Like all serious academics, I begin with a comment by Walter Benjamin that Homi Bhaba quotes at the head of a chapter in his *The Location of Culture*: “Translation passes through *continua* of transformation, not abstract ideas of identity and similarity.”¹ Whether cultural translation, which implies a language that is performative and active, or literary translation, where the language is formulative or enunciatory, the transformational process cannot (or possibly doesn’t want to) ensure a sense of belonging. The separated textuality of the translated text is proposed by, among others, the new signifying and stylizing practices, and a new order of expression that put a lot of ground between the *ur*-text and the finished product. A translation does not want to remain a mere mirror image of the original in a different language; it always aspires to appropriate elements of a new textuality to assume a new identity and to transcend strict similarities with the *ur*-text. Both of these images are abstract activities, but are now subsumed under a new language game – that of growth, not simply transformation. This ‘growth’ is largely a product of reading (or misreading) of culture in which, the reader brings his own ingrained ideas and cultural perceptions. The textuality of the translated text, in that sense, is a composite in which a cross-cultural dialogue marks space of complicity and confrontation.

Even if we agree with all these propositions, a basic question remains unanswered, namely, who is an ‘ideal’ translator? With the problem of linguistic and cultural translation gaining predominance in postcolonial studies, this paper attempts to evaluate practical issues and problems when the author himself/herself acts as the translator/transcreator of his/her own text. Also, the common trend of comparing and finding lapses as a text moves from the SL to TL obviously brings in the question posed at the title of this paper, namely are comparisons odious? To corroborate the interrogation I have chosen three different examples, namely, Rabindranath Tagore’s own translation of *Gitanjali* published in English as *Song Offerings*, Alka Saraogi’s Sahitya Akademi award winning Hindi novel *Kalikatha: Via Bypass*, retaining the same title, and Syed Waliullah’s Bengali novel *Lal Salu*, translated into English by the author himself as *Tree Without Roots*. 

I

Given that English, the only language in which Rabindranath Tagore translated his own work, was the language of his colonial masters, any evaluation of his work as translator is essentially a ‘colonial discourse.’ But the extraordinary circumstances under which the poet started translating his
own songs need to be recapitulated here. In 1912, the intelligentsia of Bengal decided to rectify the neglect of their greatest poet by celebrating his fiftieth birthday in the Town Hall of Calcutta (a very rare honour for a non-white in those days). After a string of other jubilee celebrations, the poet felt physically and emotionally exhausted and decided to have his vacation in England. He was due to set sail from Calcutta on March 19 but being taken ill the night before, he retired to his family estate in East Bengal for rest and recovery. It was there that he began to translate some of his *Gitanjali* songs into English. In a letter to his niece, a year later, he wrote:

That I cannot write English is such a patent fact that I never had even the vanity to feel ashamed of it….I had not the energy to sit down and write anything new. So I took up the poems of *Gitanjali* and set myself to translate them one by one.

As Faria Majeed rightly points out, one should keep in mind the fact that these were not ‘poems’ as such in terms of Tagore’s entire canon. Being the verbal parts of short musical compositions, their brevity was a factor singularly suitable for a novice translator’s enterprise under the circumstances. In the West, however, this simplicity was conveniently seen as “the beauty and freshness of his Oriental thought,” not as a distillation achieved by consummate artistry.

From the time he was well enough to travel and his arrival in London a few months later, Tagore had filled an exercise book with English renditions of the *Gitanjali* songs. He presented it to William Rothenstein who later showed it to A.C. Bradley and W. B. Yeats. When the India Society decided to publish a private edition of the book, Yeats was obviously chosen to be the editor and to write the preface. We are all aware of how the relationship between Tagore and Yeats soured—the same man who was all praises for the Indian bard and was largely instrumental of introducing him to the western audience, parted ways, and in May 1935 he wrote to Rothenstein:

Damn Tagore!…..he thought it more important to see and know English than to be a great poet, he brought out sentimental rubbish and wrecked his reputation. Tagore does not know English, no Indian knows English. Nobody can write with music and style in a language not learned in childhood and ever since the language of his thought.

Tagore himself felt the weakness of his translation and wrote to Amiya Chakravarty, “I have done great injustice to the translations. I could be so careless and insolent simply because they were my own writings.” I quote so many well-known historical facts just to emphasize that the crux of all these interrelated matters lies in Tagore as a translator of his own work. Like many Bengalis of his time, and judging from his letters and speeches, Tagore had a good command of English. There are occasional phrases and lines in his rendition that both capture the spirit of the original and are striking
in English. Yet, *Gitanjali* is still the best, perhaps because Yeats and Sturge Moore were able to polish the English of translations that were made in the isolation of Tagore’s village-estate in Bengal, with no other purpose than sharing some of his favourite songs with friends he would meet on his forthcoming trips abroad. There are inaccuracies and mis-translations in *Gitanjali*, but the apparent lack of any extra-literary motive make these mistakes tolerable in the days when there was no serious challenge to the assumption that literary translation is an inexact art, and when mistranslations of Oriental literature were even welcome (as in the case of Edward Fitzgerald’s *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*) as a creative activity of a sort.

If ability or command of English were in question, one would not be wrong to expect improvements in Tagore’s translating endeavours after the *Gitanjali*-experience. Though there are indications of improved English in his letter to Rothenstein over this period, yet we find that things went from bad to worse in his subsequent translations. In one of these letters Tagore stated:

> Please thank Yeats once again on my behalf for the help which he rendered to my poems in their perilous adventure of a foreign reincarnation and assure him that I at least never underestimate the value of his literary comradeship. Latterly I have written and published both prose and poetry in English, mostly translations, unaided by any friendly help, but this again I have done in order to express my ideas, not for gaining any reputation for my mastery in the use of a language which can never be mine.

The sincerity of this admission becomes suspect since Rothenstein, in fact, was being inundated with poems and translations Tagore kept sending him with a single-minded willfulness. Edward Thompson also accused Tagore of badly truncating his greater poems and inserting in his English translations “pretty.pretty nonsense that was not in the original at all.” According to Thompson, Tagore’s treatment of the Western public amounts to an insult to their intelligence. As he had managed to quarrel with everyone who criticized his English so far, Tagore claimed that being a Christian missionary, Thompson was incapable of understanding his idea of the *jiban-debata*.

Moving on to a similar phenomenon in much more recent times, the problem of self-translation manifests itself in a different form. Narrated in a chronological fashion, Alka Saraogi’s novel *Kalikatha- Via Bypass* gives us a brilliant picture of the Marwari business community that migrated from Rajasthan and made their second home in Calcutta. The novel was originally written in Hindi and later translated into English by the author herself within a short span of time. In the introduction of the translated version, Saraogi claimed that she had “rewritten” most of it and in the acknowledgements section admitted that her self-translation was faulty, and she had “little confidence
in [her] Hinglish.” The result is a work full of several grammatical errors and sometimes guffaws when literal translations were made for culture-specific words and phrases. Though there is no perfect way of translating a text, one expected a little more finesse on the part of Saraogi, especially when she was confident that it was she who would be able to do justice to her novel. In spite of the help that she had received from her unnamed friend, it remains a great lapse on the part of the publishers to print the English version in its present form. Phrases like “the weekly schedule of the his classes”\(^{(173)}\); “the British have broken the back of Bengal”\(^{(202)}\); “Kishore Babu was put in mind of a three-month-old foetus”\(^{(247)}\); “Perhaps it her fate”\(^{(242)}\); or “making a flag out of the front of your sari”\(^{(264)}\) definitely lowers the charm of reading a Sahitya Akademi award-winning novel. Thus, as both these cases illustrate, the notion that the original writer is the best translator of his or her own work remains a myth.

III

The third and the most interesting example of transcreation is that of Syed Waliullah’s classic Bangla novel, *Lal Shalu* \(^6\). Before going into the details of the actual translation, a brief biographical note and plot summary is necessary to understand the context of the situation. Syed Waliullah (1922-1971) for the uninitiated, was Bangladesh's legendary writer in Bengali and English and also was a journalist and a bureaucrat. Born in Chittagong, and completing his intermediate education from Dhaka, he got his B.A from Mymensingh. He enrolled at the University of Calcutta but did not complete his Master’s degree. He worked as a sub-editor in *The Statesman* from 1945-1947 where he was colleague of poet Sudhindranath Dutta. After the Partition, Waliullah moved to Dhaka and then to Karachi, working for Radio Pakistan. Then he joined diplomatic services and worked as attaché at Pakistani missions from 1950 to 1960 in New Delhi, Sydney, Jakarta and London. In 1960 he moved to Paris where he served as first secretary at the Pakistan Embassy till 1967 when he joined UNESCO. In 1955 he married a French lady, Anne-Marie Thibaud. Syed Waliullah did not live to see the liberation of his motherland, passing away in Paris on 10 October 1971.

*Lal Shalu*, Waliullah’s first novel, was published in 1948, only a year after Pakistan had come into being as a new state, claiming to be the homeland for the Muslims of the subcontinent. It is set in the 1940s and depicts the life of a rural Muslim community and is a brilliant commentary of the rural psyche. The story unfolds at a remote fictional village called Mahabbatnagar in some marshy region of rural Bangladesh as suddenly a bearded Mullah arrives among the simple and unlettered Muslim community. Majeed, a quite haggardly middle-aged man impresses the innocent villagers with his religious knowledge and profundity. Soon after his arrival, Majeed starts cleaning and renovating an old, dilapidated grave or *mazar* lying in an un-cared state since ages among the bamboo forests. One
day he declares the *mazar* is of a great Pir or saint who has visited him in a dream and even rebukes the ignorant villagers for neglecting the place for such a long time. This shrewd and sly fellow, Majeed, fast manages to enchant the poor, illiterate folks with his fake speeches on religion and soon succeeds in creating a supernatural awe and mystery around the grave thus bringing the people of the entire village under his influence. The village is almost mythical; it is without connections with the world outside; it has no radio set; no newspaper reaches it; no school exists; even that favourite pastime of the Bengalis called politics, is absent. Life here is elemental. The game that Majeed plays has all the makings of an absurd play. Like a veritable colonialist and an active missionary, he plants fear into the hearts of the innocent peasants, makes them feel guilty for their neglect of the patron saint. He becomes the ruler and seeks to transform the simple peasants, almost pagan in their lifestyle, into devout Muslims. In the process he tries to drive out songs and laughter from their lives.

The mysterious grave overnight turns into a holy place covered with the piece of red cloth (Lal shalu). Verses from Quran recited by Majeed day and night create awe in the minds of the villagers, most of whom are landless peasants. Completely succumbed to the spell, people start bringing offerings of cash and kinds to the 'holy' shrine, in fact to the self-created vault of Majeed. Though a loner, Majeed is hardworking; he is fearful to others but frightened within himself. He is nostalgic; he feels for his childhood home which he has left; he tries to strike root in a land where he has never been before. He has no sharer of his secrets, and is incapable of opening his heart to anyone. Once a vagabond with no home and family, Majeed, within a few years, makes his fortune and casts an immense influence on the villagers. He marries Rahima, a hard working peasant woman, not so young, robustly built yet docile and obedient to her commanding husband. But Majeed soon decides to take a younger girl as his wife and marries Jamila, a teenager, who soon sniffs something fishy about her husband's spiritual authority. Jamila, the simple young girl, has been portrayed as the nemesis of Majeed, who causes the collapse of her husband’s hypocritical façade. As Majeed gets helplessly infatuated by her and loses his composure and self-control which he has assiduously peddled to create the myth about himself and the *mazar*, Majeed’s make-believe world begins to crumble. This is expedited by a flood that devastates the holy shrine. The novel also provides a picture of eternal Bangladesh, subject to the ravages of nature, of storms and floods, of cyclones and dying rivers. Also, in an odd, and somewhat ironical manner, the village of Mahabbatnagar represents Bangladesh in miniature, particularly in respect of poverty and fundamentalism, which in fact go hand in hand, one helping the other. Waliullah’s memorable observation, “There are more tupees than heads of cattle, more tupees than sheaves of grass,” reminds one of an abiding collaboration between poverty and religion.
Lal Shalu was translated into several languages. It was translated into Urdu in 1960 by Kalimullah with the same title. In 1961, Anne-Marie Thibaud, or Mrs. Waliullah translated it into French as L’Arbre Sans Racines. In 1967, it was translated/transcreated into English and published in London by Chatto & Windus Ltd as Tree Without Roots. This edition, at present out of print, lists names of four translators: Anne-Marie Thibaud, Qaisar Saeed, Jeffrey Gibian and Malik Khayyam. A new edition has just been republished in Dhaka in 2005 and is edited by Niaz Zaman along with an introduction by Serajul Islam Choudhury. In “Wali, My Husband as I Knew Him,” an unpublished account of her life with Syed Waliullah, Anne-Marie describes how she had translated this novel into French “from Wali’s own translation into English.” She had studied Bangla, but not well enough to translate from Bangla directly. Anne-Marie does not refer to the other translators mentioned in the English version. At the same time she pointed out the changes that Waliullah made in the story for the purposes of the translation. Majeed to her is more of a “crook”, but someone “driven by hunger.” It is quite possible and now generally accepted that Syed Waliullah had actually translated the book himself and for a number of reasons did not want to publish it in his own name.

Equally adept in Bangla and English, Waliullah brought about several changes in Tree Without Roots, especially in the description of the topography of his land to make outsiders understand it. One of the reasons for these changes might be that Lal Shalu had been written in the early forties. According to a step-aunt who lived with Syed Waliullah’s family as a child, the writing took place when Syed Waliullah was studying at Anandamohan College in Mymensingh. Waliullah was, therefore, a very young man when he wrote the novel. When he turned to the book years later, he was not only older but was also an expatriate looking back at the world of Bengal that he had left behind but that formed the setting of all his later writings as well. In the English version, as Anne-Marie Waliullah points out in her recollections of her husband, Majeed acquires “a certain grandeur” at the end, which is missing in the Bangla version of the novel. When the flood waters threaten to drown the mazar, he decides to remain next to it, as if caught by his own being, not because he is a believer. Though critical of Majeed’s exploitation of religion, Waliullah also looks sympathetically at his protagonist for whom religion means food and shelter. With the imagination of an artist he has grasped the deprivation and sadness of the people in the villages, arising out of the stark fact that there was little land and too many mouths to feed. Little food means more religion, he has written in the novel. According to Serajul Islam Choudhury, what is more, Waliullah “had an almost uncanny awareness of the shape of things to come, of the use that the ruling class would be making of religion to subjugate the public as well as to legitimize its own authority. Majeed, the sly imposter, who acts like a saviour of the hapless men and women around him, is himself a poor man and has been driven to his fraudulence by the
need for a livelihood; nevertheless, what he does is typical of what the ruling class has done and is still doing.”

There is also a long description of the Bengal countryside at the beginning of the novel which Waliullah wrote perhaps with his western audience in mind. There are abridgements and alterations and an important addition to the ending of the novel which no one but the writer himself could have made. Lal Shalu ends with a hailstorm; in the new version the hailstorm is described in greater details, emphasizing the devastation it has caused to the standing crops. In the Bangla version, Majeed is not alone at the end. He tells the crowd of people who ask him what they should do, “Na farmani koriyo na. Khodar upar towakkul rakho” (Do not be ungrateful; have faith in God). In Tree Without Roots, which has at least twenty-five pages more added from the point in which the Bangla novel ends, Majeed is alone at the end. He does not go to see what has happened to the mazar or to the crops in his fields. Instead he rushes to Khaleque, the landowner and richest man in the village and leaves both his wives at Khaleque’s place, asking him to look after them. The novelist tells us that deep within him Majeed knew why he was going to Khaleque, although he did not wish to admit it too readily. “The main source of his livelihood was not his land and his crops, but faith, and faith, he knew, though not as easily destroyed by natural calamity as material wealth, if once destroyed may never be restored.” He knew that the damaged mazar could be repaired, but not the damaged faith of the public in him and their trust in the mazar. That is why the man of religion must run to the man of material wealth; and the two must collaborate to preserve faith in the system. He then returns alone to the mazar in the midst of the rising floodwaters, “a frail human speck standing alone on the edge of a vast expanse of water that merged into the infinite vastness of the sky.” This change in Majeed’s character, apart from lending him certain grandeur, also makes him one of Waliullah’s lonely heroes, and the English novel, an almost original creation. Moreover, in the original novel there are intricacies and suggestiveness of language, particularly in the dialogues, which would have been difficult, if not impossible, for an outsider to put into English as satisfactorily as has been done in Tree Without Roots. As Niaz Zaman says, “We may reasonably assume, therefore, that Tree Without Roots was Syed Waliullah’s own English translation/transcreation of Lal Shalu.” She further argues elsewhere that it is possible that Waliullah made the changes because he wrote the Bangla novel “when Islamic fundamentalism had not raised its head; when the enemy of the West was not Islam, but communism.” She further opines that the novelist
Western audience, Majeed became a symbol of the Bengali and perhaps for this reason Waliullah could not wholly condemn him.\textsuperscript{11}

Umberto Eco in \textit{Mouse or Rat: Translation as Negotiation} says,

“…translation is always a shift, not between two languages but between two cultures – or two encyclopaedias. A translator must take into account rules that are not strictly linguistic but, broadly speaking, cultural.”\textsuperscript{12} This culture-specificity applies very well to Syed Waliullah’s case. The man who wrote the Bangla version in the mid-forties was not the same person who took up the translation in the mid-sixties. The East Bengali who had traveled only as far as Kolkata during the writing of the book had become a world traveler by the 1960s. Thus when he came to translate \textit{Lal Shalu} he brought his changed sensibilities to the task.

In this context I want to digress a little and say a few words about the cinematic adaptation of the novel made by the noted Bangladeshi film director Tanvir Mokammel. Though not a question of self-rendering by the author himself, this cinematic version also adds a newer dimension to the problem of transcreation. Retaining its original title, the novel was adapted into a film in 2001, retaining the original Bangla title, \textit{Lal Shalu}. It was some twelve years back when Mokammel first decided to make a film out of the novel and in fact, he was further inspired after the publication of his analytical book \textit{Syed Waliullah, Sisyphus and Quest of Tradition in Novel} (1988). He said:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Lalsalu} tells a story very much close to that of our own lives. Though the novel is set in the mid 40's, nothing has practically changed in the rural societies of Bangladesh. At a time when fundamentalism has come under world attention, our rural societies are reeling under the spell of obscurantists and hypocrite mullahs.
\end{quote}

Tanvir is aware of the fact that fake ‘pir-ism’ and shrine business is a misdemeanour going on since ages and would probably, continue to exist. Therefore the relevance of \textit{Lal Shalu} will remain in future as it has been now. While writing this bold novel, the chief aim of Syed Waliullah was to expose the misdeeds of the religious hypocrites and to show the dark and backward communities of the pre-partition period lacking enlightenment. But to give the novel a cinema version, Tanvir Mokammel has seen the novel from a wider perspective. He finds a new chapter of interest as he closely observes the clash of Majeed with the peasants. Majeed is a parasite, living on the donations of the peasant-community yet he, all the time, holds sway on the poor people, throwing them into desolation. Hiding behind a mask of hypocrisy and misinterpreting the ideals of Islam, Majeed is also a kind of a fundamentalist who prevents the opening of a primary school in the village. He finds success but ultimately fails when his wife Jamila reveals his misdeeds before the public.
The film stirred up a hornet’s nest at its public screening in a Sylhet auditorium and was banned by the local administration for being “politically controversial.” It aroused fresh discussion among the critics and the general viewers about obscurantism and religious hypocrisy. There is no deviation from Waliullah’s storyline which has been followed to such minute details that Lal Shalu as a film is perceived to be a much greater threat to Muslim fundamentalists than the book. In a period of social unrest and anxiety, worsened by harsh attitudes of fundamentalism and fanaticism, Lal Shalu is a befitting mode of protest and a means of awareness for the secular people of the country. They are made aware of the mushrooming madrasas which are now part and parcel of Bangladesh’s social milieu. As Tanvir Mokammal states:

In a country where cinema owners refuse to show a film like Lal Shalu for commercial considerations, I consider this to be a signal honour for filmmakers like me. People are angry because hurdles are being deliberately created in its screening even after the film has received the required clearance from the Censor Board and the Maulanas of the Islamic Foundation. Actually fundamentalism of any kind is incompatible with the Bengali psyche and ethos and is a foreign creed to the Bengali soil.¹³

The director therefore draws our attention to the fact that thematically, the film is now more relevant to Bangladesh’s social and political milieu than fifty-eight years ago when the book was written, as the mazar business has thrived immensely because of the patronization and support received from both homegrown and foreign fundamentalists. Interestingly, the novel was never banned and in fact, for fifteen years, it formed part of the college curriculum for Bengali Honours students both during and after Pakistani rule.

IV

After considering all these different examples of self-translation, I am still confounded with the question of the author as transcreator. In an article published in 2003, the noted critic Susan Sontag opined:

To translate means many things, among them: to circulate, to transport, to disseminate, to explain, to make (more) accessible. By literal translation we mean, we could mean, the translation of the small percentage of published books actually worth reading; that is to say, worth rereading. ……In what I call the evangelical incentive, the purpose of translation is to enlarge the readership of a book deemed to be important.¹⁴

Sontag further explains that the translators were “the bearers of a certain inward culture” and that to translate “thoughtfully, painstakingly, ingeniously, respectfully, is a measure of the translator’s fealty to the enterprise of literature itself.” Though she propagated such values as ‘integrity,’ ‘responsibility,’ ‘fidelity,’ ‘boldness,’ ‘humility,’ and ‘ethical understanding’ in the translator, she does not define who an ‘ideal’ translator is. She just states that ‘literary translation is a branch of
literature – anything but a mechanical task.’ I thus ends with the naïve contention that though there is nothing called an ‘ideal’ translator, if desired the writer either can or cannot be a successful transcreator as well. Also, comparing a work with its translation/transcreation is not odious.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Walter Benjamin, Quoted in The Location of Culture, Homi Bhaba, 1994: 214.


4 Majeed, 100. “In terms of Tagore’s entire canon, Bengalis use the word kobita, poems, poetry, to refer to his longer and children’s poems as opposed to Rabindra-sangeet, his songs, of which there are more that 2,000 in existence. In most cases, the verbal and musical portions of each of these songs were composed simultaneously.”


8 Serajul Islam Choudhury, Introduction. Tree Without Roots, ix-x.

9 Niaz Zaman, Preface to Tree Without Roots, viii.


11 Ibid.


15 Ibid.