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***So Many Hungers!:* True Representation of Pre and Post Independent Hunger and Poverty Ridden India**

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The present research paper has been attempted to explore the miserable condition of Indian peasants during the Second World War. This paper will cover Bhabani Bhattacharya's first novel *So Many Hungers!* which deals with poverty, hunger and exploitation of the peasants in man-made famine of Bengal in 1943.

Bhabani Bhattacharya, born in Bhagalpur, a town in Bihar, wrote in an alien language and living in Maharashtra is an outstanding Indo-Anglian novelist. He is a doctorate from London University on historical research. He has attained world-wide reknown and his books have appeared in twenty-six languages, sixteen of which are European. He has won the coveted Sahitya Akademy Award for in 1967 for his latest novel *Shadow from Ladakh*. He has been inspired in his literary pursuits by his wife, Salila, who is herself a short-story writer.

His works include Tagore's translations entitled *The Golden Boat*, *Indian Cavalcade*, and a collection of historical sketches; *Towards Universal Man* a commemoration volume published on the eve of the birth centenary of Tagore, *Steel-Hawk* a collection of fifteen short stories. He wrote five novels—*So Many Hungers* (1947), *Music for Mohini* (1952), *He who rides a Tiger* (1954), *A Goddess named Gold* (1960) and *Shadow from Ladakh* (1967). All the novels of Bhattacharya present a true picture of India. His outlook is highly constructive and purposeful and his works has a social purpose. Smt. Lila Ray writes, "As we read his writing, we hear the dialogue between man and his situation, between man and man and between man and the ideas he lives by."

The novel is a historical chronicle of the struggle of India. History and literature which are generally considered different discourses but in Bhattacharya's novel, he effectively chronicles real, historical events of a war torn India. Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey's concept becomes concrete "Literature and history are not set up externally to each other but are in intricate and connected relationship, the historical conditions of existence of anything like literature."

His experience and close association with men, manners and their personalities have enabled him to grasp the basic qualities of humanity and he presented this in his novels and short-stories very skillfully. Bhattacharya has written with a spicy language and has caught the vein of rural speech and the informal behaviour of the people, their rustic world and their small and simple views about the great things. He believed that foreign story-tellers present a false view about Indians because they have seen only the surface of our way of life and that is not the ultimate reality. His earlier novels have their

roots in rural Vidarbha and he presented the life of rural India authentically. L. N. Gupta writes:

Pure intellectuals watch the crowds but do not force themselves on them. They visit slums and absorb the misery of their dwellers in their being. They tour the famine-stricken areas. They look into the shrivelled faces and sunken eyes of the sufferer. They share their distress. But they do not use amplifiers to blare their benefaction. They suffer quietly. The process involves a cycle of seething tensions. The end product is a major work, say a great novel in the case of a fiction writer. It is a monument to its times. Such is the case with Bhabani Bhattacharya.

Bhabani Bhattacharya's first novel *So Many Hungers!*(1947) deals with the hunger for freedom, hunger for food, hunger for power, hunger for sex, hunger for wealth and hunger for fame. The Bengal famine of 1943, The Quit Movement of 1942 and Satyagraha are the movements which weave its central theme man's hunger for food and political freedom and this was the background of his first novel *So Many Hungers!*

The novel is divided into two plots — the first, story of Samarendra Basu's family with young Rahoul as the central character and the story of a peasant family with the young girl Kajoli as the protagonist. The two stories represent the freedom movement or the struggle for freedom and the agonies of the famine respectively. Devesh Basu, the grandfather of Kunal and Rahoul participated in civil disobedience and after that he formed a band of volunteers and made salt from seawater in defiance of the law and this is the reason of his imprisonment. In the meeting of the peasant family and Kishore, Onu proudly discloses that Kanu, the eldest one was born in prison when Mother was jailed for following Gandhiji's *Satyagraha*. This shows the long struggle that the people of India have already engaged in.

The year 1943 was a terrible period for the nation. About one million people were killed by the famine in Bengal and many others died due to malnutrition and other diseases. The novel effectively reveals the misery and the anxiety of the destitute out in the streets dying out of hunger not only through Kajoli and her family but through the eyes of Rahoul as well. Rahoul packed his things and went for a short visit to Baruni, a folk village near the Bay of Bengal where his grandfather, Devesh Basu, lived a simple life among the common people. Seventy-year-old Devesh Basu had retired from his work as a teacher in the city school. He participated in Civil Disobedience years ago. Rahoul wanted to follow the footsteps of his grandfather but his father wanted to send him to London to study Physics instead of participating in Civil Disobedience because he wanted to convey to his son to use his knowledge of science to help the people. In Baruni, Rahoul discovered that his grandfather was the most respected man because he taught his values to the people. He was called Devata or "God" by the people because they loved him very much. He met the peasant family that was Devata's family there. The very compassionate Mother; Xanu, the father; Kajoli, the well-bred peasant girl; Kanu, the eldest in the family and Onu, the youngest one who was ten to eleven years old and Mangala, the family's beloved milk cow. His grandfather discussed to him the merits of the National Movement. He learnt that the top priority of the movement is for village

reconstruction work because this is the basis of life income. He knew that he had to fight for the elemental urges of freedom, food and security but his wife, Manju and the baby kept him back.

Samarendra Basu on the other hand was busy on making easy money from the war. He showed that he is only doing this for the luxury of his family because he himself spent his youth in poverty. But with the crash of the Calcutta Stock Market his dreams were shattered. To recover his money, prestige and social security, he resumed his work at the High Courts and toiled harder than ever before. While thinking of schemes to earn money, he conceived an idea to monopolize rice and so that he would become the Army's lone supplier. He would call this *Cheap Rice, Ltd.* He got this idea when a beggar asked rice from him instead of money. Girish, the grocer of the village was an ambitious man. He was laying his plans to exploit the people so that he could fulfill his dreams of having a bigger home and a store in the district. A man from the "Kompanee" promised him a commission if he could buy all the rice in the village. This is the scheme of the businessmen – buy the rice, keep the supply and raise the prices. The Government was engaging in the same business. L.N. Gupta states:

It was a terrible indictment of the British Raj for all their crimes which aggregated into the disastrous famine of Bengal in 1943.

The second part of the story deals with the life of Kajoli and her family living in a village known Baruni. It was a man-made famine that affects two million innocent men, women and children. Dr. Srinivasa Iyengar states:

So many Hungers! is no doubt 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.

Rahoul, the grandson of Devata, while reading a newspaper comes across a story of moral degradation. A starving mother with a child at her breast was given food at kitchen. While she was eating, the child died in her lap, but the mother ate on. She finished her meal, and then left with her dead child. Then there is another instance of depravity caused by hunger. After the efforts of the whole day, a destitute woman got some handfuls of rice but at sunset when she was about to take rice along with her three children, a hungry man pounced on her and run away with the grain. Rahoul witnessed in case of a young girl who showed her breasts to the American soldiers for a rupee or two. However, this task of the young girl was noble since the money she earned was used to buy food for her brethren. Dr. C. Paul Verghese rightly remarks:

Food is the primary requisite of human dignity; hunger debases and dehumanises 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 novel *So Many Hungers!*

The peasants were forced to sell their grain to the government agents and greedy hoarders. The peasants had to leave their village for city because they didn't find any other way to get out of these miseries. Before leaving the village Kajoli married Kishore

but her happiness was short-lived because Kishore was killed in an accident on his way to Calcutta. But after this tragedy, Kajoli and her family began to live on roots, figs and whatever they could get for food. A brothel agent from Calcutta tried to tempt Kajoli. She angrily rejected the offer. On the way to Calcutta Kajoli was raped by a soldier who had given her a piece of bread and in return he fulfilled his sexual hunger. A jackal attempted to eat up Kajoli but Onu, the only bread-winner of the family somehow drove it away. Kajoli was admitted in the hospital by the repentant soldier while her mother and Onu had to live on begging as pavement dwellers. At that time the innocent people became animal, just because of hunger and they started eating what the animals refused to eat. In this struggle for food the animals prove stronger than the suffering people. Onu was defeated in his fight with a dog for possession of a jam-tin dug-out from the rubbish. The boys fought with each other for scrap of food. The scene is simply too pathetic to be commented upon. How the hunger levelled the difference between man and animal. Kajoli's mother was happy that Kajoli was at least temporarily in a hospital because now there was no need to think about the food after her discharge from the hospital she decided to become a prostitute but was finally saved from it. Mother tried to drown herself in the Ganges. Other scenes of hunger were no less harrowing. A girl of six is sold to a prostitute for ten silver rupees. The scarcity of food transformed the rich people into soulless, money-minded. Sir Abalabandhu was a black marketer and the director in the company in which Samarendra was part of. He took advantage of the destitute's dilemma: to sell one's body. He was also at the head of the brothel business that was fast growing in the city.

Through a betel-woman who was an agent of Sir Abalabandhu, Kajoli decided to sell the last thing that she possessed – her body so that Mother and Onu could live. For the starting rate of eighty rupees, Kajoli consented although she herself was troubled. She woke up early one morning and tied the money to her mother's sari and went away to meet the betel-woman. While on the verge of going inside the brothel house, Kajoli was taken aback at the news that a certain hunger strike was going on inside the prison. This was led by Devesh Basu. At the mention of his name, she immediately changed her mind and resolved to engage in work that she will not involve in selling her body – that she will sell newspapers – to the dismay of the betel-woman.

Mother on the other hand walked towards the Ganges and slowly began to throw herself over the bridge to end all her suffering. At the same moment, a vehicle was coming. Rahoul and the others who got arrested were on the way to prison. A few moments earlier, in their home, Samarendra got the information that his son, Captain Kunal of the Artillery of the Indian Army was missing. The phone rang and Rahoul was on the phone. He was saying goodbye to his family. Manju received this firmly saying that she too would follow. In the end, everything seems to be bright and full of hope because of the intensifying and continuing struggle. 'The Times Literary Supplement' describes the novel as:

A factual and vivid account of one of the most shocking disasters in history.

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