

When Machines Translate Poetry: Cultural Meaning and Poetic Voice in Three Poems by Rabindranath Tagore

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Abstract

Poetry carries meaning through sound, images, rhythm and the relationships between words. AI translation can produce readable English quickly, but readability alone does not show whether a poem's cultural and emotional meanings have survived. This article examines three Bengali poems by Rabindranath Tagore alongside his own English versions and short illustrative AI-generated glosses. Close reading focuses on the force of a prayer for collective awakening, the uncertain identity of a beloved on a stormy night, and the language of courage in hardship. Tagore's English texts are treated as literary rewritings, not as perfect answer keys. The comparisons show how a direct rendering can retain a detail while changing its voice, and how a fluent line can hide an interpretive decision. The article proposes that AI output should serve as a starting point for bilingual literary reading, with attention to cultural context, formal features and the translator's choices.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore; Bengali poetry; AI translation; self-translation; cultural meaning; poetic voice

Introduction

A translated poem can be easy to read and still leave important questions unanswered. A reader may understand the events of a poem without hearing its rhythm, noticing a cultural reference or recognising that an apparently simple word carries several possible meanings. These problems are not new. Literary translators have long had to decide how much of a source text's unfamiliarity to retain and how much to explain. AI translation makes those decisions less visible because an English version can appear within seconds, often without a translator's note.

Rabindranath Tagore offers a useful case for examining this problem. He wrote poetry and songs in Bengali and prepared English versions of selected works. The two books commonly called *Gitanjali* are not identical: the English *Song Offerings* is a collection of poems drawn from more than one Bengali volume, with altered form and arrangement. Research on Tagore's self-translation therefore describes it as creative rewriting rather than simple replacement of Bengali words with English ones (Chen; Islam). The original and the author's English text can be read together, but neither should be mistaken for a neutral translation benchmark.

This article asks how an AI-generated English gloss may affect the reading of Tagore's poetry when compared with the Bengali text and Tagore's own English version. It concentrates on three connected questions: What happens to culturally important details? How does translation change the speaker's voice? What is lost or added when an English sentence becomes smooth and direct? Three short examples make these questions concrete. The study does not rank translation systems or claim that one model represents all AI translation. Its purpose is to develop a careful way of reading machine-produced literary language.

Translation, AI and the Problem of Fluency

In *The Translator's Invisibility*, Lawrence Venuti examines the preference for fluent translations in English and the cultural choices that fluency can conceal. A text may sound natural to English-language readers because a translator has replaced unfamiliar expressions, changed a sentence's shape or reduced ambiguity. Venuti's account does not require every translation to sound difficult. It asks readers to recognise that a smooth surface is the result of choices rather than proof of complete equivalence. This distinction matters for AI-generated prose, which can be grammatically clear even when a difficult literary question has been decided silently (Venuti).

Studies of literary machine translation also show why form and meaning require separate attention. Gao and colleagues compared AI systems on classical Chinese poetry and considered faithfulness, fluency and style as different aspects of translation. Wang and colleagues explored prompt choices for poetry translation and reported problems that remain despite improvements in generated language. Zhang, Zhao and Eger found that judging literary translations requires appropriate evaluation methods and informed readers; automatic measures alone do not settle literary value. These studies concern other language pairs or broader literary corpora. They provide reasons to examine Bengali examples closely, not numerical conclusions that can be transferred to Tagore.

Earlier work on Tagore supplies another warning. Chen argues that the English Gitanjali changes selection, form and framing. Islam discusses how later translators make different decisions about imagery and musical qualities. Iqbal's analysis of "Aji Jharer Rate Tomar Abhisar" considers the cultural implications of several English versions. These studies make it unsuitable to describe every difference from Tagore's own English as an AI error. Sometimes the Bengali line contains a detail that Tagore himself chose to reshape. A sound comparison therefore needs the Bengali original, the English rewriting and a clear statement about what the AI example was asked to do.

Method and Scope

The article uses comparative close reading of three poems: "Chitto Jetha Bhoysunyo," originally published in *Naivedya* and represented as poem 35 in the English Gitanjali; "Aji Jhorer Rate Tomar Obhisar," poem 20 in the Bengali Gitanjali and poem 23 in the English collection; and "Bipode More Rokkha Koro," poem 4 in the Bengali Gitanjali, for which Tagore published an English version as poem 79 in *Fruit-Gathering*. Bengali texts were checked against Tagoreweb; Tagore's English versions were checked against the public-domain editions reproduced by Project Gutenberg (Tagore, "Chitto"; Tagore, "Aji"; Tagore, "Bipode"; Tagore, Gitanjali; Tagore, *Fruit-Gathering*). The Bengali titles identify the particular texts even where the corresponding English collections differ.

The comparison focuses on selected words and passages rather than treating complete poems as equivalent units. Each reading examines imagery, voice, cultural context and the movement of the

Bengali original before considering Tagore's English rewriting. Three AI-assisted English glosses, prepared during drafting on 16 September 2026, are included as illustrative wording choices. They were prepared for a plain-English reading task, with attention to explicit images and references. The examples were not collected through a controlled or independently logged translation experiment. Their purpose is to make individual interpretive choices open to examination, not to measure the performance of ChatGPT or other systems.

No bilingual participants assessed the passages, and no accuracy or preference scores were calculated. Since the glosses are selected illustrations rather than a systematic sample, the article does not generalise from them to typical AI translation behaviour. The analysis is a comparative close reading of the published Bengali and English poems, with the AI-assisted lines providing examples for discussion.

Reading One: A Prayer That Loses Its Force

"Chitto Jetha Bhoysunyo" imagines a society without fear, narrow division or empty custom. The Bengali poem moves through a series of conditions beginning with the repeated idea of a place "where" these ideals may exist. Its last movement is unusually forceful: the speaker appeals to a father figure to strike with his own hand and awaken India. The request for a painful awakening complicates a purely gentle reading of the poem (Tagore, "Chitto").

Example 1: The force of awakening

Bengali excerpt: "নিজ হস্তে নির্দয় আঘাত করি, পিতঃ / ভারতেরে সেই স্বর্গে করো জাগরিত।"

Tagore's English wording: "Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake."

Illustrative AI gloss: *"Father, strike without pity with your own hand; awaken India into that heaven."*

The Bengali verb and image of an uncompromising blow give the closing appeal a sharper edge than a general request to awaken. Tagore's English version retains the ideal of freedom and the appeal to a father, but it does not carry the explicit act of striking in its final line (Tagore, Gitanjali 35). That omission cannot be treated as a mistranslation by an outside translator: it belongs to Tagore's own recasting. The illustrative AI gloss, by contrast, keeps the blow and the name India. It is closer to the explicit image of the Bengali ending while sounding more severe in English.

Closer wording is not automatically closer poetry. "Strike without pity" can make the address appear punitive unless the surrounding ideals of reason, freedom and renewal remain in view. Tagore's published English ending invites a more open interpretation by replacing the striking image with awakening. The two readings give the speaker different degrees of urgency. If an AI interface provides only one of them, an English reader may never realise that the original contains this choice. The key issue is not simply whether a noun has been preserved. It is whether the relation between force, care and renewal can still be considered.

The poem also distinguishes meaningful freedom from empty habit. Its Bengali image of sand covering the course of judgement places thinking within a physical landscape, rather than presenting reason as an isolated abstract idea. Tagore's English maintains a stream-and-desert contrast but compresses parts of the source text. Translators must choose which images carry the argument and whether direct expression should take priority over the full sequence of movements.

A fluent machine rendering can communicate the central idea quickly, but teaching or publishing it without the Bengali poem would narrow the evidence available to the reader.

Reading Two: A Beloved on a Stormy Night

“Aji Jhorer Rate Tomar Obhisar” places a waiting speaker at an open door while a storm makes the beloved’s journey hard to see. The Bengali address “poran-sokha” suggests a companion bound closely to the speaker’s life or heart. “Obhisar” can evoke a lover’s journey to a meeting, but the poem’s position in Gitanjali also permits devotional reading. Its emotional energy comes partly from allowing intimacy and spiritual longing to occupy the same space (Tagore, “Aji”; Iqbal).

Example 2: Naming the journey

Bengali excerpt: “আজি ঝড়ের রাতে তোমার অভিসার”

Tagore’s English wording: “on thy journey of love”

Illustrative AI gloss: “Tonight, on this stormy night, you travel to a secret meeting.”

The AI gloss chooses “secret meeting,” a possible interpretation of abhisar that makes a human romance more explicit. Tagore’s English text chooses a journey of love and addresses the figure as a friend (Tagore, Gitanjali 23). Neither English phrase reproduces every shade of the Bengali term. A “secret meeting” suggests concealment and an intended encounter; a “journey of love” emphasises the traveller’s feeling. The source poem does not require readers to settle the beloved’s identity before hearing the call. A translation that settles it too soon may make the poem easier to follow while reducing its openness.

Sound contributes to that openness. The Bengali opening links the storm, night and journey through a tight rhythm and recurring sounds. Later, the speaker repeatedly addresses the absent companion. Tagore’s English version turns the song into prose and adds strongly descriptive English images, including the dark river and forest. The Bengali text largely allows these places to emerge through the repeated structure of the questions. Carolyn B. Brown similarly considers how the source poem’s compact sounds and Tagore’s fuller English descriptions create different experiences of the storm (Brown).

The illustrative AI line is short, grammatical and clear. It does not preserve the refrain or offer a sound pattern that would stand in for the Bengali musical movement. This observation is about the selected gloss only: it was asked for clear English, not a singable poem. A different prompt might ask for rhythm, multiple options or a translator’s note. Yet the example reveals why prompt instructions are part of a literary translation’s meaning. Asking for clarity directs the model toward a decisive phrase, while asking it to preserve ambiguity would require another kind of response. Neither instruction removes the need for a reader to understand what abhisar can imply.

Iqbal reads the poem through the choices made by different human translators, and his discussion helps place the AI wording within an older debate about interpreting the beloved. The machine is not the first agent to mediate the poem for English readers. What changes is the visibility of mediation: readers may receive an AI version without knowing which senses of a culturally loaded word were excluded. A bilingual note offering both “journey to a meeting” and “lover’s visit,” for example, would make the interpretive choice easier to see. The purpose of such a note is not to provide a final definition but to retain the question that gives the original line much of its force.

Reading Three: Courage, Dependence and Refusal

“Bipode More Rokkha Koro” is a prayer that refuses a simple request for rescue. The speaker asks not to be protected from every danger but to retain courage within it. The poem continues through related requests for inner strength, the capacity to bear a burden and the refusal to doubt the addressee during suffering. Its repeated negative openings make courage a matter of rejecting an easier form of consolation rather than denying that pain exists (Tagore, “Bipode”).

Example 3: The shape of a refusal

Bengali excerpt: “বিপদে মোরে রক্ষা করো / এ নহে মোর প্রার্থনা”

Tagore’s English wording: “Let me not pray to be sheltered from dangers”

Illustrative AI gloss: “My prayer is not that you protect me when danger comes.”

The AI gloss makes the sentence’s logic explicit. It states what is not being requested and keeps the second-person relationship. Tagore’s version uses a more compact negative appeal, with “sheltered” shifting the emphasis from rescue by a person to protection from circumstances (Tagore, Fruit-Gathering 79). Both versions communicate refusal, but their movement is different. The Bengali opens with what sounds like a conventional petition before denying it. The illustrative English gloss explains this turn; Tagore’s English keeps the language of prayer while removing some of the source line’s pause and suspense.

The ending brings out a larger difference. In Bengali, the speaker wishes not to lose trust during the night of suffering, even when the world offers no comfort. Tagore’s English closes instead with the wish to find the addressee’s hand in failure (Tagore, “Bipode”; Tagore, Fruit-Gathering 79). Doubt and touch do not create the same scene. One emphasises the mind’s relation to faith; the other gives faith a physical image. Again, the author’s English is a creative version, not a word-for-word control text against which every other rendering must be penalised.

For machine translation, the problem is therefore broader than choosing the correct synonym for “protection.” The full poem has a sequence: danger, suffering, lack of help, strength, burdens and trust. A reader who sees only a brief inspirational English sentence may miss how carefully the poem rejects easy comfort. Short AI summaries can be useful for orientation, but they should not replace attention to the poem’s repeated structure and the shift from external rescue to inward endurance.

Discussion: What the Three Readings Show

The examples bring three kinds of interpretive choice into view. The first concerns a strong image that the author himself softened in English. The second concerns an ambiguous relationship that a short AI gloss made more definite. The third concerns the movement of a prayer that can become a plain statement once translated. These are not uniform failures of AI. They are differences in how literary meaning is organised, and they show why a study of poetry needs more than a judgement about fluent grammar.

Tagore’s self-translations complicate the usual idea of comparing a machine with a perfect human reference. In the three selected works, the author sometimes alters emphasis and texture for English readers. Chen and Islam similarly describe self-translation as revision and choice rather than mechanical transfer. A machine version that retains a Bengali word may preserve a feature Tagore changed, yet still fail to create a convincing English poem. Conversely, Tagore’s striking

English line may carry a meaningful literary effect even when it moves away from a Bengali detail. Literary criticism must make room for both possibilities.

A second issue is the treatment of uncertainty. The Bengali storm poem allows more than one account of the beloved. The danger poem turns a recognisable prayer into a refusal of protection. The awakening poem combines a vision of freedom with a demand for forceful change. In each case, ambiguity or tension belongs to the meaning rather than being an obstacle to be cleared away. AI systems can be asked to produce multiple renderings and explain alternatives, but those possibilities must be requested and checked. An unannotated output may present interpretation as if it were plain translation.

For classroom use, a productive activity would give students the Bengali poem, Tagore's English version and an AI gloss, then ask them to underline additions, omissions and changes in voice. Students could examine whether a term has been translated, explained or silently replaced. This would turn AI translation into an object of literary inquiry, rather than treating it as an invisible substitute for reading. Students without Bengali may need reliable bilingual notes or collaboration with a competent reader; otherwise a comparison risks replacing one unexamined authority with another.

The small set of examples also suggests a research design for future work. A larger study could use passages with carefully documented sources, two or more AI systems, fixed prompts, repeat runs and independent bilingual reviewers. Reviewers could distinguish the preservation of explicit meaning from rhythm, voice, ambiguity and cultural associations. Prompt sensitivity and the instability of generated responses would need to be recorded. Such a study would be able to test recurring patterns that the present close readings cannot establish. Work by Gao and colleagues and by Zhang, Zhao and Eger offers useful points of comparison for designing evaluation, although neither study supplies a ready-made score for these Bengali poems.

Limitations

The study examines three poems chosen for distinct translation questions; they cannot represent Tagore's full body of work. The short AI-assisted glosses are illustrative, were not generated under a controlled or independently logged protocol, and have not been evaluated by external bilingual readers. They cannot establish model accuracy, system-level differences or audience preferences. Tagore's English texts are literary rewritings rather than literal reference translations, and the religious and emotional meanings of the Bengali poems remain open to interpretation. A fuller study would retain complete prompts and outputs, draw on a larger corpus and include independent bilingual assessment.

Conclusion

AI can make a Bengali poem immediately legible in English, but immediate legibility does not settle what that poem means. The selected passages from Tagore show how a forceful appeal may become gentle, how an uncertain beloved may become a clearly identified visitor, and how a prayer's turning structure may become an explanatory sentence. Human translation involves choices of the same kind: Tagore's own English poems offer powerful evidence of creative revision. The practical task is therefore to make these decisions visible. AI glosses can support first reading, comparison and discussion when their origin is clear and the Bengali text remains available. Poetry translation requires attention not only to what the sentence says, but also to what its music, images and silences leave open.

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