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Avant-Garde as a Worlding Practice

In Allen’s Eyes: The Hungry-Beat Connection

What I will show in this chapter are the dynamics of interaction that were in place between the Beat and the Hungry Generation and, by and large, between the imagined sites of the West and the non-West during the 1960s. I particularly focus on West Bengal and the United States, homelands of both the avant-garde movements under analysis. Through the poets’ encounters and dialogic exchange, the various moments of appropriation and adaptation often generated meaningful distortions and playful imitation of language among the various actors of the literary movements. These sites of appropriation and distortion of so-called original texts and cultural meanings have characterised the avant-garde as a transcultural and a worlding practice, that is as a cultural, textual and literary process that is able of generating worlds of meaning beyond spatial, national and linguistic boundaries. Processes of worlding the avant-garde in the material and textual practices of the Hungry Generation have been translation, playful imitation of the language of the avant-garde, and distortion of meaning. The idea of worlding as a process was restored from Heidegger’s concept of “Welten” by the philosopher and literary scholar Pheng Cheah. Seeing the world in terms of temporal process, rather than in its spatial dimension, helped rethinking the relationship between postcolonial literature and the world to theorise an “ethicopolitically committed world literature” in contrast to the one that is market-driven (Sibley 2016). By restoring the concept of worlding through world literary texts, Cheah encouraged theorising the world as a fluid and experiential process that goes beyond spatial categories to return ethical and political salience to the power that literature has to engage with the world, irrespective of its language and its circulation in the literary market. Taking cue from Cheah’s idea of worlding, Arka Chattopadhyay (2023) showed that besides translation, other practices like intertextuality, cultural translation and planetarity could be cases in point of worlding Bengali texts and writers who were not so-well travelled according to the classical world literature frame. The transnational and transcultural connection among American and Bengali actors of the avant-garde took place across various spaces and realms, both ethereal and

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material: not only were these poets globally connected via sounds, images and a synesthetic ground that was common to the avant-garde world transculturally speaking. Materially, this connection was shaped by the conspicuous correspondence and continuous exchange that happened among the authors and editors of the American and the Bengali avant-garde, proving their serious engagement with the anti-establishment cultural project on a global scale. Such commitment to the idea of a global avant-garde movement was especially visible through a multi-layered process of linguistic and cultural translation that involved many actors of both the Indian and the American contexts. Poets and authors in general were the protagonists, although not the only actors, on this internationally entangled avant-garde world: the work of the little magazine editors and translators, as well as the contribution of amateur writers and aficionados of avant-garde poetry, was essential to carve out new spaces for literary innovation outside established mainstream channels.

The Hungryalist writers were not passive subjects on the worlding stage of avant-garde practices. On the contrary, their cultural and political agency was visible through the strategies of imitation and subversion of the linguistic and literary material provided by existing tradition. We will see how the mocking strategy of mimicry plays out in the following analysis of some moments of the Hungry-Beat interaction. Mimicry, most poignantly described by Homi Bhabha through the identification of the “not quite/not white” (Bhabha 1994: 92) will be illustrated through the Hungryalists’ use of the English language which often mimicked the style of the international counterculture. This specific moment of mimicry significantly emerged both from the critiques that came from mainstream literary criticism in Bengali, who considered the Hungry Generation as derivative of the American avant-garde, as well as from the material exchange of correspondence with the editors and poets of the international avant-garde.

Hippies and Beats in India

The journeys to India of the Beat poets Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, Gary Snyder and Joanne Kyger in 1962 have symbolically marked the beginning of a new era of cultural, literary and intellectual interaction between India and the so-called Western world of the post-war era. Like many others, they were “pilgrims of a hippie trail” (Gemie and Ireland 2007) that brought them to India in search of a spiritual guru and to witness a West Bengal worn out by famine, poverty and unemployment. The Beat Generation poets opened new pathways to the West’s rediscovery of India, which would later emerge as a country where religion and culture could provide a viable alternative to capitalism and the logic of consumption for the young and disillusioned children of the war. Writers and intellectuals

from all parts of Europe and America recorded their impressions in diaries and essays, displaying different visions and imaginations of India.¹⁰¹ In the eyes of 1960s Europe, India represented the spiritual alternative to Europe and America's materialism, while China embodied the social and political alternative to capitalism – before the horrors of Mao's Cultural Revolution became of public domain. India was imagined as the middle way that could provide a different answer to the old world's disorientation. These encounters disclosed a renewed idea of India that enriched the West with different perspectives and approaches to politics, religion, spirituality and social life.

But it was especially the journeys of the poets of the Beat Generation throughout the ex-colonial world and the Beatles' trip to the Himalayan hills of Rishikesh that paved the way for the physical and cultural exploration of the utterly exotic, mystic and unknown land of Hindu religion (Oliver 2015). These American poets were prolific travellers who left the United States behind to produce some of their best works outside the comfort zone of their homeland. As James Fazzino shows, "this distance from home" opened up new connections and transcultural perspectives by engaging with colonial and postcolonial spaces at the great moment of decolonisation across the globe (Fazzino 2016: 2). The journeys to and the travelogues of these poets on Mexico, the Amazon, Algeria and India, greatly influenced the imaginary of the counterculture in the United States, playing a major role in the critique of the materialism which was perceived as the foundation of Western culture. The interest for Asian religions, for example, was seen as the key to counter the logic of capitalism, as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac's affiliation to Buddhism has shown (Trigilio 2007). The Beat movement's "turn to East" for spiritual inspiration was seen as the main feature of the Beat Generation, therefore essentially understood as a "spiritual protest" (Prothero 1991). The spiritual interest for India was also linked to the musical experimentalism of the Beatles and to the literary exploration of the Beat writers, both paving the way for the hippies' peaceful invasion of India.

On the other hand, the hippies, who usually were young white bourgeois, escaped the wealth and comfort of their middle-class families in search of a place that, in their perception, was free from the laws of patriarchy, capitalism, and away from the conformity and social rationalisation of the American middle class. They also embarked on this overland journey to look for a cheap drug market and try out extra-sensorial experiences of trance and meditation. The counterculture, of which the hippies were only one manifestation, was an American phenomenon born out

101 Among these writers and intellectuals, many had recorded their impressions in diaries and essays that display different visions and imaginations of this country. For example, Pier Paolo Pasolini, *L'odore dell'India* (1962); Alberto Moravia, *Un'idea dell'India* (1962); Octavio Paz, *Vislumbres de India*, and *Conjunctiones y disyunciones* (1969).

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of a rejection of social and cultural ideologies such as, most notably, the racial segregation and the Vietnam war. As the 1960s progressed, the counterculture evolved along generational lines pushing the American youth to target the shameless indifference of middle-class society with regard to the Vietnam war, and its conformism regarding the slackening of taboos related to sex and homosexuality, the consumption of drugs, while new trends in music became the distinctive signs of belonging to a certain sub-culture. The hippies became the largest counter-cultural group in the United States, incorporating the values of the young generation: peace, sex, dope, rock and community, as Timothy Miller put it (1991). The hippie counter-culture embraced values and ideas already propagated by the Beatniks a decade earlier, especially with regard to discovering one’s own spiritual world, experimenting new drugs, and exploring sexuality.¹⁰² We know by a fact that Bengali and Hindi poets and painters in those years travelled to some destinations of the international “hippie trail” in South Asia, like Benares and Kathmandu, where they would meet hippies from other parts of the world to smoke, drink and discuss poetry and art, as we have discussed earlier.¹⁰³ Accounts and diaries about those days bring back the idea of the sort of transformation these young people were going through in their journey to and stay in India, especially when describing their perception of the other (Yablonsky 1969). At the same time fictional accounts of the hippie spiritual quest to India, such as Geeta Mehta’s acclaimed book *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East* (1979), ironically satirised the exoticism of the Sixties as well as criticised what later became a commodified and market-oriented culture of Indian religiosity and spirituality.

On the other hand, what could be described as a “softer” form of Orientalism can be detected in the dynamics of mutual exchange and cross-pollination that took place between the Hungry and the Beat Generation. Allen Ginsberg’s journey to India, his encounter with Bengali poets, and his mediation during the Hungryalist obscenity trial were central moments of the exchange and interaction that took place among the actors of these two literary subcultures. Their relationship of influence, imitation and adaptation was not unidirectional but it unfolded dialogically, as I show: for example, the Hungry Generation played with the hyper-technical English of the neo-avant-garde precisely to establish a transnational connection and a global affiliation with the counterculture and

102 Ginsberg was conscious of having an influence on younger people: “I am in effect setting up moral codes and standards which include drugs, orgy, music and primitive magic as worship rituals – educational tools which are supposedly contrary to our cultural mores; and I am proposing these standards to you respectable ministers, once and for all, that you endorse publically the private desire and knowledge of mankind in America, so to inspire the young” (Miller 1991: xiii).

103 See also Baker 2008 for a fictionalised account of Allen Ginsberg’s, Peter Orlovsky’s, Gary Snyder’s and Joanne Kyger’s journey to India.

anti-establishment movements across the world. Only decades later, the Hungry-ists, mainly the Raychaudhuri brothers, took up a more conservative position highlighting their concern for the authenticity of their literary experiment and downplaying the role played by the Beat Generation in inspiring the Bengali movement. These moments of transcultural interaction and withdrawal, or openness and conservatism, that can be observed in the history of the Hungry Generation in its relation to so-called Western influence underscore that concepts like mimicry have played a pivotal role in the shaping of literary and cultural identities in the long durée.

Ginsberg's *Indian Journals*: Appropriation and Distortion

A new “oriental renaissance” unfolded throughout the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁰⁴ While it encouraged the peaceful rediscovery of a spiritual and mystical India, it also reiterated an exotic and orientalisating gaze on the post-independent nation. The Beats' investigation into the realm of the personal entailed a re-formulation of the religious symbols of Indian culture, which were transformed into highly erotic and powerful weapons of global political protest. Ginsberg's *Indian Journals* offer an interesting case of this exploration and rediscovery by engaging with the world of Hindu culture.

The criticism of Ginsberg's *Indian Journals* was mixed. The *Indian Journals* have often been accused of extending the Orientalist project of the British colonisers, due to Allen's interest in aspects that were stereotypically representative of the Western imagination of India, including sex, spirituality, and poverty. The *Journals* seemed to nurture a third-worldly vision of India emerging from the portraits of beggars, poverty, hunger, and leprosy. Ginsberg could have contributed to reinforce stereotypes about India already rooted in the Western imagination, such as the mysticism and promiscuous sexuality of Tantric practitioners, whom he went in search for during his journey to India. However, other scholars have more recently offered a new reading of his journals, such as Gayatri Prabhu, who argued that while Ginsberg encouraged certain stereotypical projections and imaginations of India “as a country of spiritual quest as well as a tourist destination”, he also concretely engaged with the “squalid, the impoverished, the deformed” of the Indian city, generally despised in the white tourist's gaze (Prabhu 2013: 2). Other scholars, like Fazzino, noticed that Beat writing could entail an “orientalist

104 I here use the phrase “oriental renaissance” to outline the peaceful and mystic rediscovery of India through the Beats and the Beatles in the 1960s, retrieving the title of Raymond Schwab's book on European philology and its intrinsic project of Orientalism (Schwab 1984).

trap” because of its risk of falling in a “too-easy identification with the other or the elision of cultural differences altogether” (Fazzino 2016: 10).

Despite the shallow portrait of the Indian city that emerges from Ginsberg’s *Indian Journals*, the Beat writers were prolific travellers, and not sheer tourists of colonial and postcolonial spaces, which mostly were unexplored in those days. The Beat poets could potentially become the initiators of a new literary and anthropological experience that could truly offer an alternative to American imperialism, by building new values through the rediscovery of postcolonial world and epistemologies. Raj Chandarlapaty saw the Beats as anthropologists who initiated the literary de-racialisation and decolonisation of poetics, writing and experience through their intense engagement with marginal cultures and communities such as Black Americans, Mexicans, Moroccans and Indians (Chandarlapaty 2009). He also argued that it was only after Ginsberg’s two-year trek trip to India that he turned into “the prophet, hippie icon, and countercultural messenger who would truly challenge American structures of domination” (Chandarlapaty 2011: 114). Following this perspective, the writings of the American Beatniks had the potential of breaching new horizons of postcolonial representation. David LeHardy Sweet, in a work on avant-garde in north Africa and the Middle East, observed that both Octavio Paz and Allen Ginsberg’s poetry and travel books about India are postcolonial works in that they discuss the question of the gaze and the object of the gaze (LeHardy Sweet 2017). Therefore, the approach of the Beat movement in exploring and discovering countries like Algeria, Morocco, and India was not only an orientalising gaze, involving an exotic and unidirectional representation of “the Orient” through uniquely Eurocentric categories. But as members and actors of the avant-garde, their gaze entailed a global act of decolonisation of the political, literary, and geographical peripheries of the Empire. Moreover, Allen Ginsberg’s journey to India in search of a spiritual guru was instrumental to his political activism in the U.S. anti-war movement, turning him into a “countercultural messenger” at his return to America (Chandarlapaty 2011). Through his encounter with Hindu religiosity and Buddhist meditation Ginsberg made his own body the cornerstone of his political activism, using it “to blur distinctions among poetry and political activism as roughly analogous to what Choudhury and the Hungry Generation were doing in India” (Belleto 2019: 12). To Ginsberg, the *Indian Journals* are a moment of “authorial self-doubt”, essential for “redeveloping social ethics away from the rhetoric of colonialism, postcolonialism and globalization” (Chandarlapaty 2011: 114). In particular, the following anti-war poems by Ginsberg signal the meaningful re-inscription of the symbolism of Kali into a universal hymn against war.

Re-writing Kali the American way

The anti-war poems “Stotras to Kali Destroyer of Illusions” along with “Wichita Vortex Sutra”, both finished after Ginsberg’s return from India, have often explained his political and spiritual transformation that turned him into a messenger of the counterculture. These poems, along with two other famous anti-war poems by Ginsberg (“Hymn to U.S” and “Durga-Kali – Modern Weapon in Her Hands”), bring into our focus the re-inscription of the symbolism of Kali, often viewed as a fierce and bloody goddess, in the idiom of anti-war protest. In the poem “Wichita Vortex Sutra”, written a few months after Ginsberg left India, he fuses poetry with political protest in a mantra that evokes the “gurus and maharishis” encountered during his journey in a plea against the “black magic language” of war, an idea borrowed from one of his first protest-poems (Belletto 2019: 12). Let us see how Ginsberg transfers the symbolism traditionally associated to Kali onto other spheres of meaning.

The journey described in the poem “Wichita Vortex Sutra” takes place on a public bus to Wichita, Kansas, where the poet – “an old man now, and a lonesome man in Kansas” – is not afraid to publicly voice his “lonesomeness” to the other passengers. This is not an individual condition but a collective one that extends to America and the whole world humanity vis-à-vis the horrors of the Vietnam war. Central to developing the poet’s condemnation of war is the quest for “a language that is also yours”, an anti-war mantra that could speak for humanity and not against it. In Allen’s bricolage of Hindu cultural references, this mantra-like evocation summons a plethora of Hindu gods, saints and bodhisattvas to propagate a new language of freedom.

I call all Powers of Imagination
 To my side in this auto to make Prophecy,
 All Lords
 Of human kingdoms to come
 Shambu Bharti Baba naked covered with ash
 Khaki Baba fat-bellied mad with the dogs
 Dehorava Baba who moans Oh how wounded, How wounded
 Sitaram Onkar Das Thakur who commands
 Give up your desire
 Satyananda who raises two thumbs in tranquility
 Kali Pada Guha Roy whose yoga drops before the void
 Shivananda who touches the breast and says OM
 Srimata Krishnaji of Brindaban who says take for your guru
 William Blake the invisible father of English visions
 Sri Ramakrishna master of ecstasy eyes

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Half closed who only cries for his mother
Chaitanya arms upraised singing & dancing his own praise
Merciful Chango judging our bodies
Durga-Ma covered with blood
Destroyer of battlefield illusions
Million faced Tathagata gone past suffering
[...]
Come to my lone presence
Into this Vortex named Kansas,
I lift my voice aloud,
Make Mantra of American language now,
I here declare the end of the War!
(Ginsberg 1968)

In “Notes for a Stotra to Kali as Statue of Liberty”, Ginsberg shows the dichotomy between India’s spirituality and the materialism of American society through Ma Kali (Mā Kālī), the terrific manifestation of the female goddess popularly worshipped in Bengal, who is transformed into a political weapon that literally descends into the Statue of Liberty, monumentally standing for the liberal and democratic values of the United States. In Ginsberg’s notes, only later re-worked and published in a final version as “Stotra to Kali as Destroyer of Illusions” (1968), the traditional Kali iconography is transfigured through a secular – although equally creepy and grotesque – pantheon of historical world icons creating a patchwork that goes beyond the hegemonic representation of the world in two halves, as it was experienced during the Cold War.¹⁰⁵

The skulls that hand on Kali’s neck, Geo Washington with eyes rolled up & tongue hanging out of his mouth like a fish, N. Lenin upside down; Einstein’s hairy white cranium. Hitler with his moustache grown walrus-droop over his lip, Roosevelt with grey eyeballs; Stalin grinning, Mussolini with a broken Jaw, Artaud big eared & toothless; the subtle body of Churchill’s head transparent & babylike; an empty space for Truman, Mao Tze Tung & Chang Kai Shek shaking at the bottom of the chain, balls with eyes & noses jiggled in the Cosmic Dance (Ginsberg 1970: 13)

105 About a comparative reading of Ginsberg’s “Stotra to Kali” and the Kārpurādi Stotra, see Scholes 2010. Scholes here assumes the influence of the Sanskrit hymn to the worship of Kali on Ginsberg’s elaboration of “A Stotra to Kali”.

The additions and rewritings of these notes show Ginsberg's continuous rethinking and engagement with the re-inscription of American domination and civilisational death into what in his view was the selfless and redemptive mould of Hindu religious and devotional tradition. Ginsberg creates a new political bodyscape of Kali by integrating other milestones of modern thought, almost in a postmodern modality, that blend "Gandhi bald with a swathe of white cloth Khadi stuffed in his crow" with "Max Planck & Wittgenstein & Trotsky's visages thudding against her Shoulderblade Gefilte Fish skin". These satirical vignette-like representations of the fathers of modern political thought replace the usual weapons of Hindu deities with equally disrupting images of the "fathers of Cold War", all attributes of this overtly syncretic Statue of Liberty. The typical iconographical representation of Kali, standing on Shiva's corpse with an erect phallus, is here visualised as treading on Uncle Sam's "godlike corpse" along with other allegorical and biblical references (e.g. John Bull, an 18th century national representation of England):

Her foot is standing on the godlike corpse of Uncle Sam who's
crushing down John Bull, bloated himself over the Holy Roman
Emperor & Mohammed's illiterate belly, & Moses underneath
hidden in a mass of hair, thru which peeps Adams Forelocks &
rosy cheeks (Ginsberg 1970: 14)

The political embodiment of Kali and her incarnation of America in the symbolism of the Statue of Liberty continues in Ginsberg's military elaboration of the bloody goddess in "Durga-Kali – Modern Weapons in Her Hand". This version, written in 1962, adds a deeper set of symbols of destruction, replacing the frightening attributes of the deity with more dreadful modern weapons. Ginsberg insists on the terrific aspect and destructive function of the bloody goddess couple of Durga-Kali, who along with other Hindu deities become agents of war and death. Each of these gods are portrayed holding their original weapons, although in Ginsberg's transfigured iconography they turn into atomic bombs, air raid sirens, jet airplanes, napalm bombs and electric chairs.

Kali Yuga 432,000 years – Deity Black
Ten Arms – Borrowed from gods to kill Buffalo Demon –
Vishnu's Chakra or Discus – $E=Mc^2$
Shiva's trident – pitchfork for tossing the hays of mind – Jet airplane
Varuna's conch Shell – air Raid Siren
Agni's flaming Dart – Napalm Bomb, electric chair
[...]
Kali's insatiable blood thirst caused by eating
too many Armies (Asura whose blood

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drops formed innumerable Asuras)
Killed him with a spear & drank drips of blood.
Black, half naked. Claws. Tusks. Garland
of skulls, red tongue & mouth
dripping blood
Shiva = Destruction devouring time = white
Kali triumphs over white time – “abysmal
void”
Dance madness. Stepping on Shiva she comes
down again –
theres nothing left to dance on
Kali as Statue of Liberty starts moving
With ten arms
Reading counterclockwise
[...]

one hand fingers her pearly shining necklace of skulls –
Hitler, Mussolini, Roosevelt, Chamberlain, Laval,
Stalin, Mayakovsky, Hart Crane, Yessenin, Vachel Lindsay,
Virginia Woolf, Poe, Dylan Thomas, Ramana
Maharishi, Naomi Ginsberg, Uncle Max, Aunt Eleanor,
Uncle Harry & Aunt Rose. & WC Field – “skull rosary.”
(Ginsberg 1970: 21–23)

Once more, the classic iconography of Kali dancing on Shiva’s corpse returns in Ginsberg’s anti-war imaginary imbued with the rhetoric language of the iron curtain, which we have learned to recognise in his poetry. Kali’s iconography is again abused and transformed especially by exploiting the image of her garland made of skulls: skulls of Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, English and American poets, Russian poets and playwrights, Indian mystics and Ginsberg’s parents are bundled together in a pastiche that foreruns postmodern poetics. One last example from the anti-war poem “HYMN TO US” imagines “Mother U.S.” as embodiment of the “Spouse of Europa and Destroyer of Past Present & Future”, which subverts the masculine representation of America as Uncle Sam, which we encountered in “A Stotra to Kali”.

By thy grace may I never be reborn! Not American, Chinese,
Russian, Indian, Okinawan or Jew – May I and all my I’s never
re-incarnate but as Earth Men! Nay, not even earth Identity, but
membership in the entire Universe! Grant me this boon, Mother
Democracy, – as I fuck thee piously in the Image of America,

O Formless one, take me beyond Images & reproductions to be
thy perfect Spouse Self, beyond disunion, absorbed in My own
non duality which art thou (Ginsberg 1970: 18).

Blending high English words with references drawn from commonplace Hindu philosophical thought (e.g. “absorbed in My own non duality which art thou”), Ginsberg sarcastically addresses the “formless” Mother Democracy through the shape and “image” of America in his wish to reincarnate as a human being regardless of labels of nationality. Ginsberg imagines a collective utopian identity that projects beyond the planet earth to the entire universe, underscoring the planetarity of Ginsberg’s writing, a crucial concept to explain the worlding process of literature. In short, what Ginsberg does in these samples from his *Indian Journals* is using Indian (mainly Hindu) cultural references not to historically problematise India as such, but to open a space to question and reshape the American culture of materialism and capitalism.

“Tropical Kerouacs and Gangetic Ginsbergs”: Mimicking the Beats and the U.S.

After having suggested some patterns for understanding such worlding dynamics and transfers of meanings in place on the avant-garde stage, we now turn to focus on Hungryalism and its reception at home and in the world. Mainstream Bengali criticism has often minimised the impact that Hungryalism and alternative poetry had on a significant moment of political transition and cultural change for India. The main critique that was addressed to the Hungry Generation was due to their imitation of the American Beat Generation and of the Western culture of that era.¹⁰⁶ During the 1960s, Indian newspapers and magazines like *Blitz* and the *TIME* carried news of the Hungryalist trial and posted analysis and interviews of the group of poets, often putting an emphasis on their connection with the American Beatniks. The Indian magazine *TIME* was the first to report the antics that brought to fame the “young Bengalis with tigers in their tanks” before and after their sentence for obscenity (*TIME* 1964).

A thousand years ago, India was the land of Vātsyāyana’s *Kāma Sūtra*, the classic volume that so thoroughly detailed the art of

106 In this chapter, “West” and “Western” are mainly used in reference to the post-war (1950s to 1990s) geopolitical division of the world that opposed the United States and Europe to U.S.S.R. and its Asian allies (mainly China and India).

love that its translators still usually leave several key words in Sanskrit. Last week, in a land that has become so straitly laced that its movie heroines must burst into song rather than be kissed, five scruffy young poets were hauled into Calcutta’s dreary Bankshall Court for publishing works that would have melted even Vātsyāyana’s pen. The Hungry Generation had arrived.

Born in 1962, with an inspirational assist from visiting U.S. Beatnik Allen Ginsberg, Calcutta’s Hungry Generation is a growing band of young Bengalis with tigers in their tanks. Somewhat unoriginally they insist that only in immediate physical pleasure do they find any meaning in life, and they blame modern society for their emptiness.

Such was the beginning of the article, which right from the start introduced the Hungry Generation as a movement emerged out of an “inspirational assist” from Allen Ginsberg, after he visited the Bengali poets in 1962. It is worth noting that when describing the Hungry Generation as “young Bengalis with tigers in their tanks” the TIME journalist was likely thinking of a famous US advertising slogan used by various oil companies since the 1950s.¹⁰⁷ This formula underscores some of the reasons for the Bengali mainstream criticism towards a literary phenomenon like the Hungry Generation, which was also perceived for its ties with American culture tout court, overtly criticised by Bengali Marxist literati and intellectuals. These arguments partly explain the reluctance, and often the repulsion, on behalf of Indian Bengali and even of some American poets to fully see the movement for what it was, a language and caste-disrupting project, going beyond ideological and political visions.

Another article published in *Blitz* magazine after the poets’ arrest addressed the Hungrylists as “Calcutta Beatniks” and the movement as “Yankee-poet inspired” (BLITZ 1964). Frank sexual language, rebellion, and depravity were identified as the hallmarks of both avant-garde groups.

Yankee-Poet Inspired Movement

An example: One of those arrested is beyond doubt a powerful writer and has several publications to his credit. He, in his latest poetry, regrets why he is born at all and why his father did not masturbate instead of visiting his mother.

107 I thank Michael Bluett, who proof-red the English of my manuscript, for suggesting this connection.

In another passage, he dreams to create himself through his own sperms in the womb of his lady-love and then to see the world from her uterus through her ‘cellophane hymen’.

Two years ago, the well-known American beat poet, Allen Ginsberg came to Calcutta and stayed here sufficiently long to gather round himself some young local poets, who were enamoured of the Ginsbergian way of life and thinking, ‘The Hungry Generation’ was born with these poets.

The anonymous *Blitz*’s correspondent underlines the “Ginsbergian way of life”, referring to his homosexuality, and draws a comparison with the relevance of sexuality for Hungryalist poets, who claimed that “tension is not in the heart but in your genitals” (BLITZ 1964). Both the obscene vocabulary and the exploration of socially abhorred sexuality, like masturbation and homosexuality, are identified as the common ground between the Bengali Hungryalists and the American Beatniks.

On the other hand, Allen Ginsberg was often described as a scapegoat responsible for “corrupting the Calcutta boys”, as the Bengali poet Sunil Gangopadhyay once admitted.¹⁰⁸ Ginsberg’s help and support in the Hungryalist legal case was fundamental in bringing their trial to international attention. He sought for the intervention of the Indian Congress for Cultural Freedom, and even wrote to Pupul Jayakar, Indira Gandhi’s cultural adviser. However, the world of Indian cultural institutions would not respond positively to Allen’s cry for solidarity. Abu Sayeed Ayub, at that time president for the Indian Congress for Cultural Freedom and eminent literary critic, rejected Ginsberg’s request of institutional help in support of the Hungryalist case because he thought that the young writers did not “even possess the elementary competence of having mastered the language which they are using as the medium of their literary expression”.¹⁰⁹ Exchanges of this kind abound in magazines and in the correspondence among American and Indian authors, and they meaningfully showcase various layers of prejudice and biases for the young Bengali poets on behalf of established writers, offering interesting sites of analysis. Jyotirmoy Datta’s letter to Dick Bakken has become representative of this kind of repulsion that mainstream criticism had towards the Hungry phenomenon.

108 Sunil Gangopadhyay in a letter to Allen, undated (likely ca. 1963). Allen Ginsberg Papers, M0733, Series I, Box 25, Folder 30 (Correspondence 1960s – Sunil Gangopadhyay). Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.

109 From Abu Sayeed Ayub’s letter to Allen Ginsberg (17.11.64). In Allen Ginsberg papers, M0733, Box 8, Folder 16 (Correspondence 1960s – Ayyub, Abu Sayeed). Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.

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I am writing this letter not to dissuade you from bringing out your special number. I would be delighted if it brings the HG people some money; I would be even happier if in some remote way it helps Malay in his trial. I would be delighted to help you to the best of my ability in translating any stuff you send me. But I had hoped that when it comes to Bengali poetry you would be more interested in what is unique to it rather than what echoes American poetry, although such phenomenon is interesting sociologically and politically, indicative as it is of how all pervasive, how unavoidable is America to the rest of the world today (Bakken 1967).¹¹⁰

The context of the letter is the following: the Bengali poet and critic Jyotirmoy Datta, at that time a young visiting scholar at the University of Iowa, was requested by the Bengali expert Edward Dimock to translate a selection of Hungryalist poems for Dick Bakken’s *Salted Feathers* special issue on Hungry poetry. The Hungries’ exchange with Allen Ginsberg, enriching both on a personal and material level, was in Datta’s words reduced to a unidirectional quest for a “Western model”, contributing to consolidate the narrative of Hungryalism as a Beat-influenced and Beatnik mimicking avant-garde. Dismissing the literature of the Hungryalists as “derivative” of the Beatniks expressed a much deeper discomfort and uneasiness with the obscene, down-to-earth language of this movement’s writings.

I don’t think his [Malay] imitation of what he thinks is contemporary American poetry is worth anything. One may or may not admire Allen Ginsberg’s poetry, but one has to concede that at least most of the time Allen sounds like Allen and not somebody else. The HG people sound as if they know of no other poetry except that which is published in the magazines, pamphlets and books that Allen sends them, and whatever they have read has gone to their head and is coming out through their pen without the least alteration. I cannot derive any pleasure from the sight of a nice bunch of Calcutta kids desperately trying to ape the author of “Howl” (Bakken 1967).

By reading this excerpt, one notes that multiple narratives and discourses were at play in the early criticism of the Hungry Generation. Clearly it was not only a

110 The whole letter was published in the special issue on Hungryalism of the magazine *Salted Feathers* (Dick Bakken 1967). It has been fully quoted in the appendix of translation (chapter 7).

matter of imitating the American writers of the Beat Generation, although this is still a debated issue in the field of Bengali literary studies. Other reasons identified from a reading of Datta's letter were the young age of the Hungry poets ("a bunch of Calcutta kids") who, in spite of that, were ready to publicly announce the death of "the blankety-blank school of poetry" and to wage a war against whatever they deemed old, established, lyric and conventional in Bengali culture and literature. The aspect of generational rupture with the past tradition was indeed a characteristic feature of this movement. Moreover, the young Bengali poets were considered to be unaware and indifferent to their past literary tradition, while even their knowledge of contemporary American poetry was limited to what was published on little magazines; but their greatest fault and failure was their blunt imitation of American Beat poetry, just "like the Anglophiles of the 19th century", which will turn the movement into "a passing phenomenon". Also, it was their choice of using non-standard forms of Bengali language and unconventional images of Bengali poetry, as well as their ties with an American literary (and equally "obscene") world, that irritated the bhadralok and Marxist culture of most Bengali critics and intellectuals.

I assume that you, and Mr. Ferlinghetti, and Mr. McCord, are genuinely interested in Bengali poetry, that you are not only interested in tropical Kerouacs and Gangetic Ginsbergs but also in poets who are uniquely Bengali, who could not have been possible in the American tradition, who are not the creatures of some kind of literary PL-480 deal (Bakken 1967).

Jyotirmoy Datta's colourful phrase "tropical Kerouacs and Gangetic Ginsbergs" epitomises the critique of Hungryalist poetry as imitative and derivative of the style of the American underground writers. What Datta refers to when naming the "literary PL-480 deal" is another metaphor of Third-world poets literally eating America's cultural crops, an image that stems from the United States' foreign policy and food security plans for Third World countries implemented from the 1950s. Datta then turns to encouraging the promotion of other Bengali poets who are "deeply rooted in the poets who have gone before him", like Binoy Majumdar, at the same time denigrating both the ignorance of the Hungryalists and of the American editor, who answered back to Datta's provocations.¹¹¹ To the Bengali

111 Bakken's reply was added in a footnote to Datta's letter: "We are neither so innocent as he [Jyotirmoy Datta] believes – innocent, that is of contemporary Bengali literature available in English – nor innocent of awareness about that part of the Beat scene which is sheer noise and unmelodious farting around for gelt and fame. But there are phonies in all the schools of poetry, and simply because one attracts considerable public notoriety is

6 “Tropical Kerouacs and Gangetic Ginsbergs”

critics, one of the major shortcomings of the Hungryalist movement was their complete rejection and unawareness of the past tradition, which did not make them “uniquely Bengali”. As shown by Datta’s letter, mainstream Indian Bengali criticism was reluctant to welcome a literary movement that stemmed from a complete rejection of the past Bengali tradition advocating the disintegration of all that was conventional through an obscene and transgressive language and a dangerous social behaviour.

Resisting the Beats’ Influence

A newspaper article by Samantak Das (2019), late professor of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University, has shown how the preoccupation with Western influence is still a dominant concern in Bengali literary studies today. He uses the example of the Hungry Generation to rightly demonstrate that the Indian and Bengali literary world has always been preoccupied with so-called Western influence and recognition, and to encourage a critical shift in the “constant over-valuation of the Westerner, often to the detriment of our own artists and creators” (Das 2019). It also shows that the perception of Hungryalism as an imitation of the American Beatniks persists in Bengali critical circles. Because the question of imitation had become central in the way Hungryalism was represented, starting from the late 1990s the now grown-up poets Malay and Samir Raychaudhuri resumed to writing also with the aim to mark their distance with the Beat Generation and other avant-garde movements in Europe and North America. Even though the Hungryalists made clear right from the start what differentiated them socially and economically from the Beats and other avant-garde movements in the West, highlighting their association with other (non-Indian) anti-establishment movements became the movement’s primary target after the sentence for obscenity. Therefore, in a later move to legitimise the Hungry Generation as a “uniquely Bengali” phenomenon, to quote Jyotirmoy Datta’s phrase, the Hungryalists contributed to developing the discourse of Bengali postmodernism also to get away with their derivative connection with the American Beat Generation and Western association. In a later essay significantly entitled “How did the Hungry movement influence Allen Ginsberg” (2013), Malay argued that Bengali critics could not accept that it was the Hungry Generation who influenced Ginsberg, rather than the opposite. It was the whole Indian “traditional spirit” and not only the Bengali poets that had a tremendous impact on shaping Ginsberg’s iconic poetry and secular religiosity. Malay’s

no reason (and I call on academic logic) to assume that the poems are thereby aesthetically invalid. No more so than absolutely public ignorance of a poet’s work invalidates it” (Bakken 1967).

intention was not to deny Ginsberg's influence on the Hungry Generation altogether but to reconstruct the history of that encounter to show how this dialogic relationship was founded on an open and sincere interest in exchanging, also with a view to reciprocally enrich the practice and understanding of avant-garde language and poetry. For example, Malay noticed that Ginsberg never wrote again in the same way as he did before Howl and Kaddish, which were composed after his journey to India (Rāy'caudhurī 2013: 59). Malay presents other pieces of evidence to demonstrate the Indian influence on Ginsberg. He recalled that Ginsberg first saw the "three fish with one hand" motif, which he used at the opening of his *Indian Journals*, on the gate of Akbar's tomb in Fatehpur Sikri, but he only found out its meaning when Malay took him to the Khuda Bakhsh public library in Patna. This is where they saw the same design on the leather cover of the *Dīn-i-Ilāhī*, the Persian book on Akbar's composite faith (Rāy'caudhurī 2013: 64–65). Other theories were summoned to delegitimise the view of Hungryalism as a uniquely derivative movement. Tridib and Alo Mitra claimed that the American poet concealed the Hungryalists' influence on his *Indian Journals*. For example, when he carried his harmonium from Benares to the United States, he did not mention the Hungryalist painters and Benares residents, Anil Karanjai and Karunanidhan Mukhopadhyay, who first introduced him to the instrument. According to Malay, Ginsberg "perfected playing on the instrument at the residence of Malay's cousin sister Savitri Banerjee, where her daughters were playing on the harmonium" (Mitra and Mitra 2008, blog). His essay underlies the effort of showing the reciprocal influence of both movements and cultures in order to dispel the commonplace and reiterated perception of Hungryalism as an imitation of the Beat Generation.

Moreover, while acknowledging the actual exchange that took place with the Beat culture via Ginsberg, Malay's main goal was to highlight the causes and the background that gave birth to the Hungry Generation as a postcolonial and subaltern movement of India's post-independence era. For example, to continue projecting the Hungry Generation as a purely Bengali movement he drew a line between the Hungryalist and Western "counter-discourse" (Beng. pratisandarbha) of the Beat Generation or the British Angry Young Man, identifying the release from so-called "European epistemology" (iuroṇīyā jñān'tattva) as the main category of differentiation (Rāy'caudhurī 2013: 94). Another important distinction to be made was with the Kṛtibās movement, which had a recognised head quarter and an established publisher, while the Hungry Generation was a subaltern, anti-establishment, non-cohesive and fragmented movement (Rāy'caudhurī 2013: 110). In this way, Malay could finally reshape the common perception of Hungryalism by returning postcolonial significance to this Bengali literary avant-garde and restoring its place in the literary and cultural sphere of post-independence West Bengal. These revisited memories and reshaped histories in Malay's essays give us a sense of the urgency to draw clear boundaries between traditions and to

legitimise the movement’s position in the postcolonial literary Bengali scene. This self-declaration of Hungryalism as a postmodern and postcolonial Bengali movement emerged only in the late 1990s, which also speaks of a gradual move of legitimisation of previously controversial and “outsider” literary groups in the landscape of Bengali literary culture, progressively proclaiming themselves as home-grown and part of the Bengali tradition.

Use of English in Hungryalist Literature

Despite proclaiming their distance from the Beat Generation, the analogies between the two movements are undeniable. In terms of language, the Western avant-gardes offered a new vocabulary and a language of postmodernity which the Hungryalist were eager to incorporate. Words and idioms not perceived as authentically Bengali were welcomed into their poetry and used to violate the structures of standard Bengali grammar and symbolically overturn middle-class normativity. A central role in the Hungryalist project of revitalising Bengali language was played by Allen Ginsberg himself, who encouraged the Hungry poets to abandon foreign models and embrace their own language. Commenting on the Hungryalist poets’ English translation of their own poems, Allen Ginsberg shows a genuine interest in discovering new trends of Indian poetry and in finding a common ground for anti-establishment action (Ferlinghetti 1964: 117–8).

The poems here are not necessarily very good in English. The poets are good poets in Bengali & excellent drinking companions (They didn’t smoke much of legal *Ganja* until Mr. Orlovsky & I introduced that western notion & brought to their attention their own indigenous subliterate Shaivite pot-smoking & hymn-singing in the burning grounds as a usable poetic tradition). The poems were translated into funny English by the poets themselves & I spent a day with a pencil reversing inversions of syntax & adding in railroad stations. The poems are interesting in that they do reveal a temper that is international, i.e. the revolt of the personal. Warsaw Moscow San Francisco Calcutta, the discovery of *feeling*.

“Funny”, here meaning odd and wrong, is how the Beat poet describes the English of the Hungryalist poets in this extract, which seems to aptly epitomise the approach of these authors towards English language during the process of translation. Oddity, playfulness and improvisation were dominant aspects of both the Bengali and the English language in the works of these authors. In particular, the

English syntax and vocabulary of their translated poems appear complex, verbose, and hyper-technical to the native-English speaker, as the American editors often pointed out in their correspondence. The following sources will show that the unconventional use of the English language, instead of being welcomed by criticism and by fellow-poets as a possible site of production of new literature in India, represented a concern even for the most progressive Indian writers. We will see that the main target of the Bengali critics was the Hungryalists' unconventional and non-standard use of the Bengali and the English language in the realm of poetry. Moreover, it is worth noting that when conversing with the American editors of the avant-garde scene, the Bengali authors deliberately played with the English language in a conscious move to emulate the redundant register of the international neo-avant-garde. These two operations of language mocking and imitation are central strategies of subversion and overturning in the Hungryalist project of language revolution.

The Hungryalist attitude towards the English language, despite the differences among the single authors, can be nonetheless broken down into two major positions. While poets like Debi Roy and Subimal Basak admitted their limited knowledge of English, others (like Malay, in the first place) could mediate between the international scene and the Bengali poets, entering in conversation with a wider audience on the global literary scene. Their rupture with the standard forms of the Bengali language also paved the way for similar experiments with English, which are evident from the material exchange that took place transnationally between the two avant-garde groups. However, while remaining predominantly tied to Bengali in their literary works, the Hungryalists could not be properly called bilingual poets like Arun Kolatkar, whose work featured in both the English and Marathi language. For them, English was substantially perceived as the language of the empire or the language of experimental writing in the West. That is why the manifestoes, their translated poems, and letters represent only a minor portion of their production in English, in which they show no intention of accuracy or seriousness, but rather playfulness and imitation.

The case of these Bengali poets writing in English is not an exception in the panorama of Indian postcolonial literatures. With the independence of the country from British rule, the adoption of an official language of the Republic became a hotly debated issue.¹¹² In those years, the debate on whether a modern Indian liter-

112 In the 1960s, plans to make Hindi the official language of the Republic were met with resistance in other parts of the country, especially in the south. With the escalation of violence and the anti-Hindi movements, the government decided to extend the official use of English for fifteen years until 1967, when the Official Languages (Amendment) Act established the three-language formula (that is, English, Hindi, and the regional language of the state).

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ature was possible in the vernacular languages beyond the language of the British colonisers became the cornerstone of a fight between traditionalist and more progressive writers. While some writers thought of English as one among many other “native” languages of India, with its own respectable history and literature, others believed that it could not represent the complexity and diversity of Indian culture as faithfully and authentically as Bengali, Marathi, or Kannada.¹¹³ The suspicion for Indian writers in English was well-known among bilingual Marathi poets. Zecchini noted that bilingual poets were criticised for writing in an “alien” language, for mimicking Western models and being “outsiders” to the authentic India (Zecchini 2014: 8). In the next documents, one can easily notice the hostility on behalf of some Indian poets and literary critics for the non-standard usage of the English language in the writings of the Hungry Generation. It is surprising that, from these letters, even a bilingual poet like Arvind K. Mehrotra confessed to be vexed by their “utter wrong English”.

this subimal basak sent me his poems in utter[ly] wrong english. modernity is OK but not at the expense of language. but I attribute his mistakes to ignorance. he also sent a long discourse on the hungries. to tell you the truth it looks like a dilapadated [dilapidated] form of the beats. use of fuck, cunt, cock is getting tiresome. in bengali poetry this might have been used for the first time and the fellows got excited. but putting them in the international context there is not much to the whole movement if it is one. but always good to have things moving – even if in the wrong directions. nissimezekiel [Nissim Ezekiel] has refused to review ezra/i saying it is not all that important nor all that good.

In Mehrotra’s letter to Howard McCord, American poet and editor of an anthology of avant-garde Indian poetry, he expresses doubt that whether the translation of Hungryalist poems could have any impact internationally in their English versions.¹¹⁴ Nonetheless he acknowledges their efforts of innovating the language of

113 For example, the exchange between Jyotirmoy Datta and P. Lal, founder of the Calcutta-based Writer’s Workshop, represents well the debate on English and Indian languages. While Jyotirmoy depreciated the Indian writers in English, whom he calls “caged chaffinches and polyglot parrots”, P. Lal believed that English “proved its ability as a language to play a creative role in all-India literature” (Futehally et al. 2011).

114 Based on a letter exchange between Arvind K. Mehrotra (7/12/1966) and Howard McCord (16/12/1966) concerning the publication of the anthology of modern Indian poetry edited by McCord. In Hungry Generation Archive (MS47), Box 1. Courtesy of Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections and University Archives, Northwestern University Libraries.

Bengali poetry – e.g. also by introducing swear words – even though they may not come across as entirely original to readers familiar with Beat poetry. In reply to Mehrotra’s reservations on the English translations of Hungryalist poetry, the American poet Howard McCord stands with the Hungryalists’ – perhaps unconscious – distortion of the English language, encouraging to continue misusing English as a means to transform the language of poetry and “undergo a sea-change”.

Don’t sweat the Hungry Generation’s way with the English language. In many cases the poets are not fluent in English & have to depend almost entirely on the force of imag[e]ry rather than on the combination of imag[e]ry and music that more fluent speakers possess. But at the same time, their very strangeness can be an asset and provide them with a strong originality. In prose, the famous example is Amos Tutuola, the Nigerian writer. In this sense perhaps, they must be approached as primitives (as in painting le dounaier Rousseau, Grandma Moses). What is at the root of it is the idea that the poet must dominate the language, and not the reverse. As these poets learn more English, their poetry will undergo a sea-change; right now they are riding on the power of their insights, of their indignation, and their imag[e]ry, and not on the fine texture of their English. But as you well know by considering the poetry of the academics, a fine texture can be empty. Always, it seems to me, write as well as you can, and strive to write better; a poet who doesn’t do this is a fake. But a poet can many times overcome the limitations of his knowledge by a kind of compensation.

Therefore, in the words of the American poet, the Bengali poets’ originality for the international reader is also to be found in their misuse of English in the process of translation, which becomes their hallmark. It is interesting to note the parallel drawn between the English of the Hungryalist and that of the Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola, who became famous for one of the first creative experiments with pidgin English in his 1952 *The Palm-Wind Drinkard: And His Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Dead’s Town*. In the same way, McCord encourages to interpret the “very strangeness” of the Hungryalists’ English as a necessary step to manipulate and reshape language.

This kind of criticism towards using non-standard English was already visible in Malay’s use of the English language in his manifestoes, described by Jyotirmoy Datta as “pidgin” as opposed to Kavi George Dowden who wrote in “gibberish” (Ghoṣ 2011b: 28). It shows that these language operations of playing, mocking and making up a new English language code were widespread strategies of literary

action in world countercultures, both Bengali and English-based. Mehrotra’s words were symptomatic of a literary discussion about the meaning of “new” and “modern” when dealing with Indian literature, also reflecting the ongoing debate on the official languages of the Indian Union. In the same way, the description of the Hungryalists’ English as “funny”, “strange”, “original” and “utter[ly] wrong” hints at some main critical attitudes that emerged in the field of so-called Third-World literature: on the one hand, the hostility and mistrust for westernised or western-looking poets on behalf of Marxist critics and writers, and the neglect and discounting of non-standard forms of English; on the other, the openness towards “distorted” forms of English language and their acknowledgement as sites of production for experimental literature. It is in this last view that, I argue, derogatory comments about these poets’ use of English in the quoted exchange, such as “pidgin” or “dilapidated form”, signalled the influence of a postmodern linguistic behaviour that privileged the self-ironic, the mocking, and the playful.

Translating Hungryalism: the “Hungry!” Special Issues of *Salted Feathers* and *Intrepid* Magazines

The American avant-garde magazine *Salted Feathers* devoted a special issue to Hungry poetry collecting a wide-ranging selection of writings – biographies, poems, prose, blitzes from newspapers, letters, documents from Malay’s prosecution – in English translation. The texts were either translated by the authors themselves, often with Malay’s mediation, who was more well-versed in English than the others, or via other translators, like Jyotirmoy Datta.¹¹⁵ The last step was done by the editors, people like Dick Bakken and the guest editor Howard McCord, who would check and improve the Hungryalists’ English to offer a more readable solution. From the correspondence with American editors and writers, it emerged that the Hungryalist poets were often reluctant to translate their poems into English. In a letter to Allen Ginsberg, Sunil Gangopadhyay was “ashamed” of sending his poems because “when translated it looks so dead, almost like a dead frog”.¹¹⁶ Dick Bakken, who as the editor was aware of the various layers of textual

115 Malay discussed the translational and editing process of *Salted Feathers* in a letter exchange with the American editor: “I’ll have to translate all the matters. Because my friends are not well to do with English. I, myself, can somehow cook in English, as you find in this letter. So you’d have to edit the matter properly.” (Bakken 1967, n.p.).

116 “I never wanted to show you poems of mine, my poems in English, in spite of your repeated requests, for this same reason. I have no ambition to write in English, I can never reach the English readers, not even you. This translation business is not for me”. Yet Sunil is firm on his decision of translating contemporary Bengali poems in order to make them

editing, made clear at the opening of the *Hungry!* issue his politics of translation, distinguishing between the operation of “adaptations” and change into “English versions”:

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the original Bengali authors. In most pieces, since the meaning remains clear, I have chosen not to change misspellings, British spellings, grammatical errors, or awkward diction and syntax. ‘Adaptations’ are translations that have been changed some in spelling, punctuation, diction, and syntax to make them more clear and less awkward. ‘English versions’ have been changed much more, the primary attempt not always being to create a piece faithful to the original in form, diction, imagery, vision and so forth (Bakken 1967).

Also in the introduction to *Intrepid* special issue (DeLoach and Weissner 1968), the editors focused on the process of translation, highlighting the “seriousness & efficiency” of the Hungryalist poets in being both “poetic discoverers” and translators.

The translations (which are, for the most part, rough translations of the Bengali/hindi/Marathi & originals by the poets themselves) are certainly vivid enough so that we westerners who are not familiar with the Indian languages & literatures can at least guess what real breakthrough has been achieved there in terms of opening up new dimensions in the language & what most real damage has been done to the lit establishment [...]

The co-existence of different practices of translation, crosscutting various passages of editing, underscores the attempt at eradicating the semantic gap between the cultures of Bengali and English poetry without giving too much relevance to the scientific accuracy of translations. For example, it shows how the translations sometimes departed from the Bengali original text, revealing the intention of bowdlerising it of its most despicable contents, as in Malay Roy Choudhury’s “Stark Electric Jesus”, English translation of the Bengali poem “Pracaṇḍa baidyutik chutār”. Such practices of translation are well illustrated in two English versions

known to the American readers, even though the collection would result in a “third rate anthology of poor english verse” (Sunil letter to Allen, 29.11.1963). In Allen Ginsberg papers, M0733, Series I, Box 25, Folder 30 (Correspondence 1960s – Sunil Gangopadhyay). Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.

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of Saileshvar Ghosh’s poem “Tin bidhabā” (Three Widows), both published in the magazine *Salted Feathers* (Bakken 1967). By illustrating multiple versions, the editors wanted to transparently reveal their translational strategies also to emphasise the transcultural relevance of translation for experimental avant-garde writing. Both versions have shown how translation was fundamental in bringing attention to the challenges, the conflicts and the negotiations faced in the process of transferring ‘transgressive’ content from the Bengali to the English language and audience. On the pages of these little magazines, translation gained meaning as a worlding tool and major vehicle to channel and transfer both normative and transgressive codes from one culture to another. The outcome of the negotiations with texts, meanings and translations ended up shaping a so-called English canon of Hungryalist writings, addressed to the Anglophone audience – mainly in Europe and North America– who would finally be able to access the ‘obscene’ content and language of avant-garde Bengali poetry.

Practices of Translation: Reluctance and Adaptation

The highly controversial poem “Three Widows” by Saileshvar Ghosh chosen for publication in *Salted Feathers* shows the coexistence of different translational practices. Along with Malay’s “Stark Electric Jesus”, Ghosh’s poem became another iconic face of the Hungryalist movement because of its bawdy topic and language.¹¹⁷ Dick Bakken, editor of this issue, decided to include two versions of this poem in English translation to “illustrate some of the problems and possibilities in translating Bengali poetry to English” (Bakken 1967).

The title “Three Widows” is another way of calling the poem based on its first verse, as we will see. Originally published in its entirety as “Ghostly talk with a horse” (Ghoṛār sāṅge bhautik kathābārtā) in the magazine *Eṣāṅā* (1962–3), the following extract translated for *Salted Feathers* was based on a shorter version of the poem known as “Bhautik kathābārtā” (Ghostly Talk), previously printed in a Hungry leaflet (*Hungry Generation* #30). Here, Saileshvar Ghosh plays with the idea of the ghostly (bhautik), the terrific and uncanny feeling of fear at the unfamiliar, reminiscent of the categories of the Freudian unheimlich and Julia Kristeva’s abject. The spooky scenes of the poem reproduce images that violate certain codes and norms of an imaginary Hindu middle-class family. In the first place,

117 In a letter to Dick Bakken, Saileshvar described the reaction to the publication of his poem: “At once this stirred the whole society, gave me a hatred of the stupid, complaint was set to the police interrogated and threatened me. Even a ‘so called’ early H.G. poet left H.G. in protest of the publication of my poem. He openly insulted me and accused me of writing obscene.” (S.G. to D.B. 5/18/66, in Bakken 1967).

the initial perversion of the poet “impregnating three widows” discloses a carnivalesque world where the rules and hierarchies of ordinary life are overturned. I here present my own translation in addition to those done by Jyotirmoy Datta and Girin Das and published in the avant-garde magazine.

I lay down on the holy bed after impregnating three widows
Hey horse, three glasses to the health of Calcutta!
perdition laughs at the priest’s list of sacred names
the religion of flesh [dhātudharma] for seven times rolls down
on the floor
three widows have a walk to the South Sea to get fresh air
33 gods enjoy the fruits
the farmer counts the money he owes for rent
the holy thief is at the front door
the daughters of the householder
all spinsters, wake up at night to unlock the gate
they learn how to protect the family honour [kuladharmā] by
reading the Purāṇas and the Gītā, you Horse
after giving love to the silkworms, where’s the heart gone
hearing the religion of the Gītā a dog’s balls fill up with sperm
[dhātumudrā]
you Horse, on the holy body of 330 million people
the heart engraved with the list of sacred names, where has it gone?
After impregnating three widows I lay down without virtue and
religion
at the feet of mystery, hey Horse
the transportable road is far and desolate
(Ghoṣ 2011: 635–636)

In the Bengali poem, the author operates a rupture between sacred and profane through the conscious and skilful choice of Sanskrit-loans referring to the ideal spheres of the sacred and the domestic. To initiate the reader to his idea of transgression, the “ghostly talk” introduces us to a world where taboos and moral codes on the chastity of the widow are broken. The straightforward communication and provoking intention of the first line makes for a memorable beginning: “I lay down on the holy bed, after impregnating three widows”.¹¹⁸ This image is not scandalous because of the description of sexual intercourse, as it happens in Malay’s “Stark Electric Jesus”: here the transgressive act is the impregnation of three widows, after which the poet – or an imaginary subject of the poem – lays

118 tin bidhabā garbha kare śuṣe achi puṇya bichānāy (Ghoṣ 2011: 635).

on the "holy bed" (puṇya bichānāy) toasting with "three glasses". The recurrence of the number three, with its association to the symbolism of the Christian Trinity or the Hindu trimūrti of Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva, represents the link with the sphere of the sacred further highlighted by the repetition of the word "puṇya" (virtue or religious merit). The symbolic safety and protection of the traditional family, however, breaks down at the end of the poem, when Saileshvar lays down "without virtue and religion" (puṇyadharmahīn) after the blasphemous intercourse has taken place. The sacred threshold of the home, the safety of the domestic space (kula, gr̥hastha) and of traditional education (purāṅgītā) is physically trespassed by violating the body of the widows. In the Hindu perception, a widow (bidhabā) is close to a holy figure: she is almost a nun, who is expected to remain untouched after her husband's death. The break between the realms of the sacred and the desecrated materialises through the dialectic play, skilfully reproduced through the repetition of words such as puṇya, dharma, and dhātu. The author draws such concepts from the religious and physiological world of Hindu culture, setting the normative (both religious and institutional) backdrop to the sphere of the Indian family. Especially the material connotation of the word "dhātu", denoting both the semen and the material elements, in the context of this poem stands for the material religion (dhātudharma), which could be stretched to imply the religion of the semen, and juxtaposes to the "kuladharmā" or the religion of the family.

Without making too-close a reading of this poem, what is striking is how the two translators coped with the original Bengali poem and negotiated with Saileshvar's most despicable and challenging terminology. To begin with, Jyotirmoy Datta opens up about his initial reaction to Saileshvar's poem, declaring his inability to understand its meaning.¹¹⁹ Girin Das tries to be more faithful to the original Bengali poem, by retaining a more literal meaning of the more controversial words and phrases. On the contrary, Jyotirmoy shows great hesitation to retain the scandalous "garbha karā" (impregnate) and "dhātudharma" (religion of the semen), suggesting an adaptation of the original poem into a more fluent English reading, yet wiping out the linguistic taboos inherent in Saileshvar's Bengali language. For example, while Girin Das chooses the more literal "I am sleeping in the holy bed making three widows pregnant", Jyotirmoy replaces the act of impregnation with an equally shocking "I slump on the holy bed, the blow up job on three widows went well". It is interesting to remark that Jyotirmoy omits that the "daughters of

119 "I cannot translate Shaileshvar's 'Three Widows' for I don't understand it. Some of the rest I do, and the more I know them, the less enthusiastic I feel" (1/15/67, Bakken 1967 n.p.). In another letter to Bakken, we learn that the only person who agreed to translate the poem was Girin Das, after other invitations were rejected. It is likely that the invitation to translate first passed through Clinton Seely, Edward Dimock and Jyotirmoy Datta, as he stated elsewhere.

the family man” (grhasther meyerā) are “all spinsters” (sab āiburō), while Girin retains all the literal details of the Bengali version.

Three is the holy thief at the gate but the farmer’s girls
Wake up only bolt fast the doors and chant pious hymns
To defend the family honor”
(transl. by Jyotirmoy Datta)

Thief of heaven in the front door. The family girls –
All spinsters, get up at night to unhook the door –
They study religion and philosophy to preserve the chastity of caste
(transl. by Girin Das)

This passage shows how the translators negotiated with the concept of “kuladharmā”, a phrase referring to the duties to be accomplished within a family. Datta translated it with “family honour”, without any specific local colour, to appeal to a more general intolerance towards the institution of the family as it was experienced transnationally. By contrary, with “chastity of caste”, Das resorted to a meaning that is closer to the general Hindu concept of purity. We know by now that these two concepts, purity and caste, are interdependent and situate themselves in a long political debate as well as cultural discourse that became prominent during British rule. Provided that the translator wanted to exploit the concept of caste instead of that of family, the question remains open as to why Girin Das translated the Bengali phrase with an atypical “chastity of caste”, instead of going for “purity”. I believe that his choice mirrors the wish to adjust the idea of “kuladharmā” into a concept that could easily be accessible to readers who were not exposed to Indian culture but were familiar with the notion of caste as a ‘backward custom’, rather than familiarising with the complex idea of a family dharmā.

Similar strategies of omittance and adaptation of the normative as well as the transgressive contents from Bengali to English emerge in Subo Acharya’s “A Poem” (Ek kabitā), again translated by Jyotirmoy and Girin. Although I will not delve into a close-reading of the poem, it is enough to say that Jyotirmoy distances himself from the most contentious passages of the poem. In another letter to Bakken, Datta explains his reluctance at translating the “adolescent outpourings” of Subo Acharya’s poems.

There are still many pages of Subo’s stuff left but I quail at the thought of having to ‘translate’ them. I put the word in quotes because these adolescent outpourings, the hysteric violence of expression clouding the lack of any real perception, have to be reordered, structured, given form and meaning before they can

be translated. These vague laments, bitter outcries, etc., etc., are the raw material of the genuine poems which I hope Subo and others will some day write; these words come out of their throats too quickly, like one who goes from the table to the basin to retch up; it hasn't settled down, the nourishment hasn't gone into their bones. Which is why your's and McCord's version of the poems read much better than the Bengali, although the hysterics and adolescent dramatics still remain: 'My head is reeling', 'I shall die very soon of anaemia,' etc., for no translating miracle can make the self-pity sound better (Bakken 1967)

His reaction to the drama and violence of Subo's poem illustrates well what was the general reaction of literati, critics, poets and intellectuals, who were educated to other literary tastes and were reluctant to welcome such violence and roughness in Bengali poetry. With this assumption, I do not wish to give any final judgement about the quality of the translations but acknowledge the overlap of different translational practices in the negotiation with so-called taboo language, and the tendency of some translators to bowdlerise controversial content in the process of translating from Bengali to English.

Constructing the English Canon of Hungryalism

While the magazine *Salted Feathers* was exclusively dedicated to the Hungryalist poets, Allen DeLoach and Carl Weissner's *Intrepid* issue collected writings from other Indian poets as well: it included the Kṛttibās group (i.e. Sunil Gangopadhyay, Tarapada Ray and Shakti Chattopadhyay), the Allahabad-based poet Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, and the bilingual English/Marathi poets Dilip Chitre and Arun Kolatkar. Extracts from Ginsberg's *Indian Journals* were also part of this issue. This number of *Intrepid* opened with a map of Calcutta and Howrah in Bengali, "the center of new creative activity in india today---due to the energetic efforts & achievements of bengal's Hungry Generation poets" thus placing the city of Calcutta at the centre of the avant-garde world, with Bombay, Delhi and Allahabad placed only after the Bengali capital (DeLoach and Weissner1968). With their diverse choice of Indian avant-garde writings, the special issues on modern Indian poetry contributed to shape an English canon of Hungryalism for the wide English-speaking audience, publishing a selection of their writings in English translation and highlighting their connection with the American Beat movement. Although it may sound like a paradox that the first collection of Hungry writings appeared in English instead of Bengali, it strategically marked an important shift in the reception of the Hungry Generation. The publication prompted the association

of the Bengali movement with the international avant-garde community, while in the circle of Bengali critics it signalled the wish to “deprovincialise” the Bengali language. In a perspective of cultural marketing, it could even attract more readers overseas. Through these avant-garde American platforms, Hungryalism easily turned into a literary movement and cultural phenomenon not only confined to Calcutta and to the Bengali language but largely associated with the variety of Indian modernism, because of its colloquial language, cosmopolitanism and urban style. An interesting cue to continue our analysis is Stephen Belletto’s argument about Hungryalism being “packaged” into an American version emphasising concerns like native spirituality, sexual frankness, and political subversion (Belletto 2019). He noticed that the Hungry issue of Ferlinghetti’s *City Lights*, through Ginsberg’s mediation, prompted the association of the Hungry and Beat Generation by foregrounding the iconoclastic features of the Bengali movement aligning it with other rebellious and countercultural movements of the world. These aspects aptly represented the Bengali avant-garde as a radical and revolutionary counterculture, resonating with other protest movements in Europe and the United States.

Allen Ginsberg’s foreword to the *City Lights* number on Indian and Bengali contemporary poetry illustrates these kinds of imaginations and projections at work in the ways the Hungryalist movement was represented. The same intention of subsuming the Hungry Generation into the Beat literary world is revealed in the editors’ choice of juxtaposing the Hungry manifesto in *City Lights 1* to Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder’s rather exotic impressions on India and Japan (Ferlinghetti 1963: 7–23). The selection of Bengali poems translated in *City Lights*, mouthpiece of the American avant-garde, displayed themes and tropes bearing trace of the Beat sensibility, especially underlining the existentialism of the doomed hero, who finds solace and creativity through the abuse of drugs and alcohol. For example, this theme is predominant in Malay’s “Drunk Poem”, while the idealism of youth is central in Sunil Gangopadhyay’s poem “Age Twenty-Eight”, two poems published in *City Lights 2* (Ferlinghetti 1964: 120–128). Although *Salted Feathers* and *Intrepid* Hungry issues so far remain the best anthologies in English to exhibit the poetry and essays of the Hungry Generation, their tendency was to present texts using a language and register characteristic of neo-avant-garde writings in English to encourage global countercultural associations. In another number of *City Lights*, we find Howard McCord describing the poetry of the Hungry Generation with an interesting series of adjectives, which are juxtaposed to contemporary Indian literature, “pallid” and “otiose”, in other words “schoolmasters’ stuff” (Ferlinghetti 1966: 159–60).

Acid, destructive, morbid, nihilistic, outrageous, obscene, mad, hallucinatory, shrill – these characterize the terrifying and cleansing visions that the Hungryalists insist Indian literature must

endure if it is ever to be vital again. With few exceptions, contemporary Indian literature is schoolmasters' stuff: pallid, otiose, and dull. It tends either to be timid and moralistic within a genteel realism, or aimlessly philosophical and romantic. Two exceptions are well known outside India, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Ruth Prabher Jhabvala. But the revolutionary Bengali writers whom the Hungry Generation has built upon, such as Manik Bandhyopadhyay, Samaresh Basu, and Asim Roy, are absolutely unknown in the West. Only in the poets of the Hungry Generation, working their own Bengali poems into nervous, energetic English, excluded from the academies and the literary aristocracy, can be seen the fullness of urgency and despair that covers South Asia.

The adjectives that McCord uses seem to repeat certain popular descriptions and characterisations of modern avant-garde writings in America: a poetry born out of a profound alienation from the norms of a bourgeois society; a language that disgusted and subverted the establishment, just like the poetry of the Beat Generation. Establishing a dichotomy between contemporary Indian literature ("pallid, otiose, and dull" or "timid and moralistic") and the "acid, destructive...obscene" visions of Hungryalism is a predictable way of endorsing what was a widespread and engrained language of bipolarities in the cultural economy of the avant-garde. McCord, himself part of that world, echoes that countering attitude, choosing to stand with the experimental Bengali horizon of Hungryalism, even though he elsewhere admitted of being only familiar with Bengali poetry available in English (Bakken 1967). Moreover, further on in his essay, he declares that the movement is "autochthonous" and "built on the strong Bengali avant-garde tradition", although inspired by poets and playwrights from France and US, and once again takes position in the debate on the Western derivation, showcasing how widespread was this debate across the avant-garde. His reference to the English of the Hungryalist poets reaffirms the prevalent and frowned-upon view on the Hungryalists' use of English, here outlined in gentler words as "nervous" and "energetic", excluded from "literary aristocracy".

Another example of the jocular and rambling English of the Hungry Generation can be observed in Malay's essay "The Literary Situation in Calcutta", among many other pieces of writing published on *Salted Feathers's* Hungry! issue (Bakken 1967). His language is replete with American slang and, as in McCord's previously discussed note, showcases the inclination to delineate neat boundaries between the establishment and the counter-community. Similar descriptions of scandal and danger are used equally by the Bengali poets, and by Malay most of all, when addressing to an Anglophone audience. This is yet another evidence

of the playful use of English which mimicked the register of the avant-garde also to be internationally known as participants of the global avant-garde community. Furthermore, the practice of writing in non-standard English – often flawed, verbose, hyper-technical and replete with jargons – was also a way to turn away from the conventional and more elitist version of Indian English, mainly spoken by bhadralok Bengali intellectuals. Unlike Malay, the other Hungryalist poets, like Sunil Gangopadhyay, Saileshvar Ghosh, Debi Roy and Subo Acharya, expressed their unease for writing in English. In “The Literary Situation in Calcutta”, the author employs long adjectival constructions, slogans and formulas to create an impressive and hyperbolic effect. Here, Malay operates a major division within the panorama of Bengali literary institutions between the “Business” (also called “Sahitya Jagat”), the “smug of academic flapdoodle” and “the avant-garde”. The Business, represented by a few big groups of newspapers, is described as “a vast string of sentimental James Bond manufacturers”, a phrase that underscores the economy-oriented machinery behind the production and marketing of literature. By contrast, the avant-garde “consists mostly of the young who look upon the bulk of post-Independence writing as cheap, pop, entertaining, filler, non-Bengali and aberrant”. Malay singles out several Bengali icons from the avant-garde group, writers who managed to stay away from the “Business and its traps of ostensible megalomania”, reconfiguring a new pantheon of Bengali anti-establishment writers through names such as Manik Bandopadhyay, Bibhutibhushan, Jibanananda, Annada Shankar Roy and Satinath Bhaduri. Avant-garde is one step further in his analysis, which attempts to set the boundaries of “experimentalism” around a few Hungryalist prose writers.

Avant-garde fiction writing starts with Subimal Basak (Junk), the rawest of new talents, Basudeb Dasgupta (Kitchen-Room) and Subhash Ghosh (My Key), all top-level experimentalists, defiers of existing genres of prose-writing, advertisers of the soul, mainstays of Bengali new departures and the brazen confessors of rebellion, trespass and blatant exploitation of the inmost self. Calcutta’s mid-victorian police once issued body warrant against them and several writers had to intervene. They are among the most frequently mentioned young writers, unequivocally disavowed disapproved disowned by Sahitya Jagat and its crowd-sucking tentacles.

This language echoes a rhetoric and an aesthetic of excess, that is of hyperbolic and oxymoric contrapositions. For example, words like “advertisers”, “mainstays”, “confessors” and “exploitation”, intentionally drawn from the vocabulary of business, are inverted to counter the impersonal, materialistic and profit logic of

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capitalism when juxtaposed with grander spiritual concepts. The effect is almost parodic: the Hungryalists, poets of postmodernity, are "advertisers of the soul", "mainstays of new departures", and exploiters of "the inner self". Finally, Malay complains about the absence of an actual questioning of what constitutes "our culture". In the juxtaposition between an authentic idea of culture and a "chaotic" vision embracing linguistic hybridity and cultural contamination, Malay and the Hungry Generation have clearly gone for the latter.

Nobody knows or wants to inquire what exactly is our culture. NOW. Cross-breeding, indigestion, complacency, spiritual materialism [a term first used by Chögyam Trungpa], middle-age rationalism, failures of democracy and overall chaos. An unforeseen journey to chaos. Chaos itself has become the subject matter for the bulk of young writers, poets and dramatists who incessantly seize on it as their own solitary spirit discovers it, unveils and explores.

Concluding Remarks

The last chapter on worlding strategies of playful imitation and transversal adaptation of languages and contents of the avant-garde has brought us full circle. After zooming in on Hungryalist poetry, I returned in this chapter to issues of imitation and adaptation across the Beat and the Hungryalist avant-garde cultures. I have shown that distortion, imitation and adaptation are vital sites of production for postmodern and postcolonial literatures that experimented with forms and languages of poetry by valuing influence and contamination. For example, we have seen that the Hungryalists' unconventional usage of the English language in their poetry translations or correspondence was deliberately verbose and hyper-technical in a move to parody the idiom of the Western avant-garde, as well as to mark their association with the global counterculture of the 1960s. Sentenced for obscenity in 1964, the movement targeted Bengali middle-class hypocrisy, its moral codes and social regulations, as well as the elitist literary establishment in the fashion of other angry countercultures: by pushing the limits of Bengali language and by desecrating the traditional forms of poetry irony and sarcasm. The encounter with Allen Ginsberg and other poets of the American Beat Generation was source of inspiration for both movements, but it also condemned the Bengali poets to be forever disregarded as a "tropical and Gangetic" copy of the Western counterculture.

This final chapter has linked back to the questions laid out in the introduction and first chapter, which sought to retrace and frame the historical, literary and material trajectories along which the Hungry Generation moved. The introduction has established the object of analysis of this book, which suffered marginalisation and exclusion from the Bengali criticism that downplayed the movement as juvenile, depraved and derivative of the Western avant-garde. Other fellow poets from the Bengali anti-establishment group *Kṛttibās* slowly moved away too from the early Hungry Generation after the sentence for obscenity, although they later proclaimed the birth of a new *Kṣudhārta āndolan* (Hungry movement) in the name of the Hungry Generation. These dynamics of delegitimisation, and trajectories of rupture and exclusion that operated in the circulation and reception of this movement were countered and echoed by the textual strategies of ambivalence, irony and parodic imitation that the Hungryalists enacted through their revolution of form and language. Instead of exclusively emphasising interconnection, exchange and continuity across avant-garde cultures, these operations have shed light on disruption and fragmentation (of texts, practices, and histories) as dominant modes of these postmodern experiments in Bengali poetry. Constituting traits of Bengali identity as imagined by Hungryalism are postmodernism and radicalism, as chapter 3 demonstrates. This could be seen, for example, in the configuration of an alternative canon of the Bengali avant-garde inspired by multiple global

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traditions of radicalism and iconoclasm, such as French bohemianism and Decadent movement, German anti-modernism, American counterculture, and Indian modernism.

Chapter 2 and 4 have focused on the so-called tropes of transgression that I identified in Hungryalist poetry. We have seen that this movement mainly engaged with themes like sexuality and masculinity in the literary and social realms of post-1960s Calcutta. The concept of transgression has especially defined the interdisciplinary methodology of my research and guided a socio-literary reading of the texts produced by the Hungryalist authors. The book employed notions of transgression from anthropology and sociology (Bakhtin 1968; Turner 1969; Foucault 1978) and some perspectives from masculinity and gender studies, like hyper-masculinity and the male gaze (Mulvey 1975; Connell 1995), to reveal how the literary texts are embedded in the socio-cultural context of postcolonial West Bengal. Engaging with subjects that were perceived as taboos by Bengali bourgeois society, such as sexual violence, rape, consumption and objectification, these postmodern poets mirrored the fractures within the hegemonic views of the Indian nation-state about science, development and modernisation. I argued that the mode of transgression inscribed itself into the manly bodies of the poets, replicating the desires, ambivalences and anxieties about sexuality and consumption that could be intercepted in India’s changing public sphere. These strategies of transgression could be observed in the choice of taboo tropes and languages – e.g. sexual violence, consumption, modernisation, drug and alcohol abuse, and body objectification – expressing the violence and abuse of which the Hungryalist poets were at the same time victims and perpetrators.

By analysing a selection of poems and other writings of the Hungry Generation, this book suggests reading these texts as literary and sociocultural spaces where the dualities and paradoxes of the postcolonial Bengali identity – especially of male, urban, and middle-class Bengalis – are played out. My interpretation has sought to identify Bengali postcolonial male bodies as sites that both challenge and reaffirm disciplinary and normative subjectivities through representations of sexual intercourses, boozing and drug consumption, objectified female bodies, rape, masturbation, homosexuality, and anxious masculinities. An elucidating example of such bodily transgressions is Phalguni Ray’s poetry in which he portrayed his troubled and anxious “abnormality” in terms of class, race and gender, vis-à-vis the ideal image of the Indian man – father, husband and breadwinner – in 1960s Bengali middle-class society.

A major site of interrogation that this research used to make sense of the social and historical crisis embodied by these Bengali poets is that of sexuality. Not only has this been a central trope and topic of investigation of the realm of the personal in Hungryalist poetry, but a more sociological and historical accent has been given to the sexualities imagined and performed by these Hungry young Bengali men

through the multiple discourses on sex, marriage, love and intimacy that were captured in India's changing public sphere in the post-independence era. Drawing mainly from the history and sociology of sexuality and gendered identities as they were constructed by and for the middle class (Foucault 1978; Weeks 1981; Connell 1995; Srivastava 2013), this book provided a socio-literary interpretation of the tensions, ambivalences and anxieties that these authors expressed metonymically through the unabashed and uncensored language of their poems. But more incisively than the idea of Indian sexuality, often essentialised by psychoanalysis and culturalist approaches, the notion of transgression has helped to capture the reproaching and often subversive acts that the Hungryalists practiced through the texts of their poems. Moreover, besides framing the potentially radical actions of the Hungry poets, transgression also represents a distinctive trait of modernity and modern fiction. In Michel Foucault's essay "A Preface to Transgression" (1977), the French philosopher observes that the theme of sexuality was at the centre of writing from Marquis de Sade to Freud and symbolically represented – on a physical and moral level – the death of God already anticipated by Nietzsche (Foucault 1977). Reading George Bataille's *Story of the Eye*, Foucault provided methodological and philosophical directions to discuss the repeated use of sexuality in modern literature as that which "permits a profanation without object, a profanation that is empty and turned inward upon itself" (Foucault 1977: 30). The Hungryalists too seem to have paid homage to Foucault's statement by making 'sex' the language and trope of modern poetry and using it as instrument for expressing the depravation and obscenity of human life under capitalism. Transgression has been welcomed in literary studies in different languages and literary cultures, including gothic fiction and the picaresque novel, certainly taking cue from Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque and carnivalesque as modes of hierarchy subversion (Lickhardt et al. 2018; DiPlacidi 2018). A more politically engaged notion of transgression has, by contrast, been associated with women's writings and minority literatures in postcolonial contexts which generally did not develop an identity of their own, but rather depended on "transgression between cultures where also power and struggle for predominance are involved" (Ahrens 2005; Allison et al. 2019). Therefore, there is fertile ground to use transgression, understood as a breach of moral codes and social norms and yet site of creation of new liminal identities, as the predominant frame to critically address Hungryalist thought and practice in post-independent West Bengal.

As with the word trans-gression, the prefix trans seemed to be revealing of other key dynamics of the Hungry Generation and of postcolonial avant-gardes in general. This prefix naturally favours fluidity rather than fixity in the practice of identity building; identities, like those of middle-class unmarried and unemployed young men in Bengali society, caught in processes of transition and transformation rather than in well-established boxes. As Victor Turner pointed out, the space of

the liminal is “betwixt and between” and frequently likened to “death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon” (Turner 1969: 95). It is therefore in that liminal space of transition from the colonial rule to independence, in the emergence of India as an independent state and symbolically in the liminal space of mimicry, ambivalence and imitation that Hungryalist identities are temporarily caught, yet still seem to escape all tentative definitions.

Therefore, as with other postmodern literatures across the world, transgression as a tool of analysis and interpretive spectacle exhibited the potential of capturing shades or moments of alternative literary expression wrought by social turbulence and existential anxiety, and of extracting the ambivalences and contradictions of these countercultures rather than reconstructing any coherent and consistent ideologies existing behind literary cultures. The transgression practiced through their sexuality, masculinity, and sexist gaze was also engendered by the moment of transition from the end of the colonial rule to the rationalist ideologies of the Nehruvian nation-state. In other words, what I have sought to highlight is the fragmentary nature of histories, biographies, vocabularies and materials that characterised this movement. That this is a more common empirical methodology for the study of alternative print cultures and literary modernism in non-Western contexts is a well-known and established scholarly practice. Yet what this research adds is that the ‘fragment’ can become an epistemological instrument in its own right, representing not only in its visual and material evidence the marginality and un-officiality of print and literary cultures in postcolonial contexts, but also pointing to a radical practice of literary, cultural and political subversion.

As pointed out in the first chapter, the literary practices of the Hungry Generation were framed as postmodern and postcolonial by showing their strategies of language contamination, irony and ambivalence. Characteristically postmodernist patterns of behaviour, such as the rejection of hierarchies, were distinctive of the global phenomenon of counterculture on a transcultural scale. But how has the book reconciled with these evidently transcultural traits of the Hungry Generation? This study emphasised the multiple locations of vernacular modernism in South Asia striving to decolonise language, forms and categories of knowledge through so-called obscene poetry. The circulation and exchange of literary materials across the global avant-garde circle of the 1960s and 1970s shows that strategies of representation, imitation and adaptation in non-Western contexts are instrumental in retracing continuity, as well as difference, across the concepts of transcultural and postcolonial. The concept of the transcultural needed some reevaluation of its encompassing nature by limiting it to some moments or “scales of transculturality” in various literary fields, as Hans Harder argued (Harder 2019). Moments of transculturality can be observed, for example, in Hungryalist literature by looking at the manifesto as a genre of political modernity, the mode of

the little magazine as a platform of exchange across the global avant-garde and obscene and transgressive writings, a distinct trope of modernity. The research also stressed that the transcultural is not only defined through trans-national processes of exchange, reception and circulation. The example of Hungryalism and its reception in Bengali and American circles of avant-garde poetry, and vice versa, have shown that literary asymmetries in postcolonial texts are contested, negotiated and often resolved through parodical imitation (or mimicry), ambivalence, distortion and adaptation of other idioms and traditions.

In the last years, India has seen a peak of media and academic attention on matters of censorship, dissent and obscenity in correspondence with a resurgence of Hindu nationalism and xenophobia on a national scale. In Bangladesh, between 2013 and 2016 the killings of secularist activists and atheist bloggers have re-ignited the debate on freedom of expression in the country. In response to that, manifestations of discontent on behalf of young people and students have grown as they contributed to raise awareness of rights such as dissent and freedom of speech amidst increasing pressure from the national government for greater control and surveillance across educational campuses and in young people's lives. Against this backdrop, the memory and radical imaginary of the Hungry Generation gradually re-emerged and received greater attention in various forms, thanks to students, minor poets and literary communities in West Bengal and Bangladesh. The link that rebellious and revolutionary movements of history nurtured with political activism is best epitomised by a new concept of writing and of poetry as performances of radicalism and expression of dissent. In 2015, an experimental play based on Malay's poem "Stark Electric Jesus" was staged at JNU's Centre for English Studies as part of a seminar that explored issues of obscenity and censorship organised by prof. Brinda Bose. The student Souradeep Roy, now PhD candidate in theatre studies at Queen Mary University in London, walking half-naked on the long seminar table, recited excerpts from Manik Bandyopadhyay's short-story "Prāgaitihāsik" (Prehistoric) and from Malay Roy Choudhury's poem "Stark Electric Jesus". Other literary performances acting as forms of political protest are, for example, the political slogans inspired by Urdu poetry. The adoption of poetry as a means of protest was highly visible in December 2019, when the massive outburst of protests and police brutalities on demonstrators that followed the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) triggered a number of symbolic reactions and peaceful expressions of dissent through poetry *mushā'ira* on behalf of students from Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi. Amir Aziz's poem "Sab yād rakhā jāyegā" (We will remember it all) reached out to Pink Floyd's guitarist and rock icon Roger Waters who quoted and recited parts of Aziz's poem at a protest event in London. A photograph taken at a students' protest in the same campus portrayed three girls protesting against the CAB under the shadow of a giant statue of the Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib.

The volume *Political Aesthetics of Global Protest* (2014) shows that the imaginary of revolt and protest is utterly transcultural and that it often deploys transversally through multiple sites of protest, from the Arab Spring in north Africa to the Indian anti-corruption movement. Such analogies in the symbols and imaginaries of protest are evident, for instance, in Yemen where, during the Arab Spring protest, Bedouin poets recited their poems and songs as forms of protest (Werbner & al. 2014: 7). Therefore, poetry performance has re-emerged as the main instrument and symbol of political fight in totally new social and political contexts in South Asia and elsewhere.

However, my impression is that the performance of poetry as a form of political fight in India has reappeared not as a direct inheritance of the Hungryalists per se, but as a mechanism of existential safety in periods of crisis. Seen from this perspective, poetry is a medium of expression for the anguish and awareness of a historical crisis as experienced by a certain *communitas*, as Victor Turner noted. These contemporary expressions of dissent are part of a collectively shared literary tradition that includes various genres and codes of language in poetry that are solidly associated with a symbolism of dissent. Although the myth of Hungryalism as an anti-bourgeois movement is alive, especially in urban West Bengal, it is important to state that the same countercultural tensions and opposition between “structure” and “communitas” can be traced elsewhere and in other moments of crisis in history. By making this clear, I wanted to provide a more balanced vision of Hungryalism which, by contrast, did not set up nor inspire concrete political protest in the 1960s and 1970s. This observation is also necessary to highlight the risks of elevating the Hungry Generation and other traditions associated with revolutionary politics, like the Naxalites, to mythological actors of rebellion and transgression. In this book, I have tried to go beyond biased interpretations and established narratives of the Hungry Generation to expose less common perspectives and more complex readings of this controversial movement of Bengali literary history.

A mythicisation is visible in the contemporary reception of Hungryalism which is either extolled as a movement of political and sexual emancipation or reduced to a group of male chauvinists and misogynists. We cannot deny that so-called sexual transgression of the Bengali poets often verged on hypermasculine and misogynist behaviours objectifying the representation of the woman in their poetry. As I tried to show, their transgressions played out in all their ambiguities and contradictions symptomatic of young middle-class Bengalis struggling with their identity. However, I have sought to avoid a hyper-sexualisation of the movement’s orientation by describing the poets as utterly depraved and obsessed by sexuality and rather understand its depravation and misogyny as ways to cope with hegemonic Bengali masculinities as well as with the promises of postcolonial emancipation.

Finally, what I see needs to be stressed today, from some conversations with Bengali scholars and Hungry followers, is that we are witnessing a revival of Hungryalism that glorifies sexual freedom and the libertine aspects of the movement which result in reproducing misogynist behaviours and a masculinity disguised as gender emancipation. In this way, the Hungryalists would be transformed in a simulacrum that legitimates the depravation, excessive consumption of drugs and alcohol, misogyny, and the reproduction of conservative stereotypes about Indian womanhood. I often had the feeling that the shadows of a traumatic (colonial and postcolonial) past were re-emerging through the words of the poets as well as from the enthusiasm of my – mostly male – interlocutors with whom I discussed Hungryalism. Therefore, without pinpointing the sexual and existential anguish voiced in the poetry of this Bengali movement, we risk falling back on a populist and libertine version of Hungryalism where the sexualisation of desire and the objectification of the female body is legitimised as a model for both male and female emancipation.

