

5 “I Won’t Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis” Anxious Masculinity in Phalguni Ray’s *Television of a Rotten Soul*

Phalguni’s Poetic World

Few details are available on Phalguni’s life (1945–1981), scattered across Hungryalist essays and memoirs. The major depository of knowledge about the life of this poet, however, lies in the material of his poems, sketching the personal, sensual and emotional journey of this young Bengali man throughout his short existence spanning 36 years. My task is to read these poems as visual and material fragments of Phalguni’s life in order to make sense of the major themes he addressed. I believe that the notion of fragment well represents our knowledge of this author – as well as the Hungry Generation movement – scattered, unedited, or drawn from non-canonical sources; a knowledge that I have attempted to de-construct, rather than re-construct in this chapter. More technically speaking, what is fragmented is the structure of his poems, intentionally dismissing any traditional versification to adjust his Joycean stream of consciousness to the free verse, closer to prose and natural speech. It is inside the poems that the reader gets familiar with Phalguni’s existential world and with the ironies, contradictions, ambiguities, and the anxieties that are at the centre of his poems. These were dictated by the social and material conditions he was inhabiting: even though born in a family of landowners, he experienced poverty, struggled with the new values of the Bengali middle-class and an increasingly competitive Indian society, to ultimately remain jobless, unmarried, and addicted to alcohol.

Hailing from a family of landed gentry originally from Narail in Bangladesh, Phalguni Ray (Beng. Phālgunī Rāy) saw the fall of the landed aristocracy (zamīndārī) from his riverside mansion in north Calcutta, where his ancestors moved after the state had assigned them a piece of land. With the abolition of the zamindari system in the 1950s, all the rights and estates that once belonged to the zamindar were vested in the state, allowing for the redistribution of lands among sharecroppers and peasants. Phalguni and his family, like many others in Bengal, experienced that period of loss of wealth and status that came with the Abolition Act, especially after his father’s death in 1947. He had two brothers, Lakshmikanta Ray, who was Phalguni’s twin brother, and Tushar Ray, the eldest of the three and

5 "I Won't Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis"

himself a well-known poet.⁶⁰ The heritage house where they lived is on Ratanbabu road (fig. 10), a street named after Phalguni's great-great-grandfather and zamindar Ram Ratan Ray (1785–1860), who also gave his name to the ghat at the other end of street in the city's northern area of Baranagar (Miśra 2015: 5–6). Such familiar geographies are illustrated throughout his poetry, drawing a topography of the city which extended to Cossimpoore and Baranagar through portraits of small lanes, old neighbourhoods and popularly visited spots in Calcutta: the country-liquor shop in Khalasitala, the red-lights districts of Harkata and Sonagachi, the Indian Coffee House in College Street, the Nimtala and Ratanbabu burning ghat in north Calcutta, the South Park Street cemetery, along with his family mansion, circumscribe Phalguni's poetic and existential geography on a map of the city that extended further north than the so-called Black Town of colonial Calcutta.

Unlike the Raychaudhuri brothers, who were born and raised in Patna, Phalguni was born and grown up in the Bengali city. From birth, he witnessed the decadence of a city located at the centre of a divided country, torn by unemployment, poverty and radical politics; disillusioned over the dream of an independent India that promoted progress, wealth and equality among people; disappointed with the promises of socialism and the violence of leftist politics and overwhelmed with refugees from East Bengal. As Subimal Basak wrote of his fellow poet, there was no "anarchy" in Phalguni's spirit, but rather an "absence": of money, safety, a lover and a happy family life, which turned him into the suffering poet of suburban Calcutta (Miśra 2015: 133). For some time, Phalguni was associated to the Hungry Generation, as we assume from his outspoken presentation to the readers of *Wastepaper* magazine: "Coming from a renowned Zaminder family, he was educated in the usual mediocre manner in his early years. But as soon as he could understand all the falsehood, meaningless logics & laws of this bourgeoisie society, his role changed and for his aggressive attitude he was rusticated from a college of Calcutta University. Now he is looking for any kind of job which will help him to get sufficient food, wine and adolescent girls to satisfy his hungers of ego. Without women and wine he feels bored and walks aimlessly for hours & for miles till midnite" (Mitra and Mitra 1967: 9). Because he suffered from insomnia and a weak health, he was sent to Patna to stay with some maternal relatives, where he became

60 Tushar also died (ca. 1977) of cirrhosis abetted by untreated tuberculosis and a chronic asthma. However, as opposed to his younger brother Phalguni, Tushar was well received in Bengali poetry circles because he became associated with the magazine *Kṛtibās*. Gautam Sengupta describes him as a sort of bohemian hero, who suffered poverty and severe ailments worsened by alcohol and drug addiction. Among his most popular poems, one line seems to be iconic of the temperament of this Bengali poet: "Police, take off your hat in front of the poet" (Pulis, kabir sām'ne ṭupiṭā tui khulis). According to Sengupta, this line was instantly composed and recited by Tushar when he, shabbily dressed as usual, was stopped and enquired by a policeman in Maidan (Sengupta 2003).



Figure 10. Phalguni Ray's residence and family mansion (Rāyibāri) in Ratanbabu Road. November 2023.

close to Malay and Samir. Phalguni died at the age of just 36, leaving us forty-two poems and six prose pieces written in the span of only five years.

Phalguni's writings must be read in the context of post-independence India's project of nation building. Nehruvian socialism was steeped in a national ideology of progress, planning and development that promoted science and technology as the heralds of Indian modernity. On the background of India's industrial and scientific ethos, and a rising middle-class consumer's culture, Phalguni transposed this economic and cultural crisis onto his male body. That is why we identify the main tensions of his poetry in the dichotomy between what was perceived as normal and socially reproachable, or "abnormal", in Bengali middle-class society, two crucial concepts to Phalguni's elaboration of sexuality.⁶¹ These contrasts set Phalguni's existential marginality in dialogue with the medical and scientific discourses on

61 The question of abnormality in 19th century Europe was addressed most notably by Michel Foucault during his lectures at the Collège de France and further developed in his trilogy on the history of sexuality (1978). He argued that the "abnormal individual" mainly identified itself with three figures: the human monster, the individual to be corrected, and the onanist (Foucault 2003: xvii).

5 “I Won’t Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis”

health and hygiene in the domains of sexuality, race, and caste promoted in the Indian public sphere of the post-independence years, as we are about to see.

In his poems Phalguni explores the physical, psychic, and emotional conflicts of a man seeking non-conformity in a bourgeois society that encouraged conformism within and outside the family unit, especially in the post-Nehruvian India that promoted industrialisation even in the rural areas of West Bengal. His family of aristocratic descent (*abhijāta*), for example, played a central role in displaying Phalguni’s struggle with the homogenisation and normalisation of the social and sexual bodies that was taking place within the Bengali middle-class. Coming to terms with the unfulfillment of middle-class social expectations gave birth to a sense of uselessness and out-of-placeness of the poet in the world. Failure, passivity, resignation, frustration and alienation vis-à-vis the positive narrative of progress and development that was being advertised, are the major emotions that we encounter while reading Phalguni’s poems.

The main frictions that emerge from Phalguni’s writings could be summed up as the juxtaposition between the bourgeois rational view of sexuality (*yaunatā*), reducing the realm of love and intimacy to social and biological prescriptions, and the “peripheral” sexualities that are embodied in the author’s confessional poetry and life experience.⁶² In twentieth century India, works on sexology – pioneered by the medical doctor A. P. Pillai – were extremely popular among certain sections of the society, and promoted the idea of a “rational sex” based on biological needs and scientific findings (Srivastava 2001: 228). The science of sex, or sexology, was a field that attracted growing interest in the subcontinent: sexual manuals and scientific treatises of Western scholars circulated abundantly in Indian medical circles. Journals and magazines, like the Bengali *Nara-nārī* and the Marathi *Samāj svāsthya*, discussed questions of sexuality in the vernacular languages, providing a secret space where the middle-class man and woman could become familiar with the knowledge on sex available at that time.⁶³ These discourses were part of a larger politics of sexual reform and surveillance that were incompatible with Phalguni’s always ambiguous sexuality. Against the Nehruvian background of economic frugality (and sexual temperance), views on intimacy, love, and sexuality underwent great changes through the influence of television, cinema and advertisement, which deeply impacted the shaping of a modern Indian

62 These tensions between a normative scientific sphere of sexuality and the proliferation of so-called peripheral sexualities that are suppressed and medicalised were the subject of Michel Foucault’s work, most notably outlined in his *The History of Sexuality* (1978).

63 Sutanuka Banerjee, for example, analysed the intersection between discourses on modern womanhood in Bengal and those on modern sexual reform around the world. She especially focused on Bengali womanhood and its representation in the vernacular magazine *Nara-nārī* from 1939 to 1950 (Banerjee 2015).

public sphere. Modern ideals of intimacy entered the world of Bengalis especially through the audio-visual impact of cinema. By the 1950s, with the emergence of Bollywood, the representation and popular imagination of romance offered new models of intimacy and physicality in relationships. In this process, the images of couples, although often marking the stereotypes of a strong masculinity and a shy femininity, contributed to “re-frame the man and the woman in a specific fashion”, producing “coded fantasies regarding intimacy” (Mukherjee 2019). At the same time, Bengali satires, vignettes, and photographs showed a prevailing sense of unease at the idea of romantic love in the conjugal couple, accompanied by disquiet and scepticism of women’s emancipation and equality in the marriage, seen as demeaning notions of manhood (Majumdar 2009: 147). The invasion of images had a deep impact on the young generation in India, shaping new notions of sexuality, intimacy and romantic love that would later enter the material culture of the Indian “world-class” in the 1990s, exposing the links between capitalism, social change and the shaping of new emotional geographies (Brosius 2010).

Phalguni touches upon issues of intimacy and conjugality, revealing the shortcomings of the institution of marriage vis-à-vis the ambivalences of sexual relationships often occurring outside the married couple, as he observed in his family. He was profoundly distressed about the ways of perceiving and portraying his male body, a sad and useless machine, revealing a real obsession for his masculinity. He ironically and unapologetically portrayed the fleeting nature of his sexual urgency, at once directed towards prostitutes, ex-lovers, young men, or even close female relatives. Yet, it is often in the solitary act of masturbation that Phalguni found the erotic dimension that is more suitable to his condition of outsider. In his poems, women appear as the archetypes of love and devotion, like Ramakrishna’s disciple and partner Sarada Debi, as well as the recipients of Phalguni’s love and unfulfilled desire. His portrayal of women, as for other Hungryalist writers in general, is antithetic to the colonial and national model of a chaste and spiritual womanhood, even though these stereotypes are manipulated and presented with sarcasm in his poetry.

While family structures were undergoing important transformations, together with a process of legal reform of the Hindu family (Newbigin 2013), Phalguni targeted two recurrent themes at the basis of many modernising institutions in India: the discourses of “scientific thinking” and “ancient Indian wisdom”, promoters of a national and postcolonial society. Part of the project of developing a national intelligentsia was also promoting a “sane” sex and “rational” gender identities firmly grounded on the principles of the eugenic program, topics that anthropologist Sanjay Srivastava has extensively addressed.⁶⁴ It was with these national

64 According to Srivastava, the discourses of an “ancient Indian wisdom” and a “scientific thinking” were at the core of the nationalist development of a postcolonial society.

5 “I Won’t Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis”

narratives in mind that Phalguni resorted to “heredity”, the principle at the basis of genetic transmission. Phalguni used the English transliterated word (*heridiṭī*) to enunciate this theory, with a clear reference to eugenics, a set of allegedly scientific practices at the core of the family planning programs carried out under Nehru and Indira’s government.⁶⁵ Playing with notions of eugenics and heredity is not casual in Phalguni’s critical portrait of the middle class, as these theories share several points with ideas of Hindu kinship and social bonds, mainly founded on blood. Studies have identified two distinctive domains that define kinship in Bengali society: the shared or inherited natural substance (*dhātu*), that is the blood, and a moral code for conduct (*dharma*) (Inden and Nicholas 1977: xiii). Liquid bodily substances like blood, semen, and embryonic acids permeate Phalguni’s poetry, even though he pokes fun at these overtly biological concepts and uses them to overturn both Hindu and bourgeois views on family and society. Male semen, which we have seen being a trope in Hungryalist poetry, represents the vehicle of Phalguni’s genetic inheritance and perhaps his “aristocratic” legacy. Even though Phalguni is sarcastic about the claim of science and religious practice of institutionalising human bonds and emotions, he appears to be seriously influenced and troubled by the cultural and social prescriptions of Bengali Hindu society.

Tropes and Language in *Television of a Rotten Soul*

Nashta ātmār ṭelibhisan (Television of a Rotten Soul) is Phalguni Ray’s only poetry collection. It was printed for the first time on August 15th, 1973, on Indian Independence Day, as part of a Hungry Generation bulletin edited by Basudeb Dasgupta. Only after the poet’s death, was the collection published in a book with a foreword by the Hungryalist poet Utpalkumar Basu, who described it as “the end of modernism in Bengali poetry”.⁶⁶ Among 14 other pieces, this collection contains an eponymous poem that illustrates well the main themes and concerns addressed

Examples of modernising institutions that promoted both views as central for the development of the modern Indian intelligentsia were the Brahma Samaj, the Arya Samaj and the Doon School (Srivastava 1998).

65 One of the scholars who endorsed family planning, N.S. Phadke, suggested that “any attempt to work out a eugenic program in India will have to take careful account of the principle of Heredity” (Srivastava 2014: 37).

66 The book was republished posthumously by the little magazine *Graffiti* (1993) with a foreword written by the poet Utpalkumar Basu. His foreword along with the whole poetry collection can be retrieved at the following website <https://aamaaderbanglakabita.blogspot.com/2011/03/nashto-atmar-television-falguni-roy.html>, accessed 21.11.2023.

by the poet in his writings.⁶⁷ The poet's personal and autobiographical voice is a distinctive mark of Phalguni's poetry and a leitmotif in all his poetic production. The biographical tenor of Phalguni's poems, which returns some coherence to the events, is countered by a fragmentation of grammar, syntax and vocabulary. His sentences lack punctuation, stumbling into one another; they are often interrupted by interjections, or unfinished and broken by the subsequent thought. The poet's use of the Bengali language reflects this fragmentation, more evidently than in the English translation, where my aim was to provide the reader with a more fluent and readable solution. The Bengali language of his poems is colloquial, a result that is achieved by using the spoken register of Bengali language in place of a more refined literary style. A vocabulary of technology is prevalently borrowed from the English language, although there is evidence of heavy loans from Sanskrit, as in the choice of high words related to the sphere of science, explaining the constant tension between tradition and change in language.⁶⁸ Inversion, irony, parody, hyperbole and paradox are the main figures of speech of his poems delineating the literary and political landscape of this author as postmodern and postcolonial.

So, why *Television of a Rotten Soul*? The English transliterated word "television" and its juxtaposition with the words "naṣṭa ātmā" (rotten or corrupted soul) seem to incarnate, or better materialise, the condition of the human subject and its dimension of feelings in an increasingly mechanised and de-humanised world. The arrival of television was alarming, as also Allen Ginsberg recalled in the first draft of his poem 'Howl'. About this, his biographer Jonah Raskin said that "in San Francisco at night, he [Allen] gazed at apartments and saw 'futuristic television lights windows' and terrifying television antennae on rooftops. Television seemed to be taking over, and in the first draft of 'Howl', he offered an image of 'television treetop', which suggested television towering above trees, the machine triumphing over nature" (Raskin 2004: 161). This aesthetic of the oxymoron, implying the juxtaposition of two antithetical ideas (as in "television treetop"), seems to be representative of the post-war avant-garde, and it is also a common feature of Phalguni's poetic language. The 1970s saw the transformation of the daily lives of a wealthier middle class triggered by the introduction of electronic appliances, like refrigerators, air conditioning, telephones,

67 All the poems in this chapter are my translation from the original Bengali (Miśra 2015).

68 In sociolinguistics, D'souza among others has shown that the ambivalence between purism and modernisation in Indian languages explained "the constant conflict between the forces of tradition and change", although the "end result is a synthesis that is peculiarly Indian" (D'souza 1986: 458). Although D'souza's data are from the 1980s, a couple of decades later than the period under discussion, we can assume that such linguistic transformations were already visible in the language of our poets.

5 “I Won’t Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis”

and television.⁶⁹ Besides these new commodities, audio-visual communication media and other instruments of mass communication, including radio and television, gradually entered the ordinary life of the Indian middle class, embodying its seductive dream of consumption.

These shifts in the lifestyle of the middle-class are reflected in Phalguni’s language as well. As pointed out with regard to the postmodern tenor of the Hungry Generation (chap. 1), the assimilation of a Bengali “vocabulary of modernisation” in Phalguni’s poetry mirrored the adoption of these technical devices as well as the ambivalent feelings towards these objects. Examples of electronic and technologic terminologies borrowed from English are scattered throughout Phalguni’s poems, although this feature is not absent in other Hungryalist poets. One can find, for example, hybridisations like “phrijlsabhyatā”, literally a “refrigerator civilisation”,⁷⁰ and other English loanwords like “ṭelibhisan set” (television set), and “ṭelipyāthik kamyunikeśaner rāḍār” (radar of telepathic communication). On the other hand, the proliferation of Sanskrit loanwords displays the process of vernacularisation of the scientific vocabulary, which was predominantly used in its English counterpart until the 1940s (Mukharji 2011). The massive use of loans from Sanskrit in certain Bengali compound words and phrases and a vocabulary often drawn from vernacular physiology, as we will see, becomes representative of the attempt at resisting the widespread use and authority of English in the public sphere of postcolonial South Asia.

Among the major tropes that are exploited in his poetry, images and symbols associated with the domains of sexuality and masculinity are predominant in this poetry collection. Although these are dominant themes in the whole Hungry Generation movement, it is in the writings of this Bengali poet that sexuality and masculinity become sites for questioning gender, caste, and class identities in the context of the changing Bengali society of the 1960s. Phalguni struggled to come to terms with the contradictions and ambivalence implied in being an unemployed

69 The Indian state television system *Doordarshan*, established in 1959, provided the sole option for a growing number of Indians until 1991. In its first phase, India’s televisual modernity was oriented towards development communication and focused on national identity. The extension of media infrastructure was understood as the state’s mission, alongside creating railroads and canals, setting up heavy industries and designing new townships, laying the basis for modern attitudes that would underpin the state’s nation-building (Rajagopal 2014: 85–89). However, in the first decades after independence broadcasting in India was restricted in finance and imagination because of the austerity of the Gandhian ethos and the fear of enflaming the delicately plural Indian society. Reorganization of the AIR (All India Radio), the introduction of advertising and the rapid expansion of television were promoted under Indira Gandhi’s ministry of Information (Rajagopal 2009: 181).

70 Chakraborty more freely translated the phrase as “air-conditioned civilisation” (Tanvir 2015: 43) to convey the idea of new enclosed public spaces, like malls, cinema halls, and supermarkets in modern Indian cities.

and unmarried poet in postcolonial Calcutta. His discovery of an obsessively ambiguous sexual urge and the problematic relationship with his masculinity were marginal to so-called normal sexuality as it was known and promoted in the middle-class milieu of postcolonial West Bengal. Moreover, in a few passages of his poems he emphasises the ambivalence of his sexual identity and his sexual yearning, directed towards both men and women. He remains ambiguous about his sexual orientation, at once acknowledging his homosexuality and treating it with denial. Conscious of the different articulations of sex in the interstices of pleasure and desire, through this ambiguity the poet tries to resist the rational and scientific views of sexuality based on biological prescriptions and scientific norms by giving voice to the marginal experience of his subaltern sexual identity. Therefore, my reading locates Phalguni's reflections on his sexual urgency and troubled masculinity against the hegemonic discourses about sexuality that were promoted in postcolonial West Bengal. Central to the elaboration of sexuality (*yaunatā*) in Phalguni's poetry is the dichotomy between the national and institutional articulation of a scientific and medicalised sexuality, and his individual experience of pleasure and desire that appear as "abnormal" also to counter the institutional practices and scientific formulations of sexuality. Sex was considered socially legitimate, for example, for reproductive purposes within the heterosexual married couple. Therefore, the masculine body, in the context of Phalguni's poetry, becomes a site for displaying his conflict with normativity and literally the container of his sexual anxieties and troubled masculinity. The female body, on the contrary, is the object of Phalguni's obsessive desire and sexual urgency. In this way, the body claims a space for freedom of expression and for performing one's own experience of love and sex, by availing of the personal dimension of poetry to legitimise his peripheral sexuality that would have otherwise remained suppressed. In Hungryalist aesthetics the marginal voices of Phalguni's "other" sexuality and masculinity are thriving, overtly public, and self-conscious.

We have seen that hyper-masculinity is a distinctive feature of Malay Roy Choudhury's banned poem, as well as a more general tendency of the Hungry Generation movement. Although one can make significant distinctions among poems and authors, two main orientations can be identified in Hungryalism in relation to perspectives on gender: hyper-masculinity and the objectification of women. An aggressive and predatory sexuality seems to have represented the main thread of interpretation for the whole movement. However, Phalguni seemed to articulate a different notion of masculinity emerging from the poet's conflictual and uneasy positioning of his masculine body. It is this duality of the male gaze and of the male "pleasurable structures of looking" (Mulvey 1975) at a female body that is of interest to my analysis of Hungryalist poetry. Besides the hyper-masculine ethos of Hungryalist poetry, which objectifies and violates the female body, Phalguni's poems illustrate a more complex interaction between the spectator and the object

5 "I Won't Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis"

of gaze. He gazes obsessively at his penis, observing the functions of his male organ and its reactions to his mutable sexual desire. Linked to his male gaze is the symbolism of the mother and of the androgynous that Phalguni employs to reveal the unspoken homoerotic tensions as well as the uneasiness with being an "unaccomplished" man, unable to perform the roles of husband and father, symbols of patriarchal authority in the structure of the traditional Indian family and bourgeois society. Living the transition from the world of the Bengali landed gentry to the urban middle class of Calcutta, Phalguni was only one of many young Bengali men who experienced the crisis of values and the loss of coherence characteristic of the first decades after the partition of the country. Such existential disorientation also informed the sphere of Phalguni's ambiguous sexual identity, always in the focus of the poet's anxious investigation. In order to unpack Phalguni's anxious masculinity and homoerotic tensions we must turn again to the various discourses on masculinity that were articulated in South Asia during colonial and postcolonial times.

A key to interpret Phalguni's perversion and obsession with sex could be found in the imperial stereotypes about Indian people who were described as "weak, effete, and effeminate" (Sinha 1995), characteristics that delineated the colony as an essentially homoerotic space. With the emergence of Indian nationalism, the androgyny symbolised by Gandhi's politics of non-violence and vegetarianism caused anxiety and became associated with a political strategy of anticolonial struggle, as Joseph Alter has shown (Alter 2000: 139). Yet after independence this model was abandoned to recuperate a "lost" masculinity, heralding a renewed heteronormativity, equally homophobic and scared of effeminacy as the one nurtured by imperial and colonial stereotypes (Banerjee 2005). With the coming of independence, a particular formation of national Indian masculinity was the so-called "Five-year Plan hero" where "manliness came to attach not to bodily representations or aggressive behaviour but to being scientific" (Srivastava 2014: 39). In the emerging Bollywood cinema, the Indian and Bengali heroes broadcast a variety of manly icons who either represented the rational and scientific or the rebel angry man. Representations of homoeroticism were mainly associated with an idea of sexual perversion and corruption that came from the West.⁷¹ Phalguni's tensions

71 A repository of visual representations of masculinity and femininity can be found in the free digital archive *Tasveer Ghar: A House of Pictures* (Brosius et al. 2006). Here studies on visual culture in colonial and postcolonial India argued for the coexistence of a variety of dominant representations of masculinity. Among these, it is worth mentioning the muscular man of traditional Indian wrestling (Namrata Ganneri); the healthy and happy man of the marital couple (Margrit Pernau); the movies' underdog or angry young man played by Amitabh Bachchan (Ranjani Mazumdar); the romantic ideal of cinematic couples (Madhuja Mukherjee), and the construction of a modern middle-class woman in the domestic space (Abigail McGowan).

with normative visions of sexuality and masculinity must be set against this plural background. It is through these multiple lines of analysis and interpretation that one should examine Phalguni's male-centred poetry: by emphasising the historical dimension of his troubled masculinity, engrained in his reluctance and inability to adapt to the values and morality of the Bengali Hindu middle class. Let us see in more detail how Phalguni's peripheral visions of sexuality and masculinity are enunciated in some of his poems. I will show this by discussing the recurring images in his poetry collection *Television of a Rotten Soul* (1973) that are emblematic of the poet's negotiation with dominant social and cultural identities in postcolonial India.

Television of a Rotten Soul (Naṣṭa ātmār ṭelibhisan)

When the poetry collection and its eponymous poem were published, radical politics and terrorism were at an apex of violence. The Naxalites, a movement of peasant and low-class rebels inspired by Mao's Marxist ideology, waged a guerrilla warfare against members of the upper class, businessmen, landlords, politicians and security forces in West Bengal, later spreading to other states of eastern India. In 1971, Bengali students and intellectuals joined the rows of the Naxalite rebellion, staging a guerrilla warfare in the city of Calcutta. Prison diaries of Naxalites, as well as movies have notoriously kept record of the violence that civilians had experienced during the years of terrorism. The word revolution was on the lips of every leftist intellectual and politically committed individual. Moreover, for the new generation of young Bengali writers and intellectuals, the fight for freedom from the British empire few decades earlier in colonial India, and the fight for freedom from the occupation of Pakistan in East Bengal, were vivid memories of a recent history. Stories and legends about freedom fighters, revolutionaries and martyrs of Partition and the independence movement were setting the model of the national hero, ready to die and to withstand torture for the cause of the motherland, endowed with features of an ideal national masculinity. Phalguni was not untouched by these political happenings. In his poems, we find thoughts on revolution, partition, and the meaning of freedom for independent India. The sound of bombs, bullets and grenades burst out in ordinary and unexpected moments of the day throughout the city, observed from the inside of a moving bus. The picture that emerges from the poetry collection *Television of a Rotten Soul* is not an apologetic and lyrical celebration of the armed revolution. Phalguni, and in many ways the whole Hungry Generation, does not embrace poetry as a concrete call-to-action; rather, it distances itself from the rhetoric of revolutionary propaganda, which was a major aesthetic strand of Naxalite poetry during the peak of the movement. Phalguni remained unclear about his political positions, neither leaning for the

5 "I Won't Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis"

militaries nor for the rebels, a lack of standpoint that made his outspoken poetry dangerous and controversial.

I can see my hand
every day on my hand there's the double brain line
the same that, they say, Cheiro the astrologer has
I don't believe in palmistry
Hanging on bus-handles I came to hear sounds of poetry and death
in my skull instead of destiny there's a framework of bones
in sounds of bombs and bullets my fear of death awakens
I am a human who wants revolution

Palmistry (hāt dekhā)

The reference to palmistry or palm-reading (*hāt dekhā*) at the opening of the poem denotes a series of meanings in the sphere of Indian religious and social practice. Firstly, palmistry is a popular form of fortune-telling and matchmaking in India, and it is mainly based on Hindu astrology to which newlyweds and their families turn to check the bride and groom's charts compatibility. Therefore, palmistry and astrology were given a certain authority by the Indian middle class for its power of sanctioning social bonds and guiding the life of an individual, especially in the case of marriage and the birth of the offspring. Cheiro, the sobriquet of William John Warner – from whom the word cheiromancy – was an influential exponent of modern palmistry who contributed to revive this art at the turn of the twentieth century. We will see that the reference to the Irish astrologer and to other names associated to the new sciences of modernity, such as Sigmund Freud, Charles Darwin and Havelock Ellis, symbolise the scientific constructions of sexuality and love relations, a positivist mode of viewing sexuality in compliance with middle-class moral codes.

I kiss with the urge of desire and get pleasure beyond heaven
many times apathy lurks in such functions
in my mind the bodied divinity of wonder
I get drunk to write poetry
but I am reluctant to reflect on poetry
even revolutionaries after cleaning the barrels of their pipe-guns
are reluctant to fire
I follow Shri Chaitanya's religion of love and after giving love
to the Naxals and the Military I became listed as an enemy of
both sides

I have seen people saying, "I'm hungry, give me bread" or
"I'm jobless, give me a job"
nobody gives bread or jobs and when humans need bread and
jobs more than Picasso, Sartre or Satyajit
they see that real society
made up of father-mother-brother-sister
your own wife, other people's wives
is built with sex and economy
on my palm I see the double brain line – what they say also
Cheiro has
I don't believe in palmistry
ah, still my soul has observed that many women remain out of
reach

On the other hand, palmistry also stood for the expectations of the Bengali society and social conformism that requires Phalguni, as a young, Bengali middle-class man, to accomplish by choosing the right wife, having an auspicious marriage and giving birth to children. The palmistry reference in these lines is a good example of how scientific knowledge on sexuality, which included psychoanalysis and sexual science, was scorned and ridiculed by Phalguni because of his scepticism for scientifically established truths. However, at the same time the scientific substratum is always present in Phalguni's reading of the world of social relationships, love and intimacy. Here he mentions Freud and Havelock Ellis, the British doctor who started the study of sexology, whose theories were extremely influential for the development of the science of sex in India and the reform of sexual education promoted by Indian doctors.

and since then I have created my yoga postures
mixing Havelock Ellis' sexual psychology and Jagadish babu's *Gita*⁷²
I discovered the Oedipus complex long before reading Freud
but I don't like doing it with my mother
even though many times in the wild afternoon of my adolescence
I was ready to taste the body of any woman who was my
mother's age
I once came out on the street to commit suicide
but the sound of grenades exploding all around made me run home
for fear of death
I knew violent Revolution even without reading "Das Kapital"

72 With Jāgdiś bābu, Phalguni plausibly referred to the Bengali modern interpreter of the *Gītā* Jagdishchandra Ghosh (1872–1958).

5 “I Won’t Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis”

Phalguni rejected the authority of “theory”, a word he used to refer to the constellation of scientific norms, social prescriptions, and disciplines that govern our lives, regardless of their cultural and geographical origin.⁷³ He downplays theoretical structures to the extent that he could invent his own version of yoga by blending information taken from western manuals of sexology and a Bengali version of the *Bhagavadgītā*: the means will change but the result will remain the same, to recall a famous aphorism by Ramakrishna often quoted by Phalguni. To show the uselessness of theory Phalguni ironically points out the gap between the conceptual knowledge of the Oedipus complex and his experience of it, in the same way as he acknowledges the uselessness of reading Marx’s *The Capital* at a time when leftist guerrilla was happening at his door. In a way, he is making fun of those who boasted with theories, like some Marxist intellectuals and fans of psychoanalysis. We will take a closer look at Phalguni’s constant reference to his mother in the poem “Nirbikār cārminār” (Indifferent Charminar) later in this chapter.

The Charminar Cigarette (cār^lminār)

In Phalguni’s imagination the cigarette is always a Charminar, the most widely consumed brand of cigarettes in 1970s urban India. In West Bengal, the Charminar, originally from Hyderabad, became associated with the image of the leftist intellectual. The cigarette was identified as an attribute of masculinity, being highlighted in advertisement posters of those years.⁷⁴ In the poem “Manik Bandyopadhyay’s Spectacles”, the act of smoking a cigarette is not only an ordinary gesture that gives coherence to Phalguni’s day. The performance or non-performance of the ordinary activity of smoking is in Phalguni’s words emblematic of other realms of meaning. For example, it suggests the equation between the cigarette and the woman, where the latter can be consumed and thrown away just like a cigarette. Moreover, one can assume that alcohol and cigarettes were among the few, if not the only, luxury goods that a moneyless person like Phalguni could afford. So when the poet is left without cigarettes, he hints at a condition of greater lack – of a job, of love, of a woman, and of the possibility to imagine a future as a father and husband.

73 Even though the redundancy of theoretical knowledge as opposed to knowledge gained through living experience is a main topic throughout his poetry collection, the transliterated English word “theory” appears only in his film script “Antim jarāyū”, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

74 Similar arguments have been made on print alcohol ads in India, conveying the picture of an exaggerated masculinity, often accompanied by a highly erotic womanhood. See, for example, Rupali Sehgal, “Selling Intoxicating Bondings: Hyper Masculinity and Print Alcohol Ads in India” (5 March 2018), in Brosius et al. 2006.

Anxious Masculinity in Phalguni Ray's *Television of a Rotten Soul*

Spring, on your dry hot fields stays my heart's stamp
not in the beat of the heart
in the mist of winter I exhale smoke from the mouth without a
cigarette
without a woman on my bed
in the morning I feel that my penis gets harder
in whose belly will my child arrive?
one for which I will provide rice?

The poet's condition of lack or absence – of cigarettes and women – is outlined in the correlation between the phrase “without cigarettes” (binā sigāreṭe) and the word “without a woman” (nārīhīn) both underlining conditions of absence and solitude (the preposition binā, the suffix -hīn). Just like the act of “exhaling smoke from the mouth” can replace the real act of smoking, in the realm of Phalguni's unfulfilled sexuality erection replaces the real sexual intercourse. Similar dynamics of absence and presence are suggested by the image of the cigarette in the following passage from “Television of a Rotten Soul”. The image of the cigarette and the matches is transposed to the domain of his body and sexual desire. The woman is described only as a container (ādhār), a body to be penetrated. Yet, Phalguni does not feel excited nor sexually aroused when he has the chance of a sexual encounter with a woman. His words seem to describe a difficult relationship with his male body: a body he cannot control and that hardly belongs to him. These and other verses could be interpreted as a declaration of Phalguni's homosexuality, or as an always changing and ambivalent attitude in performing his sexuality. But these aspects are never openly acknowledged by the poet, as we will see later.

At times I carry cigarettes
but I have no matches
when I carry matches
I don't have cigarettes
at times when I feel the urge of sex
there is no container
no Radha, no wife or women to use it
when there are women
I have no desire for sex
when there's ready wit there is no unrepentant
when there is an unrepentant there's no ready wit
this is how days and nights go by

What is depicted here are a series of ordinary actions of everyday life that metaphorically explain Phalguni's utterly material and mechanical perception of women

5 “I Won’t Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis”

and of the world of sexuality. Likely modelled on the idiom of Hindu spiritual practice, Phalguni uses the noun “pratyutpannamati” (n. presence of mind, ready wit) and the adjective “abimṛṣyakārī” (adj. imprudent, unrepentant) in the context of sexuality, overturning the technical connotation originally assigned to these words. The standard meanings of the Bengali language are transgressed by applying these high scientific words to a more ordinary plane: Phalguni’s obsession with sex. The effect produced and perceived by the Bengali reader is one of dry humour also due to the exclusive and elitist significations of words such as these two that sound grand and highbrow to the ordinary Bengali reader. These words are therefore literally pulled out of the context of Indian philosophical tradition and cast down into a low level of sheer physical necessity born out of sexual arousal.

Sperm (bīrya)

After having acknowledged uneasiness with his male body and his otherness vis-à-vis what was perceived as “normal” in the realm of sexuality, he rapidly moves frame to the moment of his conception and his parents’ sexual intercourse, which is once again portrayed in extremely scientific terms.

Spending their time a bit differently
my Bengali parents gave birth to me
that is my dad’s body inside my mother’s body
my little body out from the union of the two bodies
that is from dualism to monism
I observe my desire to become a father inside masturbation
in the liquid flow of semen
a frame of 206 bones and attached to the frame are fleshy nerves
carrying thoughts
seeds holding the memories of sounds swim in the liquid sperm

His sexual numbness seems to mirror the emotional aridity of an individual caught in the highly normative and rationalising middle-class Indian society. Sex for reproductive purposes is depicted as a mechanical activity and described with a technical precision by resorting to the cold and aseptic idiom of sciences. The same strategy of language mismatch visible in the contrast between *sādhu bāṃlā* terminology and vile sexual activity operates in this verse too. Phalguni translates the act of his parents’ sexual intercourse using Sanskrit words typical of Indian philosophy, like *dvaita* (dualism) and *advaita* (monism), thus achieving an almost sarcastic and paradoxical effect, which could result disturbing to most conservative

Bengali readers. When recording his desire for paternity in the act of masturbation, Phalguni does not consider the possibility of an emotional interaction with another human being in the elaboration of his desire of paternity. Therefore, the act of masturbation is projected as the imaginative space in which the potential of his masculinity remains unexpressed and unfulfilled. At the same time, it remains the poet's safe corner in which the anxieties of his sexuality and masculinity are materialised. Again, masturbation appears as ultimately disconnected from the sphere of pleasure and desire; it is neither romanticised nor justified as a strategy of literary or artistic subversion. Autoeroticism is simply an ordinary and mechanical act used as a weapon against boredom, dissatisfaction, and frustration of his life.

In other poems, masturbation is envisioned as a liberating act that denounces and subverts the regulation of social bonds and relationships, as well as a state of frustration and uneasiness with one's own body and masculinity. In "Private Bed" (Byaktigata bichānā), for example, Phalguni makes fun of the hypocrisy of the state-sponsored family planning program and of the reassuring image of the ideal middle-class family, made of wife, husband and children, as promoted by posters and advertisement of that era. A project that propounded a vision of the family based on the economic principles of birth control and selection could not possibly imagine its "ideal man" to indulge in obscene and anti-utilitarian activities like masturbation.

Not only Radha – even the prostitute menstruates
The father of three children – the ideal man of family planning
Masturbates from childhood – doesn't he?

As already noted, semen anxiety was a major component in the analysis of colonial masculinity. Semen loss in the form of night discharges, non-reproductive sex, and masturbation was treated as a major source of preoccupation in colonial India, substantiating the fear of effeminacy and loss of virility that characterised the colonial Bengali subject (Sinha 1995; Alter 2011). In the 1950s, the anxiety of semen loss was still a concern for young married couples where wives were responsible for their husband's sexual health and the husbands in turn had to sexually satisfy their wives, as journal columns about sexuality and advertisements have shown (Haynes 2012; Botre and Haynes 2017). While my interpretation reaffirms the weight that the logic of semen anxiety had for the modern Indian middle class, at least on a more symbolic level, Phalguni's case in point discloses other possibilities of interpretation when applied to peripheral and subcultural locations of Bengal's literary landscape. In order to counter the economic logic of sex and marital life at the core of Indian society, Phalguni often resorted to the material and symbolic potential of semen revealing a real obsession with the hyper-analytical and scientific examination of the world of bodily fluids and sexuality, by

5 “I Won’t Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis”

extension. Perhaps while perpetrating these anatomical representations of semen and embryonic acids Phalguni also wanted to laugh at the language of science and dismantle the hyperrational laws of science – like heredity – and their impact on social formations. Moreover, the biological dimension sustained by the Hindu vision of caste, family and society, firmly grounded in blood ties, was further nurtured by the reappearance of an evolutionary model of society based on the science of eugenics and Malthusianism. Even though Phalguni never mentions caste in his poetry, he seems to be implicitly referring to its ideology, founded on a rule of genetic transmission, when he ironically discusses the power of heredity in influencing the social life of an individual.⁷⁵ All these various aspects that in the Hindu middle-class ideology shaped a human being were for Phalguni a constant source of observation and interrogation.

Language and Heredity

In several verses, the poem “*Naṣṭa ātmār ṭelibhisan*” also contains Phalguni’s main observations on the influence of the eugenic principle of heredity, the cultural and biological baggage of humanity, in shaping the human being as it is socially experienced. In this context, language is another object of analysis of the heredity-environment question, which wondered if human behaviour was influenced by environment or by genetic inheritance. Phalguni rhetorically wonders if a man’s education, knowledge, social position and status have an influence on biological and cultural transmission. In other words, in parodic modality Phalguni criticises the notion of caste, essentially grounded on a biological theory of transmission of traits via the mother.

Mr. Khanna speaks Hindi but his wife speaks Bangla
Mustard Khanna’s 5-year-old son can speak both ⁷⁶
through harmonic usage of tongue, teeth, palate, throat, lips
well, did the power of speaking and understanding come
through the nitric acids of his foetus?
dear heredity, what’s this language thing?
I don’t know whether it is the environment or needs that
develop language

75 For example, Mary Douglas has noted that caste identity was biologically transferred through the mother (Douglas 1966: 126).

76 The pun on the word *miṣṭānno* (sweet, pastry) plays on the previous *miṣṭār* (mister) Khanna, typical title of a Punjabi Hindi-speaker, stereotype of a military masculinity, who is here ironically downgraded to the stereotypically sweet and effeminate Bengali.

I don't know if love has a language or if there's only a language
of sensations
I see humans made of bodies
some of them want to be James Joyce and others Alamohan Das
unfortunately, we don't have any influence on our own birth
was there ever a Buddha behind Suzuki's birth?

Phalguni technically observes the biological process of birth in a specific social body: while some want to be James Joyce, a poet, or Alamohan Das, an industrialist, he has come into the jobless and sick body of a poor Bengali poet, with its innate knowledge of his mother tongue Bengali. We do not have any power nor influence on our births, he affirms, just like there is no Buddha behind the birth of the Japanese philosopher and Zen propagator Suzuki.

We have now collected enough pieces to recreate a plausible picture of Phalguni's mindset vis-à-vis the sociocultural landscape of Indian society. He unapologetically exposes the main sites of knowledge and power in modern India, reflecting the disintegration of the Indian family and Hindu traditional values: he equally targets scientific knowledge and Hindu socio-religious practice, both conflating beliefs and prescriptions on birth, sex, and marriage, into an ideology that ultimately sponsored racial purity and class distinction.⁷⁷ Questioning the influence of the deterministic law of heredity in generating human beings and human lives brings the seminal matter onto another level of discussion, which is the preservation of race in colonial and postcolonial Bengal. In late colonial Bengal, sexual temperance and abstinence were promoted to ward off fears of sexual wantonness and pollution of the health and integrity of the Bengali race, against the ongoing crisis brought about by colonial modernity. This vision clearly emerges from pseudoscientific Hindu journals on health and society of that time which sought to prepare the nation to modernity by "cleansing" the seed of future life: "If you really want to see human being happy, long-living, intelligent, rich and pious, then, before sowing the seed of future life, let the seminal fluid be ripe enough by nourishing it, search for a proper place and then plant the seed at the right moment... If you want a son who is pure, noble and most graceful, make yourself pure, noble and graceful" (Bose 2006: 164–5). Anxieties of purity were not unknown in postcolonial India too. Sara Hodges has shown that the social project of postcolonial India was dominated by the neo-Malthusian imperative to reduce poverty and the "potentially unruly poor" (Hodges 2010: 234). Questions about heredity and environment emphasise the burden of the social and religious regulations of Indian society and the influence of a

77 For more extensive studies on race, hygiene and eugenics in colonial and imperial India, and the relevance of caste in India's eugenic discourse, see Heath 2010, Hodges 2010, and Pande 2010.

5 "I Won't Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis"

hyper-scientific vision of the human subject as it was outlined in the Indian post-independence period. In general, Phalguni wanted to make fun of all the layers that were constitutive of the domain of science, which governed society in postcolonial India: this included Hindu religious and scientific inherited knowledge, colonial science, technology and medicine as central attributes of India's modernity.⁷⁸

Against the rules prescribed by science and religion, that is against the language and law of heredity, Phalguni lays out the existence of a language of love (bhālabāsā) besides one of physical perception (anubhūti). Within a postcolonial interpretation, his observations on the hegemonic discourses of Indian modernity reveal the continuities of the colonial imperative of civilisational progress with the national narrative of science and modernisation promoted by the postcolonial Indian nation. Moreover, it shows how colonial power re-inscribed the "inherited (Hindu) knowledge" about caste, gender, and race into renewed local meanings that legitimised these social constructs as proper national institutions. Thus, the search for an alternative answer to what is and what shapes an individual in its most existential needs remains unresolved in Phalguni's words ("is there any language of love? I don't know"), even though he sought to resist the power of facts and scientific truths with a utopic language of love and feeling. Aware of the colonial legacy on the anxiety for the preservation of the Bengali race that expressed through marriage, love and sex regulations, Phalguni observes the contradictions implicit in being a poet who writes and thinks in Bengali, while English, the ex-imperial language, was attaining social and official status in India. Even when speaking about "language", the theory of heredity and transmission return at the centre of his observations on English versus Bengali native speakers and Eurocentric knowledge production about India, in a way that echoes Edward Said's critique of the Orientalist imaginations of the colonies.

My Western boyfriends and girlfriends
you also don't know Bangla from birth
just like many Bengalis don't know English from birth
you also feel hungry
you also go and check the loo and the bathroom when searching
for a house
you also protest against Vietnam war
just like us, Allen Ginsberg can see the river of his poetry in
dreams and nightmares

78 About medicine, Arnold has shown that it found contested expression in both imperial ideology and nationalist agendas in colonial India. The modern scientific discourse of the postcolonial Indian state included the return of Hindu science, the revival of varied indigenous tradition, as well as Western science and technology (Arnold 2000: 169).

yet, bastard, I am a Bengali
I will learn about the God of the Shatapatha Brahmana reading
Max Müller
that's why I will take Soma and Sura, that is drug and wine
all at once, mostly in the evenings
and Buddhadeb Basu will write erudite essays on the Beat Gen-
eration saying that the Hungries are illiterate
oh, why can't I think in English?
why are my parents Bengali?
oh, you Bengali, why have you even become a poet!

In addressing his sāheb and memsāheb friends, the poet does not mean to evoke the standard foreign-native or the colonial white-black dichotomies, but rather wishes to highlight the symmetries with the Bengali people. The ex-colonised subjects and the foreigners are portrayed as part of the same human community, all sharing the same needs: satisfying hunger, desire, consuming, and dissenting. Phalguni here turns to English speakers, those who have the privilege of knowing English from birth, unlike many Indians after the demise of the British empire. The East-West opposition is here outlined in terms that are predominantly linguistic and cultural. The poet from Baranagar articulates a sense of frustration stemming from his lack of English education and proficiency in the English language, both of which are perceived as indispensable prerequisites for achieving social and intellectual success within the middle-class Bengali milieu. In this context of language and social status in post-independence India, he rightly complains that even in the realm of literature English-speaking poets are more well received and worthy of critical attention than Bengali poets like the Hungry Generation who are considered “illiterate”. The same reasons can explain his reference to Max Müller, among the first scholars to translate ancient Indian texts, and his monumental *Sacred Books of the East*, a foundational text of Indian religions even for an Indian student's curriculum in Phalguni's era. In few sentences, Phalguni encapsulates the concern of some Bengali intellectuals regarding the privileged role that English played in the public sphere of post-independence India, including education, access to social mobility, literary and intellectual achievement.

Despite recognising such cultural affinities with the West, Phalguni grapples with profound distress regarding his linguistic non-whiteness, a feeling he conveys through the nominal sentence “yet, bastard, I am a Bengali” (tabu śālā āmi bānālī). Used in counterpoint to Phalguni's preceding assertions, this clause illustrates the inherent fractures and contradictions within his pursuit of an international brotherhood. It serves to consolidate the identity of the postcolonial subject – formally liberated from the colonial administrative and political yoke – yet irrevocably anchored to the same colonial past that engendered the psychic, cultural, and

5 "I Won't Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis"

social conflicts characterising postcolonial India. Phalguni unabashedly embodies these conflicts, underscoring the complexities and tensions inherent in the postcolonial experience.

Phalguni was very conscious about the linguistic and cultural hegemony of Western knowledge and of the political power of the English language in postcolonial India.⁷⁹ Phalguni's remarks on the hierarchy of languages were not isolated but embedded in a larger political debate going on in the 1960s on the issue of the official language of India. In 1956, Hindi in the devanāgarī script replaced English as the Union's official language, although the Indian Constitution continued to acknowledge English as second official language after the reaction of non-Hindi speaking areas. The literary critic Buddhadeva Bose, active supporter of English as the lingua franca of India, looked down on Hindi's imposition as official language while he acknowledged Bengali as his "intimate language".⁸⁰ Phalguni, through his language choices, affirmed his Bengali identity, recognising that being Bengali entails carrying the cultural and biopolitical legacy of colonialism, encompassing ideas and practices related to race, gender, and class.

The paradox that Phalguni has highlighted is the continuation of the colonisation of the Bengali self that is rooted in the language, in the cultural practices and the scientific methods borrowed from Western sciences and humanities. The poet seems in fact to be highly receptive to the debates emerged from the decolonisation movements in Africa that questioned the hegemony of Western colonial epistemology and anticipated the central questions of later postcolonial studies that encouraged the "decolonisation of knowledge".⁸¹ It is within this frame that one should interpret the paradox of a Bengali learning about the sacred Hindu texts from the English translation of a German Indologist, and of the literary critic Buddhadeva Bose praising the Beat Generation while depreciating the Hungryalists as

79 Starting with William Babington Macaulay's Minute of 1853, English played a central role in the cultural and political administration of British India, where he intended to create "a class who may be the interpreters between us and the millions we govern – a class of persons Indian in blood and English in taste, in opinions, in words, and in intellect" (Bhabha 1994: 87).

80 In the late 1950s, Buddhadeva Bose wrote several essays on the role that the 'mother language' plays in the cultural and social life of Bengali people. He promoted the use of Indian vernacular languages in public institutions against the growing use of English and Hindi as official languages of India. See, for example, his essays "Language and nation" (Bhāṣā o rāṣṭra); "English and the mother language" (Iṅgreji o mātṛbhāṣā), and "Language, poetry and humanity" (Bhāṣā, kabitā o manuṣyatva). The latter was especially written in reaction to the report of the Official Language Commission (1956) which implemented the development of Hindi as official language of India (Bose 1957).

81 For example, some of Phalguni's observations on language, gaze, and identity resonate with some main views exposed by the writers who actively took part in the decolonisation movements of their countries, like Frantz Fanon.

“illiterate” and unfit for the higher goal of poetry. The Bengali language embodies and expresses Phalguni’s provincialism in contrast with the internationalism of the writers in the English language, as an obstacle to his quest for emancipating from his vernacular identity. These aspects that Phalguni repeatedly emphasised in his poetry collection *Television of a Rotten Soul* seem to resonate with the Kan-nada writer and critic Ananthamurthy’s questions about the influence of Western models on Indian writing: “Are we really a nation of mimics, victims of English education which has conditioned the faculties of our perception so much that we fail to respond freshly to the immediate situation in India? Should we reach Brecht in order to discover that our folk theatre can be used? Why do we import even our radicalism via Ginsberg, Osborne, or Sartre? And our reaction against the West – isn’t it often emotional, while intellectually we remain bound to western modes of thought?” (Ananthamurthy 1976: 186).

Indifferent Charminar (Nirbikār cārminār)

A number of symbols in Phalguni’s poetry have revealed an obsession with sexual ambiguity and homoeroticism. Among these, the Oedipal complex and the category of the androgynous have lent themselves to postcolonial interpretations of the psychic complex of colonial subjugation. Ashish Nandy, for example, has pinned down the analogy between childhood and the condition of being colonised, suggesting that many subjects internalised their colonial construction as “less male” (Nandy 1983). A psychoanalytical approach can however be reductive and essentialising because it views “Indian sexuality” as a monolithic and universal entity, heavily shaped by medical, psychological and religious concepts of “Indian culture”.⁸² Therefore, I only resort to a psychoanalytical reading to explain the symbolic potential of these images and to expose the symbolic traces of colonial oppression in these postcolonial poets. What must be stressed are the structural and social transformations that India’s middle class was undergoing after the 1960s, influenced by a culture of consumption that re-shaped material notions of need and desire.⁸³ Although these dynamics are not absent in the

82 Indian psychoanalysis has extensively engaged with the Oedipus complex, mainly with the task of formulating an Indian version of the Freudian complex. Literature on the subject includes, but is not limited to, psychoanalytic and culturalist perspectives (Nandy 1983; Kakar 1991). Other studies have problematised the psychoanalytic approach to focus on a more historicised and socially constructed elaboration of gender representations during colonial times (Rosselli 1980; Alter 1992; Sinha 1995).

83 For example, in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972) Deleuze and Guattari criticised the psychoanalytical interpretation of the Oedipus complex. They pointed out that traditional psychoanalysis ignored the main feature of modern capitalist

5 "I Won't Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis"

elaboration of Phalguni's sexuality, I will delineate a reading that focuses on the autobiographical character of Phalguni's poetry, which is replete with details from his family life: the conflictual relationship with his mother, the premature death of his father, the missed marriage with his ex-lover, and his aristocratic upbringing make up the biographical patchwork of Phalguni's life. This injection of the personal can suggest a parallel way of reading his poetry as a fragmented biography which exists transversally to the psychoanalytic and culturalist reading of the Oedipus complex. For example, Sudhir Kakar argued that among the main features of the Indian Oedipal archetype are the close mother-son bond and the son's passive acceptance of the father's authority (Kakar 1981: 80). For early Indian psychoanalysis, the consequence of the son's fear of the father engendered the Hindus' complex of castration and emasculation caused by colonial rule, which was accompanied by a reassessment of the redemptive and devoted role of the mother (Boni n.d.: 7). If these symbolic aspects of the Oedipal complex are only latently present in Phalguni's poems, the sphere of the family is at the foundation of his literary world.

Moreover, in what could be enunciated as an economy of sexuality in Phalguni's poetry, the penis becomes the object of his obsessive gaze. The anatomical details revealed by looking at his male body and organ of reproduction stand in opposition to the hegemonic ideologies of Hindu middle-class masculinity. In contrast to the scientific masculinity of the post-Nehruvian era, Phalguni does not suggest a vigorous and healthy manhood. On the contrary, he counters this state-sponsored manliness by displaying an ambivalent and deeply anxious masculinity symbolised by his "unhappy penis" (*asukhī liṅga*), always in the focus of the poet's gaze – during masturbation, in erection, or becoming limp after ejaculation.⁸⁴ Unlike the hyper-sexualisation of the male body in other Hungryalist poems, Phalguni pointed out a more ambiguous masculinity that borders on homosexuality, as I showcase in the next paragraph. The diagnosis of Phalguni's clinical

society in which the family is located: the dimension of desire, its production, repression and the degree of Oedipisation of sexuality.

84 Another sample from his collection is found in the poem "Are We Renaissance or Resurrection?" (*Ām'rāi renesāms o rejārek'śan?*). Here Phalguni makes an ironic analogy between the awakening of the Kundalini – the divine energy located at the base of the spine – during yogic sexual union and the erect position of his penis, which Phalguni observes with surprise and bafflement:

Where will Manu descend at the end of Manu's cosmic time?
whose son-in-law the Great Sage of Mud looking at his wife's breasts
would feel sexual attraction and reawaken the Kundalini Shakti through the practice of
exhaling, inhaling and retaining breath
my awake penis goes limp after ejaculation
and it becomes hard to believe that it can stand 'in that way'" (Miśra 2015: 47).

gaze on his virility highlights the strangeness, the otherness and the abnormality experienced for his sexual behaviour.

The Penis (puruṣāṅga, liṅga)

Emblematic of the mother figure and the anatomical gaze on the male body are the next stanzas from “Indifferent Charminar” (Nirbikār cārminār), a poem that has become iconic of the world and language of this Bengali bohemian poet. Here Phalguni turns against his mother, who represents the culture of their aristocratic family (abhijāta), affirming his inability of adapting to the values of her society, permeated with hypocrisy and conformism, not too different from the urban middle class. Such incapacity that seems to pervade the language of the Bengali poet is expressed through words that indicate a lack of agency: adjectives and nouns that describe a state of apathy and inaction, such as nirbikār (indifferent), as in the title of this poem, but also anihā (apathy) and anābaśyak (unnecessary), abound in their reference to the poet’s everyday life, performed in the anonymity and alienation of a changing society in a modernising nation state. Such conditions of passivity, inaction and unfulfillment are echoed in a number of images that symbolise the puzzlement at one’s own birth (janma), expressing the quintessentially existential aversion of being born and revealing the absurdity and contradictions of human life on earth. By contrast, in other poems Phalguni seems to envisage the possibility to carve out a personal corner to counter this sense of anomie produced by the impersonality of capitalist society.

Mother I won’t be able to laugh again with that polished snigger
of your aristocratic society
with the moronic white teeth of a God full of compassion
with the intelligent look of Satan
I won’t be able to treat my wife in matriarchal tradition as
Ramakrishna did
I won’t be able to eat saccharine instead of sugar for fear of
diabetes
I won’t be able⁸⁵ to become Devdas in Khalasitala with my
unhappy penis
on the eve of my ex-lover’s wedding day

85 Notice the repetition of the phrase “I won’t be able” (āmi pā’bo nā) revealing the poet’s inability to follow the social conventions of middle-class Bengali society.

5 "I Won't Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis"

My liver is gradually rotting
my grandfather had cirrhosis
I don't understand heredity
I drink alcohol and read poetry
my father used to fast during pujas
on the day of Holi men press the breasts of the mothers of their
neighbour-sisters in the name of religion

His comparison with Devdas, the doomed hero of Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay's eponymous novel (1917), aims to stress Phalguni's distance from the models of a national masculine heroism which conflated sexual abstinence with political resistance. The reference to Devdas is not arbitrary: this character became the icon of manhood and honour, maintaining his chastity and self-control against the appealing offer of the female protagonists, Paro and Chandramukhi. Therefore, Phalguni renounced this model of a "modest" masculinity which he defies by voicing his sexual perversions. The parallel with this icon of Bengali masculinity is reinforced by the "unhappiness" ascribed to his penis at the wedding day of his ex-lover, an event that Phalguni often re-evokes in his poetry. "Asukhī" is an unusual quality to be ascribed to the male organ: it translates as "unhappy", "discontented" or "miserable", underlying the pain that the poet must go through in his life. Unhappy here denotes not only the general discontent with his personal and sexual life but it also points to the poet's disidentification with his male body. This passage also links back to the question of heredity, which creates a connection of bodies with his ancestors, from his father to his grandfather.

Mother
many from your aristocratic society drank vodka on foreign
journeys
I will indifferently light up my cigarette on your burning pyre
tears water my eyes if I think about your death
I don't think about earthquakes of land or floods of water
I didn't think of Vaishnava lyrics when I put my hands on the
petticoat's lace of my virgin girlfriend
Mother I will also die one day

As if gradually increasing the load, now the mother is imagined on her death pyre. His mother's upbringing in the Bengali landed gentry is symptomatic of the moment of transition that Phalguni was experiencing in the radical leftist culture of 1960s Calcutta. These dynamics were not absent in Phalguni's friend circle too, as he shows in "The Flower of Wood" (1975). Here he wrote about his friends' boasting about their family's wealth and how their aristocratic origins coexisted with a

Communist credo despite the contradictions.⁸⁶ Again, an adjective signalling lack of agency and passivity like *nirbikār*, indifferent, as in the title of this iconic poem, is metaphorically transposed to the Charminar cigarette, a trope that captures Phalguni's attempted detachment and nonchalance about the material and emotional world he attaches to his mother. Does this image of a son symbolically "killing" his mother mean to overturn the Oedipus complex? Perhaps this is what Phalguni is attempting in this stanza: to symbolically build her pyre and burn their aristocratic past. As if in the wish to find a place in this world, Phalguni forces himself to fulfil this unwanted action. From a linguistic point of view, it is worth noting a degree of differentiation in the ways the mother is denoted. The more personal and emotional Bengali *mā* in this poem, also used to address goddesses in the Bengali cultural world, is distinct from the sterile connotation of words like *jananī* and *prasū* (lit. female progenitor), which he uses in the film scripts to denote the "mother" viewed as a sheer body, in its essential biological function and reproductive capacity. Always linked to the dimension of love and sexuality is the image of the Vaishnava *padābalī*, the genre of devotional poetry inspired to the *līla* or the game of love between Radha, the *gopīs* and their god Krishna. Although *bhakti* poetry generally sublimates these erotic tensions into devotional love, in the love between Krishna and his *gopīs* the erotic elements are often quite explicit too. Exploiting this very popular reference of the sensual Krishna, by way of a contrast with the Vaishnava *padābalī*, Phalguni exposes the absence or the oblivion of any lyric and poetic form of love when undressing his girlfriend and preparing for his game of love.

Another iconic figure of the colonial world of Calcutta in this poem is Ramakrishna, the Bengali Hindu mystic (1836–1886) and still today a popular saintly figure for Bengali Hindus. When Phalguni affirms of not being able to treat his "wife in matriarchal tradition as Ramakrishna",⁸⁷ he suggests another key to unravel the question of masculinity, so meaningful and problematic for this author. In Phalguni's collapsing world of meaning, Ramakrishna is a model of saintly man and perhaps an ideal example of masculinity to look up to. In other passages of his poetry, Ramakrishna comes across as the apostle of universal sexual peace because of his devotion to Kali. Representative of the cult of Ramakrishna was

86 Bacchu and Nirab Sanyal were the children of an aristocratic woman (*rāj'bhāṛir meye*). What is discussed in this piece are the fights and divergence of political opinions between the two brothers, both in different ways exponents of the leftist culture of Calcutta. Nirab felt guilty for his association with Communism: he remembers when his mother and other *bhadramahilā* were arrested and kept in jail by the Communists. His brother Bacchu, on the contrary, is a stunt Communist and works for the newspaper of the party *Samgrām*. In one article, he humiliates his brother Nirab by underlining his brother's hypocrisy: son of a zamindari family, consumer, yet a Lenin follower (Miśra 2015: 79).

87 *rām'kṛṣṇīya bhaṅgīte [bhaṅgi] strike byabahār kar'te māṭṭāntrik prathāy...āmi pār'bo nā* (Miśra 2015: 24).

5 “I Won’t Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis”

the relationship with his wife and disciple Sarada devi, who was worshipped like a holy mother by her husband. Rumours about this saintly couple, in many ways similar to the Gandhi-Kasturba couple, claimed that theirs was a spiritual marriage and that it was never consummated. I find this passage quite typical of how Phalguni conceived the realm of the Bengali guru’s sexuality, drawing a parallel with his aspirations to sexual normality. Moreover, the Ramakrishna Missions, founded by his disciple Vivekananda, are still today all over the place in Phalguni’s neighbourhood, which gives us room to assume the meaningful influence this urban cult had on the shaping of Phalguni’s world of meaning. After Ramakrishna’s death in 1886, his disciples and Swami Vivekananda decided to turn a dilapidated house in Baranagar into their maṭh, the first monastery of the Ramakrishna order. And, just on the opposite side of the Ganges facing Ratanbabu ghat, where Phalguni’s family house is still located, there is Belurmaṭh, the modern headquarters of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission.

At the monastery of Belur my boundless sexuality awakened
looking at the international python ass covered by the skirt of a
praying foreigner
Mother I envy you because your sexuality will be associated for
eternity with baba’s pyre
staring at my penis with modest filthiness I feel like a species
from another planet
now the glow of the setting sun shines down on my face and the
colours of sunset smearing in their wings
flocks of birds without family planning are coming back to the
peaceful nest of Banalata Sen’s eyes⁸⁸
their time for egg incubation has come

Both mother and father are mentioned in “Nirbikār cārminār”. We know that his father died in 1947, which explains why Phalguni associates his mother’s sexuality with his father’s pyre. These are heavy words for someone who lost his father at the age of only two. Even then, when writing of his father’s death, Phalguni cannot retain from obsessing on sexuality to the point that he confesses to envy his mother

88 Jibananda Das’ popular poem “Banalatā Sen” (1942) became part of the mainstream canon of Bengali literature, representing the urban middle-class nostalgia for a mythic and authentic idea of Bengal. Playing on the reassuring memory of Banalata’s “eyes like bird nests” (pākhīr nīṛer mata cokh), Phalguni disrupts the romantic imagery of the birds flying at sunset and sarcastically shows the contraposition between the Bengali ideal of romantic love, embodied by Banalata, and the impersonal and emotionally sterile project of family planning (paribār parikalpanā).

because of her extinguished sexuality, metaphorically burned on her husband's pyre. For Phalguni once again there is only left to stare at his penis with a feeling of "modest" repulsion. In this image, Phalguni encapsulates his voyeurism and "abnormality" clashing with the ideally normative sexuality of his parents. The juxtaposition between the realms of the filthy and the holy is evoked by the two powerful images of his father's pyre (*bābār citā*) and his look of modest filthiness. While his father and mother's sexuality does not come across as problematic as it became in Phalguni's time, as we read from his voice, his sexuality and masculinity are condensed into the view of "international python ass" at the monastery of Belur which reawaken his "boundless" (*sīmāhīn*) sexuality, emphasising the urgency and perversion of his desire. Despite this temporary performance of a rigid and depraved masculinity, his penis – which biologically identifies him as a man – is treated like a distant object that barely seems to belong to Phalguni's body. The stare of "modest filthiness" (*nirahaṃkāraṅgrāmi*) reveals his feeling of repulsion at being endowed with the attributes of manliness. His masculine body is repudiated because seen as an obstacle to expressing his ambiguous sexual identity, as well as scorned because of its uselessness to the goals of pleasure and reproduction. It is Phalguni's realisation of the disidentification with his male body that engenders the typical sense of alienation and otherness vis-à-vis the normality of social conventions: the sense that makes him feel like a "species from another planet" (*anyagraher jīb*), an alien or a monster.

Black Divinity (Kālo dibyatā) and Artificial Snake (Kṛtrim sāp)

Homosexuality (samakām)

Phalguni's ambivalent relationship with his male body, often depicted as the source of the poet's troubled sexuality, could also be read in terms of homosexuality. Although performative aspects of homoeroticism and transvestism were authorised in many vernacular traditions of India, homosexuality in South Asia was generally reproached and associated to the corrupt sexuality of the West, as Ruth Vanita has shown (Vanita 2002: 134–137). This could explain the Hungryalists' hesitation in openly talking about homosexuality in both poetry and real life: so far none has confirmed that Phalguni could have been homosexual. However, what strikes in the register of this poet of zamindari descent is the utterly honest and almost psychoanalytical investigation about the pain and anguish he experienced as a non-established individual in Bengali bourgeois society and culture. Yet, the tenor of his disquisitions is often self-ironic or subtly satirical in relation to the prescriptive and manipulative logic of scientific knowledge. The next passages will illustrate how Phalguni's interrogation of his gender and sexual identity are relevant to

5 "I Won't Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis"

understand the poet's negotiation with normative concepts of sexuality. For example, against the hegemonic representation of masculinity – rational and scientific, economically and sexually frugal –, Phalguni responded with a sexual behaviour that is ambiguous, depraved, urgent and obsessive, almost verging on paranoia. His sexual need is directed towards multiple objects of desire, including his ex-lover, his mother's friends, his sister-cousins, the prostitutes, as well as towards young men, as emerges from a reading of the next stanzas. The poem "Black Divinity" (Kālo dibyatā) could be read as symptomatic of Phalguni's sexual ambiguity. The title itself seems to hint to one's own black demons that remain suppressed in the subconscious and hidden from the surface. However, the black divinity, which one could read as Phalguni's suppressed homosexuality, reappears and takes possession of the body of the poet in moments of deep crisis and disorientation.

In the urban neon light
beside my lonely shadow
instead of your lonely shadow
a tail attached to my body

I forget stuff like Darwin's theory or how to spell Freud's name
and I walk this road
the shadow of my prehistoric masculine walks beside me and then
I do not remember anything else
I do not remember whom I have cheated and who flicked ten
rupees from me
I forget about literature through the diary of sorrow and even on
Vietnam day I forget about the Vietnam problem

In that moment I remember that every afternoon at five after college
you hang out with your boyfriend and I would walk alone,
I look at the healthy asses of all those young men and regret
that I am not homosexual

In the loneliness and anonymity of modern city life, Phalguni is turned into an ape, reduced to an animal in the urban jungle. The light of the urban neon projects only the shadow of his humanity and masculinity, prompting him to get back to men's most primitive instincts. When he walks, he drags along his contingent male body as well as the "shadow of my prehistoric masculine",⁸⁹ or the accumulated memories of the biologic, social and cultural meanings of manhood that he cannot easily get rid of. Phalguni's reference to Darwin's theory points to a critique of theories

89 Prāgaitihāsik puruṣer chāyā hāmṭe āmār pāše (Mishra 2015: 33).

on evolution, based on the prescriptions of science and natural history. However, one has to keep in mind that what Phalguni refers to when mentioning Darwin's theory was the more popular perception of the principle of natural selection which centred on Spenser's theory of the survival of the fittest.⁹⁰

Against the modern and positivist concept of subjectivity, influenced by biological and genetic theories on human life, Phalguni's deep historical crisis takes shape clashing with India's dominant ideology of science and development. This crisis of traditional values is epitomised by Phalguni's duality and ambivalence of needs and desires: when he "regrets of not being homosexual", he perhaps not too implicitly affirms to hide the desire of homosexuality. His amnesia of ordinary things such as forgetting "how to spell Freud's name" can be seen as an ironic reference to what is known in psychoanalysis as the Freudian slip: the linguistic mistake that brings to the surface of consciousness what the speaker has subconsciously repressed. But if he ironically points to the repressed taboos of men, he does that to subvert the idea of psychoanalysis about suppressed taboos precisely because his endeavour is to express through poetry the unspoken prohibitions of his family and society. These last observations can be read together with the poem "Artificial Snake" (*Kṛtrim sāp*), where Phalguni seeks to bring back to the surface the "consciousness of hermaphrodite" (*ardhanārīśvar cetanā*) out of his "masculine senses" (*puruṣ anubhūti*).

when I flow
in the procession of wise, talented, good looking and wealthy
men and women
in the procession of stupid, ugly and poor men and women
I forget whether I am a man or a woman
but when I touch my trouser-buttons or my chest-pockets
from the consciousness of Hermaphrodite, I come back to masculine senses
and once I come back I notice that breasts and asses of housewives and servant-women from many
households are very similar in terms of size and shape

When flowing (*bhese calā*) in the procession (*michil*) of men and women, that is when lost in the crowd, Phalguni forgets about the outer shell that society has

90 The phrase "survival of the fittest" was used by Herbert Spencer to describe the dominant approach of Darwin's theory of evolution and to draw parallels with his own economic theories. Darwin's theory of natural selection was then warped and simplified especially by social Darwinism, which controversially applied Spencer's phrase to the study of human society. In the opening decades of the twentieth century, Darwin's theory then became extremely influential in the development of Malthusianism and eugenics.

5 “I Won’t Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis”

cast upon him and that identifies him as a man. Only then can Phalguni recall his true consciousness of hermaphrodite, without any distinction of gender: he is the archetypal hermaphrodite, the composite androgynous form of Shiva and Parvati.⁹¹ By contrast, the only connection to his masculinity takes place on a material level when touching his “trouser-buttons” and “chest-pockets”, the only physical attributes that label him as a man. Although we can only assume about Phalguni’s homosexuality, the mechanisms of irony and shame, prohibition and sanction at play are overtly acknowledged in these representations of the poet’s a-sexual consciousness.

Film Scripts: Family Planning, Modernisation and Body Commodification

Moving on to another section of Phalguni’s production, and namely to film scripts, I will show that the re-inscription of images and events of the ordinary life of a Bengali Hindu into realms of “grotesque” meaning is a core strategy of Phalguni’s writing style and subversive aesthetics. The grotesque has more notably defined the transgressive style of the sixteenth-century French writer Rabelais who focused on “the bodily lower stratum” and a fixation on “degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high” (Bakhtin 1984: 19–20). Degradation – of content, style, and language – is of course a valuable way to describe a crucial strategy of Hungryalist aesthetics. Nevertheless, while reading Phalguni’s script “The Final Womb” (*Antim jarāyū*) I have noticed further analogies with the style of representation typical of Italian surrealist cinema – for example, with Pierpaolo Pasolini’s movies – where the naked body is a tool of social critique and where sexuality is called to play “a horrible metaphoric role”, because it signifies the ultimate commodification of humanity.⁹² In other words, the grotesque has the

91 It should not be out of place to see in Phalguni’s imagination of his “consciousness of hermaphrodite” a connection with what Ashish Nandy has named “klibatva” (Beng. *klibatva*) or the essence of hermaphroditism, the characteristic of the colonial culture that denied the Indian natives of their political identity (Nandy 1983). Nandy has found in Gandhian anti-colonial politics of non-violence, vegetarianism and anti-modernism the epitome of the effeminate or androgynous radicalism that “produced a transcultural protest against the hyper-masculine world view of colonialism” (Nandy 1983: 48).

92 Pasolini explained well the metaphoric role of naked bodies and sexuality in his movie *Salò*, where they visually and meaningfully pervade the scene to signify the ultimate commodification of the human body: “... all the sex that is in *Salò* [*Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*] (and it is there in great quantity) is also the metaphor of the relationship between power and those who are subjugated to it. In other words, it is the representation (oneiric

potential of blending disgust and horror with comedy and satire into one, always tending towards the unveiling of social hypocrisy. Having said this, let us plunge into Phalguni's grotesque world of "The Final Womb" in order to illustrate how subversion and degradation operate in a different kind of literary text.

"The Final Womb" (Antim jarāyū, 1972) is part of a series of film scripts published in various magazines from the late 1960s.⁹³ The grotesque and highly visual potential, as well as the usage of the idiom of filmmaking, suggest that these were written to be staged as experimental films or theatre performances. For example, the structure divided in "shots", the series of frames, and in the "freeze" frames – i.e. the single frames of content that 'freeze' the action on the screen thus resembling a still photograph – have more clearly revealed the original intention of the author. I will only focus here on the short play "The Final Womb" because its main tropes – i.e. the womb, the foetus, and the naked bodies – are symbolic of the modernisation of everyday life and the commodification of bodies and sexuality which Phalguni portrays in his film script. The bleak picture that emerges is a biting critique of India's project of industrialisation and advance in science and technology and its effects on the biopolitical regime of the bodies that was observed on a global scale. We will see that "The Final Womb" is in many ways a dystopian vision of modern societies which de-humanise people through a logic of commodification that treats bodies and lives as things. In a world where the logic of science prevails, the naked hanging bodies portrayed in their sheer biological functions apocalyptically show the end of humanity.

The Womb and the Foetus: Subverting Hindu Symbolism

The symbolism of the womb has been traced to a plurality of cultures across time. The womb is the symbol of life and birth, as well as its opposite, signifying a return to the original matter. In the poems of this author, the womb gains these universal significations, but it prevails in its reference to the female body, source of creation as well as object of commodification. Phalguni overtly criticised family planning, the government-sponsored program of demographic control, which resulted in a massive campaign of sterilisation among the poorer sections of the society, reaching a peak during the Emergency years under Indira Gandhi's government

perhaps) of what Marx calls the commodification of man: the body reduced to a thing (through exploitation). Therefore, sex is invoked in my movie to play a horrible metaphoric role". My translation (Pasolini 1975, online resource).

93 These pieces were published between 1966 and 1976 on different Hungry magazines: "The Womb" (Jarāyū, 1966); "Man-Woman" (Mānuṣ-mānuṣī, 1968); "The Final Womb" (Antim jarāyū, 1972); and "The Second Womb" (Dvīṭīya jarāyū, 1976).

5 “I Won’t Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis”

(1975–77). Sanjam Ahluwalia has shown that the birth control movement targeted the poorer sections of the population which had become a site of control because of their reproductive profligacy (Ahluwalia 2008). As a consequence, the “fear for the fertility” of the poor expressed itself in forms of medicalised violence with far-reaching effects (Tarlo 2003). His series of film scripts playing around the symbolism of the womb (jarāyū) are representative of these issues: the unfinished or unripe foetus (asamāpta bhrūṇ), the aborting mothers, and the humiliated virility of men allegorically portray the increasing objectification and commodification of the human body. In these pieces of writing, Phalguni is more than ever concerned with showing the body in its nudity and in its basic biological functions to reveal that the biopolitical regime of power can discipline and manipulate the bodies, turning human beings into “biologically living corpses”.⁹⁴

Two words are used alternatively throughout Phalguni’s poetry to denote the uterus: jarāyū and garbha, both considerably overlapping in meaning. However, the usage of jarāyū, which seems more specifically related to the place of fetal gestation than garbha, is certainly more spread in the short play we are about to examine. In the preface to “The Final Womb”, the uterus stands as the medium of creation, a place of universal and ahistorical knowledge, untouched by the social constructions that have been imposed on the bodies throughout history. To Phalguni it signifies the epitome of safety and homeness. However, the womb is also for the poet the source of a world of ambiguous sexual identities and troubled masculinity, always struggling against the normativity of middle-class society. In this apocalyptic vision, the female and male bodies are naked, stripped of their social and historical shells, projected only in their biological attributes.

Shot one: A burning pyre – around which a bevy of beautiful and ugly looking naked young women – their eyes brimming with tears.

Shot two: A Neem tree – full-moon beams dripping through its leaves.

Shot three: The blazing flames look upward to the sky and the naked young women with eyes full of tears look downward to the ground – freeze.⁹⁵

94 This idea is comparable to what Giorgio Agamben has called “bare life”, the biological life as opposed to the form or manner in which life is lived (Agamben 1995). The phrase “biologically living corpse” (It. un cadavere che vive ancora biologicamente) is used by Pier Paolo Pasolini in an interview (ca. 1975) about the society of consumerism and its effects on the post-war Italian youth (Asterione 2015).

95 A translation of “The Final Womb” appeared on the blog *Humanities Underground* (HUG 2014). My version differs from the latter in some passages.

These first shots set the scene of a Hindu funeral. The camera freezes on the frame of a group of crying women around a burning pyre, all essential components of Hindu funeral rites. Throughout this script, the author plays with traditional images of Hindu religion and ideology: among these, the burning pyre (jvalanta citā), the neem tree (nim'gāch), the full moon (pūrṇimā), and the foetus (bhrūṇ) are pulled out of their religious and sacramental connotation to be cast on a symbolically different level of meaning. The province of signification that Phalguni enters is the world of the saṃskāra, the Hindu sacraments, that must be performed throughout the life of a Hindu not only for religious observance but to purify the individual's soul and gain merit (puṇya) in this mundane life.⁹⁶ The funeral ceremony takes place under a neem tree that overlooks the scene. The neem is a highly reputed plant in Hindu religion and traditional medicine, due to its divine origins and usage as village pharmacy in today's rural India. Moreover, it is known in traditional medicine for having a strong contraceptive power. The full-moon light (pūrṇimā) that pierces the neem leaves hints at the full-moon days of the Hindu lunar calendar, which are considered auspicious days for the life of a Hindu. Yet all sorts of inauspicious events take place under the neem tree in this bleak apocalyptic picture: naked corpses of dead men hang from its branches and naked women abort their undeveloped fetuses. What to Hindu religion designates the sphere of the sacramental and the auspicious is transformed by Phalguni into a grotesquely depressing vision. The disruptive potential of these tropes, parts of the ordinary life and symbolic universe of Hindu signification, is enacted by their ascription to the gloomy scene which desecrates the original sacred meaning.

Shot four: On the branches of the Neem tree a few men hang with a rope around their neck – they have no hands or legs but in each of their phallic regions [liṅgadeś] there is a television set – beneath their hanging bodies that raging pyre and the group of naked young women with their eyes full of tears and above those dead bodies through the Neem leaves full-moon beams.

Shot five: The naked women together start ululating and suddenly from their vaginal regions [yonideś] appears an unripe

96 According to the prescriptive nature of Hindu sacraments, several rules must be followed during the performance of the funeral ceremonies. For example, Rajbali Pandey has shown that the eldest son, or a priest, is ideally the chief mourner entitled to perform the funeral rituals, starting with lighting the pyre (Pandey 1969: 434). After completing the circumambulation of the dry pyre and accomplishing the ritual offerings to the gods, the first-born pierces the skull of the defunct to release the soul on its journey towards reincarnation.

5 “I Won’t Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis”

foetus [asamāpta bhrūṅ] – like balls they plop to the ground – the women’s faces contort with pain – they scream.

The spectator’s gaze moves around the burning pyre, revealing with clinical accuracy the strange fruits hanging from the neem’s tree. Naked bodies of men hang “with ropes around their neck”, deprived of limbs but with “television sets” in place of their sexual organs. The tragic and dramatic tenor of language that should accompany the moment of mourning is absent, while the corpses are observed and described aseptically, with cold detachment. There are just a few elements that ascribe a human nature to these bodies: the screams, tears and pain depicted on the women’s faces are the only features denoting their hopelessness vis-à-vis the bleak picture of a fallen humanity. Yet the women are perhaps the only real connection to life: they are in fact those who perform the uludhvani, the typical vocal ululation that women perform for good luck to accompany auspicious events of life. The exaggerating descriptions of the bodies, the highly visual and onomatopoeic power of the language (“like balls they *plop* to the ground”), indicate Phalguni’s attempt at depicting a dystopian world of sheer commodification where the human body is advertised as a pornographic commodity and a machine for reproduction. In terms of language, the images of the female womb (jarāyū) and the foetus (bhrūṅ) are rendered with the standard Bengali register of biological terminology to designate the biological mechanisms of the female body. Also the choice of the words used for “woman” (mānuṣī instead of nārī) is a way to convey the biological aspect of the female – a sort of archetypal female.

The Human Body on Television Sets

Moving on to other grotesque and surrealist tropes in this Bengali film script, the image of the “television set” on the men’s “phallic regions” suggests an obsession with this new device of modernity, which forecasted the mechanisation and the standardisation of human life. The effect achieved by imposing the television set on the dead men’s sexual organs is not only an antithesis but a contradiction, an epitome of postmodernity.

Shot Six: The *television sets* on the hanging male bodies are turned on. On one man’s TV, one sees two young men copulating [samakāme lipta] and those naked women laughing at each other at this sight. On another TV, a naked woman pleasures herself, moaning with pleasure, and a man pierces her bosom with a sharp knife –the woman shrieks.

On another TV an elderly woman is copulating with a dog and her old husband with his face hidden on the knees of a young girl is crying inconsolably.

Shot Seven: The naked women are picking up the aborted premature foetuses [jarāyucyuta asamāpta bhrūṇ] from the ground, their eyes are now drying up and the retinal dots in their eyes begin to burst – and as their faces are awash with blood the difference between beauty and ugliness vanishes.

The emphasis of the author – here the scriptwriter – has now shifted to the visual power that images have in spreading and popularising a violent and pornographic form of sex. Linked to this topic is also the commodification of sex as a result of the reification of personal relationships that exacerbated with the coming of post-modernity. The television sets show women pleasuring themselves, young men having sex, old wives copulating with dogs, and husbands ashamed of their emasculation. Besides showing the humiliated masculinity of men, Phalguni wants to reproduce the violent mechanisms that power inscribes through the biopolitical regime in the body of the modern individual. Pornographic – and even dystopic – sexuality is the instrument that exposes such violence.

Not only are the foetuses aborted (jarāyucyuta, literally “fallen from the uterus”) but undeveloped or unripe (asamāpta, literally “unfinished”), to highlight the imperfection of what should be the potential seed of life. On the other hand, the image of aborted foetuses hints at an unfinished femininity and a failed motherhood too in the context of postcolonial India. By extension, the dual connotation of the foetus underscores the humiliated virility of men and the potential infertility of the female bodies in the bleak vision of the poet. The ideology of motherhood in colonial India became a crucial site of negotiations for a pure and authentic idea of the Indian nation that could symbolically resist the cultural corruption and economic exploitation of the British empire. Moreover, it must be pointed out that similar dynamics of shame, exclusion and marginalisation which women incurred after abortion are evident in the description of the Hindu rite of conception, the garbhādhān, by Hindu orthodox revivalists in colonial Bengal. Ishita Pande has argued, for example, that the non-performance of this rite “had multiple consequences for the person, the family and the community: the father of the girl incurred in the sin of feticide, the womb became polluted so that future sons born of the womb could not offer *pinda* or ritual offerings to ancestral spirits, and a woman who failed to perform it was fated to be a widow in many successive births” (Pande 2010: 164). Since the female body has been the focus of discursive violence in India’s colonial history, the image of the aborted foetus symbolises an abortive motherhood, and allegorically portrays the failed project of

5 "I Won't Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis"

the independent Indian nation. However, in the context of the hyper-rational and scientific project of the postcolonial Indian nation Phalguni locates both the male and the female body on the equal level of physical and psychological violence.

Shot Eight: A raging pyre – a branch of the Neem tree over the pyre – dead men hanging by the rope on the branch – *television sets* on their sexual tree [yaunagāch] – the following words appear on each *television set*:

We want food clothes a place to stay

We want women we want poetry

We want alcohol, pure and pungent alcohol

Art is our alcohol

Literature is our alcohol

Our alcohol is the feeling of hunger

Shot Nine: The naked women face the pyre and in unison say – We do not want *theory* we want bodies we just want bodies and *theories* about bodies.

On each “television sets” appeared the voiceless message of the people affirming their need to have access to basic amenities including art, poetry, women and alcohol. These words are uttered by Phalguni’s desperate voice echoing his lifestyle of poetry, drug and alcohol addiction. But literature and poetry figure in this message as the glue that gives coherence to men’s need for freedom of expression. Hence the men in “The Final Womb” are represented as dead corpses hanging from trees, portrayed without hands and without legs, whose sexual organs are caged in a television set, symbolising the deadly combination of modernity and the commodification of human life. The last words uttered by the crowd of crying women are reminiscent of a key theme in Phalguni’s poetry: the resistance against “theory” as that which cages the human bodies and their chance to freely manifest their desires. The word “theory” significantly appears in the transliterated English word (thiorī) metonymically pointing to the influence of scientific knowledge and to the power that ideologies have of regulating the lives of people. This declaration of freedom from the cage of theory, significantly uttered by a bunch of naked women, becomes representative of Phalguni’s poetic mindset, and

by extension of the reluctance of India's new generation to abide by religious and social prescriptions.

Shot Eleven: This picture is getting projected on the television sets on the phallic regions of the hanging dead-bodies – the corpses have no hands and no legs.

On one man's TV, beneath a huge family planning [paribār parikalpanā] poster the men-woman [mānuṣ-mānuṣī] couple sits with 3 babies in their lap – crying.

On another TV the man is excited – his greying hair, advancing age, the woman's greying hair and advancing age too, but a quiet, naked kid in front of them – the woman holds in her hand the kid's penis with care and the excited man tries to smash a pair of spectacles with a fat fountain pen.

On another TV the woman's whole body turns into a skeleton – only the eyes are alive – only tears in those eyes, tears, and man is blind now and his large body leprosy stricken – their child, a full-grown man but with breasts like women – long hair like women, and the man walks gingerly and the woman pets his phallus – and both say this:

Give love back to us

Give love back to us

And their girlish-man child stares at the sky, agitated – not the least sign of beard on his cheeks – like women his eyes nose lips are shaped

Shot Twelve: A sole full-moon in the sky –

Shot Thirteen: All around the pyre the naked women and in their laps unfertilised foetuses plopped out from their wombs and in every vaginal region multicoloured flowers and every eye filled with tears and everyone chants again –

Give love back to us

Give love back to us

5 "I Won't Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis"

In these final shots of "Antim jarāyu", family planning materialises in the shape of a huge poster representing the Nehruvian model of the national program for demographic regulation. By contrast, the ideal family depicted in the poster overlooks the "man-and-woman couple" (mānuṣ-mānuṣī) sitting with three crying children in their lap, thus revealing the true side of the family planning project. Carried out in a great number of countries as part of a reform of the liberal state, family planning was informed by an extremely racist and exclusivist notion of humanity and society reiterating a "eugenic, misogynist, patriarchal, heterosexist, pauperist, and racist order of reality" (Panu 2009: 5). The view on abortion that emerges from the grotesque "popping of the aborted foetus" represents the anxieties of not being able to achieve the role of mothers and fathers imposed by society. The foetus that once embodied the "seed of future life" now stands for the failure of the regulation of the citizen's bodies, as well as the failure of the colonial ideology of engendering a pure and noble nation.

Decolonising Language: The Spectacles of Bengali Identity

The preface to this film script opens other kinds of questions. Here, before painting the grotesque images discussed so far, the poet observed that language is not only the medium of creation but that it exists independently from the text and from the intention of the poet. For example, he explains this by showing that the Bengali language has been welcoming foreign words to the point that a Bengali speaker can "forget" which word is native and which one is foreign. In other words, Phalguni implicitly declares the freedom of his native language from the hegemony of English, associated with the language of the coloniser and with the influence it had on the cultural, social and psychic life of the subjugated people.

I am having an urge to say a few things about the womb
Actually just like words of a language tend to forget the scent of
the foreign and of the home-grown
like we do not remember when replacing "spectacles" [caśmā]
with *frame* that *frame* [phrem] is an English word
so often when people get mixed in real writing the idea of
writing itself becomes irrelevant
often when people get closer to an abstract god they also get
closer to abstract art poetry literature and to abstract film
as if life was a running film
one forgets that the creator is unmoved, indifferent
and that the medium itself gets a life of its own

In the preface to “The Final Womb” Phalguni affirms the priority of writing in Bengali, Phalguni’s “language of thinking” (cintār bhāṣā), as a means for emancipation from the semantic and epistemological hegemony that colonial discourse inflicted on the colonised subjects also through the English language. It seems that Phalguni wanted to argue that every human life, every single literary or artistic creation acquires a life of its own, independently from its creator. He seemed to suggest a comparison with the life of a child who, gradually separated from the womb of his mother, acquires an identity of its own. The concept of the “abstract” (bimūrta) – an abstract god, abstract film, art and literature – functions as means to recast language into a new set of meanings. He says that we are so much involved in our lives and daily tasks that they lose meaning and become irrelevant as we perform them, forgetting that this is the life we are living. Even when writing or speaking, one tends to forget the weight of the words we are using, and yet just like art and literature, we have the power to manipulate this abstract matter and give it new life. By way of comparison, the womb, just like language and literature, becomes the essence of both the creation and the medium of creation, already containing the potential seeds of life and art. This meta-reflection on life and art becomes an excuse to think about language, another central concern of our Bengali poet.

We find a link to the question of language and the use and abuse of English words in the script’s first line and English transliterated phrase “to feel the urge” (ār’j phil kar’chi). The duality and contradictions of Phalguni’s postcolonial self are mirrored in the paradoxical lexicon of his language. The Bengali word “jarāyū” (womb) significantly stands out in the linguistic mismatch of the sentence claiming for semantic independence from foreign significations. In the same way, the correspondence between the Bengali word “caśmā” and the English “frame” is not casual in Phalguni’s cultural and linguistic deconstruction: the denotative meaning of “spectacles” links to an altogether different connotation in the Bengali “caśmā” because it underlines the historical perspective of the colonised, as opposed to the “frame” (Beng. phrem) that substantiates the colonial gaze, which always identified the non-white as an object of scrutiny.⁹⁷ By putting on the lenses of the Bengali identity, which is expressed through the native language, the poet reaffirms the need of emancipating from the position of cultural

97 The idea of colonial gaze was formulated by Frantz Fanon and tackled primarily in his *Black Skin White Masks* (1952), a work on the trauma of the black subjects of being “fixed” as black and as the object of white gaze (Fanon 1986). The preface in the original Bengali is the following: “jarāyū samparke āmi kichu balār ār’j phil kar’chi, āsole bhāṣār bhetare śabderā yeman deśi-bideśi gandha bhule jāy, caśmār phrem bad’lābār samay yeman mane thāke nā “phrem” eṭā imgriji śabda tem’ni anek samay prakṛta lekhār bhetare mānuṣerā miṣe gele pher likhe phelār byāpār’tāi ghuce jāy [...]” (Miśra 2015: 101).

5 "I Won't Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis"

subalternity in which Bengali subjects have been continuously confined under foreign rule.

In Phalguni's claim of liberating Bengali words from their colonial hangover, one can recognise the textual strategies of postcolonial writings, and especially those that reject the privileges of the imperial language along with its imperial categories. These strategies, extensively discussed in much postcolonial critique, imply the "abrogation" of the categories embedded in the so-called language of the centre once they have been adopted and reused in the postcolonial text (Ashcroft et al. 1989: 38). Therefore, language variance, the retention of untranslated words in the English text, code-switching, interlanguage, and syntactic fusion, are the textual instruments that have served the aim of abrogating through subversion of the power structures of the English standard grammar.⁹⁸

These considerations on language and power are tackled through the author's observation on the idea of gaze, being a central trope of postcolonial literatures and critique. Moreover, it becomes a pretext for explaining his view of the idea of the "abstract" which is highly present throughout this text. Playing with the irony and paradoxes implicit in abstract arts and literature, he claims the creation and re-inscription of new localised meanings through the transgressive use of the Bengali language. He accesses the dimension of the abstract to subvert the denotative meaning of the hegemonic significations of both the English and Bengali language. Phalguni here draws attention to the superficial transgression of the English language, which, by contrast, hides a conformism. The same content becomes "transgressive", in his view, only when pronounced, or written, in Bengali, the language of introspection and thought, as Phalguni defines it. Therefore, throughout his poetry and writing the attempt is to crack the code of the English language, that is the register of what has always stood for the imperial language of the centre, in order to recover the unpleasant and reproachable content within the linguistic consciousness of the Bengali language. It is through the playful and transgressive use of Bengali that the postcolonial ambivalence is de-coded. Although Phalguni and other Hungryalists chose to write in Bengali, making a huge difference with the most canonical understanding of postcolonial writing in English, these Bengali texts retain and transform some of the postcolonial textual strategies on multiple levels: these include intrusions of English words into the Bengali vocabulary, as well as the Sanskritisation we have already pointed out with regard to the Bengali

98 According to classic postcolonial literary critique, this subversion is aptly illustrated by the language of the Rastafarians, who deconstructed what they saw as "the power structures of English grammar, structures in themselves metonymic of the hegemonic controls exercised by the British on Black peoples". An example of this is the Rastafarians' insistence on the pronoun "I" expressly used in all sentence positions to oppose the servile and objective "me" (Ashcroft et al. 1989: 48–49).

scientific lexicon. Phalguni seems to embody what the Kannada-speaking critic and novelist U.R. Ananthamurthy described as the “critical insider”, a position in which “the writer remains within his tradition but does so critically, rejecting the idea of a pure unalloyed tradition and embracing the contradictions of his own position as a mark of creative potential, not of a cultural decline or of a continuing colonial domination” (Ashcroft et al. 1989: 119).⁹⁹

Breaking Down Language

The need for releasing language and categories of knowledge from colonial epistemology, theory and science is put into words in the poem “Fresh Information” (Phreś in'phar'meśan). The main question of the poem is an epistemological one: why do we call things this way? How do we acquire such knowledge, and how is it established? With these rhetorical questions, Phalguni aims at disintegrating the preconceived meaning of things and at opening new paths of epistemological research in a decolonised world. The excuse for discussing such a problematic and controversial matter is subverting the scientific convention according to which the “mid-September sunlight” is conventionally associated with the arrival of fall. The sterile connotation of such a fact is superfluous to Phalguni’s curious look into human nature: instead of the seasonal change, the mid-September sunlight is for the poet associated with the “mating of dogs” (kukurer kāmottejanā).

Instead of informing about the mating of dogs the mid-September sunlight tells me that autumn has come
I found out about the hidden relation between stars and ships
from the neighbouring fishing nets on the river
A friend of mine who became marine engineer told me how to
determine the direction of the ocean with the help of a compass
When I’ll die what will remain all around me?

The uselessness and banality of preconceived notions imparted by hegemonic knowledge is reaffirmed when the poet talks about the marine engineer’s instructions for calculating the position of the ocean through a compass. The contrast between the natural and the mechanical, the “fishing nets” and the “compass”, metaphorically points at the predominance of scientific methods over the realm of artistic and literary creation.

99 My observations on the postcolonial language and ethos of Phalguni are based on the understanding of postcolonial texts and languages as delineated in early literary postcolonial criticism, especially in Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin (1989).

5 "I Won't Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis"

In this situation what can we do
if a poet struggles to find his own voice?
I call "water" what my great grandparents used to call "water"
I call "fire" what my great grandparents used to call "fire"
it means that the sons and grandsons will say what their fathers said
the material name of things [bastur bastugata nām] will be the
same as the object, only the ideas behind them will change
like in ancient times the penis was seen only as organ of
reproduction
today the penis is seen also as the radar of telepathic
communication
many people have seen an apple falling from a tree but Newton
did not see only the apple falling
he discovered gravity with it
Bhaskara had certainly discovered the *law of gravity* in other ways
and long before Copernicus, Aryabhata discovered that the
earth rotates around the sun
through all these events only one truth is established
different inventors discovered many ideas through different
methods
just like Ramakrishna's famous statement "as many opinions so
many ways"
just like there is diversity in the unity of humankind and unity
plays in that diversity

With bitter irony, Phalguni ridicules the language of the "great critics" (mahān samālocak'gaṇ), icons of those who retain the power to establish the preconceived meaning of things. In this poem he says many things. He proclaims that the poet's search for his own voice, a new vocabulary that produces a new language, is the first step to creation: to break the confined limits of signs and their significations as they have been established in their hegemonic significations by the different groups in power. The words that Phalguni uses to denote the objects cannot but be words passed on from one generation to the other. Words which he, as a poet, cannot do without. Yet he counters the dominant narratives of modernity that language and culture are embodied in ancient practices and literally incarnated into the individual, spread through genetic transmission, from parent to offspring. By contrast, his observation resonates well with what Ludwig Wittgenstein discovered about language in his theory on linguistic games.¹⁰⁰ In his book *Philosophischen*

100 I cannot give evidence for Phalguni's reading and recycling of Wittgenstein's theory of *Sprachspiel* (language game), but I acknowledge that his observations seem to echo

Untersuchungen (Philosophical investigations, 1953), he argued that denotation is only one of the many functions of language. Against the vision of language as “mirror of reality”, he suggests using another for which language produces reality through its varied and distinct applications depending on the context. Moreover, he affirmed that words hardly function as labels univocally and rigidly attached onto things. By contrast, in both ordinary and scientific language, words function like fluid mobile constructions whose meaning changes according to their specific function (Wittgenstein 1958). That is why, as Phalguni shows, both Western and Indian scholars of mathematics and astrology like Newton, Bhaskara, Copernicus and Aryabhata, regardless of their world location, discovered revolutionary theories by observing ordinary things – i.e. the apple falling from a tree or the sunset – and re-inscribing their univocal denotation into entirely new and ground-breaking meanings – like gravity and heliocentrism. Sarcastically addressing to the great critics, Phalguni asks for some “fresh information” instead of prescriptions, scientific recipes and instructions to embrace a linguistic and cultural practice that is postmodern and a decolonising operation. Therefore, Phalguni’s critique of language and culture is also postcolonial because it shows the continuation of colonial discourse and the traces of its cultural legacy into the realm of independent India. On the other hand, I prefer to use the term decolonisation in the context of this poem, because it emphasises the need to operate a formal and semiotic deconstruction of the colonial syntax and vocabulary by pushing the boundaries of Bengali grammar, words and meaning. Note how the poet intentionally chooses to express the principle of the poem in English language (phreś in'phar'meśan) to push the boundaries of Bengali itself, inverting and subverting hierarchies and authorities with sarcasm and self-irony.

Only critics blinded by knowledge sitting in caves of truth will
say that
everything is a rehash [carbitacarban] of something else
ahi ahi
Bidyasagar learned the alphabet from someone else and then
made it new in the children’s primer *Barnaparicay*
oh, you great bunch of critics tell me whose rehashed work was
Bidyasagar
inform me
instead of informing about the mating of dogs the mid-September
sun tells me that autumn has come
you too give me some fresh information

1950s new language theories, especially Wittgenstein’s formulation of language as “use” according to its specific context (Wittgenstein 1958).

5 “I Won’t Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis”

or will you read Mao’s quote and reply quoting the Taoist
philosophy
wearing a cross around your neck holding Ramakrishna’s
Līlāprasaṅga in one hand and Havelock Ellis’s sexology books
in the other
you will say what Lenin said “neither a renouncer, nor a Don
Juan! We must stay in a place between the two”
which one is it, Sir?

Through his reference to Ishvarchandra Bidyasagar (Beng. Īśvar'candra Bidyāsāgar) and Ramakrishna, two icons of cultural and religious reform in colonial Bengal, the poet disrupts the narrative of reason and rationality that dominated that era. He does that by teasing the so-called critics (*samālocak*) with an ironic provocation about Bidyasagar, the father of modern Bengali alphabet, who rehashed it into a new form for the children primer *Barṇaparicay*. The poem ends with a typically postmodern pastiche purposely mixing elements drawn from different cultural contexts – the cross, Taoism, Maoism, Ramakrishna’s treatise, Havelock Ellis’ sexology book. In this way, Phalguni disrupts the denotative meaning of language and operates a practice of decolonisation of language, in which both Bengali and English signs and meanings merge into each other to produce always new significations. The poem significantly ends with a rhetorical question about choosing one’s own identity, to negotiate and find a compromise between East and West, modernity and tradition: here allegorically denoted as either a renouncer or a Don Juan, in a reinterpretation of Lenin’s words. Phalguni significantly leaves the question open and unanswered.

Phalguni reaffirms a topic that we already encountered in other poems: the rejection of the sterile language and methods of sciences and the disintegration of preconceived ideas on language as a trap that labels, categorises and inscribes univocal meanings into empty containers that are art, life and language. At the end of the poem, the author acknowledges that “we” (*ām'rā*) – in this case the Bengali people – stand between two paths: one represented by Ramakrishna, icon of celibacy and renunciation, and the other by Havelock Ellis, promoter of the science of sexuality. Again, Phalguni emphasises the in-betweenness of the postcolonial Bengali, both resisting and embodying colonial, imperial and nationalist discourses. We could say that the tropes and languages of sexuality and masculinity described above are the tools Phalguni uses to reflect upon the painfully ambiguous identity of being postcolonial. His male body and his Bengali language, always in the liminal space of transgression and re-coding, are the focus of his postcolonial interrogation. Through these, the poet aimed at the re-inscription of the standard meanings of his Bengali language and culture, what the Hungryalists wanted to renew and revive, a task Phalguni enacts by subverting hegemonic discourses on

sex, gender, and caste/race and always questioning his liminal existence, sexuality and masculinity.

Phalguni Ray, a Postcolonial Poet?

By way of conclusion, in this chapter I laid out some of the tropes and linguistic strategies displayed in Phalguni's poems showing interesting points of contact with some main concerns of postcolonial literary theory. The Hungryalist connection with the cultural, political and historical premises of postcolonialism can be explained on different planes. First, what is utterly postcolonial in these poets is the duality and ambivalence towards India's colonial past. One can see their fascination for as well as resistance to the western cultural and literary legacy as representative of the ambivalence of postcolonial identities, already enunciated by Frantz Fanon (Bhabha 1994: 50). This ambivalence is epitomised in literature by their connection with the American Beat Generation movement, as well as by their characteristic use of the English language, signalling the duality of Hungryalist literary practices. From a political and historical standpoint, the decolonisation movements and the national liberations of the ex-colonial world must have had an undeniable influence on the political orientation of the Hungryalist movement, virtually aligned with other countercultural movements of the so-called Third World countries in their denunciation of imperialism.

The political and the psychological dimensions of postcolonialism could be observed more closely in Phalguni's work. His major preoccupation is the choice of writing in Bengali instead of English: a political decision that is situated within a larger debate between writers in vernacular languages and Indian writers in English. In his observations about the nature of language, the resistance against the denotative meaning of language and against colonial categories, one sees the intention of decolonising and "deprovincializing" Bengali language and categories of knowledge. The agency of colonial – and nationalist – power in creating and promoting hegemonic knowledge and a hegemonic use of language were in fact pivotal to the whole imperial project. When Phalguni used to write, postcolonial discourse as we know it in its main conceptual formulations had not been framed on a theoretical and critical basis, even though the historical and philosophical grounds of its development could already be observed in the decades following the decolonisation movements. Similarly, Phalguni's postcolonial reflection on language and knowledge seems to bear the influence of writings by contemporary critics of colonialism and theorists of decolonisation, including, for example, Frantz Fanon. The Martiniquean psychoanalyst revisited Jean Paul Sartre's account on the gaze to infuse it with a treatment on the identity of the black subject, literally "dissected" and "fixed under white eyes" (Fanon 1986: 116).

5 "I Won't Be Able to Become Devdas with my Unhappy Penis"

The question of looking is tackled in the poems of this Bengali author too, as we have seen in his displaying of the male gaze. Phalguni's perhaps unconscious task was to enrich Bengali language and poetry with new postcolonial perspectives – a transcultural and worlding gaze – through language games and contamination of standard meanings, by incorporating English loanwords and crafting Bengali compounds. Some of the textual and linguistic strategies of "classic" postcolonial literatures in English identified in Phalguni's language are, for example, abrogation, language variance and appropriation. These operations were visible among postcolonial writers writing in creole English precisely to subvert the imperial language and disrupt its standard grammar, re-claiming that power from the periphery (Ashcroft et al. 1989). My contention is that similar strategies of language subversion and resistance to colonial/imperial knowledge came through similar disruptive and subversive operations enacted by the poets through their native language, Bengali. Some of these linguistic strategies – such as the incorporation of English words from the sphere of science and technology, and the creation of Sanskritised Bengali neologisms – have been previously discussed in reference to other Hungryalist poets.