

## Politics of Starvation: Masculinity, Hunger, and Survival in Hamsun's *Hunger* and Müller's *The Hunger Angel*

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines the representation of starvation and its impact on masculine identity in Knut Hamsun's Hunger (1890) and Herta Müller's The Hunger Angel (2009). Both novels depict extreme deprivation, yet they approach hunger through distinct mechanisms: Hamsun internalises hunger as a psychological and existential crisis, while Müller situates it within a politically enforced system of totalitarian control. By analysing how male protagonists navigate bodily weakness, pride, and survival, this study demonstrates that masculinity is neither stable nor universal; rather, it is a performative and contingent construct, shaped by social, cultural, and political pressures. Employing interdisciplinary frameworks, including gender performativity theory, trauma studies, and socio-political critiques of the body, the paper explores how hunger destabilises autonomy, erodes dignity, and reshapes male subjectivity. Comparative analysis reveals that while Hamsun emphasises self-directed struggle and the internal erosion of identity, Müller highlights externally imposed deprivation and systemic attempts to regulate both body and mind. Together, these texts illustrate adaptive strategies of endurance, negotiation, and identity reconstruction. The study contributes to literary scholarship by highlighting intersections of hunger, gender, and power, and suggests directions for further research on starvation narratives across cultures and genders.*

**Keywords:** starvation, masculinity, hunger, trauma, identity

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## 1. Introduction

In *Hunger*, the unnamed narrator's starvation inflicts not only physical suffering but also a distortion of perception; as his senses falter, "the body is atomised and split apart", and individual limbs feel like foreign objects he must "carry" rather than inhabit (Langås 16). Ordinary scenes in Kristiania take on a surreal, disjointed quality as his "totally fragmented bodily experience" shapes the city around him (Langås 20). Hamsun's prose immerses readers in a consciousness under siege in which hunger makes the modern city feel both oppressive and alien. As Langås argues, the novel's urban environment and the protagonist's bodily deprivation are intertwined, revealing a male subject negotiating masculine norms under material precarity; the hero must "deal with a body falling apart," and his humiliation in the city threatens to feminise him, exposing the instability of his gendered position (Langås 20).

By contrast, *The Hunger Angel* frames hunger not as self-inflicted or accidental but as imposed by a totalitarian regime through forced labour camps, deprivation, and slow violence. In this context, hunger functions as an instrument of political control, disciplining bodies, eroding individuality, and dismantling identities. Müller depicts hunger as an invasive presence that penetrates thought and circulates through the body. Even when food is available, it offers no relief, as the monotonous cabbage soup sustains life only by weakening the body and destabilising the mind. Under such conditions, starvation reduces people to something almost object-like, stripping away gender, identity, and humanity.

Although each novel has inspired extensive critical attention on its own, whether focused on Hamsun's exploration of modernist psychology and alienation or Müller's engagement with trauma, memory, and the politics of dehumanisation, an important gap remains. Few scholars consider the two works together through a gender based lens on starvation, asking how severe hunger unsettles or reshapes masculine identity. This absence is striking, since both narratives follow male characters whose bodies and minds are pushed to the limits by hunger, albeit within sharply contrasting social and political contexts.

This study contends that although *Hunger* (1890) and *The Hunger Angel* (2009) both depict male encounters with starvation, they present deprivation through different means. Hamsun's novel turns hunger inward, portraying it as a psychological and existential crisis shaped by life in the city and by wounded pride. Müller's narrative, by contrast, presents hunger as an outward force, a condition deliberately created within a larger system of domination and control. In the former, male self-determination collapses under a scarcity that the protagonist partly creates for himself; in the latter, masculine identity is reshaped by political coercion, turning the effort to stay alive into a negotiation with oppressive power.

Through detailed textual analysis grounded in gender theory, trauma studies, and theories of the political body, this article explores how starvation acts as a testing ground for masculine identity. By placing *Hunger* within the unstable atmosphere of the late nineteenth-century city and *The Hunger Angel* within the system of totalitarian control, the discussion demonstrates how distinct historical settings generate different expressions of male fragility, strength, and self-redefinition. In this way, it presents an account of masculinity

as conditional, enacted, and profoundly shaped by material and political circumstances, especially under the extreme pressures of starvation.

## 2. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative and comparative literary approach that integrates close reading with insights drawn from multiple critical disciplines. Through detailed textual analysis, it investigates how masculine identity is shaped, performed, and unsettled in contexts of hunger and deprivation. Concepts from masculinity studies and gender performativity provide a framework for understanding how male subjectivity responds to physical vulnerability, while trauma theory and socio-political interpretations of the body situate starvation within broader systems of power and historical violence. By examining literary texts from diverse periods alongside one another, the study identifies both enduring patterns and significant shifts in the representation of masculinity, survival, and scarcity. The analysis culminates with *The Hunger Angel*, which functions as a contemporary case study of hunger as a politically enforced and traumatising condition.

## 3. Literature Review

Across literary history, English-language texts have repeatedly linked masculinity, hunger, and survival, using bodily deprivation to question ideals of strength, independence, and endurance. In ancient literature, hunger often serves as a proving ground for heroic masculinity. Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* (c. late 8th century BCE) portray male endurance through prolonged warfare and wandering, where the ability to withstand scarcity confirms heroic resolve. Likewise, biblical narratives such as the Book of Job (c. 6th–4th century BCE) frame hunger as a divinely sanctioned trial, testing masculine faith, patience, and moral steadfastness rather than physical dominance alone.

Medieval literature extends this association by embedding hunger within religious and social hierarchies. In allegorical and devotional works, deprivation becomes a form of moral discipline, while in social critiques such as *Piers Plowman* (c. 1370-1387), hunger exposes structural inequality. Male labouring bodies are shown enduring chronic scarcity, linking masculinity to physical toil, endurance, and submission within feudal systems.

Early modern writing increasingly politicises hunger. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Shakespeare uses food shortages as metaphors for power and governance. In *Coriolanus* (1623), famine unsettles civic stability and challenges martial masculinity, revealing how masculine authority depends on social recognition and material security. The nineteenth century marks a shift toward economic realism. Industrialisation and urban poverty shape literary representations of hunger, particularly in the novels of Charles Dickens (1830s-1860s), where male characters struggle to maintain dignity and moral agency under material deprivation. Modernist literature intensifies this inward focus. Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* (1890) transforms starvation into a psychological and existential condition, presenting masculinity as fragile, internally fractured, and increasingly detached from social ideals of self-mastery.

Contemporary literature situates hunger within explicitly political and traumatic contexts. Post-Second World War narratives foreground systemic deprivation, where masculinity is defined less by control than by adaptability and survival. This trajectory finds a powerful culmination in Herta Müller's *The Hunger Angel* (2009), which depicts politically enforced starvation as a force that reshapes male identity through endurance, memory, and trauma.

#### **4.Theoretical Framework**

Grasping how starvation influences masculine identity in *Hunger* and *The Hunger Angel* calls for an interdisciplinary approach that brings together gender theory, trauma studies, and social and political analyses of the body. Hunger emerges as both a biological necessity and a cultural idea, showing how severe deprivation uncovers the fragile points within conventional understandings of masculinity.

Research shows that extreme hunger can bring about changes in thought, emotion, and behaviour. Severe deprivation often leads to risk-taking, flawed decision-making, and swings between aggression and withdrawal, all of which emerge in the narrator of Hamsun's novel as he wanders through Kristiania. Scholars including Steven Pinker, who writes in *How the Mind Works* that "the mind is a system of organs of computation" shaped by ancestral pressures, and Leda Cosmides, who explains in *The Adapted Mind* that natural selection built "evolved information processing mechanisms" to solve recurring problems of survival and cooperation, argue that human psychology evolved to manage the tension between individual survival needs and the demands of social collaboration in conditions where resources were limited (Pinker X & Cosmides, Tooby, and Barkow xvi). This tension becomes visible in *Hunger* when the central figure rejects offers of help to preserve his sense of independence. Similarly, the prisoners in Müller's labour camp respond to hunger through actions such as storing food, devising strategies, or giving in to exhaustion, behaviours that reflect the demands of harsh social structures. Across both works, hunger forces a constant negotiation between biological needs and culturally shaped expectations of how a man should act.

Judith Butler's idea of gender as something enacted through repeated behaviour offers a productive way to examine the novels. Within this view, masculinity is not a fixed inner quality but something that must be continually performed and affirmed by society. The main character in Hamsun's work embodies this dynamic quality. His sense of pride and his determination to depend on himself signal a masculine identity, yet both traits become unstable when hunger begins to overwhelm him. Scholars such as Raewyn Connell observe that dominant forms of masculinity depend on independence, physical capability, and the capacity to support oneself and others, such that they are "vulnerable when the performance cannot be sustained" and thus weaken quickly in situations marked by scarcity (Connell 54). In Müller's narrative, Leo's understanding of himself as a man is constantly reshaped. Life in the labour camp imposes strict physical and mental limits that undermine conventional expectations of male behaviour and force a reconsideration of what strength and persistence can mean. Critic Marina Warner remarks that works of this kind portray masculinity as uncertain

and continually renegotiated, especially when the body is no longer fully under one's control, a view that clarifies the exposure of male identity to both self-inflicted and externally enforced hunger.

Trauma theory shows that sustained hunger can alter patterns of thought, emotion, and self-understanding. Scholars such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra argue that severe deprivation leaves a lasting psychological mark, with the body acting as a living archive of the traumatic event. In Müller, the figure known as the hunger angel appears as a ghostly reminder of physical pain and mental subjugation and reveals the tight connection between outside forces of control and the vulnerability absorbed within the self. In Hamsun, the narrator is not subjected to political coercion. He undergoes a similar absorption of hunger-induced trauma as his body becomes the ground on which an existential breakdown unfolds.

Finally, socio-political approaches situate hunger within wider structures of domination. Drawing on Michel Foucault's analysis in *Discipline and Punish*, Müller's camp exemplifies a disciplinary environment in which power operates directly upon the body, producing what Foucault describes as a form of life "that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault 136). Hunger here becomes a deliberate mechanism for generating compliance and docility. In contrast, Hamsun's urban setting exposes the volatile conditions of capitalist modernity, where hunger stems from economic marginality rather than overt state coercion. Feminist materialist perspectives further illuminate these dynamics. Carol Adams's observation that "the body becomes a special focus for women's struggle for freedom" emphasises how embodiment functions as a terrain where power is both exercised and resisted across the two narratives (Adams 163).

These interdisciplinary perspectives offer a framework for analysing the novels, showing how starvation unsettles established notions of masculinity while also bringing to light the adaptive strategies, resilience, and vulnerabilities that emerge across varying historical and political settings.

### **5. Case Study 1: *Hunger* by Knut Hamsun**

Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* offers an exploration of starvation as both a physical ordeal and a psychological dissolution, positioning the male body and mind as sites where identity and social norms are negotiated. From the opening pages, hunger acts not merely as a lack of sustenance but as a force fracturing perception, destabilising the narrator's sense of self, and exposing the fragility of masculine autonomy. As Paul Auster observes, hunger becomes "the catalyst... of altered consciousness," producing a state in which the mind seems to "run quietly out of the head and leave it empty," a condition marked by disorientation and the erosion of bodily certainty (Auster 13). Critics often identify the novel as an example of modernist subjectivity, emphasising the internalisation of deprivation and the resulting cognitive and emotional turbulence. Hamsun's work renders the physical and psychological effects of hunger inseparable, dramatising how scarcity reshapes perception and agency.

In *Hunger*, starvation permeates the narrator's consciousness, and everyday experience becomes distorted. Early in the novel, he is overcome by "a peculiar dizzy sensation" and feels his "whole mind... passing through a transformation, as if something was sliding apart inside" him, signalling the destabilising

cognitive effects of prolonged deprivation (Hamsun 33). Such moments illustrate how hunger erodes rationality, producing the perceptual fissures that modernist critics identify with an emerging psychological realism. This dissolution intensifies during his night in the police cell: the narrator becomes “a prey to the weirdest fantasies,” staring into a darkness that overwhelms him and unsettles the grasp of his surroundings as hunger amplifies sensory distortion and internal anxiety (Hamsun 49). Eventually, he slips into what he calls “the happy delirium of hunger,” revealing how physical starvation functions as a psychic agent that disorganises thought, identity, and emotional coherence (Hamsun 50). Through these episodes, Hamsun dramatises starvation not merely as bodily deprivation but as a psychological and existential crisis.

Critics have noted that Hamsun’s depiction aligns with early modernist concerns about subjectivity under duress. The oscillation between creative energy and collapse mirrors Virginia Woolf’s notion, captured in *Moments of Being*, that extreme experiences pierce the “cotton wool of daily life” and reveal “a token of some real thing behind appearances” (Woolf 72). In *Hunger*, the protagonist’s starvation induces this kind of shock: bodily suffering fractures the everyday surface of experience, exposing a heightened, precarious consciousness. His mental fragmentation is inseparable from his physical deprivation, reinforcing Woolf’s insight that revelation arises where the mind and body are strained to their limits. Thus, starvation becomes not only corporeal but existential and cognitive, stripping the self to its most elemental forms.

Central to the novel is the narrator’s performance of masculinity, grounded in pride, independence, and stoic endurance. Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity illuminates how these traits are not inherent qualities but enacted behaviours, sustained only through continuous self-presentation and cultural recognition. This dynamic is visible each time the narrator rejects help, even when he is physically collapsing from hunger. As Raewyn Connell explains, hegemonic masculinity prizes self-reliance and control, and Hamsun’s protagonist clings to these ideals even as his body betrays him. A moment outside the bakery captures this paradox. The narrator pauses, briefly entertaining the idea of asking for food: “Well, we’re not going to stop here... what if I was to go in now and beg for a bit of bread? It was a passing thought, a hint... and I went on my way... full of irony towards myself” (Hamsun 66). His refusal is both an assertion of masculine autonomy and a gesture that hastens his deterioration. In this way, the novel exposes how performative masculinity can become self-destructive, demanding the maintenance of pride even when survival itself is at stake.

Acts of generosity further complicate the narrator’s efforts to maintain his masculine persona. When he gives away his final coin to a beggar, he endangers his own survival to preserve an image of himself as principled, capable, and morally upright. In Hamsun’s portrayal, social morality becomes inseparable from gendered self-fashioning: even in moments of desperation, the narrator’s choices are shaped by what he believes a proper man should do. Women in the novel, especially Ylajali, appear briefly, and their fleeting presence highlights his emotional distance. Instead of offering connection, they draw attention to his increasing loneliness and to the collapse of the masculine ideals he tries to uphold.

In *Hunger*, death functions less as an immediate threat than as a psychological horizon against which identity is measured. Starvation prompts the narrator to contemplate existential disappearance, a slow internal unravelling that makes him feel, as he puts it, “I was dying helplessly away with open eyes, staring straight up at the ceiling” (Hamsun 81). Scholars in trauma and existential studies, including Cathy Caruth, suggest that prolonged deprivation produces a form of embodied psychic trauma, in which the body itself carries the weight of eroding identity. As Caruth observes, trauma is “the story of a wound that cries out,” a breach that marks not only the psyche but the body’s own attempt to speak what cannot fully be known (Caruth 4). Unlike Müller’s depiction of systemic, politically orchestrated mortality in *The Hunger Angel* (2009), Hamsun’s death is intensely personal, a reflection of internal collapse rather than structural violence. Here, the body becomes both symptom and symbol of disintegration, and the narrator’s starvation-induced dissolution marks the threshold at which his sense of self threatens to vanish.

Recurring motifs reinforce the fragility of masculine identity and the psychological effects of hunger. The narrator’s persistent refusal of aid, even at the cost of survival, reflects the destructive pride that governs his behaviour. Public scavenging illustrates humiliation and alienation, while hallucinations mark the dissolution of cognitive boundaries. Scholars such as Toril Moi emphasise that these motifs collectively dramatise the erosion of selfhood, demonstrating how hunger destabilises autonomy, dignity, and reason in tandem. As Moi notes, feminist criticism reveals how supposedly coherent identities are always shaped by “conflicting material, social, political and ideological factors,” a point that underscores how hunger exposes the instability of the narrator’s sense of self (Moi 10).

Viewed in this light, Hamsun’s *Hunger* presents starvation as a testing ground for masculine identity, exposing the strain between outward performances of autonomy and the body’s inescapable vulnerability. The narrator’s psychological unravelling, shifting moral boundaries, and growing existential fragility reveal how masculinity under extreme deprivation becomes unstable, enacted rather than inherent, and constantly at risk. Through this lens, the novel highlights the entanglement of mind, body, and social expectation, positioning the protagonist’s suffering within wider conversations about identity, gendered self-construction, and the human drive to endure.

## **6. Case Study 2: *The Hunger Angel* by Herta Müller**

Herta Müller’s *The Hunger Angel* portrays starvation as an intentionally imposed condition, transforming deprivation into a mechanism of political authority rather than a personal ordeal. The narrative follows Leo Auberg’s deportation to Soviet labour camps in 1945, where the scarcity of food is deliberately used to regulate prisoners’ bodies, actions, and emotional states. Scholars of trauma and totalitarianism, including Dominick LaCapra, argue that Müller’s depiction demonstrates how state-directed hunger functions simultaneously as bodily assault and psychological coercion, generating what LaCapra identifies as “structural trauma,” harm produced through politically driven forces. As LaCapra observes, this form of trauma arises when individuals

are situated within structures that “make a historical difference by refiguring their contexts,” embedding violence into the conditions of daily life (LaCapra 26).

In contrast to Hamsun, for whom hunger emerges as an inward, existential condition, Müller frames deprivation as the product of an imposed system of control. Food functions as a mechanism of domination: minimal rations and unpredictable allocation compel prisoners to engage in constant bargaining to stay alive. Throughout the text, Müller foregrounds the physical and symbolic weight of insignificant objects, a sandwich, a sliver of ham, whose presence or absence can decide survival. The body that results from this regime aligns with what Marina Warner terms an allegorical body, “a container of fixed meanings,” marked less by personal autonomy than by enduring traces of historical violence (Müller xxii). Hunger, therefore, exceeds the realm of pain. It becomes a didactic instrument, simultaneously punitive and instructive, training the mind as rigorously as it exhausts the flesh and reshaping the body into a locus where power is absorbed, endured, and internalised.

The labour camp enforces a regimented routine, where every action, sleeping arrangements, and physical labour, is subject to surveillance and deprivation. Hunger, Müller suggests, transforms ordinary human instincts into calculated strategies for survival. Prisoners must constantly weigh immediate physiological needs against long-term preservation, a tension that underscores the political, rather than personal, dimensions of deprivation. The “hunger angel”, a spectral presence haunting Leo, becomes a symbol of the systemic intrusion of hunger into consciousness, an embodiment of trauma that continues to exert influence even after release.

Müller’s portrayal of male identity emphasises the conflict between inherited ideals of masculinity and the constraints imposed by external authority. Within the camp, attributes traditionally aligned with hegemonic masculinity, such as independence, physical power, and self-determination, are systematically undermined. Leo remains alive not through self-assertion, but through patience, obedience, and acute awareness of institutional control. Judith Butler’s theory of performativity clarifies this shift, as masculinity in Müller’s text emerges not as dominance but as adaptation. As Butler contends, gender is “a stylized repetition of acts” that generates only “the illusion of an abiding gendered self,” allowing Leo’s regulated conduct to be read as a coerced performance of masculinity shaped by survival rather than choice (Butler 140).

Critics such as Raewyn Connell and Susan Jeffords have emphasised that extreme conditions, war, imprisonment, or systemic deprivation, reveal masculinity as contingent rather than innate. Connell conceptualises masculinity as a historically constructed “configuration of practice”, one that is shaped by social relations and therefore subject to instability under crisis (Connell 160). Jeffords similarly argues that war displaces masculine authority from moral autonomy to questions of “performance”, shifting attention from ideological purpose to endurance within systems of control (Jeffords 18). In *The Hunger Angel*, Leo’s meticulous packing of personal items, careful observation of guards’ routines, and negotiation for scarce resources exemplify a circumscribed but meaningful masculine agency. Unlike Hamsun’s protagonist, who tests pride through self-imposed scarcity, Leo’s masculinity is externally limited, shaped by what Jeffords describes as the “tight constraints” imposed on bodies by institutional power (Jeffords 80). Read through Eric

Hayot's account of literary worlds as "social and conceptual constructs," Leo's survival emerges not as an individual triumph but as a relational practice shaped by collective norms and pressures (Hayot 137). Müller thus depicts masculinity as a socially negotiated performance, in which compliance—reading routines, conserving energy, and accepting rules—functions as an assertion of self no less than defiance.

In Müller's representation of the labour camp, death is not a distant possibility but an ever-present reality embedded in structures of violence. Starvation operates as a central tool of oppression, diminishing not only physical strength but also a sense of personal identity. Recurrent descriptions of emaciated bodies, numbed limbs, and extreme fatigue foreground the corporeal consequences of sustained deprivation. This dynamic can be read through Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, in which modern power works by acting directly on the body to produce what he terms "docile bodies" (*Discipline and Punish* 135). Hunger thus becomes a regulatory force that enforces obedience, renders suffering ordinary, and conditions inmates to accept vulnerability as normal. Within this system, starvation functions simultaneously as practice and symbol: it weakens the body into compliance while inflicting enduring psychological damage.

The figure of the "hunger angel" occupies a pivotal place in the novel's symbolic framework, encapsulating both physical suffering and psychological control. By giving hunger a quasi-personal presence, Müller suggests that deprivation does not end with the cessation of material conditions but continues to inhabit the survivor's inner life. This interpretation resonates with Cathy Caruth's account of trauma as an experience that is not fully contained in the moment of its occurrence, but one that leaves lasting effects on memory and affect. The persistence of the hunger angel after liberation underscores how state-enforced starvation produces enduring psychic and bodily residues, binding survival to a continuing confrontation with trauma.

In *Hunger*, death functions less as an immediate threat than as a psychological horizon against which the narrator measures his eroding sense of self. Starvation leads him toward an awareness of existential disappearance, a gradual inward collapse that culminates in his feeling that he is dying helplessly away with open eyes. Scholars of trauma and existential suffering, including Cathy Caruth, argue that prolonged deprivation generates an embodied form of psychic trauma in which the body itself bears the imprint of loss. As Caruth describes trauma, it is "a wound that cries out," an injury that is not fully assimilated into consciousness and instead registers through persistent bodily and cognitive disturbance (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). Unlike Müller's portrayal of systemic, politically orchestrated mortality in *The Hunger Angel* (2009), Hamsun presents death as an intensely interior process, rooted in personal disintegration rather than structural violence. In this context, the starving body becomes both evidence and symbol of collapse, marking the threshold at which identity threatens to dissolve entirely.

The repeated motifs in the novel illuminate the close relationship between deprivation, identity formation, and strategies of survival. Food and rationing function not only as means of physical sustenance but also as mechanisms of power, demonstrating how hunger operates simultaneously on material and political levels. Material objects, such as the gramophone box Leo employs to order his possessions, symbolise adaptive responses to scarcity and reflect the constrained exercise of personal agency. The pervasive presence of

surveillance intensifies the effects of hunger, exposing the vulnerability of individual autonomy under oppressive conditions. Taken together, these motifs depict hunger in Müller's narrative as a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by bodily experience, psychological endurance, and structural control.

*The Hunger Angel* depicts hunger not as an existential experience but as a condition deliberately produced through social and political mechanisms, standing in stark contrast to Hamsun's individualised portrayal of starvation. Within this context, masculinity emerges as a fluid and situational construct, shaped less by autonomy or self-assertion than by endurance, adaptability, and survival under oppressive regimes. Hunger functions as a multifaceted instrument, serving simultaneously as discipline, instruction, and systemic regulation, and revealing the interconnections between the physical body, psychological life, and state power. By embedding deprivation within specific historical and ideological circumstances, Müller expands literary representations of hunger beyond personal affliction, demonstrating how sustained scarcity transforms masculine identity over time.

## 7. Comparative Analysis

A comparative reading of *Hunger* by Knut Hamsun and *The Hunger Angel* by Herta Müller reveals how starvation operates as a destabilising force that unsettles masculine identity, reconfigures subjectivity, and becomes entangled with broader historical, social, and political contexts. Both texts centre on male figures subjected to extreme deprivation, they diverge markedly in how hunger is produced and experienced, how masculinity is enacted under duress, and how death and survival are confronted.

In *Hunger*, starvation is depicted as a deeply subjective and existential experience. The protagonist's lack of nourishment is not solely the result of external hardship but is intensified by the instability of city life and a refusal of aid rooted in personal pride. This internalisation of hunger corresponds with Harald Næss's description of the novel as an "experiment in living" carried out on the most basic plane, one that examines "how to support the body ... in order that it can support an exceptional mind" (Næss 34). As deprivation intensifies, hunger exceeds the boundaries of physical need and becomes a psychological and ethical challenge. Altered perception, mounting mental tension, and moments of hallucination mark the progression of starvation, illustrating what Næss identifies as the narrative's tension between "crass realism" and the protagonist's "sparkling imagination" (34). Through this dynamic, the body is rendered not only as the locus of pain but also as an active force in the protagonist's existential disintegration.

By contrast, Müller frames hunger as the product of systematic and state-controlled deprivation. In *The Hunger Angel*, scarcity is not accidental but strategically enforced to erode bodily strength and secure obedience within the labour camp. This depiction aligns with Marina Warner's claim that bodies subjected to ideological regimes are transformed into carriers of externally imposed meaning, as she observes that "[t]he female was perceived to be a vehicle of attributed meaning" rather than a self-determining subject (Warner 225). Within Müller's narrative, the emaciated body becomes a surface upon which historical violence is inscribed, as prolonged hunger generates both corporeal weakness and psychological acquiescence. Starvation,

therefore, functions across physical, mental, and ideological dimensions, revealing how authoritarian systems exploit elemental human needs to maintain control. Set against Hamsun's inwardly driven deprivation, Müller's portrayal underscores how externally imposed hunger destabilises identity through coercion, producing vulnerability shaped by political force rather than personal will.

Hamsun's protagonist constructs his sense of masculinity through deliberate performances of independence, pride, and self-denial. His rejection of help, willingness to give despite deprivation, and concern for personal honour reflect an ideal of masculine self-mastery that aligns with Raewyn Connell's theorisation of hegemonic masculinity as a relational and exclusionary practice. As Connell observes, "[m]arginalization is always relative to the authorization of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group", clarifying how the protagonist's masculinity is defined through its distance from socially sanctioned male power (Connell 80–81). In *Hunger*, starvation exposes the instability of this masculine ideal: physical vulnerability undermines the demand for control and autonomy, generating psychic strain and self-punishing conduct. Masculinity thus appears not as a stable identity but as a fragile performance, sustained only through repeated, increasingly costly attempts to assert agency under extreme material constraint.

In Müller, masculinity is reconfigured by conditions of coercion and scarcity, where ideals of strength, independence, and authority lose meaning within the camp. Masculine identity instead takes shape within what Eric Hayot terms a "restricted systematicity" that regulates behaviour and limits individual agency from the outset (Hayot 129). Leo's survival depends on calculated restraint: food management, compliance, and quiet resistance become the primary means through which masculine selfhood is sustained. Endurance replaces dominance as the defining measure of manhood, and agency is exercised through adaptation rather than open assertion. This externally conditioned model of masculinity contrasts with Hamsun's protagonist, whose sense of manhood is rooted in internal will, pride, and refusal to compromise, even when such refusal proves self-destructive.

Hamsun represents death as an inward, psychological experience rather than an externally imposed threat. The narrator encounters mortality as a disturbance within consciousness, registering the approach of death through moments of bodily and mental disintegration, captured in his question, "Had I really begun to die?" (Hamsun 66). Mortality is thus intertwined with perception and self-awareness, unfolding as an erosion of coherence rather than a singular event. Trauma and existential theorists such as Cathy Caruth suggest that crises of this kind are internalised and embodied, producing lasting psychic effects in which the body mediates the experience of impending nonexistence.

In Müller, death is presented as an ever-present and explicitly political condition. Within the labour camp, deprivation and violence are organised mechanisms that render mortality a constant structural reality. Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power clarifies how starvation operates here: regulation of food controls bodies, produces obedience, and habituates prisoners to vulnerability. The figure of the "hunger angel" encapsulates this domination, embodying physical depletion and psychological terror as it permeates inmates' inner lives. Death in Müller is therefore collective and institutional, deployed as governance rather than

experienced as a private existential crisis. This contrasts with Hamsun's portrayal of mortality as an inward, individual struggle rooted in consciousness rather than political coercion.

In *Hunger*, female characters function largely as symbolic contrasts that accentuate the narrator's solitude and expose the instability of his masculine self-image. Their appearances signal emotional distance and relational failure, yet they seldom disrupt his gendered authority. Müller, by contrast, frames male vulnerability within an expansive network of power relations, where political domination, social stratification, and material deprivation reshape gendered subjectivity. While women and children experience hunger differently, their suffering is no less acute, revealing how deprivation reorganises social relations across gender and age. As Marina Warner suggests in her discussion of "allegorical female figures", such representations illuminate how bodily experience becomes a site through which broader social meanings are negotiated (Warner xxii). Read comparatively, Müller demonstrates that hunger unsettles not only endurance but also the relational structures through which gender and power are understood.

Both novels use hunger as a lens through which the fragility and adaptability of masculine identity are revealed. In Hamsun, deprivation is largely self-imposed, allowing the narrative to probe how ideals of pride, independence, and masculine self-presentation fracture when survival is threatened. Müller centres on enforced starvation, demonstrating how institutional violence reshapes masculinity into endurance, strategic obedience, and negotiation. Read together, the texts suggest that starvation destabilises gendered identity itself: qualities associated with masculinity, such as strength, autonomy, and control, are shown to be contingent and vulnerable under extreme physical and psychological pressure.

By contrasting existential and systemic perspectives on hunger, these works illuminate connections between the body, psyche, gender, and power. They reveal how deprivation destabilises identity, exposing the vulnerability of social norms and cultural ideals. Hunger, whether experienced personally or imposed externally, acts as both a catalyst and a lens for exploring the formation, enactment, and transformation of masculinity across historical and political contexts.

## 8. Conclusion

A comparative reading of *Hunger* by Knut Hamsun and *The Hunger Angel* by Herta Müller reveals starvation as a destabilising influence on masculine identity, dismantling ideals of autonomy, endurance, and self-mastery. In both narratives, hunger exceeds its physiological function and becomes a framework through which the precarity and nature of masculinity are exposed. Hamsun's narrator absorbs hunger into his inner life, where it emerges as both a psychological ordeal and an existential confrontation, foregrounding the conflict between bodily fragility and male independence. The text collapses distinctions between physical deprivation and mental disintegration, illustrating how material scarcity alters perception, decision-making, and agency. Traits traditionally associated with hegemonic masculinity, such as pride, self-sufficiency, and emotional restraint, are rendered counterproductive, compelling the protagonist to negotiate an unstable threshold between the instinct to survive and the imperative to preserve masculine self-respect.

In Müller's narrative, hunger functions as an externally imposed mechanism of control, operating as a political technology within the Soviet labour camp that disciplines both body and consciousness. The figure of the "hunger angel" personifies this regime of deprivation, infiltrating Leo's interior life while simultaneously gesturing toward the systemic violence of totalitarian power. As Marina Warner observes, "the body is still the map on which we mark our meanings," a formulation that illuminates how Müller inscribes ideological domination directly onto the starving body (Warner 331). Hunger thus destabilises physical integrity, social and gendered hierarchies, producing altered modes of relationality and heightened corporeal awareness. Under such conditions, masculinity is no longer articulated through autonomy, pride, or mastery; instead, it is reconstituted through endurance, compliance, and negotiation with coercive authority. Survival itself becomes an ethical and performative practice, foregrounding the adaptability and contingency of masculine identity under extreme pressure.

Comparing the two texts illuminates the intersection of hunger, gender, and power. In Hamsun, deprivation is existential and self-directed; identity erodes from within. In Müller, hunger is structural and externally enforced; identity is reshaped by systemic forces. Together, the novels reveal that traits culturally coded as masculine strength, independence, and control are contingent, performing differently depending on historical and social context. As Raewyn Connell argues, "masculinities are configurations of practice," rather than fixed or innate qualities (Connell xviii). Starvation disrupts these practices, magnifying masculinity's vulnerability and rendering identity negotiable, provisional, and deeply contingent on circumstance. Narratives of starvation highlight literature's ability to interrogate the relationships between gender, vulnerability, and social authority. By staging hunger in its most extreme forms, these texts expose how male subjectivity is shaped both by external systems of power and by internalised ideals of masculinity, generating suffering strategies of endurance and adaptation. Further scholarship could expand this discussion by examining women's experiences of hunger, exploring famine narratives across cultures, or comparing masculine responses to deprivation in diverse historical and geographical settings. Such approaches would enrich critical understanding of how hunger intersects with power and identity, reaffirming literature's enduring role in probing the limits of the human condition under conditions of extreme strain.

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