

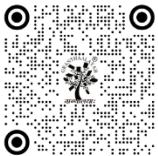
## FEMINIST AND POSTCOLONIAL DISCOURSES IN BHABANI BHATTACHARYA'S NOVELS: THE PORTRAYAL OF FAMINE AND HUNGER

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### ABSTRACT

Bhabani Bhattacharya's novels are an insightful study of socio-political and cultural dimensions of famine and hunger in the colonial and postcolonial India. This study examines his works, in particular *So Many Hungers!* and *He Who Rides a Tiger* to see how famine and hunger are not only physical realities that are devastating, but also potent metaphors for systemic oppression, economic exploitation and moral degradation under British imperial rule. Moving beyond the simple corporeal analysis offered by bodies from subjugated colonized subjects, Bhattacharya's narrative critiques colonial policies including mismanagement of resources and the privileging of the needs of imperial wartime over local welfare, which made the famines worse and the human suffering even more so.

**Keywords:** Subversion, Marginality, Other, Storytelling, Narration, Culture, Feminism, Post-Colonialism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Fictional world of Bhabani Bhattacharya is very symbolically rich in respect to socio-political and cultural progress in colonial India. In narrating tales that cause his readers to see, touch and even smell things such as hunger and the dreadful famine that established itself in Bengal. Bhattacharya is worried about taking home to people the repetition as more of a symbol than a reality of such events: they are also symbolic of whole systems of oppression, economic exploitation and non-oppression. *So Many Hungers!* One of the fictions by Bhattacharya, and *He Who Rides a Tiger*, are founded on the real historical event i.e. Bengal Famine of 1943. They convey a devastating opinion of colonising policies

that have been exploitative of this colony and maintain class differences that make mass human misery appear so natural and just to some people yet to excess or injustice to others. Besides, his stories, are good examples of the postcolonial literature because they represent the voices of the stateless and the oppressed. Bhattacharya destroys the colonial ideologies through the striking representations of farmers, women and the poor who are the ones who wants to cover the human cost of imperial domination. His interest in doing everything with the appetitive is undeniable and he is led by a burning interest and desire to investigate hunger further than the physical starvation of the body to the psychological and ethical effect of trying to test the boundaries of survival, dignity and resistance.

This blending of feminist and postcolonial discourses allows Bhattacharya to contest the legacies of colonialism but it also helps to underline the power and strength of oppressed people. His narration is easily amenable to a significant purpose of the postcolonial literature: the way through which past injustices can be challenged and the power of human spirit glorified. It makes use of postcolonial discourse as a framework to read the representation of famine and hunger in Bhabani Bhattacharya's novels. It explores how they question the domesticating forces of colonial economics, illustrate the brutalizing impact of imperialism, and celebrate the endurance of the parties most negatively affected by the imperialism — and their agency. Understanding such terrorism and subsequent memory systems and representing the fact heading to November 2023 would remain the main struggle of literature, The study intends to lay these facts by placing some of the Bhattacharya's writings on the postcolonial theory to show as how the literature serves as lifesaving vehicle, which never only saves the people behind the atrocities but also save the record of it and bring the possible social injustices into consideration.

Bhabani Bhattacharya (1906–1988), perhaps the most celebrated of Indian English novels, his work got national recognition and international acclaim, but this name belongs to the realm of Indian literature, most effectively in in lingua vernacular of his days. Bhattacharya wrote books that shows the combination of both the historical realism and the humanitarian concern. His books wrestles with the legacies related to colonization of India fighting for freedom and independence. His untiringly engaging novels not only reflect the socio-political condition of the time period they were written in, they are by no means just reading matter – they are a reflection of the epochs they were written in, the personal and personal experiences of the author, a micro-reader of the epochs of change threaded through India's history. Bhattacharya has enormous empathy on the part of the poor and unyielding criticism of systemic decimation. When he wrote it, he did it in English but she joined the local and global by chronicling the struggles of the marginalized in India and giving voice to their narrative to the international audience. Frequently his stories locate his characters within larger historical frameworks: the Bengal Famine of 1943 for one, the Indian independence movement for another — narratives that muddle the personal and the political to highlight the ways in which individual fates are shaped by larger socio-economic and political forces. Among his most famous books, there is *So Many Hungers!*, his debut novel based on the hell of the Bengal Famine. Here, Bhattacharya faces starvation, colonialism and human suffering and this is what he establishes as a roadmap to his literary journeys. It is written in a similar manner as *He Who Rides a Tiger*, addressing social stratification, moral dilemmas and resistance as a barbaric reproach against the hypocrisies and evils of society.

Bhattacharya tells stories of the most persecuted in humankind, yet his tales of the fascinating characters who tend to emerge in the fringes of society, give them a superhuman strength and power. It is not only historical work; however, it is about human condition, the mire of crisis, morality and survival. Bhattacharya, by way of his fiction, reveals the existing social injustice of his days, and presents a spirit of the ordinary man, which is almost invincible.

Bhattacharya belongs to group of writers who were politically and culturally at times, wrote against the political censors to write on sensitive topics. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1967 because of his talent of blending complicated social concepts with an exciting story. He stood as a person with significant voice, a postcolonial writer, who instructed us on history, culture, human life as intersecting.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya have received a lot of scholarly attention as postcolonial research particularly in terms of description of famine and hunger. The mechanised opponent and mass murder machine of the story can be compared to the themes that will be accessible to every person having some background in history or sociology of colonial exploitation, social hierarchy, or the ethical challenges created to the people and communities by the conditions

of disasters. Through this literature review, I want to discuss significant critical readings of Bhattacharya's writings and situate them in the larger context of postcolonial literary construct and imaginative.

## 2.1. POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE OF COLONIAL EXPLOITATION

It has been repeatedly stressed that Bhattacharya in his works criticised the exploitation of colonial rulers. The Bengal Famine of 1943, which serves as a crucial backdrop for *So Many Hungers!*, is often examined as a result of British imperial priorities, such as resource diversion and market manipulation. Amartya Sen, in his work *Poverty and Famines: In an Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Bhattacharya's depiction of the famine disputes the view that it was caused by a lack of food, but rather by a breakdown in entitlement systems. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, however, notes how Bhattacharya had a knack to humanise these systemic problems by concentrating in personal and communal experiences of people who were affected.

## 2.2. HUNGER AS A METAPHOR FOR OPPRESSION

For Bhattacharya hunger is a spiritual, emotional, moral dimension as well as a physical dimension. Hunger is a powerful metaphor for systemic oppression, and of dehumanizing human conditions. Meenakshi Mukherjee, for instance, has pointed out that Bhattacharya's novels use hunger as a metaphor to comment upon both colonial exploitation and the complicity of indigenous elites and the society of which they form a part.

## 2.3. SOCIOECONOMIC INEQUITIES AND CLASS DYNAMICS

Bhabani Bhattacharya's work is centrally concerned with the interaction between famine and class struggle. As Bhattacharya develops, *He Who Rides a Tiger*, they explore the moral crises and give and take that occurs when people find themselves operating within a system of embedded inequality. As social stratification is so thoroughly explored in the novel and the lives of the marginalised are so intricately connected to such hierarchies, it is an endless source of wonder how so damaging a system has managed to be in one people.

## 2.4. FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON HUNGER AND GENDER

Scholarly attention has been given to the gendered dimensions of famine in Bhabani Bhattacharya's novels. Researchers Jasbir Jain have looked at how famine makes women's already precarious vulnerabilities even worse, often as victims, sometimes as symbols of resilience. Bhattacharya's female characters typically struggle with the crippling combination of patriarchy and colonial exploitation even as they display their often vulnerable yet powerful lives. Feminist analyses make clear that, in such crises, women face unique challenges, among them the disproportionate share of care and survival. These representations expand on hunger as the socio-political as well as gendered whirlwind of famine, thus the imponderabilities of famine in the works of Bhattacharya.

## 2.5. RESILIENCE AND AGENCY AMID CRISIS

Amongst Bhabani Bhattacharya's novels there is recurrent reference to the unbreakable spirit with which man endures adversity. M.K. Naik has pointed out that the characters of Bhattacharya are confronted by the most profound and existential moral and existential challenge, who qualify hope and resistance. Typically, these narratives emphasise the agency of both the individual and the collective, which is a goal of postcolonial literature more generally, of recovering and amplifying the voices of those previously denied voice. Bhattacharya's work is an act of celebration of this resilience as a counter narrative to oppression, of those who endure systemic and personal struggles.

## 2.6. LITERARY TECHNIQUES AND REALISM

An excellent review has been done concerning the Tryer narrative technique of Bhabani Bhattacharya which is a mixture of historical realism and a sort of evocative prose. They laud him on the fact that he has made the bleak countenance of famine and social crisis without sensationalising it. He uses imagery to colour his imagination, creates characters thoughtfully, and tells a story over personal and collective. It is this narrative richness that makes the

storytelling of Bhattacharya an impact in the canon of Indian English literature as well as being able to last in the canon in the first place because such narrative richness engages the readers on an emotional level, and most importantly, brings about intellectual thought.

### **3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

Bhabani Bhattacharya, in her novels, makes famine and hunger so dominant in the perception of the socio-political and cultural forces of colonial and postcolonial India. Bhattacharya in *So Many Hungers!* and *He Who Rides a Tiger* considers the structural determinants of famine, the experience of hunger, the cold-blooded psychological strength of hunger, and the human and social organism capacity of endurance. This section analyses these dimensions from the point of view of postcolonial theory, taking Bhattacharya to task for his critique of colonial exploitation, and his representation of human strength in the face of systemic oppression.

#### **3.1. COLONIAL EXPLOITATION AND THE CREATION OF FAMINE.**

In *So Many Hungers!*, Bhabani Bhattacharya chose to write on Bengal Famine of 1943 to run down the devastating machinations of British colonial economic policies. Resource diversion for wartime purposes, forced grain exports and price manipulation are exploitative practises used to highlight how famine is a deliberate man-made disaster rather than a natural occurrence. Bhattacharya juxtaposes the passionate resistance of, for instance, Rahoul, a fervent nationalist, and Devi, his grandmother, against the great human suffering these policies had occasioned. Post colonialists such as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak hold, and this critique supports, that colonisation goes beyond material resources to cultural and existential fields.

#### **3.2. HUNGER AS A METAPHOR FOR SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION.**

The works of Bhattacharya employ both literal and as a form of more systemic oppression through hunger. There is an equal measure of physical deprivation experienced by characters whose neighbourhoods are dominated and exploited, as a consequence of which they are completely lost. In *He Who Rides a Tiger*, Kalo, deceived himself with a bold method to fight and provoke set of hypocrisies that lie within caste, hierarchy of classes. In this regard, hunger is the symbol of the stratification of oppression, the colonial oppression origins contained within the social injustices of their own. The symbolic aspect of this is a subtle critique of exterior colonial rule, as well as internalising structures of inequality, and fits in with numerous postcolonial discourses of unstructured injustice.

#### **3.3. PSYCHOLOGICAL AND MORAL DIMENSIONS OF FAMINE**

The stories by Bhattacharya focus on the psychological and ethical aspect of famine and present us with how utter poverty necessitates the person to confront the moral quandary. And all the dehumanising consequences of hunger are only evident when we see Kajoli become a devastated survivor of the famine, moving on her path in *So Many Hungers!*. As she experiences, women are usually exploited twice over and survive. The Frantz Fanon-esque resonance of psychological burns of systemic violence that Bhattacharya has used, and the extent to which famine deprives someone of their personal identity, as well as moral principles.

#### **3.4. RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE**

Themes that are represented in the novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya are those of deep suffering yet the wrenching suffering comes of a human spirit that is so strong. Rahoul and Kalo are the characters who do not conform to the oppressive systems (colonial, economic or social). Their behaviour as a group indicates the general desire to defy power and regain agency in concert with the larger project of postcolonial literature to amplify that which is so far omitted. This is the resistant spirit that Bhattacharya views within the setting of the India independence movement whereby he intertwines personal narratives into the national dream of liberty and justice to act as a form of representing the greater nationalist movement towards resistance.

### **3.5. FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN THE CONTEXT OF HUNGER.**

Gender and hunger are one of the most crucial areas that Bhattacharya uses in his novels where women are the worst sufferers of the ill-fated hunger. We also discover that such children end up being source of strength in their families and communities. Such deeply gendered nature, Kajoli making sacrifice, her suffering in crises is so gendered as in *So Many Hunger!* describes it. According to the feminist postcolonial theorists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, there is the case wherein the systems of colonialism and patriarchy are mutually sustained such that women are oppressed twice. The portfolios by Bhattacharya explore the intersections as played out by his female characters, both celebrating their strength, and demonstrating that they are at times oppressed by several systems at once.

### **3.6. LITERARY TECHNIQUES AND SYMBOLISM.**

The thematic richness of Bhattacharya is supplemented by a richness of literary means, including imagery, symbolism and contrasts of character. The coinciding grain description is both a symbol of life and a symbol of the death, yet the description highlights the socioeconomic difference that contributes to famine so greatly and needs to be addressed. The film also creates awareness of the existing disparities in the economic growth between towns and villages through the juxtaposition of rural and urban settings. The human and social implications of crisis are confirmed through the patterns of transformation experienced by Kalo and Kajoli. The works by Bhattacharya allow the reader to engage in the ethical and philosophical elements of famine to the same extent that they combine realist innovation with the compression of an allusion, making his works seem to be escapist, at least not transcendental thoughts on the subjects of justice, morality, and the simple question of living.

## **4. FEMINIST DISCOURSES**

The feminist analysis of Bhabani Bhattacharya is immense in his novels particularly in *So Many Hungers!* and *He Who Rides a Tiger* and the experience of famine and hunger has been presented in the novel. The feminine figures of his narratives endure both the patriarchal oppression and the institutional discrimination at the same time, and often assume a central role in the interaction with the resilience and survival in the stories. This paper analyses the feminist aspects of the works that Bhattacharya has created, with attention paid to how the works explore the interplay of the three concepts of gender, famine and agency in the context of various socio-political issues with specific reference to the agency and power of the women in this scenario.

### **4.1. HUNGER AND PATRIARCHY AGAINST WOMEN.**

One of the victims of the famine depiction by Bhabani Bhattacharya is that of unequal victimisation of women, both physically and socially. The way Kajoli changes her aspirations of being a bride to a starved survivor forced to make moral choices in *So Many Hungers!*, capturing the combined struggles women endure in crisis. Commodification of women's bodies for survival does not just make bodies part of the suffering, it makes women part of patriarchal exploitation as hunger intensifies physical suffering. Kajoli's suffering is emblematic of how patriarchal systems of social order worsen the lot of women in times of disorder. As in many of his narratives, Bhattacharya poignantly portrays a theme argued by analyst of gender Chandra Talpade Mohanty that crises exacerbate already existing gender inequalities.

### **4.2. HUNGER AS A GENDERED EXPERIENCE**

Bhattacharya's novels, however, go further than physical starvation to incorporate the hunger of the mind and heart, certainly the mind and heart of women. Women are the responsibility bearers of limited resources and bear the risk of the absence of resources for their families' survival at great personal cost. In *So Many Hungers!* Kajoli's mother is an example of this burden as she sacrifices her own good health for the good of her children. By portraying hunger as gendered, this rhetorical space both illuminates' women's resilience in the face of privation and lays bare the inequities of which they suffer at home and in public. Bhattacharya's writings are interpreted against a feminist gaze to a degree which emphasises how the hunger becomes a symbolisation of the struggles that women undergo in the face of patriarchal restrictions and blend their resilience with the grim realities of systemic inequality.

### 4.3. WOMEN AS AGENTS OF RESILIENCE AND SURVIVAL

Bhattacharya's female characters despite all that they are set through are usually projected as an example of strength and endurance. In *So Many Hungers!*, Kajoli's mother represents both those women who weather huge obstacles to keep relationships with family intact as well as those women who hunger and thirst for something better. Just like in *He Who Rides a Tiger*, female characters in this book are taking agency by challenging the status quo, and working against the prevailing system of oppression. This corresponds to feminist postcolonial perspectives centred on the participation of women in the resistance both against colonial exploitation and patriarchal domination. Bhattacharya flips the stereotype of female passivity on its head by putting women in the centre of their own survival, their agency, their resilience to structural injustice.

### 4.4. INTERSECTIONALITY OF HUNGER, GENDER, AND CLASS

As Bhattacharya's feminist discourse is inextricably linked with the splicing of hunger, gender, and class. Exploitation of women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds is the most common form of the impact of famine. Kajoli's near slavery during crisis is testament to how class and gender interact to further marginalise in such times.

For instance, feminist theorists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw insist that in order to understand women's experiences, we must analyse the interplay of multiple oppressions (colonialism, patriarchy, classism, etc.) — and to do so in an intersectional manner. Bhattacharya's literary works give a good representation of this intersectionality.

### 4.5. CRITIQUE OF PATRIARCHAL NORMS DURING CRISES

Bhattacharya's novels skewer predatory patriarchal structures that use women in emergencies. Kajoli is the victim of societal expectations which impose moral and ethical burden of survival of her family on her and burden these expectations especially on women. The criticism continues with the accounts of indifference of society in their suffering of the women, which is a greater feminist criticism of patriarchal double standards. These systemic injustices are shown in the works of Bhattacharya which tries to expose the cultural norms of violence toward women during moments of upheaval.

## 5. SYMBOLISM OF WOMEN'S STRUGGLES IN BHATTACHARYA'S NARRATIVES

In his novels, Bhattacharya usually uses the plight of women by encapsulating the experiences that incur a deep symbolic meaning as the emancipated ones against the injustices of the system. Similar to the bigger resistance to imperial and social oppression, their struggles against hunger and exploitation are analogous as well. An example is the fight of dignity and survival of Kajolis in famine and social breakdown in the society which is symbolic of the struggle of so many. Individual struggle and collective post-colonial resistance are united by Bhattacharya through these symbolic representations as the individualities are continuously associated with the collective post-colonial opposition, and the crucial part of women as they are fighting against the system inequities.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The action taken by Bhabani Bhattacharya on the issue of femininity in famine and starvation is a feminist approach to the issue, and it portrays the multidimensionality of female oppression in colonial and post-colonial India. The gendered aspects of crises in his stories highlight the problem of patriarchy and systematic exploitation whilst praising the strength and empowerment of women. The postcolonial feminist discourse finds a new meaning with preference to the experience of the female characters and Bhattacharya offers a critical eye to interpret the interaction of the gender and the issues of class and survival in the midst of poverty ridden postcolonial landscape(s).

The works on famine and hunger by Bhattacharya, identified by scholars, are complex and deeply analysed. His novels are undertaken in a postcolonial and feminist view that not only endeavours to criticise such exploitative practises in colonialism, but through an analysis of the insecurities of the systems and structures that have existed in society, the sustenance of the individual and the community. This review sets the stage, as a starting point, of the study of the

commentary on greater questions about social justice, historical memory, and humanity in the narratives that Bhattacharya writes.

The way Bhabani Bhattacharya portrays famine and hunger in his fiction shows that he is severely criticising the colonial exploitation, systemic oppression and social inequities. His literature is a part of the postcolonial discourses as it documents the deprivation that the colonialism inflicts, making the othered heard. In exploring these themes, Bhattacharya highlights the book's relevance today — how literature is a tool for understanding and questioning power and injustice, to endure and thrive in general.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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