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RADICALISM IN BHATTACHARYA'S *HE WHO RIDES A TIGER*

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Abstract:

In view of the very element of rebellion and resistance the present paper is an attempt to undertake a study of the rebellious actions taken in one of the novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya He Who Rides A Tiger published in 1954. The novel is written with the background of Second World War and the famine of 1943. The novel definitely reflects a fiercest and sterner mood of the novelist by exemplifying a note of angry protest and revenge by his characters.

Through this novel Bhattacharya brings out the hollowness of the society by telling us in a very amusing way how its central character Kalo, a low-caste blacksmith establishes himself as Mangal Adhikari, a respected and flourishing Brahmin. He takes the help of deception to wreak vengeance on the high-caste people. Through the stratagem of changing his caste and name he gets quit with his tormentors and persecutors. Kalo's riding the tiger of deceit and falsehood is not only a question of revenge but also a hard hitting attack on the futility of society.

KEY WORDS:

rebellion, revenge, deceit.

INTRODUCTION

Bhabani Bhattacharya, one of the best writers of Indian English fiction, was at once a realist, a visionary, an artist and a propagandist and has dealt with several epoch-making events in his various novels. His novels reveal that during the period of freedom struggle, there ran a parallel struggle of freedom against the social evils such as the caste system, superstitions, untouchability, poverty, hunger and exploitation. The period immediately preceding the attainment of independence was also one of struggle, suffering and hope, and the period following it has witnessed unexpected trials and tribulations, but, in spite of them, valiant efforts have been made to create a new order. With his genuine concern for society he wrote passionately for the common man's plunge into the freedom struggle with all his might, forgetting his poverty and miseries.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bhattacharya was a reformist and a social realist. In all his six novels, he dealt with the themes of hunger, poverty, exploitation, East and West encounter and rapid industrialization and its impact on Indian society. In *He Who Rides the Tiger* (1955), he forms an intricate criss-cross of themes such as appearance

and reality, the “haves” and the “have-nots” and religious hypocrisy.

He Who Rides a Tiger

The title of the novel *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1955) is borrowed from the saying “He who rides the tiger cannot dismount”. Kalo, the protagonist of the novel, rides the tiger of a lie to avenge himself on the society but he finds it difficult to dismount.

“He rode a lie as if it were a tiger which he could not dismount lest the tiger pounce upon him and eat him up” (85).

Later he becomes one with the new role to such an extent that he feels, “When you ride a tiger you must not slip off its back lest the tiger stop and eat you, you ride on, ride on” (105). K.K. Sharma in his book *Bhabani Bhattacharya: His Vision and Theme* interprets the title to reveal the theme of the novel thus:

“The suggestive title of the novel *He who Rides a Tiger* can also be interpreted in relation to the theme of hunger. To sit and ride on the tiger's back implies man's quest for riding on hunger. Just as the tiger is a ferocious animal and unhesitatingly kills the man, so is hunger. Kalo and Lekha two principal characters of the novel suffer terribly on account of hunger and lose their home, place, profession, morals and goodness. Hence they decide to ride the tiger-symbolizing relentless hunger.” (Sharma 61).

In *He Who Rides a Tiger*, Kalo is presented to us as a blacksmith of Jharna town lives happily with his only daughter, Chandralekha, and he is so called because of his black or inky complexion,

Unfortunately, along with tens of thousands of other people, Kalo too falls victim to the havoc wrought sorely by the man-made Famine of 1943 in Bengal. To his great chagrin, he finds he has absolutely no engagement for himself at his native place. In the face of such enforced idleness he decides to go to Calcutta in search of work and food leaving his daughter behind with his aunt at Jharna itself. Kalo's dangerous and grim battle with life begins from this very moment.

It is unfortunate that Kalo is sentenced to a three-month term of imprisonment for having stolen bananas from a first class rail compartment just to meet his hunger. The magistrate who knows nothing about the hunger, sentences him for three months rigorous imprisonment. When Kalo tries to convince the judge that the act was done with an urge to live, the judge asks him, “Why did you have to live?” (31) He repeats the questions for each of Kalo's statement. The question suggests that the life of the poor is not worthy of living. The question upsets Kalo's faith in the value system. It turns his life upside down. But he passively surrenders to the exploitation and accepts the punishment.

And it is indeed ironic that though he has an “abhorrence of criminals,” (36) he moves very close to one of his fellow convicts called B-10 (Biten) inside the jail. Bit by bit, in well-proportioned doses, Biten puts the seeds of radicalism into Kalo's mind, and advises him not to get weakened either by the sting of scruples or by the qualms of conscience in his fight against social injustice. Kalo does not very much understand what Biten tells him, and yet he is all admiration for him for his commitment to the cause of the poor and the exploited.

After being released from jail, Kalo moves to Calcutta in the fond hope of getting suitable employment. He finds himself, though, in a very sticky situation in that sprawling city. In a state of utter, sheer helplessness he somehow starts maintaining himself there by removing dead bodies from the streets and dumping them into municipal lorries. Kalo earns practically nothing; his anxiety for his daughter gets deeper and in tensor, and he is now a man bereft of all his hopes and dreams. Amidst all this poverty, want, hunger, squalor and death, one day as he witnesses the funeral procession of a rich man, he is shocked by the whole spectacle, and it is natural that he reacts sharply against traditional rituals and that a feeling of revulsion and of revolt grips him completely.

It is in such a mood that Kalo, a man of “accepted conventions,” (43) his roots running deep into “age-old habits of mind and belief,” (43) becomes an agent for brothels. He would have blissfully continued to serve in this very nefarious trade but for the fact that, to his great distress and dismay, one day he finds his daughter, Chandra Lekha, at one of the brothels. No doubt, he immediately rescues her; but the “metallic stuff,” (60) lying at “the core of his being,” (60) does get instantly hardened, and he launches an attack on “the centuries-old tradition, from which had come the inner climate of his being.” (71) The miseries of his own life make him hostile towards the society. Kalo turns a rebel, a “stern and implacable rebel,” (81) and resolves to smash up every possible form of tradition-bound respectability and honour. He decides to follow the way suggested by Biten. “...a way not simply to make a living but a way to settle accounts with them” (77). His grim decision to be a fake by putting on the thick and impregnable mask of a Brahmin is only “a step towards a basic reincarnation.” (81)

Kalo who rides the tiger turns an exploiter to seek revenge against the exploiters. Kalo's turning an exploiter is a symbol of his attempt to protest against the exploitation. The oppressive awareness of low birth, poverty, hunger, and three months rigorous imprisonment for an ordinary offence turn the humble

kamar into a rebel. The development of Kalo as a rebel is an outcome of a pernicious system which has to be challenged. He puts on the sacred thread of the Brahmin:

"... a small town smith toiling from dawn to midnight for a fistful of rice... rode a lie as if it were a tiger..." (85).

He finds it so very easy to become a Brahmin by just putting a sacred thread across his body and donning a holy man's cloak. A convict and harlot house procurer becomes the master of a temple, placing the hand of benediction on the bowed heads of pious folks: "So had the Wheel of Karma turned!" (87). He is Mangal Adhikari now, and we find him sitting, cross-legged, under a banyan tree, chanting *Namo Shivaya*, and waiting for the advent of Lord Shiva. Kalo knows that he is riding the tiger of deceit and falsehood, but he does also know that he would acquire both honour and wealth by exploiting the religious sentiments of people. At times, no doubt, his feeling of respect for tradition disturbs him, and he gets uneasy on account of the "secret embers of conflict" (117) burning within him, but he reconciles himself to the horror of sacrilege on the convenient plea that his fraud is not merely "a question of living" (95) or "a battle for survival" (108) but "a question of revenge" (95) and "a hard-hitting attack" (108) as well. That was the way to take revenge against the society. A smith is reincarnated as a Brahmin. When the magistrate, who had reprimanded him, questioned his right to continue to live at all in this world, and had sentenced him to a three-month term of imprisonment, comes to touch his feet in veneration he feels that he has taken the revenge.

However, as things move, Kalo finds it increasingly difficult to keep on riding the tiger of deceit; he gets painfully disillusioned, and is left with no choice but to revolt manifestly against society by revolting against himself. He is sorely touched by the fact that while gallons of milk poured on the *lingam* are later thrown into the river, hundreds and thousands of hungry and famine-stricken people go on marching in the streets, crying and screaming for food. Kalo is still Kalo, for even as Mangal Adhikari he has set up a small smithy at the top of his house, where he works everyday for some time to retain his real identity. And it is in this mood of rebellion against his deceitful self in particular and against deceit and fraud in general that on the day Chandra Lekha is to be installed as the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss, he reveals the truth about himself. Kalo, the impostor, could not have chosen a "more dramatic or irrevocable way to redeem himself." (226) Kalo's revelation of truth in the end gives satisfaction of his own victory to him. Biten, who is now out of jail and resides with Kalo, has, perhaps, the finest possible understanding of Kalo's self-revelation. He tells Kalo:

"You have chosen, my friend. You have triumphed over those others-and over yourself. What you have done just now will steel the spirit of hundreds and thousands of us. Your story will be a legend of freedom, a legend to inspire and awaken." (232)

It certainly requires a good deal of courage on one's part to make a clean and open confession of one's guilt. Kalo does have this courage, and it is with an air of triumph and glory that, along with Chandra Lekha, he walks out of the temple complex.

Kalo is a rebel, for he defies not only the contemporary society but also the sanctions of tradition. His feeling of revolt grows out of his experiences themselves; he does not borrow the creed of rebellion from any text-book of political thought or theory. He has to practise fraud in order to counter the menace of fraud. As a rebel, we find Kalo opposed to the exploitation of man by man, to hypocrisy, to the humiliation of the spirit. He has demonstrated convincingly that the consideration of caste is only a disease of the mind and that the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins, the rich and the poor are the same under the skin.

Chandralekha, who unwillingly rides the tiger with her father, does not allow herself to be carried away like her father. She is thus a silent protester. She protests against caste and evil social system on one hand and her father's deceit and fraud on the other hand. If Kalo, who belongs to the class of the exploited turns himself an exploiter to take revenge upon the exploiters; Biten, who is by caste Brahmin allows himself to be exploited by others as his punishment. Though by caste he is a Brahmin named Bikash Mukharjee, he personates himself as a man of 'a convict class' and discarded the caste to avenge the society. He refuses to wear the thread again.

Biten, a Brahmin by birth is also one more impressive character in Bhattacharya's novel, *He Who Rides a Tiger*. Although his real name is Bikash Mukherji, he is known as Biten because his official number as a convict inside the jail is B-10. However, he never divulges his real name or caste, and prefers to be called only Biten. He is sentenced to a term of one-year imprisonment for his having incited a mob of hungry people to loot a food shop in Calcutta during the dark and miserable days of famine. It is unmistakably clear to us that here is a character who believes in action and reprisals. He tells Kalo:

"We are the scum of the earth. The boss people scorn us because they fear us. They hit us where it hurts badly -in the pit of the belly. We've got to hit back." (39)

Son of a poor clerk employed in the Steel Mill at Tatanagar, Biten has been a brilliant student, securing a first with two distinctions at his final School Examination. But unfortunately he had to discontinue his studies because of his grinding poverty and in search of a suitable job goes to Calcutta

during the period of the Second World War. Biten receives the first real shock of his life when his young and beautiful sister, Purnima, is married to an old widower, only to be subsequently tortured and murdered. It is quite understandable that a pious, God-fearing but intelligent and sensitive boy like him, who has been performing "the ritual of prayers as a matter of iron routine" (161), finds himself bogged down in a state of "living death" (161). And it is as a desperate reaction to the scheme of things that he turns an arch-rebel, and seeks to demolish every conceivable form of orthodoxy and exploitation. Paradoxically but interestingly enough, it is this very arch-enemy of Brahminism who is instrumental in creating "a new Brahmin" (164) in Kalo.

Biten indoctrinates Kalo during their stay together in jail, and calls upon him to launch a fierce offensive against the corrupt and self-seeking society. Biten is a radical character, an activist, who fights for food, freedom and human dignity. As Chandra Lekha thinks of him, he is "really a man among men." (199)

Bhattacharya gives us a pathetic picture of innumerable cruelties to which the human beings are subjected due to poverty and hunger. Hunger brings mankind to a despicable level. Honour becomes the easiest target. Hunger provokes to do anything and everything deprived. It gives birth to various kinds of perverse activities and exploitation. The law of brutes prevails and everything is reduced to mere brutality. Syamala Rao in the book *Bhabani Bhattacharya* observes,

"Bhabani Bhattacharya presents a deep insight into the fact, that no one knows to what abysmal depths poverty degrades a man" (Rao 75).

This time he does not surrender to the exploitation but decides to mount on it. The 'exploited' becomes the 'exploiter'.

"Kalo had not only to deny but to eradicate the values by which he had been bred. Ultimately he had to cut his social taproot and give up his inheritance." (71)

Kalo rides the tiger to take revenge upon the exploiters. With deceit and cunning, he is able to bring round the same men and magnates of the society under thumb, who had spat on him and humiliated him. He mocks at the evils of injustice and feels happy at his success.

Bhattacharya attacks the selfish people who exploit the poor in the name of God. Through the ritual of 'Shiva's milk bath' he shows the hypocrisy of the rich people. The ritual is started to attract the customers to the temple business.

"Men of wealth with no time or heart for prayer and penance gave willingly for the ritual, the easier way for them to gain merit." (117)

Bhattacharya wants to attack a number of evils in our society, which make the lives of the poor miserable. Through the comparison of the deaths of the poor and the rich he attacks the evil rituals of Hindu religion. There are no rites performed after the death of destitute. The dead bodies of destitute are carried away by the municipality people in the garbage vans. On the other hand, in the funeral procession of the rich large quantities of rice and copper coins are scattered in the street. The rich do it to earn goodly measure of merit for the soul. But Kalo asks

"What will happen to the departing souls of those dying in the street without any ritual? Were they doomed to haunt the earth forever as specters? ... was heaven meant only for the rich alone?" (52)

Biten experiences the evil of caste system in a different manner. Biten's sister becomes the victim of the rigid caste system. In order to avoid social disgrace by marrying their daughter to a young boy of the lower caste, the parents marry her to a widower who has not only children but also grandchildren. The marriage ends with the suicide of his sister. Biten calls it a murder committed by the evil caste system. Biten protests by discarding his caste.

"The Juxtaposition of Biten's rejection of the Brahminhood which is his birth right and Kalo's renunciation of the Brahminhood he has created for himself through fraud makes the novelist's condemnation of the system total" (Chandrasekharan, 69).

Bhattacharya shows emptiness of rituals through a number of incidents in this novel.

"Kalo sees in the existing social system an obnoxious contradiction –while men died of hunger, wealth grew, and while kindness dried up religion was more in demand. It was only the outward form of religion, the shell of ritual empty within." (125)

They get furious, when they come to know that the tradition is violated. They find the tradition more important than the deaths of the poor. One of the donors of milk says:

"Ten thousand have died of hunger. What difference would a few more or a few less make?" (134)

Bhabani Bhattacharya's through his radical rebel characters, Kalo and Biten from *He Who Rides a Tiger* has made a successful attempt in awakening the society against social evils and hollow rituals. They move or try to move directly against the tide of the times; they launch their fierce offensive against poverty and bondage, superstition and ignorance, deceit and fraud, cruelty and repression with unusual boldness and determination, and they outright reject any convenient compromises with life.

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