

ABALA-NIRBHAYA-BEING WOMAN IN LANGUAGE

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Abstract:

The essay introlocutes Taslima Nasreen's translational proposal of undertaking gendered interventions ('woman-handling') of the Bangla language and enabling thereby, a gender neutral bhāsā that is a 'home' and country for women. Taslima's translational proposal, coming in a book-No Country for Women-establishes correspondences between a language free from prejudice, and a country for women that is free, secure and that they belong to. The essay focuses on the word 'abalā' at Taslima's behest, as symptomatic of all that is wrong with the Bangla and Indic bhāsās of Sanskritic origin and locates the 'abalā' concept in its times and ours.

The essay also suggests an engagement with a newer and more contemporary word-'bhay' or terror and one that conceptualizes our times and subsumes the bal/abalā binary. The essay suggests ways in which the word bhay may be woman-handled and how a truly free bhāsā desh(language country)for women may be imagined into being.

Key words: Taslima Nasreen, gender-neutral language, translation and gender, woman handling, Barbara Godard, *abalā/bal*, *abalābāndhab*, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, *Ānandamath*, *Bandemātaram*, Rabindranath Tagore, *Chitrangadādance*- drama, *bhay*, 'Nirbhayā', the 2012 New Delhi rape case, citizenship and nationality for women.

I

This essay is in dialogue with Taslima Nasreen (the Bangladeshi feminist activist's) proposal to translate, recast, 'woman- handle' the Bengali language (henceforth 'Bangla bhasa'). It engages with Taslima's call to purge the Bangla *bhasa* of its phallogocentricism; to exorcise from its being, words such as *abalā* that are specific to, coeval of, and conceptually demean the idea of 'woman.' Taslima's cry to invert such demeaned concepts (introduce 'abal' as coeval of 'man') or erase such words out from the Bangla altogether (in an essay- "*Linga nirapeksha Banglā bhāsar prayojan*" – "Gender- Neutral Bangla Language is Required", 2007 and anthologised in a book, *Nārir Kono Desh Nei- No Country for Women*)¹ is in the context of Taslima's awareness of a woman's radically exilic state. It is also made in her awareness of the urgent need to create-- in the Bangla language (and all known languages) - a home for women that, is free from fear and inequity.

Taslima's translational proposal then, is an activist one. It is a proposal made in awareness that languages (in this case, Bangla) are alien prison-houses for women and that translation (in its widest ramification of recasting, re-engaging) is an act of resistance which makes possible that intimate 'language-home'; that 'country' for women.

This essay attempts two tasks. It takes up- on Taslima's specific suggestion- the word *abalā*-(meaning both 'weak' and 'woman') - as symptomatic of gender- bias inherent to the Bangla *bhasa* (and all modern Indic *bhāsās* with Sanskritic roots). It traces the conceptual genealogy of *abala* in colonial India. The essay suggests that, Taslima's translational engagement with the *abalā*-concept is not distinct, but simply one, in a history of complex engagements on the part of late 19th early 20th century Indian -Bengali ideologues, and that such earlier engagements were equally informed by the gendered nation question.

Secondly, the essay suggests a way out from the *abalā*

conceptual bind, and indicates more enabling, acute and contemporary idea that will redefine the gender question that is the nation question (as women have no country). They will reimagine (or at the least, create possibilities of reassembling) a language that is freedom, that is a *desh*-country for woman.

Taslima Nasreen's proposal for "woman-handling" Bangla; an unshackling of its phallogocentricism, is pivotal to her feminist activism (and there are as many as three essays on the Bangla *bhasa* in the book), and integral to ways in which she conceptualizes a free, human and gender-equitable world. 'Woman-handling' (a term made current by Canadian translation scholars Barbara Godard and Sherry Simon)² is a translational *tactic* (and *tactic* as distinct in charge from *strategy*)³, that proposes invasive, interventionist modes of engaging with given languages (in Godard's case, French) unhinging, radically undermining of their phallogocentric assumptions and compelling languages to conceptualize gender equity.

Taslima's plea to recast Bangla takes on an acute and insistent charge, given that, she was (and remains) threatened by multiple death-pronouncing *fatwas* in Bangladesh and India and given that, she identifies the Bangla language as coeval of a mother and home. In her book-significantly entitled-*Nārir kono Desh Nei*-No Country for Women- she speaks of *desh*⁴ as synonymous with 'security' and 'freedom' (*desh māne jādī nirāpattā, desh māne jādī swādhinatā*) and Bangla *bhāsā* as her mother (and in Taslima's case, the only living mother) in whose bosom she may find such freedom from fear ("*Amār Māyer Amār Baner Kashte Rāngāno ekushe February Āmi ki Bhulite Pāri...*" 109-112; "Language, my Mother" ch: 27 ; 165-169). It is also to remind at this point that Bangladesh as a nation was produced on the *bhāsā* question - *ekushe* or 21st February being celebrated as its day of political resistance to Pakistan; cultural resistance to Urdu, and celebration of its Bangla *bhāsā* identity. It has also been accepted as the Mother tongue day by the U.N.O. based on this incident.

Taslima notes that the Bangla bhasa is gender- prejudiced and replete with words such as *abalā*, *sati*, *kulatā*, *kalankini*, *beshyā*, *rakshitā*, *māgi*, *chenāl* that are exclusive and distinct to women and do not have masculine equivalents⁵. Taslima's translational proposal –that is-replacing abusive, demeaned words signifying 'woman' as conceptual category (such as *abalā*, *sati*, *rakshitā*) with their semantic opposites to signify 'men' as conceptual categories (such as *abal*, *sat*, *rakshit*) and/or erasing out such words (*abalā*, etc) definitively from the Bengali language, appears bald, strident, and utopian in its simplicity and purity of intent.

I believe that Taslima is aware of the utopian nature of her proposals-given the realities of patriarchy; given that language produces realities and the relation between a word and the reality it mirrors, is a complex transactional one. Therefore the deploying or coining of *abal* to signify a 'man' just as *abalā* 'seamlessly' and 'naturally' connotes a 'woman' may not be such an easy task after all, for the simple reason that such an idea (of a 'weak man' or 'a man that is weak') does not conceptually exist in patriarchy, or Sanskrit-based languages, and is therefore a contradiction in terms. *Purush*, the Sanskrit word for man, literally means strong, tough as well as wise and collected (centred). *Parush*, the adjective derived from the same Sanskrit root also means 'tough,' 'abrasive.' In other words, patriarchy institutionalizes the normativity of 'man' and of 'man' being coeval of 'human.' It reduces woman to a state of ab/normal, sub/normal (and perennially inept) mimicry of such 'humanity.' Language, that is more than all things, discursively informed, and conceptualizing such a binarized world view, cannot therefore 'normally' introduce the demeaned idea of a 'man' and the word *abal* then, if introduced into Bangla language, would take on a jarring, oppositional, and activist note. The value of Taslima's translational proposal lies in its activist intent-its resistance producing possibilities- at the level of the Bengali language. Her life- threatened by her words (in her activist writing such as *Nirbachita Column* (Selected columns), or life-narratives such as *Lajja* (Shame) and *Dwikhandita*-(Split into two)-- gives her translational proposition- a pure, archival quality.

Taslima's argument may be bolstered in the reminder that the Sanskrit language and its worldview is demeaning to the woman and hence all Indic languages sharing Sanskrit roots take on these negative inflections. In her anthology of essays-*Prāchin Bharat: Samāj O Sāhitya* –the noted Sanskrit scholar-Sukumari Bhattacharya, states that, the world of the *Upanishads*, *Puranas* and *Mahakavyas* was demeaning to women and the Indological construction of a glorious (and woman-enabling) Aryan past ruptured by a gender-biased Islamic intervention, was just that- a mythical construction⁶. She identifies several Sanskrit equivalents for 'woman' such as *bhārijya* (someone who must be maintained, a ward, a servant) *ramani* (instrument of sexual pleasure), *kāmini* (one who satisfies sexual desire), *vāmā* (a negative), *jāyā* (one through which man re-produces himself)-all of which signify a demeaned position.

ii

My essay locates Taslima's translational proposal (so far as one particular word *abalā* is concerned) in a particular historico-cultural moment that is past, when the *desh* (that is colonized India); its enslaved status and its future emancipated forms were being imagined in gendered terms. It sees Taslima's engagement with the *abalā* concept to enable a language-country for woman-as one among many in Bangla *sāhitya*. It also revisits *abalā* at a particular historico-cultural moment that is present, when the nation imaginary is being broached/debated in terms of gender violence and gendered terror and suggests its present irrelevance. The essay urges Taslima to engage with another word-bhay (terror) that subsumes and exceeds the *bal/abal* binary. *Bhay* is a concept that defines Taslima's particular predicament and our times far more definitively and its adjectival forms-*nirbhay* and *nirbhik* (concepts in plenitude and predictably masculine)-also cry out for 'woman handling'!

Throwing up a whole host of words in Bangla that signify 'woman' as a conceptual category that is coeval of 'lack,'

and the need to recast/translate/woman-handle them, Nasreen foregrounds the word *abalā* as ripe for sacrifice⁷. *Abalā*, as Taslima points is deployed as a synonym of 'woman' and not simply- 'a woman that is weak'. A Bangla (Sanskrit root) coinage that frames the word *bal* (strength, virility) with the gender neutral prefix *a-* signifying 'lack' and a feminine suffix *ā* signifying the 'feminine'- creates a semantic category that is unique in its double bind. *A-bal-ā* then, literally means 'a woman that lacks *bal*'. Deployed as synonym for 'woman,' it functions as both adjective and noun to connote 'a weak person that is a woman' and 'a woman that is weak.' "Nasreen is right in pointing to this coinage (among many in the Bangla language) that 'otherize' woman as a category and create a semantic trap from which there is no release. The adjective becomes the noun, the description- the thing in itself. Though rarely used in contemporary Bangla parlance (except in derision) as Bengali women are perceived to have moved on from that phase of dependence and abjection⁸ this word came into common parlance especially from the fourth decade of the 19th century in colonial Bengal. It was deployed in the context of the woman question in particular and gender question in general, in colonial India⁹.

The word *abala* was -to a great extent validated within the colonial enterprise and the discursive frame of colonial virility (*bal, birjya, pourush*) *vis a vis* the colonized subject's emasculation. The effete subject 'calls out' to the 'powerful, 'manly' colonizer to 'civilize' to 'make a man' out of him and thus renders such an imperial exercise 'natural' and 'inevitable.' within such a discursive context. Colonial virility and emasculated subject-hood constitute each other and remain locked in a deadly embrace. A further twist to virility-discourses reduces the subject not to mere effete mimicry but to uncontrolled brutishness that is directed towards women in general and its own women in particular¹⁰. The redemption of women (especially from their own men that were either bestial, emasculated or both and thus falling short of normative manliness) as a key plank of 'civilizing mission' informed the crystallization of 'woman' as a doubly marginalized category,

in requirement of emancipation from patriarchy in its universality and from the particularity of Indic patriarchal structures¹¹. Questions of racial superiority, predicated on the enlightened manliness-virility- imaginary and articulated within the aegis of reformist activities such as the banning of *satidāha*; raising of the age of consent for consummation in matrimony; the making of legal provisions for Hindu widow remarriage; or resistance to the Courtney Ilbert Bill (that allowed Indian judges to try the accused -of -European- descent, in district courts in colonial India) have been subject of many studies. So have questions of controlled European masculinity/virility *vis a vis* the brute power and uncontrolled sexuality of the atavistic colonized subject, informed numerous imaginative narratives¹².

“The condition of Indian woman question” if I may echo Carlyle, was in turn calibrated, appropriated and rearticulated by Hindu Bengali ideologues, and the term *abalā* deployed to acknowledge Hindu *mahilāganer heenābasthyā* (the degenerate condition of Hindu women)¹³. The ‘abala’ concept was particularly articulated to bemoan the motherland in chains, and reawaken/ arouse the dormant *bal-birjya* of the colonized subject. The *balaban* man would in turn, redeem the *abalā* that is the ‘woman’ as well as the ‘enslaved motherland.’ It is worth reiterating that the discourse of *bal* was central to the nationalist enterprise and that *abalā* and *balaban* were binarized in the most fundamental sense in the Bangla language so that one could not be conceptualized without the other. *Abalā* then, conceptually cries out for *bal* to fulfil and complete itself. *Bal*, in turn, is meaningless without an *abalā* that it can empower and fulfil.

Significant amidst these complex translational engagements with the *abalā* concept (and nationalist imaginations predicated on the same) is Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya’s narrative *Ānandamath* (1882)¹⁴ and its centrepiece -the song-- “*Bandemātaram*.”¹⁵ Enshrined as India’s national song, “*Bandemātaram*” conflates the glorious though subjugated mother and the shackled motherland- addressing/imagining

both as '*abalā*.' Bankim's juxtaposition of *bal* with *abalā* and the coining of the suggestive line—" *abalā keno Ma eto bale*"(Oh Mother! why are you weak when you have so much strength) is a restating of the colonial logic of power. The motherland, though seemingly *abalā* cannot remain thus as she has so many *balabān* sons. Alternatively, it is the mother's lack of power that calls out for; constitutes powerful sons. Bankim creates a binary of *bal* and *abalā* so that one cannot exist without and one produces the other. If negation is the motor of history it is also the motor of language that produces concepts. A woman's and *abalā*'s 'lack' is the motor that produces the man's plenitude- *bal*. Thus *balaban* (powerful, empowered) and *abalā* remain locked in a conceptual embrace.

If Bankimchandra's (and a host of post -1850s auteurs of Bangla manual books and periodicals) translational engagement with *abalā* is complex, Rabindranath Tagore's engagement is even more so. Tagore acknowledges complexities inherent to *abalā*; its demeaned semantic associations, and the difficulties of erasing it/replacing it from the Bengali language. Significantly, Tagore inscribed a poem entitled *Sabalā* (the empowered woman) in response to the common description of women as *abalā*. The poet poses a question to a (male?) Bidhātā (god) as to why women won't be given the right to cull out their destiny and claim their independence.

Tagore's conceptual deploying of *-abalā* in *Chitrāngadā*-- a dramatic poem¹⁶ that explores the problematic interstices within polarised gender positions and their power (*bal*) equations-is incredibly nuanced¹⁷. *Chitrāngadā*, the 'virile' warrior princess of Manipur, who has been trained in arts of war and governance (and one that is the fruit of her father's prayer for a 'son') is spurned by the *birjyān* (virile) Pāndav prince Arjun as she is perceived as 'mannish' and sexually unattractive¹⁸. In a fit of hurt pride (and a fundamental misunderstanding of her true powers), she calls upon the god of love-Madan- to grant her a hyper-feminised (*surupā*) form. *Chitrāngadā*'s plea to Madan, describes the

woman's sexual prowess; her 'womanly wiles' and 'charms,' as the '*bal*' of the '*abala*,' in a narrative where the quotient of '*bal*' is unevenly spread out between the manly man (the epic hero, Arjun) and the virile warrior princess, Chitrāngadā. Chitrāngadā's radical misunderstanding of her *bal* results in her wishes being granted. The metamorphosed Chitrāngadā-*surupā* becomes the object of Arjun's unbridled 'manly' passions.

After a while, and as Arjun is tiring of the sheer physicality of the relationship with this unknown beauty, he witnesses people in the Manipuri countryside seeking succour as they are terrorized by marauding dacoits. However, Manipuris spurn Arjun's offer of assistance (in short, his manly prowess) as the victims trust the abilities of their (now absent) monarch -Chitrāngadā. Their awareness that she is temporarily unavailable and away on some secret mission does not diminish their faith in her virility and redemptive capabilities. It is she, they are convinced that, combines in herself- the *bahubal* (physical strength) of a *raja* and the *snehabal* (strength of compassion) of a mother- a composite that can redeem them. I perceive this to be a moment of narrational *perpeteia* as Arjun's offer of manly *bal* is spurned as summarily and dismissed- as he had once done to Chitrāngadā when she -as a woman- had sought his manly love.

It is also the point where Arjun begins fantasizing that special woman who possesses the *bal* and *buddhi* (acumen) of a king. It is the moment of *peripeitia* and *agnorisis* so far as Chitrāngadā is concerned as well, as she comes to terms with what she is-an awesome indeterminate. When Arjun finally accosts the re-metamorphosed and assuming her original self- Chitrāngadā- it is an epiphanic instant. Chitrāngadā displays that fearsome interdeterminacy of a *birjyabati nāri* (a potent woman) and one whose offer of a relationship is absolutely contingent and conditional. I consider Tagore's Chitrāngadā- narrative, a crucial moment in the *anuvād-prayās* (translational efforts) of *abalā* in Sanskritic languages and in the outlining of a *nārir bhasā--desh* -a language country for women.

III

Abalā is equally central to a number of discourses regarding the education- enlightenment of women in 19th century Bengal. In fact, the entire reformist exercise (and especially its Bramho dimension) in aid of the advancement of women -in the 19th early 20th century Bengal-was defined as an act of a few *bāndhabs* or *bandhus* (friends) of *abalās*¹⁹. In these reformist tracts and periodical-based writings, *bāndhab* and *bandhu* emerge as terms that embrace *abalā* at this point of time to allow the conceiving of an enlightened and compassionate friend. Such a *bandhav* is distinct from the domesticated *bhadra* man who marries/ deploys women to produce male descendants for his lineage, or the predatory man that is prone to sexually exploit women²⁰. The term *abalā*-when combined with *bāndhab*- recasts ameliorates colonial discourses of the brutish, sexually incontinent 'native' and creates another enabling composite within the emergent 'new patriarchy' in colonial India²¹. Needless to repeat that, the figure of the spiritually leavened companionate male is produced by the desexualized and hapless *abalā*. It is by extending compassion just as by deploying controlled aggression, that one becomes 'manly.'

IV

Abalabandhab was the name of a seminal journal that its editor the Bramho reformer Dwarakanath Gangopadhyay dedicated, to the cause of women enlightenment. *Abalabandhab* was published from Lonsingha in Faridpur (now in Bangladesh), from the 10th of *Jaistha* in 1876 and became a mouthpiece of Bramho initiatives regarding education and enlightenment of women. The first issue states the following as the objective of the news-journal/periodical and is worth quoting (and translating) in some detail:

*Jahāte bangiya stree samājer abasthā kramasha unnata
hoe, tāhāder gyan o dharmer briddhi hoe [...] sāmājīk o*

*pāribārik sukher janmo hoe [...] abalābalir rachanābali
prakash karāo abalābāndhaber ek kartabye parinata hoibe.
Streedigke debabat pujā karibarei patrikā prachārīto hoilo
keho jeno eirup mane Karen nā, ettadeshiya abalādigake
bhaginibat shraddhā o sneha kariat āhādige rmangal
bardhani āmāder abhiprāye*

[*Abalabandhab* is committed to the gradual evolution of Bengali women as a community; to the growth and development of their intellectual and spiritual qualities; and to the augmenting of their social and familial wellbeing. *Abalabandhab* will also take it up as its task the publishing of the writings of the *abalas*. Let no one conclude that the journal is geared towards deifying and worshipping of women. It intends to respect and render compassion to the sister-like *abalas* of this country and further the cause of their wellbeing. Qtd. Swapan Basu, "Bhumika", *Sambad-samayikpatre Bangali Samaj*. Kolkata: Pashchimbanga Bangla Academy, 2003, 10].

Here, *abalā* forms a composite with a *bandhu* and beckons to a friend that treats her as a desexualized project for compassion and redemption. In short, *abalā* takes out of the 'woman,' the quotient of fearful and obnoxious sexuality and renders her merely an object of *compassion*. Similarly, the composite *abalābāndhab*, takes out of a man the quotient of expedient sexual functionality and predatory lust. It neutralizes him as a spiritual and compassionate companion.

Another common synonym for women in 19th century Bengal is *abodh* or childlike (bereft of cognitive abilities, understanding) and came to inform news-journals addressing the woman question that called itself *Abodhbāndhab*. Equally significant is the name of the iconic women's journal-*Bāmābodhini Patrikā* as it speaks of giving *bodh* or cognition to women (*bāmā*) assuming that she is bereft of the same. Almost all newspapers, journals, and English papers of the 19th century prioritized the

woman- question and contents of roughly around 88 known periodicals in Bangla in the 19th century deploy the terms *abalā*, *abodh* as synonyms for women²².

V

I take this opportunity to randomly point towards four texts (in awareness that there were several others) being produced at this point and all constructing the *abala* in prescribed ways to prove that it was quite *the concept* of its times and engaged with repeatedly.

Abalā- Prabala, a poetic romance set against a mythical aristocratic backdrop by Kalikumar Mukhopadhyay was published in 1855. It recounts the exploits of capable women, assuming male disguises, outsmarting devious men and helping thereby, their beloved spouses. The poem creates the composite that is oppositional-that of a strong, capable *abala* in aid of patriarchy and therefore—a *prabalā* or a -powerful. This idea of the strong, capable woman who often takes up male disguises to serve a larger patriarchal cause is as old as Shakespeare and the Portias, Violas, and Rosalinds that his comedies foreground.

Abalābālā is a prose narrative by Satyacharan Mitra (1886) that recounts the multiple and continual distresses of a damsel named *Abalā*. The execrable, hyperventilating narrative underscores with tiresome regularity that, women are weak, vulnerable, prey to rapacious men and require constant male help-in short-they are *abalā*²³.

Bāmābodhini Patrikā (1864-1922) contains a dialogic tract by a certain Kumari Saudamini, in which two women-named-*Abalā* and *Saralā*- deliberate ways in which women can acquire ethical and spiritual qualities. This is one among many such dialogic advice manuals where the woman is addressed as or named *Abala*, and where qualities that constitute the desexualised ethical and spiritual constituents of being a woman

are deliberated²⁴.

A prose advice manual named *Abalābāndhab* by Saratchandra Dhar (1889) is divided into chapters-such as *Duties towards a husband; Conversation with Husband; Flirtatious and loquacious behaviour; Humility and Good Deeds; Satitva: a Heavenly Treasure; Duties of a Widow towards a Widow*-and attempts (like the more well-known reformer-ideologue Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay had done a few years ago in his *Pāribārik Prabandha* in 1882) to educate the *abalā* in new domesticity. The *swami* advises the *stree* regarding every aspect of domesticity and assumes the role of the *bandhab*-preceptor that writes on the *tabula rasa* of the ignorant but tractable-*abalā*.

I conclude this section of my argument with the point that the coining of *abalā* was inevitable, given the entire discourse of *bal*, *birjya*. The conceptualizing of *abalā* as also inevitable given that the *balbirjya* required the amelioration and conceptual latitude of the intellectual *bandhab*. I take this opportunity to remind Taslima that, if '*abalā*' must be banished, then so must '*bal*', as they walk together.

VI

I begin the second part of my translational dialogue with Taslima noting that the conceptual binaries of *bal/abalā* are largely irrelevant in the contemporary world (and a world that is conceptualized by *bhāsās* with Sanskritic roots) and therefore, insufficient to imagine a *bhāsā-desh* for women. A word that more definitively embodies/informs our times; that is equally gender informed- is *bhay* or terror. I would even go far enough to state that discourses of *bhay* subsume the *bal*-concept and exceed it. *Bal* is reduced to a component, an instrumentality of terror. The centrality and valence of *bhay*- for one like Taslima Nasreen who has been condemned to an exilic condition; remains in the shadow of multiple death-dealing *fatwas*; is threatened for her critiquing of Islamic fundamentalism's anti-woman stance-need

not be overemphasised. Here again, *bhay* is gendered because its adjectival obverse –*nirbhay* or *nirbhik* - are positions of plenitude, and therefore conceptually ‘male.’ Adjectives describing the terrorized state-*bhita*, *bhayārta* (affrighted) are feminine qualities and, related emotive concepts like *namratā*, *kunthā*, *lajjā* (humility, deference, shame) constitute feminine attraction. The ‘bold’ woman is ‘brazen’ and ‘unwomanly.’ Alternatively, the ‘proper acknowledgement of male capacity to frighten, harass, tease and coerce’ is also considered stereotypically feminine²⁵. Gendered terror-*bhay*-that takes the form of gang rape of women as punishment and sheer display of power- renders a woman exilic everywhere. Gendered humiliation/mass rape as an instrument of terror and conquest with the Taliban in Afghanistan and the ISIS in Iraq and Syria; gendered torture of prisoners in /Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib; enslaving/terrorizing women by outfits such as Boko Haram in ethnic conflicts in Nigeria²⁶, re-assemble ideas of distinctive national spaces, as women have no country in any country, and the weak are tortured ‘like women’ everywhere.

VII

Pivotal to the concluding portion of my translational dialogue is the horrific gang- rape of a girl in a moving bus in Delhi in 2012. It is a moment that forced the nation (and the world) to deliberate the effectiveness of terror in inscribing patriarchy in a transitional society, given the senseless of the brutality and incommensurability of violence in this particular incident of rape. Significantly, Taslima’s framing proposition-that women have no country-was also central to the Nirbhayā rape- debate and questions regarding a woman’s nationality/citizenship; the advisability of women inhabiting public spaces in large cities and especially at night, independently- were ceaselessly debated²⁷.

Parinitha, who has examined the Delhi-rape issue notes that, “such moments, when our naturalized ways of being woman are de-familiarised, are creative and difficult moments when we have to collectively attempt to think of new possibilities of being

women" ("Being Woman" 193-201). The coining of 'Nirbhayā' to identify and protect the identity of the young North Indian woman who fought till the bitter end, a horrific gang rape on a moving bus in Delhi; brought her rapists to justice by testifying against them, even in her death throes and identified the criminals before she succumbed to her injuries, is again that creative and difficult moment when 'being woman' in language- in representation- is being recast, reassembled.

The coining of 'Nirbhay-ā' with a feminine suffix 'ā' -to connote a 'woman' because *nirbhik* (unafraid) is conceptually masculine; and *bhayārta/bhita* (afraid) conceptually feminine-for a woman that resisted what defined her- *bhay*-has, inscribed thereby that awesome indeterminate-the fearless woman. I believe it is *the gendered intervention* (woman-handling) of Indic languages (in this instance, Hindi) of our times. The neologism has imagined into being- a country for women-a country where woman are not free or secure-but are fundamentally so in their absolute resistance to and freedom from terror-*bhay*.

NOTES

1. My essay refers to both the original' Bangla essay "*Linga -Nirapeksha Bānglā Bhāsār Prayojan*" and the Bangla book where they are anthologised- *Narir Kono Desh Nei* (Howrah: Riju, 2007, 180-184) alongside its English translation "A Gender-Neutral Bengali Language is Required" in the anthology *No Country for Women* (New Delhi: Vitasta Publishers, tr. Dipendra Raychaudhuri and others, 2010, 283-288)
2. Refer to Sherry Simon edited *Gender in Translation: Cultural identity and the Politics of Transmission*. London, New York: Routledge, 1996.
3. Michel Certeau differentiates between *tactic* and *strategy*, defining *tactic* as emancipatory moves that dodge, and defy surveillance in *The Practice of Everyday life*, Tr. Steven Rendall.

- Berkeley Los Angeles London: University of California Press, 1984.
4. *Desh* is a word with multiple connotations in Bangla, encompassing a range of meanings from country, nation, place, village, home.
 5. Though Taslima indicates that the Bangla language is gender deficient because it conceptualizes a Bengali society that is so, this correspondence (between the signifier and signified) is one that Taslima fails to forge with any degree of clarity at any given point in her essay, and it is this *lacunae* that robs her essay of its ideational cutting edge
 6. Refer to Uma Chakravarty's "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi: Orientalism, Nationalism, and a Script for the Past" in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid edited, *Recasting Women: New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990*(27-56). Also read Peter van der Veer's "Aryan Origins" in his *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton University Press and Oxford, 2001, 134-155).
 7. In the said essay, Taslima notes that apart from *abalā*, terms such as *kumāri* (virgin), *sati* (chaste wife), *rakshitā* (keep), *patitā* (the fallen woman), *bārānganā*, *barbanitā* (public woman), *ganika* (whore), *beshya* (whore), *dākini* (witch), *kalankini* (the fallen woman), *kulatā*(home-breaker), *upapatni* (sub-wife, keep), *māgi* (woman as a demeaned category)*chenāl* (tease) and so forth are used exclusively to connote (and demean) women and have no masculine equivalent.
 8. Taslima radically disagrees on this point, and sees women (in and outside Bengal) as not evolving but as regressing into more heinous and demeaned situations. Refer to the essay *Āmi Kān Pete Roi* (I strain to Listen).
 9. I make this statement with some trepidation as I don't have

enough data regarding other Indic *bhasas* to back up my claim.

10. The 'anxieties of rape' embedded within and informing 'Raj' (and East/West encounter) narratives such as E.M. Forsters' *A Passage to India* (1924), or Paul Scott's *The Jewel in the Crown* (1966), are worth reflecting upon in this context. So are Mutiny (the uprising of Indian sepoy in 1857 that rocked the foundations of the British Empire) narratives (by the likes of Flora Annie Steel's *On the Face of the Waters* 1896, James Grant's *First Love and Last Love: A Tale of the Indian Mutiny, 1868*, Jules Verne's *The Demon of Cawnpore*, 1880, J.E.P. Muddock's *The Star of Fortune*, 1895 or Ruskin Bond's *A Flight of Pigeons*, 2003) where the controlled and effective aggression of the British soldier/officer is distinguished from the brute and senseless violence of the 'native' mobs'. Also refer to Fanon's articulation of the white man's primal fears regarding the black man in *Black Skin/White Mask*.
11. While literature on this subject is vast and variegated it makes sense to read Ashis Nandy's *Intimate Enemy; Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Delhi: OUP, 1983); Mrinalini Sinha's *Colonial Masculinity: The Manly Englishman and the 'effeminate' Bengali in late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), and Indira Chaudhuri's *Frail Hero/Virile History* (New Delhi: OUP, 2003) for more on the politics of gender in colonial India.
12. *Hindu Mahilāganer Heenābastha* (the demeaned status of Hindu Women) is the title of a Bangla polemical tract, by Kailashbasini Debi (Kolkata: 1863) and sums up the basic form that the woman question took in 19th colonial India. In all probability, such discourses took their cue from James Mill's originary statement that "among rude people, the women are generally degraded; among civilized people they are exalted" and that "nothing can exceed the habitual contempt which Hindus entertain for their women [...] They are held

- accordingly, in extreme degradation." (*The History of British India*, 2 vols, New York, Chelsea House: 1968, 309-10)
13. Serialized in the Bankimchandra edited journal, *Bangadarshan*, between 1881 and 1882, *Ānandamath* was published as a book in 1882.
 14. I have dropped the 'a' sound for Bengali rendering of Sanskrit words. Hence I write 'Arjun' and not 'Arjuna', and 'Madan' and not 'Madana.' The only exception is *Mahabharata* where the final 'á' sound is retained in accordance with more traditional transliterative practices of Sanskrit words. Also the 'v' sound for original Sanskrit words- *veshya*, *virjya*, *vandemataram*, are replaced with the 'b' sound as that is how these words are spelt and pronounced in Bangla. Also I have avoided diacritical marks except the macron sign, as a uniform transliterative practice.
 15. Tagore used an episode in the epic *Mahabharata* to create a modern dance drama called *Chitrāngadā* in 1892.
 16. Refer to Sumanyu Sathpathy's treatment of such nuances in his essay "As Though She Were a Man" anthologized in D. Bannerjee's *Rabindranath Tagore in the 21st Century* (2015).
 17. Arjun's hypermasculine avatar in Tagore's *Chitrāngadā* is self-contained; self-referential and does not take into account the greater *Mahabharata* context where Arjun –in various periods of exile and disguise –took up the androgynous avatar of a Brihannalā- in the kingdom of Virat; and who was immobilized into 'unmanly' dejection at the prospect of shedding kin-blood before the great Kurukshetra war. It also does not take into account Arjun's defeat (and near death) at the hands of a mere boy-Vabruvahan-a boy that turned out to his own- and one born of a union between Chitrāngadā and himself during his stay in Manipur, in the original *Mahabharata* narrative.

18. It is not entirely arbitrary that one of the prominent female figures of the Bengal renaissance, the wife of the renowned scientist Sir Jagadishchandra Bose, was named 'Abala.' Lady Abala Bose was also known to be that perfect companionate partner to her famous husband.
19. Refer to the Bramho preceptor Dhirendranath Pal's popular advice manual *Streer Sahit Kathopokathan* (Conversations with the Wife, 1883, Tr. Walsh) and other domestic manuals as well as writings on the woman-question for more on this new companionate relation between husband and wife. The husband introduces a hitherto not-broached dimension to the marital relationship and informs his wife "that kind of friendship is essential between a husband and wife. All humans wish in their hearts for someone who'll be a "kindred spirit" a "soulmate." When we don't find such a person, our hidden grief kills us inside. Can't you have this kind [...] friendship with your husband?" (*Appendix A Domesticity in Colonial Bengal*, 172).
20. Refer to Partha Chatterjee's idea of 'new patriarchy' in "Woman and the Nation" in *The Nation and its Fragments*, New Delhi: OUP, 1999.
21. Refer to Swapan Basu edited *Sangbād Sāmayikpatre Unish Shataker Bāngālī Samāj: Dwitiya khanda* (Pashchim Banga Bangla Academy, 2003,)
22. The same Satyacharan Mitra is the author of the advice manual *Strir Prati Swāmir Upadesh* (A Husband's Advice to his Wife, 1884) and one among many who according to Judith Walsh (*Domesticity in Colonial Bengal: What Women Learnt when Men gave them advice*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004) contributed to the formulations of a 'new patriarchy' in Bengal.
23. I have used the Bharati Ray collated and edited *Nari O Paribar: Bamabodhini Patrika (1270-1329 Bangabda)* (Kolkata: Ananda

Publishers, 2002, 44-45).

24. Consider the compulsory foreplay in mainstream Hindi movies that constitutes of *ched-chãrd*-the ritual of a boy teasing, coercing the reluctant girl into submission in a romantic relationship.
25. Militants and terror groups such as BOKO Haram in Nigeria have repeatedly abducted women and reduced them to sex slaves, raping and terrorizing them into submission.
26. The Delhi gang rape of 2012 brought into forefront the question of a country/space for women. Many (and these include politicians; judges, and one of her rapists in an interview in programme entitled *India's Daughter* in 2015) have 'explained' the incident with the idea of woman as a category that requires constant protection and is not fit to inhabit public spaces independently. When 'Nirbhayã' ventured out in the evening with a boyfriend (that she was not married to) and in a public vehicle, in a huge atomised, city, she 'invited' rape as 'just' punishment for her 'transgression.' The discourse of a woman's country or security being her home and male members of her family ranging from fathers, brothers during childhood, husband after marriage, and grown up son in her old age, is as old as the Hindu lawgiver, Manu ("A woman is not fit for independence" *The Laws of Manu*. Tr. Doniger and Smith, London, Penguin, 1991).

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