POLITICAL PORTIONS: WOMEN AND HUNGER IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH ASIAN FICTION

by

MORGAN RICHARDSON DIETZ

(Under the Direction of Esra Mirze Santesso)

ABSTRACT

In “Political Portions,” I assert that women’s food preparation, consumption, and abstinence are political actions, regardless of their appearance in public or private spaces and despite their typical coding as mundane or even repressive. I use hunger as an organizing principle, analyzing examples of abstention in Anglophone literature and works in translation. I treat hunger both as an individual choice that may afford agency or signal rebellion, while also considering large-scale, systemic forms of involuntary hunger in fiction from the Eastern region of the South Asian subcontinent, West Bengal, Northeast India, and Bangladesh, among others. After an introductory chapter, Chapter Two locates instances of breastfeeding in literature, primarily Mahasweta Devi’s “Breast-Giver,” first establishing its traditional usage as a symbol of women’s exploitation, then arguing for a reconsideration of the breastfeeding trope: one that negates prior conceptions of breastfeeding and not only nourishes one’s family, but also one's self, as the mother circumvents hierarchical systems of cooking and food preparation. Chapter Three traces moments in which women “weaponize” food, eating, and even hunger itself, such as in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, ultimately arguing that these women successfully redirect food-related violence against both individuals and organizations that seek to perpetuate it. My

fourth chapter expands the definition of food weaponization set out in Chapter Three, placing it in the context of narratives centered around Bangladesh-India border conflicts and mass migrations, such as Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* and Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee.* I argue that food serves as the occasion for verbal and physical violence against these women, as well as their resistance to it; women's mutual food aid evidences a radical form of coalition building among women and a refusal to participate in government-sanctioned acts of food weaponization against migratory communities. Where my first chapter begins with the most personal of women's food experiences, breastfeeding, Chapter Five ends with both the most communal and most overtly political, arguing that instances of famine in literature, such as in Sulekha Sanyal's *The Seedling's Tale*, serve to catalyze women's participation in revolutionary political movements.

INDEX WORDS: South Asian literature, Contemporary literature, Women's and gender studies, Postcolonial, Food, Hunger

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

> *The weapon of fasting, I know, cannot be lightly wielded. It can easily savour of violence unless it is used by one skilled in the art. I claim to be such an artist in this subject.*
>
> — Mohandas Gandhi, "My Fasts"

Mohandas Gandhi's powerfully coercive use of hunger is a topic that hardly needs introduction. His fasts are well-chronicled, so infamous that a Wikipedia page entirely devoted to "fasts undertaken by Mahatma Gandhi" outlines the date, duration, place, reason, demands, reaction to fast, and result of each of the seventeen recorded hunger strikes he undertook during the Indian Independence Movement ("List of Fasts"). The "result" column ranges from information such as "Mill workers agreed to arbitration," an effect of Gandhi's 1918 fast, to "British Government withdrew the clauses in the Communal Award against which Gandhi was protesting," a result of his 1932 fast against the separate reservation of seats for depressed classes. These columns of "demands" and "results," indeed, the existence of the page in its entirety, speaks to the profound interdependence between food and politics. As Gandhi's body grew weaker with each day of the fast, his power of negotiation only increased. Hunger served as a locus of political power and, with each pang that he felt, Gandhi's negotiations grew more persuasive; the reverence of the masses meant his death would spell ruin for his political opponents. The image of the hunger striker is a captivating one, and, just last year,+ Muzna Rahman released the first monograph on hunger in postcolonial writing, identifying and complicating definitions of the hunger strike. But how might we understand the hunger

paradox—that one's negotiating power increases in direct correlation with the weakening of one's own physical form—when it is performed by someone with little political influence? When that person is already food insecure, malnourished, or anemic as a condition of their daily life, does the hunger strike remain a viable form of resistance?

The hunger strike is a compelling example of hunger in postcolonial theory and literature, as its success hinges on publicity. Yet while concepts of hunger, scarcity, and food insecurity are central to this project, I argue for the political power of *everyday* hunger, investigating hunger in both public and private spaces, as it is represented in literary texts depicting experiences of hunger both in isolation and within communities. I attend to hunger as a choice, as in Gandhi's abstentions, that may afford agency or signal rebellion, but also consider involuntary hunger, starvation or malnutrition, tracing each from the most personal of food relations, breastfeeding, to codes of hunger reified by household and familial structures, to community-level experiences with hunger, and large-scale, systemic shortages, such as the Bengal Famine of 1943. My case studies are principally taken from literature set in the Eastern region of the South Asian subcontinent, largely Bengali, Assamese, and Bangladeshi fiction.

By expanding a study of postcolonial hunger to include the everyday, we must also consider who completes daily food tasks in these texts: women. Though women are commonly involved in every stage of food production—from sowing seeds and tending crops, to harvesting, preparing, cooking, and serving—narratives centered on women's food labor are also rife with depictions of their hunger. In most nations, food insecurity occurs disproportionately among women, and the South Asian region largely follows the trend. A 2020 study in Southern India found that a third of women of reproductive age were anemic, while a 2016 study of undernutrition among Northeastern and Northwestern tribes found that married women were

twice as likely to be undernourished, 55.3% as compared with the 24.2% of married men (Finkelstein et al. 1, Kshatriya et al. 2). Moreover, women are less likely to own property, which further contributes to food insecurity; economic dependence on mostly male property owners leads to a lack of control over one's own nutrition.

Food and eating themselves have long been coded feminine "because of the strong relationship across cultures of women with food preparation and as producing food with their own bodies during pregnancy and lactation" (Lupton 109). Despite this long-held, if simplistic, association, little scholarly attention has been paid to issues related to women's experiences necessarily raised by discussions of food and hunger within postcolonial literature. Whether it is in food preparation and labor, mealtime hierarchies, breastfeeding, or more metaphorical issues of "edible" women's bodies, the role of women in food-based analyses of postcolonial literature and theory cannot be ignored. Men's alimentary experiences have already been a fertile topic for postcolonial literary scholars, as previous studies on Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*, or Romesh Gunesekera's *Reef* prove. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* alone has inspired many articles on the "chutnification of history," which connect food items with the preservation of a national culture, the hybrid nature of the subcontinent, or even his writing itself (Brown 79, Giles 182). Scholarship on each of the above texts gestures towards broader, postcolonial issues, largely removing food from the domestic and inserting it into the political and the national. This move is unsurprising; food preparation by men is consistently linked with the public sphere—restaurants, marketplaces, cooking competitions—while women's food labor is still largely associated with unexceptional, everyday, domestic cooking. As of 2019, less than seven percent of head chefs and restaurant owners worldwide are women, though they are consistently placed at the center of domestic food

narratives (Troitino). The culinary binary is clear: women remain associated with the domestic, private, and personal, while men's cooking, in literature as in life, is related to the public and political.

This disparity dovetails with the "traditional emphasis placed on […] confrontational" and, I would argue, public "struggles in social and political history writing" that often ignore "everyday negotiations of power that go on between the dominated and dominant on a more sustained basis" (Anindita Ghosh 3). Gandhi's fasts may be the most widely recognized hunger struggle, but they are exceptional circumstances, not reflective of the daily power negotiations over food. Like the authors of *Contesting Power*, I place "all forms of resistance within the ordinary life of power," attending to not only the public spectacle of hunger, but also the seemingly banal, domestic negotiations of power that occur, through the conversation of food, every day (Haynes et al. 2). In doing so, I assert that literary examples of women's food preparation, consumption, and abstinence have profound, political consequences, both exposing the material conditions of their repression, and, in many cases, offering readers a means to imagine how women might confront unequal power relations within their homes and communities.

Theoretical Foundations

This project draws from a network of feminist, postcolonial, and food scholars. Of the three points in this triangulation, feminist and postcolonial intersections are the most established. The single fact that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 1988 "Can the Subaltern Speak?" continues to be one of most widely-read works in postcolonial and feminist courses alike is a testament to their interaction. Feminist and food studies have also begun to interact productively in recent decades, their cooperation becoming increasingly common since 2000. Arlene Voski Avakian

and Barbara Haber trace the emergence of feminist interests within the field of food studies in their 2005 collection *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives On Women and Food.* Until recently, they say, "women's studies scholarship addressed domesticity, but cooking was ignored as if it were merely a marker of patriarchal oppression and, therefore, not worthy of attention" though women's pathological eating behaviors, anorexia and bulimia, were given some acknowledgment (Avakian et al. 2). Avakian's own *Through the Kitchen Window: Women Writers Explore the Intimate Meanings of Food and Cooking* (1997) was one of the first monographs to carve out a new sub-field: feminist food studies.

Though Avakian and Haber mention literature, it is chiefly to ask: can we consider cookbooks a form of women's literature? By contrast, Sarah Sceats' oft-cited *Food, Consumption, and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, published in 2000, generated discussion on food and feminism in a literary context, one of the first to bring the conversation into the realm of fiction. Building on Sceats' work, Harriet Blodgett, in her 2004 article on food in women's writing, offers a survey of the way women writers have utilized food "to speak of personal and social behaviors and psychological problems, art, sex, sexual politics, poverty, nationalism," and I would add, power, servitude, motherhood, family structures, economic conditions, social obligations, and any number of other signifiers (262). Indeed, just as Paul Vlitos concludes in *Eating and Identity in Postcolonial Fiction*, so too does Blodgett imply: "if food fascinates these authors, it is because the meanings of a meal refuse to be confined by a single imposed narrative" (Vlitos 276). But Blodgett's article also reveals a central problem with many discussions of food and feminism in literature: they are restricted to texts written in English.

As a burgeoning field over the last twenty-five years, the study of food has been relatively underrepresented in the larger scope of postcolonial studies. Initial intersections appeared as smaller sub-sections in larger works, as in the case of Homi K. Bhabha's discussion of the mythical status of the chapati in the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, in his 1994 *The Location of Culture,* or Jenny Sharpe's mention of the sugar boycott in the British abolitionist movement in her 1993 *Allegories of Empire* (Bhabha 288, Sharpe 27). In the last decade, collections such as *Food in Postcolonial and Migrant Literatures* (2012), edited by Michela Canepari and Alba Pessini, and monographs, such as *Tasting Difference: Food, Race, and Cultural Encounters in Early Modern Literature* (2020) by Gitanjali Shahani, have offered food as a lens through which scholars may consider issues of race, language, culture, and migration. Postcolonial food scholarship has also, in the last few years, begun attending to somatic associations between food and postcolonial identity. Parama Roy's *Alimentary Tracts: Appetites, Aversions, and the Postcolonial,* for example, utilizes concepts of disgust, abstinence, dearth, and appetite to scrutinize colonial identity-fashioning. Roy's singular chapter on dearth also epitomizes what changes when the broad topic of food studies in literature is narrowed to "postcolonial" literature: food scarcity enters the conversation. Introductory material on literary food studies, by contrast, tends to approach the question of food metaphorically and privileges appetite and excess over material studies of hunger or scarcity. Amy L. Tigner and Allison Carruth's *Literature and Food Studies*, for example, "does not put texts about hunger at its center," as the authors themselves signal in their critical introduction to the text (12). In their edited collection *Food, Faith, and Gender in South Asia,* Nita Kumar and Usha Sanyal also acknowledge the omission in their book: "if one speaks of food," they write, "one has to speak of its lack," a

subject on which they hope others will expand (22). Whether in connection with postcolonial studies, women's studies, or literary studies, scholars tend to focus on the *presence* of food.

A Theory of Hunger

Instead, I choose to focus on what has been largely absent from the scholarly conversation until the publication of Muzna Rahman's book *Hunger in Postcolonial Writing* in 2022: absence. Three disciplines are central to this dissertation on literature—postcolonial, gender, and food studies—but hunger serves as their connective tissue. However, because the study of hunger includes contributions from a range of fields, such as anthropology, medicine, history, biology, sociology, and political science, it is important to establish a baseline definition of hunger. First, hunger may be broadly categorized as either voluntary or involuntary, both of which appear in the literary case studies within this project. I use the term *voluntary hunger* to refer to the self-denial of food, whether it be for religious, political, or personal ends, to galvanize action in another person or to bring about a personal transformation, spiritually or physically. *Involuntary hunger* may be defined as an unintentional "inadequacy in individual dietary intake relative to the kind and quantity required for growth, for activity, and for the maintenance of good health" (Millman and Kates 3). Sara Millman and Robert W. Kates, who offer this definition in their 1990 "Toward Understanding Hunger," also "distinguish three levels at which a scarcity of food may manifest itself": the bounded region, the household, and the individual, with three corresponding terms for food scarcity at each level (11). A *food shortage* refers to large-scale provision failure at the regional level, such as a harvest failure that leads to famine (12). *Food poverty* is experienced at the household level and may be the result of a food shortage at the regional level or simply an everyday condition, despite food supplies being

available (13). Finally, *food deprivation* is experienced on an individual level, often despite available food supplies for other members of the same household (13).

The role of postcolonial studies in this discussion of hunger first becomes apparent at the regional level, wherein modern food shortages can often be linked to the colonial mismanagement of land, crops, and rations. As Richard D.E. Burton so succinctly identifies,[1] "colonialism is above all *hunger*" (Simek 6). At the most basic level, the colonial enterprise serves to enhance the well-being of the metropole, to sate the empire's growing need for resources, land, and labor, often at the direct detriment of those they colonize. In a dietary context, this means an increased variety of foods for colonial tables—"exotic" spices, fruits, sweeteners, caffeinated beverages—while the labor force required to tend and harvest these delicacies has been historically enslaved or indentured (Crossgrove et al. 221). In South Asia, European colonists "found a vast labor reservoir" and, by introducing new labor systems that undermined traditional food organization, they also introduced new kinds of famines, famines that did not, as in pre-colonial South Asia, arise from a lack of food, but rather from lack of entitlement to food on a household or individual level (226). Food became more plentiful in South Asia, as a whole, but individual households were more frequently unable to access it, and many scholars argue that "both the severity and the scope of famines increased after the imposition of British rule" (227).

This colonial-era shift in food access is only magnified for women. In his introduction to *Hunger Overcome?* Andrew Warnes writes that "hunger's cure" is cooking, moments when "resourceful cooks replenish a nutritional absence that characteristically implicates both racism and capitalism" (2). But how may we understand Warnes' precept in a gendered *and* postcolonial

[1] As translated by Nicole Simek in *Hunger and Irony in the French Caribbean: Literature, Theory, and Public Life.*

context, when cooking does not "cure" hunger because the cook is not entitled to the food she prepares? Twentieth- and twenty-first-century South Asian fiction abounds with examples of women who cook but remain hungry. Sohini, in Mulk Raj Anand's Anglophone novel *Untouchable,* prepares tea with milk and sugar as a breakfast replacement, but it is only her brother and father who enjoy it (25). Mokshada, from Ashapurna Debi's *The First Promise* (translated from the Bengali *Pratham Pratishruti*), is solely responsible for making sesame balls for Durga Puja, yet her widowed status bars her from eating the sweets herself (26). Female characters in this dissertation experience food deprivation at the individual level, as a result of ingrained household hierarchies, or at community or regional levels, exceptional circumstances of communal violence, mass migration, or famine. Some experience a combination of these, "because hunger and food insecurity often converge where marginal identities intersect" (Sachs and Patel-Campillo 400). First, food access is diminished by colonial redistribution of land, people, and food products, remnants of which survive to this day. Then, gender discrepancies in access to food may further determine individual characters' entitlement to household food stores. An already depleted pantry, the result of a human-made regional shortage, may create further inequality along gendered lines, when the women of a household eat smaller portions to accommodate their family members, a phenomenon called *buffering*. Among others, "Political Portions" explores literary examples in which male children are served larger portions than their counterparts, in which meat is reserved for men, in which malnourished mothers breastfeed until their bodies are left depleted, or in which women, upon feeding their husbands or children first, find there is nothing left over for them.

Though I consider hunger to be the organizing principle of this project, food itself will be critical to theorizing its role in literature. In fact, experiences of deprivation often inspire the

most mouth-watering, detailed depictions of meals, while narratives set in times, or households, of plenty may not fixate on food in quite the same, visceral way. Returning to Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, the following meditation on hunger exemplifies this tendency: "the Jemadar's mouth watered and his mind travelled to the great piles of cooked food which he had received on the occasion of marriages in the alleys of the city. There were fried bread and chingri puffs, vegetables, curries and semolina pudding, sweets and tasty pickles—remainders from the trays of high-caste men" (Anand 65). This daydream comes after a scene of disappointment, in which the Jemadar asks his son expectantly, "'Have you brought anything nice to eat?'" only to discover that Bakha had only scraped together a meal of two chapatis (65). Rather than face acute hunger, the Jemadar lapses into fantasy, imagining food in plenty. Such gastronomic daydreams are common to narratives surrounding hunger, and are not particular to postcolonial ones, but their existence underscores a central principle of this work: narratives of hunger are preoccupied with food.

In yoking together presence and absence in this project, I aim to achieve a largely materialist treatment of food. Scholarly discussions of food in literature often tend towards abstraction and metaphor, and for good reason: food seeps into every corner of language. It describes bodies and feelings, actions, reactions, and norms; someone might simultaneously have bigger fish to try, egg on their face, and too much on their plate. It is only natural that metaphor finds its way into scholarship surrounding food as well. A study of the ways in which chicken tikka masala represents the cultural hybridity of the Punjabi British cooks who created it, for example, is an interesting, fertile topic, but it is not the approach I favor in this project. Metaphor certainly has a place in "Political Portions"— in the next chapter, for example, where breastmilk both literally and symbolically sustains a central character—but I ground symbolic associations

in representations of the material reality of hunger, voluntary and involuntary, and at individual, household, community, and regional levels.

Methodology and Chapters

Adopting Millman's and Kate's level-system, I organize this project by gradually expanding from the individual to the region. As Megan Carney indicates in *The Unending Hunger: Tracing Women and Food Insecurity Across Borders*, "disruptions to eating and feeding register at both the personal and social levels" (16). The organization of this project keeps these two registers at the fore, broadly moving from the most personal and domestic examples of women's food preparation, labor, and consumption, to the most public and collective. While the first full chapter addresses the hunger of an individual, the next chapter considers her food access as a negotiation of her place within a household. Chapter Four centers women's mutual food aid within a community, a level of study that I have added to Millman and Kate's system. The final chapter details women's roles in mitigating regional hunger within political activist groups. By beginning with individual, bodily representations of hunger and consumption, and tracing cases to the household, community, and region, I indicate the ways in which food preparation, consumption, and abstinence have political consequences at all levels, regardless of their appearance in public or private spaces.

This project incorporates Anglophone literature and works in translation. Michela Canepari and Alba Pessini acknowledge the growing interest in the relationship between food and postcolonial identity "in particular linguistic areas," but also note that "very few works have actually brought together contributions focusing on different geographical and linguistic areas" (22). Their diagnosis remains true, as the few monographs and edited volumes that focus on the intersection of food and postcolonial studies largely focus on Anglophone traditions, or in rarer

cases, Francophone texts, such as in studies on Caribbean literatures. In my dissertation, I do utilize Anglophone texts, but, in the fashion of Arundhati Roy, I consider English just one language of South Asia. Roy writes, "I fell to wondering what my mother tongue actually was. What was—is—the politically correct, culturally apposite, and morally appropriate language in which I ought to think and write? It occurred to me that my mother was actually an alien, with fewer arms than Kali perhaps but many more tongues. English is certainly *one* of them. My English has been widened and deepened by the rhythms and cadences of my alien mother's other tongues" [Emphasis mine] (Arundhati Roy, "What is the Morally Appropriate"). Beyond English, I broaden my perspective to include other linguistic traditions, like Bengali or Assamese. I give heed to literatures that remain on the periphery of scholarly conversations in the US by considering local nuances in style within the broader scope of my argument.

My selection also presents a range of fictional modes that may fall under the expansive category of South Asian literature. Some are from authors living and working in the subcontinent, some are from diasporic authors, who divide their time among several regions, and still others are from authors born outside of the subcontinent, who consider themselves second-generation immigrants to the US or UK. However, the stories I include are largely set in Eastern South Asia or feature characters from this region of the subcontinent in which borders have been written and rewritten. In doing so, my dissertation is organized not along national lines, nor does it suggest that all literature from this region—with its various linguistic traditions, ethnic groups, Indigenous communities, and governmental bodies—are equivalent. Literature from areas such as West Bengal, Northeast India, and Bangladesh is particularly relevant because of the region's long history of food shortages, both of the everyday variety and the exceptional: the Bengal famines of 1770 and 1943, the Bihar famine of 1966, or the 1959 and 2007 famines in Tripura,

Mizoram, Manipur, and Assam. They range from the most anthropogenic—a result of inflation during World War II, British railroad construction (which disrupted natural drainage), and British cabinet refusals to divert supplies from the war front, as in the case of the infamous 1943 Bengal Famine—to those catalyzed by natural cycles, as with the Mautam famine of 1959 and the smaller-scale 2007 event. Mautam, which means death of bamboo, in Mizo, refers to the regular 48-year cycle of bamboo flowering, seeding, and death that causes an overpopulation of rats, who ravage crops, and eventually bring plague and famine. Though regional food shortages are just one antecedent for hunger, the most devastating of which belong to the previous century, their legacy remains in contemporary literature, manifesting as literary hungers both voluntary and involuntary, regional and individual.

Though the primary texts included in "Political Portions" are fictional, they represent a variety of sub-genres within this larger genre—from short fiction, to novella, to novel. By selecting a range of fictional modes, my intention is to dislodge "postcolonial literature" from its prevailing association with the novel. In her monograph *The Indian English Novel*, Priyamvada Gopal suggests that "insomuch as its very emergence was generated by the colonial encounter, the novel is an ineluctably postcolonial genre" (5). As Gopal then outlines, the rise of the novel's popularity in India during the nineteenth-century charts the same course as the increased use of the English language, and their association remains. In this way, my inclusion of multiple fictional modes and multiple languages reinforce one another; though my scope is limited to fiction, I must register an obvious, though important, observation: to focus on South Asian fiction does not mean to focus solely on the Anglophone novel.

The next chapter, "Maternal Hungers: The Politics of Breastfeeding," features short stories originally written in Bengali. In it, I argue that literary examples of breastfeeding

illustrate the unstable position of the mother figure, simultaneously treated with reverence, as a divine milk-producer, and with apathy, when she can no longer nurse. Mahasweta Devi's "Breast-Giver" is the principal text for this chapter. I first establish breastfeeding as a form of labor for the main character, that is, as an occupation that feeds her family for much of her life. Then, I investigate the food insecurity and isolation she experiences, when she can no longer produce milk. This hunger, coupled with the consistent sexualization of breastfeeding by male characters throughout the story, renders breastfeeding an ultimately ambivalent trope, both responsible for Jashoda's meals and their absence. However, I end the chapter with another Bengali short story, Purabi Basu's "French Leave," that takes the image of the breastfeeding mother in new directions. The main character circumvents her customary duties of food preparation, yet still nourishes her hungry child with breastmilk, years after her supply had been exhausted. Radha's refusals to cook and to eat establish the possibility for hunger itself to be resistant, even when performed in the private sphere, and her breastfeeding indicates that a mother's refusal to cook does not preclude her love for her children.

Building on Radha's food refusals, in Chapter Three, "Food Resistance: Weaponization of Eating and Cooking," I remain focused on the domestic sphere, widening my scope to consider the role that food plays in household negotiations of power. I identify direct references to food as weaponry, both symbolically—refusal to eat food on a plate is a "shot fired" at the person who prepared it—and literally—a punch thrown with a food-filled fist. I argue that food serves as the occasion for verbal and physical violence against women, as well as their resistance to it. Female characters rarely eat in classic, colonial-era texts, though I trace the way their food refusals establish a foundation on which later texts, from Neel Mukherjee's *A State of Freedom* to Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* and Aruni Kashyap's "Like the Thread in a Garland,"

negotiate gendered power relations through food. This chapter's final case study, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide,* represents a shift in the project's scope, from individual representations of hunger to communal ones. Through my consideration of Ghosh's novel, I introduce a profound, community-oriented form of hunger that binds women as they protest not only oppressive household structures but also government-sanctioned acts of food weaponization against underserved, migratory communities.

The novels central to Chapter Four, "Food on the Margins: Everyday Meals, Exceptional Violence," each concern migration across Northeast India and Bangladesh, Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja,* originally written in Bengali, and Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee,* written in Assamese. The conflicts depicted in each text leave women doubly vulnerable to hunger and assault, and I read the two authors as proposing a systematic link between them. Instances of hunger and assault are narratively codependent and, like the weaponization of food discussed in Chapter Three, function on both material and symbol levels: sexual assault is both rendered as a "devouring" of a woman's flesh and is often facilitated by her food insecurity. Beyond identifying the correlation between hunger and assault, however, I also suggest that Nasrin and Patangia Kalita each propose a fortification against the violence: networks of mutual food aid between women. Hunger functions to bond the women, who are solely responsible for feeding their families, and the food-based coalitions they develop in each novel have tangible, political consequences for their communities.

Women's food aid remains a central focus in the final chapter, "Canvassing and Cookware: The Role of Food in Women's Political Activism," but I widen the scope to regional-level, involuntary hunger: famine. This chapter pursues the role of hunger in political organizations, largely focusing on two historical moments: the Bengal Famine of 1943 and the

Naxalite Insurgency beginning in 1967, events linked by farmer agitations and mass starvation. I begin with a close study of Sulekha Sanyal's 1956 novel *The Seedling's Tale*, a *bildungsroman* following Chhobi as she gradually becomes more politically conscious, recognizing both gendered and colonial structures through their material consequences and eventually working in a famine relief kitchen. In the novels that follow, Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* (2014) and *A State of Freedom* (2017), decades have passed but the undernourishment of the Bengal Famine remains—skeletal descriptions beginning in famine-era literature reappear in Mukherjee's novels. Women remain involved in food preparation for political movements, even as their leaders devalue such labor as menial, often refusing to see women as political actors in their own right. I illustrate the power in women's food labor, not simply for individuals, or for contesting household hierarchies, as in Chapter Three, nor even for developing community among women, like Chapter Four, but for the mission of the very political movements they serve, even as their contributions are undervalued by their organizations, political leaders, and often, themselves.

Hunger offers a timely, and necessary, intervention in literary studies. As Deepika Bahri has argued: "the postcolonial hunger narrative ultimately showcases the alignment of power and foodways by asking us to consider not only who eats, how much, and in what order, but also whether the pleasures of food and eating are distributed equally, especially for women, immigrants, and other alimentary sub-citizens in the gastropolitical order" (Bahri 337). During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when I wrote the majority of this dissertation, food prices in South Asia surged (and remain steep), just as millions of people found themselves with reduced work, and schools providing free meals to children were shuttered: all the right conditions for a malnutrition catastrophe (Bhargava et al.). No doubt women, engaging in

buffering behaviors and with fewer resources as a result of job and wage loss, faced hunger disproportionately as well. “Political Portions” interrogates this disparity, laying bare the broken food systems and gendered structures that leave women and girls vulnerable to food insecurity at higher rates. But it also examines moments wherein women exploit the very individuals and structures that seek to profit from their repression: a woman who leverages her breastmilk to feed herself and her family, another who refuses emergency food supplies so she can distribute them to her suffering community, women who, facing hunger every day, create a system of mutual food aid amongst themselves, and who, by laboring in relief kitchens, not only feed starving neighbors, but create a women-run space for revolutionary ideas to flourish.

CHAPTER 2

MATERNAL HUNGERS: THE POLITICS OF BREASTFEEDING[2]

[2] Morgan Richardson Dietz. "The Politics of Breastfeeding in Northeast Indian Literature." 2022. *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry.* Vol. 9, no. 3. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2022.16. Reprinted with changes and by permission of the publisher.

Abstract

Breastfeeding, both in its literal consequences on a woman's body and its symbolic associations with attachment, highlights the simultaneously powerful yet servile position of the maternal figure. I trace this ambivalence in Mahasweta Devi's story "Breast-Giver," exploring women's literal and metaphorical hungers, arguing that breastfeeding often serves as a means of showcasing a woman's physical limitation based on her familial status as "feeder." However, I also argue for a profoundly embodied version of the breastfeeding trope, one that negates prior conceptions of breastfeeding as a "taking" and establishes it as a "giving" that not only nourishes one's family, but also one's self, as mothers circumvent hierarchical systems of cooking and food preparation. Ultimately, I both lay bare the interconnection between a woman's body and food-based labor systems and reveal literary methods for their extrication, through narrative instances of breastfeeding.

Despite their virtual universality, breastmilk and breastfeeding are topics usually relegated to the periphery of literature, alongside other unspoken, biological processes. However, one of the most widely recognized instances of literary breastfeeding, which appears in Toni Morrison's 1987 *Beloved*,[3] offers an introduction to this chapter's thematic threads. In a novel filled with visceral images, Sethe's stolen breastmilk is one of the most compelling: "'All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me [...] After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it'" (Morrison 19). Sethe, a formerly enslaved woman processing a lifetime of trauma, fixates on her stolen breastmilk in this recollection. Breastmilk both emphasizes her connection to her daughter, despite their separation, and epitomizes maternal nurturing, staving off the hunger so familiar to enslaved people, often fed just enough to meet a basic metabolic requirement.

The scene focalizes several contradictory notions about breastfeeding that are central to this chapter. Breastmilk is first established as a motherly commodity, precious for its literal and symbolic power to connect mother and child. But the imagery in Sethe's later retelling also suggests sexual assault; she is forcefully restrained, exposed, and violated. In several recollections, Sethe describes, with the level of detachment common to formerly-enslaved people, the various wrongs committed against her, but it is her breastmilk that Sethe comes to associate with the most egregious of these wrongs, a proxy for all the physical and emotional

[3] My decision to begin this chapter with Toni Morrison's *Beloved* acknowledges the great debt that scholarship on breastfeeding owes to critical research on Morrison's novel. The comparison between *Beloved* and "Breast-Giver" connects structural hierarchies across cultures and nations and, though these characters are enmeshed in different systems of oppression, slavery in the American, Antebellum South versus a waning feudal system in Bengal, their actions are motivated by several of the same factors: structural hunger and maternal connection. The exploitation apparent in *Beloved* necessarily operates differently in "Breast-Giver," as a result of its Bengali Hindu context; yet the "milk-taking" scene from *Beloved* provides a relevant starting point for understanding the economic and gendered structures that lead to Jashoda's eventual food insecurity, isolation, and death.

abuse she suffered. Moreover, Sethe's former status as an enslaved person, and the novel's initial setting on Sweet Home farm, cast the scene in terms of livestock. Sethe explains that they "handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses" (236-7). The boys see Sethe as chattel, a farm animal to be milked, and her milk, their birthright. Here, the long-established rhetoric of enslaved people as animal chattel is placed in the context of both motherhood and womanhood and, though the literary case studies in this chapter do not feature literal enslavement, they echo the triangulation Morrison establishes in *Beloved*—breastmilk as maternal connection, a reflection of a mother's own literal and metaphorical hungers, and an occasion for livestock comparisons and sexual assault.

This chapter will build on, then revise notions of breastfeeding as a form of "taking" epitomized by Sethe's stolen breastmilk, in literature from Eastern South Asia.[4] Mahasweta Devi's Bengali-language "Breast-Giver" ("Stanadayini"), published in 1979 and translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 1997, will serve as the keystone text of this chapter. Its central motif, breastfeeding, promotes exploration of mothers' literal and metaphorical hungers, as well as the hunger threatening their children, though breastmilk does not serve as a mechanism for dehumanization in the exact manner as *Beloved*, in this Bengali Hindu context, as comparisons between main character Jashoda and various deities suggest. Both a breadwinner for her family and nurturer to her husband and children, Jashoda, in Mahasweta Devi's "Breast-Giver," highlights the ambivalence of maternal experiences. Breastfeeding, both in its literal consequences on a woman's body, and its symbolic associations with both attachment and

[4] By using the term Eastern South Asia, I refer to the region of the South Asian Subcontinent, rather than a particular nation. Mahasweta Devi was born in pre-Partition Bengal, in what is now Bangladesh, before moving to West Bengal, India. Purabi Basu was also born in modern-day Bangladesh, called East Pakistan at the time of her birth in 1949. Though each author was born in Bangladesh, prior to its independence, Mahasweta Devi is typically labeled an Indian author while Purabi Basu is designated a Bangladeshi one. Therefore, I do not categorize their literature along national lines, but indicate a shared geographical origin, more specifically than "South Asia."

constraint, mobilizes this ambivalence, highlighting the simultaneously powerful yet servile position of the maternal figure. I argue that breastfeeding in Bengali literature often highlights a woman's physical limitations based on her familial status as "feeder," even as breastmilk in abundance is treated with reverence.

In this project's introduction, I supplied a standard definition for "buffering," a practice in which "parents reduce their food intake to ensure their kids eat," a common feature of narratives involving food insecurity (Bohn and Veiga 177). The analysis of breastmilk in this chapter also indicates a different kind of buffering, one that represents breastmilk as a resource that allows a mother to feed her children by proxy. Jashoda leverages her own body's sustenance, breastmilk, to feed children who have outgrown the milk themselves; this is the topic of the first section. While the second section remains focused on the role of women's bodies in alimentary discussions, it focuses on the relationship between breastfeeding and a mother's own experiences with hunger. I then turn to the sexualization of breastfeeding and the various ways in which a woman's breastmilk, already commodified in the case studies in this chapter, may be further diverted from its role in feeding hungry children. However, I choose to end with one topic not yet mentioned, which will serve as a bridge to the following chapter on food refusal: breastfeeding as resistance. In this section, I argue for a profoundly embodied version of the breastfeeding trope; one that negates prior conceptions of breastfeeding as a "taking" and establishes it as a "giving" that not only nourishes one's family, but one's self, as a mother circumvents hierarchical systems of cooking and food preparation.

Harriet Blodgett asks "are women empowered or *enslaved* by their role as food givers and, more broadly, nurturers?" [emphasis mine], and I suggest that a study of literary breastfeeding is a fertile starting point for answering her question (Blodgett 264). This chapter

rests on a central argument that breastfeeding itself, both as literal action and symbolic method of sustenance, is simultaneously an act of power and of constraint on the mother. Sarah Sceats argues that "mothers are overwhelmingly powerful but at the same time are socially and domestically disempowered by their nurturing, serving role" (Sceats 11). Breastfeeding epitomizes this ambivalence, adding a biological element to the social and domestic disempowerment Sceats identifies. It simultaneously offers a low-cost, sustainable food source for a mother's children, while leaving her own body open to malnutrition. In her 1986 work on dining and feminism, Eileen Bender establishes the "ambiguous role of women [...] apparently valorized through their service, simultaneously empowered and enslaved by the incessant demands of a hungry world for satiation" (Bender 316). Like Sceats, she sees a mother's role as "nurturer" ambivalently because her nutrition is linked with her children's in a variety of ways. In the context of breastfeeding, the connection appears straightforward: a nursing woman requires a higher caloric intake than one who is not. But the commodification of breastfeeding also leaves women open to exploitation, ultimately leaving them vulnerable to food insecurity.

Mahasweta Devi's story, as many previous scholars have noted, calls attention to the exploitation of mothers. For example, Rifat Rezowana Siddiqui argues that the commodification of Jashoda's body evidences a double-colonization by both colonial and patriarchal forces (Siddiqui 133). Although I agree that the commodification of Jashoda's body is a clear example of the exploitation of motherhood, I also attend to the ways in which breastfeeding affords Jashoda personal and economic autonomy, even if it is of a transient quality. Like Kinana Hamam, I explore the ways that "female agency in postcolonial women's texts overlaps with female oppression and suffering" (Hamam). Hamam's subtle and sophisticated analysis of "Breast-Giver" attends to this very discrepancy in bodily representation, "departing from its

monolithic depiction as a space of exploitation into that of agency." Jashoda's body is neither a symbol for exploitation nor of agency. Like any real person, she cannot be boiled down to a wholly exploited or wholly empowered symbol of women's experiences.[5]

Mahasweta Devi is perhaps one of the most fitting authors for a study on the interactions among women's bodies, politics, and literature, as one of the few contemporary authors whose political activism is just as robust as her creative oeuvre. Author of more than one hundred novels and twenty short story collections, primarily written in Bengali, Devi consistently centers the plight of marginalized people, such as women and tribal communities. For this reason, and because several of her works have been translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Devi's fiction is also commonly cited in scholarly conversations surrounding subalternity. A December 2011 interview with Madhurima Chakraborty underscores what Mahasweta Devi herself has established many times: she is committed to politically informed fiction. Chakraborty, who terms Devi an "activist-writer," summarizes a central tension between Devi and her translator, however, suggesting that "Mahasweta's fiction shows that truly political literature must be invested in exactly this coincidence of literary and political representation, and, consequently, needs to be rooted in the very 'representationalist realism' that Spivak denounces" as speaking *for* its subjects (Chakraborty 284). In essence, Mahasweta Devi argues that "activist writing must follow a realist impulse to understand, and subsequently represent, 'real' circumstances" (284). Mahasweta Devi understands social activism and realism in literature as intimately connected, one informing and reinforcing the other.[6]

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[5] For this reason, I also avoid the temptation to view Jashoda's story as a national allegory, in the style of Robert JC Young, or even Mahasweta Devi herself (Young 350; Spivak, 'Breast Giver' 77). Though it is a fertile topic for discussion, I prefer to treat Jashoda, and the other breastfeeding characters in this chapter, as embodied individuals, focusing on their materiality rather than their symbolic potential as versions of "Mother India" nurturing her citizen children.

[6] It is important to note that Mahasweta Devi's thinking here is indicative of her tendency towards non-fiction and reportage, late in her career. She suggests that writing about "real" events (i.e., events that someone, somewhere has

However, Mahasweta Devi is also careful to note that her stories are based on reality, but do not attempt to represent another person's real, lived experiences. To illustrate this point, she describes the origins of "Breast-Giver:" "I had to go to a Kolkata hospital, I forget for what. I met a woman there, someone who used to be a wet nurse, and had developed breast cancer. One time I went back to the hospital and she was no longer there, she had died. So that story, "Breast-Giver", is based on her. She was a real person. But, of course, the dialogue that I have in the story, she did not say that; I came up with the dialogue, with her situation, with her thoughts" (Chakraborty 286). Devi does literally write the dialogue for this character, "speaking" for her, in what Spivak might deem a dangerous blurring between political reportage and fiction. Authors who suggest that their characters are informed by real people, and their stories influenced by real events, according to Spivak, risk downplaying their own authorial role in the story's creation, representing themselves as "transparent" (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 70). But, according to Chakraborty, interviews such as this one effectively lay bare an author's own involvement in the story's creation. When Chakraborty pressed Mahasweta Devi on her idea that writers have a social responsibility, she suggested that contemporary writers have moved away from the idea of a socially engaged literature. She reminisces "It used to be – and your parents will remember this – that writers would have families and a family life. But they also had a sense of social responsibility. When calamitous things happened in our country, floods and famines hit, educated people would mobilize" (Chakraborty 285). Though she moves away from literary content in this quotation, Mahasweta Devi's concern with "real" problems is directly connected

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experienced) is directly linked to realism as a genre. By contrast, Margaret Atwood's now famous insistence that, "when I wrote 'The Handmaid's Tale,' nothing went into it that had not happened in real life somewhere at some time," also implies that Atwood considers her fiction to be informed by "real" events, yet her works are largely characterized as speculative fiction (Longmire). Though I disagree with Mahasweta Devi's conflation of realistic fiction with "real" plot events, her own desire to write politically engaged fiction establishes her short story as political by intention.

to her representation of breastfeeding, as she cites structural hunger as a primary example of the topics responsible writers should target. The topics at the center of "Breast-Giver" are nothing if not "real"—cancer, gendered labor, and breastfeeding—and material concerns drive the plot.

I place "Breast-Giver" in conversation with other texts that mirror Mahasweta Devi's own "real" subject-matter. Sarah Sceats indicates: "Where nurturing mothers are featured [in literature], the experience evoked most often that of the child, the grateful or resentful recipient, rather than that of the nourishing provider." She also admits that "there are, of course, exceptions" (12). The texts examined in this chapter are the exceptions, cases in which a narrator presents a parent's perspective rather than the prevailing perspective of the child. I argue that literary breastfeeding mobilizes contradictory notions about women's roles as nurturers, including the commodification of these nurturing qualities and its impact on a mother's own body, despite economic or emotional benefits early on. Though I focus on "Breast-Giver" for the majority of this chapter, several sections open out into a wider literary context, both to establish the relevance of conversations surrounding hunger in literature and to consider alternatives to Mahasweta Devi's ambivalent, and ultimately tragic, rendering of a breastfeeding woman. I end this interrogation of literary breastfeeding with another Bengali-language story, "French Leave" ("Arandhan") by Purabi Basu, which treats breastmilk as both symbolically and literally subversive, arguing for the power of the breastfeeding motif to supplant structural hierarchies of food and bodily labor.

Breastfeeding as Labor, Breastmilk as Commodity

The exact dates and details of "Breast-Giver" can be difficult to pin down, a result of Mahasweta Devi's use of a free indirect discourse that declines to differentiate between direct and reported speech. The story centers on Jashoda, whose husband, Kangalicharan, is left

without the use of his legs when the youngest son of a *zamindar*, the hereditary landlord of their village, accidentally hits him with his father's car. The story's initial events take place shortly after Indian independence, in the early 1950's, concurrently with the abolition of the *zamindari* system. Though the Haldars are never explicitly labeled *zamindars* in the text, their role as landlords and "protectors," and the slow dissolution of their family's power, all but seals this reading. The purpose of the *zamindari* system, which Jashoda and Kangali would have likely experienced in some form even after it was abolished in 1951, was to "provide possessors with an income:"

> This could derive from the land's products, as well as from holding back a share of the annual harvest, but also from other sources, such as the sale of milk. In this situation, agricultural production was not at all left intact in the hands of the peasants: it was creamed off by the land tax, with the government, central or provincial, taking the major share. The rest went to local landholders, with a small residue allotted to the villages collectively and from which corporate village life and its services were maintained. The actual cultivator was left with just enough to subsist on and with no reserve against famine. (Pozzo 54)

Given their participation in this feudal system, lower class tenants like Kangali and Jashoda, though Brahmin, would already be in a state of tenuous food security when Kangali becomes paralyzed at the start of the story. His disability means that he can no longer find work, and the family becomes doubly threatened by hunger, at both structural (feudal or semi-feudal) and household levels.

Though the Haldar family patriarch supports Kangali's family after his accident, they face food insecurity after his death, and Jashoda decides to find a position as a cook in the Haldar

household. While there to apply for work, Jashoda breastfeeds a crying boy to pacify him, and Mrs. Haldar instead offers her a job as a wet-nurse for the extended family's many children. During this time, a span of about thirty years, Jashoda and her family are well-fed, and Jashoda becomes pregnant twenty times to retain her supply of breastmilk. Her fertility and service to the Haldar family earns their veneration. But when Mrs. Haldar dies, years after Jashoda's supply of milk has dissipated, Jashoda's place in the household becomes uncertain. Knowing she will no longer enjoy the same privileges she had as a wet-nurse, Jashoda seeks out Kangali, who has been staying at the local temple, profiting on monetary donations, and enjoying the consecrated foods brought by devotees. Of Jashoda's twelve remaining children, several boys remain with Kangali at the temple, whereas the girls have been married off. Kangali and Jashoda argue bitterly at the temple and their relationship dissolves, at which time Jashoda determines to live the rest of her life as a kitchen maid at the Haldar house, isolated from both children and partner. However, it quickly becomes clear that Jashoda has developed breast cancer, which is left untreated until only the very final stages of her life. She dies alone in a hospital.

"Breast-Giver" places motherhood at the forefront of the narrative. Within the story's first lines, Mahasweta Devi reveals that "Jashoda doesn't remember at all when there was no child in her womb" ("Breast-Giver" 38). Motherhood drives both her personal and professional life, as Jashoda is employed as a wet-nurse for the Haldars and remains perpetually pregnant to meet the needs of the large family. But it is also a story characterized by hunger, thematically linked with maternity. Kangalicharan whines for food, just as his children do. Jashoda is surrounded by hungry children at work, as she nurses every Haldar child born in the family over several decades. When she returns home, she must also nurse her own hungry children. While employed as a wet-nurse, Jashoda's own dietary needs are met; her income provides food for

both herself and her family, and the Haldar family even sends her home with extra grain to keep her strength up. Notably, the narrator never mentions Jashoda's concerns for her future, though she must understand that a career based on breastfeeding cannot continue forever. This omission may be the result of Mahasweta Devi's characteristically sparse style, but it also mirrors Jashoda's own food insecurity at the story's outset—a lean, economic style of writing both elides any future-planning on Jashoda's part and exemplifies the very meagerness that catalyzed her decision to become a wet-nurse in the first place. Sentences like, "He and Jashoda eat rice," which references Kangali and appears in the first pages of the narration, are straightforward in content and simple in sentence structure, stylistic decisions that simulate the paucity of the family's diet prior to Jashoda's wet-nursing career (40). Mahasweta Devi even suggests that the great food insecurity Jashoda experienced at the beginning of the story meant that "she never had the time to calculate if she could or could not bear motherhood" or a wet-nursing career (38). Foresight is not a luxury she can afford, with a growing family and unemployed husband. After she can no longer bear children, no longer breastfeed, and after the Haldar family matriarch passes away, Jashoda's meals are harder to come by. As such, her breastfeeding labor is intimately connected with her own sustenance.

As South Asian historian Swapna M. Banerjee outlines in her 2010 article on non-kin female caregivers for children in Bengal, information on domestic caregivers is largely absent from official narratives and records, and even contemporary historical scholarship. Banerjee begins with a synopsis of "Breast-Giver," to suggest that the story offers a "far wider reach into niches of human life than conventional history that still fails to document and coherently reconstruct a wet-nurse's life in India" (777). Significantly for this discussion, Banerjee establishes the fact that wet-nursing would have been fairly common among upper-class and

upper-caste (though not Brahmin) households, such as the Haldar's, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Class plays a significant role in advancing the plot of "Breast-Giver," as well. Breastfeeding, described as a natural bounty for lower-class Jashoda, is an annoyance for members of the wealthy Haldar family, a labor below their care. Much of what contemporary historians like Banerjee can deduce about the lives of wet-nurses is mediated through the narratives of their employers or employer's children. "Breast-Giver," though fictional, is significant for its robust reconstruction of a working-class, non-kin caregiver's treatment throughout their life.

Because the story is largely focalized through Jashoda's perspective, we know that it is never her intention to become a wet-nurse. Instead, she asks the family's matriarch, "Perhaps you'll let me cook in your household?" (Devi, "Breast-Giver" 48). In response, Mrs. Haldar gazes "in charmed envy at Jashoda's *mammal projections* and says, The good lord sent you down as the legendary Cow of Fulfillment. Pull the teat and milk flows!" and, after consulting with the rest of her extended family, she offers Jashoda work as a "suckling-mother" (48-50). Mrs. Haldar links wet-nursing and cow-milking, a comparison that continues throughout the narrative. When Jashoda approaches the family with an offer to prepare their food, she instead becomes their food, siphoning her personal supply of breastmilk to the large Haldar family. Mrs. Haldar directly compares Jashoda with a cow, even relabeling her breasts as "teats," a term ordinarily reserved for cows' utters. It is nothing about Jashoda's personality or manner that inspires the cow analogy; their connection is simple: milk production.

This identification of domestic servants with livestock is not uncommon in literature from Eastern South Asia. Neel Mukherjee's English-language novel *A State of Freedom* (2017) offers an example of animalistic language that further reveals the status of the domestic servant. *A State*

of Freedom is a novel structured as a series of separate, though interconnected, stories and, like "Breast-Giver," is preoccupied with food and hunger. One conversation between the narrator and his mother, Mrs. Sen or "Ma," reveals her perceptions about her workers' labor, focalized through her opinions on their cook, Renu. After a dinner in which "every single dish [Renu] had cooked was wrong," the family discusses Renu's attitude towards them. Mrs. Sen says, "'This is what we have to put up with, these moods. At first I thought: you put up with the kicks of the cow that gives you milk; but recently things seem to have worsened'" (Mukherjee, *Freedom* 51). Like Mrs. Haldar, Mrs. Sen too compares her paid employee with a cow, but here the comparison is even further removed from any physical connection between the two. Jashoda and the cows both offer milk, but Renu is not a wet-nurse. The metaphor remains in the realm of food, as Renu does cook for the family, but Mrs. Sen's dialogue serves to degrade Renu, to place her on the level of an animal. She employs animal comparisons to widen the distance between herself and her employee. Moreover, there is some evidence that Mrs. Sen simply does not appreciate Renu's cooking because her combination of ingredients and spices is regionally specific, a cuisine that Mrs. Sen does not recognize as "proper." Ma's words not only otherize, but also denigrate Renu's labor, reducing it to the level of unthinking production rather than what is really is: an artful skill that requires training, knowledge, understanding of ingredients, timing, local traditions, personal tastes, not to mention memory, since illiterate Renu does not rely on recipes.

Indeed, Ma's description of Renu not only mirrors rhetoric surrounding domestic help in its bovine comparisons, but also in its depiction of Renu's ornery temperament.[7] Mrs. Sen

[7] In an 1835 travel narrative, Emma Roberts both compares Indian wet-nurses with cows and describes them as "expensive and troublesome appendages to a family," who "are too well aware of their importance not to make their employers feel it" (qtd. in Hassan 353). In essence, "the dhye, as Roberts presents her, is a potentially troublesome, demanding, and yet necessary figure who requires consistent management and demands a special space and

laments that "'This is what we have to put up with, these moods. At first I thought: you put up with the kicks of the cow that gives you milk'" (51). Significantly, her complaint does not appear in the context of wet-nursing, but rather food labor of another kind—meal preparation—which suggests that these conceptions of animalistic servitude extend beyond the limited example of breastfeeding. Yet this exchange, along with the depreciation of Renu's labor it implies, is perhaps left uncontextualized without reference to Neel Mukherjee's titular inspiration: V.S. Naipaul's *In a Free State*, whose meditations on servitude lay bare the intense preoccupation with servants' lives that appears in both "Breast-Giver" and *A State of Freedom*.

Naipaul's 1971 Booker Prize-winning *In a Free State* is, like Mukherjee's *A State of Freedom*, billed as a novel, despite its organization into five distinct sections, two of which are non-fictional. Beyond their structure and titles, though, both novels also meditate on the idea of freedom, often disrupting readerly expectations about the type of freedom in question. In one scene from Naipaul's longest story, "In a Free State," two acquaintances enjoy lunch with a third that they have, ostensibly, bumped into while driving from an unspecified African capital to the collectorate where they all live. Their conversation, like Mukherjee's above dialogue on domestic help, is about "servants," though here, it is delivered via the perspective of the driver, Bobby. As they eat, Bobby watches the others and thinks, in a moment of free indirect discourse:

> Something was wrong with Carter's molars, and he ate like a dog, holding his head over his plate and catching food in his mouth with every chew, at the same time giving a slight hiss, as though every mouthful was too hot. He finished a mouthful and made conversation. He said, 'I can't get used to this word 'boy.'' 'Doris Marshall tried to call

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importance within the household" (353). Narin Hassan's succinct description of nineteenth-century wet-nurses as troublesome but necessary, in the eyes of their British employers, finds a twenty-first-century counterpart in Neel Mukherjee's *A State of Freedom.*

> hers a butler,' Linda said. 'Isn't that typical!' Bobby said. 'In the end she settled for steward. It always seems to me such an absurd word,' Linda said. Bobby said, 'It offended Luke. He said to me afterwards, 'I am not a steward, sir. I am a houseboy'' [...] 'We are on to my favourite subject,' Carter said. 'Servants.' Bobby said, 'It always fascinates our visitors.' Carter ate. (Naipaul, *Free State* 134)

Like Mukherjee, Naipaul sets a conversation surrounding domestic servitude against the backdrop of a meal, prepared by "servants." Though one scene is set in Africa and one in Mumbai, India, each rest on the central irony that their meal is prepared and served by those they converse about, evidenced by Naipaul's attention to the minute details of their eating habits: Carter's teeth, head placement, and the sounds he makes while eating all call readerly attention to the physicality of eating. In Mukherjee's iteration, domestic help is also a common topic of conversation, the mother and son duo's own "favorite subject," as Naipaul's character puts it, though they "were mindful of steering away from the topic of the 'minutiae of servants' lives,'" in the father's presence (Mukherjee, *Freedom* 46). Their hesitation about discussing the domestic workers around Mr. Sen mirrors the anxiety present in Naipaul's characters' conversation surrounding the best names for their "servants." Like the various names Carter, Linda, and Bobby discuss for their domestic help, "boy," "butler," and "steward," Ma's comparisons between Renu and an ornery cow degrade Renu's status in the household. Even while compared with beasts of burden, Renu remains a preoccupation among Mukherjee's characters, simultaneously belittled by the comparison and yet focalized as a central topic of conversation throughout the chapter.

Like Jashoda, Renu is a character who cannot be easily categorized; though she may play the role of ornery domestic servant in this family's private drama, the narrator's visit to her

hometown sheds new light on her position: that of a breadwinner, just like Jashoda. Over dinner with Renu's brothers, the narrator learns that Renu paid for her nephew Dulal's education, saying "I am going to take care of his studies, I will work and earn money and put him through school" before moving to Bombay to work as a domestic cook, leaving her daughter in the care of her brothers (75). Renu and Jashoda are both the primary wage-earners in their families, and each make the decision to be separated from their children in order to pursue their careers as domestic staff. But where Jashoda is cast in the role of the divine cow for her plentiful milk production, Renu's comparison, that she "kicks" her employers, implies a kind of resistance to them. The narrator learns from her brother Raja-da that Renu "'earns a lot of money now. She works at a lot of places, four or five or six. Your home too," a revelation that suggests Renu is not solely dependent on any single employer (75). Where Jashoda relies on the Haldars for the majority of her life, which later leads to her food insecurity, Renu is never entirely beholden to any singular employer, a preoccupation of the narrator's mother, as she constantly speculates on Renu's life outside of their home.

The Haldar family is similarly preoccupied with Jashoda; her body, nutrition, and connection with the divine Mother are all Mrs. Haldar's own "favorite subjects." This preoccupation, alongside Mrs. Haldar's specific comparison between Jashoda and the "legendary Cow of Fulfilment" complicates the implied dehumanization of previous animal comparisons though, as her reference is to Kamadhenu, the bovine goddess considered the mother of all cows, no common farm animal (Krishna 81). Kamadhenu is a wish-fulfilling cow, who brings prosperity to her owners.[8] While the excerpt from *Beloved* that begins this chapter features an

[8] Not to be confused with Gau Mata, the holy mother cow, Kamadhenu is typically depicted with a woman's face and torso. However, both deities are associated with maternity, as Gau Mata is a cow described as a mother to humankind, while Kamadhenu is the mother of all earthly cows (Govindrajan 197).

animal comparison as justification for sexual assault and milk-theft, Mrs. Haldar's own cow comparison attempts to honor Jashoda's bounteous production. Although cow rhetoric might denigrate a wet-nurse's position in a plantation context, or even a colonial context,[9] here, the comparison also venerates her. Jashoda single-handedly nurses every child born into the large extended family, bringing "prosperity" to their home just as Kamadhenu might. Their devotion towards Jashoda is "so strong that at weddings, showers, naming and sacred threadings they" not only invite her but give her "the position of chief fruitful woman" as her "worth went up in the Haldar house" (Devi, "Breast-Giver" 52). Babies are seen running after her whining "Mother! Mother!" (52). Family members and other members of the staff also refer to her as "the Goddess," a likely reference to the lion-seated goddess, Durga, that appears in Jashoda's wet-nursing dreams and whose temple Kangali works in at the story's outset (53). As a wet-nurse, Jashoda is personally responsible for the growth and nourishment of countless infants in the family—their bodies are literally made from hers—and the Haldar family honors her, both with comparisons to maternal deities and material rewards, for her contribution. Her job title as a "suckling-mother," over the more common "wet-nurse," even indicates Jashoda's status in the household in another capacity. Though the root "suck" implies a "taking" from Jashoda, the hyphenated "mother" also indicates Jashoda's higher status as a matriarchal figure in the family. Her title exemplifies the ambivalence of her position.

[9] In their article on colonial wet-nursing practices in India, Narin Hassan offers this passage from an 1868 memoir by Florence Marryatt as indication of the typical Anglo-Indian sentiment: "'I have known several cases in India, where English children have been lost from the desertion, or constant change, of their 'amah'; and my only wonder is that Englishwomen can ever prefer the use of them to that of a cow'" (166). In this instance, not only are Indian wet-nurses compared with livestock, but it is to indicate that their employment is less useful, less detrimental than that of cow. Such common nineteenth-century conceptions suggest that British women's distrust in Indian "amahs" often manifested as dehumanizing the wet-nurses by comparing their labors to that of livestock.

During this time as a wet-nurse for the Haldar family, Jashoda earns the title of breadwinner for her own. The Haldars provided "her daily meals, clothes on feast days and some monthly pay," but also sent "grains-oils-vegetables" to Jashoda and her family regularly (50). Providing for her family fills Jashoda with pride and she begins referring to her job as a profession, imbuing her wet-nursing responsibilities with prestige; where a job is simply a task, a profession is a specialized vocation, one that places Jashoda at the head of her household. This gender reversal is affirmed when Kangali becomes the cook of their home. Concerned over Jashoda's supply of milk, Mrs. Haldar orders Kangali: "take up the cooking at home and give her a rest. Two of her own, three here, how can she cook at day's end after suckling five?" (51). Her formulation evokes the story's first scene, the all-too-common image of a tired man, Kangali, coming home from work to find dinner on the table. Reversing these roles, Kangali "took charge of the cooking at home" and "became an expert in cooking plantain curry, lentil soup and pickled fish" (51). More than simply telling readers that Kangali began cooking, Mahasweta Devi notes the dishes he became adept at. He does not merely "get by," but becomes an expert cook, leaving Jashoda free to pursue her occupation and the veneration that accompanies it. So long as Jashoda continues to bring home a steady income, Kangali is satisfied with maintaining the family that allows her to continue working.

However, this simple reversal of domestic gender roles also belongs to a larger historical tradition of divorcing a wet-nurse from her own family, in order to take full advantage of her reproductive years. Jashoda's inability to cook for her family, and general absence from their home, reads as another version of bodily bartering, which Sara Suleri Goodyear terms the "economy of the borrowed breast," though within a colonial context (Suleri Goodyear 81). Writing on wet-nursing in nineteenth-century mutiny novels, Sara Suleri Goodyear argues that

maternal loss is literalized by a bartering system in which, “the lactating Indian feeds another's child and loses her own, in order that the economic unit of her entire family may be equally fed” (81). In essence, the wet-nurse must neglect her family in order to feed them, even though, according to several historical accounts, “wet nurses, nursing mothers themselves, sometimes lost their own babies in order to nurture their Anglo-Indian charges” (P. Roy 15). Though employed by an Indian family rather than a British one, Jashoda’s time and body are similarly “borrowed” from her own children. Not only is she depicted as largely absent, a fact further evidenced later in the story when she learns her husband and children had been earning money at a nearby temple for years without her knowledge, but she becomes pregnant so many times that her own maternal connection begins to dull. Throughout her tenure as a wet-nurse, Jashoda becomes pregnant seventeen times, in addition to the three children she had prior to working for the Haldars, to maintain her ready supply of milk, even though “the maternities towards the end were profitless” (Devi, “Breast-Giver” 53). Despite her repeated miscarriages, Jashoda continues to become pregnant even at the latest stages of her career. We learn that Jashoda is the mother of twelve living children, by the time of her retirement, meaning that eight of her children were either miscarried or died in childhood. Mahasweta Devi implies that at least some of these children were lost at the expense of Jashoda’s wet-nursing career, as she continued to become pregnant even after they consistently stopped coming to full-term. Devi terms these pregnancies “profitless,” in a moment of heavy irony: though they did not result in children, Jashoda’s late pregnancies earned her several “profits,” wages, meals, and respect both within the Haldar household and her own family as “breadwinner.”

The cost of these “profits” first manifests in Jashoda’s mental health. Penny Van Esterik objects to “breastfeeding promotion that treats women as mere milk producers” and considers

breastmilk a “renewable resource” that ought to be tapped when it can (Van Esterik 520). Such efforts are “bound to fail” because “women are not canaries or cows or machines,” but women with autonomous bodies (520). Though Van Esterik is referring only to mothers feeding their own children, her point is exaggerated when placed in the context of “Breast-Giver.” A paradigm of productivity, Jashoda becomes pregnant twenty times to continue nursing the Haldar children over thirty years. Like a precious family cow, Jashoda offers the family the use of her breastmilk at the expense of her own health, but when she can no longer produce it, and after Mrs. Haldar dies, Jashoda is put out to pasture. She begins sharing a room with the other cooks of the house, cooking and serving where before she was served. It seemed to Jashoda that her “good fortune was her ability to bear children. All this misfortune happened to her as soon as that vanished” (Devi, “Breast-Giver” 60). Jashoda’s self-esteem is intimately tied to her motherhood, and to breastfeeding, as evidenced by the narrator’s description of motherhood as a “great addiction,” one that “doesn’t break even when the milk is dry" (60). Her retirement from breastfeeding signals a steep decline in her mental health as several members of the Haldar household describe her as increasingly confused once she can no longer satisfy her “addiction” to motherhood. No longer held in high regard by the Haldar family, who cannot use her breastmilk, or by her own family, who have begun feeding themselves through other means, Jashoda’s mental health deteriorates rapidly.

Jashoda’s physical health also declines after her retirement, as she discovers that her breasts, the very means of her employment, are also the location of her cancer. The irony is not lost on Jashoda. With her breasts now hard, red, and swollen, she recalls the way she “scrubbed her breasts carefully with soap and oil, for the master’s sons has put the nipples in their mouth,” and asks, “Why did those breasts betray her in the end?” (66). Jashoda cared for her breasts, her

"most precious objects," like a crafts-person cleaning, wiping, and sharpening their tools (50). As the main jobholder for her family, Jashoda came to see her body as a tool for provision, recalling her own earlier wish: "to become the earth and feed her crippled husband and helpless children with a fulsome harvest" (46). Jashoda nurses the Haldar children, who in turn keep her own family fed, indirectly fulfilling her desire to *be* the harvest that sustains her family. Indeed, this mixed metaphor, Jashoda's body as both the earth and the tool, suggests that the symbolism of Jashoda's breasts throughout "Breast-Giver" is unstable. In the sections that follow, I trace this symbolic slippage alongside Jashoda's own food security. Though her breasts begin as symbols of fulfillment and satiation, Jashoda comes to associate them with emptiness: a fact symbolized by the crater-like wound on her breasts, but materially connected to her own food insecurity; her stomach is empty, just as her breasts are both empty of milk, and eventually of flesh itself.

Jashoda's Hungers

In her monograph, *The Portrayal of Breastfeeding in Literature*, B.J. Epstein writes that breastfeeding may "contribute to 'selfworth for the nursing mother, whose milk seems to be the only material she can control' (2013, 1). [...] It is about the woman's feelings about herself, about the way she values herself, rather than how others value her. It is, in short, a form of empowerment" (24). Epstein's reasoning that breastfeeding may contribute to a mother's self-worth is certainly true for Jashoda, as her economic autonomy and status as a mother are dependent on her milk production. But, while I agree that breastmilk as a material entirely within the mother's control might be an empowering proposition, in the wet-nursing context of "Breast-Giver," it is represented as a substance for Jashoda's husband and employers to exploit. While wet-nursing, Jashoda understands her breasts as tools of her trade, which she must keep clean so

she may continue to feed her family. This very commodification of her body, which in turn leads to a sharp decline in her self-regard when she can no longer breastfeed, turns out to be unnecessary; Kangali had been easily supporting himself and their children. Confronting her husband, Jashoda laments, “Why did I have to worry for so long? You’re bringing it in at the temple, aren’t you? You’ve saved everything and eaten the food that sucked my body” (Devi, “Breast-Giver” 57). This language of “sucking” casts the scene in a parasitic light. Just one letter off from “suckling” in the English, Spivak’s choice to use the words “sucking” and “suckling” throughout the translation suggests a parasitic reading of breastfeeding. The children suckling on Jashoda’s breasts allowed her to feed her family, but, in this moment, she realizes her profession had actually been a “sucking,” her relationships with both employer and family are paratrophic, as they quite literally grew fat on her body. Where she previously viewed her husband as another mouth to feed, as helpless as her own children, in truth, he had been providing for himself for years. Jashoda’s status as breadwinner, and the resulting gender subversions, are immediately undercut with this information. Though Kangali serves as the home-maker, cooking and caring for children during the day, Jashoda’s power in their relationship has been simulated. Kangali’s exaggerated helplessness affords Jashoda more authority, more autonomy to leave the home. But, when it no longer suits Kangali to act as the dependent, because Jashoda will herself become his dependent, he secures meals in other ways. Though it is unclear whether Kangali’s actions are calculated, Mahasweta Devi does represent him as an opportunist—eating the food Jashoda brings home while earning at the temple all along—a characteristic that leaves Jashoda open to food insecurity by the very person she had supported throughout her reproductive years.

Feeling defeated by this new reality, Jashoda leaves the temple where her husband and children find their meals “to throw herself at the goddess’s [Durga’s] feet,” where she lays still

and fasts for three days (57-58). Jashoda meets the news of her food insecurity by leaving the very place her family has been sustained for years and decides to fast. In the context of Amartya Sen's conception of structural hunger, Jashoda's hunger is not a question of deprivation at the household level, but a question of her *entitlement* to the family's supply of food ("Poverty and Famines" 1). In Sen's most foundational description of starvation, he notes that hunger is not a question of there "being not enough food to eat," but rather of "some people not having enough food to eat," a characteristic that applies not only to large-scale disaster, like famine, but every day hungers as well (1). Though gender is not a major factor in Amartya Sen's formulation of entitlement, he does acknowledge that one's gender impacts access to food within a household, as it does for Jashoda. After her wet-nursing career, Jashoda is no longer entitled to the food wages the Haldars paid her with, nor is she entitled to food at the Shiva temple, as a result of her argument with Kangali. Then, when she breaks her fast, she only does so "in name" because she is socially prohibited from the food in the Durga temple, where she visits after their argument (Devi, "Breast-Giver" 58). Even when fasting, scenes that one might assume to be absent of food or eating, the question of Jashoda's food entitlement remains at the forefront of Mahasweta Devi's narration.

It is just after this "broken" fast that Jashoda decides to take her employment issues to Nabin, a local pilgrim guide working in the temple. Jashoda tells him: "I've carried so many, I was the regular Milk-Mother at the Master's house. You know everything. I've never left the straight and narrow," to which he responds, "But of course. You are a portion of the Mother" (59). Jashoda replies, "But Mother remains in divine fulfilment. Her 'portion' is about to die for want of food" (59). Here, Mahasweta Devi exposes the tenuous nature of Jashoda's food security with a wry humor. This interaction focalizes the simultaneously exalted and impoverished

position Jashoda is in, represented both in terms of motherhood and hunger. Nabin describes Jashoda's breastmilk as a symbol of the divine Mother, likely a reference to Durga, the lion-seated goddess whose temple he works in. Jashoda's ability to feed so many is, for him, an indication of her holiness. Yet her legendary lactation abilities, which earned her comparison with divinity, do nothing to earn Jashoda a meal now that she is no longer productive.

The irony of her food entitlement is perhaps most apparent in descriptions of the setting surrounding Jashoda's conversation with Nabin: in a temple surrounded by consecrated food. Jashoda, constantly compared with maternal divinity, faces dire food insecurity, while temple icons of the Durga are offered food each day. A customary practice among Hindu worshipers, those visiting a temple or other holy site often bring along an offering for the gods in the form of vegetarian food, often fruits or other raw foodstuffs. It is common to find several third-party food stalls crop up in a temple's vicinity, where visitors can purchase foods to offer to the gods, known as *naivedya* (Khare 152). Once offered to the divine, the food becomes *prasad*, consecrated food, and it does not often go to waste, but is rather consumed by temple Brahmins and other employees associated with the temple. Kangali takes advantage of this system, Jashoda discovers from Nabin, who has heard that her husbands and sons, "call pilgrims, eat temple food, stretch out in the courtyard" having established their presence in the nearby Shiva temple (Devi, "Breast-Giver" 56). Jashoda's youngest son tells her that he, his brothers, and his father enjoy the *prasad*, or "holy food," every day, but because of her recent fall-out with Kangali, Jashoda knows the food will not be available to her (58). This temple *prasad* focalizes gendered issues of entitlement. Though Jashoda is told, throughout her life, that she is an incarnation of "the legendary Cow of Fulfillment," of the "Lion-seated," or "the Goddess," her husband and sons are the ones who enjoy temple *prasad*. Her response is a play on words: the divine Mother's

"'portion' is about to die for want of food" (59). Jashoda is a "portion,"—a morsel, a helping—of the Mother, and her connection with divinity is presented in terms of her own ingestion. As she is "about to die for want of food," Jashoda herself is a "portion" to be consumed, not to consume herself. This moment even parallels Jashoda's first interaction with Mrs. Haldar, in which she came to offer her services in food preparation and instead, herself became the food. Her power, as the consistent connections with divinity might suggest, is only in name, no longer translating into material food items once she is unable to breastfeed. Jashoda's motherhood, and association divinity, is intimately connected with her breastfeeding and evidences a perilous slippage between satiated deity and a starving person.

Jashoda's transition away from her identity as "feeder" may also be traced back to traditional classifications in Hinduism that distinguish between "eating" and "feeding." According to Manuel Moreno, as quoted by R.S. Khare, a classic example of this categorization comes from the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, "namely that giving food away is the only way of preserving it, and thus preserves life itself" (qtd. in Khare 148). Feeding has therefore become more important in many Hindu cultural practices than eating (148). In this context, Jashoda's retirement from wet-nursing is a degradation from feeder to fed, from a divine giver to a mere taker. Even though Kangalicharan and the Haldars had been "taking" from Jashoda for the previous thirty years, when Jashoda is demoted from feeder to fed, she is no longer food secure. The great irony in Jashoda's change in life situation is that the moment at which she is no longer a divine feeder, when she becomes the "fed," is the moment that she can no longer find reliable meals.

Returning to the Haldar household, Jashoda accepts a demotion in status, now expected to wash dishes or prepare meals alongside the women who used to venerate her, who "used to

wash her feet and drink the water" hoping that some of her divine energy would be transferred to them (Devi, "Breast-Giver" 61). Now she "cooked and served in silence," sleeping in a room with all the other domestic servants (61). Most significant, however, is that Jashoda gradually stops eating: "she serves nearly all the rice and curry, but forgets to eat," the first clue that her health may be declining (62). Mahasweta Devi mentions her appetite twice more before the story's conclusion. Once, while Jashoda is still at the Haldar's, but in the later stages of breast cancer, she writes that "slowly Jashoda gave up eating and lost her strength" and, while she is in the hospital, Kangali mentions that "she stopped eating" (64, 68). "Breast-Giver" is a narrative book-ended by Jashoda's experiences with hunger: she faces dire food insecurity when a Haldar boy strikes and disables Kangali, then again after she can no longer breastfeed. Indeed, hunger is Mahasweta Devi's most successful mechanism for irony. It necessitates the grueling burden on Jashoda's body, but it is also the outcome of her tireless labors. Her transition from "feeder" to "fed" coincides with her most acute food insecurity. As her access to food is threatened by her loss of wet-nursing privileges, Jashoda begins to fast, in a voluntary abstinence from food, only broken in name for want of access to the temple food that her husband and sons enjoy themselves. Yet when she returns to the Haldar household, again surrounded by food as her new position in the kitchen requires, she still does not eat. Devi notes only her *lack* of appetite for the remainder of the story. This loss of appetite, repeated several times in the story's final pages, epitomizes Jashoda's destitution not merely of food or money, but of intimate relationships, and, most crucially for Jashoda herself, the loss of her identity as a mother.

Sexualization of Breastfeeding

Though Mahasweta Devi's "Breast-Giver" is the central text in this chapter, it is most famously anthologized in the collection *Breast Stories,* translated by Spivak and containing two

other stories that not only focalize breasts as minor motifs, but also hinge on their sexualization. "Breast-Giver" and "Draupadi" are the stories most often analyzed in scholarly discussion, but the collection's third story, "Behind the Bodice," ("Choli ke Pichhe") rewards closer reading as well, triangulating imagery of breastfeeding, sexual assault, and human-made hunger. Within the matrix of hunger I presented in the introduction to this dissertation, "Behind the Bodice," would feature both food shortage, hunger at the regional level, and food deprivation, hunger experienced on an individual level. The short story begins with a question that has been raised to the level of national importance: "what is behind the bodice?" a question inspired by the title of a popular song in the 1993 film *Khalnayak* (Devi, "Behind" 134). All other national issues, the first example of which is "crop failure," pale in comparison with what was "*choli ke pichhe*—behind the bodice" (135). This exposition establishes a national climate of barely repressed sexual frustration, more significant than any famine, fixated on the image of a bodice and what it contains, breasts.

It is against this backdrop, a national frenzy to know what is "behind the bodice," that Mahasweta Devi places the story of the photographer Upin and his subject, Gangor. Upin had traveled to Jharoa several times as a photojournalist and, once, while covering the famine conditions of the area, took a photo in which "a high-breasted rural woman sits slack with her breast shoved into an infant's mouth" (140). The mother, "Gangor, did not object. But she put out her hand… money, Sir, rupees? Snap a photo so give me cash!" (141). This dialogue establishes Gangor's understanding that photographs of her bare breasts objectify her, regardless of the reason for her nudity, breastfeeding her child. Knowing she is powerless to retract the image, she aims to at least capitalize on it. Her monetary request shocks Upin, though no dialogue suggests that he asks for Gangor's consent prior to snapping the photo. As B.J. Epstein

puts it in *The Portrayal of Breastfeeding in Literature,* "women's bodies are viewed as public and always available, but only when it suits society, namely men" (Epstein 15). Gangor's attempts to profit on her publicity are met with shock, an agitation that suggests that Upin considers Gangor's nudity an indication of her availability; he need not ask consent because, to him, her bare body announces her as compliant. Like "Breast-Giver," breastfeeding and its commodification are central themes of this story, though focalized through a camera lens rather than that of professional wet-nursing.

Beyond breastfeeding, "Behind the Bodice" also shares some conspicuously similar language with "Breast-Giver." As his friend Ujan reports, after Upin took this first photo of Gangor, he had turned to his friend and "said, God, those breasts are *statuesque*! Did you see the *mammal projections*?" (Devi, "Behind" 142). After his second trip to photograph Gangor, Upin reflects, "No, he cannot forget those *mammal projections*. It has become a seismic upheaval in his brain" (143). The repetition of the italicized phrase, Mahasweta's Devi's own, recalls an early scene from "Breast-Giver," in which Mrs. Haldar "looks in charmed envy at Jashoda's *mammal projections* and says, The good lord sent you down as the legendary Cow of Fulfillment" (48). The language is conspicuous, not only because Mahasweta Devi employs it across stories, but also because of its italicization and strange, quasi-scientific tone. Its use in "Breast-Giver" is perhaps more appropriate, as the term "mammal projections" calls attention to their function as mammary glands: lactation. Gangor has also been breastfeeding in the photo Upin took of her, but his use of the term "mammal projections" reads as an attempt to distance himself from Gangor as a person, in order to better objectify her with the same scientific distance between scientist and subject, or, perhaps more appropriately, photographer and subject.

Significantly, it is not Gangor herself that Upin fixates upon, but her breasts, and his quasi-biological descriptions of them serve to separate the woman from the objects of his sexual desire.

The image of Gangor breastfeeding is further sexualized by the very act of Upin directing a camera at her. Here, Mahasweta Devi, working variously on literal and symbolic levels, constructs a scene of "poverty porn,"[10] which may be defined as a "moralistically derogatory term because of anxieties that an appearance of social consciousness is thought to mask an unseemly enjoyment of others' suffering" (Stobie 524).[11] However, "enjoyment," as the above definition terms it, does not quite encompass the sexual quality of the language and content of "poverty porn." When the use of graphic images became a trend among many charity organizations, the term "pornography of poverty" became popularized. Writing in 1981, at the very outset of this trend among nonprofits, Jorgen Lissner explains that "the public display of an African child with a bloated kwashikorkor-ridden stomach in advertisements is pornographic, because it exposes something in human life that is as delicate and deeply personal as sexuality, that is, suffering" (Lissner). The image Mahasweta Devi creates, that of "a high-breasted rural woman [who] sits slack with her breast shoved into an infant's mouth," falls squarely into the category of "poverty porn" ("Behind" 140). The most common subjects for this type of photography are women and children, whose perceived innocence and vulnerability garners a strong emotional response in the viewer (Manzo 10). Gangor and her breastfeeding child, photographed during the famine conditions that typically galvanize photojournalists, are the

[10] Yaa Gyasi meditates on the subject of "poverty porn" in her 2020 *Transcendent Kingdom*. Her narrator's searing description of the brown-skinned children that appeared on pamphlets at her childhood church combines two major points of this chapter: dehumanization and sexualization. The children, she explains, were not so different from the ASPCA commercials that played on television, the pitiable people no more human than the dogs in these commercials. For Gyasi, poverty porn fixes its subjects into the position of animal and its viewer as the human agent capable of helping such a creature.

[11] It is important to note that Stobie, herself, expands the term "poverty porn" to leave room for a more empathetic, and sobering, readerly response to images of extreme poverty.

epitome of "poverty porn" subjects: impoverished and nude, woman and child. I will return to the image of the starving woman in my discussion of the Bengal Famine of 1943 in Chapter Five, one the most widely chronicled examples of starvation, rendered in both drawings and photographs.

Devi takes the gendered relationship between camera and subject, the implicitly sexualized, voyeuristic gaze of the lens and the feminized, objectified focus of that lens, and introduces literal overtones of sex. The photograph, which has already cast Gangor as the subject of "poverty porn," also literally leads to her sexual objectification. Upin is not the only one who fixates on Gangor; the publication of her photograph leads to her sexual assault, and eventually, her prostitution. As one man tells Upin: "You ruined her with your pictures Sir" an accusation remarkably similar to the idea that a woman is "ruined" by sexual experience outside of marriage (Devi, "Behind" 149). Later in the story, when Upin finds Gangor, she leads him into a private room and tears off her clothing, revealing that her breasts have been violently attacked: "'Look what's there,'" she tells Upin, and he sees, "No breasts. Two dry scars, wrinkled skin, quite flat. The two raging volcanic craters spew liquid lava at Upin—*gang rape*… biting a tearing *gang rape*… *police*… a court *case*… again a *gang rape* in the lockup" (154-55). The very focus of Upin's photographic gaze, the breast that feeds a child, is the target of vicious sexual violence, as a result of the photos he published. The "liquid lava" pouring from Gangor's breasts, blood, has replaced her milk.

Julia Kristeva identifies both blood and breastmilk as abject matter. Drawing from Mary Douglas, Kristeva writes:

> In the first place, filth is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a boundary and, more particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its

> other side, a margin. Matter issuing from them [the orifices of the body] is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body.[...] The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other margins. (Kristeva 69)

Kristeva places milk alongside the more commonly discussed images of abjection, blood or urine or feces, as a boundary substance. As a bodily fluid, milk marks the person breastfeeding as other; breastmilk reminds the viewer of their own body, its fallacies and its eventual decay. This reminder, made public by Upin's photography, is unacceptable to the men in Gangor's town and they respond with brutal sexual violence.

The sexualization of breastfeeding is taken to the logical extreme in "Behind the Bodice;" a photograph of Gangor's breasts leads to their physical destruction, as a group of men bite and tear her breasts until there is nothing left. The profound irony in Upin's reverence of Gangor's breasts has an obvious counterpart in "Breast-Giver." In fact, it is Kangalicharan's sexual fantasies that begin the action of Mahasweta Devi's story. Her own introduction to the subject of edibility is first delivered via highly metaphorical sexual "consumption." Walking home one day, Jashoda's husband, Kangali, reflects that "when he puts food in his belly in the afternoon he feels a filial inclination towards Jashoda, and he goes to sleep after handling her capacious bosom. Coming home in the afternoon, Kangalicharan was thinking of his imminent pleasure and tasting paradise at the thought of his wife's large round breasts" (Devi, "Breast-Giver" 40). The subject positions of husband and wife are quite firm here: as the family's chief provider, Kangali leaves the home to work, while Jashoda remains ensconced in household chores, which include both culinary duties, procuring and preparing his meals, as well as sexually satisfying him. Jashoda's body is connected with consumption twice in this reflection. Kangalicharan's "filial inclination"

towards his wife is a direct result of his full stomach, thanks to her food preparation, and manifests specifically as desire for her "capacious bosom." He "tastes paradise" at the mere thought of her breasts. If his sexual fantasy is a "taste," then the fulfillment of the same fantasy, rendered in alimentary terms, is the true feast, with Jashoda's breasts as the main course. We might consider this metaphoric desire to ingest as a kind of breast-feeding in its own right—that is, a desire to "feed" upon her breasts—in a "devouring" not unlike Gangor's breasts, consumed until nothing remained.

Yet, in some scenes, Kangalicharan's role shifts to occupy that of another child in their home, another mouth to feed both literally and sexually, with Jashoda acting as the mother. Jashoda is an established mother figure, both to her own children and to the Haldar children, as well as the community at large, who regard her as an embodiment of the divine Mother. But she occupies this same motherly role in several key interactions with Kangali as well and, unsurprisingly, they are filtered through the image of breastfeeding. In the aftermath of Kangali's accident, and after the death of the Haldar family patriarch whose financial support they relied upon, the family begins to experience food insecurity. Jashoda and Kangali's children "whine interminably for food and abuse their mother," though, the narrator reminds readers, "it is very natural for children to cry so for grub" (45). But, placed on the level of his own children, Kangali "also longs for food and is shouted at for trying to put his head in Jashoda's chest in the way of Gopal, the Divine son" (45). Kangali is likened with the whining children in such a way that it is almost expected; just as it is "natural" for the children to cry for food, the infantilized Kangali is expected to as well. His hunger is even embodied in the instinctual manner of a child rooting for a mother's breast, putting his head on Jashoda's chest, and he is compared with the child incarnation of Krishna, as if he is Jashoda's own "divine son." Here the metaphoric consumption

begins to shift to a more literal one. By contrast with Kangali's earlier daydreams about his wife's body, grounded in metaphor, his actions here signify a literal, bodily hunger, though with Jashoda's breasts serving as a symbolic fixation point.

As Kangali's position begins to slip from husband to child, if only during mealtimes, Jashoda too begins to take on a more maternal aspect in their relationship. When the narrator describes Jashoda's generosity, it is in these terms: "her mother-love wells up for Kangali as much as for the children. She wants to become the earth and feed her crippled husband and helpless children with a fulsome harvest" (46). Not only is Jashoda's love for her husband maternal, but the sacrifice that she wishes to enact as evidence of her devotion takes the form of bodily provision. Comparing her body to a plentiful harvest of crops, Jashoda suggests that, if she could, she would feed her family with her own body. Just as the previous scene indicates a transition point from metaphoric to literal consumption for Kangali, so too does Jashoda's desire to "become the earth." Though it reads as purely metaphoric in this scene, this wish to feed her family with her own body is later fulfilled on a physical level. Jashoda will secure her family's meals with her own breastmilk, metonymically "becoming the earth" that nourishes them with a "fulsome harvest". To preserve this breastmilk, and the financial security that comes with it, she will also surrender her reproductive health, becoming pregnant virtually every nine months, and suffering miscarriage after miscarriage towards the end of her fertile years. Jashoda pays for her family's meals with her own body as if she has "become the earth," offering her body for their provision.

This representation of maternal sacrifice as both somatic and natural is not an uncommon one either. In Anita Desai's 1980 Anglophone novel *Clear Light of Day,* similarly natural imagery appears alongside a maternal figure surrendering her own body for the sake of her

family, though Desai's novel is largely set in Old Delhi, rather than in Eastern South Asia. Aunt Mira, who becomes something of an ayah for the Das children, "fed them with her own nutrients, she reared them in her own shade, she was the support on which they leaned as they grew [...] If they choked her, if they sucked her dry of substance, she would give in without any sacrifice of will — it seemed in keeping with nature to do so" (Desai, *Clear Light* 111). Just as Jashoda wishes to "become the earth" to better nurture her family, Aunt Mira is described as a tree, with a steady trunk and plentiful shade to support her nieces and nephews. Each woman's metaphoric, bodily provision is portrayed in terms of natural imagery and Aunt Mira's sacrifice is even "in keeping with nature." Desai's description of the children who "sucked [Aunt Mira] dry of substance" is also significant for "Breast-Giver." The verb "suck," in *Clear Light of Day* calls to mind a parasite, leaching resources from the host, Aunt Mira. After Jashoda's career is over and her family is dissolved, Jashoda accuses her husband of eating the food that "sucked her body," leaving her feeling wasted and empty, just as Aunt Mira is left "dry of substance" (Devi, "Breast-Giver" 57, Desai, *Clear Light* 111). Jashoda's original desire to feed her family as if her own body was a "fulsome harvest" is still rendered in terms of natural imagery, but rather than being a benevolent act of maternal feeling, it becomes malevolent, even parasitic.

This parasitic imagery finds a familial-sexual parallel in "Breast-Giver." Further meditating on this "motherly feeling of Jashoda's for her husband," Mahasweta Devi's narrator suggests that "all women turn into mothers here [in India] and all men remain immersed in the spirit of holy childhood. Each man the Holy Child and each woman the Divine Mother" (46). The repetition of the words "all" and "each" ensure that readers understand Jashoda and Kangali's shifting roles as signs of a conventional marriage. It is not Kangali's disability that leads to his infantilization, but simply a standard and accepted role he plays as a married man

"on Indian soil," according to Mahasweta Devi (46). The simultaneous sexualizing and maternalizing of Jashoda's body in this story are not exceptional, but rather point to a common ambivalence surrounding matriarchs. According to A.K. Ramanujan in "Food for Thought," "in a wife, food and sex, mother and partner meet; a woman has two breasts, so goes a saying, so that she can give one to the husband and the other to her child" (19). Jashoda's own life epitomizes this adage. Elizabeth Johnstone, "sees breastfeeding as a means to power—an act by which they [women] may assert their worth outside the patriarchal sexual economy that oppressed and devalued them" (Epstein 10). But Jashoda's breasts become objects of both sexual and gustatory consumption, which is taken to the extreme when she becomes a professional mother, as she must be both perpetually pregnant and constantly breastfeeding.

Notably, it is language of consumption that defines Jashoda's realization that Kangali had been profiting off her body. Kangali ate "the food" that "sucked at her body," bringing their relationship back into the realm of the edible. Just as before, Kangali would rest his head against Jashoda's breasts and whine for food, Jashoda again places him on the level of eating from her body. But this provision does not feel voluntary; it "sucks" at Jashoda's body, leaving her wasted and dry. During the same altercation, Jashoda even demands of Kangali: "Living off a wife's carcass, you call that a man?" (Devi, "Breast-Giver" 57). Again, Jashoda describes their relationship in terms of consumption, with Kangali surviving off her body. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word "carcass" as: "The dead body of a person or animal; but no longer (since c1750) used, in ordinary language, of the human corpse, except in contempt. With butchers, it means the whole trunk of a slaughtered animal, after removal of the head, limbs, and offal" ("carcass"). According to the *OED*, the term is largely associated with animals, and more specifically, those butchered for meat; one definition is even specific to "cookery," as in the case

of using a carcass to make a stock. Jashoda's language is carnal, likening her own body to that of a slaughtered animal, and reflects the ambivalence of her status. Where earlier references to Jashoda as a divine cow venerate her, there can be no mistake here: Jashoda describes *herself* as an animal reserved for consumption. Her power as a feeder, and a nurturer, are again undercut by the way in which her body is compared with animals who are, instead, fed on. As her husband, Kangali both literally ate the food Jashoda earned with her body and enjoyed the sexual fulfillment that corresponded with her constant need to remain pregnant, each at the direct expense of Jashoda's long-term health. Her inability to continue breastfeeding corresponds directly with her inability to produce children; all at once, she is no longer an object of Kangali's carnal desire, sexual or alimentary, and is left feeling spent.

Breastfeeding as Power and Radha's Resistance

Jashoda's profession as a wet-nurse is both a source of power and a symbol of her servitude. It earns her veneration on par with a goddess, and, simultaneously, treatment as if she were a farm animal to be milked or even eaten. It is the literal mechanism for feeding herself and her family, but the long hours spent breastfeeding Haldar infants effectively severs her relationship with her own children. Although, it is not only the power Jashoda enjoyed as a wet-nurse that disappears when she can no longer produce, or her influence within her marriage, but her status as a mother as well. Shortly before being transported to the hospital, during the late-stages of her breast-cancer, Jashoda laments: "If you suckle you're a mother, all lies! Nepal and Gopal don't look at me, and the Master's boys don't spare a peek to ask me how I'm doing" (Devi, "Breast-Giver" 66). She reflects on her young adulthood, when she "preserve[d] the progeny" of the Haldar family, a great responsibility that she thought would connect her with the Haldar children for the rest of her life (51). At this moment, Jashoda realizes the fleeting nature

of her maternal status. She subscribes to the common conception that "good mothers" breastfeed easily, while "bad mothers" do not breastfeed or do not produce enough milk to sustain their children, a dialectic B.J. Epstein confirms in her large corpus of breastfeeding literature (Epstein 65). But what is unique about Jashoda's proclamation is that she does not label herself a "bad mother," but suggests that she is no longer a mother at all: "If you suckle you're a mother, all lies!" (66). She also includes both her surrogate children, or "milk-children," and her biological children in her formulation of motherhood, an internalization of her community's belief that she was "the Mother of the World," because of her divinely ordained, ever-flowing breastmilk (51). For Jashoda, motherhood is both an experience of bearing children and breastfeeding surrogate children; she does not distinguish between them. Though their bodies were created from her own, neither her biological children nor the Haldar children acknowledge the somatic connection they share, neither repaying what she terms a "milk-debt" with their presence at her deathbed (72). For this reason, Jashoda, whose self-worth has been linked to her motherhood throughout her life, no longer considers herself a mother at all, by the story's end.

In a strikingly similar scene, from Amit Majmudar's 2013 English-language novel, *The Abundance*, the narrator reflects on her own motherhood. Like "Breast-Giver," *The Abundance* adopts the perspective of the unnamed mother figure, who is also an Indian woman, though living in the United States. Like Jashoda, this mother-figure also learns that she is dying of cancer. In one of the novel's later scenes, the narrator holds her adult son close and thinks, "I have broken through to the old Ronak, which is to say, the young Ronak, weak as he once was, when I was all food and drink to him. When he would push away from his father and call to me. This is how powerful I used to be" (Majmudar 232). Like "Breast-Giver," this scene finds the narrator reflecting on her young motherhood, when she was "all food and all drink" to her child,

and she connects her breast-feeding experience with feeling "powerful." Breastfeeding provides a metaphorical framework through which these women reflect on motherhood: as their children grow, and their connection becomes less corporal, this feeling of powerlessness sets in for each character. Though neither character becomes dependent on their children, so there is no complete role reversal, their shared cancer diagnosis coupled with the relative isolation of their respective lives leaves them each feeling vulnerable.

Each narrator also laments the isolation she experiences during the final stages of her life. Majmudar's narrator mourns the loss of this symbolic connection with her children, as both of her two children live independent lives, growing their own families in cities far-removed from their parents' Midwest home. By contrast, Jashoda mourns the *fact* of her solitude. Mahasweta Devi mentions few of her children by name, but it is instead the idea of her isolation that plagues her. During Jashoda's long tenure as a "professional mother," her breasts are perpetually full with milk and she is surrounded by family, both her own and the Haldar's. When she can no longer produce milk, she describes her breasts as "empty, as if wasted" (Devi, "Breast-Giver" 62). The isolation she experiences, the severed connections between her husband, children, and the Haldar family is not only punctuated by this absence of breastmilk, but by a more tangible absence, an abscess created by her spreading cancer. During the late stages, Jashoda's chest becomes a negative space; her "left breast bursts and becomes like the *crater* of a volcano" [Emphasis Devi's] (73). If breastfeeding in the milk-theft scene from *Beloved* is a "taking," then this crater-like image is the extreme. Jashoda's breasts, which have previously been the source of her meals, characterized by abundance and presence, have now become the epitome of absence. In yet another connection between "Behind the Bodice" and "Breast-Giver," Mahasweta Devi describes both Gangor's and Jashoda's breasts as volcanic craters. First simply devoid of milk,

now devoid of flesh—each woman's breasts become symbolically and literally craterous, a direct result of the exploitation they have experienced. For Jashoda, the cancer "eats away" at her and her appetite withers to nothing.

When Jashoda first arrives at the hospital for cancer treatment, her doctor asks a series of questions related to her profession as a wet-nurse, and when he learns that she nursed twenty children of her own and another thirty Haldar children, he is aghast: "Fifty! … God!" (67). Kangali asks if Jashoda's cancer stems from her breastfeeding, to which the doctor responds "One can't say why someone gets cancer, one can't say. But when people breast-feed too much—" and trails off (67). Though Mahasweta Devi is careful not to imply the relationship between cancer and breastfeeding on a literal, medical level, the doctor's astonishment establishes a parabolic association. Taken as a moral tale, the answer to Blodgett's question "Are women empowered or enslaved by their role as food givers and, more broadly, nurturers?" is straightforward. With a child perpetually latched to her, Jashoda is physically restrained, or "enslaved" to use Blodgett's term, and the need to remain perpetually pregnant means that she can never leave Kangali, so long as she remains fertile. Mahasweta Devi seals the moral with Jashoda's breast cancer diagnosis, in the style of nineteenth-century British fiction; just as the fallen woman of a Victorian novel must die at the end of her story, so too does Jashoda's death read as a moral indictment, though one targeting her parasitic family and employers.

Yet to read Jashoda as an entirely "powerless" character because of her isolation and death would be to ignore the ways her decline connects to her earlier experiences of maternal, economic, and even divine power. In her now canonical article, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," Chandra Talpade Mohanty criticizes the habit of "defining women as archetypal victims [which] freezes them into 'objects-who-defend-

themselves,' men into 'subjects-who-perpetrate-violence,' and (every) society into a simple opposition between the powerless (read: women) and powerful (read: men) groups of people" (Mohanty 699). This formulation of power "locks all revolutionary struggles into binary structures—possessing power versus being powerless." Jashoda cannot simply be placed on a binary of "possessing power versus being powerless" (Mohanty 709). She enjoys the comparisons between herself and deities, but, after her retirement, none of the material rewards. She becomes the family breadwinner, subverting traditional gender roles, only to find that her husband had been securing his meals elsewhere all along. She has the capacity to nourish fifty bodies with her one, but this same body succumbs to breast cancer. For each representation of breastfeeding as a symbol of power—as divinely ordained, as a reversal of gendered labor norms, or as evidence of monumental strength of body—there is an equal and opposite reversal of that power.

The true tragedy of "Breast-Giver" is that Jashoda's experiences of power and powerlessness are fundamentally interdependent: each of the aforementioned ways in which Jashoda experiences the *feeling* of power is, in reality, a power that has been granted *to* her by the Haldar family or her husband, Kangali. By lavishing her with praise for being a divine milk-producer and essential breadwinner for her family, the people in Jashoda's life offer her the experience of power and influence. Their praise placates her, such that she does not question the decades of labor she offers them, dressed-up as "power." These experiences of economic, maternal, and divine power, because awarded to her, can also be removed, resulting in feelings of vulnerability and isolation. Indeed, to label Jashoda as either powerful or powerless would be to misrepresent their interconnection: her experiences with each are ultimately governed by the same actors in her life, the Haldar family and her husband.

Another Bengali-language short story, Purabi Basu's "French Leave" ("Arandhan") expands on the potential for breastfeeding as an act of power set out by Mahasweta Devi, though Devi's ending forecloses this possibility for her own main character. Like Mahasweta Devi, Basu is a writer and activist born in a district of Dhaka, now Bangladesh, who writes primarily in Bengali. "Breast-Giver" and "French Leave," sometimes called "Radha Will Not Cook Today," were published in English in 1997 and 1999, respectively. But beyond these accidents of birth and language, Mahasweta Devi and Purabi Basu share a spare, economical writing style. "French Leave" contains many of the same simple, lean sentences as "Breast-Giver," such as the example offered at the beginning of this chapter—"He and Jashoda ate rice"—most readily apparent in the story's refrain, "Radha will not cook" (Basu 158). It is for these reasons that I end my discussion of "Breast-Giver" with a different short story: they mirror each other in language, style, and content, but their ultimate treatment of breastfeeding is disparate and instructive.

Jashoda experiences a transitory feeling of power—a power granted to her by the Haldars or Kangali, only to be withdrawn later—while Basu's main character, Radha, draws power from an internal source, made tangible through breastmilk. In "French Leave," breastfeeding itself is resistant. As in Mahasweta Devi's story, or Majmudar's novel, it is a source of deep, natural power, but not one that disappears once a mother's children begin to grow. Where "Breast-Giver" focalizes the ambivalence of breastfeeding, Basu employs breastfeeding as a method of maternal rebellion, evidencing a profound alimentary connection between mother and child, even as she refuses to cook for her family. "French Leave" begins in the pre-dawn morning of a Bengali household, a morning ostensibly like any other. Basu tells readers that there had been no arguments the previous night, the weather is sunny—neither too warm, nor too cold—and that the main character, mother, wife, and daughter-in-law Radha did not "feel unwell or fatigued in

any way" (154). It is against this entirely ordinary backdrop that Basu introduces the story's central tension: that "Radha suddenly decided that she would not cook today" (154). The story continues throughout the day, with the refrain "she will not cook today" appearing after each family member attempts to reason with Radha.

As the household grows more confused about Radha's sudden decision not to cook, their daily routines break down, emphasizing Radha's crucial role in the maintenance of her family's nutrition. When her family first notices Radha's refusal to cook, they ask her "what's wrong? What on earth is the matter?" indicating that her behavior is out of the ordinary, though Basu has already established that the day itself is not (155). One relation, presumably her mother-in-law, asks Radha "'Will you force us all to fast today?'" (155). Her question is notable for its implication that, without Radha, the family would go hungry. She does not ask Radha "Will you force us all to cook today?" and provide for themselves, but rather places the duty of sustaining her family solely on Radha. Without her labor, they will not eat. Radha's behavior clearly reads as resistant; in a household in which three generations rely on her food preparation, taking a day off without illness or provocation reads as a profound statement. It calls attention to the value of her work, which may otherwise go unnoticed, given that most cooking and food preparation takes place in a separate space, a kitchen detached from the rest of the home.

Despite the entreaties of her mother-in-law and husband, who is first surprised then angry at leaving the home with an empty stomach, Radha remains silent, neither explaining her refusal to cook, nor reversing the decision. This silence further suggests we read Radha's decision not to cook as a protest, with all the quiet dignity of silent protestors who refuse negotiation. While sitting at the edge of the pond near her home, however, Radha's son tells her "Ma, I am hungry" and she knows that she must devise a workaround to account for him (157). Though she easily

stonewalls her other family members, Radha's reaction to her son, Sadhan, is more tender; she felt "something big stir in her heart. Upon the calm sea of her mind, huge waves suddenly reared up in the furious dance of the storm" (158). Even still, Radha does not move to begin cooking, but remains sitting with her son when a crow flies by and drops a papaya onto her lap, which she peels for Sadhan. A kingfisher brings Radha a water lily seed, which she also offers her son, but he remains hungry and asks, "Ma, won't you cook?" to which she responds "no" (158). Though she feeds her child, it is only with the fruits and seeds nature, quite literally, offers her, and she successfully maintains her decision not to cook.

As the papaya and water lily seed suggest, Radha wants to feed Sadhan; his appeals for food are the only ones that stir her heart. But when he is still hungry after eating the foods the forest had brought them, Radha circumnavigates her desire not to cook another way:

> She slowly uncovered her breasts. Under the clear sky her firm and well-formed breasts gleamed in the sunlight. Radha put the left nipple into her son's mouth. With her right hand she continually caressed Sadhan's forehead, eyes, head and hair.
>
> Unused to breast-feeding, Sadhan was puzzled for a few moments at this unexpected gesture. Then gradually he began to draw upon his mother's nipple in his mouth with great enthusiasm. First softly, then with a little more force and finally with all his strength Sadhan tried to suck in his best and safest food from his mother's body [...] Gritting her teeth, she bit her lips in determination and wished—exercized all her power. And then it happened that very moment. Like a gurgling waterfall, her body trembling with pleasure, something flowed out of her breasts, brimming over the banks like floodwaters.
>
> Radha looked at her son. Sadhan giggled.

> Bubbling white milk flowed from his busy lips and dripped on the ground. (Basu 158-59)

Where each previous family member's reliance on Radha leaves them hungry and leaves her labeled as a bad wife, or bad daughter-in-law, here, Radha is both resistant to traditional food labor systems and able to provide for her child while remaining outside of those systems. Her refusal to cook reads as a practice in regaining power, a term used explicitly here as Radha "exercised all her power," drawing from her own internal reserves to produce milk for her child. Her body has all the force of a natural disaster, as her breastmilk is "brimming over the banks like floodwaters" (159). An inverse of the "crater of a volcano" invoked by Mahasweta Devi, language of "floodwaters" not only suggests bounty, but presents breastfeeding as both powerful, a current pulsing with energy, and natural. Like a dam stopping up a river, Basu's floodwater comparison calls attention to the constructed nature of food systems in Radha's home; their wide acceptance does not mean they are "natural." Radha's will, physically represented by breastmilk and compared to powerful waters, beats against the human-made constructions that lie in her path and offers an alternative that refuses to participate in traditionally gendered food roles.

Unlike Mahasweta Devi's story, in which representational realism means that Jashoda must remain perpetually pregnant to maintain her supply of breastmilk, Radha has no such burden on her body. She is not physically restrained by the presence of a child in her womb, nor the one on her lap, as her body can feed him without the practical need for pregnancy to induce lactation. The caloric burden placed on lactating women is not even a factor, at this moment, as Radha appears unconcerned with her own hunger. This, combined with the fantastic depictions of woodland creatures offering Radha food, marks "French Leave" as fantastic, unlike Mahasweta Devi's realist work. It is in these moments of folkloric magic that Basu's story

supplies resistance. In them, Basu imagines a familial structure not defined by hierarchical domestic labor, simply categorized into who prepares food and who consumes it, but a radical reimagining that not only locates power *within* a mother figure, but also assures readers that her boycott of domesticity does not preclude her love for her family. Both Mahasweta Devi and Purabi Basu represent the negotiation of domestic power through the image of a breastfeeding woman. But where Mahasweta Devi's story offers breastfeeding as an ambivalent image, as any domestic, economic, or divine power Jashoda experiences is later withdrawn from the very people that offer it, Basu's magical realist elements offer an alternative: Radha's power is an internal, and constant, force.

Yet the fact that Radha's refusal to participate in hierarchical systems of food preparation exists within a fabulist story also draws attention to the disparity between the ambivalent reality Devi represents and the radical imaginary of Basu's story. The gap between their work reinforces the exigency driving their study: it is precisely in their comparison that a reader encounters profound moments of women's embodied labor and even resistance. Such moments locate power within a woman's body, long coded as weak and vulnerable, and whose physical labors, often surrounding the feeding of others, have meanwhile been overlooked and undervalued. What is more, both "Breast-Giver" and "French Leave" testify to the power of their themes: motherhood, breastfeeding, and maternal hunger are worthy subjects for literary fiction. Instances of breastfeeding both declare the power in a women's body and highlight the issues of access that reroute that power, and it is by pursuing such instances that we may begin to tug at the relationships between a woman's body and food-based labor systems that remain inextricably intertwined.

The very refusals to eat and to cook that drive the plot of Basu's "French Leave" are at center of the next chapter, which continues to meditate on women's labor. Though the subject is no longer confined to breastfeeding, the thematic threads that emerge in this chapter, those of labor and resistance, will remain instructive. Chapter Three also includes narratives of women who experience food insecurity, like Jashoda, but these characters also learn to resist, if not always escape, the structures that precipitate their hunger. Whether it be depicted in the gardens she tends, the food she prepares, or the milk drawn from her own body, the connection between power and hunger finds a clear intersection in the form of women's resistance. My argument hinges on the idea of food weaponization—that cooking, eating, and even hunger may serve as a weapon in service both of women's domestic servility and of their defiance. Like breastfeeding, an ambivalent literary image that both highlights the power of women's labor and lays bare her exploitation, food weaponization is a contradictory trope, dependent on who wields it.

CHAPTER 3

FOOD RESISTANCE: WEAPONIZATION OF EATING AND COOKING

> *Amma says: 'I've made avarekaalu upma because you like it.' It seems an innocuous enough statement. An outsider may not be able to see its explosive power. But as someone who lives in this house, I know just how grave the consequences can be.*
>
> — Vivek Shanbhag, *Ghachar Ghochar*

Though just one hundred and eighteen pages, Vivek Shanbhag's 2013 Kannada-language novella *Ghachar Ghochar* contains meal after meal: in cafes, at crowded dinner tables, eaten separately or communally. Food variously serves as a stand-in for sexuality, anxiety, control, or isolation. The family earns an income from the sale of colonial food products, tea and spices, and shared mealtimes signify happiness and togetherness. But, when their business begins to flourish, the previously content family becomes increasingly fragmented and tensions simmer in the household. Where before mealtimes symbolized congeniality, the family later uses food products and preparation as weapons in their psychological warfare. Avarekaalu upma, for example, the response to the simple question of "what's for breakfast?" incites a family feud rendered as if the breakfast table were a battleground. The meal, a breakfast dish consisting of semolina and avarekaalu beans, starts an unspoken argument between family members—mother, daughter, and daughter-in-law—who "address each other indirectly" (Shanbhag 65). Amma's decision to serve avarekaalu upma, a dish whose smell physically nauseates her daughter-in-law, Anita, is the catalyst to their unsaid argument, "the shot fired in the air to challenge an adversary to battle" as if "to inquire if the enemy is prepared and willing to fight" (65). The unnamed narrator contextualizes the argument occurring, in large part, below the surface. When Malati, the

narrator's sister, comments on his lack of motivation, he explains that "this particular arrow from Malati is aimed jointly at Anita and me," as his apathy reflects poorly on them both (65). The narrator delivers a play-by-play account of each blow; one from Anita "might sound like a tame comeback, but the sword of insult seldom cuts on the surface. No, it lacerates from within and leaves wounds that reopen with remembrance" (66). But the scene's irony, and greatest indication of the family's slow dissolution, is that "after all of this blowing of war bugles over the *upma*, [the narrator does not] even eat it" (66). Instead, he rushes from the scene and orders breakfast at his favorite local coffee house. Rather than take sides in the breakfast battle, aligning with wife or mother, the narrator refuses the food altogether, alimentary evidence of his growing isolation.

Though set in Bangalore, in South India, rather than the East, the above scene from *Ghachar Ghochar* epitomizes several characteristics of the weaponization of domestic food discussed in this chapter: its consistent use in women's negotiation of household hierarchies and appearance in domestic spaces. Shanbhag's narrator identifies three predominant actors in the breakfast battle, all women, whose prominence in the family is directly related to her control in the kitchen: his mother, sister, and wife. The mother, who decides the narrator's breakfast for him, "can do this because she controls the kitchen. There's a daughter-in-law, there's a daughter who's left her husband and set up camp here, yet Amma clings to the kitchen," as if it alone indicates her status as matriarch in their multigenerational household (64). Boundaries and territories between women, and their husbands and children, are literally mediated through each of their roles within the culinary space and symbolically played out on the level of alimentary conversation. Shanbhag's use of breakfast food to indicate a tangled web of familial relations—old grievances, hierarchies, and power struggles—evidences the second key characteristic of the

weaponization of food in literature: its setting is often domestic. Whether the focus is on family members or domestic workers, such as cooks and housekeepers, the narratives at the center of this chapter are largely confined to the home and, often, to the kitchen itself.

This chapter's first section examines colonial-era literature and offers an account of traditional gendered food hierarchies within a home, with which later examples of resistant eating and cooking may be compared. Subsequent sections are divided by the types of food resistance under study, beginning with examples in which cooking offers the opportunity for domestic resistance and even escape. The final section concentrates on the refusal to eat, a form of food weaponization that centers the woman's body and reads as another form of silent protest. However, it is necessary to note that the examples in this section involve acute incidents of food refusals, rather than patterns of disordered eating.[12] As it progresses, this chapter moves from instances of individualized food weaponization, as well as those confined to a domestic space, towards a broader context for the weaponization of food: the literal consequences of war and insurgency on food security, the topic of the following chapter. While the majority of this chapter relies on a definition of food resistance as the whole or partial realization of one's individual autonomy, negotiated through cooking/not cooking or eating/not eating, my conclusion moves towards an understanding of food resistance as informed both by the historical milieu of an individual's time and place and her role within a larger community.

By coining the term food resistance, I have the unique opportunity to revise and expand traditionally held definitions of the term resistance, more broadly. It should be noted that my

[12] Disordered eating habits have become a fertile proving-ground for literary scholarship in recent years, as is the case with research on Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions,* including Deepika Bahri's analysis, which notes the way Nyasha's anorexia becomes an indication of Rhodesia's national history of colonialism and patriarchy. She writes that "Nyasha's war with the patriarchal and colonial systems is fought on the turf of her own body, both because it is the scene of enactment of these systems and because it is the only site of resistance available" (2). While I also treat food abnegation as resistant, I forgo any categorization of disordered eating, as the occurrences I discuss are isolated in the scope of each narrative.

own emphasis on the resistant imaginings of food and hunger supply a reading of a character's actions rather than motives. I do not assume that the female characters considered in this analysis are motivated by subversion or resistance against gendered, hierarchical structures in their lives, though in some cases they may be. Like Henriette Dahan-Kalev, whose project in *An Anatomy of Feminist Resistance* is to redefine notions of the "success" or "failure" of a given moment of resistance, this chapter also aims at redefinition, though of resistance itself. Dahan-Kalev consistently associates resistance with refusal—"the refusal to carry on with enduring obedience norms"—and, as we have already seen in Purabi Basu's "French Leave," refusal to participate in cooking and eating can be powerful modes of resistance (Dahan-Kalev 12). But it is the aim of this chapter not only to locate instances where refusal is depicted but instances representing *participation* in gendered domestic roles, especially those suggesting that each may have the effect of improving the quality of a woman's daily life. As Anindita Ghosh writes in *Behind the Veil,* "What has been systematically excluded from accounts of women's struggles is the everyday realm of social relations in which power is constantly and relentlessly negotiated" (6). I see the kitchen and the dining table as key spaces of relentless negotiation. Though the first section traces the *absence* of women's eating in colonial-era fiction, the reversal of this absence, in my argument, is not always, and simply, the *presence* of women's eating; not eating can be just as powerful. Food resistance offers a profound entry-point into literary criticism on women's agency within the domestic space. In focusing on refusal and contestation, this chapter explicates the ways in which women weaponize the kitchen, the dinner table, and hunger itself, severing the simple connection between a woman's presence in the kitchen, or even her own hunger, as evidence of her subordination. Such examples of mealtime battles indicate that food, whether

eaten or uneaten, offers a medium through which a woman's influence in the home may be concentrated and her concerns negotiated.

Traditional Household Food Structures in Colonial-Era Literature

This chapter's argument hinges on exceptional circumstances, moments in which women are portrayed as repurposing food for their own ends, registering resistance either through participation in or refusal of mealtime conventions. But to illustrate these exceptions, we must first establish the rules. According to Ishita Banerjee-Dube, conceptions surrounding women's roles within a typical household started to crystalize most visibly in colonial Bengal. The modern "Indian Woman," "reconfigured by the elite nationalist discourse, as educated, accomplished and modern but totally dedicated to the care and wellbeing of the family, was conferred with vital importance as the caregiver and caretaker of the family" (Banerjee-Dube 100). The woman and the nation are each "domestics," reflections of one another. If we ask Harriet Blodgett's question, "Are women empowered or enslaved by their role as food givers and, more broadly, nurturers?" in the context of Banerjee-Dube's description of the ideal, modern woman the answer would be clear: women serve the nation-building project by adhering to their role as caregivers, and should, therefore, feel both politically and domestically empowered.

This conflation of the national and the domestic is reflected in the literary narratives of the time as well. Rabindranath Tagore's 1916 *The Home and the World* (translated from the Bengali *Ghare Baire*) in title alone suggests that Bengali thinkers had begun to place new emphasis on the domestic space as one of national consequence. The story, which takes place almost entirely within one couple's home, centers on three characters. When Bimala, married to gentle, non-violent Nikhilesh, meets his revolutionary friend, Sandip, she begins to wonder how she can contribute politically from within the home. After Sandip convinces her to steal from her

husband, Nikhilesh, to give to the Swadeshi Movement, Bimala realizes the grave error she has made, reflecting: “I could not think of my house as separate from my country: I had robbed my house, I had robbed my country. For this sin my house had ceased to be mine, my country also was estranged from me” (Tagore 93). Implicit in Bimala’s formulation is the idea that women, as domestics, are custodians of the nation itself. Anindita Ghosh traces the connection between women’s domestic roles and the nation from colonialism to nationalism. For the colonial state, a woman’s confinement to the home:

> was part of a strategy to perpetuate domination: helpless and weak Indian women in need of protection provided one moral justification for colonial rule. Later, historians showed how the Indian became the site for nationalist constructions of tradition and cultural authenticity in the quest for self-identity from the late- nineteenth century onwards. Faced with defeat and humiliation in the political and material world, Indian men constructed their women as the repositories of all that was pure and worthy in their own culture. In both perspectives, women emerge as unresisting, inert, and passive objects of defining discourse. (Anindita Ghosh 3)

According to such a construction, a woman’s actions from within the home can have great consequences on the larger political world, but it is only through her passivity and domesticity. As a firm national identity became increasingly important, not only to the bhadralok class in Bengal, but across India, cuisine became a major signifier of a national identity distinct from the West, and women were the stewards of the national cuisine. The women of a home then, already enshrined in their roles as mothers, wives, and daughters, also began to be seen as arbiters of national consciousness, cultivating the dining table as a space in which projections of nations may be debated and serving the food that would feed future leaders of the country. Though their

presumably upper-class, upper-caste status means that Bimala can rely on domestic workers to cook their meals, it does fall to her to orchestrate the mealtimes. On the evening of Sandip's first dinner in their home, Bimala wonders, "would Sandip Babu find the Shakti of the Motherland manifest in me? Or would he simply take me to be an ordinary, domestic woman?" (Tagore 14). Bimala hopes that Sandip will recognize the nation's *shakti*, the divine feminine power, within her, connecting her metonymically with the nation. Her worries prove unfounded when Sandip calls her a "talisman" of the country, associating her with India itself, just as she wishes.

Despite the new emphasis placed on cuisine in colonial literary representations of this national-domestic dialectic, women themselves are rarely depicted as eating. Their meals are considered implicit and off-stage, not important enough to reach the surface of a plot. Their relationships to food are marked by food preparation and serving, as we might expect given the importance of cuisine in establishing a concrete national identity. But they are also marked by a conspicuous absence of eating, scenes in which other characters eat while they abstain, of intense involuntary hunger, or voluntary fasting. The few notable mealtime scenes that involve Bimala, for example, explicitly emphasize her lack of eating. Over their first shared meal, when Sandip establishes Bimala as a "talisman," Sandip and Nikhilesh debate the finer points of the Swadeshi Movement, as will be their habit throughout the novel. But where the men have the option to discuss the nationalist movement *over* their meal, Bimala must leave the table to eat her own dinner, as is customary. When she returns, Sandip apologizes, "'I am afraid we have spoilt your appetite,'" indicating that he had noticed how quickly she returned from her own meal. Bimala reflects: "I felt greatly ashamed. Indeed, I had been too indecently quick over my dinner. With a little calculation, it would become quite evident that my non-eating had surpassed the eating" (17). This first meeting between the three characters not only establishes the relationship

between domesticity and the formation of national identity, but also sets a precedent for Bimala's eating habits: her non-eating is often more notable than her eating. Unlike the men, Bimala cannot participate in the nationalist debate while enjoying her meal, so she decides to forgo most of her own dinner, all of which appears narratively "off-stage." Though their conversation is made possible by Bimala's mealtime orchestrations, Bimala must tolerate her own hunger to participate in them fully. In my discussion of *The Seedling's Tale,* by Sulekha Sanyal, in Chapter Five, I will return to the idea that revolutionaries often leverage their own hunger against their political goals, though Chhobi, the female Swadeshi main character, represents a break from the construction of women as political only insofar as they are a symbol for the nation, as she fiercely rebels against domestic labor. By contrast, Bimala's political action must be negotiated through her customary duties.

Later in the novel, as her relationship with Nikhilesh begins to crack, Bimala narrates, "when my husband nowadays comes in for his meals I feel I cannot sit before him; and yet it is such a shame not to be near him that I feel I cannot do that either. So I seat myself where we cannot look at each other's face" (Tagore 97). This mealtime is one solely reserved for Nikhilesh. Bimala merely sits while he eats, attending to him without eating herself or leaving the room to enjoy her own meal. Far from a question of access here, Bimala's decision to attend her husband's meals without interacting with him reads as self-flagellation for her betrayals. In a chapter from his perspective, Nikhilesh remarks, "Bimal was not present at my meal-time that day" (129). His use of the possessive is notable, as Nikhilesh establishes it as "*my* meal-time" [emphasis mine] rather than a shared dinner. The expectation is that Bimala will attend, but not eat, during his evening meal. However, this does not mean that the compassionate Nikhilesh is unconcerned about Bimala's nutrition. That evening he asks Bimala if she had already eaten, to

which she responds that she had. Her response is quickly established as a lie, however, when "a maid came and told Bimal that her dinner had been served and was getting cold" though "she gave no sign of having heard" her (129). Again, Bimala's relationship with food is marked by absence, though it is a self-inflicted one. The previous day, in anguish over her decision to steal money from her husband, Bimala had prayed for "some little mercy from somewhere, some shelter, some sign of forgiveness, some hope that might bring about the end. Lord,'" she vowed "'I will lie here, waiting and waiting, touching neither food nor drink, so long as your blessing does not reach me'" (122). Quite like Jashoda's fast, in "Breast-Giver," Bimala turns to voluntary hunger in her desperation. Each fast is only broken only in name, as Bimala is never shown eating within the action of the story, nor does Tagore offer any narrative resolution to her fast. Her hunger, a handy signifier of her desperation, is significant for Tagore's plot, as well as her role as an arbiter for national identity through cuisine, but her satiation is clearly not.

Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, a contemporary of Tagore's, manages to create, in "Mahesh," a Bengali short story that is wholly preoccupied with cooking and hunger, while leaving women's consumption entirely out of the narrative scope. Unlike Tagore's main characters in *The Home and The World*, those in Chattopadhyay's story are food insecure, Bengali Muslims. But, despite this drastic socio-economic disparity, the lack of narrative representation remains the same: women and girls do not eat in the action of either story. Main character Gafur, caught in a vicious cycle in which he cannot afford to pay rent, also cannot afford to feed his bull, Mahesh, nor his daughter, when his landlord withholds his share of straw. The plot largely revolves around Gafur's attempts to find a meal for Mahesh, pulling from the straw that secures his hut or begging for rice water from neighbors. Upon returning home from work one day, he calls out to his daughter:

"'Is the food ready?' Gafur repeated without receiving an answer.

'What do you say! No? Why?'

'There's no rice, father.'

'No rice? Why didn't you tell me in the morning?'

'Why, I told you last night.'

'I told you last night,' mimicked Gafur. 'How am I to remember what you told me last night?' His anger grew more and more violent at the sound of his own voice. 'Of course, there's no rice!' he growled, with his face more distorted than ever. 'What does it matter whether your father eats or not? But the young lady must have her three meals! In the future I shall lock up the rice when I go out. Give me some water to drink-I'm dying of thirst….So you haven't any water, either!'" (Chattopadhyay 8-9)

Gafur's daughter, Amina, just ten years old, is not only responsible for cooking, serving, and monitoring food stores, but she takes the brunt of Gafur's anger when he learns that they are completely without food. Amina's reminder that she told her father the previous night that they were out of rice indicates clearly where his worries lie: with feeding Mahesh rather than themselves. Gafur, who previously has been shown asking Amina for the leftover rice water from the pot to feed Mahesh, is not only concerned for his own loss of dinner, but for Mahesh's. His actions make a strange kind of sense: as a beast of burden, Mahesh's labor in the fields may help lift the family out of poverty. Read this way, his meals are an investment. Yet, at one point, Gafur finds someone willing to pay "full price" for the scrawny Mahesh, but, in the end, Gafur cannot accept the deal, not because he considers Mahesh an investment, but because of his own attachment to the bull. The irony in Gafur's above accusations is that they target Amina—"But the young lady must have her three meals!"—whose nutrition he hardly considers in his

endeavors to feed Mahesh. Amina's diet does broach the surface of the text, in this scene, but it is only to emphasize her lack of proper nutrition in a moment of black humor. Amina is never once depicted eating or drinking, though Mahesh is described eating straw or flowers and drinking water.

"Mahesh" also focalizes gendered and class-based issues of water access. After his outburst, and once Amina has left in search of water, Gafur begins to feel remorse over his actions, reflecting that he was aware of the reason there is no water in their home:

> The two or three tanks in the village had all dried up. The little water that there was still in the private tank of Shibu Babu was not for the public. A few holes had been dug at the bottom of the other tanks, but there was such crowding and jostling for a little water that this chit of a girl could not even approach them. She stood for hours on end and, after much begging if somebody took pity on her, she returned home with a little water." (Chattopadhyay 9)

A child of ten years old, Amina is responsible for collecting water while her father is away, though her age, size, and mild manner are prohibitive for the jostling required to fill her bucket. So, she resorts to begging. The entire production could take hours, which suggests that a large portion of Amina's days are filled with procuring water or preparing what little food their family has. Despite her consistent association with food and water access, Amina's nutrition is not the text's, nor her father's, central concern, and she is never shown eating nor drinking within the action of the story, though Mahesh is, consistently.

Chattopadhyay's scene recalls another, by now infamous one, by Mulk Raj Anand. *Untouchable*, published three years before Chattopadhyay's death, in 1935, follows Bakha, a young Dalit man, as he navigates his daily routine, raising issues of food purity, quality, and

accessibility. Because the novel is focalized through Bakha's perspective, little narrative space is granted to his sister, Sohini. One notable exception is a scene that parallels Chattopadhyay's own: Sohini's trip to the well. As Dalits, simply drawing water from a communal well is impossible if "no caste Hindu" is nearby; the "outcastes" have to wait near the well "joining their hands with servile humility to every passer-by, cursing their fate, and bemoaning their lot, if they were refused the help they wanted, praying, beseeching and blessing, if some generous soul condescended to listen to them" (Anand 16, 18). Sohini waits at the well, and at long last a pundit passes by, to whom the crowd begs for water, "joining their palms in beggary" and "twisting their lips in various attitudes of servile appeal and abject humility" (19). As people who cannot even access the most basic of necessities, the crowd is rendered abject, their daily living conditions likened to beggary. The pundit agrees to help, hoping that the exercise he exerts in cranking the pulley will sooth his irritated stomach, and after drawing the water, he decides who receives it first. Notably, the water finally given to the Dalit crowd is necessarily leftover, as it must first be drawn by a caste Hindu who apportions it to the group; even their water is second-hand. It is this status as leftover[13] that marks almost all food and drink Bakha and his family encounter. Though set in a fictional North Indian town, rather than a specific geographical

[13] Leftovers, as the "polluted" form of food reserved for low-class and low-caste people, prove a consistent nexus between food and human rights issues in literature. As the border between food and feces, leftovers evoke another border, that between human and non-human. Those who live on such a border, in these literary works, find themselves in an impossible double bind: accept food that triggers an abject response, incorporate it into the body, and be represented as a sub-human "scavenger," or refuse leftover and contaminated food, thus becoming more emaciated, cadaverous, and subhuman, and still be rendered abject. In his study on food images in Indian literature and culture, "Food for Thought," A.K. Ramanujan, drawing from anthropologists R.S. Khare and McKim Marriott, suggests that the food cycle is directly connected with social hierarchy (6). This circulation, "the lifeblood of caste rank," is dependent on "a three-way distinction, the Indian food triangle: Food/Leftovers/Faeces, a sort of entropy" (6). The three terms correspond to points on a timeline of decay; leftovers are not considered food and both leftovers and feces are polluting, rendering the person encountering these substances abject. Representations of food insecure people often revolve around scenes of abjection, settling for the lowest quality food imaginable: homeless people lifting the lids off garbage cans or children begging for scraps.

location, Anand's narrative is like Chattopadhyay's in that each includes a brief interlude in which young girls must beg for water.

Indeed, "Mahesh" and *Untouchable* are each preoccupied with food and drink. Just as Gafur struggles to find rice water or hay for Mahesh, most of Bakha's daily tasks involve begging for food and water. By the time Bakha is finished with his early morning chores, the narrator has mentioned his craving for a cup of tea several times, though there is no accessible water in their home that morning. In one scene, Bakha purchases jalebis and, distracted by his treat, brushes against an upper-caste man. In another, he sweeps a lane in exchange for a couple of stale chapatis and looks forward to the leftover sweets from a friend's sister's marriage ceremony. Sohini serves tea at several points throughout the day, and the narrative covers multiple mealtimes. When Bakha's brother, Rakha, returns mid-day with a basket of leftover food, the descriptions of his meal are carnal: "he ate big morsels. His mouth filled on one side. It looked grotesque" (72). The scene is visceral, calling attention to the physicality of his eating, in much the same style as V.S. Naipaul's description of Carter's eating habits in *In a Free State*. Eating is front and center in this scene, but we only know that Sohini is present because she tells Bakha to "'come and eat a piece of bread'" (72). Whether she does not eat at this moment or Anand simply neglects to mention her repast, it is difficult to know. In either case, Sohini's sustenance takes a back seat to that of her brother's and father's. Despite the great deal of attention paid to Amina's and Sohini's ability to procure food and drink for their family members, neither *Untouchable* nor "Mahesh" includes any mention of their own consumption, either of food or drink.

Weaponization of Food Preparation

As these early twentieth-century texts establish, "the 'family meal' and the 'dinner table' are potent symbols, even metonyms, of the family itself.' In the family, power is enshrined at the dinner table" (Rahman 42). Who eats first, who may eat in another's presence, and, indeed, who may eat at all, are shown to be clear barometers for familial hierarchies. Eating and abstention in these texts are hardly resistant for female characters, if they are rarely noted at all. But they establish a baseline for understanding the ways in which cooking, serving, and eating, along with their respective refusals at the "family meal," become textual moments of resistance in later works, through language of weaponry. During this period, when a discourse of nationalistic domesticity was crystallizing in Bengal, one cookbook author, writing in 1900, connects cuisine with military order and power. Prajnasundari Debi describes life in Bengal as one characterized by a "lack of orderliness" and prescribes a change of diet as the cure, "to rescue the Bengali cuisine from this chaos, and to give it a disciplined character," evidencing an implicit understanding of bodily and national constitutions as intimately related, a common enough conception at the time (qtd. in Sengupta 69). To simply compile a list of recipes of the region is not enough to create an ordered culinary culture, she writes; "just as a disciplined regiment of even a few soldiers is of much greater use in war than the mobilization of millions of troops, so is discipline a crucially important matter in the writing of cookbooks" (69). This language of regiments, soldiers, and troops may be incidental in the case of Debi's cookbook, *Amish o Niramish Ahar,* or "Vegetarian and Non-Vegetarian Foods," but the idea of meals as critical moments of weaponization is a central to this chapter's argument.

If we return to Neel Mukherjee's *A State of Freedom,* shifting from the discussion of Renu in Chapter Two to another domestic worker in the family's household, the weaponization

of food begins to take shape. Though Renu is the central preoccupation of the novel's second section, Milly's story makes up the entirety of the fourth and longest section, the only with chapters itself. In the second section, Milly's characterization is largely conveyed through conversation between the narrator and his mother. She is evasive, turning her head from the narrator on their first introduction, and Mrs. Sen later explains that she had "noticed that Milly did not talk to, or even look at, men" (Mukherjee, *Freedom* 34, 36). She rarely speaks but is often a topic of conversation and speculation. Other than the fact that she is married with children,[14] much of Milly's life remains a mystery to both the family she works for and to readers.

It is, therefore, all the more satisfying when Milly's story is demystified several sections later. Readers learn that Milly had witnessed extreme violence at the hands of both Naxalites and Indian soldiers during her childhood in the Munda tribe. After just two years of school, "Milly, at the age of eight, was taken out and sent by her mother to work as a housemaid in distant Dumri" where she experienced food security for the first time—two meals a day (170, 188). After a brief employment with a couple in Jamshedpur, Milly's mother informs her that she will be moving to Mumbai to work as a domestic maid for the Vachani family (191, 223). Though the salary she earns is "five times" that of her previous job, the money is deposited directly into a bank account, and slowly, Milly begins to realize that, "she wasn't allowed to leave the building" (225). She notices the metal bars on the windows and the cage-like appearance of the building's

[14] A brief discussion of breastfeeding also appears in this chapter, in the context of Milly's children. The narrator learns from his mother that "Milly was pregnant when she began working for [his] parents, so Ma decided to give her a heavy meal a day. The good practice had continued, [he] was cheered to note, even though Milly, [he] assumed, had stopped breastfeeding" (36). Implicit in Ma's practice is an acknowledgment that breastfeeding women require more calories a day and that compensating Milly with a meal, given her pregnancy, is not uncommon. But the surprise that underlines the narrator's "cheer" also suggests that terminating the daily meal after a woman is no longer breastfeeding is also common. Like Jashoda, breastfeeding women may be afforded a higher status, but also lose this status after their children graduate to solid foods. Fortunately for Milly, this is not the case, but her exceptional circumstance offers some insight into more common practices.

elevator, and a year passes in this domestic confinement. Realizing that she will not get any help from the building's guards "Milly, now resigned and fatalistic, had another idea—what if she performed her duties so badly that they had to let her go? She began subtly, then escalated in gradual steps. First, oversalting the food, burning the rice and rotis, putting salt in tea and heaped tablespoons of sugar in the savoury food at lunch and dinner" (233). Milly hopes to gradually degrade the quality of her food so that the couple will terminate her employment and release her from the confines of their apartment. Aware that any drastic steps may result in violence, or further restriction to her movement, Milly responds to her circumstances with careful, calculated action. It is a resistance measured out by the tablespoon so as to not draw the suspicion of her employers.

Milly's resistance is deliberate both in quantity and quality, as her culinary subterfuge is a direct reaction to her employers' requirement that she cook, though it is not a part of Milly's job description. Milly serves as both cook and housekeeper: "Although her salary in Mumbai was nearly five times what she got in Jamshedpur, she discovered later that she was being paid only one salary, the live-in housemaid's, when she should have been given twice that sum, since she was saving them the wages they would have had to pay a cook" (224). It is significant, then, that Milly decides to register her complaints about her living and working conditions through food; if she is not being paid for her culinary work, how can the couple expect professional level food quality? However, Milly's employer, Hemali, responds even to this restrained form of resistance with violence. Hemali complains about the food, then begins hitting Milly, forcing her "to eat all the ruined food in one sitting, shoving her fist full of food into Milly's mouth when she could no longer ingest anything" (233). This scene lays bare the common association between women's domestic labors and the violence committed against them, epitomized by

cases of kitchen fires in which a woman's murder may easily be labeled an "accident." Bride-burning "characteristically involves dousing a wife with kerosene, or a similarly flammable liquid, and then setting her on fire. The victims rarely survive, and those who do are often severely and permanently scarred over much of their body" (Kaur et al. 2). The perpetrators are rarely convicted for their crimes. Because it is traditionally a woman's role to handle such flammable liquids during food preparation, many instances of bride-burning are ultimately labeled an accident. I will return to this method of violence against women in my discussion of the next text, *When I Hit You* by Meena Kandasamy. In Milly's case, kitchen-related domestic violence is distilled into the image of a fist filled with food. But the already salient image is made more notable by the fact that this fist is filled with Milly's own sabotaged food. Hemali takes up the same weapon, in an acknowledgement that Milly's food subversion is her only available ammunition, and turns it against her. Like an adversary picking up one's own fallen sword on the battlefield, Hemali forces Milly to consume the tainted food that she herself prepared.

Thereafter, the paranoid Hemali views Milly's attempts at escape through the lens of food, even when they are squarely outside the realm of the kitchen. When Milly's father dies and she approaches Hemali with the news, she says, "'You're lying. It's a ruse you've cooked up'" (Mukherjee, *Freedom* 234). Milly's confinement is both necessitated by food and described by it: she is trapped so she can cook for the family, and her method of escape is described as one she has "cooked up." Food both literally and metaphorically ensnares her, though she does eventually escape the confines of this apartment, with the help of Biney, initially just a passing stranger. Their first face-to-face encounter is made possible by take-out food. One day, when her

employers are away, Milly opens the front door to find Biney "standing with two large paper boxes in a plastic bag" (238). Their first words to one another, across the threshold are:

> 'Take,' he said, handing her the plastic bag.
>
> She didn't take it, but asked, 'What's in it?'
>
> 'Food.'
>
> 'What food?'
>
> 'I work in a restaurant. It's food from there.'
>
> A pause as she absorbed this.
>
> 'I had to have something in my hands to convince the guards that I had come to deliver,' he said, almost injured that she shouldn't accept the food, although it was only a prop in a somewhat elaborate game.
>
> 'What food?' she asked again.
>
> 'Chow mein and chilli chicken,' he said.
>
> She didn't understand a single word; her mind was elsewhere. 'If they see the food, what am I going to say to them?' she asked. "I'll get into trouble.'
>
> 'You can eat it now.'
>
> She smiled, then said, "So much?', and went back to looking anxious. (239)

The above excerpt is the entirety of their first interaction, as Mukherjee represents it on the page. Every word they say comes back to the food in Biney's hands. When mediated through Biney's perspective, the food becomes "only a prop in a somewhat elaborate game," but readers understand that the stakes are much higher for Milly (239). For her, the type of food is significant, clear by her insistent question, "What food?" But its very presence also serves as a smoking gun of her escape plans; should her employers find any trace of the food or its

packaging, they will be alerted to her contact with the world outside of their apartment. This rendezvous, made possible by the take-out containers between them, is a key to her "freedom" from the apartment, and Milly recognizes the danger of the moment, represented as concern about the food itself. As their relationship continues, Biney helps Milly to escape her confinement, and she eventually finds work with the Sens.

"Freedom" is the very word Milly herself uses to describe her employment with the Sens, the principal family in the novel's second section, and this freedom is characterized by abundance. While working for the Sens, "Mrs Sen beg[ins] to give her a huge lunch every day" when she discovers that Milly is pregnant with her second child (255). The practice continues long after Milly's pregnancy and Mrs. Sen eventually advises her to "help herself" to any containers in the refrigerator "not only when they were stale or about to go off" (255). Milly, in a moment of free indirect discourse, reflects that "there was maximum democracy of food here, the greatest Milly had come across so far" (255). Mrs. Sen allows her to take leftover food home to her daughter Milly and even advises her, "if you want to take any food home for your children, just take it. You don't need to divide your own portion and eat less" (257). Implicit in Mrs. Sen's dialogue is the fact that Milly had been engaging in buffering behavior whereby "parents reduce their food intake to ensure their kids eat" (Bohn and Veiga 177). It is after this scene, in a moment of reflection, that Milly "realised what she had been given was a kind of freedom" (Mukherjee, *Freedom* 257). Milly traces both her captivity and her freedom with food. It is both her mechanism for resistance and escape, as well as the indication that she has gained a kind of personal and financial freedom that she had previously thought impossible. Indeed, where early twentieth-century iterations of women's domestic experience either emphasize non-eating, or simply fail to mention a woman's mealtimes, Milly is both explicitly shown eating and reflecting

on her food access. If we treat this narrative device as a spectrum—on one end, the absence of women's eating, and the other, its presence—Milly's story represents a major revision to the rule.

However, Milly and her family are by no means entirely food and water secure; there is no running water in their home, and the spigot closest to their slum has limited hours and long lines, a fact heavily reminiscent of Anand's *Untouchable* (Mukherjee, *Freedom* 250). But Milly does attain her own understanding of freedom, hard won through her acts of food resistance: sabotaged meals and take-out decoys. It is, therefore, crucial to both define Milly's understanding of freedom and temper it. As Saba Mahmood iterates in her discussion of the term "resistance,"

> the articulation of conditions of relative freedom that enable women both to formulate and to enact self-determined goals and interests remains the object of feminist politics and theorizing. Freedom is normative to feminism, as it is to liberalism, and critical scrutiny is applied to those who want to limit women's freedom rather than those who want to extend it." (Mahmood 10)

To be free, as it is typically understood in the tradition of liberalism, an individual's actions must be the "consequence of her 'own will' rather than of custom, tradition, or social coercion" (Mahmood 11). Under this definition of freedom, Milly is not truly free. The tenuous freedom she achieves, epitomized, for Milly, by her access to leftover food, is granted by her employer rather than her "own will." Like Jashoda, whose feeling of power is granted and, therefore, removable, Milly's freedom, by her own definition, is one given to her. Perhaps then, it is more appropriate to say that her food resistance has won her escape from physical confinement, but not from the larger structures that confine her. Leftover food, Milly's idea of freedom, may have

the effect of soothing her daily hunger, but it will not lift her from her depressed socioeconomic status. As such, Milly's narrative represents a first, tentative step in the construction of food as resistant.

Just as food serves as the occasion both for great violence and hard-won escape, in *A State of Freedom,* it serves as both the weapon for and against domestic abuse in Meena Kandasamy's 2017 *When I Hit You, or a Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife,* also written in English. Though the novel exceeds the geographical scope of this project—Kandasamy is from Chennai, on India's Southeast coast, and sets her novel in Mangalore, on the Southwest coast—its themes offer a profound entry point into the relationship between food and domestic resistance. *A State of Freedom* and *When I Hit You* each feature a woman who had become entrapped within a domestic space and made to perform domestic duties outside of her original agreement upon entering the home. But where Milly is a paid worker, the unnamed narrator in *When I Hit You* is a writer and scholar whose independence has been so corroded by her marriage that she fears stepping out of her home or engaging in any activity beyond cooking and cleaning. Indeed, it is the fact that Milly and the narrator in *When I Hit You* are in different situations—marriage versus occupation—that necessitates their comparison: the catalysts for and reaction to violence in each situation are preternaturally similar, which suggests that the weaponization of food is a relevant motif across domestic situations.

When I Hit You is a narrative chronicling the brief but violent marriage of a liberal young woman, working as a writer, who marries a former-militant turned university professor. The novel is written as a retrospective, and the unnamed protagonist begins her story by reflecting on her abusive marriage. In an attempt to pinpoint when the abuse first began, she recalls that "it always begins with a silly accusation, my denial, an argument, and along the road, the verbal

clash cascades into a torrent of blows" (Kandasamy 69). One of the unremarkable complaints she remembers was: "Why are you trying to kill me by trying to oversalt my food?" (69). The comparison with *A State of Freedom* is clear: the oversalting of food is a crime punishable by fist. Though the motivation behind each situation is different, Kandasamy's narrator does not oversalt the food purposefully, minor food infractions are met with the same physical punishment.

Early in their marriage, Kandasamy's narrator believes that her careful, intentional actions might engender change in her husband's abusive behavior; she must not give him any fuel for his rage. She discovers that the kitchen is a refuge:

> The kitchen is the tiniest space in our house, but it is a space of peace. While everything about me drives him into fits of rage, it is my food that manages to placate him. It is the only redeemable thing that he finds in me. This is the something on which I can try to build, try to trick myself into the make-believe of a happy marriage. In the kitchen, I discover my mustard-grain of faith. The only ceasefire is the food I make. The only conversations we have where he does not begin to suspect me are when we are talking about meals [...] Even though he interferes, and lectures me on how to reduce wastage and how to save cooking time, the kitchen is the only place in which he defers to me. It is the only component of our marriage where I have the upper hand. (98-99)

Even Kandasamy's description of accord between the couple is rendered in terms of their conflict. The kitchen is a space of peace, as if it is the demilitarized zone of their home. Food itself is a "ceasefire," an armistice designed to placate her husband. Such descriptions indicate that the couple's moments of civility are merely an interlude before the fighting begins again. Though the narrator considers the kitchen a space of peace, and food a means of achieving that

peace, she also recognizes the profound power she wields with it: “It is the only component of our marriage where I have the upper hand” (99). Throughout the novel, the narrator’s own power, through cuisine, will be negotiated and questioned, but ultimately, will also serve as her escape from the violent marriage.

Kandasamy’s description of food preparation as her only “upper hand” recalls Anita Desai’s 1999 *Fasting, Feasting*, an Anglophone novel that has become foundational to food studies in South Asian literature. *Fasting, Feasting* is set in an unnamed town, though likely in the Eastern state of Bihar, based on the early reference to the city of Patna and proximity to the Ganga River. Desai depicts two of her main characters, Mama and Papa, as so entirely unified as to become a conjoined noun, MamaPapa, sharing opinions on every matter from politics to shopping. However, Desai is quick to clarify,

> Of course there were arguments between them, and debate. In fact, these occurred every day, at the same hour—when ordering meals for the day. This could never be done without heated discussion: that would have gone against custom. It was actually wonderful to see what fertile ground the dining table was for discussion and debate. But it was also impossible not to see that the verdict would be the same as at the outset—if Mama had suggested plain rice and mutton curry to begin with, then it would be that and no other, no matter what fancies had been entertained along the way: pilaos, kebabs, koftas… That was just part of the procedure.” (*Fasting* 14)

Here, meals are a safe space for contestation. In a marriage defined by its symbiosis, rather than by isolation or violence, like many of the other texts in this chapter, the only remaining topic to dispute is food, a “fertile ground” for “discussion and debate.” In reality though, it is Mama who always wins the mealtime debates, her choice is the final “verdict” every time. Desai even

employs the language of Papa's profession as a lawyer, verdicts and procedures, to underscore what readers suspect: in this realm, Mama is the authority. As Kandasamy's narrator explains, her husband may "interfere" in the kitchen, lecture her about ingredients and procedures, but it is simply a show, as both know that he will defer to her in the end. It is the only space where she is in control.

But before the narrator finds the capacity to leave her husband, the violence gradually escalates, as is common in situations of domestic abuse. This narrative progression means that Kandasamy's narrator must constantly rewrite her notions of which conversations are safe and which spaces peaceful. Soon, the kitchen is no longer a refuge from her husband's anger, but an outlet for it. One chapter begins: "My husband is in the kitchen. He is channeling his anger, practicing his outrage. I am the wooden cutting board banged against the countertop. I am the clattering plates flung into the cupboards. I am the unwashed glass being thrown to the floor. Shatter and shards and diamond sparkle of tiny pieces. My hips and thighs and breasts and buttocks" (Kandasamy 131). There is no context for his outburst because the catalyst is unimportant; it could be something as small as a swipe of lipstick or an email from a colleague that sets him off. However, food has become the cause of his outrage with increasing regularity, as the previous example of oversalting attests. Just days after this description of her husband in the kitchen, the narrator explains, "The smallest thing could spark a major fight: the level of salt in the pumpkin *sambar,* the excess oil in the groundnut chutney, the green chilli in the chicken curry" (138). The combination of violence that the narrator witnesses in the kitchen, a previous space of respite, and her husband's increasing complaints about her cooking, overwrite her previous associations between food and marital peace. It is crucial to note, though, that her husband's rage is not always based on food; failure to prepare a shopping list or finish the

laundry are other catalysts for argument. But what links each of the occasions for violence is their domesticity. The narrator's husband, who has come to measure his own masculinity against his wife's performance of her domestic roles, cannot help seeing failure to attend to household chores as an attack on his own masculinity. But because cooking fills most of her day—preparing morning tea, breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea and snacks, and dinner—it is the most consistent impetus for his rage. As the kitchen becomes a site of violence, the narrator begins to insert herself as the inanimate objects he throws. She is the cutting board, plate, and glass, and as they shatter, she imagines her own body—"hips and thighs and breasts and buttocks" similarly broken at the hands of her husband (131).

In the previous example, the husband's method of violence in the kitchen is blunt force—throwing objects until they break—but the most common refrain surrounding the weaponization of food relates to fire. Kandasamy is careful to connect images of fire to the long-history of bride and widow-burning, contextualizing the husband's methods within the larger framework of violence against women across the subcontinent. One of her first references to the role of fire in domestic abuse explicitly states: "In India, a bride is burnt every ninety minutes. The time it takes to fix a quick dinner" (187). It is not a quick reference, but one the narrator meditates on, tracing modern-day instances of bride-burning back to widow-immolation, and describing the reasons it remains a common avenue for murder:

> Fire has been established as the easiest way to kill an unnecessary wife. Knives, poisoning, hanging—the needle of suspicion in other methods would point to the husband. Fire can be faked, however, made to look like a real accident. The fear of being burnt to death seizes me. Fear takes me to strange places. It paralyzes me. Even in the middle of a downpour, I leave the windows open before I switch on the gas stove. I light

> matchsticks in the empty air before I open the valve of the gas cylinder. I step into my kitchen like someone steps into a land filled with Claymore mines. Marriage has made sure that this is the space where I spend most of my living day. I do not want my kitchen to become my funeral pyre. (187-88)

Kandasamy quickly establishes fire as a weapon by comparing it with more traditional methods: knives, poisoning, and hanging. Far from her initial conception of the kitchen as a space of peace, the narrator now sees her kitchen as a no-man's-land, filled with landmines she must approach with caution. Her husband's presence is no longer even necessary to inspire such a fear of death, but his consistent use of her cooking as occasion for violence is enough to transform the kitchen into a battlezone. The narrator's fears are worsened by her own education: she is a liberal, educated writer, which ensures that she *knows* how this marriage operates to confine her to the kitchen, even as she understands it as the most likely place for her untimely death. Unlike a traditional Spivakian subaltern, this narrator recognizes and speaks to the structures that bind her in place, but the threat to her life is no less real. She cannot yet leave her husband for multiple reasons. First, having rushed into their marriage following a devastating affair with a politician, the narrator is desperate to have her marriage *appear* successful for as long as possible. But beyond her embarrassment, the narrator knows she has nowhere to escape to. Her parents think that she is exaggerating the situation, and she knows that if she were to arrive at their home without concrete evidence of extreme violence, they would simply return her to him.

The weaponization of cuisine in *When I Hit You* is neither subtle nor static: where burns in the previous example represent the narrator's deeply-ingrained fear of fire as a weapon against her, her husband also turns the weapon against himself. When he requests that the narrator visit the gynecologist with him, another stunt in his long-running efforts to impregnate her, the

narrator refuses. In retaliation, "he leaves a ladle on the gas stove, threatens to burn himself if" she does not go with him (195). As he does, the narrator internally wills "him to do it. I want him to hurt. I refuse to leave the house. Calmly, he removes the red-hot ladle from the stove and pushes it into the flesh of his left calf, right above the ankle. I miss the hiss of scorching skin because I begin to scream. I disarm him" (195). The status of the ladle as a weapon is most explicit in the passage's final line: "I disarm him." A common kitchen utensil, the ladle, becomes a dangerous weapon when combined with another mundane appliance, the gas stove. But, as Kandasamy has already established, the gas stove is replete with violent associations of its own, and it is the gas stove that turns a common object into a weapon in their marital power struggle.

Although the narrator consciously registers her husband's actions as self-harm—"I want him to hurt"—the weaponization of the ladle is another method to control her. Though the burns are inflicted on his body, they represent the violence he may turn towards the narrator should she not agree to leave with him. Even his self-harm is a form of manipulation, designed to impress upon the narrator his physical power. But reflecting on this episode, weeks later, the narrator explains: "I remember that my defiance over the trip to the gynecologist was enough to make him inflict burns on his own body with a glowing handle. I begin to realize, for the first time, that his violence, which is forever directed against me, can sometimes be twisted to turn upon himself. It gives me hope. I know that his anger is a device that I can detonate at will" (207-8). The language of weaponry is unrelenting, occurring more regularly as the violence within the narrative escalates in both frequency and intensity. Her husband has come to weaponize food, food utensils, appliances, and even the kitchen itself, but it is in this moment that the narrator realizes that her responses, in kind, can turn the weapon against himself. The ceasefire that food

represented in the novel's early pages is gone, but in its place is the realization that she can use it to renegotiate the power in their relationship.

Given the food-based landmines of their relationship, it should come as no surprise that the novel's climactic scene, and the one that seals the narrator's escape, is set in the kitchen. Recounting their final fight, the narrator sets the scene: "In the kitchen, I am shelling green peas and chopping up mushrooms and capsicum. I make a curry with aubergines and green chillies. The rice dances in the boiling water. I drain the rice, and set it aside. When I check, every grain is standing up as if in prayer. I call my husband to eat" (210). The narrator waits for her opening, recognizing that her husband's capacity for anger may be weaponized to her benefit. When he begins his usual line of paranoid questioning—asking who is calling her and whether she has begun sleeping with her ex-boyfriend—she explains, "I see my chance and sharpen the blade. 'But darling,' I say quietly, 'why all this hypocrisy? It is you who already has one failed marriage behind him.' I slip the words between his ribs like a stiletto knife" (211). Her description of their conversation has all the tension of an ambush. Lulled into a sense of comfort by the food before him, her husband is unprepared for the verbal blade: that she knows he has been married before.

His reaction is entirely expected. The scene that unfolds has been carefully curated by the narrator, who has been waiting for her husband to verbalize a threat on her life so that she may have sufficient cause to leave. His previous physical and sexual abuse, extreme by any standards, has not been enough. The narrator knows that she must appear inches from death for the severity of her situation to truly register to her family. So when her husband tells her, "'I am going to bring this to an end. Now. You are going to die. I should have done this long ago,'" it is the first time in her marriage she is not afraid (212). She knows that he will not act on his threats, but it is

simply “dishing out the black and white version [of their separation] demanded by this world” (213). The relationship between food and violence underpins even this climactic scene, the very last before the narrator leaves for her childhood home. Kandasamy describes the abuse in detail—“his toes digging into my cheeks, stomping my ears,” but, simultaneously, there is a sense of distance between the narrator and this scene she relives (212). She describes her husband “dishing out” the ending to their relationship, in a final allusion to the role food has played in their marital power struggles before the marriage is to dissolve.

Refusal to Eat

In *A State of Freedom* and *When I Hit Yo*u, food itself is both the occasion for violence against women, and a weapon against their abuse, as well as eventual lifelines for escape. In narratives that are characterized by female characters’ isolation, food is one of the only remaining weapons available to them. But where the previous novels emphasize the presence of food, the narratives in this section are characterized by its absence, instead locating power in food *refusal*. I first consider Aruni Kashyap’s “Like the Thread in a Garland,” in which voluntary hunger remains largely contained within the domestic space, as a newly married couple negotiates the boundaries of their relationship, then turn to Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*. Though Ghosh’s novel does contain minor instances of the domestic weaponization of food, these examples ultimately serve to transition into broader issues of government-sanctioned starvation tactics and community resistance to food warfare.

Kashyap’s “Like the Thread in a Garland,” written in English and included in the 2019 story collection *His Father’s Disease*, centers on a dysfunctional couple, Rubul and Anuradha, told from the perspective of Rubul’s best friend, Nishad. The role of food in their marriage is evident from the story’s first pages, when, on their wedding night, Rubul did not press Anuradha

for sex because "he had fasted all day. He was allowed to eat only fruits and palm sugar with water for dinner" (Kashyap 133). When Nishad invites Rubul's family, including Anuradha, to a housewarming and promotion party at his new home, the finer details of their marital strife are negotiated through food and hunger. Nishad asks Rubul to arrive around noon, and when he fails to appear by 4 o'clock, Nishad finally calls Rubul's mother. Upon hearing that they had been waiting for Rubul to pick them up for hours, missing lunch because they expected to eat at his party, Nishad responds, "'Well, the poor girl must be dying of hunger'" (144). When the family finally arrives, eleven hours later than planned, all they had eaten that day was a small amount of rice and dal, many hours before. But as they sit down to eat, Anuradha tells Nishad's aunt,"'I will just have plain rice with dal'" (146). The party food laid out on the table includes, "brinjal fritters, chicken cooked with cashew paste, fish in tomato curry soured with a lemon, goat rogan josh, sauteed cauliflower and potatoes, and palm jaggery kheer and shiny light-brown lalmohans for dessert. So, of course Bina-pehi's eyes popped in horror" at Anuradha's declaration (146). The image conjured here is one of abundance and variety, which marks Anuradha's choice of rice and dal as especially meager, even ascetic, by comparison.

For this reason, Anuradha's decision launches an interrogation. Nishad's aunt, Bina-pehi, asks if Anuradha believes their family does not cook well, or that their kitchen is dirty, and finally concludes, "'I have no doubt your mother cooks better than this, but does that mean you will go hungry in our house? I am sad'" (146). Despite Anuradha's protests that she does not believe any of the above to be true, Nishad recounts that:

> My aunt continued to hurl missiles at the poor girl. This is a tactic the host uses to guilt-trip guests into overeating: nine pieces of chicken instead of three, an extra bowl of kheer, four slices of cake instead of one and, of course, a lot of rice—like, a lot. That the

> new bride who was visiting for the first time would eat only rice and dal was an alarming situation for my aunt. That's why she pulled out her most powerful weapons at the very beginning. (146-147)

Like the excerpt from Vivek Shanbhag's *Ghachar Ghochar* that begins this chapter, mealtime power struggles are explicitly couched in the language of weaponry. Every sentence from Bina-pehi is a "missile" hurled Anuradha's way, another attempt to guilt her into eating. Her rhetorical strategies are "powerful weapons," the most forceful of which are her assertions that Anuradha believes the food to be of poor quality or cooked in a dirty kitchen, serious accusations indeed, especially during a celebratory occasion. The pressure to eat is relentless, but Anuradha resists, saying that she has heartburn. Within Muzna Rahman's theory of hunger, Anuradha's actions resemble the hunger strike. Rahman's chapter on Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* details a similar formulation: Mimi also revolts against her husband by refusing to eat (Rahman 38). In this kind of food abnegation, as Rahman terms it, the woman's "body is chosen as the site upon which to enact a defence [sic] against her husband and all he represents" (42). Like the texts in the previous section, *A State of Freedom* and *When I Hit You*, a woman's body remains the site of household negotiation. But where these texts emphasize the violence first done to a woman's body, whether by employer or husband, Anuradha's hunger strike is the first move in an unspoken power struggle.

Anuradha's refusal recognizes and capitalizes on the power she has as a guest. As Bena-pehi herself laments, because she is the new bride, Anuradha is "'the chief guest of today's lunch," placed in a position of honor as a newly-wed (Kashyap 147). As the guest of honor, her food refusal carries all the more power. Nishad recognizes that Anuradha "didn't have heartburn, or if she did, it wasn't serious. She was launching a passive resistance against her irresponsible

new husband turning up eleven hours late for a meal they were invited to" (147). The people at the table are aware of the power struggle playing out on the level of food:

> Rubul also knew what was going on. And perhaps his mother and Subho, too. He took the ladle, picked up a leg piece with a generous helping of cashew gravy. 'We will worry about you. And I will, of course, worry about you.' Then he poured it over her rice.
>
> Anuradha was startled. She wasn't prepared for that. She paused. Then she slowly pushed her unfinished plate of food towards the centre of the table—just a few inches. I was surprised she didn't raise her voice or push her plate away with more force.
>
> 'I am done.'
>
> 'You won't eat the chicken *I served you*?' Rubal asked. As if rejecting the chicken piece he served meant that she was rejecting him.
>
> She looked straight into his eyes and said coldly, 'No. I said I have heartburn.' (147-48)

Rubul, by pouring the chicken and gravy on Anuradha's plate, attempts to force her to eat. Anuradha is startled at this treatment, being coerced into eating as if she were a child. Where before her refusal was moderate—she was not refusing *all* the food on the table, but just the heavy, greasy food that signaled a celebration—now her refusal is complete. She pushes away the entire plate. Rubul's retort announces their marital negotiation for all to understand—'You won't eat the chicken *I served you*?'—and Kashyap's decision to italicize the later portion of the sentence underscores Rubul's ingrained misogyny, his belief that a wife should take what she is given from her husband. Though their relationship has never been defined by abuse, like the marriage in *When I Hit You*, the italicized portion of Rubul's dialogue drips with implication: his tone has turned threatening. Anuradha's response clearly rejects this bid to control her, as she

simply repeats her refusal, "No," after which Rubul leaves the room in defeat. Their back and forth reads like a sparring match, and the scene is delivered in a painfully slow, blow-by-blow account so as to accentuate the combative nature of their meal. Anuradha's food refusal, and her subsequent "win" in the mealtime battle, establishes a significant boundary in their relationship: she will not take orders from her husband. By refusing to eat, Anuradha's literally rejects what she "cannot swallow." Writing on the fasting body in Neo-Victorian literature, Lin Elinor Petterson writes: "taken that the psychological dimension of eating [...] is often embedded in suppressed emotions of anger and denial, swallowing becomes a subversive metaphor of acceptance and refusal of what is unfair" (Petterson 14). Swallowing is a key metaphor for Anuradha's own food refusal: she cannot accept, or "swallow," her husband's rude behavior.

Where the weaponization of food in "Like the Thread in a Garland," and, indeed, each of the above examples of food resistance, evidence the everyday combat of familial relations, Amitav Ghosh's Anglophone novel *The Hungry Tide* establishes food and hunger as weapons in both individual and communal, political conflicts. It is this later formulation that serves as an apt transition into the topic of the next chapter, which is concerned with women's food experience in times of mass migration and conflict. As its title suggests, Amitav Ghosh's 2005 *The Hungry Tide* largely revolves around oceanic, ecological exploration. Its principal character, Piya, is an American-born marine biologist of Bengali heritage visiting the Sundarbans in search of a rare river dolphin. But, as its title also suggests, hunger is another one of the novel's preoccupations, underpinning many of its plots and character motivations. In one early chapter, rich with historical information on the region, Ghosh's narrator explains:

> The destitution of the tide country was such as to remind them of the terrible famine that had devastated Bengal in 1942—except that in Lusibari hunger and catastrophe were a

> way of life. They learned that after decades of settlement, the land had still not been wholly leached of its salt. The soil bore poor crops and could not be farmed all year round. Most families subsisted on a single daily meal. Despite all the labor that had been invested in the embankments, there were still periodic breaches because of floods and storms: each such inundation rendered the land infertile for several years at a time. The settlers were mainly of farming stock who had been drawn to Lusibari by the promise of free farmland. Hunger drove them to hunting and fishing, and the results were often disastrous. Many died of drowning, and many more were picked off by crocodiles and estuarine sharks. Nor did the mangroves offer much of immediate value to human beings—yet thousands risked death in order to collect meager quantities of honey, wax, firewood and the sour fruit of the kewra tree. (66-7)

In a region so often racked by famine-like conditions, Ghosh is careful to note that in Lusibari, hunger is no exceptional circumstance, but an everyday occurrence. There is no single reason for the city's food insecurity—it is the result of everything from salt leaching into the soil, to the destruction of crops from floods and storms, and the disastrous results of hunting and foraging in unsafe areas. Many of Lusibari's occupants live meal to meal.

In the present-day action of the story, information about this extended malnutrition is delivered to readers via the perspective of a food secure person, Piya. By comparison with several of the women in the previous section, ensconced in household positions that leave food as their sole option for resistance, Piya seems an unlikely subject for food refusal. She is an independent American, traveling alone, her way paid by a research grant that, while tight, allowed for a degree of comfort: first class train tickets and private boats for research. Yet her diet consists of nutrition bars. When Fokir, a young man who had saved her from the clutches of

a greedy captain, begins to prepare a small dinner for her on his boat, “the smells were harsh on Piya’s nose” and she reflects that “it was a long time now since she had eaten food of this kind: while in the field she rarely ate anything not from a can, a jar or a package” (Amitav Ghosh 80). Her caution stems from a bout of intense food poisoning on a previous research trip, which had ended in an emergency airlift to the hospital. Since then, Piya traveled solely with “a cache of mineral water and portable food—principally high-protein nutrition bars. On occasion, she also carried a jar or two of Ovaltine, or some other kind of powder for making malted milk. When there was milk to be had, fresh or condensed, she treated herself to a glass of Ovaltine; otherwise, she managed to get by on very little—a couple of protein bars a day was all she needed” (80). Set against Ghosh’s earlier depiction of the community’s food insecurity, Piya’s own hunger is ironic. The language Ghosh uses to describe her nutrition, that “she managed to get by on very little,” could be cut from this description and placed in any scene of involuntary hunger, such as the families scraping together a meal a day in Lusibari. But instead, it refers to a voluntary hunger, one that does not serve to negotiate power, either within the home, as with Milly or Kandasamy’s narrator, or for her community, as I will argue that Kusum does, in the same novel, but a hunger that serves to isolate her from personal relationships.

When Fokir offers Piya a plate of the food that he has prepared, Piya braces herself for the conversation, delivered in hand signals as they do not share a language: “she knew he would offer her some of his food and she knew also she would refuse it” (80). The smells of his cooking remind her of her childhood, the smells like “creatures with lives of their own” who clung to the walls of her family’s apartment (81). When she smells the familiar ingredients here on Fokir’s boat, Piya reacts as if attacked: “suddenly the phantoms came alive again, clawing at her throat and her eyes, attacking her as though she were an enemy who had crossed over undetected” (81).

The cooking smells "claw" at her throat, "attack her" as if an enemy, language that characterizes this mealtime as wartime. Then, "She retreated to the bow and when [Fokir] followed her there, with a plateful of rice and cooked crab, she fended him off with her protein bars and her bottled water, smiling and bobbing her head in apology, to show she meant no offense" (81). Piya's actions read as if she is undergoing an attack; she "retreated" from the stove and "fended" off a plate of cooked food with her own individually wrapped provisions. But, by contrast with the previous sections' principal characters, Piya and Fokir are not negotiating any domestic conflict.

Instead, Piya's actions beg to be read symbolically. A diasporic character "returning" to Bengal, the nutrition bars offer a hermetically-sealed and known option, one that cushions her from reconciling her identities: both American and Bengali. Her reaction to the smells of her childhood indicates the all-too-common experience of second-generation immigrant children in the US: being marked as different when the smell of chilis cling to their clothes or when they open a container of turmeric-stained Tupperware at their school lunch table. Her reaction to these "pointed jokes and chance playground comments" about the odors of her family's cooking is to "fight back, with a quietly ferocious tenacity, against [the smells] and against her mother, shutting them away with closed doors, sealing them into the kitchen" (81). Her food resistance is quite disparate from, say, Milly's in *A State of Freedom*, or even that of Radha's in Basu's "French Leave." Where Radha's is a refusal of the labor involved in feeding her family, as well as herself, Piya's choice is not whether to cook, because Fokir is responsible for the food preparation. Instead, it is a decision to eat the meal he has prepared or a ready-to-eat bar. The bar serves a simple, caloric purpose—Piya does not enjoy this meal, but subsists on it. It serves as a weapon with which to "fight back" as she describes it, against the smells that threaten to mark

her as Bengali, or Indian, or simply "other," a holdover from her childhood that she cannot abandon.

This perception of cooked meals as "attackers" has the effect of distancing Piya from the food she eats both psychologically, as her trauma-based reaction to cooking smells indicates, and physically. Just as she physically removes herself from the cooking stove to the opposite end of Fokir's boat, she experiences another kind of physical distance from her meals throughout the novel. In one later scene, Kanai and Piya find a tiffin for them in the guest quarters of Nilima's home filled with "rice, dal, fish curry, chorchori, begun bhaja" (164). But Piya gives "the containers a look of dubious appraisal" and politely refuses the food, explaining, "'I have to be careful about what I eat'" (164). When Kanai asks if she would eat some of the rice, she agrees, so long as it is "plain white rice" (164). After serving her, "he gave her a spoon and then dug into the rice on his own plate with his hands" (164). Kanai's decision to give Piya a spoon is directly correlated with her attitude towards their dinner. Her initial response to the feast is outright refusal. Their subsequent conversation reads as a negotiation, with Kanai wheedling her to at least have some rice, which Piya can only agree to if it is plain, white rice. Like Anuradha, Piya opts for the plainest food, though, in Ghosh's formulation, the rice is a compromise with Kanai, rather than a sign of her disapproval. Kanai knows Piya was born in the US, but this conversation establishes her hesitancy, even fear, of Bengali food, so Kanai offers her utensils, intuiting the strain between Piya and this food of her childhood. The spoon, which Piya accepts without comment, offers another layer of protection, cushioning Piya from the smells and tastes that declare her dual identity. Clearly, food refusal takes different shapes in Kashyap's and Ghosh's examples, but Piya's hesitancy towards cooked meals and weaponization of pre-packaged foods is also quickly juxtaposed with a first-person account of the historical weaponization of hunger

against Dalit people, a move that establishes the significance of food refusal in interpersonal relations beyond the household.

It is in this discussion of mass food weaponization that my focus shifts from individual instances of food resistance to communal ones, a purview that extends into the next chapter, not with the intention to minimize individual and domestic experiences, but to highlight a previously undiscussed form of food resistance, one based on responsibility to one's community. This narrative represents a break from the isolation in *When I Hit You* and *A State of Freedom* or Piya's own self-quarantine, and, I argue, establishes food and hunger as mechanisms for coalition building. The novel's interpolated chapters, set apart from others by its italicization, read as a notebook addressed to Kanai from his uncle Nirmal. Nirmal, a leftist intellectual and headmaster of the first school in Lusibari, recounts the true events of the Morichjhapi settlement and subsequent massacre of 1979. There are few historical accounts of the Morichjhapi massacre, and very little scholarship, but Ghosh's interpolated chapters offer a compelling glimpse into both the settlers' food sovereignty, despite great scarcity, as well as the weaponization of food against them. When Nirmal first visits Morichjhapi, he is awed by the industry of the thirty-thousand Dalit refugees—still impacted by the fallout of Bengal's division in 1947 and the later creation of Bangladesh in 1971—that have made camp there. Inspired to support the community in any way he can, Nirmal offers to teach the children. His guide responds: "our children here have no time to waste [...] Most of them have to help their families find food to eat'" (143). Ghosh establishes the islanders' food insecurity, even more tenuous than that of Lusibari, whose population has long battled with their environment to earn their nutrition. Despite the dismissal, Nirmal does begin to conduct lessons on Morichjhapi, until the refugees

began to hear whisperings that the Left Front, the alliance of left-wing parties in power at the time, would soon act against their unauthorized occupation of reserved forest land.

Early on in the conflict, access to food and water emerge as weapons with which the government may control the settlers. The government "announced that all movement in and out of Morichjhapi was banned" and that gatherings of five or more people were prohibited (209). Because it is an island, the blockade has the effect of isolating the settlement from fresh water or food supplies. Nirmal, who hears of the conflict while in Lusibari, gathers that "dozens of police boats had encircled the island, tear gas and rubber bullets had been used, the settlers had been forcibly prevented from bringing rice or water to Morichjhapi" (209). On his first attempt to visit the island, Nirmal witnesses a police vessel sink a boat, laden with food supplies and several dozen people attempting to reach Morichjhapi. The next entry in Nirmal's notebook recounts: "The siege went on for many days and we were powerless to affect the outcome. All we heard were rumors: that despite careful rationing, food had run out and the settlers had been reduced to eating grass. The police had destroyed the tube wells and there was no potable water left; the settlers were drinking from puddles and ponds" (215). The police weaponize thirst and hunger twofold. Their first measure, which might be categorized as a passive strategy, is to isolate the islanders from outside food and water. The second, destruction of the island's wells, reads as an active attack, and an effective one. Bullets are hardly necessary against a parched and emaciated enemy.

After the siege, Nirmal makes his way to Morichjhapi in search of his friend Kusum and her son Fokir, Piya's savior and navigator in the present day, then settlers on the island. After weeks of near starvation, Nirmal finds Kusum with "bones protruding from her skin, like the ribs of a drum [...] too weak to rise from her mat" (215-6). Her son, Fokir "appeared to have

weathered the siege in better health" and Nirmal "assumed that Kusum had starved herself in order to feed Fokir" (216). What food they did find during the siege was divided by protein content: while Fokir ate the crabs and fish, Kusum insisted that she only have a "wild green known as jadu-palong" (216). Like Milly in *A State of Freedom*, Kusum exhibits clear buffering behavior; not only are her portions smaller, but she subsists on grasses, leaving higher-protein items for Fokir. Both characters are mothers who eat less so their child may have more. The government-sanctioned attacks on food and water have their intended effect: weakening the population. Everyone eats less, but it is the women who bear the brunt of the blockade's effects. Indeed, what is notable about the comparison between Milly and Kusum is the difference in circumstances; regardless of whether the hunger in question is an everyday occurrence or an exceptional, and intentional, circumstance, it is often women who eat less to accommodate for their families.

But where Kusum's actions depart from Milly's, and where this chapter's emphasis on food resistance comes to the fore, is in the aftermath of the siege. Upon seeing Kusum's emaciated form, Nirmal recounts: "Fortunately, we had taken the precaution of buying some essential provisions on the way—rice, dal, oil—and we now occupied ourselves in storing these in Kusum's dwelling (216). But before they can finish, it becomes clear that "Kusum would have none of it. She roused herself from her mat and hefted some of the bags on her shoulders" and told them "'I can't keep them, Saar; we're rationing everything. I have to take them to the leader of my ward'" (216). Even in her withered state, Kusum's first thought is of her community's rations rather than her own. Where moments before she had been unable to rise from her mat, seeing the provisions, Kusum quite literally shoulders the burden of her community's food security, hefting the bags to take to her leaders. In a circumstance in which the police have

weaponized hunger, in an effort to weaken the will of the settlers, Kusum refuses to give in to the individualistic instinct to survive. Instead, her actions evidence a radical form of food equity. To borrow Milly's description of her employment with the Sens: "there was maximum democracy of food here" (Mukherjee 225). Her refusal to keep the donated food resists government-sanctioned food warfare in equal and opposite measure, simply by distributing what could be hers alone. If the citizens of Morichjhapi wish to be sovereign, they must engage in food sovereignty: a vision for "restructuring food systems around alternative technologies and local exchange networks" (Meek 79). According to food systems education scholar David Meek, educating citizens on alternative food systems is "an explicitly political activity," because "it emerges in response to political economic processes and global flows of capital" and "mobilizes education for an equally politically explicit purpose: helping farmers become food sovereign" (79). Food sovereignty, a form of food resistance, is characterized by exchange networks among community members. It is this focus on community, I argue, that marks Kusum's food refusal as a weapon *for* her community, rather than a weapon against her.

By stark contrast with Piya's form of food refusal, Kusum's is community-oriented. Piya's decision to subsist on prepackaged nutrition bars is a personal refusal. Connected both to her previous experiences with food poisoning and childhood traumas, Piya's refusal of meals cooked on her travels has the effect of closing her off from those she encounters, marking her an individual separate both from her own family and now from those who have come to represent them.[15] Kusum's food refusal is in service of the very connection that Piya seeks to avoid.

[15] It is important to note, however, that Piya does eventually accept a meal from Fokir, towards the end of the novel and after they had established a rapport. They are on what will become their last journey following the river dolphins together and a cyclone is brewing, though neither knows it. They make camp on Fokir's boat that night, and when Fokir "offered her a plate of rice and spiced potatoes," Piya "could not bring herself to decline it, for the plate seemed like an offering, a valedictory gesture" (290). Piya's internal monologue suggests that her previous food refusals did, in part, relate to hesitancy over the person serving it.

Though the end result may be similar—in each circumstance a woman subsists on a very small amount of food—their motivations evidence a key divide in Ghosh's representation of food refusal: that which is in service of the individual and that which is in service of the collective.

Piya and Kusum's disparate refusals delineate two key points of this chapter's argument: first, that both decisions to eat and to abstain may fall under the category of food weaponization, and second, that it is not simply *the fact* of a woman's weaponization of food that marks her behavior as resistant to gendered food and labor structures. A mother-in-law may weaponize food against her daughter-in-law for the purposes of maintaining her own domestic prowess, such as in *Ghachar Ghochar.* As Anindita Ghosh reminds us: "women who dissent do not always emerge only as 'victims,' but often as 'perpetrators' in upholding repressive orders. And, as such, their compliance with patriarchy must be placed alongside their resistance in order for us to fully grasp these struggles" (7). Food serves as a crucial lens for us to understand women as either resisting agents, or collaborators, or both. But in a resistant formulation of food weaponization, cooking, eating, and even hunger itself become tools with which a woman may negotiate her status within the home or a method she may use to escape it, as is the case with Mukherjee and Kandasamy's characters.

Where the texts by Tagore, Chattopadhyay, and Anand are marked by a conspicuous inattention to women's eating and abstention, be it in a food secure household or one on the brink of starvation, the contemporary texts in the latter half of this essay upset the norm. Containing both eating and abstention, these stories not only feature scenes in which women consume food, but weaponize it in order to negotiate domestic power. As such, the lens of food weaponization in instances of both personal and communal conflict establishes food as a nontraditional form of resistance, cultivated by women. As Saba Mahmood argues:

> If the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes 'changes' and the means by which it is effected), then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity. Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency—but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. (15)

A woman's participation in gendered, domestic structures that may, at first, "appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view," actually serves as a form of agency, in many of the texts in this chapter. Food weaponization draws on the long-established food-related violence against women—the overt bride-burning and the covert control of portions alike—and redirects that violence against those that perpetuate it. Though the results vary, Milly's "freedom" may be a limited one where Kandasamy's escape appears complete, the food resistance in these texts attempt to locate and reject gendered relations of domestic power.

This redirection of violence finds an even larger context in the chapter that follows, expanding the emphasis on communal food relations, in my discussion of *The Hungry Tide,* and tracing the weaponization of food against whole communities during instances of communal violence, border conflicts, and insurgency. Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* serves to introduce a key component of the following chapter: each novel details Bangladesh-India border relations. Victims of the 1979 Morichjhapi massacre are lower-caste Hindu refugees displaced from Bangladesh, and the two central texts of Chapter Four are set in either side of the Bangladesh-India border, during the conflict in Assam between 1979 and 1985 that renders the main

characters refugees, in the case of *The Story of Felanee*, and during the 1992 anti-Hindu riots in Bangladesh, and subsequent mass migrations, in *Lajja.* My decision to analyze fiction set against nonfictional border and migration conflicts is meant to highlight a broader literary context for the weaponization of food, on that has consequences in public and private spaces alike. Where each of the above examples, from colonial-era texts like *The Home and the World* to twenty-first century fiction, *A State of Freedom* or "Like the Thread in a Garland," evince the everyday combat of familial relations, the next chapter establishes food and hunger as weapons in both individual and communal, political conflicts. When we extend the weaponization of food to military and police conflicts, we find that women and girls are similarly central to negotiations, despite the simplistic understanding of women's food preparation and consumption as domestically-coded and, consequently, undervalued.

CHAPTER 4

FOOD ON THE MARGINS: EVERYDAY HUNGER, EXCEPTIONAL VIOLENCE

'*Maa says the place which feeds us is our own. That place is our mother.'*

— Rita Chowdhury, *Chinatown Days*

For Rita Chowdhury, motherland means food security. Hers is a fluid conception of home, as is necessary for the characters in her novel, *Chinatown Days* (translated from the Assamese *Makam* in 2018), descendants of Chinese indentured laborers who continue to live in Assam, where their ancestors migrated. When war breaks out between India and China, the protagonist, Mei Lin, and thousands of other Indian-born Chinese people are deported to Maoist China, where they experience a kind of double-diaspora. Their understanding of homeland is written and rewritten throughout the story's events, which span almost 200 years. One character, Yiu Yi, offers the above lines as a comfort to her displaced aunt: "'the place which feeds us is our own. That place is our mother'" (Chowdhury 127). Her belonging in Assam is mediated, and assured, through food security.

By beginning this chapter with an epigraph on the relationship between food and place, which gestures towards a broader understanding of national belonging, I signal a shift in this dissertation's scope. Where the previous two chapters negotiate an individual's hunger largely within a domestic space, this chapter places individuals and their households within the context of the larger historical conflicts surrounding their experiences with hunger. Like Mei Lin and her family, the characters at the center of this chapter grapple with questions of belonging and home. Yet as they navigate these abstract notions of identity formation and reformation, they must also

contend with the material consequences of conflict situations and migratory experiences, namely the hunger and assault that disproportionately impact women migrants.

Taslima Nasrin's Bengali-language *Lajja* and Arupa Patangia Kalita's Assamese-language novel, *The Story of Felanee* are the central texts in this chapter and, like *Chinatown Days*, are each set against the backdrop of mass migration in Northeast India and Bangladesh, though of different ethnic and religious groups. A tandem study of *Lajja* and *The Story of Felanee* is particularly fertile for this reason: the tensions surrounding land rights that led to violence in Assam during the early 1980's were in large part due to the influx of migrants from Bangladesh after its creation in 1971.[16] Though the conflicts at the center of *Felanee* and *Lajja* are distinct—one largely forged along religious lines and the other ethnic—they are both historically and thematically connected. Each poses questions about migrancy and belonging that are focalized through food.

Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja*, meaning "shame," was first published in 1993 after the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in India in 1992, which resulted in anti-Hindu communal riots throughout Bangladesh. Nasrin's narrative centers on the Datta family, Hindus who have lived in Bangladesh their whole lives, opting to stay even as many of their friends and family left for India in waves, first after Partition in 1947 and then after the Bangladesh Liberation war in 1971. Like *Lajja*, Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee*, simply *Felanee* in the original Assamese edition, centers on questions of migration and belonging, but where the decision to migrate to India is not solidified until the last pages in *Lajja*, *The Story of Felanee* is defined by forced migration at its outset. Patangia Kalita's 2003 novel is set against the conflict in Assam between 1979 and 1985, at the height of the independence for Assam movement led by the All-

[16] See Uddipana Goswami's *Conflict and Reconciliation: The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam*. Chapter Five, "State Policy, Ethnicity and Conflict" traces state responses to the conflict to the twenty-first century.

Assam Students Union, and a separate movement for Bodo Statehood, from 1987 to 1993. As *Felanee* shows, the AASU were motivated to remove "foreigners" from Assam by force, burning entire villages to drive out anyone not ethnically Assamese, often targeting Bengalis in particular. The protagonist, Felanee, is in the unique position of claiming Assamese, Bodo, *and* Bengali lineage, three communities in conflict throughout her life.

Despite the fact that each of these novels is preoccupied with concepts of home and belonging, neither author dwells on representations of food as a symbol *for* home, as we might expect based on recurring literary examples of food as both a catalyst for homesickness and its cure.[17] Instead, food comes to serve as both a literal and metaphorical proxy for the physical and sexual violence that ensues during each conflict, violence directly resulting from the precarious status of "home" for each character. In a material sense, the novels examined in this chapter follow the example of Morichjhapi, as it is represented in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*: hunger is both an everyday occurrence in the lives of these characters and one that is variously exploited by separatist groups and arms of national governments, police and military officers. Women characters are disproportionately affected by this food insecurity, while simultaneously left open to sexual violence during the riots and raids common to each conflict. As Carolyn Sachs and Anouk Patel-Campillo establish, "in conflict situations, women and girls are more vulnerable to gender-related violence and may not be able to access their fields for growing crops or grazing livestock" (Sachs et al. 402). Women may be separated from their homes, as Sachs and Patel-Campillo explain, or from the men in their families, both of which increase their risk of assault and of hunger, especially if their male family members are the primary wage-earners. Brinda J. Mehta writes in her article "Contesting Militarized Violence in 'Northeast

[17] Such as *The Hungry Tide*, for example, which depicts Piya's ingrained association between the smell of Bengali cooking and her childhood home.

India:' Women Poets against Conflict:" "women's stories remain invisible in master narratives of war, conflict, and nationalism. At the same time, absorbed traumas and patriarchal morality codes have inhibited women from speaking out about their violated bodies for fear of dishonoring family, community, and nation" (58). Like Mehta, I focus on the exceptions, lifting stories of women in conflict situations and tracing the way their bodies are not only inscribed with sexual violence, as Mehta suggests, but with hunger.

Sachs and Patel-Campillo represent hunger and assault as separate layers of a woman's experience during conflict situations, treating them as distinct vulnerabilities. By contrast, my own comparative treatment of hunger and sexual violence reveals their correlation: instances of food insecurity and sexual violence are narratively codependent. Hunger and assault do not just appear in the same narrative, but hunger often *leads* to instances of assault, and depictions of the assault are rendered in alimentary terms. Patangia Kalita and Nasrin not only attend to the double-vulnerability of women in times of conflict but connect their form and content: they describe sexual violence *through* the language of food. I contend that, in the novels under consideration, these increased instances of hunger and assault in conflict situations are systematically linked, on both material and linguistic levels. Nor do I simply acknowledge the interdependence of these vulnerabilities. In another departure from the individual focus of this project to the collective, I argue that mutual aid networks between communities of women serve to combat them.

***Lajja*: Assault as Cannibalism**

Lajja is told from the perspective of Suronjon Datta,[18] a young, Hindu man living in Dhaka, Bangladesh with his mother, Kironmoyee, father, Sudhamoy, and sister, Maya, during

[18] The protagonist's name is spelled Suronjon, in Anchita Ghatak's translation of *Lajja*, and Suranjan, in its sequel *Shameless*, translated by Arunava Sinha. For sake of consistency, I will always use the spelling Suronjon, in keeping

the 1992 anti-Hindu riots. Much of the novel chronicles the daily lives of the family as they navigate communal conflict: the ways they secure food, the friendly visits to gain information, and the repeated conversations about whether to flee for India. At the novel's outset, the family has already moved once. Amidst a land dispute over their ancestral home, Maya disappeared for several days, and, upon her return, they decided to migrate to Dhaka. After the riots erupt in Dhaka, in response to the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in India, the family fears for their safety, and, when Sudhamoy suffers from a stroke, the family is left without their primary bread-winner as well. Sudhamoy is bedridden and hardly able to speak, but he eventually stabilizes and the family returns to a kind of normality, though Sudhamoy is still too weak to work. One day, seven Muslim men abduct Maya from their home and, while searching for her, Suronjon's behavior becomes erratic. He sexually assaults a Muslim woman working as a prostitute. Shortly after, a friend of the family finds Maya's body floating in the water under a bridge, and the Dattas decide to leave Bangladesh for India. Like the families at the center of *Chinatown Days*, the Dattas experience a kind of double-migration, first when they are displaced from their ancestral home and move to Dhaka, then as they migrate to India.

The story's action begins in 1992, during the Anti-Hindu riots in Dhaka, which quickly begin to affect the Datta family's food supply. Reflecting on their current scarcity, Suronjon reminisces about the foods of his childhood, when they still lived in their ancestral home— "full-cream milk and butter; and in the afternoons he wanted fish and meat and parathas fried in ghee"— and reflects that his father, Sudhamoy, "was now reduced to belching contentedly after eating a simple meal of dal and rice" (Nasrin, *Lajja* 88). The stereotypical scarcity meal, rice and

with the original text. Moreover, while *Lajja* ("Shame") is left untranslated on the book's cover, while *Shameless* is translated into English. Following this precedent, I refer to the original text as *Lajja* and its sequel as *Shameless.*

dal[19] represents a dish made only of staple foods, the items left in the pantry even after a long lockdown. Suronjon reflects that his middle-class family never went hungry prior to the riots, despite their forced move to Dhaka: "earlier [in his life], food would always be left for him on the table, even if he did not want it" (145). Now, the family's food stores dwindle for several reasons. First, Sudhamoy can no longer work after his stroke leaves him incapacitated, and, since he had been the primary wage-earner, the family must economize. But, beyond their financial insecurity, the rioting neighborhood means that it is more difficult to even find provisions; it is often unsafe for Suronjon to leave the house for ingredients, and store hours are undependable because of the conflict. While visiting his friend Pulok, Suronjon learns that "the Jamaat and the BNP [...] are taking away even the pots and pans of the Hindus, along with fish from their ponds. Many Hindus haven't had anything to eat for seven or eight days now" (151). His intel suggests that the food insecurity many families face is a combined effect of both targeted attacks and incidental side effects of the rioting city. Hunger is both a primary weapon of torment for the rioting groups, as in the case of stolen food stores and poisoned supplies, and secondary one, the incidental hunger many families experience because their local grocers are closed or because they will not risk leaving their homes.

Though this insecurity impacts the entire family, it weighs most heavily on Kironmoyee, Suronjon's mother and the primary cook. As tensions mount in the streets around them, Kironmoyee becomes increasingly quiet, going "about her chores silently, cooking some dal and rice" and eating little herself (143-44). As she serves Maya her meal one evening, the narrator notes that Kironmoyee herself "did not eat" (144). Nasrin does not reveal Kironmoyee's motivation for abstaining; she may be losing her appetite as a result of the stress in her life, or

[19] See, for example, Monica Ali's *Brick Lane,* which establishes "rice and dal" as a symbol for economic hardship in an extended refrain that bookends the narration (Ali 88, 411).

engaging in buffering behavior, eating less so the rest of her family may have more. This latter possibility is especially significant for the Datta family, who distributed food equitably prior to the Anti-Hindu riots. Kironmoyee reflected that, throughout their marriage, and prior to his stroke, Sudhamoy "never sat for a meal without her and would always take the larger piece of fish from his plate and give it to her" (168). His insistence on eating together is particularly significant given the traditional Bengali practice for women to serve men their meal, then retire to a separate room to eat the leftover food, as in Tagore's earlier *The Home and the World*. Not only do Kironmoyee and Sudhamoy eat together, but he offers her the largest portion, a tangible token of his respect. Nasrin's explicit indication that Kironmoyee refrains from some meals during the riots is all the more striking for its contrast with her earlier food security. It establishes an important note about women's buffering behaviors in literature: though they are often catalyzed by economic need, it is not only the most traditional, or conservative, of households that see women to restrict their intake for the sake of their families, particularly in times of conflict.

Nasrin often interrupts the family's narrative, and their everyday concerns over food and safety, with long lists of murder, theft, violence, sexual assault, and destruction of property committed against Hindu people in Bangladesh. Consequently, *Lajja*'s narrative does not fit the typical generic conventions of a novel; for whole pages or chapters, it more closely resembles a governmental report. These narrative intrusions are sometimes explained as conversations between Suronjon and friends, but other times it is simply the narrator who offers countless, specific examples of communal violence. For example, with the exception of its first paragraph, Chapter Three consists entirely of dates and figures detailing violent events. Dates and numbers blend together after a time: thefts of one million takas, arrests of sixty-five people, land sold for

eight thousand takas, imprisonment of sixteen people, a hundred people ransacking a home, and an entire page of statistics. Another statistic-heavy scene features Suronjon reading the census report:

> of 1986 with figures from 1974 and 1981. The total population of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in 1974 was 508,000 and in 1981 it became 580,000. In 1974 there were 96,000 Muslims and 188,000 in 1981. In 1974 there were 53,000 Hindus and 66,000 in 1981. The rate of increase in the number of Muslims was 95.83 percent and in the number of Hindus, 24.53 percent. (97)

These statistics, taken from the annual report of the Census Bureau of the Government of Bangladesh, is approximately four times longer than the passage above, such that the page itself swims with numbers. What is more, paragraphs often begin, "On 8 February 1979," "Later in 1979, on 27 May," "On the afternoon of 9 May ," "On 16 June," "Around eleven o'clock at night, on 18 June," "On 10 December 1988," "In the dead of night on 3 July 1988," "On 20 June," "On 7 April 1979," "On 3 and 4 May 1979," "On 19 and 20 May," "On 12 and 16 August 1988," and "On 10 December" (60-71). Each date is followed by a detailed account of the crime committed: arson, sexual assault of women and girls, and the murder of entire families. The numbers are dizzying, the reportage quality of the narration recalling Bartolome De Las Casas' *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* in its unrelenting list of atrocities. Though, where the historical distance between a contemporary reader and writer in the case of De Las Casas' text is some 480 years, the atrocities Nasrin recounts took place just 30 years ago. The effect is both overwhelming and numbing: after a time, the reader may become desensitized to the violence, even glossing over some accounts to return to the plot of the story. In this way, the lists of statistics accomplish two objectives: first, and most apparently, they illustrate the number of

atrocities committed during the Anti-Hindu riots of 1992, but they also mimic Suronjon's own, gradual desensitization to the violence surrounding him, a violence that he internalizes and, I will argue later, weaponizes against Muslim women.

One pattern emerges throughout these long lists of crimes: a vast majority of the accounts involve physical and sexual violence against women. Sometimes the descriptions *revolve* around assault against women—stories about rape and beatings—and other times, they are treated as incidental, as in the many instances when men arrive to loot a home, but, finding women home alone, sexually assault them:

> Yunus Sardar's people raped Sobita Rani and Pushpo Rani in Romjanpur village of Madaripur. In Dumuria in Khulna, two sisters, Orchina Rani Biswas and Bhogoboti Biswas were both dragged off a rickshaw van at Malopara on their way home and raped at Wajed Ali's house. [...] Sobita Rani Dey, a student of Borolekha School, was studying at night when Nijamuddin came with some men and abducted her. Sobita was never found again. Shefali Rani Datta, the daughter of Nripendro Chondro Datta of Bogura, was abducted and forced to change her religion. The administration did not help at all. In the Shuro and Bagdanga villages of Joshor, armed men surrounded the houses of Hindus, plundered and beat up the people inside, and then raped eleven women through the night. [...] Ronjon's sisters, Maloti and Ramroti, were forcibly converted to Islam and married off to Muslim men and then turned out of their marital homes soon after marriage. (Nasrin, *Lajja* 205-07)

These long, detailed descriptions of violence against women retain the distance of a reporter or historian throughout the novel. Lacking a narrative to bind them, these events take on a clinical quality, one that does not expect, or perhaps even allow, readers to empathize with the victims.

Nasrin explains many of the extended passages with the fact that Suronjon "had worked for two years with *Ekata* Magazine. This was 1988-99. As a reporter, he went to all parts of the country. His bag was full of news of such kinds of torture" (71). Though the statistics are focalized through his perspective, Suronjon maintains a distance from the victims, and Tasrin's language reflects this journalistic separation. Dates are imparted and events disclosed in sentences entirely free of metaphor or writerly flourish.

Yet, in instances where he and his family are concerned, Suronjon's dialogue and Nasrin's language retreat into obfuscation of the details, largely revolving around food and eating. In the novel's early pages, and the early days of the violence in 1992, Suronjon hears a procession pass their home, shouting:

> Pack up Hindus
>
> One or two
>
> And snack on them
>
> Won't you? (23)

In the lines following the slogan, represented as verse on the page, the narrator suggests that "Suronjon remembered that they had heard the same slogan in 1990. If they found Suronjon somewhere close by just now, they would *gobble him up*" [emphasis mine] (23-34). On the next page, he reflects that the people in the procession must be boys from his neighborhood, friends and acquaintances who "were going to snack on" him (24). Though this example is not gendered, it does establish the use of food metaphor in instances of communal violence. Suronjon inserts himself as the victim of cannibalism, and it is this collapsed distance between himself and the conflict around him that causes Suronjon's retreat into metaphor. He thinks that the procession of boys would attack him, which, on the page, translates to being "gobbled up," an anxiety he

cannot capture with his usual deluge of statistics and reporting, perhaps out of fear that he will become one of them.

This cannibalistic language of "gobbling" and "snacking" extends to sexual violence as well, connecting experiences of food insecurity with the threat of sexual assault that many Hindu women face in the novel. The most extended example of this language occurs after Maya is abducted by a group of rioting Muslim men, again indicating that Suronjon conceptualizes violence as cannibalism when it impacts himself or his family. While Suronjon is out one day, "seven young men barged into the house" damaging everything in their home and dragging Maya away (213). Though Suronjon searches the streets of Dhaka for her, he cannot find her, and several days pass without Maya returning home. As he becomes increasingly desperate for her return, and his behavior steadily more erratic, Suronjon's friends attempt to comfort him, saying: "'I'm sure Maya will be back. They won't swallow a living woman'" (249). Again, Maya's assault is rendered in terms of consumption, as Suronjon's friends reason that the men will not "swallow" her. Though it likely refers to the possibility that Maya may never return, what happens when she is "swallowed" is unclear: it may refer to her sexual assault, death, her removal to a distant city, or the event that she is made to convert to Islam to marry a Muslim man, changing her name and "swallowing" her identity as Maya. By obscuring her abduction in metaphor, characters do not have to name their fears explicitly.

As his hope for Maya's survival dwindles, Suronjon's descriptions of the attack connect more explicitly to eating. He imagines that "Maya's abductors would be feasting on her like vultures devouring a corpse. They must be gouging her flesh out and tearing it apart. Were they eating her like the early humans feasted on raw flesh? An inexplicable pain left Suronjon shattered. He felt as though those men were feasting on him. He was being devoured by a pack

of seven hyenas" (293). Nasrin's passage takes the idea of edible corporeality to the logical extreme as Suronjon's fear for Maya's safety manifests as fear of cannibalism. Unable to verbalize, or even theorize, sexual violence, he imagines primitive anthropophagites feasting on his sister, taking the food metaphor for women's bodies farther along the metaphorical-literal spectrum; her body is literally consumed—as in used up, destroyed, exhausted—even if not literally eaten, as Suronjon imagines. But, abruptly, the cannibals' attention transfers to himself halfway through the narration, and he imagines they are now "feasting on *him* [emphasis mine]" (293). Suronjon's fear for his sister is inextricably tied to his own bodily harm, fears over his own extinction rendered in terms of total consumption. In my discussion of *The Story of Felanee,* I will trace how the language of consumption alters when focalized through the perspective of a woman. For now, it is important to note that language of cannibalism in *Lajja* is neither static with regard to *whom* it describes—Suronjon or Maya—nor in relation to *what* it describes—sexual or physical violence. Yet, hunger and assault are consistently linked.

In the days and weeks following Maya's abduction, during which time she is assumed dead, Suronjon decides to assault a Muslim woman, descriptions of which further displace his cannibal metaphor from its original referent. Nasrin is careful to note that Suronjon's sexual assault is a decision, rather than a momentary action of passion, when she writes that "he was extremely keen on raping a Muslim woman," was "not drunk," but rather "completely in his senses and was fully aware of what he was doing" (294). Significantly, the woman he assaults first approaches Suronjon in the same paragraph as his most abject description of Maya's abduction and assault—in which he imagines her abductors "eating her like the early humans feasted on raw flesh" (293). After asking her full name and father's name to determine that she is Muslim, Suronjon takes Shamima, a prostitute, back to his home. When she protests that they

have not yet agreed on payment, Suronjon tells her to "shut up" and forces himself on her. Nasrin describes the scene in detail: "Suronjon was breathing quickly and he sank his nails into her stomach and bit her breast [...] he pulled the woman's hair and bit her face, neck, and chest" (294). In revenge for the sexual "consumption" he imagines Maya has experienced, and his own fear of the rioters, Suronjon not only sexually assaults Shamima but *bites* her face, neck, and chest, enacting the type of "feasting" he imagines Maya's assaulters have done. Afterwards, Shamima asks to be paid, and Suronjon at first refuses, then notices that:

> The bite on her cheek was bleeding [...] [H]e felt sorry when he saw the woman's sad eyes. She was poor and sold her body for food. The wretched mores of society were not putting her labour or intelligence to use but pushing her to dark alleys instead. Today's earnings would surely help her buy some rice. He had no idea if she managed two meals a day! Suronjon took out ten takas from his pocket and gave it to her. (296)

S.M. Shamsul Alam writes that this scene "signifies the disintegration of the Islam-based state of Pakistan. Suranjan used to participate in these celebrations, but now Bangladesh was a foreign land to him and the act of raping a Bangladeshi Muslim woman indicated a rejection of all to which he had belonged" (Alam 448). While it is certainly significant that this moment takes place on "Victory Day," December 16, the day in 1971 when the Pakistani army surrendered, and *Lajja* is a novel clearly preoccupied with national belonging, I do not read Shamima as entirely symbolic. Here, Nasrin explicitly connects sexual assault with the material reality of her food insecurity. As Suronjon notes the tangible evidence of his assault, the bite on Shamima's cheek, he realizes that the only reason she does not run from him is her dire need for food. Nasrin's narrative itself, with its unrelenting lists of violent acts against women, asks readers not to escape into the realm of symbolism entirely. Her attention to food security reminds us of

Shamima's corporeality and asks readers to reckon with her personhood in a more robust capacity than Alam's reading suggests.

Yet even after his "revenge," Suronjon's refrain about Muslim people "consuming" Hindus continues to the end of the novel. In *Lajja*'s last pages, Suronjon tells his father that the rioting Muslims "snack on Hindus and make no allowances for the old or young" and suggests that the family leave Bangladesh (Nasrin, *Lajja* 304). Despite the fact that he has now participated in the kind of "snacking" that he has previously only associated with Muslim people, Suronjon still uses this language in his conversation with Sudhamoy. He does not associate his own behavior with the communal violence that surrounds them. In the final dialogue of the novel, Sudhamoy and Suronjon decide that their family should leave for India, leaving behind their home country and any hope for Maya's return.

Any study of *Lajja* would be incomplete without discussion of the novel's afterlife. *Lajja* was famously banned after its publication and Taslima Nasrin exiled from Bangladesh; in fact, much of the scholarship on the novel details its reception, rather than its content (Alam, Hasan). After a *fatwa* was issued against her, often compared to Salman Rushdie's after the publication of his 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses,* Nasrin found sanctuary in Sweden, before moving to Kolkata in 2004. [20] In 2017, while living in Kolkata under police protection and facing pressure to leave Bengal, Taslima Nasrin wrote a sequel to her *Lajja (Shame),* entitled *Shameless,* published several years later, in 2020. In her author's note, Nasrin describes the sequel's inception: "I imagined what Suranjan's life today would be like. He wasn't well, I thought. Like

[20] It is significant that at the time of *Lajja*'s publication, in 1993, most *fatwas* in Bangladesh were issued against women. According to S.M. Shamsul Alam, in 1994, "five hundred cases of *fatwa* were reported and fifty women were killed as a result of these *fatwas* [...] In almost every case, the *fatwa* was exclusively used against poor rural women who [...] strove to be economically independent" (433-44). It follows that Nasrin's *Lajja,* which critiques the way Islamic fundamentalism sanctions violence against women, resulted in her own *fatwa.*

me, he was in exile. [...] That was when I decided to write a new novel about Suranjan and his family, whom I had written about in *Lajja*. In the new novel, alongside my fictional creations, I too would be a character, in my real self" (Nasrin, *Shameless* viii). Along with the turn towards metafiction, *Shameless* breaks from *Lajja* in a variety of other ways. On a plot level, Maya's death, which was all but confirmed in *Lajja*, is reversed, and the entire family migrates to Kolkata. In a 2011 article on *Lajja*, Debali Mookerjea-Leonard complains that:

> female characters are given little textual space in Nasreen's novel. The two most prominent women are Kiranmoyee and Maya. Even so, as characters they are underdeveloped; they serve primarily as sites for the performance of violence, physical as well as psychological. While much of Nasreen's literary and journalistic writings focus on cultural, economic, and sexual oppression of women under patriarchy, *Lajja,* surprisingly, withholds any exploration of Maya's or Shamima's sufferings (these characters disappear after the traumatic events). (34)

Written before the publication of *Shameless* in 2020, this criticism seems valid. Indeed, it is the fact that female "characters disappear after the traumatic events" and the revision of this in *Shameless,* that make space for a powerful form of coalition building among women within *Lajja*'s extended universe.

Shameless is distinct from its predecessor in its language and style, as the comparison between eating and assault is absent. Instead, Nasrin replaces terms like "snacked," "gobbled," "swallowed," "feasted," and "devoured," with largely literal representations of plot events. For example, Suronjon admits to domestic violence in the barest of language: "'I did beat Sudeshna,'" his ex-wife (Nasrin, *Shameless* 28). Maya's abduction, previously rendered a cannibalistic feast, becomes "the assault on Maya" or, even more explicitly, Nasrin writes that

"Maya had been abducted; she had been raped" (96, 99). Though Nasrin describes Maya's assault in more detail, and she is literally "bitten and mangled by a group of Muslim men in ways that words cannot describe," Nasrin does not retreat into eating metaphors in these moments (103). Throughout the novel, Nasrin tends towards literal descriptions of sexual assault, both when discussing Maya's experience and that of another main character, new to *Shameless*, Zulekha. The question is then: why does Taslima Nasrin abandon language that combines sexual assault and food, eating, or hunger? While it may be true that Nasrin's style could have simply evolved in the twenty-seven years that elapsed between the two novels' publications, I suggest that the novels' endings, respectively hopeless and hopeful, provide another answer.

Where *Lajja* ends with Maya's assumed death and the family's desolate prospects for the future, *Shameless*, which remains similarly bleak throughout much of its narrative, ends on a surprisingly optimistic note: the founding of a coalition of women, inclusive of all castes, classes, and religions. It is only in the novel's last ten pages that Nasrin reveals that Maya has decided not to marry Sobhaan, a married Muslim man with whom she had been having an affair. Rather, she enrolls her children from a previous marriage in boarding school and moves into a hostel where Zulekha, a Muslim woman Suronjon previously dated, now lives. She joins Zulekha's organization, Bold Girls, which Nasrin describes in the previous chapter:

> [Zulekha's] friendship with Mayur and other women like her had deepened. She had set up an organization named Bold Girls in the hostel; leaflets were being distributed asking the other inmates to join. The Bold Girls met every night, their membership growing by the day. They encouraged their members to pool their strength so that each of them could lend support if one was in trouble, so that each of them could stand up in protest if one was humiliated. Female unity—without this, nothing mattered. Once this was in place,

> the women who were forced to be subservient, who had no choice but to depend on others, who had lost their identity, would no longer feel isolated, they would know the others were with them, they had many shoulders to lean on, many hands to lift them up from the dust. If the boss made a proposition in the workplace, Bold Girls would send a warning letter to the company, and even file a case if need be—three of the members were lawyers. If any of the women couldn't afford to pay her examination fees, contributions were raised. There were four doctors too, who provided free treatment if anyone fell ill. (253)

Maya, previously a self-proclaimed "Muslim-hater" with a personal resentment towards Zulekha for her relationship with Suronjon and friendship with Sobhaan, now willingly moves in with Zulekha and joins her organization. Their reconciliation does not take place in the action of the story—Nasrin leads the reader to believe that Maya distrusts Zulekha until their cohabitation is revealed—so Maya's radical shift in thinking appears sudden. Even after learning of Bold Girls, Maya calls Zulekha "jealous," and in the same breath explains, "She's formed a women's organization; she's become quite the feminist," in a patronizing tone (263). To follow Maya's lead, foundational feminist theory is instructive for understanding both Maya's resentment towards Zulekha and their eventual collaboration. bell hooks writes that women "are taught that our relationships with one another diminish rather than enrich our experience. We are taught that women are 'natural' enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another. We have learned these lessons well. We must unlearn them if we are to build a sustained feminist movement. We must learn to live and work in solidarity" (127). Maya and Zulekha are presented as romantic adversaries for most of the novel, resentful towards the other for their relationships with the men in each of their lives. Yet

each woman has experienced severe psychological trauma in her marriage and share the experiences of abduction and sexual assault. Just as Hindu Maya had been abducted from her home and sexually assaulted by a group of Muslim men, in Bangladesh, Muslim Zulekha has been taken from her home and assaulted by a group of Hindu men, in India. By the novel's end, each of these women comes to recognize her marriage as a part of the same structures that led to her assault by strangers, and their participation in Bold Girls suggests that each character finds catharsis through mutual aid between women.

These characters "live and work in solidarity," as bell hooks writes, building a coalition of women committed to improving the material conditions of one another's lives. My description of the Bold Girls as a mutual aid project relies on Dean Spade's definition of mutual aid as "a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions, not just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on their representatives in government but by actually building new social relations that are more survivable" (136). Bold Girls is an organization apparently without hierarchy. Taslima Nasrin, as a character in her own novel, tells Zulekha that she will not be an adviser to the Bold Girls because she does not want to impose a hierarchy on their mutual aid project; "don't let anyone be superior or inferior," she says, "give everyone the same opportunity, the same importance" (Nasrin, *Shameless* 276). The Bold Girls are all working women who plan to pool their resources and share the cost of an apartment, which Zulekha and Nasrin take to calling a "commune" (281). In doing so, the women enjoy similar benefits to living in a multigenerational household with their husbands—the financial security of many incomes and the physical security of a large group of people—without the presence of men. Bold Girls aims to make living conditions "more

survivable" for the women in it, not only evidencing the kind of "bonding" among women that bell hooks advocates for, but using their bonds to enact real, material changes in their daily lives.

Taslima Nasrin's language in *Lajja*, the complete "devouring" or "swallowing" of women, leaves no room for their continued existence after sexual assault because a woman's body is linguistically consumed in its entirety, as Debali Mookerjea-Leonard's critique suggests. In *Shameless*, however, Nasrin's language shifts to a more literal representation to accommodate for the "after" of sexual assault victims' lives. Maya and Zulekha are not "swallowed" whole, but rather survive, and, in the end, thrive, as they work across religious lines, creating a community of women who stand against the very patriarchal structures that led to each of their abusive marriages and experiences with sexual assault.

***The Story of Felanee*: Hunger and Sexual Assault**

Like *Shameless*, hunger in *The Story of Felanee* is often both the occasion for sexual assault and its result, when a survivor might be labelled as "tainted" and cast out of her family's home. The mutual aid between single, working women in *Shameless* appears in Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee*, as well. Yet, while Nasrin's coalition of women support one another legally, medically, and socially, Arupa Patangia Kalita imagines a community of women founded specifically on food aid. My argument remains trained on the cannibalistic descriptions of women's assault found in *Lajja* and connects this linguistic consumption with women's food insecurity. Though I continue to trace figurative language of "feasting" or "devouring" on women's bodies in *Felanee*, I argue that the hunger both catalyzed by and resulting from sexual assault also is represented as forming the basis of a coalition of women and as ultimately serving as a tool for material, political change in their community. Theirs is a community formed *around* hunger.

The Story of Felanee begins with a chapter on Felanee's family history. Her grandparents' brief love affair ends when Felanee's grandmother dies in childbirth and her Bodo grandfather is killed shortly after by a Mauzadar, a revenue collector for the British government. Felanee's mother, Jutimala, is raised by her father's side of the family, in a Bodo household, and marries a Bengali sweet-shop owner, Khitish Ghosh. Shortly after their marriage, Khitish dies during the Assamese Language riots of the 1960's. While Jutimala is in labor at home, their house is set on fire and Jutimala dies, though a relative of Khitish saves the newborn Felanee. This genealogy is notable for two reasons: it both establishes Felanee's "mixed" identity, significant because these communities are in conflict over land rights and because it illustrates the generational trauma she inherits. Both her grandparents and her parents die at the moment of their child's birth, or shortly after, such that Felanee is a second-generation orphan. Her life is marked from the beginning by conflict.

In *Felanee*, the literal foodways in the text cannot be separated from the metaphorical. Patangia Kalita establishes a connection between sexual experience and food early in the novel. Felanee, pregnant with her second child, is compared with a "ripening rice field," language long associated with a woman's arrival at sexual maturity, here repurposed to indicate her body's preparation for a child, though she will later miscarry as a result of extreme trauma (Patangia Kalita, *Felanee* 10). In a later scene, a television character is about to kiss his crush's breasts, described as "two round, smooth, luscious fruits," just before the scene cuts away, in a version of the near-culturally-universal language of breasts as fruits (136). Taken alone, these instances of food-based sexual metaphor appear as simple descriptors, isolated instances of linguistic playfulness and attempts to obfuscate "seedy" topics of conversation. But I argue that their appearance in scenes of sexual violence, in turn explicitly related to hunger, calls for a more

rigorous explication. If sexualized food-language is merely an innocuous by-product of linguistic habits, why do Patangia Kalita and Taslima Nasrin each choose to use it in conflict situations in which women's bodies are made doubly vulnerable, by sexual assault and increased rate of hunger?

In the present action of the story, Felanee and her son, Moni, are forced to flee their home when their entire village is burned to the ground, and many of its inhabitants, including her husband, Lambodar, are murdered. Amidst the gruesome violence perpetuated by an as yet unspecified separatist group, Felanee's thoughts revolve around hunger: "both the unborn baby and Moni had been hungry for so long" (25). It quickly becomes clear that their food insecurity will continue when Felanee returns to her village to find that their garden, which "had been the most beautiful and bountiful in the village [...] was nothing but ashes" (40). Like the scenario that Carolyn Sachs and Anouk Patel-Campillo present, in which women "may not be able to access their fields for growing crops" during conflicts, Felanee no longer has access to her primary food source and takes Moni to live in a refugee camp (402). Here, they are allotted a tin roof to create a temporary shelter and a small amount of rice per week.

Though this refugee camp, with its plastic sheets for walls and worm-infested food, is a brief stopover in the larger scope of the novel, it is also the setting in which questions of hunger and sexual *violence* first begin to coalesce. The instability of the camp breeds unrest, in the form of both sexual trouble and skirmishes over rations, examples of which are given one after the other:

> Despite the poor food in the camp she [a young girl] was blooming like a flower. Runu, it seemed, was the cause of the disturbance. The previous night, when she was asleep next to her grandmother, two boys carried her out through the torn plastic sheets that made up

> their cubicle in the middle of the night. Runu did not recognize the boys. She shouted and struggled for all she was worth. The boys dumped her and ran off. The camp was in an uproar over this incident.
>
> The common kitchen where food was cooked for the camp dwellers had been closed down. Instead, each family was given a weekly quota of rice, dal, wheat and oil. The wheat and oil it was said, was donated by other countries. Moni loved the porridge that his mother made, using broken wheat grains. Each week there were fights over the rations. Each day it seemed that the problem multiplied. (Patangia Kalita, *Felanee* 42)

Formally, the two incidents—sexual assault and fights over depleted rations—read as two items on a list of reasons why Felanee and Moni leave the camp. But the narrator, focalized through Felanee throughout much of the novel, also connects sustenance with sexual disturbance: it is despite "the poor food in the camp" that Runu's body is developing (41-42). Each incident is also characterized by struggle; just as Runu fought off the boys, "each week there were fights over the rations" (42). With so many people displaced, the camps become crowded and tense. Hunger and sexual assault are unintended consequences of the cramped, transitory experience, and it is their combination that finally leads to Felanee's decision to leave with Bulen and Sumala, distant relatives of her late husband. When Bulen hears of a new settlement in a reserve forest,[21] he invites Felanee along, and the two families join the other recent migrants who "had all been evicted by someone or something—either the floods, wild elephants or hunger" (55). Like many migrants before them, forced to move when food or water supplies are depleted,

[21] Like Morichjhapi in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, "the uninhabited land was "actually a reserve forest. A few people had built makeshift huts on this land for there was no knowing when they might be evicted" (Amitav Ghosh 54). The refugees in *Felanee*, already displaced from their homes, make camp on reserve forest land, a tenuous existence, where the government might force them to leave with little notice.

Felanee and Bulen's families, driven by hunger, leave the relative safety of the camp for the unknown.

The women in this new community implicitly understand the double-vulnerability of their status as migrants. Felanee's neighbors, a mother, father, and teenage daughter, Ratna, are both food insecure and concerned for their daughter's safety. The insolent Ratna complains, "'In this house, there is never enough for two meals [...] There isn't anything in the house. No oil, no potatoes, no lentils" (140-1). Like most families living in the makeshift community, their food insecurity is dire. But after Ratna begins to visit the "driver's wife," a woman rumored to be a sex worker who often feeds and entertains Ratna during the day, her mother is concerned. As they ete a meal of mutton curry provided by the driver's wife, "she looked at her teenage daughter [and] she found that her torn dress wasn't enough to cover her body. Her face looked innocent like a little girl's. At this growing age, it was but natural that they craved for good food and good clothes. The driver's wife fed her daughter meat curry today. What if she bartered her daughter's meat tomorrow?" (142). For Ratna's mother, hunger and sexual violence are explicitly connected. She worries that the filling, protein-rich meals may be a ploy to entice Ratna into the driver's home, where his wife can fatten her for prostitution. Unlike the case of Runu, in the refugee camp, food is not simply a metaphor for sexual violence, nor narratively proximate to it, but is also its catalyst.

Nor is *Felanee* the only text in which Patangia Kalita features a mother comparing her daughter's body to meat when confronted with the possibility of sexual assault. In her short story, "Kunu's Mother," from the 2015 collection *Written in Tears*, an Assamese translation, Kunu's mother supports her family in many of the same ways as the women from *Felanee*: "grinding spices at the roadside eatery," or selling "puffed or boiled rice" (Patangia Kalita,

"Kunu's Mother" 161). Like Felanee, Kunu's mother also supports her child alone, after her husband leaves them. When a man, likely an insurgent, appears at their home one day, stating "I'm going to marry Kunu," Kunu's mother sends her to live with her uncles (175). Upon hearing that the man had returned with several friends, Kunu's mother arms herself with a chopping boti, a long, curved blade connected to a platform, used for chopping vegetables, before running out to her courtyard and screaming, "'Hey you all! Do you hear me? These men want to feast on my daughter's flesh!'" (179). In retaliation, the insurgent and his friends try to take the chickens from her coop, a literal threat of starvation in response to her metaphorical feasting reference. The story ends in a manner befitting my own argument about *Felanee:* the courtyard gradually fills with community-members coming to Kunu's mothers' aid as she stands her ground: "'Who are you to drive me away?" (180). Though the tension is not resolved within the story's action, with the mother's final words, readers understand that Kunu's mother will not go hungry; she has the support of her community.

But each of these examples, of men "feasting on flesh" in "Kunu's mother" or bartering Radha's "meat," in *Felanee,* remain generalized examples, referring to the sexual consumption of a young woman. Several instances in *Felanee* depict violence against women that focalizes their breasts, in particular. Like Mahasweta Devi's "Behind the Bodice" or "Draupadi," from the same collection as "Breast-Giver," *Breast Stories,* Patangia Kalita features several instances of sexual violence specifically targeting a woman's breasts. "Draupadi" depicts a Santhal tribe member whose insurgent actions during the Naxalite Movement result in her capture by the government, during which time she is raped and beaten, leaving her breasts "bitten raw, the nipples torn" and bloodied (Devi, "Draupadi" 35). This visceral image finds an almost exact

replica in *Felanee*, when Jon's Mother, a woman Felanee sees on market days, comes to her home. Felanee offers Jon's Mother some moori, which she ate in mere seconds, exclaiming:

'My, how hungry I was!'

'Why, haven't you had your dinner?'

'No.'

'But I saw you bringing home small fish.'

'Yes. I cooked rice, and I cooked fish as well.'

'And then? Why didn't you eat?'[...]

'My hunger disappeared listening to the old man's abuses.' [...]

'You always work so hard for the family; why does your old man abuse you so? It's really a shame.'

Suddenly, Jon's mother took off her blouse and threw off her sador. In her nakedness, she looked like a statue; her breasts looking firm like two ripe fruits.

'It's for my blasted body, don't you understand?' she shouted in anger. 'His own juices have dried up. When he can't perform at night, this is what he does to me; look, see for yourself.' Just then, there was a flash of lightning. In the brightness, Felanee saw that the woman's firm black breasts were scarred with numerous wounds, that looked red and raw.

'Feel them Moni's Ma, feel them!' Saying this, Jon's mother caught hold of Felanee's hand, and forced her to touch the wounds. Then she broke down sobbing. 'How do you expect me to eat after this? Tell me.' (Patangia Kalita, *Felanee* 80)

Unlike Draupadi, whose assaulters are strangers working for the Indian military, Jon's mother is left with numerous wounds on her breasts from her husband. But what is more, this sexual

violence is explicitly linked to her own hunger. Though it is entirely her labor that supplies her family with food—she sells moori in the market to purchase ingredients, which she then prepares, and cooks—the physical and verbal abuse she experiences diminishes her appetite. Patangia Kalita even compares Jon's mother herself with food. Her breasts are "firm like two ripe fruits" and this description's proximity to her hunger suggests their dependence: treated like a food item by her husband, bitten and discarded at will, Jon's mother cannot herself rationalize the experience of hunger. When she is treated as food to be consumed, she cannot herself consume. She escapes the site of this sexual violence, even just for a brief visit, and her appetite returns enough to eat the food Felanee offers. The experience of Jon's mother is evidence of the double-vulnerability of women during conflict situations. She is first left open to hunger by the circumstances of her family, namely her husband's extended illness, and the migratory housing she lives in. But significantly, her experiences of hunger and sexual assault are not separate factors, of "vulnerabilities," as Sachs and Patel-Campillo represent them, but rather, the second layer of her malnutrition is a *result* of sexual violence. It is not enough to mention that women experience each, separately, at a greater rate during conflict situations, but we must consider their interdependence. In doing so, we gain the understanding that figurative language surrounding sexual assault is no simple, linguistic by-product of common food expressions, but, in fact, a marker of the deeply insidious relationship between hunger and sexual violence.

This sort of linguistic obfuscation is not uncommon either, as real-life examples of sexual assault evince. In 2003, the National Commission for Women (NCW) asked the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research (C-NES) in India to conduct a study titled, "The Impact of Armed Conflict on Women: Case Studies from Nagaland and Tripura," states geographically connected by Assam, the setting of *Felanee*. In one interview, a Naga woman describes three

Assam Rifles, a branch of the Indian army that execute anti-insurgency operations in the area, that entered her home and "ill-treated her." When the interviewer "asked if by 'ill treated' she meant raped, she nodded her head in agreement. A nearby man said, 'it is not part of our culture especially among women to use such words' [...] women are hesitant to talk about rape and abuse and will often couch the act in other words that are not perceived to be as offensive" (National Commission for Women 44). Consumption is not only enacted on the linguistic level, but physically as well. Jon's mothers' sexual assault is represented as a cannibalization in much the same way Suronjon viciously bites Shamima in *Lajja*, or the way military officers leave Draupadi with literal chunks missing from her breasts after she is taken into custody. Patangia Kalita's representation of sexual assault in language of cannibalization does not simply circumvent words "perceived to be as offensive" but calls attention to the literal ways in women's bodies are scarred. Each instance of cannibalization makes literal the connection between sexual assault and hunger. Just as Jashoda's breasts become "craters," when she is no longer food secure, these women's bodies are both consumed by hunger and by the men who assault them.

But it is Sumala's sexual assault and death that represent the most literal connection between sexual assault and hunger. When Bulen becomes involved with the Bodo separatist movement, he becomes more hostile towards Felanee, with whom he has left his now-senile wife, Sumala. Sumala's presence is a burden on Felanee and Moni, as she eats the portions of an adult, but cannot replenish them. Upon Bulen's return, he brings Felanee money for feeding Sumala, which she refuses on principle. A young girl, Bulen's new partner, speaks to Felanee: "'Keep the money,' she said. 'There will soon be a thousand house bandh. You'll die of starvation" (Patangia Kalita, *Felanee* 244). In an effort to have their demands heard, separatist

groups begin to call for bandhs, a form of civil disobedience in which schools, businesses, and markets close for a set amount of time. The bandhs are generally enforced by separatist militants, such that there is a high level of compliance, even among those who do not share separatists' sentiments. For Felanee and the women she attends the market with each day, the bandh represents a loss of income. While Felanee has managed to store more food than some of her neighbors, who often live meal to meal, she still has just enough rice for two days, not the forty-one days that a thousand-hour bandh will last. Moreover, because the community knows about each bandh in advance, those who can afford it stockpile food in preparation for the bandh, and by the time Felanee or her neighbors get to the market, stalls are empty of food. This thousand-hour bandh is an almost incomprehensible amount of time for those with little cash or food stores.

This threat to their food security is perhaps the most dire of the entire novel and precedes another climactic moment. In the very scene after Bulen and the young woman's visit, Sumala is found dead: "In place of her breasts there were two raw bleeding wounds. Her emaciated genital passage was a huge open wound. Many people had seen her near the military camp looking around for a piece of bread" (246). While the rendering of sexual assault in terms of food may be common, the repeated language of "feasting" and "devouring" evidence a more literal link to hunger as well. Sumala's death is narratively bookended by hunger. The lines directly before the revelation of her death warn of the eminent thousand-hour bandh and those directly after suggest that she had been looking for food when she was sexually assaulted and killed. Hunger leaves under-resourced women, like Sumala, more vulnerable to sexual assault, which is linguistically rendered in terms of consumption, completing the circuit such that assault is both narratively preceded by and characterized by hunger. Yet, in the follow section, I will illustrate the ways in

which hunger, so commonly associated with sexual assault in *Felanee*, becomes an occasion for coalition-building between women, and, ultimately, a method through which they enact social change for their community.

Women's Mutual Food Aid: Hunger as Bond

After leaving the refugee camp, Felanee and Moni rent a room from a woman named Kali Boori. The two women regularly bond over experiences with hunger, and their first meeting is no exception. Before either speaks, Kali Boori brings "some tea and puffed rice," which "smelled divine with oil and onions," and the first words spoken between them are "'won't you have some [puffed rice]?" (58). The use of food as communication is no new concept: neighbors leave sweets as welcome gifts for new residents or announce their child's engagement with a box of mishti. Without acknowledging it overtly, Kali Boori recognizes Felanee's hunger, and offers her a snack. However, the puffed rice is no mere set piece in their first interaction, but a shared means of economic security, as Kali Boori offers to share her puffed rice business with Felanee. Kali's first words "won't you have some [puffed rice]" come to serve a double meaning: she both offers Felanee puffed rice as a singular meal, in satisfaction of a momentary hunger, and later offers her a share in her puffed rice business, insurance against a more extended malnutrition. This shared business venture is a key for differentiating between "charity" and "mutual aid" between women. Where Carolina Moraes describes charity as a "paternalistic delivery of essential goods," mutual aid is a radical form of care that not only relieves immediate needs, like Kali Boori's proffered meal, but creates a space for solidarity and collaboration, as in the case of their puffed rice business (645).

Kali Boori and Felanee's collaboration, as well as the larger coalition of women they will create, is founded on a shared knowledge of food insecurity and the literal exchange of food.

"Open body" and "closed body" ontologies, common to anthropological food studies, is instructive for understanding the coalitional politics of *Felanee*. In an "open body" ontology, eating and feeding create community as the "act of incorporation physically folds each person into the group. When you eat, you eat for and with the group, and the resulting existence reflects on the community's health as a whole" (Hastorf 281). Early in their acquaintance, just pages after their first meeting, Kali Boori and Felanee discuss hunger explicitly. When Kali Boori gives Felanee a plate of "rice, and a curry of small fish, cooked with mustard and chillies" with jackfruit seeds, Felanee ate until she "licked the plate clean" (Patangia Kalita, *Felanee* 63-4). Unable to ignore her obvious starvation, Kali Boori remarks "'You must have been very hungry,'" and "Felanee looked down without answering. Yes, the moment she touched the plate, all her worries evaporated, even if just for a while. She hadn't eaten so well for ages. She felt ashamed of herself. 'I understand so well,' the old woman remarked. 'There is nothing worse than the fire in your stomach'" (65). Shared experiences with hunger, and communal meals, bonds the two women, as it will for many of the relationships Felanee forms with women throughout the novel. Their bodies are "open," such that food and shared knowledge pass between them, strengthening each participant emotionally and physically. Though neither of them verbalizes it, in this scene, each of their experiences with hunger are also shaped by gender—Felanee, whose widowed status leaves her both without her husband's income and their shared home, and Kali Boori, whose family shunned her after she eloped with a priest who quickly left her, each recognize the experience of hunger in the other person. For Kali Boori, the memory of hunger has not dulled, a painful remembrance that allows her to connect with Felanee through knowledge: the desperation of hunger particular to single women. Where hunger in literature is often represented as a means of division—desperate people stealing food from one

another or hoarding resources to ensure their own families' survival—hunger in *Felanee* is largely a binding force when it is negotiated between women.

Although Felanee is the more food insecure of the two women, she imagines offering food to Kali Boori, wishing she could reciprocate Kali Boori's gesture. After eating the plate of fish curry, Felanee looks up to see Kali Boori looking "frail" and "breathless," and "Felanee felt like offering her a glass of water. Not just water; she wished she could offer her a plate of sweets, a guava, and a slice of ripe papaya from an imaginary garden—like her devotees did" (64). Felanee's desire to feed Kali Boori, though confined to her imagination for now, represents a significant first moment of potential food aid between women. Scenes in which women mutually support one another through the sharing of food resources, cooking skills, and knowledge of ingredients or foraging spots comprise a significant portion of the novel's narration, along with countless moments of commiseration over shared experiences with hunger. Though Felanee cannot yet share her own resources, she can participate in the mutual food network by bonding over food and imagining the fruits she would offer Kali Boori, just like her devotees do.

Kali Boori's "occupation" as a person possessed by Kali is also a direct reversal of the association with divine femininity that precludes Jashoda from temple *prasad* in "Breast-Giver." Though Jashoda's association with divine femininity earns her veneration and food security throughout much of her life, that stability dries up with her breastmilk. Upon finding her husband, Kangali, at a nearby Shiva temple, she learns that he had been enjoying the consecrated temple food, *prasad,* throughout her tenure with the Haldar family. After her argument with Kangali, the very woman associated with divinity is prohibited from eating the *prasad* that surrounds her; her only access to it would be through a man, and their relationship's dissolution

bars her access. By contrast, Kali Boori is both associated with the divine feminine, through Kali, and enjoys the fruits of that association: “she had plenty of offerings in terms of food and cash” (57). Kali Boori’s possession draws massive crowds who “throw coins towards the goddess” and her feet “would be covered with offerings of fruits, and dry sweets” (64). For her annual Kali Puja, Kali Boori visits the houses of her neighbors; “The householders donated whatever they could—rice, dal, vegetables and sometimes a little money” (198). Like Jashoda, Kali Boori is isolated from her family, but Kali Boori’s connection to the goddess means that she not only sustains herself, with the help of her community, but can offer aid to Felanee. Felanee too recognizes the connection between Kali Boori’s possession and her food security. She reflects that Kali Boori “not only keeps herself, but others too. And today, she has been able to feed me a full meal [...] As she sat before the image of the goddess, tears flowed down her cheeks” (65). Kali Boori can feed Felanee because of her community’s support.

Seeing her tears, Kali Boori emphasizes to Felanee the importance of women’s independence. Kali turns stern, chastising, “Who do you think you are crying for? What man do you need to take your sorrows to?” (66). Then, she “pick[s] up a small white chilli” and brings it to Felanee:

> ‘Women have to be like this chili,” the old woman declared, putting the chilli in Felanee’s hand. ‘Tiny to look at but real fire once in the mouth.’ Felanee’s anger had not subsided yet. The old woman led her to a picture of the goddess Kali with her feet firmly placed on the body of Mahadev, her husband.
>
> ‘Look, how powerful the goddess is; she has ultimate control over man. If you become her devotee you will feel an infinite power inside you. (66)

Here, the comparison between Kali and Jashoda comes full circle: where Jashoda's access to food is tenuous because she must rely on the men in her life to pay or feed her, Kali Boori stands alone. It is not *in spite* of her single status that Kali Boori enjoys her food security, but *because* of it. Her power comes from her conception of femininity as a divine force. Her assurance that "you will feel an infinite power inside you" even recalls Radha's internal power in Purabi Basu's "French Leave." When Radha urges her body to produce milk, "she bit her lips in determination and wished—exercised all her power" (Basu 159). Basu's formulation of breastfeeding features a woman, physically removed from her household, sitting at a pond, exercising the power within herself. In the same way, Kali Boori emphasizes that devotees of Kali feel an "infinite power" from within themselves. However, it is important to note that this internal fortitude does not mean *isolation* from one's community: the ability to feed herself may come from an internal "power," according to Kali, but it is the network of women around her that provides her with food, which she may then redistribute to others, including Felanee.

It is also significant that even Kali Boori's metaphor for women's independence is symbolized by a food item: the white chili. In her book chapter, aptly titled "Red Hot Chili Peppers: Visualizing Class Critique and Female Labor," Anita Mannur analyzes the 1986 film *Mirch Masala*, which centers on a peasant woman, Sonbai, who is relentlessly pursued by a *subedar*, or tax collector. Sonbai "resists his sexual advances," running from him, and "taking refuge in the chili factory" where she works (Mannur 121). The *subedar* tells the factory owner "there's a certain woman inside your factory (licking his lips). She's hot as spice. I want her" in what Mannur terms an imagining of Sonbai as "a spicy commodity to satisfy his libidinal desires" (122). But the women surrounding her, Sonbai's fellow factory workers, protect her

with their only available weapons: the chili peppers.[22] Throwing them in the *subedar's* eyes, they successfully incapacitate him, burning the eyes that "looked up Sonbai as if she were a fiery spice to nourish his sexual appetite" with the exact object of his metaphor for desire, the chili (24-25). Mannur's description of this scene is poignant, but there is one, crucial note that I will add to her analysis: the women throw chili *powder* at the *subedar*. The chili peppers themselves would make ineffectual weapons, which the film establishes early on, when the giggling factory workers playfully toss them at one another. It is the women's communal labor—drying and grinding the chilis into a fine powder—that turns them into a dangerous weapon. Where characters from Chapter Three, like Milly or Kandasamy's narrator, also successfully redirect food weaponization against their individual abusers, in *Mirch Masala*, an entire battalion of men lay siege to the chili factory. A successful deflection, therefore, requires more than one individual's food weaponization, but the product of their combined labor. Like Kali Boori's words, "women have to be like this chili," the image of the chili in each context both represents women as "appetizing" to the men around them, but powerful enough, together, to resist their attempts at sexual consumption. Food works on both metamorphic and material levels in *Mirch Masala* and *Felanee*; they link a woman's successful rebuff of male desire with her ability to form community with other women, mediated through food. Just as the women in *Mirch Masala* protect Sonbai, Kali Boori and Felanee become partners, both in their food-based businesses and in mutual protection.[23]

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[22] Patangia Kalita also makes explicit reference to the use of chili peppers as weapons, in *The Story of Felanee*. Early in the novel Felanee hears rumors of separatist tactics: "Chilly powder, nettles and wasps," they whisper, "will be used and so will bows and arrows" (11). The location of "chilly powder" alongside the more traditional bow and arrow establishes its use as a weapon. Though, unlike in *Mirch Masala*, it is not a community of women using it for protection, but a violent militia.

[23] It is important to note that food is not the only vector through which we may understand mutual aid in *The Story of Felanee*, though it is the most common. The women often share childcare responsibilities or clothes. Once, early in their friendship, Minoti and Jon's mother, "pooling their resources," purchased a petticoat for Felanee. Though

It is moments after her injunction to be "like this chili," that Kali Boori introduces Felanee to her puffed rice, or moori, business, which will secure meals for both women. Upon showing her the rice paddy, Kali Boori chides her "'what are you waiting for? If you don't start frying, what are you going to eat tomorrow? I can't always feed you, can I?" (Patangia Kalita, *Felanee* 67). Like Jashoda's bartered breastmilk, in Devi's "Breast-Giver," the food economy in *Felanee* means that she must prepare food and sell it, to earn meals for her child, and much of the novel's action revolves around market days when Felanee sells the moori. With each market day she narrates, Patangia Kalita describes in great detail the provision Felanee had purchased with her earnings: "a kilo of rice, four eggs, half a kilo of potatoes and a quarter litre of mustard oil" (72). Far from simply noting that Felanee purchased groceries with her day's earnings, Patangia Kalita notes the quantity of each ingredient. The effect of this exactitude is to have readers calculating alongside Felanee, trying to determine how many days these provisions will last in the face of coming bandhs.

Kali Boori's food aid, both in the form of feeding Felanee and teaching her how to cook and sell moori, is a common topic throughout the novel, but Kali Boori is by no means the only participant in their mutual food network. Felanee first meets Minoti and Jon's Mother on her first trip to sell moori with Kali Boori. On her first market day with the two women, Jon's Mother tells Minoti that Felanee "has neither a wok, nor a plate and bowl' and they pool their resources to buy her the items she will need to cook for herself and Moni (91). When Felanee is left without any money after her day's purchases, Minoti offers to teach her how to make dried dal bori to sell, helping her buy the ingredients and saying, "Tomorrow we don't have to come to the market; you come over in the morning, and I'll teach you how to make it" (92). Though they face

she tries to refuse their generous gift, Felanee eventually accepts, thinking, "these two women were so poor, and yet here they were trying to help her" (91).

the same food insecurity as Felanee, all the sole wage-earners for their households, the two women purchase her the implements she will need to cook for her family and prepare any food that she sells at the market. Moreover, Minoti offers both precious time and knowledge: she takes time off from the market, sacrificing her own earnings, to teach Felanee how to prepare dried dal bori. Without concern for any competition Felanee's dal bori might add to the market, Minoti shares the recipe details. In the "open/closed body" dialectic, their bodies are "open;" eating and feeding are processes by which new members are added to their community. Like Kusum in *The Hungry Tide*, Minoti and Jon's Mother's actions evidence a community-minded approach to food and, as in Ghosh's novel, it is the women who ensure one another's meals, even in times of upheaval.

Their coalition, though unstructured, mirrors the Bold Girls from *Shameless* in material consequences for its members. Where the Bold Girls favor advocacy in the workplace, Felanee's mutual aid network is largely based on food: shared ingredients, recipes, and knowledge of techniques, markets, and foraging spots. Also unlike the Bold Girls, the women in *Felanee* do not explicitly label their coalition. They do not see it as a feminist undertaking to provide for one another, nor do their beliefs and community practices necessarily categorize them as such. Despite this, coalition studies, which stems from feminist theory, is a valuable lens through which we may understand community-building among women in *Felanee*. Terms like "coalition," "mutual aid," and "community" are perhaps most often used in the context of intersectionality, as is the case in bell hooks' "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women." hooks identifies several topics through which communities of women may form, including bonds between women formed on the basis of victimhood; she writes that:

Ironically, the women who were most eager to be seen as 'victims', who

> overwhelmingly stressed the role of victim, were more privileged and powerful than the vast majority of women in our society. An example of this tendency is some writing about violence against women. Women who are exploited and oppressed daily cannot afford to relinquish the belief that they exercise some measure of control, however relative, over their lives. They cannot afford to see themselves solely as 'victims' because their survival depends on continued exercise of whatever personal powers they possess. It would be psychologically demoralizing for these women to bond with other women on the basis of shared victimization. They bond with other women on the basis of shared strengths and resources. This is the woman bonding feminist movement should encourage. (hooks 128)

Felanee and many of the women in her community fall squarely into hooks' description of women whose "survival depends on continued exercise of whatever personal powers they possess;" many of them are single women, responsible both for providing income and maintaining a household. Their migratory status has left them with few possessions, and the militancy surrounding them has restricted their movements even more. Yet they bond with one another "on the basis of shared strengths and resources" (hooks 128). Rather than hoarding knowledge of recipes or ingredients, they share amongst themselves, a community-minded approach to food that, in the novel's climax, leads to explicitly political, and communal, action. Together, they battle the everyday hunger that threatens each household.

This everyday hunger in *The Story of Felanee* is soon made acute by insurgent starvation tactics later in the novel. Just as the Anti-Hindu riots in *Lajja* mean that Suronjon must weigh his safety against his family's food security, the bandhs serve a similar function in *Felanee,* only exacerbated for the single, working women in the novel. As the novel progresses, the bandhs

become longer and longer: "'It will be a hundred hour bandh,'" Felanee and her friends speculate, "'Two hundred hours.' 'No, three hundred hours'" (Patangia Kalita, *Felanee* 207). Just days later, Felanee learns that in two days,

> there would be a three hundred hour bandh. They were all flabbergasted. How would they survive? [...] So many market days were ruined. A section of the people here had turned militant and were demanding a separate state. Some people thought that the government would not allow such a prolonged bandh. They said that the Delhi government too had decided to call them for talks. If the bandh was not called off it would mean that the government was deliberately letting people die.
>
> Starting to cook, Felanee discovered that there was just enough rice to last two more days. There was no rice to make moori. The only money she had was what she had managed to save with great difficulty. How would they survive for three hundred hours? (210)

I have already established that the bandhs themselves represent a loss of income and ingredients for the characters in *Felanee.* But their food security is even further threatened by the looting of insurgents themselves. In one scene, a group of boys "shouting slogans of 'Long Live Assam', 'Long Live the Assam Accord," begin looting the market where Felanee and her friends are selling their goods. They take all the fowl left in the market and every item from Jaggu's sweet shop, where the women are enjoying tea, leaving the market looking "deserted" (111). The bandhs represent hunger threefold: closed markets mean the women cannot sell their goods, and resource hoarding from wealthier neighbors and the separatist groups' own looting leaves little for them to stockpile before the bandhs.

When the bandhs first begin, many members of Felanee's community rely on foraging. Minoti picks greens from the forest to sell at the market, and we know from an earlier chapter that "sour otenga fruits" and "curry leaves" can also be found in the reserve (85, 93). As the tensions mount in Assam though, foraging and fishing become too dangerous, and another avenue for meals is eliminated. Felanee reflects that Moni often went "to the reserve forest in search of greens and to fish in the numerous hollows filled with water [...] She decided that there was no need for him to go to the forest anymore. They would buy firewood if need be. People said that the forest was full of strangers these days" (156). The forests are common hide-out spots for militants and no longer safe for Moni, as "armed groups would come down to the woods from the hills and invariably stay the night on the river bank" (162). Not only do the bandhs, instated by various separatist groups, impact the community's ability to make a living, and deplete food supplies, but militants' presence in the forest cut obstructs another channel for feeding themselves. As the novel reaches its climax, previously established avenues for provision are cut off, one by one.

The climax of the text, the only moment that Hemjyoti Medhi identifies as directly participating in the identity politics "at the centre of much bloodshed in this valley," is also a scene that hinges on women's hunger (Medhi 52). As tensions mount in their community, many of the men and boys are taken by the military, including Moni, and the women decide to spend the night at Felanee's home (Patangia Kalita, *Felanee* 296). This event coincides with a military-issued curfew, which Patangia Kalita describes as "an entirely different experience" from the separatist groups' bandhs; "This time no one went out to sell their homegrown vegetables or the fish they had caught" for fear of breaking curfew (288). The same issues that these characters face during bandhs, market closures and scarce provisions, are exacerbated during a military

curfew. Despite these severe restrictions, while huddled together in Felanee's home, "Phool, the old tailor's wife decided that some food had to be organized. If not for them at least for the children. [...] There was enough rice and pulses to go round, thanks to Moni. But everyone brought something or the other from their own homes to add to the pool. As a result there was enough khichiri for all" (296). In this scene, the network of mutual food aid among women is both expanded and made most literal: each woman contributes something from her own home, so that there is enough for all. Where many previous instances of food aid involve a gift of ingredients or a meal for the woman who happens to be less fortunate at the time, under the assumption that she will "pay them back," here, many families distribute food equally. Nor is it a coincidence that their community food-sharing coincides with one the most climactic scenes of the novel: the moment that the women decide to protest the army's actions and free the taken men.

As Felanee looks around the room of women, wailing for their sons and husbands, she remembers Kali Boori chiding: do not cry, but instead be fiery and strong, like a chili. Felanee organizes the women into action, creating a plan to surround the army camp. Once there, "None of them were going to leave without taking their men back with them. The day passed; and the night too. None of them got up from where they squatted. The bread given to them from the camp was left untouched. Some of them just drank water" (300). After a novel's worth of detailed descriptions of food and hunger, wherein almost every plot point revolves around avoiding starvation, these women now voluntarily enter into a hunger strike. They repeat their singular demand, "'we have come to take our men back to their homes'" each time the police threaten to remove them (300). On the second day of their strike, the military "curfew was lifted" as "word got around about these women and their demands" (300). By the third day of their

strike, the men still had not been released and "all the womenfolk were weak, exhausted and limp. They were all in bad shape. The media people arrived on the scene. They took photographs" (300-1). By that evening, "The women who were weakened by hunger and thirst felt unable to sit up any longer" (301). Wagering their own hunger and thirst against the lives of their husbands and children, these women engage in a kind of communal, voluntary hunger that draws the attention of the media. Where my third chapter features several scenes of a woman's voluntary hunger within her own home, the effects of which negotiate power within a specifically domestic space, the women in this climactic scene both unite and publicize their hunger.

Their public protest is possible, in large part, *because* they are women. In one 2011 report, entitled "Bearing witness: A report on the impact of conflict on women in Nagaland and Assam," interviewees describe the pivotal role women play during the times of conflict. Women were:

> often threatened by the army and asked to give information about insurgents; often their sons and husbands were taken away to army camps without reason, or evidence and beaten. This led to women in villages forming women groups to try [to] rescue the young men taken away by the army on mere suspicion. The women felt that they were better positioned to pursue such activism in those times, as there was no space for men to do the same, as they could easily be branded as ULFA members, arrested and tortured. (Centre for North East 42)

As this report suggests, the women of Felanee's community would be uniquely positioned to pursue activism during this moment of crisis. It is not incidental that it is the women who save the men in the community, but a conclusion Patangia Kalita had been building towards

throughout the novel. By this point in the conflict, it is mostly women that make up the encampment, a fact reiterated several times: "'most of the houses only have women left'" because "the menfolk had gone away to places that were unaffected by the bandh[s]" (Patangia Kalita, *Felanee* 213, 225). Like the Bold Girls coalition in *Shameless*, these women are single, and, as Zulekha explains, they have the most time to organize. It is precisely because many of the women are single, widowed, or abandoned that they can band together without fear of backlash from the men in their lives. Remembering Kali Boori, whose strength is not in spite of her independence from men but *because* of it, Felanee and the women in her community quite literally feel they have "nothing to lose" and draw strength from their bonds with one another.

The women, working within the long tradition of hunger strikes in South Asian protest movements, effectively wager their own hunger to secure the future food security of their entire community. Prior to this moment, Patangia Kalita has often treated hunger as a vector of women's vulnerability, as in the case of Sumala, who wandered too close to the military camp while begging for bread and was both sexually assaulted and murdered. Here though, hunger is a strength. The major difference between each of these instances: one centers on an individual experience and the other, the communal. It is their numbers that protect the women from the physical and sexual threat that the military camp represents. Moreover, *hunger itself* serves as the occasion for the initial collaboration between these women; their shared experiences with hunger, and resulting mutual food aid, bonds these women together, such that they already have a community in place when they decide to strike. Writing on the hunger striker, Muzna Rahman also employs the concept of the "open body" and the "closed body." She writes that:

> the open body model is one of permeability. In this understanding, identity is predicated on a dualism of self and other, and becoming is a process of negotiating these two poles.

> These concepts of the body – and how the body and its boundaries may be affected by food or starvation – are important to my understanding of the starving bodies and subjectivities in this study. The hunger striker's protest takes the form of one-of-many – thus, the 'open' body of the striker stands in for a larger community in whose name he/she enacts resistance. He/she enacts the protest synecdochally for an oppressed group. (13)

The mutual aid network in *Felanee* is founded on sharing food—ingredients, meals, recipes, and foraging locations—and with each contribution, the group's bond is strengthened. The novel's climax should come as no surprise then, as their protest "takes the form of one-of-many" standing in "for a larger community in whose name [they] enact resistance." *Felanee*'s story is predicated on the idea of the permeable body—the food actions taken by one individual have real consequences for those around them—and its climax enacts the ultimate form of bodily permeability, wagering one's own hunger, as an individual, for the good of the community body.

This climactic hunger strike represents community-oriented food concerns both in its form and its result: though their aim was to have the men released from the military camp, another consequence of their hunger strike is that the curfew, which had caused food insecurity for their entire community, is lifted. Like Kusum, in *The Hungry Tide,* Felanee and the other women in her community endure a temporary hunger to lessen food insecurity for the entire encampment. Though theirs is a coalition of women, their actions benefit all. Their organization fits the definition of coalitional politics that Liza Taylor outlines, which, "requires an appreciation of interlocking oppressions, which not only produce what they conceive as "coalitional" understandings of collective group politics, identity, consciousness, and even scholarship" but reshape crisis" (Taylor 14). Inherent in their hunger strike is a protest against

various structures: racialized violence, nationalist violence, violence against women during both militant and governmental operations, and even against hunger itself, the insecurity resulting from the conflict. As a woman with conflicting, multivalent identities, Felanee is best positioned to lead this intersectional coalition, winning the freedom of her friends and family, and ensuring her community's relief.

Conclusion

Rita Chowdhury writes in *Chinatown Days*, "the place which feeds us is our own. That place is our mother" (127). The characters at the heart of *Lajja* and *Felanee* have certainly migrated, in part, for food security. But the "place" they find is a less literal one, and more of a place in a community; it is mutual food aid that comes to define their notions of belonging. The instances of women's mutual aid that end Taslima Nasrin's and Arupa Patangia Kalita's stories rewrite definitions of "home." In *Lajja*, Hindu characters question whether they belong in Bangladesh, and in *Shameless*, question whether they belong in India. In *The Story of Felanee*, claims to place are largely based on ethnic background, and Felanee's Assamese, Bodo, and Bengali lineage complicate her sense of belonging, as each of these groups wage war against one another. Against the larger conflicts surrounding them, characters' daily concerns revolve around securing meals for themselves and their families, and lack of food security, as in the case of Felanee's decision to leave the refugee camp, sometimes even drives characters to migrate.

Yet, in each conflict, women characters also come to "belong" to a coalition of women that ensure their physical security. In *Shameless*, this community crosses the bounds of religion that underpin the story's major conflicts and in *Felanee,* traverses ethnic backgrounds. In highlighting these moments of women's mutual aid, I wish neither to flatten their experiences into a single identity category nor to suggest that their gender is the only defining factor in their

experiences. Rather, I argue that women's coalitions, in each case resulting from conflict and migration, offer these characters protection from the hunger and sexual assault to which they are disproportionately exposed as a result of their gender. Indeed, though gender is one link between these women, it is not the only one. The women in *Felanee* bond over shared knowledge of hunger, a knowledge that they ultimately use to political advantage: participating in a hunger strike to secure the release of community members. Though hunger narratively accompanies physical and sexual assault, it is also the basis for bonding between women and a source of their political power.

As each novel's climactic scene suggests, communities of women wield real political power, though each author only begins to suggest this outcome in the story's final pages. The following chapter, "Canvassing and Cookware: The Role of Food in Women's Political Activism" continues to meditate on food networks. While my chapter on breastfeeding began with the most individual of experiences with hunger, Chapter Five ends with the most communal and most overtly political, considering the way hunger may influence not just entire groups of women, but entire political movements. Moreover, where Chapter Four details community-level food insecurity, as a result of food weaponization against religious communities and the subsequent closure of markets, in *Lajja*, or the separatist movement bandhs, militant occupation of forest preserves, and government lockdowns of *Felanee,* Chapter Five explores narratives on the systemic hunger of an entire region: famine. Women, I argue, remain central to community organizing during famine conditions, though their essential labor is consistently undervalued.

CHAPTER 5

CANVASSING AND COOKWARE: THE ROLE OF FOOD IN WOMEN'S POLITICAL ACTIVISM

> *Thud! A well-hurled spatula hit another rioter right in his eye. [...] As the flames in the Mohammeds' living room spread, the forty-fifty men in the mob faced a shower of iron, steel, aluminum, tin and wooden implements. The women of Subhanpura Colony had turned out in force. Some pelted the rioters with their kadahis and katoris, others threw degchis and frying pans. Some threw old, heavy irons. Some threw sticks and brooms. Those who had nothing heavy to throw, pelted vegetables, packets of juice and butter, and bottles of oil and ketchup. Many in the mob were hurt. The heavy irons landed on heads, the glass bottles cut legs, and the frying pans hit eyes, noses and necks.*
>
> — Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, "They Eat Meat!"

Like the women in *Mirch Masala* who protect their coworker with chili powder, the women of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's Subhanpura Colony quell an anti-Muslim riot in their neighborhood with the items they have on hand: cooking implements and pantry items. In both instances, women band together to defend other women, and Shekhar's characters shout to the rioters, "if you are your father's sons, you will come for the men. You will not hurt any woman in that house" (Shekhar 24). Like the women considered in my chapter "Food Resistance: Weaponization of Cooking and Eating," these characters mobilize against men using ingredients and cooking utensils. But where each instance in Chapter Three is both individual in nature and domestic in scope, in this epigraph, women act within a community, a necessary counter-measure to the mobs of men swarming their homes and workplaces.

As the chorus of clanging kitchen utensils in Shekhar's short story suggests, this chapter remains trained on women's experiences within communities. But it also expands upon the

possibility for political action set out by Taslima Nasrin and Arupa Patangia Kalita in the previous chapter. Each of the texts in this chapter portray women's involvement with historical, political movements in the twentieth century, though their parties do not solely consist of women, as is the case in Nasrin and Patangia Kalita's novels, nor are the goals of their organizations in service of women's rights, as in the "Bold Girls" group Nasrin imagines. Moreover, where my argument in Chapter Four delineates the relationship between hunger and assault in literary renderings of conflict and mass migration, the historical events featured in this chapter *themselves* hinge on food and hunger, and women's participation is crucial to their success. I begin with a section on the 1943 Bengal Famine, then turn to the 1960's Food Revolution Agitations, also primarily in Bengal. In each case, I link the historical event to a contemporaneous political movement, the Swadeshi Movement and the Naxalite Movement, respectively, and consider the representation of women's involvement in each. Women's political activism in each historical moment is necessitated by famine-like conditions, and their involvement often includes their own abstention, while they work to improve the food conditions of others.

In the first section of this chapter, I discuss Sulekha Sanyal's 1956 novel *The Seedling's Tale* (*Nabankur*) alongside Ania Loomba's 2019 monograph *Revolutionary Desires: Women, Communism, and Feminism in India.* The second features Neel Mukherjee's 2014 *The Lives of Others* and 2017 *A State of Freedom,* previously considered in the context of food weaponization in Chapter Three, and here placed in the context of the Food Agitations and Naxalite Movement. Each text considers women's roles within the Communist party, and I trace Communist sentiment from its proponents in the Swadeshi Movement, to the Communist Party of India (Marxist), CPI (M), and its militant offshoots, such as the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army

(PLGA), an armed, and banned, wing of the CPI(M). By studying women's political involvement across decades and movements, it becomes clear that their participation is often both catalyzed by hunger and characterized by their food labor. Moreover, as branches of communist thought become increasingly focused on armed struggle, care work, such as cooking and feeding, is devalued by organizations and by women themselves, despite its potential for both material and ideological change.

1933-1943: Bengal Famine and the Swadeshi Movement

The Seedling's Tale, or *Nabankur*, is a Bengali-language novel by Sulekha Sanyal, first published in 1956 and translated into English in 2001 by Gouranga P. Chattopadhyay. Often labeled a bildungsroman, *The Seedling's Tale* offers a close third-person perspective of a young, strong-willed girl named Chhobi growing up in pre-independence rural Bengal. A daughter in a large, *zamindari* family, Chhobi is expected to act according to her status and gender, tending to domestic duties rather than attending secondary school, though she shirks these responsibilities consistently. The story begins with the arrest of her paternal uncle, Adhir, Adhirka to her, a Swadeshi who teaches Chhobi patriotic poems and informs her about the independence movement. When her wealthy Aunt Sukumari, whom she calls Pishima (Aunt), offers to educate Chhobi in Chittagong, Chhobi spends the next several years living with her and her husband. While there, Chhobi makes friends with children less privileged than herself, and her early interest in politics continues to grow. After the Second World War threatens Chittagong, where she lives with her aunt and uncle, Chhobi returns to her childhood home. Here, she reunites with Adhir, now a member of the communist party after his release from prison, and becomes involved in famine relief efforts. She meets Tamal, through Adhir, a communist party member and freedom fighter living in Calcutta, and they confess their feelings to one another. Though

Tamal returns to Calcutta, the novel ends with Chhobi passing qualification exams and leaving for Calcutta to attend college. Throughout her life, Chhobi becomes increasingly politically conscious, both in matters of Indian nationalism and women's roles in society, topics that she first encounters through questions of food access and later participates in by preparing and serving meals. I trace each thread, ultimately arguing for their interdependence: Chhobi's consciousness of her own role as a woman within her family, community, and society inform, and is informed by, her theories on national freedom, and each is mediated through food and hunger.

Sanyal first establishes the role of food in Chhobi's political development when Chhobi is still a young child, just beginning elementary school, around 1933. Young Chhobi and her brother follow Adhir through town as the police escort him away, a crime for which Chhobi's mother beats her: "Mamata struck Chhobi's back hard with the ladle a couple of times and said in a tense but low voice, 'You good-for-nothing girl! Why do I have to listen to criticism from other people on your account all the time? I can't take it anymore.' [...] 'It's not as if I have dozens of daughters. Only this one, yet I can't feed her properly'" (Sanyal 21). Mamata's choice of implement clearly belongs to the pattern of food weaponization I set out in Chapter Three: as a woman in this *zamindari* family, Mamata's power extends to food, meals, cooking implements, and the kitchen itself. The ladle is hers to wield as she sees fit. But Mamata's harsh words and ladle beatings gradually deescalate, as she reflects on her actions. Chhobi is her only daughter, and the waning feudal system means that this previously wealthy family is now merely scraping together meals. Mamata recognizes that her daughter, as a girl, may not be "properly" fed, in their new financial situation—meat and other desirable food items would go to patriarchs and boy children first. In this way, Chhobi is threatened by hunger at both regional and household

levels. The slow dissolution of the *zamindari* system, though not outlawed yet, means that the family's landlord status no longer guarantees them meals made from the crops that tenant farmers "owe" them. The restricted food supply disproportionately affects women, as their portions would be the first to shrink. Chhobi, though more privileged than many in their community, seems to be conscious of this gendered threat to her meals. Labeled a "wild" child by her family members, Chhobi is "sure to quarrel over the size of her piece of fish or her portion of roe" at every meal (24). She is "never the least bit ashamed" of her behavior, "not like a girl at all," according to Mamata (24). Chhobi clearly rejects the hunger marked out for her, based on her gender, loudly complaining if she receives smaller portions until her mother secretly slips her a choice piece of meat.

Still, Chhobi's awareness of gendered food inequality is limited, at the novel's outset; like most young children, Chhobi sees unfairness mostly as it pertains to herself. But when she moves in with her aunt and uncle, her definitions of inequality begin to expand, as she interacts with people outside her family and small village. Shortly after her move, Chhobi meets two sisters, covered in dust and with tattered clothing, who live close to her new home and pay rent to her Pishima. Upon entering Nilu and Pilu's tin home, Chhobi notes their mother's "skeletal arms" and sparse hair, and on a later visit, learns that the family is food insecure (72). Nilu tells her: "'Some days we have food in the house, some days we go hungry. If we are too hungry and ask for food Ma curses us, she wishes us dead'" (84). Chhobi, whose aunt has forbidden her from entering Nilu's home, wonders:

> Did her aunt hate them because they were poor? [...] This was the first time Chhobi realized that muhuris were indeed very poor.

> She entered [her aunt's] house and Pishima was in the kitchen. [...] The smell of ghee floated in the air—could Nilu and Pilu smell it too? As she thought about this, she felt tears coming to her eyes. The sight of hot luchis did not make her happy today as they did on other days. (86)

Though the "skeletal frame" of Nilu and Pilu's family members "filled her with terror," Chhobi begins to recognize the inequality of their situations (88). A young girl still, Chhobi cannot put words to her sense of injustice, but cries at the abundance of food in her own home, nonetheless. Chhobi's unlabeled distress over the food in her aunt's home is an important moment in her political development, as she begins to understand her friends' impoverished conditions most readily through food insecurity.

Moreover, descriptions of Nilu and Pilu's family as "skeletal" are the first of many such depictions of starving people throughout the novel. Though it is still several years before the Bengal Famine[24] that would inspire countless fictional and nonfictional depictions of "skeletal" people, already Nilu and Pilu's family is depicted this way. In his 1947 Anglophone novel *So Many Hungers!,* for example, Bhabani Bhattacharya describes "pictures of destitutes" in a newspaper: "The camera had done its work well. The child, a skeleton with unwinking eyes, perhaps too feeble to cry, gazed on while the hunger-mad mother ate with ravenous gulps" (Bhattacharya 160). Bhattacharya's fictional account, mere years after the Bengal Famine itself, reflects the reporting of the time; images of starving people appeared in large English-language newspapers, like *The Statesman*, and communist presses, like *People's War*, alike. While "skeletal" language and imagery may be common in media surrounding the Bengal Famine,

[24] An estimated three million Bengalis died of starvation and disease exacerbated by starvation or lack of healthcare access during the famine. Both fictional and nonfictional depictions of the event commonly contain visuals of starving people and employ language likening them to skeletons (Sen, "Famine Mortality" 215).

Sanyal's novel has not yet turned towards famine conditions, at this point. In fact, the first signs of famine in the narration do not begin until about two-thirds of the way through the novel. This early description, which will mirror Chhobi's later encounters with starving people in 1943, suggests their connection. Though the starving people of the Bengal Famine will receive national and international media attention, their skeletal condition inspiring some governmental and humanitarian relief efforts, the starving people of Chhobi's childhood are commonplace; their condition warrants no newspaper articles or relief efforts. Chhobi's visit with Nilu and Pilu's family contributes to her growing unease with the distribution of food in her community, which will later culminate with volunteer work with the relief kitchen and admittance to a political organization.

In classic *bildungsroman* form, Chhobi's political consciousness, gradually building below of the surface, begins to materialize as she acts on her sense of injustice. Several years after meeting Nilu and Pilu, their father dies. Now that they lack an income, the threat of hunger looms ever more acutely over the family, and "for a few days Pishima sent Bidhu across with some groceries and bags of rice, but after a while that stopped too. How long could she go on supplying them with food?" (Sanyal 140-1). Chhobi picks up where her aunt left off; she "had learnt a trick—she began to steal rice and kept it hidden in the garden; Pilu would quietly go and collect it after dark. But she could not steal every day—just once in a while. How could Chhobi go on giving them food, even if it was only plain rice!" (141). Chhobi begins to sneak staple foods to her friends, but also recognizes the limits of charity; her actions are a short-term solution to a long-term, and systemic, problem. Though she does not identify it herself, Nilu and Pilu's hunger belongs to a larger system of gendered labor practices. As the head of their household, their father was the only person with a paying job, leaving them vulnerable to food

insecurity in the case of his death. Searching for a remedy, Chhobi "would walk about feeling helpless. She didn't know what to do or how to help" (141). As an individual facing systemic hunger, and, moreover, a child living in her aunt and uncle's home, there is little Chhobi can do beyond stealing meager provisions to support the family, and she despairs over her limitations.

Yet, Chhobi also encounters a different kind of hunger, one made public and political: that of the hunger strike, a method of rebellion that serves to locate and combine her concerns over both social inequality and national independence. An older classmate at school tells her that the Swadeshis who have been arrested and exiled to the Andamans are desperate: "they don't have any weapons to fight it out either. So they've gone on a hunger strike. They will starve till they are brought back to the country'" (127). Chhobi responds in shock: "'But they are going to die that way!' Chhobi's eyes brimmed over. How could anyone live without food? Sometimes, when Chhobi was sad, she wouldn't feel like eating, but she couldn't stay without food for too long. You have to eat when you are very hungry. What would they do when they got that hungry?" (127). Still a child, Chhobi filters the idea of hunger through her own subjective experiences. But as she ages, and when World War II breaks out and the threat of famine becomes increasingly likely, Chhobi internalizes all that she has experienced in Chittagong. Armed with this new, if shocking, understanding of hunger as a political tool, alongside her burgeoning ideas about the unequal distribution of food, Chhobi returns to her village. Like the "seedling" of the novel's title, Chhobi's political consciousness germinates during her childhood, ready to sprout forth once the conditions are right: when she returns to her ancestral home.

Now, as World War II wages on and the possibility of famine looms, the patriarchs in Chhobi's family make plans to profit on coming food shortages. Chhobi's uncle explains his schemes to her father:

> ‘We will make a two hundred percent profit if we start stocking up from now. Imports from Burma stopped long ago and now even the government is building up its own reserves. All traders believe that prices will shoot up three or four times. There is no way for people to buy directly from the farmers. They are selling their produce fast to get a better deal before the government can acquire the stuff at a fixed price, according to the new regulations.’ (168-9)

Sanyal sets the stage for a human-made famine. Chhobi’s family members begin stockpiling food, with the intention of selling it at highly inflated rates when food shortages begin. Simultaneously, Chhobi, unaware of her own family’s role in the process, comes to understand that other merchants and landlords have begun to hoard staples like rice. Meanwhile, Chhobi’s Swadeshi uncle has joined the communist party, becoming more radicalized during his long stint in prison. In an overheard conversation between Adhir and his comrade, Tamal, Chhobi learns that hungry people “have started asking why shouldn’t they loot the granaries when they are full of rice?” (171). Tamal, a young organizer from Calcutta, tells Adhir, “I’ll do the work as long as I’m here. Help enforce the law and get the rice out of the hoarders’ clutches, run relief kitchens and sing to raise funds. If the famine can be stopped that way, so be it’” (172). Their coalition, though primarily concerned with the quest for independence from Britain, has become increasingly food-centric in the face of the Bengal Famine. Adhir’s response is less than receptive. He suspects that Tamal is unprepared for the hunger their work entails: “You city people have no idea what the work is like, here. You’ll have to pull your fancy, flowing dhuti above your knees and wade through mud. Or swim across if need be, to get from one village to another, walk miles on end, and share the peasants meals of coarse rice and burnt, red chillies—that is, if you’re lucky and they’re not starving” (172-3). Adhir’s warning establishes what

Chhobi herself, and several characters in Neel Mukherjee's novels, will soon learn: hunger is a common price to pay for one's involvement in a political organization, especially during this era of war and famine.

As the war wages on, and the famine intensifies, Chhobi not only hears about starving people through Adhirka, but encounters them herself, one moment among the many in her childhood that catalyzes her active participation in famine relief efforts. While eating a meal at home with her mother, Chhobi suddenly heard "a low nasal cry;"

> Chhobi looked, and was horrorstruck—as though she had spotted a snake. Were these human beings? She saw three pairs of skeletal arms holding out their pots for the rice and phan, the liquid starch that Kakima was giving them, three pairs of eyes glittering hungrily at the sight of food. [...] Chhobi had never ever seen such a ghastly spectacle of hunger. That girl of fifteen or sixteen, wrapped in rags, stretching out her skeletal hand for a pot of rice water to drink, was she Panchu Pal's daughter or was she Chhobi herself? (191).

This encounter is significant for several reasons. First, Sulekha Sanyal continues to use the language of skeletons to describe hungry people. Just as Nilu and Pilu's "skeletal" family members evoke a kind of terror in Chhobi, so too do Panchu Pal's daughters. Their shared description calls attention to the nature of each family's experiences with hunger: while Nilu and Pilu's family experience an everyday hunger, one that predated the catastrophic conditions of the Bengal Famine, Panchu Pal's daughters experience direct effects of the famine itself. Though, on the surface, each family experiences hunger for different reasons, each instance is catalyzed by the same event: the death of the family's patriarch. When Panchu Pal and his wife die on the same day, their daughters resort to begging. The teenage girls, apparently without education or

professional training, like most young women of their village, have few options besides relying on the charity of others. The similarity of the girls' situation establishes the fact that the skeletal condition of Panchu Pal's daughters, which may appear to simply be numbered among the other millions of starving people in Bengal, still belongs to the larger system of gendered oppression Nilu and Pilu experienced, many years before the famine. As David Arnold writes, in *Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change:*

> Famine acts as a revealing commentary upon a society's deeper and more enduring difficulties. The proximate cause of a famine might lie in some apparently unpredictable 'natural disaster', like a flood or drought, or in a 'man-made' calamity like a civil war or invasion; but these are often no more than the precipitating factors, intensifying or bringing to the fore a society's inner contradictions and inherent weaknesses, exposing an already extant vulnerability to food shortages and famine. (Arnold 7)

The Bengal Famine did not *create* the conditions in which women are more likely to experience food insecurity but exacerbated pre-existing systematic gendered inequalities like lack of access to work and decreased likelihood of owning land, which increased women's chances of starvation.

But this scene is also a turning point in Chhobi's political development. She recognizes herself in the oldest of the girls, asking, "Was she Panchu Pal's daughter or was she Chhobi herself?" (191). In an association reminiscent of Suronjon's tendency to insert himself as the one "feasted on" in *Lajja,* Chhobi imagines herself in the position of this other girl. But where Suronjon's fear results in a self-pitying spiral into violence, I argue that Chhobi's identification with Panchu Pal's daughter directly leads to her political involvement. Just pages later, we learn that Chhobi runs the famine relief kitchen for their community. Chhobi was "in charge of the

relief kitchen" with the help of Maya, a widowed young woman in a relationship with Adhir (Sanyal 199). Chhobi's role in the famine relief kitchen represents a culmination of her political consciousness. From the unfair portions she received as a girl child, to the everyday hunger she witnessed in Nilu and Pilu's home, the hunger strikes that she learned weaponize food, to the destitute fate of both her married and widowed friends,[25] and the skeletal girls who beg her family for food, each of these moments has been building to Chhobi's direct involvement in the Swadeshi Movement and communist party.

In one chapter of *Revolutionary Desires: Women, Communism, and Feminism in India*, Ania Loomba traces communist women's involvement in the Bengali famine relief efforts. Loomba, who in her chapter "The Dance of Hunger" deftly links fictional and historical accounts of the Bengal Famine, explains that "Communist representations of famine were deeply gendered; that is, they relied on stereotypical images of women (and indeed of men)" (Loomba 196). Many drawings and photographs of famine-struck women depict them nude, breastfeeding, scavenging for food for their children, or otherwise reduced to the barest depictions of human need. Despite these sensationalized—and as I established in my discussion of "Behind the Bodice" in Chapter Two, often sexualized—images of starving women, "communist women were in the forefront of famine relief efforts, and their work catalyzed the formation of a new kind of women's political organization—one which moved beyond the ambit of existing nationalist women's organizations, and simultaneously pushed the Communist Party to engage

[25] After she returns from Chittagong, Chhobi seeks out a childhood friend and discovers that "Uma had married two years after Chhobi went off with Pishima; at sixteen, she was now a mother of three. She did not recognize Chhobi when they met, and Chhobi too didn't recognize her childhood friend in the skeletal anemic-looking young woman" (164). Another friend, Durga, was widowed after just 10 months of marriage and now has "to fast every new moon day," and her in-laws do not allow her to drink water until she has performed puja in the evening, in addition to keeping her to a strict widow's diet of boiled rice and vegetables (164). Each of Chhobi's now-married schoolmates endure food insecurity, though it manifests in different ways, further evidence of a direct link between the patriarchal structures in their lives and hunger.

with women's political activities" (Loomba 195). So, even as the famine inspired stereotypical representations of women, it also spurred a new level of women's involvement in the Communist Party. The ending of Loomba's chapter even points to *The Seedling's Tale* as a unique example of political involvement as a form of individual identity-formation.

As Ania Loomba suggests, famine relief efforts in 1943 were closely linked with women's political organizations, but I would posit that famine relief efforts, in *The Seedling's Tale*, not only supply women a role within the Communist Party but create a space for all party members to meet, during a time in which their public gatherings have been banned. One altercation between Maya and a government officer illustrates the famine relief center's role in raising awareness for the Swadeshi Movement. Sanyal writes:

> Maya's daily duty was to read out the newspaper to the women and give them lessons. One day the officer snatched the newspaper from her hand as she was reading it and said, 'This can't be done here. This is a government-run charitable institution. You might not have anything to say in favour of the government, but you can't speak against it here.'
>
> Maya bristled. 'I will say anything I wish to. Give me back that newspaper. I will listen to you only when that paper is officially banned.'
>
> 'It's not just the newspaper. You are not allowed to sing those protest songs of yours here—*Bideshi sarkar ghare, duware dushman* (foreigners inside the house/enemies at the door). None of those songs are allowed here.'
>
> Maya said, 'We'll sing what we like. Do I have to say that the foreigners are my own people?'

> ‘If you can’t, then don’t work here. Who asked you to come? All you do is read out your paper, teach them to sing songs, incite them against the government in the name of running a relief kitchen.’ (Sanyal 199-200)

Though this relief kitchen is funded by the British government, they do not staff it. In their 2020 article on “radical care,” authors Hobart and Kneese describe the tendency for “political leaders [to] also take advantage of stereo-types about caregiving to extract unpaid labor from citizens” (8). Women like Chhobi and Maya, as the “natural” caretakers of their community, run the relief kitchen, labor for which they are unpaid. But this relief work is also connected with the nationalist project. Not only is the kitchen a space where Chhobi and Maya tend to the daily, material concerns of the villagers by offering a meal, but they also educate them on the systemic issues that have led to their hunger in the first place, namely Britain’s unequal distribution of rations.[26] The British government, by operating on the basis of unpaid labor, does not staff the relief kitchen, and because the roles required for its operation are ones that typically fall to women, they inadvertently create a women-run space for proponents of the Swadeshi movement to gather and organize.

In a 2022 book chapter on the novel, centered on what she terms the “transgressive geography” of Chhobi’s political action, Nandini Dhar argues that *The Seedling’s Tale* negotiates a kind of “‘public domesticity:’ a distinct discursive space that gave the Bengali women access to the public realm of left political radicalism” (32). For Dhar, the famine relief kitchen is one such space of “public domesticity,” which “ultimately upturn[s] the existing dynamics between

[26] As Ania Loomba writes, “British wartime policies were squarely responsible for the food shortages; indeed a recent student argues that the famine was a result of deliberate policy decisions taken by Winston Churchill (Mukherjee, *Churchill’s Secret War*). [...] The British Government adopted a ‘Denial Scheme,” whereby all available stocks of rice were to be acquired by it so that if the Japanese army invaded India, its troops could not be fed” (198).

the public and private spheres" (47). The relief kitchen, as Dhar argues, inserts domestic roles in a political space and gives "the Bengali women access to the public realm of left political radicalism" (47). But in Sanyal's novel the relief kitchen not only grants women political space, but it only operates as a space to disseminate political ideas *because* it is largely run by women. According to Ania Loomba, "the government refused to allow communist workers to hold public meetings to discuss the food crisis. Police took down posters that asked people to unite to fight famine, and threatened people with dire consequences if the posters were seen again" (199). Maya's altercation with the government officers suggests that the kitchen workers are under suspicion. After Maya tells the officer that she will continue to feed and teach the people who come to the kitchen, the officer "arranged to have her locked up" in her uncle's home so that she could not come to the kitchen (Sanyal 200). His actions suggest an understanding of who truly keeps the relief kitchen running. Without the food that Maya, Chhobi, and others cook each day, hungry people would not make the effort to meet there, and the kitchen would cease to function as a place to educate community members and discuss national crises. Women's food labor is the keystone to their political enterprise.

Chhobi herself recognizes relief work as connected to the larger politics of the day; she needs to understand how the care work is connected to the long-term goals of the Swadeshi Movement to find purpose in her tasks. Early in her volunteer efforts, Chhobi questions her duties: ""Doling out the rice and dal cooked together—khichuri—and distributing clothes—this was charity work! You needed no education for it! Why did they need to organize meetings and marches? What hope for the future could this work uphold?" (202). Chhobi's initial hesitation typifies the kind of "purism" in mutual aid that Dean Spade identifies, an aid in which "only the most overtly militant actions are valuable, discounting work that directly cares for people made

vulnerable by current conditions now" (Spade 142). Here Chhobi, who herself has felt the sting of gender inequality many times, subscribes to a mindset that inherently devalues the kind of work typically assigned to women: distributing clothes and serving food. Chhobi falls into the common pitfall of rebelling against domestic duties so completely that she fails to see their value in a political context. Hungry, unclothed people will not hear calls for independence from Britain, reduced as they are to thinking only about where they will obtain their next meal, nor would they continue to make the trip to the relief kitchen each day without the food they provide, and it would cease to function as a political meeting place.

Soon though, Chhobi learns to balance care work with direct action. Sanyal describes her as the type of person who "could not settle down to any task till her doubts were cleared, till she understood the issues well," who must connect her daily tasks to a larger, political purpose (Sanyal 202). Chhobi throws herself into her work at the relief kitchen, "while also avoiding becoming solely focused on providing for people without getting to the root causes of what produces vulnerability" (Spade 142). Tamal, upon seeing Chhobi starting a massive fire for the daily meal, teases her, "'Only a few days ago you were going on about how futile it is just to keep the people alive on khichuri. Now why this sudden love for the kitchen? Look at the state of your eyes" (Sanyal 203). Tamal's dialogue establishes Chhobi's perspective change and, at the same time, calls attention to the effects of her labors in the kitchen on her body: her teary, red eyes. Chhobi almost scoffs at his worry over her eyes: "As if that was news! Indeed, she had not slept for several nights because of the pain. How could she tell anyone that? With all this running around and slogging, she had begun to look like a famine-stricken peasant herself" (203). Though Ania Loomba does not mention this scene in her discussion of the novel, her historical

background contextualizes the physical effects of famine relief work on Chhobi's body. She explains:

> Manikuntala Sen and Kanak Mukherjee were among the group of communist women who set up relief kitchens that fed 1,000 people daily in Calcutta by September 1943 [...] While they were organizing relief efforts, pickets, and camps, these women activists lived hand to mouth themselves: Manikuntala writes that 'the price of rice had risen from Rs. 4 or Rs. 5 a maund to Rs. 28. It became difficult to procure food for ourselves and on many a day nothing was cooked.' (Loomba 202)

By calling attention to the bodily effect of Chhobi's labors, a hunger that clearly has historical precedent, Sanyal connects the physical to the political. However, it is also crucial to note that Chhobi's changing body, which appears "famine-stricken," is not a result of her difficulties procuring food, as it was for the activists Loomba describes. Rather, it is meant to serve as an indication to readers that Chhobi is working hard; we imagine her continuously on her feet, lugging heavy bags of grains, and hunching over large vats of food. She does not lose weight because she is food insecure, but because of this manual labor. In fact, Chhobi's ability to volunteer such long hours at the relief kitchen is made possible by the other women in her household, namely her mother.

Chhobi's mother, who quietly slipped Chhobi choice cuts of meat when she was a child, continues to be characterized by her kitchen labors at the novel's climax. Chhobi, now a teenager who has been exposed to a larger city, sees her mother's circumstances with a new perspective. One day, she reflects that:

> Ma and Kakima had still not had lunch. The whole household had finished eating, but they were still stuck in the kitchen so late in the afternoon. Often the food would be

> finished and after serving everyone they would have to boil more rice before they could eat. No curry or vegetables would be left to go with the rice; they would mop the sides of the curry bowl with rice for what remained of the gravy. It was the same now as it had been when she was a little girl. (Sanyal 188)

Chhobi's reflection establishes a throughline from her childhood rebellions, like daily agitations over the size of fish she received, to her political consciousness. She recognizes that her mother receives little to eat, despite being the person who cooks each meal, a practice that remains unchanged from her childhood. Nandini Dhar, whose argument hinges on the idea of public domesticity as Chhobi's entrance to politics, mentions that "the kitchen as the place of labor, specifically culinary labor, dominates the women's domestic calendar, making their experience of time solely subject to their ability to navigate, and remain bound to, enclosed surroundings that correspond to enclosed routines of labor, described effectively as "drudgery" in much of activist Marxist literature" (43). Indeed, the kitchen duties Chhobi's mother performs physically limit her, such that she rarely, if ever, has time to leave her home. But her actions do allow her daughter, Chhobi, to leave the domestic space. Sanyal does not depict Chhobi participating in domestic routines like cooking or washing clothing while she is at home, and yet she eats and is clothed, labor, we can assume, that is performed by the other women in her household. In a displacement of labor, Chhobi's mother engages in the same kind of "care work" Chhobi does, in order for Chhobi herself to feed many more people than just herself or her family. Dhar writes that "*Nabankur* demonstrates there are two different kinds of domesticities—a 'bad domesticity' and a 'good domesticity,' the former embodied in the relationships the young, rebellious protagonist shares with her family, and the latter in the relationships generated within the realms and spaces of the Communist Party structures" (33). But where Dhar suggests that Sanyal

imposes a hierarchy of food-based labor, I argue that the domestic labor her mother performs allows Chhobi to participate fully in political labor. Because the "bad domesticity" of the home is in service of the "good domesticity" of the relief kitchen, they cannot be divorced from one another. The domesticity Chhobi's mother performs allows Chhobi to complete similar tasks at the relief kitchen, tasks that directly support her political mission.

The tension between public and domestic labor culminates in one of the novel's pivotal scenes, when the patriarch of Chhobi's family, Dakshinaranjan, attempts to remove her from the relief kitchen. He "came to take Chhobi home," telling her,

> 'Come home with me. You've had enough fussing with these riffraff. No more. Show me one other respectable woman who comes here the way you do!' [...]
>
> "Women should not get involved in all this [...] A woman's work is to tend the household, she has no business with scholarship, nor with politics. Do you know what a bad name our family has got because of you? Do you realize how this might affect your father's business?' (Sanyal 204)

Dakshinaranjan's speech directly labels Chhobi's relief work political. Though here she engages in the same behaviors he expects her to at home—cooking, serving food, tending the fire—when displaced from the domestic space, her actions take on a distinctly political quality. Her refusal to leave with him is stated simply: "No, I am not going. I still have a lot of work to do" (204). Though equipped with ideological messaging from her talks with Adhir, and her own research, Chhobi's response co-opts Dakshinaranjan's language; he insists that "a woman's work is to tend the household," and her response candidly protests his philosophy. Her work is in the relief kitchen. Without the kitchen itself, Chhobi's work in the communist party would be far less tangible—singing protest songs and debating current issues—but it is the physical labor of the

relief work that allows Chhobi a space to protest her uncle. In the midst of a famine, there is far too much work to be done and she will not leave.

Chhobi's refusal to leave the relief kitchen represents the climax of her political consciousness, and the final convergence of her beliefs about both nationalist sentiment and gender inequality. Where her earlier food rebellions—such as arguing over portions—read as frustration over the limits placed on her as an individual, Chhobi's actions become increasingly focused on those around her, and increasingly removed from the domestic space, beginning with stealing rice for her starving friends and expanding to include community at large, with her involvement in the relief kitchen. Until the novel's final chapters, Chhobi has understood resistance to mean an all-out rejection of food labor, but, as Nita Kumar and Usha Sanyal write in *Food, Faith, and Gender in South Asia,* women's resistance is:

> plural and discursive. It is not predetermined and easily categorized or even recognized. It can consist of fasting or feasting, celebration or abstinence, largesse or frugality. It is not the handling of food at any stage, or the raw or cooked nature of food that clues us in on either subordination or resistance by women. Food has too many resonances to play such a simple role. We have to assess in every case what the relationships surrounding food are. (6)

In Chhobi's case, the nascent formation of her political consciousness involved an initial rejection of all traditional held food roles, an early, and effective, form of resistance. Yet, as Kumar and Sanyal suggest, food does not, "play a simple role" in Chhobi's *bildungsroman*, but its significance shifts throughout the novel, as Chhobi's awareness of gender inequality and nationalism grows. Indeed, while Kumar and Sanyal's assertion about the symbolic plurality of food is astute, I would add one more binary to their list: food cannot signify a woman's

subordination or resistance simply based on its appearance in the public or private space. Chhobi's refusal to return home with her uncle, then, represents not only her political involvement with the Swadeshi Movement, and a protest of her family's complacency in the famine, but her understanding that the "woman's work" she has so desperately avoided, and tacitly undervalued, throughout her life, may, in fact, serve her political mission most effectively, and that even her mother's own food labors, strictly confined to the domestic sphere, bolster Chhobi's own political action.

1967-2016: Food Revolution and the Naxalite Movement

In Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers!,* a central character, Rahoul, portends the Bengal Famine will impact Bengal for many years to come: "When times grew normal again the innate humanity of the masses of Bengal would soon be re-lit? Rahoul was far from sure. It was too much to hope that the burning experience would leave no scars on the spirit, would not twist the spirit beyond repair for a generation, for an age" (Bhattacharya 161). His prediction is prescient; many of the driving forces behind the Bengal Famine, the stock-piling of staple grains or landowners taking a large percentage of farmers' yields for themselves, remain issues in the coming decades. In the introduction to *The Seedling's Tale,* for example, Himani Bannerji writes, "Though the echoes of armed struggle are not directly present in the famine relief work that Chhobi takes part in, we get a strong sense of peasant militancy and portents of future uprisings: the possibility of the later Tebhaga movement," a 1946-47 sharecroppers agitation that demanded reduction of landlords' share from one half to one third (Sanyal xix). The Tebhaga Movement is a direct precursor to the food agitations and Naxalite Movement depicted in Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* and *A State of Freedom.* This section represents a shift not only in the time period of the novels in question, but the contemporaneity of their authors. Whereas

Sulekha Sanyal's novel was first published in 1956, about thirteen years after the Bengal Famine, the texts in this section are twenty-first century Anglophone novels: Neel Mukherjee's 2014 novel *The Lives of Others* and his 2017 *A State of Freedom.* Where *The Lives of Others* is primarily set in the mid to late 1960's, shortly after the Naxalbari Uprising of 1967 and the beginning of the Naxalite Movement, the section of the novel focused on the Naxalite Movement in *A State of Freedom* takes place in the early 2000's.

Distinct from the other novels in its setting, *The Lives of Others* takes place in the mid to late 1960's, but the food agitations it addresses are a direct successor of the Tebhaga movement, and the "scars" of the Bengal Famine clearly linger in Mukherjee's narrative, just as Rahoul predicts in *So Many Hungers!*. While *The Lives of Others* largely centers on an upper-middle class extended family, I am primarily concerned with its interpolated chapters, in which a family member, Supratik, joins the Naxalite Movement, which began as an armed revolt in 1967 in West Bengal and later developed into the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Lenonist), CPI(M). These chapters, which occur at regular intervals until the two storylines merge towards the novels' end, are written in epistolary style, a first-person account of Supratik's experiences mobilizing farmers against their landlords. He travels to "indigent agricultural areas where feudalism was still the order of the day" despite its legal abolition in 1951, with the First Amendment of the Constitution of India (Mukherjee, *Lives* 61). Under the *zamindari* system, *zamindars* are the recognized owners of land, who lease plots to farmers in exchange for a portion of their crop yield, a ratio that changes with every landlord, sometimes varying by the year. In this system, which Supratik labels a "form of slavery," low crop yields (due to infertile soil, lack of rain, death of a plowing animal etc.) can trap farmers into "borrowing" more money or grains from landlords because they cannot pay their entire "debt," a cycle that, one begun, is

often difficult to escape from (61). In another throughline from *The Seedling's Tale*, the feudal system that kept Chhobi's family fed, though already beginning to deteriorate in the early 1940's, persists in *The Lives of Others*, several decades later, and continues to threaten the food security of its many unwilling participants.

Set in 1966, Mukherjee's prologue sets the stage for one of the novel's major critiques: preventable starvation as a result of this exploitative feudal system. The prologue, which is, at first, seemingly unrelated to the story's other plot points, describes an agricultural worker, Nitai Das, whose money and food are depleted after three long years of drought and whose "three children haven't eaten for five days" (1). After the Das family's landlord will no longer share leftovers, starvation drives them to make a meal from "a handful of hay stolen from the landlord's cowshed and boiled in the cloudy yellow water from the well" (1). Their desperation is so great that they eat the fodder reserved for animals. One day, when Das "begged all morning outside the landlord's house for one cup of rice," the family "set their guards on him" (1). As one of the guards began to beat Das with a stick, the other "joked 'Where are you going to hit this dog? He is nothing but bones, we don't even have to hit him. Blow on him and he'll fall back" (1-2). Receiving nothing from the *zamindar*, Das returns to his family, in the final stages of starvation, and murders his wife and children before committing suicide. Mukherjee presents the scene in excruciating detail—Das's youngest child is a "barely moving bundle," while the middle child "is a skeleton sheathed in loose, polished black skin [...] their bones have eaten up what little flesh they had on their thighs and buttocks"—and details of their murder are similarly specific (2).[27] The prologue establishes a key thesis of the novel: preventable hunger is violence. Das's children are described with a grotesque attention to their bodies, dehumanized as they are

[27] The Das murder is likely modeled on the real-life events in Haltu, West Bengal, when "one Biren De committed suicide along with his entire family" (Anwesha Roy 34).

reduced to discrete parts: skin and bones, thighs and buttocks. In another through line from *The Seedling's Tale*, the middle child is a skeleton, a reference to the sub-human, or no-longer-human, and their daily existence hovers right along the border between life and death. The corporality of Mukherjee's descriptions suggest that starvation is a passive violence against the body, but his decision to depict their brutal murder simply makes the violence active and unmistakable. The scene reads as a tragedy of the most exceptional kind, starvation taken to the violent extreme. But, notably, in a report on the state of food and agriculture from 1966, the same year as the prologue, the United Nations implies that "disaster" was averted in India that year. The UN's report states that mass starvation was mitigated because of the "large-scale emergency shipments" of grain stock from North America, and most reports do not even refer to food shortages in 1966 as famine (Food and Agriculture 1). Though just one example, and a fictional one at that, *The Lives of Others* tells a different story, one that not only presents the food shortage as a full-blown famine but suggests that this wide-spread starvation was preventable, as in the case of the Bengal Famine, and the death of this family, mitigable.

Certainly, this 1966 prologue describes exceptional circumstances, as the narrator suggests that its events take place after three years of drought, which leads to crop failure and starvation. But the interpolated chapters of Mukherjee's novel, which read as pages in a Naxalite's journal, point to a starvation that is far more routine. In one chapter, Supratik describes rural starvation: "The picture of starvation here, the picture that we city-dwellers carried around in our heads when we thought of rural poverty, of bony half-naked people withering to death, was wrong—that was what happened during times of famine" (Mukherjee, *Lives* 175). Supratik is careful to note, however, that this image is no longer accurate by the time he arrives in rural Bengal. "In ordinary times," such as when Supratik is writing, in 1968, "the

truth was different; the boniness remained, but it was no longer day after day of fasting; instead, weeks and months of hunger, of not having enough to eat, of meagreness and undernourishment and weakness" (175). His narration highlights the everyday hunger among the villagers he stays with, as well as the fact that hunger only earns media attention during times of crisis, when a disaster comes to a boil and is formally labeled as a famine. But the rest of the time, when issues of malnutrition and hunger merely simmer, "the boniness remained." This description is key, as it refuses to sever the connection between skeletal thinness in times of famine and the commonplace hunger Supratik witnesses, just as Sanyal uses skeletal descriptions to draw attention to similarities between Nilu and Pilu's everyday hunger and victims of the Bengal Famine.

As Parama Roy suggests in *Alimentary Tracts*, "the subject of famine brings into visibility in a striking way questions of equity and access as well as questions of normality and anomaly or crisis" and brings "into scandalous relief everyday forms of poverty and inequality" (21). In such "everyday forms of poverty, "according to Supratik, "the boniness remained" (P. Roy 21, Mukherjee, *Lives* 175). The skeletal abjection associated with times of crisis is no longer the exception, but the rule. Mukherjee's skeletal descriptions consciously gesture towards the images of emaciated people commonly linked with the Bengal Famine of 1943. Like the "everyday" hunger of Nilu and Pilu's family in *The Seedling's Tale*, Mukherjee too conveys consistent malnutrition with the image of the skeletal person, co-opting the rhetorical strategy common in Bengal Famine-era media.

These images of starving, skeletal people are made even more compelling by the historical background: the Food Revolution agitations that occurred several years before. In a collection of documents on these 1959 agitations, Suranjan Das and P. Bandyopadhyay describe

the Food Revolution as a "turning point" in the history of West Bengal (Das et al.). Formed in 1958 by the Communist Party of India, the Price Increase and Famine Resistance Committee led agitations, primarily in Kolkata, demanding retribution of landlord-controlled lands. Though the agitations climaxed in 1959, the Food Revolution in Bengal has its roots in post-1943 Bengal Famine movements and extended into the late 1960's, when revolutionaries came to focus on rural areas of Bengal, the time and place of Mukherjee's novel. In 1966, the price of rice skyrocketed, and kerosene, the main domestic fuel in rural areas, became increasingly scarce. Tensions mounted again, and the food agitations that lay dominant since 1959 sprang up again. In his first journal entry, Supratik explicitly notes that the "the Food Revolution agitations in the city in '66 morphed seamlessly into this front of our war" (Mukherjee, *Lives* 35). Under an agricultural system in which farmers produce ample food, stored in their landlords' silos, and still starve, revolutionary action entails seizing food itself.

Indeed, many of Supratik's journal entries revolve around directing crop production and seizing crop stores from landlords (97). Supratik, city-raised with little practical knowledge of agriculture, feels his inexperience acutely. He must closely observe the local family he is living with at every stage of food production. This inexperience recalls Adhir's conversation with city-raised Tamal, which outlines the drudgery he would endure should he stay—"You city people have no idea what the work is like, here" he warns, and "share the peasants meals of coarse rice and burnt, red chillies—that is, if you're lucky and they're not starving" (Sanyal 173). Supratik has no prior knowledge of daily hunger, nor of the steps rural families take to supplement their meager earnings. He notes a small garden patch near their home and writes in his journal:

> Take, for example, Bijli sowing the seeds of various gourds and pumpkin in the tiny patch of dirt next to her hut. Who brought the seeds? Did she save them herself, taking

> them out and putting them carefully away when she cut the vegetables before cooking? Did she buy them somewhere? I asked Kanu. He said that his wife saved the seeds, everyone did it, so that they could grow a little something for their own use; the wealthier farmers grew cash crops, such as paan or sugar cane, because they had the land to do it, while people like Kanu grew edible stuff for their own use in a scrap of vegetable garden. In itself this fact was yet another of those little things that added to my growing knowledge of a new world. But it disturbed me because I hadn't noticed the process of retaining the seeds and drying them out and saving them. Did it happen while I was away in Chhurimara or Munirgram? Or did I simply overlook it? (Mukherjee, *Lives* 176-77)

Driven by famine-like conditions, women save the seeds from vegetables to plant on their own properties. In a food system that leaves workers with one meal a day while landlords store massive silos for future use, this repurposing of seeds, cut from vegetables prepared in the kitchen, reads as an act of political resistance, one cultivated by women. As Chhobi learns by the end of *The Seedling's Tale*, here, women's political involvement does not involve rejecting food preparation, but participating in it. Traditionally domestic spaces of kitchen and garden are coded resistant and women's food labor is thus proven profoundly political, undercutting the human-made, systematic hunger resulting from unequal distribution of food. Supratik, though, had overlooked the seed-saving. It is likely that women save seeds during cooking, the stage of food production he discusses only in passing, with far less detail than that of sowing seeds or plowing fields. That his oversight "disturbs" him emphasizes the power in women's food labors. Food preparation, which typically takes place in a kitchen physically separate from the rest of the house to reduce smoke damage and risk of fire, offers women the cover to perform political

action in secret, a place and method of rebellion that Supratik would have never considered because of its gendered context.

Supratik also records women's involvement in sowing seeds, as women both perform a seed ceremony before the first planting and are largely responsible for the sowing themselves, even as he continues to discount their roles as political actors. Witness to the "little ceremony" of sowing seeds, made diminutive as if to deemphasize the importance of this role, Supratik explains:

> The farmer's wives do it. They put on new clothes, it looked like. They carry a little quilt with germinated seeds in it, and a small plate with oil, and salt and sindoor. The farmers stand back, each holding a little sack of seeds. But the women have to consecrate the whole business first. They bend down, pick up a tiny bit of soil, touch it to forehead and then to tongue. Then they walk over the aal, along the full perimeter of the seedbed, singing a song and throwing a small handful of the seed grain mixed with oil and salt and sindoor at each corner. [...]
>
> Where are you, Mother Lakshmi?
>
> Rise and show your face.
>
> Our men are cultivating paddy
>
> But there's no rice in the store-room.
>
> What are we going to live on?
>
> How are we going to get through the year? (198-9).

Along with this ritual, and the seed-saving and food preparation they perform in the kitchen, it was also "mostly women who did the transplanting" later in the rice-growing process (217). Sapling transplantation requires deft movements, speed, and precision, "bending down so that

your top half made, at the waist, a variable angle between forty-five and sixty degrees with your bottom half and maintaining that for hours," an action that Supratik describes as the "visual illustration of the process that had given us the term 'back-breaking labour'" (218). Yet the lines of their song go, "our men are cultivating paddy," eliding their own involvement in the cultivation entirely. Despite their clear, active participation in the "back-breaking" agricultural labor, Supratik's efforts to educate and organize the people include only male farmers, in part because the women de-emphasize their own role in the labor, and in part because Supratik fails to consider them political actors, in their own right.

Each of Supratik's observations about women's labor involve seeds, which begs a comparison with *The Seedling's Tale*. In Sanyal's novel, Chhobi herself is a "seedling," whose ideas about her role in society grow as she matures, germinating throughout her childhood as she learns of the inequalities in her community. In these scenes from *The Lives of Others,* women literally interact with seeds, carefully saving them while cooking, performing a sowing ceremony, and then planting them in the fields. But the symbolic potential of a seed in Sanyal's novel is instructive in *The Lives of Others* as well. An armed rebel in an agricultural revolution, Supratik misses the obvious metaphor: that the women plant seeds of resistance. As Nita Kumar and Usha Sanyal remind us, "women were the original planters and harvesters of grain, the farmers of history. Moreover, being the bearers of humans, carrying the seed/field as well as the nourishment for reproduction, they furnish the best metaphors for the earth's fertility" and, therefore, have been historically linked more to "'nature' than to 'culture'" (Kumar et al. 4). It is, in part, women's metonymic association with earth and seed that obscures their potential as political actors, for Supratik. Women are "natural" seed bearers, their actions revolving around

food barely above the threshold of notice, and so their role in the agricultural revolution is similarly overlooked.

Here, Mukherjee establishes the *potential* for women's political activism in the Naxalite Movement. Predicated on the promotion of class consciousness, Supratik and his party have difficulty seeing women as participants in the labor system they seek to overthrow through education, though the women who aid their husbands in the fields are nothing if not workers. Naxalites, who targeted agricultural workers as new recruits, understood that farmers likely had the most anger to harness. Despite their long hours in the fields, the agricultural workers Supratik lives with and works alongside are disproportionately impacted by hunger. In a study of death rates in the Bengal Famine, Amartya Sen reports that "agricultural laborer" was the most common occupation among those whose deaths were registered during the famine ("Famine Mortality" 208). Though the Bengal Famine occurred about twenty years before the action in *The Lives of Others*, Mukherjee's novel also takes place in Bengal. Many of the agricultural workers Supratik meets would have been impacted by the Bengal Famine, and several decades later, remain trapped in an exploitative food system that leaves their families on the brink of starvation. Women, whose job it is to stretch meager rations into meals, have every reason to participate in a food revolution alongside their husbands and sons.

However, it is not this novel, but Mukherjee's 2017 novel *A State of Freedom*, that explores the life of a female Naxalite, though decades later, in the early 2000's. Chapter Four, which largely focuses on Milly's childhood and arrival in Mumbai, contains a thread about Milly's friend, Soni, who joins the People's Liberation Guerilla Army (PLGA), an armed wing of the Naxalites. In her 2018 article on the novel, Meghan Gorman-DaRif argues that Soni's decision to join the PLGA "is contextualized in the novel by both material and structural

violence emerging from the state, the Party, and domestic spaces" (304). Gorman-DaRif offers examples of physical and sexual violence as catalysts for Soni's involvement in the PLGA, such as the brutal amputation of Milly's brothers' hand by Maoist part members or Soni's sister's sexual assault at the hands of forest department officials or her mother's suicide after being unable for find medical care for her cancerous tumor. But while these incidents of violence certainly influence Soni's political action, so do the famine and hunger that plague her family, a form of structural violence Gorman-DaRif does not note. Soni's narration begins with the discovery of her mother's tumor, set against a drought year: "The monsoons had tricked them that year by not arriving and the rice in the fields had died to a brown waste. The only thing the villagers could salvage was bundles of hay and straw from the dried plants" (Mukherjee, *Freedom* 175). Her mother's illness only compounds the family's food insecurity, and the two sisters take over her foraging duties, "picking kendu leaves in the forest together" (177). While foraging, Soni's sister is sexually assaulted by forest officers. Picking leaves to sell and support their family, the sisters are left vulnerable to assault. Indeed, as my previous chapter establishes, sexual assault and hunger are often narratively intertwined; the threat of starvation drives young women to leave their home for food or work, as in the case of Soni and her sister, often remote or isolated places, such as the forest, where their attackers may harm them without witnesses.

This exact combination of vulnerabilities, starvation and assault, politicizes the sisters. Members of the CPI(M) visit their village shortly after the sisters' encounter with forest officials and two women perform a play depicting villagers picking kendu leaves before being dragged away by forest officers. The scene strikes a chord for Soni, having experienced the exact situation they describe, but it also suggests that Soni and her sister are not alone; forest officers prey on women foraging in the woods with regularity. Building to their theme, the women ask

their audience "'Why have we been poor and hungry for decades? Why do we always hear of vikas, or crores of rupees given by the Centre for development, and never see a paisa of it? Where does the money go? Why has our situation not changed?'" (193). These kinds of meetings are well-attended in the area, and many young men and women "were inspired to join because they wanted change, improvement to their lives of hunger and squalor" (196). Soni and her sister each join separate guerrilla wings of the CPI(M); Soni joins the People's Liberation Guerilla Army (PLGA). Nor are they the only women in their squads, as "there were nearly as many women who joined the guerrillas as men," and Soni's squad consists of five women and six men (196-7). Motivated by the hunger that has impacted their village for decades, Soni and her sister each join the Naxalite Movement and fight for a food revolution.

Yet Soni's experience as a Naxal, like Supratik's, is characterized by hunger. Despite the fact that, "the women got extra rations of food, particularly eggs, and if eggs were not available, groundnuts," their food insecurity was dire (197).

> The guerrillas' main—often only—source of sustenance was the food levy they imposed on the surrounding villages: they took five kilos of rice and lentils from the thirty kilos that every villager who held a ration card was entitled to, from the public distribution system. Not infrequently they would have to collect the food from villages which had missed the ration day, because they were so far away from the distribution hub, so there was either nothing the guerrillas could be given, in the worst situation, or they had to do with very little, with food that could barely be called food: rice that was more stones than rice, lentils that had gone maggoty. There were days when they subsisted on this stony rice and tamarind paste or a fiery chutney made with ants, salt, tamarind and dried red chillies. On such days they looked upon every animal they glimpsed in the jungle—a

> bird, a scurrying rodent in the undergrowth, a crashing board, a snake—with hunger, wanting only to bring it down, roast it over a fire and fall upon it. (198)

Hungry people join the movement to improve living conditions, wagering temporary hunger for later stability. They are paradoxically invited to join the party as a reprieve from hunger—promised an "upfront payment of fifteen hundred rupees," a monthly payment, and meals—yet are left hungry once they join, because of their constant movement (196). Like Chhobi's emaciated form in *The Seedling's Tale,* party members participate in a kind of bodily bartering, sacrificing immediate needs for their political goals.

It is also necessary to distinguish the private hunger of a Naxalite on the run from public hunger-strikes. Each is a politically-motivated form of hunger but have distinct outcomes for the people who perform them. In *The Seedling's Tale,* learning about Swadeshi's hunger-strikes is a formative moment in Chhobi's education, which establishes the political potential of food and hunger, though the hunger-strikers themselves are an aside in the larger narrative. In Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, which, like Neel Mukherjee's novels, is written in English and features women members of the CPI(M), hunger-strikes are represented in opposition to participation in violent struggle. While this may be unsurprising, hunger-strikes, after all, are associated with Mohandas Gandhi and considered a nonviolent form of protest, hunger itself is a part of both violent and non-violent means of weaponization—recall, for example, the police cordon on Morichjhapi to starve out its residents—and methods of resistance. The narrative about a full-time CPI(M) member comes close to the end of Roy's novel, which takes place around 2016, and is delivered in the form of a letter from the Bastar Forest where "Maoist guerrillas… were waging a war against security forces that were trying to clear the land" for mining companies (Arundhati Roy, *Ministry* 422). The letter is authored by

Revathy, the biological mother of a child, Miss Jebeen II, who several of the novel's main characters have begun to raise.

Revathy explains that she was influenced by communist thinking as a young child and, as a young adult, joined the "Mahila Sangham—women's organization, creating class awareness in slums and villages," which has roots in the same communist women's organization Ania Loomba focuses on in her book chapter about the Bengal Famine, the Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti (Arundhati Roy, *Ministry* 426). Revathy later describes her experience joining the PLGA, as she becomes more radicalized in her thinking, and being captured and sexually assaulted. When she returned to the party after learning she was pregnant, was told "to go outside because PLGA women are banned to have children" (430). Revathy concludes her letter:

> Women join because they are revolutionaries but also because they cannot bear their sufferings at home. Party says men and women are equal, but still they never understand. I know Comrade Stalin and Chairman Mao have done many good things and many bad things also. But still I cannot leave my party. I cannot live outside […]. I saw many good people in Jantar Mantar so I had the idea to leave Udaya there. I cannot be like you and them. I cannot go on hunger-strike and make requests. In the forest every day police is burning killing raping poor people. Outside there is you people to fight and take up issues. But inside there is us only. So I am returned to Dandakaranya to live and die by my gun. (431)

Revathy's experiences in the PLGA are directly impacted by her gender—her sexual assault and expulsion from the movement during her pregnancy—but she "cannot leave." Revathy explicitly separates herself from people who hunger strike. But her narration also serves to illustrate a crucial point in my argument: the same devaluation of women's political action in 1943, during

the Bengal Famine, and during the Food Revolution, appears in the letter of a twenty-first century revolutionary woman. Revathy herself participates in the kind of women's political labor as a young adult that she later abandons—she would attend "meetings carrying booklets and pamphlets," and "sing and dance at protest meetings" (426). But Revathy's final paragraph distances herself from this kind of political action, which she associates with the women's organization. She can no longer "take up issues" like women outside of the PLGA but turns to a more violent means of political participation.

Conclusion:

Revathy's letter emphasizes several crucial points of this chapter. First, she experiences sexual assault while a member of PLGA, the very tragedy that motivated Soni and her sister to join the PLGA in the first place. The PLGA's handling of her assault was callous and dismissive—barely allowing her any time to recover from her wounds and banishing her once she became pregnant. Even as the party mistreats her on the basis of gender though, Revathy herself devalues the activism she associates with women, just as the women in *The Lives of Others* elide their own role in the farming labor they do, and just as Chhobi initially dismisses food preparation as a weak form of political action. Politically involved women throughout this chapter often devalue their own labor—whether it be to cook and serve food in a famine relief kitchen or to save seeds from meager vegetable rations. These food labors often come at the detriment of the people who perform them—evidenced by Chhobi comparing herself to a "famine-stricken" peasant or the desperate meals Naxalite women prepare in *A State of Freedom*—but these contributions go largely unnoticed in their parties, from the 1943 setting of *The Seedling's Tale*, to the 2016 letter in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness.* Despite this

inattention, and as Sulekha Sanyal's *The Seedling's Tale* suggests, women's food labor has radical, subversive consequences for their communities and political organizations.

Yet Anindita Ghosh writes that, in both colonial and nationalist sentiments, South Asian women are represented as passive. Where there are exceptions, in which "women are discovered in assertive roles, they are either participants in larger mass struggles under the tutelage of their male peers and guardians (women activists in the national movement), or unusual eruptions within a conventional social fabric" (Anindita Ghosh 2). Indeed, Chhobi falls into each of these categories, both under the tutelage of her uncle, in the Swadeshi Movement, and presented as an exceptional girl, an "unusual eruption within a conventional social fabric." Where Chhobi differs though, is that she comes to see the value in the labor she provides for the community; she and Maya create a women-run space in which communist party members can meet under cover of famine relief, feeding members of their community and arming them with nationalist sentiment. Though Chhobi first participates in the movement under the tutelage of Adhir, the famine relief kitchen becomes a women-run space. Its success hinges on her and Maya twofold: both to cook the food that will draw needy community members and to mask the political meetings that take place there with their presence as women. Chhobi certainly is an eruption of the usual social fabric, but she is no mere cog in her organization, exploited by her male counterparts. Chhobi herself learns what I have argued throughout this dissertation: that women's food preparation and abstinence have tangible, political consequences in both public and private spaces and that these "separate" spheres, in fact, mutually reinforce one another.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In a 1986 New York Times article entitled "Writer's Hunger: Food as Metephor" [sic] Joyce Carol Oates writes that "in literature, eating and not eating are always symbolic. Food always 'means' something other than mere food" (Oates). While I certainly attend to the symbolic in this dissertation, it has also shown that descriptions of ingredients and meals are anything but "mere food" for the hungry characters in these literary texts; food does not *need* to symbolize anything for it to be a worthy topic of literary inquiry. That serious study of food is a relatively recent field within literature is no doubt clear by Oates' diminution of it, an oversight that I believe is, at least in part, due to its ties to women's labor. Just as food preparation is often invisible, so too are the accompanying experiences with hunger that South Asian women face. Yet the literary texts in this study suggest that women's food preparation, consumption, and abstinence may have tangible political consequences for women themselves and for their families, communities, and political organizations.

As my introduction establishes, this dissertation begins with individual experiences with hunger, then moves to the household, community, and region, as each chapter grows in scope. Regardless of the level discussed in a given chapter, women's experiences with hunger have political implications. The context of the *zamindari* system, in my chapter on "Breast-Giver," for example, explicitly connects to *The Seedling's Tale* and *The Lives of Other*s in my final chapter—each call attention to the unequal distribution of food supplies. But Devi's story emphasizes the consequences of food insecurity on an individual, while the texts in Chapter Five

place hunger in the context of larger political organizations that work to overthrow the *zamindari* system itself.

Though each chapter in this project attends to the ways in which food preparation, consumption, or abstinence may subjugate women—from the physical consequences of wet-nursing in "Breast-Giver" to the structures that leave Nilu and Pilu food insecure after their father's death—every chapter also delineates the subversive potentials for food and hunger. Jashoda enjoys the status of "chief fruitful women" in the Haldar household, venerated for her divinely abundant supply of breastmilk, and respected by her own family as the sole wage-earner for their household, despite the story's ultimately tragic ending. By turning to another Bengali-language short story, Purabi Basu's "French Leave," I both establish the possibility for breastfeeding as a subversive act, radically reimagining food systems that lay claim to women's time, energy, and labor, and gesture towards the possibility for hunger itself as a form of resistance.

This very refusal to cook and eat appears in my chapter on food weaponization, in cases such as Neel Mukherjee's *A State of Freedom*, Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*, Aruni Kashyap's "Like the Thread in a Garland," and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. I both establish food as a weapon wielded against women by abusive family members or employers and illustrate the ways in which women reappropriate food, eating, and even their own hunger, turning these weapons against their persecutors. From a simple refusal to eat celebratory food as a passive resistance to a husband's bad manners, in Aruni Kashyap's "Like the Thread in a Garland," to the kitchen as a marital battlezone in which the narrator finally has due cause to leave her abusive husband in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*, women identify food and hunger as modes of power within their households, exploiting them to register disapproval or

win liberation. But it is my analysis of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* that signals a shift in my dissertation's scope, from the instances of domestic experiences with hunger that characterize previous examples to the broader issues of government-sanctioned acts of food weaponization and women's resistance to such pressures in the texts that follow. Kusum voluntarily refuses food both to ensure her son Fokir's survival and shares emergency provisions with her community. Her actions connect the common buffering behavior established in previous literary examples to the possibility for hunger as a form of resistance to government sanctioned warfare, a possibility realized by women's mutual food aid in Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee.*

For the women in *The Story of Felanee*, and Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* and *Shameless*, hunger and assault are both intimately linked vulnerabilities, as one often begets the other in conflict situations, and experiences that occur together formally. I trace these narratively codependent experiences from the most metaphorical, men described as "devouring" the women they assault, to the most literal, women left with visible bite marks and whole chunks of flesh missing from their breasts. In doing so, I find that the women in these texts come to bond over their shared experiences with both hunger and assault, forging networks of mutual food aid among the women in their communities, and even drawing on these bonds with other women to take political action. In *The Story of Felanee,* for example, hunger becomes an occasion for women to commiserate, but also the opportunity for their mutual aid—sharing foraging locations, recipes, and even cooking implements—with the explicit, shared understanding that their actions should not be taken as charity, but as cooperation in a larger network of mutual aid that they may draw from themselves. My argument culminates in the novel's climactic hunger

strike, in which the women, recognizing the power in their hunger, protest the unjustified capture of men in their community by the military.

Pulling the thread of women's food labor and hunger as forms of political protest, my final chapter identifies the ways in which women's food labor is often devalued within their political organizations. By tracing women's roles from the Swadeshi Movement in the 1940's to the Food Revolution in the 1960's, and the related Naxalite Movement, I also establish the importance of this labor both for meeting the basic needs of community members and for creating discrete spaces to disseminate political ideas when such meetings are illegal and dangerous. The elision of women's labor, I argue, reveals not only the common enough devaluation of work associated with women, but a tacit preference, even among women themselves, for political activism that is violent, public, and reactionary, all modes of political intervention commonly associated with men. Far from the notion Chhobi has in the beginning of *The Seedling's Tale*, women's political activism does not need to entail an all-out rejection of food labor for it to be valuable, nor does it need to be violent, nor public. Something as simple as saving seeds, in the context of an exploitative agriculture system, or feeding someone a meal, in the face of a human-made famine overlooked by colonial authorities, can be radical, and political, acts of care.

While the role of food in postcolonial studies is well-established—say, in symbolic readings of national dishes as nostalgia-fodder for one's "homeland"—the role of hunger is a newer avenue, one whose critical importance in literary studies has yet to be fully realized. In the last two decades, universities have begun to offer degrees in hunger studies. The University of Rhode Island, for example, has a minor in hunger studies, which includes courses in Philosophy, Political Science, Sociology, Nutrition, and other disciplines, but not English, and the University

of Kentucky, Utah State, and Auburn University, which offer similar studies in hunger, lack literature courses on the subject as well. By outlining this lack of institutional literary intervention within the academic discipline of hunger and food studies, I risk implying that these programs do not include English courses because literature does not add to the conversation around hunger. Margaret Kelleher, for example, questions, "Is it possible to depict the horror and scale of an event such as famine, are literature and language adequate to the task?" (Kelleher 2). But I maintain that literature cannot, and should not, be relegated to the position of case study in the larger field of hunger studies because eating (and not eating) is deeply rooted in experience—the tastes, textures, emotions, and associations one has with particular ingredients, recipes, and meals—a unique strength of literature.

Just last year, in August 2022, the first monograph on hunger in postcolonial literature was published. In its introduction, Muzna Rahman writes that "literature remains largely cordoned off from the field of Food Studies [...] There exists a general understanding that food, eating, and hunger deserve the rigorous, more empirical treatment that subjects like history, sociology, cultural studies, or anthropology are understood to provide" (5). This tacit preference for the Social Sciences, Rahman writes, is exaggerated in the context of hunger as:

> Academic studies of food insecurity are often oriented towards hunger alleviation and attempt to produce positive social change. This understanding provides some clue as to why literature has perhaps been marginalized in the debate on food. Real famines – not imagined representations of them – need to be rigorously studied and understood to formulate ways of overcoming them. Literature is understood to somehow lack the proper register required for these sorts of interventions. (5)

While hunger studies is an emergent, interdisciplinary field, its connection to literary studies is, as yet, minimal. Another possible explanation for this is that food is often considered a set piece in fiction, and food-based figurative language is even further removed from scholarly conversation, chalked up as common idioms. If food has only just begun to join the conversation in the last decades, then it is no wonder that the *absence* of food hardly ever reaches the threshold of scholarly attention. Yet, the last few years have revealed to us that our global, national, and regional food systems are more tenuous than we had ever imagined, and as the population increases, and environmental catastrophes strike with increasing regularity, this fragility is likely to continue. Moreover, it is by attending to these moments of abstinence that we begin to understand whose experiences we omit when we ignore the role of food and hunger in literature, the people whose food preparation, traditions, and buffering behaviors prop-up failing food systems: women.

In tracing women's experiences with hunger, through plot-level events and formal elements, I find that women's eating and abstention have profoundly political implications. From the most personal of women's food labors, breastfeeding, to her use of meals to identify and upset household hierarchies, to the creation of mutual aid networks founded on knowledge of both hunger and food labor, to the role of women's food preparation and abstinence in larger political movements—in other words, from the most individual to the most communal, and most private to most public—women's food preparation and abstinence are overlooked, in literature as in life, to this day. But it is by lingering over the very moments that are so commonly elided in literary inquiry that we may consider the enormous role food plays in the lives of individuals, and within households, communities, and regions; it is a mechanism both for exposing deeply entrenched beliefs and structures, as well as a means by which women may subvert them. Food

is a symbol, as Joyce Carol Oates writes, but it is by combining a symbolic treatment of food with the material realities of hunger that I lay bare the structural inequities that leave South Asian women and girls more vulnerable to food insecurity in order that we may begin to combat them.

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