Modern Indian Writing in Translation
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Week 1 Lecture 1: Hunger of Stones
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Hello and welcome to this 12-week course called 'Modern Indian Writing in Translation'. In today's session, we are going look at Tagore's short story, 'The Hunger of Stones'. The translation that I am going to use for discussion is Amitav Ghosh's, and I have a couple of students with me here to participate in a discussion about the form and structure and content of the story.

Let me invite the students. I have here with me Sanchar, (say hello) Mridula

Mridula: Hi.

Professor: And Shweta.

So, Mridula what do you think about this story, what are your initial reactions to reading this story from Tagore?

Mridula: When I first read this story, the first thing that popped up in my head was that this is essentially a supernatural story, which talks about a man's longing for a colonial past and he wants to relive in it. And the story is basically his ramblings of his likeness towards his colonial past and he just wants to get into that and all the descriptions that he has given about the lady and about the structure and everything is just basically is yearnings, that is what I, that is the first impression that I got.

Professor: Correct, so the first thing that strikes us is just what you said, it is supernatural in tone and mood, because we have a fantastic isolated palace in a desolate setting and then we have, you know, enchantress figures waltzing through the palace and we have a figure trying to get to them. And so all these things naturally lead us to think that there is definitely going to be a lot of horrors in this particular tale. So, yes, it is gothic, it is supernatural.

I think the colonial past that you are referring to is linked to the British Empire which has its tentacles around India.

And then you are also kind of connecting it to the Moghul inroads that has come into India. So, we have more than one colonizer kind of, you know, in Indian space at this point in the story.

So apart from the supernatural elements, what are the other aspects that kind of strike you about this story? Sanchar, what do you think?

Sanchar: Well, I feel that, there are a few elements, which are playing, I mean which are at large in the entire narrative. I personally believe that, there are certain elements of light and darkness, which we call the chiaroscuro. And there is a pretty oscillating process of this illusion and reality. So, since there is a lot of conflict between this illusion and reality, we have seen that although it's a meta-narrative story, where there are two stories, two plots which are going parallely, there are also two meta-narratives of psychology, like one is a conscious narrative which is spoken by all the characters who are conscious, and one is the main plot of the story, where the writer, where the narrator actually, he is actually oscillating between an illusion whether it's right or whether it's unreal. The thing is that this illusion, which is created in that part of the story, he feels that it is more real than the reality itself.

And more than that, if we go into the critical dimensions of the text, apart from being anything also, I feel that it has an encompassing idea about how the colonial mindset is looking forward to its own structure and how it is trying to break away, or kind of extract itself out from the post-colonial ideas, like how the person is dressing himself in the western robes and then he feels, when he is back, when he is supposedly in an illusionary world, he is feeling that, 'Ok, that this oriental charm is the real thing.'

Professor: Yeah, very good.

Sanchar: In that sense, I think it is a dimensional and more versatile task.

Professor: So, there are lot of things here in what you have just said— the ideas of illusion and reality, and we can even ask this question— 'Is the story teller bluffing? Or is he making this entire story up to pass the time on a train?'. So that question is there, whether this whole story is a fiction narrated to a kind of while away the time. The other is, if we believe in this illusion, is that illusion telling us the real story about lives lived in colonial India? We have the Nizam of Hyderabad ruling a pocket of Indian soil and then we have the British administers ruling the rest— most of the rest of the country.

So what world is the real world?

What is the tangible concrete world? And is this man who is telling the story caught between these various worlds? Is he trying to make sense of these differing orders? Is those, are those orders kind of suffocating him? So, is that why he is trying to escape into the realm of these beautiful women of pleasure in the marble palace? So, these are some of the questions that, you know, arises in our minds. And again, we will come to the issue of clothing and orientalism in a little while.

So I will now move onto Shweta and ask her what are her thoughts on reading this story. So we have the supernatural, we have questions of illusion and reality and different political regimes. What do you think after you have read the story?

Shweta: I think I read the story a little differently because as I was reading it, I couldn't help noticing that the language both the second narrator uses, the tax collector, is very oriental. It's what you would read, it's what you would use, if you'd been exposed to stories like the 'Arabian Nights' or stories about India written by western people.

And that's one of the things that I found quite interesting. So the language itself gives it a very story-like form, I mean you're reading it and you're thinking, 'Well, this, it doesn't sound like an actual tale, it just sounds like something he's narrating.' It sounds in fact, like a story, like something you would make up. But then again, it's not that simple, you can't just discount it. Because at the end of it, when, as you're reading it and the first narrator and his theosophist cousin come to the same conclusion that you're sort of edging at when you're reading it, and he says, 'Well he made all up to you know, he made fools of us, he just made it up to pass the time,' you think, 'Well that's not very satisfactory now that it's been articulated.' So that's an interesting thing.

Professor: Correct, so I am glad you pointed out the language aspect of this embedded narrative. So, we need to remember that this is a story within a story, so the story within the story is very exaggerated. It's overtly fictional, right? And it is very oriental in tone and imagery; and even in its characters, right? If you look at all these women, the damsels—even the terminology used to describe all these women— it could be plucked from anywhere, from all these oriental tales starting from the Arabian Nights to Christabel and to Keats's ballads.

So, what do we take away from this exaggerated nature of the story? Either we can stop believing it or we can believe in it and start to question it, right? What if it's a lie? Ok, it is a lie, why should we have such a beautiful lie? Why should we have a lie which is clothed in desire and lust and exaggeration and supernatural and other kinds of stuff which is beyond the pale of reality? Can we ask that question?

Yes, we agree that it's kind of over the top, but what do we make of that kind of world? Can we unpack that orientalism? Why is it too oriental? And what is the impact of the oriental on the minds of the two listeners and us as readers outside the pages? Sanchar, what do you think?

Sanchar: I believe that the story itself is a kind of a parallel of real life. So, there is this, as I said since it is an illusion and reality balance there, so as I think Coleridge himself suggests there is a willing suspension of disbelief on our part. So, I feel that this hallucination and this dream-like way, I mean which has the mannerism in which you have portrayed this one, it actually gives us a visual narrative.

And this disbelief or this conflict that whether it's real or it's illusory, I think that is what adds the charm to the story, that is what adds this dimension of theoretical conflicts in the story. And since Tagore himself was a postmodern, if not a postmodern himself had a postmodern bent of mind while writing these kind stories and he himself had a pretty colonial past, because he had been in the west for a pretty long time.

I think that the reasons why he has inclined himself to write this kind of story is that he wanted to blend both these systems of colonial as well as anti-colonial ideas. And we also have found out something, I personally believe that there is a kind of a protest here, like the way he has exaggerated the oriental concepts here, maybe by the maiden's charm or the jewellry or the ambience, everything is somehow or the other creating a counter narrative towards the overarching idea of the post-colonial— the person who is a tax collector, who is going to Barich for administrative matters.

Somewhere or the other this exaggerated illusion which he is trying to give out, it's kind of shadowing this idea of the administration of the colonial person who is going there in order to do something which is more connected administratively.

Professor: Let me pick up on this idea of protest before we forget it or the idea of the counter-narrative. It's embedded in every aspect of the story. Let me just pick up on the most obvious one, the central female figure. We have a counter-narrative in her body itself, if you look at her persona, if you look at the initial description of that female figure, she is beautifully dressed even though we don't get details of her face, we do get a reference to the dagger. The dagger that's at her waist. So, that is one very small kind of weapon of resistance there for you, embedded in her body.

And the other very obvious counter-narrative, can you think about it? Maybe I will ask Shweta or, so maybe we can think about all those moments of resistance in the story within that embedded narrative. That can tell us a lot about that world, about which we are seeing in the story.

Shweta: Well, as you mentioned there is the dagger in her belt and there's also the narrator's, I mean at first glance quite he comes back home and he dresses in quote unquote "oriental clothes" and while he is out he is in an Englishman's clothes, but then there's that small thing where he decides to go out for a ride and then the wind blows away, or supposedly the wind blows away, his jacket and his cap and from that day onwards he never wears English clothes again. So, it is almost like…

Professor: It's a fantastic example.

Shweta: It is, but if I can stretch it out and perhaps theorize more than I'm supposed to, it is almost as if it's a colonial past that is embedded, not a colonial, but this idea of a pure past that is embedded in the women that's brushing away vestiges of colonial, traces of colonialism.

Professor: I can go further than that if you want me to, I mean if you look at the exact words used in the story, we have the leaves of the Aravalli mountains and the sands of Shusta the river, literally coming up and kind of you know, sweeping away the sola topi and the other accessories which indicate that this man is aping the mannerisms and the ideals of this new colonial order represented by the British Empire. So yes, that is a fantastic moment in the story, where elements of nature attack this interloper regime in a very symbolic way.

So, that is obviously there. And I was also thinking about the fact that this woman of pleasure brought from Arabia and somehow shut up in this palace of pleasure, she wants to get out,

she wants to go home, she just wants to get out of this place. That is resistance as well for you, right? She says, 'Get me away from this place, just take me away on the horse.'

And she is using this tax collector in a way to get what she wants, I mean you can kind of further interpret this in various ways. Perhaps Mridula, you can add to this and tell us what you think about the narratives of resistance that are there.

Mridula: So, when you look at the woman character, there is no woman *characters* but still there is one central woman character, although she is not named. We get to know about her appearance through his writings, like how he describes the beauty of her. So, she is essentially an exotic creature and she is very beautiful. And in a sense we can feel that she is luring the person and luring that person for, we do not know for what. Maybe fo,r maybe she sees this person as an escape for her. And the words, and the some of the terminologies used by the writer to describe her, as if in, she's described as she-snake. That is a very orientalistic look at how women are described. Mostly you have a lot of such references in many of Indian, many Indian writings.

And she is essentially, when you first read about her, it's kind of scary. First, we do not know whether she is an enchantress, but we tend to empathize with her, sympathize with her because there is a longing in her and she is pleading to the, to the main protagonist asking him to rescue her from this bondage. And that is mainly what I get about the, that is what mainly I can think of now.

Professor: Yeah. I can just sum it up. I would say there is an agenda to her, you know she is just not there for the delight, the central delight of this narrator who is walking through the halls of that marble palace. She has an agenda which she wants to fulfill through the help of the tax collector, that is what is the premise of this story and that is what is described in the story.

So, it is a narrative which runs counter to Shah Muhammad the Second's idea of having her in the house of pleasure, right? So that narrative of protest is there. And as Shweta was pointing out, there is also a kind of a rebellion against the order of the British colonial regime. And there is another bigger protest narrative I would say, and that is given by Tagore himself, you know his resistance to offer a neat conclusion to the story is itself a mark of resistance to the story structure of the western world perhaps. You know, so in 'Arabian

Nights' we have stories not concluding, stories just continuing on and on and on, there are nested narratives.

In that same fashion, in the fashion of the eastern way to tell a story perhaps, Tagore is resisting the closure, so which is why I want to connect this to this idea of postmodernism that you brought out. Perhaps you can give me specific examples from the story in terms of its structure to tie up this kind of point that I am trying to make here.

Sanchar: Just before taking the next point, it's like, as she was saying on post-colonialism itself, so I just had a small thought like, if we kind of personate the woman character as a colonial prisoner. And if we personate the male character, the narrator, as a savior, so basically, somebody who is kind of a colonial representative, the man. And the woman who is a colonial prisoner, the man is asked to shade his colonial attire to become the native who he actually is, so that he can rescue the woman who is actually a prisoner to the colonial heritage. So, in that sense it can become most, I mean more post-colonial in that sense. And in the terms of the postmodern narrative I think that, I will go back to that idea that since it has this idea of transcending time, it is breaking the barriers of the of time and it is going through, it is bringing out the I mean, it is somewhere or the other where there is no verisimilitude.

It's like it is overlapping. There are planes; and I mean temporally as well as spatially, it's overlapping each other, the chronotope is disbalanced but in spite of everything if we, I think if we try to bring out unity in the narrative form it will be kind of making injustice to the way he has presented it. So, somehow or the other this disbalance in the uniformity of the entire narrative, it is what I feel adds charm to the entirety, to the complete understanding of this entire prose.

So, in that sense I feel that the disbalance in this structure in terms of time and space, it adds to the justification more of this text in a much more, in a way of clarity, I suppose so.

Professor: Correct and the story is very conscious of its structure. The story is somewhat conscious of its postmodernism. I am kind of jumping time scales here, but I am using that word because it will be very helpful to kind of get the idea. So when we have a reference to the 'Arabian Nights' and when we have all this reference to other stories, it seems as if Tagore is consciously kind of reminding himself that there is no kind of proper end point, no teleology in text. All you can get from text as well as from life is fragments, fragmentary

glimpses, you know snapshots of life, you cannot pursue life to the end somehow and make sense of everything.

So all the grand narratives are broken up in some ways with all these fragmentary structures of text. There is a particular moment in the story, I don't know whether we can quickly look for that, I was talking to you about it earlier too, where the story is aware of that fact. So, it's page 9 in my collection. It says, 'As the darkness gathered around me', the narrator says 'as the darkness gathered around me, strange things would happen that are impossible to describe.' There are certain things that cannot be described in a story, you cannot capture it, 'It was as though the pages of some extravagant romance were blowing through the strange rooms of that vast palace on sudden gush of summer breeze. Episodes that could be followed only to a certain point and no further. Setting out in pursuit of those swirling fragments I would wander from room to room all through the nights.'

So if you want to kind of pursue life itself to the, to its culmination, maybe you will be unsuccessful. If these two narrators, if these two listeners to the story want to know everything that happened to this man, they wouldn't possibly know, it is not going to happen. So that kind of idea is embedded there in the story, the story is very conscious of that.

Now, let me come back to the title of the story, it has a very fascinating magnetic title, 'The Hunger of Stones' or 'Hungry Stones'. In some translations we have it as the Hungry Stones, right? So Shweta, what are your thoughts on the title of the story?

Shweta: I think it's interesting because you don't think about the title when you are reading this story. And it's always the second narrator's desire or the woman's desire that is seen in the story. Her desire to run away or to be rescued or lust, for instance. And it's his desire, his desire isn't even articulated, he knows that he wants something from these hallucinations he's having, but he is not sure what.

And when you do stop to think about the title, you see that Tagore is trying to attribute desire to the stones but you never think about it that way when you are reading it. The stones have, seemed to have, imbibed desire from the people who are living in it, and that seems to be a constant need that they exercise upon whoever comes there. But their desire is to make the people who come in feel A desire, but for what it is never articulated. Because even at the end if I may look at it, towards the end when the second narrator asks Karim Khan what exactly

the story was, you don't get the full story, you just get that sentence on page 13 that says the gist of what the old man said is this, you do not get the entire story.

Professor: Do you want to read that for us?

Shweta: Sure. It says, 'The gist of what the old man said is this. There was a time once when many flames of unfulfilled desire and demented lust had teemed and flared inside that palace. Every block of stone within it is still hungry, still athirst from the curse of that anguish and frustrated longing. Whenever they find a living human being within their grasp they seek to devour him like ravening demons. Of all the people who had spent three nights in that place, Meher Ali was the only one who had emerged alive, although he too had lost his reason. No one else has ever been able to elude its grasp.'

And this might be unwarranted for, uncalled for but it leads you to wonder if Meher Ali had the same vision as the narrator, if it's the same woman he saw, or because again you are unsure if this woman's desire, the woman who the narrator sees— if it's lustful, if it's desire for escape, if it's a desire for something else; and the narrator's desire seems to be quite material, because he can't describe her face. He can describe luxuries, he can describe her clothes, he can describe the opulence, he can describe the sense, which again speaks of opulence, but he can't describe character or feeling or faces.

Professor: Absolutely, absolutely I think that desire is congealed there as a kind of character almost and the stones of that marble palace seem to have kind of imbibed the desire that has been kind of swirling in that palace.

Shweta: And you don't know what desire it is.

Professor: Exactly, which is what I am trying to come to. Is it a desire for escaping? It is a desire for escaping in the context of the lady there who wants the help of the tax collector, but if we take that palace as a whole, it is a structure made by Shah Muhammad the second, so it can be also kind of I think about power as a massive desire that that emperor had reflected in the past.

So is that desire of the emperor kind of embedded in the stones as well? So is it trying to regain its glory, its past power, across the Indian subcontinent? It has lost somehow, we have new emperors here, we have new administrators, so do we have a kind of power struggle?

Yes, there is a power struggle if we see that you know the Aravallis are trying their best to get rid of the vestiges of professionalism associated with the empire by sweeping away the sola topi.

So we have a kind of a symbolic struggle or fight between two past structures and we have figures such as this woman of pleasure as well as the tax collector, caught in this fight for hegemony across the Indian subcontinent.

I think with this we can come to a conclusion for today. More is to come, stay with us and I hope to see you again in the next session.