

Strategies for Translating Obscenity: Medical Language and Sanitization in Malay Rāyçhouthurī's Poetry

Daniela Cappello

Obscenity and Taboo Language

Cultures vary widely in the treatment and reception of speech related to sex and bodily activities; while some cultures may perceive language related to sex as dirty and offensive, other social and cultural contexts may in fact not regard the same as a taboo (Allen and Burridge 2006). Working on modern Bengali poetry and specifically dealing with 'poetics of obscenity' has forced me to question my position as a translator with regard to the cultural, social and ethical limits – as well as freedoms – that I, consciously or unconsciously, avail myself of in my research. In particular, I was faced with the challenge of finding ways to negotiate between the multiple meanings of the text and my personal experience and understanding of those. For instance, how does a foreign translator of a South Asian language respond to 'obscene' phrases which are not a taboo in her own culture? Or else, how do I, an Italian scholar translating into English for a German academic audience, distinguish between different layers and understandings of a translated 'obscene' word, and reproduce its ambivalences and problematics? To show how possible an 'impossible translation' can be, I will here address some of the problematics that I face in translating 'obscene' words and phrases in the poem 'Pracaṇḍa Baidyutik Chutār' (1964) and its English translation ('Stark Electric Jesus', 1967) by the Hungryalist poet and writer Malay Rāyçhouthurī. In particular, the verses that will be examined relate to the description of a woman's sexual organs, rape, masturbation, and bodily 'effluvia',¹ such as sperm and menstrual blood. In my attempt at re-translation, I have first identified the ambivalent purpose behind the texts: the poet's ironical use of a Bengali 'medical' lexicon achieves a 'sanitized' description of the sexual organs and sexual activity while aiming at provoking the 'bourgeois' readership and subverting normalized views on sexuality. Yet the scientific high-status language of both the Bengali poem and its English translation, pregnant with terms of Latin derivation, betrays the poet's attempt at 'cleaning' the translation of its most controversial aspects in order to avert the risks of obscenity charges. The dualities and ambivalences of 'Pracaṇḍa Baidyutik Chutār' and its English counterpart make the process of re-translation all the more significant to the translator who wants to unravel the multiple stages, layers, and meanings of a literary text. My concern here is to engage with the 'possibilities' of negotiation between the textual strategies (irony, sanitization, subversion, and self-censorship) and the material and economic reasons behind the production of such texts.

Before addressing the problems of translation, the main methodological question that I am constantly faced with is: what do we mean by 'obscenity'? Which textual strategies and interpretative practices operate within an 'obscene' poem? The boundaries between the concepts of erotic, bawdy, obscene and pornographic have always been fuzzy and mobile, moving back and forth according to gender, class, taste and times.² Any attempt to define this category has inevitably ended up in essentialistic views of obscenity and resulted in determining 'obscene' an intrinsic quality of a speech, a writing, a performance. However, there has been wide research from different disciplines, from legal, cultural and literary studies, that has wanted to re-examine the concept of obscenity as it was formulated in a specific historical situation by a particular social group in power. These re-examinations have contributed to releasing the concept of obscenity from moral, legal and ethical essentialisms, acknowledging the multiplicity of its meanings and applications in different social and cultural locations.³ The concept of the obscene (*aślīl*) in nineteenth century Bengal, for instance, was informed by the differentiation that was being shaped between elite and popular culture, high and low registers, where the latter was obscured and suppressed from the life of the *bhadralok*, the Bengali gentry (Banerjee 1197). Obscene acts or materials generally denote something that is offensive to common morality and to the public sense of decency, predominantly referring to the domain of sexuality ('Obscenity', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). Breaking down the concept of obscenity into smaller units can help in identifying the main characteristics that define a behaviour, a speech, or a text, as obscene. Taboo, for instance, is a key concept to the understanding of the 'obscene': it originally denoted a 'prohibition', more likely a food, an object, or a behaviour that was perceived as

‘polluting’, harmful and offensive, to a certain community. Taboo and taboo language has been the subject of much scholarship from anthropology and social linguistics which has found the main interpretation of taboo as ‘the matter out of place’, that is contaminating and therefore dangerous for the social order of the community (Douglas 1966). Yet taboo language, in its most contemporary and colloquial acceptation, is more than ritual prohibition and avoidance: it is “a breach of etiquette” consisting of ‘dirty words’ that a speaker normally avoids in a standard public context. These words “have the power to titillate” and along with taboo language are “the most emotionally evocative of all language expression” (Allan and Burridge 42).

The process of translating Bengali *as̄līl* poetry into English has shown resistance to traditional practices of translation formulated in the field of Translation Studies, such as fluency, accuracy, and Lawrence Venuti’s much debated ‘foreignization’ of a text and ‘visibility’ of the translator (Venuti 2008). To cope with these problematic aspects of the translation process, I have taken free inspiration from Anjali Nerlekar’s study on the poet Arun Kolatkar (2016), the bilingual poet in the Marathi and English languages, where she observes that the concept of translation needs to be questioned because of the “slippery nature of the translational practices”, especially when these take place in multilingual contexts. Practices of self-translation and transcreation have in fact contributed to interrogating the authority and authenticity of original texts (Nerlekar 208). In the same way as Kolatkar’s translation of his own poetry collection *Jejuri* resists simplified readings – which identify one version as the original and the other as a derivative version – the ‘mobile’ nature of the two translations of the Hungryalist poem is established by reason of its multiple editings and re-translations.

The Poet and the Poems: ‘Pracaṇḍa Baidyutik Chutār’ and ‘Stark Electric Jesus’

Malay Rāychaudhurī is today acknowledged as one of the early creators of the Hungry Generation movement in 1961, along with his brother Samir, Shakti Chattopadhyay and Debi Roy.⁴ Inspired by the American beatniks and affiliated to the global neo-avant-gardes, the anti-establishment group of wild guys published manifestos and little magazines, experimented with language, brought their subjectivity and sexuality into poetry and challenged the cultural and political establishment of Calcutta with irony and provocation. Born in Patna in 1939, Malay lived his childhood and late adolescence in a poor suburb of the city known as Imlitalā. In his childhood memoirs, Malay gives great importance to the years spent in this neighbourhood surrounded by Shia Muslims, Dalits and low-caste Hindus. He turns to the memories and stories of these subaltern people in Patna to retrace the cultural and social hunger for a ‘realer’ literature, as promoted in a late manifesto, which has later become a mark of Hungryalist writing (Rāychaudhurī n.d.).

Both the English and Bengali versions of the poem ‘Pracaṇḍa Baidyutik Chutār’ and ‘Stark Electric Jesus’ have become icons of Hungryalist writings, especially after Malay’s infamous sentence for obscenity. The poem originally appeared in Bengali in 1964 as part of the Hungry bulletin that was seized by the police and used as the main object for the obscenity accusations against the Hungry writers. After the poem was banned as obscene, Malay and his fellows, Debi Roy, Subimal Basak, Saileswar Ghosh and Pradip Chaudhuri started an intense correspondence with American editors and poets, such as Howard McCord, Karl Weissner, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Allen Ginsberg, in order to ask for financial support for the trial. In response to that, the international avant-garde community started a circle of literary exchange with the Hungryalists, collected and edited a selection of their writings and compendia of contemporary Indian poetry that were eventually published in special issues of American journals and little magazines such as *Salted Feathers*, *Intrepid* and *City Lights*. From the mid-sixties, Malay and his ‘Stark Electric Jesus’ had become well-known names associated with the Indian avant-garde movement and with issues related to obscenity and freedom of speech.

The English version of the poem was originally published by Tribal Press and edited by Howard McCord, professor of English literature at Bowling Green State University and avant-garde writer himself, in three editions in 1965 and 1966 with an afterword by the editor. *City Lights Journal* #3 also published the poem with a longer version of the afterword under the title “Note on the Hungry Generation” (Ferlinghetti 159-60). ‘Stark Electric Jesus’, self-translated by Malay for the first Tribal Press edition, appears again in a 1967 issue of the American journal *Salted Feathers* edited by Dick Bakken. In this issue, fully dedicated to poetry, essays and letters from Hungryalist writers, it is mentioned that Dick Bakken wrote to poets and scholars of Bengali in the United States, at that time

Edward C. Dimock and Jyotirmoy Datta, to assist him in the translation project (Bakken n.p.). The politics of translation endorsed by the editor of *Salted Feathers* aimed at keeping the original translations of the Bengali authors, unless otherwise noted, and changing some spelling, diction and syntax to make them 'less awkward' (Bakken n.p.). Malay offered to translate his poetry as well as some of his friends', who were "not well to do with English", and leaves the work of re-editing to Dick Bakken.⁵ The English version of the poem is then edited at least twice by McCord and Bakken to produce a text that appeals to a different audience - readers of avant-garde literature in Europe and the United States. The distribution of Malay's English poem to these American journals of avant-garde poetry finds the main reason in the search for financial support during the obscenity trial. The 'material' reason of financial necessity behind the translation of the Bengali poem locates this text at the juncture of commercial publishing and experimental writing. Prompted by the need for a critical re-interpretation of the poem, I will here lay out some methodological principles that have guided my new English translation of 'Pracaṇḍa Baidyutik Chutār' (from now on PBC), informed by a consciousness of the economic reasons and ethical choices that stood behind Malay's 'Stark Electric Jesus' (from now on SEJ). In the extracts from the English poem that will follow in this paper, I suggest a slightly different rendering of the verses here discussed, especially those concerning the representation of the female body and male masturbation.

Translating Shubha's Sexual Body

Issues surrounding the poet's unfulfilled sexual desires, his inability to love, scenes of rape and masturbation have made this poem a divisive icon of the unabashed and grotesque, yet ultimately misogynist and irreducibly bourgeois, 'hunger' of these poets. Through the hallucinatory monologue of Malay to his imaginary muse Shubha, an allegoric representation of woman, the poem describes the oedipal and sexual frustrations of the poet. The documents of the Hungryalists' trial show that the charges for obscenity were corroborated by Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code, which stated that "the accused was found to be in possession of the impugned publication. So one of the ingredients of Sec 292 IPC namely, of circulation, distribution, making and possessing [of obscene material] are present." Although the Magistrate acknowledges that the IPC does not define the word 'obscene', and that a piece of art or literature may not be judged only on the basis of vulgarity, he finally decides to sentence Malay's poem because it deals with sex and nudity in a way that "transgresses public decency and morality."⁶ Interestingly, the Magistrate then delves into a detailed description of the 'moral transgressions' of the poem:

In bizarre style it starts with restless impatience of sensuous man for a woman obsessed with uncontrollable urge for sexual intercourse followed by a description of the vagina, uterus, clitoris, seminal fluid, and other parts of the female body and organ, boasting of the man's innate impulse and conscious skill as to how to enjoy a woman, blaspheming God and profaning parents accusing them of homosexuality and masturbation, debasing all that is noble and beautiful in human love and relationship. (Decision by Presidency Magistrate, 1965)

According to the Magistrate's interpretation, the offensive passages of the poem were the ones describing female pleasure and uncontrollable sexual desire, parental homosexuality and masturbation. The controversial content of the poem was identified in the idea of a woman's sexual 'urge' and in sexual activity as non-procreative or as performed for the sake of pure pleasure. Malay's banned poem is still the object of critique from Bengali literary critics, academics and an ordinary readership who have especially criticized the lack of substantial literary quality in his poetry. Apart from that, there exists also a feminist critique of Hungryalism as a male-centered poetics where "female sexual agency is vilified" and where women are described only as 'sexual bodies' (Dhar).⁷ The ambivalent status of Hungryalism in Bengali literary history seems to mirror the ambiguous role that the representation of sexuality and the related terminology plays in Malay's poetry. In the controversial passages of the Bengali poem, for instance, transliterated English words are juxtaposed to a scientific Bengali terminology to describe Shubha's sexual and reproductive organs and other bodily activities

such as male ejaculation and urination. Kumar Bishnu De, in his research on Malay's poetry, admits that the meaning of the words 'clitoris' (ক্লিটোরিস) and 'labia majora' (লাবিয়া ম্যাজোরা) became clear only after he read the sequence of Bengali words that visually depicted a vagina (De 210).⁸ The incorporation of these English words into the Bengali text helps mitigate the scandalous content and attenuate the visual power that the 'obscene' words depicting the female sex organs may have on the reader.

The following verses show how the juxtaposition between the English-Latin words (i.e. *uterus*, *clitoris*, *labia majora*) and the Sanskritized Bengali words (i.e. *garbha* (womb), *ṛtusrāb* (seasonal bloodstream), *śukra* (sperm) and *satīcchad* (hymen)) operates in the poem as 'sanitizer' of the 'sexual body', ultimately deprived of its sensual component and transformed into a biological body, where sexual intercourse and masturbation occur exclusively as mechanical activities:

Shubha, let me sleep for a few moments in your violent silvery *uterus*
Give me peace, Shubha, let me have peace
Let my sin-driven skeleton be washed anew in your seasonal bloodstream
[*ṛtusrāb*]
Let me create myself in your womb with my own sperm [*śukra*]
[...]
Let me see the earth through your cellophane hymen [*sātīcchad*]
[...]
I remember the letter of that final decision in 1956
The surroundings of your *clitoris* were being embellished with coon⁹ at
that time
[...]
Let me enter in the immemorial incontinence of your *labia majora*
Into the absurdity of woeless effort
In the golden chlorophyll of the drunken heart (Bakken 1967)¹⁰

Both the Bengali words (*ṛtusrāb*; *ātmapaithuna*; *śleṣmā*) and their English translation (i.e. *seasonal bloodstream*; *self-coition*; *ovum-flux*) show a conscious selection by the author of a scientific vocabulary of the Bengali language and a correspondent English translation of the medical terminology related to the sexual body. In some of the passages illustrated above, Malay directly uses the transliterated English word to denote the female sexual organs (i.e. *labia majora*; *uterus*; *clitoris*) for lack of a Bengali equivalent, or so the poet himself explained during an interview I carried out at his home in Mumbai (personal interview, November 26, 2017). Yet the proliferation of a Bengali 'sexual' terminology, already established from the late nineteenth century through an expanding market of medical publications (Mukharji 86), shows that Malay's use of the English words was actually prompted by the need for a certain degree of secrecy with regard to the more contentious aspects of the poem. It is in fact quite common in ordinary Bengali language, and especially in the technical and more problematic context of sexual activity, to use English words as substitutes for a Bengali that would more easily 'offend' middle-class morality. If the poet was at that point already aware of the risk of a trial and sentence for obscenity, he knew how provocative and transgressive his writings could become in media and popular perception. The use of the English equivalents in the Bengali poem then shows the poet's attempts at suppressing the straightforwardly outrageous quality of the Bengali by replacing it with a more 'delicate' English word to attenuate the scandalous content.

Medical Language and Sanitization

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the explosion of medical publishing in vernacular languages, including Bengali medical dictionaries, books on sexology and encyclopedias of sexual knowledge, which acted as sites of 'vernacularization' that provided vernacular alternatives to English technical terms (Mukharji 86-7). These publications illustrate the creation of a vocabulary of anatomic and physiological terms of the Bengali language, shaped from an already established English medical lexicon, encouraged by the international reception of modern 'western' books on the study of sexuality. For instance, the description of the male and female reproductive organs (*strī-jananendriya*)

already had a quite well-established Bengali vocabulary by the late 1930s, when Hasanat's *Yauna Bigyān* and Basu's *Yauna-Biśbakoṣ* were published (Hasanat 1936; Basu 1938-1946). In the latter, 'clitoris' is in fact translated into *bhogāṅkur* and 'labia majora' into *bhogādhār guru* (lit. *bhog* = vagina; *adhār* = lip) (Basu 187).

Malay plays with the Bengali medical lexicon related to sexual organs and activities (i.e. *yonivartma* (urethra); *ātmamaithuna* (self-coition); *rajaḥ/ṛtusrāb* (menstruation); *śleṣmā* (mucus, phlegm)) to convey a biological description of the body.¹¹ The effects generated by such scientific treatment of the language are ones of ironic 'inversion' of the obscene images related to sex: on the one hand, non-procreative sex acquires dignity of literary treatment, while on the other, the high status of the constructed, artificial scientific vocabulary is ironically downplayed through the sexual context. Abul Hasanat's *Sacitra Youna Bigyān* (Illustrated Book of Sexual Science) presents a good example of a modern book of sexology dealing with multiple aspects of sexuality, including illustrated descriptions of conception, the formation of the embryo, and birth, as well as a detailed analysis of *younabodh*, the sexual perception.¹² In the first volume, Hasanat describes the anatomy and physiology of sex (*youna-indriyasamuha*) with illustrations of the male and female sex organs (Hasanat 93-99) and the process of menstruation (*ṛtusrāb*), a word "originated from the latin 'mensis' meaning 'monthly.' Since it takes place every month, it is called monthly (*māsik*) in different languages" (Hasanat 102). Abul Hasanat wrote books on this subject until the 1950s and his works remained highly popular through the sixties. The occurrence of words for the organs, such as *linga*, *yoni*, *joṛāyu*, *garbha*, *śukra*, *aṅḍakoṣ*, *mūtrāśay*, *yonipath*, *saṭicchad*, and their functions, such as *prasrāb* (urination) and *ṛtusrāb* (menstruation), provide evidence for the selection of medical words in the Bengali poem.

In my own translation, I substitute *seasonal bloodstream* and *ovum-flux* with *menstruation*, *self-coition* with *masturbation* and *phlegm* with *mucus*, as it appears from the following verses:

Why wasn't I lost in my mother's urethra?
Why wasn't I shaken away in my father's urine after *he masturbates*?
Why wasn't I mixed *with mucus in the menstruation*?¹³

As compared to Malay's English translation:

Why wasn't I lost in my mother's urethra?
Why wasn't I driven away in my father's urine after his self-coition?
Why wasn't I mixed in the ovum-flux or in the phlegm?

My choice of replacing the more sterile, scientific terms that describe masturbation and menstruation was informed by the need for greater readability and a more direct reception of the 'defiling' activities on behalf of the readers, while still retaining the scientific touch of the Latin etymology. If Malay's *self-coition*, *phlegm*, and *seasonal bloodstream* aim at reproducing masturbation, menstruation and reproduction purely as mechanical processes of the biological body in the 'anatomic' lexicon, they also lay out different possibilities of interpreting the reasons behind their use. The semantic potential of the English *self-coition* and *seasonal bloodstream*, for example, and the possibilities of playing with the construction and meaning of these words, allow the retention of the 'clinical' structure of the poem and a mechanical description of the body. At the same time, the choice of 'high' words here serves two functions: on the one hand, they elevate to a lyrical subject what the middle-class readership interprets as low, repulsive and scandalous; on the other, they ironically 'minimize' the technical scientific language by applying it to the low semantic sphere of sex and other bodily activities.

By replacing *self-coition* with the verb *masturbate*, I have tried to make the reading more fluent and the 'obscene' content more easily graspable, as well as to reproduce the ironical touch that was inevitably lost in the 'surgical' English translation. Yet Malay's 'sanitization' of the original poem is only one among other valuable hypotheses that explain the textual tactics and language strategies behind this text. The representation of Shubha's body and of the male semen through a subversive use of Bengali medical terminology is not only a mark of purification of the text already banned for obscenity. The hyper-pedantic constructions of the English translation (i.e. *self-coition*;

ovum-flux; seasonal bloodstream), as well as the juxtaposition with the higher status of the Latin-derived English words, appear as anti-hegemonic practices of translation and language construction that give the dignity of literary matter to the bawdy topic of sexuality.

One more practice of subverting the rules of accuracy and faithfulness in translation appears in another instance of the poem, where Malay translates the Bengali *dharṣaṇ* into the English ‘copulation’, as in the following verses:

I’d have gone two billion light years and kissed God’s ass
But nothing pleases me nothing sounds well
I feel nauseated with more than a single kiss
I’ve forgotten women during copulation and returned to Muse
Into the sun-colored bladder
I do not know what these happenings are but they are occurring within me
[...]
My power of recollection is withering away
Let me ascend alone toward death
I haven’t had to learn copulation and dying (Bakken 1967)¹⁴

If we look into the Sanskrit etymology of the word *dharṣaṇ*, we encounter no explicit ‘sexual’ connotation, but the nouns ‘assault, outrage, offence, violation, seduction’, ‘overpowering’ and ‘copulation’ (Monier Williams 513). For a modern definition of the word, the *Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary* (2000 edition) translates *dharṣaṇ* also as ‘rape’ (537). On the other hand, according to the *Samsad Bāmlā Abhidhān* (1964 edition), the monolingual dictionary of the Bengali language, the noun lacks the connotation of sexual abuse, signifying more generally an act of oppression or submission (416). However, among the multiple entries under *dharṣaṇ* (i.e. *pīrhan*, *atyācār*, *balātkār*, *daman*, *parājit-karaṇ*), the synonym *balātkār* in particular involves the idea of oppression, control and submission “especially against women” (*biśeṣatah nārīr prati*) (Biswas 416). I could not come across any critical engagement with the alleged ‘dishonest’ translation until I came across Nandini Dhar’s ‘feminist critique’ of Hungryalist poetry, where she acknowledges the Hungryalist movement as a “profound failure of the Bengali radical imagination” (Dhar n.p.). Here she proposes a gender-based critique by pointing out to the fundamental ‘vilification’ of the female sexual agency in Malay’s poetry, turned into a site of male sexual violation. In a new critical reading, Dhar remarks how Malay has mistranslated the passages of the poem that centered on Shubha’s body. In Dhar’s view, the alleged mistranslations of *dharṣaṇ* as ‘copulation’, and of *uṭhiye neowā* as ‘elevate’ (whereas she claims the real meaning to be ‘abduction’) legitimize rape and sexual violence. My suspicions regarding Malay’s translation grew during a reading session with Bengali-speaking colleagues and students at the Sūdasiēn-Institut in Heidelberg, as they remained quite perplexed at the ‘unfair’ translator. My puzzlement at the ‘mysterious’ translation initially led me to argue that if Malay had replaced ‘copulation’ with another English equivalent involving a violent act of oppression and submission he could have found a way to escape the mistranslation. Since SEJ was edited and corrected by the American editors, native speakers of English who were most likely not aware of the original Bengali version, we could assume that Malay was fully conscious of the ‘corrupt’ translation he was proposing to avant-garde readers in the United States.

Yet in order to clarify Malay’s choice of translation, I turned to him in a private communication where he claimed that “the word ‘rape’ has been in use now only. When I wrote, people talked either of intercourse or of copulation. For me at that time ‘dharshan’ was same as intercourse or copulation. I did not mean rape while using the word ‘dharshan’”.¹⁵ How do I engage with the changing semantics of one specific word in translation? Was the poet enacting a strategy of self-censorship, purging the text of its most objectionable contents to make it less problematic to the American readership (where Shubha would not be the object of violent sexual abuse, but the consenting partner in intercourse)? Or is the ‘misunderstanding’ by Nandini Dhar caused by the enhanced sexual and violent connotation that has been assigned to the word in more recent times? *Dharṣaṇ* today has become a highly controversial term in the social and political landscapes of South Asia, especially after the Delhi Gang Rape in 2012 has projected the discourse on rape and violence

against women to the foreground of national interest. Taking the word out of the original poetic context here helps retracing the semantic history and evolution of the word and establishing a trajectory of social, cultural and literal meaning that could not be transmitted to the reader through the mere act of translating. The recasting of *dharṣaṇ* and its history into the subversive semiotics of the poem, which aims at representing the act of sexual intercourse as a possibility of emancipation from middle-class oppressive morality, also on behalf of the ‘sexual body’ of the Muse Shubha, contributes to returning meaning and dignity to what Dhar has criticized as a ‘mysterious’ translation that ‘legitimizes rape and sexual violence through repetitive articulations of male pain and alienation’ (Dhar n.p.). The rough, unabashed ‘bodily’ language of Malay, a mark of the Hungryalist aesthetics signalling the disintegration of a masculinity that oscillates between the traditional models of the Indian patriarchy and the ‘Western’-oriented revolution of love and sexual relationships, is often embodied in Malay’s highly conservative and misogynist aesthetics. Yet in the internal logic of the poem, where *dharṣaṇ* is viewed as an imaginary act of social subversion, it can be argued that the word had a more nuanced connotation that did not necessarily entail sexual aggression or abuse in the years when Malay was writing and translating his poem.

What, in this case, shall a more ethically and politically correct translation in the first place account for? The task of the translator in this case lies in the sensibility and ability to ensure the same thoroughness and contextualization for both options of translation (i.e. copulation, rape). Although my translation here ‘betrays’ the intentions of the author, who had personally dissociated the word *dharṣaṇ* from a context of sexual violation, it performs a conscious transgression of traditional norms and practices of translation such as accuracy and faithfulness. My personal approach was here to exploit the potential of the original word, with all the multiple shades of meaning implied in the Sanskrit and Bengali etymology, by suggesting in my own re-translation the more contemporary political signification of *dharṣaṇ* in PBC, in order to ‘dislocate’ the poem and operate a semantic transfer to a modern readership’s perception.

Then I would kiss the ass of God for billions of light years
But nothing pleases me, nothing pleases me
If I gave more than one kiss my body would be nauseated
How many times have I forgot women after *rape* and came back to Art
In the solar bladder of poetry
What’s going on I don’t know, yet it happens inside me
[...]
My power of recollection is fading away
Let me walk alone towards death
I didn’t have to learn about *rape* and death

Translating Masturbation

The abundance of descriptions of male masturbation in Hungry poetry has turned it into a true literary *topos* of Hungryalism. The grotesque and pictorial character of masturbation, a leitmotif of avant-garde arts, performances and literature across the world, plays a relevant role also in Hungryalist poetry: the non-reproductive nature of ‘solitary’ and pleasurable sex becomes one way to express the social and psychological conflicts of the young Bengali male with the dominant bourgeois morality and middle-class social regulations of post-independence Bengal. Masturbation and ejaculation were signs of pathological abnormality in colonial Bengal that affected Bengali middle-class narratives of the body and sexuality. The ‘weakness of the semen’ (*dhātu dourbālyā*), associated with impotency and involuntary discharges, substantiated the anxieties of Bengali effeminacy and racial inferiority (Mukharji 247). Following Foucault’s engagement with the repression of ‘peripheric’ sexualities and the obsession with their classification in the Victorian period (Foucault 1990), scholarship on the cultural significations of masturbation in colonial India has showed that loss of semen was mainly associated with sickness, sexual perversion and anxieties of masculinity (cf. Pande 2010; Alter 2011; Mukharji 2011). In the late nineteenth century, Bengali men, burdened with the stereotypes of degeneration and perversion, developed a paranoia over squandered sperm resulting in an ambivalence towards women that verged on misogyny (Pande 172). Bengali periodicals on public

health treated the subject of masturbation, especially when this activity takes place during puberty and adolescence, as a serious health issue since it makes the boy's "semen watery and weak" (*śukradhātu taral o nisteja*) (Basu 228). In accordance with the state of *brahmacharya*, male Hindu celibacy, masturbation was interpreted in terms of physical strength more than a moral vice: the preservation of semen represented in fact an act of self-control and self-development while waste of semen signified a loss of virility (Alter 287). According to Hindu physiology at large and to Indian traditional medicines, ejaculation was therefore equated to a loss of masculine strength and waste of essential energy. However, Srivastava has remarked how the notion of 'semen anxiety', combined with a general ethic of self-control, had come to take on the appearance of an irrevocable truth of Indian masculinity (Srivastava 3).¹⁶

In Hungryalist poetry, non-reproductive sexual activity is ambivalently represented as a liberating act that denounces and subverts the regulation of social bonds and relationships, as well as a state of frustrated uneasiness with one's own unconventional position towards matters of sexuality and sociality. As powerfully illustrated by Falguni Roy, a cult figure of the Hungry Generation, in his poem 'Byāktigata Bichāna' (A Private Bed), the act of masturbating becomes part of normal daily life when it concerns the ideal 'family man':

Not only Radha – even the prostitute menstruates
The father of three children – the ideal man of family planning
Masturbates from childhood – doesn't he?¹⁷ (my translation)

The acts of masturbating and ejaculating, as suggested in this passage, do not only relate to colonial discourses and to traditional medicine that pathologized sex and semen loss. Through masturbation, here the Hungry poet wants to subvert the post-colonial predicament of the Indian father, 'ideal man of family planning', with all the creepy associations with vasectomy and mass sterilization programs carried on under Indira Gandhi's rule, and express the wish for liberation from imposed disciplined regulations of the body. At the same time, these poets' relationship with the body remains ambiguous and unavoidably torn between society and personal experience, between the ongoing sexual revolution of the West and the ostensible cultural immobility of Bengali middle-class society. In Malay and other Hungryalist poets like Falguni Roy, preoccupations with masculinity and virility take shape through the description of male semen during sexual intercourse, masturbation and fetus production (Mishra 2015). The obscene character of these representations, however, is not determined by the 'fear' of prudish descriptions of sexual intercourse or discourses on sexuality at large; rather, they are informed by the insecure and precarious conditions of modern masculinity. The act of masturbation thus reproduces the conflicts, ambivalences and anxieties of a changing concept of the modern male middle-class Bengali individual.

We have already encountered the word *ātmamaithuna* in *PBC*, which is transcreated in *SEJ* as *self-coition*, a neologism crafted by the poet to reproduce ironically and scientifically a 'copulation with oneself.' Although *ātmamaithun* seems to be the most common word in Bengali language that refers to 'masturbation', along with *hastamaithun*, there are other equivalents to define both male and female masturbation, such as *svamehan*, *svakām*, *hastamaithun* and *svayamrati*, as appears from a fully detailed Wikipedia page in Bengali dedicated to this subject.¹⁸ The medical periodical *Chikitsā Sammilanī*, a magazine of health and medical science instructing families on modern concerns surrounding sexuality and sexual relations in late colonial Bengal, also uses the word *hastamaithun* for the 'evil' practice of masturbation among male children and adolescents (Basu 227). Abul Hasanat's *Sacitra Youna Bigyān* dedicates a section to 'auto-eroticism' (*svayamāithuna*) and 'masturbation' (*hastamaithuna*), and includes these phenomena in the section 'The Multiple Manifestations of the Sexual Perception' (*younabodher bibhinnamukhī prakāś*) (Hasanat 200-1).

Although the word 'masturbation' linguistically speaking is an 'orthophemism' that does not constitute an offense,¹⁹ the trespassing from the medical space into the public domain of literature and poetry makes its interpretation more problematic, to the point that it becomes one of the triggers of the obscenity charges, as it is pointed out by the Magistrate of the obscenity trial (Decision by Presidency Magistrate, 1965). In the following verses of *SEJ*, the contentious topic of masturbation and the cultural significations of male semen are addressed with the Bengali words *śukra* and *bīrya*:

Let me create myself in your womb with my own sperm [*śukra*]
Would I have been like this if I had different parents?
Was Malay alias me possible from an absolutely different sperm? [*śukra*]
Would I have been Malay in the womb of other women of my father?²⁰
[...]
I will die
Oh what are these happenings within me
I am failing to fetch out my hand and my palm
From the dried sperms [*bīrya*] on trousers spreading wings
3000000 children gliding towards the district of Shubha's bosom
Millions of needles are now running from my blood into Poetry
Now the smuggling of my obstinate leg is trying to plunge
Into the death-killer sex-wig entangled in the hypnotic kingdom of words
(Bakken 1967)²¹

The English 'sperm/s' for both words in SEJ does not distinguish between the meanings of the two Bengali words *śukra* and *bīrya*, two equivalents of the English 'sperm', 'semen.' The *Samsad Bāmlā Abhidhān* considers both terms, *śukra* and *bīrya*, as synonyms, although there is a qualitative difference between the two that classifies *śukra* as noun only, and *bīrya* also as attribute (i.e. as in the adjectival construction *bīryavān* or *bīryasālī*, 'endowed with vigour'). The Sanskrit definition of *vīrya* associates it with 'manliness, valour, strength, power, energy', and only in the third entry with 'manly vigour, virility, semen virile' (Monier-Williams 1006); the modern Bengali usage assigns to *bīrya* the characteristics of valour, courage and heroism, which are by definition qualities that pertain to a male hero, a *bīr* (Biswas 756). As also Kakar observes, *vīrya* is "a word that stands for both sexual energy and semen. *Virya*, in fact, is identical with the essence of maleness: it can either move downward in sexual intercourse, where it is emitted in its gross physical form as semen, or it can move upward through the spinal chord and into the brain, in its subtle form known as *ojas*" (Kakar 118-9). Hasanat's sexology book, in the section describing the male sex organs, abounds with compounds having *śukra*- as first noun for organs related to the production of semen (i.e. *śukrakoś*; *śukravahī nala*) (93). 'Spermatozoa' here translate as *śukrakīṭ* and are described as follows: "The man's spermatozoa give life to the woman's eggs. The spermatozoa are immersed in the liquid part of the man's semen (*puruṣer śukrer aṅgśe bhāsiyā berhāy*)" (86). The recurrence of *śukra* in such texts, as compared to the absent *bīrya*, suggests the scientific connotation of the former.

In Malay's poem, *bīrya* stands as the concrete physical appearance of the spermatid liquid, while *śukra* represents the neutral, scientific term that refers to the smaller units of the latter, the spermatozoa, as shown above in Habunat's sexology book. Drawing a distinction between the two words becomes a significant operation in the translation of Malay's medical language: if *śukra* is an orthophemism, a neutral term with neither positive nor negative connotation, *bīrya* has attributive quality and is intentionally juxtaposed to the latter to suggest a metaphorical reference to the poet's troubled masculinity, expressed through the culminating gesture of the poet who compares the activity of masturbation to poetry-making. Also the recurrence of the words *bīrya* and *bīj* rather than *śukra* in Falguni Roy's poetry is used in a significantly different context where the 'liquid flow of sperms' is the material substance through which heredity traits are transmitted: "In the liquid flow of sperms inside autoeroticism there is a skeleton of 206 bones and fleshy nerves sticking to the skeleton in the liquid semen the semen of memories of thought-carrying sound" (Miśra 29). The abstract matter denoted by the word *śukra* is substantiated in *bīrya*, significantly originating from the same root of *bīj*, the seed, through the bodily materialization of the spermatozoa during ejaculation. Hence in my re-translation I suggest preserving the 'material' differentiation denoted by the Bengali words by translating *śukra* as the English 'semen' and *bīrya* as 'sperm', following the Oxford Learner's Dictionaries of the English Language that define 'semen' as "the whitish liquid containing sperm" ('Semen', *Oxford Learners Dictionary*). Exploiting the Latin etymology of *semen*, I aimed at highlighting the medical representation of male semen.

Give me birth again from your womb with my own *semen*
Would I have been like this even if I had different parents?

Would I have become Malay alias me from a completely different *semen*?
Would there be Malay if my father had impregnated another woman?

The orthophemistic or neutral connotation of the words *ātmamaithuna*, *śukra* and *bīrya*, shows that Malay pursued an ambivalent strategy of sanitization of the text through the medical lexicon that resulted in an ironical ‘inversion’ where the ‘dirty’ sexual matter is elevated to lyrical subject of poetry, while the high status of the scientific language is minimized through the transgressive descriptions of masturbation and bodily fluids. Masturbation is not only painted as a mechanical act, but it stands also as the ultimate condition of the alienated male poet, the ultimately bourgeois man of modernity, inexorably caged in a modernity that mechanizes sexuality and disintegrates relationships between the sexes.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have tried to clarify the linguistic terminology related to the description of sexual organs and masturbation, and to identify the textual strategies for sanitizing the ‘sexual body’ in selected passages of Malay Rāychoudhuri’s banned poem ‘Pracaṇḍa Baidyutik Chutār’ and his English self-translation ‘Stark Electric Jesus’. First, the use of a medical terminology for describing the ‘sexual body’ in Bengali (i.e. *yonī*, *jorāyu*, *mūtrāśay*, *śukra*, *yonivartma*, *satīcchad*, *ātmamaithun*, *rajahsrāb*, *śleṣmā*) and in the English translation (i.e. uterus, bladder, semen, urethra, hymen, self-coition, seasonal bloodstream, ovum-flux, phlegm) functions as a strategy of ‘sanitization’ of the language related to the contentious topic of the text. The incorporation of transliterated English words into the Bengali poem (i.e. *lābīyā myājorā*, *yuterās*, *kliṭoris*) allows the poet to attenuate the ‘bawdy’ and ‘obscene’ perception of what the Bengali middle-class interprets as indecent and offensive. The hyper-literal, artificial constructions of the English translation (i.e. self-coition, seasonal bloodstream) aim at representing the body as a machine, in its purely biological functions. Secondly, as illustrated by the discussion surrounding the translation of the word *dharṣaṇ*, the hyper-technical lexicon of medical sciences could be seen as a moderate practice of self-censorship that ‘obscures’ the most controversial aspects treated in the poem as a tactic to defend himself against further institutional censorship. Yet the poet’s subversive use of the medical lexicon allows for a double effect of subversion of the textual components: on the one hand, the high status of the scientific language is brought down to earth by applying it to the semantic sphere of sex, a subject considered unsuitable for the ‘respectable’ sphere of poetry. On the other, the socially reproachable topics of masturbation and un-reproductive sexual activity gain dignity of literary and lyrical subject by being dealt with a scientific terminology that dislocates the repulsive sexual matter to the ‘extra-ordinary’ discourse of poetry-making.

In the duality of Malay’s poem, located between irony, sanitization, literary subversion, and self-censorship, dwells the ‘radical’ operations of the translator and the problematic process of re-translation. The pragmatic choices of my re-translation and re-reading of ‘Pracaṇḍa Baidyutik Chutār’ reflect the need to propose a new text that identifies and reproduces the strategies already foregrounded in the source-texts. The multiple textual strategies already identified in the ‘original’ poem shall not be neglected by the translator who wants to produce an ethically and politically correct translation.

The conclusions that I want to share in this paper are based on my experience of translating so-called ‘obscene’ modern poetry in Bengali; they show that translation remains a ‘tentative process’, neither impossible nor fully possible, that can change according to the tasks and intentions of the translator, who becomes a ‘visible’ agency, to follow Venuti’s main argument, of a newly produced independent text. As translators, especially of writings of living authors, we have to engage with the ‘life’ and mobility of that text, confront the textual strategies and the material and economic conditions behind the production of the piece of writing. Finally, what I draw from the ‘tentative process’ of translation of Hungryalist poetry is: that one way to process a ‘radical translation’ is to elaborate a personal and contextual practice of the latter by going to the ‘roots’, that is, to the textual, economical and material reasons of semantically problematic texts such as ‘obscene’ poetry.

Notes

¹ I am borrowing this evocative phrase from Allen and Burrige, which offers a perspective on ‘the human psyche’ in its relation with ‘tabooed language’ (2), who associate “bodily effluvia like ear-wax, menstrual blood, piss, semen, shit, snot, spit, sweat and vomit” with “dirt, rotting organic material” (41).

² See, for example, Gladfelder’s overview of the debates on the cultural significance of erotic, obscene, and pornographic writing from the eighteenth century (Gladfelder 2013). Here he lists the criteria that scholars have used to distinguish among the concepts of ‘*pornographic*, *obscene*, *erotic*, *bawdy*, *lewd*, and *indecent*’, such as authorial intention, content, tone, mode of representation, reader and political or censorial response. For instance, an ‘obscene’ writing is defined as ‘a description whose effect is shocking or disgusting [reader response]’, while ‘bawdy’ denotes ‘the humorous treatment of sex [content and tone]’ (Gladfelder 5).

³ For works that focus on India, see for example Deana Heath’s exploration of the British biopolitical project of regulation of the obscene in Britain and its relocalization in the colonies (Heath 2010); Anindita Ghosh’s analysis of the popular prints of Baṭṭalā market in colonial Bengal (Ghosh 2006), and Charu Gupta’s study on the emergence of discourses on gender and sexuality in colonial Hindi pamphlets (Gupta 2001).

⁴ There has been a long controversy on the issue of the ‘founder’ (*sraṣṭābitarka*) in Bengali criticism on the Hungry Generation (Sen 13-6). Meetings and interviews with some old Hungryalists and other contemporary poets have proved the existence of multiple narratives on the history of the movement. I have noticed a clear negative stance against Malay Rāyḥoudhurī on behalf of some Bengali academics and critics, as well as of some poets and translators who associated with the movement in the past. On the other hand, Malay has been the gigantic omnipresence of Hungryalism compared to others participants of the rebellious group, who celebrated himself as a ‘great poet’ (*mahākabi*) and as the only founder of the movement (Sen 13). The eminent Bengali critic Jyotirmoy Datta, for instance, claims that Malay has been “quite as generous to himself and his brother as he is niggardly to others”, alleging Bengali criticism and writing to be “dead, mummified, goofy, but when he comes to himself his language rises to lyric heights” (Bakken 1967).

⁵ “I’ll have to translate all the matters. Because my friends are not well to do with English. I, myself, can somehow cook in English, as you find in this letter. So you’d have to edit the matter properly. You give all sorts of matter in it. You can include my poem” (Letter from Malay Raychoudhuri to Dick Bakken, 18.4.66).

⁶ Decision by Presidency Magistrate, Bankshal Court, Calcutta, concerning Malay Roychoudhuri’s Poem “Prachanda Baidyutik Chutar”, Case No. Cr/579 of 1965 (Courtesy of Stanford University Libraries, Dept. of Special Collections, Ginsberg Papers).

⁷ The phrase ‘sexual body’ is used in Nandini Dhar’s article to criticize the misogynist stance of much Hungryalist poetry, where women are represented as “nothing but bodies on which desire is projected” (Dhar).

⁸ “Barāṅga, bīrya, mūtrāśay, satīchhad, yuterās, ṛtusrāb, yonivartma, śukra, yonikeśar, poṁd, prasrāb, ityādi”. He later on explains his embarrassment in reading out the poem or reciting it in public because at a first reading those words had sounded ‘obscene’ (*aślīl*) to him (De 211).

⁹ According to the digital *Oxford Living Dictionaries of English*, the word has two definitions: the first one is a shortened version of ‘raccoon’ (the North American Procyon), while the second is an offensive way to address a black person. Considering that the original Bengali poem has *bhālluker chāl* (lit. bear fur), I assume that the English translation ‘coon’ must be a metonymic use of the word that, by extension, must here signify the pubic hair. Yet one fundamental question remains unanswered: why did the Bengali poet and the American editor use such a problematic word, at least for a virtual American readership of the Sixties, such as the slang ‘coon’? In the limited space of this paper it suffices to take this example as a further evidence of the multiple –and unexpected!– manners of subverting the original meaning of a given text.

¹⁰ Unless stated otherwise, all quotations of the English poem ‘Stark Electric Jesus’ in this paper are taken from the issue of the journal *Salted Feathers* dedicated to Hungryalism and Indian experimental writings (Bakken 1967).

¹¹ In a private conversation, Malay confirmed his selective choice of the words that illustrate the sexual body from a Bengali medical handbook until then unknown to him (Private Facebook conversation with Malay Rāychoudhurī, April 17, 2018).

¹² I am deeply grateful to Projit Bihari Mukharji who has shared with me his findings and considerations on Abul Hasanat’s *Sacitra Yauna Bigyān*. In a private conversation via email, Projit Bihari Mukharji kindly informed me that Abul Hasanat was a police officer who turned to sexology partly under the influence of Girindrakeshar Bose (who corresponded with Freud and presided over one of the most popular literary addas in the 1920s/30s). Hasanat began writing on sexology in the late 1930s, and wrote several books on the subject until the early 1950s, which remained highly popular through the 60s. One of Hasanat’s stated missions was to create a scientific vocabulary for speaking of sex in his mothertongue, viz. Bengali. Hasanat’s mentor, Girin Bose, was the elder brother of Rajsekhar Bose (aka Parasuram, the litterateur) who purportedly presided over a Calcutta University committee to create a scientific vocabulary in Bengali (private mail conversation, April 17, 2018).

¹³ The italicized words are my own rephrasing of Malay’s English translation.

¹⁴ “tāhole āmi dukotī ālokbarṣa iṣbarer porṁde cumu khetum/ kintu kichui bhālo lāge nā āmār kichui bhālo lāgche nā/ ekādhik cumo khele āmār gā guloy/ dharṣaṅkāle nārīke bhule giye śilpe phire esechi katadin/ kabitār ādityabarṇā mūtrāśaye/ esab kī hocche jāni nā tabu buker madhye ghoṭe jāchhe aharaha [...] / āmār smṛtiśakti naṣṭa hoye jācche/ āmāke mṛtyur dike jete dāo ekā/ āmāke dharṣaṅ o more jāowā śikhe nite hoyeni” (Rāychoudhurī 187).

¹⁵ Private Facebook conversation, April 17, 2018.

¹⁶ He further argues that the obsession of India-related scholarship for semen anxiety has overshadowed the multiple, little ‘social topographies’ that could constitute a fuller picture of Indian sexualities, a word that the sociologist declines in plural (Srivastava 4).

¹⁷ “śudhui rādhikā noy - gāṅikāo ṛumatī hoy/ tin santāner pitā – paribār parikalpanār ādarśapurūṣ/ kaiśore kare thāke ātmamaithun – kare nā ki” (Mishra 19).

¹⁸ “Svamehan” (n.d.). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved January 23, 2018, from <https://bn.wikipedia.org/wiki/স্বমেহন>

¹⁹ As pointed out by Allen and Burridge (29), masturbation is an orthophemism, a neutral term with neither positive nor derogatory connotations.

²⁰ “āmāke tomār garbhe āmāri śukra theke janma nite dāo/ āmār bābā-mā anya holeo ki erakam hotum?/ sampūrna bhinna ek śukra theke malay orphe āmi hote pārtum? (Rāychoudhurī 188)

²¹ “oh e samasta kī ghaṭche āmār madhye/ āmi āmār hāt hāter ceṭo khumje pācchi nā/ pāyjamār śukiye jāoyā bīrya theke dānā melche/ 300000 śiśu urhe jācche śubhār stanamaṅḍalīr dike/ jhāmke jhāmke chumc chuṭe jācche rakta theke kabitāy/ ekhan āmār jedi ṭhāṅger corācālān semdote cāiche/ hipnoṭik śabdarājya theke phāmsāno mṛtyubhedī jouna-parculāy” (Rāychoudhurī 189).

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Daniela Cappello
Cluster of Excellence Asia and Europe in a Global Context
University of Heidelberg
daniela.cappello@asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de
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