

Hunger-Matrix in Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers!*

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Abstract—Hunger has haunted human kind throughout the known history of the world. It has always remained a mystery that history of the hunger persists in all the societies- whether of scarcity or plenty. But while observing the history, it is observed that the causes of hunger are multiple, the conditions of hunger are several. The consequences of hunger are varied and the effort to prevent or alleviate hunger constitutes a major, continuing strand of human history. It is a very complex phenomenon involving different social and biological dimensions present in human mind as instincts. There has been different contours of hunger which cannot be explained merely as a biological hunger or craving for food. It cannot be explained in a single dimension. So, it is appropriate to explain it in the form of 'matrix', a concept used in mathematics.

This paper attempts to correlate hunger as a matrix with various elements- food, faith and freedom by taking the novel, *So Many Hungers!* of Bhabani Bhattacharya. Hunger as a three-fold matrix used with context to food, faith and freedom as discussed in *So Many Hungers!* is a space in which each element has its own existence and after relating with respect to other elements form different resultant elements. Again, under the aegis of the main elements of hunger (food, faith and freedom) other sub-elements of hunger finds its place beneath the novel which supports the undercurrent are love, wealth, religion, socio-cultural, sex, knowledge, synthesis, etc. Although these are related, but cannot be studied in air tight compartment as each element have varied dimensions reflecting and affecting the society. As these elements are corelated and one of the properties of mathematical matrix clearly mentions that the rows as well as columns of matrix can be inter-changed. When we look from this perspective in the novel, the 'hunger matrix' with their sub-elements is shown as:

HUNGER MATRIX

| FOOD | FAITH | FREEDOM |
|-----------|--------------------|-----------|
| Love | Myriad Tradition | Political |
| Wealth | Country's Prospect | Social |
| Knowledge | Synthesis | Economic |

Hunger has haunted human kind throughout the known history of the world. It has always remained a mystery that history of the hunger persists in all the societies- whether of scarcity or plenty. But while observing the history, it is observed that the causes of hunger are multiple, the conditions of hunger are several, the consequences of hunger are varied and the effort to prevent or alleviate hunger constitutes a major, continuing strand of human history. It is a very complex phenomenon involving different social and biological dimensions present in human mind as instincts. Bhabani

Bhattacharya has artistically dealt with the theme of hunger in his novels. He treats 'hunger' as the fundamental reality of life. *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. It 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!*, Bhattacharya 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

In Bhattacharya novels, theme of hunger always comes in limelight. Hunger as a three-fold matrix used with context to food, faith and freedom as discussed in *So Many Hungers!* is a space in which each element has its own existence and after relating with respect to other elements form different resultant elements. The reason for that instigating hunger in the novels of Bhattacharya are mainly due 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 as well as 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 British rulers the hunger to retain power, accumulate wealth, exploitation of raw material, natural and human resources; whereas for common India, it is the hunger for self rule or freedom. Hence,

results in the formation of catalyst that resulted in the creation of hunger matrix of food, faith and freedom in the novels of 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). In fact, the title of the novel itself portrays the theme regarding different types of hunger prevalent in the society. And the exclamation mark with which the title ends denotes the author’s bewilderment at the multiplicity of these hungers as at the ghastliness of the malevolent ones. The novel does not immortalize the memory of the hideous famine years but has a humanitarian outlook preaching the path of love for the oppressed and the sympathy for the destitute.

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 hungers: 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 wheel of hungers 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 trubulence’ 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.

Bhattacharya always stressed on the theme of freedom in his novels as he was very sensitive towards the national upheaval in the country during his times. At that time India was confronted with difficult economic as well as social problems; leading to the craving for achieving freedom. But, first and foremost gaining political freedom from the hands of British Government seemed to be important for Bhattacharya. The novel vividly described the freedom struggle and began with the references to World War II i.e. Britain’s declaration of war against Germany, signing of Land-Lease Bill and the Japanese invasion in the Indian Territory, etc. And all these events sow the seeds of hunger having political dimension in the first stance and the individual in the subsequent. The impact of World War II on India was terrible and the misery that flowed from it - Bengal Famine was a repercussion of it. Writing about the calamity caused by the famine in Bengal, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru in his book *The Discovery of India* said:

Famine came; ghastly, staggering, horrible beyond words...here death has no purpose, no logic, no necessity: it was the result of man’s incompetence and callousness, manmade, slow creeping thing of horror with nothing to redeem it.

This famine ultimately resulted in the formation of hunger matrix – not only in the hunger for food in literal sense, but also for wealth as people did hoarding and look upon famine as a rare chance to harvest their property, hunger for lust and the repercussion of it was the shattering of faith among the common masses.

Bhattacharya talked about the concept of political freedom by taking Rahoul as a mouthpiece in the novel. Though initially his participation was indirect, but his heart was with the people of the country whether fighting for their political freedom or economic freedom. His father, Samarendra Basu was poles apart from him. On chance of meeting a beggar who refused Samarendra Basu his alms of money for rice, convinced him about the value of food grain for the uprooted people of India in the context of war, devastation, famine and poverty which lead to the hunger for food: “What good is that, Father? The goddess is gone from copper bit; it is an empty shrine the goddess lives nowhere save in a rice grain” (39). He realized a simple fact that in the days of crisis morsel of rice was more precious than anything else. He formed a trading concern having ironic name *Cheap Rice Limited* with Sir Abalabandhu. Hence, hunger came as a curse and caused innumerable miseries to poor and destitute for keeping their faith in tradition, “...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) or make people corrupt to go to any extent for satisfying their lust for wealth at the cost of hunger of people dying miserable day by day due to lack of food..

In the novel, Bhattacharya focused our attention towards the economic conditions of the peasant and one main factor responsible for it was the lack of awareness and education. Devata knew that villagers longed hunger for economic freedom and this economic freedom cannot be attained until political freedom was no attained by Indians. Again, for attaining economic freedom, awareness among the ignorant villagers was necessary, but the government did not like the idea of mass literacy resulted in the closing of schools in the villages. Therefore, hunger matrix develops between economic and political freedom, social awareness and political freedom and form synthesis between these two.

In the novel, Bhattacharya artistically dealt with the hunger i.e. the journey of Rahoul's and Kajoli's family is the tour de force of self-realization and self-assertion. Symbolically, it is the revolt for gaining freedom by the educated middle class against the disorder caused by the British government by Rahoul who was aware that without gaining political freedom, exploitation of Indian people cannot be stopped. The narrative of both Kajoli and Rahoul were interlinked in the novel to expose the theme of hunger for food, freedom and unflinching faith. Kajoli being a peasant girl of Baruni illustrated the cruel fate of rural population of Bengal in 1943. Her father and elder brother were taken to jail for participation in freedom struggle. She along with her mother and younger brother Onu had to survive amidst the grim situation due to Bengal famine. Moreover, being unaware of the death of her husband, being five month pregnant had to go on exodus in search of food and was raped by the soldier. Bhattacharya portrayed this incident as a hunger matrix i.e. Kajoli being hungry for food had not eaten anything for days and the soldier was sexually starved. He had not met his wife for a year- was suffering from hunger for sex.

But after being raped, soldier realized his mistake and admitted Kajoli in hospital where she was very well looked after. However, Onu and his mother eked out their living by

begging at pavement. All their illusions about the city of Calcutta were shattered. Onu had to ransack the garbage bins for some left over or had to fight with a dog to yield them. Yet there were some relief centers run by the people. But the number of destitute was a lot and relief was limited. This all made Kajoli to make a grim decision to sell her body. She sold her body out of dire necessity but not her soul, her faith. On the next day, Kajoli was going to accept the proposal of betel-woman. Kajoli happened to hear a newspaper report that the prisoners of Dehradun jail including Devata, her father were going on hunger strike. This incident opened her eyes. She overcame the hunger for food by keeping the faith in inspiring ideology of Devata and in under taking the hunger for freedom that again resultant I the formation of hunger matrix in the novel.

Thus, while studying *So many Hungers!*. it comes to mind that hunger is the ultimate reality of modern life. In fact, it is a vicious product of our times. It is not a single entity; it is associated with- food, money, lust, fame and name, finally freedom. These hungers are not only confined to a particular place or a country but these hungers are universal and they can be applied to the international community as well. Even today there are so many hungers prevailing in the society but only the priorities changed. Today the society appears to be in a dire need of people having faith like Devata (Devesh Basu), Kajoli and Rahoul who always challenges their limits for the betterment of the destitute and suppressed lots for making the world a better place to live in.

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