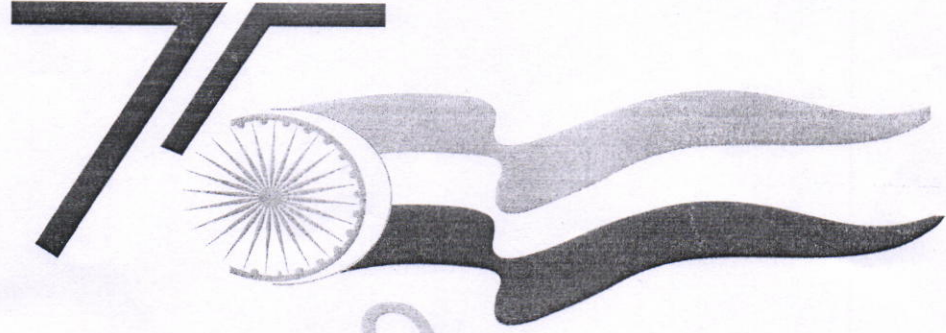


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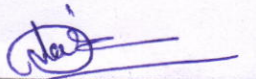


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Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger*: A Story of Religious Hypocrisy and Casteism

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Abstract :

Bhabani Bhattacharya's post-independence period was full of struggle, suffering and hope with many social evils. His third novel *He Who Rides a Tiger* was published in 1954, wherein he presents an exact picture of Indian society before independence. The novel reflects the degrading political and economic system in the caste-ridden society of the early forties and depicts unbridgeable gulf between the rich and the poor, the high and the low. This research paper aims at studying and analyzing the novel *He Who Rides a Tiger* as a story of religious hypocrisy and Casteism. Through the major characters like Kalo and his daughter Lekha, the novelist tries to show how Kalo, a dark skinned blacksmith and Chandra Lekha retaliate on society due to hunger and ill treatments they receive from people and denunciate the caste system.

Keywords: Religion, Hypocrisy, Casteism, Hunger, Famine, Revenge, Society.

Introduction :

Dr. Bhabani Bhattacharya was a humanist. He was greatly moved by the poverty, hunger and sufferings of the people. He has exposed various social evils of modern India such as exploitation, superstitions, prostitution and hoarding of food grains. As a social reformer he wants to make men self-reliant and self-respectful individuals. Events of the early post-independence period such as the partition of the country in 1947 with

its disastrous aftermath and the development of the nation serve as an ideal material for the writers to ponder over and use it to express their feelings and thoughts. Being a true nationalist with a deep concern for the welfare of the society continues to be interested in the themes of vital national significance. So many social evils still persists even after independence. He, therefore, pleads for intelligent exercising of vote, advocates widow remarriage, rebels against child marriage and is against the barrier of caste. As a visionary, he firmly believes that there is every hope for India to be a better place because it has all the basic material required for development and reconstruction. He is concerned with the dignity of man both at the national and at the international level.

The Victims of Casteism :

Chandra Lekha is an image of suffering that is subjected to traditional restraints. The caste restrictions and her role of priestess in the temple add to the sufferings of this motherless girl. Chandra Lekha and her father spend their life happily with the mutual affection between the father and the daughter. Her father, Kalo, is a self-competent, industrious and ambitious dark-skinned blacksmith of Jharna town whose pretty wife dies in childbirth and the baby daughter is named Chandra Lekha, which is suggested by the priest when he comes to the blacksmith for some work. The girl is nurtured under the tender care of her father and his old widowed aunt who comes to stay with them. The girl inherited her



mother's good looks and displays unmatched beauty and intelligence as she grows up. He sends her to the local English Convent School where her presence is frowned upon by the girls belonging to the higher castes. They were cold and aloof because of her humble caste. She was at the top in every test and that made it worse. Kalo is criticized for his daughter's education by both, the upper-caste people and the people of his community. He feels very much proud for Lekha as she moves up from one class to another at school.

Lekha steps in to womanhood from girlhood. She is a tall, fair, soft-spoken, composed, graceful, pretty, intelligent and a well-mannered girl with beautiful black eloquent eyes. Being a bright student, she loves her books that she won as prizes for her schoolwork and other books she issues from the library. Lekha's fair-skinned beauty is genetic; however, she seems unaware of her beauty and takes no notice when people watch her with admiration. She is not only self-contented but also a solitary girl like her father and absorbs more and more in studies. She wins Ashoka Memorial Medal in an essay competition which was held for all the students of Bengal. Her name was also printed in the Hindusthan newspaper. Kalo's joy knows no bounds on reading the newspaper and thinks that Lekha will be honoured publically at the hands of Magistrate but they get cold response from high class people who only send the medal in blue velvet case and nobody takes pain to come to Jharna town. Lekha does not get anything what she deserves to get and her father feels very sad on her account. Despite it, Lekha and her father spend their life happily with the mutual affection between the father and the daughter until the man-made famine strikes their village in 1943.

During Famine food grain become scares and unemployment become more acute in Jharna. Weavers and tradesmen sell their implements and are forced to leave for Calcutta in search of food

and work. Kalo finds it difficult and looks for a job, but when he fails, he also leaves for Calcutta with an aching heart, leaving behind his daughter in the care of an old aunt. While going to Calcutta he suffers much in railway, does not have money to buy a railway ticket and hence he travels on the footboard of a train. He tries to steal bananas due to hunger but is caught and is taken to the court where the magistrate sentences him an exemplary punishment of three month's imprisonment because of the fast growing incidents of theft. In prison Kalo shares his cell with Bikash Mukherji who has been jailed for protesting against a policeman, beating up and killing a poverty stricken person for standing before an eating place for staring at the food there. Bikash Mukherjee protests against hunger i.e. he protests against the British rule itself and its lackeys. He is given the number B-10. This B-10 protests casteism as his sister, Purnima was forced to get married to an elderly widower by her parents, when they discovered her love affair with Bhasav, a man from a lower caste. She was not at all happy in her married life so finally she ends the entire ordeal by committing suicide. He, thereby, renounces his Brahminhood by throwing away his sacred thread and promises never to speak about his caste. That is why he refuses to disclose his caste when Kalo questions him about it. They become good friends in due course of time.

After the departure of her father, Chandra Lekha suffers a lot due to Bengal famine as she is also one of the victims like the other people of the village Jharana. She sells her gold medal, a golden chain and gold bangles which are bought for her by her father. The tradesmen-cum-agents of the Brothel who come from Calcutta try to tempt the hungry and poor village girls. He tries to capture Lekha as well by giving her grain as she has no grain in the house but she understands the meaning of his look. She recalls her father's warning about such agents while going to Calcutta. A few days later a woman comes to Lekha from Calcutta, tells her that her father who



works in her house has met with an accident and she has come there to take her to her father. Lekha who loves her father a lot is greatly discouraged by that time and goes with the stranger woman. She cannot meet her father since she is tricked to bring in Harlot's house where she spends two days in a locked room without food; the windows are closed and barred. On the third day the woman gives her some rice to eat. On the last and fifth day she has been given a feast. She begs to see her father but the pimp woman beats her, gives her a transparent blue sari to wear without blouse and a strong perfume is sprayed on her body. She shouts and cries since a rich stranger enters the room and embraces her. She feels sickened and vomits. The rich man, therefore, leaves the room in anger. Kalo who now works for a group of brothels in the city due to the irony of fate, is near by the room, recognizes her voice and feels the presence of his daughter. He enters the room and is horrified to see his loving daughter Lekha. He rescues her and takes her home without the knowledge of the brothel keeper. She is a virgin and is saved in time but is very much terrified and the fear remains very long in her life.

A Religious Hypocrisy :

As a destitute, Kalo, a hard working blacksmith, has been denied the opportunity to earn an honest living, has been convicted as a thief and compelled to work as a pimp for the brothel to eke out a miserable livelihood. He sees these social cruelties torturing the life of the poor and the low-caste people through his own experience. He sees innocent poor girls working as a prostitute, innocent poor person's imprisonment for minor lapses and the animal like life of the prisoners in the prison where the people who take part in Quit India struggle are imprisoned. The meanness and cruelty shown by unscrupulous exploiters rouses Kalo's indignation. Society has hurt him so much in the belly that he decides to take revenge upon the

exploiters of society by perpetrating the fraud already hinted at. He, therefore, declares war on society and resolves to be revenged on its pillars for the famine they have caused and the harlot-homes they have kept flourishing and he:

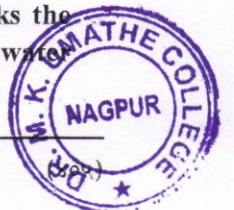
"was going to be a pillar of society! A pillar created by two seers of grain. Han, that was the way to avenge himself. A smith reincarnated a Brahmin. A convict and harlot-house procurer becomes a master of a temple, placing the hand of benediction on the bowed heads of pious folks. So had the Wheel of Karma turned!" (Pp. 86-7)

Lekha believes that her father is not the only person who can fight heroically; his daughter too can stand on her own legs. To avenge on the society the father and the daughter decide to perform a fake miracle. He makes a phallic image of Shiva which is raised out of the soil under an old banyan tree. Wearing a sacred thread like a Brahmin, Kalo:

"twisted his sacred thread to his thumb, in Brahminic manner, seeking strength from the contact, and let his trembling hand rest upon his stomach. It was a thick, brand-new thread with nine white strands, no simple thread but a Brahmin's holy emblem. ...The terrible fraud of posing as high of caste, the highest when he was so far down in the scale. No man in Bengal could ever before have dared such rashness. Doubt had preyed on his mind." (Pp. 81-2)

Kalo sits in the position of fervent prayer, sitting next to him Lekha tells the crowd tonelessly that her father,

"had a dream. Shiva visited him in his sleep and said, I lie buried under an aged banyan in the large vacant plot on Behula Road. An ant-heap marks the spot. Remove the ant-heap. Pour water on the spot until I rise." (p.79)





The people are amazed, wonderstruck to see the dream come true,

“as the sun sank and dusk began to thicken, the brown surface of earth, which Kalo had watered for hours, split open and the top of a small stone Shiva pushed its way slowly into sight. Only the few who sat very close saw the miracle happen. For a moment they gazed in tongue-tide wonder. Then the triumphant shout came in unison, ‘Namo Shivaya!’ The god has shown himself, the god Shiva himself!” (Pp.83-4)

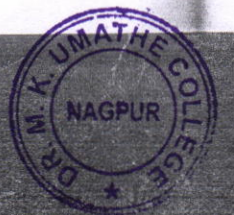
Kalo takes a new name Mangal Adhikari and Lekha becomes a Mother of Sevenfold Bliss rather people make her so. A temple is built and a pujari is appointed to perform the ritual worship. The profiteers like Motichand, Sir Abalabandhu and the other constitute a board to look after day-to-day working of the temple. The magistrate who had sent Kalo to jail is among many others who visit the temple and touch his feet.

Kalo’s rebuking the blacksmith Viswanath for touching and polluting him after wearing the Brahmin mask temporarily exposes the arrogance of the upper class people. The ill-treatment given to the boy Obhijit by Pujari’s wife is also the example of caste tyranny. Dr. Bhattacharya in the novel describes the religious aspect of the Hindu society and has given certain references of the Hindu religion as practiced by the people of the country like the people’s eager expectation of Kalo’s promised miracle, offering of money and materials for construction of false temple, etc. Bhattacharya exposes the wicked practices of the hollow religion. He points out the hypocrisy of the corrupt society through the instance of the temple. Mangal Adhikari brings home an old Viswanath who works as a gardener and has no faith in the temple. He is very sentimental man who creates a storm in the temple by one of his bold act. According to the

practice, the milk that has been used for the ritual bath given to the image every day, is collected and thrown into the sacred river Ganga. Viswanath begins to steal the milk and distribute it after boiling to destitute children in the neighbourhood. This is considered as disrespect. Mangal Adhikari supports him, but the trustees and the worshippers who pay for the milk through endowment create uproar but he rides the storm and finally establishes the custom of using the sanctified milk for feeding the hungry children. This instance shows the hypocrisy, hollowness of Hindu religion.

Conclusion :

Kalo has a firm faith in the traditional values of life. He has a simple set of values such as honesty, hard-work and faith in law and justice. The oppressive awareness of his low birth, poverty, hunger, three month’s imprisonment for a small offence, his work as a brothel-house agent, and above all Lekha’s degradation and humiliation in the brothel-house are the various factors which turn Kalo into a social rebel. He metamorphoses himself and casts away the old values and rebels against the entire social system. He renounces his caste and becomes a twice-born by wearing the sacred Brahminic thread across his chest, revolts against ‘tradition’ free from his spiritual bondage and emerges as a modern man with the release from the oppressive bondage of class and caste and starts believing in the modern man’s faith in equality between man and man. Lekha not only helps her father in the erection of fake God but also becomes the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss and merely an object of adoration. She eventually releases herself from the cage of fear that she builds around her. She works as a redeemer by getting rid of the burden of falsehood the imposture as a Brahmin and as Goddess and by desiring to link her life with Bitten for the emancipation of the downtrodden people.





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