

## Reading of War in Children's Narratives in Translation through *Totto-chan* and *Shaharer Meye*

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### Abstract

In the history of modern humans, World War II is considered to be the most horrendous man-made calamity to befall people. This war affected and impacted thousands of people around the world, either directly or indirectly. However, as opposed to adults, the children of the time are often shown to be mostly oblivious to the devastation of the war. Popular historical narratives of World War II, whether fictional or real, depict that children, despite being one of the most affected parties, lived their lives significantly differently than the adults in their lives. Their issues and concerns were often vastly different than the adults, even in those circumstances.

In this paper, I want to examine the effects of the war through the eyes of two little girls- Valentinka of Lyubov Voronkova's *Shaharer Meye* (A Girl from the City), and Totto-chan from the eponymous memoir of Tetsuko Kuroyanagi. The two girls, both of similar age, were on the opposite sides of World War II, by virtue of their citizenship of the Soviet Union and Japan, respectively. However, *Shaharer Meye* depicts the war while it was raging, whereas in *Totto-chan*, the war was still only a whisper, and was just starting. Also of note is the fact that Voronkova's story is a children's narrative by an adult, while *Totto-chan* is an autobiographical memoir of the writer. I want to study how the two girls perceived the same war on the opposing sides within these conditions. Additionally, given that I have only read both the books in their Bengali translation, I want to explore how both narratives stand as Bengali texts on their own.

### Introduction

Writings for children are fundamentally different from any other forms of writing. Despite the changing definitions of children and childhood over the years, as well as many critics such as Jack Zipes, Riita Oittinen and so on arguing against the very existence of children's literature, it cannot be ignored that a distinct form of writing exists that caters to mostly children. Even without delving deep into the discussions of different forms of writings, genres, styles and so on, any person - a literary critique or someone who has very little to do with the world of literature, can distinguish children's writings from hoards of other forms of writings. While speaking about her husband, the noted filmmaker and writer Satyajit Ray, Bijaya Ray in her poignant memoir *Amader Katha* (The Tale of Us) (2008) discussed how much deliberation and consideration Ray had put into his writing and the thought process while creating the

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tremendously famous Feluda character and stories (259), which till date form a strong pillar of Bengali children's literature, as he was writing for children. Any form of children's writing, that is, writing whose intended audience is children, as well as writings by children, possesses a distinctive array of features, foremost of which is an air of innocence. In fact, the first thing that is often noticeable about children's literature is the effortless optimism that is always evident, irrespective of the context or circumstances of the narrative. The primary message that any writing intended for children sends is that of hopeful optimism - that no matter what, eventually all will be well.

Conversely, in the history of modern humans, World War II is considered to be the most horrendous man-made calamity to befall people. This war affected and impacted thousands of people around the world, either directly or indirectly. However, as opposed to adults, the children of the time are often shown to be mostly oblivious to the devastation of the war. Popular historical narratives of World War II, whether fictional or real, depict that children, despite being one of the most affected parties, often lived their lives significantly differently than the adults in their lives. Their issues and concerns were at times vastly different than the adults, even in those circumstances.

With this in mind, in this paper I have attempted to examine the effects of the second World War through the eyes of two little girls- Valentinka of Lyubov Voronkova's *Shaharer Meye* (A Girl from the City), first published in Russian in 1943, from the book *Jaadu Teer* (Enchanted Beach), and Totto-chan from the eponymous memoir of Tetsuko Kuroyanagi, which was first published in Japanese in 1981. The two girls, of similar age, were on opposite sides of World War II, by virtue of being from the Soviet Union and Japan, respectively. However, *Shaharer Meye* depicts the war while it was raging, whereas in Totto-chan, the war was still only a whisper, and was just starting. Also of note is the fact that Voronkova's story is a children's narrative by an adult, while Totto-chan is an autobiographical memoir of the writer. I want to study how the two girls perceived the same war on the opposing sides, within these conditions. Additionally, given that I have only read both the writings in their Bengali translation, I want to explore how both narratives stand as Bengali texts on their own.

### **Holocaust Narratives in Contemporary Times**

The second World War and the holocaust have made a substantial mark not just in human

history, but also in popular culture across the world. Narratives depicting the holocaust and its aftermath are as much part of contemporary popular culture as they were immediately after the war. From novels like *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* (2018) by Heather Morris, *The Book Thief* (2005) by Markus Zusak, Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014), two films such as *Schindler's List* (1993), *La vita è bella* (Life is Beautiful) (1997), to the more recent *Dunkirk* (2017), and *Jojo Rabbit* (2019), such narratives are tremendously popular among audience. Whether it is because these narratives push people to ask existential questions on the human condition such as in *Dunkirk*, work as a continuous reminder of one of the lowest points of humanity as depicted in the book *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account* (1946) by Miklós Nyiszli, or help retain faith in human courage and decency as depicted in *The Book Thief* or *Ceremony of Innocence* (1970), the details and effects of the second world war still continue to haunt human psyche.

### **War through the eyes of Totto-chan and Valentinka**

The grim nature of holocaust narratives notwithstanding, when it comes to holocaust narratives that have been deemed to be part of children's literature and culture, the sanguine nature of children's literature is evident even there. This particular feature of delving into wishful thinking, of finding little joys in life in the darkest of days, is found in popular culture pertaining to holocaust narratives whenever children have been portrayed. John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (2006), which was later adapted into a film of the same name, is considered to be one of the most gut wrenching pieces of fictitious holocaust narratives; debates regarding factual inaccuracies aside. Although this book is not considered to be a narrative for children, the two main characters, a Jewish boy imprisoned in the concentration camp, and a German boy who was the son of one of the commanders in charge of said concentration camp, are children who form an unlikely friendship, and still find ways to be children, to play and have fun. Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005), another holocaust narrative which is regarded as one of the finest contemporary writings for children, also shows how Liesel, one of the protagonists, who had lost her family because of the war and had to go live with strangers in a new place, found ways to look for the silver lining, as can be observed in the following excerpt, "And she loved the fact that despite her failure in the classroom, her reading and writing were definitely improving and would soon be on the verge of something respectable." (92)

This tendency of children to always find the good in a bad situation isn't just a manifestation

of fanciful ideas by adult writers, however. One of the finest examples of the joyous optimism of children is listed in the pages of the widely read diary of Anne Frank, a Jewish girl from the Netherlands, who went into hiding with her family and friends during the second World War. Even as she was forced into hiding, she noted in her diary that “It’s really not that bad here, since we can do our own cooking and can listen to the wireless in Daddy’s office... We’ve already preserved loads of rhubarb, strawberries and cherries, so for the time being I doubt we will be bored. We also have a supply of reading material, and we’re going to buy lots of games.” (39)

Even after living in hiding for close to two years during one of the most dreadful events in human history, her optimism about the future is almost contagious, as can be observed in another diary entry where she noted “... I can’t help it, the prospect of going back to school in October is making me too happy to be logical!” (419)

As mentioned previously, Kuroyanagi’s *Totto-chan* and Voronkova’s *Valentinka*, despite being on two different sides of the war, have marked differences in their experience of the same war. Voronkova’s novel starts with the mention of the war in the very first sentence as the depiction of war refugees walking through the village (49) creates the background for the story to unfold. Whereas in *Totto-chan*, the first mention of the ongoing war comes only in the last one-third part of the book, with the mention of an incident where Totto-chan goes to visit wounded soldiers along with a number of students from other schools (105). As opposed to the experience of going to visit soldiers in a hospital, who look plenty cheerful and praise the school children’s singing, the dismal hopelessness of seeing homeless refugees making the trek in the dead of winter towards an uncertain future is decidedly sobering.

In *Shaharer Meye*, the protagonist Valentinka had lost her entire family, with her father dying in the war front, and her mother and brother dying right in front of her eyes in a bombing. She was taken by her neighbours along in the refugee caravan simply because she had nothing and no one left. When Darya Shalikhina decided to adopt her, even in that decision she didn’t get a say, and found herself suddenly having to adjust in a new place among new people that she had to call family. Her memories and fear of the war continued to haunt her- whether in her dreams, or while playing with dolls, or when her new adoptive siblings ask her questions about if she had seen the Germans and so on.

In comparison to Valentinka, Totto-chan's life did not face much disruption from the war - she continued to go to a school she loved, and kept on doing the things she did. Perhaps the first tragedy, and I use the word lightly, that the war brought to her life was the lack of sweets in the vending machine of the Ookayama station (123). Although she wasn't old or aware enough to understand the issue of food shortage brought on by the war, this particular incident made a mark in her life as she continued to try to get a packet of sweets, hoping that 'there must be at least one packet inside'(ibid.). Her next significant encounter with the war was during summer vacation at her uncle's house, where a number of her relatives were absent, as they had gone to the war (126). Even when Ryo-chan, the beloved guard of her school, was drafted to the war, Totto-chan and her friends bid adieu to him with a tea-party, not fully comprehending the seriousness of the situation (129).

Valentinka, as is obvious from previous observations, did not have a cushioned experience of the war. Even upon being adopted by the Shalikhins, and despite their village being far away from the front, stark realities of the war were very much present. Her adoptive mother's husband was fighting in the war and nobody had gotten any news of him for a while. Scarcity of decent food was a reality, as was the lack of other basic necessities such as clothes and space.

Yet, led by the genuine curiosity for life (and the hopeful stance of children's narratives), Valentinka kept on finding joyous things that took her by surprise - whether it's her bewilderment at finding that the seeds the grandfather sowed had sprouted, or the realisation that despite looking like the bad men in her childhood stories, grandfather himself was not so bad. Even her genuine fondness for the new lambs that she helped deliver helped her establish a connection to the place she was now supposed to call home. In spite of the contrasting polarity in their situations, as well as the impact of war in their lives, both Totto-chan and Valentinka share the positive determination of finding the best possible outcome within the situations they have been thrust into.

### **Reading *Totto-chan* and *Shaharer Meye* in Bangla**

One of the things that intrigued me the most about these two narratives that I have been discussing in this paper is how they shaped the experience of reading in my childhood. I had first read both narratives around the same time while I was in primary school. At the time, I was old enough to understand that these were translated works. In fact, this was made evident

from the covers of the books themselves, with illustrations so unlike the ones found in the popular Bengali books at the time, especially with Kuroyanagi's book adorned with the drawings of famous Japanese artist Chihiro Iwasaki. However, despite having that knowledge, the writings had never felt foreign to a practically new reader as I was back then. Rereading the same narratives as an adult, it is obvious that this experience was largely due to the excellent translation work that was put into creating the target texts by the translators in both the cases.

Translating children's literature is a significantly more complicated process, compared to that of translating for adults. As Metcalf discussed in the essay "Exploring Cultural Difference through Translating Children's Literature", that "More children's books than ever before address a dual audience of children and adults, which on the other hand comes with a dual challenge for the translator, who now has to address both audiences in the translated literature" (qtd in Alla), shows how the task of the translator is all the more arduous when it comes to translating children's literature. Generally speaking, at its core, the act of translation is done to embrace knowledge from and about a different culture and language than one's own. However, while translating for children, the theoretical deliberations regarding the various strategies of translation, such as domestication and foreignization as propagated by theorist Lawrence Venuti, lead to notable dilemmas on the translator's part. As mentioned previously, while translating children's literature, the translator is not just translating for children but also for adults. In fact, much before the translated texts actually reach the target audience of children, it has to pass through a number of adults during the stages of publication and commercialization. In consequence, translation works intended for children often come with the burden of what adults think are suitable for children. This contemplation regarding suitability is borne out of the adults' perception of what children are capable of understanding, as well as their idea of how children are. In his essay "Diversity can change the world: Children's literature, translation and images of childhood" Coillie has noted that "cultural context adaptation is one of the most frequently discussed characteristics of children's literature in translation" (142). Furthermore, he has also observed that many researchers have found "...that translators for children are much more likely than translators for adults to remove foreign elements in a text, or replace them with elements from the target culture" (144). This particular stance by many translators is typically in direct contradiction of the very purpose of translation, because as Emer O'Sullivan rightly notes that "claims about how many foreign elements young readers can handle are

based on assumptions” (qtd in Coillie 145).

When it comes to translating children’s literature, the translator is put into a uniquely subjective position of not only assuming what will be the most appealing to the readers, but also deciding how much of the foreign concepts would the reader be able to grasp, and translating accordingly. There are no set courses of strategies in this particular context, as in some cases, too much domestication can take away the very essence of the source text by simplifying it unnecessarily, simply over the assumption that children are not capable of understanding something unfamiliar. On the other hand, as Coillie points out, “certain forms of domestication may actually help keep young readers engaged in stories they would otherwise cast aside due, for instance, to an unfamiliar style or uncontextualized norms and values” (152).

According to the French comparatist Paul Hazard, each translated children’s book is “a messenger that goes beyond mountains and rivers, beyond the seas, to the very ends of the world in search of new friendships” (qtd in Coillie 141). Coillie noted in his aforementioned essay that for many researchers, the act of translating children’s literature is “an ideal means to increase intercultural understanding” (141). He further noted the thoughts of the Spanish theorist Isabel Pascua on this topic, who was of the opinion that children’s literature in translation helps to “overcome so much hostility toward the foreign, the strange, the other” (qtd in Coillie 142). These perceptions were exceptionally discernible in both *Totto-Chan* and *Shaharer Meye*.

*Totto-Chan* in Bengali is actually a translation of a translation; it was translated by Mousumi Bhowmik from the English translation of the original book by Dorothy Britton, whose translation Kuroyanagi herself had vocally appreciated for its authenticity. Despite overcoming the cultural and language barrier twice, the final target text in Bangla however, was as faithful to Bengali as it was successful in conveying its Japanese roots. Similarly, Nani Bhowmik’s translation of Voronkova’s novel has resulted in the text that was successful in conveying many foreign concepts to the young Bengali reader with ease.

This was perhaps due to the translation strategies used. Instead of getting into the debates regarding whether a translation of children’s literature should be domesticated or foreignized, Alla noted that Scopos (alternately spelled as Skopos) theory, brought forth by Vermeer, has made great contributions towards the act of translating for children. Scopos theory, which focuses on the purpose of the translation rather than faithfulness to the original, indeed helps

with the translator's priorities. By putting the needs of the reader in the centre of the process, as Alla notes, "the status and responsibilities of translator changed as well, having more freedom to resort to strategies which meet the children's special demands as the main readers." (17)

In both the books in this discussion, the needs of the readers have been given priority by retaining elements of source culture and thereby not undermining their ability to grasp foreign concepts. Simultaneously, these foreign concepts were presented in such a manner that it is easy to form a comparative perception of somewhat similar local cultural markers. For instance, in *Shaharer Meye*, there is a mention of the family celebrating the mother's "সন্তুদিন" (santodin), which in English would perhaps be something like a Patron Saint's day celebration. However, for children, it might be easier to relate to various festival days, especially Hindu festival days that are women centric, such as 'Itu pujo', 'Shivratri' etc. In the same book, the concept of Russian collective farming is introduced, which is simultaneously foreign as a notion, and familiar with the descriptions of farming almost every Bengali child is aware of. In another instance in *Shaharer Meye*, a festival day was described where the family came together to make flour dumplings shaped like swallow birds, which is immensely similar to Poush parbon celebrated among Bengalis, a day where the whole family collectively participates in making and consuming 'pithe', a sort of rice dumpling with sweet fillings. Conversely, the translator chose to retain the pronunciations of the names of the people similar to as they are in Russian, along with the pronunciation of many other words, introducing the young Bengali readers to foreign names, literally and figuratively, nudging them to empathise with this strange other.

Mousumi Bhowmik's translation of *Totto-chan* has also taken the same liberty by retaining the pronunciation of the Japanese names of the characters in this book, along with that of the names of places and objects. Although, in this particular instance, the translation also explained the way Japanese names were given, which in turn helps the reader properly understand the logic behind the foreign names. Bhowmik's translation also introduced the readers to the form of the Japanese haiku poems, by excellently translating the few haikus by noted Japanese poets Basho and Issa respectively, that were in the source text.

One of the finest contributions, in my opinion, that Mousumi Bhowmik's translation of Kuroyanagi's memoir has made is that of familiarising the Bengali children with the ifestyle of Japanese kids, even so long ago. Culturally, Japanese children are considerably more independent



than Bengali, or even Indian children. Japanese children travel in public transports as well as take care of their daily chores and needs from a much younger age than Bengali children. Instances of travelling in train every day to commute to school, dealing with their own pocket money, and so on are ideas that most children under the age of ten in our country are only conceptually familiar with. But by introducing these concepts to the readers, this book has succeeded in instilling an urge to be more independent among them.

While discussing translators of children's literature, Aida Alla noted that "no matter what strategy the translator resorts to, he/she must produce a text which conveys the elements of the unusual, but it must be acceptable and easy-to-read-and-remember, without underestimating the children's knowledge about the world." (18) Both the target texts in this discussion, *Totto-chan* and *Shaharer Meye* have done so with masterful accuracy, where the needs of the child reader have been given consideration above all.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have tried to examine two of the most beloved pieces of writing from my childhood- first comparatively, focusing on the elements of holocaust narrative in them. Secondly, I examined these as translated texts in Bengali, observing the elements that helped the target texts immerse in the target culture.

Writing for young children, especially while touching upon subjects such as the second World War and the holocaust, is a terribly difficult task. The writers have to be mindful so as to not traumatise children by recounting the horrors of those times, yet be masterful enough to ascertain that these writings help the reader become more empathetic and understanding towards the tragedies that took place, as well as give the lesson to see that history doesn't repeat itself. Both the narratives in consideration, I believe, are excellent examples of what children's writing should be like, as well as how to translate children's literature. Both *Totto-chan* and *Shaharer Meye* succeeded in capturing the innocence of children which is so devoid of cynicism, and that makes them embrace and accept the foreign without much doubt, unlike adults, even after being translated and brought into a completely different language and culture.

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