

Bhabani Bhattacharya's Novels: The Portrayal of Famine and Hunger

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Abstract: *The millions of the country are shown as victims of periodic outbursts of hunger and famine. Bhattacharya is the finest exponent of the novel of 'the Hunger Theme'. In this article 'So Many Hungers!' and 'He Who Rides a Tiger' are two main novels to be studied. These novels show how the poor people suffer during the time of famine as, "Weavers sold their looms to traders from big cities who scoured the countryside for bargains." 'So Many Hungers!' is built on two strands of the story which are well knit--- the story of Rahoul, the protagonist and his family and also the sad tale of Kajoli, the peasant girl and her family. This novel lies equally in the enactment of the horrors of hunger and famine, and the novelist's keen awareness of the life of the rural area. The novel is also a satire on the Hindu orthodoxy written against the socio-political background of Bengal famine and the freedom struggle before the attainment of independence. In 'He who Rides a Tiger' is the story of Kalo's victory of revenge against society and his learning of the principle through varied experiences that the integrity is the greatest achievement of man. It also shows that any man who rebels against society cannot adjust himself and so he has to reconcile himself to it in the long run. This article also concludes that the description of the poor and the deserted is concerned; Bhattacharya is undoubtedly unequalled in the realm of Indian English fiction and truthful and poetic portrayal of the famine and hunger is worth noticeable.*

Keywords: *Novel, Hunger, Famine*

1. INTRODUCTION

The rural poverty and misery of the Indian people have given rise to new class of the Indian- English novel called the novel of 'the Hunger Theme'. The teeming millions of the country are shown as victims of periodic outbursts of hunger and famine. They encounter all "sinister consequences flowing from such calamities: moral lapses, illicit trafficking, and all the ghastly scenes that accompany a famine in India". Characters in these novels are shown leaving their native village in search for food and employment.

Bhattacharya is the finest exponent of the novel of 'the Hunger Theme'. Though the other writers have written on the theme of hunger, but not in the same passion as Bhattacharya. Bhabani Bhattacharya is a rare genius in the firmament of Indian English fiction of Post Independent India. As a novelist, What Bhattacharya has earned in the realms of Indian English fiction is really enduring.

The central theme of Bhattacharya's novels is famine and hunger. Bhattacharya presents a gruesome picture of Bengal famine during the year 1943 in **So Many Hungers!** and **He Who Rides a Tiger**. To quote his words, "... the plague of hunger in the wave of war... no rationing of food-grains, no price control, no chocking of giant sharks who play cornering game on a stupendous scale... barns are empty — the peasants had been induced to sell off heir grain. Markets arc empty-the grain is hidden away... And now the rice was five times the old rate, weavers sold their looms to traders from big cities... Artisans sold their tools. Fishermen's boats were chopped up for fire wood to sell... The plague washed up in fierce tides" (He Who Rides a Tiger, p.15).

As a result of the Bengal Famine, poor people are deprived of food. The middle class and rich people are managed to get through the situation by their savings and reserve supplies. Poor people are the victims, as they depend on their day-to-day earnings. The result is the massive hunger deaths. Bhabani Bhattacharya portrays the picture of poor people during the time of famine as, "Weavers sold their looms to traders from big cities who scoured the countryside for bargains. Artisans sold their food. Fishermen's boats were chopped up for firewood to sell. The plague washed up in fierce tides. Bengal was dying. Jharna was dying." (HWRT, p.15)

Thus Bhattacharya's novels present a stark and grim picture of the hungry rural India; its misery and travails, uncertainties and privations, agonies and frustrations. The themes generally cover the problems of poverty, hunger, pestilence, traditionalism, casteism, and India's struggle against these problems. His works appeal to the core of our heart and arouse our sense of pathos and sympathy to the poor and the marginalized.

2. SO MANY HUNGERS! (1947)

Bhattacharya's first novel 'So Many Hungers!' deals with the twin themes of hunger for food and hunger for freedom. The socio-political events of the country immediately preceding independence i.e. Bengal Famine of 1943 and the Quit India Movement of 1942 inspired Bhattacharya to write this novel. As a result it deals with the theme of hunger/ poverty engendered by Bengal famine. It is built on two strands of the story which are well knit- the story of Rahoul, the protagonist and his family. Also the sad tale of Kajoli, the peasant girl and her family. Bhattacharya deals about the hunger which was the consequence of the famine took a toll of more than two million people, the desperate fight of man against hunger produced both the types of images- man at his noblest and at his worst as well. Thus, this novel portrays the two diabolical forces of war and famine which sucked the blood of the poor. His harrowing account of famine in Bengal and the joy of the profiteers and black marketers are very thoughtfully and beautifully projected. Here the life of Rahoul symbolizes the struggle for freedom and the pathetic story of Kajoli represents the sufferings of the millions of men and women who lost their lives on account of the man-made famine and the callous apathy of the alien Government.

Of the two intertwined themes of freedom and hunger, the theme of hunger figures more prominently and it outweighs the other in content. Thus, Bhattacharya depicts the naked horror of the famine stricken peasants in the background of Gandhian Satyagraha struggle.

Here the characters are silent and passive observers of the effects of famine. They yield to the situation without any revolt or protest. The artistic success of the novel lies equally in the enactment of the horrors of hunger and famine, and the novelist's keen awareness of the life of the rural, peasant folk of Bengal and rich splendour of life hidden in it.

3. HE WHO RIDES A TIGER (1955)

Bhattacharya's another novel, 'He Who Rides a Tiger' has an affinity with his first novel, 'So Many Hungers!' In that the two themes of Bengal famine of 1943 and the Quit India Movement of 1942 have also figured, though not as obtrusively as in the former one.

It is an attack on those who profited on people's misery during the famine as well as those who exploited them as caste tyrants. The novel is also a satire on the Hindu orthodoxy written against the socio-political background of Bengal famine and the freedom struggle before the attainment of independence.

He Who Rides a Tiger is the story of Kalo's victory of revenge against society and his learning of the principle through varied experiences that the integrity is the greatest achievement of man. It is only when he liberates himself from the fetters which bind him that his friend Biten tells him admiringly, "your story will be a legend of freedom, a legend to inspire and awaken"

The famine of Bengal is grinding the people to death. Kalo too sits idly in his smithy for days together and watches the position. He fears that Lekha "might have to roam the fields with hundreds of others, like a hungry animal, digging out soft wild roots for a meal". Unable to see his daughter suffer the pangs of starvation, Kalo decides to go to Calcutta where he hopes to find work and earn a living. Travelling without ticket on the footboard of a train, along- with hundreds of other destitute- men and women clinging to the foot boards, his eyes are the ripe fruit inside the compartment gives him an unbearable ache. He steals three ripe bananas and is arrested and tried for his offence. Kalo pleads guilty and explains:

"I was hungry, sir. A madness came upon me. It was because I thought I had to eat or I would die. A madness came upon me. I had to live".

The theme of hunger signifies the title of the novel, He Who Rides a Tiger. Riding on the tiger implies man's quest for riding on hunger. Hunger is ferocious and is killing man as a tiger does. Kalo and Lekha, the two central characters, suffer from hunger losing their all on account of it. So they decide to ride the tiger of hunger to eke out their living.

The irony of the novel lies in the description of the famine and hunger. On the one hand, the poor people are suffering from hunger and poverty. On the other hand the rich people, profiteers and black marketers are busy in accumulating wealth by hook or crook. The poor are hungry for corns, the rich for money and sex:

“Two great hungers had stuck the land of Bengal in the wake of war; the hunger for masses of people uprooted from the old earth and turned into beggars, hunger of the all-owning few for pleasure and more pleasure, raging fever of the times. Uprooted women with their kind of hunger, had to cool the raging pleasure: fever with their bodies”

‘He Who Rides a Tiger’ is the finest of all the novels of Bhattacharya deals with the theme of hunger and utter helplessness. It shows that any man who rebels against society cannot adjust himself and so he has to reconcile himself to it in the long run.

4. CONCLUSION

In his novels Bhattacharya has tried to depict with remarkable fidelity, the conditions of the hungry and famine stricken masses of India who have suffered enormously at the hands of man, machine and nature.

He makes his characters revolt against the injustice and hitting back the people who are the cause of sufferings. Besides portraying the sufferings imposed by the famine on the people of Bengal. His novels have also depicted certain dramatic changes that have come about in the life of an individual, belonging to an oppressed and depressed section of the society. While presenting those changes, the author has allowed us an insight into the kind of society envisioned by him. It is a society in which notions of caste-based superiority or inferiority make little sense. It is a society in which uprightness and moral values prevail over frivolous and hypocritical emotions, bringing about the ultimate triumph of good over evil and truth over falsehood.

Thus, the description of the poor and the deserted is concerned; he is undoubtedly unequalled in the realm of Indian English fiction. His truthful and poetic portrayal of the famine and hunger is worth noticeable.

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