

Translation, space and body in *The Hour Before Dawn*

Priyanka Kakoti*

Abstract: This paper analyses *The Hour Before Dawn* (2015), which is Maitreyee Chakravarty's English translation of the Assamese novel *Antoreep* written by Bhabendranath Saikia through the theoretical framework of translation studies, spatial studies and feminist criticism. Situating the text within the centre-periphery tussle and translations from Northeast India, the paper argues that translation goes beyond the linguistic transfer and reorganises cultural geographies. Drawing on Andre Lefebvre's notion of translation as rewriting and Susan Bassnett's emphasis on the ideological embeddedness of translation, the study foregrounds how the movement from a regional language to a globally dominant one is conditioned by asymmetrical power relations, publishing economies, and representational expectations. The translator's preface is read as a paratextual "threshold space" (Genette), revealing the paradox of retaining "regional flavour" while seeking global readability. A close reading of the text is made to analyse silence, sexuality and the body. A reading of fragile masculinity is made through the critical lens of R.W Connell. The silence of the protagonist is studied through Spivak's concept of "strategic opacity" while intersecting it with a study of physical and metaphorical spatiality using Foucault's notion of heterotopias and Doreen Massey's relational understanding of space. The study argues for understanding translated regional texts as critical sites where power, resistance, and subjectivity are continually reconfigured rather than as transparent cultural artifacts.

Keywords: translation, spatiality, sexuality, Northeast literature, Assamese fiction

Introduction: Translation and spatial politics

The Northeastern region of India is a geographical periphery. Constituting of eight states, this umbrella term encompasses a vastly heterogeneous region. In recent times there has been a gamut of writings from the region which portray the land and lives that inhabit.

* Priyanka Kakoti (✉)

Department of English, Dibrugarh University, Assam, India
e-mail: priyanka.dib@gmail.com

While there has been a considerable body of writings in English from the region, one cannot overlook the significance of regional literatures. In recent years many translated works from the region are also available. In the context of the negotiations between the center and the periphery, the translated literary works function as a spatial practice that seems to reorganize cultural geographies. In the context of this centre- periphery contestation, the movement of a text from a regional language to a globally dominant language is deeply political.

In the translator's Preface to the novel *The Hour Before Dawn*, Maitreyee Chakravarty asserts her fidelity to the source text and precisely mentions about one of her objectives behind such a translation – the attempt to increase readership in the following lines:

What you see now is an attempt to bring some of Saikia's magic to the non Assamese reading folks. Every effort has been made to retain the narrative style of the original, and I have included a glossary and notes to explain the Assamese terms I felt had to be retained, so as to not rob the book of its regional flavour. (n.pg)

Here Chakravarty's assertion to the fidelity of the translated text to the original one asserts Henri Lefebvre's (1992) notion of translation as rewriting, where fidelity is not neutral but an ideological positioning. The position and culture of the translator is of equal importance as that of the author. When we talk of ideology in translation, encompasses questions like- who translates, from which culture and to which culture. When Lefebvre talks of translation as a form of rewriting, he positions rewriting as that which is deeply embedded in the literary, ideological and institutional structures of the target culture. This is further foregrounded in Susan Bassnett's assertion that:

Writing does not happen in a vacuum, it happens in a context and the process of translating texts from one cultural system into another is not neutral, innocent, transparent activity. Translation is instead a highly charged, transgressive activity and the politics of translation and translating deserve much greater attention than has been paid in the past. (Susan Bassnett 1993, 160-161)

This foregrounds power relations in translation in the process of cultural transfer because it shows that in being translated from a regional language to a global one involves power dynamics of language and culture. Here, the translator's preface acts as a 'threshold space' (Genette 1997). The attempt to "retain regional flavour" while aiming for global readership is problematic in the sense that it refers to

a central paradox of postcolonial translation, that is, how do we negotiate this cultural difference or how do we overcome cultural representations which resists translatability. Again when we refer to translation as rewriting, we notice that when we talk of translators, rewriting is not equally available to all and is largely dependent on recognition by such as publishing industries, funding mechanisms, and dominant language hierarchies-especially in postcolonial contexts. Hence, translation is not just a disruptive act but is limited by commercial and cultural norms.

In the context of writings from the Northeast of India translated into English, translation can be viewed as a spatial practice. While translation increases visibility, it is paradoxical in the sense that it remediates identity assertion (here visibility) through an external linguistic aid. The translated text does not merely move from one linguistic realm to another but from one culture to another. In this process it occupies an in-between space- a space of 'negotiation' (Bhabha 1994). Keeping these complex positioning and theoretical framework in mind, the paper attempts to read into the problematics of gender, body, space and translation in *The Hour Before Dawn* (2015) which is an English translation of an Assamese novel titled *Antoreep* written by Bhabendranath Saikia, an Assamese literary stalwart.

Gendered domestic space and patriarchal order

The novel *The Hour Before Dawn* which is set in a small village in Assam during the pre-independence days deals with the theme of conjugal betrayal, human relationships and a woman's hidden strength in the darkest phase of her life. Gendered space is the major focus of the novel. It is about how Menoka, the protagonist creates a space of her own in the male- dominated society. Later during a dispute between the two brothers – Mohikanto and Bhadrakanto; Bhadrakanto moves away from Mohikanto's house and settles in a different house with his family. Bhadrakanto thinks that by creating a space of his own away from his brother he would keep his identity intact. Menoka, on the other hand does not move out, she creates a space for herself within the constructs of the patriarchal set up which is represented here through the character of Mohikanto. She resorts to various means of protecting her identity when she feels that it is at stake because of her husband's second marriage. The empathy among the women characters is very succinctly brought out in the novel. The news of Mohikanto's marriage travels various mouths originating from Deukilal, the one

who sacrificed goats at the mill but it is a woman – Reboti who breaks the news to Menoka. Reboti is used to taking small denominations from Menoka to make up for her opium shortfall but the day she comes to break this news, she does not ask Menoka for any money because perhaps being a woman she would understand what Menoka was undergoing. Menoka's body language is in tandem with her thoughts and she is determined not to let Mohikanto touch her once he is back from the mill at night. When Mohikanto returns home, Menoka does not utter a word, she does not demand any explanation, nor does she accuse him. She is silent; it is a thoughtful and deep silence and it is this language of silence which becomes a language of resistance, a language of protest:

Mohikanto rose from his seat and tottered to the bedside. Holding on to the carved headboard, he straightened himself and moved a few steps forward before sitting with a thud near Menoka. In a flash, his hand was on her waist. She instantly brushed it away, but ignoring this, he gripped her in an embrace and tried to rest his head on her shoulder. Pushing him to a sitting position, she rolled over to the middle of the bed, sat up and slid over to the other side. Both her body and mind felt weak, but just to ensure that Mohikanto could not touch her, and that she could escape if he tried, she remained sitting, her legs dangling. The very next moment, an uncontrollable sobbing wracked her body, notwithstanding the awareness that her four children were in the room. (Chakravarty 2015, 15)

Although Mohikanto is portrayed as a powerful patriarch, At the same time, he expresses his fear of Menoka's stoical silence: "Do you know why I didn't? Out of fear. I was afraid to tell you. Can I talk to you of these things? There are certain things that I can't hide, but I can't talk about either" (Chakravarty 2015, 15). Dressed as a bridegroom, as Mohikanto prepares to leave for his marriage, Menoka pays her last obeisance to him as if he were a dead body; signifying the metaphorical death of her husband from the day of his second marriage. Menoka's silence can be read in terms of Spivak's (1999) notion of "strategic opacity". Menoka's silence is akin to this notion of opacity where she withdraws from linguistic expression so that she becomes untranslatable and others, specially Mohikanto no longer has access to her emotions and feelings; even her rage.

Spatial reconfiguration and heterotopic sites

The metaphorical space that Menoka resolves to create for her own is symbolically represented by the physical space that she demarcates for her husband and herself in the house where they had lived together for

so many years. She does not leave Mohikanto's home but she shifts to another room in the house along with her children and restricts Mohikanto's entry into that room. The novel repeatedly foregrounds space - domestic rooms, bedrooms, groves, thresholds to represent Menoka's resistance. Menoka carves a space of her own in the household, into which she does not allow Mohikanto to enter either physically or metaphorically. While Mohikanto and Kiron are given a separate room, Menoka stays in the house with her children. Not only this, she makes it pretty clear that he would not be allowed to enter the room unless accompanied by Kiron when needed. The space in the groove of trees behind the house where the clandestine meetings between Menoka and Modon take place represent a space where the patriarchal norms are reversed. It is the female who leads in this space that she has created for herself. The groove functions as a 'heterotopic space' (Foucault 1986); a space where normative hierarchies are inverted. Patriarchal binaries of inside/ outside, private/public are destabilized by Menoka's refusal to leave her marital home. Her resistance is enacted through spatial resignification. In reconfiguring physical access or proximity, Menoka transforms her domestic space-her home from a site of domination to a site of resistance; a contested terrain.

In *For Space* (2005), Doreen Massey reconceptualises space against the idea of space as a static container or a bounded geography. According to Massey, space is relational, dynamic and foregrounds multiplicities. Space is where heterogenous identities and power relations intersect. In this context, we can reconceptualise the physical space in the novel. The home for that matter and how it attains significance not as a space where physical bodies live but also as a space where these physical bodies interact and how power relations among these physical bodies are negotiated over the years. A space owned and overpowered by the Mohikanto gives way to a space where soon Menoka starts dominating. Also the groove or the house built by Bhadrakanto can be read as alternate spaces- heterotopic spaces.

The female body: Sexuality and control

The kitchen becomes another contested terrain where Menoka avoids looking at the "new woman" Kiron. However, it is the body of the "new woman" that she cannot help noticing:

Menoka was more obsessed with Kiron's head bath than with the fear of Mohikanto's imminent eruption after last night. She imagined what Kiron

would look like as she hung out her wet clothes, freshly washed long hair screening her back. She couldn't possibly present a more seductive picture — like the fresh silver of the moon that shows up at the start of its waxing phase. Menoka only hoped the lure was sustained. The picture haunted her even after she put Moni to bed and fed the other three children. (Chakravarty 2015, 40)

During her conversation with Modon, she reiterates the body imagery which is so very central to the novel:

But I have never deliberately done anything wrong, nor hurt anybody. I gave nobody any reason to dislike me. Yet...If so much had to happen only because my body is no longer new then I have to show them that these eleven years haven't taken their toll on me alone! I'll show them who's new and who's old. And how! (Chakravarty 2015, 104)

In the relationship that Menoka has with Modon, it is she who has an upper hand. She not only instructs him whether to meet at a particular night or not but also directs his movements. Luce Irigaray (1985, 23) comments: "Female sexuality has always been conceptualized in the basis of masculine parameters ... about woman and her pleasure, this view of sexual relation has nothing to say". While Mohikanto's reason of remarriage is an assertion of the female body being valued in terms of its productivity, what Foucault (1978) terms as "biopolitical economy". Menoka's withdrawal from conjugal sexuality is an act of denial- a refusal to participate in the sexual contract.

When Mohikanto gets to know of Menoka's pregnancy, he recedes into himself, envisioning the metaphor of a snake and a frog until he can think of being betrayed by none other than his younger brother Bhodrokanto. The body imagery is present throughout the novel and we find a significant role being played by body and sexuality in shaping the identity – 'the new one' -- of Menoka. When Mohikanto demands an explanation from Menoka for her pregnancy, the lady curtly replies:

You had elephants, you had drums and music, so you could fetch a woman and make her the mother of your child right before my eyes. I have nothing. I have done whatever I could with my limited resources. It's the same thing. Now tolerate the situation as best as you can. May the realization eat into you. (Chakravarty 2015, 132)

Assertion of the body can be both empowering and restraining for women. As far as Menoka is concerned, we see that initially she is let down when her body is demeaned because her husband Mohikanto

thinks that her physical charm has waned after all these years of marriage. But it is the body which she uses to empower herself. From the day her body is demeaned by Mohikanto and a new woman is brought to replace Menoka on bed. Menoka decides to keep her body away from her husband's touch forever and she sticks to her principle till the end. Under no circumstance does she surrender to Mohikanto's sexuality. Mohikanto had used the body imagery to shrink Menoka's space in their conjugal life, Menoka resorts to the same body imagery to regain the space which she feels have been occupied by the second wife. It is female sexuality which becomes one major way of Menoka's emancipation. Later when it is pointed out by Indro that she had committed a mistake by forging a relationship with Modon, Menoka is determined not to be defeated in the eyes of her son. She said that whatever she did was not a mistake and very soon Indro would realise that his judgement is wrong. When Indro requests her to forget everything and return to his father, she denies explaining that nothing would atone for the pain that she has suffered all these years. Menoka's body becomes a site of resistance, negotiation and subversion.

Masculinity, performance, and patriarchal instability

Mohikanto had thought that the dictates of patriarchy which he exercised through his second marriage would expand the space that he enjoyed in the society and in his home but soon after his second marriage he realises that the space he had created for himself all these years has shrunk. The male body which is often absent in patriarchal narratives, is here described as insecure, fragile, anxious and diminished. R. W. Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity explains how the masculinity of certain individuals is exalted in the society through social recognition and legitimatisation of their dominance over women and other men in the society. While the masculinity of some men is exalted, others are marginalised. Mohikanto is symbolic of Connell's hegemonic masculinity. His masculinity can be read not only in his domination of women as evident through the characters of Menoka and Kiron but also as stark contrast to the characters of the men in the novel - Modon and Bhodrokanto. An insight into Connell's work shows how this hegemonic masculinity is not inherent but is achieved through performance. Mohikanto's second marriage can be read through this framework of performance and hence his assertion of hegemonic

masculinity. Mohikanto compares his remarriage to showcasing his wealth to the rest of the society. Being a wealthy person, marrying another woman would just mean one more mouth to be fed. For him, women were commodities, the more one possessed, wealthier he was. But hegemonic masculinity is supposed to be unstable. Later, Mohikanto's imagery of frogs and snakes affirms this instability - an instability brought about by his excesses.

Various myths regarding the body of women have been responsible for pushing women to the peripheries. According to Kramer (2001, 28), "Contained within bodies, women are projected as either too passive or too active, as those who cannot and should not be left to themselves, who always need either protection from or control by men". The body imagery which is present in the novel all throughout, has been used by the author to subvert the myths associated with the female body. Body and sexuality which are limitations on a woman, have been used for emancipation of women. Women's sexuality makes her fit for only two accepted roles in the society – that of the wife and a mother. Although she is entangled by these two roles, it is these roles which give her the potential to be independent. We find this being exhibited in the novel *The Hour Before Dawn* through the character of Menoka. She uses her body as a means of emancipation: "Last night, one woman had died and she would never be born in the same form again. Another had been born and she would never die. Menoka would never fight herself ever again" (Chakravarty 2015, 30).

Motherhood: Institution and experience

Orleck (2007, 3-4) in "Tradition Unbound – Radical Mothers in International Perspective" states:

Motherhood has been politicized in multiple ways, both as a means to control women –through state regulation, medical intervention, and brutal military assault — and as a means by which women have sought to regain control over their lives and the lives of their children.

Thus, motherhood, for most of the time is used to control and limit the space of women. But as far as Menoka is concerned, she uses the role of motherhood as a means of expanding her space in both the domestic and the social sphere. It is not only her own children who are dependent on her, but Kiron's children also start looking up to her. Menoka's maternal authority destabilises the notion that equates motherhood with confinement. Later, she not only supports Kiron's

children but also Modon's family. Motherhood empowers Menoka socially. Here, one can read into the ambivalence of motherhood that the novel represents- motherhood as an empowerment and at the same time women being caught in the traditional ties of nurturing and labour. This resonates with Adrienne Rich's (1976, 13) distinction between motherhood as an institution and motherhood as an experience articulated in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*: "Patriarchy would seem to require motherhood as an institution under which all women are subsumed; it also requires that mothering be kept from women." This means that while motherhood as an institution is seen as a kind of patriarchal control, motherhood as a lived experience includes physical experiences, emotional bonding, moments of connection, creativity and resistance.

Kiron, herself was jostling to create a space of her own in Mohikanto's house after marriage. Her marriage with Mohikanto had made her his second wife and hence entitled to a particular position. Before being married to him, since she was already aware of Menoka, she had often thought that there would be fights between her and Menoka; she would win these fights; grab the key of the house and would ultimately reign as the queen of Mohikanto's household. But, after marriage she found that Menoka had stepped down from the position of wife, entrusted all the responsibilities of Mohikanto on her and led her life like a servant. Kiron became the undisputed queen in the domestic space and this made her feel ashamed of herself. It made her guilty of Menoka's plight and she started suffering from a sense of self reproach.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that *The Hour Before Dawn* must be read at the intersection of gender, body, space, and translation, where each of these categories is mutually constitutive rather than discrete. Situated within the broader context of translations from Northeast India into English, the novel's English afterlife foregrounds translation not as a neutral linguistic transfer but as a spatial and ideological practice that reorganizes cultural geographies and power relations. The movement of *Antoreep* from Assamese into English exemplifies how regional texts enter national and global literary circuits through asymmetrical conditions shaped by language hierarchies, publishing economies, and representational expectations. Although subject to mediation, selective legibility or framing, the cultural life is made more comprehensible

through translation of the novel into English. The translator's preface, which speaks of global readership while trying to retain the 'regional flavour', points out to this tension. However, translation increases visibility and emphasises the necessity of comprehending the periphery by the center. It asserts that the Northeast needs to be noticed by the global readership. This situates the Northeast (Assam here) as a space which has to be understood. The novel's engagement with gendered bodies, domestic spaces, and silences parallels the condition of translated Northeast literatures themselves- visible yet negotiated, present yet peripherally positioned. By foregrounding these layered negotiations, the paper highlights translation as a powerful, though uneven, mediator of space and subjectivity, and argues for reading translated regional texts not merely as cultural artifacts but as sites where power, resistance, and identity are continually reconfigured.

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