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Self and Society: A Study of Bhabani Bhattacharya's He Who Rides a Tiger

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Abstract

He Who Rides a Tiger is a novel written by the remarkable Indian writer Bhabani Bhattacharya, depicts the ineffable hunger of protagonist and how he is misguided by the society to escape from the agony. The theme of self and the society is played the significant role in Bhabani Bhattacharya's novel. These two themes go hand in hand in all of his novels and sometimes it used as a character to elevate the story. The novel reveals that the theme of poverty, hunger and social exploitation, transforms Kalo to realize the condition of poisoned society as well as how people are trapped into the hand of racism and hierarchy. This title explains that if one sit and ride on the tiger's back implies man's quest for riding on hunger. But like the ferocious tiger kills the man cruelly, hunger kills too. In this novel kalo also loses his life and had to face the consequences of his attempt.

Key words: hunger, society, social exploitation, racism, hierarchy.

Self identity and searching for space have been an inevitable theme of a number of Indian writers in English, and Bhabani Bhattacharya plays a vital role in the list of such novelists, who has dealt the theme of identity and space in a unique style. He is one of the notable novelists who has discussed with the theme of identity in realistic way using historical events as background of the story. When the other Indian writer's perspective on theme of identity refers to individual identity, for Bhattacharya, he wants to analyze one's identity socially, economically and politically. As a social realist, he has a deep consciousness about the society to bring the goodness to society and so he had been keenly noticing all the changes occurred socially and politically throughout the nation by the administrators as well as common people in order to make their own life, comfort. Like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Kamala Markandaya and many other Indian writers, Bhattacharya also has depicted the social issues and political condition of his contemporary society in all of his novels. In his third novel *He Who Rides a Tiger*, he aims to explore the theme of social and economic condition of the Indian society through representing various characters. Palme Dutt explains the socio- economic condition of pre- Independence India:

“While the wealth of the country has been drained, while industrial and other outlets and development have been choked and thwarted, the agriculture which has been made the overburdened sole source of subsistence for the mass of the people has itself been placed under crippling conditions and condemned to neglect and deterioration”. (15)

He Who Rides a Tiger is a story of Kalo, the protagonist, and his taking revenge against the rulers as well as suppressors, and his learning of the rules and principles which is implemented by the dominators, through different experiences has been clearly depicted by the novelist. In the middle of the story Kalo, the protagonist of the novel tries to liberate himself from the fetters by transforming himself as a new man, as he has to face any hardship created by the society, that his friend Biten (B-10) tells him admiringly, “your story will be a legend of freedom, a legend to inspire and awaken.” (HWRT, 232) The man made famine of Bengal crushed the people and drove the native people away to death. Kalo too knew nothing about the further move, so he watched the situation of the society silently. He feared that Lekha “might have to roam the fields with hundreds of theirs, like a hungry animal, digging out soft wild roots for a meal” (HWRT, 24). Unable to see his daughter’s suffering caused by the pangs of starvation, Kalo has decided to go to Calcutta where he hoped to find work and earn much money to fulfill the basic need of his daughter. His condition forced him travelling without ticket, on the footboard of a train, along with hundreds of other destitute- men and women, clinging to the footboards, his eyes were on the ripe fruits, as soon as it tempted him to eat immediately, which gave him an unbearable starving. He stole three ripe bananas and was arrested and trialed for his offence. Kalo pleads guilty and explained: “I was hungry, sir. A madness came upon me. It was because I thought I had to eat or I would die. A madness came upon me, I had to live.” (HWRT, 31)

The idea discussed above has clearly explained, the novelist’s treatment of the theme of hunger which signified the title of the novel *He Who Rides a Tiger*. Riding on the tiger implies man’s quest for riding on hunger. Hunger is ferocious and is killing man as a tiger does. Kalo and Leka, the two central characters suffered from hunger, losing their all belongings on account of it. So they decided to ride the tiger of hunger to get back their living and decided to lead the happy life. Prof. S.K. Desai describes that “the characters in this novel are often frankly presented as symbols, types or representatives of certain classes or social forces” (p. 124). In this novel, the protagonist

Kalo played a significant role. He lived with his daughter Chandraleka with lot of hope and aspiration and thinking about their own future, at Jharna. For the sake of his daughter, Kalo admitted Chandraleka to a convent school in Jharna town. Throughout her schooling she had been discriminated by the upper class school mates, as she belonged lower caste and community. But she never denied her chance and ambition, never minds about what others comment on her and her father, instead she focused herself towards her destination. Such attitude, hope and hard work brought her recognition that is ‘Ashok Memorial Medal’ in an essay competition, defeating Calcutta’s participants easily. Even after this victory she couldn’t win the attention of her own town people, because after all she was the daughter of a blacksmith. This shows that the society has deeply rooted in the caste system than humanity and equality. Her neighbours also commented that “what if the motherless girl is dizzied by her knowledge?” (HWRT, 11-12). As Kalo also came from such society he knew the value of education and social justice. In order to get equal rights and social identity among the high class people, he had prepared himself to face any difficult situation. He always ready to rebel against the ruling society for bringing a comfort life to his daughter Chandraleka.

After the death of Kalo’s wife he completely took more care for filling the space of Chandraleka’s mother also and enacted dual role for his daughter. Since Chandraleka became a motherless female child Kalo’s whole life revolves around her. So for the sake of Chandraleka, Kalo would not hesitate to do anything against the victimizers. His only aim was to make the life of Chandraleka, happy ever and would not be created any hurdles by the hand of any social evils throughout her life journey. He was very cautious to keep his daughter safe and away from the victimizers and oppressed community, so he put a fence around her wherever she had gone. On the other side Bhattacharya slowly and deliberately introduces the darkest side of Bengal famine and considered it as the darkest period in the history of Bengal. As the village peasants have no work to do, for their basic needs, many of them migrating to the city to seek a better living. They exchange their household things for money to lead a peaceful life. Here the hero, a

poor blacksmith, a hard worker Kalo performs some tricks by avenging himself on a rich and high class people. Such pathetic situation drives Kalo to Calcutta for searching job, leaving behind Chandraleka with her grandmother in the village. On his way to capital city he faces many struggles and feels unbearable hungry and pain. While he was searching for food,

“His eyes were trapped by the fruits. It gave him an unbearable ache. He could not look away. His hunger seemed to grow a hundred-fold. He could no longer stand on the foot-board, he had to sit or lie down. Lie down indeed! But he kept his eyes on the bananas, torturing himself.” (HWRT, 32)

For this he was arrested and put in prison for stealing bananas. After three month he came out of the prison without having job and money for the supper. As he has to survive on the earthly life, he starts to work at a harlot-house. There he saw his daughter, Chandraleka unfortunately going to be ruined by the hand of starvation. But Kalo saved her in time from the crucial situation. The novelist explained that situation as: “.....uprooted women with their own kind of hunger had to soothe the other hungers had to cool the raging pleasure fever with their bodies.” (HWRT, 53)

To resolve all the chaos and sufferings of his family, Kalo created a temple in deserted area and act as a brahmin. Harish Raizada rightly states that “.....people in search of miracles may throng before her and make liberal gifts of their earnings to her” (p. 162). The rich merchant, Sir Abalabandhu, black marketer Motichand and even the magistrate become Mangal Adhikari’s devotees, often visited to the temple and even touches his feet without any hesitation. Though such transformation of the situation brings happiness to Kalo, indeed mentally he suffered a lot by his disguising role. Chandrasekaran explains the situation as:

“Kalo has over-reached himself and while deceiving the society that he hates, he is also deceiving himself. He has more or less persuaded himself that he is a Brahmin. Truly he is riding a tiger and cannot get down from its back. He is playing the Brahminic role with gusto.” (63)

On the other side Chandraleka also dissatisfied with the activities of her father Kalo, so that

she accepted the proposal of Motichand to marry as his fourth wife. This decision of Le-ka, made Kalo worried about her future, and he himself decided to reveal all of his cheating to the peasants. As soon as he unfolded the truth some Brahmins turned against him to take legal actions. But the common people were happy about his braveness against the victimizers and shouts “victory to our brother”. The revelation of Kalo brought his daughter a new hope and aspiration in her mind and says, “Baba, after this, whatever happens to us, wherever we go, we can never again be unhappy or defeated.” (HWRT, 48). Then both of them moved out of the temple to regain their lost life and identity. Thus in this novel the novelist depicted the great spirit of the poor peasants, how they bear the hardship of their life, created by the profiteers and how they struggle to come out of all sufferings and how one has to be aware to preserve his or her own life from the victimizers, even to live an ordinary life with dignity among the richest. The characters of this novel not only exhibit the sociological and political condition of the society but also it teaches how to come out of the problem to built the new path for the future generation in order to reach the real destination.

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