2 “I’ll Kick All the Literary Trash in the Ass” Hunger and the Aesthetics of Transgression

Hunger

After our focus on Hungryalist literary sources and use of language, let us now shift to the poetic imagery that pervades the Hungryalist textual world. Drawing from a selected corpus of Hungryalist writings, I here single out what are the overarching tropes of the Hungry Generation literature, namely hunger, alcohol and drug consumption. A separate chapter will further explore their “aesthetics of transgression” by delving into the subject of hyper-masculinity.

Metaphors originating from the sense of taste, such as eating, consuming, and feeling hungry, are known to have a strong performative power. Since the early twentieth century, modernist literature and theatre performances have made the “hungry body” the centre of their artistic, aesthetic and political statements. Michel Delville pointed out that in the context of the modernist avant-garde, for example, “the body itself is apprehended and represented as an unfinished, indigestible figure which hesitates between identification and rejection” (Delville 2008: 3). The figurative force of the hungry body, torn between pleasure and disgust, and tempted by the fetish of consumption, was the powerful cultural metonymy of the Hungry Generation.

The domain of hunger (kṣudhā) proffered the Bengali authors the cultural baggage and historical memory of the Bengal Famine which linked the concerns of the Hungry Generation to the economically precarious background that the city of Calcutta was going through in the post-independence period. According to Hungryalist philosophy, all five senses of the body must be involved in the total transformation of the man and of his means of knowing the world. Sight, taste, touch and hearing must partake of this synesthetic revolution of knowledge and perception. Besides this more allegorical vision of hunger, there is also a typically historical one that emerged from the memories of the Partition of Bengal. First, the Bengal Famine of 1943 (durbhikṣa), whose reasons and number of casualties are still debated issues, left a deep mark in the memory and historical consciousness

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of the Bengali people.[21] Its effects were documented and commemorated throughout the Bengali arts scene, most notably with Chittaprosad's series of pen and ink sketches of the famine-struck district of Midnapore; in the performing arts, with Bijon Bhattacharya's drama *Nabānna* (1944); and in film culture, where its effects on the rural populations are examined in Satyajit Ray's movie *Aśani saṃket* (1973). Food crisis, inflation, and reduced access to food on behalf of the poorer sections of the society have been recurring episodes of Bengal history, in both sides of the country. In 1958 and then again in 1966, a CPI-led mass movement erupted onto the streets to protest against the shortage of food and the inflation of food prices. The movement is still remembered in Bengal as "khādya āndolan" (Food movement). Hunger and poverty became infamous traits and stereotypes of the so-called Third World, a phrase which by that era had lost its technical meaning of non-aligned states to be replaced by the collective imaginary of underdevelopment, poverty and overpopulation of the decolonising countries of Asia, Africa and South America. The Hungry Generation's historical and emotional link with Bengal's history of famine and food crisis cannot but be symbolically perpetuated through the numerous metaphors of hunger.

Moreover, the feeling and physical conditions produced by hunger became a common subject of observation and of social criticism in Europe and the United States. Early twentieth century literature, for instance, following a wave of social criticism triggered by Socialist ideas, observed the living conditions of the destitute people and of the proletariat. Some authors, such as George Orwell and Jack London, became penniless beggars, wore the beggar's clothes and carried on a destitute lifestyle that helped them get closer to the life of the poor.[22] Modernity and urbanisation in the urban centres of Europe and the United States triggered the romantic idealisation of the 'poor', drawing the attention of Marxist and Socialist writers concerned about the living conditions of the labour and the working-class. In West Bengal, prose writers inspired by Marxism, like Manik Bandyopadhyay and Tarashankar Bandhyopadhyay, gave dignity to real life characters living at the margins of urban Bengal in their novels. For example, hunger was a major trope in Tarashankar's novel *Caitālī ghūrṇi* (1931) and it became a key constituent of dystopia in the portrayal of industrialisation and the subsequent alienation of the individual, a claim which is made "further compelling by adding the dimensions

21 See, for example, Janam Mukherjee's detailed study on the political and economic reasons that unleashed the famine which caused the "annihilation of at least three million people" (Mukherjee 2015).

22 See, for example, Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* (1903) and George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), two accounts of the destitute living conditions of working-class people living in the poor neighbourhoods of the two capitals. Charlie Chaplin's character of the 'tramp' became part of the literary and cinematographic imagination as well as one of the most popular icons of modernity.

of physicality and urgency of human hunger" (Chatterjee 2019b: 20). In addition to the physicality of hunger, to the Hungry Generation it also symbolised the cultural need to renovate the Bengali culture and language literally by "devouring" (sarbagrās karā) foreign cultural elements. Metaphorically it signalled the need to "feed" and enrich the conventional and bourgeois Bengali culture of the post-independence with new modes, styles, themes, and contents of modernity.

Malay Roy Choudhury at first conceptualised hunger by quoting Geoffrey Chaucer's line "in the sowre hungry tymes" from his *Boece*.[23] Payal Singh reported that according to Malay "nobody before Chaucer had expressed 'hunger' with relation to culture" (Bhattacharya n.d.: 4). Malay also provided a philosophical backbone to the movement and further explained the recurrence of metaphors of food and hunger in the group by mentioning Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (*The Decline of the West*, 1918). Indrajit Bhattacharya described the notion of hunger in Hungryalism as deeply engrained in the cultural and political alienation of the Bengali unemployed and disoriented youth of independent India: "It was the time of endlessness. It was also the time which had no measurements, no limits, no directions, no movements. When time itself saw its children's unhealthy and improper modes of defining time, their jugglery of coining artificial and lunatic jargons, their dimensions of observations and their games, it became hungry and therefore it turned sour". In his vision of culture as a biological organism, the "ailing culture feeds on cultural elements brought from outside" after its self-creative power decays (Bhattacharya n.d.: 4). Malay eventually described this "insatiable" need to feed on foreign cultures as hunger and, in a later article (Basu 2011), explained it as "a sour time of putrefaction" marking the period following the Partition of India.

One of the early manifestoes of Hungryalism, only later attributed to Malay, prophetically proclaimed the final liberation of poetry from the conventions and technicalities of the verse, trapped in the "cage of Form", with a virtuous language that seemed to play with the terminology of Buddhist and Hindu philosophical traditions. In Malay's words, life is imbued with a temporary experience of death, a central notion of the Hindu and Buddhist philosophy and discipline, both heavily centred on the spiritual potential of the body. Therefore, the political potential of hunger stems from a condition that is "mental, physical, and corporeal" at the same time, as proclaimed in the next manifesto.[24] Although the image of hunger is

23 I quote the full line in *Boece*'s Book 1 (Prosa 4, lines 80–81): "Whan it was in the sowre hungry tyme, ther was establissed or cryed grievous and unplitable coempcioun, that men sayen wel it schulde gretly tormenten and endamagen al the province of Campayne" (Robinson 1957: 324).

24 Other cases in literary history have exploited the symbolic potential of hunger. Franz Kafka's *A Hunger Artist* was a "potent metaphor of artisthood" as well as a powerful tool of extra-sensorial knowledge emerging out of the physical and psychological weaknesses of the author's body. Alys Moody has argued that the "trope of starvation" resonates in much

here exploited in its metaphoric potential, underscoring a state of both cultural and material sickness, it takes on a variety of meaning all stemming from a condition that is primarily physiological and psychological, a state of lack which is at the foundation of poetry.

> Today poetry is inherent in the contradictions of life. It no longer tries to be a harmoniser of life; it is not an overpopulated blind anthill, nor it is an unrelenting collection of logic arguments. Today, in this time, the human need has manifested as a terrible hunger for the inescapable depth, so much so that the need to extract meaning from life is over. Today it's the time of meaninglessness, catastrophe, soul-lessness. The aforesaid hunger is not only hunger for world dissent: it is also psychological, physical and corporeal. The only nourisher of hunger is poetry, for what else would there be in life without poetry! Man, God, Democracy and Science have been defeated. Today poetry has become the only refuge. (Caṭṭopādhyāẏ 2015: 118).

Food and Eating Metaphors

The Hungryalist metaphor of "eating" foreign cultural elements was already present in the movement from the very beginning. In 1962, already at a very early stage of the movement, Shakti Chattopadhyay explained the Hungry movement as the contamination of Bengali literary culture with Beat elements by using the metaphor of food contamination.

> If there has been an unspoken or unclean movement also in Bengal, in the perspective of similar movements like the Beat Generation, the Angry – all that is going on at the centre of literature in the West or even in Soviet Russia –, in our national and social environment only a movement related to hunger is possible. Those countries in that part of the world live in affluent social conditions, they can be Angry or Beat. But we are Hungry. Hungry for each and every form and emotion. No form or emotion is excluded; exclusion is itself impossible. It is wrong to say that the movement was influenced by Beat or Angry, because

modern and postmodern authors (e.g. the Parisian surrealists, the American Lost Generation, Beckett, Auster, and Coetzee) imagining "a novel aesthetics that sees the body as the point of mediation between art and society, between necessity and negation" (Moody 2018: 2).

> the main word of this movement is "all-devouring" [sarbagrās]: it means that it wants to eat up the Beat Generation and mix it with rice, lentils and shrimps and season it with salt and spices. I hope that the idea of indigestion won't be raised because art itself has become indigestion. Chewing life, all the inedible stuff is vomited into prose, verse, painting and so on, including cow dung (Sen 2015: 9).

By choosing the label of Hungry rather than Angry or Beat, the Bengali poets declared their independence from Western avant-gardes and from the economic and political situation of the West, an "affluent" one unlike in India and West Bengal. At the same time, the evident resemblance to the English word "angry" must have suggested a possible alternative to replace the British-sounding "angry" with "hungry", an adjective more appropriate for describing the social and economic catastrophe of post-Partition in West Bengal. Moreover, the visual, gustative and olfactory capacity of metaphors related to food and cooking served to justify the unavoidability of literary and cultural contamination. The theme of food and hunger in modern Bengali culture went through significant transformations during the twentieth century, starting from the aftermath of the Famine, when the lack of ruṭi and bhāt (bread and rice) had made these food items literary and cinematographic metaphors of hunger, poverty and distress, all through the contemporary "gentrification" of local cooking and street food.[25] "Khāoẏā" (lit. to eat), an all-pervading verb in ordinary Bengali language, with a multiplicity of generic and idiomatic significations, is so much part of a Bengali's cultural world of meaning that Bengali cuisine has become a symbol of identity and belonging throughout colonial and postcolonial history. For example, while Indian nationalism promoted a morality of moderation which extended also to the consumption of food and implied a reform of taste, India's transition to postmodernity and a growing consumerism signalled the return of "extreme" tastes as in the quick and extemporary consumption of street food in the city of Calcutta (Mukhopadhyay 2004). In their lifestyle and poetry, the Hungry Generation anticipated and mirrored quite well that morality of excess.

25 This was a widespread trope also in post-war Europe's cultural production. In Italian cinema, for instance, the recurrence of scenes related to the table and food consumption (like the memorable spaghetti scenes with movie characters such as Totò in Mattoli's *Miseria e nobiltà* and Alberto Sordi in Steno's *Un Americano a Roma*) was at first associated with the memory of war deprivation and then later meant to celebrate the wealth of the post-war years, when references to food and eating had gained the grotesque tone of bourgeois criticism (as in Truffault's *La grande bouffe*) (Natale 2009).

Art as Vomit and Indigestion

A common assumption within the world avant-garde is that the "obscenity" of life is visually and symbolically removed from public perception, confined to a space outside of the domain of the bourgeoisie. In order to counter this confinement of the so-called "matter out of place", as Mary Douglas effectively described the realm of impurity in tribal societies (Douglas 1966), the goal of the counterculture was to literally "vomit" the obscenities together with the prescriptions of society that made poets and artists slaves of the establishment. Against the institutionalisation of Art and Literature, the task of the world counterculture was to preach the need to "free" language from both cultural codes and social conventions, embracing the total vocabulary of humanity and releasing poetry from the chain of form. This vision was promoted, for example, in Malay Roy Choudhury's pamphlet "In Defense of Obscenity" (ca. 1966), which proclaimed the need for obscenity in modern society to reveal the depravities and corruptions of the system. The wish of Hungryalism, aligned with the goals of other avant-gardes, was to imagine a language that could accommodate all slangs, jargons, and taboos.

> If speaking & writing in the total FREE LANGUAGE of the ENTIRE SOCIETY leads to the saintliness labelled by the money suckers as "depravity & corruption";
>
> I WILL DEPRAVE & CORRUPT MAN TO SANITY.
>
> I'd go on defending Obscenity until I've forced the society to embrace the total vocabulary of MAN. I want POETRY to be given back to LIFE

Linked to the project of language regeneration is the metaphor of "throwing up" because of the sense of disgust and satiation engendered by the regulations of bourgeois society. Shakti Chattopadhyay, writing about the goals of Hungryalism, compared art and the process of literary creation to indigestion (badˈhajam): "I hope that the idea of indigestion won't be raised because art itself has become indigestion. Chewing life, all the inedible stuff is vomited into prose, verse, painting and so on, including cow dung" (Sen 2015: 9). In his bleak but honest vision of life, art and literature are viewed as by-products of an inevitable physiological process that ends up by 'vomiting' the indigestible residues of life. Throughout the global avant-garde, nausea and vomit were common images to symbolise the unavoidable truth of life that is in itself violent and obscene. Jeff Nuttall, the British 'Angry' artist, writing about the counterculture in London in his *Bomb Culture*, wished to propound an aesthetics of nausea to encourage a "pessimistic acceptance of life" (Nuttall 1970: 141–2).

> The magazine [*My Own Mag: a Super-Absorbant Periodical*], even those first three pages, used nausea and flagrant scatology as a violent means of presentation. I wanted to make the fundamental condition of living unavoidable by nausea. You can't pretend it's not there if you're throwing up as a result. My hope was that a pessimistic acceptance of life would counteract the optimistic refusal of unpleasantness, the optimistic refusal of life, the deathwish, the bomb.

The process of writing and creating poetry for the writers and artists of the avant-garde turned into a physiological and thus inevitable act, just like eating and defecating. Like all the primary needs, by definition bodily and physical, the language of poetry must carry the same shocking potential that pervades the grotesque representations of activities like copulation, vomit, defecation or decomposition. As a result, these writers and artists of the world avant-garde made all the defiling processes of the body part of the sacramental sphere of literature.

Rice and Empty Bellies

Besides metaphorically representing hunger in its relation to images of food and culture consumption, Hungryalist poetry visually portrayed hunger in its substantial physical and bodily features. Emaciated faces, beggars, and the recurrence of the symbol of cooked rice (bhāt), were the predominant features of the urban and rural landscape of post-independence West Bengal. In the next Hungryalist poems, it is through the silent presence of people consumed by war, famine and migration, that the image of hunger stands for the basic need of biological life. In other words, human life is reduced to "bare life" – the biological fact of life (Gr. zoē), to quote Agamben (1995) – which was violated and regulated during and after traumatic events like Partition and the Bengal Famine. Yet the next poem proclaims the uselessness of politics and war vis-à-vis the "emaciated hunger" painted on the people's faces, revealing that life under such circumstances means sheer survival.

Shakti Chattopadhyay's "Border proposal 1: Addressed to the Prime Minister" (Sīmāntaprastāb 1: mukhyamantrīr pratinibedan, 1962) denounces the poverty and deprivation that became rooted in West Bengal during the Cold War years. The author critically situates his poem in the frame of the political and armed confrontations between the two blocks of the World: the continuing provocations between America and the Soviet Union, the fear of a nuclear war, and territorial negotiations going on along the borders of India. In juxtaposition to the events of national and international politics, Shakti counterpoises a real history from below

unravelling at the level of ordinary life. The beggar boy embodies the crude truth and bareness of ordinary life as opposed to the games of politics taking place from above.

> A beggar boy loved to stare at the boiled rice
> and examined
> the paddy plants spread in the moonlight
> at the roots of the paddy
> like silent waterfilled butter
> glossy puffed up paddy in earth's simplicity –
> Can paddy turn into rice?

At the beginning of the poem, the young beggar (bhikhāri) observes the extension of paddy fields of Bengal in the moonlight: the paddy fields are "glossy and puffed up", according to the natural rules of the soil, and yet they do not constitute an edible food that provides nourishment. Shakti does not use any word that literally translates as "food" (like khābār) but chooses rather "rice" (bhāt), which constitutes the main nourishment of a Bengali meal. Rice played a pivotal role in cementing a sense of Bengali self-identity, unlike wheat which is mainly consumed as roti by non-Bengali communities in North India. During the Swadeshi movement of self-sufficiency, rice also became a symbol of resistance to the so-called "colonisation of taste" taking place in India and Bengal (Prasad 2015: 30–31). On a different level of reading, Shakti Chattopadhyay's poem also seems to overturn the romanticised vision of the village of rural Bengal, which emerged in Bengali literature as the site of discourses on modernity and nation-building. In the rhetorical question "can paddy turn into rice?", the opposition between the rich and thriving paddy (dhān), predominant feature of the landscape of rural Bengal, and the absence of rice (bhāt) voices the paradoxes of a lush and fertile soil incapable of nourishing the Bengali population. Therefore, to the eyes of the young beggar, the simple rules of the earth, as well as the transformation of paddy into edible rice, become a site of desire and utopia.

> The beggar's good boy was shaved
> Many bad boys never bothered about love
> they are alive
> they are clean too
> how many good fruits like amla exist on earth
> the beggar's good boy bad boy dropped from beggar father's belly
> In a phenomenal chaos Chinese peace is taking place on earth,
> freedom, melancholy and so on
> stand close to war

stop all kinds of war
let us die of natural deaths
let us die, let us go in our familiar deaths
arrange the marriage between Kennedy and Khrushchev
don't let them beat their womb's bomb-boys
let their bomb-girls die in their womb
let their marriage anniversary be lethal year by year
without Krushchev or Kennedy will there ever be a mother?
Then stop violence, megaton war, explosion
otherwise the hungry will eat decomposed flesh as much as they need
from the party of snow hyenas borders for distressed India
with a red flag of blasphemy, only with a limping hunger of the body
and seeing through the eyes of the snow hyenas the painted
emaciated hunger of the women
Chief Minister, send a bunch of Hungry poets
even though they don't know how to write
they can swallow transcendentally
they can devour the entire border and discuss the issue at the
coffee house
(Caṭṭopādhyāẏ 2015: 22–23)

The war between Kennedy and Khrushchev, the arms race and the fear of a nuclear bomb, both located atop the ordinary lives of the beggars, seem to have no connection or effect on them. Shakti traces a line between the two foci of the poem – the war and the poor – zooming in and out from one to the other to reveal the blind link that connects people with politics. Yet, in Shakti's utopic vision, the poor and the hungries (kṣudhārta) are not helpless and passive actors of war but agents of revolution. They are the ones who will overcome and voice the wish of stopping "violence, megaton war, explosion": they will "eat decomposed flesh as much as they need" if their demand remains unanswered. In a plea to stop the "Megaton war", the poet directly turns to the ruling class and to the chief ministers threatening to "send a bunch of Hungry poets", the last chance of human redemption.

Also Subo Acharya, the Hungry poet turned Hindu monk, used similar words of absence to describe the uselessness of poetry and art in general when basic nourishment is missing: "Ay! What is the sense of writing poems/ With no rice in my belly/ What can it mean to have anything in my belly/ When there is nothing in my belly/ I want to eat up the whole world" ("Personal Destruction", in Bakken 1967 n.p.). On the other hand, the hunger denoted by an empty belly can be a powerful agent of change and political revolution, as announced in Debi Roy's poem "Hunger, I am" (Kṣudhā, āmi): "Hunger, come on, I'll change your religion / Hunger, come on let us march on Vietnam / Hunger, let us show up in Greenwich

Village / In Iowa, in Moscow, the two of us… / I am very Hunger. I want peace thru my hunger, liberty!".[26] Hunger, the attribute of poverty and shortage, is now embodied by the Bengali pronoun "āmi" (Eng. "I") in this poem, calling all the hungry people and the Hungry poets of the world to join for peace and anti-establishment protest.

We have found a multifaceted description and conceptualisation of hunger in these examples of Hungryalist poems. First, in his manifesto Malay outlines the physical and psychological connotation of hunger, a sphere that he metaphorically connects to the domain of artistic and literary creation. The institutionalised world of art and literature is in fact what the avant-garde wants to counter by "throwing up", that is by exposing the dirtiest and abominable facts of life in the art's sphere. The somatic traits of hunger are depicted in the numerous descriptions of beggars, starving people, and homeless refugees in the poems we have examined. Other features have concerned the figurative potential of hunger and activities related to food consumption, such as cooking, eating and digesting processes, mainly translating into metaphors of literary contamination and cultural hybridity, a key feature of the Hungryalist literary ethos. Moreover, the creation of poetry is allegorically compared to the biological processes entailed in the activities of eating and digesting. Food corruption, indigestion, the sense of nausea and vomit are seen in analogy with the literary contamination of Bengali language and culture that Hungryalism viewed as the only possibility of cultural regeneration in what Malay named the "sour time of putrefaction", as crystallised in the title of Nayanima Basu's article (Basu 2011).

Alcohol

Hunger deploys transversally in Hungryalism, constituting both a trope of poetry and the backbone of its revolutionary theory of art. Alcohol, another image of Hungryalist poetry, has become a common trait of the radical imaginary associated with this Bengali avant-garde. Discourses on alcohol prohibition played a role in the constitution of middle-class and nationalist identities since colonial modernity. In the late colonial period, abstinence from drinking became part of a prominent anti-colonial campaign that promoted a morality of temperance and moderation against the "corruption" of moral values fostered by the colonial encounter (Fischer-Tiné

26 Extract from Debi Roy's translated poem "Hunger, I am" ("Kṣudhā, āmi") quoted from Debi Roy's letter to Howard McCord (undated). In Howard McCord Papers, Cage 578, Box 2, Folder 56, Item 2. Courtesy of Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC), Washington State University Libraries.

and Tschurenev 2013). Although boozing is still perceived as socially reproachable in middle-class India, it constitutes an essential part of the Bengali middle-class literary imagination. Boozing was already an act of transgression of the social and moral codes of Bengali society in early colonial times, when the Young Bengal group of Anglo-Indian rationalists and liberal thinkers rejected Hindu orthodoxy and performed, sometimes publicly, acts of moral and religious transgression such as drinking alcohol and consuming beef-meat. On the other hand, during the 1960s alcohol consumption has also been associated with middle-class, especially male, urban alienation due to social pressure and urbanisation. This aspect has emerged in many novels of that period, including Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Araṇyer din'rātri* (Days and Nights in the Forest, 1968), which follows a group of city youths and their journey away from city life to spend some days in the Palamau forests in today's Jharkhand. The short escape into the forest meant for them a break with the social bonds of urban civilisation. In this novel, later turned into a movie by Satyajit Ray, the middle-class protagonists visit a local liquor store where they meet young Santhal girls, who are portrayed as beautiful and lascivious: the association between the consumption of local toddy and the immorality of the adivasi women points at the middle-class stereotype that imagines the tribal community as immoral and uncivilised. Together with other novels of the same genre, *Araṇyer din'rātri* focuses on the life of the Bengali urban middle class, their disorientation in a grinding city and an oppressive society that forces them to accept all the social prescription related to status, education and marriage.

Also postmodern literature is aware of the place of booze in Bengal's social life. For example, Nabarun Bhattacharya's novel *Kāṅāl mālsāṭ* (War Cry of Beggars, 2003) employs a variety of words to describe booze in Bengali that "interrelate the kind of alcoholic drink to class, caste, occupational group, religious and gender identity of the drinker" (Lorea 2018: 42). For example, "desī dāru" is the general term for the country liquor or toddy, a locally distilled drink extracted from date palms or flowers. Other varieties of local toddy is "colāi", a bootleg cheap distilled liquor, usually made from rice and sometimes mixed with industrial alcohol or methanol. Important distinctions of class and status exist between drinking local toddy and foreign liquor: while the former is mainly consumed by lower classes and poorer people, foreign liquor is consumed by the middle class, being expensive imported alcohol such as brandy, scotch and whisky.

The Myth of Absinthe

The Hungryalists celebrated their passion for alcohol. Their meetings and poetry readings at the country liquor shop in Khalasitala, in south Calcutta, have left traces in the memoirs of the movement. Some poets, like Phalguni and Tushar

Roy, were addicted to alcohol and drugs like opium, and died prematurely because of cirrhosis and untreated tuberculosis. The parallels with the poètes maudits and the icons of the French décadence – the bohemian hero and the flâneur – are numerous and overtly emphasised by the members of the Hungry Generation. The repeated references to the poets Baudelaire, Apollinaire and Rimbaud, to mention only a few, in Hungryalist poems and essays signal the wish to acknowledge the legacy of decadentism in the transgressive practices of Hungryalism.

Luc Ferry has shown that "bohemian" generally denotes a bourgeois who has abandoned the safety of his society, which he rejects and desecrates by embracing immorality, promiscuity and debauchery. He is usually a man who explores the abysses of extra-sensorial experience through addiction to drugs and alcohol as forms of protest against the formality and regulations of mainstream bourgeois society (Ferry 2012). Walter Benjamin identified in Baudelaire the icon of the modern bourgeois artist, "walking through the city and making sense of the crowd" (Benjamin 2014: 99). The feeling of loss, anonymity, and disorientation in the urban crowd is, in Benjamin's words, accompanied by the experience of choc which dissolves and replaces the lively and animated image of the crowd. This sense of attraction and repulsion for urban life is at the centre of Europe's experience of modernity. The exploration of the phenomenon of modernity is also the subject of Baudelaire's, among others, experiments with drugs, most notably expressed in his *Les paradis artificiels* (1860), in which the poet discusses the possible connections between artistic creation and drugs.

Malay Roy Choudhury's poem "The Green Nymph" (Sabuj debakanyā) traces a direct connection with drinking as a transgressive and escapist practice. In this poem, he celebrates the qualities of absinthe, the "green nymph" of Europe: "Oh, it is you then that beautiful nymph/ Toulouse Lautrec, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Baudelaire/ Van Gogh, Modigliani and who else" (Rāẏˈcaudhurī 2013: 17). In a later essay, Malay reported that during his stay in Amsterdam he was disappointed by his first sip of absinthe, which he tasted at a local coffee shop in the Dutch city. The drink was meant to be sipped slowly and mixed with water, which did not give him any sense of inebriation. He thought that his "Bihari tharra and local liquors from Khalasitala did not change his drinking habits" (Rāẏˈcaudhurī 2011, blog).

The social and cultural distinction derived from consuming country liquor or foreign imported alcohol is also characteristic of the Bengali drinking culture. While in the 1960s the emphasis was rather on consuming local toddy, the focus on the poet's relationship with alcohol in Malay Roy Choudhury's "Theory of Drinking" (Madyapān tattva) normalises the consumption of alcohol as part of Bengali middle-class life. If consuming "Scotch or Martini" with "fried pork meat" is perceived as a transgressive habit, the poem signals the incorporation of these practices into ordinary Bengali middle-class life.

Even now I am drinking alone, oh good gracious!
a few ounces [chaṭāk] of rice liquor
stale palm tree toddy
fried pork meat
Scotch or Martini –
don't like this at all
a few jackals on the veranda
sing a blind chant
throughout the night, blowing a cigar
pulling out the spectacles from the left side,
I sit in silence
I know the earth and the motherfucker
called Dhruv, he
will accept
that racket will be
or call it as you wish
(Rāẏˈcaudhurī 2005: 99–100)

Notice the variety of the Bengali vocabulary of spirits in this poem. Malay drinks from local palm toddies like dheno (made from rice) and tāṛi (made from the date palm) to imported liquors like Scotch and Martini. These practices of transgression functioned in the Bengali avant-garde as a strategy of subversion and provocation that ultimately criticises the immobility and narrow-mindedness of Indian social and cultural life.

The New āḍḍā at Khalasitala

The Hungry Generation poets were regular clients of the country-liquor shop at Khalasitala, in the neighbourhood of Alipur. This, like other shops and coffee houses in Calcutta, were at the centre of an underground map of gathering places where the Hungry Generation poets would meet to drink and discuss a variety of subjects ranging from literature to politics; in other words, to perform what has become a cultural institution in the Bengali middle-class world: āḍḍā, the informal conversation. The country liquor shop in Khalasitala greatly differed from the old coffee houses which became popular centres of reunion for the intellectual middle class since the first decades of the century. The much-celebrated Indian Coffee Houses, gathering places for most of the leftist intellectuals, were in the 1960s seen as sites of an exclusive and high-brow culture of political disquisitions and poetic reunions. Bhaswati Bhattacharya has recalled that in the Sixties and Seventies the centre of the literary āḍḍā shifted from the more bourgeois coffee houses to the

marginal country-liquor shops usually crowded with low-class people, shipmate labourers and sailors (lit. khālāsi) (Bhattacharya 2017). The vision of the coffee houses as elite poetry workshops was noticed, for example, by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra in his poem "Bharatmata – a Prayer" (1970) in which he recalled that "poetry/ is kept in a hothouse/ under the artificial ceiling and tube lights/ of the India Coffee House".

Selling local cheap liquors, Khalasitala was celebrated by the Hungryalist as one of the many meeting places of the Bengali counterculture, like Calcutta's brothel areas of Sonagachi and Harkata lane in Bowbazar. This subculture praised drunkards, prostitutes, smokers, criminals, and incorporated their stories into writing, turning these marginal meeting places into an iconic and creative space for the Bengali avant-garde.[27] Amitranjan Basu (2012), recalling the days when he used to visit the liquor shop in Khalasitala, pointed out the social distinction embedded in consuming the more prestigious foreign liquor instead of cheap local toddy (bāṃlā mad). He also showed that this practice gradually became a habit of the more educated middle class.

> I have heard that country spirit shops at Khalasitala, Baroduari and Ganja Park are frequented by upcoming and well-known poets and writers. Well, consuming country spirit by intellectuals was nothing new in Calcutta. Writers like Saratchandra and Manik Bandopadhyay have already inscribed the history of their love for country spirit. But drinking in a country spirit bar with the so-called subalterns and trying to 'create' a radical culture was something new…We started drinking Bangla mod (country liquor) because we couldn't afford anything else. Though we carried a hidden middle-class inverse pride that we smoked Charminar and drank Bangla! We frequented Khalasitala and Baroduari to meet our favourite writers and poets but never met them as most of the time we left the tavern by early evening. But drinking there was a unique experience as I met various people and surprisingly found that not many came to drink out of frustration as it was shown in the Bengali or Hindi films! For most of the customers it was a social space. Some would spend hours with a pint or a file (quarter) and some would quickly gulp down a few shots at the counter and leave.

27 In the last years, a re-evaluation of the underground and the subculture in literary studies has witnessed a growing interest in "establishing" also minor Bengali icons, writings and places. This is visible for example in one issue of the magazine *Kaurab* that is fully devoted to Khalasitala (*Kaurab 92: Khālāsiṭolā*, Kal'kātā: Hemanta, 2002).

The poet Phalguni Ray too was known to be visiting the poetry readings and meetings at Khalasitala. During his life, he became famous for his destitute lifestyle, and especially for his addiction to alcohol and opium. His death by cirrhosis at the early age of thirty-six made him a cult figure for the young generations, encouraging an analogy with other rebellion icons of the literary world, most notably with Rimbaud. A part of his poetry reflects his addiction to alcohol, viewed as a genetic disease that Phalguni inherits through his forefathers. The idea of genetically inheriting the disease was an obsession for this poet. His brother Tushar Ray, himself a controversial poet too, suffered from alcohol addiction and died of cirrhosis. We will later see that, in Phalguni's view, these are considered the signs of his forefathers' legacy and experienced as a bodily burden of alcohol abuse, diabetes and cirrhosis. Besides representing a real issue in the poet's life, the act of drinking transforms itself into an activity that prompts literary creation in a fashion that was not so different from the late 19th century myth of the French Bohème. In the following extract from the poem "Television of a Rotten Soul" (1973), Phalguni's translation of the emotional, poetic spaces from the French modern city to the Bengali city of the post-partition shows the need to formulate a new idiom of postmodernity that could work for the cultural and historical conditions lived by the young Bengali rebel writers.

> I have never been by the river Seine I have never tasted absinthe
> and roamed about Paris
> I'm a boy from the shores of the Ganges
> on a tropical stormy night I have howled out to the thunder:
> "Thunder! Blaze out! I want to see your blue aura on the breast
> of the Ganges!"
> I have carried Christ's cross and guns smuggled by Rimbaud
> marching on processions of armed revolutionaries on Gandhi's
> birth centenary
>
> I have eaten beef and sang the name of Hari
> I'm not drunk now, there's no dreaming, no daydream or
> nightmare and I am standing and I don't feel like smoking
> (Miśra 2015: 30)

Psychedelic Drugs and Ganja

Creativity has often been associated with the world of substance addiction. It is hard to reconstruct history when it comes to man's relationship with drugs, but undoubtedly in the period under analysis drugs were very popular in art and music

culture. Research and experimentation with music and drugs, such as LSD and mescaline, encouraged the consumption of these hallucinogenic substances as means to expand consciousness both for recreation as well as to prompt literary creation. However, despite the shame and social stigma of drug addiction, the counterculture movement celebrated its aesthetic and synesthetic value often with fully detailed descriptions of processing the chemical substances. Christopher Gair recalled that the link between the bebop, cool jazz, the Beat Generation, and the "Times Square's junkies has blended Greenwich Village bohemia into this association" (Gair 2007: 61). Allen Ginsberg most poignantly portrayed the addiction, the madness and hysteria of that American generation in his famous "Howl" (1956), another poem in our transgressive corpus to withstand a trial for obscenity: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,/ dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix/ angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night " (Ginsberg 2009: 1). We could report many examples from literary and music subcultures of that age about substance use and abuse, but it will suffice here to mention Ginsberg's "Howl" as a manifesto of the existential hunger and madness of that generation.

The use of alcohol, drugs and cannabis in Hungryalism is of course not an exception in the Bengali literary landscape: other rebellious personalities of 19th century Bengal, such as Henri Derozio and Michael Madhusudan Dutt, emerged out of the iconoclast Young Bengal group, looked at the West also as an act of defiance to Hindu and Brahmo social orthopraxy. The parallels with the bohemian artist and the dandy of European modernity easily translate into the escapism of the Hungry Generation poets, who popularly consumed alcohol and drugs as means to transgress moral codes and escape the social rules of the Bengali middle class. Also cannabis was highly consumed and perceived as a common habit in countercultural circles worldwide. In South Asia, consumption of hemp (Beng. gāṁjā) for ritual purposes was never seen as a taboo. Even though in British India cannabis became linked with insanity, immorality and revolt (Mills 2000: 47), its consumption remained a common practice of traditional Indian medicine and religious traditions since ancient times all over South Asia. However, also as a legacy of colonial medical and scientific discourses, the consumption of cannabis, and other drugs in general, for recreational purposes was disapproved of by the middle class.

Shifting to the Bengali 1960s avant-garde, it is once again Malay who recounts the Hungry Generation's first experience with drugs (Rāẏˈcaudhurī 1994: 26–27). In his picture, Benares and Kathmandu stand out as true melting pots, where the Hungry poets, painters, Hindi writers, and hippies encountered and experienced with drugs. Hindi poet Rajkamal Chaudhuri and novelist Phanishwar Nath Renu also took part in these international drug āḍḍās: Rajkamal "enjoyed playing chess

while taking injections of pethidine. If the poetry reading went on for the whole night, he would take tablets of benzedrine". Renu is shown carefully preparing the cannabis leaves, accompanied by a glass of local toddy: "Renu had a small, beautiful knife for cutting the leaves of cannabis and reduce them into powder. He used to mix a drop of fragrance with the leaves. He kept a cut-glass for palm toddy on which he would sprinkle some cardamom powder". The following extract gives us a portrayal of the drug subculture in the centres of the hippy trail across India and Nepal.

> From these hippies, Karuna [Hungryalist painter] got LSD, cocaine, heroin and marijuana, and we got it from him. I still remember some of them. Margaret: she would soak the blotting paper with LSD, cut the paper in different sizes. 8 hours, 16 hours, 24 hours-sizes according to the level of intoxication. The paper had to be chewed and then swallowed. Tresham Gregg: he mixed LSD with water from the Ganges. He used to carry a tambourine. Once he came all high and started to play tambourine with his mouth open. Then, from a dropper, he poured one drop on the tongue, while still high and playing, but then closed his mouth. Froth: he made a statue of Bajrang Hanuman out of hashish. He would smear sindur [vermilion paste] of about 6 inches long. After paying homage to Hanuman he cut his tail, but later gave him a new one.

In Malay's recollection of his friend and poet Phalguni Ray, he brings to life the moments spent together on crematorium ghats, drinking, smoking weed and trying out new drugs that would make them "fly in the sky" (Miśra 2015: 105). The drug and alcoholic menu in Malay's words shows the enormous variety of words existing to describe a wholly developed subcultural world of drugs in the Bengali language.[28] In his words, the "aeroplanes" that helped them to "fly higher" were cheap "small packets of hemp, hash or opium of either two, four or eight annas:[29] eight annas for one fourth of a bottle, four annas for one sixth of a bottle, two annas for somꞏrās (a Bihari rice liquor mixed with fruit liquor) and ṭharra in a clay tumbler (khucꞏrā), and one anna for palm toddy (tāṛhi) in a clay pot (lamani)" (Miśra 2015: 105). Even then, their conversation would hinge on the connection that poetry and music nurture with drugs. When Malay asks him the reason for smoking, Phalguni replies: "I don't get high to write poetry, I get high to escape

28 Malay clarified the meaning of the terminology in use for the country liquors, measurements of the liquid, and containers in a private Facebook conversation (28.03.2018).
29 One anna is approximately equal to 1/16th of a rupee.

the banality of everyday life. I am not Baudelaire who smoked opium to write poetry!”. Their conversation about this everyday “banality” (byānāliṭi) would continue the day after: “You would understand if you were one of my relatives. Even the passing of time in Calcutta has become banal. People are even selling marble stones taken from the floor. There is no love, there is only the inexplicability of the absence of love” (Miśra 2015: 109–10), a very Phalgunian observation to make, as we will explore in chapter 5.