



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM

On invisibilised VIOLENCE

During a recent class discussion on violence against women (and girl children) portrayed in South Asian literature, talk turned to the spectacularised nature of violence seen in literary texts.

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From Sadat Hasan Manto’s visceral depiction of physical trauma inflicted upon women’s bodies in Partition-era India to Bapsi Sidhwa’s offhand, normalised mention of sexual violence against women in their homes and outside, to the explicit, haunting rape of the central character in Shahidul Zahir’s work on 1971, violence against women and girls is often portrayed in classic South Asian literary texts through a spectacularised, gratuitous, and one might even say, indulgent lens. Such renderings of explicit violence can be linked with one of colonisation’s foundational traits itself—the colonial mission at its core is an enterprise to conquer land. Consequently, theorists of postcolonial studies draw an unavoidable parallel between women and land as both embody the colonial desire to possess, exploit, dominate, violate, and own. Perhaps it is this land/women analogisation that leads to such portrayals in literature—of ripping away of skin, of vicious rapes, of molestation, of battered and bruised bodies. Yet there are other, more quotidian forms of violence inflicted upon women

and girls and literary representations of such violence—fleshly and bodily—deserve close inspection. As a reader of this genre of literature, I cannot help but find myself drawn more to the erasures and absences of minoritised, everyday acts of violence. Without a doubt, the spectacle of gendered violence—such as Momena’s raped body being discovered by her brother in Zahir’s work—serves a specific, important purpose. But increasingly, the sort of violence that does not get the spectacularised treatment, that hides in between lines, that is withheld, that gets the ambiguous treatment and is left to the imagination—intrigues me more. Those effacements compel me to ask: What does such absence of everyday violence in literary representation tell us about violence against women in general? Take, for instance, the violence of debilitating, all-consuming hunger and how it disproportionately affects women, especially when we consider the nexus among patriarchy, the gendered notion of shame and self-sacrifice, and caregiving. Abu Ishaque’s *Surjo Dighal Bari* (1955), set in the immediate

aftermath of the 1943 Bengal famine, painstakingly and evocatively captures the horrors of hunger through the protagonist Jaigun. That Jaigun refuses to bow down to the strictures of purdah after the death of her husband undoubtedly marks her as a resilient, uncompromising female figure. Yet, Jaigun chooses to work because she refuses to let her children go hungry, establishing her as someone who abides by the sanctioned, accepted codes of Bengali motherhood. A different but notable treatment of hunger from the female perspective can be seen in Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay’s *Pather Panchali* (1929) through the adolescent Durga. One perhaps recalls Satyajit Ray’s film version depicting a white sari clad Durga rummaging through wild bushes searching for fresh fruit, roots, and practically anything that is edible to help her mother cook one decent meal for the poverty-stricken family. Durga however, is routinely shamed by her mother for wanting more food whereas Apu, her brother, in line with our conventions, gets the first pick of food. Here we must recall

another powerful visual medium, the Bangladeshi cartoon *Meena* and its compelling critique of such gendered food inequalities within the household where the titular Meena gets a single slice of a mango whereas her brother Raju gets the rest of it. Importantly, it is Raju who expresses his delight in the mango, commenting “aamta khub-e moja”, not Meena. The episode ends with the family serving two identical plates to their children as the boy child experiences a day of household work from the perspective of his sister. In other words, fictional women experience hunger much in the same way women in real lives do—in private and in silence. Their joy in consuming food or relishing an item is also muted. Too often, women and girls are caregivers who want to satiate others’ hunger—husbands, men they love, and children. Gendered hunger caused by systemic inequality such as man-made famine or patriarchal practices within the domestic space thus is a form of violence that affects women in both fictional and real worlds. One curious way in which feminine hunger presents itself within our cultural landscape is through female ghosts or petnis. From shakhchunni, dakeeni, mecho petni, and rakkhoshi—female supernatural beings are hungry, and their hunger is often addressed with relish as well as ridicule in our tales. Interestingly, hunger is permissible in the supernatural world—a petni can boldly claim “toke khabo”, making her more comfortable in expressing her desires in contrast to her worldly counterparts. The mecho petni’s craving for fish can easily be interpreted as a commentary of society’s strict food codes imposed on women. Consider, for instance, the widowed ghost in Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay’s *Goynar Baksho* (1993) who wanted to taste fish—an action that bears witness to the complete denial of fish to her from the age of 12 when she became a widow. Rakkhoshi’s all-consuming hunger is code for shame and derision and

residing in post-9/11 New York—respectively have a complexity about Ramzan. Both characters grapple with the ethics and politics of the practice, sometimes introspectively and other times with other characters including a girlfriend who is also Muslim. Yet, neither novelist explores the Muslim women’s relationship to Ramadan—an effacement that is applicable to this genre of fiction itself which is rather male-centric. A curious case, considering 9/11 altered the image of the Muslim women within the Western imagination rather irrevocably—the ripple effects of which are still ongoing in the present moment. Culturally too, Ramadan becomes a month about food. In affluent and affluent adjacent households around us, women become engulfed by the elaborate making of the iftar, their days structured around the (still) three meals they must provide for their families, often keeping them away from the central purpose of Ramadan—ibadat itself. Spatially too, women’s relationship with food structures her movement within the domestic realm and determines her role within the family ecosystem. In classic Bengali fiction, the kitchen is a central site for conflict and community bonding. One here might recall the grandfather figure from Sunil Ganguly’s *Purbo Poschim* (1989) who made the women make an endless array of items for each meal but himself only ate plain rice with ghee and perhaps one other item. When asked why he insists on being served so many items if he only consumes the simplest of meals, he responds that if the patriarch eats a simple meal, women will simplify the cooking process and will spend their free time in “kutkachali”. An important scene that solidifies the argument this essay is trying to make—that food and its making and consumption is deeply patriarchal and men dictate much of women’s relationship with it. Of course, the kitchen can also be an empowering space for women—a domain where she finds kinship and can exercise control

A further appearance of gendered food ethics is noticeable in novels about 9/11. In at least two prominent novels in the subgenre, fasting during Ramzan is portrayed with much fanfare but from the male perspective. In both *The Submission* (2011) by Amy Waldman and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) by Mohsin Hamid, the protagonists Mo and Changez—diasporic subjects residing in post-9/11 New York—respectively have a complexity about Ramzan.

women whose loved ones die are often derogatorily termed rakkhoshi—she who eats it all, lives included. It appears that only in death can women and their ghostly alter egos express hunger or fondness for food as their living, corporeal beings are expected to serve, starve or both. A further appearance of gendered food ethics is noticeable in novels about 9/11. In at least two prominent novels in the subgenre, fasting during Ramzan is portrayed with much fanfare but from the male perspective. In both *The Submission* (2011) by Amy Waldman and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) by Mohsin Hamid, the protagonists Mo and Changez—diasporic subjects

and bring joy to herself and her loved ones. Ultimately, much in the same way in which what women can or cannot wear is socially dictated, what women consume, at which stages of their lives, in what way is also designed and dictated by society, albeit in a more muted, invisibilised way. These underrepresented forms of violence thus deserve deeper engagement from us. Nazia Manzoor teaches English at North South University. She is also Editor, Star Books and Literature. Reach her at nazia.manzoor@gmail.com.

POETRY

Remnants of a burning home

MALIHA TRIBHU

I fell asleep to the chatters of cicadas on a quiet summer night; Half indulged in a delirium, half a dreamless sleep—with an unutterable desire clung to my chest like a safety-pillow, Let the nightmare end, let me sleep till then. And yet, I woke up at the crackling noise of a burning home, The fire, reaching up to the ceiling with no escape doors left to carry myself out. A home that I had once thought to be my own Suddenly caught fire that night—and I packed no bags And left no goodbye letters at the dining table, Only a handful of freshly-cut apples and a jar full of my father’s favorite cookies, A bread with strawberry jam spread on it And a last cup of tea in my father’s big-old ceramic mug—I am sorry, for I can no longer carry on standing under the roof that you set on fire, pretending to be your perfect daughter Who doesn’t scream at the sight of a waking nightmare, I can no longer carry on being in a burning home, And consider myself as grateful for my failing health and a wrecked heart.



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

I am sorry, but I have forgotten what it feels like to be a daughter Without having to prove my worth for it every once in a while, And now I am an empty glass-jar that has nothing left to offer—I am sorry, For I do not have the strength in me to burn any longer Just to keep you warm. So, I fell back into a deep, dreamless

sleep, To the sounds of stars falling over my head Like bullets crashing over my wearisome bones, Like flocks of migrating herons quietly dropping dead, And after the end of an unfathomable winter, when I finally awake—the house was no longer burning. There was nothing left to burn, nor to

mend. The tea has gone cold, the apples all rotten—the cookies eaten by fungus, And the fungus spreading over my lungs. I woke up to the sound of silence hovering over my room, with the sunlight splashing over my face and the dragonflies fluttering over the blues. Another winter has made its way to

this home now—in between my crushed bones, like a wretched memory of an unwanted childhood. And I cannot tell if I have awakened from a long, lost dream Or am I still dreaming of a yet-to-be-found life? I cannot decide if the war is over yet, and whether the fire has finally been put out. I can no longer tell the difference between all the before and afters of survival. And whether I am safe once and for all without catching up to a burning home again. All that I can truly think of is this—what about after all this survival? What do I do with all this grief? Where do I put it? Where do I bury it? Tell me, father, what do I do with the memories of once-a-burning home clung to my throat? Where shall I bury the remnants of a home that no longer exists? Where shall I bury myself? Maliha Tribhu is currently an undergraduate majoring in Marketing at the University of Dhaka. During her leisure hours, she likes to talk to moths and plants and soak under the winter sun.