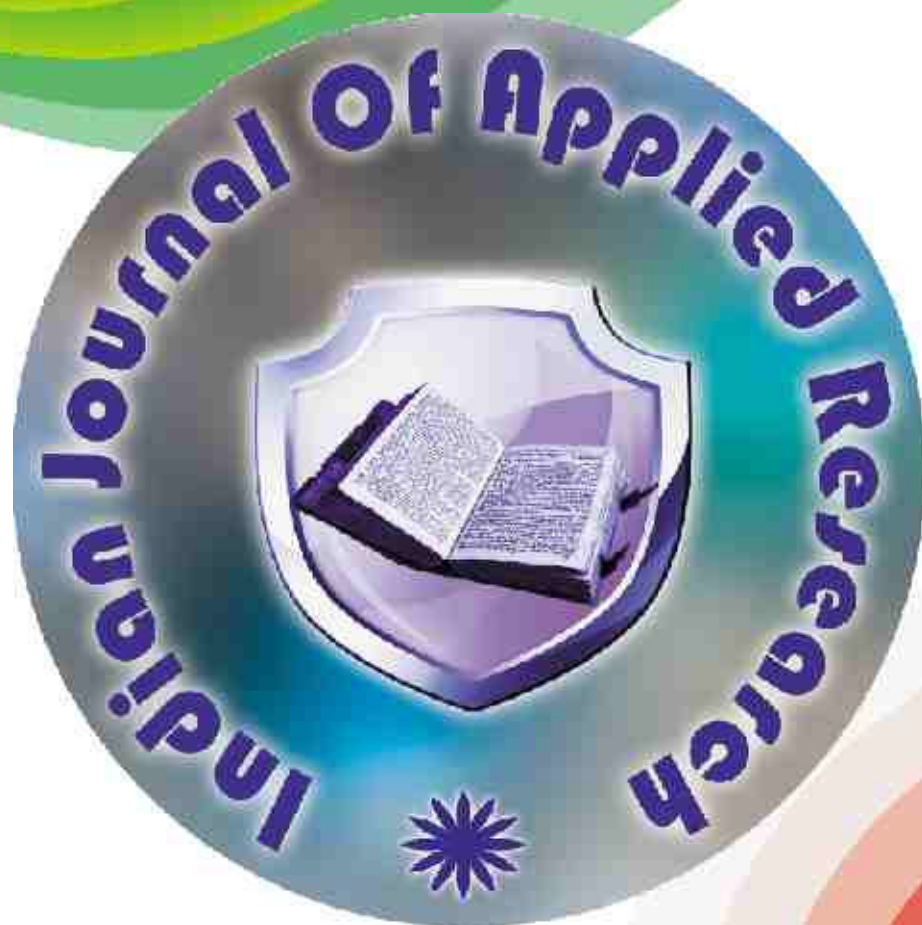


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Research Paper

Literature



Facets of Hunger in Bhabani Bhattacharya's So Many Hungers and Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve

* Dr. Paramleen Kaur Syali ** Ruchee Aggarwal

* English Lecturer In Govt College, Chandigarh

** English Lecturer In Govt College, Chandigarh

ABSTRACT

Hunger and poverty, tragic waste and despair are the inhuman products of economic life. Hunger and poverty has been a favourite theme with a number of Indo-Anglian writers of the early 20th century. Bhabani Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandaya have dealt quite forcefully with the theme of hunger in their novels 'So Many Hungers' and 'Nectar in a Sieve,' respectively. The Bengal famine of 1943 was the background to Bhattacharya's first novel 'So Many Hungers'. It was published in 1947 and became a best-seller in various translations. So Many Hungers records a brilliant and accurate account of one of the most appalling disasters in our history that not only affected the socio-political and economic life but also entered into the personal life of the ordinary men and women. Kamala Markandaya, one of the finest and most distinguished Indian novelists in English of the postcolonial era also deals with this theme with all its facets. In her first masterpiece Nectar in a Sieve, she presents this theme in the context of rural India. Through this theme Kamala Markandaya depicts the uncertain life of poor farmers, who are dependent on nature. Owing to the natural calamities and freaks of weather, they are forced to face miserable poverty, hunger and starvation. The article intends to discuss hunger in various facets and to record the troubles and tribulations of the suppressed and the oppressed.

Keywords : Hunger and Poverty, Literature

"For hunger is a curious thing: at first it is with you all the time, waking and sleeping and in your dreams, and your belly cries out insistently, and there is a gnawing and a pain as if your very vitals were being devoured, and you must stop it at any cost, and you buy a moment's respite even while you know and fear the sequel. Then the pain is no longer sharp but dull, and this too is with you always, so that you think of food many times a day and each time a terrible sickness assails you, and because you know this you try to avoid the thought, but you cannot, it is with you."

"Nectar in a Sieve" by Kamala Markandaya

One of the major features of early 20th century has been the interest expressed in the oppressed which was reflected in the literature of the period. In the 19th century, many religious and social reformers tried to give a new life to the debauched contemporary society. This philosophy of social change was shared by the litterateurs and fiction writers in almost all the Indian languages focused on the farmers, the down-trodden and the outcasts. Various writers started revealing the social evil in their poems, plays, stories and other writings and wrote stirring accounts of the ugliness and unhappiness of the lives of the downtrodden putting their focus on the farmers, the down-trodden and the outcasts. In their works the suppressed face injustice silently and even though dismayed with life, are apologetic about their existence during this time. As Gangadhar Gadgil observes, "The development of modern literature in Indian languages is directly associated with the social transformation that has been taking place in the country for a century". These portraits allow us to see the oppressed, the downtrodden as humans, not just "helpless victims" but men and women with their explicit uniqueness.

Writers are visionaries as well as realists. As creative writers they cannot but express their feelings, reactions and anxiety of the incidents that are taking place all around them. Portrayal of diseases, conflicts in society, social evils, tensions, hunger, starvation and the deterioration of values which cause hunger is the theme of Bhabani Bhattacharya So Many Hungers and Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve. So Many Hungers deals with the man made famine of 1943 which caused suffering and degradation where as Nectar in a Sieve, a powerful novel written in 1954 set in a South Indian rural village shows that starvation is caused by natural forces drought and excessive rain on one hand and industrialization on another. Dr. C. Paul Verghese rightly remarks that "Food is the primary requisite of human dignity; hunger debases and dehumanises man. That is why hunger is the theme of a large number of Indo-Anglian novels".

In both the novels the theme of hunger has been realistically portrayed and at the same time it shows the heroic conflict of central figures against all the odds of life. Both the novels record poverty and heart breaking survival of the poor families of India. K. B Vaid in his article The Modern Indian Novel views that the Indian novelists are chiefly concerned with the portrayal of poverty, hunger,.....innumerable dislocations and conflicts in a tradition ridden society under the impact of an incipient half hearted industrialization.

Bhattacharya in 'So Many Hungers' provides a comprehensive and realistic account of one of the most horrendous catastrophes in our history that not only affected the socio-political and economic life but also entered into the private life of the average men and women.

While narrating the ghastly effects of Bengal Famine of 1943, he also projects the sincerity, integrity and dignity of spirit. The story talks about the attitudes of mind the psychological responses of human beings who are multifariously concerned in the terrible conditions produced by the famine. Some are its sufferers, some its profiteers. The novelist makes no attempt to condemn a class, group or nation for the famine. The human beings of India are presented in the same normal variety which is found in other parts of the world. There is remarkable constancy and remarkable disloyalty; there is calmness and commotion of heart. The story is not only about so many hungry people but also about man's other yearnings. It not only describes the macabre scenes of famine but also delineates its physical and moral aspects in detail. L.N. Gupta states, "It was a terrible indictment of the British Raj for all their crimes which aggregated into the disastrous famine of Bengal in 1943.

So Many Hungers revolves around the Basu family, the peasant family, the girl Kajoli, her mother and her brother. Samarendra Basu thinks of organizing the concern Bengal Rice Limited and the dishonest Sir Lakshminath helps the company stretch its branches to every far off corner of the province. It is this man's brilliance that has multiplied the evil of corruption. Bhattacharya paints the shocking horror of it all with unforgiving precision and collective facts. The story has been effectively told and the tragic suffering of the real mass-starvation described in the novel moves the reader intensely.

Dr. Srinivasa Iyengar states, "So many Hungers is no doubt an impeachment of man's inhumanity to man, but it is also a dramatic study of a set of human beings caught in a unique and tragic predicament." The novel deals with the hunger for freedom, hunger for food, and hunger for power; hunger for sex, wealth, and for fame.

The novel records the most tragic calamity in Indian history .Bengal was in economic crisis, authority was apathetic and corruption spread like a virulent epidemic in the bureaucracy. Hospitals on the other hand allowed only the disease inflicted ones whereas those facing hunger were not allowed to enter the hospitals. "Streams of desperate men ventured out of their ancestral homes in search of food hanging on to the foot boards of railways trains, riding on the sun baked roof."

A passionate cry of protest against social injustice, hunger and degradation which were the common factors of countless villages in India before independence forms the theme of Kamala Markandaya's maiden novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. The novel mirrors her travels through impoverished villages focusing on the life of Rukmani, an Indian peasant woman who struggles in poverty throughout her life. It is a novel of tradition, solitude, desolation, and the courage of the human spirit, Markandaya presents a modern India that is cut off from its people .The novel is a powerful presentation of persistence in the face of suffering. It is a woeful tale of the trials and tribulations of a peasant couple. Kamala Markandaya makes readers realize the true meaning of hunger and starvation. She describes hunger with reference to starving people, who are sometimes willing to do anything in order to feed themselves. People's approach towards the new economic opportunities is treated by the cruelty of the

natural environment on which they depend. She deals with this theme in all its aspects. In all of Kamala Markandaya's works, a common theme of social distinctions and the differences between people living in poverty and wealth, as well as the difficulties each class undergoes is rampant. Markandaya thinks ahead of environmental and societal problem.

A heart wrenching tale that depicts the hardships of a woman's life in rural India, *Nectar in a Sieve*, portrays the life of a girl, Rukmani, and all that she undergoes growing up in a changing India. Rukmani becomes a victim of this monster of Hunger and Degradation. Kamala Markandaya shows how the gruesome form of Nature's hostility and fast industrialization led her and her family to sufferings. Through this theme Kamala Markandaya delineates the uncertain life of poor farmers, who have deep faith in nature. Owing to the natural calamities and weather conditions; they are forced to face miserable poverty, hunger and starvation. Many a times they are forced to sell their belongings in order to fulfill their essential wants and to pay the rent.

Rukmani marries at the tender age of thirteen to a man she has never met before and moves far from her family to the country. There she gives birth to several children whom she and her husband struggle to feed when drought strikes and numerous crop cycles are destroyed. Rukmani witnesses the blow that post-colonial influences have on India when a tannery is constructed in their village and changes their life terribly. Rukmani watches her children struggle to live on what little food they have and her newborn baby ultimately dies of starvation. It is apparent how nature attacks the villagers first in a furious form of heavy rains and then in the worst form of drought. It destroys everything, leaves nothing to eat and leads to ruin and despair. Her daughter is rejected by her husband for being unable to give birth to a child, turns to prostitution to help the family. Finally, Rukmani and her husband leave their village for the city, only to find more sufferings. It is a harsh and heart rending account of poverty, hunger and starvation but yet they try to preserve the love, compassion and vigour to face life.

The fiction of Bhabani Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandaya traces the aspirations and urges of the people participating in the struggle to remake the world. Though pain and suffering is involved in this struggle, the determination of the people to fight against all odds, in order to create a better world for themselves and their loved ones, is exemplary. This hopefulness of the common man, which Bhattacharya represents in his fiction, encourages the reader to look forward to a bright future and help eradicate the various evils of the society. In a country of mass apathy, such as ours, it is always good to read some novels which are not lost after they are put down but inspire the readers to find and put into action the needed reforms and ideals . Hunger failed to suffocate the basic values. This is the success of spirit over matter. Though suffering is there in the struggle but there is determination also to create a better world. This optimism of the common man encourages him to fight for a bright future and various evils of the society. Both the authors have tried to awaken the conscience of man through awareness so that the world can become a better place free from exploitation, oppression and injustice.

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