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BHABANI BHATTACHARYA'S HE WHO RIDES A TIGER AS A SOCIAL-REALIST NOVEL

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Abstract

During the post-independence period, writing in English act as a vent for the writers to share their colonial experience. Most of the writers have shown interest in writing the social condition of people around them. Social-realistic novels become prominence among the readers which induced the writers to write about the happenings they experience on their day-to-day life. Bhabani Bhattacharya was one among the Indian writers who voiced out the sufferings of individual in the society due to political unrest and Bengal famine of 1943. This paper is an attempt to explore the elements of social awareness in Bhattacharya's third and finest novel He who rides a tiger.

Keywords: Hunger, HWRT.

Introduction

Bhabani Bhattacharya was a renowned writer, known for his social consciousness and nationalistic zeal. Like his contemporary writers, Bhattacharya also highlighted the theme of hunger, poverty, exploitation, famine, caste discrimination and other burning issues pertained in the society during his period. Many of his writings portray the reality of life. Realism stands as a constant feature in his works. These novel traces out the real condition of Bengal during India's struggle for freedom, Bengal Famine of 1943, Quit Indian Movement of 1942, early stages of Second World War and political unrest.

Huge number of people lost their life in Bengal during the famine in 1943. Bengal was depleting its food stocks especially the main crops like wheat and rice. Second World War seems to be main cause for famine and starvation. Due to the famine, families were also disintegrated. It created, fear, anger and depression in the minds of deprived people. On the other hand, Opportunist made use of the situation in a ruthless manner.

“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 their grain. 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 pg. 15)

Bhattacharya in his first novel” So many hungers!’ and in his third novel” He who rides the tiger” dealt with the same theme hunger due to famine. In So many hungers! the main characters were mere observers of the situations, whereas in HWRT the characters revolt against the people who degraded them in all possible ways. Like the other novelist of his period, Bhattacharya is also an admirer of Gandhian philosophy. Many of his novels show the impact of Gandhian thoughts and philosophy.

The title of the novel is taken from the old saying “He who rides a tiger cannot dismount”. The protagonist, Kalo lived in Jharna with his lovable daughter Chandra Lekha. Lekha who lost her mother at her birth. After his wife's death Kalo started living for his only daughter. He spent all his hard-earned money on his daughter's education. Though he is a poor blacksmith, he made her daughter study in a mission school. Being an intelligent girl, Lekha excelled in her academics and also in extra-curricular activities. Like Bhattacharya's other female characters, Lekha was also portrayed as a strong person who never gets tired of fighting against the odds of the society. Though she is very good at her studies, she is often subjected to caste discrimination. Lekha's achievement is the only ray of hope in kalo's day to day life. When she has won Ashoka Memorial Medal in an essay writing competition, Kalo was overwhelmed with joy. But that happiness doesn't continue for a longtime as he realized that no one from the upper caste is ready to appreciate his daughter's success. Kalo was highly disturbed when the rich people pour liters of milk on the idol of God and not ready to offer even a drop of milk to the poor and needy. While Kalo showed his willingness to offer the bath milk of the idol to the starving children, people from the upper class highly protest his action and degraded him. The kind-hearted Kalo adopted a destitute child named obhijit who has lost his parents. Though Obhijit was provided with slices of bread every day, he was hiding the bread slices with a fear that he may not get it for the next day. Fear of hunger was the main cause for the restiveness of this destitute child. Through the character of obhijit, Bhattacharya showed the pathetic condition of poor children and their longing for food during famine. In order to overcome his extreme poverty, Kalo started his journey to Calcutta. Initially he wanted to earn hundred rupees so



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that he can take Lekha with him and continue their life in the city. He started working day and night without food. He has become so tired because of his hard work. His starvation for food made him to steal bananas in a train compartment and also got arrested by the police for his act of stealing the bananas. Though Kalo begged to leave him that time, the magistrate was not willing to listen and finally he was sentenced to imprisonment for three months. Kalo was traumatized when he heard the words of the magistrate” Why did you have to live? (HWRT pg 31) His three months of imprisonment created an aversion in his mind towards the society. He decided to rebel against the upper-class people who treated him in an undignified way. Kalo took a vow to take revenge upon the society. In prison Kalo met a person named Bikash Mukherji (Biten). Biten is also a victim of the cruelty of caste system. Though belong to the upper caste, Biten suffered a lot because of his poor economic condition. His sister committed suicide as her parents didn’t accept her love with a young man from lower caste. Even she has lost her life due to her unhappy marriage with an old man in their own caste. This incident forced Biten to revolt against the society through Kalo.

Biten recommended Kalo to wear saffron rope and project himself as a yogi with an extra ordinary spiritual power, so that all sort of people will fall on his feet and beg for his blessing. After his release from the prison in order to meet his daily needs, Kalo carried corpses in municipal trucks and leave it in the graveyard. Soon he discontinued his work as he found it to be sickening. Later, for the sake of survival Kalo started to work as a procurer for some brothels in the city. Kalo was extremely shocked when he came to know that his only daughter has become the victim of prostitution, somehow, she was saved by Kalo at the last moment. This incident strengthened his path of taking revenge on the society. As Biten said, Kalo decided to disguise himself as mangal adhikari by wearing sacred thread and applying red paste on his fore head. People started pouring money on him and begged him for a prosperous and peaceful life. To his surprise, the magistrate who sentenced him to imprisonment also touched his feet and waited for his blessings.

Kalo and Lekha were worshipped by upper caste people as priest and priestess. Though Kalo enjoyed his role as a managal Adhikari, Lekha was unhappy and felt like a caged bird. She wants to free herself from the boredom circumstance. People started believing Lekha as the “Mother of Sevenfold bliss” but she was unhappy with her role as a priestess in the temple. She never wanted to lose her own identity. She argued with her father to get rid of this falsehood. In order to escape from this state of falsehood, Lekha was even ready to sacrifice her life by marrying Motichand, a greedy trustee of the temple who had four wives. As Kalo wanted to save her daughter’s life by not marrying an old man, he revealed his own identity to others. Anyway, he felt happy that he managed to dismount the tiger and succeed in his strong revolt against the society. At last, both Kalo and Lekha left the temple happily and decided to lead their normal life. As Srinivasa Iyengar rightly opines,

As for Kalo he the ‘low caste’ has taken more than his full revenge on the people who had lorded it over being puffed up with ‘caste and cash’; and now he and Lekha, having cut themselves loose from their entanglements and deceptions, are content to begin life a new, purged of the past completely and not despairing of the future (pg 418)

The novel portrays Kalo’s strong protest against the injustice he faced at every walk of his life. Bhattacharya’s keen observation of the social disorder and its consequences was vividly expressed through his characters, plot and incidents. The aspect of realism is the key element of this distinguished novel. Kalo is the representative of millions of people who felt insignificant due to class and caste discrimination and their strong determination to fight for their livelihood.

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