



## DECEITFUL STARVATION AND MUDDLED SCENARIOS IN BHABANI BHATTACHARYA'S *SO MANY HUNGERS*

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### ABSTRACT

*Most of Bhabani Bhattacharya's novels deal with the contemporary human problems with a human heart. His major concern in his works is with the forces which are conducive to life. Chandrasekharan (1974:2) says that Bhabani "explores the various levels and dimensions of human growth and individual freedom and projects in his works the confrontation between the humanistic and anti-humanistic values." Besides it, Bhabani's novels focused on the problems of contemporary issues such as famines. The historical incidents mainly the Quit India Movement and the Bengal famine of 1942-43 had made deep impression on the mind of Bhabani Bhattacharya. This is the enormous motivation to his first novel, So Many Hungers!, which was published in 1947. As to how he became a novelist, Bhattacharya (1972:71) recalls: "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) where a sheer compulsion to creativity. The result was the novel So Many Hungers!" To his great surprise, the novel got quick success and was translated into many languages. Regarding the novel, Mahendra N. Pandia (1989:6) writes, "This runaway success of his first novel was due to the very human approach to a national tragedy where what man had made of man was seen in its bare nakedness!"*

### INTRODUCTION

The story opens with the declaration of war by the British against Germany. India was seriously forced to join the war on some conditions. The consequence was the shortage of food grains and this led to the worst Bengal famine. Bengal had never witnessed such kind of hideous and repugnant famine till that time. In connection to this, Raizada (1982: 158) utters the novel is "one of the first pieces of creative writing born out of the agonized torment of

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body and spirit endured by the sacred soil of Bengal during the hideous famine years and the early stages of the Second World War.” It deals with not only Bengal famine but also human relations. Gaur Rashmi (1995:9-10) adds that in this novel Bhabani suggestively “probes into the problems of existence, suffering, evil, love, passion and greed. The apparently simple story of the novel evokes a sense of shame in us and arouses our conscience. It also exorcises all our attempts at evasion, or justification of the immortal, the unscrupulous and the evil even today when every individual protected by a carapace of an inherent duality of conscience.” Bhabani in this novel analyses the real cause for the famine. According to him, natural conditions are not the reason for this, but it is the failure and inefficiency of administration. In addition to this, there were selfish hoarders who wanted to make personal gain from the critical situation. So the Bengal famine is more than the natural calamity. It is treated as man-made famine. Reddy Venkata (1970: 43) remarks that the novel “unfolds the tragic story of a largely man-made famine in which over a million people died. The novelist has taken one of the most stirring periods and one of the most tragic calamities in Indian history: the Bengal famine of 1943, which was so horrible and harrowing.” Regarding to this, Iyengar (1984: 52) also adds that the novel is “no doubt an impeachment of man's sin humanity to man, but it is also a dramatic study of a set of human beings caught in a unique and tragic predicament. The story has been effectively told and the tragic pathos of the real mass starvation described in the guise of fiction, moves the reader deeply. The novel describes a factual and vivid account of one of the most shocking disasters in history.”

The novel deals with the Bengal famine and describes the story of two families, one in the village of Baruni and the other one living in Calcutta. Samarendra Basu is the head of the rich family in Calcutta. Rahoul and Kunal are his sons who are quite opposite to their selfish father. The other family in Baruni consists of Kajoli, her mother and her two brothers. The families in the villages suffered a lot due to the famine. They had no work to do and no food to eat. The poor people and the peasants of Bengal take for granted that the famine is imposed on them by God. It is their fate that has made them repent for their past sins. But the fact is that hoarders and black marketers stored the food grains for a huge profit. This fact is made clear through the character of Samarendra Basu in the novel. Though he is a lawyer by profession, he belongs to the vicious circle that causes the mass human tragedy in the story. Rahoul, Samarendra Basu's elder son is the contradictory pole of his father. He is a great intellectual and a D.Sc. of Cambridge. He is a staunch nationalist like his grandfather Devender Basu and would like to kill or to be killed for the cause of Indian Independence. Being an intellectual, Rahoul rightly finds the root cause for the famine. Kajoli is an innocent girl of fourteen when the novel begins. She lives in a thatched house with her family. Her father and her elder brother Kanu, are imprisoned for having taken part in the Civil Disobedience Movement. She gets married to Kishore, a patriot. But her happiness is short-lived. Devesh Basu, who is called as Devata by the villagers is the bridge between the two families in this story. When Rahoul comes to Baruni, to meet his grandfather Devesh Basu,

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he wonders at the affection and respect of innocent villagers. Devesh Basu takes him to Kajoli's house for meals. Kajoli respectfully removes Rahoul's shoes and washes his feet. As Rahoul is unaware of village manners, he feels reluctant. The old mother of Kajoli is an embodiment of compassion, unselfishness, strength and hope. Once she comes across a young mother burying her child, though the child is alive. When she comes to know that the young mother has no milk in her breast for her dying child, she gives her cow, Mangala, which is then-only asset. She gives not only her cow to save her and her infant life but also gives encouragement and hope. During the famine days, most mothers in the villages sell their daughters to the city brokers. But Kajoli's mother bluntly rejected the offer of brothel woman. Her character shows the importance of chastity even at the time of trouble.

Onu, Kajoli's younger brother, struggles hard to feed his mother and sister by plucking figs on the top of the tree. Though he first collected figs only for his family, he later realized the sorrow of his friends. He is determined to collect a lot of figs so as to save his and his friend's near blood relations. He is ready to share his secret treasure, which he only could reach. There is an act of self-sacrifice, when a big boy shares the jam tin with Onu, after fighting with the hungry dog. The novelist concludes the novel: "There was no defeat in the voices, but a secret, excited triumph...freedom could not drop from the skies, not be asked from lands beyond the seas; but there, in the cast swamp of suffering and struggle, would it bloom, growing out of the seeds of the spirit." (205)

So Many Hungers! Mostly focuses on man's great hunger for food. Bhabani Bhattacharya artistically portrays this hunger as a major theme in two of his novels. Verghese Paul (1971: 120) rightly remarks, "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 forcefully with the theme of hunger and the concomitant theme of human degradation in his novels So Many Hungers! and He Who rides a Tiger." The title of the novel reveals that there are many types of hungers apart from hunger for food. Sharma (1979: 86) rightly points out, "So Many Hungers!, Bhattacharya's first novel, is primarily devoted to man's hunger for food, though it also closely analyses man's other urges. It is a story not only about hunger for food but so many types of human hunger."

Bhabani Bhattacharya gives a vivid picture of hunger both in the villages and in the great city of Bengal. In the villages, people have nothing to eat, not even the roots of a plant. So thousands of people abandon their homes and start flowing to the big city of Calcutta, with lots of hope. The innocent villagers are in the wrong notion that the people of city are generous that they will feed the village folk. Their journey is described as, "Streams of desperate men ventured out of their ancestral homes in search of food hanging on the foot boards of railway trains, riding on the sun-baked roofs. The police threw up barrier. Then the men trekked the meadows and roads ten thousand village streams flowing city wards."

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(111)The irony is that the city, where these people migrate, has been fully dependent on the countryside for food grains.

Bhabani Bhattacharya depicts the realistic picture of hunger by collecting the details from the newspapers. In the city, the horrible scenes are common place things: the mothers kill their own children for want of milk and food; the hungry infants are seen sucking the breast of their dead mothers; the mothers sell their daughters and even send to brothels for the sake of food and pregnant women die before they give birth to their babies. As Grover Malta (1991: 34) observes, "Bhattacharya has portrayed the image of hunger on an epic scale in his first novel, *So Many Hungers!*, by focusing our attention on the story of a peasant family, and comparing and contrasting it with the story of an urban family living in Calcutta." Vulture-eaten corpses keep company of famished humanity, who move towards Calcutta in the hope of getting food. They see jackals eating hungry people lying unconscious, because of hunger. While giving a general picture of hunger all over Bengal, Bhattacharya particularizes it by showing the flight of Kajoli, Onu and their mother. Kajoli, pregnant and hungry would go out with her mother to hunt for roots which are boiled, salted and eaten, being difficult to digest. It is this unbearable hunger that drives Kajoli to eat the entire bread which the soldier gives her, without thinking for a minute about her mother and brother. She eats eagerly unaware of the indecent behavior of the soldier; the result is her painful abortion. Like Kajoli, there are millions of peasants who groan due to unbearable hunger.

The theme of hunger for food is presented, not in fragments, but in its wholeness. Bhattacharya describes not only the horrible scenes of famine in Bengal, but also reflects its physical and moral aspects. Through *Rahoul*, the novelist reflects the physical side of the famine. As a realistic novelist, Bhattacharya portrays both sides of the hunger-stricken people. The one side of them is their inner degradation, while the other side is the moral uprightness. He has faith in the goodness of mankind. This is not so because he is a rationalist or a Utopian, but because he gives an evidence of his acute awareness of the history of mankind and his unflinching faith in the essential richness and nobility of the human soul. The moral uprightness, dedications to ideals, self-sacrifice and unselfishness have been adequately shown in the novel. Bhabani Bhattacharya unmistakably reveals the essential goodness and nobility of the hungry people. This scene makes *Rahoul* to feel a signal of hope and deliverance for the hunger stricken masses of Bengal. This is the other side of the moral aspect of hunger. Singh (1975: 33) says, "In *So Many Hungers!* No hunger is satisfied but the human spirit's sanctity, richness and beauty are fully vindicated." Though, in this novel the hunger for food and political freedom dominate, there are other hungers like hunger for money, for sex, for ethical values, hunger for social prestige, titles, riches and prosperity and hunger for self-respect. Gupta Balarama (1979: 210) observes, "*So Many Hungers!* has for its theme, hungers - so many of them - both benign and maleficent. First there is the hunger as it is commonly understood, the hunger for food... then, there is hunger for power which means

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enormous bloodshed, agony and exploitation; ... the third variety is the hunger for freedom and 1942 Quit India Movement provides the novel with yet another thread of its plot.”

So Many Hungers! was published in 1947, the year India achieved freedom. The author had witnessed the entire National Movement. So he deals with the major events like the Civil Disobedience and the Quit India Movements in this novel. Reddy Venkata (1990: 64) remarks about the novel, “The theme of hunger for food intertwines the theme of hunger for freedom. The Indian National Movement for freedom forms an integral part of the narrative. Though Bhattacharya highlights the Quit India Movement, the other phases of the Movement such as the Civil Disobedience and the breaking of the Salt Law are presented.” The first chapter shows the hunger for freedom of Rahoul and his brother Kunal. The theme of freedom runs throughout the novel along with hunger for food. Reddy Venkata (1970: 43) adds that the central theme of So Many Hungers! is the “twin hunger for food and for freedom.” Rahoul, who always craves for freedom for not only his country but also for the world, represents “one class of freedom fighters—the upper middleclass intellectuals.” (Chandrasekharan, 1974: 90) He even longs to lead and organize the freedom fighters of the world. He tells his wife Manju, how he feels sad for missed opportunities to fight for freedom. The younger brother of Rahoul, Kunal also exhibits his hunger for freedom. When his mother persists him to stay at home he says, “Why at this very moment a million mothers the world over must be sending their sons to war.” (13)

The important character in the novel Devesh Basu, Rahoul's grandfather exhibits hunger for freedom throughout the novel. He is a freedom fighter in Gandhian way, i.e., Ahimsa. He went to prison several times and spent a number of years there. He is the man of ideals who has sacrificed his life of luxury for freedom movement. In his old age, he leaves his family and lives in the village and educates the villagers about the national movements. The villagers treat him as their living god calling him Devata. His broad outlook towards the freedom struggle is obvious through his advice to Rahoul, “Why should you fight the people of England? They are good people. The people are good everywhere. Our fight is with the rulers of England, who hold us in subjection for their narrow interests.” (21)

The character of Devata is modeled after Gandhi. His simple living, dedication to the service of humanity, the principle of non-violence in the story is dealt with great care. Jha Rama (1983: 164) remarks, “Entry of Devesh Basu in the novel is like Gandhi's phenomenal advent on the Indian political scene. Bhattacharya's characterization of Devata shows the meticulous care he has taken to model this character after Gandhi.”

So Many Hungers! focuses on man's hunger for money and titles. This is illustrated by the life of Samarendra Basu and Abalabandhu. Samarendra Basu is an embodiment of man's quest for money and titles. He has accumulated wealth and land by his black market business.

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He never minds feeding on the sufferings of human beings-“Rich, he hungered to be still richer.” (176) Bachchan (1994: 31) points out:

“Bhabani Bhattacharya uses the device of contrast to highlight the problem of hunger. He presents the contrasting scenes of hunger for food and hunger for wealth simultaneously. Kajoli, Onu, mother and the dispossessed suffer from hunger for food. On the other hand, Sri Abalabandhu and Samarendra Basu suffer from un-quenching lust for wealth.” World War II is a favorable opportunity for Samarendra Basu to make money. His hunger for money does not weaken even with the advent of old age. In the period of World War II, while Rahoul and Kunal worry about the country, their father Samarendra Basu is calculating how to make huge profits in stock market.

The novelist portrays another type of hunger, the hunger for sex in the novel. This hunger spoils the life of Kajoli in the image of a soldier. The soldier who lives away from his family craves for sex in a moment of weakness. The result is he rapes the pregnant girl Kajoli and causes a painful abortion. He satisfies his hunger for sex after satisfying Kajoli's hunger for food. As Chandrasekharan (1974: 84) states, “the sad tale of Kajoli is a pathetic record of what happened to more than two million men and women who became 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.” In the great city, this hunger for sex is the cause for brothel business. During the famine, many young girls from the countryside move to city to satisfy their hunger for food by satisfying the hunger for sex of the rich people. Sri Abalabandhu, a curious character is obsessed by sex. He reveals his thoughts, “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). He took an odd pleasure in relating the sex adventures of a person he called 'my friend'. Under the disguise of a friend he expressed his own thoughts. Though he is fifty years of age, he spends money extravagantly to satisfy his hunger for sexual pleasure. He suggests that a new post of controller of Brothels, otherwise named a controller of social sickness should be created and that his friend is the most suitable for that. There are many people like him in the city who suffer from the hunger for sex-life.

## CONCLUSION:

Bhattacharya throws light on many basic hungers which govern the lives of men and women. He analyses the theme of hunger not only from a general point of view but also from gender point of view. The paper deals with unscrupulous people, unquenchable hungers and some chaotic scenarios of Bhabani's So Many Hungers. It also spotlights on the theme of agony on social injustice, exploitation, hunger for social status and family life.

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