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HUMAN BEING: A PERENNIAL SLAVE OF HUNGER IN BHABANI BHATTACHARYA'S  
*SO MANY HUNGERS!*

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ABSTRACT

Hunger has haunted humankind throughout the known history of the world. It has remained a mystery that history of hunger persists in all the societies— whether of scarcity or plenty. It is a vicious product of modern economic life. Bhabani Bhattacharya has artistically dwelled the theme of hunger in his novels. In his novel *So Many Hungers!*, Bhattacharya expresses that human beings have innumerable cravings, wants and longings which cannot be fulfilled and satisfied till the end of life. These desires, if allowed to multiply in a man will take the form of hunger as is discussed in the novel. Therefore, anyone can find himself engulfed in the pangs of hunger at one or another point of life. It has the power to dehumanize anyone by its dark frenzy with the varied dimensions: food, faith and freedom. Thus, hunger has the power of transforming the man into a perennial slave of hunger.

**Keywords:** Hunger, perennial slave, degradation, oppression, subjugation, optimistic faith.

Hunger has haunted humankind throughout the known history of the world. It has always remained a mystery that history of hunger persists in all the societies— whether of scarcity or plenty. It is a vicious product of modern human life. For a layman hunger simply refers as an inadequacy in individual dietary intake relative to the kind and quantity of food required for growth, for activity and for the maintenance of good health. While this definition is broad enough to include voluntary forms of self-denial, but there are also other forms of hunger which embarks its presence latently in this world. The experience of hunger and its immediate consequences are individual in nature yet it affects the functioning of the social aggregations within which hunger occurs in the limelight of hungry individuals for themselves. Bhabani Bhattacharya has artistically dealt with the theme of hunger in his novels. He treats 'hunger' as the fundamental reality of life.

In Bhattacharya novels, theme of hunger always comes in limelight. The reason for instigating hunger in the novels of Bhattacharya chiefly owe to the World War II (1939-1945), the Bengal Famine (1943), the Freedom struggle during (1919-1947) and the Indo-China War (1962) which altogether brought innumerable miseries to the people of India; it uprooted, killed a lot of people leading to a disastrous scenario in the history of India. For example, during the British Rule in India, at one side it provides tendency of British rulers as the hunger to retain power, accumulate wealth, exploitation of raw material, natural and human resources; whereas on the other side for common ones, it is the hunger for self rule or freedom. The resultant catalyst between forces (British rulers and Indians) thus creates a sort of hunger matrix having diverse elements which transforms a man into a perennial slave of hunger.

*So Many Hungers!* is the first novel of Bhabani Bhattacharya published in the year 1947 just after India's Independence and the partition of the country. It was written in the backdrop of impending

independence. *So Many Hungers!* is primarily devoted to the man's hunger for food, faith and freedom in which Bhattacharya has used the word 'hunger' as refrain and is expressed in such a manner that it becomes a matrix which forms the central gist of the novel. In *So Many Hungers!*, he writes:

I know, I know, beloved,  
Not in this life will hungers be sated—  
I know, I know, beloved!  
What hungers? (93)

Through these lines, Bhattacharya wants to express that human beings have innumerable cravings, wants and longings which cannot be fulfilled and satisfied till the end of life. These desires, if allowed to multiply in a man will take the form of hunger as is discussed in the novel. Therefore, anyone can find himself engulfed in the pangs of hunger at one or another point of life. It has the power to dehumanize anyone by its dark frenzy and this argument is supported by Bhattacharya

The title of the novel, *So Many Hungers!* is apt and suggestive to its theme. Regarding it, Bhattacharya observed that, "novel was concerned with all the intensified hungers of the historic years 1942-43, not food alone, the money hunger, the sex hunger, the hunger to achieve India's political freedom" (qtd. in Gupta 2). In fact, the title of the novel itself portrays the theme regarding different types of hunger prevalent in the society. Therefore, it appears that the novel is a reflection in microcosm about the reality of the situations taking place during that period. As, Lukacs comments in *Writer and Critic*:

The goal for all great art is to provide a picture of reality in which the contradiction between appearance and reality, the particular and the general, the immediate and the conceptual, etc., is so resolved that the two converge into a spontaneous integrity in the direct impression of the work of art and provides a sense of an inseparable integrity. (34-35)

The thematic pattern of the novel is connected by the two main strands which weaves the narrative as a single entity. We find two plots in the novel— one is the narrative of Samarendra Basu's family residing in Calcutta city having Rahoul as the leading character with a striking contrast of a peasant family having Kajoli as the leading character. The two narrative of Rahoul and Kajoli are linked by a common character named Devesh Basu reverentially addressed as "Devata" (celestial being, a messiah), who is the grandfather of Rahoul and the godfather of Kajoli. He is the bridge between the two families being the *de facto* (actual) head of the Basu family and the *de jure* head of the peasant family. He acts as a source of inspiration to both Rahoul and Kajoli. He renounces the luxurious life of city leaving behind his son and grandsons to reside in Baruni village with the peasant family of Kajoli. In short, Devata acts as a connecting point where the two plots of the novel joins and ultimately dwells into a one big theme of hunger. At the apparent glance, the novel refers to the people's three-fold matrix of hunger i.e. for food, faith and freedom. But when studied minutely; it appears that it has so many of them— both benign and maleficent. In the words of Kh. Kunjo Singh:

The novel indeed shows many kinds of hunger: for food, for affection, for love, for lust, for money, for name and fame, for sacrifice, for political freedom, for imperial expansion, for human dignity and self-respect, for the general welfare of all and for spiritual weapon as employed by the hunger strikers and Devata fasting into death. (77)

And all these dimensions of hunger pointed towards the particular period of Indian history; to show the agonies, cruelties and frustrations which befell on India in general and Bengal in particular. Firstly there is 'hunger' commonly understood as the hunger for food and the 1943 Bengal Famine is mainly responsible for it which crushed millions of people with its 'devastating tribulence' forms the major part of the novel's plot. Then, there is quest for freedom, Quit India Movement of 1947 which weaves the another thread of the plot with its long cherished goal of India's independence. And the third is the hunger for faith in human values of compassion and brotherhood which is very necessary in such a grim scenario of chaos and poverty to survive. Bhattacharya not only dwells on the literary meaning of the word 'hunger,' but probes deeper and deeper in order to bring out the inner meaning of a dramatic situation which leads to the formation of hunger in a society.

During the time of writing this novel, India was enslave of British Empire which added to the miseries of the people leading to hunger for freedom— not only political; but also economic and social. Bhattacharya

has given ample of references to various events during National Freedom Struggle, its phases— the Quit India Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, breaking of the Salt Law, etc. forming the major portion of the novel as well as playing a significant part of its theme.

Bhattacharya talked about the concept of political freedom by taking Rahoul as a mouthpiece in the novel. Though initially Rahoul's participation was indirect, his heart was with the people of the country whether fighting for their freedom or suffering in the famine-stricken Bengal. He was the elder son of Samarendra Basu and the grandson of Devesh Basu. He was deeply influenced by his grandfather and had consulted him when his father wanted to send him to Cambridge to avoid his getting involved in the Struggle for freedom. His grandfather had unhesitatingly told him that the call of the country came first. Rahoul had explained him that his stay in Cambridge would enable him to know the English people and then he would be able to fight them better on his return to India. In the true Gandhian spirit Devata had told him to remember that their quarrel was with the British rulers and not with the British people.

Being a scientist, still Rahoul was always haunted by the desire to see his people and country free. He under the 'inward urge for freedom' had the passion of the soul as for him nothing was more precious in his life than this. He craved for freedom for all and in all respects. Though initially, Rahoul's participation was indirect in the war. But, in his heart, he always wanted to help his country whether fighting for their freedom or helping the people suffering from famine. He realized that a foreign government is incapable of solving the problems of his countrymen and the freedom of the country is a dire need, "...Quit India cried the two million dead of Bengal... Quit cried all Indians. You have done us some good along with much evil. For the good you have done you have been paid full. The accounts have been settled. Now for God's sake, Quit! (202).

The hunger for freedom of nation started developing in the mind of Rahoul and for attaining it; he seriously wanted to take some action. Rahoul after taking the advice of his grandfather, Devata, who was at that time in the prison, plunges into Quit India Movement. He even set up relief centre for the poor peasant families in Calcutta where he fed them. Later on, he joined the movement directly. The novel closes with the incident of voluntarily seeking imprisonment of other freedom fighters so that India can be free. At this point of time, Rahoul had shunned all the wants from his life. He did not want that the British government will grant them their freedom, but on the contrary knows how to get it. One morning, he was taken away to jail and at the gate of prison, he was joined by other detunes who had full confidence in the future.

Yet another was the tale of Kajoli. Her life was the saga of millions of peasant families when famine struck Bengal i.e. they were reduces to destitute, they had to leave their villages, etc. Kajoli's father and elder brother Kanu were incarcerated for joining Civil Disobedience Movement. Hence she lived with her mother, younger brother, Onu and Devata in her ancestral mud and thatched house. Through the character of Kajoli and the circumstances that her family faced, Bhattacharya projected the hunger for economic freedom which people belonging to her community demanded for.

Hunger came as a curse and cause innumerable miseries to poor and destitute on one hand and as a God-given largess to the rich for making money. Samarendra Basu, father of Rahoul was a greedy man insensitive towards the want of people and looks at the "War only as a rare chance to reap a harvest gold" (30). He formed a trading concern having the ironic name *Cheap Rice Limited* to collect rice, hoard it and later sell it at a very exorbitant price. On the contrary, his children Rahoul and Kunal felt worried about the war and its consequences. Although in the end of the novel, he got the title, but lost his entire happiness, his family, and sons.

Bhattacharya's fictional presentation in *So Many Hungers!* can be truly considered as a materialist society-centered novel as it compelled the reader to find the actuality of life under extreme unjust conditions. The economic hardships that fall on the people in the novel led them to take two strands of life— either they became corrupt by keeping their faith in wealth and material possessions or work according to their morals by keeping their faith in humanity and brotherhood; thereby forming a matrix of hunger for wealth and faith. Samarendra Basu belonged to the first group of people who wanted to satisfy his own hunger for wealth at the cost of the hunger of millions of people dying miserably day by day due to lack of food. Bhattacharya was deeply aware of these realities of life and wanted that his reader should understand these phenomena of life that in this world everyone has some kind of hunger.

The deteriorated conditions of the peasants were not only due to the leprous attitude of government, but also because of keeping their faith in tradition alive amidst such gruesome conditions i.e. believing that God will rescue them one day from all the miseries of the world. Hence, the faith in their tradition came in the way to satisfy their hunger for food by passively enduring all the atrocities of the authorities resulting in the formation of hunger matrix among the different faiths i.e. faith in tradition, God, previous birth. Rahoul lamented on the prevalent conditions due to the traditionally bound faith of peasants, "hunger was their fate, an expiration of the sins of the past lives. The peasant hands were manacled with their antique moral tradition. The rice robbers were safe from peril because of the peasant tradition" (108).

In Baruni village, after the arrest of Kajoli's father and brother, Devata became the head of the Kajoli's family as he considered Kajoli as his granddaughter and her mother as his daughter. Devata not only gave inspiration and guidance to Kajoli family, but to the entire Baruni village in their times of difficulty. But after the arrest of Devata, people did not pay any attention to his advice and later bore its consequences. Later, Devata was taken to Dehradun jail and when the Quit India Movement reached its zenith he undertook a fast in prison. Bhattacharya has described another form of hunger for food: in the form of 'self-imposed hunger' here which the people like Devata and others undertaken in the end. This hunger strike is the 'self-imposed' hunger and was demonstrated by the people who undertook 'Satyagrah' by resorting to hunger-strike. The irony of situation took place as in the whole country, people wanted food to satisfy their hunger i.e. they were still in the pangs of hunger—'hunger-trapped' and could go to any extent to satisfy their hunger for food. At that time a man (Devata) who was getting food in the jail house, left it for the sake of his hunger for freedom i.e. Devata had broken the hunger-barrier— this incident is an example of hunger matrix between two dimensions of hunger i.e. food and freedom.

Amidst such atrocities due to lack of food, lack of faith, Bhattacharya introduced one more type of hunger i.e. hunger for love. Kajoli has the best time of life when she marries Kishore as they both possess great love, respect, care and affection for each other. The union of Kajoli and Kishore reflected the different aspects of hunger which every man and woman encounters in their life time, "Man has a hunger that he may look tall in the eyes of his kin and brethren. . . Woman wed has one big hunger for home- no other little hungers make part of the big home hunger; they belong to it as the spokes belong to the cart-wheel" (43).

Culmination of one narrative of hunger resulted in the beginning of the other as their happiness was short lived. The conditions prevailing in the village started worsening, resulting into the Kishore's decision of finding a job in the Calcutta city. But, Kishore was killed while going to Calcutta in an accident on the railway embankment and his fate remained unknown to the Kajoli's family right up to the end of the novel. By this time Kajoli was five month pregnant. In the village, hunger approached their family. They sold, whatever they had, including the cow-bell of their loving cow, Mangala whom they consider as their mother. They began to live on figs, roots and on whatever their luck brought to them. The novel is full of heart rending scenes which could evoke the human soul to the deepest level while reading the dreadful experience of Kajoli's family. Bhattacharya portrayed another dimension of hunger which was the hunger for sex and lust. This hunger spoiled the life of Kajoli as her rape by the soldier which led to her abortion and end of all the dreams which she had seen for her baby. This hunger for sex led to the establishment of brothels houses. Brothels agents from Calcutta try to lure girls like Kajoli and others like her. The business of brothels was on peak at that time and their agents were recruiting impoverished girls for the flourishing of their business more and more. After being raped, Kajoli was admitted in hospital, where she was very well looked after and taken care of. However, Onu and mother ekked out their living by begging as pavement dwellers. All their illusions about the city of Calcutta were shattered. Their problems did not stop here, their problem of hunger continued to defy the solution. For supporting the family, Onu had to ransack the garbage bins for some left over. They had no food, no shelter and no money and remained unaware of Rahoul's kindness who sent them money order.

Amidst the scarcity of food grains, famines, callous behaviour of government etc., Bhattacharya spotlighted his affirmative faith in life. Bhattacharya did not permit anyone to conceive of nihilism. On the contrary, pointed towards the positive view of life which is possible only if a man has faith in his ownself and has ethical values (morality). He evinced an affirmative vision of life issuing out of one's socio-moral and socio-ethical sense of values. In the novel, it was this "sense that prevails over one's utter feeling of desolation and

desperation, culminating at times in self-abnegation or self-effacement...characters live on hope and live for hope" (Bhatnagar 97).

In the opening chapter, Bhattacharya plead his optimistic view of life. Through Rahoul's character, Bhattacharya show his belief in the theory of goodness of people everywhere. Despite of his father being a merciless profiteer; he tried to help the destitute in all the possible ways. His faith in goodness of soul and deeds always helped him throughout his path of helping downtrodden people. He opened charity kitchens for oppressed and destitute. Rahoul like his grandfather, Devata has faith in human values and wanted to create a new enlighten world out of the world-in-ruins. This presence of true life spirit and faith in goodness of soul impressed his wife and was expressed as, "...her husband's true spirit, his hunger for a happier life for the common man" (176). When the man-made famine broke out, he was one of those few persons who offer help to the suffering humanity.

Through Devata, Bhattacharya gave vent to his faith in the greatness of life, as the divine bliss fills his heart with riches and he is called as Devata (celestial being) by all those who come in contact with him. He had not only hunger for human values, but also represented human values of mankind with all its grandeur, dignity and courage. He acted as a beacon of hope, inspiration and guidance to the villagers. Through his character, Bhattacharya emphasized the self's abiding hunger for faith in life and commitment to a higher goal of life which was above every sort of greed and temptation.

Again, the character of Kajoli was shown as possessing faith in herself that helped her in all the difficult walks of her life, helped her to differentiate between good and bad, to stand firm when nobody came to help her. In a nut shell, more the difficulties arouse in her life, the more she became stronger. Due to sufferings and hunger for food for sustenance, Kajoli accepted the proposal of betel-woman. But realized her folly as how she could degrade herself to such a level as both her father and elder brother had fought for the national movement, her husband had fought for the workers, even her grandfather in jail-house had not break his spirit of freedom and she was utterly lost—"selling all of herself" (196). All the sufferings, struggle of her family members resulted in making Kajoli a fighter who fought with all the dimensions of hunger i.e. firstly with the hunger for food, then with the hunger for freedom by keeping hunger for faith in higher ideals and ethical values of life.

Although hunger had resulted in the devastating effect on the people, but one thing which hunger had done good was that the hungry masses did not remember their caste or creed, touchability or untouchability ,they worked, ate together from the common garbage, slept over common roads, demonstrated and protested together. The hunger which dehumanized the rich, ennoble the poor folk to calls forth the best trait in them. In short, it portrays the unflinching faith of the individuals in human values even in the teeth of all miseries and privations. Sufferings do not snatch them away from values which they cherish high.

Thus, it all reflects the positive attitude of life which the novelist projects even in the great harrowing scenes. This positive vision, optimistic view of life lies in Bhattacharya due to his faith in human values. So that his protagonist does not fear from the shackles of hunger for food and freedom as they are having faith. Against the backdrop of such an intensified struggle for food and the hunger of people for the sheer survival, Bhattacharya portrays simple characters that represent the noblest form of freedom.

*So Many Hungers!* is based on the facts personally observed and carefully reported as a whole entity. Faith always lies on the dormant end for achieving the food and freedom. The novel depicts a saga of man-made hunger which by virtue of various hunger elements transforms itself into hunger matrix that took a toll of more than two million innocent people including simple, poor men, women and children and making it an everlasting phenomenon which makes human beings a perennial slave of it.

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