Chapter 2
The Rustle of Language

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**Abstract** In this essay, named, after Roland Barthes, “The Rustle of Language,” the author explores the manner in which Rabindranath crafted his poetic voice in the poem “Nirjarer Swapnabhangha” [The Waterfall Awakens from a Dream], published when he was twenty-one, out of the vicissitudes of his early experimentation with meter and form in the shadow of other voices, other rhythms. The author demonstrates how in this poem the poet constructed, out of materials he had already played with before, his particular poetic voice. This discussion attempts thereby to understand why the English translation of Rabindranath’s Bengali poetry inevitably fails at many levels, most of all failing to capture the repetition and rhythm of the Bengali words and lines as they rustle and murmur on the page or in the ear with a life of their own.

**Keywords** Poetics · Bengali literature · Literary history · Creativity · Psychology · *Nirjarer Swapnabhangha*

At the start of the year 1877, when he was just sixteen, Rabindranath lay down one day in the inner quarters of a corner room of his ancestral home in Jorasanko, Calcutta, and wrote a line upon a slate: *gahana kusuma kunja majhe* (within the dense flowering woods). In his recollection, “It had one day become very cloudy at mid-day. In that cloud-darkened delight of leisure, lying on my stomach upon a bed in a room, I wrote upon a slate: *gahana kusuma kunja majhe*. Writing it made me very happy….” (*Jibansmriti*, 462). And rightfully so, for this was one of the finest lines in the collection of poems/songs that appeared in every issue of *Bharati* save one between the years 1877–1878 and was later to be known in book form as *Bhanusingher Padabali*.

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All translations in this chapter from Rabindranath Tagore are mine.

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The first line he wrote, however, was not the first poem he published in this collection. He had published the first poem of Bhanusingha in the Ashwin (September/October) issue of Bharati in 1877; this poem was to later undergo many revisions and become standardized as the song “sawan gagane ghor ghanaghata / nishitha yamini re” (Splendidly dark with clouds is the monsoon sky / in the dead of night).

This was the start of the regular serial publication in Bharati of poems written under the pseudonym Bhanusingha, the name that meant Rabindranath, which appeared listed on the contents page of that periodical as Bhanusingher Kabita (Bhanusingha’s Poems).\(^1\) The story behind the publication of these poems by a sixteen-year-old Rabindranath has been told many times and is well known. Like most of the reconstruction of his early work, this story too is heavily premised upon Rabindranath’s own version of its composition as he presented it in Jibansmriti.

From 1874 onward, three years before the first line of Bhanusingha was written, Akshaychandra Sarkar, Saradacharan Mitra, and Barodakanta Mitra had edited and published a selection of poems titled Prachin Kavyasangraha (Collection of Old Poetry) serially in the Sadharani periodical, edited by Akshaychandra. Here, the verses of the medieval Vaishnava poet Vidyapati were reprinted along with footnotes; Rabindranath has described how the volumes of the periodical were purloined by him from his brother Jyotirindranath’s collection. [“My elders were regular subscribers but not regular readers. Therefore, to collect and take them away was not too much trouble” (Jibansmriti, 453)]. Reading the poetry of Vidyapati enraptured him, and making a careful study of the use of language in this old dialect in self-made notebooks, he proceeded to fashion in that language a number of poems in the style of the medieval poet.\(^2\)

It should not, perhaps, be surprising that Rabindranath first found his voice in poetry in the disguise of an imagined medieval poet long dead, in a language strangely obscure and archaic, tangentially placed within modern Bengali as it was spoken and written at the time in literary quarters. Inspired by the legend of Thomas Chatterton, whom he had first heard about from his brother’s friend, Akshay Chaudhuri, the person he credited with introducing him to much of English literature in this period, he set about replicating the achievement. “Keeping aside the unnecessary part about his suicide,” he writes, “I rolled up my sleeves and began my endeavour to become the second Chatterton” (Jibansmriti, 461).

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\(^1\) The name Bhanusingha was derived from Bhanu, another word for the sun, or Rabi. The full name in both cases would then mean “lord of the sun”; it has been speculated that the name was one given to him by Kadambari Debi. Many of the poems that were being published in Bharati at this time, apart from the ones that belong to this collection of the Bhanusingher Padabali, were signed with the initial letter “Bh,” revealing the extent to which the half-hidden half-revealed productions of this period shelter under the anonymity of pseudonyms and one-letter signatures, shy of proclaiming their nature and identity out loud and in the open.

\(^2\) His mastery over the subject was so complete that a few years later, upon re-reading Akshaychandra’s text, he wrote (no doubt goaded by that critic’s unsparing criticism of his own poetry so far) a trenchant and unsparing critique of the lazy and slipshod manner in which much of the work had been done in presenting Vidyapati in Prachin Kavyasangraha.
The difficulty and ambiguity of the Maithili dialect (a mixture of old Hindi and Bengali prevalent in eastern India) that he simulated to write these poems appealed to him for precisely those very reasons: their half-hidden, half-revealed nature, similar, he said, to the attraction held by “the seeds of trees, containing a mystery undiscovered underneath the earth.” Those were seeds that contained embryonically within their encrypted code, in the guise of Bhanusingha, the core of Rabindranath’s poetic vocation, the musicality and mystery that his mature poetry would convey later with a direct intensity.

Pretending that he had discovered an old and tattered manuscript of a medieval poet named Bhanusingha in the library of the Brahmo Samaj, he read his poems out to a friend. The friend, in turn, excited by their beauty, claimed they were better than anything written by Chandidas or Vidyapati, and wanted them for publication, at which point Rabindranath informed him that the poems were his own by showing him his exercise book in which they had been written. The friend then apparently became very grave, and had to concede, “Not bad at all” (Jibansmriti, 462). At the time that the poems were appearing serially in Bharati, Dr. Nishikanta Chattopadhyay, an academic, was said to have written a dissertation on these poems while in Germany, comparing them to European lyric poetry, thereby obtaining his doctorate on the subject, Rabindranath reported inaccurately, but with great pride, in Jibansmriti (p. 462).

Nevertheless, this section on the Bhanusingha poems in his autobiography, Jibansmriti, ends with a disclaimer. While expressing his satisfaction with the language of the poems, which closely resembled the language of the medieval Vaishnava poets, he nevertheless concludes by saying that they do not stand up to careful scrutiny as their made-up nature is then revealed; “they are not like the flowing, heart-melting tune of the nahabat (shehnai performance), but merely like the sound of the contemporary cheap English organ’s tung tang” (62).

In later life too, he referred to this collection as “an example of unlawful entry (anadhikar prabesh) into the precincts of literature,” (cited in Prabodhchandra Sen, Bhorer Pakhi, 131) and it has been surmised that he might never have published the poems separately in book form if not for the shocking suicide in April 1884 of his beloved sister-in-law Kadambari Debi, wife of his older brother Jyotirindranath, close friend, childhood companion, and muse, at this time. In the dedication to Bhanusingha Thakurer Padabali, he wrote: “You had requested, many a time, that I publish the poems of Bhanusingha. At that time I did not grant your request. Today I have done so, and you are not here to see it.” Yet his own attachment to these adolescent compositions can be seen from the fact that although he omitted almost every other poem he wrote at this time from the precincts of the Rabindra Rachanabali, this group of poems were not conferred the same ignominy, but remain enshrined in his Collected Works in their rightful place.

After the first line of Bhanusingha had come into being, it took another six years to the publication of Prabhatasangeet in 1883, his breakthrough volume of poetry. (In the meanwhile, his first collection of poems, Sandhyasangeet, had been published to indifferent praise.) This collection included a poem that he felt bore the stamp of his own individual voice with a certainty and clarity not evident so
far—Nirjarer Swapnabhanga ("The Waterfall Awakens from a Dream")—which was first published in Bharati on December 2, 1882. When it was later incorporated into Prabhat Sangeet, the poem added sixty-seven lines to the original two hundred and one lines; subsequently, it underwent many changes and is currently available in the Rabindra Rachanabali in one hundred and fifty-four lines; however, the version in the Sanchayita is compressed to a mere forty-three lines.

It was with the publication of Prabhat Sangeet that the tide of literary criticism turned substantially in his favor within the field of Bengali letters—critics and journalists across the spectrum, from Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay in the Education Gazette to the reviewers in Somprakash and Sanjibani—all published praise for the simple, unaffected marvel of language accomplished in some of the poems in this volume. Rabindranath grudgingly acknowledged as much of his own early work here: "In the period of Sandhya Sangeet my mind was taken over by a cloying articulation of my inner forceful feelings alone. With the season of Prabhat Sangeet, a few spontaneous forms began to be seen; that is, these productions were not the flowers but the fruit of harvest, although grown on uneducated, un-tilled farm land" (quoted in Pal, 132).

A long poem (in some versions perhaps too long), revised over and over again, the free flowing lyricism of "Nirjarer Swapnabhanga" was contained in a meter and rhythm of astonishing suppleness; the words on the page quiver and tremble with an intensity captured almost entirely through sound and language, constituting a magnum leap forward toward a form and style that was to become so distinctively his own. Revelatory and celebratory in its incantation of the beauty of morning, the poem’s narrative resides entirely in feeling and sensation, capturing the wonder of the world as the poet sees it one extraordinary dawn. While his essays and letters of this period were self-assured, argumentative, and sometimes sharp and impassioned, his poetry was still afloat upon a vague inner turbulence.

Returning home from England in 1880, he had published, in quick succession, four different volumes—Balmiki Pratibha, Bhagnahriday, Rudrachanda, and Europe Prabashir Patra—each in a separate genre, and each achieving some element of success within its own precinct. Yet in the matter of poetry, although he had just published the collection, Sandhya Sangeet, he was still to make an advance into his own domain, both in his own perception as well as in the reader’s. With this poem, that breakthrough was finally accomplished.

Constructing the story of his beginning as a poet later in life, he regarded the poetic accomplishments before this as merely the prelude to "Nirjarer Swapnabhanga," a poem that he said inaugurated his adult career as a poet, as is evident in his description of it as "the Preface or Introduction to his entire poetic corpus" ("amar shamasta kabyer bhumika") (Jibansmriti, 492). Written in one sitting over the entire afternoon and evening of a day of extraordinary experience, Rabindranath has immortalized the poem not only on its own merit, but also upon the basis of the revelation on which it was sourced, an experience of whose importance he wrote repeatedly. Describing the sensation in Jibansmriti, he wrote:

At the place where the Sudder Street road came to an end one could see the trees in the garden of perhaps the Free School. One morning I stood on the
veranda and looked in that direction. At that time, the sun was rising from behind the leaves of those trees. As I stood there and looked, suddenly, in a moment, the curtain fell from my eyes. I looked, and saw the world and this earth enveloped in an astonishing glory, everything swaying in joy and beauty. Piercing in one moment through the many layers of dejection in which my heart was covered, my entire inner self was scattered in the light of the universe. On that day itself, “Nirjarer Swapnabhanga” seemed to flow out of me like a waterfall (492).

This was not the only occasion wherein Rabindranath had felt such revelatory joy—he catalogs many other instances in his childhood and life of a similar nature—but certainly it was the most sustained and powerful experience among them. “Piercing the veil” was an expression he used repeatedly to indicate, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has pointed out, “seeing beyond” the “pratyahik” or the everyday, which “was ‘anitya,’ impermanent, subject to the changes of history. The realm of the poetic laced the everyday but had to be revealed by the operation of the poetic eye” (168).

The expression of wonder insists always upon that which cannot be understood but at the same time that which is undeniably premised upon the exigency of the experience. Ranajit Guha calls this heightened joy of wonder by its name in Indian esthetics, “chamatkara,” pointing out that it is usually rendered in English as “supernormal rapture” (67). Of the three similar childhood experiences cited by Rabindranath in the last essay of his life, Sahitye Aitihasikata (Historicality in Literature), of glistening dew, gathering clouds, and a cow licking a foal, each occasion was in fact a repetition or premonition of that central experience on Sudder Street, which was “a matter of seeing in a way Tagore claims to have been uniquely his own” (77). Guha then quotes Rabindranath himself in corroboration: “It is in this [seeing] that one is a poet” (80).

To experience the world as an outsider was a feeling that animated other poems written at this time (“Prabhat Utsav,” “Ananta Maran,” and “Ananta Jiban,” “Maha Swapna,” “Srishti, Stithi, Pralay”), but nowhere more clearly and extensively as in this one, “Nirjarer Swapnabhanga.” The feeling had partly animated his composition of Balmiki Pratibha as well, where, in language that was strangely reminiscent of his experience of writing Nirjarer Swapnabhanga, he had said he wanted to capture, in the character of Balmiki, how “a deep pity from within had pierced the dacoit’s stern exterior. His natural humanity had been covered over by hard habit. One day, there was turmoil, and the inner man was suddenly impelled into the open” (Tagore, Balmiki Pratibha 1). Whatever the internal impulse of wonder upon which “Nirjarer Swapnabhanga” was composed, however, it is in its formal execution that the poem achieves a rupture in relation to Rabindranath’s entire poetic corpus.

This might not be his finest poem and is certainly not among the best poems of his career, but in it he constructs, out of material he has already played with before in Bhanusingher Padabali, his particular poetic voice. Discarding the disguise of

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3 All quotes from this essay follow Guha’s translation in the appendix to his book (pp. 95–99).
4 Critic and poet Sankha Ghosh has just written on the importance of “dekha” [seeing] to Rabindranath in an eponymous special issue of Desh in May 2011.
the Vaishnava poet, he assumes his own contemporary form, in the accomplish-
ment of which there was at work not some mystical revelation alone but a hard
fought attainment at a formal level. With this poem, the early style, prickly with
the impediment of other poetic preoccupations and voices, largely disappears.

If Rabindranath’s adolescent nationalist poems had been written in imitation of
Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay and the patriotic feelings in the air at the time, and
if the first lyric poems too were modeled in imitation of Biharilal, Shelley, and
the other Romantics, then here, in this poem mainly, the tone and rhythm, the lan-
guage, and feeling that permeate his poetic voice—a voice so distinctively his own
that it later becomes instantly recognizable—are put into place for the first time.
What is remarkable about the poem is also the manner in which the poet lets him-
selves loose, sets himself free of all previous conventions and expectations:

_Bahudin pare ekti kiran_
_Guhay diyachhe dekha,_
Porechhe amar andhar shalile
_Ekti kanaka rekha._
_Praner abeg rakhite nari_
_Thara thara kore kanpichhe bari,_
Talamala jal kare thal thal,
Kal kal kari dhorechhe taan.
_Aaji e prabhate ki jani keno re_
_Jagiya uthechhe pran_ (Rabindra Rachanabali, I:51).

(After many days has one ray
Appeared in the cave,
Upon the dark waters of my heart
Has fallen a single trace of light.
I cannot contain my heart’s ardour
The water trembles, it trembles,
It talks and sings a complicated tune.
Today in this morning I don’t know why
My heart has awakened.)

The translation into English of Rabindranath’s Bengali—not only here, but usu-
ally—fails on many levels, inevitably; but most of all, it fails to capture the rep-
etition of the words and the rhythm of the lines as they are spoken aloud. In their
content and subject matter, they repeat the first words of poetry Rabindranath
thought he read in Vidyasagar’s children’s primer, “Jal pare, pata nore”
(Jibansmriti, 412) (Water falls, the leaves move), which for him, he said, con-
stituted the substance of all poetry. In their original spoken Bengali rhythm, the
words work to constitute what Barthes famously called “the rustle of language”:
“to rustle is to make audible the very evaporation of noise: the tenuous, the
blurred, the tremulous are received as the signs of an auditory annulation” (76).
“Can language rustle?” Barthes asks, for it seems impossible, as in language,
“there always remains too much meaning” for that to happen.
But what is impossible is not inconceivable: The rustle of language forms a utopia. Which utopia? “That of a music of meaning; in its utopian state, language would be enlarged, I should even say denatured to the point of forming a vast auditory fabric in which the semantic apparatus would be made unreal; the phonic, metric, vocal signifier would be deployed in all its sumptuousness, without a sign ever becoming detached from it (ever naturalizing this pure layer of delection), but also—and this is what is difficult—without meaning being brutally dismissed, dogmatically foreclosed, in short castrated” (77).

Into that utopia of freedom—to paraphrase Rabindranath in “Where the Mind is Without Fear”—has this poem awoken; and the poet is aware of the impossible nature of this attainment. Over and over again, in poems ranging from Balaka to Sonar Tori to Manasi, this would be the unique character of Rabindranath’s achievement, as he touched again and again with a surer and surer touch this state of utopia where what he achieves in language is “that meaning which reveals an exemption of meaning or—the same thing—that non-meaning which produces in the distance a meaning henceforth liberated from all the aggression of which the sign, formed in the ‘sad and fierce history of men,’ is the Pandora’s box” (78).

It is utopia, as Barthes points out, that often “guides the investigations of the avant-garde,” and it is to be found in many experimentations of the avant-garde. His own discovery of it is far removed from the world of Rabindranath, but has much to say in aid of pinpointing exactly the quality of the auditory that resides in Rabindranath’s untranslatable poems. It was while watching, one evening, Antonioni’s film on China, particularly a certain scene in which some children sit on a village street against a wall and read aloud together, but each from a different book, that Barthes discovers the rustle of language in the doubly impenetrable Chinese of different simultaneous readings. What he hears, however, in “a kind of hallucinated perception,” is what one hears in the poetry of Rabindranath: “the music, the breath, the tension, the application” (p. 78).

Is that all one needs, Barthes wonders, “in order to make language rustle, in the rare fashion, stamped with delection”—‘just speak all at the same time?’” “No, of course not; the auditory scene requires an erotics (in the broadest sense of the term), the élan, or the discovery, or the simple accompaniment of an emotion” (p. 79). This was present for him in that moment in “the countenances of the Chinese children,” and it is present for the readers of Bengali, “stamped with delection,” as Barthes felt, when they read, or read out, the lines “Aaji e prabhate ki jani keno re/Jagiya uthechhe pran” in ‘Nirjharer Swapnabhanga’ above. (Other lines from other poems fulfill a similar function; so we can think of, for instance, the famous lines in the poem “Duhsamay”: “tobu bihanga, ore bihanga mor, /ekhoni, andha, bandha koro na pakha” (Rabindra Rachanabali) (“And yet, O bird, O bird of mine, /do not blind, do not close your wings just now).”

What Barthes calls the “erotics,” the “élan” or the “simple accompaniment of an emotion” are an essential adjunct to the sound of the language in Rabindranath’s best poetry, which accomplishes its effect upon these twin premises. The reader of poetry, especially the poetry of Rabindranath, must feel akin to the ancient Greek as described by Hegel that Barthes ends his brief essay with: “He interrogated, Hegel
says, passionately, uninterruptedly, the rustle of branches, of springs, of winds, in short, the shudder of Nature, in order to perceive in it the design of an intelligence.” To interrogate that shudder of meaning, Barthes says in closing, is to listen to “the rustle of language,” “that language which for me, modern man, is my Nature” (79).

“Modern man” is the term that tenuously links the likes of Barthes with Tagore, for the experience upon which both premise their engagement with the creative is that of modernity. What Rabindranath achieves with the poem “Nirjharer Swapnabhanga” may be compared to what Adorno had said about the apotheosis of Beethoven’s accomplishment in the Appassionata, that it was “more compacted, closed, and ‘harmonic’ than the late quartets,” as well as “in equal measure more subjective, autonomous and spontaneous” (13).

From “Nirjharer Swapnabhanga” onward, in the mystery of his most beautiful poems, the “subjectivist approach” predominates—“the rejection of all conventions, and the remoulding of those that prove inevitable in accordance with the requirements of expression.” It is this subjectivity that will go on to create the mature works of perfection, works that are the “products of a subjectivity or ‘personality’ uncompromisingly articulating itself, which for the sake of its own expression, breaks open the roundness of conventional forms” (Adorno 12). The best poems of Rabindranath will follow “Nirjharer Swapnabhanga” in achieving within themselves a similar “harmonic synthesis” as in Beethoven’s best works that was apparently miraculously attained in that poem on an extraordinary morning in Sudder Street, Calcutta, in 1882.

**Bibliography**


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5 It might be worth mentioning, in the contexts of both creativity and modernity, that T. J. Clark, writing recently in the *London Review of Books*, has invoked Barthes’ Rustle of Language in the context of an exhibition of Matisse’s cut outs. Looking at a documentary film on Matisse as he cuts out the shapes from paper he writes: “I thought, looking at the film sequence, that I could hear the paper shapes rustle. And the word—the imagined sound—sent me back to a wonderful essay by Roland Barthes called ‘The Rustle of Language’, and especially to its last two sentences: I imagine myself today something like the ancient Greek as Hegel describes him: he interrogated, Hegel says, passionately, uninterruptedly, the rustle of branches, of springs, of winds, in short, the shudder of Nature, in order to perceive in it the design of an intelligence. And I—it is the shudder of meaning I interrogate, listening to the rustle of language, that language which for me, modern man, is my Nature. Was Matisse at the end of his life the Greek or the modern? It is the question posed by this extraordinary show, and one in which the whole meaning and fate of ‘modern’ art is, triumphantly and sometimes painfully, at stake” (Clark 2014).
Rabindranath Tagore in the 21st Century
Theoretical Renewals
Banerji, D. (Ed.)
2015, X, 288 p. 26 illus., 16 illus. in color., Hardcover
ISBN: 978-81-322-2037-4