona—Transcreated by Sudipta Chattopadhyay, directed by Ramaprasad Banik

(*Death of a Salesman*)—*Feriwalar Mrityu*—Nandikar Projojona—Transcreated and directed by Rudraprasad Sengupta

(*A view from the bridge*)—*Gotroheen*—Nandikar Projojona—Transcreated and directed by Rudraprasad Sengupta (95)

Death of a Salesman is the only play mentioned in this article twice. After the publication of the book (*Paschimer Natok*) containing this essay, at least two more Bengali renditions of the play have been made and staged. In addition to the canonical stature of the modern tragedy that it had attained within two decades of being produced and published, another significant reason behind its popularity in this part of the world was due to the inherent desire in Bengalis to rise the social ladder. In the art and literature of this time, this motif comes up in covert and overt ways through the avenues of characters, themes, or even settings.

In West Bengal, class consciousness became a parameter of discrimination and unification in the last few decades of the twentieth century. We did not have an American dream of rising through the ranks to ensure a better life for the next generation in the verbatim sense, but the hope of having a better tomorrow by sacrificing our today to menial labour was, like an effervescent spirit, looming the corridors of Bengal during this time. In a paper entitled "A wake-up call: Exploring the Gramscian notion of False Consciousness in the poems of Subhash Mukhopadhyay", I argued how "[t]he rift between the dominated and the dominators is a discourse which raises its ugly head in almost every academic discipline; and recent developments [...] have shown that what was apparently the dominated section in these spheres [...] have the potential to stage a return, which can, and in one of these dynamics, is called, the return of the repressed" (Basu 1). This rift made this play's popularity rise, irrespective of the audience's age, mentality and location. Rudraprasad, for instance, made the play a local by naming the characters Parbati and Amal, which are as quintessentially Bengali as Willy and Linda are American. The opening scene by Miller describes Linda as "most often jovial, she has developed an iron repression of her exceptions to Willy's behaviour—she more than loves him, she admires him, as though his mercurial nature, his temper, his massive dreams and little cruelties, served her only as sharp reminders of the turbulent longings within him, longings which she shares but lacks the temperament to utter and follow to their end" (Miller 38). Sengupta translates this almost literally in Bengali:

Prayoshi hashikhusi Parbati swamir beboharer dharalo dikguloke
protikriyaheen bhabe nitey sikheche kothorotomo songjomer sahajjye.
Swamir proti tar anubhab bhalobasar cheyeo boro—sroddhya pujar
nibedon mesha shei anubhab. Swamir sohojato obyebosthochittota,
tar mejaj, tar choto choto nirdoyota, tar swapner bishalottoyo, esob e
Parbatir kache Amal er gobhirtomo osthir tibrotaar chinho swarup. (191)

The difference in the languages and cultures comes forward when Sengupta translates Willy Loman's "Oh, boy, oh, boy" (Miller 2)

to “oma r pari na”. The latter saying is a familiar turn of phrase when anyone feels exasperated. The essence of the play is carried forward perfectly by Sengupta in his translation. There are almost no standardised reviews of Nandikar’s production of this modern tragedy, though it finds mention in nearly all of the famous Bengali magazines, newspapers and online portals whenever these platforms have been discussing Rudraprasad or Nandikar. *Dakbangla.com*, a recently popularised website, enlists this translation as one of his most significant works. Moreover, Sengupta’s version of the play was so popular that a website named *guruchandali.com* asks this question about it:

Why has *Feriwalar Mrityu* been staged on a priority basis against original plays for the last two/three decades? Is there a paucity of original content? Is *Feriwalar Mrityu* that great a rendition that people would be missing out on something if they do not watch it? Or do the funds from companies like Ford not flow in if such drawing room wonders are not showcased? (n.p.)

LATER TRANSLATIONS

If Sengupta’s translation captured the twentieth century market in Bengal, Anjan Dutta’s rendition of the play “Salesman er Songsar” made it big in the twenty-first century. In “When the Windows Opened: Communications through Foreign Adaptations on the Bengali Stage” (2013), Gautam Sen Gupta fails to mention this rendition of Miller’s play. He comments:

Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* stormed the stage as ‘Janaiker Mrityu’ by ‘Chaturmukh’ under the able direction of Ashim Chakraborty in the sixties. Rudra Prasad Sengupta revived the same as *Feriwalar Mrityu* under Nandikar, as well as his *A View from the Bridge* as *Gotraheen*. A more recent adaptation of Miller has been ‘Aagsuddhi’ (The Crucible) by ‘Chenamukh’ under the direction of Rama Prasad Banik. (5)

However, the impact of Anjan Dutta’s rendition is evident from the verisimilitude of reviews available on the internet. Before delving into them, one must question how and why a translated (rather re-

translated) play becomes so relevant and significant to a generation of millennials that multiple reviews ooze out of it. The internet is booming with articles about Swedish, Chinese, Spanish, Italian and other translations of *Death of a Salesman*, and a stark paucity of such articles about the Bengali translations of the play shows not-so-subtle favouritism of the European languages. While discussing this canonical work, Harold Bloom's *Critical Interpretation of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman* does not mention a single translation of the play, save the one instance when it was performed in Beijing.

The critical commentary and scholarship on this modern tragedy demonstrate an evident need for more focus on the translatability of the play in a setting and language like Bengali. Terry Otten points out how Miller "creates a naturalistic, almost Marxist view of American culture in the post-Depression era; some have reduced the drama to social determinism. And the truth is Miller does describe Willy as a childlike victim of the cultural values he adopts virtually without question" (95). This American culture made its way into not only the Indian population of Bengali-speaking and reading members but also Bangladesh. "Dhakai Anjan Duttaer natok *Salesmaner Songshaar*" and "Kamon holo Anjaner *Salesmaner Songshaar*" narrate the story of his play's performance in Dhaka. Moreover, the latter article provides a rather rudimentary summary of the play thus:

Bequeathed many awards, this play is all about the tragic end to the life of a salesman, Willy Loman. Willy believes financial upliftment is the only parameter of success in life. Subsequently, he becomes desperate to achieve that. His scintillating attempts fail at every avenue. This idea of failure finally leads to his anticlimactic death. In *Salesmaner Songshaar*, Anjan Dutta plays the role of Willy Loman. (n.p.)

In terms of translation, it is doubtful that Dutta has done anything extraordinary or out of the box. The set-up of Miller's original play is so homogenous with the dreams of middle-class and lower-middle-class people all across the globe that a translation of such an act fits perfectly with the scheme of things. One cannot help but recall the number of freelance salesmen and saleswomen we know

from our day-to-day life, making their living out of commissioned products, calling people daily with an ever-shrinking hope of someone allowing them to come to their homes. On the contrary, most buildings/apartment complexes have a 'Salesmen not allowed' signboard hung outside their uprising walls of difference. In an ever-competitive world, somehow, salesmanship became a profession of neglect. Although a large portion of the blame is to be put on salespersons themselves, the customers also become unnecessarily rude and mean to them on countless occasions.

After Dutta's translation, 10th Planet also staged a translation of the play as *Ekti Salesman er Mrityu*. In a review of the play, Aritra Dutta writes (translated here):

Never for once did this feel like a foreign play. It seemed close to home, quintessentially Indian. Most of the credit for this goes to lucid language. This play has been translated by famous theatrician Rudraprasad Sengupta and Anjan Dutta, but Sharanya Dey's (this play's director) translation is freer. In the previous renditions, the appropriations were played out safely. That is how Sharanya Dey managed to maintain his autonomy. (*Prohor.in*, n.p.)

This is the most recent rendition of the play and is a currently running version in the literary canon of Bengal. With their next show scheduled on April 10th Planet is all set to continue reminding the audience of the relevance of this play to the current scenario. Dey's play is a reminder that even in the twenty-first century and a post-pandemic world, we, as Bengalis, follow Kabir Suman's line, "Swapnogulo cherecho to koyek bochor age/Amar kintu swapno dekhite ajo bhalo lage" (n.p.), which roughly translates to "Though you have left your dreams, god knows when; I still love dreaming every now and then" (n.p.).

MARXIST UNDERSTANDING OF THE PLAY

As mentioned in the paper, the American Dream comes forward as a cross-continental ideology that links two cultures together. The sly critique of the Capitalist society that forces Willy to dream

big or surrender finds itself utterly relevant to the day and age of Post-industrial Bengal. The segregation of the masses into the three established classes allowed the nouveau riche to rise the social ladder on the back of the masses that had been driven into labour without love by the idea of False consciousness. Rather adamantly, Willy wishes to surpass the boundaries inflicted upon him by the dominant hegemonic discourse of modern American society, and when he fails to do so, he takes a decision that impacts no one. The fact that the world goes on just how it used to after the irrelevant Salesman's death is telling.

A Marxist understanding of any text has to make the hauntingly readers aware of the distinctions that inform the society we live in while not necessarily providing any solution to it. The global impact of this play, especially in Third-world Asian countries like India and China, where the work culture is drastically different from the United States, is evident from the array of translations that this play has seen in the last seven decades or so. As an ideological construct, Marxism might be past its prime, but its relevance of it in understanding social stratification, especially in the literary oeuvre of Miller with particular reference to *Death of a Salesman*, remains one of the most crucial assets that it has to offer.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, the trends in translating *Death of a Salesman* betray an eerie similarity in the setting of 1950s America and the last few decades of West Bengal, India. Moreover, the minor differences that inform the structural and linguistic differences between the English and Bengali versions of the play and within the various Bengali versions themselves could be primarily attributed to the artist's autonomy and the fundamental differences between Bengal and the United States. Despite these differences, Miller's seminal play became a text that the average Bengali intellectual got acquainted with, either through the multiple stage adaptations of the play for the last few decades or through the inclusion of the play in undergraduate or postgraduate syllabi of colleges or universities

in our homeland. However, the paucity of primary and secondary material on this particular angle of translation and adaptation tells of the slacking importance and focus that had been hitherto attributed to this line of research.

Following suit from stalwarts like Ashim Chakraborty, Rudraprasad Sengupta and Anjan Dutta, contemporary and young theatricians like Sharanya Dey have taken up the venture of re-translating this play, keeping the millennial audience in mind. An act or a performance finds its true success and timelessness when people across generations find the zest in themselves to own and adapt the text to suit their time. *Death of a Salesman*, in its unflinching glory, manages to strike a chord with the Bengali reader every time there is a change in the existent strands of intellectual narrative. Perhaps, this timeless quality of the play makes Miller a genius, and the intertwining of the narratives of the American dream with the lowly, middle-class hopes of the Bengali, takes it one step further to imply a deeper connection between two languages and cultures that can be explored variously in the future.

NOTES

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1. In this paper, Bengal would denote all Bengali-speaking in India and also, in some cases, Bangladesh.
2. This paper uses America as synonymous with the United States of America.
3. The reference sections of a Bengali essay entitled, *After the Fall o notun Arthur Miller*, enlist the name of the group who performed Janaiker Mrityu.
4. Anandabazar Patrika is the leading Bengali daily newspaper, launched in 1922.
5. The Bengali passages have been provided in translation by the author of this chapter.

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