

## Bhabani Bhattacharya's Novel 'So Many Hungers': A Portrayal of Indian Culture and Its Struggle for Food, Poverty and Freedom

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### Abstract

The theme of Bhattacharya's novels is mainly the existing pressing problems of India especially the rural India before and after the Independence. All his novels belong to the special category of novels called Indo-Anglian political novels. The form of these novels may be alien yet their themes and treatment, character delineation, plot construction and the complete content is Indian. In this paper I would like to present Bhabani Bhattacharya's heed towards Indian Culture and its struggle for food, poverty and freedom in his novel *So Many Hungers*. One can very well find the reflection of Indian culture, tradition and struggle in it.

**Keywords:** Pressing problem, Rural India, Alien, Character delineation.

### INTRODUCTION

Bhattacharya's novel *So Many Hungers* were published in 1947 and the year is momentous in the history of India. Freedom is the central theme of the novel. Regarding its theme, critic G P Sharma writes: "Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers*, is not only the last political novel about the freedom struggle of India but also one of the best of this category?" Presentation of revolutionary motif of the Indian people, people's involvement in the freedom movement and freedom struggle, national uprising against the alien rule and the unique influence of Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru on the movement and its events, delineation of characters and content of thought and action, construction of plot etc. are all typically Indian. The novelist has a keen eye to observe and exploit the minutest details from the Indian culture, tradition and religious beliefs. His knowledge of Indian tradition and moral religious values and practices is simply amazing. He has used this knowledge so artistically that they (culture, tradition and religion) become the part and parcel of the novel. In this respect critic K.K. Sharma has rightly commented -- that all his novels embody and put forth "a transparently positive vision of life."

### HUMAN AGONY & SUFFERING

The cleansing power of suffering and human agony is typical to Indian culture and religion. Indian tradition and religious practice -- endorse it. Similarly, Devata, the grandfather of Rahoul, comments in the novel *So Many Hungers* that the farmers are good human beings because "Centuries of hardship and strain have not destroyed their faith in human values."

In this novel Bhattacharya refers to the peoples' hunger for food and for freedom--- the two pressing problems of India at the momentous moment of India. And this twofold hunger is dealt with as the central theme of his first novel. The novelist has successfully and artistically inter-twisted the historic Bengal famine of 1943 and the Quit India Movement of 1942. He makes relevant references to these dual aspects---- so the song of Kishore with deep sense and meaning:

"I Know, I know, beloved,  
Not in this life will hungers be sated  
I know, I know, beloved."

Then, at the end of the novel, Tagore's song is also very significant:

"The more they tighten the chains,  
The more the chains loosen."

A close understanding and analysis of the novel will show that the title *So Many Hungers* is highly justified. The novel represents many hungers of man ---food, love, affection, lust, money, name and fame, political freedom, imperial expansion, human dignity, self respect etc. all interweaves together is the central theme of the novel. The very title of the novel is very justified and suggestive of all these hungers of man. The man-made famine of Bengal and man's insatiable hunger for wealth and many are main motifs of the novel. This motif is brought out against the back drop of the Quit India Movement and Gandhiji's Satyagrah for total freedom of the country. The two themes of the novel are shown through the two families of Kajoli and Rahoul and the various events inter-mixed. The plot of the novel is very simple yet coherent weaving out successfully the two main strands in the novel. The story of Rahoul's family and peasant girl Kajoli's family are well united and interwoven with the main themes of the novel i.e. the historic famine and the freedom movement of the country. Devish Basu is an important character in the novel as he happens to join the two families together i.e. of

Rahoul and Kajoli Devish Basu lives in the village Baruni with the family of Kajoli leaving behind the family of this son and grandsons rolling in the luxury of the city life. He is the source of inspiration to both the peasant girl kajoli and the city lad Rahoul. In this respect the critic K.R. Chandrasekharan has rightly and aptly observed:

“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 people who become victims of a famine, which was not an act of God, but which was brought about by the rapacity and selfishness of profiteers and the indifference of an alien government.”

At one level, *So Many Hungers* is the story of Rahoul, an astrophysicist in the University of Calcutta and the grandson of Devish Basu. The story unfolds his gradual development as a freedom fighter and follower of Gandhiji. K.R. Chandrasekharan again remarks about Rahoul in the following words:

“He is a staunch realist and nationalist and he cannot forget the hypocrisy of the foreign rulers who talk about the four freedoms which, so far as India is concerned, do not include the freedom to be free.”

### **STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM**

In the opening of the novel, Rahoul is busy with his studies and research at Cambridge University and he has nothing to do with India. But later on the historic famine of Bengal and subsequent deaths of millions of people make him very upset. But his lofty ideals and refined views of life and human existence make him an ideal man. He wants to bring social change on the basis of his optimistic and ideal view of life and society.

The second chapter of the novel starts with a bright new day symbolizing his optimism about man and society. He is full of the inner confidence that sacrifice of men and women will not go astray and bring change in Bengal in the wake of the Bengal famine and the death of millions of people due to it. So in spite of the fact that he is a son of a rich trade man and profiteer, he offers free help to the poor and needy people suffering from a great man-made human tragedy. His younger brother Kunal is also very lovable and affectionate character; like his brother Rahoul, Kunal too is a spirited and adventurous young man embodying noble ideals and cheerful disposition but his presence is limited to only in the earlier part of the novel. Nothing is heard about him after his leaving home for service in North Africa and Italy as an army officer.

Rahoul’s father Samrendra Basu, a lawyer by profession, is just the opposite of Devish Basu. Semrendra Basu’s character in the novel is pitted against the character of Devish Basu on the one hand and Rahoul and Kunal on the other hand. He is very shrewd and greedy person and has no feeling for the nation or society. His only aim is to amass huge wealth, name and fame by pleasing the British rulers. His trade company named ‘Cheap Rice Ltd’ collects rice from the farmers on cheap rate and boards it to sale it later on high prices. He is very proud of his sons but towards the end of the novel his dreams are shattered when the report of Kunal missing in Italy and the news of Rahoul’s arrest come simultaneously to him in connection with the historic Quit India Movement. His father Devish Basu, popularly known as Devata is a prototype of Gandhiji himself. He is beloved and venerated by the people of Baruni village. He has infused Rahoul with trust in existence. In fact the character portrayal of Dervish Basu is based on Gandhiji and represents his ideals of life with all its dignity, courage and strength of truth and moral values. He always thinks about the welfare of the villagers. For the sake of the villagers and society in general, he does not care for his own son and his own family- interest. He advises the villagers not to sell rice to the government agents and thus tries to save them from their exploitation at the hands for tradesmen and hoarders of rice. The village Baruni is a miniature India and as such it agitates and gathers momentum and fervous in the wake of Gandhiji’s famous quit India movement. Dervesh Basu, like a true follower of Gandhiji urges the people of the village not to pay taxes to the unjust ruler.

The story of the peasant girl Kajoli comes in to represent another hunger in the novel. Her story is brought into focus on the issue of poverty, destitution and hunger for food caused by the man made famine. Kajoli’s father and brother Kanu are arrested for their joining the Civil Disobedience Movement. But Devish Basu or Devata adopts Kajoli’s mother as his daughter and takes care of the family in the absence of her father and brother. Thus, now, he acts their family head and helps them to face the new situation they are in. He also encourages the people in the freedom struggle by advising them not to resort to violence and face the situation by becoming strong, true and deathless. Then later on, Devata is also arrested for taking part in the movement and taken to Dehradun jail. Devata, strongly protests his arrest and starts a fast unto death in the jail itself in the mid of the historic Quit India Movement. Thus, the story of novel *So Many Hungers* Works on two levels--- the historic Quit India Movement and the unfortunate Bengal Famine with references to the nationwide agitation of Gandhiji and the unjust rule of the Britishers on one hand and the hunger, destitution, death and sufferings of the people on the other hand in the wake of Bengal famine.

### **PORRAYAL OF HIGHLY IDEALIZED INDIAN WOMEN**

Through the character of Kajoli, Bhattacharya has presented the characteristic portrayal of a highly idealized Indian woman. She represents the image of new woman as heralded by Gandhian thought and our nationalist movement. According to Kh. Kunjuo Singh, Kajoli is:

“...the novelist main focus and conveyer of his message, and incarnation of faith in the nobleness and fullness of life inheriting the fundamental values and manners of India, un affected and undefiled by modern attitudes and notions.”

The plot of the novel is a composite one and the stories of Rahoul and Kajoli are intermixed to expose the two themes of the novel – freedom and hunger. Rahoul is the key figure of the novel as he represents the youth of India –educated progressive and strong. Like other youths he wants to see India free from the foreign rule of the British and make the people happy. This mind has been clearly impressed by his grandfather’s Gandhian ideals and he joins the people to take part in the nationalist movement. Bhattacharya successfully portrays a complete change in the personality of Rahoul under the influence of movement final academic city elite to a traditional devoted freedom fighter. After meeting his grandfather in the central jail of Dehradun, Rahoul plunges into the historic Quit India Movement and thus fights against the unjust rule of the British in India. One day, he is also arrested and taken to jail. At the prison gate he is joined by other prisoners. Together, they all sing Tagor’s memorable song,” The more they tighten the chains, the more the chains loosen.” The novel’ ends with the close of Rahoul’s story as he seeks voluntary imprisonment for the country freedom.

The plot of the novel is very composite in nature and the story of Rahoul with the theme of political freedom is inter mixed with that of Kajoli and her family suffering hunger and destitution in the wake of Bengal famine. The Tragedy of the innocent Kajoli family is the premonition and symbolic shape of devastation affecting the whole of Bengal. The novel is full of many scenes of poverty and destitution in the wake of Bengal famine and the callous attitude of the government officials. The fishing boats are destroyed, villagers are evacuated and peasants are forced to sell their grains to the government agents and greedy hoarders and profiteers. The common people are thus reduced to paupers whose life becomes a tale of sorrow and pain. The end of one tale is the beginning of another tale. Men, women and children of Bengal sink down and die due to the acute shortage of food in the villages of Bengal. The poor and destitute humanity begins its march towards the rich city of Calcutta in search of food and employment. In such a difficult situation Kajoli marries a Youngman named Kishore. But her happiness is short lived as Kishore is killed in a railway accident on his way to Calcutta. By this time Kajoli is five months pregnant. She along with the family—mother and younger brothers begin to live on roots, figs and whatever they can get in the name of food. They start selling their little family belongings including the cow –bell. The mother offers the family cow to a fisher woman to save the life of the starving child. Later on, finding no possibility to live in the village, Kajoli, her mother and little brother Onu also join the cavalcade of starving masses towards Calcutta.

### **PATHETIC AND HELPLESS CONDITION**

In the novel, Bhattacharya creates scenes after scenes which depict the helplessness and pathetic condition of the villagers, peasants and laboures leaving their homes and marching towards the big city in search of food and jobs--- millions of men, women and children rendered homeless and penniless by this calamity. The sufferings met by Kajoli and her family on her way to Calcutta are not theirs only but of all those people who pour into the city in search of food and help. On the way, Kajoli is raped by sexually starving soldier leaving her to bleed helplessly. In this condition, a jackal attempts to eat up Kajoli but her younger brother Onu somehow drives it away. She is sent to a hospital by the repentant soldiers and thus somehow her life is saved. Her aged mother and Onu are forced to earn their living through begging on the streets of the city. The city itself presents the pathetic plight of the poor people more and more people come to the city in search of food and job and there is no body to help them. Even the government officials do nothing to overcome the man made crisis. At times, hungry people eat what the animals refuse to take. In this struggle for food, animal’s often prove strongest than the weak suffering folk. Boys fight with boys for scrap of food.

After her discharge from the hospital Kajoli finds it difficult to maintain her family in these circumstances and even decides to go to a brothel. But on the way she hears the news paper vendor’s voice shorting about Devata’s first unto death in the prison at Dehradun. She is, thus, reminded of the words of Devata and so decides to earn an honest living by becoming a newspaper vendor in the city.

In this regard, the words of Kh. Kunjo Singh are worth quoting:

“Indeed, the novel unfolds the mental agonies of the people during the war period because of the misrule and wrong policies of the unfavorable British government. The novel deals with the destiny of a whole populace and not that of an individual. Such aspects of disintegration and social cataclysm is shown in Boris Pasternak’s Dr. Zhivago.”

### **CONCLUSION**

On the whole, his novels are remarkable for their social realism and their honest treatment of themes, problems of contemporary India. India’s social realism, problems, poverty, destitution and hunger find a successful depiction in them. India, all its rich heritage social, historical and geographical variety, to get focused in his novels. As a novelist he is true to his purpose of writing and his character delineation and presentation of Indian

people's problems and challenges is artistic and in-depth. His mastery and control over the incidents and events of the novel is really marvellous and enchanting. This adds to his success as a novelist and social realist of present day India.

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