

Bhabani Bhattacharya's Fiction: A Study into the Suffering of Starvation

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Abstract

India, a nation of glorious past, developing present and promising future has been threatened by various types of foes- internal and external, visible and invisible. The problem of hunger has been the recurring issue for India that has to feed a large number of Populations after China. The problem of famine and hunger has been as serious as more than 30 million deaths over last three centuries. The dependency of Indian agriculture on monsoon, droughts, policy failure and engagement of unwanted wars invited gamines and the critical issues of hunger in India. Indian sub-continental authors bewailed on the problem of famine and hunger; Bhabani Bhattacharya, one of the most popular spokespersons of the hunger-stricken people of Bengal in 1943, is on the tips of scholars and critics. Bhabani Bhattacharya (1910-88) is one of the most illumined fiction writers in the long chain of Indo-Anglian novelists. In spite of writing only six novels, he has scratched immortal lines on the cheeks of Time. He is the first writer who acquainted the world to the problem of famine in the British ruled Bengal first time. A Brahmin by birth, born at Bhagalpur (Binard), doctorate from London University on historical research and bread winner in Maharashtra,

regards art as criticism of life and declared the uselessness of purposeless art and literature. He always thinks of the weal of man at national and international level. The present research paper deals with the aspects of physical and spiritual hunger in humanity as Bhabani Bhattacharya dealt with his novels.

Keywords: Hunger, Famine, Humanity, Morality, Food, Bengal.

“The novelists of the hunger theme write stories of the teeming millions of this country who have to face periodic outburst of hunger and famine and encounter all the evil consequences flowing from such calamities, such as moral lapses, illicit relationships and all the ghostly scenes that accompany a famine in India”- Sanyal

The failure in crop production, the bursting of population and the improper government dictums case the problem of scarcity or want of food, this natural or irregular phenomenon is known as famine. The scarcity in the production or imbalance distribution of food-productions result into starvation, epidemics, malnutrition among masses, lead to high rate of mortality in any

area. Hunger and famine has been one of the principal motifs of the Sub-continental authors. The universal struggle for existence has directed human actions in various directions including literature. Sub-continental Indian authors like M. R. Anand, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Kamala Markendaya and Bhabani Bhattacharya have given vent to human sufferings, caused by hunger and famine- natural and human-made. The failure in search for natural needs like food debases man and a person who can be 'deity', turns into a 'devil' to satisfy his natural or devalued hungers. Hunger and famine are no the issues of human existence; they disturb social harmony and break the pious nature of relation. On the one hand, these make human life, difficult to live and on the other hand, these are responsible for the unwanted and irrelevant migration.

How ironical is this that a man is punished for abducting the property or killing another one but there is no provision for one for fighting against hunger and famine in our legislature!. There is no shelter for a man, scorching under the sun of famine; there is no remedy for one who is suffering from hunger; there is no finger to wipe the tears from the eye of a hungry child. The silence of the system breaks all of a sudden when, in order to satiate his hunger, a man steals something. In Bhabani Bhattacharya's literature, we see the suffering of a man, caused by hunger and the torment for a person who is not a victim but needy. Actually, his novels are the touchstone to reveal the double-minded scale of society. Bhabani Bhattacharya is

among highly realist story-tellers who presented various themes of Famine and hunger in his novels. His characters are the victims of empty bellies and the society takes them as its enemy. His novels present a picture of the characters with instinctive physical and materialistic hunger. Bhabani Bhattacharya is the chief exposé of the cruelty against the poor hungry generation of Bengal.

Bhabani Bhattacharya has considered various aspects of human society in his novels but his primary concern is the quest of rural poverty, famine, hunger and human degradation in Pre-independent India. R.K. Pathak, comments on the universalization of the hunger problem still present in the modern world as it was in pre-independence days and feels sorry for "the pangs of hunger even today cry....." (122) and ".....the authenticity of his treatment cannot be doubted" (123).

His novels' journey started with 'So Many Hungers!' (1947) found the musicality of life in 'Music for Mohini' (1947); then he became one revolutionary in 'He who Rides a Tiger' (1954) to retort the problems of India and showed the negative aspect of materialism to people in 'A Goddess Named Gold' (1960). In 1962, when China crushed the rose in the jacket of Chacha Nehru, we felt his cry and despair in 'Shadow from Ladakh' (1967) and the Sahitya Academy wiped his tears and consoled him by awarding Sahitya Academy Award and he became fourth to receive such a glory after R.K. Narayana, Raja Rao and Verrier Elwin. About his concern with the problem of hunger and

famine, Harish Raizada is very aptly remarks that Bhabani Bhattacharya's 'graphic and moving picture of this (p. 45). Bhattacharya's 'So Many Hungers!' is the result of "the agonized torments of body and spirit endured by the sacred soil of Bengal during the hideous famine years and early stages of the s World War II" (Raizada, 128). Bhattacharya was inspired to compose this novel in the background of two hungers- hunger for freedom and the movement of 1942 through the life of Rahoul, the protagonist and starvation in Bengal in 1943 through the picture of Kajoli. Not to speak of Political urge, if the novel is studied from the perspective of Kajoli, it is pathetically remarked with the pangs of hunger and famine. Kajoli, a girl of 14, has beautiful dreams but her dreams are scattered with the imprisonment of her father and brother; she, with her mother and younger brother tries to keep the wolf out of her house. As the famine starts, she suffers a lot and sells the small objects of family to manage bread. Desperate girl thinks to sell her but hesitates. She marches to Calcutta with her family and on the way to Calcutta, she sees tired, fallen and agonized people. The hunger for sex is depicted through the rape of Kajoli, while Kajoli is searching for food, a soldier quenches his thirst for sexual relation with her. She gets money to satisfy her belly too. In the novel, Bhattacharya shows the distressed picture of man, fighting with dogs and mothers, unable to feed their children, bury their alive children.

Like his first novel, his third novel. 'He Who Rides a Tiger' is also a study into the degradation of humanity due to hunger but

the difference between both novels is that the characters in first novel surrender to condition and situation while in the third novel, the characters revolt against the man made cruelty. Bhattacharya comments on the failure of rationing, cloth-weaving weavers running naked in the cities, no respect for art and literature. (HWRT, p. 15) Kalo, the protagonist, lives in Jharna with his motherless daughter Chandralekha who is diligent in study and a pride to her father. Kalo is disturbed to see that people waste milk on stature while the children die in want of milk. He adopts Obhijit and feeds him well but Obhijit hides one or two pieces of bread in a fear that the next day, he has to remain hungry. Kalo leaves Jharna for city to earn money so that he may save his daughter; in the city, he keeps starving to earn at least 100 rupees. To feed himself, he steals bananas and is sent to prison for three months. The released Kalo is a rebel with Bikash Mukherji (Biten) who is a victim of caste system. On the other hand, Chandralekha sells her body in the brothel but is saved by Kalo anyhow. Kalo resumes the role of a priest and makes the people surrender to him, including the Majistrate who sentenced him jail. The novel portrays the problem of livelihood effectively. The novel portrays the hunger of poor for bread pathetically and the hunger of rich for money and power ironically. The exile of the unfed population to the cities in the search of food and earnings, their tragic death on their futile journey, the surrender of common rural and cultured half world to the profession of prostitutes and the export of the skeletons of the destitute persons to

fulfill the demand of medical students in foreign is also commented. About 'So Many Hungers!' and 'He who Rides a Tiger', written in the back ground of Bengal famine of 1942-43, Mahashabde writes: The unfortunate part of it was that famine was not natural but man-made, in spite of fair harvest, and that the callous British Government, concerned with its own security in the war and anxious to retain its power in India, not only remained indifferent to the famine and its victims but grow more tyrannical. (68)

In 'A Goddess Named Gold' (1960), Bhattacharya awakes his countrymen the insatiety and hunger for freedom of personality through the characters of Meera, Lakshmi, Sohagi, Champa, Munni and Bimla in a village called Sonamitti, set a century before Indian Independence. Here 'Gold' does not stand for materialistic prosperity but the freedom of human mind from obsolete rotten customs, Zamindari and Sahukari cruelty. Meera, the protagonist, is given a touchstone by her sagacious grandfather, Atmaram; this touchstone can turn copper into gold but Seth Samander, the greedy moneylender allures Meera in the name of spreading goodness in the society by concerting copper of the nation into gold. Seth Samander's hunger is not selfless but private. Dr. Indu Sharma comments: The main theme of the novel is about the true concept of freedom and faith i.e. the proper way to preserve and sustain freedom by having faith in country's prospect. Some of the basic values of human beings that are required in need to attain true freedom is kindness, self-

sacrifice, friendship, goodness of inner self, purity of mind, dignity, fight for the down-trodden section of the society, revolt against corruption, etc. that all comes under the aegis of hunger-matrix of freedom, faith and food.

Besides the struggle of women for freedom from rotten customs, the negative mentality of men is also commented. Halwai, a character wants to marry Meera who younger even to his elder daughter. He is ready to bribe the five men of society to sanction his outcaste marriage; when he is advised to marry any widow, he gets furious. Through his character, Bhattacharya has told us that it is the time for male too to come out their narrow mindedness. To preserve freedom from the hunger of malicious persons whether they are social or political is as necessary as it is to gain freedom and this message is apparent from the following quote from the novel:

Listen, Meera, with your gold you will save this village....Each has a Seth of its own. Each Seth wants to snatch the new power from the people...It is the fight with the Seth that will save India, not a miracle, not armfuls of gold. You did have your share in the flight, a big share. (GNG)

Thus, it is found out that 'Hunger' is the main theme of Bhabani's work. The variations of hunger are found here to present the glory of men among the inglorious circumstances. The scholars have expressed hunger but Indian values of life are only hinted by them to and fro. There have been some other aspects, prevalent in Indian society as caste, creed, religion, superstition which need more attention. Actually, they are covered under the cries of hunger and there is the need to study how Indian values enable a man to overcome western outlook and bring the fish out of hot water. Though the themes and topics, chosen by Bhattacharya were predominant in his own tome, they have not lost their values even-now-days caste and hunger are still the burning questions in India and to find the glory of human values his works need ne consideration. The problem of hunger is still present in different parts of country. The stores and godowns are full of grains but the bowls of the hungry persons are empty, still they don't loss their beliefs in better future and don't run away from following in Indian ethos. Man, in the naked state and empty bowls under the parched or rainy sky is not unbeknown phenomenon in our land; a number of them can still be seen, struggling for a respectable lives, on the pavement of our affluent cities, accompanied with the prime political and economic cities. Though, hunger always tries to demoralize men but men overcome them and stand supreme among the creatures of the world due to his universal values. Dr. Satish Kumar appreciates his art of narration for

his 'a credible picture of India through his sense of situation' and his realistic presentation of contemporary ills of the society.

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