

# The Famine And The Female In Bhabani Bhattacharya's So Many Hungers!

Pooja Dagar<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Jyoti Sharma<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Manav Rachna International Institute of Research and Studies, Faridabad, 121001

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Department of English, Manav Rachna International Institute of Research and Studies, Faridabad, 121001

Corresponding author: Dr. Jyoti Sharma

**Abstract:** Bhabani Bhattacharya's novel 'So Many Hungers!' is a story of human plight and suffering during the great Bengal famine of 1943. It also has the Quit India Movement at its focus and shows Gandhi's impact on Bhattacharya. The idea of the 'New Indian Woman' based on Gandhi's principles is perpetuated through the story by the means of its female characters. . It is a tale of people caught in tragic predicaments and their response to this situation. This essay examines the novel's female characters and studies the situation of women during the famine. It also highlights how Bhattacharya advocated for women participation in the freedom movement through his characters and created close ties between India and the woman protagonist in his story. A critical analysis based on a close reading of the story reveals several layers in Bhattacharya's narrative and offers an authentic account of one of the most critical moments in the Indian history.

**Keywords:** famine, female, women, hunger, struggle, survival.

## Introduction:

Bhabani Bhattacharya was one of the earliest social realist writers of Anglo Indian fiction and wrote about socio-political issues that were shaping India as a nation in the period of 1940s-1960s. His debut novel *So Many Hungers!*, published in 1947, the year of India's independence, focused on two most significant events of the Indian history. Firstly, the man-made famine of 1943 that starved thousands of people of Bengal and secondly, the Quit India Movement, that was the biggest event of the Indian freedom struggle. Bhattacharya himself admitted that this novel was a product of the emotional disturbance that he experienced on witnessing the plight of the starving people. "Then the great famine swept down upon Bengal. The emotional stirring I felt (more than two million men, women and children died of slow starvation amid a man-made scarcity) were a sheer compulsion to creativity. The

result was the novel *So Many Hungers!*" (Bhattacharya, 1972). As such, the hunger for food and the hunger for political freedom constitute the main themes of the story. But apart from these two dominant hungers, the story also speaks of several other forms of hunger- hunger for wealth, for sex, for fame, for human dignity and rights, for love and family and hunger for a happiness. Through the parallel stories of Rahoul and Kajoli, Bhattacharya displays the pathetic situation of the masses striving for food and survival. The two protagonists also represent the binaries of class, caste, gender, and rural/urban location and can be viewed as representatives of a larger populace of Bengal during that time. Also notable is the fact that Kajoli is a manifestation of the new Indian woman based on Gandhian principles. In fact, Gandhi's ideology and his impact on Bhattacharya's writings is evident throughout the novel. Thus, the interconnection between the national movement and the

redefining of women's role in society is also a remarkable feature of the story. It is this idea of the new woman in *So Many Hungers!* that this paper is directed towards, and explores Bhattacharya's views on women's role as mothers and nurturers, during scarcity and fight for survival.

From the beginning of the story, Bhattacharya constantly maintains a contrast between his two protagonists. While Rahoul belongs to a prosperous family, is well educated, with an air of authority around him, Kajoli is as humble as it gets. This difference is due to their genders and their social status as well. She is a servile girl of fourteen years living the simple village life as is evident by her introductory scene when she removes Rahoul's shoes and washes his feet when she first meets him. However, during the course of the novel, it is Kajoli who emerges as the stronger of the two, as she is thrust into the depravity and destituteness brought by the famine while Rahoul is safe and sheltered in his house. Rahoul's choice to participate in the freedom movement and also help the dying, hungry masses is not born out of necessity but for Kajoli, it is a fight for survival. After her father and husband's arrest, she has no choice but to struggle to feed her mother and Onu.

Bhattacharya has drawn a close connection between Kajoli and India. Kajoli's struggles and triumphs are also India's. Like Kajoli, India too had fallen prey to jackals- foreign exploiters, and they both had to fight for their dignity and respectable existence. Kajoli and her mother's self-effacing and sacrificing character is similar to the image of India drawn in nationalist minds. Like Gandhi led India towards freedom, it is Devata or Devesh Basu, who teaches Kajoli about life and instills patriotic feelings in her, and it is his voice that helps her emerge victorious at the end. As Kajoli finally rises above her situation and decides to sell newspapers and live with dignity, rather than sell her body, it is also an embodiment of India deciding to fight for her freedom, rather than live an enslaved life. Thus, the close connection between the two serves in

affirming the socio-political nature of the novel and also establishes women at the centre of the novel, which is a distinguishing feature in Bhattacharya's writing.

The theme of hunger is dominant in the novel and considered the primary nurturers and food-givers, women bear the worst brunt of the famine that sweeps down in Bengal.

Even the song that Kishore sings to Kajoli speaks of hunger, though it is a different hunger altogether.

I know, I know, beloved

Not in this life will hungers be sated-

I know, I know, beloved. (Bhattacharya, 127)

Kajoli, on the other hand, wanted nothing except a home and her family. "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 cartwheel. Woman, she has one big wheel of hunger. Man is a single spoke in that cartwheel-nah, maybe he is the axle." (Bhattacharya, 128). But like millions of people of Bengal, her life is upturned by the famine and her hunger for home is overtaken by much primal hunger for food. Moreover, her husband's arrest and Kanu's death serve a severe blow to the family and Kajoli has to take over the role of food giver of the family. "The transformation in the identity of Kajoli is due to her awareness of the fact that strength of character and truth to life are enduring human values." (Swain, 39) As Devata explains the purpose of mass literacy to "make the trampled ones conscious of their birth right- the right to live as human beings" (Bhattacharya, 35), it also talks about the inhuman conditions of exploited groups, including women.

When the 'jackal emissary', the woman from a brothel first comes to Baruni with the proposal for Kajoli to become a prostitute, Kajoli's mother sends her away rudely. But fate plays a cruel game and Kajoli is subjected to rape by a soldier, who then also sends her to a hospital for

treatment. The famine dehumanised the humans, and in turn, brought out another hunger in man- the hunger for sex. The brothels of Kolkata became a booming business as destitute women came there to sell their bodies for food. Rich men took advantage of the situation and used these 'skinny girls fresh from the countryside' to fulfil their sexual hunger. These men devoid of any social consciousness and shame exploited the helpless women. Kajoli, raped first by a soldier and then almost giving herself up at the brothel and becoming a prostitute is just another example of what women went through during the famine. "Alienated from her 'self,' Kajoli suffers from the conflict between situational compulsions and moral considerations. She never intends to live a sinful life but her utter poverty urges her to sacrifice her virginity and stoop to moral turpitude" (Swain, 38). However, she was saved from prostitution as she remembered Devata's words that she was a fighter, and decided not to yield without a struggle. Seeing a newspaper seller, she also decide to sell papers rather than her body and earn her living.

Bhattacharya also questions the notions of sanctity and morality attached to women's bodies. As Rahoul watches a young destitute woman who had turned into a prostitute and was feeding people from what she was paid for her body, he realised that she was in no way immoral. "She had sold her shame, the convention-bound moron would so decry her, and she had abused the body's sanctity. But Rahoul, walking out of the lane, felt as though he had glimpsed the sanctity of the human spirit and was dazzled by too much richness and beauty." (Bhattacharya, 256).

Another point of significance is Bhattacharya's critique of the role of mother as the provider and feeder. Early on in the novel, it is depicted that Monju, having given birth to a baby girl, is a fulfilled woman, 'possessing all that a woman could dream of.' (Bhattacharya, 11). However, as the story progresses this notion of motherhood and wifehood as the primary needs of a woman is questioned and challenged. "To

emphasise the dehumanising consequences of the horrendous man- made famine stalking the length and breadth of the country the mother figure as traditional food giver and nurturer is ideologically exalted, but also clearly shown as distanced from material conditions thus effectively debunking the myth." (Dutta, 1990). While Rahoul's daughter is nursed by Monju, the scenes outside on the streets of Bengal present a ghastly contradiction to this. The image of the dead woman lying on the platform while her child suckled on her breasts, or the destitute woman who carried a dead child door to door to blackmail charity, present an opposite image, questioning the mother role and present the inability and powerlessness of the mother. Similarly, the woman who sold her daughter into prostitution to get food and clothes, the mother was buying her starved child alive, or the mother who drowned her children in the Ganges because she had nothing to feed them, all these depictions focusing on mother-child relation and through them Bhattacharya addresses the non-necessity of such compensatory glorification of motherhood.

The novel also contains multiple undertones of sexual politics and hints at women rebellion and struggle that was emerging slowly but gradually. From the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new consciousness had emerged in the minds of Indian women, especially in Bengal because it was the center of major political activities. Bharti Ray has said that, "One can trace the evolution, albeit slow, of new beliefs shaping their goals, attitudes and activities. What began to emerge, although in an embryonic form, is an awareness of, and an attempt to change, women's subordination and disadvantages under patriarchy" (Ray, 1991). Monju's character is an example of the middle class Bengali women who developed a new belief as the freedom struggle gained momentum. At the start of the story, she is just a new mother who is happy in her role and is reluctant to let her husband go to war. When Monju states that she is glad to have a daughter as "she will not go to the war" (Bhattacharya, 18), Rahoul's sudden

outburst of “You are choking her, Monju” is a reference to women being choked by decisions forced upon them before they are ready to choose for themselves. However, they are both unaware of the fact that there is a greater battle of survival at the doors of Bengal, the great famine that would force men and women alike to struggle for food and life. It is Kajoli who fights this battle from the frontline. Her worries and concerns are limited to her household roles, although she is educated and modern. Her resentment at Rahoul when he decides to go to the village to his grand-father is also chiefly because she doesn’t want to be left alone. “You men are self-sunk. Never looking an inch beyond your own heart’s desire. Here am I, relieved after nine months of agony, but no release for me yet, a prisoner within those four walls, lone save for my child, and you planning a trip to the village, if not to war.” (Bhattacharya, 21). But after she witnessed the murder of an innocent lamp man by a British sergeant, a change came about her. “And growing possessed her, the alchemy that transmutes the metal of an individual or a race. Monju could never be her old self again” (Bhattacharya, 97). Another event that awakened her conscience was when a woman trying to give birth died in the process in their home. “Out of the travail that had consumed one woman, a glow quickened in another, an understanding, a humanizing tenderness, so that the creatures of misery were no longer a race apart, soulless and dead- men and women all.” (Bhattacharya, 231). She started helping Rahoul in the relief work, helping him run the free kitchen, at the milk-canteen and in the new orphanage they were planning to open. And towards the end, as Rahoul informs her of his arrest, she had transformed into a calm, strong woman, unlike how she was at the beginning. Her final words to her husband reveal that she has found a new belief and purpose in life and would join the national movement. “So you begin your new journey? I too shall go your way soon... I am not the silly thing I used to be, you know that.” (Bhattacharya, 280)

The new Indian woman that Bhattacharya envisions is a symbol of progress, not of decadence brought upon by the influence of Western ideas. For him, imbibing western ideals completely is also just another form of mental slavery. Rahoul’s remarks upon seeing a woman dancing at the club, “She is a slave inside of her, poor woman” and “Our new life still caught in the age old slavery is half progress, half decadence” (Bhattacharya, 66-67) reflect his views. Kajoli and Monju, in their own different ways embody the image of new woman that Gandhi envisioned and Bhattacharya too advocated. Completely devoted to the family, yet aware of the larger human sufferings and willing to contribute their share to the freedom movement and social causes, courageous and undaunted and resilient to the core, these are some of the qualities that are highlighted in the novel as becoming of the ideal woman who would rebuild the Indian society and restore its glory and dignity.

Thus, *So Many Hungers!* along with being an authentic and harrowing account of the sufferings of the people during the famine, is also significant for showing the female resilience and strength during times of crisis. It is a story of self-affirmation and self elation and depicts the relation between the self and society. IN the words of S.P. Sawin, “The individual struggles for self-liberation but is silenced by the buffets of societal values, falters and then puts up a faltering fight but never yields. Never gives in to the forces of evil. The struggle of the self for liberation culminates in a compromise, in an affirmation and an assertion of the right to live.” (Swain, 01). It depicts the horrors, depravity and destituteness of the society but it also suggests of a new world and new order where hunger for food and hunger for freedom, both shall be fulfilled. It also affirms the changing role of women in the society and grounds the idea of the Gandhian new Indian woman, breaking frontiers and stepping up to walk shoulder to shoulder with men in the fight for Independence and for the formation of a better society.

### Works Cited:

1. Bhattacharya, Bhabani. *So Many Hungers!* Bombay, Hind Kitabs Limited, 1947.
2. Bhattacharya interviewed. *Contemporary Novelists in the English Language*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 1972.
3. Dutta, Sangeeta. "Relinquishing the Halo: Portrayal of Mother in Indian Writing in English." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 25, no. 42/43, 1990, pp. WS84–94, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4396896>
4. Ray, Bharati. "Women of Bengal: Transformation in Ideas and Ideals, 1900-1947." *Social Scientist*, vol. 19, no. 5/6, 1991, pp. 3–23. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3517870>. Accessed 17 Jul. 2022.
5. Swain, S. P. "A Comparative Study of the Alienated Protagonist in Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers!* And *Music for Mohini*." *The Novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya*, edited by Monika Gupta, New Delhi, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2002, pp. 37–43.
6. ---. "Self and Society: A Study of Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers!*" *The Novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya*, edited by Monika Gupta, New Delhi, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2002, pp. 01–10.