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How Real Is *Hunger*? Stories of a Disaster and Amṛtlāl Nāgar's *Bhūkh*

SUMMARY: The present paper looks at a fictional account of the Bengal famine of 1943 in order to locate relevant historical information regarding a specific period of time (Chatterjee 2014) and identify elements that would allow it to be read as an example of the ‘prose of the world’ in Ranajit Guha’s understanding of the term (Guha 2002). The narrative of Amṛtlāl Nāgar’s *Bhūkh* is framed through author’s recourse to his own experience, artistic and historical research, lived emotions and personal feeling of urgency to record the event. By repeatedly raising the claim of authenticity of his testimonial, Nāgar unwittingly draws us into an investigation of his relationship with the main narrator and the protagonist of his work. This, in turn, reveals the absence of clarity on the part of the author—he seems in two minds when discussing the role of the elites in making of the famine and is unable to either criticise or justify their failure to act. Further, the paper investigates social reality presented in the novel; the naturalistic, progressive aesthetics used in the description of the embodied violence of hunger; and the portrayal of the protagonist whose vantage point makes the story significantly detached from the ‘masses’ depicted variously as insects or savages, driven by hunger and hunger only. Principal focaliser’s upper-caste perspective allows him to feel superior to the less fortunate ‘skeletons’ and ultimately justify his survival by saving a seemingly upper cast infant, the action understood by him as equal to saving the entire human race. However, to my mind, the reality of hunger presented by the protagonist is conventional, self-centred, and lacks in-depth social criticism.

KEYWORDS: hunger, Bengal Famine of 1943, disaster literature, disaster narrative, Amṛtlāl Nāgar, *Bhūkh*, Hindi novel, authenticity in a novel, violent death

Introduction

In literary criticism of recent years, novels, and fictional narratives in general, have gained importance as valuable sources of relevant and reliable information on particular period by providing “glimpses of the life of the common people” (Chatterjee 2014: vii).¹ Dissecting Hegel’s twin concepts of the ‘prose of history’ and the ‘prose of the world’ and their rootedness in imperial Eurocentrism, Ranajit Guha moves beyond such constraints and adopting a postcolonial vantage point revisits history-writing in colonial Bengal. Quoting Rabindranath Tagore on the role of fiction in addressing the lives of people in their “everyday contentment and misery” (*ibid.*: 92), he explicates further, “everydayness is (...) necessarily informed, like historicity itself, by a sense of the past. The past which informs everydayness is usually one that is shared, hence public,” (*ibid.*: 93), the thus conceived public everydayness serving as the base for history-writing projects. Going back to Hegel and his terminology, Guha juxtaposes both concepts and writes, the ‘prose of the world’ is open to “all of man’s being in time and his being with others to write itself into that prose and enter it with all the multiplicity and singularity, complexity and simplicity, regularity and unpredictability of such being. ‘The prose of history’ shuts that out by its exclusive and selective approach to the past” (Guha 2002: 46), linked, as it is to the idea of state and state history. The novel, as a genre, Guha suggests, is rooted in the experienced ‘everydayness’ and involves developing a story contemporary to the protagonist with all that it might entail.²

¹ See Dalmia 2017, Guha 2002.

² Nāgar stressed the importance of his own experience for the story writing. He refers to Śaratcandra Caṭṭopādyaī, who advised him: “Whatever you write, write from experience” (Śarmā 1992: 12).

On the other hand, Vasudha Dalmia claims that novels are an elaboration of reality itself, “animating rather than expanding the current social code,” but their main objective remains to provide “information regarding matters of emotional life” (Dalmia 2017: 4–5).³ The reader needs to be aware that the story s/he is engaging with is a “product of certain social, cultural and political formulations.” Through the subjectivity, blurriness and the blending of fiction and history, the novel emerges as a “discursive space” (Padma 2009: 150) in which the narrator becomes the spokesperson and attests to its authenticity. It is her/his history, for which s/he must provide her/his justification and craft the narrative accordingly. Her/his experience acquires the centrality and s/he herself/himself takes this position to assert the authority of the beginning (Guha 2002: 55).

This paper examines novel written by a prominent and critically acclaimed Hindi writer, Amṛtlāl Nāgar (1916–1990), keeping in mind the author’s claim to provide an emotive, experiential, and current account of narrated events. Literary criticism describes him as an artist “sincerely interested in understanding and representing the lived history of the Indian people by relating the country’s social ethos and its urban traditions to the larger canvas of the nation.”⁴ He has also been portrayed as a master storyteller who stayed in touch with the social reality of his country and vividly depicted socio-political changes (Rāy 2005: 221). Gopal Rāy calls Nāgar “the most important novelist of the post-Premcand era,”⁵ mainly due to his literary interests being exceptionally vast and diversified.⁶ According to the critic, Nāgar’s writing represents the literary period called ‘The New Voices of Realism’ (*yathārth ke nae svār*)

³ Referring to Conte 1986: 112.

⁴ “bhāratīy samāj ke itihās aur śaharō kī saṃskṛti ko jāṭīy (rāṣṭrīy) jīvan se joṛkar lok samāj ke itihās ko gahrāī ke sāth samajhne aur sthāpit karne kī zid thān rakhī ho” (Caube 2016: 7). If not stated otherwise, translations by the author.

⁵ Nāgar mentions Devakīnandan Khatri, Śaratcandra Caṭṭopādyaī and Premcand as his biggest influences when it comes to short story writing (Śarmā 1992: 12).

⁶ “nāgar jī kā kathāsamsār bahut vyāpak aur vaividyaṇ hai. sac pūchē to nāgar jī is dṛṣṭi se premcandottar yug ke sab se bare upanyāskār hai” (Rāy 2005: 221).

when writers took great interest in the characters' psychology. The texts reflect the subjective mental states of fictional characters thanks to internal monologues. Both male and female characters are, simultaneously, 'complex and ambiguous,' but 'ordinary,' which makes it possible to focus better on their inner world and thoughts (*ibid.*: 126ff).

Dalmia sees Nāgar as an "enormously talented and productive author" of novels, the majority of which are set in urban surroundings (Dalmia 2017: 338). In his most acclaimed second novel, *Būd aur samudr*, published in 1956, Nāgar portrays social life in Lucknow and, through a detailed description of the language and life of the middle class and the city topography, secures for this book prominent place among the classics of the regional genre of the Hindi novel, the *āñcaliktā*.⁷ He is often called a 'quintessential Lakhnawi' having with time emerged as the veritable chronicler of the city. The genre within which his works might be best defined is *śahrī āñcaliktā* and he was particularly interested in bringing out the social perspectives of the young generation, often writers, poets, and authors (Śarmā 1992: 22–43). Describing Nāgar's oeuvre, Rāmvilās Śarmā claims that it is characterised by multiple plots, driven by dialogues and often, rather than one single hero, privileges the prevailing social milieu. According to Śarmā, the novelist uses a close-up technique, through which he pays attention to details, often body parts. Nāgar was well-read, including Marathi, Gujarati, Bangla, and English literature, and translated Western masters like Tolstoy, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, Balzac, Flaubert, Dickens, and Dumas into Hindi. Śarmā describes him as a follower of Gandhi, a socialist and a Marxist, who, however, unlike Premchand, offers in his writing little comment by way of suggesting remedies for social ills.

This paper proposes a different reading of Nāgar's prose: the alleged realism of the text is viewed as debatable; the narrative, rooted in personal experience, appears devoid of the later developed regionalism or psychological investigation. Nor does the text stand testimony to Devendra Caube's characterisation of Nāgar's novels as an analysis

⁷ See e.g., Madhureś 2008, Tivārī 2006, Mishra 1983.

of social history vis-à-vis that of the masses, or to Dalmia's emotional criterion. In his fictional response to the famine, Nāgar seems to be a mediator, a reflective survivor who, obsessed with validating his voice, loses the detachment required to view the subject of the story in a more objective manner. Trying to reflect on his own identity, Nāgar moves in and out of his main protagonist, who is equipped with a set of qualities one could also ascribe to the author, while simultaneously keeping distance when it comes to accepting even partial responsibility for the disaster.⁸ As a result, he fails at both—looking beyond the middle-class perspective and holding up a mirror of social critique.

In his lifetime, Nāgar authored nearly fifty books—novels, collections of short stories, plays, essays and criticism—published later as *Rācnāvālī* (*Collected Works*, 1992) by his son, Śarad Nāgar. His novel, *Nectar and Poison* (*Amṛt aur viṣ*), brought him the *Sahitya Akademi Award* in 1967; and his overall literary achievements were recognized when he was honoured, in 1981, with the Padma Bhushan. In the early 1940s, he had witnessed the traumatic ordeal of famine in Bengal, which led him later to confess, “the pen couldn't help but write.”⁹ *Mahākāl* (“Famine”/“Disaster”), first published in 1947, and then under the changed title, *Bhūkh* (*Hunger*), in 1970, was written between September 1944 and January 1946, while the famine still raged. The revision of the title was motivated by the realisation that “in the span of one generation (...) people have forgotten the Bengal famine and the title *Mahākāl* [‘Disaster’] was incapable of indicating that catastrophe for them.”¹⁰ According to

⁸ Nāgar once confessed that it was the urge to read Caṭṭopādhyāy's novels in original that motivated him to learn Bengali (Nāgar 1991a: 7–10). He read Caṭṭopādhyāy's books multiple times and was greatly inspired by him. They finally met in 1933 and Nāgar received some writing advice from him. A closer look at the narrative of *Bhūkh* and the focaliser of the novel reveals similarities with Caṭṭopādhyāy's style and particularly to one of his most famous characters, the title protagonist of *Śrīkānt*. Śrīkānt is a passive observer, never engaged, never judging; his narrative is flat and transparent. I am thankful to Judhajit Sarkar for this valuable reference.

⁹ “kalam apne-āp se vivaś hokar dauṛ cal” (Nāgar 2016: 94).

¹⁰ “bād mẽ lagbhag ek pīrhī ke antarāl ke bād nāgarjī ko lagā ki baṅgāl ke durbhikṣ ko logō dvārā bhulā diye jāne ke kāraṅ ‘mahākāl’ se us durghatnā kā saṅket nahī

the blurb on the cover of the English translation of the book, the novel “has been hailed by readers and critics alike as a modern classic of Hindi literature” (Nagar 1990).

Hunger is “perhaps the first and unique novel written by a Hindi writer from Uttar Pradesh about a village in Bengal.”¹¹ It depicts the Bengal famine that claimed close to three million lives.¹² People

mil pātā” (Śukla 1994: 12). The term *mahākāl*, although indicating a famine, generally refers to a disaster or catastrophe of an apocalyptic nature, else great or located in primordial time, and as such does not necessarily bring to mind any particular event.

¹¹ “uttar pradeś ke hindī bhāṣī lekhak dvārā baṅgāl ke ek gāv kī pṛṣṭhbūmi mẽ likhā gayā kadācit yah pahlā aur ekmātr upanyās hai” (Śukla 1994: 13). There have been other novels with a similar theme, the most comprehensive being Bhabani Bhattacharya’s *So Many Hungers* (1947) and *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1954). Others include Bijon Bhaṭṭācārya’s play *Nabānna* (“New Harvest,” 1944), Rāmcandra Tivārī’s *Sāgar, saritā aur akāl* (1966); Tārāsankar Bandhopādhyāy’s *Manvantar* (*Epoch’s End*, 1944), Bibhūtībhūsaṅ Bandhopādhyāy’s *Aśani saṅket* (“Distant Thunder,” 1944) and *Cintāmaṇi* (1946); Amalendu Cakrabartī’s *Ākāl sandhāne* (“In Search of Famine,” 1982). For more examples, see Bhattacharya 2020: 79. It is a known fact that Nāgar read Bengali, Gujarati, and Marathi novels, some in original, yet he does not mention reading or being inspired by any of the above works specifically, especially that most of them were published after he already started researching for *Hunger*. Nāgar’s theme bears some resemblance to *Dukhī-dukhī* (*Two Desperate Souls*), a short story written by Yaśpāl and published in 1938. The story is based on its author’s experience of hiding from the police as a wanted man after the Lahore Conspiracy Case of 1929. Alone and exhausted after a long journey, Yaśpāl arrives in Delhi hungry and broke. The fourth sentence of the story reads: “not a grain of food had passed my lips for four whole days” (Friend 1969: 20). Nāgar mentions his own four-day fasting in the introduction to *Hunger*; the main character of the novel is introduced when he is hungry for four consecutive days. Yaśpāl’s protagonist wanders around the city and feels compassion for other, even less fortunate than him. One of those is a prostitute, in whose room narrator finds himself by chance. He sympathises with her hunger and pain, but unlike her, he is saved by a police officer who informs his parents. Yaśpāl and Nāgar, both living in Lucknow, were well acquainted, visited each other’s houses, had the same friends’ circle and were members of the same literary organisations. Nāgar sees Yaśpāl as essential to the literary fabric of Lucknow and admires his early, revolutionary work (Nāgar 1991b, 1991c).

¹² Nāgar very often depicted historical events and set his narrative in the past, as well as chose non-Hindi speaking regions, like Bengal or Tamil Nadu, as settings for his stories. See Śarmā 1992.

of Bengal died on the watch of the colonial government which had criminally neglected its subjects and was unprepared to address issues such as the need to control prices, combat corruption among traders and government agents or provide quick relief measures. According to Janam Mukherjee, to understand the 1947 Partition and the 1946 Calcutta riots which made Partition inevitable, one must understand the famine of 1942–1946.¹³ The Bengal famine needs to be seen as central to the history of 20th-century India and an event of importance to global history. As Mukherjee further explains, the famine had affected different people differently and the dice were loaded against the poor and the vulnerable—certain families were able to profit from the tragedy, while lives of others became even more precarious. The government enacted policies that diverted food to the army and support staff in the cities, even as the death toll in rural Bengal kept rising. Churchill refused to import grain in large quantities and even allowed exports out of India.¹⁴ The price of grain rose tenfold until there was no rice at all in the village markets. What had not been seized by the government had been sold off to traders who hoarded the supplies. This resulted in an unprecedented rise in prices and a decrease in marketable surplus. Rice disappeared from the market and thousands of people died (Mukherjee 2015, Bhatia 1991).

Amartya Sen called the Bengal famine a ‘boom famine’—there was sufficient rice to feed everyone, but few could afford to purchase it. He also raised other issues such as the ‘boat denial’ and the ‘scorched earth’ policies, namely, the burning of all boats along the Bengal border or the forcible extraction of rice from the peasants for fear of Japanese invasion. In 1943, Bengal had had the largest rice crop production in recent history; hence, the famine was not the result of drought or other natural causes. Instead, it had to do with political economy of the times. It was not a result of an accident but an accumulation of economic changes

¹³ On other famines in Bengal, see Ghosh 1944.

¹⁴ On direct links of famine with the conditions of war and wartime capitalism, see Bhatia 1991 and Sen 1981.

(Drèze and Sen 2007). Large sections of political elite either politicised or communalised the famine and benefited from it. In the cities, supporters of the Congress, the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha had a hand in the collection and distribution of rice. Between 1943 and 1946, the famine became a field in which larger politics were played out. In these turbulent times, fortunes were made on the one hand and on the other, those in the countryside with little land, cash or paddy in stock were left vulnerable (Mukherjee 2015). Further studies have found other reasons for the disaster as well, including the collapse of social relations, colonial land policies, fascism, and imperialism.¹⁵

A number of these historical facts found reflection in Nāgar's novel, which is centred on Pācū Gopāl Mukherjī (henceforth, Panchu Gopal Mukherjee or Panchu), the headmaster of a village school, which admits low-caste children. He is the sole breadwinner of his extended, joined family. His brother, although married and father of two small children, is unreliable and has violent temper. Therefore, despite being the only politically engaged character, he is ridiculed for his behaviour and flaws. Nāgar presents the horrifying living conditions and scenes of social violence like snapshots from the warzone. Panchu gradually loses his school, family, and dignity. His family members either die, run away, or are forced into prostitution. Yet the novel ends on a hopeful note when Panchu picks up a newly delivered baby, whose mother he found dead.

Narrative rooted in experience: Author-narrator

The story is mostly focalised by Panchu and only occasionally by others such as the zamindar Dayal Babu, the trader Monai or Panchu's family members. All of them are anti-heroes and to a large extent—tendentious. Initially, one might consider Panchu as the alter ego of the author and his story as the author's story—he is young (Nāgar was around thirty when he wrote his first novel), educated and a Brahmin from an intellectual family which he supports financially.

¹⁵ See, e.g. Greenough 1982, Arnold 1988, Mukherjee 2010, Mukherjee 2015.

This upper caste perspective is evident throughout the novel. Panchu externalises himself from what is happening in town; he presents an outer gaze and speaks of himself, mostly in his inner monologues, as morally and intellectually superior. He almost never intervenes, even when the events escalate and ends up, for example, silently watching a massacre. He sees every starving human being outside of his own family as a repulsive, beast-like creature. As the only ‘intellectual’ character, he positions himself as an outsider vis-à-vis the indolent ‘masses.’ Recognising his own intellectual and moral superiority, high caste status, finer physiological features, and exceptional relationship to the external world, he sees himself as a ‘messiah.’

The reader is presented with author’s own re-telling of the famine and its harsh reality. Nāgar claims the authenticity of his testimony through several arguments—among them, the aesthetic and the emotional (by being an eyewitness and by his personal experience, which he describes in the introduction and in one of his later essays).

In the introduction to the 1970 Hindi edition of *Hunger*, Nāgar frames himself as an eyewitness and his story as an authentic, first-hand account written during and right after the events in question occurred. This historical argument points to the immediacy of his observations and the fact that his work was based on the material he had personally collected and the notes he had taken during the period from 1944 to 1946. He emphasises that the stories put together by him came both from the survivors as well as his own family members.¹⁶

He also names some literary sources that had inspired the book—old folk Rajasthani poems, one probably composed by D. K. Baṭādkar, filled with the mood of compassion, *karuṇa rasa*. The poems contain depictions of Marwaris as “dried up skeletons with sunken, hungry bellies” (*sūkhe asthipañjar mē pāpī peṭ kā gaḍdhā*) and “stony eyes” (*pathrāī ākhē*) (Nāgar 2012: 5).

¹⁶ This method of work is typical of Nāgar, who used to conduct interviews and research before starting to write. See Śarmā 1992.

Most importantly, in 1943, Nāgar saw famine playing out on the streets of Calcutta and experienced the mood of “revolting pity” (*bībhatsa karuṇā*) at first hand. As other city dwellers, he himself was confronted with the dissonance between the relative wealth of the city and the unimaginable poverty and suffering of the farmers and the urban poor. He emphasises seeing the tragedy with his own eyes (*apnī ākhō se dekhe the*) (*ibid.*) at the Sealdah Station and on the streets of the city.

The next argument is based on pure experience and may raise some doubts. The author initially admits that there is a big difference between a forced starvation and a voluntary fasting, but he still decides to recount the two four-days long fasts, which he underwent in 1941 and 1943. Nāgar recalls a feeling of “suffocation, powerlessness and rebellion” (*ghuṭan, bebsī aur vidroh-bhāvnā*) (*ibid.*: 6) during the first experience and of “more endurance and deeper understanding” (*sahanśakti baṛhī aur cetnā gahrāī*) (*ibid.*) during the second. The thought of famine was still fresh in his mind when he started making first notes and then, preparing the draft of *Hunger*. He explains:

At that time, my mind was so overwhelmed with the sights [seen] in Calcutta that I used to easily forget about my self-imposed hunger by immersing myself in the compassionate thought of the people. The first notes for this novel were written during this fasting.¹⁷

He recalls one more incident of “being hungry,” which he considers essential for his story, because “without writing down this experience, the story would have been incomplete.”¹⁸ When Nāgar was on leave from the Bombay film industry and came to Agra to work on his novel, he experimented with the fast to be able to narrate the experience of

¹⁷ “merā man un dinō kalkatte ke dṛśyō se itnā bhārā huā thā ki apnī icchā se āropit bhūkh ko janman kī karuṇ mē lay karke sahaj bisār detā thā. is upanyās ke arambhik noṭs maīne apne usī upavās ke daur mē likhe the” (Nāgar 2012: 5). The English translation by S. Jag Mohan published in 1990 as *Hunger*, does not include author’s preface and is at times inaccurate, thus, all translations from *Bhūkh* are by the author of this paper.

¹⁸ “apnā ek aur anubhav likhe binā bāt adhūrī hī rah jāegī” (*ibid.*: 6).

his chief protagonist better and felt badly tormented by unbearable hunger pangs (*mujhe bhūkh ne behad satāyā*) (*ibid.*). While writing, he used to feel the urge to eat all the time. “Later on, that aberrant state of mind stabilised by itself.”¹⁹ This indicates that Nāgar sensed certain equivalence of his own experiences and those of the survivors, suggesting a deeper emotional connection with the subject and even willingness to experiment with hunger.

The last of Nāgar’s arguments is based on artistic impressions. Nāgar mentions a meeting with a photographer, Śrīyut Cintāprasād, who had covered the Bengal famine extensively. The images, seen as artistic representations of the events, influenced Nāgar’s own vision (Nāgar 2012: 7). The naturalistic, apocalyptic, or even dramatic style of his descriptions is one of the strongest points of the novel.

Nāgar summarises his personal experience and motivation to explore the topic of hunger in his 1963 essay titled, “How did I write *The Drop and the Ocean?*.”

In 1943, the Bengal famine shook my mind. Two years earlier, during my unemployment days, I had to go without food for four days. Before that, my friend, Maheś Kaul, a film director, and I, used to live on half-empty stomachs for months. My personal experience started to connect my mind with something bigger. The hardships of the Bengal famine appeared to me as if it were a part of my intimate struggle. When I decided to write a novel about it, it became essential for me to understand the background of the famine in my own way. My own, that is, an individual’s experiences, linked as they are to the social, political, and psychological context, started to fathom the social [dimension] of hunger. Even when the famine was still raging, I made up my mind to write a social novel. Just like I had collected real stories of the time in order to construct the scenes and characters of the novel, I also noted down old stories and [accounts of] events from my family and neighbourhood. I still have the very register recording the memories of that time.²⁰

¹⁹ “bād mẽ yah manovikār svayam hī dūr bhī kar liyā” (*ibid.*).

²⁰ “san ’43 mẽ baṅgāl ke akāl ne mere man ko xkhūb jhijhoṛā; use do vars pūrv bambaī mẽ apnī ghanghor bekārī ke dinō mẽ mujhe cār dinō tak bhūkhā rahnā

The arguments chosen by Nāgar, which he believes justify and frame his narrative as an authentic story, are based on multiple evidence and are of a rather peculiar nature. He names his aesthetic inspirations and the works he refers to are realistic or naturalistic representations of suffering and starvation. Nāgar was a supporter of the Progressivism in Hindi literature which advocated direct approach and to-the-point depiction of reality, promoting difficult, marginalised topics and authentic language (Coppola 1988). He joined Pragatiśīl Lekhak Saṅgh (PLS) in Bombay and later in Lucknow, and was very well acquainted with writers like Nīrala, Narendra Śarmā, Rāmvilās Śarmā and Yaśpāl. He had a brief exchange of letters with Premchand, who, prior to his death in 1936, was a strong supporter of the agenda of the emerging AIPWA, and who, after reading one of Nāgar's early short stories, suggested he quit 'the poetic prose' style and concentrate on realistic, down to earth narratives. Nāgar admitted that this feedback had an enormous impact on his later literary style. He supported the idea that the progressive literary movement had proven that "only those literary works become effective, which, while staying close to society, go a step ahead by virtue of their creative vitality and thus give the whole society a new direction."²¹ He presented the first draft of *Hunger* during the three meetings of PLS and received valuable feedback and encouragement for further work (Nāgar 1992: 99).

paṛā thā. usse pahale adhpeṭ to māi aur mere mitr śrī maheś kaul (film nirdeśak) kā mahīnō tak rah cuke the. ātmānubhav kī kaṛiyā mere man ko virāt se joṛne lagī. baṅg durbhikṣ kī samasyā mere sāmne vyaktigat anubhav sī hī āī. jab us par upanyās likhne kā vicar kiyā tab akāl kī pṛṣṭhbūmi ko apnī tarah se samajhnā mere lie āvaśyak ho gayā. mere yānī ek vyakti ke anubhav apnī sāmājīk, naitik evam manovaijñānik pṛṣṭhbūmi kī kaṛiyō ke sāth us sāmājīk bhūkh ko bhedne lage. mahākāl pūrā hote-na-hote tak mere man mẽ ek sāmājīk upanyās likhne kī bāt pūrī tarah se spaṣṭ ho gayī thī. jaise 'mahākāl' ke citr aur caritr samjote samay māine vahā kī kathācē baṭoṛī thī, vaise hī apne ghar, paṛos kī purānī kathāō evam ghaṭnāō ke noṭs banāne lagā. un dinō kī smṛti mẽ merā ek rajistar ab bhī surakṣit hai" (Nāgar 1992: 150).

²¹ "sāhitya vahī prabhāvśālī hotā hai jo samay ke sāth-sāth calte hue apnī sjanātmak pratibhā ke joś se ek kadam āge baṛhkar pūre samāj ko naī gati bhī deī hai" (*ibid.*: 99).

Being in Time: Historicity and Social Reality

The last statement that Nāgar gives in the introduction to his novel is of historical nature and concerns the question of blame and responsibility. He states that the Bengal famine was not a result of “godly rage” (*daivī prakop*) but of “vested human interest” (*manuṣya ke svārth kā*) (Nāgar 2012: 6). He quotes testimony of an economist, prof. Mahālanvīs²², who claims that given the crop production that year, there was no likelihood of a famine building up.

During the Second World War, thousands of people died of dire hunger, strangled by the machinations of the British government, and self-seeking officials and traders. Thousands of housewives became prostitutes, thousands of children were sold like slaves for a handful of rice. The emerging picture, with the World War as the background, was this: one powerful man was snatching the [last] morsel from the mouth of the weak and after devouring it himself, had to face a third, equally powerful man, in a fight for life and death. This very act made that which was beyond the limit of possibility, possible. That very ‘impossible possible’ is inscribed in this novel.²³

Throughout the novel, one can find just a few references to the historical and social reality of the famine. This fact was denounced by the critics and may be seen as a flaw in the composition if one were to compare *Hunger* to other famine novels.²⁴ The book contains only

²² Nāgar is most probably referring to the work of P. C. Mahalanobis (1893–1972), famous Indian statistician who published extensively on the consequences of the Bengal famine.

²³ “dviṭī mahāyudh mē galā phāmsāe hue tatkālīn britīś sarkār aur nihit svārthōbhare afsar-vaipāriyō ke ṣaḍyantr ke kāraṇ hī hazārō log bhūkhō tarap-tarapkar mar gae, saikaṛō ḡṛīṇiyā veśyāē banāī jāne ke lie aur saikaṛō bacce gulāmō kī tarah do muṭṭī cāval ke mol bik gae. mahāyuddh kī pṛṣṭhbhūmi mē tasvīr yō bantī thī ki ek śaktīśālī puruṣ dūsre nirbal ke mūh kā nivālā chīn aur khud khākar tīsre śaktīśālī se mārne yā mar jāne kī ṭhānkar laṛ rahā thā. uske isī haṭh mē asambhav sambhav ho gayā. vahī asambhav sambhav is upanyās mē ankit hai” (Nāgar 2012: 6).

²⁴ See Bhattacharya 2020.

a few mentions of war and largely limits itself to mere reporting of certain singular events, which are not political either. The one-page long “Prologue”/“Kathā-praveś” mentions the occupation of Burma by the Japanese troops and the initial solidarity of the people, which, however, gradually fades away.

Panchu seems to assign part of the fault and responsibility for the famine to ordinary farmers. Initially, they were overjoyed to sell their crops at unusually high prices; they even sold grain meant for their own consumption. The surplus money was used to buy luxuries like ornaments and pay off some of the debts, but soon the luck changed, and the same goods had to be sold for next to nothing in order to repay the outstanding financial liabilities.

According to Panchu, it was the war that set off the spiral of disaster and the famine would not end as long as the war lasted. The newspapers did report the fact of rice being imported into Bengal and the Union Boards selling cheap rice to the common man, but that never materialised in the town of the novel as local powers highjacked the entire process. Panchu briefly mentions some ‘government policies’ and the evident determination of the British to torture Indians instead of letting them rule themselves. “They are making Indians cut the throats of their fellow countrymen. Then, they would get away by simply saying that they are busy dealing with the Hitler issue.”²⁵

The social reality during the famine, apart from bringing death across castes, was gender biased (see e.g., Kelleher 1997). Women suffered more and were given away to ‘charitable houses,’ sold to prostitution, abandoned, and traded for goods and services. Panchu supports this claim: “Almost eighty percent of women from respected families were compelled to become prostitutes in exchange for money or food, or in order to get away from the circle of constant hunger and anxiety, expecting to momentarily forget their sufferings.”²⁶ However, Nāgar

²⁵ “hindustān kā galā hindustānī se hī katvā rahe hai. bād mẽ kah dēge, ham to apnī hitlārī musībat mẽ mubtilā the” (Nāgar 2012: 113).

²⁶ “assī pratiśat bhale gharō kī bahū-beṭiyā majbūr kie jāne par, paisō yā khāne ke lālac se, athvā bhūkh aur cintāō kī uljhan se chūṭkar do gharī ḡam galat karne kī nīyat se veśyāē ho cukī hai” (*ibid.*: 94).

does not seem to be interested in finding female voices of the famine. The women in *Hunger* serve as a background against which the male protagonists speak and act.²⁷

Being with Others: Narrator-Protagonist

Right at the beginning, in the opening chapter, the narrator brings the reader face to face with the main protagonist and focaliser, Panchu. He is introduced as a knowledge bearer and later on will become the historian of the famine. He sits on his school veranda thinking about one of his former students who has just died of malaria. Panchu himself has been starving for four consecutive days—a fact that, after what we have read in the introduction, naturally associates him with the author himself. It is his fourth day without food so Panchu is feeling very weak, physically and mentally, and is experiencing dizziness. Soon, he discovers that termites are eating the wooden school furniture. Here, for the first time, the reader is confronted with the juxtaposition of ‘humans contra other creatures,’ much used throughout the book. Panchu, close to hallucinating, is worried that the insects might slowly start eating the humans, the first sign of the narrative hint at the theme of cannibalism, which appears later.

What’s so special about the human body—it’s all tender flesh and warm human blood. Suppose the termites develop a taste for it? What will happen then? Now, only six people are dying every week, but then it would be six hundred deaths, six thousand, a lakh, a million, a billion, a trillion... so many that you won’t be able to count... then it would simply be a deluge—a catastrophe!²⁸

²⁷ Later, Nāgar became famous for introducing strong female voices in his narratives, yet whether this was actually the case is a matter of opinion. See Śarmā 1992.

²⁸ “ādmī ke māś mẽ kyā rakhā hai—mulāyam gośt aur pīne ko ādmī kā garam-garam *khūn*. agar kahī dīmakō kī zabān ko caskā lag gayā! phir... to kyā hogā? are, abhī hafte mẽ 6 mautē huī haī, tab chaḥ sau, chaḥ hazār, lākh, das lākh, karōḥ, das karōḥ,

Soon Panchu starts comparing humans to insects—insatiable eaters, consuming and destroying everything around.

It is the fifth month of the famine and Panchu’s family, like the entire town, starts feeling dire consequences of short supplies. People are reduced to their bodily needs, their stomachs and hunger. Many commit suicide or escape to neighbouring towns hoping that they might somehow send some money home from there. Death starts hunting people who slowly turn into all-digesting, locust-like creatures that feast on just anything—“plants and leaves, grass and weed, dogs, cats, rats: the stomachs’ blazing flames consumed everything. Even then, the hunger didn’t cease—it returned every day.”²⁹ Panchu always refers to other people as ‘them’ and distances himself from their actions as if he were not a part of the events he considers ‘abnormal.’ His views are often contradictory as he has a tendency to generalise and hyperbolise. He sees his town and the goings-on there as an allegory of the fate of the entire nation at given historical moment but fails to apply this logic to his own behaviour and his privileged status of the village intellectual, very much a part of the elite, avoiding any engagement with or intervention into the politics of economic exploitation.

Every household in each and every village must be facing the same challenge of securing a meal. And a Monai in every village must be demanding similar exorbitant rates. People must be flattering Monai, giving him the highest blessings, begging him, and prostrating themselves before him. The hunger of the entire village must have already turned into the greed for profit and accrued in his stomach. People must be circling around him, wailing, cursing, shouting abuses. And the Monai of every village must be listening to people’s blessings and

arab, padma, śaṅkh, mahāśaṅkh—iske māne sab gintī khatam. tab to bas pralay—ekdam pralay!” (Nāgar 2012: 22f).

²⁹ “peṭ-patte, ghās-phūs, kutte-billī-cūhe kā mās, jo bhī milā, peṭ kī jvālā mẽ bhasm ho gayā. bhūkh itne par bhī nahī māntī-roz lagtī hai” (*ibid.*).

curses with the same indifference, unmoved, calculating his profit. Thousands of people would be dying around him.³⁰

He seems to empathize with people of Bengal but only briefly and most often concerns himself just with his own and his family's well-being but only if it does not damage his prestige. He sees his status as very fragile; it can be affected even by asking for too much rice from Dayal Babu, the local zamindar, to whose son he gives private tuitions. He is anxious that if he arrives for class too early, it will show him as needy and raise doubts about the nature of his work and reputation. Ultimately, he comes across as an upper-class snob, preoccupied with himself, although the narrator occasionally tries to put him in a better light. "Panchu's social consciousness, which had been strengthened by the political and social movements in the city, was reawakened. His heart brimmed with resentment for the upper-caste people."³¹ This reawakening consists mainly of accepting the low-caste children into his school, yet there is a separate sitting arrangement for the low and the high-caste students. His own family seems to be a contravention of the ideals he praises; the famine just highlights the existing issues—violence of his brother, sexual demands of his father, the subordinate position of women.

In the entire novel, only a handful of incidents actually take place, mainly because Panchu is merely an observer and not an active participant. The first event, when Panchu is moved to react, is when he sees dead children left in front of a hut while he is on his way from Dayal's house. He continues walking and witnesses a scene at Monai's shop, where

³⁰ "har gāṅv mẽ, har ghar mẽ, isī tarah bhāt kī samasyā hogī. aur har gāṅv kā monāi isī tarah behisāb dām māṅg rahā hogā. log monāi kī dukān par isī tarah k̄huṣāmad karte hōge, monāi ko svarag se bhī ūce-ūce āśīrvād de-dekar hāth-pāṅv jorte hōge. sāre gāṅv kī bhūkh munāfe kā lobh bankar monāi ke peṭ mẽ samā cukī hogī. log monāi ko gherkar rote hōge, koste hōge, gāliyē dete hōge. aur har gāṅv kā monāi āśīrvād aur gāliyō ko samān rūp se suntā huā, stircitt hokar baiṭhā-baiṭhā apne khāte kā hisāb jortā hogā. hazār log mar rahe hōge" (*ibid.*: 30).

³¹ "śahar kī rājnītik aur sāmājīk halcalō se prabhāvit pācū kī sābhayavādītā cetan ho gāi. uskā hṛday ūcī jāti vālō ke prati vidroh se bhar gayā" (*ibid.*: 38).

people have gathered in hope of food. He is determined to get home and feed his family with the little rice he got from the zamindar, but suddenly, someone he knows drops dead on the spot. He decides to help, but his good-heartedness is entirely accidental—he just cannot stand seeing any more corpses. Panchu and others carry the body home. The dead man’s friend notices that Panchu is carrying rice and cajoles him into giving it away. He convinces Panchu with these words, “Sir, as a Brahmin, you cannot take home grains that have been touched by a dead body, especially the body of a Muslim.”³² Panchu’s Brahmin consciousness forces him to abandon his only meal for the sake of prestige. Even after many days of hunger, confronted with the unfolding catastrophe, he is mainly concerned with his social status and religious purity.

Panchu alienates himself from the others by calling them ‘they’ and externalises ‘their’ characteristics, needs and behaviour. ‘They’ are always depicted as a crowd and a mass. He observes ‘them’ from a distance, which may influence his gaze and perception—always seeing ‘them’ as ants or other insects. He dehumanises ‘them’ and judges their moral qualities. He becomes all eyes, similarly ‘they’ became all stomachs and mouths. This external view has the potential of facilitating a more global look at the society and the elites at large, investigating one’s own responsibility and moral obligation in the face of tragedy. Panchu, however, fails to extend this critical view to his own person.

The creatures are compared to the environment, which has become skeletal, lifeless, and empty, just like them. Only Panchu seems to stand on high moral ground in the midst of this madness. Somehow, the omniscient narrator does not condemn Panchu’s thoughts or opinions. According to him, “his Bengali mind, having been tempered by the city’s political climate, was contemplating upon the slavish (and yet human) condition of the hungry and the naked folks, shackled right up to their necks by the chains of helplessness.”³³

³² “murdō se chuā huā anāj brahman hoke ghar kaise le jāoge māstar bābū, aur vah bhī musalmān kā murdā!” (*ibid.*: 75).

³³ “śahar ke rājnītik samāj mẽ paṅpā huā baṅgālī dimāg majbūrī kī zañjīrō mẽ gale-gale tak jakre hue, bhūkhe nañge gulām (magar insān) kī hālat par gaur kar rahā thā” (*ibid.*: 88).

Gradually, all social contracts collapse, but according to Panchu, it is the condition of the ‘respectable people of the middle class’ which is much worse than that of the poor. Communities are in disarray. We read, “Nobody bothered about distinctions of caste. Distinction between Hindus and Muslims had disappeared. Everyone was hungry (...). Everyone was sick and tired of themselves;”³⁴ Panchu views this development negatively.

The next dramatic event takes place when the crowd surrounding Monai’s shop is told about the cancelling of the promised government supply of rice and that the belongings, which they were hoping to barter for grain, will be returned to them; they will not be compensated with food or money. A riot breaks out and people pounce upon Monai “like hungry wolves” (*bhūkhe bheriyō kī tarah*) (*ibid.*: 98). The collective, hungry mob beats his wife and plunders his house, each man thrusting found eatables down his own throat. The attacking people have been enraged for quite some time, but their low social position and their lack of strength stopped them from intervening in political affairs. Now they have nothing more to lose and just laugh hysterically.

The raid stops once Dayal’s men arrive and shoot a few attackers. “Monai’s house was tinged with stains of blood. It became a cremation ground, full of dead bodies of the hungry. Out of seventy or eighty people, twenty or twenty-five became martyrs because of hunger.”³⁵ Panchu stands in the corner, an impotent witness to the gruesome scenes. He is afraid of how the situation might unfold but his main concern is not to be associated with the common people. This attitude seems absurd even to the narrator who on this rare occasion deploys irony in his description.³⁶

³⁴ “varṇ-bhed ko koī take ser bhī nahī pūchtā. hindū-musalmān kā bhed mit cukā hai. sabhī bhūkhe hāī. (...) darasal khud apne se hī pareśan hāī” (*ibid.*: 94).

³⁵ “khūn ke dāgō se monāī kā ghar raṅg gayā. marbhūkhō kī lāsō se monāī kā ghar śmaśān ban gayā. sattar-assī ādmīyō mē se bīs-pacīs bhūkh se śahīd ho gae” (*ibid.*: 98f).

³⁶ Nāgar wrote numerous satirical pieces and often adopted caricature in his writing, yet when Ramvilās Śarmā called him a “writer of humour and satire”

How could a middle-class, kulin Brahmin from a respectable family, and an English-educated headmaster at that, join those common people? He stayed aloof, taciturn when they were fighting for justice and when injustice came heavily down on them, he remained equally unmoved. He kept, however, exerting himself mentally. (...) Blind to his own cowardice, waves of disgust and pain did, nevertheless, well up in his heart at the thought of capitalist exploitation of the workers and the peasants.³⁷

Dayal, arrives at the scene dressed in immaculate clothes and orders his sitting arrangement to be set up among the rubble, where he starts eating and distributing pan next to the corpses. He seems entirely out of place at the scene and ends up complaining about the heat. His advice is to hide the bodies in the basement, behind the bags of grain. Both Dayal and Monai are portrayed as thoroughly vicious.

The next event takes place after ten days, when Monai organises the customary feeding of Brahmins to pacify the souls of the victims of the massacre. All Brahmins of the village show up, although in normal circumstances, they would not participate in a feast offered by a low caste. The guests who ate too much, that too, on stomachs empty for weeks, start collapsing in front of the temple and some throw up. Monai is immediately accused by Dayal of poisoning them. Dayal, who now takes the side of those sick, just to humiliate Monai and receive some recognition, wants to present himself as a noble friend of the people. The reader cannot but help to see parallels between him and Panchu. Both feel superior to other villagers, both are detached from reality, and

(*hāsya-vyañgya kā lekha*), he was immediately reprimanded by his Tamil colleague, saying that in *Hunger* “there is no trace of humour or satire” (*hāsya-vyañgya kī guñjāś nahī*) (Śarmā 1992: 28).

³⁷ “madhyavarg kā, kulīn, sadgrhastha, āgrezī parhā-likhā hedmāstar bhalā in choṭe logō kā sāth kaise de saktā hai? jab log nyāy ke lie lar rahe the, tab bhī vah dubkā huā kharā rahā, aur jab logō par anyāy kī mār parne lagī tab bhī vah vaise hī dubkā rahā. hā, dimāgī zor barābar dikhātā rahā. (...) apnī kāyartā ke prati acetan, pūjīpatiyō ke atyācār aur śram-jīvī kisānō kī dīn daśā ke lie uske man mē glānī aur duḥkh kī lahrē uṭh rahī thī” (Nāgar 2012: 99).

both have not the slightest understanding of the lives and struggles of the common man.

The narrator uses similar techniques to describe the thoughts of both men—hidden irony and lack of commentary. Dayal thinks he suffered enough to understand the poor people. Now he wishes to stand in the election and hopes that Panchu might write articles praising his good deeds and publish them in local newspapers. To convince Panchu, Dayal throws a party, to which he invites the secretary of the Union Board. The opulence of his three-story mansion furnished with a fountain, a mirror-glass room, electric chandeliers, a marble floor, Persian carpets, and a piano, seems perverse given the famine and poverty around. The men get drunk and Dayal and the official engage in a fight, which ends when Panchu proposes a toast to the dead. The men already had consumed tobacco-laced pan at the battleground at Monai's house and the present scene seems like an addendum to the previous one, introducing even more obscenity and profanity of human behaviour.

“It is the death of all the wretched folks that has turned into the intoxication brewing in the sparkling liquid of this glass, which is now giving us pleasure. Come! Let's drink once more to the death of thousands!,”³⁸ proposes Panchu. The two pick up their glasses and drink toast to the death of their countrymen. Panchu becomes an accomplice of the worse villains of the town. He does feel remorseful, but this does not transform into any response. The metaphor of eating and drinking in the name of the dead positions the elites, with Panchu as their representative, as ruthless oppressors failing at their leadership role. The last thing he witnesses, and again is reluctant to react to, is the bringing in of two village women, who will be used by the guests as prostitutes. Panchu knows them both yet all he can do is to run away. On the way home, he sees his beloved school on fire. The grain meant for redistribution and the sacks kept for profit by Monai's men were stored there.

³⁸ “marbhukhō kī maut hī is gilās ke sunahle pānī mẽ naśā bankar ham logō ko khuś kar rahī hai. āie, ham hazārō kī maut kā ek jām piē” (*ibid.*: 149).

Now people gather around the building, trying to save the foodstuffs. Panchu does not react, doesn't jump in to extinguish the fire or save anything, he just gazes at the total disintegration of reason and order. He blames himself for a brief moment. "It's my sin burning. My pride burning."³⁹ His response is to engage, to be an active part of society. In the face of famine and the total collapse of human relationships, this will prove difficult.

Panchu's own family seems to have lost its inner moral bearings and he does not want to witness its destruction. He decides to run away, as "home itself had become the centre of great turmoil."⁴⁰ He is a coward who sneaks out at night and abandons his entire family. Far from home, he hears the cry of a child who is still connected by the umbilical cord to its half-naked, dead mother. Panchu confirms the woman's death and proceeds to examine the baby and then the mother's appearance.

She didn't appear particularly skinny. It looked as if till recently she had had food to eat. She even had some clothes on. Her face and appearance indicated that she was from a respectable family. But which one? How had she come here? The whole history was lost with her death. (...) In the moonlight of the late night, Panchu noticed that the child was fair.⁴¹

Panchu decides to save the baby, but one might ask why was it necessary to mention child's complexion and mother's possible class identity? Would have the child been saved had it been darker or had the mother been less beautiful? What follows is a rationalisation of Panchu's previous actions. He contemplates the possibility that "it was only to save

³⁹ "merā pāp jal rahā hai. merā ahañkārah jal rahā hai" (*ibid.*: 117).

⁴⁰ "ghar hī mahān aśānti kā kēndr-sthal dikhāi detā thā" (*ibid.*: 210).

⁴¹ "bahut dublī nahī thī. jān partā hai, kuch roz pahle tak ise khāne ko miltā rahā hai. kaprā bhī badan par hai. (...) sūrat-śakal se bhale ghar kī hī jān partī hai. kiske ghar kī hogī? yahā kaise āi hogī? sārā itihās iskī mṛtyu ke sāth hī lupt ho gayā hai. (...) pichlī rāt kī cādni ke ujāle mẽ pācū ne dekhā, baccā gorā hai" (*ibid.*: 214). Translation of this passage is almost identical to that by S. Jag Mohan. See Nagar 1990: 157.

his life that the incident took place at my house and I had to leave” and that “it seemed like a miracle.”⁴² He is immensely proud of the power of his intellect, which enables him to understand that things do not happen by accident. “Even though thousands of people have died, Bengal is still alive today. Does this not prove the invincibility of life?”⁴³ He sees the fate of Bengal reflected in the fact of his own survival. He is like Bengal, he cannot die. He manages to turn infant’s survival story into his moral victory. He is fully convinced that he can be the saviour of society. Although he has not engaged himself in any of the struggles until now, by saving one life he might have saved all humanity.

What follows is a peculiar expression of self-obsession and narcissism.

I’ve conceived such a profound thought! Panchu felt like one of the great men. A messiah who has come to save the world, a prophet tasked with re-awakening the world, an avatar bringing enlightenment to the people—having saved an unknown infant, he is now sitting against the wall, contemplating the welfare of the people. (...) In this peaceful state of mind, the avatar, the prophet, the messiah looked lovingly at the child.⁴⁴

He decides to return home and hand the baby to his wife, who, he predicts, will agree to raise it, because “her heart is very tender” (*uskā hṛday barā komal hai*) (*ibid.*: 221) and “she has a spontaneous feeling of mother’s love” (*usmē mān kī mamtā sahaj hī utpann hotī hai*) (*ibid.*). The man starts thinking about a suitable name for the child, which

⁴² “śāyad is kī jān bacāne ke lie hī mere ghar mē vah kaṇḍ huā aur mujhe ghar choṛnā parā; ek barā camatkār-sā mālūm par rahā thā” (Nāgar 2012: 215).

⁴³ “lākhō admī mar jāne par bhī baṅgāl āj jīvit hai. kyā isse jīvan ajey siddh nahī hotā?” (*ibid.*: 216).

⁴⁴ “maīne itnī barhiyā bāt soc lī! pācū apne-āpko mahāpuruṣō ke rūp mē anubhav kar rahā thā. saṃsār ko bacānevālā masīhā, saṃsār ko jagānevālā paigambar aur saṃsār ko ālok denevālā avatār ek anjān bacce ko bacākar, divār ke sahāre baiṭhā huā lok-kalyān ke lie cintan kar rahā hai. (...) aur usī apūrv śānti kī chāyā mē avtār—paigambar—masīhā ne bacce kī or pyār-bharī nazarō se dekhā” (*ibid.*: 218ff).

again brings up the main question—‘What community does the child belong to?’

Panchu claims to have understood his previous mistakes. He didn’t try to fight the famine out of fear of losing his reputation. Now he knows that there’s nothing shameful about being hungry and promises that he will beg Monai for rice on behalf of all those who are hungry.

My hunger is subsumed within everyone’s hunger. It includes my family and this human. (...) I’ll fight against Monai and Dayal, against all those who have hoarded all the resources that can end this hunger.⁴⁵

He will lead a revolution towards utopia. “Our sacrifice, our hard work, and our revolution will make this child’s world fit for living, a world in which there will be no distinctions of rich and poor, of colour and religion, community and nationality. It will be one world, one society for all men.”⁴⁶

The question of aesthetics: The embodied violence

Throughout the narrative, the dominant motif is the half-dead, dehumanised body—a skeleton, a diseased and hungry creature, reduced to bones, deprived of dignity, morality, and personality. All hungry people become one unified, disfigured, anonymous mass of flesh and an object of violence. Their bodies are subjected to pain and torture, they stop being humans. Their in-between status causes them to appear disgusting and

⁴⁵ “sabkī bhūkh mẽ meṛī bhūkh bhī to śāmil hai, mera ghar aur yah ‘ādmī’ bhī to śāmil hai. (...) hā, māī laṛūgā. monāī se, dayāl se—un sab logō se jinke pās sabkī bhūkh ke sādhan chīnkar jamā hai” (*ibid.*: 221ff).

⁴⁶ “hamārā balidān, hamārī karmaṇyatā aur hamārī krānti is bacce kī duniyā ko insān ke rahne yogya banāegī, jismē amīr-ḡarīb na hōge, raṅgbhed na hogā, dharm-bhed na hogā, jāṭiytā aur rāṣṭriyātā na hogī—ek duniyā hogī, ek mānav samāj hogā” (*ibid.*: 222f). Translation of this passage is very similar to that by S. Jag Mohan. See Nagar 1990: 163.

turn into abject, rejected and feared liminal substances. This motif is played out on the cover of the 1970 edition of the book, which shows naked arms detached from the rest of the body and stretched out in a begging, desperate gesture as if the eponymous hunger took away their individuality and the body to which they belonged.

Bhattacharya calls this type of narrative “disaster writing.” It provides accounts of violence, addresses the suffering and tragedy, and helps ease the pain. Nāgar’s novel, as we have already established, does not offer any in-depth analysis or historical insights, although the author was writing very close to the event, which could have triggered a more analytical, to-the-point approach. However, “rigorous analytical engagement is not always widely found in famine novels” (Bhattacharya 2020: 57) because they lack the benefit of hindsight. What marks Nāgar’s writing is the impulse for documentation of the famine violence, documentation which is almost naturalistic in nature. Throughout the novel, he uses the juxtaposition technique—contradictory pictures of wealth and poverty are presented next to each other (*ibid.*: 58). We have closely analysed party scenes at Dayal’s mansion and at Monai’s house in the aftermath of the riot, where Dayal appears dressed up, with servants and luxurious goods in tow. Such images when contrasted with multiple scenes of murder, cannibalism, and display of famished bodies enhance the horror but, at the same time, raise many questions regarding ethical issues, humanistic concerns, and reflections on the suitable modes and language of representation.

The ending of the novel shows a utopian concept in which the entire society, including the middle-class main character, can embrace mansions along the anti-capitalist mode of life and rebellion against oppression. The author suggests that a new society can be built in the near future. What may strike the reader as somewhat peculiar is the aesthetic admixture of didacticism, naturalism, and behaviourism, with melodramatic style, and idealised happy ending. This amalgam glued together by the main character and the author’s initial claim for authority and authenticity seems incongruous. An interested reader

might start questioning the nature of the literary medium chosen by Nāgar.

The subsequent section of this paper is devoted to the analysis of Nāgar's aesthetics of death and violence, or more precisely, 'the embodied representation of violence.' We have already mentioned the fact that a dying or a dead body is the most common image in Nāgar's book.⁴⁷

Initially, it seems that death is distant and only "occasionally visits some families" but later it starts "dancing on people's heads" and hunger becomes indiscriminate. Like everyone else, death too becomes unsatiated, ravenous, and cannot wait to consume. The body parts of the people are exaggerated, all the "veins and bones have a peculiar shine," "they" are all "swaying creatures" (Nāgar 2012: 66). People are reduced to their bodies—skin and bones. Apart from "creatures" they are also called "ghosts" or "vultures." Their death does not resemble human death. Skeletal beings—dried up, wrinkled, with sunken eyes—accumulate everywhere, creating a surplus of dead bodies. God, "if he exists, created their mouths but did not give them food to eat."⁴⁸ Mouths, hands, and stomachs are their most visible features, emblems, making everyone look the same. They gather in spots such as shops, garbage dumps, and roadsides, creating concentration camp-like scenes of skeletons waiting for death.

The starving people stretch themselves on the ground or sit in small groups gossiping; they are all hungry and anxious, passing time as if they were "an ant crushed under a foot" or a man "concentrating on death" (*ibid.*: 88). At those near-death moments, they lose their human identity. They are "insects—without voice, without strength!." Their frightening, hysterical cries and shrieks mix with "the loud barking of the dogs" and together create "the terror of death."

⁴⁷ Death and decay are not a new theme in Nāgar's prose. His 1941 short story, *Marghāt ke kutte*, describes a burial site—blood, body parts, and a corpse. Some of his later works include suicide as a reoccurring theme (see novels *Būd aur samudr*, *Amṛt aur viṣ*, *Karvaṭ*).

⁴⁸ "agar vo hai to usne hī in sabō ke mūh bhī cīre haī, lekin inhē khāne ko nahī detā" (Nāgar 2012: 85).

Further into the text, descriptions of people on the brink of death become more and more graphic, contemplating decay and rotten, sick flesh, like in this passage depicting the crowd attacking Monai's shop.

Because of the itching, their skin was peeling off like chalk, exposing the ribcage. Some had swollen hands and feet. Their wounds were oozing all over. Bodies rotting with syphilis, gonorrhoea, and blood infections rubbed against each other.⁴⁹

This new, primordial, half-dead man feasts on the leftover food and piles of garbage where dogs, kites and human beings fight over in mass abjection. Such scenes take place during the feeding of the Brahmins—when people start leaving the temple, their health and disposition suddenly worsen. They have consumed too much, “they had eaten with such avarice that the food had become poison to them.”⁵⁰ “Some felt giddy and a large number of them were throwing up.”⁵¹ They collapse on the ground but “the most disgusting sight Panchu witnessed was when one famished man attacked another to lick his vomit” .⁵² It is a war fought with hands and jaws, if one were to hyperbolise this “shameless incident” (*beśarmī se bhārī hūi ghaṭnā*) (*ibid.*: 108). The scene, focalised through Panchu, a Brahmin, becomes a meaningful metaphor—for Brahmins are the only ones that are being fed. However, they are too greedy, consume too much and their bodies cannot digest the food. They are punished, but they have brought this misery upon themselves. Not one of them thinks of saving food for later or sharing it with the other

⁴⁹ “khāj ke kāraṅ khariyā kī tarah nikal ānevālī camṛī mẽ pasliyō kī lakirē camaktī thī. kaiyō ke hāth-pairō mẽ sūjan ā gāi thī. śarīr mẽ jagah-jagah se pānī ristā thā. garmī, sūzāk aur khūn kī bīmāriyō se sare hue śarīr ek-dūsre se ragarte (...)” (*ibid.*: 97).

⁵⁰ “logō ne is kadar badniyat hokar khāne kī kośis kī thī ki vah bhojan hī unke lie zahar ban gayā” (*ibid.*: 109).

⁵¹ “kaiyō ko cakkār āne lagā aur bahutō ko kai hone lagī” (*ibid.*).

⁵² “sab se adhik bhībhatsa dṛśya pācū ne yah dekhā ki ek kī kai par dūsarā marbhukhā use cāṭne ke lie baṛī āturtā ke sāth tūt paṛā” (*ibid.*).

starving. Those others will now consume what the Brahmins threw up, the ultimate ‘left-overs.’

The competition for food means that every man considers another his sworn enemy. People behave like beasts producing “pathetic, angry howl of a helpless wild beast being strangled to death.”⁵³ Famine initiates a reversed evolution, language fails and is replaced by a collective cry, and “the echo of that cry, moving like a saw, pierced through Panchu’s being travelling from his ears to his soul.”⁵⁴ Gradually, a new language appears, a language consisting of abuses and curses only.

Another scene of madness breaks off after the fire at school, where rice was stored. People dance, cry, laugh, and start cooking rice in the flames of the burning building. “People were dancing, getting dizzy and falling, rice spilling everywhere. They were picking it up grain by grain, snatching it from one another and eating; stuffing it by handful into the mouths—and bursting out in laughter.”⁵⁵ The scene turns into a dance macabre—carefree, devoid of anxiety or consciousness. Dying, skeletal men of different ages, gender, and classes unite around the fire in their last attempt at living.

After being roasted in the fire, like rice or sacrificial animals, humans too are ‘cooked’ and fall prey to vultures. Fire, which destroys the school, the fire of the stomachs, and the fire under the stove are linked with the scenes of the cooking people and eating them up. The case of Dinu is particularly macabre. He is obsessed with cooking something, anything when fire becomes available. In his case, the fire of the stove is replaced with the fire of his stomach.⁵⁶ He recently took

⁵³ “galā ghuṭte hue kamzor, majbūr jaṅglī jānvarō kā bebas gusse se bharā huā karuṅ ārtanād!” (*ibid.*: 96).

⁵⁴ “pācū ke kānō se lekar ātmā tak, us cīkh kī dil par ārā-sā calāfī huī gūj se bindh gā” (*ibid.*).

⁵⁵ “log nāc rahe the, cakkār khākar gir paṛte the, cāval bikhar jātā thā. log bīn-bīnkar, chīn-chīnkar khā rahe the; mutṭī bhar-bharkar cāval mūh mẽ rakhte the—hāsī phūṭī paṛṭī thī” (*ibid.*: 156ff).

⁵⁶ For more on fire and consumption of bodies in Hindi novel, see Kurowska 2020.

in the two little daughters of his deceased friend. Now he contemplates this macabre scenario:

‘When will these girls come in handy? If I cook them, joy will return to this house ... cook them!’ With gleaming eyes, he looked at Chand, and suddenly grabbed her neck and with great force pushed her face against the stove. She screamed. Rukiya started crying aloud. Pressing Chand’s face with both his hands Dinu let it burn on the stove. He needed to bring joy to the house again. Without joy back in the house, this disaster would never go away.⁵⁷

People start to realise that they are inevitably going to die and be eaten by jackals, dogs or one another. One incident of cannibalism involves Beni, who, on his way home, tries to shoo away dogs feasting on a corpse but stumbles and one of his hands touches the rotting body.

Scraps of flesh stuck to his hand, but Beni was not aware of that, neither did he care. He turned back and threw the chopper. The dogs ran away. Beni got up on unsteady legs. His eyes were bloodshot. His hand was smeared with blood and bits of flesh. There was human blood on his lips.⁵⁸

It seems like the flesh infects Beni—he loses his mind and turns into a blood-craving monster. Later on, he accidentally finds his chopper, picks it up and goes home. Now he is armed. The first thing on his mind

⁵⁷ “‘ye lar̥kiyā̃ kis dīn kām āēgī? inhē pakāo to ghar kī raunak lauteḡī... pakāo.’ camaktī huī ākhō se cānd ko dekhte hue sahsā barī zor se uskī gardan pakṛī aur zor ke sāth cūlhe mē uskā mūh jhukā diyā. cānd cīkh paṛī. rukiyā zor-zor se cīkhne lagī. dīnū donō hāthō se dṛṛhtāpūrvak cānd kā mūh culhe kī āg mē jalātā hī rahā. use apne ghar kī raunak cāhīe thī. ghar kī raunak āe baḡair akāl nahī jāegā” (Nāgar 2012: 132).

⁵⁸ “hāthō mē chīchare-chīchare lag gae, lekin benī ko iskī khabar na thī, koī parvāh na thī. gaṇḍāsā uṭhākar usne pīche ulaṭkar phēkā. kutte bhāge. benī lar̥kharātā huā uṭhā. uskī ākhō se khūn baras rahā thā. uskā hāth khūn aur chīchareḡ se sanā huā thā. uske hōṭhō par ādmī kā khūn loṭṭā huā thā” (*ibid.*: 187).

when he sees his beautiful, almost unconscious wife, is that he wants to save her from being eaten by the dogs. His solution is radical.

If he could cut her into pieces and hide her in his heart, she would be saved. Death would not be able to see her and dogs would not be able to feast on her. (...) He picked up his chopper. His wife's breathing was shallow. Beni thought he should hurry. Before she dies, he must cut her up, he must keep her safe before death overtakes her. (...) In amok, Beni chopped and chopped until he dropped down exhausted. His fists held bits of flesh. (...) This was a new experience. Seeing pieces of his wife's flesh in his hands, he felt elated. He brought his hands to his mouth. His eyes lit up even more. He thrust the pieces into his mouth and started chewing.⁵⁹

No one is spared the madness, even the most respected individuals resort to cannibalism and slaughter. The priest from Monai's temple decides to send his wife and sister to one of the 'charitable houses' for women but before that happens they hang themselves. For the sake of his surviving children, he decides to kill the temple cow. He manages to cut its throat but is so overwhelmed by the task that he decides to kill himself next. But first, he must take care of his children by giving them lethal oleander brew; afterwards, he runs away in despair. The man is capable of killing his wife and children but hesitates at the thought of calf-slaughter.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ "iske țukre-țukre karke ise kaleje mẽ chipa liyã jãe, bas yah bac jãegĩ. maut ise dekh nahĩ pãegĩ, kutte ise khã nahĩ sakẽge. (...) usne apnã gañdãsa liyã. sãhs uskĩ patnĩ kĩ chãtĩ mẽ barĩ dhĩmĩ cal rahĩ thĩ. benĩ ne socã, jaldĩ karnã cãhie. marne se pahle hĩ ise kãțkar kaleje mẽ rakh lũ, nahĩ to yah mar jãegĩ. (...) apne andhãdhundh joś mẽ vah lãś ko barãbar kãțtã hĩ gayã, yahã tak ki thakkar gir parã. mãs ke țukre uskĩ muțthĩ mẽ ãe. (...) use ek nayã anubhav milã thã. apne hãth mẽ patnĩ ke śarĩr ke țukre dekhkar benĩ ko nayã utsãh ãyã. vah apne hãth ko mũh ke karĩb lata gayã. ãkhõ kĩ camak barãbar barh rahĩ thĩ. benĩ ne un țukrõ ko apne mũh mẽ bhar liyã aur cabãne lagã" (*ibid.*: 189).

⁶⁰ We may suspect it is Nãgar's own Brahmin identity revealing itself in this scene. Another possible interpretation of this scene, which would also explain the very specific construction of Panchu's character, would be the author's attempt to ridicule Bengali elite and to depict them as immoral, repulsive and reactionary. I am immensely

In the course of the narrative, while the famine progresses, Panchu experiences a full collapse of faith, reason, social structures, governmental authority and relationships. People first start to behave like animals and then become murderers and cannibals. Finally, in Panchu's vision, they will all be destroyed. Only later does the finding of a new-born infant change his mind and turns him into a self-proclaimed revolutionary. Before that, he imagines the final and inevitable destruction of the entire human race; it will be wiped from the face of the earth and rightly so. The life Panchu strives for at the end of the novel and his promise of a real political engagement and social awareness seem idealised, and moreover, an unsuitable happy ending to a novel that is so vastly dominated by death and despair. At this point, catastrophic realism seems to turn into an idealised catastrophic realism⁶¹ somewhat contesting the classification by Rāy.

Conclusion

In *Hunger*, Amṭlāl Nāgar describes few days of March 1943 in a fictional town of Mohanpur. He frames the story as a personal, emotional, and experience-based account of events he was an eyewitness to or had heard of. The vision is presented in the progressive aesthetics of naturalistic and macabre style, describing human suffering, despair, cannibalism and human slaughter in a very detailed but matter-of-fact manner. The deadly reality represents the state of affairs under colonial rule and the condition of Indian elites—corrupt, wealthy, ready to utilise anything, including dead or living bodies of the people, and indifferent to the common man. The author, through his focaliser, but also

grateful to the anonymous reviewer, who suggested that Panchu might exemplify the moral failure of the self-centred casteist Bengali society. Unfortunately, I was not able to locate in Nāgar's non-fiction writings any statement or commentary that would support this hypothesis.

⁶¹ Idealistic realism, *ādarśvonmukt yathārthavād*, is a term used to describe the type of realism encountered in Premchand's writing, mainly because of a moralising tone, idealised characters and proposed solutions for social problems.

in his authorial introduction to the novel, seems to support this class-conflict vision of history and some of his statements reproduce or even reinforce the normative behaviour based on class, caste or ‘colour of the skin’ sentiments. His villains are conventionally constructed—as the landlord, the trader, and the administrative representative. These frames the mainstream narrative in which the ‘other,’ the ‘distant’ is responsible for all the evil happening to a simple but helpless man. But the novel fails to produce a ‘history from below’ and only reproduces common emotions associated with trauma, such as superiority, morality, and disgust, the narrative of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ which at the same time preaches humanism.

The protagonist, calling himself a messiah, saves a child, luckily a high-caste one, and promises to fight injustice and orchestrate a social revolution for all hungry. This is a vision of freedom under the known leadership of a middle-class intellectual, who has never engaged in any action and whose plan for saving humanity is to feed all. ‘They’ are, however, seen as a mass of brainless, helpless, dumb, sick, smelly, and rotting, zombie-like creatures that cause repulsion. The protagonist repeatedly highlights their moral and intellectual inferiority.

In *Hunger*, the blending of fiction and history reveals the absence of an in-depth criticism of the social order. Nāgar’s attempt to comment on the ‘event’ of famine fails in the face of visible confusion as how to shape, transform or de-heroicize his protagonist. Panchu’s internal monologues make him utterly repulsive. He is an impotent man who always finds a good enough reason to justify his own passivity. He is torn between prestige, duty, humanitarianism and self-obsession.

As an example of ‘prose of the world,’ *Hunger* engages with a particular moment in time and has a protagonist who speaks from experience but lacks the required humanity, Dalmia’s ‘emotional life.’ Ultimately, as V. Padma rightly points out, novel is a product of social, cultural and political circumstances, and thus always subjective (Padma 2009: 150). In this case, the story is narrated by a survivor who was not severely affected and who, by accident of birth and class, belongs to the guilty

elites. Hunger does not belong to everybody; it mostly affects the poor and unprivileged, leaving the wealthy untouched.

Hunger attempts to build an overarching metaphor for a nation hungry for freedom and people hungry for change but fails to do so due to the confused, passive character of the protagonist who always steps back once confronted with his own thoughts of moral and intellectual superiority. The final, artificial catharsis falls short due to its unrealistic, chauvinist, and caste-conscious approach. Consequently, the historical vision Nāgar lays in front of his readers, presented as his own version of history, indeed proves to be a self-centred, upper caste, and conventional representation, apocalyptic but detached from an average ‘hunger’ experience based on lived starvation and not on ‘experimenting’ with not eating.

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