

“No Hungry Generations Tread Thee Down”? — Exploring the Poetics of Alterity

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***Abstract:** This essay discusses the Hungryalist Movement of the 1960s which attempted to change the path of the early 20th century Bengali literature because it failed to represent the existential angst and pessimism of the youth of post-Partition Bengal. There is no doubt, of course, that the movement ushered in a violent surge of change that hit right at the outdated mode of conceiving literature and art according to a city-centric, western educated, bourgeois sense of taste. But despite their constant revolution for almost five years, the extent of success of the Hungryalist movement still remains questionable. It is argued here that although it set out to attack and disintegrate contemporary Bengali literature on the premise that it was unbearably imitative of the West, the movement itself seems to have been heavily inspired by certain revolutionary ideas conceptualized largely by the Occident.*

***Keywords:** Hungryalist movement, Hungryalism, Bengal, postcolonial, anti-canonical, socio-literary revolution.*

The Hungryalist Movement hit the complacent surface of mid 20th century mainstream Bengali literature in 1961 and the storm that would rage through the next four years in Bengal would alter the course of history of Bengali literature forever. Chronologically speaking, the Hungryalist movement

continued from 1961 to 1965. The movement was Malay Roychoudhury's brainchild whereas his elder brother Samir Roychoudhury, renowned poet Shakti Chattopadhyay and Debi Ray alias Haradhan Dhara led it on. Soon the movement gathered many other members from different sections of the society, e.g., Utpal Kumar Basu, Binoy Majumdar, Sandipan Chattopadhyay, Basudeb Dasgupta, Falguni Roy, Subhas Ghosh, Saileshwar Ghosh, Tridib Mitra, Alo Mitra, Arunesh Ghosh, Ramananda Chattopadhyay, Anil Karanjai, Karunanidhan Mukhopadhyay, Subo Acharya etc. The goal of the Hungryalists was to offer a complete artistic alterity so as to devastate the readers' normative taste that had been shaped by colonial canons. Their deviant poetry in terms of both form and content also influenced Hindi, Marathi, Assamese, Telegu and Urdu literatures. But the Establishment accused the movement of promoting perversion and obscenity in society and issued arrest warrants against Samir Roychoudhury, Malay Roychoudhury, Debi Ray, Subhash Ghosh, Saileshwar Ghosh, Pradip Choudhury, Utpal Kumar Basu, Ramananda Chattopadhyay, Basudeb Dasgupta, Subo Acharya and Subimal Basak. Although all of them were finally released, the movement slowly died down. There have been occasional claims about the revival of the movement by many writers of the post 70s period as also by practitioners of other later streams of literature that resembled the Hungryalist genre in a few ways. In fact, Malay Roychoudhuri, who was the founder and life spirit of the movement, mentions that he is often requested by youngsters to help them re-launch the Hungryalist movement afresh. But he steadily rejects any such proposal. "I tell them to understand their own space and time", he says, "and thereafter, devise their own platform to express themselves" (Roychoudhury, "A Sour Time of Putrefaction" Web. np).

So, what was this alterity that the Hungryalists tried to forge through their movement? Alterity can briefly be defined as the state of being different, as a state of otherness as opposed

to the self. The concept can be traced back to Descartes and his formulation of the relationship between the self and the other (Newman). But rather than engaging in the philosophical notion of alterity, I have here used the term to refer to the cultural difference that the movement symbolized from the mimetic tendencies of post-colonial socio-literary scenario of Bengal.

In my paper, I have provided an elaborate idea about how the Hungryalists launched the movement as an attack on the status quo of the literary scenario during the 1960s, only to propose that despite being a revolutionary period in the history of Bengali literature that shocked the typical 19th century poetic sensibility of the Calcutta-based intelligentsia, the success of the Hungryalist movement seems questionable as the organized counter discourse developed by the Hungryalists are often found to rely on those very points of references that they set out to destroy and discard. I have divided my paper into four sections in order to discuss separately certain important aspects of the Movement. In the first section I have given a general overview of the movement by locating it in its social, cultural and political context. In the second part, I have talked about the fundamental characteristics of Hungryalist literature, its principles and beliefs, and how the movement promised an alternate form of poetics that shook the roots of the orthodox and sanitized tradition of postcolonial Bengali literature. I have taken examples of certain poems and prose pieces written by the Hungryalists to elaborate their theories through instances of their works and demonstrate their stark difference from the elitist, bourgeois literature. In the last section, I have attempted to examine the extent of success that the movement could achieve in freeing Bengali literature from the shackles of western notions of politics and aesthetics.

1

Bengali art and literature has always been deeply influenced by the different aesthetic movements of the West. Despite the presence of certain minor trends in parallel literature, the modern

Bengali artistic and literary arena had been fed on Western colonial thought. Even little magazines like *Kallol* (1932) and *Krittibas* (1953) that appeared with promises of rebellion and change had failed to break completely away from the Bengali literary canons which were modeled largely on Western philosophical notions. They clearly depended on the colonial aesthetic reality for their creations. The Hungryalists started a movement against this boot-licking tendency of postcolonial Bengali art and literature by denying the basic premises of Western aesthetic theories in their works. According to Malay Roychoudhury, the name 'hungry' was taken from Chaucer's phrase "In Sowre Hungry Tyme" (Ray 64). The philosophical basis for the movement was founded on Oswald Spengler's idea of history not as a linear progression but rather, as a flourishing of self-contained individual cultures (1991). The Hungryalist movement was thus, the offspring of its sour and hungry time. The two Five Year Plans of 1951 and 1956 proved to be unsatisfactory for the progress of the newly independent nation. The dream of a free, ideal state which had kept the nation going in the pre-Independence era remained unfulfilled. Partition led to an unprecedented cultural bankruptcy in Bengal giving rise to stagnancy in creative endeavors. It is at this juncture that the Hungryalist movement first broke out in the form of an alterity in poetics and thought and posed a serious threat to the discursive practices of the mainstream elite culture of Bengal through the assertion of a counter discourse. The movement was first launched in November 1961 from the Patna residence of Malay and Samir Roychoudhury. The first bulletin however, was published in English since Bengali typefaces were hard to find in the Hindi speaking township of Patna and the only printer with the required typefaces refused to publish it. This first bulletin goes:

Poetry is no more a civilizing maneuver, a replanting
of the bamboozled gardens; it is a holocaust, a violent

and somnambulistic jazzing of the hymning five, a sowing of the tempestual Hunger. [...] Naturally, we have discarded the blanket-blank school of modern poetry, the darling of the press, where poetry does not resurrect itself in an orgasmic flow, but words come out bubbling in an artificial muddle. [...] Saturated with self-consciousness, poems have begun to appear from the tomb of logic or the bier of unsexed rhetoric. (Mitra Web)

Debi Ray, who was in charge of strategically distributing the pamphlets, had arranged to disperse the bulletin at intellectual joints, offices of periodicals and college campuses within one single day. Such a movement being unprecedented in the history of Bengal, it had taken Calcutta by storm. It had struck each layer of the Establishment as it had aspired to and disturbed profoundly, the age old canons with its practice of systematic counter-canonization. The bulletin was reprinted with slight revisions in 1962 and then again in November 1963 under the heading “The Hungryalist Manifesto on Poetry”. By then, the movement had gathered quite a few members whose names were printed on the flipside of the reprinted pamphlet. Meanwhile many other bulletins and manifestoes were constantly being issued and distributed freely by the Hungryalists which caused the number of members to cross forty, by January 1964. Samir had introduced his friends Sandipan Chattopadhyay, Utpalkumar Basu and Binoy Majumdar; Malay had brought in his friends Subimal Basak, Sambhu Rakshit, Tapan Das, Anil Karanjai and Karunanidhan Mukhopadhyay; Subimal Basak had brought in his friends Tridib Mitra, AloMitra and Falguni Ray; Shakti had brought in Arupratan Basu, Pradip Choudhuri and Basudeb Dasgupta; Debi Ray had brought in Subo Acharya, Subhas Ghosh, Satindra Bhowmik, Haranath Ghose, Nihar Guha, Saileswar Ghosh, Amritatanay Gupta, Ramananda Chattopadhyay, Sunil Mitra, Shankar Sen, Bhanu

Chattopadhyay, Ashok Chattopadhyay, Jogesh Panda and Manohar Das. The painters Anil and Karuna, brought in painters like Subir Chatterjee, Bibhuti Chakrabarty, Arun Datta and Bibhas Das into the fold of the movement. Before long, the Hungry Generation had become a socio-cultural force to deal with. Many contemporary critics were of the idea that Hungryalism was deeply influenced by Dadaism.

The theoretical basis for the movement was borrowed from Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, a two volume work that had influenced Malay greatly in his youth. According to Spengler, the history of a culture does not move in a linear progression but develops into a number of cultural preferences, each with its own typical spiritual tendency, or idea of space within which they operate (Spengler 4). This whole theory was revolutionary since it broke away completely from the traditional Hegelian concept of history being a process governed by reason. Spengler uses the metaphor of biology. He says that this is an organic process and so it's impossible to predict towards which direction it would grow (Mitra Web). The cultures go through a process of growing, reaching a climax and then withering away. A culture is self-creative during ascendancy, but once its creativity is exhausted, it starts absorbing random elements from without. Its demand for these external elements becomes insatiable during descent. It is this unquenchable thirst for ingredients outside self that was termed Hunger by Malay when he first launched the movement. The Hungryalists felt that after Partition, Bengal had reached that moment of rot and it was impossible to go back to the idealized position of the 19th century. That is why they devised the Hungryalist movement as a counter-culture movement and deliberately created their literature in a counter discourse. All the artistic and literary movements of the West had been arranged according to the functioning of a linear history. Groups like *Parichay* (1931), *Kallol* (1932), *Krittibas* (1953) and *Notun Reeti* (1958) which were founded with the promise

of making a difference with their new literary experimentations also started replicating the colonial aesthetic reality and linear progression of narrative history in their works. Their writings were heavily dependent on logical progression of thoughts and the idea of self as one, whole and unified. *Parichay* and *Kallol* were formulated on the basis of Calcutta-centric, middle class values that identified themselves with occidental canons and discourses. *Krittibas* and *Notun Reeti* developed a method of counter-identification by remaining within the discursive control of the above ideas only with the incorporation of certain elements from the Soviet discourse in case of some writers. The Hungryalists aspired to go beyond this structure of conflicts and completely negated that discourse through de-identification. They also opposed aesthetic realism. In a poem, Shambhu Rakshit writes:

These coconut-leaf combs, even they threaten me as
soon as I turn my back.
Nothing, just a minute, nothing do I know about
parliaments or rumors or.
The shrieks of wild dogs surround me— and of course
I should be informed, of course I
Should be allowed to sink, allowed to go where I don't
want to, allowed to pace up and down.
(My own translation of *Ami Swechbachari* by
Shambhu Rakshit, Lines 1–4) (Hungry Bulletin O
Patrika Theke (1961 - 1965))

Instead of following a normative, logical sequence which is used to express realism, this movement sought to introduce chaos and disintegration in the very structure of a poem rendering it conventionally meaningless. To sum it up in the words of Professor Howard McCord, the Hungryalists composed “Poetry of Chaos and Death” (in Mitra Web).

The Hungryalists generally brought out their bulletins in one page pamphlets. The ones that were published by Malay

from Patna were in English due to the lack of Bengali typeface there. The address given on the pamphlets was generally of Haradhon Dhara, who was the editor, and whose slum residence in Howrah was used by the Hungryalists for correspondence. This decision was perhaps intentional since Dhara belonged to a subaltern caste and so his image aided in flouting the conservative sensibility that denied the subaltern any position in the space of its aestheticism. The Hungryalists published their precise, solidified commentary on various issues ranging from poetry, short story, drama to religion, politics, obscenity and even life and distributed them all across Calcutta— in the College Street Coffee House, many magazine and newspaper offices, in colleges, especially in the Bengali departments and libraries etc. Because a large body of writing was printed on handbills and leaflets, the Hungryalists were unable to preserve and archive much of their work which leads to some difficulty in carrying on extensive and detailed research on the movement. But it no doubt fulfilled their immediate objective— that of being noticed by both common people and those in power. It is not difficult to guess that their innovative use of different media generated far greater attention towards the movement than it would have done had the media been conventional and expected.

In between 1963 to 1965, the Hungryalists had also started publishing a few magazines, e.g., *Protidwondwi* edited by Subimal Basak, *Unmargo* edited by Tridib Mitra, *Jebra* edited by Malay Roychoudhury, *Chinho* edited by Debi Ray, *Phoo* edited by Pradip Choudhury, *Eshona* edited by Satindra Bhowmick and the only English language magazine of the movement, *The Waste Paper*, edited by Alo Mitra.

Except for Debi Ray, Tridib and Alo Mitra, who were stationed at Howrah, across Calcutta, most of the participants came from outside the city. They belonged to the fringe. Subimal, like Malay, came from Patna; Samir was Chaibasa-based; the Ghosh brothers, Subhas and Saileswar, were from Balurghat;

Shakti was from Jaynagar-Majilpur; all the painters were from Benaras; Pradip Choudhuri, originally from Tripura, was based at Shantiniketan; Subo Acharya was based at Bishnupur and Ramananda Chattopadhyay at Bankura. The Hungryalist movement thus developed spatial qualities instead of time-centric features of earlier post-Tagore literary generations. Professor Howard McCord clearly states that although the serious, introspective Indian poetry before the Hungryalist movement had a certain merit, they seemed to lack any sense of space. "These are sincere and harmless poems, and aside from a little local colour, could have been written in Leeds or Philadelphia. The denatured cosmopolitanism that infects the poetry of the West prevails in India as well, and few of the poems carry any sense of place, or the sound of a man speaking, or the rasping smell of cow-dung fires", he writes (in Mitra Web). On the other hand, in the guise of being spatially neutral, a large body of post-Tagore poetry remained too regional, focusing only on a privileged social group and their discourse. It was predominantly Kolkata-centric, epitomizing certain urban middle class values and considering them to be universally 'perfect', a proposition that directly reflects Matthew Arnold's ideas about poetry in *The Study of Poetry* (Arnold 184). But defying this inheritance of Victorian conservatism, Hungryalism emerged as a post-colonial counter-discourse. In the first bulletin itself the movement gave a battle cry against modern poetry, as well as against the tyranny of logic. Till then the concept of syntactical and logical progression of the text was considered the ultimate poetics in literary canons. Following the narrative conventions of post-Enlightenment English literature that went on till the turn of the 19th century, the poets and writers of early 20th century Bengal were chiefly following a chronological and syntactical order in their writings. The reason for such linear progression of narratives was to produce proper meaning for the urban elite readers whose literary and cultural sensibility were

deeply influenced by the three hundred years of colonial rule in India. That is why, when the Hungryalists moved out of this convention of representation, their works were considered vulgar and obscene by the erudite middle class population who had already hierarchized literature according to their notions of literary taste.

But at the peak of the movement, Binoy Majumdar developed schizoid problems. Shakti was harried by literary guardians to leave the group and issue anti-Hungryalist proclamations. Sandipan Chattopadhyay was enticed by a mass circulation magazine with a promise to bring out his novel provided he quit the movement. Sunil Gangopadhyay, in his editorial in *Krittibas*, castigated the movement:

We don't know whether the Hungry Generation movement is good or bad. We have nothing to comment about its future. However, none of the leaflets circulated by them had shown any remarkable literary merit— ordinary writings aspiring to be different. Funnily enough, some are even juvenile. Other than that, the non-literary associations that the movement seems to have developed are indeed disgusting. We really couldn't imagine that a few youths would attempt to create literature in Pidgin English even after 1960. But if the movement can give rise to a different kind of literature, we'll definitely welcome it. ("Hungry Bulletin O Patrika Theke" [1961 – 1965]. Translation mine)

As a result several fence-sitters were trapped in an intellectual bind. These writers in the end committed themselves to prolific commercial writing. By the middle of 1964 only Utpal, Samir, Malay, Debi, Subimal, Subhas, Saileshwar, Pradip, Karuna, Anil, Tridib, Alo, Falguni, Subo and Ramananda remained in the movement. The departure of fence-sitters proved to be a positive feature. The process accelerated the disintegration of

aesthetic realism, leading to gradual dissolution of distinction between the elite and subaltern cultures. Hungryalist texts developed subversive and multiple semiotic and semantic characteristics. The mono-centric, unified truth as demanded by the then presiding academicians were persistently attacked by the participants. In their writings, prose writers such as Samir, Falguni, Subhas and Subimal, as well as in Malay (in his dramas), developed a kind of textual reality that was not oblivious to the problematics of heteroglossia (Vice 18). They accommodated not only different languages but also different dialects within the same language irrespective of how localized that dialect was. They were aware of the hierarchical relationship between different languages and even different forms of the same language. They used this awareness of heteroglossia to highlight their own minority status which defied contemporary literary poetics in favor of transgressive styles. Subimal Basak's novel *Chhata Matha* is a good example of this transgression. It is written in its entirety in the language of East Bengali tongawalas which makes it a difficult read. However, being in a distinct East Bengali dialect, the novel could be understood easily by the illiterate common East Bengalis when read out loud.

Hungryalists like Malay Roychoudhury, Subimal Basak and Debi Ray became well known through their radically anti-Establishment policies. They used different, innovative media to spread their manifestos and bulletins. "It had been a revolution from the very beginning. I had constantly sponsored the production of bulletins, masks, posters, poems in wedding cards, literary meets in red light areas, tribal women in Chowrangi, etc." (My own translation) (Ray 64), said Malay Roychoudhury in an interview taken by Arunesh Ghosh during the 1980s. They would deliver paper masks of animals, monsters and gods to ministers, critics, publishers and other powerful people with the slogan 'please remove your mask'. They would critique poets on wedding cards and make obscene sketches on papers and posters

and distribute them for free. They would send shoeboxes for book review or blank paper in the name of short stories to well-known commercial newspaper offices. They violently attacked the administration and media. They would often go to Benaras or Kathmandu and engage in sexual anarchy and drug abuse along with hippies. They would exhibit Hungryalist paintings and at the end of the exhibition, set fire to all of them. It was their firm belief that it was only through such brutality that the colonial hangover which the decadent Bengali culture had absorbed, could be shaken out of the Bengali socio-literary arena. Naturally, these meetings, exhibitions and promotion of such literature among the masses led to a socio-literary unrest which alarmed the government. Finally, the administration intervened. On 2nd September 1964, an arrest warrant was issued against eleven Hungryalists namely Samir Roychoudhury, Malay Roychoudhury, Debi Ray, Subhash Ghosh, Saileshwar Ghosh, Pradip Choudhury, Utpal Kumar Basu, Ramananda Chattopadhyay, Basudeb Dasgupta, Subo Acharya and Subimal Basak under IPC sections 120b and 292. Articles were seized from Samir and Malay's ancestral home in Patna on 4th September. Consequently, a charge sheet against Malay was submitted at the Bankshal court by Calcutta Police on 3rd May 1965. The charge sheet goes:

In August 1964 a printed booklet entitled *Hungry Generation* published by Samir Roychoudhury was found in circulation at Kolkata. The poetry captioned *Prachanda Boidyutik Chhutar* (Stark Electric Jesus) by Malay Roychoudhury was found obscene and the Director of Public Prosecution, West Bengal being consulted, observed that the book was actionable under Section 292 of Indian Penal Code, and suggested prosecution of Malay Roychoudhury, who is on criminal bail till today the 3rd May 1965, may be prosecuted against under Section 292 IPC. (*Hungry Generation*)

Many of the fellow Hungryalists were coerced and persuaded by the police to bear witness against Malay. Shakti Chattapadhyay, one of the founding members of the movement himself spoke against the movement. Saileshwar Ghose and Shubhas Ghose also bore witness against Malay. But Malay appealed to the higher court and eventually was acquitted of all charges by July 1967. However, this court case against the Hungryalists had a tremendous impact on their individual lives. Utpal Kumar Basu was fired from his job of a professor; Pradip Choudhury was rusticated from Bishwabharati. Samir Roychoudhury was suspended from his government office; Debi Ray and Subimal Basak were transferred outside Calcutta. Subo Achrya and Ramananda Chattapadhyay became fugitives. Article 120b being that of conspiracy, the Calcutta detective department had issued dossiers for each and every Hungryalist member. During the arrests, the police mercilessly rummaged through each of their houses and the books, manuscripts, files, diaries and even letters that they had confiscated during that period were never given back to them.

2

Who would you acknowledge as the first poet? Some think that it was that Cro-Magnon who plucked a flower for his Eve twenty five thousand years ago. But for me, the first poet was that Zinjanthropus who lifted a stone millions of years ago and made it into a weapon. (My own translation) (Ray 41)

This very comment of Malay makes it evident how the Hungryalist movement revolutionized the ways in which poetry was to be composed in postcolonial Bengal. The Hungryalists evolved a new ethos of diction breaking down the stagnancy and depravity of the sophisticated, artificial poetry that was constantly highlighted by the intelligentsia of the 40s, 50s and 60s in Calcutta. In one of his Hungry bulletins, Malay Roychoudhury clearly announces that poetry has to erupt in an

orgasmic flow; hence it is essential to unlearn the education imposed by the institutionalized units of administration, religion, politics and society. Vision, which is fundamental to creativity, can come only to the raw, uneducated soul. Logic and rationality must be done away with, completely. It should be freed from the fetters of artistic hierarchies, from the manacles of neatly assigned watertight meters. While discussing the condition of contemporary Bengali literature Malay says:

those idealized and universalized noble passions, knowledge and expertise in art, all those academic hotchpotch, the artificialities dressed as subjectivism— if these are not gotten rid of, no poetry is possible...” (Roychoudhury, *Ishtabar Sankalan* 47. Translation mine).

He bitterly condemns western aesthetic movements like art for art's sake, art for technique's sake, art for form's sake, art for symbol's sake etc. and the imitators of such movements in the Bengali bourgeois scholastic circle. Vision can be attained only through the mediation of the 'native idiom' and it is this native idiom that serves as the language of real poetry, the language of resistance. In the Hungryalist Manifesto, the objectives of the Movement have been clearly stated:

1. To never emulate the reality of Aristotle, but to take the un-enameled whoring reality by shock under the genital of Art.
2. To let speechlessness burst into communication without breaking the silence.
3. To let free a creative ruckus, in order to unknot the knotted world and start afresh from chaos.
4. To exploit every matrix of senses except that of a writer.
5. To disclose the belief that world and existence are justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon.

6. To accept all doubts and despairs rather than to be content to live with the sense made by others.
7. To lash out against the values of the bi-legged career-making animals.
8. To abjure all meretricious blandishments for the sake of absolute sincerity.
9. To stop writing and painting beyond the point of self-realization. (in Mitra Web)

The Hungryalists, as mentioned before, had completely broken away from any kind of form, meter, style, mannerism, punctuation, line, pattern, symbol, genre, metaphor and logical arrangement of words. They believed that the only justification for writing is bursting out in passion. They were deeply inspired by Antonin Artaud's views. "People who leave the obscure and try to define whatever it is that goes on in their heads, are pigs.... Those for whom certain words have meaning, and certain manners of being; those who are so fussy; those for whom emotions are classifiable, and who quibble over some degree or other of their hilarious classifications; those who still believe in 'terms', those who brandish whatever ideologies belong to the hierarchy of the times, who talk of contemporary currents of thought; those who still believe in some orientation of the spirit, those who follow paths, who drop names, who fill books with screaming headlines ...are the worst kind of pigs" (Artaud 38). This principle of uncontrollable energy, welling out of the self without any pre-determined shape, form or purpose can be amply found in Hungryalist poetry:

Oh I'll die I'll die I'll die
 My skin is in blazing furore
 I do not know what I'll do where I'll go oh I am sick
 [...]
 Oh Malay
 Calcutta seems to be a procession of wet and slippery
 organs today

But I do not know what I'll do now with my own self
My power of recollection is withering away
Let me ascend alone toward death
I haven't had to learn copulation and dying
[...]
Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah
I do not know whether I am going to die
Squandering was roaring within heart's exhaustive
impatience
I'll disrupt and destroy
I'll split all into pieces for the sake of Art
There isn't any other way out for poetry except
suicide... (Roychoudhury "Stark Electric Jesus", Lines
1-62)

This poem 'Prochondo Boidyutik Chhutar', translated as 'Stark Electric Jesus' composed by Malay, was a ground-breaking one of its time. It elaborated unmistakably that the Hungryalists aimed not at changing or appropriating form, but at completely destructing any formal elements that have been thrust upon indigenous literature indiscriminately following the practice of occidental literary canons. In the original Bengali texts, the alteration of the spellings of certain words according to their pronunciations was a blasphemously revolutionary poetic innovation that sought to redefine the rules of quintessential Bengali grammar. The primary job of a poet is to declare war against art. The reader should first be alienated and made hostile, and then, through that same aggressive rhetoric and attitude, be provoked and scandalized. Poetry, in actuality is the embodiment of violent and destructive creativity. According to Dr. Indrajit Bhattacharjee, (Professor of English, Osmania University) the movement had reached a crescendo when it was on the brink of withdrawing itself completely from the western canon and discourse (Hungry Generation Blog). The stark difference of this revolutionary movement from the contemporary

mainstream aesthetics was neatly categorized by Subimal Basak and Rajkamal Choudhary in their trilingual (Bengali-Hindi English) bulletin in 1963.

Prevailing Canons

1. Establishment 2. Tyranny 3. Insiders 4. Elite high-brow culture 5. Satisfied 6. Cohesive 7. Showy 8. Sex as known 9. Socialite 10. Lovers 11. Ecstasy 12. Unmoved 13. Hatred as camouflage 14. Art films 15. Art 16. Sugam Sangeet (Tagore songs) 17. Dream 18. Tutored language 19. Redeemed 20. Framed 21. Conformist 22. Indifferent 23. Mainstream 24. Curiosity 25. Endocrine 26. Conclusions inevitable 27. Ceremony 28. Throne 29. Entertainer 30. Self-projecting 31. How am I 32. Symmetrical 33. Accountants of prosody 34. Revising poems 35. Fantasy's game.

Hungryalist Canons

1. Anti-Establishment 2. Protester 3. Outsiders 4. Commoners' culture 5. Unsatisfied 6. Brittle 7. Raw-bone 8. Sex as unknown 9. Sociable 10. Mourners 11. Agony 12. Turbulent 13. Real hatred 14. All films 15. Life 16. Any song 17. Nightmare 18. Gut language 19. Unredeemed 20. Contestatory 21. Dissident 22. Struck ethically 23. Watershed 24. Anxiousness 25. Adrenalin 26. No end to unfolding 27. Celebration 28. Abdication 29. Thought provoking 30. Self-effacing 31. How are you 32. Tattered and decanonized 33. Extravagance 34. Continuation revision of life 35. Imagination's flight (Hungry Generation).

Apart from their avant-garde theories on poetry, the Hungryalists also issued manifestos discussing politics and religion which alarmed the administration of Bengal and made them realize that Hungryalism had already become a cult in itself. In their 'political manifesto', the Hungryalists promoted that it is important to depoliticize the soul of every individual, in order to make him realize that existence is pre-political. They declared that all intellectual fakeries called political hypothesis are basically

the sources of lethal and seductive lies exploding out of monstrous irresponsibility. In their religious manifesto, they propagated that god is garbage and that religion is nothing but murder, rape, suicide, drug-abuse, poison, perversion, addiction, insomnia and constant transformation.

The Hungryalist Movement redefined the meaning of obscenity in contemporary Bengali literature. For the first time, it introduced the idea that there is nothing called obscenity. The Hungryalists felt that obscenity is an artificial construct; it is created, invented, made-up by a group of uneducated class-conscious conspirators. These opportunistic conspirators have divided the vocabulary along class divisions. To the elite, the language of the subaltern is coarse, crude, obscene and his own language, an art. The Hungryalists deliberately attacked this double standard by subverting the very diction in which Bengali poetry was written during the 40s, 50s and 60s. The poem 'Habijabi', by Subimal Basak would have been a brilliant example to cite here, a poem which brings to life the colloquial Bengali of Dhaka, posing a direct challenge to the so called puritan guardians of mainstream Bengali literature. But unfortunately, the essence of the poem lies in its accent and delivery of words, so it loses its most important meaning in translation.

The movement further launched the idea that sexuality is not obscene. In fact, sex is the only phenomenon which is beyond the pettiness of culture, tradition, religion, race, wealth, rituals, conventions and law. Sexuality is probably the only medium through which the unconscious can be realized and examined.

Within my clasp, your absolute, exploding fetus
Bursts again. I'm my own root, I'm food for the soil,
earth
Salty water, I'm grass and I smoke myself, look, my
green body, my maroon limbs
Maroon eyes, maroon abdomen and pale genital

Hurling abuses of love among the yellow waves of
blood

The scent of fresh gunpowder numbs my body and
perhaps life... (*Siddhartha* by Pradip Choudhury in
“Hungry Bulletin O Patrika Theke” [1961 – 1965]
Translation mine)

The Hungryalists vehemently protested against the hypocrisy of the established literary culture which censored sexual content and language when used as an expression of unprocessed creativity and yet, itself indulged in sexuality for achieving certain commercial, capitalistic ends. It was them, who first exposed how the establishment promotes a society where sexuality can be used as a commodity but not as a weapon.

3

It is unnecessary to mention the huge legacy of alterity that the Hungryalist Movement has left to the history of postcolonial Bengali literature. The movement had shaken away the yoke of dominance imposed upon Bengali literature by the stalwarts of established literary canons; stalwarts, who replicated Western philosophical thought in their writings and criticism even many years after India had attained independence. It brought in a breath of fresh air through the brutally different ideas that were born out of it. Hungryalist literature, even in its initial stage, seemed to have been self conscious of its minority status and deliberately sought to locate itself as the ‘other’ which would question the very power structures associated with the ideas of majority and minority. Before 1961, most Bengali magazines had Sanskritized names which were probably supposed to mark their superiority over cheap Bengali literature, e.g., *Kobita*, *Purbasha*, *Arani*, *Krittibas*, *Uttorsuri*, *Dhrupodi*, *Kranti*, etc. After the movement such classical names were replaced by radical ones like *Kaurab*, *Abar Esehhi Phire*, *Manusher Bachchha*, *Dhoper Kagoj*, etc. Subaltern literature, a field so long

intentionally left out of the scope of magazines like *Kobita*, *Krittibas*, *Dhrupodi* and others, found its voice for the first time in Hungryalist literature. The subaltern discourse was given as much importance as the dominant discourse or perhaps more. This further hastened the use of mixed diction in modern Bengali poetry. Poets started employing sexual metaphors and slangs of every kind to create striking and hard-hitting images in their works. The openness in rhythm, punctuation and order gave a new freedom to Bengali literature post 1965. Poems of Falguni Ray, Malay Roychoudhury, Saileshwar Ghose and Tridib Mitra are points of reference in poetry and the pieces by Subimal Basak and Subimal Roychoudhury in prose. Expressions such as ‘uh’, ‘ahh’, ‘aaaaaaaaaaah’, ‘oh’, ‘phooh’ etc. that were so long forbidden to be a part of the sophisticated postcolonial Bengali rhetoric, now began to be accommodated. Absence of a logical sequence both in terms of sentence structure and meaning was first used by the Hungryalists, a process that became vital to the literature of the 70s. As is evident from the lines of Roychoudhury’s “Stark Electric Jesus”, the Hungryalists also introduced the playful use of unstable imagery which collapsed into one another even before being fully formed. The Naxalite movement that ravaged Bengal towards the 1960s seems to be somewhat influenced by the subversion, the destructiveness and the urge to restart after complete collapse that the Hungryalist movement embodied.

The revolutionary ideologies developed by the Hungryalists were however, not limited only to Bengal. It created a stir all over the world. Not only the English version of *Time* magazine, but the Spanish version too, wrote about the movement. Many international magazines and periodicals like *City Lights Journal*, *Kulchur*, *Klactoveedsedsteen*, *Salted Feathers* etc. printed, reprinted and brought out special issues on the movement.

In his letter to Malay Roychoudhury, American writer Howard McCord requests Malay to send him a copy of “Stark

Electric Jesus” which he wished to publish in *Contemporary Indian Poetry* (Ghosh Dastidar np). The poem was first written in Bengali and translated by Malay himself. The poem was published in *City Lights Journal* with an introduction on the movement written by Prof McCord, and the same matter was republished in the Hungryalist commemorative issue of *Salted Feathers* edited by Dick Bakken. *Salted Feathers* featured most of the participants of the movement.

As for the other Indian languages, in Hindi, Sharad Deora wrote a novel titled *College Street Ka Naya Maseeha* based on the life and works of Hungryalists; Phanishwarnath Renu wrote *Ram Pathak Ki Diary Se*; Dharmaveer Bharati and S.H. Vatsayana Ajneya wrote quite frequently about them in the periodicals they edited, i.e., *Dharmayug* and *Dinaman*; Ashok Shahane, Dilip Chitre and Arun Kolatkar hailed them in Marathi; Umashankar Joshi introduced them in Gujarat; Ameerq Hanfee translated and introduced them to Urdu readers. The Bengali intelligentsia had not bargained for this national and international exposure and publicity. Reputed academicians of the time, such as, Sukumar Sen, Asitkumar Bandyopadhyay, Haraprasad Mitra, Bhabatosh Datta, Ujjwalkumar Majumdar, Kshetra Gupta, Saroj Bandyopadhyay, Sashubhushan Dasgupta, Sukumar Bhattacharya, Debiprasad Bhattacharya, Bhudeb Choudhury, Tarapada Mukhopadhyay, Chinmohan Sehanobis and others preferred to ignore the turbulence created by the movement. Some academicians even persuaded academicians of other Indian languages to ignore the Hungryalist impact (Hungry Generation). Nevertheless, intellectuals from other countries, such as Gary Snyder, Octavio Paz and Ernesto Cardenal sought out the Hungryalists when they visited India.

4

One question must be asked in order to properly evaluate the Hungryalist Movement through a post colonial lens. Could

the Hungryalists succeed completely in evolving a counter discourse against the colonial aesthetics practiced by the established literary culture? Perhaps not entirely. The name of the movement itself was a lift from the great medieval poet of England, Geoffrey Chaucer. The theoretical foundation on which the whole body of the movement stands is borrowed from Oswald Spengler, himself a German historian and philosopher who wrote his theories on the decline of the 'west'. It is his theory that Malay and Shakti had imposed upon the postcolonial Indian reality. The justification of such an assumption of similarity is indeed questionable. In his letter to Malay on 22nd May 1965, Howard McCord writes:

I have enjoyed very much reading your letter and coming in contact with your thoughts. Artaud, Genet, Burroughs: yes. They are the dialecticians of chaos presiding at the dissolution of the west. They describe, with joy and exactitude, the destruction in which they are themselves involved. Burroughs, to me, is a man performing an autopsy on himself. They are all quite mad, and therefore speak the truth. We can only trust the mad anymore. The West began to die around 1750, and it has been the function of poets to recite, in series, the long funeral oration. William Blake began it. Goethe, Baudelaire, Lautremont, Rimbaud, Huysmans (unknowingly), Pound, Eliot, Crane, and all the other familiar names have continued the chant. We are their heirs, and perhaps the culmination, for our anguish and despair, the aesthetic suicide of which we are capable, may mark the end. Perhaps it will go on. (in Ghosh Dastidar)

Although we don't have access to Malay's letter to McCord, it is evident from this letter that Malay had indeed discussed the influence of these significant theoreticians with McCord. Both Antoine Artaud and Jean Genet are controversial thinkers of

20th century France, a typically colonial power and William S. Burroughs, a primary figure of the Beatnik movement that has always been notoriously aligned with the Hungryalist movement. Moreover, Hungryalists have repeatedly expressed their admiration for the 19th century Bengal renaissance literary personages like Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. The 19th century enlightenment was perceived by them to be a state of idealized history which has been lost forever. This indeed seems murky waters since 19th century was the age of western education and Cartesian philosophy of thought— two issues that the principles of Hungryalism clearly appears to negate, unlearn and cruelly annihilate. What are we to make of such contradictions?

Poets like Pabitra Mukhopadhyay, Basudeb Dasgupta etc. have seen overt Beatnik influence in Malay's poems of the *Amimangshito* and *Jakham* range poetry. I have already quoted McCord's letter to Malay to demonstrate how indeed Malay seems to have discussed Burroughs in his correspondence with him. Some have even pointed towards the obvious similarity between Hungryalism and the Hippie culture of the west. When confronted with this charge, Malay had refuted it by saying that such a comment can only be the result of poor research. In an interview to Sayed Samidul Alam during the 1980s, he specifies the distinction between the Hungryalists and the hippies. He says that hippies were essentially a sect of upper-class dropouts; they represented a counter culture. But the Hungryalists, while also representing a counter culture, had always been lower class people, subaltern to the elites, complete 'outsiders' to mainstream society. Their bohemianism, unlike the hippies, was not by choice, but by compulsion. Any charge of the Hungryalists imitating the hippies must be taken as the ploy of the bourgeois Bengali society to dishonor the movement. On one hand, Malay says, "I think of my ancestor, the lascivious Sabarna Choudhury, I must do something new, something different" ('Prochondo Boidyutik

Chhutar') – which is a total castigation of his ancestor. But on the other hand, there is a sense of unease associated with his own roots that he seems unable to justify to himself, an anxiety with respect to his present identity as the founding member of a subaltern movement.

A close reading of the Hungryalist poems often reveals that after all, poetry does not actually well out of the self in an orgasmic fervor. It is a careful construct, a cautiously developed pattern of words placed one against the other in order to shock the readers. Most of the Hungryalist poems, in fact, clearly bear marks of being a manufactured product designed to create a certain affect. Every single image seems a meticulous choice to be juxtaposed against another image. The Hungryalist objective of making every word speak for itself gives special attention to the vividness and audibility of words, and the poets, while they erect the body of poetry with these words are quite conscious of this whole process of rigorous creation. Malay himself confesses, “An idea keeps revolving inside my head for a few days. I put it down on paper in a trance. And only after polishing it thoroughly does it become poetry” (Ray 13).

So Malay, (who, in the Hungryalist manifestos ridicules poet and academician Buddhadeb Basu for his statement “any art is a construct and in that sense, artificial” (Roychoudhury, *Ishtahar Sankalan*) unwittingly confesses that he himself undergoes this same procedure of initial inspired passion and consequent thorough polishing and revision while composing, quite contrary to his propagated theory of making poetry the expression of bare, unmediated instincts.

The claim that Hungryalism is different from the Western hippie culture since the former propagates a system of alternate ethos and the latter, a conscious conflict with the Establishment, hardly seems convincing. In many Hungryalist manifestos and bulletins, the members of the movement repeatedly use words like “counter-canonization”, “counter-discourse”, “counter-

culture” etc. In each of their writings, it becomes apparent that the whole cult of Hungryalism has been formulated as a reaction or counter-action to the prevailing, established aesthetics. It is undoubtedly a confrontation, an act of calculated flouting of ‘norm’. But in this act of ‘writing back’ the Hungryalists often seem to use those very points of reference (e.g., counter-discourse can be formulated only in reference to that of the ‘discourse’) that they had planned to undo at the very outset.

Conclusion

According to Pradip Choudhuri, a leading philosopher and poet of the time whose work has been extensively translated in French, the counter-discourse of the Hungryalist Generation of Bengal was the first voice of post-colonial freedom of pen and brush (Datta Web). The majority of Bengalis having almost an instinctive inclination for Marxist ideology during the post-independence era, Oswald Spengler’s prophecy of doom and disaster was the first salvo of controversy which made the Hungryalists unacceptable to leftist media and professors for almost two decades. It was because of the individual genius of such authors as novelist Subimal Basak and poet Malay Roychoudhury that the barriers were broken. Subsequent researchers such as Dr. Uttam Das of Calcutta University, Prof. Nandalal Sharma of Chittagong University and Prof Howard McCord of Washington State University, however, have explained that the social commitment in the Hungryalist writers over the years alleviated the fear of political leftists (Mitra Web). It is the trace of nationalist feeling that has kept them in good stead and cut through shallow political controversies. Nevertheless, very often their nationalism itself has led to controversy as the Hungryalists have been criticizing politicians of all kinds. In spite of trial and harassment, the Hungry Generation has continued to produce and publish poetry and prose. Sharp, caustic, dark, hallucinatory, nihilistic, offensive, obscene, angry, piercing— these characterize the terrifying and

cleansing visions that the Hungryalists insist Indian literature must suffer. With a few exceptions, modern Indian literature is age old and tedious: pallid, otiose, and dull. It is timid and moralizing, and when it is not courteously realistic, it is idealistic and pointlessly and eternally philosophical (Mitra Web). But in the Hungry Generation, excluded from the academies and the literary aristocracy, the sense of urgency and anguish can be seen, for they, more than any other group have realized that there is possibly no hope for most indigenous literatures of India; that what lies ahead is disorder and disintegration. And it is through their movement that they had announced a declaration of freedom, of independence from any culture that is normative by compulsion and unaccommodating and snobbish by choice. There are indeed certain portions still unanswerable with regard to the combination of their theories and practice. Hopefully the Hungryalist poets, especially Roychoudhury himself, being still alive, would be able to shed some light on the murky issues discussed within the course of this paper and without, in the near future.

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