

THE THEME OF HUNGER IN BHATTACHARYA'S 'SO MANY HUNGERS' AND 'HE WHO RIDES A TIGER'

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Abstract

Bhabani Bhattacharya is a prominent Indo- Anglian novelist. He is a social realist and great humanist. His novels move around the contemporary era. He has ruthlessly exposed various social evils and aspects of hunger in his novels. The present paper brings out the theme of hunger portrayed in Bhattacharya's two renowned novels 'So Many Hungers' and 'He Who Rides a Tiger'. Under the title of hunger different shades of need, hunger, desire, greed, obsession and lust are brutally revealed in these novels. The novelist has brought forth the horrific era of the Great Bengal Famine of 1943. Both the novels are written on the same backdrop but with fundamental difference in respect of people's attitude towards it. The innocent preys of hunger grab the role of hunters and try to change the whole social set up. This is an effort to explore the different reaction and changed attitude for the same.

Keywords: *peasants, artisans, hunger, poverty, exploitation, starvation, misery, freedom, revolt, etc.*

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INTRODUCTION:

Bhabani Bhattacharya an outstanding Indo-Anglian novelist occupies an important place in the galaxy of Indo-Anglian literature. He belongs to the group of social realist and has rejected the diction of *Art for Art's sake*. The brutal realities of the time brought out the sensitive man and brilliant artist in him. The novelist has witnessed one of the most upheaval period of Indian history. It was a period of 1940s. Indian society was on the threshold of social and political change. The Gandhian Movements had given a progressive step towards *Swaraj* and social reformers were fighting hard for social equality. At this positive start, India had to go through the hideous period of Bengal famine of 1943. The collective outcomes of the events are found in the marvellous fictional creation of Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers* and *He Who Rides a Tiger*. Though both novels project the era of Bengal famine but are portrayed with different perspectives. Starving destitute in *So Many Hungers* are the silent sufferers whereas in *He Who Rides a Tiger* the famine victims raise their voice against social apathy. Both the novels are predominantly woven round the theme of hunger. Professor Chandrasekharan remarks:

*'He Who Rides a Tiger, marks a departure from So Many Hungers in the sense that though the background is common the former highlights the growing protest in the country. The protest is chiefly against two evils - the evil of exploitation which results in hunger and degradation and the evil of castes.'*¹ (J. Prasad. TNOBB Pg.72)

In the first novel *So Many Hungers* the author discloses the circumstances behind the Bengal famine of 1943. The famine was not a natural disaster due to flood or drought but was man-made scarcity; the actual reasons were rooted in the dark chapter of Second World War. It was a time when the entire world was set on the fire of war. Under the preparational strategy of British Government, the coastal part of Bengal was forcefully evacuated and their boats and stock of rice were snatched away. Without food, shelter and boats these rural people became paralyzed and village economy collapsed. The poor peasants turned into helpless beggars. The novel talks about the horror of period.

Bhattacharya has used two plots to scrutinize the causes and effects of hunger. First plot shows the rich family of Samarendra Basu who lives at Calcutta with his two sons and second plot portrays the story of a peasant girl Kajoli. Two plots are connected by Devesh Basu, father of Samarendra Basu who lives with peasant folks at Baruni. The author reveals slowly, dark to darker shade of hunger through the moving story of Kajoli and her family. Kajoli is the heroine of the present novel. A peasant girl of fourteen has a beautiful dream for her future life, but it breaks horribly, as it says 'it never rains but pours.' Her father and elder brother are sent to prison due to their active participation in India's freedom struggle. In absence of backbone of the family, Kajoli shoulders the responsibilities of her younger brother and aged mother. She works hard in the field; in a course of action she gets wed with city youth Kishore. Unfortunately, her sweet dream of future life breaks again with the arrival of tempest of famine. Finding no hope in village for work and food, Kishore follows the path of other villagers to city. But as it says 'man proposes and God disposes' he is killed by sentry on his way to Calcutta by mistaken identity. The fact remains unrevealed to Kajoli, she waits for her Godot, Kishore till the end of the novel. Pregnant Kajoli stands for any maiden of the village. She tries to fight back but demon of hunger grows bigger with every passing moment. The story portrays the utter helplessness in the wake of famine.

Nothing edible was left around. Without rice and money, Kajoli decides to follow the millions of destitute kith and kin towards the lighthouse 'Calcutta' to get a mouthful and some work. Kajoli, isolated from her husband and excluded from society, suffers the anguish of a tortuous state of loneliness. She leaves the village but misfortune follows her.

Hunger turned a peasant girl into a beggar. In exchange of food Kajoli is brutally raped by an Indian soldier and goes through painful abortion. The hunger debases the humanity at the lowest. Kajoli decides to sell her body to feed her loved once. Fortunately she changes her mind and decides to earn an honest living by turning a newspaper vender.

The hunger for food and its deadly impacts are keenly portrayed in the novel. The innocent people become animals, they start eating what the animal refuse to have. The novel is full of heart-rending scenes of utter helplessness. Bhattacharya pens down the horror of hunger by depicting the incident, a starving mother wants to bury her living child to save him from the torture of hunger and slow death; in the second picture, the readers come across the painful scene of a child clinging and sucking a dead mother's breast. Countless peasant maidens and women were forced to accept prostitution. The novel is full of disturbing incidents. When humiliation becomes a fate of hungry, the rich people treat destitute as a mode of entertainment, soldiers get fun by enjoying helpless gestures of maidens for a coin, they stand bare in front of them, some people feel amazed by getting naked photo of destitute maiden and some licentious demand to show the breast. Bhattacharya in his *So Many Hungers* presents 'What hunger really means'.

Bhattacharya realistically presents the tragedy of Bengal famine of 1943, along with brutal consequences; he also brings into light the actual causes behind devastating famine. Besides alien preparation for war, greedy Indians are found the second culprit behind the Bengal famine. It was the result of obsession for money and power that took millions of innocent lives. The callous people like Sir Lakshminath and Samarandra Basu satisfy their hunger for wealth by holding stock of rice for long time and creating artificial scarcity. The web is created from small trader of village to main director of 'Company *sarkar*', and the web becomes woollier with additional self-interests. And peasants become silent sufferers of this inhuman greed.

Through the character Samarendra Basu and Sir Lakshminath, we come across the hunger for more money, social prestige, titles, riches and sex. The name Sir Lakshminath reveals itself his interest in money, he is called 'the prince of the black market' and also business partner of Samarendra in rice trade. He comes from Western province in order to exploit the famine situation for making money. The character also reveals sexist social

stance for destitute maidens. At time of famine rice and women were in demand. Destitute maidens became an easy prey to satisfy hunger for sex. In the name of social service, Lakshminath seduces helpless girls. He is presented as an expert player in flesh trade who takes advantage of the destitute' dilemma: whether to starve or sell one's body. He is the head of the brothel, one of the fastest growing businesses of the city.

The selfless hunger for human betterment and political freedom bring the positive note in the novel. Rahoul wants to form a new world on higher values. He is a scientist and great patriotic soul. He has strong feeling for humanity and betterment for common people. His constant hunger for people's welfare never allows him to sit quiet. He is deeply influenced by his grandfather, Devesh Basu, a true follower of Gandhian ideology. We find the shade of humanism in his hunger for human betterment. The theme of the novel touches the core of human heart. The novel mirrors the naked horror of famine, ruthlessness of society and above all the psychological and superstitious temperament of the people.

So Many Hungers came out in 1947 just two months after Independence of India. In this novel Bhattacharya speaks about hunger for political freedom. The character of Devesh Basu brings out hunger for political freedom. Though his primary interest is village reconstruction work, he awakes the people for their political responsibilities. For his participation in the freedom movements, he spends more than seven years in the prison. He equally fulfils his duties as social mentor and political guide. Utter indifference on the part of British Government towards famine victim was due to fast spreading National awareness for freedom. Without discrimination old, young, women jump into the war of freedom with great fervour. The unity creates restlessness among British Government and to subdue its effect, they put leaders behind the bar. Even from the early part of the novel, we witness the devotion for freedom. Devesh is arrested for his active participation in freedom movements but before he is taken to the prison, he advises his beloved villagers to follow the way non-violence:

'Friends and comrades do not betray the flag. Do not betray yourselves. There is violence in your thoughts; that is evil enough. Do not make it worse by violence in action..... ours is the

harder task. If we use the weapons of our enemy, we play into their hands. The supreme test has come. Be strong, Be true. Be deathless.’² (SMH Pg.101)

Bhattacharya’s *So Many Hungers* is primarily devoted to man’s hunger for food, it also closely analyses man’s other yearnings. It is a story not about many hungry people, but also about many types of human hunger.

Though Bhattacharya’s *He Who Rides a Tiger* dwells upon the Bengal Famine of 1943 it is portrayed with difference in attitude. The novel depicts the story of Kalo, a simple artisan of Jharna town. He is as an honest and hard-working *kamar*. He is happy go lucky man who has total faith in aged long caste system and its hierarchy. He leads a happy life with his only daughter, Chandra Lekha at Jharna town. But his simple set of values get disturbed with bitter experiences of life. His daughter Chandra Lekha is portrayed as an intelligent and studious girl. She makes ‘Jharna’, a proud town by earning laurels. She wins first prize in essay writing competition by defeating even the candidates of the great Calcutta city. Kalo find cold social attitude towards her brilliant achievement. None take heed of her extraordinary intelligence. Moreover they become the target of social criticism. Kalo feels upset but is happy for his golden daughter. He had great pride for his daughter, for him Lekha was ‘*devi* in human form’. But the wake of hunger hammers the calm picture of Jharna town. Through the character of Kalo the novelist once again brings out the horror of hunger in Bengal.

As a last option for survival people start migrating towards the nearest dreamland Calcutta city. Skilled artisan Kalo follows the same path to get rid of haunting hunger. Journey from Jharna to Calcutta was itself a great ordeal. After a long struggle and strong resistance Kalo got succeeded to enter in the train. But hunger brought misfortune to him. Kalo could not control his hunger and steals three bananas to satisfy the burning ache of hunger. He is caught and sent to the jail. His dream of better future for his daughter gets destroyed due to his petty offence of stealing bananas. With tag of thief he comes out from the jail house and continues his bread of honesty. With broken heart, he works as corpse sweeper for municipal office, while doing the job, he comes across with bitter experience of social hypocrisy of high caste people. He finds the worst condition of the dead destitute

on the road. The unclaimed bodies were evacuated from the road by sweepers and dumped them carelessly, whereas the rich were treated with all the respect and funeral rituals. The questions consciously haunt him. But his set target was to feed his daughter. He started working as a harlot agent. He was working hard for his only daughter Chandra-Lekha. But his anger for caste system busts out as he finds his 'devi' in the same harlot house. He cannot bear his object of purity was defiled. Chandra Lekha's humiliation and degradation in the harlot house turn Kalo in a social rebel. The heinous situation reminds him the scornful words from Biten a fellow prisoner in jail house to hit back.

In *So Many Hunger* we find the destitute at helpless situation, they are passive, timid and submissive whereas in the present novel the famine victims raise their voice against the wrong. Number of characters are portrayed with Marxist colour, who take a stand against injustice. Kalo, Biten and Viswanath belong to the group. Along with these characters the revolutionary sound of protest is recorded on many pages of the novel.

Kalo takes the grim decision to hit back not at an individual but to whole society. He holds the entire society responsible for creating such an inhuman situation. Kalo vows revenge on so called upper caste and rich people of society, who reject the fundamental rights of humanity. The question 'Why do you have to live' haunts Kalo throughout. The revolt was not against an individual but against the whole society. He holds the upper class responsible for devastating famine and uncountable death. Kalo becomes a Brahmin, he wears nine-stranded sacred thread. He creates a temple with false story. People accept him as a holy man. He makes the upper caste to bow-down and touch the feet of untouchable. He earns name, fame and money by deception. He becomes a hunter from prey. Similarly the character of Biten is portrayed with the same revolutionary sound. Bitter experiences of life, shake his humanism. He raises question on so called caste hierarchy and upper caste status of Brahmin. He becomes the flag bearer for social equality. He forsakes his Brahmin status for ever and becomes a common man who fights for rights of lower people. Viswanath fights for the hungry destitute. He raises his voice against callous attitude of rich. He faces the wrath of rich. He fearlessly joins procession demanding food and justice. Kalo, Biten and Viswanath are the examples of revolt. The

novel echoes with the fearless demand: “Food for all!” “Work for all!” “Jail for the rice profiteers!”³ (HWRAT Pg.160-161)

The novel vividly portrays how the wealthy people are callously indifferent to the hungry and greatly responsible for their unspeakable miseries. Besides hunger for food Bhattacharya also dealt with man’s unending hunger for worldly pleasures, material possessions and economic profits in this novel. The hunger for worldly pleasures made the condition of famine deadlier. The callous attitude towards the needy is beautifully brought out in the novel. The reality of these people shows how these so called prosperous people engage themselves to build a temple when entire Bengal province was badly inflected by famine, millions of people were dying on road without food and on the contrary the rich pouring their money for sheltered ‘stone God’. Through the characters of Sir Abalabandhu and Motichand the novelist shows shameless attitude of the rich towards the poor. Sir Abalabhandhu is a merchant who always seeks an opportunity of gaining profit. He stocked the great amount of rice with the thought that the artificial scarcity will increase the margin of their profit. The following line reveals social apathy: ‘As scarcity grew, as masses of people died of hunger, his margin of profit increased.’⁴ (HWRAT Pg.125)

The novelist has revealed brutal psychology of money minded people. he has exploited the sarcasm to rebuke the society. Dorothy B. Shimer says: ‘According to Bhattacharya’, while *So Many Hungers!* is a ‘straight story’. *He Who Rides a Tiger* is a satire.’⁵ (J. Prasad. TNOBB Pg.76)

CONCLUSION:

Bhabani Bhattacharya has discussed the causes and effects with reactions. *So Many Hungers* and *He Who Rides a Tiger* have an excellence of their presentation. Though both novels are written on the same backdrop, are designed with different attitude. If there is any protagonist in both the novels it is hunger. In *So Many Hungers* the novelist has given the detailed description of cause, consequences and effects of the Great Bengal Famine. The victims were innocent, ignorant and timid, didn’t fight back. The passive sufferers were found unknown about the causes of their own doom. It fills the readers with disgust and anger. The novelist has exploited the same anger to present the revolutionary spirit

in the destitute. *He Who Rides a Tiger* brings the revolutionary picture coloured with Marxist ideology. As a social realist it might be his dream or expectation from the neglected part of society to stand and ask for their rights. Bhattacharya wanted to rebuke the society for their wrong done. Of course the way selected by Kalo can be criticised in the theory of right and wrong. The impulsive decision to avenge on the society shocks the readers at the same time convinces them with law of action. The novel is set as an alarm to the rest of society. The class discrimination leads to moral chaos. We need to work on equality and no room for exploitation. The novel *So Many Hungers* successfully documents the hunger and exploitation through the behavioral pattern of various characters.

Thus Bhattacharya has a thorough grasp of his basic theme of hunger and he has dealt it with most of its significant aspects.

- Abbreviation **SMH** is used for **So Many Hungers**, **HWRAT** is for *He Who Rides a Tiger* and **TNOBB** for **The novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya, A Historical and Sociological study**

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