



The Shackles of Caste and Cries of Starvation: Analysing Gender and Social Stratification in *He Who Rides a Tiger*

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Abstract

The paper presents a close reading of the novel *He Who Rides a Tiger* by Bhabani Bhattacharya, examining how caste, gender, and famine are illusionary and exploitative forces that dismantle societal stability. Though postcolonial and feminist readings are possible, this paper emphasizes a critique of societal structures such as patriarchal authority, casteism, and religious manipulation. It invites deeper scholarly exploration into the socio-political condition and examines the commodification of human suffering and identity. The paper adopts a multidisciplinary lens, intersecting sociological, political, and literary analysis, to critique patriarchal authority, which is shown to function via both societal and religious mechanisms. This also reflects religious manipulation as a key mechanism for social dominance, particularly through the figure of the Kalo who manipulates faith to avenge and exploit the masses. The commodification of human suffering is another critical concern which is evaluated through close reading of the text. It critically examines Bhattacharya's strategies and thematic concerns in portraying the complex interplay of caste, gender, and famine. The paper explores how Bhattacharya paints a socio-political landscape where systemic oppression is both normalized through constant cultural conditioning and challenged through symbolic and realist elements. His critical depiction reveals the mechanisms of exploitation embedded within religious orthodoxy, patriarchal authority, and caste hierarchy which was present in Bengal during the Nineteenth and Twentieth century. By foregrounding marginalized voices, Bhattacharya not only critiques institutionalized injustice but also articulates possibilities for resistance and transformative social change.

Keywords: Gender Oppression, Societal hypocrisy, Casteism, Gender stereotypes, religious manipulation, Symbolic tiger.

Introduction:

Famine and Caste throughout the novel exploits the marginalized simultaneously. Whereas the Famine is not the root of suffering rather it catalyses a gap in existing society created by caste, and both create a power dynamic which helps the elites to exploit the people from lower caste. The author reflects how Caste, Gender and Religion all three of these elements in society are artificial mechanisms, and Bhattacharya who often advocates for the "Art for social purpose" portrays the hypocrisy of this artificiality in its peak in 20th century Bengal. We can also trace how Bhattacharya mends the stark realities and horrors in his fiction making it both relevant and revolutionary, in his book *Socio-political Currents in Bengal* we can trace the consciousness of Bhattacharya regarding his contemporary period. Even in his interview with Mahfi he points out how the degradation of society, such as the impact of famine, the caste hierarchy etc influenced him to write and equipped him with an effective writing style. The plot of the novel is linear at first, but as it progresses elements like Gender oppression, Caste oppression, rising nationalism, religious hypocrisy makes it complex. This complexity provides a space for the reader to engage critically about the artificiality of the society, where power is generated in a void but through the help of cultural conditioning of episteme in the society. The plot deals with vulnerable characters like Kalo, Chandralekha, Bikash Mukherjee, Purnima and so on, each character comes across the different hegemonic structures of the society for one it might be caste inferiority (Kalo), and for another it's caste superiority (Bikash Mukherjee). The famine which Bhattacharya uses as backdrop contextually refers to The Great Bengal Famine (1943), which brought food crisis, malnutrition eventually leading to millions of deaths. For more contextual reference about the holocaust, one might refer to "I Remember Bengal Famine", an interview with Zebunnessa Khair who

highlighted through the interview how society was at its lowest, she describes how people were begging for food "Maa, give us some starch, if not rice, give us some starch", also she talks about monopoly of British soldiers, and anti-British marches. These are the pivotal elements which shaped the creativity of the writer, and provided raw materials for writing fiction.

Caste & Religion: Invisible Chains of Power and Privilege.

In *He Who Rides a Tiger*, Bhattacharya presents caste not merely as an existing artificial structure, instead exposes its negative force that shapes the living, fate, and choices in orthodox Indian society. The writings of Bhattacharya present extreme social realism with an intention to address issues like radical casteism, gender norms, religion and other societal hypocrisy. The author's writings and tone clearly have a humanistic meaning, like the Italian Renaissance thinkers who focus on man as centre. In his interaction with Sudhakar Joshi, the author says that a novelist should be concerned with social reality "I hold that a novel should have a social purpose. It must place before the reader something from the society's point of view. Art is not necessarily for art's sake. Purposeless art and literature which is much in vogue does not appear to me a sound judgement" this ideology of the writer contradicts with the "rosy reality" of aestheticism and helps the author to paint real like images in his fiction. Particularly the hypocrisy of casteism and religion is portrayed through Kalo who subverses his fate by declaring himself as a "Twice Born" but originally, he is a blacksmith a "kamar". In early phase of the novel, we see how the other people treat Kalo and Chandralekha, who are almost unnoticeable in the society due to an artificial imposition of caste and religion. Chandralekha despite of her academic achievement, being the first girl in Bengal to receive the prestigious Ashoka Memorial Medal her success is neither celebrated nor acknowledged, instead it is met with derision from the upper caste. Whose

criticism is rooted not in the merit of her performance but in the audacity of her caste background. Inequality such as getting imprisoned for straight three months for stealing a banana with a remark of "Why did you have to live?" by the judge filling the void of nothingness with a spark of rebellion, incidents like these lead to the ironic subversion of hierarchy.

In reality Caste, is a social construct, lacks ontological reality which is illusionary neither it is concrete nor a natural phenomenon. Although with a continuous cultural conditioning and imposition, it becomes internalised which convinces both marginalized and oppressor to accept it as an immutable truth. As the education and knowledge in the society has been spreading ever faster now the idea of this oppressive structure is blurring, and the very sentiment is seen in the protagonist of the novel. Kalo performs a trick of "rising shiva linga" under a tree and successfully goes away with the forgery and pretends that he is a Brahmin under a pseudonym of Mangal Adhikari. Ironically, once Kalo attains this fabricated status, he begins to replicate the very structures of dominance he once sought to dismantle. His internalization of superiority underscores the cyclical and pervasive nature of hegemonic power—it not only marginalizes but also has the capacity to corrupt its challengers. It is only after his departure from Jharana and subsequent imprisonment that Kalo is confronted with the brutal reality of systemic oppression. His declaration, "We are the scum of the earth. The boss people scorn us because they fear us. They hit us where it hurts badly...We've got to hit back," marks a pivotal moment of character evolution.

This moment of rebellion is not merely reactionary but symbolic of a deeper awakening. It reflects Kalo's transformation from a passive sufferer of caste-based humiliation to an active agent of resistance. His journey, rooted in the lived experience of caste suffering, illuminates the psychological and

social toll of hegemonic domination, while also asserting the possibility of reclaiming agency through subversive means. Kalo's unreasonable imprisonment early in the novel serves as a metaphor for the societal incarceration of individuals born into lower castes- punished not for what they do, but for what they are. However, the manipulation of religion marks one of the most satirical elements in the novel, exposing how caste is not an essence or starta, but a performance, furthermore the novel examines the inherent inequality present in the caste system. The conflict of truth and illusion, rebellion and responsibility, adds psychological depth to the novel, Kalo's journey symbolises not only a social critique but also a personal quest for Identity and Revenge. In the end, Kalo's journey is a horrendous tragedy as well as pleasurable triumph because he becomes successful in exposing the illusion of core of caste system, he also gets tangled in his own approach to expose the system, throughout the process for a time being he also becomes the part of hegemonic structures. caste still exists in society and till now we see no way out of it and the awareness of these problems can be achieved through novels like this. Bhattacharya's work remains deeply relevant, reminding us that the struggle for dignity and justice in the face of oppression requires both courage and sacrifice.

Intersection of gender: multiple layers of oppression

One of the most essential dimensions in Bhattacharya's works is his Importance to the female characters for e.g. "*Music for Mohini*", female characters are central to the unfolding narrative, females don't represent the periphery rather they build the scope of complexity for objective evaluation. Bhattacharya's portrayal of Indian women emphasizes on the purity and moral integrity that paints a picture of the cultural ideal of womanhood from the Indian framework. Although the characters are attributed with divine qualities, they are often vulnerable and subjected to systematic

victimization and symbolic oppression, and marginalization. Throughout the novel we see how two of the female characters are exploited, and oppressed. Again, the contradiction of caste is present here, the gender is more oppressive than the caste. Chandralekha belongs to a lower caste, and Purnima is Brahmin but despite their caste they continue to suffer in the patriarchal society. Purnima's oppression is rooted in her emotional engagement with a boy from lower caste, eventually her parents get to know about it and thus her downfall starts. Here we see the intersection of caste and gender leading to devastating situations. Basav was the love affair of Purnima who worked in a factory, but despite that she was restricted to meet him and her parents put an end to her education. This also refers to the stereotypes of the society where labour also has a hierarchical structure, if one's working in a factory it means lack of social prestige, even if it produces more than a desk job. Thus it can be stated that Caste and Gender affects the familial relationship. Purnima eventually gets married forcefully by her parents to a Brahmin, and soon she dies with despair, spectating all these events eventually creates an Anti-Brahmin sentiment in Bikash Mukherjee thus his journey starts as a revolutionary. Chandralekha the main female character in this novel gets manipulated in the novel first through the Brothel owner, then through the businessmen Motichand who wanted Chandralekha as his wife but he was already married thrice. When Lekha was trapped in the brothel she was forced to perform prostitution, but she still didn't let the trauma of spending a night in the Brothel never left her. Despite pretending to be a Brahmin and having food for it she never seems to be happy, and never spends a minute in darkness, the trauma gets worse and worse. This portrayal of Bhattacharya refers to how women are subjugated from one or other methods, either from family or from society, but society is the root cause of the suffering due to its artificial power dynamics and stereotypes. Chandralekha through the novel adapts a child

who was searching food in a dustbin, and the talk spreaded here and there, that a Brahmin lady has given a roof to a casteless. This creates an opportunity for Motichand to exploit Chandralekha, he demands that Lekha should marry her or rather she has to release that boy to save her reputation. Motichand is one of the major contributors to the temple thus she was left with no choice. The systematic mechanism of dominating the female characters is vivid in this novel, till now also we can see how relatable is the writings of Bhattacharya. Generally, women are represented as twice oppressed, but my argument is that this novel portrays women as thrice oppressed with the intersection of famine, gender, caste. These structures don't work in isolation but converge to reinforce each other, creating a web of exploitation. Lekha represents this complex intersectionality, however for Purnima the famine wasn't horrendous rather her emotional engagement was. But Lekha as a woman was marginalized in the patriarchal society that limited the autonomy of females, then appeared caste status which restricted her within rigid social hierarchies and rejected dignity and respect. The appearance of famine multiplies these vulnerabilities, pushing her to the edge of survival, taking away whatever autonomy was there. For women like Lekha, who is both economically and socially exploited the famine is not merely a crisis of hunger, rather it becomes a crisis of the very identity and existence. Bhattacharya uses this context to reveal how women bear the brunt of societal collapse, becoming victims and symbols of larger societal failure.

Conclusion

The title "*He Who Rides a Tiger*" represents the subversion of the religious superiority which is present in the novel. The tiger is not literal, but has metaphorical implications which refers to rebellion and subversion and a resistance to systematic conditioning. The title sets the tone of the novel's plot which eventually moves towards

rebellious in nature. Kalo: "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". In simple words one may say that the title refers to a type of situation which is created by the protagonist which he cannot abandon, for e.g. his forgery with religion he cannot go back from it because if he does then he will get killed by the faithful of the religion. The tiger symbolizes the dangerous path of resistance, a double-edged nature of rebellion, because it offers status in the society, but also creates a perpetual threat of being devoured by the very forces which he seeks to challenge. Ironically the tiger also symbolizes the caste system itself which is an intense social force that consumes those who are unable or unwilling to conform. It is both a tool and a trap. Hence it is a complex and multi-dimensional symbol which represents various types of threats once you play with subversion and also refers to the inescapability of social roles. The findings across both chapters engage critically with the interwoven themes of caste, famine, gender, and their associated sufferings each revealed as a product of artificial social constructions. The famine, in particular, is portrayed not as a natural calamity, but as a consequence of flawed and exploitative policy making during the exigencies of World War II. Numerous documentaries on the Bengal Famine underscore the monopolistic control exercised by British colonial powers and native elites, leading to the slow, agonizing deaths of nearly three million individuals. The novel vividly captures these grotesque and haunting realities, which may aptly be termed as the "horror of the famine." To conclude, the novel works in a space where multiple critical approaches can be implemented and I have applied Gender intersection, and Sociological approach to explore the complexity of fact and fiction.

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