

MIRACLE AND MAGIC: A STUDY OF BHABANI BHATTACHARYA'S *HE WHO RIDES A TIGER*

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The Bengal Famine of 1943 obsessed the mind of Bhabani Bhattacharya resulting in his first novel *So Many Hungers!* Though *He Who Rides A Tiger* was published in 1955 after a twelve years gap, the famine is a haunting memory for him. However, it does not treat the Bengal Famine with the depth and concentration with which *So Many Hungers!* does. The novel focuses on the darkest chapter in the history of Bengal, "It was almost darkest in the history of Bengal. A plague took the land in its grip, the plague of hunger, in the wake of 1943." Bhattacharya presents a gruesome picture of Bengal famine during the year 1943 in *So Many Hungers!* and *He Who Rides a Tiger*. To quote his words, "... the plague of hunger in the wave of war... no rationing of food-grains, no price control, no chocking of giant sharks who play cornering game on a stupendous scale... barns are empty — the peasants had been induced to sell off heir grain. Markets arc empty-the grain is hidden away... And now the rice was five times the old rate, weavers sold their looms to traders from big cities... Artisans sold their tools. Fishermen's boats were chopped up for fire wood to sell... The plague washed up in fierce tides" (*He Who Rides a Tiger*, p.15)

As a result of the Bengal Famine, poor people are deprived of food. The middle class and rich people are managed to get through the situation by their savings and reserve supplies. Poor people are the victims, as they depend on their day-to-day earnings. The result is the massive hunger deaths. Bhabani Bhattacharya portrays the picture of poor people during the time of famine as, "Weavers sold their looms to traders from big cities who scoured the countryside for bargains. Artisans sold their food. Fishermen's boats were chopped up for firewood to sell. The plague washed up in fierce tides. Bengal was dying. Jharna was dying." (HWRT, p.15)

In his first novel *So Many Hungers*, the novelist vividly portrays the effects of the famine and the life of poor peasants in the remote village of Bengal, called Baruni. In his third novel, he again mentions the evils of famine in Jharna, a remote town of Bengal. Baruni and Jharana symbolise extreme hunger and poverty during the Bengal Famine. The conditions of poor people and the exploitation of selfish traders are same in both the places. Dr. C. Paul Verghese rightly remarks, "Food is the primary requisite of human dignity; hunger debases and dehumanizes 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*."

In *So Many Hungers!*, the characters are silent and passive observers of the effects of famine. They yield to the situation without any revolt or protest, whereas in *He Who Rides a Tiger*, the characters are not mere spectators of sufferings but they revolt against the human injustice. As Malta Grover points out, "The novel *He Who Rides a Tiger* is also written with the famine for the background and deals with

the same theme, the only difference being that, *So Many Hungers!* is a silent sage of human miseries and sufferings, this novel is their vocal protest.”

In *So Many Hungers!*, the human degradation is at the lowest level. The hunger-stricken masses behave like beasts. The hunger turns Kalo, the protagonist, into a thief in *He Who Rides a Tiger*. Kalo could not resist hunger, at the sight of bananas in the high-class compartment in the train. Hunger drives him to steal the bananas in an aggressive mood.

The novel, *He Who Rides a Tiger*, is based on an ancient saying, “He who rides a tiger cannot dismount.” But Bhabani Bhattacharya through the character of Kalo makes it possible to dismount the tiger if the necessity arises. The character of Kalo is one of the best creations of Bhattacharya. Kalo, the protagonist of the novel, is a blacksmith living in a small town Jharna with his daughter, Chandra Lekha. The novelist describes his appearance of his hero, “But Kalo, black, was true to his complexion, which had the color quality of ink and people said that when he sweated, you could collect the oozing fluid for your inkwell.” (HWRT, p.1) But, Kalo performs a miracle by avenging himself on the wealthy and high caste people and becomes a legend in his own life-time.

Kalo’s wife dies after giving birth to a child. He does not marry again only due to his affection towards his daughter Chandra Lekha. She is a very beautiful girl like her mother and in color opposite to his father. People comment, “He is iron all over, three mounds of metal, with one tender spot at his top, and that spot is Lekha, his daughter.” (HWRT, p.1)

Kalo has firm faith in the traditional values of life. The caste hierarchy is deep in his spirit. An interesting point is that people from other communities also seek his advice, “...Men of his community and other communities nearby come trustfully to him for counsel whenever a festive day was to be celebrated, a quarrel to be settled, or a death to be mourned. His words were calm and wise. His decision had the weight of finality. His strength seemed based on an inner metal, which people recognized, and they knew Kalo could be relied upon.” (HWRT, p.16)

Though unable to understand the validity or the utility of the established social order, Kalo never questions its existence. Honesty, hard work, and faith in law and justice are the core of his being. He is “a man of accepted conventions” and his roots run “deep into age-old habits of mind and belief.” (HWRT, p.43)

Kalo joins his daughter in a mission school, in spite of the financial constraints. He works hard and earns enough to pay for Lekha’s school fees. Lekha is not only beautiful but also intelligent. Kalo has no limits to his joy, when Lekha stands first at the annual test and gets double promotion. As Kalo can just read and write he cannot answer her questions in her subjects. So, he starts to learn from her books. This shows his eagerness to help his daughter and his determination to face any difficulty for her sake. He feels sad when anybody calls his lovely daughter Kamar’s daughter. Come to Lekha, Kalo is everything for her. When her classmate comments at her father’s work, she feels hurt and fights with her. Even in her fancy she cannot bear to see him mocked or insulted.

No one in the Jharna town responds to the incident when Lekha wins Ashoka Memorial medal in an essay writing competition. Kalo is very proud of Lekha’s achievement and preserves copies of newspapers safely. He values medal more than his life. But the town remains silent as though nothing has happened. This incident sows the seeds of hatred in Kalo towards higher caste people.

The novel vividly portrays how the wealthy people are callously indifferent to the hungry millions and are greatly responsible for their miseries. The rich gladly offer a lot of milk to the temples and the Ganges. But they are not prepared to help the destitute even in ordinary manner. When Viswanath and Kalo give some of the bath milk of temple to the starving children, the wealthy people object to it in the strongest possible terms. In fact, these well-to-do people are not at all moved by the tragedy of the destitute dying like rats in a plague. They are absolutely unaffected by the suffering of the hungry masses. There is no lessening of the hunger for more than ten months at a stretch, though thunderous demonstrations by hungry marchers led by Biten, Viswanath and others are seen in the streets almost every day. In spite of large-scale arrests and beatings by the police, these demonstrations continue. But this does not end the miseries of the destitutes. So many heart-rending scenes of hunger are witnessed every day. There is the pathetic tale of Obhijit, a destitute lost child, who is adopted by Lekha and her father. Lekha's first meeting with this hungry child is described in the novel thus, "The boy had found a half-eaten mango, rotting in its yellow skin. He saw Lekha coming toward him and stiffened. He put the fruit back in the garbage and waited, staring. His mouth opened but no voice came. He could not even whimper or beg for mercy."

The attitude of the village folk shows that they have a set of simple values with "faith in the law that instrument which served out justice even to the poor."(p.33). Even in the most desperate state of hunger, they don't commit suicide, because they believe in the preservation of life in a dignified manner. "For days and months they had prayed hard, prayed to all the gods in temples and in heaven. The gods would not listen. They would not even bless the slow dying with death's quick thunderbolt. Kill yourself and be relieved? That would be sinful. You could not take a life, not even you own." (HWRT, p.26)

Kalo decides to liberate himself and his daughter from hunger. He leaves his daughter in the care of his old aunt and starts his journey to Calcutta. The thought of leaving Lekha pains him, but he must earn for her and for her better future. He hopes "He must find work soon. He must save all he could. When he had a hundred rupees in his waistcloth, he would rush back home- the day of rejoining- and take Lekha with him to the city. Never again would Chandra Lekha have to fear hunger." (HWRT, p.21) The irony is the city itself is the source of hunger in addition to many evils.

After a long walk for hours, Kalo had nothing eat. He has eaten nothing for the past few days. So, he is hungry and loses his sense. In a fit of madness, he has stolen three ripened bananas from the first class compartment and is caught red-handed by the police. For this petty offence, he is handed over to the court for punishment. The cruelty and inhumanity of higher people is depicted clearly in the court scene. Kalo pleads with the Magistrate, "I was hungry sir. Madness came upon me. It was because I thought I had to eat or I would die. Madness came upon me. I had to live." (HWRT, p.31) This indicates that people degrade to the lowest position during the time of hunger.

The Magistrate, after hearing Kalo's misery, instead of showing pity questions harshly, "Why did you have to live?" (HWRT, p.31) This question makes Kalo a rebel afterwards. Hunger has debased a man to a thief and a rebel. K.K. Sharma points out, "Hunger not only alienates him from his family, profession and native place, but also sends him to jail for stealing fruit at a time when hordes of hunger-mad folks are moving about throughout Bengal. He is sent to prison as a common thief by the Magistrate who knows nothing of the meaning of hunger because he has never experienced it."

The words of Magistrate completely change the attitude of Kalo towards his fellow beings. He comes to know the life of a downtrodden person is not worthy enough to live in view of high-class

people like the Magistrate. He loses his innocence and sows the seeds of revenge. He knows fully that he wants to live not for himself but for his daughter. He is not afraid of punishment but he is afraid of the wastage of time. He has to live because Chandra Lekha has to live. He is ordered to undergo three months imprisonment. This turns out to be significant period in his life. He loses his innocence and sows the seeds of revenge. "His bulky figure, the face beard – stubble and lined with shock, shuffled and slowly from the prisoner's bar. But a part of him stayed there, never to be regained. Some thing was gone and Kalo, blacksmith of Jharna town could never be whole again." (HWRT, p.32)

In his first novel, Bhabani Bhattacharya makes his characters suffer and undergo hardships and miseries. But in "He Who Rides A Tiger", he makes his characters revolt against the injustice and hitting back the people who are the cause of sufferings. In this novel, Biten, Kalo's fellow prisoner, gives Kalo the idea of hitting back at the people. From Biten, Kalo comes to know about the horrible situation in the city he always dreams of a saviour. To face the society, the only way according to Biten is "hitting back". He remarks about the high-class people, "They hit us where it hurts badly in the pit of the belly. We've got to hit back." (HWRT, p.37)

In the prison, Kalo shares a cell with Bikash Mukherji, who is known in the prison by his number B-10. B-10 is in prison for having protested against a policeman who has tried to kill a hungry destitute stood before an eating-place and stared at the food. Biten succeeds in instilling his revolutionary fervour in Kalo and convinces him that the right answer to society which has shown human callousness is to hit back. Biten casually mentions to Kalo how one can retaliate, to fake a miracle to get a temple raised by exploiting the gullible people, and to make fools of them by making them worship a bogus image.

While Kalo thinks for finding a honourable job after his release from prison, Biten opens Kalo's eyes and explains the condition of present society and the easy way to make a living in the great city. It is Biten who gives the idea that makes Kalo ride the tiger. Biten asks, "Can you wear a Saffron loincloth, smear your body with ashes, and mark a red-paste trident of Shiva on your forehead? Then, as you walk the streets, your alms bowl will fill up in no time; and may be, if you have luck, someone with money enough to squander will see in you a yogi with great spiritual power." (HWRT, p.40)

After his release, for sometime Kalo takes up the job of carrying corpses of destitute into municipal trucks and unloading them at the cremation ground. He finds the job very harrowing. Not able to continue the present job, Kalo reluctantly takes up the work of procurer for a group of brothels in the city. Kalo finds it almost impossible to be a pimp but circumstances compel him to take up the job. He feels that his job as a harlot-house agent is as bad as his earlier job. When Kalo finds to his horror his daughter Chandra Lekha in the brothel house, he casts away his old values and wages a war against the entire social system. "His battle was with the accuser, the age-old tradition, from which had come the inner climate of his being....Kalo had not only to deny but to eradicate the values by which he had been bred. He had to cut his social taproot and give up his inheritance" (HWRT, p.71)

Kalo renounces his caste and becomes a twice-born by wearing the nine-stranded sacred thread across his chest. He feels himself free from his spiritual bondage. He succeeds in making the miracle happen and a temple is erected on the hallowed spot. Money and materials pour in from all sides, especially from black marketers for whom worship is atonement for all sins committed and a guarantee of success in future undertakings. Kalo assumes a new name, Mangal Adhikari. A Board of Trustees is constituted to manage the financial and administrative work of the temple. Important men associate with

the management. Among worshippers who come to the temple and touch Mangal Adhikari's feet is the magistrate who has sentenced Kalo to hard labour for stealing bananas.

He is able to win over his enemies by sheer deception. The magistrate, who sentenced him to imprisonment, is seen touching his feet. He tells Lekha, "The turn of the wheel favours us beyond all reckoning!..They are paying. They touch our low-caste feet. They pray to a god who is no god. They are polluted, fallen. They are doomed - for many lives to come." (HWRT, p.93)

All the same Kalo feels sad, when poor people like coolies, rickshaw pullers and blind beggars spend their hard-earned money in the temple. Kalo appoints an old man named Vishwanath as a gardener in the temple. When he comes to know that the latter is a blacksmith, he desires to arrange a smithy for him in the future. Kalo does not forget Biten when he occupies a new position in his life. He remembers the day of Biten's release from prison and goes there, accompanied by his daughter, to receive him. He tells Biten how his plan worked and offers him a share in the income. But Biten rejects the offer. He feels that Kalo will surely be tired of the game in the near future. His comment — "A man like you cannot trick himself too long" (HWRT, p.174) implies a tribute to Kalo, as it suggests a high opinion of his true nature.

Kalo plays the role of a Brahmin so thoroughly that he is completely immersed in it at times. He abuses the old destitute, Vishwanath, for touching him. Lekha is shocked to see her father's behaviour. Meenakshi Mukherjee is inclined to regard this act as a proof of Kalo's having struck root in Brahminism. But one cannot afford to forget that Kalo has only been playing a part with intensity. And inasmuch as such a piece of behaviour is expected of a typical Brahmin, it does not amount to a lapse on the part of Kalo, Mrs. Meenakshi Mukherjee's view may also be less than apt in the context, as Kalo's main purpose is to take revenge on brahmins. It should be hard indeed to believe that he ever has a deep desire to strike root in Brahmanism, as suggested by Mrs. Mukherjee. In fact Kalo's plan to arrange a smithy for Vishwanath in the future may be suggestive of the soft corner he has in his heart of hearts for his own profession, notwithstanding his pretences and pretensions. Kalo's attempt to make amends for his undesirable behaviour may speak of his ability to keep in touch with his own roots. The words spoken by him in the context to Vishwanath may go a long way towards confirming that view. "A craftsman honest with his iron and fire is as good as the best of folks. He can hold his head high because of the skill of his hands, his special knowledge." (HWRT, p.113)

The comment suggests that Kalo was not ashamed of his own roots by any means. The secret smithy he had set up in the attic of his house also reveals his deep attachment to his own roots.

Through the life history of Kalo, Bhabani Bhattacharya expresses his conviction in a positive, bright view of life. Kalo, a low-caste blacksmith upsets the social order by investing himself with Brahminhood and rising to the top. He does not undermine the society but becomes a part of it and uses its power by accepting its rules and by fully comprehending to its purpose.

While thousands of people suffer due to hunger for food, rich people suffer due to hunger for soul. The hunger for soul is well cashed by some pseudo *sadhus* at all times. The innocent people are always the victims of this. As Biten says, "Food for the soul is produced and sold like food for the stomach, and though the ways of the two trades are different, you pay for both with hard cash. The temple is a market and the priest a dealer. People are always ready to pay well for feeding the inner man!" (HWRT, p.41)

Notwithstanding the numerous evils emanating from famine, there is one blessing in disguise which accompanies it- elimination of caste. Hunger does not discriminate between man of the highest caste and that of the lowest. Kalo says to Motichand that like a hungry kamar or untouchable boy even a hungry Brahmin boy would eat from garbage cans. Likewise, the hungry demonstrators do not think of caste even for a moment and live and work together to demand food. Millions of hungry people eat together at charity kitchens, oblivious of their caste and creed, thus completely rejecting caste-ridden society.

Besides portraying the sufferings imposed by the famine on the people of Bengal, the novel has also depicted certain dramatic changes that have come about in the life of an individual, belonging to an oppressed and depressed section of the society. While presenting those changes, the author has allowed us an insight into the kind of society envisioned by him. It is a society in which notions of caste-based superiority or inferiority make little sense. It is a society in which uprightness and moral values prevail over frivolous and hypocritical emotions, bringing about the ultimate triumph of good over evil and truth over falsehood.

Kalo rides the tiger in the sense that he is able to successfully deal with his enemies. The tiger may also symbolize the mighty airs he has to assume to pass for a brahmin. Bhattacharya says, "He rode a lie as if it were a tiger which he could not dismount lest the tiger pounce upon him and eat him up." (HWRT, p.85)

The suggestive title of the novel, *He Who Rides a Tiger*, can also be interpreted in relation to the theme of hunger. To sit and ride on the tiger's back implies man's quest for riding on hunger. Just as the tiger is ferocious animal and unhesitatingly kills man, so is hunger. Kalo and Lekha, two principal characters in the novel, suffer terribly on account of hunger and lose their home, peace, profession, morals and goodness. Hence, they decide to ride the tiger- symbolizing relentless hunger.

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