

**Caged Flesh: Reading Female Body Politics in Contemporary
Translated Assamese, Bengali, and Odia Fiction by Women
Writers**

**A thesis submitted in part fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

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July, 2024**

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

The representations of women's bodies in localized regional contexts in the selected literary fiction by women are urgent modes of archiving the corporeal trauma, prevalent in the lived bodily experiences of gender. The fictionality of these selected socio-literary texts renders the writers a unique freedom to portray critical and uncomfortable truths about women's embodiment in society. Some of these portraits are heavily based on real events of political tension and fill in the gaps left by the official archives of the state. While the state-sanctioned statistical records lack particular narratives of bodily trauma endured by women of affected communities, these relevant fictional depictions rescue such narratives that are otherwise erased from dominant collective memory through the politics of archiving. The selected texts of women's fiction in this research not only address such gaps in knowledge by offering a lesser-known gendered narrative of corporeal oppression but also present an enactment of the emotional impact brought forth by such bodily trauma. Therefore, literary case studies that are presented by the selected texts of women's fiction have offered a more vivid understanding of the lived experiences of the body, making the characters' corporeal subjectivity accessible.

My position as a reader and a researcher makes me serve the role of an interloper as I access these corporeal subjectivities and compare them with the embodied realities of the characters' cultural surroundings. Through this comparison, I have problematized the contrast between what the body desires in cognition and what it is forced to experience in social circumstances. This research primarily problematizes such incompatibilities between individualistic bodily aspirations and the dominant socio-cultural corporeal impositions. Such an intervention calls into question the lack of accountability of social and legal institutions for the female body as they consistently attempt to jeopardize their needs and desires. Through its three primary research questions, this study aims to reach an understanding of the way the female body is caged by political, social, and cultural forces. In the first research objective, the study engages with the political implications of wars and communal riots on the female body as it analyses the nexus between forced migration and female embodiment. The analysis of the displaced female body takes into account the selected fictional portraits of some of the major wars and communal riots that

were experienced at the eastern front of India to deconstruct the politics of female migrants' pregnant embodiment, locating female bodies in such turbulent times. The Sino-Indian war (1962) that resulted in the forced deportation of Chinese-Indians has only been recorded with narratives of Indian military humiliation and exploitation by the Chinese of the newly independent India. However, there is a huge gap in the narrative of those Indians of Chinese ethnicity who were forcefully displaced in the aftermath of the war. This study locates the pregnant body of the Chinese-Indian or the Assamese-Chinese migrant in such neglected narratives and interrogates its treatment. Similarly, this study also problematizes the mass abduction and rape of women during the Bengal partitions. Through such interrogation, certain tellingly hegemonic and exploitative modes of nation-building become evident. The two pregnant protagonists in Rita Chowdhury's *Chinatown Days* (2018) and Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee* (2011) suffer state-sanctioned or communal banishment due to the ethnic and racial undesirability of their bodies and the unborn fetuses they carry. Both these characters endure the torments of their pregnant embodiment in addition to the discomforts of forced displacement.

This study further criticizes the selective attention paid to the pregnant bodies state's policies as the literary portraits reveal how they don't accommodate all pregnant bodies such as the pregnant female body of the banished migrant. The treatment of such unwanted female bodies can be perceived as symbolic of strategic revenge against the enemy community. Such discriminatory practices are more evidently depicted in the portrait of spaces of transit such as refugee or detainment camps. Both Choudhary's and Kalita's texts portray a lack of nutrition, sanitation, and healthcare in these spaces that makes the female bodies of the displaced migrant susceptible to corporeal torment. While these inadequacies intensify the migrant's corporeal challenges in the spaces of transit, there is also the risk of sexual vulnerability that is experienced in these camps. The female migrants are much more vulnerable to falling prey to sexual predators in these refugee and detainment camps. This is well-represented through the embodiment of Anita Agnihotri's (2021) character Terna. Her efforts at taking precautionary measures after being raped once while sleeping in the makeshift shanties of the sugar mill factories present a brutal picture of the plights of bonded laborers. It shows how the group of bonded laborers who are constantly displaced from the notion of home struggle to find a living space where the female body is secured from hegemonic sexual violence. Terna's silence following her rape by the contractor projects how they are tied to their sorry circumstances by the exploitative

financial bonds they have signed. The analysis of the displaced female body through these literary portraits also depicts the stark contrast between the bodily treatment of migrant men and women. While the male migrant's body is imposed with relentless physical labor, the female migrant's body suffers through a multitude of challenges. It is punished with inadequate sanitary living conditions, healthcare, or nutrition in addition to sexual violence. While the inadequate facilities at transit camps are endured by migrant men as well, unlike the migrant women they don't have to negotiate gender-specific embodied experiences like pregnancy or menstruation. Moreover, it must also be noted that lack of proper care and sanitation during these bodily changes can even sometimes prove to be fatal. More importantly, such systematic negligence unveils the state's strategies to control the reproductive gene pool of the nation and prohibit the proliferation of a particular race or ethnicity in disguised forms of social eugenics. This is also why during the Bengal partition, women endured mass rape and abduction so that their wombs can be colonized by the rival community. However, the fictional portrait selected to analyze this gendered political oppression problematically reveals that such colonization of the female sexuality or the womb is also validated by the members of their own community or their own families. Many statistical studies done on the recovery operations sanctioned by the government reveal how the majority of Hindu upper-caste women preferred committing suicide than returning to their family homes as they feared bringing dishonor to their communities.

Jyotirmayi Devi's (1995) character Sutara becomes a victim of this seemingly victorious act of surviving the riot and returning to one's community but as soon as she does, she is treated like an outcast. Sutara gets rescued by a Muslim household and even though her body is not sexually violated while she spends her time in that family, it is treated to be contaminated by religious transgression. Perhaps this concept of female bodies as pollutants that threaten to contaminate social structures is most prominently manifested in the treatment of the subaltern female body which is my second point of focus in this study. A close reading of the subaltern female body unpacks the intricate interlinking of social class, caste, and the female body. The subaltern tribal and Dalit women characters in the translated fictional texts selected for analysis reveal how the marginalized female body is used as a site for social hegemonic dominance and enactment of power. The subalternity of the female bodies of these characters does not only emerge from the way they are conceived by the dominant upper-class and upper-caste patriarchy. Rather it also becomes

functional within their own subaltern community since owing to their gender and sexual subalternity. While Brahminical ideologies limit the upper-caste Hindu wife's embodiment within the boundaries of domesticity, the Dalit female body, because it is accessible to the public gaze through daily wage labor, is treated like a sexual tool to be exploited by the dominant upper-caste men. By gaining control over the subaltern female bodies, the dominant communities employ modes of sexual subjugation. Due to their hegemonic relations with the upper-class society, these narratives of bodily subjugation of the subaltern women are often treated to have peripheral significance in dominant discourses. The silencing of the subaltern female corporeality is normalized as the subaltern female body is constantly forced to be written down in history. While most of the fictional depictions analyzed in the present research to interpret the subaltern female embodiment portray a categorical submission, Mahasweta Devi's (2018) character Draupadi enacts a bodily resistance that threatens to destabilize the established hegemonic structures. Devi's character Dopdi Mejhen, a tribal rebel in the custody of the army chief refuses to cover her body to etch the memory of its violation in public memory. She refuses to cover her bruises in the aftermath of suffering military gang rape. Her adamant attitude about exposing the condition of her body to install it in public memory intimidates the army chief even though momentarily.

However, in many of the narratives, there is a visible submission that women of subaltern identity perform in the company of powerful upper-class/caste men. For instance, poverty and unemployment in the famine-stricken region of Odisha's Kalahandi drive Gayatri Sharaf's (2016) character Kumari to be bought and sold as a sexual slave by an upper-caste man from a privileged city. Bound by these social evils that her subaltern identity subjects her to, Kumari is displaced from her home and is treated as a utilitarian tool of sexual satisfaction by her master. Contrary to Devi's Draupadi, Kumari enacts the generational silence that her community is known to practice at the hands of an exploitative dominant caste. The hypocrisy of upper-class patriarchy is evident in the duality attitude of considering the subaltern female body as a contaminating agent while also using it as a sexual tool to satisfy male fantasies and desires that are too licentious to be performed with their dignified upper-caste wives. Poverty is also a driving force for Saptadwipa Adhikari's (2020) Dalit character Panchi to get married into an exploitative household where her husband forces her into marital rape and sexual abuse. However, Panchi performs a stark bodily resistance when she leaves her husband's home and discovers in the long run how

to satisfy her own bodily desires by accessing self-pleasure. Panchi takes charge of her own sexual subjectivity and performs her bodily desires in the most autonomous sense. This makes Panchi's body self-reliant and renders her the autonomy to decide the sexual script for her body. Narratives like that of Draupadi and Panchi depict how the subaltern female remains a potential agent to enact oppositional forces against social hegemony and the subaltern female body serves as a brilliant site to practice it. In its analysis of the subaltern female body, the present research also looks at how it is culturally caged within its own community. The subaltern female has a further subaltern stature within her own community because there is no undoing of the sexual and gendered subalternity associated with her. Moreover, it also can be observed how the subaltern male finds the subaltern female body as the only site for his agential dominance. The only way for the tribal and Dalit men to feel powerful and with agency is by controlling the subaltern female body. Therefore, this research studies the modes of corporeal subjugation for the subaltern female based on their own cultures, beliefs, and customs. For instance, the Bonda women's bodies in Pratibha Ray's *The Prima Land* (2009) are subjected to labor and caregiving roles to serve the husband while the Bonda man can spend his time idly or engaging in feuds.

The Bonda women are made to serve the role of 'wife-mothers' as their culture dictates them to marry boys much younger than them so that they can go from the care of one mother to another. However, this regime reveals how the problem of bodily urges and desires that the Bonda women might have, is simply ignored with the pretext of serving men. Since the age gap between the Bonda wife and her husband is significant, their youth and desires never overlap or find compatibility. Ray presents an instance when the aging body of the Bonda wife becomes a source of her anxiety because she gradually ceases to be an object of desire for her young husband who is at the peak of his sexuality. To rescue himself of any sexual dissatisfaction, the Bonda husband can visit the female dormitories called *Selani Dingos* where unmarried women engage sexually but the married Bonda woman has no space to access her desires. The marginalization of ethnic tribal communities sometimes provokes an intensified performance of their communal identity and this performance is enacted on the subaltern female bodies. The subaltern female body is strictly conditioned to abide by the prescriptive sartorial behavior to propagate the community's fight for cultural supremacy. However, when the female body fails to accomplish this role of being the cultural marker for the community, it receives some form

of corporeal punishment. Arupa Patangia Kalita's (2020) tribal Bodo protagonist Mainao gets punished because she fails to wear the traditional attire of her community and even dared to enjoy a Bengali festival. Mainao loses her precious long hair and gets her beauty defiled because of this supposed transgression. The subaltern female embodiment is therefore twice-marginalized as it suffers corporeal oppression not just at the hands of the men from dominant classes but also from other subaltern men within their own community. My last point of focus in this study is the pleasure-seeking aspect of the female body that is caged in heteronormative marriages and Brahminical widowhood. Hinduism's obsession with the marital chastity of the female body dictates the wife's servility in the sexual dynamic between the husband and wife. There is a lot of moral panic around female sexuality since it is treated as a taboo topic and in the literary narratives chosen for this analysis, many female characters enact their pleasure-seeking transgressive performance of straying beyond the boundaries of domesticity but such culminations are seen to be short-lived or accompanied with serious repercussions. Analyzing the desiring female body reveals how there is a normalization of sexual repression for women in marital interactions.

The literary characters also depict how there is a constant struggle to maintain a desirable body under the scrutiny of the husband's gaze. Failure to uphold the beauty standards makes the wife's body an asexual element for the husband. This is very well exemplified in Bani Basu's (2014) character of Neelam who goes through significant bodily changes following a hysterectomy. Neelam's corpulent body is rejected by her husband Aritra as he finds her undesirable. Ironically, despite proclaiming such undesirability for her body, Aritra tries to restrain Neelam when she talks to other men. Such conditioning of the married female body shows how deep-rooted the marital ownership of the wife's body is. It initiates a conversation about how the female body is restricted both within the marital realms and outside of it. Despite the discontent in the intimacies within the marital life, many of the women characters continue to stay in the marriage fearing social ignominy that is often associated with a divorced woman. Moreover, there is a certain glorification of reproductive sexuality since that it is in that context, women's bodies are most valued. The desiring female body in a non-maternal context is rigorously omitted from the social discourse and such omissions are challenged by these selected literary portraits that represent the lived experience of the body in such a sterile environment. Female pleasure is treated as a controversial realm and the conditioning of female bodies in marriages

shows how it can never be performed or expressed ostensibly. Yet this study deals with characters like Homi portrayed in Sangeeta Bandyopadhyay's (2019) novel who leaves her seemingly normal marital life despite a loving husband because of her sexual dissatisfaction. While Homi clearly follows bodily autonomy and does not get bounded by any marital strictures, it must be noted that she belongs to the upper-class society, unlike other women characters from this particular analysis who belong to a lower-middle-class society. Homi's class privileges offer her the opportunity to exercise her free will and openly seek her bodily desires. The stigmatization of female sexuality as it is feared to threaten the established structures of hetero-patriarchal power also reveals how as opposed to all this surveillance, there is no such restriction for the adulterous husband or the desiring husband. Contrary to the legal remedy available to a distressed husband for the adultery of the wife criminalizes her male partner, there is no such legality around the husband's adulterous acts that rescues the wife from her agony. This study deals with characters like Sarojini Sahoo's (2009) protagonist, Kuki, who leads a dual life: one where she is an obedient docile housewife engaged in an abusive marriage and the other that exists in the virtual world of the internet where she engages in a love affair with a Pakistani artist whom she has never met. Although her love affair is not physical or tangible, Kuki feels her desires getting fulfilled by it in ways her non-existent physical relationship with her husband fails to.

In other instances, there are also characters like Anjali in Yashodha Mishra's (2020) text who self-regulate her body to an extent where she self-inflicts corporeal punishments for being adulterous. Anjali burns herself when she finds out that her husband knows of her straying desires out of embarrassment and social humiliation. While such acts of conditioning the wife's chastity in a marriage where her desires are not getting satiated seem problematic, the marital ownership of the female body practiced beyond the death of the husband is even more outrageous. The practice of sexual abstinence, widow immolation, or dietary regulations in order to keep a check on the body's heat are all acts of ensuring that the dead husband is not dishonored by his wife's betrayal even though he no longer exists in the physical realm. A lot of these disciplinary acts are also re-iterated by other women. For instance, Nabaneeta Dev Sen (2013) presents the character of Nistarini who boldly talks about the art of love-making in an old age home, revisiting the sexual adventures from her youth. While this aspect of her memory shows how she had enjoyed sexual autonomy, her character is mercilessly excoriated for its crude ways and

licentious behavior. Similarly, Kuntala Kumari Sabat's (2014) widowed character of Lakhmi is also pursued to observe all the stringent rules of widowhood by the elderly women of her household. It shows how the re-iteration of these social evils successfully contains the female body in the servility of male authority even in its material absence. The dead husband becomes an invisible agent that demands commitment and the commitment to this invisible entity is rewarded with moral and social upliftment or praise. The issue of female pleasure is more often than not overlooked within the social institution of marriage. Ironically, it is through marriage that many women from conservative Indian society get to experience their sexuality. This study by delving deeper into the gap between female desire and the performance of female pleasure in marital negotiations necessitates how women's embodied reality is erased within the patriarchal context of disciplining erotic aspirations. The idea of female pleasure is frequently neglected within the social milieu of India, thus emphasizing the critical necessity of delving into narratives that illustrate repressed voices of desires. Despite the historical subjugation of women's sexualities, the female body is far from being merely a passive recipient of male desires. The female physique, conceived as a potent agent of sexual enticement, poses a threat to the established masculine power dynamics which is why it is leashed within the institution of marriage.

This confinement extends even beyond the demise of the husband to safeguard his honor. Instances of deviation from these normative conditions by the sexually transgressive female body often result in severe bodily repercussions. The severity of these conditions also at times culminate in the complete physical elimination of the female body in the form of death. This epitomizes how systematic disciplining is imposed on the female body to satisfy the heteropatriarchal demands of society, positioning them as mere objects handled with utilitarian motives. The political urgency of this literary research on the female body located in the Eastern-Indian regions of Odisha, Assam, and West Bengal lies in the fact that it unpacks unique cultural, social, and political anecdotes of bodily restrictions. It aids in being inclusive of some lesser-known narratives that are hitherto absent in the academic sphere specifically in discussions of female body politics and embodiment. While its geographical setting has facilitated this study to conduct this comparative cultural analysis, it has also limited its access to perspectives of alternate sexualities. Due to the lack of translations made out of this understudied body of regional women's fiction, this study could only focus on the dominant themes it presented. Another issue is that literary texts

are written in the context of Hinduism and alternate analyses of the treatment of the married female body in other religions like Islam are absent from this study. However, the urgency of this research is not discounted by this fact because of its criticism of the dominant cultures. The scholarship on body feminism in South Asia has not focused on this region and its specific political climate has forced women's bodies to face corporeal trauma in the face of communal tensions. This is also further explained through the instance of the army using rape as a weapon for counter-insurgencies as they target female relatives of ULFA members to make them surrender. The research therefore predominantly traces stands of political meaning behind systematic violence against the female body and then disenfranchisement of this memory of organized violence. This study also traces fragments of representational bodily resistance that provide the reader with alternate ways of performing female embodiment in such regulatory regimes. By bringing the Assamese, Odia, and Bengali women characters to the forefront, it contests the overwhelming representations of a mainstream North Indian perspective that are often alien to the embodied realities of the women from this region.

This study, therefore, aims to rescue the lost narratives of women's fiction that present stifled voices of corporeal discrimination in multiple contexts. This study can serve as a good starting point for a long-term serious scholarly engagement with the politics of the female body in these regions, expanding it further to other northeastern regions as well. One of the shortcomings of this research is that it is only limited to the narratives presented by women writers and this is a very conscious effort because I did not want an appropriated representation of the body. At the least, I wanted to focus on the narratives of female embodiment written by people who lived and experienced it themselves. It aspires to urge future feminist scholars from the region to potentially engage with the theories of embodiment while taking up interpretation research on this body of women's literature. Since this study is majorly based on literary analysis and interpretations, my position as an insider might and as someone who belongs to the region might have influenced some of the analysis. However, such perspectives of the researcher come from the point of participant observer and only play a role in my judgment regarding the authenticity of such representations. This research is an attempt to give the seemingly silent body a voice which it lacks in multiple contexts even though it carries a tangible presence. The socio-cultural mapping of the body through fiction also aids in our understanding of the emotional impact of power abuses on women's embodiment. The meaning-making process of the embodied

cultures is called into question in this research. The study also conducts a symbolical analysis of certain linguistic nuances present in some of the texts. For instance, Adhikari's short story is heavily suffused with sexual innuendoes and I have taken liberties in interpreting them through my own subjective understanding. This study also uses some online news articles as supplementary hyperlinks in footnotes in cases where I felt there was a need to supplement the literary representation with social realism by presenting the media coverage of similar events from the real world. In that sense, this research aspires to be treated as interdisciplinary and not merely a critical engagement with the literary arts. Therefore, I have often defined these texts as socio-literary narratives in this study since much of it is backed by rigorous ethnographic and socio-historical research. This study questions how the hunger for flesh is dominantly represented to be emerging from the male body specifically in many cultural contexts of India. It brings forth an alternative narrative to bodily hunger and shows how this body of women's fiction creates a space for female readers to feel included and that corporeality is being given a voice. The cultural diversity even in these three regions is undeniable and the selected texts obviously do not cover all strands of it. Therefore, I hope that this study inspires other scholars from the region to conduct similar research applying the constructionist lens of body politics to other cultural and political strands that this study does not address. Finally, this research is written envisioning a social change brought forth through widespread scholarly engagements with the female body so that it breathes, desires, gets proper healthcare or sexual security, and gets satiated by pleasure in all social scenarios.