

Portrayal of 'Hunger' and 'Human Spirit' in the fiction of Bhabani Bhattacharya with special reference to his *So Many Hungers*: A Brief Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper, at the outset, introduces the readers to the origin and growth of Indian English novel laying focus on the Indian themes like hunger, poverty, economic exploitation, humanism, class consciousness etc explored by the writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K.Narayan, Kamala Markandaya and then projects focus on the portrayal of 'Hunger' and 'Human Spirit' in the select novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya with a special reference to **So Many Hungers**, related to the political and economic situations of Bengali's society.

Key words: Hunger, Human Spirit.

Every piece of literature is like a treasure and its value greatly depends on its explorations to make it useful for life. The 'novel', now the most widely read of all kinds of literature, is almost a treasure to Indian life and cultural development. The first English novel namely **Wife** by Rajmohan in 1864 and the novels published during his period did expose the tyrannical customs and the economic plight of the peasants with the sole intention of bringing about social and economic reform. Novelists like Sir Jogendra Singh in **Kamala** and **Kamini** and K.S.Venkataramani in **Murugan the Tiller** and **Kandan the Patriot** brought out the rural life and the sufferings of the poor. Later, Mulk Raj Anand explored the problems of hunger, poverty, economic exploitation and class distinction in his 'novels' like **Coolie**, **Untouchable** etc. and R.K.Narayan, in his small world of Malgudi, exposed and revealed its pathos and comedy with a mixture of humour, compassion and

irony while Raja Rao did juxtapose life in India with the Western mode of life.

Besides M.R.Anand, Narayan and Raja Rao, there are other notable novelists like Bhabani, Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandaya, Manohar Malgonkar, Kushwant Singh, Anita Desai, Jhabwalla and a few others who made a significant contribution in this regard following their predecessors. The Indo-Anglian novelists by and large did base his novels on Indian themes. Depicting the life of the middle class people, he voiced the joys and sorrows along with the problems of India "Crisis cross of emotions, crisis, the frustrations, urges and ideas which move Indian men and women, the maladjustments, character - crisis, and hunger are the popular theme of Indo-Anglian novelist" (Joshi 121). Though a novel primarily tells a story, a novelist has his own conception of its form and his own purpose. While one upholds the

theory of 'Art for Art's sake, the other emphasizes that 'art should be for society's sake'. Writer like Bhabani Bhattacharya is of the view that art must have purposiveness and the novel must have a social purpose. He himself confirmed this view point in an interview:

" I hold that a novel must have a social purpose. It must place before the reader something from the society's point of view . Art is not necessarily for art's sake. purposeless art and literature which is much in vogue does not appear to me a sound judgment" (Badal 25)

Born on 10th November 1906 in Bhagalpur, Bihar in a well-to-do educated family, Bhabani Bhattacharya had his school education at Puri and his graduation at Patna University by obtaining his B.A with Honors in English literature in 1927. and got his Doctoral degree from the University of London in 1934 in History Major. In one way, his study of History helped him in forming his background and the perspective to his writings. He had lectured in New Zealand and Australia in 1962 and in West Germany in 1963 and he was honored by the university of New Zealand and presented with the Indian National Academy of Letters Award for his novel **Shadow from Ladakh** in the year 1967. He has to his credit publication of his first novel **So Many Hungers (1947)**, second novel **Music for Mohini (1952)**, third novel **He who Rides a Tiger (1954)**, fourth novel (1960), fifth novel **Shadow from Ladakh (1966)**, and sixth and last novel **A Dream in Hawaii (1978)**. His thematic concerns in his novels lay focus on the social, political and

economic realities in rural and urban lives and their resultant influences on society, the need for the change of traditional beliefs for the betterment of modern society, exposing the evils of caste system and the growing protest for a change in the social order, importance of political freedom and need for acts of faith, exposing the conflict between Gandhian idealism and the industrialism of Nehru and the spiritual sterility of the American society and its desperate turning to the East for guidance for inner peace.

Bhabani Bhattacharya does vividly portray various kinds of hungers prevalent in the society and their consequences in his first novel **So Many Hungers!**. The novel for its background has the Second World War and the Bengal famine of 1943. Though the location of the novel is Calcutta and a nearby village Baruni, it represents the urban and rural lives of the society of the pre - independent India with its good and evil. The plot of the novel is woven and around two families - Rehoul's and Kajoli's K. R. Chandrasekaran rightly observes:" Rahoul's story is a representation in miniature of the struggle for freedom. The sad tale of kajoli is likewise a pathetic record of what happened to more than two million men and women, who became victims of a famine which was not an act of god, but which was brought out by a rapacity and selfishness of profiteers and the indifference of alien Government " (P11)

In the story, though centering round two families, the focus of the novelist is on society and its varied hungers. Due to the announcement of war by Britian against Germany, Rahoul thinks that it is a crisis for

humanity and his father Sameranda Basu thinks that it is a God -sent opportunity to reap a harvest of gold. His younger brother Kunal sees the opportunity of joining the Army Service while the mother of the family thinks that she should stock pulse, for the price would rise high during war. The single event of war this creates diverse reactions in a single family and the novel brings out emphatically all those diverse reactions triggered in the hearts of individuals living within one family. When there is deep desire to achieve one's own end, whether right or wrong, exploitation follows with no limitation. The novelist here brings out broadly all the consequences that arise on account of deep desires and hungers. Bhabani vividly portrays the actions of his characters who bring immeasurable sufferings to society. At the same time, he describes the alleviation action, initiated by some people who are responsible for the welfare of the society. Various kinds of exploitation and immeasurable sufferings are neatly projected in the novel. In other words, it was due to the exploitative nature of people like Sameranda Basu, Sir Abalabandhu, Sir lakshminatha who in order to become rich resorted to hoarding make the situation rather worse.

The hunger for food is a major factor which affects living beings basically. The novelist has brought out the pathetic situations caused by hunger for food . and also given a heart - rending account of the sufferings of mankind and of animals. The onslaught of the war, the failure of authority, the exploitative nature of vested interest made the villagers homeless and landless. Even their cattle was lost and they became desperately hopeless.

The women in the village in order to save their sarees from getting ragged even slept nakedly. The novelist paints the naked horror of the pathetic conditions of destitute with pitiless precision and razor-sharp details:

“Corpses lay by the road, huddling together. Picked to the bone: only the hair uneaten fluffy body's hair, the waist long hair of women. A family group had sunk into sleep; and beyond the sleep was vultures” (SMH 137).

They were forced to dig into the piles and garbage cans in the city in order to survive. An old destitute describes the condition: “Here in the city we are less than Pariah dogs” (P 160). They began to eat even rats found in the alley. As days passed, there was even competition for the remainings in the garbage cans.

“Those garbage cans-they are our food-Bowls, mother. We pick out of them before The city's scavenge folk come with Their vans. Sometimes we pick at night- Less competition. I saw two women fighting Like animals over a dust-bin-it happened Yesterday” (P 162).

These words of the destitute reveal their precarious condition. Further they had to fight even with dogs for possession of the city's heaps of rubbish, which contain caps of rotting food. The portrayal of the scene in which Kajoli saw a Jackal crouch and ate the body of woman, who stretched by the tree trunk also exposes the stark reality. The episode in which an artist, a ticket collector and the crowd watching a gruesome scene of a child sucking the breast of its dead mother also creates horror.

Bhabani's keen observation is revealed by portraying the hunger of even the animals. In the words of the author, even the ants were desperate: "Perhaps they (ants) too, had a famine. Man had robbed them of their food, the roots that grow wild in waste land" (P 116). These sufferings and the pathetic conditions of the destitutes were all due to "man's inhumanity to man" (Iyengar 414). Bhabani has also brought out the implications of the famine and the degradation caused due to hunger. Assessing the implications of the famine, Rahoul realized the over-all effect. As aptly observed by Bhabani;

"...the inner degradation. At the outset the feminized parents gave what food they could collect to the children-there was not enough for all to share-but as hunger hit harder the finer feelings began to be deadened"

The inner degradation caused by the feminine is brought to light through certain episodes by the novelist. A destitute mother, for want of milk in her breast, goes to the extent of laying her child in a trench dug by her. She says, "No more hurt in the belly my sweet one, my godling, you will sleep" (P 121). This reveals how sub-human, she has become in killing her own child. In other words, such was the depth of degradation! There is another mother who felt joy at the sight of a jackfruit by the side of a mutilated corpse. She felt that with that jackfruit she and her children could sustain their lives for another two days. A mother after receiving a bowl of rice water for her child in her arms burst into wailing:

"Ma-go-o! What is this you gave in? my child is dead look ma-go-o, what have I done to you that you killed my tiny one" (P 166).

Her wail is nothing but blackmail. She wants to accuse the alms giver as having killed her child. Even an innocent mind to which selfishness should be an alien quality gets debased due to hunger. Onu, who had always loved to share his gifts with his friends now became a hoarder. He hoarded for himself, his sister and mother, the wild green figs on tree-tops which none, but he, could reach. It was due to hunger that he and other boys, who were till then friends, turned wide apart motivated by the need for survival.

A starving mother continued to eat the food at the Free kitchen eventhough her child lay dead in her lap. A hungry man pounced on a destitute woman, who was about to take the rice for her children. Even Kajoli, without thinking about her mother, and brother ate the entire bread herself. This act of Kajoli was indeed a shame, coming as it does from a girl trained to a life of sacrifice. Though hunger had caused such degradation in some of the destitute, Bhabani reveals the faith and the richness of human spirit found among the other destitutes. As said by Devata: "Centuries of hardship and strain have not destroyed their faith in human values" (P 24). Even amidst colossal sufferings, the destitutes, who had their hunger for food, exhibit the spirit of humanism. One example can be cited here; while the greed for money and hunger for sex had made many lose their inner spirit, the destitutes in utter ruin possess better compassion than the rich. A

destitute girl, who when each time a rupee was dropped in her begging bowl:

“Then the arms unfolded, stripping the ragged garment from her breast. So she stood bare, the hooded street light full upon her, a bonze image with eyes reacting star ward” (P 184).

It was not for her that she did this but for the other destitutes, who were depending on her for their food. Though it was an act of shame, the destitute girl had risen to a tremendous crisis and on whom so many lives hung. The sanctity of the human spirit is indeed more important than that of the body. An old man, surrendered his ticket for food and thus he exhibits the richness of human spirit. He said that since he had eaten, he could live without food for two weeks and so he wanted his place to be given to someone whose need was more than his. Kajoli's mother handed over the cow, Mangala, to the destitute fisher woman as a gift. The mother had initially refused to sell the cow Mangala though they were suffering from hunger for:

“They would starve and die yet not touch. The rice taken in exchange for their Mangala, Rightly so, for it would be like eating the meat of Mangala, who was no animal to those children (Onu and Kajoli); She had become human for them by their boy association and fondness” (P 118).

Subsequently, she handed over the cow Mangala to the destitute fisher woman, in order to save her and her baby. There was an empty jam tin in the garbage heap. There was a little quantity of remnants in the tin. Onu, the brother of Kajoli wanted to pick up the jam tin, but there was a dog which prevented

him from picking up the tin. A destitute boy, bigger than Onu, on seeing the fight between the dog and Onu, rushed to the spot and fought with the dog. Driving the dog away, the bigger boy picked up the jam tin. He tells Onu: “Lick this side; the other side belongs to my mouth. Lick” (P 171). This reveals his second victory, the first being against the dog. Onu, who initially refused to share the figs with his friends later realized that they too had brothers and sisters. It was only to feed them that they fought with Onu. Realizing this, it is magnanimous gesture indeed. Bhabani by narrating these acts of some of the destitutes reveals their human spirit in them. He asserts, as observed by M.K.Naik, “the ultimate triumph of the human spirit over demeaning circumstantial powers” (Balaramgupta 217).

Hunger for food was one form of hunger prevalent in the society. Another form of hunger-hunger for political freedom was also felt there using the method of non-violence for the fight for national political freedom through the characters Devata and Rahoul. Devata, a truly Gandhian character, stood for love, truth and non-violence and people were found to be the core of his being, his 'blood-and-bone'. He had dedicated his life to village reconstruction mainly through an evening school. This was to educate them and bring in an awareness of their birth right-the right to live as human beings. The reaffirmation of Devata's faith in courage and non-violence can be seen in his speech before his arrest:

“Friends and comrades, do not betray the flag. Do not betray yourselves. There is violence in you 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 death less" (72)

The intensity of patriotism in the villagers was so much that they could not bear the sight of their flag being shot at by a police officer. With his exemplary life of love and sacrifice, Devata shaped the life and ideals of not only Kajoli and the other members of his adopted family, but also those of the people of the entire village. Again it is he who guides and shapes Rahoul's life all along moulding his ideas and stirring a fire in his heart.

In addition to the hunger for food and political freedom there were other people who had their own hungers in the society and those are hunger for wealth, title and sex also projected by Bhabani. Samarendra had his hunger for wealth and title. On learning the news of the war, Samarendra reveals his attitude:

"Tomorrow there will be a storm in the share market. The bulls will carry all before them, the bears, will be no where. Steels will rise steeply, so will gold, which to choose?. The chance of a life time" (P 9).

His idea of starting 'Cheap Rice Limited' also exposes his hunger for wealth. His hunger for titles is brought out by Bhabani through his conversation with his son Rahoul:

"Think of the glory that could be yours Perhaps a title, and you so young. Don't you see? A title! As wealth grew, the

dream grew, Till it was now an obsession. A title For himself. Rai Bahadur. Rai Bahadur Samarendra Basu" (P 34).

While Samarendra Besu had his hunger for wealth and title, Sir.Abalabandhy had his hunger for wealth and sex. In the words of Srivatsava, "Bhattacharya's portrayal of hunger is a concretization in words of his concern for the well-being of humanity" (P 232). To conclude, all these hungers pictured are related to the political and economic situations of Bengal's society.

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