



SOCIO-POLITICAL ELEMENTS IN BHABANI BHATTACHARYA'S 'SO MANY HUNGERS!'

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ABSTRACT

Bhabani Bhattacharya is well-known among Indian writers in English for his use of art as a medium for achieving social reforms. Being the writer of transitional period in the Indian Socio-Political history, Bhattacharya, through his writings proves himself to be the product of his age. He has depicted the socio-political and economic changes in India on the background of the contemporary historical events and social conditions. Bhattacharya has written six novels. They are : So Many Hungers! (1947), Music for Mohini (1952), He Who Rides a Tiger (1954), A Goddess Named Gold (1960), Shadow from Ladakh (1966) and A Dream in Hawaii (1978). Bhattacharya, in each of his novels gives an account of various customs, conventions, superstitious and oddities present in the Indian society without commenting on their Merits or demerits. Bhattacharya's education, travels and experiences as a journalist shaped his vision of life. It helped him to write exhaustively on social problems. He was acutely aware of the social , political and cultural problems of the then society , so that he could emphatically voice the voiceless of the society.

Delineation of Dalit life: As Dhasal lived and experienced the destitute life of underworld he presented it in very firing words in his poetry and attracted the attention of readers'. He was born in a Dalit caste and grew up in dire poverty. He spent his childhood in Goliatha, a red light district in Mumbai, where his father worked for butcher. While talking about his very birth as an orphan in a pathetic condition he says in the poem,' On the Way of Dargah'-

'So many Hungers!' is a socio-political novel set against the background of Bengal famine of 1943 and Quit India Movement of 1942. The central theme of the novel is man's hunger for food and political freedom. The story has two plots 1) The story of Samarendra Basu's family with young Rahoul as the main figure and 2) The story of a young girl, Kajoli who belongs to a peasant family. The ovel is a tragic story of the largely man-made hunger that took a toll of two million innocent people in Calcutta and Bengal. The man made famine of 1943 was the result of hoarding foodgrains by the Britishers for the white soldiers and leaving the poor Indians on air for dying and becoming the prey of vultures and Jackals.

The exclamation mark of the end of the title of the novel 'So many Hungers!' denotes the writer's bewilderment at the multiplicity of hungers. Hunger for political freedom (in the case



of freedom fighters) Hunger for imperial expansion (in case of the axis powers) Hunger for money (in case of the capitalists who create artificial food scarcity by hoarding rice) Hunger for food (in case of the starving Bengali Poor People) Hunger for sex (in the particular case of sex starved soldier who rapes the destitute rustic girl and in a general of those who frequent the Calcutta brothels) Hunger for human dignity and self respect (in case of Kajoli, who rejects the brothel) and Hunger as a spiritual weapon employed by the freedom fighters. Of these several hungers the novelist has succeeded in presenting hunger for food and the scenes depicting the havoc wrought by the famine among the rural poor in Bengal constitute some of the finest examples of social elements in the novel.

The novel records the political and social condition of the pre-independence society minutely. Samarendra Basu is a lawyer by profession. He has two sons – Rahoul and Kunal. Rahul has a strong patriotic feeling. Samarendra Basu is a shrewd and money minded person. His aim in life is to please the British rulers and to earn titles. He buys rice at a very low price from the villagers and hoards it. And later he sells it at a very high price. He wants his son Rahoul to do a job as Technical Advisor in New Delhi. However his dreams are shattered when he comes to know that Rahoul has been arrested for joining the Quit India Movement and Kunal goes missing in Italy. Samarendra's father Devesh Basu, popularly known as Devata, due to his love for the common people is a Gandhian Character. Devata encourages the villagers to take part in the Quit India Movement. He believes in non-violence. He always thinks of the welfare of the villagers and not to sell their rice to the government agents. He lives in a village Baruni with Kajoli and her family. Kajoli's father and brother Kanu have been arrested for their participation in Civil Disobedience Movement. Started by Mahatma Gandhi. Devata shares food with them and now he becomes the head of the family. Devata was also arrested, however he asked the villagers to be strong and truthful. Kajoli is also the victim of the man-made famine. Kajoli and her family have to face the terrible pangs of starvation after the arrest of Devata. When she meets an Indian soldier and asks him for food, he gives her bread, which she gulps without thinking of her brother and mother and just in return for one piece of bread the soldier rapes her.

However the two satisfy the hunger of each other for she has the hunger for food and he has the hunger for sex. It was the time when hungry people start having those things which the animals refused to have. A six year old girl is sold to procurer for only ten silver rupees. There is a scene in which an empty jam tin is dug out by Onu from a rubbish heap and the tin is snatched by a bigger boy. In order to ward off starvation, people have to live on roots, figs, and whatever else their luck could bring them. Vultures eat them alive as they do not have enough strength to shoe them off. Kajoli decides to become a prostitute, but she is finally saved from it.

The novel vividly portrays the sufferings of the common people during the war. The wild fire of the Second World War was spreading all over the world, engulfing nations one by one. It took no time to reach India and strangle the Indian soil in its clutches, Bengal was apprehending violence on her own soil. The Japanese were about to attack from the sea. As a



protective measure, the government destroyed all the boats of the villagers along the coast. These boats were the only means for the villagers to earn their bread. Moreover the villagers were led to sell grains to the agents of the imperialist government, greedy merchants and hoarders. War arrived as an opportunity to the blood suckers businessmen like Samarendra Basu and Sir Ablabandhu. The hunger for money is observed here on the part of merchants on the one hand and hunger for food for the people on the other hand. Thus Bhabani Bhattacharya introduces us so many hungers that never get fulfilled. The villagers migrate to the big cities, dreaming of getting good job. However the same vultures and jackals of the countryside who feed themselves on their miseries also exist in the city. In the countryside they catch the fish and crabs to eat, here in the city they are compelled to catch the rats to survive. In the country side they search their food through jungles and meadows. In the city the garbage cans become their food bowls. Still the hunger for food cannot be fulfilled. A large number of people migrated from villages to the cities fail to survive.

As the Second World War broke out the British government wanted India to help them. Indian leaders were ready to help but on the condition of India's freedom. However when the British were confronting defeat against the superior armed might of Germany, India was not sure about British keeping their promise. So the congress demanded the establishment of provisional national government at the centre. Obviously, British turned down their demand and Indian national congress launched the Civil Disobedience Movement in October, 1940. British government took it very casual as such revolt for freedom happened in India earlier also which was very cruelly trampled by them. As a result congress demanded an immediate end of the British rule and adopted the Quit India Resolution in August 1942. The viceroy of India banned the congress and initiated drastic repressive measures. The prominent leaders like Mahatma Gandhi were imprisoned. This added the fuel in the revolt. For Gandhi was the most inspiring figure for many Indians to fight against the British. Truth and non-violence became the weapons in the hands of Indians like Devesh Babu and his grandson, Rahoul, which helped to instil patriotic zeal and spirit of sacrifice for the cause of the freedom of the country Devesh Babu, like Gandhi was Devata for Indians who underwent imprisonment several times for participation in freedom movement. He very much sounds like Gandhiji when he says that his fight is not with the people of England but with their ruthless rulers who hold Indians in subjugation for their narrow interests.

The observations of the writer seem to be applicable even after 67 years of Independence of India. Money has become the benefactor for those who do not have the potential to get the jobs. One can get government jobs by greasing the palms of officials secretly. Many incidents are seen as sting operation conducted by private agencies. The market of the fake degrees of doctors, engineers is in its harvest nowadays. Even our so called great politicians are accused in case of acquiring fake degrees. The bundles of notes in crores are waved in the house of Parliament by the oppositions to expose the act of ruling party in buying their votes in favour of them. The novelist has tried to unveil the fake face of the politicians and officials through 'So Many Hungers!'



Thus, the picture that Bhattacharya presents in the novel seems to be very ghastly. Its heart-rendering sights of human miseries sufferings move us to tears. At the same time it conveys to us the assertion of life amidst hunger, the flickering of light in the ashes. Rahoul joins the freedom struggle and helps the destitute suffering from famine Kajoli who decide to sell herself for the sake of food, moves back and remembers Devata's word never betray yourself, she decides to earn food by doing hard work honestly. The novelist has given an optimistic message here. The characters of the novel live on the hope and live for hope. Their dark and gloomy life has a silver lining too.

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