



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

REVOLUTION WITHOUT LIBERATION

THE HUNGRY GENERATION, LANGUAGE, AND THE REPLICATION OF PATRIARCHY

Dr. Debalina Ghosh

State Aided College Teacher

Department of History

Vidyasagar College for Women, University of Calcutta, Kolkata, India

Abstract: This article examines the Hungry Generation literary movement of 1960s Calcutta, arguing that despite its avowedly revolutionary posture towards bourgeois culture and institutional literature, the movement reproduced the very patriarchal constructions of gender and femininity it claimed to subvert. Drawing on the movement's manifestos, theoretical writings, and primary literary productions, the article demonstrates that the Hungry Writers' deployment of sexuality and obscenity as instruments of aesthetic revolt was deeply complicit with normative bourgeois constructions of womanhood, purity, and the phallogocentric literary imagination. The movement's failure to challenge gender hierarchies constitutes a structural paradox at the heart of its radical self-understanding.

Index Terms- Patriarchy, gender replication, avant-garde, *bhadralok* culture, literary revolt, phallogocentrism, bourgeois aesthetics, Bengali modernism, counter-discourse, Hungry Generation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Hungry Generation movement, inaugurated in Calcutta in the early 1960s, represents one of the most significant and controversial literary upheavals in post-Independence Bengali cultural history. Its principal figures — Malay Roychoudhury, Saileshwar Ghosh, Samir Chaudhury, Basudeb Dasgupta and others — proclaimed an uncompromising assault on what they identified as the repressive and exhausted values of *bhadralok* literary culture. Their stated aims were radical: to free language from the stranglehold of bourgeois morality, to restore to it what they called its 'organic vitality', and to inaugurate a counter-discourse against the 'conspiring assemblage of things' that sustained establishment culture.¹

What this article proposes to demonstrate is that these revolutionary ambitions were systematically undermined by the movement's own theoretical assumptions and aesthetic practice. Specifically, the Hungry Writers' understanding of both language and the female body was governed by precisely the patriarchal logic they nominally opposed. Their deployment of sexuality as a tool of literary revolt, far from constituting a challenge to bourgeois gender norms, entrenched those norms at the level of form and metaphor. In Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's terms, what we encounter in Hungry writing is a 'functional displacement' that fails to materialise — a gesture of rupture that inhabits, and is inhabited by, the very structure it seeks to displace.²

II.METHODOLOGY

This article employs a feminist discourse analysis of the primary literary and theoretical writings of the Hungry Generation movement, including manifestos, bulletins, anthologies, and critical essays produced between 1962 and 1975. The methodological approach is guided by the theoretical frameworks of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial feminist criticism, which together provide the analytical tools to identify the structural contradictions embedded within the movement's revolutionary self-understanding. Rather than evaluating the movement's political intentions at face value, the methodology foregrounds the gap between the movement's avowed radicalism and its actual discursive practice — specifically, the ways in which its figurative language, its deployment of sexual imagery, and its conception of the creative act replicated the very patriarchal norms it nominally opposed. The article treats literary and non-literary texts with equal analytical rigour, following Spivak's proposition that the tasks of the literary critic and the historian must 'critically interrupt each other, bring each other to crisis.' Close textual analysis of selected writings by Saileshwar Ghosh, Samir Chaudhury, and Malay Roychaudhury is placed alongside broader contextualisation within the social and cultural history of 1960s Calcutta. The methodology is therefore interdisciplinary, combining the tools of feminist literary criticism, cultural history, and post-structuralist theory. It does not seek to recover an authorial intention or to assess the movement's political legacy in aggregate terms, but rather to trace the specific sites within the movement's textual production where patriarchal logic surfaces, operates, and forecloses the possibility of genuine gender rupture.

III.THE AESTHETICS OF HUNGER AND THE FEMALE BODY

The Hungry movement's theoretical self-articulation consistently figured language as feminine and the creative act as masculine penetration. Saileshwar Ghosh, one of the movement's key theorists, described the relationship between the revolutionary writer and language in explicitly sexual terms: 'The communication through language must be like that of a man and woman united through their sex organs.'³ In another formulation, he compared bourgeois literature to 'a woman who has her vaginal membrane violated long ago but still pretends to be a coy virgin' — a figure that conflates aesthetic critique with the policing of female sexual purity.⁴

This figuration is not incidental. It is constitutive of the movement's entire aesthetic economy. Language, for the Hungry writers, was inert and docile, responsive to the controlling hands of the creative writer. As Ghosh wrote elsewhere, 'it is power that constructs language, just as patriarchy constructs woman for its own purposes.'⁵ The analogy, intended as a critique of both power and patriarchy, inadvertently reproduces the very hierarchy it names: language is woman, passive, awaiting the transformative agency of the (male) writer. The Hungry writer's task was to wrest this woman-language from bourgeois proprietorship and restore her 'purity'.⁶

The privileging of the 'pure' woman over the 'corrupted' woman of the marketplace is perhaps the movement's most revealing patriarchal gesture. Samir Chaudhury, in his foreword to the *Hungry Generation Rachana Samkalan*, lamented that Bengali literature had 'gone on providing entertainment for women and love-letters for the college-going girls' and declared the movement's ambition to set 'the genitals of language on fire'.⁷ The movement's proclaimed sexual liberation coexisted with a profound conservatism regarding femininity: the prostitute-language of the bourgeois was to be 'purified', restored to a prelapsarian wholeness. This is the logic not of liberation but of the restoration of patriarchal order.

IV.REVOLUTIONARY RHETORIC AND PATRIARCHAL UNCONSCIOUS

What is most intellectually significant about the Hungry movement's failure is that it is not a failure of intention but of understanding. The writers were, in many respects, acute diagnosticians of the cultural pathologies of their time. They correctly identified the class character of Bengali literary institutions, the repressive morality of *bhadralok* culture, and the insufficiency of both liberal humanism and socialist realism as aesthetic responses to the crisis of the 1960s.⁸

Their failure was, rather, a failure to comprehend how power operates within the cultural field — what Jacques Derrida calls the impossibility of subversion from an absolutely exterior position. As Derrida writes: 'The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures.'⁹ The Hungry writers, convinced that they could demolish the existing complex of capitalism, patriarchy, and religion with one revolutionary blow, were precisely those who did not suspect they were already inhabiting it.

In a poem titled 'Tin Bidhaba', Saileshwar Ghosh portrays *satya*, *shib* and *sundar* — truth, eternity and beauty — as three widows made pregnant by modern civilisation. The image is symptomatic of the movement's deep structure: civilisation is figured as a rapist, truth and beauty as violated women awaiting rescue. The political analysis is crude, but the gender imagination is revealing. Women in Hungry writing are consistently the terrain on which male ideological battles are conducted. They are never agents; they are always symbols — of lost purity, of violated ideals, of the bourgeois corruption that the revolutionary male will avenge.¹⁰

V. THE PARADOX OF THE PATRIARCHAL AVANT-GARDE

The Hungry Generation movement constitutes what we may call the paradox of the patriarchal avant-garde: a formation that aspired to total cultural rupture but was incapable of extending that rupture to the domain of gender. The movement's failure was not merely a political limitation but an epistemological one. Without a theorisation of gender as a constitutive axis of power — and in the absence of any engagement with the feminist theoretical currents that were, by the mid-1960s, developing internationally — the Hungry Writers' rebellion could only reproduce, in displaced form, the hierarchies they nominally opposed.¹¹

This paradox has a broader historical significance. It demonstrates that the discourse of rupture which permeated 1960s Calcutta — the sense of an epochal break with the past — was profoundly partial. The rupture was class-conscious but gender-blind; aesthetically radical but sexually conservative. The most incisive measure of any claim to liberation is its capacity to include women as subjects rather than objects of history. By this measure, the Hungry Generation movement's revolutionary credentials remain, at best, incomplete.

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