
Social Freedom in Bhabani Bhattacharya's
*He Who Rides a Tiger***Ravindra Kumar*****Department of English, CCS University Campus, Meerut*

Hunger for freedom has been a favorite theme with a number of Indian writers in English, and Bhabani Bhattacharya is notable in being one such novelist who has presented this theme in a special way. He is one such novelist who has dealt with the idea of freedom in a realistic way. Indeed, while for other authors the idea of freedom mainly refers to political freedom, for Bhattacharya, it refers to economic, cultural, intellectual and above all social freedom. It is as if Bhattacharya is translating in fictional terms the idea that Tagore has sung of in the following lines in his *Gitanjali*:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high,
Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow
domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth.
Where mind is led forward by thee into ever widening thought and action-
Into that heaven of freedom, my father,
Let my country awake (*Gitanjali*: XXXV).

Bhattacharya was a socially conscious author who had little faith in purposeless art or for “art for art’s sake”. Keeping in mind the functional role of art in society, Bhattacharya rejected the purposeless pursuit of art and literature. His art being purposive, the novel in his hands became an instrument to bring about an awareness of social reality and it was his conviction that values in art must follow values in life, for the artist is a human being among human beings. Keeping this in mind, Bhattacharya depicts life in Indian society exactly as he has viewed it with a discerning eye. As we know, India faced many problems of serious magnitude in the wake of its emergence as an independent nation. Our freedom was born in an hour of communal disturbances of unprecedented ferocity and unbelievable bestiality. Millions of people had to leave their native places and property, nearly half a million were killed, and over a lakh women, young and old were abducted, raped and mutilated. Added to this was the shocking assassination of Mahatma Gandhi and the unprovoked attack on Kashmir by Pakistan. This attack by Pakistan came at a time when India was busy in solving the Herculean problems of the rehabilitation of millions of refugees and the integration of the scattered and unfriendly states in the Indian Union. On the 26th of January 1950, India became a republic and opted for secular democracy with socialism as its goal, and it initiated tremendous efforts to speed up industrialization in the country to lead it on the road to progress. Bhattacharya, who witnessed these significant turning points in the journey of his country with keenness, tried to integrate them in the fabric of his

novels. Reconciling his art with his social and cultural commitments, Bhattacharya wove the web of his fiction around contemporary historical events and social problems. Thus, his themes in his novels are close to a social reality based on real-life experiences. This is why as a novelist he generally writes about hunger, poverty, pestilence, traditionalism and the contemporary controversy between the Gandhian vision of development versus the perceived panacea of rapid industrialization. And closely allied to this, he provides an emphatic treatment of freedom. He seems to share with Mulk Raj Anand a deep concern with the social, economic, and political problems of Indian society, and this is why he has been able to present his views on the problematic issue of freedom and hunger quite authentically. But apart from social, political and economic freedoms, the author deals with the freedom of the mind, “the freedom to be free.” The desire for freedom in its various shades and manifestations finds artistic expression in a number of the novels of Bhattacharya. The present paper aims to explore his ideas about social freedom with special reference to his masterpiece, *He Who Rides a Tiger*.

The background of *He Who Rides a Tiger* is partly political and mainly social and economic. The Quit India Movement has realistically been depicted by the author- the people being imprisoned and tortured for the crime of loving their nation, defiance of bans, hunger strikes in jail are the very incidents indicating in the novel of the political situation of India before independence. The Second World War and the threat of the Japanese attack also form part of the background suggested by the presence of the British army in the nation. Since the paper deals mainly with the social freedom, it is unnecessary to depict political freedom in detail. Bhattacharya presents the theme of social freedom quite exhaustively in *He Who Rides a Tiger*. The idea is presented through Kalo, the protagonist of the book. Kalo is a dark-skinned blacksmith living in the small town of Jharna. After his wife dies in child birth, his daughter is named Chandralekha, a name suggested by the priest. As the girl grows under the tender care of the rough artisan, she displays extraordinary intelligence and talent. At school, Chandralekha takes part in an inter-state-essay competition, and to the great joy of her father, her essay is adjudged the best, bagging her gold medal. Unfortunately, the age old caste system disappoints him and his daughter. Just because Kalo is a downtrodden, his daughter is not given due regards by the authorities of the school. Both the father and the daughter are treated like untouchables and are made to feel alien in their own society. It shocks Kalo terribly and he plans to retaliate in a different manner. In order to take revenge, Kalo makes a plan centered on a supernatural event. In one of the suburbs of the city a vast crowd has assembled to witness a promised miracle. The man who has foretold the miracle is sitting in an attitude of fervent prayer, occasionally sprinkling water on the earth. A young girl is seated by his side. Both wear robes pertaining to an ascetic order. The holy man has had a dream that at a certain hour an idol of Lord Shiva will miraculously emerge from the earth. A temple is to be built on the spot to bring the solace of religion to the people of the great city. The man has a striking resemblance with Kalo because he is Kalo himself wearing a sacred thread like a Brahmin. The young girl by his side is none other than Chandralekha, his own daughter. The promised miracle takes place and a stone image of Shiva – the phallic image slowly emerges from the ground. The onlookers are thrilled and happy because the God has chosen this place in the city as His habitation. All are befooled by this trick of Kalo. The image that emerged from the earth had been placed by Kalo on the top of a tin containing two seers of gram and then both had been covered under the earth. When the water sprinkled on the earth by

Kalo had soaked down to the tin and made the gram germinate, the image had been gradually pushed up.

Now a temple is erected on the spot and people come to witness from all the parts of the city. Money and material pour in from all the sides, especially from the rich black-marketers and speculators for whom worship is an atonement for all sins committed and a guarantee of success in future undertakings. There is a deluge of worshippers who come and touch the feet of Kalo. Ironically, among the worshippers who come to the temple and touch Kalo's feet is the magistrate who had sentenced him to hard labor for stealing fruits. Now Kalo becomes Mangal Adhikari, the care-taker of the temple. In his disguise of Mangal Adhikari, he is soon believed to be a true Brahmin under whose guidance and influence the people will never lose faith in the social order and religion. Kalo, thus, succeeds wonderfully in befooling the rich and making them worship the false God in his temple and bow to him. Thus does a low-caste blacksmith take his revenge.

But Kalo does not stop here and plans to go some more steps ahead. Now he plans to marry his daughter to a Brahmin so that she may be free from the load of her agonies for the rest of her life. Believing in social freedom, Kalo is of the view that his daughter richly deserves to marry an educated Brahmin boy because even as a blacksmith's daughter, she has been able to win the medal as the best student of her class, though due recognition and encouragement had not been given to her simply because she belonged to a low-caste. Kalo is very happy to see how easy it is to break the ageless caste barriers and to attain social emancipation. Deeply concerned with social problems, he is remarkably successful in upsetting the apple-cart of the traditional social order by investing himself with Brahminhood and rising to the top using society's strength against itself. He tries to make people believe that god is not a Brahmin by caste, and that people of low-caste deserve to go to heaven as much as people of any other caste. When he discloses his real identity to the society, the Brahmins and the rich people are panic-stricken, while the downtrodden hail him as their brother. Voicing the feelings of the common folk, Biten proclaims, "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 awake." (*He Who Rides a Tiger*, 232)

Through his depiction of the case of Kalo, Bhattacharya clearly indicates that freedom is the most valuable thing in life, perhaps, above everything else. It is a desire that is preferred even by the animals. But though Kalo becomes Mangal Adhikari mentally, at heart he remains Kalo the blacksmith. Even in his guise as Mangal Adhikari, he always craves for his own individual self. In the novel we are given indications by the author that in spite of his best attempts to assimilate Brahmanism, Kalo remains in his heart of hearts a simple blacksmith. He converts the top storey of his house into a temporary smithy and works there secretly so that the urge in him to do his own work may be satisfied. It simply means that even after achieving name and fame in society, Kalo is not satisfied with his own life. Chandralekha also becomes bored with the game of make-believe that her father and she have been playing by befooling public. She becomes almost an automaton and goes about her duties in the temple mechanically without the least enthusiasm. Actually both father and daughter have lost their freedom in a lack through which they are forced to present themselves in a false way. They have lost their own identity which was the main thing in their personality. Lekha in particular becomes unhappy about the hypocritical part she has to play before other people. It seems as if both father and daughter are riding on a tiger's back, and

it becomes difficult, indeed, for them to dismount from the tiger's back. If they do so, they may be in danger of losing their lives. The situation of Lekha is very pathetic, she feels as if she is in a prison and finally she revolts because she wants to live like a human being. She wants to take her breath in free air. Above all she wants herself to be freed from the social bondage that has been, to a great extent, created by herself and her father. Though she achieves immense fame and wealth as the daughter of Mangal Adhikari, the reputed priest of the great temple, yet she is not free to live in her own way. To achieve this freedom, she is even ready to marry the aged Motichand: "For the remaining hours of the day Lekha's burden was lifted. Wearing the vermilion mark of marriage at the central part of hair, as a woman must, she would gain freedom, freedom to live in her own way." (218)

Apart from social freedom discussed by Bhabani Bhattacharya in *He Who Rides a Tiger* some other forms of freedom have also been discussed. The background of the novel is partly political and mainly social and economic. There are several casual references in the book to the Indian freedom struggle, especially the Quit India Movement, and there is a vivid description of the Indians sent to jail for participating in this Movement. Through Vishwanath, an interesting minor character in the novel, we learn how the prison cells are choked with men raising 'Quit India' slogan. These freedom fighters are treated very badly, contemptuously and heartlessly by the British and their Indian henchmen. They are looked down as sons of swine who are stupidly and fruitlessly attempting to defy and scare away the mighty British Empire by raising a quite comical tricolor flag. The Englishmen treat them quite cruelly and try their best to crush them. But in spite of the tyranny of the British, the Quit India Movement grows in strength every day. Men from all social fields join it enthusiastically. Even women belonging to all classes come out of their homes to join it, and soon it assumes a form of a mass struggle and spreads all over the nation covering rural as well as urban areas. This shakes the very foundations of the great British Empire and it makes the Indian lovers of freedom confident of victory in the near future. Processions of men and women with tall banners in their hands are commonly seen every day. Lathi charges and gunfire by the white uniformed horsemen on the freedom fighters become commonplace, and yet the spirit of agitation spreads like a fire over the whole country. Shaking off their centuries old sleep, Indians begin to feel the chains of slavery on their legs. No wonder, then, that "when they are fully awake and the strength surges in their limbs, they will snap the chains with a mighty effort." (170) It appears as whole of India is willing and joyfully ready to go to jail, and that this great movement will continue with unabated enthusiasm and courage:

Imprisoned in the great movement that shook the country....Imprisoned for no crime save the one of loving their country and asking a better way of life for it, a life free from hunger and indignity, a life built by hard self-denial which was a joy because each iron today was the framework for a secure, happier tomorrow. (167-168)

Another form of freedom portrayed by Bhattacharya in *He Who Rides a Tiger* is economic freedom. The novel focuses on one of the darkest chapters in the history of Bengal – famine: "A plague took the landscape in its grip, the plague of hunger, in the wake of war." (56) The famine situation was made worse by the landlord profiteers who hoarded grain in order to earn more and more money. The price of food went so high that even the common things went out of the reach of the people and they began to starve. The result was that people started moving towards cities with an expectation of getting food and work. Bhattacharya tells us of the hungry destitute going

to the city in a futile search for work and food, of famished men and women dying of hunger, of innocent girls lured to the city and forced into prostitution to save themselves from starvation. We are told, too, of the corpses of the destitute stripped of skin and their skeletons shipped to far off countries to satisfy the needs of the medical profession. Processions of political volunteers demanding food for the hungry are chased and beaten mercilessly by cruel and hard-hearted policemen. Bhattacharya gives a very pathetic description of hungry people. We hear the chorus of lamentation of men and women wailing together, “save us from slaughter” as they are forcibly evicted from the big city in military trucks. Giving a vivid picture of the pitiable situation of famine, Bhattacharya writes:

The plague washed up in fierce tides. Bengal was dying. Jharna was dying... People were flying from the hungry town. Many were going to the capital city for a living.... The people had exchanged their pots and pans, furniture and trinkets for fistfuls of food grains. Twenty cartloads of household utensils had moved out of towns. (57)

He Who Rides a Tiger shows also how hunger adversely affects men, not only physically and mentally, but also morally and spiritually. It rudely shakes many people's faith in God and religion. People feel that the rich have a different God and the poor have a different God, ironically the God of the rich is stronger than the God of the poor. Vishwanath, who comes in close contact with Kalo, is one such person. He cannot understand why his grandchild, Meenu, had to die of starvation. He asks Kalo, “Only tell me why my little grandchild has to die of hunger? Would you blame a three-year-old girl for not having faith?” (67)

Another type of freedom in *He Who Rides a Tiger* is the one which a prisoner pines for. Kalo, the dark-skinned protagonist of the novel, is imprisoned for stealing fruit in a desperate state of starvation. During his stay in the jail, even his movements and time are not his own as he is not allowed to do things according to his own desire. He is not free to do anything in his own way as he is directed to sleep, to wake up and to eat at particular times. Thus, he finds prison life very painful and craves for the liberty to live according to his own free will. However, the novelist points out that even in jail, this blacksmith has at least the freedom of thinking and dreaming: “Only his feelings and thoughts had been free, free to look forward to his movement of release, free to dream.” (144) But Kalo longs for complete independence, and imprisonment oppresses him so much that he becomes oblivious of the terrible hunger which has ruined him and his family completely; he is alienated from his profession, blood relations and native place. And Bhattacharya reveals his view that man loves freedom above everything by showing Kalo as a completely transformed man filled with vigour and joy at the time of his release from the prison: “Kalo feels queer. A new warmth, the power of life itself replaced the chill of dread he had been feeling. The deadening yoke was off his shoulder. He was liberated at last.” (45)

A freedom of a different kind that Bhattacharya portrays in *He Who Rides a Tiger* is the freedom from the established social order which labels men as superior or inferior by virtue of the accident of their birth. India during the time of Bhattacharya was a nation where there was a big gap between the rich and the poor. The rich have been the colonizers and the poor the colonized; the rich have been the exploiters and the poor the exploited. The poor were in such a pathetic situation that they were not able even to have two meals a day. People were discriminated on the basis of caste also. The novelist seems to raise his voice against the caste system which

discriminates between one man and another. The atrocities of the caste system are faced not only by Kalo in his novel, but by Biten and his sister Purnima also. Purnima was in love with Basav, a young man from a low caste. When her parents come to know about it, they get her married to an elderly widower. Purnima's unhappy life finally leads her to commit suicide. Biten also takes a risk in losing the girl he loves in sticking to his resolve never more to refer to his caste. Bhattacharya here shows good artistic judgment in avoiding explicit fulmination against the caste system and by exposing and ridiculing it in a dramatic manner. The juxtaposition of Biten's rejection of the Brahminhood, which is his birthright and Kalo's renunciation of the Brahminhood he has created for himself through fraud, shows the novelist's condemnation of the total system.

Bhattacharya has E.M. Forster's sharp eye for east-west dichotomies, R.K. Narayan's comic playfulness, and particularly Mulk Raj Anand's deep concern with the social, economic and political problems of India. *He Who Rides a Tiger* embodies a definite perspective related to India's freedom and its reconstruction on the basis of sound social, economic and political ideas and ideals. The desire for freedom in its various shades and manifestations finds in this novel an adequate artistic expression as it is shown to be born of individual inner struggles and of larger sociopolitical realities. In writing *He Who Rides a Tiger*, Bhattacharya seems to be more a social reformer than a novelist. His clear cut idea is that social freedom is above all types of freedom. In the absence of social freedom, economic freedom is useless. First we need social freedom, only then we can enjoy other forms of freedom. It is all important for the real progress of people because without it even political freedom is of little importance. The idea has well been elaborated through Bhattacharya's seminal work *He Who Rides a Tiger*.

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