
Abhorrent Caste In Indian Fiction With Special Reference To Bhabani Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides A Tiger*

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Abstract: *This study highlights the novel as a hope of Ambedkar's goal of annihilation of caste from Indian society, a backlash against the age-old caste system. It contextualizes caste hierarchy prevailing in India. It deals with the issues of marginalization of lower caste people, their lack of voice and their subjectivity as reflected in the novel.*

This study has investigated that caste was not only in past but in present scenario also is a definitive aspect of Indian society. It is depiction of the human feelings and aspirations of the lower caste people, their attempts to create a new order, the dangers and difficulties which confront them in their task. Through this study we will try to understand casticism in India with a different perspective. It reveals that casticism will no longer remain a silent sage of human miseries and sufferings but will become a vocal protest. The selection is entirely subjective, offered as personal recommendations.

Index Terms: *Caste, Annihilation, Contextualization, Marginalization.*

Caste has been an integral part of Indian social system since ancient times. Over the centuries caste has continued to regulate the Hindu society. According to Louis Dumont in "Homo Hierarchicus"- Indian society was structured on a firm notion of hierarchy that was based on the relationship between the pure and the impure. It is more of a religious than political or economic notion. He also points out the prevalence of traditional hierarchy which was based on "varnas" or colours, whereby people were divided into four categories namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras; and untouchables are outside the classification.

There are numerous stories of injustice towards Dalits appearing on pages of newspapers, TV screens, social media, which make us aware of the atrocities, the impunity of perpetrators and the backlash of the sufferers. Literature is the oldest form of human activity. It expresses human emotions. The writer is the child of his environment. No writer can remain aloof to the things happening around him and Indian writers writing in English have not been an exception to this. In nineteenth century several books in Bengali and some in English, were written dealing with caste related sufferings and injustices. Books like "Rajmohan's Wife", "Anandmath", "Kapalkundala", "Durgeshnandini", "The Lake of Palms", "Kamala and Kamini", came into criticizing the custom-ridden society and the evils of caste system. Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao in more recent times dealt with social problems in their works. Mulk Raj Anand like Dickens and H. G. Wells, tried to bring about social reform. His "Untouchable" is a land mark in social novels. Bhabani Bhattacharya who was awarded the Sahitya Academy Award in 1967 portrayed burning problems of India in, "So Many Hungers" and "He who Rides a Tiger" and his other novels. Kamala Markandya, Probin Jhabwala, B. Rajan also focussed attention on alienation, poverty, and loss of values in society. Khushwant Singh, Manohar Malgaonkar brought out the terror and the bloodshed of the partition. Writers like Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Chaman Lal, examine the socio-political conditions of India. Arundhati Roy and Githa Hariharan have enriched Indian English fiction by their commitment and vitality. This study is deeply concerned with the suffering and pain of downtrodden. Caste is present here as one of the factors inspecting human relations and attitudes.

"An artist is a Dionysian ear where resound all the underground rumblings of the period, a super-sensitive seismograph which records the most secret movements stirring the world which surrounds him".(1) Like

Rolland Bhabani Bhattacharya also believes in the social character and significance of art and literature. He once remarked, “I hold that a novel must 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.”(2)

It is therefore not surprising that high idealism permeates all Bhabani Bhattacharya’s works. They record the aspirations and hates of the people heroically involved in the struggle between the old and the new and are inspired by the vision of a just social order. Very few Indian writers are his equal in the faithful depiction of the horrors characterizing a dying alien rule and the old mode of life. Very few have visited such lower depths of society and been so ruthless in tearing down the mask on avaricious hypocrites who fatten on the suffering of others. At the same time, very few writers are able, as he is, to portray with such power the real grandeur of the peasant and the downtrodden and their ability to survive and be the makers of a new future.

Bhattacharya is a novelist with a vision. His vision is of a new India. He has a message to give. In all of his novels (So Many Hungers, 1947; Shadow From Ladakh, 1966; He who rides a tiger, 1954; Music for Mohini, 1952; Goddess Named Gold, 1960), he is mainly concerned with the future of India, its social, religious, economic and political regeneration so that it may make rapid progress and come to take pride of place in the comity of world’s nations. He does not dwell on personal relation; the communion among characters exists only on socio-political level. Problems are conceptualized and characters are symbolized and so the novels become allegories of the revolutionary sensibility needed for the building up of new forms of life. The novels are built on themes related to external events- the independence of India, the Bengal famine, the Chinese assertion. Characters in the novels always stand for values external to them and interaction among characters is usually carried out in the solid world of day to day happenings.

In the light of the above observation we will now take a closer look to one of his masterpiece He Who Rides a Tiger. In it Kalo is a dark skinned blacksmith in a small town Jharna. He is efficient and commands respects of others. His wife had died in childbirth and the child, a daughter, is given the name Chandra Lekha, who with growing years shows unusual intelligence and good looks. She is sent to a local convent where her presence is frowned upon by the girls belonging to the higher castes. Kalo is criticized for his presumptuousness both by the high caste people and the people at his level. With Chandra Lekha’s success at school, Kalo is filled with pride and joy. He is conscious of his own mental backwardness and tries to improve himself by reading his daughter’s books at night when she is asleep. When she is in final year, she takes part in the State Essay competition and wins for herself the coveted gold medal. Kalo looks at the medal fondly every day with great pride. We are told that both are conscious of their low caste but the girl’s attainments. Food grains become scarce and unemployment becomes acute. Weavers and other tradesmen sell their implements for a pittance and leave the town. Kalo doesn’t find enough work and his hammer and blowpipe which he affectionately calls thunder bolt and swollen cheek, become idle. Petty traders from the cities take advantage of the situation and buy implements and household articles at bargain prices. Agents from brothels roam from place to place trying to ensnare good-looking and impoverished girls. One such agent talks to Lekha when she is alone in house in insinuating language. The protagonist of the novel decides to go to Calcutta. He has no money even to buy a railway ticket. He is ravenously hungry so is tempted to steal some bananas from a carriage, but is pounced upon by a policeman and taken for his trial. He tries to justify his deed saying that he stole only to live and the magistrate asks harshly, “Why did you have to live?” (HWRT, p.31)

He is sentenced to imprisonment where he meets Bikash Mukherjee who transmits revolutionary fervour to Kalo, telling him that inhuman society deserves to hit back suggesting various ways of retaliation. On being released Kalo ekes out a miserable existence for some time by carrying the corpses of the destitute in the municipal trucks. Later on he works as a procurer for brothels which becomes a turning point of his life when he finds that his own daughter was brought there by foul means and was severely beaten to submit to degradation. The meanness and cruelty shown by the unscrupulous exploiters rouses his indignation, he now thinks of having revenge. He fakes a miracle by getting a deity installed, exploits the gullibility of the people,

making them worship a bogus image. Kalo wears a sacred thread like a Brahmin and becomes a Brahmin under the assumed name of Mangal Adhikari.

The protagonist of the novel suffered on account of the dictates of caste. His daughter is dear to him more than anything else and yet he hesitates to take her to the gate of her school. He is afraid someone would say “Look at Kamar’s daughter comes to school.”(HWRT, p.6) When she wins the gold medal he is unable to share his joy with anyone because who would be happy at the victory of a Kamar’s daughter. Holding the medal he muses: “What luck that he had given a befitting name to his daughter, the name that adored the silver face of the medal. But there was no one to whom he could show it.”(HWRT, p.14)

Uprooted from his village, deprived and beaten, convicted and imprisoned for lifting a banana, and above all seeing with his own eye the injustice of starving men and women dying like flies in the streets of the big city full of riches, he began to question. He asks: “would the hundred thousand dead hover in unseen shapes over the great city eternally? Was heaven meant for the rich alone?”(HWRT, p.52) The horror of the city, the injustice that he faced himself and that he saw around him made him change his settled beliefs: “Kalo had not only to deny but to eradicate the values by which he has been bred. He had to cut his social top root and give up his inheritance.” (HWRT, p.71)

Turning his past values upside down he decides to seek his revenge upon those who live by those values. He will now forget that “a Brahmin is born.” He will become a Brahmin himself. Kalo has to re-emerge as a Brahmin, a holy man to whom God Shiva had vouched in a dream where and when He would emerge out of earth. Kalo then wears a sacred thread, a mark of Brahmin. Bhattacharya writes: “With that gesture he had thrown off the heavy yoke of his past and flouted three thousand years of his yesterdays. Putting on the sacred he had made himself rootless.” (HWRT, p.82)

Kalo then reincarnates himself as Mangal Adhikari. In his new avatar he becomes the master of the temple, placing the hand of benediction on the bowed heads of pious folks. Highly pleased, he exulted in his adroitly contrived feat, Kalo tells his daughter: “The turn of the wheel favours us beyond all reckonings! What strange things have come to pass! They are paying. They touch our low caste feet. They pray to God who is no God. What expiation could ever cleanse their souls? They are polluted, fallen. They are doomed for many lives to come--- Yesterday a man came and touched my feet humbly. Lekha, he was no other than the Magistrate who sent me to prison, the Magistrate who asked, ‘Why do you have to live? Why does your daughter have to live?’” (HWRT, pp.93-94)

Kalo is tormented by his falsehood. The facade of glory-his temple-seemed to grow and springs of misery welled up in him. Yet a lie told many times begin to appear truth. Kalo has his moments of Brahmin hood. He is angry that a low caste person had touched his feet. It is curious that Kalo who exploits the belief of others to bring about their doom, tries to ape their behaviour. But these are the passing moods. At heart he retains his integrity. Though he plays the Brahmin role with the confidence of a twice born, he does give people many clues to suspect his origin. He sympathises with Vishwanath, a homeless uprooted villager, of his own caste. He employs him, allows him to distribute consecrated milk, sets up a smithy in his own house, provides shelter to a destitute boy and names him Obhijeet. In this of make believe world of shams the worst sufferer is Lekha who fears for the integrity of her father. Her decision to be the fifth wife of the merchant scandalizes Kalo and who then realizes the gravity of Lekha’s intolerable state of mind. Her decision to accept the proposal of marriage shatters his illusions. He decides to kill the tiger with the knife of truth and complete the process of revenge. In his final revelation he stuns everyone saying: “I have made you commit sacrilege and blacken your faces. There is no expiation for you- A downtrodden Kamar has been in charge of your inmost souls, souls, corrupt with caste and caste.” (HWRT, p.227)

The likely onslaught of the caste Hindus is stopped by the congregated might of the Dalits. Their crescendo of wrath gathers more and more power as they feel Kalo has avenged the wrongs done to them by outwitting the so called superior ones. “The scum of the earth has hit back where it hurts.”(HWRT, p.243) They cheer Kalo and his brave decision saying, “Your story will be a legend of freedom, a legend to inspire and awaken.”(HWRT, p.245) Here the accent shifts from mute, passive suffering to protest and rebellion, “Food for all,” “Work for all,” “Jail for the rich profiteers.” (HWRT, pp.160-161)

The question posed by the magistrate, “Why do you have to live?” vibrates and echoes in our ears. We become aware of the ghastly contrast between affluence and poverty, power and helplessness, essential goodness and hypocrisy. The protest is not only against the political and economic system but against the social set-up. Prof. Asnani writes: “Kalo tricked by the society into becoming a thief, a convict and an immoral trafficker, foists a big fraud on it and thus proves how hollow our religion and its upholders are.”(3)

The novel also highlights the unjustness of a system that allows such famines to happen and the greed that comes into play at such times. Against the background of famine and hunger another story unfolds- the story of caste, its limitations and taboos. Kalo the victim of his tradition and history yet has sufficient strength in him to come out of the web of lies that he himself has woven. Essentially the novel is about Kalo, his retrieving of his own truth of nature. Caste is a complication- an evil spectrum that numbs human sense of justice, love and sympathy. The bitterest satire on religious on religious hollowness and social corruption is presented in the scenes where people with selfish motives offer their worship at the temple. Motichand prays for favour so that he may secure another wife and make more money. Another devotee prays for rise of the price of gold. We are shown a mockery of true religion as witnessed in the temple. Kalo’s temple is flush with money, from offerings, while famished people die like flies without any help coming their way. This irony is heavily underlined by the author and the novel confirms to Bhabani Bhattacharya’s conception of art: “Art must teach but unobtrusively by its vivid interpretation of life. Art must preach, but only by virtue of its being a vehicle, a vehicle of truth. If that is propaganda, there is no need to eschew the word.”(4)

Here famine has been represented as a whirlpool into which the lives of the unfortunate victims have been sucked. Human society in this novel revolves on the two hinges of caste and cash. The protagonist rebels against the inhuman values and ultimately is able to hold his own in the fight. The novel thus becomes an epitome of struggle of man against unjust society. Kalo’s disguise is the outcome of necessity. He wants to rehabilitate himself but the malevolent society rejects his efforts. Circumstances make him a cheat against man and God, leading him to defiance of his earlier held values. Kalo would not have acted so decisively, had his daughter not fallen victim to circumstances. His revenge is taken but his conscience is not blinded. Though he had his revenge, there was redemption neither of society, nor the reshaping of the daughter’s life. But a necessary step has been taken.

Caste is always present in the novel, hovering over like poisoned air adding to misery and suffering. The protest against caste system which is made forcefully gains a new dimension because the person who makes Kalo aware of the inequity is himself a Brahmin-Bitten. Kalo gives the Brahmin name Obhijeet to the destitute boy whom he brings up in his house. The arrogance of the higher caste people is unfailingly portrayed in the novel. They don’t allow themselves to be touched by persons of low caste. Certain names like Chandra Lekha and Obhijeet are supposedly not for low castes. The ritual of milk bath of the deity is expected to expiate sins and gain merit for the devotee. The ritual is supposed to lose its effect if the milk is given to children who are presumably of low castes.

The novel suggests that economic circumstances can and do override caste imperatives. Hunger is a great leveller. It makes no discrimination between man and man, between high and low caste. Kalo says to Motichand that like a hungry untouchable boy, even a hungry Brahmin boy would pick from garbage cans. Likewise, the hungry demonstrators do not think of caste even for a moment and live and work together. Millions of hungry people eat together at charity kitchens oblivious of their caste and creed, thus completely rejecting caste-ridden society. But caste in India tends to reassert itself once the crisis is over.

The novel examines caste and class barriers in society. Kalo suffers a lot because of his low caste. His daughter stands first in the class and is awarded a medal but nobody applauds her since she belongs to a low caste. Later when Kalo exposes the falsehood of caste barriers by pretending to be a Brahmin and playing the role of a Brahmin, his joy is great as he realizes that no thunderbolt crashes on his head for this. He says to Biten: “Look friend; see how easy it is to break the ageless barrier held to be sacred.”(HWRT, p.159)

He easily befools all those who are full of caste pride. He upsets the old social order by investing himself with Brahmin hood and rising to the top. What real difference did it make either to the order to which he truly belonged or to the caste to which he had attached himself? He says to the high caste persons and the rich

devotees gathered for the ceremony in the temple: “Do not dare judge me or call me a swindler. I have been as Brahminic as any of you.” (HWRT, p.240)

Caste is irrevocably present in all the tangles in the novel. Lekha explaining to her father her decision to marry Motichand, says to him, “I shall at last be with you in your battle. The proud men (Motichand) will have a casteless spouse.” (HWRT, p.198) Biten shakes off his Brahmin hood as he finds it worthless. The novel demonstrates that a man’s caste is too much with him. Installed as a Brahmin Kalo keeps his distance from others as suits a Brahmin, yet his heart is with his own people. His roots remain deep in the soil of his own caste. The book also focuses on the unbridgeable gulf between an entirely different kind of division, that of classes, division between the rich and the poor, the high and the low. Kalo reflects on the tragic lives of the poor. “Were they doomed to haunt the earth forever as spectres? No Brahmin priest spoke the timeless words from the Veda or applied the holy fire to the fleshless faces on the funeral pyres. Would the hundred thousand dead hover in unseen shapes over the great city eternally? Was heaven meant for the rich alone?” (HWRT, p.52)

The caste system indeed is the worst evil that has been crushing Indian society for ages. Kalo tells Lekha that the low-caste -the untouchables are helpless creatures who cannot think of going to the police. Kalo feels ill because nobody applauds the merit of his daughter. If she had been the daughter of a magistrate, the whole town would have rejoiced and feted her. It had been Jharna’s (his village) sneaking shame, not glory that the medal was won for them by a Kamar’s daughter. This incident sows the seeds of hatred in Kalo against higher caste people.

Kalo’s hatred for the caste system is intensified by Biten’s graphic account of the tragic end to the life of his sister, Purnima. Her parents turn her enemies when she wishes to marry a young man of a different caste whom she loves. Biten fails to understand why parents make their child’s life miserable simply because of their belief in the caste system Was it an evil too strong for man to remove? He observes, “What evil power was it that in a minute, turned loving parents into brutes? How could the force of belief be so blind and devastating? For they who could have given all they had to make their daughter happy condemned her to a living death. How was such perversion possible?” (HWRT, p.167) The tragedy in the life of his sister has made Biten hate and defy all social customs and Brahmanism. He takes the human mask off and exposes the real faces of the rich and respected man. It is a grim satire on Hindu orthodoxy. The story of Biten and his sister Purnima, stated incidentally to bring out the tyranny of caste. In today’s context we know it by the name “owner killing.”

Bhattacharya shows great artistic judgement in avoiding explicit culminations against the caste system. He exposes and ridicules this caste system in a very dramatic manner. The juxtaposition of Biten’s rejection of the Brahmin hood, which is his birth right and Kalo’s renunciation of the Brahmin hood he has created for himself through fraud, makes the novelist’s condemnation of the total system.

Caste barriers appear strong but Kalo proves they can be broken, though he has to sacrifice power, position and wealth for doing so. The uneducated Kalo then can see that a religion without humanity was empty within: “While men died of hunger, wealth grew, while kindness dried up, religion was more in demand. It was only the outward form of religion, the shell of ritual, empty within.” (HWRT, p.117)

He Who Rides a Tiger, thus, is essentially the story of a crusade to challenge the very organization of society. Set in the early 1940s when the British policy of reservation of seats in the legislature for different communal and social groups was in the air, the novel records the inter-class struggle within the Hindu community. It records the nascent consciousness among the poor in general and the untouchables in particular, the result of a number of political developments like MacDonal’s Communal Award of 1932 and the rise of the anti-untouchability league, Gandhi’s inspiring articles against the pernicious practice of untouchability and his going on a 12,500 mile tour in 1933-34 to spread awareness against the practice of untouchability. There was anti caste stirring in the country and the novel reflects the stirring thoughts of the time. In the novel, Kalo’s fight is against discriminatory social values. Personal misery and humiliation act as a catalyst. He exposes the illogicality and heartlessness implicit in the rigid social stratification along caste lines. Caste is always there as an evil fact, a negative presence which complicated the issues and frustrated the will. The novel does not

explicitly state it but suggests, nonetheless, that the dying hordes, the groups of men wandering in the city were all of low castes-the castes of working men who were then without work. Since religion in case of Hinduism gives its nod to caste Kalo's anger was directed at religion. By desecrating its sanctified holy idols he sought his revenge. At one point in the novel Bhattacharya comments, "Faith could have its root in helplessness." (HWRT, p.224) It is the helplessness of people that makes them flock to the priest. Kalo and Lekha awaken to the realization that what had been ordained and prescribed by religion could be flouted without any dire consequences following. The power of religion rests on the faith of its adherents. Once the faith dries up as happened in case of Biten, Kalo and even Lekha one is freed from constraints and could turn to much good or evil. Bhattacharya has used religion as an instrument of social revenge. Kalo is transformed from a victim to a rebel who, full of guile, joins his tormenters, to defeat them in their own game. Hindus view life as a part of a continuum. They seek answers of their present problems in past or future. It breeds attitudes which make one reconciled to status quo. When Kalo confesses and reveals the full extent of what he had done, it is also called God's doing which forced Kalo to make his confession. Their logic is that punishment to Kalo will also come from God. Such paralyzing faith in God is effectively rebutted by Bhattacharya. His Kalo and Lekha are without any apprehension or fear. On the contrary what they feel is very different from dread and fear.

Bhattacharya's novel has been applauded as a successful novel of social realism:

"*He Who Rides a Tiger* is one of the most significant novels written by Indians in the English language and among the apt illustration of social realism." (5) Bhattacharya presents the socio-economic scenario of his time and is incensed by the inhuman callousness that allows people to let others die because they have nothing to eat and nowhere to live. All religion and all systems of hierarchy are implicated in this. His preoccupation is with evil lurking within human organizations that impedes man's self fulfilment. According to him, a creative writer must record the life around him truthfully and artistically, "He reveals it, unlike the philosopher in no cold statements of dogma but only in terms of life, rendered through the devices of dramatization" (6)

In the novel *He Who Rides a Tiger* the hope shines through the dark. It is the hope that social order will change and put an end to exploitation. Despite the dehumanizing effect of hunger and other vicissitudes, the common man is never shown by Bhattacharya as bereft of his essential goodness: "I am proud of my people - - -

Centuries of hardship and strain have not destroyed their faith in human values" (So Many Hungers, p.22)

And:

"We are fighting ignorance and superstitious, aren't we? We are flighty the false clay foot Gods. They have had their day and now they must quit" (Music for Mohini, p.203)

And:

"Society is sick with taboos and inhibitions of its own making; the iniquities of caste of untouchability—it was all an outgrowth of centuries of decadence" (Music for Mohini, p.80)

Marline Fisher aptly sums up the havoc caused by caste; "The sanctimoniousness of caste, the way of Brahmins, and the smug hypocrisy of the rich-these are some of the aspects that Bhattacharya etches biting and with an abundance of understanding. The human cruelty and emotional disfigurement that result from the rigidities of a time honoured system of caste add to the already intolerable burdens of famine and war" (7)

Krishna Rao sees in the rebellion against the inequities of caste the possibility of a new awakening in society; "It makes a frontal attack on the social reality of caste and class system and its dehumanizing effect on the individual- - - . It is at once a pointer and a reminder; a pointer to the fact of man's all too imperfect system of social organisation based on fear, and a reminder of the redemptive possibilities of truth and courage." (8)

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