



Hunger and Exploitation in Bhabani Bhattacharya's

So Many Hungers !



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ABSTRACT :

Bhabani Bhattacharya, a representative writer of contemporary period, is undoubtedly a prominent Indo – English fiction writer. Among the galaxy of Indo – Anglian novelists Bhabani Bhattacharya is reckoned as one of the strongest voices of all times. Bhabani Bhattacharya's So Many Hungers shows the prevalence of hunger and exploitation. Rahoul , the central figure of the novel takes the story forward along with Kajoli. The present novel develops a social theme of scarcity, deficiency and the mental unrest. The novelist deals with the socio- political and economic problems of hunger, poverty, famine, exploitation, war, superstitions, ignorance and other burning contemporary issues of Indian social life. He holds up the mirror to society by highlighting social evils like injustice, exploitation, cruelty and oppression.

KEYWORDS :

Injustice, famine, superstitions, oppression, exploitation, cruelty, hunger

RESEARCH PAPER :

Influenced by the works of John Steinbeck, W. B. Yeats and Roman Rolland, Bhabani Bhattacharya has shown a true picture of Indian society in all his novels. Along with some short stories and translations, he has produced creations like *The Golden Book* (Translations from Tagore, 1932), *Indian Cavalcades* (1944), *So Many Hungers!* (1947), *Music for Mohini* (1952), *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1954), *A Goddess Named Gold* (1960), *Shadows from Ladakh* (1966), *Gandhi the Writer* (1967), *Steel Hawk and other Stories* (1968) and *A dream in Hawaii* (1973).

Published in 1947, *So Many Hungers* is predominantly entwined round the theme of hunger and exploitation in the same way as exhibited in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand and Kamala Markandya. Anand's *Coolie* and *Untouchable* deal with human degradation. It was compelled by hunger and distress of the poor. Kamala Markandaya's novels *Nectar in a Sieve* and *A Handful of Rice* have also focused on the poverty and hunger.

Both Bhattacharya and Markandaya are gratified with presenting a convincing picture of human existence, without allowing themselves to be propagandists.

So Many Hungers, a socio-political novel, is an authentic record of the Bengal famine of 1943 and the Quit India Movement. It was published a couple of months after India's accomplishment of Independence. It is concerned with the freedom struggle with its tensions and conflicts. Bhattacharya has illustrated here the money hunger, the sex hunger, the hunger for food and the hunger for political freedom. The main objective of his writing is to resent the Indian scenario with a view to change it. Being a social realist, he is also engrossed with human predicament. He analyses the real cause of the famine. According to him, natural conditions do not lead to a famine, but it is the inefficiency or lack of will power of the administration. In addition, the black-marketers wanted to accumulate wealth from this critical state. The story centers round the Basus, a peasant family. Bhattacharya sketches the characters of the girl Kajoli, her mother and her brother. Another urban family of Samendra Basu in Calcutta consists of his wife, two sons Rahoul, his wife Manju and Kunal.

These two families make the two components of the plot. All the poor are depicted as the exploited ones but not all the rich are exploiters. While only one member, on the contrary, extends their helping hand to the poor. The stories of these two families run parallel till the end of the novel. Bhattacharya mostly focuses on the current problems

that are concerned with political, social and economic oppression of our nationals. Whenever he sees exploitation, he takes up cudgel to oppose the exploitation. He defends and illuminates the exploited turning into his favorite concerns. The following description in the novel is concerned with hunger in the big city:

He had died for lack of food, so it was reported, and the brief news flashed past almost unnoticed. A mere beggar. No one of them felt that he was a premonition, a symbolic shape of things to come. Other men sank down and died. (104-105)

The novel is full of horrible scenes of hunger and exploitation. It is of the peasants, and of moral degradation of the rich landlords and the capitalists, and of indifference of the Government officials. Bhattacharya shows that hunger and exploitation cannot reduce the true human spirit through the behavior of Devesh Basu. Sufferings can take them away from the moral values but only temporarily.

So Many Hungers also symbolizes the novelist's hunger for human values. The characters have shown full faith in the values of life. Rahoul is the central character of the novel. He believes that sufferings can purify human beings. The aim of Devata's life is the welfare of the people. In fact, he truly shows the ideals of noble life, its dignity and strength. The fight of man against hunger creates two types of images. Man is at his noblest or at his worst. The difficult situation of hungry, poor people expressed by Rahoul represents the difficulties of all the migrants:

Strange how much a human body could go through before life left at last. The first few days the man suffered most. He was mad with hunger. Then he grew listless. He laid himself down. His mouth was too tired for food and he only wanted to be left alone. His eyes died. He wasted to a skeleton, using up whatever shreds of flesh he had anywhere on his body. (153,154).

In fact, Bhattacharya succeeded in fabricating motif of difficult types of hunger into a fabric. It has shown in order to reaffirm a faith in the goodness of human values. The book reveals the two disruptive forces-war and famine. The novel presents a harrowing picture of famine in Bengal and the delight of the profiteers and black marketers, who hoarded rice illegally, are very sympathetically projected, though a bit exaggerated and sentimental.

Bhattacharya has a through grasp of his basic theme of hunger. He has dealt with most of its significant aspects. In this novel, Kajoli and her family are the symbols of poverty and hunger. Bhattacharya has contemplated revolts against the social evils in

the society. Kajoli protests against seduction and Rahoul protests against the exploiters. Bhabani Bhattacharya gives a vivid picture of hunger both in villages and in the great cities of Bengal.

Kunal is Rahoul's younger brother. He is spirited young man. He does not worry about idealism. He is a realist. He also takes life as it comes his way. Though unperturbed by idealism, Kunal too has faith in certain moral values. He helps a needy young man in solving his food problem. The families those live in villages endure a lot due to the hunger. They have no work to do and no food to eat. Food happens to be the primary requisite of human dignity. Ironically, the severity of hunger degrades and brutalizes human beings. Bhattacharya has dealt quite convincingly with the theme of poverty and hunger and the associated theme of human degradation in his very first novel.

Bhattacharya draws the desperate condition of people through the story of Kajoli and her family. According to him, the selfish businessmen like Samarendra Basu and the indifferent attitude of the government are responsible for this situation. Hunger makes the human put aside their affection at the sight of food. The conflict of self throughout the novel has not been with the materialistic forces of evil but the social forces of evil and the social forces of exploitation and degradation.

Kajoli is the peasant girl from Baruni. She lives with her brother, Onu and her mother. Her father and brother are arrested during the Quit movement. These people find it extremely difficult to face the hunger and walk towards Calcutta, the city of dreams. Kajoli leaves her ailing mother. She goes in search of food. Hunger not only drives Kajoli and her family out of their village in search of food but also tries to force her to sell herself. She would go out with her mother to hunt for roots. These are boiled, salted and difficult to digest. Kajoli emphasizes the cruel fate of the rural population of Bengal at the time India faced the Japanese peril in the East. When Kajoli gets piece of bread from a soldier she forgets her mother and brother :

...Instantly she dug her teeth into the lump, swallowing swiftly, not chewing, not lingering for the feel of bread on her tongue, swallowing hard. And the soldier clacked his tongue with pity, for his hearth was worm. He watched her... In a minute the bread was all gone, and then the realization burst upon her that she had eaten all; nothing was left for her brother, her mother nothing.
(144)

Kajoli is married to a young man, Kishore. He decides to go to Calcutta where he hopes to get employment in a mill. The family thinks that he has gone to Calcutta and when he fails to write, they fear that possibly he has been arrested somehow and penalized to jail again. Sri Abalabandhu is a curious character obsessed by sex. He reveals his thoughts on the need of feeding.

The famished ones must feed well before they go into business – feed on rice and ghee and milk, so that their bones may put on meat. Hair to be rid of like, smoothed. A hundred other details. It pays. No better investment in the whole money market (176).

If there is any protagonist in this novel, it is hunger. All the characters represent various types of hungers. People hurt by bombs during those days are promptly taken to hospitals, but nobody bothers about those who are hurt terribly by hunger. When a soldier gives half a rupee to Onu, he is excited and thinks of buying cheap meals. But later he changes his mind and buys flowers for the Goddess. Rahoul is a victim of *So Many Hungers*. He shows his hunger for research and freedom, Kunal has hunger for adventures; Samarendra has hunger for money.

Manju is hungry for money. Devesh Basu, and Kajoli's father and brother have shown hunger for freedom. Rahoul feels pity and sympathy for the poor people. He decides to work for the victims of hunger. Bhattacharya accuses the poor for their situation but he believes that their faith in God gives them courage to fight against hunger. That the father and son are poles apart is noticed when, during draught, Rahoul runs a free kitchen for the poor people. And on the other side, his father plans to sell rice. He goes into black market for that purpose. Rahoul expresses his agony :

. . . The empty stomach was due to no blight of nature, no failure of crops Rahoul knew. It was man-made scarcity, for the harvest had been fair, and even if the Army bought up big stocks, with rationing at the right level there could be food for all. But there was no rationing (105).

Their faith makes them embodiment of robust life full of energy and fearlessness. They are strengthened and not softened by the exploitation. The novel successfully documents the hunger and exploitation through the behavioral patterns of various characters.

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