

Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers* : A Study in Human Suffering

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Abstract. Bhabani Bhattacharya was an Indo-English writer, born in Bhagalpur, Bihar. He has attained world-wide recognition and his books have been translated into twenty-six languages, sixteen of which are European. His first novel, *So Many Hungers*, came in 1947, gained tremendous response from the readers. This novel presents the picture of human suffering and degradation during the great Bengal famine of 1942-43 and Quit India Movement. The present paper highlights the theme that move men and women the world over, such as the soul's hunger for the absolute, a subject's hunger for freedom, a ruler's hunger for power, a greedy man's hunger for cuddling girls. "The Time Literary Supplement", even describes the novel as, "a factual and vivid account of one of the most shocking disasters in history" (www.dokument.in).

Keywords : Hunger; Quit India Movement; Bengal famine; human degradation and suffering; disaster.

Bhabani Bhattacharya was an Indian writer of Bengali origin, who wrote social realist fiction. He was born in Bhagalpur, part of the Bengal Presidency in British India. He graduated from Patna University and gained a doctorate from the University of London. His writings include ideas that are made more tangible through situational examples. His first novel, *So Many Hungers* is one of the finest pieces of creative writing born out of the suffering and endurance of the sacred soil of Bengal during the hideous famine year. It holds multiple themes of hunger for food, hunger for freedom, hunger for lust, hunger for money, hunger for name and fame and hunger for self-respect. These hungers are not confined to a particular place or country rather it is universal and they can be applied to the international community as well. The topic may be of the day or may be ancient. Hunger has always been an instrument that manipulates human mind to such an extent that they lose the ability to differentiate between right and wrong. Even, Dr. C. Paul Verghese rightly observes :

Food is the primary requisite of human dignity;
hunger debases and dehumanises man.

(www.thecriterian.com)

In this novel, Bhabani has tried to describe the yearning for hunger with moving picture, brought up due to the great Bengal famine in it. The people of Baruni led a drastic and pathetic life during the war. Scarcity of food and starvation forced them to wander in the roadside, unsheltered, helpless and empty stomach. Their situation degraded day by day :

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Wave after wave of hunger-stricken masses surging from the countryside. A great many were not fit to consume solid food. They ate and died. To so many hungers, give them rice was to kill them.

(*So Many Hungers*, 211)

The people of Baruni were passing through tough situation. Their lives have been aggravated without food. Hunger compelled them to eat the rotten, waste of vegetables and fruits from the dustbin :

There are big black rats in the alley-dozens. Some of us (destitute) catch and eat rats. (222)

The scarcity of food made human worse than animal. They fight with one another for food and sometimes with the animals too :

Destitution and dogs in those days fought often for possession of the rich city's ten thousand rubbish heaps in which scraps of rotting food lay buried. (235)

Another main theme lies in the novel i.e desire to be freed or hunger for freedom, which runs down the vein of the people of Baruni as blood. In this context, Devesh Basu holds the important place in the heart of the villagers of Baruni. His dedication is so deep that even when he is arrested and is about to be taken away to prison, he still uttered the words:

The supreme test has come : Be strong, Be true, Be deathless. (63)

Further, it was carried by Rahoul, son of Samrendra Basu, who being influenced by his grandfather's move and thoughts, got himself indulged in the freedom movement with full enthusiasm. Even the Indians were full of enthusiasm and courage. Their hopes knew no bounds. Like Rahoul, the villagers too, held the view :

The soul of a race, as the soul of a man, doesn't grow only in terms of time space, wrote Rahoul, "Once in a while through the catalysis of experience it grows for more in moments than in years. This is such a moment of quick-growing and India after. August will never be the India of before." (69)

As the day progresses, more and more the hunger for freedom multiplied. In this crucial moment, Rahoul was well performing his duty of enlightening the flame of freedom in every one's heart :

The hour is not just yet he said, but we are apart from it by an hour's - breath. We must stand ready

to carry out our leader's command : Do or Die, we
must not let our strength run to waste. (93)

Every content holds the hunger for freedom for the people of Baruni. There was no defeat in the voices, but a secret excited triumph :

The more their eyes redder with rays.
The more our eyes open
The more they tighten the chains,
The more the chains loosen! (289)

Besides the main theme, the novel also contains other themes of hunger for lust, money, name, fame and self-respect.

Hunger is not fixed to a particular subject rather it varies accordingly. The symbol of this inferno is Shri Lakshminath, a cruel character of the novel who forces the helpless girls to sell their bodies. They are nowhere different from the jackals and the vultures who crouch and make a prey of human flesh. In both cases they hunt to satisfy their hunger. Another pathetic character is Sri Abalabandhu who is shown to be a curious character, obsessed by lust. His thoughts reveal 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
lice, smoothed. A hundred other details. It pays,
no better investment in the whole money
market(176).

Among the hungers, the most relevant topic of the contemporary society is the hunger for money, name and fame. In this novel, there are some, among many, who reveal the bitter truth of the present society. Samarendra Basu, son of Devesh Basu, a selfish, greedy and corrupted man whose only aim in life is to earn enormous titles from the British ruler by pleasing them and accumulate more and more money. Sri Abalabandhu is portrayed as the same. His hunger for money, publicity, corruption, depravity, brutality knows no satisfaction at all; even death would not ring satisfaction to the hunger of such evil men.

The background scenerio of those days can be revealed through the lines:

Corruption had grown like an epidemic. Money had become a mad hunger. Flowing in great swollen streams, it made private lakes for the rich, who grew vastly richer. The poor grew proportionately poorer. Never in the land's history had the process that made the rich richer, the poor poorer gained such ruthless intensity (147).

Among all virtues, self-respect stood at the top which makes human remain as human. And Kajoli, in this regard, is the best character of the novel. Through her, one can analyse the true hunger which could not be able to break the self-respect of the girl, even after the utmost suffering, Kajoli loses her husband, her child, her virginity, her health still is unable to shake her self-respect which compelled her to choose respectful life by denouncing destitution and selecting newspaper vendering. She is proved to be ideal for the society.

So Many Hungers is overall an outstanding book presenting the prevailing issue of the society which is depressing and pitiful. Basically, it is the mirror of the society where vice and virtue prevails in the face of cruel men like Samarendra Basu and Shri Abalabandhu, whereas, goodness exists in the form of Devesh Basu, Devata, Kajoli and Rahoul. The novel contains a plenty of horrible scenes of hunger and exploitation of peasants, moral degradation of the rich landlords and the capitalist and the biased government officers. In other words, it throws light on human status. The upper class or the rich persons who seem to be richer financially but morally they are the beggars, whereas the poor, though seem beggar but by heart and humanity they are the richest one on the earth. K. Venkata Reddy has rightly pointed out:

Bhattacharya is at his best when he depicts the
plight of ruined peasants, their exodus to the city
and their abject misery and degradation. (Reddy, 61).

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