

# Mapping the Twin Metaphors of “Food and Hunger” in Manjima Chatterjee

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## Abstract

In today's world, billions of people regularly face the challenge of not getting enough food to survive. According to the experts in the field, the issue at hand is not a deficiency in production or a rise in population; rather, it is a political-economic system that is motivated by profit. Both of Manjima Chatterjee's plays, *The Mountain of Bones* and *Two Men on a Tree*, which she chooses to collectively refer to as "Two Plays on Hunger," make clear the historical connection between the abundance of food, the waste of food, and profit-driven capitalist policies that result in hunger. Both of these plays are titled "Two Plays on Hunger."

**Keywords:** Indian women Theatre, Myth, Food, Hunger, War, Waste

Manjima Chatterjee, a contemporary Indian dramatist, drama explorer, teacher, and occasional writer, lives in Noida with her husband and two children. Manjima studied sociology at DSE and English at St Stefan's College, Delhi University. Drama in Education was her postgraduate degree. T.E.S.T. (Theatre for Education and Social Transformation). Maya Krishna Rao (born 1953), an Indian theatrical artist, stand-up comedian, social activist, and Sangeet Natak Academy Award winner, taught her process drama (2010). Maya Krishna Rao created and taught a postgraduate diploma programme, TEST, at Shiv Nadar University in Delhi, a first in India. Manjima Chatterjee, the arts programme leader at Shiv Nadar School in Noida, has spent her life working with youngsters in drama. Arts Praxis, NYU Steinhardt's arts-in-education journal, *Nation*, *Nationalism and the Public Sphere*, and *The Hindu*, *The Hindu Business Line*, *Education World*, and *Hindustan Times* have published her work.

She told Medha Dutta Yadav of *The Hindu* magazine that she was raised on Shakespeare, Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, Tom Stoppard, Peter Shaffer, and Caryl Churchill. She admired Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Elkunchwar. She was also influenced by drama teacher and educationist Dorothy Heathcote, who pioneered "mantle of the expert" and "teacher-in-role" learning techniques. She realised drama's force when watching Badal Sircar's *Michhil* (*The Procession*).

After Rage's Writers' Bloc Workshops and Royal Court Theatre's encouragement, she started writing for the stage. Since then, her plays have been shortlisted and acclaimed in playwriting competitions. *Limbo* was a 2010 *Hindu Metro Plus* Playwright Award finalist. The BBC International Radio Playwriting Competition complimented her 2011 play *The Baby Shower* and shortlisted her 2012 play *Two Men on a Tree*. After being shortlisted again for the BBC International Radio Playwriting Competition, she won *The Hindu Metro Plus* Playwright Award for *The Mountain of Bones* in 2013. Mr. Ramanathan, part of the International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC), wrote:

“Set as a modern day parable, the play draws from peasant values and folk humour to create a vivid political critique. A solid play, that gives a sense of Manjima Chatterjee’s prowess as a playwright.”

(Hindu)

Her book *Two Plays on Hunger* was printed by Dhauli Press in 2018 and her award-winning play *The Mountain of Bones* was published in Shirley Huston-2019 Findley's anthology *Creating a Profession: Disparate Voices of Indian Women Playwrights*.

#### The Mountain of Bones: A Modern Day Parable

AD 2 They’ll be stunned, they’ll be shocked, they’ll be horrified!

AD 1 Horrified? I should hope not!

AD 2 Why not?

AD 1 Is it civilized? To evoke horror? To seek it?

AD 2 My dear chap! It’s the very basis of civilization.

If there was nothing to be horrified of, why, do you think civil society would exist? (12)

Before analysing *The Mountain of Bones*, an incredible journey through Bengal's famine history and folk culture, one of the most comprehensive and encyclopaedic World War II sagas, and the play's geopolitical and socio-cultural background must be ascertained, though not in detail, to prove my point that corruption, capitalism, and imperialism caused hunger and food in the play. The fifty-one page literary masterpiece *The Mountain of Bones* opens in the backdrop of the 1943 Bengal famine and World War II.

The Bengal famine of 1943 occurred in British India's Bengal area (now Bangladesh, West Bengal, and eastern India). Out of a population of 60.3 million, an estimated 2.1–3 million people died of malnutrition, malaria, and other diseases. Historians claim colonial practices during World War II aggravated the disaster. The Bengal famine of 1943, which killed up to three million people, was not caused by drought but rather by Winston Churchill's "total policy failure" as British Prime Minister. Large-scale natural disasters in south-western Bengal were among the more immediate causes (a cyclone, tidal waves and flooding).

The play's title, *The Mountain of Bones*, is taken from an artwork in Sri Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's collection of Bengali folk stories, *Thakurmar Jhuli*. In the book's acknowledgment; Manjima Chatterjee provides an interesting story about the source of inspiration for these two plays. She says the inspiration for these plays came to her in the summer of 2011 while reading P. Sainath's brilliant and heartbreaking series of essays about the plight of farmers in rural India.

India's new development paradigm and neoliberal repression are terrifyingly shown in *The Mountain of Bones*. The modern fantasy drama uses peasant idealism and folk black humour to make a powerful political statement. The performance takes place in the Flooded Tree Area and the Old Woman's Village,

where all the houses are desolate. — a village in which an old woman is telling a young girl a strange fable; a flooded area where a man stranded atop a tree with a young boy awaits rescue; and another where the whole theatre of State machinery, bureaucracy, well meaning Communists, yes- men and the large, faceless entity called the ‘ The Hungry Crowd’ plays out. There are no speeches, and truths are cloaked in the exaggeratedly ridiculous. The fields are utterly devoid of vegetation. There are no people in the markets. The "war machine's" devastation of the invisible hungry audience continues throughout it all The Mountain of Bones is a grim commentary on the attitude to food, the deprivation of which is not so much a result of depleted resources as is a combination of misguided policies and misplaced priorities.

Manjima paints a vivid picture, through the words of the Old Woman:

But there is nothing left to see here, is there? What shall I see? There is no one, no one. The houses are empty. The fields, empty. The markets, all empty. Nothing remains but these walls pointlessly popping up the skeletons of this village. This village is dead, girl. Dead. Do you hear? Get away from here! Go! (pg 7)

The depiction of the” Hungry Crowd” at the start of the play indicates not just their poverty, but also their subhuman existence.

“As she speaks, the Hungry Crowd assembles in the CPZ. They enter, walking in the huddle, a uniform moan on their lips, so that it sounds more like an animal crying than crowd sounds. The Leader enters, speaking into a horn speaker. On cue, the moaning reduces or increases, but does not go away entirely ...” (pg. 8, 9)

The hungry crowd is barely fed enough “gruel”, and as the leader scoops out gruel in their bowls, their moaning also rises. Agitated leader, pushing the Hungry Crowd back shouts;

LEADER : Done? Always hungry, you lot! What do you think, just clap your hands together and food will appear? You have to work for it! Now get back to it! Don’t you know war is going on? I’ll blow my whistle for the next mealtime! (pg 9)

hunger, but also spiritual hunger.

Although hunger had long been deeply carved into the lives of Indian subjects, it is its politicization that gave the experience a new meaning and a profound political charge claims, James Vemon in his book *Hunger :A Modern History* (2009):

“Hunger certainly hurt, but it hurt all the more when it was understood to be a result of misgovernment rather than the unavoidable consequence of natural or providential law... Instead hunger became the basis for political tactics and critiques that expose the claims of the modern state to care for its subjects as founded upon an act of original violence capable of reducing them to what Agamben calls "bare life".” (page 44)

This “bare life” is embodied in the “Hungry Crowd” people's cries go unnoticed; they lose trust in the value system and are tempted to do things that we typically condemn. Poverty and hunger have negative consequences not just for the physical body but also for the soul. The constant barrage of exploitation has a harrowing effect on the hungry crowd's oppressed minds. Hunger has is used as a weapon against the enemy as well as the crowd, to be able to control them. Jogi Dakat tries to incite a sense of revolt and revolution in the Hungry Crowd but fails miserably; as they are too hungry –to the point of being dead – to be roused or even think about revolution to “take away” away what is rightfully theirs. Jogi gives up hopes on them in the end declaring “they can’t be roused with empty bellies.

The broad socio-political and historical relevance of hunger has been addressed in Manjima's play that depicts the move from seeing hunger as an individual problem to seeing it as a political issue, as well as the belief that the impoverished and underfed are no longer simply idle, but victims of circumstances beyond their control. While *The Mountain of Bones* is an evident condemnation of capitalism's exploitation, consumerism, and brutality, its profit incentive cannot be denied. The entire set up of the play depicts the poverty of the afflicted. Hunger, famine, floods, violence, dread, oppression, and revolution are among topics that *The Mountain of Bones* explores to attack through satirical critique on the handling of the disaster by the government officials.

### **Two men on a Tree**

*Two Men on a Tree* is a short drama that was initially intended to be developed as a two-act radio play. The first act begins against the backdrop of a tropical hurricane wreaking destruction, with howling winds uprooting trees and ripping off metal roofs and tossing them about. Heavy objects collided with wooden and clay structures. Heavy rain falls. Individuals yell in confusion and terror as the river surges through, destroying the barricades and inundating the entire region. In the midst of this cyclone, a radio transmission carries the news that the” Nazis reportedly losing ground...”comes “like manna...”

In the beginning of the play, there is a man who is stranded on a tree in a place that is flooded. Due to the low level of light, all that can be made out of the other person is their silhouette.

The setting and the entire sequence have striking parallels with the two men caught on a tree in that play in Manjima Chatterjee's earlier drama, *The Mountain of Bones*, in which a man and a boy struggle to survive the rising floods below them while perched high on a tree branch. In that play, the setting and the entire sequence have striking obvious similarities with the two men caught on a tree.

Nevertheless, after three awful days during which he waited for rescue without receiving any food or aid, the boy began to lose hope and began to cry and is reminded by the Man, “We don’t live in the jungle. We live in society. People look after each other. They care about each other. You’ll see!” His assurances, however, do not accord with the radio news that can be heard in the background before it goes off the air. The final piece of news that is transmitted by the buzzing radio, which states, “...situation is now critical...two guys stuck on a tree...current in the Damodar is too strong for rescue,” creates a more ominous picture and foreshadows the impending disaster. Despite this, the two males continue to cling to the faintest shred of hope.

The men are soaked, famished, damp, cold, and feverish, and may be hallucinating as a result of their conditions. They are starving, so they have no recourse but to consume the leaves. The two of them have conversations that are riddled with uncertainty and incoherence. They engage in some meaningful

conversation in an effort to maintain their equilibrium, but this interaction doesn't disclose much about either of them, and it just serves to make the boy's situation more mysterious. The boy seems to have completely lost it as he drifts in and out of some daydream while singing some folksong.

Man reprimands Boy to bring him back to reality. He claims there are no Tepantar greens; the only thing seen for kilometres in either way is water! Boy should cease concocting all sorts of absurd tales in his brain. Boy should stop imagining all sorts of crazy stories in his head. The man tries to bring him back to a reasonable conversation by questioning him about the circumstances that led him to the tree branch. The boy is momentarily relieved of his dismal situation and recalls that he was in school, probably studying the subject he enjoys most, mathematics, when it suddenly flooded. While his teacher, " ... He's dead now. Mukhujebabu. He couldn't swim. (Suddenly laughs) How he was jumping, flailing about in water, his dhoti at his nose! I couldn't stop laughing, and laughing..." While he stood watching first on the desk and then on the cupboard, when the water level rose, he was crouching, waiting for his teacher to drown.

The sun rising the next day brings about some optimism, and the fact that the rain ceased falling the day before gives rise to this hope. We see a glimmer of hope for their survival in the jubilation of the boy as he applauds and jumps in response to the guy taking off his clothes and putting them out to dry. The Boy rejoices; "A lungi on a tree! A tree wearing a lungi! Ha! Ha! That's funny!" The man finds it peculiar that Boy just witnessed his teacher drown when he had the opportunity to save him. The Boy was so innocent that he simply answered because, "He looked at me, and then smiled. And then he did his flip flop thing. He never asked me to save him." further he adds that, " ...Ma says I should only help people when they ask for help." This makes him think of his mother, and he sobs uncontrollably.

During the course of their conversation, it comes to light that the young boy's name is Bulu, and that the adult man is, in fact, his biological father. The boy's mother and he were left behind by their biological father when he was born because his father was already married to another woman and had a daughter by her. After his father abandoned the family, his mother was forced into a position where the only way to secure their continued existence was for her to engage in prostitution.

The boy in the current play Two Men on a Tree tells the man that the last time he ate to his heart's content from Majumdar Babu's dustbin. He relates the horrifying story of a fight he had with a dog named Bailey over the stale rice that Majumdar Babu tossed into the street. When Mukhujebabu had his son's rice ceremony and he invited the entire village to the feast. He consumed the rice that had been discarded for their dog, Bagha. The boy had to steal it from the dog in order to eat.

Man when was the last time you ate, Bulu.?

Boy Last week when Mukherjee Babu had his son's rice ceremony, they fed the entire village. I was hungry after that, too. So I took some rice from the extra threw out.

Man They threw away rice? I was right to loot them, then!

Boy they threw it out for Bagha the dog. He showed me his teeth, you know. But I showed him mine right back.

(PG 27)

## Conclusion

The government officials throughout history, both men and women have struggled to achieve attainable goals in the face of narrow-minded societies, and authors have frequently used this theme to develop stories about characters that face challenges and are sometimes unable to satisfy or overcome the stigma that is attached to them. This incapacity to rise beyond prejudice is sometimes portrayed with the metaphor of hunger; individuals not only experience physical hunger, but also spiritual hunger.

Although hunger had long been deeply carved into the lives of Indian subjects, it is its politicization that gave the experience a new meaning and a profound political charge claims, James Vernon in his book *Hunger: A Modern History* (2009):

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