



VIDHYAYANA

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

ELEMENTS OF CASTEISM AND WICKED RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

IN BHABANI BHATTACHARYA'S *HE WHO RIDES A TIGER*

Mr. Nilesh K. Vaja

Research Scholar,

Dept. of English & CLS,

Saurashtra University, Rajkot.



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Dr. Firoz A Shaikh

Associate Professor & Head,

Dept. of English,

Bhakta Kavi Narsinh Mehta University, Junagadh.



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ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

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Abstract:

Bhabani Bhattacharya is a socially conscious author who has little faith in purposeless art. Keeping in mind the functional role of art, he rejects the purposeless pursuit of art and literature. His major preoccupation is with the future of India in context of its social, religious, economic and political regeneration. He is a committed writer and a social reformer who probed deep into the relevant problems and social issues that affected the contemporary Indian society. He has presented a faithful picture of exploitation, casteism, false religious practices, and superstitions in his novels. He is a keen observer and has an eye for the details of general behaviour of folks. He does not miss even a single opportunity of observing incidents and happenings around.

The novel *He Who Rides a tiger* (1954) is set in Jharna, a small town of Bengal. Bhattacharya in this novel reveals certain social issues prevalent in the then society. He exposes some social evils such as; exploitation of the poor by the rich, caste distinction, religious gullibility and false practices. Kalo's only daughter Chandralekha becomes the victim of caste discrimination and humiliation. She is also sexually exploited. Her father Kalo also witnesses casteism and exploitation and is also trapped in the web of caste-ridden society. The novelist has realistically describes how Kalo involves himself with the false religious practices in order to avenge the upper class and make them fool. Kalo successfully carries out the plan of religious falsehood from his co prisoner Biten and feels liberation in the end. He makes religion his shield to protect himself against the evil of casteism and takes his revenge against the caste-ridden society.

Key Words: exploitation, casteism, false religious practices, social discrimination.



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Elements of Casteism and Exploitation:

Bhattacharya has faithfully depicted various incidents of casteism and exploitation in *He Who Rides a Tiger*. The novel is an attack on both who profited by people's misery during the famine and those who exploited them as caste tyrants. The novelist shows how the lower caste people have to suffer due to caste discrimination.

The novel opens with the depiction of the happy life of Kalo, a dark-skinned, self-competent, and ambitious blacksmith of Jharna town. His pretty wife dies while giving birth to a child. The baby daughter is named Chandralekha. The baby grows up into a girl by displaying intelligence and inheriting her mother's good looks. She loves her father more than anything else. He sends her to local English convent school despite the opposition of his fellow caste men. In school she passes through caste discrimination time and again. In school she has to suffer the social protest and some students tease her because of her lower caste status in the society. She is a good looking girl and displays unusual intelligence. At school her presence is frowned upon by the girls belonging to the higher castes and also by the people of her own caste out of jealousy. It was believed that education was the birth right of high-caste people and the lower-caste women were not allowed to step out of the old boundaries made by high-caste privileged people. Lekha is an exception in this case. She is very intelligent and clever girl. In the final year at school she participates in state level essay writing competition. Her essay is adjudged as the best one so she receives the prize in the form of a gold medal, Ashoke Memorial Medal. But due to the age old beliefs of disrespecting lower-caste, the people of the town show no significance to her distinguished achievement as people have caste-based prejudices. Kalo believes that this medal is a symbol of the bright future of his daughter. Later on, because of starvation and exploitation by the rich, Lekha has to sell off her gold medal for some handful of food grains.

Kalo, a simple blacksmith leaves the town to earn some livelihood leaving his daughter at home. The agents from Brothel roam place to place so as to trap good looking and impoverish girls. One such agent talks to Chandra Lekha when she was alone in the house in an insulting language and for the time being induces her to sell a pair of gold bangles. Thus, the predicament of Kalo and Lekha is of poverty, hunger and exploitation. The circumstances compel him to leave his daughter with a heavy heart. While traveling on the foot board of a train, he is tempted to steal bananas from a carriage when he is extremely hungry. He is caught red handed and is presented in the court where judge asks him why he stole bananas. Kalo expresses his extreme hunger and his desire for living. The magistrate humiliates him saying "why did you have to live?" the incident suggests that lower caste people have no value. They have to suffer and thus Kalo is imprisoned for three months.



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The only place for young girls of low-caste was a brothel. Chandralekha does not go there willingly. She carries on with difficulty even though she does not get any letter from her father for a long time. She is deceived by a woman and taken to a brothel in the city. Coincidentally, the father and daughter are united there. Kalo saves his daughter by running away from there. He is full of hatred for the strange social system, the oppression by the rich and high caste people and is desperate to take revenge on them. He succeeds in doing so. It is in doing so that the father and daughter expose the falsehood of the caste barriers.

Biten experiences the evil of caste system in a different manner. Biten's sister Purnima becomes the victim of rigid caste system. In order to avoid social disgrace by marrying their daughter to a young boy of the lower caste, the parents marry her to a widower who has not only children but also grand children. The marriage ends with the suicide of Purnima. Biten calls it a murder committed by the evil caste system. But he also realizes that the root cause of the tragedy is poverty and exploitation. Biten protests by discerning his caste. He fails to understand why parents make their child's life miserable simply because of their belief in the evil caste system. 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 160)

Biten cannot understand the parental love suddenly turned into cruelty only because of the caste. He throws his sacred thread and wipe out his identity of twice-born. He does not expose his name Bikas Mukharjee that indicates his Brahmin caste. B-10 was the number given in the jail by the police. After his release he assumes the name Biten. He discards his Brahmin caste when he sees the contradiction of values. The loving parents can change, they can mercilessly throw their own daughter in the well of death – it is shocking to Biten. He has changed after his sister's suicide. He abandons his home and never indicates his caste. There is a fear to lose his beloved Chandra Lekha. When asked by Kalo, he tells “ I belong to convict caste.”

The treatment given to Obhijit by the *pujari*'s wife is the best example of the caste role. A curious small boy, Obhijit entered *pujari*'s kitchen. The priest woman was cooking on the oven. She scolded the little boy,

Casteless waif. Boy from gutters! Dare you set eyes on a Brahmins kitchen?
You will pollute the food with your breath. Then I shall have to give it to the



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dogs. (HWRT 202)

There was no proof that the child was an untouchable. He was considered a lower-caste boy by his appearance. The master of the temple, Kalo had adopted him as his son. That was not enough to accept him as a Brahmin. He was treated as an untouchable. The casteless waif stepped inside the kitchen and ruined its sanctity. The *pujari*'s wife wanted to purify her kitchen with cow-dung. She wanted to throw away the food, break the earthen-ware pots and pans. But it would be reported to Mangal Adhikari and *pujari* might lose his job. The priest woman called Obhijit the 'waif' who had eaten crumbs from the gutters. It was plain to any seeing eye that he was no better than a peasant. Motichand was against Kalo to adopt the child as a son. He said to Kalo,

You picked him up from the streets. He was often seen eating from garbage cans. He may be a chamar or some other kind of Untouchable.
(HWRT 206)

Kalos protest shows his protest against the system. He says that it is possible a hungry boy from any caste would eat from garbage cans. Thus, through the injustice to different characters Bhattacharya describes the social evil of caste distinction and exploitation.

Wicked Religious Practices:

Bhattacharya describes people's blind faith in religion in the novel. He has represented the contemporary society's false religious practices due to people's blind belief in it. Kalo is very much upset with social caste hierarchy due to his daughter's seduction, the low significance given to her extraordinary achievement and his imprisonment despite his pleading to magistrate. Because of these many reasons Kalo is in the mood of taking revenge against the caste-ridden society that is very indifferent to him and his daughter. In jail he meets Biten who is his fellow prisoner. He enlightens Kalo about the ground realities of the suffering of the downtrodden and about the hypocrisy of the privileged classes. He suggests him the way to avenge the caste-ridden society by false religious practices.

There is one road for us, for me, for you, for all of us... We are the scum of the earth. The boss people scorn us because they fear us. They hit us where it



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hurts badly-in the pit of the belly. We have got to hit back. (HWRT 37).

Kalo wears the sacred thread like a Brahmin. He establishes a stone-image of Shiva. Kalo metamorphoses himself into a Brahmin, Mangal Adhikari. People gather in large numbers by his miracle- a Shivaling emerging through the earth. All types of people gathered to see the miracle. One can easily form a true picture of life of the simple unsophisticated people who are victims of wicked religious practices and whose blind belief is exploited. The destitute are also among the audience. They hope that the deity will help them to remove their sorrow. The reputed citizens like Motichand and Sir Abalabandhu become associated with the temple management. The magistrate who had sentenced Kalo to hard-labour for stealing bananas now touches his feet and becomes a worshipper. Money and materials pour in from all sides to build the temple. A big temple is built in a short time. The black-marketers have given money because the worship is atonement for all sins committed and a guarantee of success in future undertakings. He is surrounded by sages and politicians, leaders of industry and trade. He is very happy because he was no longer a scum now he is an incarnation of Brahmin.

Men of wealth are indifferent to hungry children, but donate richly for the maintenance of the temple. They have neither time nor heart for prayer and penance hence allow willingly for ritual to gain merit. A man wearing a saffron loincloth with ashes on his body and a mark of red-paste trident of Shiva on his forehead is seen “ as a Yogi with great spiritual power.” (42) There are people who squander money for such a holy man. It Bhattacharya remarks depicting the strange condition;

While men died of hunger, wealth grew; and while kindness dried up, religion was more in demand; it was only the outward form of religion, the shell of ritual, empty within. (HWRT 113)

Thus, the novelist exposes the society that is dominated by caste and cash. Kalo takes the advantage of people’ s blind belief in religion and involves himself in a wicked practice of religion to befool the upper class. The novelist exposes the wicked practices of the hollow religion. In the novel religion seems to have lost its pristine glory and forgotten its ethical values. It is turned into a spiritual trade where people try to bury spiritual merit in exchange for merchandise. Kalo is the masterpiece who reveals people’ s false and fake practices and age old beliefs of religion. He himself is involved in malpractice of so-called religion as



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he wants to become a man belonging to higher-caste. He wants to earn some respect from society instead of degradation. The novelist remarks;

“ Nothing is as true as fearlessness. The more false you are to yourself and to others, the more true you become. The rest of the answer is evil is to be fought with its own knife.” (HWRT 239)

Bhattacharya attacks the selfish people who exploit the poor in the name of God. Through the ritual of Shiva Milk Bath he shows the hypocrisy of the rich people. The ritual is started to attract the customers to the temple business. Through such rituals the rich gain name and fame. The poor also succumb to such rituals out of their blind faith and belief. When Kalo realizes that a particular peasant wants to perform the ritual but he has no enough money for it, he shows readiness to offer milk to the God on behalf of poor destitute without money. The peasant touches the Brahmin's feet and says;

Don't deny me, sir. These pieces are all I have been able to save. It will buy not more than half a tumbler, but if I fail to pay, what I can, no merit is gained. (HWRT 130)

Bhattacharya suggests that whether it is the rich or the poor, everybody looks at the God as a customer. If you want to buy merits, you must pay for it. By making Abalabandhu the chairman of the board of the temple trustees Bhattacharya makes parody of the system. Abalabandhu means ' a friend of poor' . Everyone knows he had cornered great quantities of rice. “ As scarcity grew, masses of people died of hunger, his margin of profit increased. Masses of people had to die so he could profit” (HWRT 125). Most of the members of the board of trusty belong to the class of Abalabandhu. They invest their money in the temple business to gain more and more profit. Bhattacharya laughs at the insensible demands of the rich through their rituals when one of the devotees says “ Let the price of gold go high and yet higher...” (136). Another devotee says, “ Let gold go down and down more” (136). What can the gold do when two devotees



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ISSN 2454-8596

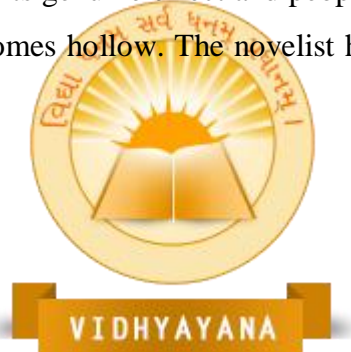
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make same kind of offerings with counter wishes?

Through the meeting that takes place over the issue of the milk of Shiva's bath, the novelist laughs at the funny ideas of the charity in the high class society. One says that he fed a thousand beggars, blind men and cripples at his father's funeral ceremony. Another donor says that his wife has organized a charity show for the for the governor's famine fund. But it is contradictory that they do not find charity in giving the milk of Shiva's bath to the hungry babies of the destitutes.

In brief, Bhattacharya graphically describes the elements of exploitation, hunger, caste discrimination in the novel. Many innocent lives are trapped and victimized in the rigid web of caste distinction and humiliation. Religion seems to have lost its genuine effect and people of the society follow it blindly. When mechanization begins in religion, it becomes hollow. The novelist has vividly describes religious trade and its wicked practices.



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