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PORTRAYAL OF POVERTY IN THE WORKS OF INDIAN WRITERS IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Poverty has consistently remained a significant challenge in India. It profoundly impacts socio economic structure of the country. It creates a division between the affluent and the impoverished categorizing society into two groups. The financially disadvantaged always find themselves subordinate to the elite due to lack of education, limited sources of income, and the absence of social recognition. Poverty affects a man socially, physically, and mentally. Renowned authors such as Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandaya, Arundhati Roy, and Aravind Adiga trace poverty showing its bare reality in the contemporary Indian society. The present paper seeks to address the uncompassionate attitude of the rich towards the poor reflecting violence and cruelty turning them into either a depressed beings or an enemy of society. It also throws light on the futility of class differences in bringing social uniformity.

Keywords: Poverty, violence, cruelty, injustice, exploitation, social uniformity etc.

Poverty has always been a curse to humanity. It represents a social ill that necessitates a complete transformation in political and social structure emphasizing the requirements of the poor population. Poverty, in essence, is the insufficiency of resources to sustain basic standard of living and fulfill essential requirements. Low levels of education, poor health, unwillingness to work, and lack of life skills are associated with poverty. Poverty is the state of lacking "a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions" ("Poverty"). It signifies division within society, separating the wealthy from the economically disadvantaged, thereby jeopardizing the welfare of the less affluent strata of the population. It defines the very being of a person in a social setting in terms of lifestyle, dietary habits, and vocal and physical gestures. The cause of poverty varies from one person to another encompassing issues such as unemployment, population growth, inflation and less agricultural production. Overcoming poverty is a challenge particularly in Indian social context. In Indian society, the wealthy people have their autonomy overlooking the needs, rights, justice, and opportunities of less affluent class. They always remain subordinate to the rich. The indifference and lack of empathy of the affluent towards the impoverished sometimes turn into acts of violence and cruelty. It affects their psyche deeply sometimes turning them into a pathetic creature and sometimes an enemy to the rich. This situation calls for regulation and

change. Indeed, poverty presents a substantial challenge that necessitates a collective effort of the entire privileged group of people to bring them into the main strata. Throughout history, many renowned reformers have addressed poverty in various ways. Figures such as Swami Vivekanand and Mother Teresa have consistently been a helping hand to the needy and poor. In the realm of Indian English literature, authors like Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandaya, Arundhati Roy, and Aravind Adiga have brought the issue of poverty to the forefront showcasing its effect on the individual and society within diverse social contexts. They have addressed the issue of poverty in different social backgrounds. They have portrayed poverty in their contemporary time and its impact on people's lives.

Bhabani Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1954) is a prominent work of social realism. It is an intriguing portrayal of Kalo, a poverty-stricken blacksmith characterized by his remarkable courage, progressive outlook, and a conscious attitude towards societal issues. He has a firm faith in hard work, honesty, and law. The backdrop of the Bengal famine in 1943 is a pivotal element in the narrative profoundly impacting the life and values of people. During this challenging period, the affluent relied on their savings, while those less fortunate faced dire poverty and the harsh realities of starvation, struggling to secure daily employment. Kalo is also the victim of poverty and cruelty of people in the time of hunger.

Kalo's story unfolds as he embarks on a journey to Calcutta in search of employment opportunities leaving his sole daughter Chandra Lekha in the care of an old aunt. Starving and with nothing to eat for the past few days, he loses his senses and in a fit of madness, he steals three ripened bananas from the first-class compartment and is caught by the police red-handed. The subsequent legal proceedings illustrate the cruelty of wealthy and authoritative figures in the society. When asked by the magistrate to explain his action, Kalo explains "I was hungry, sir. A madness came upon me. It was because I thought I had to eat or I would die. A madness came upon me. I had to live" (Bhattacharya 31). It shows the sheer helplessness of Kalo that he performs the lowest act of stealing he ever imagined. Magistrate asks Kalo scornfully "why did you have to live?" (Bhattacharya 31). Kalo experiences a hollowness in his words and is completely shaken to express further. Despite telling his responsibility as a daughter to feed and nurture, he gets a punishment of three months imprisonment. As a result, his belief in law wavers and he develops hatred towards the rich. "Hunger has debased a man to a thief and a rebel" (Puletipalli). The privileged people can not even understand what the destitute go through because they are untouched by such dire circumstances.

Finding decent employment is a challenge for the destitute. Out of jail, after three months, Kalo worries about getting some work to survive in the city. However, he starts with no resources, not even enough to borrow a rickshaw. In utter distress, he reluctantly takes on the role of a stretcher bearer to transport the corpses to the cremation site. Kalo confronts the reality seeing "the corpses of destitute people who had found no work" (Bhattacharya 46) in the city. Firstly, he is paid one rupee but the very next day, his compensation is slashed in half. Asking for at least one rupee the municipal official callously informs him that the rates have been reduced, adding, "there are scores of hands willing to work at this new rate.....I have no patience with man like you. Don't show your face to me ever again." (Bhattacharya 51). The episode shows the grim reality of the world that despite their unwillingness, poverty drags them up to take such work that not only fails to provide them a decent livelihood but leaves them struggling to make ends meet. Society acts so cruelly to the poor that all the unwanted work is left to the poor and they have to opt for it under the pressure of their circumstances.

With no better option, Kalo feels bound to work as a procurer for a brothel in the city. This is a profession that goes against his values and principles but he gets engaged in to ensure the well-being of his daughter. Poverty haunts him to see the end of thousands of poor people lying on the road senseless and children scavenging for food in the garbage which he does not want to happen with his daughter. However, all his efforts to spare her from the clutches of poverty turns fruitless when he discovers her in the brothel. He takes her away from that shabby place as soon as he sees her. Chandra Lekha is completely shattered as "there was no conscious joy in her at her rescue, no feeling save utter exhaustion. All she wanted was to lie down and sleep, or die" (Bhattacharya 70). Kalo could not utter even a single word to console her and felt defeated. He kept his moral values aside to work for prostitutes for the sake of his daughter but the fate of the poor is something like that.

A woman befools Chandra Lekha at her aunt's place when she has gone to the temple saying her father had an accident and he needs his daughter in the hospital. She takes Lekha to Calcutta in the brothel. Bhattacharya throws light on the dark side of the society where unscrupulous individuals exploit the destitute. They look for deprived people and take advantage of their weaknesses. Bhattacharya consciously shows the victimization of poor strata to unimaginable circumstances that a common man never thinks about. "All men are born equal" but the social structure divides them into distinct classes where the poor are compelled to do degraded work for a few pennies to feed their stomachs (Bhattacharya 113). The author conveys the struggles of the destitute and the merciless attitude of society towards them, highlighting the urgent need for a more compassionate and equitable social structure.

Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) is a story weaved in poverty. It is a narrative of Rukmani's struggle in personal and social life in the face of poverty. She lives in a village with her husband and children, relying on their crops for sustenance. However, their lives take a tragic turn as first, heavy rain and then drought destroys their crop. Poverty crushes them inside out to the extent of selling household items and clothes still they are on the verge of starvation. As they struggle against the relentless grip of poverty, Rukmani's three sons seek employment at distinct places including Ceylon. Her fourth son, Raja takes a job in the tannery to win two times bread despite of tannery owner's inhuman attitude towards their employees. Raja's death proves to be a notable loss to Rukmani. He was alleged for stealing the calfskin from the tannery and the watchman confronts him in a suspicious location. The watchman hits Raja to protect their property but he dies on the spot. Rukmani's grief is overwhelming. She is left without answers about the circumstances of her son's death. The tannery men visit her to assert that Raja was solely responsible for his own demise, claiming that he was caught in the act of theft. "He was seen in the yard, where he had no business to be, and when the chowkidars caught him, they found he had stolen a calfskin" (Markandaya 93). The tannery men understand that this incident could be prevented but showing their superiority they want to prove themselves completely fair. Poverty makes Rukmani so helpless that she does not even bother to enquire about the cause of her son's death. Although she does not believe in the narrative of his son's stealing, she knows the weakness of his body in want of proper food. She accepts that "he worked hard, and ate little" (Markandaya 94). The incident depicts the harsh reality of a present-day world where poor people can be seen toiling hard beyond their physical strength. Rickshaw pullers, tonga pullers, and labor class can be seen frequently in such conditions.

Irawaddy, the only daughter of Rukmani and Nathan lives with them as her husband deserted her for her infertility. She lives very isolated and disappointed but finds solace in her youngest brother Kuti. She takes care of him like a mother. The family's destitution pushes them to the brink of desperation, leading them to consume grass to quell their hunger and often go empty stomach. Ira's suffering from chronic hunger becomes unbearable, and she makes a heart-wrenching decision to become a prostitute to feed her family, especially Kuti. The customers treat her very brutally and leave her with "horrible marks, one lip was bleeding where her tooth had bitten down" (Markandaya 99). Poverty and helplessness led Ira to face the cruelty of the world. She is abused physically, mentally, and socially but poverty hardens her emotions. Social reputation and physical abuse do not affect her as much as the gnawing hunger. Even though "she had been badly cut. A long jagged gash showed in her left side, there was a similar one on her left wrist", she remains firm to be a prostitute to nurture her family as long as the need persists. (Markandaya 99). She accepts her harlot identity saying "tonight and tomorrow and every night, so long as there is need. I will not hunger any more" (Markandaya 102). Her poverty makes her the subject of physical abuse by wealthy people. Her grim acceptance of this harsh reality is reflected in her words to her parents "the cuts will heal. Men do not seek my face" (Markandaya 103). Markandaya portrays a very pathetic image of poverty where the poor individual is only a subject of scorn and humiliation.

Rukmani's husband, Nathan is not away from becoming the victim of poverty. His poor health is the consequence of sheer poverty and suffering due to famine and flood. Nathan begins to "suffers from rheumatism and apart from this had several attacks of fever" (Markandaya 131) due to excessive stress and physical weakness. Repeated crop failures force them into a hand to mouth existence, making it impossible to afford the rent for their farmland. In the time of recession due to drought, the landlord demands a guarantee of

income. They do not take concern for people's helplessness and behave cruelly to ensure their profit. Shivaji warns Nathan "the land is to be given to another if you can not make payment" (Markandaya 75). Eventually, the landlord seizes their land for profit. It affects him and his family so badly that proper food for two times becomes their longing. "It is money which rules the world and a person without money will prove himself to be a misfit" (Shalika Sharma & Pankaj Arora 371). Completely shattered and distressed, Nathan and Rukmani go to the city but finding no clue of his son's dwelling they are bound to work in a stone quarry for their survival. Nathan does physical work more than his body can bear. Consequently, he becomes very weak and his health deteriorates day by day. Still, with patience and courage, he cuts the stone even on rainy days. Excessive hard work makes him ill, he shivers due to weakness and fever. Rukmani tries to cure him in all possible ways but he dies ultimately. Throughout the novel, longing for food prevails. It depicts all the problems associated with poverty. Nathan's poor health, Ira's prostitution, and her son's migration to urban places for work and food are quite appealing in its description reflecting society's violence and cruelty towards the poor.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is a breathtaking tale of Velutha's struggle in poverty to sustain a good life. Born into a family of limited means, Velutha's journey is marked by a relentless pursuit of knowledge and an acute awareness of the injustices suffered by the poor. He tries his best to overcome class barriers and make his identity but poverty and untouchability prove too cruel to him in the end. Baby Kochamma's false accusation of Velutha assaulting Ammu and kidnapping Estha and Rahel makes him a prisoner. The police caught him in an unexpected location which makes their doubt deeper. The policemen "woke Velutha with their boots" showing their utmost cruelty even before his crime is proven (Roy 308). In prison, he becomes a victim of physical violence just to make him confess his crime. The police easily take him into custody without further query admitting a poor person to perform such a brutal crime. They torture him to the extent that he is unable to move. "His skull was fractured in three places. His nose and both his cheekbones were smashed, leaving his face pulpy, undefined" (Roy 310). Wounds and fractured ribs make him completely helpless leading to his death. Truth is disclosed after all the inquiry has been made after all the possible violence happened with Velutha that "he was an innocent man. There was no case" (Roy 314). Roy shows the pervasive influence of the affluent, who manipulate the authorities to maintain their power privilege. On one side, the police warn Baby Kochamma for "lodging a false FIR" on the other hand, they ask her a proof "either the rape-victim must file a complaint. Or the children must identify the pravan as their abductor" to justify the complaint and to save themselves from any kind of public outrage for victimizing an innocent (Roy 314-315). Velutha becomes the victim of societal norms, taboos, and poverty. Here, Roy effectively critiques the inequities in society. The novel is a powerful commentary on the abuse of power, discrimination and injustice that persist in the face of social and economic disparities.

*The White Tiger* (2008) a Man Booker Prize-winning novel by Aravind Adiga is another interpretation of poverty in all its ruthless and violent face. Balram Halwai is a very thought-provoking portrayal by Aravind Adiga describing the real being of a servant and a master. Initially, Balram's experiences are marked by humiliation and mistreatment at the hands of his employer, Ashok and Ashok's family. His master is somewhat liberal but Mukesh, his elder brother, and other family members behave rudely making him conscious of his position. He gets insulted even for no big reason at all. On his way back to Dhanbad, Mukesh orders him to search for his lost one rupee on the car floor. He expresses "I got down on my knees. I sniffed in between the mats like a dog, all in search of that one rupee" (Adiga 139). He feels so humiliated that he gives him a rupee coin from his pocket to save himself from his callousness. Mukesh represents the disbelief of the entire rich class who disregard the poor just for their poverty. The wealthy class associate dishonesty, greed, and crime with the poor and remains doubtful towards them. The sheer cruel behaviour of his master comes to light when they put Pinky's crime on his shoulder and ask him to sign the affidavit in the concern before any prior discussion with him. They believe that it is the responsibility of a servant to take charge of the crime of their masters saying "my man will do what he is to do, no worries about that. He's part of the family. He's a good boy" (Adiga 167). The affluent people expect a servant to act as per their command with no wish of his own and subjected to cover up all the misdeeds committed by the employer. Balram asserts "my life had been written away. I was to go to jail for a killing I had not done. I was in terror, and yet not once did the thought of running away cross my mind. Not once did the

thought, I'll tell the judge the truth, cross my mind" (Adiga 177). Submissiveness becomes a trait of impoverished being conscious of their subordinate existence to the other. Adiga portrays the harsh reality of the cutting-edge society where "money overtakes all other systems of living" (Mahal 5647).

In this way, the present paper emphasizes the diverse ways in which people respond to poverty. Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandaya, Arundhati Roy, and Aravind Adiga address poverty with different temperaments. Rukmani suffers a lot despite being conscious of social injustice but she accepts her fate in the end. Velutha's death also indicates the cruelty of the privileged class. Though he tries hard, he fails to change the opinion of society. On the other hand, Kalo and Balram Halwai turn to revolt against the ill-treatment of the elite class without concerning the path to be right or wrong. Thus, poverty puts different impressions on the psyche of people which develops their specific opinion towards society. It has both a suppressive and aggressive attitude. Sometimes people get depressed about their financial weakness and live their life in the darkness accepting the worst of their life but some people develop hate for the elite class and revolt against their suppression in various forms such as robbery, murder, and deception and turns into ruthless being. This vast rift between the elite and the downtrodden needs to be regulated. It should be the collective effort of the affluent and empowered to give space to the impoverished and bring them equality. One "should understand the lacunae in the current social structure, heed to the voice of lower class and search for suitable measures to restore normalcy in the areas of disparity" (Surendran and C. S. Senthil). Thus, the present society needs a more uniform outlook of society where education, job opportunities, and social recognition are extended to those in need.

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