

Introduction

A History of Hungryalism?

In 1964, *TIME* magazine reported the arrest and trial of a “band of young Bengalis with tigers in their tanks”. The article cited as one of the objects of contention a wedding invitation card advertising the “first topless bathing suit contest” in Calcutta that was sent to all leading citizens of the city “from police commissioner to wealthy spinsters” (TIME 1964). These Bengali mavericks in their early twenties wrote poems on sex and rape, printed masks of animals and parcelled them to various authorities of the Bengali establishment; they organised poetry performances at cemeteries and liquor shops and then used to walk naked and hungover in the streets. Presently, the Calcutta establishment rose up in rage and the poets’ houses were raided by the police, their leaflets and pamphlets seized and each of them was arrested and brought to court on charges of obscenity. This cohort of rebellious Bengalis became known as the Hungry Generation, a poetry movement that sought to put an end to the “game of writing rhymed-prose” and to start composing “poetry as spontaneously as an orgasm” (Caṭṭopādhyāy 2015: 118). Their new poetry manifesto (1961) announced the death of the old-school forms and styles of Bengali poetry, proclaiming the need for “holocaust, a violent and somnambulist jazzing of the hymning five, a sowing of the tempestual hunger” in their new vision of writing (*Hungry Generation XII*). Known for being charged and sentenced for obscenity in 1964, these young middle-class authors remained for decades associated with the label of “obscene” and rebelliousness especially after their encounters with Allen Ginsberg and other icons of the American avant-garde and countercultural scene. Bengali critics and journalists like Jyotirmoy Datta saw the movement essentially as a “tropical and Gangetic” copy of the American avant-garde (Bakken 1967), a narrative that until now has hardly been separated from the account of the Hungry Generation. It is true, however, that the Hungry poets mainly explored sexuality and alienation, targeted Bengali middle-class hypocrisy, its moral codes and social regulations in the mode of other “angry” countercultural movements of the world: through irony, transgression and the desecration of codes of language and norms of social behaviour. They

Introduction

did so by reproducing the taboos of bourgeois society, such as sexual violence, hyper-masculinity, objectification, alcohol and drug consumption, in their writings and lifestyle.

The main themes that emerged from a close reading of the literary texts – poems, manifestoes, essays and other miscellaneous writings – are related to what I call tropes and practices of transgression, enacted both within and without the literary texts. Transgression – of bodies and texts – is the dominant frame characterising the Hungryalist breach of literary and social norms of the Bengali middle class in the poetry of this avant-garde movement. For instance, misogyny, objectification, consumption, and sexual violence represent physical and metaphorical violations in the view of dominant bourgeois morality that these poets always wanted to shake and sabotage. My interpretation thus places the body as a site that both questions and reinforces disciplinary and normalising subjectivities through representations of hunger, sexual intercourse, objectified female bodies, rape, masturbation and instances of anxious masculinities. Moreover, my book attempts a complex articulation of the concept of transgression in a broader perspective by going beyond the realm of what was perceived as non-normative according to the Bengali middle-class society of the 1960s. Stretching the mode of transgression in the social and cultural context of postcolonial India, I argue that this mode reproduced itself also on an existential level for the Hungryalist authors, who inscribed onto their male bodies the ambivalences and anxieties of sexuality and changing gender-roles in an increasingly global and postmodern world.

In a nutshell, this book and the research behind it rest on two primary interpretive foci: the literary and the sociocultural. These two spheres are not separate domains in Hungryalist texts. In fact, they act interdependently, enlightening and reinforcing one another. The texts, literary and biographic, emerged in the context of Calcutta's post-independence when the city experienced economic crisis, unemployment, radical politics, and a massive influx of refugees from East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh). The Bengali poems are set against the broader context of India's postcolonial project of state-building and Nehruvian socialist ethos which emphasised a morality of economic and sexual frugality while, in contrast, promoting industrialisation, scientific progress and technological advance on a national scale. I analyse the literary production of the Hungry Generation poets, and especially of one of its iconic representatives, Phalguni Ray, as a reaction to discourses on sexuality and masculinity of that era. This book raises these interrogatives from a socio-literary perspective highlighting the influence that historical formations like the middle class, consumption, and modernisation had on the elaboration of the Hungryalists' language and hyper-masculine ethos. The special configuration of the Hungryalist literary materials, which consisted of poems, little magazines, manifestoes, and other ephemera, lends itself to a historical interpretation that has been functional to unravelling the anxieties, contradictions and

ambivalence that the Bengali youth experienced in India's postcolonial transition to global modernity: anxieties that were especially visible in the realm of sexuality.

Transgression of bodies and texts seemed like a natural way of interpreting these literary documents because they blatantly violate moral norms, linguistic and stylistic standards both metaphorically and concretely, as demonstrated by the actual sentence of obscenity imposed on the Hungry Generation writings following the court trial. However, this book's main contention about the so-called "obscene" poetry of this young group of Bengali bohemians is that transgression as a literary and political practice often operates historically and provisionally. Transgression has meant not only to violate and trespass borders – of an alleged moral, social and cultural status quo – but it has also been described as an act of authorised subversion, often temporary and grounded in a specific historical moment. Victor Turner, the British anthropologist who popularised the concept of liminality in modern society's rites of passage (1969), has contributed greatly to a way of viewing acts of transgression as provisional breaks in the social and political "structure", as he called it, of post-industrial societies, which he studied closely from the 1960s. Turner's revisited ideas of the "liminoid" explaining these transitory ruptures and identity mutations in post-industrial societies has seemed to work well to theoretically and historically situate the literary and cultural transgressions operating in the anti-structural world of the Hungry Generation, to use a Turnerian phrase. Therefore, following the thread of transgression, along with the extensive secondary literature on the topic, my attempt is that of bringing out a plausible historical account and historicist reading of the Hungryalist literary experience understood in the context of the Indian post-independence period. The question mark at the end of the paragraph title (A History of Hungryalism?) is of course provocative in the sense that the aim of this book is precisely to sketch a picture of Hungryalism emerging from the social and historical context of 1960s Indian post-independence, by availing of a text-based and history-grounded reading of the literary sources.

Moreover, questions about censorship and ensuing legal debates on what constitutes moral standards in the realm of art and literature seemed to naturally emerge in media and social discourse around the time I started this doctoral project. With the increasingly restrictive policies of the Indian Censor Board and the rise of BJP political rule with its overt ideology of xenophobia and religious communalism, debates on censorship and freedom of expression have resurfaced in India in the last two decades. Simultaneously, inside and outside Indian academia, greater attention was given to cultural and literary production that was considered in some way radical or transgressive vis-à-vis the cultural and political context in which it emerged. Signals of a renewed interest for radical literary cultures in South Asia prompted by centres of academic teaching and research in Delhi and Calcutta, as well as from the personal participation of teachers and students

Introduction

in workshops and theatre performances on topics like obscenity, censorship and radical literary cultures. With such social and political unrest in the background, my research started with questions about the nature of obscenity in the context of an experimental movement of poetry in postcolonial West Bengal. Why was the poetry of the Hungry Generation considered “*aśīlī*” (obscene)? What were the features one could identify as obscene in their literary production? Does obscenity articulate itself differently in a postcolonial context and in a vernacular language? With such questions in mind I began my research on the Hungry Generation to end up on a socio-literary inquiry of literary transgressions and representations of sexuality as formulated by 1960s and 1970s West Bengal literary avant-garde. While such questions were retained as part of the literary and historical backdrop of this postmodern Bengali poetry, the research became oriented to see how literary texts produced at sites of crisis in a postcolonial context can challenge official cultures, canons and sociocultural standards by questioning the always contested sites of the body and sexuality.

The Global and the Bengali Sixties

Putting the Hungry Generation in context links its literary production to the cultural and political landscape of the 1960s in West Bengal and on the global scale. The Sixties have received great popular and academic attention, divided as they were between memory and history (Heale 2005). The decade has been looked at “as the sharing of a common objective situation”, what Frederic Jameson famously noted as “periodisation” (Jameson 1984: 178). Since then, scholars have conceptualised the Sixties as a global historical event, which encompassed a diversity of experiences such as decolonisation movements, ensuing nation-building, the rise of Maoism and protest movements against various establishments, such as women’s movements and the civil rights movement (Scott Brown and Lison 2014; Jian et al. 2018). Moreover, scholars put great emphasis on the vision of a “global 1968”, often understood as coterminous with youth’s rebellion against established powers, although mainly from a Eurocentric perspective. However, the transnational character of 1968 is seen in the vernacular translations of the word pointing to the regional dimension of that decade: for example, the French *soixante-huit*, the German *Achtundsechziger*, the Spanish *sesentaochero*, and the Italian *sessantotto* all characterised specific local contexts.

The “spirit of 1968” has played a special role in the global imagination not only as a symbol of rebellion, youth protest and left-wing activism. Even more evocative of that spirit were the cultural manifestations of a revolt against the establishment that was primarily aesthetic and political: experimentations with music, sound, words and image culture, as well as the democratisation of the means of

cultural production. The birth of the “counterculture” highlighted the cultural and political potential of love, peace and individual freedom, against the established culture of the petit bourgeoisie. The French protest movement known as May 68 stood for a symbol of revolt against spreading imperialism, capitalism and consumerism, inspiring similar protest movements worldwide: the anti-war and the civil rights movement in the United States, especially after the assassination of Martin Luther King and John Fitzgerald Kennedy; the crushing of the Prague Spring and the rule of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy in Eastern Europe; the end of the cultural revolution and the rediscovery of its horrors in China; the Cuban revolution and the armed struggle in Latin America. Historical landmarks, such as the moon landing, have remained impressed in the memory of later generations as new mass media and communications technology facilitated the spread of images, along with political ideas, brand-new experimentation with arts and aesthetics, and postmodern subjectivities. What became known as an “invasion” of sound and images, mainly transferred through television and cinema, paved the way for new forms of access to information and helped shape utopian imaginaries about the future of humanity. The conjuncture of the invasion of images and the creation of imaginaries has also shown that responses to the project of modernisation in the 1960s were ambivalent and affective, as seen, for example, in science fiction movies and narratives of that era (Scott Brown and Lison 2014). Ambivalent was also the academic reaction to the study of the decade, which was later criticised for having nurtured a Eurocentric radicalism without any real political outcome. Once again in the circle of French anti-humanism, which moved away from the classical subject of European Enlightenment, Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut (1985) spoke of 1968 as a “pseudo-revolution” mainly because it reasserted what they call the “democratic logic of hedonism”, observing that it “revealed its true colours through its cultural and political radicalism, its exaggerated hedonism, students’ rebellions, the counterculture, the marijuana and LSD fads, sexual liberation and porno-pop films and publications” (Ferry and Renaut 1985: 51).

On the other hand, if we look towards Asia, scholars noted that a regionalised study of the Asian Sixties has often exhibited stronger features than those characterising the decade in Europe and America. Social, political and cultural change happened more abruptly in the postcolonial countries, which brutally shifted from subjugation to independence. The experience of anti-imperialism and decolonisation in multiple sites of the colonised world has shown that the “dialectics of liberation”, as Christopher Connery phrased it, was the measure and goal of radical and revolutionary activity worldwide: liberation was promoted on different fronts, including national, psychic, sexual, economic, and social liberation (Chen et al. 2018: 575). The Bandung conference (1955) promoted transnationalism and cooperation among the Asian countries. The leaders of the new independent Asian nations (India, Pakistan, Burma, Ceylon, People’s Republic of China, and

Introduction

Indonesia) established a formal coalition of countries that opposed the politics of alignment in the context of the Cold War between a Western and an Eastern bloc. From India, Jawaharlal Nehru constructed a global geography of anti-imperialism with pivotal nodes in China, Egypt and Soviet Russia, as well as with the imperialist world of Europe and America (Louro 2018: 5). Moreover, Bandung proclaimed equality among all nations, support of the movements of national liberation against the colonial forces and the rejection of military coalitions hegemonised by superpowers.

But how are the 1960s imagined when it comes to Asia, and if we look closely at the context of post-independence West Bengal? How does the Hungry Generation feature in the worlding map of 1960s avant-garde and counterculture? To attempt an answer, I will look at the transcultural interaction that took place especially, even though not exclusively, between West Bengal and the United States in the context of cosmopolitan modernism, drawing a transcultural map of literary and imagined regions of desire that entangles South Asia with other world peripheries of avant-garde practice, often located in lesser-known literary centres in Europe and America. After all, the concept of “geomodernism” has helped to delineate the divergent narratives of modernity and modernism in non-Western contexts which have often been articulated in resistance to the assimilation by a dominant ethos (Doyle and Winkiel 2005). In this context of imagined geographies of desire, the concept of a Bengal region takes a different shape that goes beyond purely national and geo-political boundaries, in the same way as this region extended beyond the actual administrative boundaries currently dividing West Bengal and Bangladesh. The Bengali “literary region” of the avant-garde which is the focus of this book seeks to encompass literary and artistic production from various peripheral sites of modernism in India and abroad: from West Bengal, Bihar, East Pakistan (today’s Bangladesh), Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Tripura, to the United States, Germany, France and the UK, as we will see later.

Anjali Nerlekar offers a tangible example of a vernacular rendition of the Indian 1960s. In her book, she designates with the Marathi word “sāṭhotthār” (lit. post-1960) that moment of transnational influence, international connection and experimentation that characterised the literary and artistic scene of post-1960s Bombay (Nerlekar 2016: 7). Her attempt at regionalising the topical experience of modernism and negotiations with modernity in Maharashtra is persuasive, especially when set in the context of the rise of Marathi nationalism and demands for the creation of a separate Marathi state. A similar operation could be suggested for the Bengali regional context, bringing together historical events that took place in the region in those decades under the box “ṣāt sattar daśak” (the Sixties/Seventies). This label was mainly used in the context of the student movement (chātra āndolan) that took place in Calcutta and other parts of West Bengal to mark a politically meaningful time for West Bengal that saw the splitting of the Communist

Party of India (1964), the rise of Naxalism (1967), and the urban Naxalite guerrilla (1971) as the founding events of that period (Ācārya 2012). Therefore, the popular imaginary about the 1960s in West Bengal strongly links those decades to the collective memory of radical politics and the romantic ideals of revolution. Ranabir Samaddar (2018) noticed that the extensive wave of student protests and radicalism in Calcutta were in some way reminiscent of those in Europe and North America, showing an equally vocal anti-imperialist trait. The nearly six-month long Presidency College movement became the centre of the rebellious students and youth of Bengal. This university had already been the centre of radical movements in the first decades after the Independence, serving as the gathering point for student mobilisations in the anti-tram fare rise movements in 1953 and 1965, the food movements in 1959 and 1966 and student movements against the educational policies of the government (Samaddar 2018: 907). A general discontent with the new government and the high unemployment rate among middle-class youth in West Bengal exacerbated the frustration and anxiety within the middle class. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (2009), speaking on decolonisation and freedom in post-independence Bengal, argued that the “dreams of nationhood” were betrayed after a new and inexperienced government failed to handle the problems of the new nation-state. Steep price rises, food shortages, industrial unrest, continuing corruption and the black market, high crime rates in Calcutta, and above all the continuous refugee influx from East Bengal were among the causes of the vast discontent that spread among the working and middle-class population starting from the early years of independent India (Bandyopadhyay 2009: 39).

While the newly independent Indian nation was involved in armed wars all along its frontiers – against China over control of Arunachal Pradesh (1962), and against West Pakistan during the liberation war that gave birth to Bangladesh (1971) – the split of the CPI (Communist Party of India) inaugurated a period of radical left politics and peasant terrorism in West Bengal, targeting feudal landlords as well as politicians and government representatives. Calcutta became one of the focal points of the anti-imperialist agenda in Asia. The emergence of Naxalism, a Soviet-oriented and anti-imperialist movement, is one of the landmarks in Bengali political history of the last century. From 1967 to 1972, this Maoist-inspired movement born in the village of Naxalbari, not too far from the border with Nepal, transformed itself from a peasant rebellion against landowners to an urban guerrilla movement that terrorised Calcutta and other cities which happened to fall into the Red Corridor. Charu Majumdar, Naxal’s main spokesperson, gave political and ideological cohesion to Naxalism — by then turned into a cultural movement — seeking to react to the CPI’s lack of action by taking a clear anti-parliamentary stance against traditional Marxist parties in the Soviet-Union, India and Europe while supporting the Chinese Communist Party and the cultural revolution. Iconoclasm was the central tenet of Naxalism, especially after the poet Saroj

Introduction

Dutta's wrote the ideological manifesto of the movement "In Defense of Iconoclasm" (1970), proclaiming the break with the "idols of the past". The Naxalite iconoclasm symbolically and materially annihilated feudal landlords and smashed statues during campaigns. Sanjay Seth argued that Naxalism and Maoist-inspired insurgencies, commonly regarded as juvenile, naïve, and ultra-leftist, had a direct effect on the development of Marxist theory in the Subaltern studies and postcolonial theory in general (Seth 2006). One can hardly ignore the analogies with the iconoclastic movement of the Hungry Generation, which sought to dismantle canons, forms, and languages of poetry through obscenity and perversion. The analogy is plainly visible by juxtaposing Malay Roy Choudhury's "In Defense of Obscenity" and Saroj Dutta's "In Defense of Iconoclasm". Yet, despite the analogies in using strategies of rebellion and transgression in language and aesthetics, the Hungry Generation movement overtly denied any ideological affiliation with Naxalism and its political wing.

Despite Nehru's anti-imperialism, in the cultural sphere the new generation of poets and writers in India were unavoidably influenced by Anglo-American culture, mainly through music and literature. Arun Kolatkar, bilingual poet in English and Marathi, has become an icon of the Indian "roaring Sixties", deeply rooted in the local culture of Bombay and transnationally located at the crossroad of global modernism. In many ways, the critical history and reception of this poet, "barely known outside India and still a marginal writer in his own country" (Zecchini 2014: 1) shares several points with the Bengali movement of Hungryalism. Kolatkar was neglected by literary criticism in India, attacked by the "champions of nativism and cultural fundamentalism" and accused of being "'un-Indian', inauthentic, anti-national, cynical, and of mis-interpreting India, but also of obscenity and irreverence" (Zecchini 2014: 8). The Indian poets in English were equally attacked for their inauthenticity and for threatening the integrity of Indian culture (King 1987). Similar charges were raised against the Hungry Generation in 1960s Calcutta for their shocking statements about the need to "embrace the total vocabulary of MAN" (Roy Choudhuri 1966) and to pervade the everyday language with obscenity and violence. Their unconventional usage of Bengali and English in their writings was considered "utter[ly] wrong" even by the Indian poet in English Arvind Krishna Mehrotra. Even more outrageous for the Bengali critics – steeped in Marxist ideology and its anti-colonial rhetoric – was the Hungryalists' association with the American writers of the avant-garde Beat Generation, namely with Allen Ginsberg, whom the Hungryalists encountered during his Indian trip in 1962. Both groups undeniably borrowed ideas and inspired each other, but this transcultural encounter condemned the young Bengali poets to be forever treated as "derivative" and a "bad copy" of the American avant-garde, as stated in Jyotirmoy Datta's seminal letter to the avant-garde editor Dick Bakken, which can be fully read in the appendix to this book.

The connection with the poets of the Beat Generation visibly created a fertile terrain for transaction. Transnationalism expressed itself also through the movement of poetry across the Iron Curtain, proving that the Cold War synchronised cultures across the globe, leading to similar themes, forms, and critical manoeuvres. It seems natural to draw comparisons and identify world (and worlding) trends in the 1960s literature of North African novelists, Frantz Fanon's critical studies on the postcolonial individual, Phalguni Ray's poems and film scripts and American Beat poetry which sought to strike at the heart of the Anglo-American culture of materialism and capitalism. The experience of postcolonialism, frustration, anxious masculinity, severe alcohol-addiction and unemployment lived by most Hungryalist poets in post-partition Calcutta and Allen Ginsberg's obsession over mental disease, drug abuse and overt homosexuality are interdependent and comparable experiences on several levels. This view is not to reduce the impact that traumatic events like Partition, the Bengal famine, or the Bangladesh War have had for the people of West Bengal. On the contrary, these events significantly inscribe themselves in the global entanglements of the varied yet simultaneous experiences of decolonisation, independence, and revolution that have become emblematic of the global Sixties in popular culture and collective memory.

Fragmented Histories, Fragmented Sources

The sources instrumental to reconstructing a history of the Hungry Generation are varied and diverse: anthologies of Hungryalist poetry, memoirs and essays written by members of the movement, papers of the trial, letter correspondence among American editors and the Bengali poets. Meaningfully, one of the sources useful to retrace the history of the Hungry Generation is a book entitled "Hungry Legends" (Hāmri kimbadantī), with the English subtitle "History of a Literary Revolution". Perhaps provocatively the title of these Hungry memoirs (2013) penned by Hungry Generation founder Malay Roy Choudhury merges two opposing views of literary history, namely legend and history, consciously pointing at the highly fragmentary nature of the sources and nebulous constellation of narratives that were propounded on this movement. In addition, literary history has been prevalently silent about the Hungry Generation. To my knowledge, even the most recent histories of Bengali literature fail to reserve a place for the Hungry Generation in the chapters on modern and post-independent literary production.¹ Moreover,

1 I have consulted two of the most exhaustive literary histories covering the modern period (Caudhurī 1995; Miśra 2014), which only covered the literature produced until the Partition. Of these two, only Miśra (2014) mentions Shakti and Sunil, and their connection with the members of the Hungry Generation is undiscussed.

Introduction

because of the lack of a serious literary criticism on the Hungry Generation, the authors themselves have provided a corpus of critical analysis of their poetry. In this way, the silences of institutional literary history in addition to the prevalent scepticism of Indian literary criticism for Hungryalism have contributed to building mythologies of the movement rather than encouraging a critical reading of its texts. Despite these gaps in knowledge, over the last decades the movement and its poetry have received growing critical attention mainly in West Bengal and Bangladesh, and some parts of the United States thanks to academic research and a quite extensive work of translation, although mostly informal and unpublished. Therefore, literary history and criticism have merged with popular culture and literary narratives on the Hungry Generation resulting in a partial and incoherent picture, which I try to debate here.

Both the chronology and the composition of the Hungry Generation are contested areas. According to the various documents at hand, we can affirm that the movement emerged in the early 1960s, when Malay and Samir Raychaudhuri's first manifesto announced the birth of the movement from Patna. The movement grew and received international attention throughout the Sixties and early Seventies, and some of its members have continued their literary career under the legacy of the early Hungry Generation writers for decades until today, everyone with different life stories. Since 1961, the movement has welcomed authors who focused on different literary genres, hailing from different places in eastern India and from diverse social conditions, counting above 40 participants by 1964. If some writers have continued to claim the legacy and tradition of the Hungry Generation (Malay and Samir Raychaudhuri, Pradip Chaudhuri and Debi Roy), others abandoned the radical movement to embrace religious life (Subo Acharya) or the the air-force (Subhas Ghosh). Some died prematurely (Phalguni Ray), while others pursued their literary careers individually or in the folds of a later Hungry movement (Shakti Chattopadhyay, Saileshvar Ghosh, and Sandipan Chattopadhyay).

Among the documents that have been instrumental to a reconstruction of the histories and narratives of the movement, the introductions to the anthologies of Hungryalist poetry and prose are among the most reliable (Ghoṣ 2011; Sen 2015; Caṭṭopādhyāy 2015). The greatest part of these publications is quite precise when referring to the birth of the movement as an informal association of young writers: it officially started in 1961 with the printing of the "Manifesto on Hungryalistic Poetry", written by Malay from Patna, Bihar. Among these, Sen and Ghosh (2015, 2011) did not acknowledge Malay as the initiator of the movement and propagated a different version of the story. Saileshvar Ghosh, for example, was a poet formally affiliated to the Hungry Generation only until the 1964 trial for obscenity, when he and Subhash Ghosh were jailed and soon after released on bail, unlike Malay and others. At that point in time Saileshvar initiated the Kṣudhārta āndolan (lit. Hungry

movement) which he acknowledged as the “authentic” Hungry Generation movement. To support this version, Ghosh wrote a booklet trying to debunk the myth of Malay as the founder of the movement (Ghoṣ 2011b). Reading and juxtaposing Malay Roy Choudhury and Saileshvar Ghosh’s views, the feeling is that multiple souls coexisted in the Hungry Generation.

The main concern of the Hungryalist anthologies’ editors primarily regarded the debate on Hungry Generation’s initiators and leaders (*sraṣṭā*), Shakti Chattopadhyay and Malay Roy Choudhury’s pivotal role in shaping the movement, the trial and sentence for obscenity, and the final split. Tracing a genealogy of the Hungry Generation was never a serious task for the members of the movement, due to their typical attitude of non-commitment and un-seriousness that defined their literary practices. Addressing the question of the birth of Hungryalism became an issue only later in the 1990s, when Samir Raychaudhuri edited the little magazine *Hāoyāṇ*49, which soon became the mouthpiece of a new wave of postmodern writers in Bengali. This can be seen plausibly as a move to legitimise and give authority to the Hungry Generation as a literary movement in the landscape of postmodern writing in Bengali, addressing its genealogy and internal hierarchies. On the other hand, the De’j publications penned by Ghosh and Sen (2011, 2015) show the widespread trend in Bengali criticism and literary history to de-legitimise the “early” Hungryalists – mainly Malay, Samir and Debi – while it helped to authorise and build support around the “later” Kṣudhārta writers. Poets and prose writers like Saileshvar Ghosh, Sandipan Chattopadhyay and Basudeb Dasgupta became the spokespersons of what could be delineated as a spin-off of the Hungry Generation. The amount and the quality of publications by and on the Kṣudhārta founders tells much of the move to establish this later phase of Hungryalism: if Malay and his associates relied on self-funded means to run their little magazines and to print at non-commercial presses, the writers associated to the later Kṣudhārta āndolan got their prose and verses published in anthologies edited by the prestigious De’j publishing house.

Defining Hungryalism: Movement or Generation?

Another concern addressed in this wave of literary criticism concerns the various attempts at defining Hungryalism, the most recurring question being whether it deserved to be considered a “generation” or a “movement” (Ghoṣ 2011; Ghoṣ 2011b; Sen 2015; Caṭṭopādhyāy 2015). What is the difference implied in these two terminologies? The term “generation” has played a formative role in modern literary history because it helped to articulate notions of evolution, rupture and continuity. However, its use is contested and subject to intense scholarly scrutiny in literary and cultural memory studies. In its first connotation, a generation refers to a

Introduction

community sharing the social and cultural standards which have distinctly marked that era as a turn away from past generations (such as the 1960s' baby boomers). It is significant that the twentieth century saw a proliferation of "generations" (the Lost Generation, Generation of '27, the Beat Generation) to signal a rejection or fundamental rupture with traditional ideologies. For example, as Astrid Erll noted, the concept of generation has been marked by two dimensions: generationality and genealogy. The first term indicates how generations define themselves or are defined on the basis of a shared "space of experience"; the second term points to the relations generations maintain to what or who precedes them (Erll 2014). In other words, a generation is made up by synchronicity and contemporaneity as well as by diachronic transmission and the dynamics of change. These aspects emerge also in the Bengali term "prajanma", of little use in the literature on Hungryalism as compared to the English "generation". Even though the root of the two words in both languages stress the idea of birth and descentance (Latin generatio, Sanskrit jan), the modern usage of this word in the context of 20th century avant-garde points at breaking away rather than at carrying on the inherited legacy (e.g. family, clan, class, and largely, society). This is how the Hungry Generation poets portrayed themselves – as either a prajanma (generation) or an āndolan (movement) – while connecting to other avant-garde groups and movements across the world characterised by a spirit of rebellion and departure from the established – literary, political, and cultural – order.

Following the charges and then conviction for obscenity of Malay Roy Choudhury and his fellows in 1965, publications on these numerous authors have often described this literary phenomenon of West Bengal's post-independence era as an "anti-establishment movement" (pratiṣṭhān'birodhī āndolan). The usage of the phrase Hungryalist movement or āndolan points to the existence of a consistent and coherent literary poetics sustaining the practices of members of the movement. It argues that the movement acts according to a precise aesthetic agenda, following a program that is shared by those associated to the movement. It is significant that some critics of Hungryalism remarked on the absence of a real movement in the phenomenon of the Hungry Generation, considering the serious heterogeneity of the group in terms of genre, style, aesthetics and degree of participation in the literary activities. Critiques of the term "movement" (āndolan) have also pointed out the lack of a coherent theoretical reflection on poetry. Moreover, what undermined the idea of movement was, to quote Sophie Seita, the "provisionality" of such literary experiences that intentionally published and distributed "ephemera", provisional and short-lived literary material, to pinpoint the fleeting character of literary canons and institutions (Seita 2019). This recognition of variances in the usage of the terminology when referring to the Hungry Generation is significant to understand the plurality and fragmentation of sources, which have conveyed a partial and contradictory history of this Bengali movement.

The different labels describing the Hungry Generation showcase the manifold faces that this movement has shown throughout its history. In particular, it was after the arrest of the poets on charges of obscenity in 1964 that one could notice the emergence of other groups or strands within the Hungryalist movement, simultaneously bringing forth new names and definitions for the Bengali avant-garde. After Malay's sentence for obscenity, other writers gathered around Saileshvar Ghosh, declaring themselves "Hungry" (Beng. Kṣudhārta) and claiming recognition as the first and only Hungry Generation. Saileshvar Ghosh, known as a great poet also outside the Hungryalist circle, targeted Malay as the source of all the "falsity and hypocrisy" that was told about the movement (Ghoṣ 2011: 37). In contrast, Saileshvar endorsed the version that retraced the beginning of the movement to Shakti Chattopadhyay (Ghoṣ 2011b: 15). These kinds of divisions within the movement were made the object of mocking and sarcasm here and there on leaflets and little magazines: "High hierarchy – Jyotir Datta's 'Bangrezi' – yuck, Shakti Chattopadhyay + MOLE-ay Raychoudhuri – consider Saileshvar Ghosh an enemy." This example carried the signature of "Saileshvar Ghosh, Impostor, No P-O-E-T. Saileshvar Ghosh, the Kabigan of Coffee House, so called Impostor – ihihihih" (*Hungry Generation* #66).

The question of designating this literary phenomenon as a fashion, style, movement, or generation has gained momentum only recently, in a move to fix the slippery notion of Hungryalist literature and legitimise this controversial moment of Bengali literary history. Provided that a literary movement can be understood as a mobilisation of individuals sharing social, cultural and political principles, who join inspired by the common objective of countering dominant cultural and moral standards, the Hungry Generation would inscribe in this category. However, the mythologies produced by the scanty reception of Hungryalism in criticism as well as the sentence for obscenity have complicated the picture, often transforming the phenomenon of Hungryalism into a nostalgic and romanticised memory of rebellion and political dissent in Bengali popular culture. Let us see how such contested narratives on the history of the movement can serve the goal of reconstructing literary history.

Myths of Foundation

The debate about the initiation of the movement has been latent in Hungry criticism until recently published anthologies of Hungryalist poetry brought it new attention. No doubt the dominant view attributes the foundation of the movement to Malay Roy Choudhury (1939–2023). The several books written by Malay Roy Choudhury portray the group as a movement founded and led by Malay from 1961 until 1964, the year of the obscenity trial that sentenced him and other

Introduction

poets to jail. The “early” group of writers was originally made up by Malay and Samir Raychaudhuri, Shakti Chattopadhyay and Debi Roy. These were in fact the names of the authors who signed the movement’s first manifesto on poetry. Afterwards, other fellows joined the group through their friendship with Shakti: Subimal Basak, Subo Acharya, Binoy Majumdar, Tridib Mitra, Pradip Chaudhuri, Phalguni Ray, Basudeb Dasgupta, Utpalkumar Basu, Sandipan Chattopadhyay, Saileshvar and Subhash Ghosh were the main names associated with the Hungry-
alist project.

The most popular account of the beginnings of the Hungry Generation movement is told from Malay’s perspective.² In his memoirs on the first days of the Hungry Generation, these young poets in their early twenties gathered in Calcutta after the publication of their first manifesto on poetry (Rāy/chaudhurī 1994). The “Manifesto on Hungryalistic Poetry” was written by Malay and edited by his elder brother Samir from Patna, where they lived in the neighbourhood of Imlitala, an area inhabited by Muslim and Dalit communities. The idea at the basis of this group of young writers was to give birth to an alternative kind of poetry showing no continuity with the past tradition, by writing in the “total free language of the entire society”, as declared in Malay’s “In Defense of Obscenity” (Roy Choudhuri 1966), with the aim of countering the establishment and aligning with the international avant-garde project of political resistance.

On the other hand, the later Kṣudhārtha writers acknowledged Shakti Chattopadhyay as the “real initiator” of the Hungry Generation movement (Sen 2015: 10). Clearly the frictions among the members and the fractures within the group already started before the arrest and the sentence, when Shakti broke up with Samir for personal reasons,³ and joined another group formed around the literary magazine *Kṛttibās*, experiment initiated in 1953 by Sunil Gangopadhyay, Ananda Bagchi and Dipak Mazumdar. Moreover, what seemingly made Shakti turn his back against Malay and the original group of poets was a disagreement with regard to the way modern Bengali poetry was conceived. Hungryalism nourished itself on the “brutal assassination of the past”, but Shakti was reluctant to completely renounce Bengali tradition. Another advocate of Shakti’s leadership — and a fierce opponent of Malay’s self-assertion — was Saileshvar Ghosh, a big name in the landscape of postmodern prose and poetry in Bengali. He described Kṣudhārta

2 We must acknowledge the Raychaudhuri brothers’ contribution to reopening the debate on the Hungryalist legacy in postmodern Bengali culture since the 1990s, mainly through their magazine and independent publisher *Hāōyā*49.

3 During an interview, Malay stated that the breakup had happened because Shakti was seemingly rejected by Samir’s cousin after he proposed to her. Probably this event provoked a series of domino effects that eventually caused the dissolution of the movement. Personal interview with Malay Roy Choudhuri, March 30, 2017.

as the “only avant-garde magazine” of Bengali literature, as “a joyful dance on the corpse of modernity” (Ghoṣ 2011: 7). In his words, the five people who created the Hungry Generation movement were Basudeb Dasgupta, Subhash Ghosh, Pradip Chaudhuri, Subo Acharya and Saileshvar Ghosh (Ghoṣ 2011: 7). He made no mention of Malay, Samir and Debi Roy as part of the initiators of the Hungry Generation.

The Hungry Generation started in 1963–64. This was the only movement in the literature in Bengali language that can be called avant-garde. Not only was it the only movement in Bengali language dealing with mind, thought and language. It was as relevant as other movements that shocked the world and carved out a new path for literature. It started spontaneously. It is ahead in some intuitions as compared to other movements from today’s homicide present of modernity. Those who like to mention the Beat Generation have misunderstood Beat and Hungry literature.

For the first time we have created a literature in Bengali that is completely free from foreign influence. The Hungry writers used to be called a third-class copy of American literature. Their goal in the first place was to destroy that kind of literature. In those days, a conspiracy kept this literature away from the people. They want to break the establishment, to destroy the immobility of power, they want to wipe away power from within themselves. That is why the Hungries are anarchists. (Ghoṣ 2011: 7–8)

A few details change in Saileshvar’s new account of the birth of the movement. The new group of poets gathered around the magazine *Kṣudhārta* announcing more assertively the rejection of foreign influence as well as the dissolution of the “early” Hungry Generation in order to establish themselves as authentically Bengali poets. While the early names related to the Hungry Generation gradually faded after a few years, other writers joined the group with renewed strength around the magazine *Kṣudhārta*, with the aim to “worship anarchy and perverted sexuality” (Ghoṣ 2011: 24). Not even the Manifesto on Hungryalistic Poetry, allegedly the first source documenting the birth of the movement, finds any place in Saileshvar’s words.

How can we explain such divergencies in recording the history of the Hungry Generation? Sabyasachi Sen’s more “diluted” version of the birth of Hungryalism has probably received greater visibility (Sen 2015). Quoting an interview with Sandipan Chattopadhyay, Sen argued that “for some time, an unknown young man called Malay Raychaudhuri led the movement from Patna. Although there wasn’t any Hungry generation that lasted too long under anybody’s leadership. In that

Introduction

period, even though Malay for a while was the leader [netṛtva] of the movement, he was not the initiator [sraṣṭā]. The real initiator was Shakti Chattopadhyay” (Sen 2015: 10). Therefore, according to a later narrative a new movement was created around the publication of the magazine *Kṣudhārta* under the leadership of Saileshvar Ghosh, after Shakti’s departure from the movement, which occurred not later than 1965. In Saileshvar’s words, the early Hungryalists were only a “generation” of writers, a passing phenomenon, who failed to build up a movement, while “the real Hungry or *Kṣudhārta* generation was made up by Basudeb Dasgupta, Subhas Ghosh, Pradip Chaudhuri, Subo Acharya and Saileshvar Ghosh. The real movement of the Hungry generation started in 1963–4” (Ghoṣ 2011b). He repeated this concept many times in his booklet.

A reviewer of Sen’s above quoted anthology lucidly notes the absence of other major initiators of the Hungry Generation and their oeuvre — Malay, Samir and Utpalkumar Basu —, explaining their omission as a deliberate move to delegitimise the impact of Malay and the other Patna-based writers on the formation of a Hungryalist movement.

By entitling this collection *The Hungry Generation (second period)*, there was the clear intention of leaving Malay, Samir, Shakti and Utpal behind. On the other hand, one cannot deny that until 1965 he [Malay] was one of the men of (the first period of) Hungry Generation — even though Malay has shown antipathy for the refugees, pride about his bourgeois past, and announced the end of the Hungry Generation in 1965.

These more recent publications demonstrate an attempt to dismiss Malay’s myth of foundation while legitimising only one version as the “authentic” history of the Hungry Generation. Both versions are significant for bringing attention to the contradictions intrinsic to the history of the literary movement. Following these two divergent perspectives, one can assume that the group initially gathered around Malay, Samir and Shakti – who were close college friends – when the Raychaudhuri brothers moved to Calcutta and started distributing manifestoes from the Indian Coffee House in College Street. Other fellow poets gradually joined the group through the help and friendship of Shakti Chattopadhyay. It was after Shakti’s departure and Malay’s sentence for obscenity in 1964 that the core of the Hungry Generation broke down into smaller pieces, walked separate paths, or formed larger groups joining under different names and literary magazines.

The Trial on Charges of Obscenity

The trial and sentence for obscenity is the main bone of contention in the history of the Hungry Generation. Obscenity trials were a near daily occurrence in those days and the Hungryalist trial, underpinned by Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), was no exception here. In West Bengal, trials for books banned on charges of obscenity included Buddhadeva Bose's *Rāt bhare bṛṣṭi* (It Rained All Night) and Samaresh Basu's *Prajāpati* (The Butterfly), both convicted for obscenity. The period after the end of the war saw a rise in governmental censorship also in the United States, often resulting in obscenity. D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl*, and Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* were only some of the popular literary cases that led to obscenity trials, testing American laws and standards of obscenity.

Court cases in India and the United States have shown the variability of legal definitions of obscenity. Until the middle of the 20th century, the standard definition used by U.S. courts was articulated in the British Hicklin case. Many novels were banned according to this law, including D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, also prohibited in India in 1964. The so-called Hicklin standard was later abandoned to legalise the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, once again shifting the standards for judging obscenity, which depended on the "libidinous effect of the whole publication" and not on selected isolated passages of the work under charge. In 1957, on the occasion of another trial against Samuel Roth, who ran an adult-book business in New York, the U.S Supreme Court held that the standard of obscenity should be "whether, to the average person, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme of the material taken as a whole appeals to prurient interest" (Jenkins 2023). During the 1960s, Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code, which prohibited the sale, distribution, exhibition or possession of any obscene object or materials, was discussed in the Lok Sabha resulting in amendments which exacerbated the punishment for obscenity offences. After the amendment was passed in 1963, Dilip Chitre, Indian author in English, acknowledged the risks for the creative writer of working in a "far more oppressive climate than earlier", especially when definitions of obscenity, art, and literature were left vague (Futehally et al. 2011). Although India maintained older British obscenity laws and definitions, different public formations and regulatory strategies were mobilised in the colonial and the postcolonial state. Also Mazzarella and Kaur (2009) reaffirmed the shifting politics of obscenity and cultural regulation in India's colonial history and contemporaneity, along with category markers that came to be associated with it such as blasphemy, sedition and obscenity. For example, they identify ambivalence as the defining cipher of the public culture of Indian independence. If Nehru's secularism and developmentalist project marked the overcoming of the split of inner and outer domains, hallmark of the domestic

Introduction

and public spheres in colonial India, it also inaugurated a stringent filter on affective representations. The rationalising ethos of Nehru's nationalism clashed with the coming of so-called "affective-intensive" television image with its interpenetration of devotional viewing, political propaganda and consumer goods advertising (Mazzarella and Kaur 2009: 16).

This ambivalence regarding the definition and politics of obscenity seems to be a characterising feature of the workings of cultural regulation in general, as demonstrated also in the documents of the Hungryalists' sentence for obscenity. The main target of their obscenity trial was Malay Roy Choudhury's poem "Pračaṇḍa Baidyutik Chutār" (Terrific Electric Carpenter), printed as part of a Hungry bulletin seized by police and used as key evidence in the obscenity allegations against the poets. This poem, later translated and made famous via its English version "Stark Electric Jesus", would have become the mark of Hungryalist outrageous poetry and the icon of the trial and sentence for obscenity. The decision by the Presidency Magistrate (fig. 1), which confirmed Malay's sentence for obscenity on the basis of his poem "Stark Electric Jesus", is evidence of the pitfalls of the obscenity category marker when applied to the field of art and literature. The obscenity charges were supported by Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code, still largely based on British obscenity law, which stated that "the accused was found to be in possession of the impugned publication. One of the ingredients of Section 292 IPC namely, of circulation, distribution, making and possessing [of obscene material] are present" (Mitra 1965). The Magistrate acknowledged that the IPC does not define the word obscene, and that a piece of art or literature may not be judged only based on "vulgarity". The decision would have depended on a fleeting judgement of value about the writing under obscenity charges and the witnesses' deposition: does it stimulate an "obscene reaction" on behalf of the reader? Does the work positively adapt to literary values? These sorts of questions were asked to the Hungryalist trial witnesses, many of whom writers in their own right, indicating that morality and public decency were the main parameters to assess a work of art as obscene (Mitra 1965). Yet the final decision sentenced Malay's poem because of its treatment of sex and nudity in a way that "transgresses public decency and morality." Here is how the Magistrate described and explained the "moral transgressions" of the poem:

Applying the test to the offending poem and realising it as a whole, it appears to be perse obscene. In bizarre style it starts with restless impatience of sensuous man for a woman obsessed with uncontrollable urge for sexual intercourse followed by a description of the vagina, uterus, clitoris, seminal fluid, and other parts of the female body and organ, boasting of the man's innate impulse and conscious skill as to how to enjoy a woman,

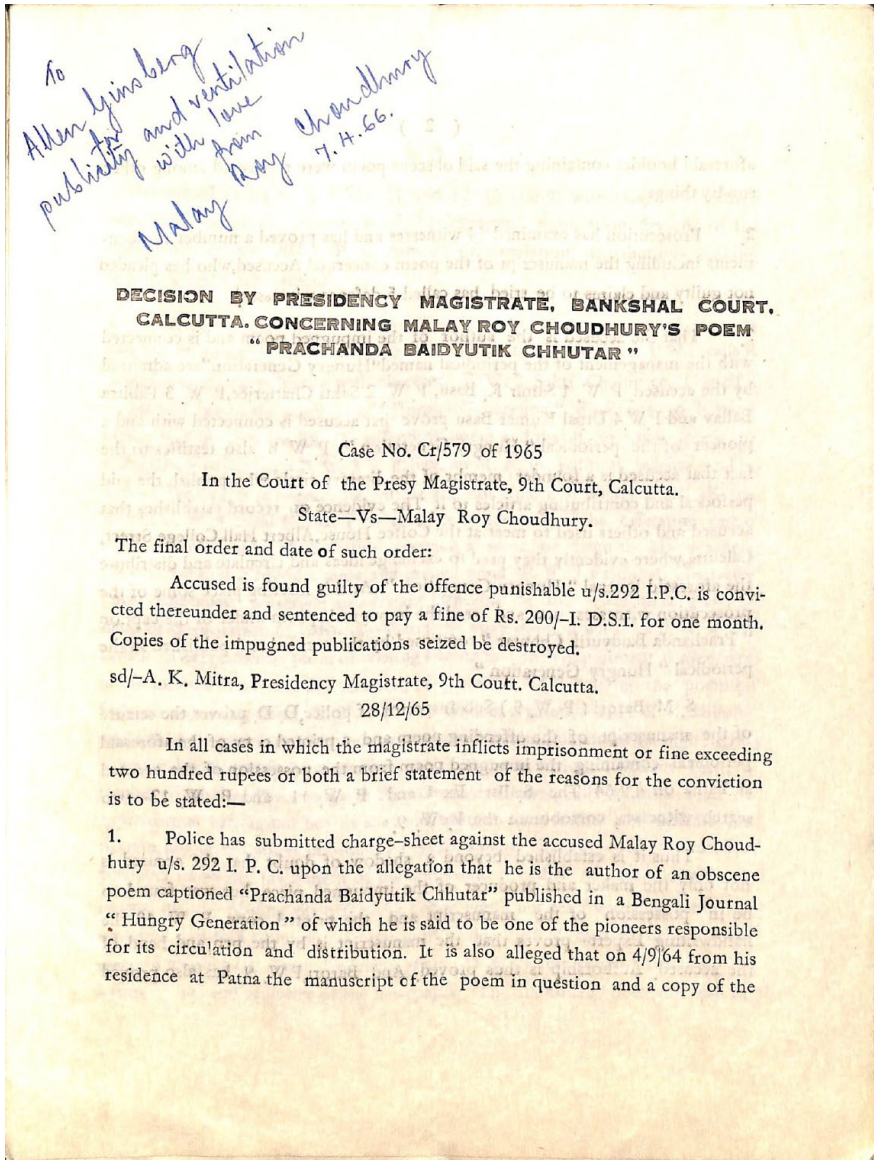


Figure 1. Decision by the Presidency Magistrate, Bankshal Court, Calcutta, concerning Malay Roy Choudhury's poem "Prachanda Baidyutik Chutar" (1965). In Allen Ginsberg papers M733, Box 16, Folder 2 (Correspondence 1960s - Choudhury, Malay Roy). Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.

Introduction

blaspheming God and profaning parents accusing them of homosexuality and masturbation, debasing all that is noble and beautiful in human love and relationship. It is a piece of self analysis and eroticism in autobiographical or confessional vein when the poet engages himself in a mercilessly obnoxious and revolting self degeneration and reportage of sexual vulgarity to a degree of perversion and morbidity far exceeding the customary and permissible limits of condour [candour] in description or representation. It is patently offensive to what is called contemporary community standards. [...] Considering the dominant theme it is dirt for dirt's sake, or, what is commonly called, hard-core pornography suggesting to the minds of those in whose hands it may fall stinking wearisome and suffocating thoughts of a most impure and libidinous character and thus tending to deprave and corrupt them without any rendering social or artistic value and importance. (Mitra 1965)

In the Magistrate's interpretation, the offensive passages of the poem were the ones describing female pleasure, sexual urge and sexual activity as non-creative or performed for the sake of pure pleasure. Moreover, a crucial distinction that the Magistrate highlights here is the lack of a social purpose in the literary or artistic depiction of obscenity, described as "dirt for dirt's sake", which made it vulnerable to a legal sentence. Malay Roy Choudhury penned his "In Defense of Obscenity" as a response to the sentence and to the world trend of suppression of freedoms. Printed in various copies during the Hungryalist trial (fig. 2), this declaration addressed "the bourgeois vultures of Establishment" worldwide to proclaim the freedom of language from the shackles of morality and class distinction. This proclamation in defence of obscenity situates itself in the context of a global discourse that saw artists, writers and intellectuals debating on and battling against state censorship and for everyone's freedom of expression. The pamphlet circulated across underground magazines in the United States, such as *Salted Feathers* from Portland and *Guerrilla* from Detroit, transformed the Hungryalist trial on charges of obscenity into a global symbol of protest and resilience of the avant-garde, encouraging continued fighting against censorship and suppression of dissent.

I defend Obscenity

I'll go on defending Obscenity so long as the flagitious bourgeoisie go on claiming the atavist

Superiority of their false air.

In fact there is no such thing as Obscenity.

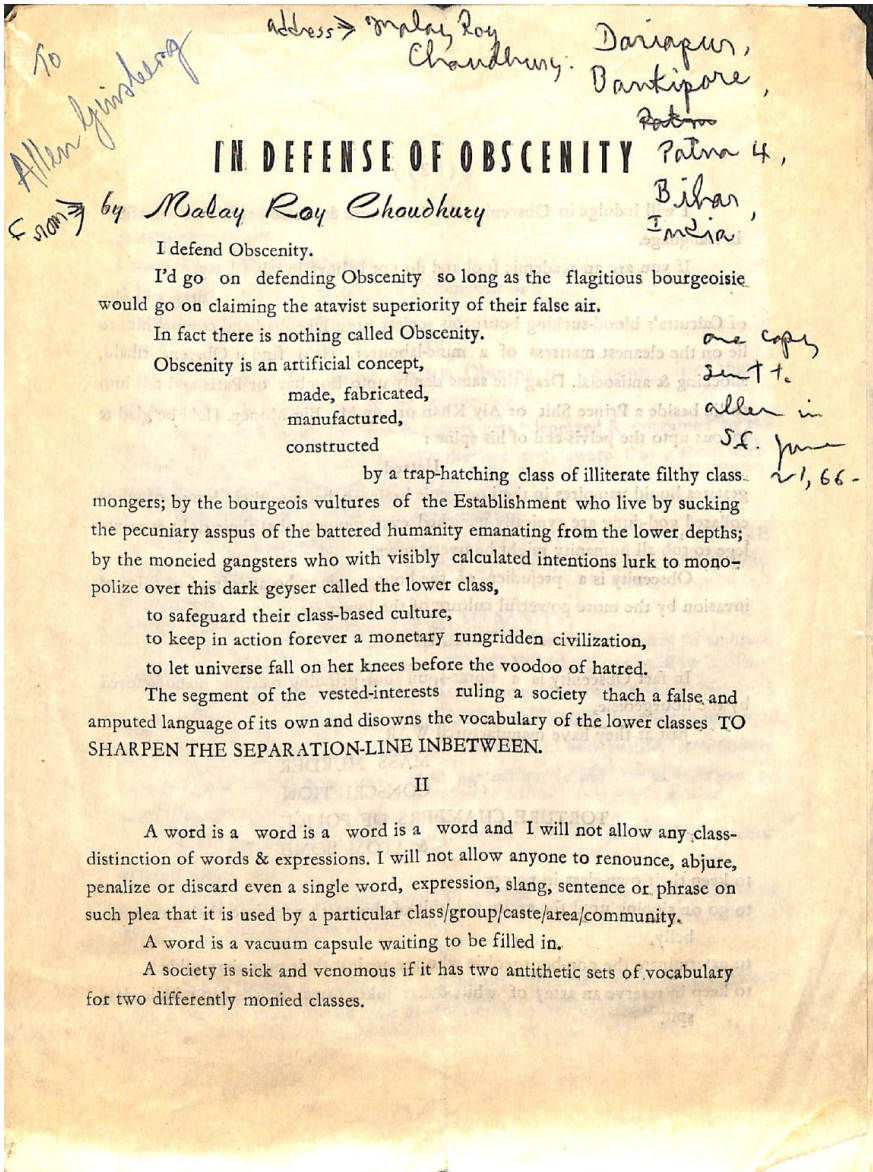


Figure 2. *In Defense of Obscenity*, Malay Roy Choudhury (pamphlet sent by Malay Roy Choudhury to Allen Ginsberg in 1966). In Allen Ginsberg papers M733, Box 16, Folder 2 (Correspondence 1960s - Choudhury, Malay Roy). Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.

Introduction

Obscenity is an artificial concept,

Made, fabricated,

Constructed

By a trap-hatching class of illiterate filthy class mongers; by the bourgeois vultures of the Establishment who live by sucking the pecuniary asspus of the battered humanity emanating from the lower depths

What was exceptional in the Hungryalist trial and sentence was that it created an unprecedented chain of solidarity within the international avant-garde scene, spanning from the United States to Europe and South Asia. After the sentence brought the Hungry authors to jail for obscenity in 1964, the young men started correspondence with well-known editors, poets and writers of the American and European avant-garde scene, such as Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Howard McCord, Jan Herman and Carl Weissner, to name just a few. Although the exchange initially started out of a financial need to support the obscenity trial, as shown in the “Malay Roy Choudhury Defense Fund” sent out to Allen Ginsberg for publication (fig. 3), it eventually turned itself into a transnational platform where unedited texts, translations and trial documents were exchanged, creating a real underground space for the circulation of literary and political discourses on obscenity. Despite the obstacles of having to face a trial, the sentence for obscenity helped building the identity of the Hungry Generation, which gradually came to associate itself with the international countercultural wave. It was especially through Allen Ginsberg’s mediation that Hungryalism connected with avant-gardes across the ocean, building a transnational network of poets, editors, artists and writers who joined in the battle against censorship and the suppression of freedoms.

Furthermore, the Hungryalists’ association with the international avant-garde ensured international coverage and financial support needed during their trial for obscenity at the Bankshall court in Calcutta. Their affiliation to the global counterculture with its anti-establishment spirit was symptomatic of a world community against war, censorship and for freedom of expression. The aesthetic of obscenity became a feature that transversally crossed the literary and artistic production of avant-gardes across the peripheries of world modernism. The Hungryalist production endorsed the anti-establishment discourse of the counterculture and of the international avant-garde that made obscenity and freedom of speech the banner of their social criticism, drawing international media attention. Hence, the American avant-garde and other circles of avant-garde writers from Europe established a transnational community of exchange, protest and solidarity with the dual goal of promoting avant-garde literature and voicing the injustice of obscenity trials.

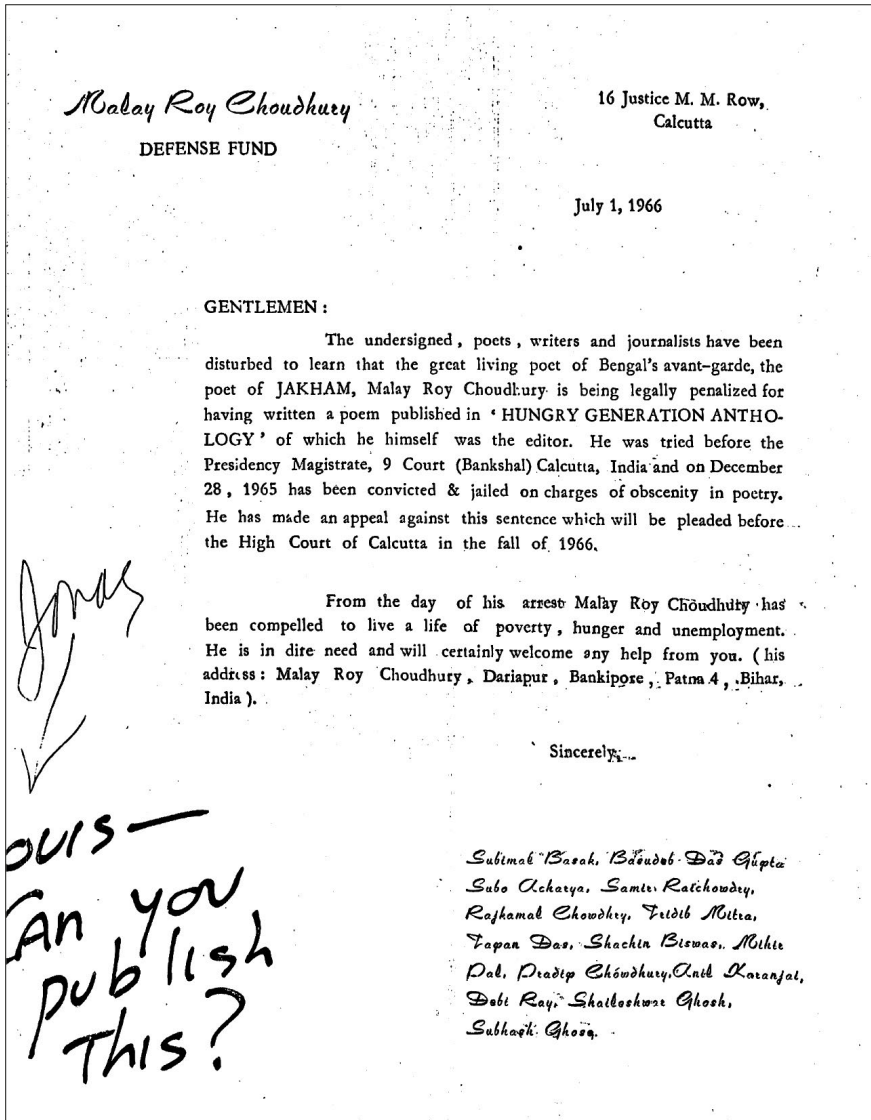


Figure 3. Malay Roy Choudhury Defense Fund (1966). In Allen Ginsberg papers M733, Box 16, Folder 2 (Correspondence 1960s - Choudhury, Malay Roy). Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.

Obscenity, Sexuality and Masculinity

After the trial, the Hungry Generation was catapulted into the limelight of avant-garde magazines internationally, gathering support from fellow poets and editors worldwide to sustain them financially through the hard times of the trial for obscenity. In retrospective, the sentence managed to transform the Hungry Generation from a movement into a real cultural phenomenon within the global discourse on censorship and freedom of speech taking place out of the counter-cultural movement throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Even though obscenity as a marker of cultural regulation will be unpacked here in its colonial and postcolonial discourses and representations, the Hungryalist trial shows that the core of an obscenity ban seeks to apply a moral – therefore universal and ahistorical – judgment on a literary work. Throughout colonial and postcolonial history the basic question of obscenity has remained the same: limiting freedoms, censoring, and selecting aesthetic tastes and canons for the public knowledge. Notwithstanding the recognition of these censoring operations in the process of an obscenity ban, the Hungry trial was shown to act in the reverse. Instead of silencing the object of the obscenity sentence, it promoted and amplified its reach. Besides that, in the Hungryalist way of portraying subjects like sexuality and masculinity we find inherited legacies and colonial reminiscences that have engendered overlapping and often conflicting views of gender, sexuality, and morality, which seem to have become embodied behaviours in the context of the Bengali middle class under Nehruvian India. In order to provide an historical background to this study, I want to trace a common thread linking the Bengali poetry of the Hungry Generation with colonial and nationalist economies of morality and sexuality, to come full circle at the end of this introductory chapter with a discussion on the methodology of transgression, at the core of my reading of Hungryalist poetry. I argue that Hungryalism articulates a different idea of obscenity, precisely because it emerged in the realm of confessional poetry, adding another shade of meaning and practice to the varied and composite world of obscene print cultures in India.

So, how is the question of obscenity addressed throughout this book? To start with, obscenity has been a difficult field to delineate. In the visual arts, obscenity is defined as the “representation of matter that is deemed beyond representation or that is beyond the accepted norms of public display, that is indecent, vulgar, dirty, lewd, gross and vile, thus morally corrupting and potentially depraving” (Mey 2007: 2). Therefore, one cannot discern the question of obscenity from that of sexuality. Issues of obscenity started to have legal repercussions when sexuality became a major source of social concern. After Britain passed the Obscene Publications Act (1857), obscenity trials multiplied in a move to counter the moral panic about sexuality that was spreading in the bourgeoisie. Scholarship in the history of sexuality proved that panic about sexuality was a key factor in the formation of

middle-class identity in modern Europe as well as in West Bengal and other British colonial societies (Foucault 1978; Weeks 1981; Banerjee 1998). In British colonies, the moral panic about sexuality also brought along other issues concerning the health, purity, and hygiene of the race. Deana Heath (2010), for example, argued that the emergence of obscenity regulation in Britain was enacted as a biopolitical project in both a settler and an exploitation colony – Australia and India – where it distinctly served as a moral regulatory project. Concerns with preserving the strength of the empire and purity of the race, what Alison Bashford has named “imperial hygiene” (Bashford 2004), shifted from viewing purity as a moral question to regarding it as a medical and racial one underpinned by a socially approved scientific apparatus. Heath argued that it is the crisis generated by crossing moral and medical/biological boundaries, in other words the fear of “contagion”, that made the realm of obscenity a potent form of subversion that destabilized the boundaries of culture and society (Heath 2010: 36). In the context of the British imperial project of disciplining the colonised body, the main task of the obscenity ban was to mark the moral and biological boundaries between what was perceived as appropriate and inappropriate in the public sphere of colonial India.

With the development of a nationalist discourse, Indian nationalists and social reformers enacted similar dynamics of distinction to delineate the boundaries of the Indian race and nation. In Bengal, the formation of a class of bourgeois known as “bhadralok” (Western-educated gentry), mainly hailing from the landed aristocracy and rich merchants, delineated a body of manners and established moral standards and cultural taste. Bhadrakok tastes and manners in colonial Calcutta were shaped through the social and cultural distinction between elite and popular classes significantly affecting the perception of what came to be viewed as dirty, inappropriate and obscene (Banerjee 1998). Similar dynamics of distinction took place in India’s colonial print culture, another vital instrument for crafting identities. In India’s changing public sphere, the spread of the vernacular press encouraged the distribution of cheap publications on indecent or satirical subjects that appealed to the emerging reading audience of the cities. A plethora of Hindi and Bengali pamphlets, journals, and manuals on sexuality substantiated the fear as well as the interest for the world of conjugal love and sexuality (Gupta 2001; Ghosh 2006). According to Charu Gupta, these “low” Hindi publications, which included erotic sex manuals, popular romances, entertaining songs, and texts offering advice on sexual relationships, proliferated at a moment when a national Hindu middle class was essentially being shaped on Victorian moral codes (Gupta 2001). In the same line, Anindita Ghosh showed that the thriving market of cheap Bengali books in Calcutta’s neighbourhood of Battala (baṭṭalā) spoke to the fears and anxieties at the advent of colonial modernity (Ghosh 2006). Farces and other satirical works conveyed a topsy-turvy world of women’s emancipation, men’s weakened virility, corruption of values and depravity, lampooning the over-Westernised new

Introduction

middle class and signalling the crisis of traditional values and fractures within the Bengali society vis-à-vis the colonial rule (Harder and Mittler 2011; Harder 2013).

Gender was another crucial site of negotiation with colonial modernity. Women were particularly the target of nationalist imagination which imagined them chaste and obedient wives, relegated to the *antahpur*, the inner domain of the Bengali household. Against the fear of corruption of values wrought by British rule and colonial modernity, the woman turned into a national symbol of domesticity, chastity and spirituality that was disciplined through a national discourse that promoted moral temperance and sexual abstinence (Sarkar 2001; Chatterjee 1989). The role of women as heroic mothers of the nation was emphasised through political parallels with the *svadeś*, the motherland, elsewhere compared to *Bhārat māṭā* or Mother India (Bagchi 1990). Studies have particularly focused on Indian nationalism when the body of the Indian woman became the site of imperial, colonial and nationalist politics of reform and regulation through a highly controlled and restrained morality of modesty. For example, representations of the ideal Indian woman as a chaste housewife and devoted mother dominated the literature of vernacular journals at the end of the nineteenth century, including *Bāmābodhinī patrikā*, which sought education and empowerment of the modern Indian woman (Sen 2004). The project of women's emancipation, however, was enacted by promoting a national ideology of a domestic feminine sphere that was imagined resisting, both physically and symbolically, the corruption of moral values associated with foreign rule (Chatterjee 1989). By contrast, men were expected to embody the ideal of a martial and muscular masculinity, as well as moral fortitude, that characterised the images of the Hindu soldier and the warrior-monk (Banerjee 2005). In the realm of traditional sport and spiritual practice, physical strength and virility were maintained also through the preservation of male semen, which signified celibacy and sexual abstinence, often perpetrated with a clear anti-colonial intention (Alter 2011). Perhaps the best example of this morality of restriction and sexual abstinence is that of Gandhi and his anti-colonial politics, strongly engrained in the vision of the Hindu's physical and moral fortitude as antidote to British colonialism (Alter 2000).

Instead of changing pace after Partition and Indian independence, the post-colonial state showed a continuity with previous policies that regulated sexuality and gender. A legacy of the anti-colonial rhetoric, the Nehruvian state promoted an economic frugality that extended also to the private sphere of sexuality. Colonial anxieties around sexuality, in fact, did not diminish during the postcolonial era, with the newly independent state-nation seeking an active role in the making of modern India. Discourses on family, marriage, conjugality, and sexuality then reappeared in their institutional forms. A new debate on the Hindu Code in 1955 anticipated an institutional reform of the Hindu family, which was made the object of a process of "nationalisation" (Majumdar 2009). Eleanor Newbigin explained

that calls for family reform raised by the mobilisation around the Hindu Code Bill at first seemed “to critique patriarchal control and social order more generally, creating the intellectual space to rethink the place of women within the family, and the state more widely”, while they actually enhanced men’s individual control over the family thus establishing a “new, post-colonial patriarchy based around the authority of the propertied husband” (Newbiggin 2010). Marriage and modern forms of conjugality with a focus on intimacy and the sexual life of the married couple were reformed to suit the project of the modern Indian nation ready for modernity and scientific advancement (Majumdar 2009). In the field of science, the modern conjugal couple needed instruction on how to practice a “healthy” sexuality, as more and more men and women expressed their anxieties about sexual inadequacy on national magazines. Scientific writings on sexuality, known as sexual science, were also part of a project that sought to discipline the body of the modern Indian citizen. Sexology, or the science of sex, attracted growing interest in the subcontinent: sexual manuals, international and vernacular journals and scientific treatises of Western scholars circulated abundantly in Indian medical circles. In India, this work was pioneered by the medical doctor A. P. Pillai, who helped promoting the idea of “rational sex” based on biological needs and scientific findings (Srivastava 2013; Srivastava 2014). Anxieties about sexual inadequacy, female desire, premature ejaculation, semen loss and homosexuality – either medicalised or scientifically instructed through sexual education – had an enormous impact on the elaboration of modern sexual cultures and identities and new sexual imaginaries of the younger generations born in independent India.

We see such colonial and postcolonial economies of sexuality and masculinity playing out also in the confessional poetry of the Hungry Generation authors. Their poems blatantly show that moral panic and anxieties around sexuality were deeply entrenched in the Bengali (and Indian) middle class, also as a legacy of British colonialism. Let me explain how the colonial and postcolonial discourses of masculinity have influenced what I call the “hyper-masculine ethos” of the Hungry Generation poets.

The Male Gaze and Hyper-Masculinity as Filters of Interpretation

A picture of overlapping discourses and performances of masculinity in colonial and postcolonial India helped making sense of the articulation of manhood by young Bengali poets in post-independent India. Two views have been particularly influential in formulating the question of masculinity in Hungryalist poetry: the impact of colonialism on discourses of gender and race, and that of the Nehruvian ideology of scientific advance and industrialisation in shaping the model of a scientific Indian masculinity. These dominant agents of change and transformation,

Introduction

colonialism and nationalism, have had a tremendous impact on representations of gender and practices of sexuality in different sections of Indian society, as shown by a great number of studies on the intersection between colonialism and gender politics. I have also drawn from the reflections around Connell's idea of "hegemonic masculinity", articulated in her seminal and influential book *Masculinities* (Connell 1995). Her interpretation of patterns and performances of masculinity in 1980s American culture has put emphasis on the existence of multiple models of masculinity – hegemonic as well as subaltern –, as underscored in my analysis of Hungryalist hyper-masculinity vis-à-vis the rational and scientific masculinity promoted by the Nehruvian state. Connell's work suggested viewing masculinity in terms of power relations where masculinity cannot be reduced exclusively to the pattern of the "dominant male" of the patriarchal order. In her view, hegemonic masculinities are "patterns of practice" that legitimise men's dominant position in society and justify the subordination of women and common men or other marginalised ways of being a man. Hegemony is a crucial word here that, after Antonio Gramsci's intuition in the *Prison Notebooks*, defines a position of privilege which is achieved not by violence – although it can be supported by force – but through culture, institutions and persuasion.

Going back to the colonial scenario, the best source for our topic is Mrinalini Sinha's work on perceptions of "colonial masculinity" in late 19th century India (Sinha 1995). She argued that the new class of Western-educated Indians – the middle-class Bengali Hindu – was seen by the British administrators as an "unnatural" or "perverted" form of masculinity and became the quintessential referent for that category designated as the "effeminate *babus*" (Sinha 1995: 2). The broad generalisation about the mild-mannered Bengali *babu* (Beng. *bābu*) intersects with other stereotypes about Indians as a "feeble", "passive", and "effete" people already disseminated in the early period of colonial rule. Thomas Babington Macaulay's classic description in his *Minute on Indian Education* (1835) defined Bengalis in the following way: "The physical organisation of the Bengalee is feeble even to effeminacy. He lives in a constant vapour bath. His pursuits are sedentary, his limbs delicate, his movements languid. During many ages he has been trampled upon by men of bolder and more hardy breeds. Courage, independence, veracity are qualities to which his constitution and his situation are equally unfavourable" (Sinha 1995: 15–16). The indolence and feebleness of the Bengali race explained their loss of independence to the British. With the erosion of property, the declining fortune of the landed gentry, and the loss of local businesses to the Marwari community, the image of Bengali "effeteness" became a stereotype also within the Bengali intellectual class at least until the 1930s (Rosselli 1980: 123). Other hegemonic Indian masculinities reappeared in reaction to the emasculation of Indian men such as that which glorified the muscular strength and martial prowess of the so-called martial races as well as of the Hindu soldier (Banerjee 2005).

Simultaneously, another common stereotype about the natives of the British colonies perpetrated the idea of hypersexuality and predatory masculinity as a characteristic of the natives which threatened the chastity of the white woman. Evidence of this is provided by a great number of rape trials carried out against natives in the British African colonies as well as by the alleged rape case narrated in E.M Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924). But if the dominant narrative about the natives characterised them as a sexual threat for the white woman, Ann Laura Stoler has also noticed that the colony was an open terrain for the sexually repressed Westerner (Stoler 1995: 174–5). After all, via Freud and psychoanalytic theory Frantz Fanon previously observed that the “Negro” was constantly the object of the white man’s gaze (Fanon 1986: 116) as well as “the projection of the white man’s desires” (Stoler 1995: 171).

In addition to the violence perpetrated by colonialism, the Hungryalist hyper-masculinity must be understood in the framework of Nehru’s national project of scientific progress and economic development propagated in the first decades of independence. The muscular and virile, subjugating and violating action performed by the Hungryalist male body – a hungry and all-devouring body – acts with such violence also in response to the dominant models of a modest sexuality and masculinity that aligned with the ideology of economic frugality promoted by the nation-state (Srivastava 2014). The toxic masculinity that most Hungryalists perform in their poems – especially in displaying the sexual power of the male body and through the possession, consumption and objectification of the female body – should thus be interpreted in the frame of these multiple hegemonic masculinities. In my analysis of the hyper-masculine ethos of Hungryalist poetry and of Phalguni Ray’s anxious sexuality (chapter 4 and 5), I use the concepts of hyper-masculinity and “male gaze” to describe the gender approach in my reading of Hungryalist poetry. This perspective arrays within the symbolic pace of the poems while materialising in the gaze of the same authors, revealing the positionality of the poetic voice vis-à-vis the object represented. The concept of male gaze was initially addressed in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis which focused on the erotic compulsion to look, known as scopophilia, the pleasurable desire to be seen and the power of fantasy by which the viewer identifies with the object of the look. Yet it was Michel Foucault’s theory of the controlling power of the gaze, exercised through modern instruments of surveillance – the clinic, the prison and the census operation – that has remained most influential in interpreting visual and literary cultures in South Asia (Foucault 1979; Uberoi 2006; Chatterjee 2019). With Laura Mulvey’s seminal work in feminist film theory, the concept of a “scopic” regime gained additional salience in its emphasis on inequality of gender power relations in cinematic representations (Mulvey 1975). Along the same line of the feminist film theorist, the British painter and art critic John Berger analysed the unequal relationship between genders in the spectator-object observed dichotomy,

Introduction

where the former was always male and the latter a woman. He argued that this gender inequality became structural in the representation of women with its spread in television and advertising (Berger 2008). We will see that the male gaze is the primary instrument of Hungryalist aesthetics, exhibiting distinct traits of misogyny and objectification in portraying the woman's body. Description of sexual bodies and male masturbation, as in Malay Roy Choudhury's "Pracaṇḍa baidyutik chutār" (Terrific Electric Carpenter, 1964), heavily rested on what I call an aesthetics of rape and consumption which were also symptomatic of postmodernity, emerging consumerism and the commodifying logic of capitalism. However, my analysis of Phalguni Ray's poems (chapter 5) has shown a different articulation of the masculine gaze which here obsessively stares and objectifies one's own male body. Within the general hyper-masculine ethos of Hungryalist poetry, generally objectifying and abusive of the woman's body, Phalguni's writing hinted at a more ambiguous and troubled coexistence with his masculinity. It is the double declination of the male gaze and of male "pleasurable structures of looking" that is articulated in this corpus of Hungryalist poetry. This perspective shows that the male gaze as potential interpretive filter can reveal the multiple inequalities embedded in the dichotomy between viewer and object viewed. Inequalities that are gender-focused, but also sharpened by socio-cultural transformations and structural imbalances visible on a global scale in the context of mid-20th century modernisation, industrialisation and an increasingly capitalist culture.

A Transgressive Approach to the Sources

Transgression of bodies and textualities are the dominant tropes addressed and performed in the poetry of this avant-garde movement, as well as in the lives of the Hungry poets, as I argue in this book.⁴ The body that is transgressed physically and metaphorically is a deeply historical body: it is the male body of the middle-class alienated bohemian poet, who performs his virility weakened by a colonial legacy of emasculation, deprived by the desire of consuming – of bodies and commodities –, and whose (im)morality of sexual and aesthetic excess is pathologised as "abnormal" and corrupted. It is the Foucauldian body of biopolitics that must "be put in order" through discipline and governmentality (Foucault 1978).

4 I use "trope" in this book to outline recurring images, words or expressions, themes and figures of speech in the Hungry Generation poetry projecting a higher and symbolic layer of meaning beyond the literal and denotative signification of the single word (Baldick 2001: 264). An example of tropes that are emblematic of Hungryalist poetry are hunger, masturbation, rape and consumption.

How does this book conceptualise transgression? The Latin etymology of transgression literally means “to go beyond” (trans + gradi): beyond the limits of what is morally acceptable. Transgression has a long critical history that has shaped its meaning according to the sociohistorical context in which the concept was applied. Originally, transgression was used to describe historical moments of subversion of social roles and hierarchies, which Mikhail Bakhtin memorably detected in the mode of the “carnavalesque” (Bakhtin 1984). The concept proved extremely fruitful to cultural theorists for its radical potential that could be applied to a plethora of literary texts and cultural contexts. Most notably, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White used Bakhtin’s carnivalesque to explain a wider phenomenon of transgression: while the carnival embodied a celebration of the “lower bodily stratum” – associated with functions like urinating, defecating, and copulating –, it also helped to delimit the social and cultural boundaries of the bourgeoisie, which identified itself based on a differentiation with the world of the poor and dirty (Stallybrass and White 1986). A similar dynamic of social distinction was observed by Sumanta Banerjee (1998) between elite and popular culture in colonial Bengal which demarcated the physical and cultural boundaries between *bhadralok* and *choṭalok*, the Bengali gentry and the lower classes.⁵ Moreover, studies in anthropology and the social sciences proved that transgression can be endowed with various cultural meanings and interpretations. Above all, transgression was pivotal throughout history to build social identities and status through acts of social distinction and marginalisation (Douglas 1966; Turner 1969; Bourdieu 1984; Stallybrass and White 1986). My perspective on transgression takes its cue from these authors’ seminal works and insights into the dynamics of social and cultural distinction from tribal and non-Western communities to urban middle-class in post-industrial societies. The central idea of such distinction, which also gave birth to the bourgeoisie, is that the so-called “bourgeois body” essentially defined itself based on a neat separation from and repudiation of filth, what symbolically distinguished the lower classes. In studies on the history of sexuality most notably inaugurated by Michel Foucault, the historian Jeffrey Weeks (1981) too observed that “the concern with the ‘immorality’ of the working class said more about bourgeois morality than about the complex realities of working-class life” (Weeks 1981: 47). Many others followed in reaffirming the role of morality in articulating distinction, while observing that the formation of the bourgeoisie in modern societies took place through a factual as well as symbolic separation from the realm of the poor, lazy and filthy embodied by the lower classes. Looking at the separation of social bodies, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) noticed that the process of demarcation of

5 As Sumanta Banerjee noted in his popular book (1998), the idea of “obscene” (*aślīl*) in 19th century Bengal was shaped by the differentiation between high and low classes and culture, where the latter was obscured and suppressed from the life of the *bhadralok*.

Introduction

bourgeois status and taste in post-war France was steeped in the economic as well as cultural capital possessed by a certain social class. In this context, he claimed that “art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences” (Bourdieu 1984: 7).

What Mikhail Bakhtin described as the defiling and “grotesque body” in display during the subversive time of the carnival has since been qualified in various ways: polluted, abject, abnormal, excessive, disgusting, and obscene. In the realm of literature, Bakhtin was among the first to explore acts of transgression as political and cultural subversions. For example, in his analysis of Rabelais’s *Gargantua*, a model of his notion of transgression, he comments on the episode of Friar John asserting that “even the shadow of the monastery belfry can render the women more fertile” with an ironic twist that symbolically transforms the belfry into the phallus. To explain this sarcastic transgression of the denotative meaning of the word, Bakhtin points out that “the object transgresses its own confines, ceases to be itself. The limits between the body and the world are erased, leading to the fusion of the one with the other and with surrounding objects” (Bakhtin 1984: 310). These words explain well the inner workings of transgression, which functions as an actual trespassing of the border delimiting what is morally accepted and socially established by a religious, political or literary community. The ideas initially developed by Bakhtin were recovered by Stallybrass and White and others to use transgression as a potent analytic category able to reveal the “symbolic inversions” taking place during carnival (Stallybrass and White 1986: 18). They remarked a more complex dynamic of power, fear and desire involved in the construction of bourgeois subjectivity in modern Europe that structured itself in relation to the “debasements and degradations of low discourse” (Stallybrass and White 1986: 3). Seen from this perspective, transgression more generally denotes a symbolic inversion that is overtly political in nature. The result of this process of identity formation is a conflictual, contradictory and mobile relationship between the two discourses where “the ‘top’ attempts to reject and eliminate the ‘bottom’ for reasons of prestige and status, only to discover, not only that it is in some way frequently dependent upon that low-Other [...] but also that the top includes that low symbolically, as a primary eroticised constituent of its own phantasy life” (Stallybrass and White 1986: 5). The ambivalent relationship of repugnance and attraction well explains the imagination and eroticisation of the “low-Other” that takes shape also – but not only – on a symbolic level in the obscene and dirty language of Hungryalist poetry, often the object of neglect and depreciation by Indian and Bengali criticism. Sociological interpretations like these about the separation of elite and lower social bodies have highlighted other key mechanisms and ideologies that are essential to unpack the ambivalence and duality of transgression as such, also in the realm of Hungryalist poetry.

What has made the application of an idea of transgression more problematic and harder to pinpoint is when dealing with hyper-masculinity, a trope and embodied practice often involving abusive representations of a woman's body, often verging on misogyny and homophobia. How can the trope of hyper-masculinity be approached in terms of transgression? My suggestion is that hyper-masculinity should be interpreted as part of the subversive yet highly ambivalent action of transgression which turns itself into an instrument to perpetuate the social and cultural violence it seeks to overturn: an "epistemic violence", to use Foucault and Spivak's popular phrase, that is both perpetrated and endured by these young Bengalis in the postcolonial moment of 1960s India. Another major component of transgression is that it is sanctioned and legitimised by the specific structure of power. Scholars of postmodernism affirmed the sanctioning power of transgression and other textual strategies of transgression like pastiche and parody, iconic modes of postmodern writing. For example, Linda Hutcheon (1985) provided a new reading of parody as that which is "fundamentally double and divided; its ambivalence stems from the dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces that are inherent in its nature as authorised transgression" (Hutcheon 1985: 26). Chris Jenks (2003) too referred to Bakhtin's formulation of carnival as a transient moment of desire to transgress the limits, pointing out that "every rule, limit, boundary or edge carries with it its own fracture, penetration or impulse to disobey" and that "transgression is a component of the rule" (Jenks 2003: 7). This is where the ground-breaking contribution of anthropologist Victor Turner and his concept of the liminal comes into the Hungry Generation story.

Just like changing social entities and identities in the making, Hungryalist poetry rightly functions as a literary and highly symbolic space where newly modern and national identities are questioned, subverted and fractured through a language of obscenity and all-devouring consumption of bodies and commodities. In Victor Turner's words, liminality is the condition of hybridity and in-betweenness characterising some moments of passage in history just like the traditional rites of passage (e.g. birth, puberty, menstruation, marriage etc.) which members of a society necessarily go through in order to maintain and re-establish a new social order of meaning. Liminal entities are "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 precisely this ambivalent nature of the Hungry Generation poets, rebellious to social and sexual standards yet perpetuating aggressive masculine roles, which configures their identity as liminal. By using the concept of transgression, I want to stress the ambivalence implicit in the subversive and corrupting language of the Hungry Generation, overtly aimed at challenging the structure while incorporating and reiterating the language of the dominant order. Representation in Bengali poetry of morally "filthy" activities like masturbating, boozing, smoking marijuana, and

Introduction

performing socially reproachable or abusive sexualities vis-à-vis Bengali middle-class moral standards locates the avant-garde acts of transgression in the liminal space between subversion and reaffirmation. Although transgression of moral standards and social rules are main operations of the Hungry Generation poets, a certain degree of differentiation can be identified in the various tropes under discussion. For instance, representations of hunger, alcohol, drug consumption, and masturbation have shown the attempt at transgressing middle-class narratives on the body through the physical abuse of the poets' own bodies. By contrast, concerns for masculinity, changing gender-roles, as well as the persistence of a family-oriented system in the postcolonial Bengali society, as it emerges from Phalguni Ray's poetry, underscore an ethos of resistance to and subversion of the dominant social structures of Indian society – the bourgeoisie, the middle class, and Hindu ideology – which delineated Hungryalism as a postcolonial and post-modern literary movement in the Bengali language.

By stressing the ambivalence between reaffirmation and disruption of norms in Hungryalist poetry, I want to demystify the prevalent view of the Hungry Generation as a rebellious and obscene movement or a condemned group of depraved misogynists. I suggest looking at both views in a larger perspective by zooming in on the literary texts of Hungryalism to gauge the transgressive potential of its main tropes. It is true that their hyper-masculinity and misogyny, as well as the spirit of rejection and emancipation from standard norms and dominant moralities, are predominant traits of Hungryalism. The duality of their language, shifting from a sexist register to the quest for emancipation from the patriarchal idiom reiterated by the Bengali middle-class society, is in fact distinctive of the transgressive mode of Hungryalism.⁶ At the same time, one cannot deny the provocative and disruptive potential of practices perceived as scandalous and immoral by the conservative cultural milieu of the Bengali middle class, such as orgies, masturbation, boozing, and smoking hemp, as these are visualised in Hungryalist poems and made part of their revolutionary process of poetry writing. This is precisely where Turner's idea of modern forms of performance as "liminoid" spaces that stage and enact social drama (Turner 1982) could serve as an interpretive tool of the Hungryalists' physical and symbolic acts of transgression of middle-class Bengali social and cultural normativity. According to Turner, modern performances – just like avant-garde theatre – reproduce on stage a crisis having the potential to engender social transformation through the inversion and re-coding of language and meaning. Turner's intuition about liminality in modern societies can be aptly used to address the question of the Hungryalists' marginality vis-à-vis the normativity of the Bengali

6 My use of "patriarchy" follows Judith Butler (1990) who inferred that this notion cannot be viewed as an essential monolithic entity. Patriarchy, like the categories of sex and gender, must be understood in relation to their specific historical and social context of research.

society of the 1960s. Transgressing the boundaries of Bengali middle-class social world, the Hungryalists drew attention to the ruptures and failures embedded in postcolonial history by revealing the contradictions involved in the struggle to emancipate themselves from the burden of social norms and moral codes of the Bengali middle class. We will see that the tropes of transgression of Hungryalist poetry articulate in the interstitial spaces between duality and affirmation, defeat, and emancipation, oscillating between the reactionary and the progressive.

State of the Art

This work aspires to be the first academic book on the topic, offering a socio-literary analysis of the Hungry Generation poetry to the wider public. The book covers some major aspects of the poetry movement regarding its literary production and reception in the American and Bengali avant-garde circle. It does so by reconstructing its histories and narratives, literary practice, so-called “tropes of transgression”, the reception and interaction with the American avant-garde in the 1960s. Although the movement counted over forty participants at its peak, this book focuses on selected poetry and other literary texts written by the following Hungryalists, in alphabetical order: Subo Acharya, Utpalkumar Basu, Shakti Chattopadhyay, Sandipan Chattopadhyay, Basudeb Dasgupta, Saileshvar Ghosh, Phalguni Ray, Debi Roy and Malay Roy Choudhury.

During my research, I have availed myself of both primary and secondary sources in Bengali and English. Among the first, Hungry leaflets, pamphlets, bulletins, manifestoes and little magazines, as well as material from the correspondence that took place among American and Bengali authors. Interviews to some Hungryalist poets (i.e. Malay and Samir Raychaudhuri, Pradip Chaudhuri and Debi Roy) have also been essential to the present research. This book discusses only a selection of the vast material I collected from the various archives in Calcutta, Chicago, Madison, Stanford and Washington because of the number and heterogeneity of the texts. Throughout the book, I have used the phrase “literary materials” to refer to non-poetic texts that are however considered of literary value because of their form, content and materiality. In other places, these are also called “ephemera”, that is cheap pamphlets, little magazines, bulletins, cards and single-sheet leaflets meant to be printed and distributed in big quantity against the usual commercial methods of the literary market. Let us now briefly review the scholarship available on the Hungry Generation.

In Bengali, Uttam Das’s book *Hām̐ri, śruti o śāstrabirodhī āndolan* (Hungry, Shruti and Anti-scriptures Movements) introduced the readers to the history of the movement in the context of other anti-establishment movements of postmodern Bengali literature (Dās 1986). More recently, Malay Roy Choudhury’s poetry

Introduction

Hāmri āndolan o drohapuruṣer kathā (On the Hungry Movement and Rebels) was the subject of a book by Kumar Bishnu De from Assam University (De 2013). Titas De Sarkar is currently conducting his doctoral research at the University of Chicago on postcolonial representations of youth culture in Calcutta, and Malay Roy Choudhury's banned poem "Stark Electric Jesus" is one of his foci, as he showed in a chapter of an edited volume (De Sarkar 2019). I previously published an article where I analyse the medical lexicon prevalent in descriptions of the female "sexual body" in the Bengali and English version of Malay Roy Choudhury's same poem (Cappello 2018). Various papers in English have discussed the movement in comparative perspective with the Beat Generation (Bhattacharya 2013; Belletto 2019). A book by Maitrayee Chowdhury Bhattacharjee was published by Penguin India with the title *The Hungryalists: The Poets who Sparked a Revolution*, the only book until now which deals with the Hungry Generation (Chowdhury Bhattacharjee 2018). Written in the genre of a fictionalised documentary, also based on archival sources, it nonetheless eschews focusing on a critical presentation and analysis of their poetry and literary history. A similar experiment which predates Maitrayee's book is Deborah Baker's *A Blue Hand: The Beats in India*, which tangentially deals with the Hungryalists in relation to the Beatniks visit to India (Baker 2008).

Based on previous scholarship on postcolonial literary modernism and alternative print cultures in South Asia, this research also contributes to these fields by turning attention to a Bengali avant-garde movement that is on many levels relatable to the bilingual literary cultures of post-independent India (Zecchini 2014; Nerlekar 2016; Chaudhuri 2008; King 1987). While building on these works, this book wants to depart from their emphasis on minor archives and the materiality of alternative literary practices. Although these features are present and relevant in the world of Hungryalist literature, I deemed repetitive a further focus on aspects of materiality and circulation, which constitute by now an established and varied section of modern literary studies (Bornstein 2001; Bulson 2013; Loren 2013; Nerlekar 2016). I decided to draw attention to the contents, the tropes and language employed in Hungryalist poetry and other writing, which call for greater critical and academic attention. In terms of size and priority, this study is conscious of its limitations in the selection of the authors and genres on which the book is based. I did not include any prose writings by Sandipan Chattopadhyay, Subhas Ghosh and Basudeb Dasgupta who were prolific prose writers even beyond the Hungry Generation. Readers and scholars of Bengali literature might be disappointed to see only marginal reference to the poets of the Kṛttibās group and other major voices of Bengali modern poetry from the post-independence era, like Binoy Majumdar. One of the reasons is that poets of the Kṛttibās group like Shakti Chattopadhyay and Sunil Gangopadhyay are by now part of the official literary culture and, therefore, more accessible for further critical studies. Moreover, this book is

more interested in initiating a qualitative and critical reading of individual authors than on expanding the already vast archive of modern Bengali poetry. A selection of poems and other literary materials was collected in a concluding appendix to introduce the full texts, without explanatory footnotes, to encourage a direct reading of these authors.

Overview of the Content

The introduction pinpoints the main features as well as the problems that have been addressed in the literary history of the Hungry Generation. I read the production of this literary movement in the context of the global as well as the Bengali 1960s, surveying the histories, sources and narratives that made this literary movement a contested object of discussion in Bengali criticism until today. In chapter 1 (Language and Materiality), I illustrate the dominant practices of Hungry literature which were characteristic of most international avant-garde and underground literatures of that period. The circulation and exchange of literary and non-literary material, including letters, little magazines, poetry, manifestoes, and other ephemera, as well as the use of a vocabulary that reflected consumption and modernisation were defining features of this Bengali avant-garde.

Chapter 2 (Hunger and the Aesthetics of Transgression) delves into Hungry-artist texts to retrace the major tropes of transgression, drawing from the theoretical discussions on transgression and liminality. With this notion, I aim at reading Hungry literary transgressions as liminal moments of rupture with middle-class normativity moving from a quasi-misogynist view to the struggle for emancipation from the burden of scientific authorities, social rules and hierarchies that dominated Bengali middle-class society in that epoch. The ambivalence and duality of their language is in fact a constituting and distinguishing trait of their transgressive behaviour. Representations of hunger, alcohol and drug consumption, masturbation, hyper-masculinity and objectification of a woman's body are transversally present in their poetry and pivotal to the formulation of an aesthetic of transgression.

Chapter 3 (Modernism, Postmodernism and the Avant-garde) follows up with a look at the possible influences from Bengali and Indian modernism and other European literary figures and philosophical traditions that helped shaping the avant-garde horizon of the Hungry Generation. Hungryalism was a postmodern avant-garde not only confined to Bengal and to Bengali language but intimately connected to other alternative circles of writers in Bombay, Delhi, Benares and other cities of North India. A central feature of the movement was its insistence on hybridity, corruption and non-Bengaliness by which it contributed to reinvent a Bengali literary modernism that is transcultural, postmodern and postcolonial.

Introduction

After retracing the possible influences that shaped the Hungry Generation as a postmodern avant-garde, chapter 4 (Hyper-masculinity and the Objectification of Bodies) goes back to the tropes of transgression, this time zooming in on hyper-masculinity and the objectification of the woman's body. Based on a few poems, it emerged that the male gaze was the primary instrument of Hungryalist aesthetics, heavily resting on an aesthetics of rape and consumption in many ways symptomatic of the emerging consumer's culture and commodifying logic of capitalism.

Chapter 5 (Anxious Masculinity in Phalguni Ray's *Television of a Rotten Soul*) continues the close reading of Hungryalist poetry and introduces the reader to the troubled and ambivalent world of Phalguni Ray's poetry. A cult figure of the Hungry Generation hailing from an old family of landed gentry, Phalguni died prematurely at the age of 36, unmarried, unemployed and cirrhotic (1954–1981). On the background of India's industrial and scientific ethos, with the rise of terrorism and radical politics in West Bengal and of middle-class consumer's culture, Phalguni transposed the economic and cultural crisis onto his male body in his poetry and film scripts, which are the subject of my analysis. His main existential conflicts portrayed in his poetry centre on the dichotomy between the normative and the socially reproachable, both crucial concepts for Phalguni's elaboration of a troubled and deeply anxious masculinity. Phalguni's marginal position in Bengali middle-class society – poor, unemployed, alcoholic, and sexually ambiguous – sets against social and religious regulations and medical and scientific discourses on sane and healthy sex in colonial and postcolonial India.

In the last chapter (Avant-Garde as a Worlding Practice), I return to questions about the reception of the Hungry Generation by looking at transfigurations of cultural symbols and language through in place across the transnational avant-garde circle. I point out the major representations of the Hungry Generation by focusing on the poets' interaction with the American avant-garde circle and its reception in Bengali criticism. Central to my analysis of these interactions are issues of imitation and adaptation, and to a lesser extent of distortion, as vital sites of production for postcolonial literatures. The ambiguous position of Hungryalism in seeking Western models while rejecting the colonial canon and values of the Bengali middle class, frames this movement's response to and engagement with the Beat Generation in terms that valued hybridity, ambivalence and mimicry.