Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific
Issue 53, May 2026
doi: 10.25911/765V-TG77

Vernacular Voids: Gendered Trauma and the Politics of Untranslatability in *Kallol*'s Radical Short Stories from Colonial Bengal

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Abstract

This paper analyses epistemic violence as it appears in western feminist interpretations of Bengali women's writings from the *Kallol* (1923–1929) literary movement, whose works remain untranslated. *Kallol* magazine privileged women's experiences under colonial and patriarchal domination through experimental strategies like fractured syntax, vernacular language, and deliberate silences. Through a close reading of the short stories of *Kallol* writers like Haripada Guha and Premendra Mitra this paper argues their representation of female trauma through culturally specific motifs like *ghorer chaya* (shadow of the home) resists assimilation into western feminist universalisation of suffering. Drawing on Spivak's epistemic violence thesis (1988) and Mohanty's critique of western feminism, the paper shows how untranslated *Kallol* works resist erasure of the intersectional critique of these Bengali women. By staging the untranslatable as epistemic resistance, this research maps a decolonial translation ethics based on *Kallol*'s feminist poetics as exemplified in key texts like *Chithi*, *Aparadhini*, and *Bikrita Khudar Phande* which collectively demonstrate the movement's multifaceted feminist strategies. It warns against translations that would empty these women's silences into spaces filled with hegemonic paradigms, calling instead for critical opacity through vernacular metaphors and syntactical interruptions. This advances discourse on gendered trauma in postcolonial translation, emphasising ethical engagement with South Asian literary radicalism.

Keywords: Epistemic violence, gendered trauma, postcolonial feminism, subaltern silence, decolonial translation, colonial India.

Historical background to *Kallol*

The little Bengali magazine *Kallol* was in print from 1923 to 1929. The name *Kallol* translates as the 'sound of roaring waves.'[1] Edited by Dineshranjan Das and Gokulchandra Nag, *Kallol* represents what Sudhir Chandra has called a larger 'critical traditionalism' in colonial India.[2] As an engagement with and resistance to both indigenous patriarchy and western modernity, the magazine announced itself not merely as another literary magazine but as a revolutionary force with a deliberate, cacophonous challenge to the established orders of both colonial and literary authority. In the 1920s landscape of colonial Bengal, where the dying echoes of the

[1] The name *Kallol* (কল্লোল) derives from the Sanskrit *Kallola*, meaning the surging or roaring of waves.

[2] Sudhir Chandra, *The Oppressive Present: Literature and Social Consciousness in Colonial India* (Routledge India, 2014), 5, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315734095.

Swadeshi movement mingled with rising anti-colonial sentiment and fervent social reform debates, a new voice arose that would fundamentally reshape Bengali literature and feminist discourse. Emerging during what Sabyasachi Bhattacharya has termed 'the rebellious decade,'[3] *Kallol* became the definitive platform for a new generation of writers who sought to break free from what they perceived as the pervasive influence of Rabindranath Tagore's humanist universalism and the genteel reformism of the previous era's *bhadralok* intellectuals.

The magazine's importance, however, lay not quite in its anti-colonialism or in its rejection of Tagorean aestheticism. What distinguished *Kallol* within the landscape of early twentieth-century Bengali print culture was a systematic effort to democratise literary space, offering unprecedented attention to the experiences of the most marginal of figures—the widow doomed to social death, the prostitute fighting her way through the system of entrenched exploitation, and the educated woman chafing against the bonds of domesticity. The group did not merely merge with Bengali literature; they fundamentally reshaped Bengal's literary history by introducing colloquial language (*chalit bhasa*). *Kallol* emerged as a jolt to the outmoded social systems of the nineteenth century and opened a route that shifted the established spells of Bengali writing. Born in the intellectual turmoil of post-World War I Bengal, when humanity suffered from the aftershocks of war and the loosening of traditional morality, *Kallol* exemplified a movement of necessity. As Buddhadeb Basu recognised, the revolt they launched was one that was wholly necessary. The *Kallol* writers were an assemblage of young, intellectual anarchists who challenged social bondage for the full status of a human entity. They shot their 'revolting arrows,'[4] directly at the systems of the nineteenth century.

That was an age of great intellectual ferment. The consequences of global war sent the western world reeling in an existential uncertainty that duly found its mirror in Bengal's intellectual landscape. New philosophies like Marxism, Freudian thought, and the radical relativity of Einstein flooded the decrepit social structure, generating friction and new ideas. The *Kallol* group became the carrier of this fire for women. While they had to forge a new path away from the immense influence of Rabindranath Tagore, their principal target was not the giant himself but the systemic ideology and deep-seated bondage of the outdated social order. When *Kallol* magazine was established in 1923, it marked a significant break from Bengali romanticism of the nineteenth century. *Kallol* authors experimented with fragmented narratives, free verse, and most importantly *chalit bhasa* (colloquial Bengali). This linguistic decision was essentially political; *chalit bhasa* included the common urban Bengali speakers' vernacular rhythms, vocabulary, and syntax, including those from lower socioeconomic classes and non-elite groups who were typically left out of formal literature.

As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak theorises, 'Two senses of representation are being run together: representation as "speaking for", as in politics, and representation as "representation", as in art or philosophy.... These two senses of representation—within state formation and the law, on the one hand, and in subject—predication, on the other—are

[3] Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal: 1920—1947* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 214, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198098942.001.0001.

[4] Buddhadeva Bose, 'Perspectives on Bengali Poetry: An Interview with Buddhadeva Bose,' *Mahfil* 3, no. 4 (1966), http://www.jstor.org/stable/23030779.

related but irreducibly discontinuous.'[5] What defined the *Kallol* sensibility was a commitment to qualitative modernism and a refusal to uphold the social untouchability that had plagued earlier writing. They did not primarily focus on the elite. Instead, they sought out the pangs and sufferings of lives—the poor, the middle class, the fallen woman, the beggar. They used literature to paint the ferocious and dirty picture of society, and, through that unflinching realism, they aimed to heal traumatised hearts and dismantle superstitious systems and practices. Their method was sharpened by an active engagement with foreign literature and philosophy, often facilitated by translation, pulling in challenging ideas from French and German thought.

But the *Kallol* writers enacted a certain politics of untranslatability, an act which was another very conscious decolonial move. The use of the vernacular *chalit bhasa* over the Sanskritised *sadhu bhasa* was a political rejection of the male *bhadralok* elite. Their fractured syntax wasn't poor writing; it was performative of the fragmented female consciousness under patriarchy. In staking their resistance on the untranslatable, the literature of *Kallol* pre-emptively counters the epistemic violence Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty diagnosed.[6] It does not wait to be misinterpreted; it builds resistance into its form. This is not a rejection of dialogue. It's an insistence on a more ethical, rigorous engagement that begins by seeing opacity not as something to be overcome but as a right to be respected. The decolonial critic's work is not to eliminate this opacity but to protect and foreground it. The flattening of semantic depth here sacrificed the original cultural resonance of the text for artificial clarity. This process finally erases political specificity. The narrative is divested of its precise location within anti-colonial and social reform debates peculiar to Bengal and is reframed as the universal, eternal story of woman versus patriarchy.

However, the existing body of scholarship on *Kallol*, ranging from *Kallol Yug* (1950) to more recent work, has largely focused on the movement's male authors. Feminist readings of the period have focused on the *Bhadramahila* reform histories of the nineteenth century.

Methodology

I propose that the women writers of *Kallol* and the construction of female subjectivity demand a specific theoretical discourse, as they defy the very conditions of legibility that western feminism and nationalist historiography traditionally demanded.

The radical argument in this paper is threefold—a close reading of *Kallol*'s women-authored short stories through the lens of untranslatability, intervening in translation studies and using critical opacity as an ethical framework for future translations of South Asian feminist texts. The *Kallol* authors had built defences into the very structure of their work. They enacted Édouard Glissant's 'right to opacity' where 'opacity itself is neither an ontological given nor an existential description; rather, it is a political achievement, a goal that must be cultivated and fostered in active, quotidian relays.'[7] This refusal protects the text's irreducible density. If the powerful critiques from Spivak and Mohanty diagnose the illness—epistemic violence in the consumption of non-western texts, then the work of thinkers like Glissant and

[5] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (University of Illinois Press, 1988).

[6] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,' *Feminist Review* 30 (1988), 75, https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1988.42; Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' 280

[7] Benjamin P. Davis, 'The Politics of Édouard Glissant's Right to Opacity,' *The CLR James Journal* 25, nos. 1/2 (2019), https://www.jstor.org/stable/26946358.

Barbara Cassin offers the actual strategy for a cure.[8] They give the tools to understand how a text can literally arm itself against hermeneutic colonisation. The revolutionary potential of the *Kallol* narratives is not just in what they say, but in their formal, deliberate construction as productively untranslatable. This is the core of their decolonial argument. This article also argues that the radical feminist potential of *Kallol*'s short stories resides precisely in the vernacular voids where the deliberate use of culturally saturated motifs by the authors performs a politics of untranslatability. The fractured syntaxes of the texts and the strategic silences resist assimilation into universalising western feminist frameworks. It posits that future translation efforts must adopt an ethics of 'critical opacity' to honour this resistance.

All translations from Bengali in this paper are the author's own unless otherwise specified. All other English quotations are cited from published sources.

Vernacular form and gendered resistance

It is feasible to see *Aparadhini* as formally staging this tension if untranslatability provides one textual answer and epistemic violence identifies the structural challenge that makes subaltern discourse only readable inside dominant frames. The narrative creates a dramatic conflict between vernacular testimony and judicial authority, rather than just depicting gendered violence. The story reorganises the space of judgment through Manisha's courtroom statement, focusing on the moral framework that leads to the accused woman's criminalisation rather than the accused herself.

Manisha is a widow forced into prostitution and in the story is on trial for the murder of a client in self-defence. She finds that her judge is Niren, the very man who had seduced and abandoned her. It is a narrative contrivance and the masterstroke of this story which creates a closed arena where intimate betrayal collides with state-sanctioned power. Manisha speaks not for a plea of mercy but as an indictment in raw, vernacular Bengali that carries her weight of lived experience starkly contrasting with the sanitised, procedural language of the court. Her speech exposes the hypocritical core of patriarchal morality which she calls a brutal double standard: 'এই পুরুষ—দুনিয়ায় ইহারাই শ্রেষ্ঠ—বরেণ্য—মাননীয়. অথচ এই পুরুষ—ইহারাই উচ্চকণ্ঠে প্রকাশ করে নারী আমাদের মা ভগিনী ও কন্যা.' (These men—considered the greatest, the most honourable in this world. Yet these men loudly proclaim that women are our mothers, sisters, and daughters.)[9]

While the speech remains embedded in lived experience rather than abstraction, its structure produces a diagnostic effect. By juxtaposing idealised categories of 'mother, sister, daughter' with the socially abandoned widow, the monologue exposes the moral bifurcation through which patriarchy sanctifies symbolic womanhood while abandoning material women. Manisha outlines the mechanism through which the patriarchal system (*samaj*) idealises the abstract, symbolic woman (mother, sister, daughter) and devalues the material, vulnerable one (the destitute widow). She names the epistemic violence that brands her 'weak, easily deceived' (*durbala nari*), thus locating the guilt for her victimisation in her nature. She refuses the transparent designation of criminal and instead defines herself as the logical product of a rotten system.

[8] Barbara Cassin, ed., *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, trans. Steven Rendall et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400849918.

[9] Prabhabatidevi Saraswati, 'Aparadhini,' in *Kallol Galpasamagra*, ed. Arun Mukhopadhaya, vol. 2 (Mitra and Ghosh Publishers, 2007).

This act of reclamation culminates in a powerful moment of untranslatable resistance. Niren gave her a necklace which became a physical symbol of Manisha's exploitation. In returning it, she severs their connection and symbolically returns the burden of her guilt. Her declaration reverses the stance of the law: although being officially condemned, she takes on the role of an assessor. The speech act undermines the moral order that supports the ruling, but it does not fundamentally invalidate it: 'আজ তুমি উন্নত মহান মাননীয় লোক, আর আমি হেয় ঘৃণ্য একটা পতিতা নারী; আজ তুমি আমার বিচারক, আমি অপরাধিনী। যদি শক্তি থাকত এ নারীর, তোমার মত পুরুষকে আমি এমন শাস্তি দিতুম যা কল্পনাতেও কেউ কখনও আনতে পারে নি.'(Today you stand as an honourable, respectable man, while I am a despised, disgraceful woman. if only women had the power, I would have given men like you a punishment so unimaginable that no one could ever conceive it.)[10]

Here, the vernacular becomes the only adequate vessel for her rage and despair. The phrase 'হে ঘৃণ্য' (*hey ghrinya*/despised, disgraceful) carries a cultural weight and social stigma that a simple English translation cannot capture. Her acceptance of the death sentence 'এ দণ্ড আমি মাথা পেতে আদর করে নিচ্ছি' (I accept this punishment with open arms, embracing it with love)[11] complicates any simple reading of resistance. It is an act of will that denies the state any claim on disposing of her life on its own terms. She converts her execution into triumph over a life of degradation. The story collapses the impersonal state apparatus into personalised patriarchal corruption—the magistrate pronouncing the death sentence is none other than Niren.

This scene makes the problem of translation even more difficult. The layered collapse of intimate betrayal and legal power is insufficiently registered by terms like 'injustice.' It's not just unfairness that's at stake; it's the mixing of personal seduction and governmental punishment in one person. And Manisha's final realisation 'জ্ঞান হয়েছিল, তাই বুঝেছিলুম' (I gained awareness, that's why I understood)[12] marks a shift from personal grievance to systemic perception. It marks her transition from a state of false consciousness wherein she believed Niren's promises to one of critical awareness of the true nature of the patriarchal system. Her crime of murder gets repositioned from a sin to a violent act of enlightenment. Saraswati Devi, through Manisha, demonstrates that for the subaltern, speech only is not enough; it must be a speech act of judgment which is delivered from the space of the 'vernacular void' that the hegemonic system cannot comprehend or forgive. In *Aparadhini*, the subaltern does not just speak; she testifies, she prosecutes, and she passes sentence.

To put these events into a bigger theoretical context, we need to look at how writings by non-western women are circulated in global academic networks. In this context, Spivak and Mohanty's contributions are still useful, not as definitive conclusions, but as spaces to start asking how subaltern speech fits into theoretical languages that already exist. In the literary translational sphere, this is a systematic act of hermeneutic injustice.

It is also important to tell the difference between opacity as strategic resistance and opacity as structural exclusion. It is possible to see Manisha's dense use of vernacular in *Aparadhini* as a form of resistant excess, but it is also a reflection of the limited room she has for discourse. As a result, her speech's opacity is double edged: it preserves irreducibility

[10] Saraswati, 'Aparadhini,' 213.

[11] Saraswati, 'Aparadhini,' 214.

[12] Saraswati, 'Aparadhini,' 214.

while also indicating her marginal place within legal terminology. Recognising this tension prevents opacity from becoming an uncomplicated celebration.

Although Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' has often been summarised reductively, its relevance for translation studies lies in its attention to the conditions under which speech becomes intelligible. Spivak does not present subalternity as an identity, but as a position produced through structural erasure, in which attempts at articulation risk assimilation into dominant frameworks. To articulate within colonial, patriarchal or nationalist dominant discourses of means assimilating their predetermined terms of legibility. The latter entails nothing less than the fundamental distortion of her specific consciousness. The notorious case of *sati* provides the critical diagnosis of the woman's body which became a semiotic battlefield for the conflict between the contending patriarchies of British colonial intervention versus Hindu nationalist veneration. In her analysis of sati, Spivak shows how the widow's body became a contested site between colonial reform and nationalist preservation. In this configuration, the subjective will of the widow was largely overwritten by competing patriarchal narratives.[13]

Moving from the general thesis to the textual domain, in order to rephrase Spivak's question: 'Can the subaltern text signify on its own terms?' when a text from the *Kallol* milieu imbued in the vernacular specificities of Bengali *chalit bhasa*, inflected by the cultural calculus of *apoman* (caste-specific shame), or situated within a specifically Bengali *bhadralok* critique is rendered for a western readership. Even at moments of apparent critical and translational solidarity, formal and cultural opacities of the text are smoothed over. The text is framed as an illustration of a pre-sanctioned universal (trauma theory, agency-focused feminism). Motifs such as *shunya* or *ghorer chaya* can be rendered through approximate equivalents—'emptiness,' 'domestic sphere'—yet such substitutions shift their semantic field. What is gained in accessibility may be accompanied by a narrowing of cultural resonance.

In order to understand what is not translated, consider two possible ways to translate Manisha's final statement: 'এ দণ্ড আমি মাথা পেতে আদর করে নিচ্ছি.' [14]A literal translation—'I accept this punishment bowing my head, embracing it with love'—may give a wrong message that Manisha is meekly surrendering to the punishment. A translation focusing on defiance—'I welcome this punishment as if embracing a beloved'—may correctly identify the active verb (*ador* kore: to caress/embrace affectionately), but it fails to convey the cultural implications of *ador*, which carries a connotation of intimacy. These limitations are not in the target language but are a measure of the text's untranslatability: it forces the reader to think about the paradox without providing a way out.

It is possible that this leads to a partial transmission: the story gets told, but its regionally specific tensions are recalibrated within dominant interpretive grids. The writing 'speaks,' but it does so within a framework that it did not make. The subaltern text, therefore, cannot truly 'speak'; it can only be articulated. The radical project *Kallol* thus refused this systemic violence of literary translation, insisting instead upon an ethics rooted not in forced clarity, but rather in Glissant's 'right to opacity,' allowing the resistances inherent within the text to remain potent and challenging.[15]

[13] Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' 295.

[14] Saraswati, 'Aparadhini,' 214.

[15] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189, https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.10257.

While Prabhabatidevi Saraswati's *Aparadhini* represents resistance as a spectacular public indictment, Haripada Guha's *Chithi* (Letter) explores a more introspective, yet no less radical path of subversion hinged on the politics of untranslatability. This story takes the action away from the judicial court into the interior space of a widow who negotiates a vernacular landscape of key cultural terms becoming sites of epistemic resistance. It powerfully captures how the systemic violence of dispossession reinforced by the lack of property rights before the 1937 Hindu Women's Property Act could crush women. *Chithi* shows that the very oppression could forge a unique and pragmatic form of feminist consciousness expressed through culturally dense terms that defy easy assimilation into western feminist frameworks.

The protagonist's plight begins with a familiar pattern of gendered violence. The quiet, philosophical lament of her moment of profound crisis reads as: 'ভাবতে লাগলুম, এই স্ত্রী জাতিটা এত দুর্বল, এতটা অসহায় কেন? এর জন্য কে বেশী দায়ী? প্রকৃতি, না তারা নিজে?' (I began to wonder, why is womankind so weak and helpless? Who is more responsible for this nature, or they themselves?)[16]

The phrase 'স্ত্রী জাতি' (*stree jati*) is often flatly translated as womankind, but this erases its specific resonance. *Jati* carries connotations of species, genus, even caste, and the perceived weakness of women thus becomes a possibly inherent biological trait—*prakriti*, or nature—rather than a socially constructed condition. To the western feminist sensitised to such nuances, this might appear readily as false consciousness; but the text holds the question in opaque suspension—forcing an engagement far more nuanced with internalised patriarchal blame. This is not a transparent statement of self-hatred but a vernacular articulation of a philosophical dilemma, a strategic opacity that mirrors the character's confused awakening. Her radical response to this crisis is a carefully planned act of economic and communal subversion, which is phrased through another powerful untranslatable. Forced into prostitution, she decides to turn the fruits of her exploitation to new ends:

> তারপর পাপের উপার্জিত সমস্ত অর্থ দিয়ে এমন একটা আশ্রম নির্মাণ করাই যাতে আমার ন্যায় উৎপীড়িত, আশ্রয়শূন্য, উপায়হীন অভাগিনীরা আর ক্ষুধার তাড়নায় পাপ পথে না গিয়ে, সেখানে একটু মাথা গোঁজবার স্থান পায় এবং দু – মুঠো শাক ভাত খেয়ে কোনরকমে নিজেদের জীবন – যাত্রা নির্বাহ করতে পারে![17]
>
> Then, I would use all the money earned through sin to build an *ashram* so that the oppressed, shelterless, and helpless unfortunate women like myself could find refuge and instead of being driven to sin by the pangs of hunger, they would have a place to rest their heads and survive somehow on a simple meal of rice and greens.

Here, the vernacular expression 'পাপের উপার্জিত অর্থ' (paaper uparjito ortho/money earned through sin) becomes central to the narrative's moral logic. The term 'পাপ' (paap/sin) is replete with Brahmanical moral theology. It is not a synonym for the secular western concept of immorality or crime. It bears the weight of spiritual pollution, karmic consequence, and social ostracism. Thus, promising to use *paaper ortho* to build an 'ashram' the latter being itself a term fraught with connotations of Hindu spiritual retreat and purity she performs an act of profound semiotic alchemy. By proposing to build an *ashram* with *paaper ortho*, the

[16] Haripada Guha, 'Chithi,' in *Kallol Galpasamagra*, ed. Arun Mukhopadhaya, vol. 2 (Mitra and Ghosh Publishers, 2007).

[17] Guha, 'Chithi,' 220.

narrative creates a paradox—a site associated with spiritual retreat financed through socially condemned labour. Whether this inversion is strategic defiance or an attempt to reclaim moral legitimacy through existing theological categories remains open.

The Hindu Women's Right to Property Act passed in 1937, close to a decade after the publication of *Chithi* itself, would subsequently grant limited inheritance rights to widows. The complete lack of property, which is evident in the case of the protagonist, is therefore in consonance with the legal conditions pertaining to Hindu widows prior to 1937, who would not inherit any property from their husbands unless specifically mentioned in a will. The choice to become a prostitute must therefore not be viewed as an act of personal failing on her part but as a logical outcome of a legal and economic system that made widows structurally dependent upon patriarchal charity or its absence. The *ashram* she wishes to set up must therefore be viewed as a prelegal, communitarian response to a problem that was caused by colonialism and Hindu law.

Her goal for the *ashram* to help women avoid being driven to 'পাপ পথ' (*paap poth/*the path of sin) further illustrates this. The 'path of sin' is not a generic metaphor but a specific societal label for prostitution. Her plan is thus a direct, systemic intervention to short-circuit the very cycle that ensnared her. These are the untranslatables which form the spine of feminist critique in *Kallol*. A domesticating translation of the phrase *ghorer chaya*, the shadow of the home, might call it domestic confinement. But that misses the point entirely. *Chaya* is a shadow—it is pervasive, soft, yet inseparable from the *ghor*, the home, which itself is an ambivalent space of both comfort and captivity. The term forces a confrontation, since English does not have a single concept which captures this specific, diffuse, intimate form of patriarchal suffocation. A smooth translation risks narrowing its semantic field, reducing layered cultural associations to a single functional equivalent.

Where Manisha in *Aparadhini* uses her voice to condemn the system, the protagonist of *Chithi* uses the system's own stigmatised currency to build an alternative one. Both narratives are united by a decolonial feminist logic, but they leverage different forms of the untranslatable. *Aparadhini* weaponises the vernacular in a public, rhetorical performance. *Chithi* embeds its resistance in the opaque, cultural semantics of key terms *stree jati, pap, ashram* that form a conceptual fortress around its radical proposal. Together, they showcase the multifaceted strategies of refusal that *Kallol*'s authors championed, proving that the subaltern, when she writes, not only testifies to her suffering but drafts blueprints for her liberation in a language whose deepest political insights are protected by their cultural thickness.

Forging opacity

This section advances three related claims about Premendra Mitra's *Bikrita Khudar Phande Bandi Mor Bhagaban Kande* (Trapped in the snare of distorted hunger, my imprisoned God weeps). First, the story is difficult to translate because it uses symbolic conflict instead of language obscurity. Second, it creates a split interiority that does not easily accept moral reduction. Third, its metaphysical title makes it harder for realists to understand because it connects material hunger to spiritual sorrow. All these formal techniques do not completely reject translation, but they do make it hard to fit everything into universal categories.

The theoretical imperatives of Glissant's 'right to opacity' and Cassin's 'philosophy of the untranslatable' are effectively realised as active textual praxis within *Kallol* narratives.[18] To understand this transition from theory into form, one must understand how the very process of literary construction becomes a site of resistance. In this story, opacity emerges not as an abstract philosophical principle, but as a formal effect produced through contradiction, tonal dissonance, and vernacular detail.

This defence mechanism is evident in stories like Mitra's 'Bikrita KhudarPhande.' The text deliberately deploys cultural points of friction within the symbolic collision of a silk sari with the woman's wretchedness. It asserts a complex, dual consciousness and the use of metaphysical titles that resist reduction to simple pity or universal psychological category. A reading that reduces the narrative to poverty, ugliness, and pity risks flattening the text into a familiar template of female victimhood. The story complicates such legibility by sustaining unresolved contradictions rather than offering moral clarity.

In 'Bikrita KhudarPhande,' Mitra shifts the decolonial critique from the overtly political courtroom or the aspirational *ashram* to the grimy, intimate theatre of everyday survival. The resistance is performed through the desperate, calculated upkeep of the body itself. It becomes a performance whose full meaning is encrypted in the vernacular specificities of poverty and gendered aging. The narrative is centred around two women, Mashi and Shashi (who are on the brink of destitution), and it uses the microcosm of their preparation for a colonial 'exhibition' to expose the brutal intersection of patriarchy, class, and the colonial gaze.

The central, untranslatable motif that structures their hope and humiliation is the 'একজিবিশন' (Exhibition). Mashi's explanation, 'সায়েবদের মেলা' (Sahebder mela, a festival or gathering of the Sahibs),[19] is a critical act of vernacular framing. This is not a neutral cultural event. Instead, it is the site of potential economic transaction and social performance under the eyes of the coloniser. The women's entire struggle and the mending of the 'মান্ধাতার আমলের সিল্কের শাড়ি' (silk sari from the era of Mandhata, i.e., ancient and outdated),[20] the anxiety over a pawned blouse along with and the shame of using chalk dust as cheap powder is all oriented towards this space. The term 'ekjibishon,' phonetically spelled in Bangla, marks it as a foreign implant, a space where they are spectacles and spectators simultaneously. Their desire to enter is not for assimilation rather a grim necessity for survival. This fact would be lost if 'exhibition' were translated without this contextual, socio-economic weight.

Mitra masterfully deploys the vernacular of the body as a site of opaque resistance and inescapable truth. It gets quite poignant and tragic to see the labour she puts into making her body legibly desirable: 'ডানদিকে কপালের ওপরেই চুল অত্যন্ত পাতলা হয়ে টাক পড়বার মতো হয়েছে, সেখানটা অন্যদিকের চুল টেনে ঢেকে সে খোঁপা বাঁধলে' (On the right side of her

[18] Barbara Cassin, ed., *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, trans. Steven Rendall et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400849918; Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189, https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.10257.

[19] Premendra Mitra, 'Bikrita Khudar Phande, Bandi Mor Bhagaban Kande,' in *Kallol Galpasamagra*, ed. Arun Mukhopadhaya, vol. 1 (Mitra and Ghosh Publishers, 2007).

[20] Mitra, 'Bikrita Khudar Phande,' 346.

forehead, her hair had thinned so much it was almost bald; she pulled hair from the other side to cover it and tied her bun.)[21]

'কেরোসিনের ডিবের আলোয় খড়ির গুঁড়ো ধরা পড়ে না। কিন্তু একজিবিশনের উজ্জ্বল আলোতে খড়ির গুঁড়ো মেখে যেতে তার সাহস হল না' (In the kerosene lamp's light, the chalk dust would not be noticed. But she didn't dare go to the exhibition's bright lights wearing chalk dust.)[22] These are not mere descriptions of vanity; they are a granular account of the 'shadow work' of poverty and aging that women must perform. The 'chalk dust' (*khorir guṛo*) is a powerfully untranslatable detail—a specific, local substance used as a desperate substitute for western-style face powder. Its failure to hold up under the 'উজ্জ্বল আলো' (bright lights) of the colonial exhibition symbolises the ultimate failure of such vernacular tactics to truly conceal the marks of deprivation from the harsh, modern gaze. The body, in its material reality (thinning hair, the need for food), constantly threatens to betray the performance.

Moreover, the exchange between Mashi and Shashi is a masterclass in vernacular relational dynamics. Shashi's cruel taunt, 'তুই যে ধুমসি' (Tui je dhumshi/ You are so stout/clumsy)[23] and her assertion of power as the 'রূপসী' (ruposi /beautiful one) establishes a hierarchy among the oppressed. This internalised misogyny and economic tension, 'খোরাকি আর ভাড়া না পেলে ... কাল থেকে আমার বাড়িতে আর তোমার জায়গা হবে না' (If you don't pay for food and rent you can't stay in our home from tomorrow)[24] reveals how patriarchy and capitalism pit women against each other for sheer survival. In Mitra's hands, the story of preparation for 'ekjibishon' becomes a profound commentary on the politics of appearance. The struggle is to keep up an appearance of viability and desirability in a system that has rendered them economically invisible. Their 'saj poshak'—the clothes and adornment are not for pleasure; they are weapons in a brutal economic war. The vernacular from the chalk dust to the taunt of 'dhumshi' constitutes the substance of their precarious lives. This story shows that for the subaltern woman, the body itself is a text of struggle written in a vernacular of lack and longing. It becomes increasingly opaque before any gaze that has not known the price of one meal or the shame of a thinning bun of hair in the bright light of the Sahib's world.

The opacity generated here is ambivalent. On one level, the vernacular detail—the chalk dust, the thin hair, the old silk sari—prevents a sentimentalisation that is abstract. This opacity, however, also shows structural marginality. Most people do still not understand the struggles of women unless they are turned into a spectacle. So, opacity is both a rejection of moral simplification and a sign of being left out of cultural and economic recognition.

This resistance of being untranslatable runs on three different yet interconnected levels. First, the text establishes a potent symbolic friction point, in Cassin's terms, through its central, irreconcilable contradiction.[25] The woman's 'ugliness and wretchedness' are depicted not through straightforward description, but through the symbolic weight of their skilled labour: the sewing of a torn silk sari. A silk sari, within the Bengali cultural imaginary,

[21] Mitra, 'Bikrita Khudar Phande,' 346.

[22] Mitra, 'Bikrita Khudar Phande,' 346.

[23] Mitra, 'Bikrita Khudar Phande,' 345.

[24] Mitra, 'Bikrita Khudar Phande,' 346.

[25] Barbara Cassin, ed., *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, trans. Steven Rendall et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400849918.

signifies luxury, aesthetic refinement, and sanctified purity. The silk sari introduces dissonance: an object associated with refinement and sanctity is sewn by a woman positioned as socially degraded. The contradiction is not resolved; instead, it destabilises moral categorisation. This is far more than simple irony; it is the formal assertion of a complex, specific economic and existential cruelty that actively resists transparent moral judgment. The text refuses to allow the woman to be legibly categorised as solely degraded; she is simultaneously an artist of luxury, an exploited labourer, and a victim of systemic necessity, and the narrative maintains these contradictory identities in unresolved, opaque tension.

Second, the narrative's construction of a persistent dual consciousness within the protagonist asserts Glissant's right to opacity. The identified critical tension is not between different actions, but between the observed social reality of her existence and the lingering, subconscious desire for coming back to an unperturbed world. Her being is not a unified, transparent tragedy easily consumed by a pitying gaze. It is a site of internal conflict, housing a complex inner life. The spectral presence of a self that persists outside the reductive social label of prostitute foregrounds this unresolved duality. The narrative formally ensures that the social role cannot monolithically define her human essence. The narrative sustains a divided interiority. The protagonist is neither reducible to degradation nor recoverable as pure victim. This unresolved duality resists singular moral interpretation without converting ambiguity into triumph.

The title, *Bandi Mor Bhagaban Kande*, intensifies this tension. Its juxtaposition of imprisonment and divine lament binds material hunger to metaphysical sorrow. Although translations can get close to the meaning, the connection between the deprivation idiom and the devotional phrase goes beyond simple equivalence. This is a jarring mix of economic realities and spirituality that contest the norms of both the Sanskritised *Sadhu Bhasa* of the Bengali *Bhadralok* and of western literary realism. Rather than presenting hunger solely as material lack, it situates deprivation within a theological register. This coupling complicates reduction to social realism or sentimental pathos. In other words, Mitra's use of contradictory symbolism, a narrative structure marked by double consciousness and the metaphysical structuring of the title, represents far more than aesthetic flourish. Collectively, this double consciousness amounts to an active, decolonial mode of defence. Whether understood as strategic resistance or as the narrative trace of social precarity, the *Kallol* writers prevent seamless absorption into universalising frameworks.

Conclusion

The radical feminism portrayed in *Kallol* is more than a thematic resistance to patriarchy or colonial modernity that these stories manifest. Instead, it engages with linguistic and stylistic subversion. The fractured syntax, the untranslatable metaphors are not signs of weakness but marks of political intention that protect the specificity of experience from the violence of universality. The untranslatability which western discourses tend to confront as weakness is instead the beat that marks resistance.

The writers of *Kallol* transformed the substance of their oppression—language, silence, hunger and desire—into those of subversion. In refusing to be compliant with either the cleansed discourses of colonial humanism or western feminism respectively, the writers formulated a poetics of opacity, one that continues to transgress the ethics of translation. These vernacular voids are full zones rather than vacant sites ripe with meaning.

In this light, the feminism pursued by *Kallol* does not try to be integrated into the mainstream women's movement in international feminism. Rather, it puts forward another

genealogy of resistance that draws upon the regional histories of pain, belief, and resistance. The women here withhold speech and break it to narrate the unspoken boundaries that encircle both the colonial utterances and those that are legible in feminism. In this sense, the impact of *Kallol* gets extended beyond that defined within its temporal boundaries. This paper although written in English and relying on anglophone frameworks performs its own translational act by offering three practical models. The first is annotated translation where the translator's thick cultural notes preserve the context over domestication. Second, paratextual ethics in introductions and glossaries maintain the translator's choice of explicit words. The third is collaborative translation, where scholars from within the source culture function as co-interpreters rather than informants sharing the translator's authority.

The aim here is certainly not to render the meaning of *Kallol* clear to the western reader but to allow *Kallol*'s untranslatability to disrupt the very parameters within which the act of reading gets defined. *Kallol* therefore exists as a deep testament to the fact that decolonial feminism is about recovering voices as well as preserving those conditions that create difference. To read these stories with care is to listen to the whispers that exist below the surface—the whispers that are the survival and resistance that are continually present like the roaring of the waves that refuse to be stilled.

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