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## Where have all the Girls Gone? The Invisible and Visible Hungry Girls of Bengali Literature

Prama Bhattacharjee

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Netaji Satabarshiki Mahavidyalaya, Ashoknagar, North 24 Parganas, West Bengal – 743223

### Abstract

*The last fifty year's history of feminist food studies has found the kitchen as a contested area between the location of women as the victim of patriarchal subjugation, and simultaneously the centre of empowerment. While there are ample instances to support both the theories, the traditional roles assigned for women require them to remain a caring, and perpetually self-denying provider of the family, rather than being vocal of her own needs including hunger. While Bengali literature resonates with the presence of greedy boys and food-loving male adults, and the Bengali culture is quite proud of being a food-loving clan, except Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's Durga, and Sulekha Sanyal's Chhobi, there is hardly any hungry girl prominently represented in Bengali literature's career of four centuries or more. However, these "invisible" hungry women are found in a very unlikely sphere: in the world of supernaturals. Bengali literature has an abundance of female ghosts, namely, saakchunni, petni and daakini, who continuously create havoc in the world of humans searching for food. The imagination of the supernatural entities in the ghost tales had always been a reflection of society's collective fear of the marginalised getting empowered from the other side of the earthly existence and coming back to take revenge. Thus, it is through these supernatural beings the society acknowledges the presence of domesticated girls remaining hungry and mutinous till the last breath and beyond.*

**Keywords:** Food Studies; Patriarchy; Supernatural entities; Marginalised voices; Gender.

Corresponding author phone: +91 9831733295; E-mail address: [pramabhattacharjeensm@gmail.com](mailto:pramabhattacharjeensm@gmail.com)

### Introduction

In her preface to *Rannar Boi* (The Book of Cooking, 1979), the eminent Bengali author Lila Majumdar refers to the International Women's Year (1975) and strikes a contrast between the women who remain the "queen of the kitchen" (*ranna ghorer rani*) and the women who become the slaves of an office (*aapis ghorer baandi*). She is rather subtle about this stark polarisation between the two kinds of women, and proceeds to her main subject of the book: the art of cooking. She expresses the opinion that the life of the human centres around a kitchen, and no man can live without food. Majumdar promptly moves on to address the women, who are in charge of a kitchen, and proceeds her advice of minimising the labour and time spent in a kitchen to produce a healthy meal for the family. It is obvious from the very beginning that the purpose of good cooking is to keep men of the family happy and nourished, and the primary charge of that falls on women. Majumdar, a topper of M.A. in English from the Calcutta University around 1930, must have heard about the Waves of Feminism, but that did not stop her from expressing the opinion that domestic cooking is primarily the charge of the women

in the family. She was writing a few decades prior to Arlene Avakian (2014) who wrote “Food is not sweetness and families, little flying hearts...Food is aggravation and too much work and hurting you back and trapping the woman inside like slaves”. Feminist food studies inspect the space between these two polarised locations of women around preparing and serving food.

### **Culture of caring and feeding**

The last fifty year’s history of feminist food studies has been a contested location when one inspects the complex relationship between gender and food. On one hand, women have been seen as the victim of patriarchal design of subjugation, because the main onus of preparing a family food traditionally fell upon them. Simultaneously, the kitchen had been seen as the symbol of empowerment of women, as the patriarchal set up had instigated women to employ their skills and get their sense of worth from being the sole caregiver of the family. The traditional roles assigned for women require them to remain a caring, and perpetually self-denying provider of the family, rather than being vocal of her own emotional and physical needs including hunger. Caroline Daniel in her book *Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children’s Literature* (2006) had, after inspection of a few Victorian children’s literature, suggested that “The ideal woman was represented as a creature of disinterested love and nurture and the moral center of both the home and society. To conform to this ideal, women and girls had to downplay every aspect of their physicality, including desire and appetite.” It is also suggested that a good woman must practice control over her appetites, so that she can have a dominance over her sexual desires as well. Assuming that literature reflects society at large, we attempt to take a close look into Bengali literature in general and some texts in particular, to find the social history inside the domestic sphere which remained unrecorded.

### **Hungry boys and gluttonous men**

The Bengalis are a class in themselves, who love to eat and feed on every possible occasion, and in many cases the feast itself becomes the main motive while the occasion remains an excuse. Thus, there are feasts appending almost every sort of religious or social occasions in Bengal. In the last century, we have seen and heard about many famous “khaiye” (amateur eaters) who were the pride of a family or a locality. Even as late as in the nineties of the last century we have seen these amateur eaters or young men of a locality being invited to the bride’s or groom’s house for the wedding ceremony as an item of entertainment. They would display a superhuman feat by eating three buckets of meat or ninety pieces of fish or one hundred rasgullas. The initiation in this culinary art starts at the very beginning when boys are passively encouraged to steal food from the family kitchen or fruits from the trees of the neighbours, the argument being that a boy has to eat well to become a strong man. The story of Krishna creating havoc (with his fellow boys), in the village community store of butter and ghee is well-known and lovingly encouraged. Society looks at the gluttony of the boys as a long-time investment in order to create future ‘guardians’ of the family. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Sukumar Roy, Lila Majumdar, Narayan Gangopadhyay, Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay, Narayan Debnath and many other stalwarts of Bengali children’s literature have lovingly portrayed such gluttonous boys and men. But do they have any female counterparts? The answer is an obvious “no”.

While there is such a culture of sharing and caring through excess of food, we hardly find any significant female character in Bengali literature who expresses hunger, or a taste for a particular food. Our society till now would be at a loss to find out what item a senior female member of their family likes to eat herself. In most cases, the woman is not aware of that either, because it is not customary to serve a woman her favourite food. The entire menu planning in an average household revolves around the food preferences of the adult males of the family, as Avakian (2014) had pointed out, and the rest of the members learn to accept that as the custom.

## What is so disgusting / horrible about women enjoying food?

Rassundari Devi (1876) in her memoir had narrated how at times she had to go two days at a stretch without a meal because she had to prioritise her domestic duties in a big family. Sacrificing a meal was seen and encouraged as a virtue especially in a married woman. It was anticipated, and in most cases desirable, that a woman would control her hunger if there is work to do. In the opening sentence of *Ramkanaier Nirbuddhita*, a short story by Rabindranath Tagore, the reader is informed that while the elderly husband was dying in his bed, his young wife was enjoying a meal of soaked rice (*panta bhaat*) and a curry made of shrimps and vegetables in the privacy of her kitchen. The description of her sitting posture and the small heap of chewed *daata* (fibrous vegetables) is suggestive of her immense satisfaction in such a humble meal. But the reader is immediately being alerted of the dubious character of a woman who was enjoying a meal while her husband was lying on his death bed. We must also remember that this young woman, after turning a widow, would be denied of all sorts of non-vegetarian food items including fish. This was her last meal of happiness, which she obviously was aware of. But the suggestive description is an exposition of the 'selfish' character of the lady who would proceed to commit other acts of selfishness very soon. Thus, in the common psyche, a woman who expresses her love for food is equated with an avaricious and selfish person. Again, in popular culture, the women who love to eat or enjoy eating, are seen as the butt of social satire. The cruel mother-in-law is, in most cases, fat, as are her pampered unmarried daughters. The virtuous young *bou* (the daughter-in-law) is shown serving them food in addition to the men of the house. The very fact that these women share a table with men while being served by a *bou*, thereby enjoying the male privileges, is suggestive that these women are evil. More often than not, a fat woman invites criticism for being involved in excessive eating, and thus, daring to defy her gendered roles in the society.

## Critical attitude towards female hunger in *Brata Kathas*

The *Brata Kathas* are a subset of folk tales that are closely associated with the women's world in a Bengali household, especially in the lower and lower-middle classes. These are stories, mostly circulated orally and sung on the occasion of some designated religious festivals performed at home. They teach young unmarried women about the societal expectation of 'womanly virtues' in the form of cautionary tales. The purpose of a *Brata Katha* is much like a fairy tale, to instruct the uninitiated children into the codes and conducts of an adult world. The difference remains in the nature of the particularized target audience (young women and girls) and its close relation with the worship of local deities within the boundary of the house. The young, unmarried girls are initiated into these *bratas* by the elder women of their family, and in most of the *bratas*, men play a very minimal role, except that of a *purohit* (a Brahmin man who is traditionally assigned to handle the formal worship). The materials needed to perform a *brata* can be collected easily from the locality, mostly from the roadside bushes, and the *puja* performance can be done by the woman herself in most cases. Again, a *brata* is a community ritual where women of a family or a locality perform the rites together and share a meal in the end. While a *brata* performance gives women a form of autonomy as well as entertainment, if looked closely, one would find staunch patriarchal values being celebrated in these tales. Thus, in the *Patai Sasthi brata*, to be performed on the month of *Poush* and the *Aranya Sasthi brata*, to be performed on the month of *Jaisthya*, we find a young married woman who lusts after food. As a punishment, she was cursed with stillborn children, until she performed the particular *brata* and vows to control her appetite and eat only after the males of the family had finished their meal.

Again, in the story of *Umno-Jhumno*, two daughters of a very poor Brahmin who wanted to eat only one *pitha* (a sort of homemade sweetmeat) each, were punished by their father severely. The Brahmin bought materials for *pitha* because he wanted to eat them all by himself, and secretly kept a count of the number of the *pithas* being made by his wife. As he sat down to enjoy his meal, he found two *pithas* less. Upon enquiring, he came to know that the mother had given two of the *pithas* to the two hungry daughters. The Brahmin got very angry and took the girls to a faraway forest and left them there to die. Later, after performing a particular *brata*, the hapless girls got a lot of wealth and returned home to give that

to their father. No one questioned the justification of such a severe punishment for such a petty crime. The moral of the story was to tell women how to behave like the mother who kept her mouth shut all along the events without protesting even for once. This tale also suggests how the women of a household have sometimes tried to subvert the vigilance of patriarchy. This possibility was such a big threat, that it was planned to be nipped at the very beginning with tales of dire consequences.

### **Widowhood as an excuse for outcasting**

The life of the Hindu upper caste women of Bengal had been a long story of deprivation and cruelty. While the girls were married at a very young age, mostly before puberty, to a man three or four times her age, it was only to be expected that she would be widowed very soon. The next phase of her life had been planned to look worse than death. The widows, a great burden on their families with their budding youth, became a sort of social outcaste in their own home. They were either sent permanently to holy places like Kashi and Gaya to live a life of extreme denial at the charity houses funded by temples or allowed to stay at home and perform menial jobs for a lifetime. Left to a single meal of vegetables and rice a day, they were banned from entering the common kitchen or touching the food prepared there. They were not allowed to attend any sort of auspicious social rituals and were left to die prematurely, in most cases out of depression and malnutrition. Those women who survived all these, usually became the strong representatives of patriarchy and tortured the young married women of the families in all their capacities.

### **Hungry girls of Bengali literature**

It was none other than Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, who had known the village life of the economically as well as socially marginalised groups of Bengal, to be representing the hungry girls in his novels and stories. The most detailed representation among them was that of Durga in *Pather Panchali*, where Durga was an adolescent girl growing up in poverty and denial in a remote village of Bangaon in formerly undivided Bengal. Although Durga was by caste a Brahmin, and thus socially in a higher rank, her father's unstable economic conditions had pushed the entire family of four to a precarious position. Left to a meagre meal, Durga foraged through the wild bushes and groves of the village to pick ripe or raw mangoes, coconuts, mushrooms, berries, roots and other humble edible items that helped her mother cook at least one square meal per day. But Durga was severely criticised by her mother for being such a gluttonous girl who spent the entire day outside home, unlike other girls of her village who performed *brata katha* instead, to get a good husband and a stable economic status **in near future**. It is through the contrasting treatment between Durga and her brother Apu, that we see the discriminatory behaviour in the society at large when it comes to gender. While Apu was getting the first pick of the humble food and was allowed to go to school, Durga was advised to behave and control her wayward tendencies in search of food and stay at home. She was even chastised for going to the neighbours for the meals served after a puja, while Apu, her brother, was encouraged to do so.

In the story *Puimacha* of Bandyopadhyay, we follow the short life span of Khenti, another adolescent girl, who was in a similar economic condition. But Khenti was much more docile. All she desired was just a second helping of a dish made of *pui shaak*, a very common vegetable growing wild or cultivated, eaten by the humble village folk of Bengal. But her mother tried to train her into the ways of the world and denied her that small object of greed, in the apprehension that her hunger would be severely criticised in her future in -law's house. Khenti died out of mistreatment, including denial of sufficient food, at her in-law's shortly after marriage, but the mother did not complain, neither did her two younger daughters. Khenti remained an example for them not to follow. In *Nabankur* (1954), a novel by Sulekha Sanyal, we met Chhobi, who expressed her hunger to the elderly women of her family. Her "I want more" moment came when she found her brothers and male cousins being given generous second helpings of food by the grandmother while she was denied on the ground that the girls should train their appetite. But afterwards, we found Chhobi growing up and being vocal on other

social issues and her physical hunger being transformed into a hunger for equal rights and empowerment for women. Her fight for an equal amount of food remained forgotten and set aside as irrelevant by the author. It is interesting to note that, her expression of hunger, which is so invisible in our society, had a metaphoric role to signify that in future, she was going to be a rebel.

### **The ghostly voices as an important document of social injustice**

However, the hungry girls make their existence known in a rather unlikely place: in the world of ghost stories. The ghosts are there to remind us that our past deeds would leave a shadow to our presence, and ghosts lurk from behind that shadow to demand explanation of the injustice done to them. In *The Book of Indian Ghosts* (2021), Riksundar Banerjee says, “The oppression and pain of women throughout centuries have engendered one of the largest corpuses of ghost stories. It explains why there are so many female ghosts in both literature and films. Throughout history, in all cultures, women have been deprived, tortured and victimised. Other than the patriarchy, social barriers have also heavily affected women....Whether it is the Sankhchunni or the Chiroguni-these blood-curdling ghosts seek revenge on behalf of women who were terrorised when they were alive”. In fact, our past never truly leaves us. According to Kathleen Brogan (1998), ghosts are present in the folklore of every culture. They provide a means “to identify and revise the cultural past” and a way to “give body to memory”. Ghosts and spirits are quite extensively used in ghost stories to restore and empower the marginalised voices in the telling of their stories.

### **The world of female ghosts in Bengal**

The Bengali imagination is at its best when it portrays ghosts. In fact, for the Bengali people, the world of the living is crisscrossed with the world of the dead in a mostly stable relationship, with a respectful distance between the parties. Thus, there is a ghost for every random *banyan* or *sheora* tree, a ghostly community in every deserted house or village, and some lonely ghosts would be found lurking in the dark corners of the house. These ghosts are usually mischievous, on the border of evil, but they seldom get success in actually killing a human. These ghosts are there to fulfil their unfinished business in life, or to satisfy their unsatiated hunger of various sorts in human life. So, it would not be hard to imagine that most of the ghosts are either females, hankering either after food, or marital bliss; or from the marginalised classes, snatching away food from the unsuspecting travellers. There is a *Saakchunni* who is a ghost of a woman who was denied of marital bliss, who probably also died childless. There is a *Petni*, usually the unhappy ghost of an unmarried woman, who continuously wails from some far corner of a jungle. There is a *daakini* who attacks mostly men and children. In fact, there is a ghost for every category of unhappy women. The presence of all these vengeful female ghosts is the living proof that the society remains very much aware of women living an unsatisfactory life as a result of the systematic denial of their basic rights while they were living.

### **Female ghosts in Bengali literature**

Although the denial of women from the worldly happiness resulted in malnutrition and early death, the female ghosts in literature seem powerful and healthy. Moreover, in the other world they acquire a sort of release from the rigorous rules imposed upon them, and sometimes develop a taste for the food which was a taboo for them in life. It seems as if the authors try to find a poetic justice to the female ghosts through fictional representations. Naakeshwari was a *petni* in *Konkaboti* of Troilokyanath Mukhopadhyay who had an elaborate plan to eat the flesh of humans. She and her aunt, another *petni*, went a long way to actualise their plan to eat alive Khetu, the male protagonist of the novel. There was a rather vivid, yet funny detail of recipes made out of different parts of the human body for the ghostly kitchen. The widowed pishima's ghost in Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay's *Goynar Baksho* wanted to taste fish, which was completely denied to her from the age of twelve, after early widowhood. There are also greedy and hungry *petnis* and *saakchunnis* in many ghost stories who

try to snatch fish from the lone fishermen returning home late at night, or lonely women cooking in their kitchen. In fact, there is a type of female ghost who is called *Mechho-petni*, who look only for fish to eat. There are the *Rakshashi* (man-eating ogres) women in all sorts of fairy tales as well, who have a particular taste for the flesh and blood of young boys. To fulfil this desire, they assume the disguise of a beautiful woman and lure the king to marry them, so that they have an easy access to the unprotected inner quarters of a royal household.

In a rather harmless version of the hungry female ghosts, in Lila Majumdar's short story *Laxmi*, there was a group of schoolgirls who created a significant mess in the kitchen of a girls' hostel, by stealing food, spoiling milk, destroying the pickles and doing all other havoc. Later it was learnt that they were the ghosts of a group of unruly girls living in a hostel specifically meant for correction of naughty girls, who died in a sudden flood which swept away the hostel entirely. It appears that they were having a great time now that they were free from their corporeal body and also from human rules. They seemed to defy all human rules imposed particularly upon young girls, and tried to help out rebellious girls like Laxmi herself who were punished because of rule-breaking.

## Conclusion

Avery Gordon (1997) sees haunting as a sign of the past whose appearance in the present calls for transformation. To her, "ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life". Obviously, ghosts consist of a very important part of our social conscience. The hungry girls of society could not show their presence out loud to the world. But once liberated in death, they challenged the entire system by eating everything they like, being wicked and evil, killing men and at times sucking their blood as well. The common fear of the society at this broad social injustice done to women as well as other marginalised class, is thus given a body. In the life beyond death, these social and economic outcasts pose a threat to the peace and prosperity of the happy, privileged people.

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