

4 “I Want to Use You Like Amul Butter” Hyper-masculinity and the Objectification of Bodies

Linking back to the “transgressive” tropes of hunger, drugs and alcohol consumption as actual violations of the bourgeois body, we will now shift focus to another central trope of Hungryalist poetry: hyper-masculinity. The hyper-masculine character of the Bengali all-boys club does not only display in the gender composition of the group but in the development of a poetics of hyper-masculinity: this has oscillated between performances of a predatory virility (Malay Roy Choudhury, Subimal Basak, and Saileshvar Ghosh), and instances of anxious masculinity, as we will see in Phalguni Ray’s poetry, which voiced the aversion to traditional gender roles and the impossibility to gain release from the expectations of the middle-class society.⁴⁴ The poems under discussion have shown a consistent engagement with the anxious masculinity of these Bengali poets, confronted as they were by a rapidly transforming Indian society where gender-roles and traditional social structures were tenaciously being questioned both in the private and public spheres. For example, a major concern of the new Indian state was the rationalisation of the Hindu family as the basic economic unit of the Indian democracy (Newbigin 2013: 2). A part of this project of reforming Hindu personal law was to improve Hindu women’s legal rights within the family, by instituting divorce, civil marriage and access to property for widows (Majumdar 2009; Sinha 2007). Although structures of exploitation and ideologies of subordination persisted for women living in post-independent India, their growing participation in the public sphere offered new forums to negotiate and redefine nationalist ideas on women in the domestic sphere under the British rule (Sen 2004; Gupta 2001; Nijhawan 2012). In this context, women’s emancipation was perceived as a threat to the men’s hegemonic position in society. It is also from this fear of seeing the authority of men menaced by the transformation of the traditional social structures that the hyper-masculinity of the Hungry Generation poets stemmed, placing the poets’ manly bodies at the centre of the poem.

44 To my knowledge, the only woman who took part in the movement was Alo Mitra, editor of the Hungryalist little magazine *Wastepaper* and Tridib Mitra’s “registered unmarried wife”, as she is described in the Hungry Generation Condolence Meeting.

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As previously stated, both the impact of colonialism on gender and race formations as well as Nehru's nation-state project of modernisation were essential frameworks that helped recomposing the ambivalent masculinity visible in Hungryalist poetry. In the context of Nehruvian India – with its national ideology of scientific progress and economic development – the dominant pattern of masculinity was that of a rational and scientific manliness represented by the husband and father of the planned Indian family, what Sanjay Srivastava named the "Five Year Plan hero" (Srivastava 2014: 39). This model promoted modern ideas of the Indian married couple in which man is not only the breadwinner of the family but also the provider of pleasure (Brosius et al. 2006). Besides the tendency to institutionalise religious practices of the Hindu family, as shown by the Hindu Code Bill, debates on new forms of sexuality, intimacy and conjugality circulating in Europe and other western countries played a role in the imagination of a young Indian generation. Therefore, the toxic masculinity that most Hungryalist poets perform in their poems by displaying the sexual power of the male body and the possession, consumption and objectification of the female body gains meaning when interpreted in light of these multiple masculinities and as a reaction to the dominant ideology of Nehruvian socialism that valued economic and sexual frugality as major criteria.

Moreover, homophobia, misogyny and homosexuality often coexisted in certain performances of hyper-masculinity.⁴⁵ In Hungryalist poems, these tensions merged with other ambivalent desires, including the exploration of "other" sexual behaviours and orientations, and with a predatory and aggressive male sexuality. These sexual concerns were part of a widespread interrogation about sexuality that took place across the post-war world. Certain passages in Hungryalist poetry have suggested that exploring "other" sexualities was a means to break social taboos on family, marriage and sex regulation in India. That is why the sexist and misogynist poetics of the Hungryalist writers must be seen in light of their inability to cope with the norms and expectations of the patriarchal Indian family and the impossibility of creating an alternative system of value. Here, I utilise the concept of "male gaze" drawing from Laura Mulvey's suggestions in the field of film theory. Mulvey tackled the asymmetry of social and political power between men and women at the heart of cinematic representation, arguing for the centrality of the

45 For example, Polchin (2019) revisits the dynamics of sex, power and masculinity that were at play among a young Lucien Carr, Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, ending up in the murder of their English teacher David Kammerer by Lucien Carr. It is within the panic for a "homophobic homosexuality" that the readers have positioned David Kammerer's murder: "Whatever the motive for Carr's violence, the story of Kammerer's murder encapsulated a compelling and troubling idea in the popular imagination that took root in the forties and grew in the years after: assertions of heterosexual masculinity were defined by violent reactions against queer men".

male gaze and the aesthetic pleasure of the male spectator. In her analysis of Hollywood movies of the 1960s, the “looked-at” object was often a woman (Mulvey 1975). I use Mulvey’s concept in a more fluid way that adapts the visuality of film culture to the poetic images of sexual intercourse, violence, and rape that are so common in the poetry under analysis. Although I have found that the often-sexist look of much Hungryalist poems can be a by-product of multiple sociocultural factors – their anxieties of masculinity, postmodern anguish and alienation, reaction to dominant discourses on sexual temperance and economic frugality – the Hungryalists have shown no concrete endeavour to address women’s issues and gender equality as part of their anti-establishment agenda. Despite the poets’ effort to be released from the burden of patriarchy, the Hungry Generation did so also as victims of the discriminating race and gender politics of colonialism and of an increasing consumerist culture that objectified social relationships.

In this sense, the Hungryalist poets have continued to reproduce other mythologies about the woman in post-independent West Bengal, who was repeatedly objectified and reduced to a silent sexual body.⁴⁶ To have an idea of how stereotypical imaginations of the woman were reiterated in the post-independence period, Geraldine Forbes quoted a special issue of *Femina*, a leading women’s magazine of the 1970s, which came out with a cover portraying Indira Gandhi as the goddess Durga: “To be a woman – a wife, a mother, an individual – in India means many things. It means that you are the store-house of tradition and culture and, in contrast a volcano of seething energy, of strength and power that can motivate a whole generation to change its values, its aspirations, its very concept of civilized life” (Forbes 1996: 227). In other words, the woman’s body continued to be a discursive site of negotiation of modern identities even in the utterly masculine landscape of the 1960s Bengali avant-garde. Therefore, while in constant tension with the model of a national Indian masculinity – which imagined the Indian man as the ideal father, husband and breadwinner of the family – the young Bengali poets staged an abysmal and often abusive sexuality perhaps as a way to counter the fear for women’s changing place in Indian society, at a time when they were claiming right to sexual pleasure against a middle-class morality of chastity and sacrifice.

To showcase such dualities and fractures in the Hungry Generation’s agenda of literary and cultural transgression, I focus here on representations of the female

46 On the other hand, it must be pointed out that the 1960s also saw the proliferation of Bengali feminist poetry and fiction. For example, Kabita Sinha (1931–1999) was recognised as the first feminist poet of Bengal, rejecting the traditional housewife role assigned to women, a theme later echoed in the poet Mallika Sengupta and the prose-writer Taslima Nasreen. Her poems signalled a shift from traditional representations of woman, breaking ideals of motherhood, chastity and modesty in view of a more troubled and conflicted female world that does not accept recognition of the traditional narrative of the woman. See, for example, Tharu and Lalita 1993; Sinha 2005.

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body seen through the “male gaze” – often a misogynist, hyper-sexual, objectifying and predatory one – of some Hungryalist poems. I will more specifically address Malay Roy Choudhury’s banned poem “Stark Electric Jesus” and Saileshvar Ghosh’s “To Pranati on the Street” (Pranati janya rastāy) to highlight the textual strategies and use of the Bengali vocabulary illustrating the hypermasculine ethos and objectification of the female body. For example, Malay’s banned poem is representative of the Hungryalist hyper-masculinity, as it centres on the sexual power of the male body which objectifies the female body. The objectification and hyper-sexualisation of the female body in Hungryalist poetry has seemed to legitimise what I call an aesthetics of rape and consumption, as I show in a reading of the next poems. In an attempt to go beyond the stereotype of women as devoted wives, mothers and muses, poetry for the Hungry writer turned into a site for performing a predatory virility. However, this representation of the Hungryalist masculine ethos is only partially representative of the gender ideology of the Bengali movement. A different and yet complementary articulation of this performative hypermasculinity is visible in Phalguni Ray’s writings, which do not glorify the violent and aggressive masculinity but rather endeavour to metabolise the poet’s ambivalent sexual identity by questioning gender-roles in urban post-colonial India.

Yet the male gaze remains the emblematic subject of all Hungryalist poetry, regardless of the single living experiences and performances of manhood. In the next examples from Malay and Saileshvar’s poems, the woman figures only as the object of a man’s desire. It is clear that these samples of Hungryalist poetics have no intention of rejecting the gender roles that are traditionally established within the Bengali society. However, at a closer analysis representing the woman as a purely “sexual body” does attempt at – although transgressively – to go beyond nationalist views of the Indian woman as a sacred sphere of chastity and domesticity. That is why these ways of representing women are only partially transgressive: in Malay and Saileshvar’s words, they voice the poets’ sexual obsessions and perversions of desiring and possessing a woman’s body, like a commodity: perversions that usually remain unspoken moral taboos.

Aesthetics of Rape and Consumption

Across the Hungryalist poems under analysis, women are silent and passive subjects of the hypermasculine gaze. They are portrayed either as silent sexual bodies, like Subha in Malay Roy Choudhury’s “Stark Electric Jesus”, or as commodities to be eaten and consumed, as in Saileshvar Ghosh’s “To Pranati on the Street”. One way to explain the sexist representation of women in the Bengali poetry of

the Hungry Generation is that the young poets sought to go beyond colonial stereotypes of womanhood that imagined women as chaste wives, devoted mothers, and domestic goddesses. Yet while attempting this demystification of the role of the modern Indian woman, the Bengali poets perpetrated a hegemonic ideology of masculinity that feared the image of the modern Indian girl, who questioned and transgressed gender boundaries by her individual autonomy, rebellion and overt sexuality (Ramamurthy 2006: 202). What emerges from these representations are the sexual perversions of the Bengali poets and their desires to possess the woman's body, thus reproducing the violence of a postmodern world where traditional social bonds and values were shifting and being replaced with others. Within this frame of sexual abuse, the notion of rape or physical violence (Beng. *dharṣaṇ*) has found legitimation both physically and metaphorically in Hungryalist aesthetics, where the language and forms of poetry are described as predatory, voracious and violent just like rape and murder. For example, in one of the Hungryalist manifestoes, Malay affirmed that "Poetry is formed in the unhesitant rebellion of the inner world, in the tremendous irritation of the soul, in every drop of blood" and that "the creation of poetry is possible only in a state of 'conscious overwhelming' during the apex of rape, hangover or drowning" (Caṭṭopādhyāy 2015: 118). In other words, in Hungryalist aesthetics the only way out of the bourgeois moral order is to symbolically "rape" (*dharṣaṇ karā*) and "murder" (*hatyā karā*) the forms and idioms of representation.

However, in the process of translation from Bengali to English of sensible content, Malay's translation of "Stark Electric Jesus" (Bakken 1967) demonstrated that the obscuration of morally reproachable content is used to avoid further legal charges. For example, in the following verses Malay has translated the Bengali *dharṣaṇ* into the English "copulation":

I've forgotten women during copulation and returned to Muse
[...]
My power of recollection is withering away
Let me ascend alone toward death
I haven't had to learn copulation and dying

In Nandini Dhar's feminist critique of Hungryalist poetry, she proposed a gender-based critique by pointing out the fundamental "vilification" of the female sexual agency in Malay's poetry, turned into a site of male sexual violation (Dhar 2016). In her reading, Dhar has remarked how Malay mistranslated the passages centred on Shubha's sexual body. In her view, the alleged mistranslations of *dharṣaṇ* as copulation, and "uṭhiye neoṃyā" as elevate (whereas she claims the real meaning to be "abduction") are used to legitimise rape and sexual violence (Dhar 2016). In order to clarify Malay's choice of translation, I turned to him in a private

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communication where he claimed that "the word 'rape' has been in use now only. When I wrote, people talked either of intercourse or of copulation. For me at that time 'dharshan' was same as intercourse or copulation. I did not mean rape while using the word 'dharshan'".⁴⁷

Was the poet enacting a strategy of self-censorship, purging the text of its most objectionable contents to make it less problematic to the American readership? Or is the misunderstanding caused by the enhanced sexual and violent connotation assigned to the word in more recent times? Today the word *dharṣaṇ* has become a highly controversial term in the South Asian social and political landscape, especially after the Delhi Gang Rape of 2012 projected the discourse on rape and violence against women into the foreground of national interest. Taking the word out of the original poetic context here helps to retrace the semantic history and evolution of the word and establish a trajectory of social, cultural and literal meaning that cannot be transmitted to the reader through the mere act of translation. The recasting of *dharṣaṇ* and its history into the subversive semiotics of the poem, which aims to represent the act of sexual intercourse as a possibility of emancipation from the oppressive morality of the middle class, can complement Dhar's critique of a translation that "legitimises rape and sexual violence through repetitive articulations of male pain and alienation" (Dhar 2016). In the logic of poetry, *dharṣaṇ* is viewed as a twofold act that can disrupt and subvert moral and literary taboos about "appropriate" practices. The rough and unabashed bodily language that Malay uses to portray the female body, always in a passive and objective position vis-à-vis the author's male gaze, cannot but be a sign of aggressive masculinity verging on misogyny and misanthropy. At the same time, this language of excess is also a major characteristic of Hungryalist poetic register, signalling the disintegration of an ideal model of masculinity that oscillated between the traditional model of the family-oriented Hindu middle class and the changes that were occurring in other western countries within the realm of sexuality and civil rights.

Shifting focus to the poems by Saileshvar Ghosh ("To Pranati on the Street") and Subimal Basak ("sTigmata/23"), we will see that the female body is portrayed as a commodity to be consumed and a body to be possessed and penetrated. In chapter I, I already drew the parallel between commodity fetishism and the sexual urge to possess the woman's body in Saileshvar's poem. In the vocabulary of

47 Private Facebook conversation, April 17, 2018. For a reconstruction of the etymology of the word, the Sanskrit Monier-Williams dictionary translates "dharṣaṇ" also as "copulation". For a modern definition of the word, while in the monolingual dictionary of the Bengali language (Biśvās 2014) it generally means an act of suppression or submission lacking a clear connotation of sexual abuse, the Bengali-English dictionary translates *dharṣaṇ* also as rape. However, among the various Bengali synonyms of *dharṣaṇ*, there is also "balāt·kār" which involves the idea of oppression, control and submission "especially against women" (*biśeṣataḥ nārī prati*).

Marxism, the fetishism of consumption is the most visible aspect of the so-called reification, which denotes the objectification of social relationships taking place in the capitalist system.⁴⁸ As actors involved in the practices and processes of capitalist society, women too are shaped by sexual objectification as “both consumers with buying power and consumable objects” (Verkerk 2017: 149). This pattern of objectification and symbolic exploitation of women as sexual bodies clearly emerges from Saileshvar’s words, as I previously showed.

Pranati, how hard it is to live like a man
to live like a husband, like a wife or a son
even living for one’s own name is hard
to live by masturbation is even harder.
There’s no sense in living only by writing poems.
Easier than everything is dying
Bimal had hairs on his chest
still he died
Nikhil weighed 160 pounds
still he died.
My head is reeling so I shall also die
Now, waiting for Pranati
back in my room we will think of something else,
and after sleeping in bed,
today I may be eager for something else!
(Ghoṣ n.d.: 25–26)

In this poem’s final stanzas (“how hard it is to live like a man”), the poet’s ego materialises as a male body in its sheer chemical composition and biological needs of sexual copulation. The male subject views himself as an animal: reduced to his animal instincts, he has lost any connection with his humanity.⁴⁹ While Saileshvar acknowledges the social burden of being a man, the next poem by Subimal Basak “Stigmata/23” bears no trace of the self-pity that Saileshvar expressed by stressing the pain and anxiety of performing the social roles expected by a man.

48 The concept of “reification” was adopted by gender studies to signify the essentialisation of a political domain, like that of women, men, patriarchy etc., following the objectification of that political subject (Butler 1990).

49 A similar observation is expressed by Phalguni Ray in the poem “Black Divinity” (Kālo dibyatā):

“In the urban neon light
Beside my lonely shadow
Instead of your lonely shadow
A tail attached to my body” (Miśra 2015: 33).

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Every woman-eye shakes a different beam of light
Different taste from different women – I get
Different use of love-flesh-blood
They come to me even if I try to discard them
Their selfishness accepts my hate with pleasure
They know the use of their flesh, skin and limbs –
& they weigh & bargain the depths of love
By their body-flesh
Right! I use their body for my ego's need
While entering into different holes
I'm alone
& I enter into Myself.

Subimal Basak's words (Mitra and Mitra 1969: 30–1) are emblematic of the reification of the female body as a result of a range of factors that included the hyper-sexualisation of masculinity – also an effect and reaction to the rise of feminism and movements for women's emancipation across the world. Note, for example, how the author consciously employs the vocabulary of the market ("they weigh & bargain") in order to operate a semantic transfer to the realm of social relationships, eventually transformed into commodities. In Subimal's overtly misogynist perspective, there is also no attempt to problematise womanhood or to contextualise the shifting gender-roles and masculinity in crisis. What strikes is rather the poet's insistence on using and consuming the women's bodies at one's own pleasure and needs. In this poem, there is only the narcissistic ego and the male gaze of the poet who describes the sexual encounter in the language of the market thus drawing a parallel between sex, love, and economic transactions. Dry and sarcastic humour is a characteristic of Hungryalist poems; yet here it is mainly the awareness to violate and to transgress a woman's body that strikes the reader, reaffirming the woman's body as a site of suffering identities in postcolonial India.

A Clinical Gaze on Shubha's Body

“I know Shubha, spread your vagina”

“Shubha let me sneak under your cloaked watermelon”

“I've forgotten women during rape and come back to Art a long time back”

(Bakken 1967)⁵⁰

The poem “Stark Electric Jesus” (Pracaṇḍa baidyutik chutār) by Malay Roy Choudhury has become the icon of the Hungry Generation, especially after Malay's infamous sentence for obscenity.⁵¹ Issues surrounding the poet's unfulfilled sexual desires, his inability to love, scenes of rape and masturbation have made this poem a divisive icon of the unabashed language and grotesque aesthetics that has become a feature of Hungryalism. Through Malay's frenzied monologue, only virtually addressed to his imaginary muse Shubha, an allegoric representation of woman, the poem describes the oedipal and sexual frustrations of the poet. Malay's “muse” Shubha materialises into the flesh of a woman's body; a merely “sexual body”, as Nandini Dhar rightly notices, a passive and silent object that opens up in her nudity to the author's eyes.

In the controversial passages of Malay Roy Choudhury's notoriously banned poem “Stark Electric Jesus”, transliterated English words are juxtaposed to a scientific Bengali terminology to describe Shubha's sexual and reproductive organs and other bodily activities such as male ejaculation and urination. The incorporation of these English words into the Bengali text helped mitigate the outrageous content and attenuate the visual power that the obscene words depicting the female sex organs may have on the reader. The following verses show how the usage of English words of Latin derivation (e.g. uterus, clitoris, labia majora) and the Sanskritised Bengali words (i.e. garbha (womb), ṛtusrāb (seasonal bloodstream), śukra (sperm) and satīcchad (hymen)) operate in the poem as means to bowdlerise the description of the female “sexual body”, cleansing it of its overtly sexual component and transforming it into a biological body, where sexual intercourse and masturbation occur exclusively as mechanical activities.

50 Unless otherwise noted, all extracts in this section are from Malay Roy Choudhury's English version of “Stark Electric Jesus” (Bakken 1967).

51 This section is a shorter version of my article published in *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry* (Cappello 2018).

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Shubha, let me sleep for a few moments in your violent silvery
uterus
Give me peace, Shubha, let me have peace
Let my sin-driven skeleton be washed anew in your seasonal blood-
stream [ṛtusrāb]
Let me create myself in your womb with my own sperm [śukra]
[...]
Let me see the earth through your cellophane hymen [satīcchad]
[...]
The surroundings of your clitoris were being embellished with coon
at that time
[...]
Let me enter in the immemorial incontinence of your labia majora
Into the absurdity of woeless effort
In the golden chlorophyll of the drunken heart

Both the Bengali words (ṛtusrāb, ātmamaithun, śleṣmā) and their English translation that are used to describe the bodily fluids (seasonal bloodstream, self-coition, ovum-flux) show a conscious selection by the author of a scientific vocabulary of the Bengali language and a correspondent English translation for the medical terminology related to the sexual body. In some of the passages illustrated above, Malay directly used the transliterated English word to denote the female sexual organ (e.g. *lābiyā myājorā*, *ṅuterās*, and *klitoris*) for lack of a Bengali equivalent.⁵² Yet the proliferation of a Bengali sexual terminology, already established from the late nineteenth century through an expanding market of medical publications, exposed Malay’s use of the English words as due to the need for a certain degree of secrecy with regard to the more contentious aspects of the poem.⁵³ It is in fact quite common in ordinary Bengali language, and especially in the technical and more

52 Malay personally claimed to have used English words for want of Bengali words to denote female sexual organs (personal interview, November 26, 2017). This lack of knowledge of the Bengali words for the sexual organs – which betray an uneasiness with using such words – is not uncommon. For example, Kumar Bishnu De, author of a book on Malay’s “rebel poetry”, admitted of being unfamiliar with the meaning of the words “clitoris” (*klitoris*) and “labia majora” (*lābiyā myājorā*). They became clear only after coming across the sequence of Bengali word in Malay’s poem that visually depicted the vagina (De 2013: 210).

53 An example of Bengali manuals on sexology is Abul Hasanat’s *Sacitra yaunabijñān* (Illustrated Book of Sexual Science, 1936). This book deals with multiple aspects of sexuality, including conception, the formation of the embryo, and birth, as well as a detailed analysis of so-called sexual perception (*yaunabodh*). Hasanat wrote books on this subject until the 1950s and his works remained highly popular through the Sixties. The occurrence of such scientific terminology to describe sexual organs and their functions in Hasanat’s manual, such as *liṅga* (penis), *yoni* (vulva), *jarāyū* (uterus), *garbha* (womb), *śukra* (semen),

problematic context of sexuality, to use English words as substitutes for a Bengali that would more easily offend middle-class morality. If the poet was already aware of the risk of a trial and sentence for obscenity, he knew how provocative and transgressive his writings could become in media and popular perception. The use of the English equivalents in the Bengali poem then shows the poet's attempts to suppress the straightforwardly "outrageous" quality of the Bengali by replacing it with a more "delicate" English word to attenuate the scandalous content.

On the other hand, Malay played with the Bengali medical lexicon related to sexual organs and activities (i.e. *yonivartma* (urethra); *ātmamaithun* (self-coition); *rajaḥ/ṛtusrāb* (menstruation); *śleṣmā* (mucus, phlegm)) to convey a biological description of the body.⁵⁴ The effects generated by such scientific treatment of the language are ones of ironic inversion of the obscene images related to sex: on the one hand, non-procreative sex acquires dignity of literary treatment, while on the other, the high status of the artificial scientific vocabulary is sarcastically downplayed through the sexual context: "Why wasn't I lost in my mother's urethra?/ Why wasn't I driven away in my father's urine after his self-coition?/ Why wasn't I mixed in the ovum-flux or in the phlegm?" (Bakken 1967). If the words "self-coition, phlegm" and "seasonal bloodstream" aim at reproducing masturbation, menstruation and reproduction purely as mechanical processes of the biological body in the anatomic lexicon, they also lay out different possibilities of interpreting the reasons behind their use. Even in the English translation of Malay's poem, the choice of the translator and editors has been to exploit the semantic potential of the English scientific terminology as opposed to the more common "masturbation" and "menstruation" to retain the clinical and perhaps sanitised intention behind the original Bengali version. In other words, choosing words from the high register of the English and Bengali languages here serves two functions: on the one hand, they elevate to a lyrical subject what the middle-class readership interprets as low, repulsive and scandalous; on the other, they manage to ironically downplay the technical scientific language by applying it to the low semantic sphere of sex and other bodily activities. The representation of Shubha's body and of the male semen through the Bengali medical vocabulary does not function only as a way to purify the text banned for obscenity. The hyper-pedantic constructions of the English translation and their juxtaposition with the higher status of the Latin-derived English words, functioned here as practices of translation and language composition that give the dignity of literary matter to the bawdy topic of sexuality.

aṅḍakoṣ (scrotum), *mūtrāśay* (bladder), *satīcchad* (hymen), *prasrāb* (urination) and *ṛtusrāb* (menstruation), offer evidence for the selection of medical words in the Bengali poem.

⁵⁴ In a private conversation, Malay confirmed his selective choice of the words describing the sexual body from a Bengali medical handbook (Private Facebook conversation with Malay Roy Choudhury, April 17, 2018).

Masturbation as a Trope of the Avant-garde

Another aspect of Hungryalist poetry underpinning the hypermasculinity of the movement is the trope of male masturbation, placing the physiological and biological male body at the centre of the poem. Against colonial representations that equated the loss of semen with emasculation, in the context of Hungryalist poetry masturbation is both a physical act and a metaphorical allusion: it is both a gesture of pleasure and metaphor of poetry writing. We find an example of the transcultural aestheticisation of the trope of masturbation in Allen Ginsberg's so-called "Blake vision", an hallucination he experienced, by his own admission, while masturbating with Blake's book *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (Mortuza 2015: 65), an extra-sensorial romantic experience which launched Ginsberg's early prophetic poetry and arguably shaped his future interest in Buddhism (Trigilio 2007: 120–1). Images of semen and male autoeroticism are tropes of Hungryalist poetry too. They stand in contradiction to the normative sphere of middle-class sexuality in postcolonial India that promoted sane sex for reproductive purposes and a eugenic program of family planning and birth control, in line with caste and class ideologies. By contrast, the non-reproductive nature of "solitary sex" (Laqueur 2003) was either treated as a mental disorder or a disease, besides being reproached and undesirable because of its anti-social and anti-utilitarian purposes.⁵⁵ The Hungry Generation managed to turn male masturbation into a literary trope, exploiting both its grotesque and metaphoric potential. We could stretch to the point of formulating masturbation as the sexuality of Hungryalism, the only solitary pleasure that is left to the men disillusioned with the traditional roles of the Hindu family and middle-class society.

In colonial Bengal, masturbation and ejaculation were signs of pathological abnormality in middle-class narratives of the body and sexuality. Scholarship on the cultural significations of masturbation in colonial India identified that loss of semen was a sign of sickness, sexual perversion, effeminacy, and anxieties of masculinity (Pande 2010, Alter 2011, Mukharji 2011). For example, the so-called "weakness of the semen" (dhātu daurbalya) was associated with impotency and involuntary discharges, substantiating the anxieties of Bengali effeminacy and racial inferiority (Mukharji 2011: 213–48). Bengali men, burdened with such

55 Thomas Laqueur pointed out that the adjective "masturbatory" was used in a pejorative way "always in pointing out to an excess of imagination, to a lack of seriousness, to a retreat from reason and from proper, polite behaviour" (Laqueur 2003: 62). Imagination was believed to pertain exclusively to the single individual, and precluded to the modern self who must perform it in solitude, autonomy, and freedom from external interference. The social fear of masturbation and its prominent individual characteristic condemned the "heinous" act as fundamentally anti-social.

stereotypes of degeneration and perversion, developed a paranoia over squandered sperm resulting in an ambivalence towards women that verged on misogyny (Pande 2010). Bengali periodicals on public health treated the subject of masturbation as a serious health issue, especially during puberty and adolescence, since it made the boy's semen "watery and weak" (śukradhātu taral o nistej) (Basu 1998: 228). In accordance with the state of brahmachārya, male Hindu celibacy, masturbation was interpreted in terms of physical strength more than as a moral vice: the preservation of semen represented in fact an act of self-control and self-development whereas "wasting" semen signified a loss of virility (Alter 2011: 55–86). According to Hindu physiology at large and to Indian traditional medicines, ejaculation was equated with a loss of masculine strength and a waste of essential energy. However, Srivastava (2001) has remarked how the notion of "semen anxiety", combined with a general ethic of self-control, came to take on the appearance of an irrevocable truth of Indian masculinity.⁵⁶

All these medical, social and psychological layers are relevant to understand the Hungryalist re-elaboration of the trope of masturbation. Again, the male body and its sexual power – as well as its impotence – is located at the centre of the poem. Masturbation becomes a way to express the social and psychological conflicts of the young Bengali male with the dominant bourgeois morality and middle-class social regulations of post-independence Bengal. At the same time, these poets' relationship with the body remains ambiguous and unavoidably torn between the expectations of the family and their personal experience, between the ongoing sexual revolution in Europe and America and the ostensible cultural immobility of Bengali middle-class society. The concern of the Hungryalist poets about changing notions and perceptions of masculinity in patriarchal Indian society finds a material as well as symbolical translation in the act of masturbation. Even though images of masturbation in Hungryalist poetry were considered "obscene" from the legal point of view, they were part of a constellation of allegedly obscene imaginaries of avant-garde poetry which spoke of the ambivalent and precarious conditions of modern masculinity in India. Therefore, portraying acts of autoeroticism in avant-garde Bengali poetry meant to metaphorically mirror the conflicts, ambivalences and anxieties of a changing concept of the modern male middle-class Bengali individual.

Turning again to Malay's banned poem where Shubha is the object of the author's so-called clinical gaze, I show that masturbation is inscribed in the same Bengali medical vocabulary that characterised the description of Shubha's sexual

56 Srivastava further argues that the obsession of India-related scholarship for semen anxiety has overshadowed the multiple, little "social topographies" that could constitute a fuller picture of Indian sexualities, a word that the sociologist declines in plural (Srivastava 2001: 3–4).

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body, as we have just seen. The result of using this medical lexicon for describing the socially reproachable activities of male masturbation and copulation have operated a funny inversion of these “defiling” sexual practices, now treated with the clinical and aseptic idiom of medical sciences. In this way, Malay’s use of the image of semen in his poem is not too different from what we are about to encounter in Phalguni Ray’s description of bodily fluids: the poets’ goal is to make fun of the rational, medical and scientific discourses promoted on a national basis in post-independence India.

Masturbation in “Stark Electric Jesus”

In the Bengali original poem, the word used for masturbation is “ātmaithun”, translated in English as “self-coition”: a neologism seemingly crafted by the poet to reproduce the scientific act of masturbation. Although *ātmaithun* and *hastamaithun* seem to be the most common words in Bengali that refer to masturbation, other equivalents are used to define both male and female masturbation (*svamehan*, *svakām* and *svayāmṛati*).⁵⁷ Although the word masturbation linguistically speaking is an orthophemism – a word that does not constitute an offense –, the trespassing from the medical space into the public domain of literature and poetry makes its interpretation more problematic, to the point that it becomes one of the triggers of the obscenity charges, as pointed out by the Magistrate of the obscenity trial. In the following verses, the contentious topic of masturbation and the cultural meanings of male semen are addressed with two Bengali synonyms of semen: *śukra* and *bīrya*.

Let me create myself in your womb with my own sperm [śukra]
would I have been like this if I had different parents?
was Malay alias me possible from an absolutely different sperm?
[śukra]
would I have been Malay in the womb of other women of my father?
[...]

57 The medical periodical *Cikit-sā sammilanī*, a magazine of health and medical science instructing families on modern concerns about sexuality in late colonial Bengal, also uses the word “*hastamaithun*” for the practice of masturbation among male children and adolescents (Basu 1998: 227). Abul Hasanat (Hāsānāt: 1936: 200–1) devotes a section to autoeroticism (*svayāmāithun*) and masturbation (*hastamaithun*), including these practices in the section “Different Manifestations of the Sexual Feeling” (Yaunabodher bibhinnaṁukhī prakāś).

I will die
oh what are these happenings within me
I am failing to fetch out my hand and my palm
from the dried sperms [bīrya] on trousers spreading wings
3000000 children gliding towards the district of Shubha's bosom
millions of needles are now running from my blood into Poetry
now the smuggling of my obstinate leg is trying to plunge
into the death-killer sex-wig entangled in the hypnotic kingdom
of words

The English word sperm does not distinguish between the meanings of the two Bengali words śukra and bīrya, two equivalents of the English sperm or semen.⁵⁸ As Kakar also observes, the Sanskrit vīrya is “a word that stands for both sexual energy and semen. *Vīrya*, in fact, is identical with the essence of maleness: it can either move downward in sexual intercourse, where it is emitted in its gross physical form as semen, or it can move upward through the spinal cord and into the brain, in its subtle form known as *ojas*” (Kakar 1990: 118–9). Abul Hasanat's sexology book, in the section describing the male sex organs, abounds with compounds having śukra- as a first noun for organs related to the production of semen (śukrakoś, śukravāhī nala) (Hāsānāt· 1936: 93). “Spermatozoa” here translate as “śukrakīṭ” and are described as follows: “The man's spermatozoa give life to the woman's eggs. The spermatozoa are immersed in the liquid part of the man's semen (puruṣer śukrer aṃṣe bhāsiyā beṛāy)” (Hāsānāt· 1936: 86). Therefore, the recurrence of the Bengali word śukra in such texts, as compared to the absent bīrya, suggests the scientific connotation of the former.

In Malay's poem, bīrya stands as the concrete physical appearance of the spermatogenic liquid, while śukra represents the neutral, scientific term that refers to the smaller units of the latter, the spermatozoa, as shown above in Hasanat's sexology book. Drawing a distinction between the two words becomes a significant operation in the translation of Malay's medical language: if śukra is an orthophemism, a neutral term with neither positive nor negative connotation, bīrya has attributive quality and is intentionally juxtaposed to the latter to suggest a metaphorical reference to the poet's troubled masculinity, expressed through the culminating

58 The monolingual dictionary of the Bengali language (Biśvās 2014) considers both terms as synonyms, although there is a qualitative difference between the two that classifies śukra only as a noun, while bīrya also as an attribute (as in the adjectival construction bīryavān or bīryaśālī, “endowed with vigour”). The Sanskrit definition of vīrya associates it with “manliness, valour, strength, power, energy”, and only in the third entry with “manly vigour, virility, semen virile”. The modern Bengali usage assigns to bīrya the characteristics of valour, courage and heroism, by definition qualities that pertain to a male hero (bīr).

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gesture of the poet who compares the activity of masturbation to poetry-making. Also in Phalguni Ray’s poetry, words like *bīrya* or *bīj* instead of *śukra* are used to denote the material substance transmitting the heredity traits: “I observe my desire to become a father inside masturbation/ in the liquid flow of semen/ a frame of two hundred and six bones/ and attached to the frame are fleshy nerves carrying thoughts/ seeds holding the memories of sounds swim in the liquid sperm” (Miśra 2015: 29). The abstract matter denoted by the word *śukra* is substantiated in *bīrya*, significantly originating from the same root of “*bīj*”, the seed, through the bodily materialisation of the spermatozoa during ejaculation. Hence in my re-translation of Malay’s poem I suggest preserving the material differentiation denoted by the Bengali words by translating *śukra* as the English “semen” and *bīrya* as “sperm”.⁵⁹ Exploiting the Latin etymology of “semen”, I aimed at highlighting the medical representation of male semen.

Give me birth again from your womb with my own semen
Would I have been like this even if I had different parents?
Would I have become Malay alias me from a completely different semen?
Would there be Malay if my father had impregnated another woman?

The orthophemistic or neutral connotation of the words *ātmamaithun* (self-coi-tion), *śukra* and *bīrya* (sperm and semen), shows that Malay pursued an ambivalent strategy of sanitisation of the text through the medical lexicon, producing an ironical inversion where the dirty sexual matter is elevated to lyrical subject of poetry, while the high status of the scientific language is minimised through the transgressive descriptions of masturbation and bodily fluids. Therefore, masturbation is not only painted as a mechanical act, but it also stands out as the ultimate condition of the middle-class alienated Bengali poet, caged in a modernity that rationalises and mechanises sexuality, disintegrating social relationships between men and women.

59 I have referred to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*’s definition of semen as “the fluid that contains sperm cells” (Britannica 2023).