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The Politics of Hunger and the Ethics of Degradation in Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hunger!*

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Abstract

Hunger and human degradation are powerful, recurring themes in literature, often used to explore human suffering, the fragility of the human condition, and societal oppression. It appears in a variety of contexts as physical hunger, emotional and moral degradation etc. are frequently used to highlight social inequalities, the desperation of marginalized individuals, or the struggle for survival. Hunger often symbolizes more than just the lack of food; it can represent deprivation, poverty, and the desperation that comes with living on the margins of society. Degradation in literature often goes hand in hand with the loss of personal identity, social status, or moral integrity. Characters may face physical or emotional degradation as a result of systemic oppression, personal failure, or external circumstances that strip them of their humanity. Several Indian writers have focused their attention to explore the condition of hunger and exploitation in their works. The writers who have tackled these themes in their writings are Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Arundhati Roy, Mahasweta Devi, Ismat Chughtai, Tariq Ali, Kiran Desai, Vikram Seth, Bapsi Sidhwa, etc. In these writers, Bhabani Bhattacharya has a unique place who deals his novels in own distinctive way; have used hunger and degradation not just as

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themes but as symbols of the larger social and political dynamics in India. Hunger in their works often becomes a metaphor for the oppression, marginalization, and exploitation of individuals and communities, reflecting the deep socio-economic divides that still exist in Indian society. In this connection, the paper tries to explore to look into Bhabani Bhattacharya's historic vision of hunger and degradation and its impact on Indian civilization and social values.

Keywords: Democracy, Austere, Falsehood, Abstention, Hunger, Degradation

Bhabani Bhattacharya (1906–1988) is an Indian novelist and short story writer, best known for his vivid portrayals of the socio-political landscape of India during and after British colonial rule. His works often focus on the lives of ordinary people, particularly the struggles faced by the poor, and the degradation they endure due to social, economic, and political circumstances. Themes of poverty, hunger, and human suffering run through his works, reflecting the broader realities of post-independence India. The Bengal famine is the background of his two novels. These two novels are *So Many Hungers* and *He Who Rides a Tiger*. *So Many Hungers* was first published in 1947, the year of independence. It was a terrible picture of the British colonial powers and the disastrous famine of Bengal in 1943. The novel deals with the realistic story of the Basu family and a peasant family. It is a composite tale in the sense that it centers on two families; The family of Samarendra Basu, consisting of his wife, two sons Rahoul and Kunal, his father Devesh (Devta), and his daughter-in-law Manju and the peasant family consisting of two brothers Onu and Konu and their sister Kajoli and her husband Kishore. Samarendra Basu is involved in a food business named, Bengal Rice Limited. He is very genius and very cleverly tried his best to hoard food grains and sell them at high prices after fluctuating stock market and made a pile. Rahul is a professor at Calcutta University and is engaged in advanced research work in Astrophysics. Kunal, brother of Rahoul is in Army. He feels that the Second World War was an unexpected war loaded on the shoulders of India.

The whole story of the novel happens in a Bengali family in the Bengali village of Baruni. After the famine in 1943, the Government was purchasing rice from all over Bengal and villages were being emptied of all their rice. Few greedy agents paid fancy prices tempted the villagers to sell all their hoarded rice and other edible materials. Great Britain is at war with Germany for a second time. Rahoul heard this news over the radio and got agitated. His mother remembered that Rahoul too was born during war time. She got panicky about the consequences of war. She

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knew that prices would touch the sky and that she should store rice and mustard oil. Rahoul's brother Kunal came and asked him to stay there to talk on war. Kunal was tall, slim, neatly dressed, and had a good physique. He introduced an officer of His Majesty's armed forces to his brother Rahoul. He was however sure that such petty affair of the world would not be palatable to a person like Rahoul, who belongs to the scholar's sanctum. Kunal started speaking profusely about war and army forces and expressed his hope that he would get a commission. He considered war to be a great adventure and decided to plunge into it. He wanted action, enterprise, and speed. His father, Samarendra Basu was a man of fifty years of age. He too wanted to make the best use of the war and the chance of a lifetime. Thus, Kunal was going to be a soldier. Father was going to buy shares. His mother would buy and store essential goods. Rahoul began to feel sorry. He had a good look at the new come. His heart started swelling

Famine had famished Bengal, All India was rushing to save Bengal from destruction. Guns moved into Bengal, and grain moved out of Bengal. The very producers of rice were denied food. Wave after wave of hunger-stricken masses came out of the countryside. Their condition was indescribable. Rahoul saw various people-hunger-stricken souls. There were heart-rending sights. An artist was painting the scenes. The ticket collector was merciless. He found the woman dead. It was men like him who had brought upon Bengal the darkest misery in her history. The heavy sound of traffic woke the peasant mother at daybreak. When Rahoul saw a miserable woman, he took her into their house. Her face was overlaid with pain. She succumbed herself to death and became the refuse for the corpse-disposal squad. It was a touching scene. Monju, wife of Rahoul saw her husband's true spirit his hunger for a happier life for the common man. A bigger boy attacked the dog. Onu threw a stone at the animal. Onu and the other boy shared the Jam tin by licking it from either side. Samarendra Basu was the Senior Director of Cheap Rice Limited and its moving spirit. It was this man's hand that had spread well the grease of corruption to win the company great privileges. He had come from another province and amassed great wealth in Bengal. He was a characterless person. He carried his fifty years lightly. He would get anything for anybody in his black market. He was slightly perverted and was entirely free of social conscience. Still, he was known as a man of charity. He would pay princely donations to the war funds.

Kajoli came out of the hospital gates. But she found no joy on her mother's face. Mother and Onu lived in a hell-like home for a month. They saw a fat, middle-aged woman selling betel leaves from a stall at the corner. She found in Kajoli a good figure and she wanted to seize the chance. She offered a betel leaf to Mother. The woman drew the facts about them. She watched the girl with sharp interest. She had such a golden image. In the evening the betel-woman offered a seat to Kajoli in her stall. A number of photographs were exhibited at the entrance. They were

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mementos of India. They earned some money as models. There was a brothel round the corner. All destitute women from the countryside lived well and enjoyed every comfort. Agents went about the city picking good lookers and paying them advance money. Kajoli looked like a golden lotus. Kajoli knew the truth about the betel woman. The agent pursued her offering her seventy rupees or even eighty rupees. She was in a dilemma about whether to accept living death. She kept well away from this evil force.

Some special items of news appeared on the news page. They were pictures of the destitute. Rahoul was terrified to see the deeper implications of the famine and its overall effect. The picture of the mother, her daughter Kajoli, and Kishore haunted his thoughts. Wherever he went, he reached for them with hope and fear. He dreamed of them. One day he saw Onu and found his mother on another day passing a few yards away. Inflation had done its worst and many poor middle-class people knew the pangs of hunger. Rahoul was walking past Red Road and saw a number of white soldiers standing in a group around a young destitute girl. She sat on the roadside under a lamppost, with her head bent low. He was amazed to find Kajoli with the look on her. The soldiers started dropping rupee coins into her begging bowl. Kajoli made a grim decision to sell herself for her mother who was dying, bedridden, and could not eat anything that her son and daughter provided. She required shelter, in view of the severe winter. The agent of the brothel house offered eighty rupees. Then Mother and Onu could go back to the village. She still expected that her father would come back from prison. She would not be able to go back, since her lot is defilement of her body. She took the money from her. Mother wanted to and herself as she did not like to be a burden to her son or daughter. She blessed her son Onu who was sleeping. She went out, reached a bridge, and fell down into the river. One betel woman took Kajoli first into her show and kept her there for an hour. Kajoli cleansed herself and made herself attractive, in accordance with the instructions of the betel-woman. The newspaper vendors started shouting that the prisoners in the Dehra Dun Jail were on hunger strike. Devesh Basu at the age of seventy years, was on strike another side people were fighting for freedom. She cursed herself for having taken recourse to this present profession. Her father and brother Kanu had fought for the national movement. Her husband had fought for the worker but she was lost completely. She consoled herself because circumstances forced her into such a situation. At this stage, Kajoli thought of earning money by selling newspapers. But the Jackal woman would not leave her.

It was news time. Samarendra was a late-riser so he missed listening to the news. He deeply desired to speak to Rahoul for reassurance. He was not found in the house as he was perhaps in his office at the relief center. Samarendra's heart knew a throb of pride for his heroic son. Kunal had acted in force as Company Commander. He felt a deep longing to go through the

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letter again but it was kept in the Jewellery box by his wife. After three hours he had another message that Captain Kunal Basu had returned safely to his line. But soon there was another bad news that Radoul was under arrest. Samarendra began to sob like child. He had achieved astounding success in business. He made a fortune for his two sons. He saw the horizon of the east illumined by a new dawn. "Freedom could not drop from the skies, nor be asked from lands beyond the seas; but there, in the vast swamp of suffering and struggle, would it break into bloom, growing out of the seeds of the spirit. It was the four-petalled lotus of the people". Rahoul was above and in enemy hands, yet he was far from alone. He too joined their voices, repeating Tagor's slogan.

Samrendra Basu, the father of Rahul was one of the directors of the concern, which had bought rice from the whole of Bengal and was left lamenting. The story revolves around various characters, each representing different facets of society—peasants, intellectuals, and the urban poor. They confront their own hunger, which symbolizes not just physical hunger but also the hunger for dignity, identity, and social justice. The characters of Bhabani epitomize the conflicts and aspirations of the Indian populace. Through his journey, Bhattacharya illustrates the harsh realities faced by many, the sacrifices made for freedom, and the enduring spirit of resilience. The novel captures the complexity of human emotions and relationships, showcasing how interconnected lives can be in the face of adversity. Bhattacharya's lyrical prose brings out the vivid imagery of India, making the reader acutely aware of both the beauty and the suffering present in the landscape.

Bhabani Bhattacharya has taken the most stirring period and the most tragic calamity in Indian History. There are depths of human misery, hunger, prostitution, ill-legal profession, and death. The title of the novel 'So Many Hungers' is amply justified. There are indeed so many hungers: hunger for food, hunger for affection, hunger for love, hunger for lust, hunger for money, hunger for name and fame, hunger for sacrifice, and hunger for the general welfare of all. The events of the 'Quit India Movement' of 1942 and the naked horror of the Bengal famine of 1943 haunted his mind so often that he was impelled to put it in the framework of fiction. The Bengal Famine was a devastating humanitarian crisis that occurred in British India, specifically in the Bengal province. It resulted in the deaths of an estimated two to three million people due to starvation and disease. Floods and crop failures in the years leading up to the famine reduced agricultural output. The British government's response was inadequate, with significant delays in aid and food distribution. Some policies prioritized military needs over civilian welfare. Millions suffered from malnutrition, disease, and death. The famine caused social unrest and contributed to a decline in trust in the British colonial administration. The famine heightened awareness of colonial policies' impacts on local populations and fueled the Indian independence movement.

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The Bengal Famine remains a significant and tragic chapter in Indian history, highlighting the devastating consequences of colonial exploitation and mismanagement. It continues to serve as a poignant reminder of the need for effective governance and humanitarian responsibility. As his heart was so swayed by the consequences of the famine and its depiction, Bhattacharya could not do enough justice to the plot and some characters in the novel. One gets uneasy at the flimsy construction of the plot and with the fleecy characters. The novel depicts the seething tension of life through which the characters had to pass.

The people, especially, the poor peasants, become unhappy victims of the miserable plight that war brought upon them. It is a tale that relates the underlying truth that poverty and hunger debase humanity to an unfortunate level and it is impossible to imagine the depths to which they degrade themselves only to make a living. Bengal passed through the darkest misery in her history. It is an iron that the mythical Sonar-Bengla (Bengal) has always been an ill-fated land subject to floods, degradation, famine, and atrocities. The texture of the plot is loose and the author's attention is focused more on the depiction of the aftermath of war and famine. The plot of the novel is weaving together various narratives that reflect the complexities of life in colonial India. It features a diverse cast of characters from different social backgrounds, each facing their unique struggles. Their stories intersect, illustrating how individual experiences are influenced by broader societal issues. The notion of hunger—both physical and metaphorical—permeates the narrative. The characters of the novel grapple with not just the absence of food but also the hunger for dignity, love, and social justice, creating a profound emotional resonance. The backdrop of the Bengal Famine and the struggle for independence serves as a critical framework, grounding the personal stories in a larger historical narrative. This context enriches the plot and highlights the urgency of the characters' quests. Bhattacharya employs vivid imagery and symbolism, particularly in portraying the landscape of Bengal. The contrasts between the beauty of nature and the harsh realities of human suffering add depth to the narrative. The characters are portrayed with emotional nuance, allowing readers to empathize with their struggles and aspirations. The exploration of relationships—familial, romantic, and communal—adds layers to the plot. It is characterized by its emotional complexity, historical relevance, and the interweaving of personal and collective narratives, making it a compelling and thought-provoking read. Bhabani Bhattacharya shows consummate skill in providing a deep insight into the realism of the disastrous famine.

The descriptions are surcharged with emotional atmosphere and the underlying sympathy of the author for the situations and the characters make the novel a memorable account of the war years more than any other historical details. Bhattacharya presents his material of the novel on behalf of perception, memory, and speculation. Knowledge of the past

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history, with an awareness of the present and a visualization of the future, seem to be at the core of the novel creating a rich tapestry that reflects the socio-political landscape of colonial India. The novel is deeply rooted in the historical context of India during the 1940s, particularly the Bengal Famine of 1943. This historical awareness informs the characters' experiences and motivations. The narrative reflects on the impact of British colonial policies, the exploitation of resources, and the struggles faced by the Indian populace, providing a historical lens through which readers can understand the systemic inequalities and injustices that led to widespread suffering. The characters in the novel grapple with their current realities—poverty, hunger, and social injustice. Their struggles are depicted with immediacy, emphasizing the urgent need for change. Bhattacharya highlights the resilience of the human spirit amidst adversity, showcasing the everyday lives of individuals caught in a cycle of despair yet yearning for dignity and fulfillment. This awareness of the present resonates with contemporary issues, making the story relevant beyond its historical setting. Through the characters' dreams and aspirations, the novel hints at a vision for a better future. The desire for independence and social justice becomes a driving force, suggesting that change is possible through collective action and perseverance. The hopeful undertones of the narrative point toward the potential for renewal and transformation, reflecting the broader aspirations of the Indian independence movement. The novel serves as a powerful commentary on the interconnectedness of history, present struggles, and future possibilities. Bhattacharya's portrayal of these elements invites readers to reflect on the cyclical nature of socio-political issues and the enduring quest for dignity and justice in the face of adversity. In *So Many Hungers*, several people march towards Calcutta. Kajoli and her family soon join the ranks of the destitute on this road. On this road they discover that the road does not necessarily led to prosperity:

The mother had no notion yet of the vast starving masses that had gone ahead and the others who followed in their wake - hundreds of thousands hunger-marching city-ward. Not many would reach their goal. Each dragging step would take a little of their remnants of life. (SMH-119)

They see corpses by the roadside, and horrendous sights such as a woman being eaten alive by a hungry jackal and Kajoli almost sells herself to a soldier. The road is also the road to greater suffering than they had imagined. In this particular novel, the road bridges an imaginary paradise (Calcutta) and deserted homes (Baruni). Kishore also decides to go to Calcutta to find work. When he is taking leave, his wife, Kajoli, gives him her earrings to sell in the city. She is confident that in Calcutta he would find work, make money and would return with more jewellery for her, "When you come back home in the winter you will bring me silver loops of the new city fashion. And bangles for my arms" (SMH- 91).

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Later, her mother persuades another woman to go to Calcutta. Here is the passage that describes the locus amoenus of Calcutta entirely in terms of an imaginative geography that approximates almost to a utopia:

They are all going hotfoot to Calcutta city - hundreds have gone...you will get milk a-plenty in the wonder city, and rice, and a new sari to put on. Calcutta city has money to spare. The people have kindness in their hearts to spare for poor folk. You will be looked after. You will find work, big wages! Nothing to worry about nothing. One day when your child has grown and he is employed on a great jute mill think of that proud day! (SMH-109)

On the outskirts of Calcutta, Kajoli's mother views the city thus: 'In the hour of midnight the lone mother stood on the pavement of strange city and saw bright silver streaking the edges of a massive pitch-black cloud'. This is the very last of the villager's illusions regarding the city. Bhattacharya suggests a mirage in this image, a trick of moonlight which seems to bathe the city in brightness, or at least dispel the darkness. Hunger is not simply a theme but a lens through which Bhattacharya explores the complexities of human suffering, survival, and social change. It is both a literal and metaphorical force that shapes the lives of the characters, pushing them to the edge of physical, moral, and psychological endurance. Degradation, in its various forms, is a central aspect of the novel's exploration of hunger. Yet, amid this suffering, there is also a desire for transformation—a hunger for a better, more just world. This tension between deprivation and aspiration is what drives the characters' struggles and forms the emotional heart of the novel. Bhattacharya's work ultimately suggests that while hunger may degrade, it also energizes the human spirit, pushing individuals and societies toward change. The multiple hungers in the novel—whether for food, dignity, or justice—reflect the larger human condition in the face of adversity, and the continuous struggle to overcome the degradation imposed by both external forces and internal conflicts.

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