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**Hunger for Food and Freedom in So Many Hungers! by
Bhabani Bhattacharya**

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research paper is to analyse and evaluate Bhabani Bhattacharya's novel *So Many Hungers!*, paying particular attention to how the author portrays issues of poverty, hunger, and exploitation. Bhabani Bhattacharya is well-known for tackling contemporary human challenges while maintaining a humanistic perspective. Before it gained its independence, India went through a particularly wretched period in its history. Bhattacharya's ideas were profoundly influenced by recent historical happenings, in particular the Quit India Movement and the Bengal Famine of 1942–1943. As a direct result of this, Bhattacharya's writing is preoccupied with themes related to destitution and starvation. Bhabani Bhattacharya's first novel, titled "*So Many Hungers!*", was released into the world in October 1947, not long after India attained its freedom. Nevertheless, it includes the entirety of the wartime era, with all of the unpredictability, anguish, brutality, and frustration that it entails. Another purpose of this study is to provide a thematic analysis of the dynamics included within this story.

Keywords: Poverty, Hunger, Exploitation, India, Industrialization



Introduction:

The novel "So Many Hungers!" focuses on the struggle of Bengal's peasants during the 1943 famine that was caused by humans. In addition, Bengal is observed during the beginning stages of World War II. During the conflict, a few individuals involved in the illegal market began hoarding rice. Over than two million individuals lost their lives as a direct result of the famine that caused their malnutrition. The book explains how the destabilizing effects of war and famine can interact with one another. The work depicts a harrowing picture of the famine in Bengal, and it does so in a way that is sympathetic to the joy of monopolists and black marketeers who unlawfully hoarded grains, even if the depiction is somewhat exaggerated and romanticized.

Food and Freedom:

The fight with starvation evokes two very different pictures of man: one of him at his best, and one of him at his worst. A starving peasant and a dog are having a fight over the leftovers in the garbage can. Outside, he subdues the dog, which represents a lower animal instinct, so that he can satisfy the animal that resides inside of him—hunger. According to the author:

Destitute and dogs in those days often fought for possession of the rich city's ten thousand rubbish-heaps, in which scraps of rotting food lay buried. It was not every time that the destitute won, routing the dogs on the streets and the dog within themselves (SMH 178).



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The book recounts the story of a food shortage in Bengal that led to the deaths of two million people over the time period covered. In point of fact, Bhattacharya was effective in combining themes of a variety of different types of hunger into a framework in order to bolster faith in the goodness of human ideals. Rashmi Gour expresses herself as follows: “Hunger becomes a symbol depicting man in the midst of things, man set upon by things, man confused and facing that inner real self whose existence perhaps he never felt sure of. In this novel, the motif of hunger becomes the central metaphor” (Gaur 3).

In this work, Bhattacharya investigates the real reason for the famine that the people were suffering. He asserts that the famine was not brought on by natural causes but rather by incompetence or a lack of governance on the part of the government. In addition, the participants in the illegal market anticipated making a profit from this perilous circumstance. As a consequence of this, the famine in Bengal is more than just a natural disaster. In other words, the famine in Bengal may be traced back to the actions of humans. The first event of the story is the proclamation of war by the British government against Germany. There were a few instances in which India was coerced into joining the war. Because of this, there was a shortage of food, which ultimately led to the notorious famine in Bengal. This level of devastation caused by the famine in Bengal has never been seen before. The impoverished and peasantry of Bengal feel that God is to blame for the hunger that they are experiencing since God has forced it on them. Their current circumstance has compelled them to acknowledge and seek forgiveness for their past mistakes. However, the fact of the matter is that the individuals involved in illegal trading kept the food grains with the intention of selling them at a later time for a significant profit. This idea is articulated inside the pages of the book by the character of



Samarendra Basu. In spite of the fact that he is a lawyer by trade, he is a participant in the destructive cycle that is the root cause of the extensive human suffering depicted in the narrative.

He is so astute that when a beggar informally tells him that a grain of rice is favoured over money, he realises that the best way to amass money is by stockpiling rice and selling it to high price at the most opportune moment. He does this by keeping rice in his hoard and selling it at a high price when the time is right. Cheap Rice Limited is the name of his trading company, which he uses to persuade farmers to sell both their existing stock of rice and their unharvested crops. The rice is hidden away in secure locations by those who engage in illegal trading, which results in a diminished supply on the market and drives up the price of rice. Samarendra Basu's older kid, Rahoul, represents the polar opposite of his father in every way. He graduated from Cambridge with a Bachelor of Science degree and is a brilliant intellectual. He takes after his passionate nationalist grandfather, Devender Basu, and is prepared to fight to the death for the cause of Indian independence, regardless of the consequences. Rahoul, being an academic, correctly identifies the underlying problem that is causing the hunger, and he feels compassion for the people who are suffering. When there is a famine, Rahoul runs a free kitchen for the needy while his father continues to hoard rice in order to sell it on the underground market. This contrast highlights the fact that the father and son come from completely different worlds. Through Rahoul, the novelist expresses:

. . . the empty stomach was due to no blight of nature, no failure of crops Rahoul knew. It was man-made scarcity, for the harvest had been fair, and even if the



Army bought up big stocks, with rationing at the right level there could be food for all. But there was no rationing (SMH 105).

The famine causes a great deal of hardship for the folks living in the villages. They are without a means of earning a living and are without food to eat. Through the narrative of Kajoli and her family, Bhabani Bhattacharya illustrates the hopeless circumstances that people are living in today. According to him, the egotistical actions of businesspeople like Samarendra Basu and the apathetic stance taken by the government are to blame for the current predicament. The simultaneous desires to be free and to satisfy one's physical hunger are the driving force behind the narrative of *So Many Hungers*. Both the narrative of the young scientist Rahoul and his family and the story of the peasant girl Kajoli and her family are intertwined throughout the course of the novel to form its narrative structure. The narrative of Rahoul embodies the subject of desire for independence, and the story of Kajoli illustrates the idea of want for food. Both of these stories are intertwined throughout the novel. The two families do not reside close to one another. The family of Rahoul lives in Calcutta, and the family of Kajoli lives in a little village called Baroni. As G. S. Balarama Gupta points out:

So Many Hungers is woven around the happenings in the lives of Rahoul and Kajoli and their families and these are meant to highlight and vivify the crushing effects of the cataclysmic consequences of the horrendous famine stalking the length and breadth of the country [39].

Kajoli is an innocent girl of fourteen when the novel begins. She lives in a thatched house with her family. Her father and her elder brother Kanu are imprisoned for having taken



part in the Civil Disobedience Movement. She gets married to Kishore, a patriot. But she has a brief spell of happiness after the marriage. Devesh Basu, reverentially called 'Devata', is the bridge between the two families in this story.

When Rahoul comes to Baruni to meet his grandfather, he wonders at the affection and respect of innocent villagers. Devesh Basu takes him to Kajoli's house for meals. Kajoli respectfully removes Rahoul's shoes and washes his feet. As Rahoul is unaware of village manners, he feels reluctant. The character of Kajoli is highlighted through the following word of Devesh Basu when he says that "she has a legacy of manners as old as India" (SMH 28).

It just so happens that food is the most essential component of human dignity. Hunger's pangs have a brutalising effect on humans, which is an ironic twist of fate. The peasants' already precarious living conditions deteriorate with the famine that grips the region. They have been reduced to the status of ordinary beggars wandering the streets of the city in quest of sustenance. When Bhattacharya shows the suffering of the impoverished peasants, their migration to the city, as well as their extreme misery and degradation, he is at the height of his artistic prowess. The unfortunate folks who live in rural areas are forced to witness gruesome sights during their journey. They are forced to live long enough to see horrific scenes before they die. Bhattacharya writes:

A myriad vulture gazed down upon the countryside.... corpses lay by the road, huddling together. Picked to the bone; only the hair uneaten-fluffy baby's hair,



man's hair, the waist-long hair of women. A family group had sunk into sleep, and beyond the sleep were vultures (SMH 137)

Bhabani Bhattacharya paints a realistic image of the hunger that exists not just in the rural areas of Bengal but also in the city of Bengal itself. The naive peasant population mistakenly believes that the kind citizens of the city will provide food for the people living in the surrounding countryside. Their journey is described as:

Streams of desperate men ventured out of their ancestral homes in search of food hanging on the foot boards of railway trains, riding on the sun-baked roofs. The police threw up barrier. Then the men trekked the meadows and roads ten thousand village streams following city wards (SMH 111)

The city, in which these people migrate to, has been totally reliant on the countryside for the provision of food grains. This is an ironic situation. The only food products that the city has eaten come from the surrounding villages. In addition, the city is suffering from a lack of available food grains. A catastrophe has been brought upon the land as a result of the Second World War. The following description in the novel shows hunger in the big city: "He had died for lack of food, so it was reported, and the brief news flashed past almost unnoticed. A mere beggar. No one of them felt that he was a premonition, a symbolic shape of things to come. Other men sank down and died" (SMH 104-105).

The author creates a convincing picture of starvation by compiling information taken from several newspapers. The horrifying circumstances are, unfortunately, all too common in the metropolis. The mothers are unable to produce breast milk or other food for their children,



so they are forced to put an end to their lives. It was discovered that the malnourished children were sucking on their mothers' breasts after they had died. The mothers are forced to resort to selling their daughters into prostitution or even sending them to work in sweatshops in order to provide for their families' basic needs. Women who are pregnant do not live long enough to give birth to their children.

When it comes to the suffering of average Indian peasants, Bhattacharya is affected by their struggle. The alien Government's exploitative policies have reduced them to utter poverty. In the book, he paints a realistic image of Indian peasants as follows:

On his petty income the landed peasant can have just enough of his own rice to eat, no reserve for lean days. And the kisans – they must always be hungry save for a spell of two or three months in the year, when they earn meals and a wage for field work. The hundred million kisans of India must always be hungry. It is a gracious day to have the stomach full (SMH 22).

While presenting a broad picture of starvation in Bengal, Bhattacharya focuses on the struggle of Kajoli, Onu, and their mother. Kajoli, a pregnant and hungry girl, would go root hunting with her mother, boiling, salting, and eating the difficult-to-digest roots. It is characterised as follows:

Some roots tortured the stomach, and you learnt to discard them; but those that only made you uneasy, resting in your stomach like a stone load, had to be retained in your daily fare.... When you had to choose between the ache of



hunger and the ache of indigestion, you would often choose the latter, so in her heart the mother knew (SMH 119).

Kajoli's insatiable hunger causes her to consume the whole loaf of bread given to her by the soldier, without giving a second's thought to her mother or brother. She eats greedily, oblivious to the soldier's obscene actions, and the outcome is a terrible abortion. Millions of peasants, like Kajoli, are groaning in pain due to insatiable hunger.

Despite the availability of free kitchens that are sponsored by humanitarian organisations, thousands of individuals who are living in poverty still pass away every day. Because of their prolonged state of fasting, many people are unable to consume solid meals and require glucose in addition to a specific diet plan. As a direct consequence of this, they are doomed to die whenever they consume conventional food. The irony is that many individuals in Calcutta pass away as a result of their inability to contain their excitement when they see food in free kitchens. This sad story includes a tragic event in which an old man passed away while watching food being served in the free kitchen. These individuals consume the peels of vegetables as well as rotting vegetable matter. Some of them are so hungry that they would even devour rats that they catch. Even for the garbage cans, people have to engage in intense competition. They frequently engage in bloody brawls with one another, acting exactly like animals would. Onu, Kajoli's brother, tells his mother about the unpleasant situation: "Those garbage cans they are out food-bowls, Mother we pick out of them before the City's Scavenger folk come with their vans. Sometimes we pick at night – less competition. I saw two men fighting like animals over a dust-bin. It happened yesterday" (SMH 162).



The poor are more likely to suffer from dysentery because of their poor eating habits. The underprivileged are under the impression that it will help them. mostly due to the fact that they are going to be moved to a sick hospital, where they'll be cared for and nourished. Many people are left to their own fate because the sick-care facilities already have too many patients in need of treatment. During those days, those who were hurt by bombs are swiftly sent to clinics, but no one seemed to care about someone who is famished. Onu is thrilled to get a half rupee from a soldier, and he immediately prepares to buy some food that is not expensive. However, at a later time he had a change of heart and decides to buy flowers for the Goddess.

Vicious Chain of Poverty and Exploitation:

As a consequence of this, the anguish of hunger has been further communicated through the cries of a poor young child who wishes to be hurt in a Japanese airstrike. When people are hungry, they behave in an awful manner. Rather than being broken down into its component parts, the topic of hunger is discussed in its whole here. Not only does Bhabani Bhattacharya illustrate the terrible events that took place during the famine in Bengal, but she also explores the repercussions that it had both physically and morally. The author conducts an analysis of the whole impact of the famine, considering both the physiological and ethical repercussions. The writer represents the physical aspect of the hunger via Rahoul, as follows:

Death would claim two million, perhaps their millions more would escape by the skin of their teeth, but they would never be strong again, especially the children and the rickety babies who had so little success, who had been exposed much to sun and rain (SMH 181).



Bhabani Bhattacharya goes into great detail on the moral elements of the devastating famine. Hunger reduces the poor to their lowest level. The writer depicts the inner degeneration of human souls caused by a lack of sustenance. Onu, Kajoli's brother, has matured under Devata's idealistic influence. He is a kind and innocent little child who is not self-centered. He has a propensity of sharing even his most valuable items with his closest pals. Hunger, on the other hand, has degraded him.

In his book, Bhattacharya depicts a number of scenarios that illustrate the ethical repercussions that might result from a person's insatiable desire for food. When people are hungry, they tend to put their emotions on the back burner when they see food. When Kajoli is distracted by the bread that she receives from a soldier, she momentarily forgets about her mother and brother. After she has finished her meal, she is finally able to think about her mother and brother without feeling overwhelmed with sadness.

Yet another instance of degradation and corruption has surfaced as a direct result of hunger. A handful of rice is given to a destitute woman after she has toiled out all day to earn it. At dusk, when she makes a fire and gets ready to take rice with her three children, an opportunistic man sneaks up behind them, grabs the rice, and runs away. Another heartbreaking picture shows a mother sitting on the sidewalk while her young child stares at her pitifully while she eagerly eats from a bowl. The child is obviously hungry. As a realistic novelist, Bhattacharya illustrates every facet of the individuals who are suffering from starvation. On the one hand, they have a deterioration of their inner self, but on the other, they have a moral perfection. He has faith in the benevolence of humanity. Bhabani Bhattacharya illustrates,



without a shadow of a doubt, the inherent goodness and dignity of the people who are starving through a few of the individuals in the narrative. This work is a shining example of moral rectitude, steadfast adherence to values, self-sacrifice, and altruism.

Kajoli's elderly mother embodies compassion, selflessness, courage, and optimism. She once came upon a young woman who was burying her kid, despite the fact that the infant was still alive. When she learns that the young mother's breasts are devoid of milk for her dying infant, she provides her cow, Mangala, their sole possession. She not only offers her cow to save her and her baby's lives, but she also provides hope and encouragement. The mother says, "Take my cow. Sell her. Go to the yonder city and be saved" (SMH 123).

Exploitation of Peasants:

During the famine, the vast majority of mothers in rural areas sell their daughters to middlemen in the city. On the other hand, Kajoli's mother categorically rejects the proposition of becoming a brothel lady. In the face of adversity, her attitude emphasises the importance of maintaining one's virginity. She views the prospect of living off of unethical earnings as preferable to death.

Onu, Kajoli's younger brother, pulls long hours to provide for his family by picking figs from the canopy of a nearby tree. Kajoli is his sister. Although at first he only harvested figs for his own family, he ultimately became aware of the suffering of his travelling companions. In order to preserve the blood ties between himself and his companion, he makes the decision to collect a significant number of figs. He is ready to reveal the secret location of his buried



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wealth, which he is the only person who can access. After having to contend with a ravenous dog, a large man makes a self-sacrificing act by giving the jam tin to Onu to share with him. Again, there is an elderly villager who, despite his frailty, passes out his free meal card to Rahoul, saying: “Father, there is no end to your kindness of heart, I owe you, my life. I can give you no service in return. I can do no good to my brethren save this much. I can give my place to a needier person unfed at a kitchen. Do not deny me this one joy, I beg” (SMH 187).

Rahoul sees this artwork as a representation of optimism and redemption for the people of Bengal, who are suffering from starvation. On the other side, this relates to the ethical dimension of starvation. Despite the fact that the hunger for food and the desire for political autonomy take up the majority of this labour, there are other insatiable hunger as well, such as the hunger for money, sex, ethical ideals, social standing, titles, fortune and success, as well as respect for oneself. In addition to the Bengal famine of 1943, which was responsible for the deaths of millions of people, this text also discusses the Second World War in all of its brutality. The drive for supremacy displayed by certain prosperous nations during World War II is an example of this ambition. In order to secure India's independence from British rule, India is forced to participate in the war. Bhattacharya investigates the cause of terrified hunger. The Bengal Famine was caused by three factors: the devious motives of black-marketeers such as Abalabandu, Samarendra Basu, and those who stored rice for profit; the Second World War, which caused the harvest crop to be destroyed; and the indifference of the British Government due to the rapid spread of the National Movement. Bhabani Bhattacharya investigates the repercussions of the Bengal Famine from every conceivable angle in her book, titled *So Many Hungers*.



Conclusion:

One of the few Indian authors who has a strong understanding of both eastern and western traditions, Bhattacharya is a rare breed indeed. The west makes an appearance in his writings on occasion in the form of a character, an attitude, or a set of values. The interaction of the two different sets of values that coexist has always fascinated Bhattacharya and this has not changed. A few of the characters exhibit traits that are typical of western society, and they react to their encounters with elements of Indian culture in a variety of unique ways. The competition between the two ways of being is reflected on a number of different scales, including the human, the social, the political, and the cultural scales, as well as the industrial and agricultural scales. In this paper, Bhattacharya explores the possibility of finding common ground between two divergent points of view. The novel "*So Many Hungers!*" written by Bhattacharya describes the consequences of industrialization on people's attitudes and values, the decadence that crept in even in India's rural society, the inhumanity and exploitation performed by government police and greedy money-minded traders like Samarendra Basu, as well as the resultant changes in people's traditions and customs, as well as in the economy. The state of society is continually deteriorating across all spheres of human endeavour. These indicators of Westernization and Industrialization in society show an internal shift in Indian people's beliefs and viewpoints, showing that the west's influence is so strong that even a nobleman like Rahoul cannot avoid being influenced by it. In spite of the fact that Rahoul has spent a significant amount of time living in England, he maintains his connection to "The Soul of India." His connections with those around him are rock-solid. During the Bengal famine, he



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takes care of them by providing food and a place to stay. He takes up their cause and ultimately finds himself behind bars. As a result, it is plausible to assert that the industrialization of the Indian people was unable to completely eradicate their traditions.



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