



So Many Hungers! - Still an Existing Reality in the Country (In Reference to Bhabani Bhattacharya's Novel, 'So Many Hungers')

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ABSTRACT

Bhabani Bhattacharya's 'So Many Hungers!' is a story about different hungers of the people representing different sections of the country during pre-independence. These hungers demonstrate their spiritual and psychological statuses. As other novels of the period, this novel also highlights a theme of social importance. The author deals in detail with the social setting of the time, with his own style of objective treatment. The famine of 1943 brings so many hungers, the hunger for food, money and sex, the exploitation of man by man seemed to him to have become the creed of the day. The prevailing social conditions also worked upon the growing mind of Bhattacharya, and inspired him to create his first novel. The famine of 1943 which stalked through the scared soil of Bengal, was one of the such events as he himself confesses: "Then the great famine swept down upon Bengal. The emotional stirrings I felt (more than two million men, women and children died of slow starvation amid a man — made scarcity) were a sheer compulsion to creativity". The result was the novel 'So Many Hungers!.' The novel is regarded as a socio-political novel because it deals with the social, political and economical history of the pre-independent India.

The characters of the novel represent different types of hungers prevalent in the Indian society at the time when the country faced a great famine. But the characters are also individuals because they have their own styles of behavior in different situations. The characters also seem to belong to all ages. It is very much clear when the relevance of the novel is taken into consideration. The issues raised in the novel are

still present in the current Indian society. This research paper presents the very subject of discussion on the relevance of the social themes raised in the novel to the present day situations in India. The novel is full of realistic but pathetic scenes that they haunt the reader to a great extent. And one may be surprised to find the same situations in the country, and in which the people are still living, even after seventy-five years. The aim of this paper is also to highlight those situations faced in every walk of life in the independent India.

Keywords: Hungers, hard core reality, hell, human values, Samaritan, heaven

Introduction :

Bhabani Bhattacharya is a renowned writer of Indian writing in English, known for his marked realism. His novels portray the Indian society with haughty treatment of the themes pertaining to the flaws and misgivings in the structure of that society. Though the details presented in the novel, are in a way, hard for digestion, they must be received with no cynical perception. He believes that art is not necessarily for art's sake and insists on its social purpose, of the writer's own choice. In his early phase as a novelist, he focused his attention on the atrocious conditions that prevailed in Bengal during the famine of 1943. His career apparently began under the influence of Mulk Raj Anand. In almost all his works, Bhabani Bhattacharya deals with various aspects of Indian life. He deals with the

social, religious, economic, political and even psychological aspects of Indian life. The diversified elements of Indian society are portrayed and concluded in unity. He has made his mark as a translator, a creative historian, a biographer, a storyteller and finally a novelist. His works mainly focus on the happenings of the early twentieth century in India.

Shyamala Rao remarks: "Bhattacharya presents the different aspects of Indian life—clash between the past and the present, caste and reform, man and machine, tradition and modernity, mysticism and materialism, science and superstition, myth and reality and individual and society".

Like other great Indian novelists, his works present him as a revolutionary social writer. As a sociologist, Bhabani Bhattacharya identifies and analyses the issues and problems of the society. As a committed artist, he identifies himself with the society and has an inner urge to express the contemporary issues to create awareness in the people. As a psychologist, he deals with a variety of social problems and issues, analyzing them through his characters in day to day situation. He peeps into the minds of character and portrays them in a realistic manner.

About Bhabani Bhattacharya's art H. G. S. Arulandram rightly points out: "A novelist then for Bhattacharya is a man among men, gifted with an extra measure of sensitivity and keen powers of observation. What he sees around him creates an inner urge, a compelling need to express himself then and only then a novel is born."

Novel and its Relevance :

Bhabhani Bhattacharya's first novel, *So Many Hungers!* (1947), is one of the finest pieces of creative writing born out of the agonised torment of body and spirit endured by the sacred soil of Bengal during the hideous famine years and the early stages of the Second World War. The novelist shows the unfortunate predicament of Bengal by portraying the ups and downs in the life of two families- one of Samarendra Bose, an affluent barrister and businessman of Calcutta and the other of a peasant of Baruni, whose soul is given to song and wandering. The two families are linked by their contact with the saintly figure of an aged nationalist leader, Devesh Bose (father of Samrendra Bose), who is worshipped by the villagers of Baruni as God because "the divine

bliss fills his heart with riches." He is a true Gandhian and has been deep in Civil Disobedience Movement and has courted imprisonment several times. He loves villagers and is proud of them. When many other characters in the novel symbolize a hard core reality of the pessimistic side of country 's sociopolitical scene, Devesh symbolizes the optimistic side of the same.

Devesh Bose's son Samerandra Bose, is quite opposite in nature and ways of life to his saintly father. His only aim in life is to please his British rulers, earn glamorous titles from them and accumulate more money. To him the war is veritable windfall. He treats it as the chance of life-time. As war progresses, he collects rice and hoards it and later on sells it at very high price. He has his plans for his eldest son, Rahoul too. He is proud of son's D.Sc. degree in Astrophysics from Cambridge University and wants him to be on the highest post of technical Adviser in New Delhi so that he may use scientific knowledge to invent a highly destructive weapon. This was the darkest side of a person who plotted against his fellow human beings and his mother land. The callousness of this character really disappoints the readers. But a clear ray of hope found in his son's character soothes us. Rahoul's heart is, however, set elsewhere. Having come under the influence of his grand-father earlier, he is drawn towards Gandhiji's Non-Cooperation Movement. While pretending to research on the Death Ray, he works secretly for the Quit India Movement.

As the clouds of war envelop the world by their darkness and scarcity of food and famine stare the people of Bengal in the face, the life of town as well as of village, deviates from its traditional grooves and undergoes sudden and far-reaching changes. The crisis of Europe overtakes Bengal and disrupts its moral life. As the war runs the third year of its dismal course, the villagers of Baruni begin to experience its heavy burden. Their guide, Devata, and other congress workers of the village along with the mendicant and his eldest son, Kanu, are arrested during the Quit India Movement. The fishing boats of the villagers are seized by the Government for the use of military personnel and peasants are forced to sell their grain to the agents of the imperialist government and greedy hoarders. The real but very pathetic conditions of the country men depicted in the novel arouse in us sympathy towards the suppressed. Then the real tragedy will follow.

As the famine stalks through the land, villagers begin to die of hunger. The destitute leave their villages and march towards big cities in the hope of getting food. The mendicant's daughter, Kajoli, her mother and her little brother, Anu also join this endless cavalcade of starving masses. On the way, they come across tired and famished skeletons groaning in pain while jackals crouch and eat their bodies. Vultures circle over the dead bodies and make a prey of human flesh. Facing numerous difficulties and hardships, they reach Calcutta. Kajoli and her mother make a vain attempt to search for Rahoul and they join the destitutes crowded on the roads and payments. They beg for their food but find it difficult to satisfy their hunger. When unable to fight against hunger, kajoli's mother and brother fall ill, she thinks of earning money by selling her shame. But as she goes to the betel woman who keeps a brothel, she hears the newspaper vendors shouting about Devata's fast unto death in the prison house and immediately his message to his people to be strong, true and deathless in the face of their miseries, begins to ring in her ears: "Friends and comrades, do not betray flag. Be true. Be deathless. Bande Matram." How could she, dadu's granddaughter, demean herself, her grand-father and her flag? Stricken by deep remorse, kajoli decides to earn an honest living by turning a newspaper vendor.

The fateful morning on which Kajoli makes her momentous decision, Samarendra Bose receives the news that his youngest son, Capt. Kunal of Indian Artillery, has been listed as missing and his eldest son Rahoul been arrested. Simultaneously the radio announces in its morning news that he has been awarded the title of the "Companion of the Indian Empire." The Empire that claimed both of his sons, the broken-hearted Samarendra Bose reflects gloomily and drops down lifeless. It was an utter dejection for his unreasonable wishes and an appropriate punishment pronounced by God for his essentially evil natured acts.

The author then discusses in detail different hungers that move men and women the world over, such as the soul's hunger for the absolute, a subject nation's hunger for freedom, a ruler's hunger for power, a greedy man's hunger for wealth and titles, a debauch's hunger for cuddling girls, and most importantly the poor men's hunger for food. Bhabhani Bhattacharya gives a very detailed, graphic and moving picture of human hunger and the heavy loss of lives resulting from it. Famine shows distressing pictures of human sufferings as men have never

witnessed before. Mother, unable to bear the death by starvation of their children, bury them alive. Men, keenly waiting for their turn to get food, breathe their last the moment food is poured in their bowls. Destitute and dogs fight for possession of the rich city's ten thousand rubbish heaps, in which scraps of rotting food lie buried.

Juxtaposed with this woeful tale of man's hunger for food is that hateful sight of man's callous greed for wealth. While the granaries of the selfish and greedy capitalists and black marketers like Shri Lakshminathan and Samrendra Bose abound in rice, innumerable human beings die for want of it. While the restaurants of the rich city, Calcutta, buzz with life and music and bulge with food, destitutes in the nearby lanes and pavements lie sick and helpless and die for hunger. In this world of wealthy traders, there prevails a callous disregard of all codes of civilized humanity. It is a picture of mad world in which vice and self-interest are flauntingly successful and corruption universally prevalent. The symbol of this inferno is Shri Lakshminathan, a leering debauch, a big businessman who fattens on black market and shamelessly gloats over the sorry predicament of helpless destitute girls forced by circumstances to sell their bodies.

If the famine exposes the sordidness and meanness of human soul, it also brings on the surface of its latent nobleness. There are moments when the helpless and famished destitutes rise above their bodily infirmities and show a hidden core of sympathy, nobility and heroism. A famished boy, who has fought against a dog to procure a jam tin lying in the dustbin, holds out the treasure to be shared by a youngster who looks with wistful eyes towards him. A peasant girl abuse the body's sanctity to feed starving destitutes, who call her mother. It is these sights of richness of human spirit that hold out before us hope for man's survival in spite of all the bludgeoning he has to endure at the hands of nature and fellow beings.

M. K. Bhatnagar aptly remarks: "Bhattacharya's characters mark the triumph of the artist in their creator. They are not bundles of ideological platitudes, grinding their marker's axe, but mortals who have psychological compulsion to adopt a particular course of action."

The present novel is born out of the Bengal Famine and the sufferings of the millions of people. Like every great writer, Bhabani Bhattacharya is

obsessed by a theme, a personal and compelling experience. His central preoccupation with the theme of hunger is evident in his novel. The Bengal famine seized his mind, and hunger in one form or another has haunted him. He regards hunger, external and internal as the fundamental reality of life. Bhattacharya has a thorough grasp of his basic theme of hunger, and has dealt with most of its significant aspects and varieties. His fiction is based upon man's hunger for food and political freedom. But it also gives adequate consideration to other forms of human hunger – viz., hunger of eternal ethical values; hunger for a happier life for the common people; hunger for sex and wealth without any concern for moral and social codes and decency; hunger for social prestige; title, riches and prosperity of one's children. In a word, his fictional work fully explores and communicates his theme of hunger. Bhattacharya is a novelist of social vision. In his novels, there are number of incidents that everyone faces, observes and reacts in day to day life. The nature of human beings is presented through his first hand observation. From the pathetic condition of Indian peasant to the spiritual discourses of Indian Yogi, there is an element of naturalism. He is a realist and is a visionary at the same time. He depicts the eye in the country as he has seen it with his eyes. One finds the humanistic concerns and reformist zeal of Bhabani Bhattacharya in full play in his maiden venture. In 'So Many Hungers!', he presents a threadbare analysis of a sickening state of affairs. The freedom movement and the Second World War also make their presence felt in the course of the novel. The stark realities relating to the famine are depicted in it with all their macabre details. The author throws a flood of light on the ignorance, hypocrisy, poverty, the exploitation of the poor and the evil of prostitution that afflicted the society of his time. He concludes the novel with a hope for a better future of the society, revealing a positive vision of life.

While considering the relevance of the novel to the present day situations of our country, a certain every day happenings should be taken into account for our study. As we witness, to our disappointment, we find more or less the same situations in our country even after seventy-five years of independence. A section of people in the country see no sun rises in their huts. They still take life giving risks for a single slice of

bread. Many people have no shelter, for they are forced to live on the footpaths, at the mercy of the authorities of the government. It is a real curse upon them, it is a hunger for a life - a life with bare minimums, food and shelter. When we read in the newspapers, a son killing his father for a five hundred rupee note, we see the degradation of relationships and human values. It is a hunger for comfort or luxury. Yet another incident of rape of a girl in the heart of the country 's capital raises questions about their safety. It is dehumanized existence of the very humans. But it is still an irrational hunger for sex. When we hear about clashes in the name of religion or caste, we think it a diminished form of civilization, or man unlearn the very essence of social life, but it is, in hiding, a hunger of a political party or a politician for his power. Still there are many an instance in which the people who are losing their lives for the safety of their fellow country men - it is the soldiers who have hunger for selfless service for their country. When heard about the people handing over the organs of their dead relative to the needy, it is understood as their hunger for humanity. The people donating their lifetime earnings for the welfare of the society and the country, it is in other words, a hunger for being good samaritans. The very existence of mankind is dependent upon the selfless actions of such good human beings. They really have a hunger for goodness. It is no wonder that a man becomes a type of human according to his own perceptions of the world and his own response to it. Various people respond to the situations in various ways. Some positively, the others negatively. Some try to swindle and the others may try to help. The Indian society, or any other society for that matter, is a bundle of contradictions. Though it may look as a wonder, India is a country with many such contradictions. The country has seen a number of attacks and foreign rules and still it survives with its own cultural roots and traditional bonds. The callousness that is seen to an outsider may need not actually be generalized. The views of the author of this novel on the Indian society should not shock the reader because he is seen more as an optimist than as a mere observer. He hails people who have a hunger for doing good to the society. My article also ends on an optimistic note : Let there be many more such hungers for the good, and hungers for great things that can make life on earth beautiful, let us hope for such a heaven of freedom into which our country will awake.

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