



Representation of Colonial Encounters in Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers!*

Dr. Vaishali Meshram

Assistant Professor

Dr. M. K. Umathe College, Nagpur

Email ID: drvaishalimeshram@gmail.com

Abstract

The Indian writers writing in different languages responded to the colonial experience and also captured the changing patterns and social tensions of that era. In this venture, the Indo-Anglian novelists made a major contribution. The reverberations of which were felt throughout India and abroad. Bhabani Bhattacharya occupies a place of honour amongst those Indo-Anglian novelists as he responded to the colonial rule in India through the description of the colonial encounters and the Gandhian movement throughout his novels. He fictionalized the National Movement with Gandhi or Gandhism at the center. The present paper endeavors to explore how Bhabani Bhattacharya represented the traumatic colonial experiences in his novel *So Many Hungers* through his characters who responded to the colonial rule and the Gandhian Movement with great enthusiasm and zeal.

Key words: colonial, imperial, encounter, patriotism, gandhism

Dr. Bhabani Bhattacharya was brought up in the Colonial India and like many other Indo-Anglian writers; he not only responded to the Colonial experiences but also captured the socio-economic tension of that era. He lived in a period in which the entire nation was immersed in the struggle for freedom from the British rule. Indian struggle for independence was such an epic struggle that covered almost half of the twentieth century. India had been passing through the experience of War and the long drawn struggle for Independence. Patriotism forms the major ingredient in Bhattacharya's characterization. Almost all the major characters in his novels show a lot of public spirit. They have either actively participated in the national liberation struggle and have been to prison or devoted themselves mainly under Gandhiji's influence to national reconstruction and public welfare activities. In 1947 after Independence, the

country was confronted with difficult economic problems, since it was still to be achieved. It was, therefore, natural for Bhattacharya to be drawn towards the problem of economic freedom also.

Bhattacharya's first novel *So Many Hungers!* was published two months after the independence in October 1947 while Bengal was still recovering from the man-made famine and experiencing the violence of partition. He, who had closely witnessed the entire National movement, no wonder deals with the major events preceding independence. The Quit India and the Civil Disobedience Movements have been particularly treated in the novel. Bhattacharya's faith in freedom for all finds forceful expression in the novel. Besides some of the important phases of the National Movement, the Bengal famine, which is its main theme, is also delineated in the novel. In this paper I have focused more on the National Movement.

The novel focuses on two families, one rich and urban while the other poor and rural. Rahoul, a Cambridge-educated physicist and a son of wealthy and corrupt industrialist Samarendra, intermittently involved with nationalism. His younger brother Kunal is selected as an officer in the army during World War II and he sees it as a way of achieving the intellectual confidence required to throw off the shackles of imperialism. In the second family, a young girl Kajoli, the main protagonist of the novel, lives with her younger brother Onu and her mother. The family falls prey to the Bengal famine and migrates to the city where Kajoli prostitutes herself to earn money for her family and community of destitute after her husband Kishore is shot by the authorities for his protest of grain and boat confiscation by the government. The nationalist frame also occurs primarily through Rahoul's story. In the beginning of the novel Rahoul seems happy and hopeful to know that the Allied Powers have at last declared war against the Swastika in order to keep the soul of man free from the clutches of Germany. He whistles shrilly in joy to indicate that the Great War will preserve man's freedom in consonance with his ideas. He always longs for freedom for all i.e. world freedom,

"World for as were dancing to his tune. Had he not often in his fancy mobilized on international army of freedom-seekers and declared war on fascists?" (So Many Hungers! 11-12)

But Rahoul is upset since he is unable to understand how England, one of the Allied Powers, can fight for democratic freedom while she is denying freedom to India. It is a great irony that Indians who live in the oppression, are asked to fight for world freedom. He, however, deeply desires that freedom should prevail in Europe and Asia.

Dr. Bhattacharya vividly describes the National Movement over a large portion of the novel and forms a very significant part of its theme. He highlights the Quit India Movement and the other phases of the National Movement such as the Civil Disobedience Movement and the breaking of the salt law. Rahoul's grandfather Devesh Basu participates actively in it. Like great patriots, he

organizes a large number of peasants and fishermen, and defies the law by making salt from sea-water. Thousands of people and he himself are sent to prison for breaking the salt law. The movement spreads over the entire country as a result more than a hundred thousand men and women, the old and the young, irrespective of caste, creed and sex go to prison in a month. Samarendra Basu, Rahoul's father tries to keep Rahoul away from the movement by sending him abroad for higher studies with great difficulty. The movement spreads in villages as the leaders give top priority to village reconstruction work, since it is thought to be the very basis of the Indian way of living to come when the movement emphasizes the importance of mass literacy, the alien rulers regard it dangerous. Devesh Basu tells Rahoul that,

"The mass literacy is a danger for the rulers. It would, they know, make the trampled ones conscious of their birth-right, the right to live as human beings." (26-27)

The novel also deals with India's dilemma during World War II, whether she should oppose the British Government or should support it to fight against the fascist forces. She stands inactive, uncertain for sometimes about which way to take. The dilemma is resolved by the decision to fight with the British people against the Nazis. It is felt that Indians are to oppose British people who are in danger of losing their liberty. Indians are to ride with freedom and democracy, and not with the tyranny and enslavement. Dr. Bhattacharya has expressed this dilemma through Rahoul. He gives the national situation in a nutshell through the consciousness of Rahoul in these words:

"The National movement Offered co-operation, pledging its full strength to the war effort, in return for recognition of the Indian people's right to freedom. Authority, hating to part with power, promptly answered by clapping into prisons a great figure in the national movement who had decried the attempt to drag his people into a war that was none of their seeking, as though they were the humblest of slaves." (42)

Some of the great Indians oppose to this step of their countrymen and go to jail on account of it. The National Movement that was based on the significant principle of non-violence at its core does not stop supporting Englishmen in their effort just to save their freedom.

“It would not hurt Britain in the grave hour of trial. That would not be ahimsa-true non-violence. The National movement had more morality than strategy.” (51)

The novel refers to Jawaharlal Nehru’s trial in Gorakhpur prison, whose statement during the trial is cyclostyled and circulated. The statement emphatically brings out Indian nationalism and their determination to achieve complete independence for the country. He says,

“I stand before you, sir, as an individual being tried for certain offences against the state you are symbol of that state. But I also am something more than an individual...a symbol of Indian nationalism, resolved to achieve the independence of India. It is not me that you are seeking to judge and condemn, but rather the hundreds of millions of the people of India, and that is a large task even for a proud Empire. Perhaps it may be that, although I am standing before you on my trial, it is the British Empire itself that is on its trial before the bar of the world. There are more powerful forces at work today than courts of law, there are elemental urges of freedom and food and security which are moving vast masses of people.” (43-44)

After suspending the demand for freedom for a short period owing to World War II, it is felt that the Independence movement should no longer mark time, but should strongly press for freedom. But the British rulers do not relish this changed attitude of Indians, and use all their power to crush them and try to put the movement in fetters and chains. As a result people revolt and to suppress the rebellion, the police swing their lathis and open fire on the people mad for freedom. The Government is determined to smash movement and to outlaw it. On the other hand the patriots are convinced that enslaved India will be a blot on world freedom. Thus the storm is in full fury. Terror prevails not only in

cities but also in villages. In spite of it people start destroying Government property; many start tricolor national flag march. Such flag march is also organized by Devata at Buruni- men, women, young and old participate enthusiastically and courageously. Devata calls them, “the new minds, the new words of the national movements.” (70)

Thousands of men and women are insulted, beaten up and arrested. Devata tries to remind them and commands:

“Friends and comrades do not betray the flag. Do not betray yourselves. There is violence in your thoughts; that is evil enough. Do not make it worse by violence in action....Ours is the harder task. If we use the weapons of our enemy, we play into their hands. The supreme test has come. Be strong. Be true. Be deathless.” (72)

People go to the prison by singing songs of freedom with triumph and have no mark of defeat in their voices. Devata, too, goes to prison several times and spends a number of years together. The novel ends with the lines of Rabindranath Tagore’s song,

“The more their eyes redden with rage,
the more our eyes open;
the more they tighten the chains,
the more the chains loosen!” (205)

The Quit India Movement enters a new phase with the prisoner’s launching of a hunger strike to carry on the movement even in jails. Men, women and children have vowed to be true, strong and deathless, and not to betray the flag and themselves. Devata, Kajoli’s father Kanu and Kishore are true patriots. The entire country asks in thunderous shouts the alien rulers to quit:

“Meantime they stayed in prison, sixty thousand men and women and the bulk of them were peasants. A thousand killed, twice as many wounded. Many had been hanged after a hurried trial-peasant lads had gone to the rope crying with

their last breath, "Victory, victory to freedom!" (97-98)

Dr. Bhattacharya attacks the corrupt practices in the novel *So Many Hungers* through the characters like Samrendra Basu and Abalabandhu. Samrendra Basu is nominally a lawyer but a well-to-do person. Having suffered privation in his younger days, his main aim in life is to accumulate more and more money by fair or foul means for himself and his family. He is greedy without even a tinge of patriotism and desires affluence, safety and respectability. His only aim is to please his British masters to earn titles and to accumulate a huge wealth. When World War II starts, he treats it as the chance of life-time to multiply his wealth. When a beggar casually mentions that a grain of rice would be more welcomed to him than money, Samarendra is quick to understand that rice is becoming scarce and that a good way to make money by hoarding it and selling at the most appropriate time. He, therefore, joins hands with his capitalist friend Sir. Abalabandhu and hoards rice in large quantity to sell it at exorbitant price later on. As a result a trading concern with the ironic name Cheap Rice Limited is formed. As the war progresses and hardships of people increase Calcutta turns into a world of wealthy traders where one witnesses the hateful sight of man's callous greed for money and shameless disregard of all codes of civilized humanity. Sir Abalabandhu is a prince among black-marketeters. Technique employed by the company is to tempt all the small farmers to sell not only all their stock of rice but also the unharvested crops; Samarendra wants his sons to lead comfortable, self-centered lives with the ill-gotten wealth.

The dilemma of the national movement is, however, soon over. The leadership gives the call for Quit India Movement because the British do not fulfill the required commitment. Thus begins a parallel war at home against the colonial rulers who reply by putting leaders behind the bars, and suppressing the movement with force, Bhattacharya notices all these incidents very minutely and has captured most authentically the state of nationalist movement for freedom in its entire varying nuisance. Participating in the national freedom

movement and going to prison for the country's sake are common experiences in the lives of several people in Bhattacharya's novels.

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