

# Translational Departures: Rethinking Genre and Translation

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**Abstract:** The present paper attempts to read certain episodes in nineteenth century colonial Calcutta as processes of cultural translation. The translational aspect of the colonial encounter has been largely unnoticed. The cultural traffic, the movement of languages, books, genres and ideas indicate a larger process of cultural translation at work. In rethinking how cultures relate to one another at moments of cultural encounter, I have tried to emphasize the crucial role that genres play in such a process. Through a select reading of the novel and some popular print genres in nineteenth century Calcutta I suggest that instead of a stable mimetic theory of art we need to approach the colonial encounter as a process of constant negotiation and exchange, of translational departures which in turn helps us unsettle conventional notions of the rigidity of genre boundaries enabling a furthering of processes of translation.

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## Introduction

In the essay titled “The Law of Genre,” Derrida comments in the following fashion: “Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres. I repeat: genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them” (Derrida 1980, 55).

One of the least studied areas in translation studies is perhaps its relation to genre and the phenomenon of generic translation. Derrida’s comment opens new and interesting possibilities for understanding genres and their translational aspects. With the “cultural turn”<sup>1</sup> in translation studies, there has been a lot of scholarly discussion and debate on the way in which translation informs and is informed by its association with disciplines as diverse as culture studies, gender studies, postcolonial studies, ethnography, and anthropology to name just a few. This has definitely widened the scope and the possibilities for translation studies and made it an

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere were among the early proponents of the “cultural turn.” The term then gained currency and has been used ever since by scholars and specialists across different disciplines.

interdisciplinary if not a multidisciplinary domain. However, it seems to me that, despite this widening of boundaries, the relation between genre and translation has not received its due attention. It seems to me that the notion of cultural translation is perhaps best perceived in the translation of literary forms or genres. Not only are words, phrases, and sentences translated, but often the entire genre gets translated in the process of cultural interaction and transmission. Genre provides an appropriate site for cultural negotiation and exchange. Genre translations become more interesting when the period to be studied is that of a colonial encounter. In the present paper I attempt to illustrate the process of generic translation in nineteenth-century Calcutta, highlighting the possibilities that such an approach holds for scholars of translation studies and post-colonial studies alike. It seems to me that the opening assertion in Derrida's essay is not workable when generic translations are concerned. Genre mixtures is the only possible way of understanding the processes in which genres are shaped and reshaped over cultural exchanges, of which the colonial encounter may be one. These translational "departures" in genre formation (I use the word "departure" both in the sense of difference, that is, departing from the original and also indicating a movement, a crossing over, a ferrying across, thereby indicating a process of dislocation and a relocation in different spatial and temporal domains) open interesting ways of locating and answering questions related to colonial and post-colonial phases in literary history. In the first section of this paper, I will try to contextualize the phase in the colonial history of Calcutta which was retrospectively called the Bengal Renaissance, highlighting the translational aspect of this period. In the second section, I will discuss at some length the ways in which the colonial encounter facilitated translations of genres, taking the example of the Bengali novel. In the third section, I will elaborate on the translational aspect of the print phenomena in nineteenth-century Calcutta and the ways in which print culture further facilitated generic translations.

### **The Bengal Renaissance**

The much discussed Bengal Renaissance has been described as a phase of the beginning of modernity in the sociocultural history of India. It was a period when the English educational cur-

riculum was successfully launched, and institutions for the dissemination of English education were set up with the hope of creating a new class of Bengali *intelligentsia*. It was also a period of reform movements, new laws being promulgated to replace older ones, a phase of constant negotiation and exchange between the colonial masters and the natives. It was a phase when popular printing really took off in Calcutta, churning out a huge variety of texts and genres that in turn inaugurated a new reading culture and a public sphere in the city which boasted new marvels. Scholars who have tried to revisit this immensely productive, vibrant, and rich phase in the history of Bengal have also noted the difficulty of talking of the Bengal Renaissance as a unified and monolithic phenomenon, thereby escaping holistic definitions.<sup>2</sup> It seems to me that one of the defining features of the Bengal Renaissance which actually problematizes the way in which we understand this phase in colonial history is the way in which translations played a very vital role in shaping sensibilities and, in the process, manufacturing knowledge and intellectuals. The role of translation in defining the Renaissance has not been studied with proper care. In fact, one of the primary ways in which the cultural exchange in the colonial phase was facilitated was through the translation of European texts into Bengali in the nineteenth century. Often, these translations would help import new forms which would then be negotiated by native readers before they could be assimilated or rejected. These translations thus redefined the way in which literature would be understood from this moment on. Itamar Even-Zohar, when discussing the polysystem theory, mentioned three instances where translations play and have played a vital role in the shaping of a literary culture. These are 1) when a literature is young or in the process of being established; 2) when a literature is peripheral or weak or both; and 3) when there are turning points, crises, or literary vacuums in a culture.<sup>3</sup> Even though the nature of the nineteenth-century transla-

<sup>2</sup> Research on the phase which was retrospectively called the Bengal Renaissance has been stupendous. Though scholars have held diverse opinions on the nature of this phase, however, they have all agreed on the productivity of this phase. Some studies on the Bengal Renaissance would include David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization 1773–1835* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969); R. C. Majumdar, *Resurgent Bengal* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1972); Susobhan Sarkar, *On the Bengal Renaissance* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1985); Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Itamar Even-Zohar, "The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem," in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London: Routledge, 2000), 192–197.

tions in Bengal cannot be understood in any of the abovementioned ways, these translations nonetheless played a vital role in shaping the culture of Bengal in particular and India in general. These translations gave rise to new genres and challenged notions of existing genres. In fact, Calcutta can be described in terms of a city found in translation. The sheer bulk of translated literature produced in the city from the late eighteenth through the nineteenth century indicates the ways in which cultural translation and exchange formed the basis of the cultural plurality of the city as we know it even today.

These translations cannot be appreciated without a brief overview of the way in which the introduction of English education transformed the sociocultural scene in Bengal in the nineteenth century. The controversy between the ‘Orientalists’ and the ‘Anglicists’ over the utilization of the money that was set aside for education<sup>4</sup> by the act of 1813 was finally resolved in William Bentinck’s tenure. By the Resolution of March 7, 1835, it was resolved that the funds would “be henceforth employed in imparting to the Native population knowledge of English literature and science through the medium of the English language” (Spear 1970, 127). Schools and colleges were set up by the British, and Persian gave way to English as the official language of the colonial state and the medium of the higher courts of law. Bentinck’s administrative methodology thereby led to an induction of more and more Indians into the hierarchy, a possibility that was enabled by English education. According to Gauri Viswanathan, the introduction of English education can be seen as “an embattled response to historical and political pressures: to tensions between the English Parliament and the East India Company and the native elite classes” (Viswanathan 1987, 24). The colonial practice of translation played a very significant role in the way in which prevalent practices were negotiated and rearticulated in this phase of history. While the European translations of Indian texts prepared for a Western audience provided the educated Indian with a whole range of Orientalist images, the translations from the European languages into the native tongue

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the education debates in colonial India see Lynn Zastoupil and Moir Martin, eds., *The Great Indian Education Debate: Documents Relating to the Orientalist-Anglicist Controversy, 1781–1843* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999).

affords many more interesting instances of cultural translation, negotiation, cross-overs, and departures, particularly with respect to a reconfiguration of generic boundaries.

### **Translational Departures: Reconfiguring Generic Boundaries**

With the introduction of the colonial literary models came the initial desire to emulate them. We have records of the ways in which the English poets who were studied within the new educational curriculum immensely inspired the first generation of English learners in Calcutta. These new learners were not only avid readers of English poetry but they were also attempting to write poetry like the poems they were reading. So we have evidence of the ways in which poetry writing was encouraged in the Hindu college, one of the earliest institutions set up for the teaching of English. It is interesting to note the translational practice at work in the choice of themes, recurring images, and the procolonial discourse at work in these early poems. Harachandra Ghosh's "Benaras" comes immediately to mind. This poem was listed as one that was selected for an award at the Annual Prize distribution ceremony of the Hindu College.<sup>5</sup> What strikes the reader is the encomiastic nature of the poem. Having listed the earlier colonizers of India as dangerous, the poetic persona sighs with relief at the way in which the country has been rescued by the English. The rest of the poem is in praise of the present rulers interweaved through a history of the natives. Such poetic compositions can perhaps best be read as works of translation—a translation of the anxiety of a young group of English learners who wanted to draw the attention of the rulers and please them. Harachandra Ghosh's poem and several other poems written in a similar vein cannot be understood without the colonial context and the introduction of the new educational system. However, poems of this genre cannot simply be understood, either, as a mere copy of any of the English poets who were being read as part of the new educational curriculum. There was a desire to emulate, but local history and culture added new dimensions to these poems, making these new works of art.

<sup>5</sup> This poem is cited in R. K. Dasgupta, *East-West Literary Relations* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1995), 278.

In fact, a study of the history of translation reveals the ways in which original texts are rewritten and also exposes the routes through which innovations are introduced into the literary field. The colonial context of these works inscribes the asymmetrical relationship between the European originals and their Indian translations. The proliferation of texts translated from European languages, especially English, in colonial India indicates the multiple layers of contact between the two cultures. A study of texts translated into Bengali from 1800 to 1900 reveals the copious work which was being done in translation around this time.<sup>6</sup> Apart from literature, which is divided into fiction, poetry, drama, and miscellaneous works, there are translations of the Bible, biographies and exemplary lives, economics, general science, geography, history, law, medicine and child rearing, philosophy, political tracts, and religion and history of religion. With particular reference to literary genres one often notices a curious blurring of generic boundaries and interesting examples of cultural translation. *The Arabian Nights* was one of the most popular texts and was translated over and over again by different translators. Nilmani Basak translated the work as *Arabya Upanyas* in three parts. The term *upanyas* in Bengali translates to the genre category that is called the novel in English. Moreover, the initial confusion and debate regarding the nomenclature of this genre is interesting to note. In different parts of India, writers and scholars debated what the correct Indian equivalent of this genre might be. In some cases new words were coined for the new genre, while in others the English word was retained. Supriya Chaudhuri notes how the term *upanyas* was still new, and was used interchangeably with other more well known terms as late as 1931:

In an essay published in *Prabasi* (1931) Rabindranath Tagore distinguished the social realism of Bankimchandra's novel *Bishabriksha* ('The Poisoned Tree', 1873) from historical romance, for which he used the term *kahini* (usually translated as 'tale') as contrasted with *akhyan* (chronicle, narrative). While the terminology he was trying to establish (at a time when the choice of the term *upanyas* for 'novel' was still fairly recent) never found favour, Ra-

<sup>6</sup> See P. R. Sen, *Western Influence in Bengali Literature* (Calcutta: Academic Publishers, 1966); see also *Time Charts of Events and Publications 1798–1900*, prepared by the Department of English, Jadavpur University, Kolkata.

bindranath's autobiographical account of the breathless anticipation with which instalments of *Bishabriksha* were awaited (as they appeared serially in the journal *Bangadarshan* from its first issue in 1872) memorably evokes an unprecedented literary experience. (Chaudhuri 2012, 108)

In fact, this “unprecedented literary experience” led to several sociocultural transformations interestingly through a new literary genre. The innate tendency of genres to diffuse is best witnessed in times of cultural exchange. In such situations, genres become intermediaries between two cultures revealing not only its formal and technical features but also the sociocultural and political situation of its emergence. The emergence of the novel in nineteenth-century Calcutta offers an interesting case study of the translational aspects of the colonial encounter.

### **The Novel: A Translated Genre?**

The novel in nineteenth-century Calcutta provides an interesting *mélange*. Perhaps the only possible way to understand a complex phenomenon like the novel is by examining the dynamics of translatability that it puts forth and the “dialogic” activity that it necessitates. The dialogic act enables translators to preserve the difference between the “self” and the “other.” Translation attains a voice of its own that is neither an imitation of the source text nor a completely detached work. Here I am referencing Mikhail Bakhtin's postulation of translation as the “answering word.” It seems to me that the way in which the novel was introduced in the cultural horizon of India in general and Calcutta in particular and the way it was interpreted, understood, and translated makes it understandable along Bakhtinian paradigms of the dialogic and the notion of the answering word. Translation, according to Bakhtin, results from an interaction between two languages and cultures situated differently in time and space. A translation extends the influence of a source text to another culture, and thus contributes to the open-ended nature of the text. It often keeps alive the source text's influence among readers of the native tongue. These aspects allow us to view translation as an “answering word” in the Bakhtinian sense. Bakhtin argues that “every word is directed towards an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates” (Bakhtin 1994, 280). Translators not only com-

pose an “answering word” referring to the source text but also produce it so that this answering word will meet the anticipation of target readers. Translation is thus the product of a dialogic triangulation between the source text, the translator, and the target text audience. This “dialogic” demands that translators comprehend both the source culture and the target culture as “the other.” Thus translation is the outcome of a “dialogic event,” that is, open-ended and a never-ending dialogue between the translators’ consciousness and the source and target cultures. Bakhtin talks of translation as a process of “active understanding”.<sup>7</sup> Theories that consider translation as a secondary and derivative activity, advocate “passive understanding.” Passive understanding is monologic because it allows only one singular perspective to exist. In fact, active understanding is what makes translation an “answering word.” In appreciating the novel in Calcutta as a phenomenon in cultural translation, I will refer to the Bakhtinian notion of the “answering word” as “active understanding,” for the novel was neither a pastiche of the English model nor can it be understood without the backdrop of the colonial encounter. It was a process of negotiation and exchange, an active understanding and interpretation that led to the development of the novel in Calcutta.

Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838–1894) is regarded as the first novelist of note so far as the development of Bengali prose is concerned. An ardent admirer of Shakespeare, Scott and the Romantic poets, Chatterjee utilized the form of the novel to question the basic premise of western education in Bengal : namely, that western education acts as a morally uplifting, beneficial reforming force in the social sphere. He adopts a revisionist stance with regards to western education in the novels that deal with it. Chatterjee’s first novel, *Rajmohan’s Wife* (1864), remains his only novel in English.<sup>8</sup> Between the introduction of a new form and its assimilation or rejection in any culture there is generally a lapse of

<sup>7</sup> The terms “active understanding” and “passive understanding” are taken from Bakhtin’s conceptualizations on aesthetic activity. Bakhtin draws attention to a conceptual category called “Being-as-event,” which presupposes an answerable participation (Bakhtin 1993, 1–77). In his words, “[t]he entire aesthetic world as a whole is but a moment of Being-as-event, brought rightfully into communion with Being-as-event through an answerable consciousness – through an answerable deed by a participant” (Bakhtin 1993, 18).

<sup>8</sup> This is in keeping with many writers of the nineteenth century who tried their hand at the English language and then returned to their mother tongue. The obvious example that comes to mind is that of Michael Madhusudan Dutt.



time and several social and cultural factors play a role in it. In the West as well, the novel was not the outcome of the experimentation of one single author or of some set conditions. It was a long-drawn process of additions and alterations that ultimately resulted in such a hybrid but distinct form.<sup>9</sup> In the case of India as well, in the early part of the nineteenth century, many writers produced various kinds of prose writings claiming to be novels. However, it took around two decades for the form to consolidate itself.

Bankimchandra's works depict this space of negotiation, exchange, and translation almost like a palimpsest. The traces of the old world had to be written on. This world of rearticulation is what I understand as translation. The Bakhtinian notion of "outsideness" becomes significant here. According to Bakhtin, "[i]n order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of their creative understanding in time, in space, in culture" (Bakhtin 1994, 7). The novel writers in Calcutta were located outside in time space and culture and could develop an active and creative understanding of the new form that was made available to them again primarily through translations.

In his first English endeavor, Bankimchandra starts negotiating two worlds—one that was known to his readers, and another that was unfamiliar. In *Rajmohan's Wife*, "woman" is portrayed as the traditional wife. However, the foregrounding of a female character (although unnamed in the title and only referred to as "wife") is worth noting. It is her story, the story of a suffering but courageous woman, which is rendered in a hybrid genre, drawing on the tradition of the adventure story and romance. Certainly, the way a strong, beautiful woman is wasted on a brutal, evil man is meant to mark a critical stance towards the submission of woman to social norms. Moreover, the central position of the female character in the novel also hints at the implied criticism of gendered roles and female identity, both strongly connected to women's marital status. The "claustrophobia of women in incompatible marriages" (Mukherjee 1996, vi) is countered by the romance plot which is based on a specifically Indian discourse on love and passion, al-

<sup>9</sup> See Paul J. Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York: Norton, 1990).

luding to Radha and Krishna,<sup>10</sup> a story about romantic, but extra-marital, love. This very hybridity of genres is of interest to us. Not only is the novel a quite audacious blend of genres, but it certainly also draws together different discourses on women. As Makarand Paranjape notes, “[c]reated from an amalgam of classical, medieval and European sources and totally unprecedented imaginative leaps into what might constitute a new female subjectivity [...]. She, moreover, embodies the hopes of an entire society struggling for selfhood and dignity” (Paranjape 2002, 158). The translational aspect of this new genre can be located in the way it questioned and negotiated earlier modes of existence. It needs to be noted here that certain components of the novel, particularly the story and the plot, are universally present in all forms of narratives. Within the European tradition, too, one finds the epic and the romance, which are considered to be precursors to the novel. In the Indian literary tradition there were fantastically sizeable narratives like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the vast storehouse of *kathas*. Yet readers almost immediately recognized the differences between the novel and existing narrative traditions. In fact, this new form led to several shifts in representation and interpretation and challenged prevalent conventions. In Bakhtin’s conceptual framework it can be regarded as an active interpretation and an answering word for native writers who were experimenting with this new form. It is here that I locate the translational aspects of this new genre. Readers were attracted by the stories that the novels narrated and the real-life men and women it conjured. When the novel appeared in India, it knocked on the door of modernity as it were. However, the shift in paradigms was not as easy and straightforward as it might appear to us now. In fact, one can perceive the ways in which the novel as a new genre became the site of a dual struggle against the constraints of tradition on the one hand and the hegemonic tendencies inherent in the process of colonialism on the other. The early novels in most Indian languages convincingly illustrate this point. Traditions had to be reclaimed and revitalized as part of modernity in order to establish their continuity, while at the same time the le-

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<sup>10</sup> In the story of Krishna, as told in the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavata Purana* (ancient Hindu religious texts), he spends much of his childhood in the company of young cow-herd girls, called Gopis in the village of Madhuvan. Radha is one of the gopis. The Radha-Krishna amour is discussed in later texts like the Gita Govinda. Radha pines and waits for Krishna who is married. This love outside the defined and conventional institution of marriage has been rendered in a variety of ways in different parts of India.

gitimacy of modernity depended on how it conformed to tradition. The negotiation between these two worlds is what one notices in the early experiments with the novel. What one perceives, perhaps, is a process of cultural translation at work — an entire discourse regarding human beings, nature, religion, and society being translated. As Shivaram Padikkal notes:

Even when we employ — as we are often forced to — the terms of reference of Western novel criticism, we realize the unique nature of a Western genre as it unfolds in the Indian context. This is not to suggest that the Indian novel is merely imitative or derivative. The reception of a literary form is certainly not such a simple process, being a complex historical transaction rather than the decision of an individual author. (Padikkal 1993, 222)

Two such important locales of cultural transaction were perhaps the emergence of new subjectivities, particularly with reference to women and the sense of history. In trying to elaborate on the translational nature of the novel in Calcutta, I would read some of Bankimchandra Chatterjee's writing in this light.

However, before discussing Bankim's contribution to the development of the genre of the novel, let us briefly look at the translations that in a way paved the emergence of the Bengali novel. In 1835, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* was translated into Bengali by the Calcutta Tract and Christian Book Society; in 1837, Raja Kali Krishna translated *Rasselas* into Bengali; in 1849, *Romeo and Juliet*, the first of the dramatist's stories to be thus rendered was translated by one Gurudas Hazra from *Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare*. Some imaginative essays bordering on fiction proper but with an allegorical significance were translated by Akshay Kumar Dutta. His *Svapna Darshan* was a rendering of Addison's *Vision of Mirza in the Tatler*, published in the issues of the journal *Tattvabodhini Patrika*, 1849–1850.<sup>11</sup> It is, however, in the latter half of the nineteenth century that we come across more energetic and successful attempts. The Vernacular Literature Society, with Government support, took a leading part in paving the way for Bengali fiction by undertaking to translate many stories from English literature. *Robinson Crusoe* was translated in 1853, *Lamb's Tales* (nine

<sup>11</sup> For similar details see Priyaranjan Sen's *Western Influence in Bengali Literature* (Calcutta: Academic Publishers, 1966).

tales) in 1856, 1857, and in 1858. Novel writing in Bengal also received an impetus from social reformers.<sup>12</sup> Jay Kissan Mookherji of Uttarpra declared a prize of five hundred rupees for a novel in Bengali or English on the “[s]ocial and domestic life of the rural population of the working classes of Bengal.”<sup>13</sup> The Viceroy also offered a prize of five hundred rupees “for the best Bengali tale or novel illustrating the social and domestic life of the Hindu.”<sup>14</sup>

Sisir Kumar Das, in an essay titled “Assimilation of Foreign Genres,” quotes a few lines from a play spoken by a young woman of modest education to an uneducated woman, a maid-servant, representing two types of readers and the nature of the genre, the novel:

A series of new publications, have appeared these days; they are known as novels. No other works have so much knowledge to offer. Previously, how wonderful it was to read the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Now as I have learnt to read the novels, I don't like even to touch them. I wish I could teach you, you would have known the delight of reading novels. (Das 2004, 21)

The young reader in the above conversation is a woman who is talking about both the pleasure and instructional value of the novel. Moreover, the newness and the attractive nature of the genre cannot be missed in the above description. The most exciting aspect of this conversation, however, is the depiction of women readers and the concept of private reading. In fact, the novel introduced a new form of female subjectivity that was a curious mixture of the old and the new and was conscious of its translated nature. The coexistence and often jostling of space between the prevalent and new concepts and ideas can be witnessed in the novel.

Bankimchandra Chatterjee<sup>15</sup> provides an interesting entry point. Historians of Bengali literature have explored the various

<sup>12</sup> See *Time Charts of Events and Publications 1798–1900*, Jadavpur University, Kolkata.

<sup>13</sup> The *Hindu Patriot*, February 6, 1871.

<sup>14</sup> The *Hindu Patriot*, April 24, 1871.

<sup>15</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838–1894) was a forceful thinker who embraced Western thought enthusiastically and applied it to examine Hinduism within the framework of Positivist and Utilitarian thinking. His fame largely rests on his fictional work. He is regarded as having introduced the form of the novel in India. His first attempt at the novel was in English. *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) remains his only novel written in English. He was also a poet and a journalist. His later and mature novel *Anandamath* (The Abbey of Bliss, 1882) became a favourite during the nationalist struggle. In fact, this novel was the source of the song “Vande Mataram” (“I worship my Motherland for she truly is my mother”) which was set to music by Rabindranath Tagore and was taken up by the freedom fighters. It is now recognized as the National Song of India.

Western literary influences on Bankim's writings. The affinities between his first novel in Bengali, *Durgeshnandini* (1865),<sup>16</sup> and Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820) have been commented upon repeatedly. Bankim himself acknowledged that his story of the blind girl, *Rajani*, was inspired by Bulwer-Lytton's *Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860). Both his romantic historical themes and the later "social novels" concerned with ordinary men and women of his own days and the problems of the human condition in a specific cultural context have very obvious Western resonances as literary products. Our concern here is not to accuse Bankim of consciously or unconsciously modeling his writing on Western forms or styles, but to indicate the sensibilities which informed his world of imagination and intellect and thereby to locate the translational aspects involved in this process. There was at least one attempt to write a novel in Bengali before Bankim, the famous *Alaler Gharer Dulal* by Tekchand Thakur<sup>17</sup>. Bankim's writing and this earlier literary effort do not belong to the same world of emotional, aesthetic, or intellectual ambience. The differences derive not simply from one man's individual genius but the complex interaction between distinct cultural influences in a particular historical situation resulting in new patterns of sensibilities (Raychaudhuri, 2002, 127–128).

Perhaps the most striking new characteristic of Bankim's novels is an intensely romantic mood expressed in a variety of forms and contexts. It is a romanticism unmistakably different from the delight in the miraculous and the wonderful that educated Bengalis had acquired from their exposure to Arabic and Persian tales. His romantic imagination was no doubt inspired by his profound reading of European, and particularly English, literature. However, the discursive strategy that was employed was one of recovering local history within western forms of writing. Those who were familiar with English literature immediately realized the deeper affinity between *Durgeshnandini* and the European romance.

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<sup>16</sup> *Durgeshnandini* narrates a story of the love triangle between Jagat Singh, a Mughal general, Tilottama, the daughter of a Bengali feudal lord, and Ayesha, the daughter of a rebel Pathan leader against whom Jagat Singh was fighting. The story is set against the backdrop of the Pathan–Mughal conflicts that took place in West Bengal during the reign of Akbar.

<sup>17</sup> Published in 1857, this work is retrospectively regarded as one of the earliest novels in Bengali. It was written by Peary Chand Mitra (1814–1883). The writer used the pseudonym "Tekchand Thakur" for this novel, which describes the society of the nineteenth-century Calcutta and the bohemian lifestyle of the protagonist Matilal. It is a landmark in Bengali literature because of its use of the colloquial in prose writing.

It was not just an external resemblance analyzable in terms of plot and structure but a resemblance in mood and spirit. Soon after the publication of *Durgeshnandini*, some critics charged Bankim of plagiarism, noticing similarities with Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*. *Ivanhoe* deals with an episode in twelfth-century England, a period of confusion and oppression when hostilities between the Saxons and Normans still lingered. *Durgeshnandini* is set against the background of the Pathan and Mughal conflicts in sixteenth-century Bengal. Despite this parallel, the plan and policy of the two writers are entirely different. The obvious similarities in plot and structure cannot be overlooked, but this does not negate the originality of *Durgeshnandini*. The novel in India was the result of a tension between Western fiction and native traditions. Though the historical novel introduced by Bankim drew its inspiration from the West, it was also a product born out of the emotional requirements of the nineteenth century. As Sudipta Kaviraj suggests, "the fundamental asymmetry between the European and the Bengali made a simple imitation of the European manner of doing history impossible. To discover the truth of historical objects and connections is the ironical privilege of the subaltern" (Kaviraj 1995, 107). There is therefore in nineteenth-century Bengal, a double turning towards history. On the one hand it is a subject of empirical research, while on the other it is a site of imaginative freedom. Nowhere is the engagement with history more complex than in the fiction of Bankim. Thus, whether Bankim had read *Ivanhoe* before writing *Durgeshnandini* will remain a matter of debate among scholars studying cross-cultural literary exchange and influence. But what is significant is the way in which through his acquaintance with English literature, Bankim created a new genre which not only became a site for rewriting history but also gave the Bengali writers a new form of writing that they had been struggling to create. This genre opened new imaginative domains and redefined human relations which have played a significant role in the shaping of Bengali culture in the nineteenth century. It seems to me that Bankim used historical material to create a space where history and romance mingled freely. More than his concern with a particular form was his experimentation with a new aesthetics. In fact, the form of the historical novel was found particularly suitable by the western educated Bengalis as a means of critiquing the dominant ideology at the end of

the nineteenth century. Chatterjee used this form to question the malpractices of the contemporary society regarding women's freedom and the institution of marriage. The concept of premarital love, a concept translated from English literature, was explored by many writers of the time. When the socially sanctioned marriageable age for girls was five or six and that of boys ten, premarital romance was absurd. The historical romance provided the scope for dealing with youthful and premarital life. In fact, the readers in Bengal began to deal with love from the literary end. That is to say, at first it was transferred to Bengali literature from English literature, and then taken over from literature to life. It is perhaps necessary to understand the translational aspect at work here. We are talking of a new form, which is read and translated (in the sense of each reading/interpretation being a translation) into a completely different sociocultural and literary environment. The process, of course, involves obvious transformations so far as the features of the genre are concerned. The translational departure in the case of Bankim was to use the framework of the historical romance to express powerful ideas in a covert form. Chatterjee as a representative of his generation, found the woman question one that required special attention. Proper education of women and their engagement outside the domestic sphere becomes a recurring theme in his novels. His novels became a powerful tool for the propagation of his religious and social ideas. By deifying the Bengali woman into an aspect of the Motherland and by repeatedly reviving a sense of a forgotten past Chatterjee's literary works pioneered the Indian nationalist movement.

According to Sudipta Kaviraj, "[h]is characters are people who are nearly always living their lives close to these regions of intersection, of liminality, where opposites come to play with each other. If there is a central theme in his novels, I suggest it is this enquiry, this concern about the nature of the liminal" (Kaviraj 1995, 15). Taking Kaviraj's notion one step further, I suggest that the "liminal" is largely a zone of translational departures.

## Print Genres and Translation

The translational departures of the kind discussed above are also witnessed in the ways in which the advent of print technology revolutionized practices of reading, introducing new and transforming existing genres. Printing in India dates back to the sixteenth century when the Portuguese set up the first printing press on the subcontinent. However, indigenous printing and publishing really took off in Bengal in the first half of the nineteenth century. Bengal emerges as the focus of study for various reasons. It was not only the seat of the first established vernacular press (The Serampore Press)<sup>18</sup> and the earliest printing and publishing industry in the country, but also the seed bed of Indian nationalism. In his largely informative book titled *Indian Response to European Technology and Culture*, Ahsan Jan Qaisar discusses at length the arrival of this new technology in India and the way it was received. It is amazing, says Qaisar, that the Chinese knowledge of wooden block printing did not create a ripple of reaction in India. The early reaction to this new technology was varied—one of awe and fear, of wonder and, of course, full of the contamination myth according to which the printing press was an alien agent and, along with the missionary project, designed to pollute and convert the natives. However, one of the sections of society who resisted this new technology the most were the organized calligraphers and illuminators whose livelihood was threatened with the coming of the printing press. As Francesca Orsini (2009) rightly comments, unlike in Europe, print did not take off immediately in the East and Far East, because the infrastructure needed for the flourishing of a print culture was not available. So, although the technique of woodblock printing had been developed by the eighth century at the latest, and that of metallic movable type no later than the twelfth century, several centuries elapsed before it was commercially exploited in Ming China and seventeenth-century Korea and Japan. Thus in nineteenth-century Calcutta, commercial publishing in particular faced two daunting challenges: the low literacy rate and the strong presence of oral and aural cultures which it was difficult to replace com-

<sup>18</sup> The Serampore Press was established by William Carey in 1800 in Serampore, in the Hooghly district of Bengal. Around 1818, the press started printing in the Bengali language. For a detailed study of the beginnings of printing in Bengal in particular and India in general, see A. K. Priokar, *The Printing Press in India: Its Beginnings and Early Development* (Mumbai: Marathi Samshodhana Mandala, 1958).



pletely with the printed book. Instead of looking on this as an obstacle or hurdle which printing was finally able to overcome, I choose to read the early days of commercial printing in Calcutta as an instance of translational departure. There was an attempt to increase the sale of printed books, but it was not done by outdoing or replacing earlier practices of the oral and the aural. Rather, popular commercial printing in Calcutta created new and translated genres which would incorporate and also negotiate the new space that the print medium had brought along with it. This negotiation was not easy and required a rearticulation of ideas and sentiments and a new semiotics of reception. A study of the emergence of the popular print phenomena in Calcutta in the nineteenth century affords interesting examples of the translational phenomena at work. As has already been mentioned, the shift from a largely oral and aural culture to a print culture was not easy, nor was it one of complete replacement. Print technology in certain ways facilitated a carrying forward, a translation of the prevalent forms. Print created the space for the oral and the aural to exist alongside the printed medium. In other words, it translated the earlier forms into a new format. Let us consider some examples. While the elite presses located in the south of Calcutta<sup>19</sup> were primarily catering to the printing of the Bible and other official treatises, the popular printing extravaganza was located in the north of Calcutta in the area known as Bat-tala.<sup>20</sup> The Bat-tala presses were run by the natives and were doing a brisk trade in the publication and sale of cheap literature. The output of these presses often exceeded those of the elite presses and was consumed by both the elite and the nonelite. Wherein lay the popularity of Bat-tala literature? Social historians have commented on the consumers of Bat-tala literature, identifying them as consisting mainly of office clerks who would commute via ferry from the neighboring villages to Calcutta and would return to their villages in the evening. These readers were looking for entertainment, and Bat-tala had a lot to offer. The Bat-tala printers and artists would take

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<sup>19</sup> The area in the north of Calcutta, called the Black Town, is the area where the natives had settled, while the south of Calcutta, where the British had settled, was called the White Town.

<sup>20</sup> The term *Bat-tala* (literally *Bat* "banyan tree," and *tala* "beneath") refers to the numerous presses that operated in the north of Calcutta in the nineteenth century. They could be compared to the *bibliothèque bleue* in early modern France, and offered cheap texts which were adapted, abridged, or cannibalized with scant regard for scholarly decorum and put together for quick sale and wide circulation.

contemporary polemical events, often spicing them up, and create very cheap twenty- to thirty-page booklets with plenty of illustrations. Often veering on the pornographic, Bat-tala almost became synonymous with the lowly and was forbidden to be read among the respectable. Bat-tala became a genre in itself, coterminous with the common and the deviant. But a critical reading of Bat-tala literature would show that the printers and writers were social observers often criticizing the changing sociocultural scenario with utmost contempt and cynicism. Apparently conservative in content, Bat-tala also produced much social farce, which was one of the most popular genres. It therefore seems to me that Bat-tala was the popular sociocultural register that was translating a rapidly changing and transforming world for its readers. It is in the critical observation and often cannibalization of ancient texts and the critical rendition of contemporary sociocultural events that the translational departures of Bat-tala may be located. Operating from the periphery of a society that was undergoing rapid transformation, the Bat-tala writers and printers were keen observers trying to record this transitional phase, not as mere factual recorders, but as artists and aestheticians who were crucially aware of the way in which reading tastes were altering with the advent of the new technology of print and several sociocultural readjustments. It is clear that in Bat-tala and its cheap street literature lies one of those hidden spaces of negotiation and exchange that often goes unnoticed. Moreover, in translating the preprint world into the world of print, the Bat-tala printers were careful about the way the book appeared to its readers. The preponderance of images and pictures in the Bat-tala printed books is an obvious indicator of the shift these popular printers were negotiating. For an audience accustomed to the oral and the aural, the visual would have an immediate appeal. Instead of the eye being guided along a page full of letters, the space for accommodating the image was created. Also, we cannot forget the fact that Bat-tala catered to a modestly literate audience. In this case, too, the pictures served a purpose—it was pictures, rather than printed matter, that often guided a reader. This is one of the major ways in which the earlier forms crept into the Bat-tala genres, making it not only a popular phenomenon but also a translational phenomenon. Furthermore, the language used in these pieces, rather than the standardized Sanskritized Bengali of the elite presses, was

very close to the colloquial vernacular. While the government was busy standardizing the Bengali language, trying to get rid of the Persian and Arabic influences, Bat-tala-produced texts were often full of Persian and Arabic words (Ghosh, 2006, 259). In defying standardization, Bat-tala printed texts opened further possibilities of negotiation between the center and the periphery.

It is interesting to note that in the early days a large bulk of Bat-tala printing comprised manuscripts that were bought from the neighborhood villages. James Long, one of the most avid readers of popular print in Calcutta, commented on the way in which the best advertisement for the book was a living agent—the bookseller himself. Hawkers were often employed to sell printed matter, and these hawkers would not only sell the books, but in return would also acquire manuscripts from households which they would then bring to the printers. The printers would use these manuscripts, often translate them (in the wider sense of the word), embellish them with pictures and images, and print them again.<sup>21</sup> The printed book here becomes the afterlife of the manuscript.

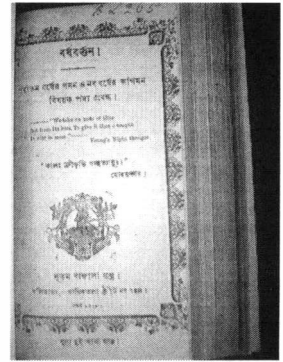
Apart from this direct translational aspect, a study of some of the title pages of printed matter produced in Calcutta between 1800 and 1900 would show the broad use of the word “translation.” Often, translations of texts from the European languages would be called a “new work” or modeled on some author’s work. The notion of “transcreation” was perhaps a quality that these early printers, publishers, and writers were aware of. Moreover, in most instances the English and the Bengali appeared together on the title page indicating a playful coexistence of the two languages in the early days of printing. Apart from indicating a clear translational feature, these title pages also point to the varied readership that the printers anticipated. It also undoubtedly makes us contemplate the growing literacy rate and the clear increase in the number of people who could read English. The title pages provide interesting insights into a culture in transition, a culture minimally inhabiting two linguistic domains. Sherry Simon’s (2012) notion of the “dual city” is perhaps best witnessed with respect to the transformations and transitions

<sup>21</sup> See Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Street: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1989); Anindita Ghosh, *Power in Print* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006); Stuart Blackburn, *Print, Folklore and Nationalism in Colonial South India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003).

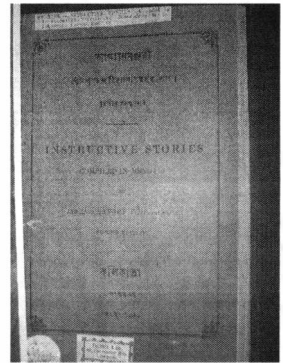
that print necessitated. Often, there are quotations from canonical English writers on the title page. Some writers are repeatedly quoted—Shakespeare and Dickens being two of the most popular.

The sheer variety of the title pages is an indication of the different generic experimentations that nineteenth-century printers were practicing. While there were popular and cannibalized renderings of classical stories, moral tales, and educational tracts, these presses also published new genres such as the social farce, the novel, and the almanac.

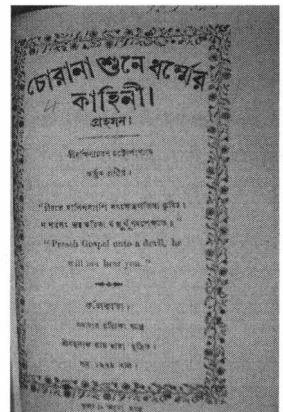
The social farce of nineteenth-century Calcutta is probably the best example of the translational departures that we have been discussing. It is in these farces that one notices a vivid rendering of a society that is on the threshold of change and also the apprehensions that accompany such change. Often in these farces, conventional practices are pitted against new ways of life and the former upheld. Moreover, the farces did not stop there. With caustic remarks and hatred at a rapidly transforming society, these social farces often used unfortunate and scandalous contemporary events to make their point about the evils of the new age. Churned out primarily by the popular presses in Bat-tala, these farces were also full of hatred of the elite, the *babu* as he was called, for his “translated” nature. He had not only learnt the master’s language, but he was also following a lifestyle modeled on the English. He had changed the way he dressed, ate, and conversed in his desire to be recognized by the masters. The popular presses at Bat-tala were inundated with a variety of representations of the *babu*, including the visual. Most of these farces were accompanied by woodcut prints, which were sometimes also sold alone. The printers at Bat-tala followed the indigenous technique of the Kallighat *pat* painters here. Themes, motifs, and concepts were translated into the new medium of the printed book at Bat-tala. Many scholars and book historians



Title page of a collection of poems on the occasion of the new year. Interesting to note is a quotation from Young’s *Night-Thoughts*.



Title page of a compilation of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar’s *Instructive Stories*. It is interesting how the Bengali and English existed simultaneously on the title page.



Title page of a social farce.

have studied this phase in the colonial history of Calcutta, but the translational aspect of the popular print phenomenon has not received due attention. I locate the translational departures of popular printing in nineteenth-century Calcutta in two primary aspects. In the first place, the Bat-tala book market is, for me, the melting pot of a wide variety of genres. That is to say, unlike the more established elite presses, which limited themselves to single, specific genres, at Bat-tala, where no stipulations or rules applied, anything could be printed. Its readership had not been clearly defined and the printers and publishers at Bat-tala were testing the waters, as it were, in an attempt to determine popular reading tastes. It is in such circumstances that Bat-tala creates new combinations, new genre mixtures, which can be understood perhaps only in terms of translational departures. There was nothing “original” about Bat-tala genres—they were either retellings of ancient myths or rearticulations of stories and incidents whose source can be located elsewhere. However, it is this rearticulation that I am particularly interested in as therein lay the possibilities of innovation, addition, and, often, cannibalization. In the second place, Bat-tala translates a whole set of visual aesthetics into print. I am here referring to the woodcut artists of Calcutta. As Ashit Paul comments,

Beginning as illustrators for the new books, they soon came to publish their works as independent works of art. They drew inspiration from the Kalighat artists. The Kalighat artists had not only severed the connections the picture had had traditionally with the spoken word and the musical narrative, but had also liberated it from its ties with ritual. [...] The works of the woodcut artists and engravers had the same independence, and the same secular approach even though dealing primarily with religious and mythological themes. (Paul 1983, 8)

In fact, the popular print phenomenon translated a whole set of religious iconography to a more secular and polemical domain. Religious and mythological representations were repeatedly used, but their secularized contexts and translated natures were not difficult to locate. Moreover, the new visual vocabulary was a translation of a variety of Western motifs. The popular printers and woodcut artists, developed the notion of perspective and distance in their illustrations, which was not to be seen before the nineteenth century. In the depiction of classical and mythological narratives, one often finds European motifs and patterns being used. For example,

though a representation of a nineteenth-century *babu* would typically portray him in his *dhuti* and *kurta* (traditional Bengali attire for men) he would be wearing English “pump” shoes or would be smoking a pipe. In the depiction of the interiors of a domestic setting, European furniture and architecture would often be used. Motifs and themes from European art could even be discerned in Hindu mythological depictions. For example in figure 1, which depicts a scene from Lord Krishna’s childhood, one cannot fail to notice the Roman arches and columns used as a backdrop.

Figure 2 and figure 3, both depict Lord Krishna with the *gopinis*. In figure 2 one notices the use of perspective, a foregrounding of Lord Krishna in the center surrounded by the *gopinis* creating a kind of balance in the depiction. Moreover, the two scenes in the corners in the background depicting episodes from Lord Krishna’s life also creates a unique balance, which was not found in earlier woodcut prints. Figure 3 is again an episode from Lord Krishna’s life, stealing clothes of the *gopinis*. This is one rare depiction of Krishna playing the flute standing. Conventionally he is depicted playing the flute sitting. This vertical central motif is balanced by two trees on either sides. It is clear that the central tree and the trees on the sides do not look similar. In fact, the side trees remind one of floral marginal motifs which the woodcut



Fig. 1—Scene from the childhood of Lord Krishna.

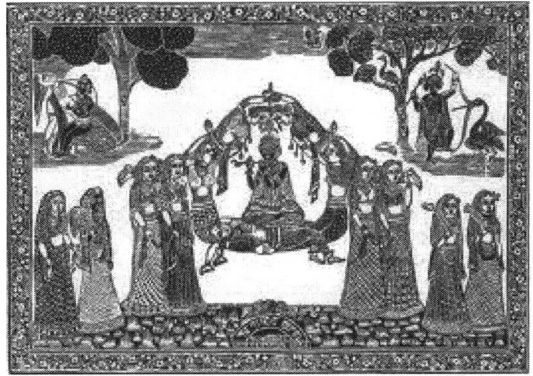


Fig. 2—Krishna with gopis.

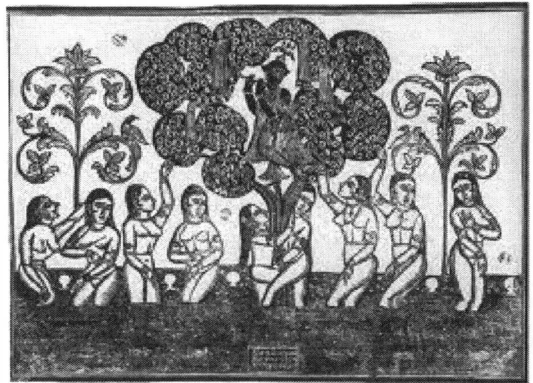


Fig. 3—Another depiction of Krishna with gopis.

artist may have seen in some European book. (Paul, 1983, 50–56). Such translational aspects of the popular print episode in Calcutta have generally gone unnoticed.

Although woodcut print production declined rapidly with the arrival of lithography and oleography in popular art, this phase in the popular print history of Calcutta is one of experimentation and translation—a cultural translation which was facilitated by the colonial encounter.

## Conclusion

In *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation*, Umberto Eco questions the traditional way of viewing translation as follows:

What I want to emphasize is that many concepts circulating in translation studies (such as adequacy, equivalence, faithfulness) will be considered in the course of my lectures from the point of view of negotiation.

Negotiation is a process by virtue of which, in order to get something, each party renounces something else, and at the end everybody feels satisfied since one cannot have everything. (Eco 2003, 6).

These “negotiations,” in fact, defined the colonial period in Calcutta. We have seen how the Bengali novel in the nineteenth century was not just a product of the colonial encounter, but drew upon a multiplicity of literary traditions, indigenous as well as foreign. The fissures and uncertainties which accompanied such negotiations in a way transformed our understanding of literature, life, and society. As Supriya Chaudhuri remarks, “the ‘realism’ of the novel clearly offers native writers a unique opportunity for the self-representation of their class and people in a period of rapid transition” (Chaudhuri 2012, 104). In the case of the print genres, too, there were similar negotiations which redefined visual aesthetics along with transforming traditional iconography and a questioning of social values and a rapidly transforming society. Stuart Hall, in an essay titled “When was ‘The Post-Colonial’? Thinking at the Limit,” argues that

The term post-colonial is not merely descriptive of this society rather than that, or of then and now. It re-reads colonization as part of an essentially transna-

tional global process – and it produces a decentred, diasporic or global rewriting of earlier, nation-centered imperial grand narratives. [...] It obliges us to re-read the binaries as forms of transculturation, of cultural translation, destined to trouble the here/there binaries forever. (Hall 1996, 242–260)

The colonial encounter in Bengali literature provided us with rich material for similar explorations and theoretical debates. While most analyses would agree on the translated nature of the Bengal Renaissance of the nineteenth century, they often tend to overlook the fact that the process of translation cannot be simply understood as the effects of cultural imperialism. Rather, understanding the colonial encounter as a process of cultural translation enables us to look at the interactive, dialogic, two-way process involving complex negotiation and exchange. The cultural traffic, the movement of languages, books, genres, and ideas indicate the larger process of cultural translation at work, including the sociocultural, economic, and political frameworks through which ideas are circulated and received. In rethinking how cultures relate to one another at moments of cultural encounter, I have tried to emphasize the crucial role that genres play in such a process. Instead of a stable mimetic theory of art, approaching the colonial encounter in Calcutta through the negotiations in the spaces of the liminal helps us unsettle conventional notions of the rigidity of generic boundaries enabling a furthering of processes of translation.



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