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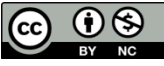
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Social Discrimination in Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers*

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Abstract

This article offers an in-depth analysis of suffering and social discrimination as a central theme in Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers*. The novel portrays different types of socio-gender discrimination and his characters seem to be at war with both the self and society. India must reorient her national life on a new social basis where woman has to sacrifice her comforts in the social rebirth of India. It emphasizes the author's nuanced portrayal of the Indian society during the tumultuous period of the Bengal Famine and the Quit India movement against the backdrop of World War II. Bhattacharya's narrative unveils the complex layers of

discrimination present within the society, accentuated by the crisis. The article commences by explicating the socio-economic disparities highlighted in the novel, examining Bhattacharya's critique of the British colonial government and the elite Indian class. Bhattacharya astutely intertwines these inequalities with the plight of the famine victims, illuminating the juxtaposition between excessive affluence and abject poverty. The author makes a minute scrutiny of the prevailing caste system, elucidating how it perpetuates the vicious cycle of discrimination. Bhattacharya's female characters, often victims of societal norms and expectations, expose the prevalent gender biases. However, they also emerge as symbols of resilience, defying their ordained roles in an oppressive system. The article argues that Bhattacharya uses this setting to indicate that freedom from colonial rule must accompany freedom from socio-cultural biases for India to truly progress. The study also depicts how a woman plays a role of a bridge between culture, custom and conventions. It tries to pose a testimony to the lasting relevance and power of his writing in contemporary discussions on social equity and justice. The innocent preys of hunger grab the role of hunters and try to explore the different reactions and the changed attitude for the same. This paper traces out the cause of human suffering and their possible remedies through a sensitive understanding of the problem of the contemporary Indian society.

Keywords: Alienation, Social discrimination, Social reconstruction, Social rebirth, Sophisticated, Dehumanization

Bhabani Bhattacharya's novels deal with the theme of suffering and social discrimination. His novels portray different types of alienated characters who seem to be at war with both the Self and Society. His novels depict India and its teeming millions bursting with life and substance. He is not a believer in art for the sake of art. For him, all writing serves a social purpose. He has a really positive and purposeful approach. He sees art as a form of life criticism that examines current values and he sees the novel as a sympathetic idiom with a remedial social effect.

His first novel *So Many Hungers* expresses his determined rage to expose to the world the fact that the Bengal famine of 1942-43 was feigned by some greedy Indians and callous British administrators. The novel's background is the historical - the Quit India Movement of 1942 and the man-made famine of Bengal of 1942-43. One can see the different types of hungers in this novel: hunger to survive, hunger for food, hunger for affection, hunger for love, hunger for sacrifice, hunger for name and fame and hunger of the exploiters can be seen narrated touchingly in this novel.

In *So Many Hungers*, the protagonist, Kajoli, undergoes a profound transformation characterized by the disintegration of her ebullient and untainted spirit, which is attributed to the catastrophic famine that forms the backdrop of the narrative. Kajoli, as a character, embodies enduring perseverance and a commendable moral compass despite the adversity she faces. However, her state of euphoria is transient; though she enters into matrimony with

Kishore, this bliss is rendered evanescent within the broader tableau of existence. The impermanence of happiness is poignantly depicted through her experience. Despite the agony and deprivation, Kajoli remains unyielding to the dehumanizing forces of penury and starvation. Her spouse, Kishore, embarks on a journey to Calcutta with aspirations of procuring employment in a mill, but fate is ill-disposed towards him, culminating in his untimely demise at the hands of a military serviceman. His disheartening fate is veiled in secrecy from his kin throughout the narrative.

The novel further explores the disconcerting transformation of individuals into entities devoid of humanity under the immense weight of starvation. The starvation-induced desperation manifests itself in various disquieting forms, such as belligerent disputes amongst famished individuals over minuscule sustenance portions. The narrative hauntingly captures the abhorrent consequences of hunger, wherein a mother is compelled to consume food whilst cradling her lifeless offspring. Further, in a harrowing representation of the extremities of human degradation, a young maiden is driven to expose her person to an assembly of men, as a lamentable exchange for sustenance for herself and her cherished kin. Through these stark depictions, the author brings to light the abyssal depths to which humanity can plummet when faced with insurmountable privation. Here Bhattacharya wishes to convey a message of confidence and hope. One can have a panorama of people emaciated by hunger and finally the triumph of spirit over matter. Devesh Basu, who is the model of Mahatma Gandhi, gives the people a mantra, namely, 'Be strong. Be brave'. In all moments of depression and sorrow, one must not be frustrated but live with hope for a better tomorrow. Since here Bhattacharya personally witnessed the Bengal famine of 1943 and the Quit India Movement of 1942 he has given an authentic record of all that happened. G.P. Sharma speaking in praise of the novel, writes, "A unique quality of this novel is that it portrays realistically the agony of the age it depicts, a quality which perhaps no other novel of this category published till 1947 possesses" (*Nationalism in Indo-Anglian Fiction*, p.227).

There are three factors that go to account for the Bengal famine. (a) The nefarious profit motive of the profiteers who hoard foodgrains for making money, thus creating man-made scarcity. (b) The Second World War (1939 - 45) causing the destruction of the crops; and (c) The British government being completely indifferent to the condition of the people because of the National Movement. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar comments that the novel is "an impeachment of man's inhumanity of man" (*Indian Writing in English*, p.414). H.W. Williams expresses his view, ". . .the war, imprisonment of the national leaders, the cupidity of profiteers political violence and nature's ferocity combine to produce a tragedy" (*Indo-Anglian Literature*, p. 92). Elener Kallinikova remarks "... the writer rathfully brands culprits of the tragedy, the British government or as he himself calls 'cold and inhuman colossus of authority'" (*The Problems of Bhabani Bhattacharya's Novels: A Survey*, p. 102).

In the narrative, the society is depicted as a heterogeneous amalgamation of virtuous and malevolent elements. The laudable individuals within this societal construct exhibit an unwavering propensity to extend succor to those engulfed in the throes of starvation and desperation. The characters of the soldier, who perpetrates an egregious act upon Kajoli, and the military physician, who administers meticulous care to her in the aftermath, serve as

emblematic representations of the multifaceted nature of society. These characters are endowed with an array of humanistic values that bespeak the intrinsic duality of mankind.

Of particular note is the soldier, whose moral compass, despite his initial deplorable actions, is depicted as not being entirely vitiated. His conscience is portrayed as still having the faculty to discern the moral reprehensibility of his conduct. There is a palpable sense of contrition and remorse within him for the transgressions he has committed. This manifestation of an ethical conscience within the soldier character is indicative of the complex layers of humanity and the oscillation between ethical and unethical behaviors that can occur within individuals. Furthermore, Kajoli's mother is depicted as an emblem of steadfast faith in human goodness, which serves as a testament to the enduring optimism that may persist even amidst abject circumstances.

The novel, through these intricate character portrayals, astutely dissects the interplay of various moral and ethical elements within society and illuminates the potential for both the degradation and redemption of human values. The following words presents the situation in realistic manner, "She and her son would surely find a roof for their heads – they would work hard earn their keep, for they were no beggars, she and her son – the people had great kindness in their hearts, like the young Khaki – clad military doctor. There would be food. One would go to school" (*So Many Hungers*, p.152).

Kajoli is an expectant mother. There is no food for next meals, husband and wife sell whatever can be sold. The condition worsens so they find it impossible to live in the village and like thousands of other families, Kajoli sets out on a long and perilous trek to Calcutta. Isolated from her husband and excluded from the society, Kajoli suffers the anguish of a torturous state of loneliness. Her socio-economic poverty alienates her from both her husband and the society. The famine of Bengal drives her to this miserable plight. But poverty fails to bog her down, to stultify her endeavouring and sanguine self. Kajoli persists in her lone and solitary struggle against the ferocious assaults of existence.

Kajoli, the protagonist lives and flourish enduringly and ethically. Suffer and hunger cannot brutalise him. Nor can it degrade and debase him: "Live. We do not fear to live dangerously" (*SMH*, 40). Thus, the individual self doesn't run away from life, but escapes into it. It wrestles with the worn-out societal values and aim to transcend its monotonous limitations through self-sacrifice. According to K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar it is an "algebraic symbol, jostled into an expression of the plight of humanity in Calcutta, in Bengal, in India" (*Indian Writing in English*, p.412).

Ann Duffy rightly states, "The lives of almost all women, regardless of class, caste and age, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability or disability have been distorted by violence and the expectation of violence" (*The Commonwealth Review*, p.152). In Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers* the poor people preserve the sense of moral values even in the face of hunger. Devata says to Rahoul, "I have scores of daughters and sons in Baruni. I am proud of my people. They are not bright and knowing and civilized: like you city-breds; but they are good people. Centuries of hardship and strain have not destroyed their faith in human values" (*SMH*, 24).

A woman who sells betel leaves and also runs a brothel, offers Kajoli for sixty or even eighty rupees for a life of harlotry. At first she spurns the offer, but the escalating misery and suffering of her life makes her toy with the idea of accepting the woman's offer so that she can eke out a living for her mother and Onu. "Why, girl, you can go to Calcutta city; you never thought of that!" ... "You will be looked after. You will find work, big wages! Nothing to worry about ... nothing" (SMH,123). After days of anxious brooding and vacillation, she at length decides to sell herself, to plunge into the flesh trade. Hence her sudden and abrupt departure with the betel – woman one early morning.

Kajoli suffers from the conflict between situational compulsions and moral considerations. She never intends to live a sinful life but her utter poverty urges her to sacrifice her virginity and stoop to moral turpitude. Consequently, it leads to the loss of her identity. Desperate and despair stricken, she becomes sparingly frustrated and has negative emotions of great pain and privation. She turns psychopathic and suffers from rootlessness and meaninglessness. But all is not lost. On her way to the house of ill – fame, she hears the news of her dear Devata going to become the leader of the Satyagrahis. This information transforms the tenor and tempo of her life. Kajoli, instead of going towards the brothel house, goes in a different direction: "This way, said Kajoli, and her feet hurried. 'Which way?'. The woman scowled. 'Hindustan', said the girl briefly" (SMH, 191). Bhattacharya had with him actual paper clippings on the war period atrocities and famine of Bengal, while writing this novel. K.R. Chandrasekharan rightly sums up:

So Many Hungers! is a severe indictment both of the foreign government for its apathy and neglect and of unprincipled Indians who exploit the situation for their own benefit and who are no better than the vultures and jackals 'waiting for the flesh that dies' and sometimes not even waiting till it dies. The novelist's righteous indignation, his sincerity and his comparison are in evidence all through the novel. It undoubtedly represents an artistic success. (Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers: A Study*, p.32)

Kajoli's alienation from herself is the offspring of her needs and necessities. It is a phonotypical manifestation of her inner drives and desires. Her mundane self transforms societal values into something ugly and profane. Unable to adapt herself to the transient social milieu and the wretched plight in which her family is enmeshed, she becomes an easy prey to the rapacity of circumstances. S. Chitra & Dr. K. Balachandran record, "In a marriage, adjustment for the woman means deleting her individuality, herself and her conscience. It affects her entire psyche and behaviour destroying her sensibility and herself" (*Russian Studies in Indian Languages, Literature and Culture Comparison*, p.76).

Kajoli's character, Bhattacharya portrays the dehumanization of man in a mechanical society, where an individual remains alienated from the human aspect of his identity. Kajoli's struggle is not with the materialistic forces of evil and vice but with the social forces of exploitation and degradation. She does not submit wholeheartedly to these forces but fights it out, even at the risk of her own self – effacement.

Rahoul's grandfather Devata becomes a beacon of hope, inspiration and guidance to the villagers: "Do not rush to sell your grain. Think it over" (SMH, 63). He is worried about

the village economy going to pieces in the hands of the Government agents and private entrepreneurs. S.K. Desai observes that the characters “are often frankly presented as symbols, types or representatives of certain classes or social forces” (*Commonwealth Literature: Problems of Response*, p.124).

War is always a symbol of evil in the pacifist vision of Bhattacharya. Here the novelist brings out the war of man towards mankind. India attaining its freedom from a foreign clutch leads its people eventually into the clutches of its exploiters the communal mafia class, pushing them to be the subaltern class and the marginalised lots. (<http://www.telanganauniversity.ac.in>)

In this narrative one could realise that the minds of people stuffed with choices of hunger. Hunger for wealth in Samerandra Bose; hunger for position in Shri. Lakshminathan; the debaucher’s hunger for cuddly girls; woman’s hunger for a secure home and happiness; hunger for food among peasants of Baruni and the ruler’s hunger for power. The dehumanizing and demeaning effects of exploitation in terms of hunger carving to different types are depicted in this novel. C. Paul Verghese rightly explains: “Food is the primary requisite of human dignity; hunger debases and dehumanizes man. That is why hunger is the theme of a large number of Indo-Anglian novels. Bhattacharya has dealt quite concomitant” (*Bansthali Patrika*, p. 84).

So Many Hungers effectively reveals the misery and the anxiety of the destitute out in the street dying out of hunger not only through Kajoli and her family but through the eyes of Rahoul as well. As he goes through the city, he sees the destitute and the hunger debasing themselves just to get something into their stomachs. It brings out the stark realism of exploitation of the Indian mass in terms of famine, peasant insurgency, caste violence and loss of identity amidst the urban and rural society.

Conclusion

Bhattacharya is basically a social philosopher who strives to express the social problems confronting society and the conceivable remedies through his novel. His novels have an extraordinary responsibility in depicting the social and political issues that prevailed after the Indian Independence. He empathises from the point of the people who are greatly affected by the outcomes of Indian Independence.

His novel *So Many Hungers* was the result of his anger and aggression against the brutality of the British government as well as the inability of the Indians who failed to live in unity and discriminated against the people from oppressed class or community. The novel portrays vivid pictures of disparity among the two classes of people the upper and lower. Leaders strive for independence to bring back the feeling of unity and oneness among the people with equality. But Bhattacharya points out the real independence should arise from the mind where there are no boundaries and no social discrimination. He wants a society sans social discrimination for the social rebirth of a sophisticated society where there cannot be alienation discrimination and dehumanization.

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