
Bhabani Bhattacharya Tells the Story: Calcutta/Kolkata Heard in *So Many Hungers!*

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Abstract

Considering relevance of Kolkata as the city that has produced and sustained Indian tradition of knowledge, novelists, poets, playwrights and other artists are still engaged in expressing the essence of the cityscape as they perceive it, and the myriad images of Calcutta produced through art, cinema and literature have always been the subject of interest for the scholars. Continuing with the tradition, this article will further contextualise Calcutta as a city invoking nostalgia for the sensitive audience. This dissertation would present a phased metamorphosis of the city as delineated in the novel, *So Many Hungers!* by Bhabani Bhattacharya. It is assumed that culture of a place has great bearing on literature, and because Calcutta has undergone enormous socio-cultural changes since independence, the literature reflects varied images of the city during various phases of post-independence period. The proposed research would explore how Calcutta is as much an imagined place as it is physical and factual.

Keywords: Polyphony, Postcolonial, colonial, Calcutta, Kolkata, City, Space, City, Citizen, nation, hunger, poverty, alienation, freedom, migration, dislocation, torture, social discrimination

The fictional world of Dr. Bhabani Bhattacharya (born in 10 November, 1906 – died in 10 October, 1988) portrays a vivid picture of the human being torn between two worlds – the self and the society. The fettered self-struggling for emancipation from the oppression of a chaotic society appears to be the pivotal features in Bhabani Bhattacharya's novels. He receives Sahitya Academy award in 1967. His first novel, *So Many Hungers!* is published in October, 1947 two months after India's attainment of political Independence. The novel is set against the

background of the Quit India Movement and the man-made Bengal Famine of 1943. His third novel, *He Who Rides a Tigers*, published in 1955, also deals with an attack on both those who profited by people's misery during the Bengal famine of 1943 and those who exploited them as caste tyrants. This novel too focuses on the theme of Hunger. Bijon Bhattacharya (born in 17 July, 1906 – died in 19 January, 1978), a famous dramatist and actor also set his Bengali drama, *Nabanna* (Fresh Harvest) against the backdrop of the Bengal famine of 1943. *Nabanna* is written in 1944 and staged by the Indian People's Theatre Association in the same year under the joint direction of Sombhu Mitra and the dramatist, Bijon Bhattacharya himself. All these three works (*So Many Hungers!*, *He Who Rides a Tiger* and *Nabanna*) portray a vivid and engaging picture of Calcutta, West Bengal, India. Calcutta is now officially known as Kolkata. 'Sahitya Samrat' Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (born in 26 or 27 June, 1838 – died in 8 April, 1894) too sets his novel, *Anandamath* (published in 1882) in the background of the Sannyasi Rebellion and Great Bengal famine of 1770. 'Vande Mataram', the first song to symbolise India as the Motherland is sung in this novel.

So Many Hungers! is a realistic study of the man-made Bengal famine of 1943. The novel delineates an authentic scenario of rural life in contrast with the sophisticated life of the city of Calcutta. The novel portrays polyphonic depiction of Calcutta/Kolkata. The word, 'polyphony' is originally used in the field of music. It is the amalgamation of two or more independent, melodies played at the same time in music. The core idea is that each part is distinct. Mikhail Bakhtin develops this concept of polyphony in literature. Polyphony is a narrative where multiple, independent character's voices and consciousness coexist without being merged or controlled by a single authorial voice. It contains numerous distinct voices, each with its own philosophy, ideology, desire and perspective. Bakhtin opines in the first chapter, "Dostoevsky's Polyphonic Novel and Its Treatment in Critical Literature" of his book, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*:

A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels. What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event. Dostoevsky's major heroes are, by the very nature of his creative design, not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse. In no way, then, can a character's discourse be exhausted by the usual functions of characterization and plot

development, nor does it serve as a vehicle for the author's own ideological position (as with Byron, for instance). The consciousness of a character is given as someone else's consciousness, another consciousness, yet at the same time it is not turned into an object, is not closed, does not become a simple object of the author's consciousness. In this sense the image of a character in Dostoevsky is not the usual objectified image of a hero in the traditional novel.

In the novel, *So Many Hungers!* each character has their valid voice. They are distinct from each other. Dr. Bhattacharya depicts the changing society, streets, geographical space and location of Calcutta throughout the entire novel. We notice the busy metropolitan city of Calcutta:

Gold rush in Clive Street. A motley crowd surging by the Stock Exchange, the tall, massive, dark brown door open only to privilege. On the road, on the concrete pavements shadowed from the angry sun by mammoth cement-grey structures, a big motley crowd surging, voices buzzing, brains pounding at full pressure. Inside, the brokers, the brokers' agents, sub-agents, booking orders from clients in the motley crowd, clients too excited to sit still at home or in the brokers' office with telephone at the mouth, pouring orders, buying, selling, buying again. Bees darting and buzzing for money-honey!

...Hot activity in the street of Clive who built Empire with a thousand muskets and forgery. (*So Many Hungers!*, Hind Kitabs Limited Publishers, 1947, p21-22)

Ambivalence, as explained by Homi Kharshedji Bhaba, is one of the postcolonial traits. We notice a state of ambivalence and dichotomy in the protagonist of the novel, Rahoul in the following way:

'And shouldn't I know the people of England before I start my fight with them?' he had pleaded.

'Why should you fight the people of England? They are good people. The people are good everywhere. Our fight is with the rulers of England who hold us in subjection for their narrow interests'

So there had been a keen struggle in his mind. Cambridge had won.

The protagonist of Bhabani Bhattacharya lives and thrives durably and ethically. Pain and hunger cannot brutalise him. Nor can it degrade and debase him: "Live. We do not fear to live dangerously"(40). Thus, the individual self does not escape into it. It wrestles with the worn-out societal values and endeavours to transcend its worldly limitations through self-sacrifice. The nobility of the individual in spite of all sufferings imparts an epic dimension to the self, be he Rahoul or Kaoli.

Suffering and hunger ennobles and strengthens it. Rahoul says: “In the agonies of war the soul would be cleansed” (9).

The novelists including Bhabani Bhattacharya in postcolonial period were free from the moral obligation of voicing the political aspiration of the people in throwing away the foreign slavery and achieving national freedom and turned their attention to the internal problems of the teeming millions – their economic impoverishment, terrible poverty, agricultural tradition, caste system and its post-independence social milieu. Critic, Prof. P. P. Mehta opines in *Indo-Anglian Fiction – An Assessment*, “The rural poverty which was emphasised by the government while presenting their First Five year Plan has thrown up a new class of novel”(248) – with what is known as the hunger theme. Bhabani Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandaya are the finest exponents of this new type of novels. In *Indo-Anglian Literature* Dr. C. Paul Verghese observes, “Food is the primary requisite of human dignity; hunger debases and dehumanises man. Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandaya have dealt quite forcefully with the theme of hunger and the concomitant theme of human degradation...”(120-21). We get a summary movement of the plot of such novels through what Prof. Shiv K. Kumar writes in his essay, “Some Indian Writers of English Fiction” (published in *Modern Indian Language*) -

“the story of the teeming million of this country who face periodic outbursts of hunger and famine and encounter all the evil consequences flowing from such calamities: moral lapses, traffic in illicit relationships, and all the ghastly scenes that accompany a famine in India. Characters in these novels, like nomads, go in search of food and employment to distant parts of India only to have nostalgic memories of their home towns.”(283)

Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers!*, *He Who Rides A Tiger* and Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in A Sieve* and *A Handful of Rice* are representative specimens of this new type of novels. The novels dealing with the theme of hunger have imparted to the Indo-Anglian novel a sharp awareness of the basic predicament of Indian masses both rural and urban.

In one of his interviews Bhabani Bhattacharya confesses that *So Many Hungers!* is an offspring of his emotionally disturbed self in the hunger stricken society: “Then the great famine swept down upon Bengal. 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!*” The novel serves the social purpose as Bhattacharya ridicules art for art sake. He says in his essay, “Literature and Social Reality” published in *The Aryan Path* – ‘a novel must have a social

purpose' and that art should "preach but unobtrusively by the vivid interpretation of life." (39)

The different thematic patterns of the novel are held together neither by socio-political forces nor the intense poetic appeal of Rahoul or Kajoli, but by the individual predicament of hunger on the one hand and the socio-historical on the other. He like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan grew up in British India, and observed the socio-economic, cultural and political plight prevailing under the despotic colonial rules and hence could bring out realistically the effect of colonialism. He felt that the history of colonialism has been the history of genocide, slavery, destructive wars for racial and political supremacy, cultural thrust, religious conversion, cruel oppression and exploitation, and suppression of national movements. The English colony in India which began to spread its tentacles in the seventeenth century and gradually it had the whole of India in its grip by 1849. Bhattacharya, like many Indo-Anglian writers responded to colonial experience and captured the changing pattern and socio-economic tension of that era.

The novel, *So Many Hungers!* depicts realistically the agony of the age. Showing the injustice of the British, it unfolds the human drama against the dismal background of the Bengal famine and war years of the early forties. It deals with the theme of exploitation political, economic and social. The *So Many Hungers!* depicted are those for political freedom - in the case of India, political expansion in the case of axis powers, for money in the case of capitalists in Calcutta who create an artificial scarcity of food by hoarding, for food in the case of starved Bengal, for erotic desire in the case of sex-starved soldier who rapes the destitute rustic girl, Kajoli and of all those who frequent the Calcutta brothers, for human dignity and self-respect in the case of Kajoli, hungers as a spiritual weapon employed by the freedom fighters, who go on a hunger strike in jail. Of all these hungers, the novelist has succeeded best in dealing with the hunger for food and the scenes depicting the havoc wrought by the famine among the poor in Bengal constitutes some of the finest social realism in Indian-English fiction.

In his essay, 'The Women in Bhattacharya Novels' published in *World Literature Written in English* in 1972, Dr. Marlene Fisher confirms that in *So Many Hungers!* the Bengal famine is more than just a background: "In fact, the major part of the novel comprises a series of snapshots of the gruesome picture of men, women, and children – all famished and pauperized questing ceaselessly for food, some or any kind of food that they may keep their bodies and souls together." (98)

Although *So Many Hungers!* was published in 1947 soon after the most coveted independence, it actually covers the war years with their uncertainties, privations, agonies, cruelties and frustrations. The foreground is occupied by the Basu family

and partly by the peasant family, the girl Kajoli, her mother and brother. The novel delineates the picture of a largely man-made hunger that took a toll of two million innocent people in Calcutta and Bengal. The man-made famine of 1943 was the result of hoarding food-grains by the British for the ‘White Soldiers’ whereas the ‘coloured soldiers’ dragged to the war were merely common fodders.

The Second World War blew it whistle by this time in India and Bengal was apprehending violence on her own soil. The Japanese War fleet in the Bay and cordoned off Bengal, and any moment the province could be attacked from the sea. The government had seized and destroyed all the boats of the villagers along the coast as a protective measure, though the boats were the only kind of transport and livelihood of a large section of the population. After the boatmen and the fishermen communities, the agricultural cultivators were affected, when the government requisitioned their paddy without controlling the price of paddy and rice. Hence, the peasants were soon reduced to poverty.

The Second World War caused famine and it had wrought havoc, and the villagers migrated in masses to the city of Calcutta with the hopeless hope of finding food and job. The colonial ruler’s response to the war was by evicting the villagers from their land, draining the countryside of rice and wrecking the boat. Their response to the national movement was to brutally suppress it. Their response to starvation was callous as ever – it showed how inhuman civilized human beings could become so short-sighted and callous in their policies. It is this lack of humanistic approach which finds a sub-conscious guilty response in the Report of *Famine Inquiry Commission* headed by John Woodhead, “It has been for us a sad task to enquire into the course and causes of the Bengal famine. We have been haunted by a deep sense of tragedy. A million and a half of the poor of Bengal fell victim to circumstances for which they themselves are not responsible.” (414) In *Indian Writings in English* Srinivas Iyengar opines that novel is “an impeachment of man’s inhumanity of man” H. W. Williams utters in the same vein in *Indo-Anglian Literature 1800-1970*: “the war, imprisonment of the national leaders, the cupidity of profiteers political violence and nature’s ferocity combine to produce a tragedy.” (92) Elener Kallinikova in *The Problems of Bhabani Bhattacharya’s Novels- A Survey* rightly writes, “the writer rathfully brands culprits of the tragedy, the British government or as he himself calls “Cold and inhuman colossus of authority.” (102)

The British government arrested people randomly and thoughtlessly. They showed callousness in controlling the price of goods and in rationing and letting loose a ring of blackmarketeers and hoarders. Taking advantage of the situation Rahoul’s father, Samarendra, an inhabitant in the City of Calcutta, a conservative diehard with influence in the government, opened a rice supply agency and had become one of its

directors. In this way, Samarendra got profited in an unlawful and unethical scheme. And it made Rahoul unhappy. While in the City of Calcutta the hoarders, profiteers and blackmarketeers made a thundering trade, authority was apathetic, the wells of human pity seemed to have almost dried up, apart from the hoarders, the jackals and the vultures were in jubilant action.

The passing of the Quit India Resolution in August, 1942 followed by the mass arresting of leaders led to a convulsion and this gave a last vicious twist to the Bengal tragedy which, of a sudden burst its tenuous bonds and become a nightmarish drama of general disintegration. While Samarendra and Lakshminath and their like were making money and exploring new ways of sensuality, Rahoul with his own younger brother, Kunal expanded their helping hands to relieve the hapless, desolate hunger-stricken people. The accredited leaders were captive in jail, underground workers often created confusion and the common people in Bengal along with the City of Calcutta, of course, had the worst of everything, lacking food and clothing, going without relief or even the hope of it. We get a vivid description in the novel, *So Many Hungers!*: “Forty Thousand country boats wantonly destroyed. Many villages evacuated. The uprooted people pauperised – Inflated currency – eating up the peoples purchasing power, reducing the small saving of a life time to a fifth of their worth. Nothing was left of the foundation of life.”

The readers shriek in pity as if they see a nightmare when they feel the naked horror of it with a pitiless precision of details:

“Corpses lay by the road, huddled together. Picked to the bones, with eyeless cavern of sockets, bits of skin and flesh rotting on the nose and chin and ribs, skull pecked open, only the hair uneaten. A family group had sunk into sleep, and beyond the sleep vultures – Heaven’s scavengers save for them the air of Bengal would be putrid with the rotting flesh of men. Fellow human being had ceased to care for the living, how could they care for the dead” (*So Many Hungers!*, 187, Orient Paperback, 1978).

P.B. Shelley felt the dance of death:

Death is here, and death is there,
Death is busy everywhere,
All around, within, beneath,
Above is death – and we are death.

(P. B. Shelley, “Death”, 1920)

The grim tale compounded of the ingredients of sighs and tears, misery, squalor, hunger and poverty, heroic suffering and sacrifice. The novel is a slice of life, rather small slices imaginatively fused into an artistic pattern. Like other novels, it does not depict the freedom movement in details, although there are

occasional glimpses of the freedom movements in the novel. Rather, the plot of the novel delves deep to the root – the real cause which was responsible for such a movement instead of the movement itself. The story takes place as much in the soul of an intellectual of a very fine sensibility as in the affected material world of Bengal and rest of the country. This matter has been dealt in detail and has had a great influence on the readers.

The protagonist, Rahoul lives in the City of Calcutta. The story of the war is the story of Rahoul. He is a D. Sc. from Cambridge University working as a Professor of Astrophysics in the University of Calcutta, at Rashbehari Siksha Prangan (commonly known as Rajabazar Science College campus), situated at 92, Acharya Prafulla Chandra Road, Kolkata- 700009. He is torn by the Second World War gradually spreading to Bengal- right from his Cambridge days he had been expecting it. But now that the work had broken out, should he, should his country, join the Allied Power and fight? In the novel, we notice that “Indian opinion was at once with the progressive forces the world over. But how could a people step out into a war said to be waged for democratic freedom, so long as that freedom was denied to them” (*So Many Hunger!*, 9, Orient Paperback).

India at first hesitates to join. But soon India decides to support Britain: “Its fight was with England’s diehard rulers, not with her people, who defeated would face enslavement adding to the miseries of human kind” (*So Many Hungers!*, 41, Orient Paperback). India, in return, wanted “recognition of the Indian People’s right to freedom” (41). When Gandhi was imprisoned for he had “decried the attempt to drag his people into a war that was none of their seeking as they were the humblest of servants. Rahoul was shocked for the one personage who India knew to be her man of destiny stirred his depths”(41). The nationalistic nature is infused in him by his grandfather, Devesh. Dichotomy and ambivalence are the characteristics of postcolonialism. Rahoul is shocked by the British who championed the cause of freedom abroad, and simultaneously destroyer of freedom in his land. Like his grandfather, Devesh he is too inspired by Gandhi’s policy of non-violence, learns violence, learns there is room for morality and spirituality in politics. What is dramatised is not man’s helplessness, but the human grandeur.

In *So Many Hunger!* Kajoli is the chief female character. She suffers the pangs of the disintegration of her sprightly and innocent self on account of the catastrophic famine. Her brief married life with Kishore shatters when Kishore plans to reach Calcutta where he hopes to get employment in a mill. There, he is shot dead by a soldier. His unfortunate fate remains unknown to the family right up to the end of the novel.

The family of Kajoli has to sell everything to live. Condition worsens. Like thousand of other families, Kajoli sets out on a long and hazardous trek to the City of Calcutta. Isolated from her husband and excluded from the society, she suffers anguish of a torturous state of loneliness. On her way to Calcutta, she meets an Indian soldier and begs him for food. Food she gets, but only after fulfilling the erotic desires of the soldier. She loses her chastity. 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. Consequently it leads to the loss of her identity. Desperate and despair-stricken, she becomes sparingly frustrated and has negative emotions of great pain and privation. She turns psychopathic and suffers from rootlessness and meaninglessness. But all is not lost. On her way to the house of ill-fame, she hears the news of dear Devata going to become the leader of the Satyagrahis. This information transforms the tenor and tempo of her life.

Bhattacharya's response to the dynamics of the colonial rule and colonial society is as intense as that of Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* but wider in sweep than that of Raja Rao. With his deep understanding of historical dialectics, his rich imagination and artistic restraint he has succeeded in bringing to life the colonial era of 1939-44 where the City of Calcutta is reliably depicted. His lacerating description of Calcutta is touched with compassion.

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