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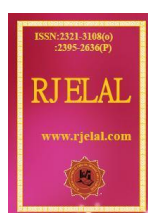
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The Alchemy of Hunger: Social Stratification and Poverty in *He Who Rides a Tiger*

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Abstract

Bhabani Bhattacharya is an outstanding Indo-Anglian novelist of the twentieth century. He has earned worldwide distinction, and his books have appeared in twenty-six languages. He has raised a powerful voice against the problems of hunger, starvation, and the exploitation of the poor by merchants, the administration, and other affluent classes. *He Who Rides a Tiger* is an impeachment of man's inhumanity to man, but it is also a dramatic study of a set of human beings caught in a unique and tragic predicament. The novel powerfully depicts a society that compels individuals to face social discrimination, exploitation, hypocrisy, disease, and the suffering of the poor. It engages with tradition and modernity, social evils, tensions and pretensions, changing values of modern civilization, inter-racial relations, the crisis of character, and East-West relations. The novel captures every aspect of village life, including Kalo and the village economy, which was based on agriculture, fishery, handicrafts, and cottage industries such as blacksmithy, poultry, and weaving.

Keywords: Caste system, Hunger, Poverty, Exploitation, Hypocrisy.

INTRODUCTION

Bhabani Bhattacharya is one of the greatest Indo-Anglian novelists in English literature. He has worked as Press Attaché at the Indian Embassy in Washington, D.C. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1967. He is influenced by D. H. Lawrence and Ernest Hemingway, but never indulges in vulgar books reveling in sexual description. Bhattacharya

himself answers several questions about his novels and his medium of expression. He is a novelist who has clearly stated that the purpose of writing novels is not merely decorative but to serve a social purpose.

So Many Hungers (1947) is concerned with all forms of intensified hunger – the sex hunger and the hunger to achieve India's political freedom. *Music for Mohini* (1952) deals with the

conflict between the cultures of East and West, caste distinctions, and poverty. *A Goddess Named Gold* (1960) deals with Indian village life and makes for most illuminating and satisfying reading. Spiritual values like spontaneous kindness are sought to be prosecuted for purposes of gold. *Shadow from Ladakh* (1966) depicts the background of the Indo-China conflict. It tells what India needs for a meeting point between Gandhian social ethics and the tremendous forces of science and technology. It deals with India's conflict with China and her response to the challenges.

In *He Who Rides a Tiger*, the novelist deals with social arguments and shows his deep understanding of the social fabric of Indian village life, its caste system, and religious superstition. Bhattacharya has created Kalo as one of the finest characters in his novel. Kalo is the hero and protagonist—a well-developed and sound character. He is a poor blacksmith with a well-built physique, strong in body and will. He is a widower who nurses his only daughter, Chander Lekha, with all the love and care of both mother and father. He is a good artisan and forces his work.

The novel explicates Kalo's confidence and boosts his dexterous craftsmanship. Once the destitute Vishwanath comes to meet Kalo in his pitiable plight, Kalo convincingly states that an honest and competent artisan is as good and dignified as the best of talks:

"He can hold his head high because of the skill of his hands and his special knowledge." (p. 110)

Here, the novelist brings out the astonishing fighting soul of Kalo. He has not only a purpose in life but also the power to achieve it. Kalo is the controlling figure of *He Who Rides a Tiger*, and his daughter Chandra Lekha suffers a great deal owing to the caste system and the economic pattern of society. He ironically tells the so-called protectors and custodians of society:

"A downtrodden Kamar has been in charge of your innermost souls, concerned with caste and cash." (p. 227)

He becomes the champion of the downtrodden and a legend of freedom. The caste difference is the worst evil that has been crushing Indian society for ages. Kalo tells his daughter that untouchables are helpless creatures who do not "dare go to the police" (p. 142). He reveals the hypocrisy of caste barriers and advocates their elimination and a sound synthesis of the different races:

"Do not dare judge me or call me a swindler. I have been as Brahminic as any of you." (p. 228)

Inspired and stimulated by Biten, Kalo breaks the backbone of the caste system. He is a Kamar by race and a blacksmith by profession, yet Kalo rises to high social status.

Here the novelist depicts Kalo as a rebel, a compassionate father who loves his daughter deeply. He feels proud when Lekha wins a silver medal in an essay competition. When famine breaks out, he goes to Calcutta for a livelihood only because of his daughter. The emotional crux is reached at the moment of parting:

"Tears sprang to his eyes. What misery was this? A fistful of rice for Lekha and himself was all he asked. In return he would trill like a peasant's bullock and bless you from his heart, bless you. Only let him not be parted from his Lekha, his daughter." (p. 24)

In fact, the genesis and the sustained source of his struggle lie in his obsessive love for her. Again, Kalo is deeply rooted in social custom and tradition. He behaves as a non-conformist when the question arises of Chandra Lekha's education. He gets her admitted to a missionary school and does everything to educate her despite opposition from his own men.

Social Perspective

In *He Who Rides a Tiger*, the novelist has raised the social argument and shows his deep understanding of the social fabric of Indian village life and the caste system, religious superstition, and the conflict between the haves and have-nots. As Prof. Meenakshi Mukherjee observes:

"Hereafter the conflict becomes simply the conflict between the exploiters and the exploited, the haves and have-nots, the proletariat and the bourgeois." (p. 24)

Kalo's crusade against discrimination based on the caste system begins silently. He gets his daughter admitted to a convent school in Jharana town. Chandra Lekha is subjected to this discrimination throughout her studentship at the hands of upper-caste schoolmates who tease her and look down upon her. She wins the "Ashok Memorial Medal" in an essay competition, defeating Calcutta's participants, yet she does not win the attention of her town folk simply because she is the daughter of a blacksmith. The caste system is so deep-rooted in the consciousness of the people that they honour the caste hierarchy with all taboos as if it were a divine design. The people of her own station were frankly critical.

A Kamar, Kalo, and his people are called the scum of society. In the beginning, he shows no resentment against this social injustice. In jail, Biten prepares him to hit back. Owing to poverty, he unwillingly works for some time as a pimp for prostitutes, shedding his middle-class morality that prefers death to prostitution. The novelist depicts the ugliest social evil of prostitution. We see how women are forced to soothe the sex-hunger of men, and how Chandra Lekha is duped and brought to the brothel where her father works. Fortunately, Kalo comes in time and somehow rescues her. It is a turning point in the life of Kalo. He metamorphoses himself into a Brahmin, Mangal Adhikari, and sits under a banyan tree chanting "Namo Shivaya." His well-calculated game plan

works, and Shiva Linga rises out of the earth, and in no time, from scum he becomes the pillar of society.

His fight is not against an individual but against the system that produces such individuals. H. M. William rightly observes that "In rage against the corrupt system, against the acquisitive society, Kalo perpetrates a successful masquerade by turning himself into a miracle-working Brahmin."

In the course of this fight, Mangal Adhikari is caught in the dilemma of a double life. On the one hand, he cannot shake off Kalo, the blacksmith, from himself. On the other, he has to maintain the social decorum of a Brahmin's life. He leads a comfortable life, but his hands ache for the smithy's work. Being uprooted from the soil, both Mangal and his daughter at times feel trapped and alienated. As Lekha says, "The press heavy on my chest" (p. 107). One lie leads to a chain of lies, and one finds it difficult to get out of it. He is worried about Lekha's marriage. She can only be married to a Brahmin boy. But the question is: how long will this twice-born life continue? Lekha is not at all happy with this life and wants to come out of it: "I have had enough of this gilded cage. You are content with it. How long must it hold me too?" (p. 182)

The climax of Kalo's fight with the system is reached in the episode of the Yagna ceremony when Lekha is installed as the "mother of seven-fold bliss." Now that he has virtually realized his objectives, he explodes the myth at an opportune moment amidst a heterogeneous crowd consisting of the trustees of the temple, distinguished guests, priests and pundits, street sweepers, rickshaw pullers, and porters:

"I am no fit person to speak to you... I have installed a false god, for there was no dream at all. I have made you commit sacrilege and blackened your faces... Some of you have been wild-eyed with wrath because I gave shelter to a homeless little boy of unknown caste. A

downtrodden Kamar has been in charge of your innermost souls, souls concerned with caste and cash..." (pp. 238-239)

He Who Rides a Tiger is an attack on both those who profited by famine and those who exploited them as caste felons. Here the novelist discusses a variation on the theme of hunger. It is a grim satire on Hindu orthodoxy. Dr. Iyengar says:

"The tempo of life in Calcutta, the complex of urban vices and urban sophistication, the pressure of mass movements and mass hysteria, the reign of superstition and mumbo-jumbo gives the novel an entire and piquant quality all its own." (p. 276)

An ancient saying goes, "He who rides a tiger cannot dismount." Kalo takes his revenge on a rigid, caste-ridden society and makes a living for himself and his daughter Chandra Lekha by faking a miracle that begins as a fraud and ends as a legend. This novel is skilful and entertaining and an illuminating fictional glimpse inside the corner of India.

Dr. C. Paul Verghese rightly shows that "Food is the primary requisite of human dignity; hunger debases and dehumanises man. 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*" (p. 86).

The finale to the drama comes with Kalo's realization that his beloved Chandra Lekha is to ruin herself for his sake. He sees himself and his moral fall. He decides to act, and to act dramatically. On the day of the ceremony for the installation of the mother, when the whole congregation is assembled and Mangal is asked to make a speech, he deafens everyone by revealing his true story – that he is no Brahmin and the temple of Lord Shiva is no true temple.

Here, the novelist depicts how he faked the miracle of the image of Shiva germinating from the ground. As a result, some of the

audience wanted to beat him up, and some suggested legal action. A large number of destitutes and men of the lower castes have stationed themselves in the rear. Vishwanath and Biten are also with them. They raise the victory cry to their brother. Biten congratulates him and tells him, "Your story will be a legend of freedom..." At the end, Kalo and Chandra Lekha leave the temple forever, presumably to go back to their own way of life, seeking the peace that is the fruit of being true to one's own self.

CONCLUSION

In *He Who Rides a Tiger*, Bhabani Bhattacharya puts forward a complete picture of the socio-economic argument against the exploitation of innocent villagers by the caste system and attempts to awaken society against social evils and hollow rituals. We understand that once you ride the tiger of corruption, you have to continue.

Finally, Bhattacharya shows the protagonist Kalo confessing his true low-caste identity to the public and abandoning his fake life as a caste Brahmin priest. He eventually walks away with his daughter Chandra Lekha to start a new, honest life.

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