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ABSTRACT

Bhabani Bhattacharya is one of the key writers of the 19th century. Being born in India, he delineates his love and concern for his country. His first published novel titled as *So Many Hungers* deal with the aspect of man and society, self and individual, nature and its resources. The novel stages the trajectory of Bengal famine and its aftermath. The storyline moves around the implicit details of socio-political affinity through the casts of characters and incidents. The prime object of this paper is to analyse *So Many Hungers* from the perspective of an ecocritical endeavour. This paper aims to demonstrate the varied skill and wisdom of man in reliving with the macrocosm of nature. Here nature acts as a force that triggers the potential of a person. Further, it acts as a source of inspiration for man specifically during and after the outbreak of famine. Though the famine appears to be a man-made one yet the consequences are the same. The local valour and aspiration are of utmost concern for Bhattacharya. The understanding of nature in such a crisis is a sort of a construct for him. He thus redefines it with a new vista of experience.

Keywords: ecocriticism, individual, society, experience, representation.

INTRODUCTION

Bhabani Bhattacharya is one of the most distinguished writers of the 20th century. His novels mainly deal with society, conflict, class hierarchy and individuality. Besides being a writer he is also a social reformer who insists on the importance of man-nature relationship. His novels talk about environment that plays a vital role in fostering value added life and standard of living. Man invariably shares a special bond with the environment. This paper attempts to re-read Bhattacharya's take on environment in the life of human beings. Literature plays a cognitive role in dealing with the binary between man and nature.

Ecocriticism has always been a key concept in literary studies. This paper attempts to foster the growth and effect of environment on the society and the self. It posits to explore the link between individual health and ecological sustainability. The paper particularly emphasizes on Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers* that deals with the aspect of crisis, society, individual alienation and many more. This novel redefines the mediated relationship between human beings and the natural world.

Happiness and health are the two major life force of every individual. It envisages the power to live a rejuvenating life with a healthy mind and body. This can only be achieved from the environment. Thus, environment plays a vital role in configuring the bond between man and nature. Moreover, the link between environment and literature has always been an intricate one.

Literature as a part of society captures and mirrors human expression and experience. It reflects and records human condition. The consequences of any disaster always seem to be the subject matter of the contemporary writers. Since time immemorial the writers have undergone and dealt with such kind of situation. This paper foregrounds the crisis that man passes through, during and after the outbreak of the famine. The paper concentrates on the element of alienation that the individual characters undergo. This particular novel deals with Bengal Famine during 1942-43. Bhattacharya dwells upon the helplessness of the characters, their hunger, impact of the famine on their physical and mental well-being and many more. It mainly attempts to narrate the reciprocal relationship between the psychological and physiological claim of man's happiness and satisfaction.

Literary writings articulate the unprecedented link between man and environment. This is what Ecocriticism talks about. The philosophy of this theory tries to revitalize a new approach to life. The paper insists on man's profound alienation and final recognition. It also revolves around man's successive stages of degeneration. The aftermath of any disaster appears to bring a change in the general principle of life. Thereby, they stand at the brink of abject abandonment. Human-nature binary posits man at the centre of the cosmos. So, we must now retrace the lost connection.

This paper tries to project the human persona of approaching the natural world. The captured human emotions and faithful expression exist as a symbol of awakened consciousness. The awareness of the co-existence of human and nature helps us to face all kinds of undeclared struggle. It also aims to establish the link between

sustenance of physical environment and survival of man. The novel chronicles the life and living of the people in the city Calcutta and the village Baruni. He shows a striking contrast in the two extremes of life, the rich and the poor. With the progression of the plot and growth of the characters the novel focuses on the affinity between human psychology and natural commodities. The novel stages categorisation of different set of characters. Some of the important characters are named as Devata, Samarendra Basu, Rahoul from the city and Kajoli, Kishore and Girish from the village. The novel categorises people from all clans namely the rich, the poor and the bureaucrats.

The definition propounded by Cheryl Glotfelty in his *The Ecocriticism Reader* reads as: Landmarks in Literary Ecology says: "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment" (xviii). Moreover, Lawrence Buell in his *The Environmental Imagination* says ecocriticism is "a commitment to environmentality from whatever critical vantage point" (11). These two definitions converge to the spirit of increasing consciousness about the environment among the human beings. It invites us to relook at our surroundings.

The intricate connection between man and nature refer to a spiritual bonding. Nature advocates a kind of a culture. It is always necessary to revive our concern towards nature in every possible ways. Nature acts as an immunity booster in times of crisis. Man-nature relationship has always been a symbiotic one. Ecocriticism alerts us to the presence of multiple time frames. It refers to human consciousness that seems to be unable to know the world around us. During this over organised and mechanised age, individual initiative and endeavour are of utmost priority. At this time human carelessness and irresponsibility must be taken care of.

Moreover, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* emphasizes on how to evoke consciousness among people. He comments: 'Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature- the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter'. Carson refers to Albert Schweitzer who writes: 'Man can hardly even recognize the evils of his own creation' (12). Here the novel celebrates the domain of ecology where it projects how nature gets preserved in its original form without any interference by anybody. This is how the aspect of ecocriticism gets featured here. It creates a kind of an awareness among mankind about the blend between human and non-human world. The interconnection between the living and the non-living appears to be the main agenda of ecocriticism. The novel is an excellent example of ecocritical text that deals with the problem of moral degradation of human beings, politics of survival and human psychology that cause a threat to the ecosystem. Thereby, it refers to the idea of man-made famine and hierarchy of caste. Here, nature represents preservation of life. The writer presents how the evils of power politics destroy the harmony of the people both from the city and from the village. Bhattacharya echoes the interdependence in the ecosystem through his cast of characters and progression of events. The natural landscape in the novel seems to act as a character in itself. This landscape consists of elements like plants, trees, birds, animals etc.

The human representation of the sensitivity and truth of the non-human world gets emphasized by Bhattacharya. The main basis of ecocriticism lies in earth centred approach. The analytical structure of the text revolves around the strong bond between man and nature. Michael P. Branch and Scott Slovic define ecocriticism as: "Ecocriticism is the term now widely used to describe scholarship that is concerned with the environmental implications of the literary texts" (*ISLE Reader*, xiv). Bhattacharya's text grounds the fact of the importance of sugarcane, beans, jackfruit, pumpkin so on and so forth. Before the outbreak of the famine, humans had hardly any time to stand and stare at the beauty and generosity of nature. Nature appears more graceful where man gets an opportunity to stand beneath the boughs and look at the enchanted nature to feel its grace. As Garrard writes in *Ecocriticism* that nature always appears to be culturally constructed and it 'really exists' (10). The existence of nature in the lives of human beings gets proper acknowledgement during the famine in *So Many Hungers*.

Balram S. Sorot writes in *The Novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya* that Bhattacharya 'touches almost all the aspects of the present day India' (16). His moral sense becomes more prominent with the way he deals with environment and the sustainable growth of a particular character and society. Ecology refers to the power of social surrounding in the growth of a person. Bhabani Bhattacharya also deals with the growth of a character namely Rahoul and the impact of the society on him. He fights for the independence of his country. He appears to be hungry for freedom. He satisfies his urge by relying completely on nature during the hard times in his life. Man seems to get relief from the trajectories of nature. The novel reflects the growth of human mind and psyche. Further, the environment in the novel mirrors individual responses, psychological reactions and social connotations. This helps in tracing man's pragmatic perception of its reliance with nature.

Suresh Frederick writes in *Contemporary Contemplation in Ecoliterature*: "The modern ecological consciousness has a feeling that the balance between human and the natural world must be maintained. A perfect ecology is one in which plants, animals, birds and human beings live in such harmony that none dominates or destroys the other" (147). During the period of any global crisis, it is only nature that is central to protect the future of mankind in general. Ecocriticism is against all kinds of exploitation. Spiritual understanding and cooperation are the two important elements that the theory deals with. With the mercantile and global commercialisation, the social ecology gets evolved. On the other hand nature centric life gets accreditation

particularly with the outbreak of varied disasters. The way history repeats itself in different variations—sometimes in the form of Black death, sometimes in the manner of Plague and at other times in the form of famine, whether man-made or natural seem to be a sequential reality. What stays with us is the unconditional support put forth by nature and its component parts. Literary texts always stand as a medium of support and consolidation for the understanding of the human beings about the natural order of the universe. It always speaks for the bonding between the human and the natural world.

The instances in the novel that gets portrayed through the characters like Devesh Basu, Rahoul, Kajoli and Kishore deliver the universal understanding of the term ecology and environment. For example, Devata, when he was in the village Rahoul, his grandson comes to visit him. He seems to be bewildered to see that his grandfather was truly living the life of a poor village man. As Devata says: “Rahoul our meals are a very simple affair. We peasants do not have elaborate courses with our rice-fish, meats, curds, sweets- we can’t afford them. You’ll be given a leaf plate of steamed rice and lentils, a pinch of salt and a lemon” (24). This aspect in the novel shows how the people of Baruni village were depended on nature and its byproducts in the true sense of the term. As Schultz writes in Chapter 4 titled as “Inclusion with nature: the Psychology of Human-Nature Relations” that appears in the book, *Psychology of Sustainable Development*: “Connectedness refers to the extent to which an individual includes nature within his/her cognitive representation of self” (67).

The novelist portrays Kajoli’s pregnancy when Kishore wonders “in a wood at the edge of the village, collecting ‘frogs’ parsols (wild mushroom)” (100) for Kajoli. During her pregnancy she intends to prepare her own vegetable shred with care and conviction. The novel reads: “She had dug the moist, dark brown earth, loosened the clods and picked off grass and weed and let air soak into the soil- the rootlets of plants drew life from the air they imbibed” (109). She manures the soil with Mangala’s dung till the land becomes rich and fertile for cultivation. She too knows the secret ways of growing eggplants, pumpkin and ladies fingers. She utilizes every part of the land in agricultural production. This sort of cultivation seems to be the call of the hour. The villagers begin to rely on prawns from the ponds, aquatic plants, green beans, grains and vegetables from the productive land. The scarcity of food was so grim that the ants also make a search for food. In an instance, it is seen that a huge group of ants starts eating the vegetables that Kajoli grows. There is also a reference to the fig tree which seems to be the last fig stock left for them.

Literature offers us insights and instincts to deal with the situation that is beyond anybody’s control. In this regard nature plays an enormous role in keeping pace with the changes and transformations in human lives. Hunger acts as a natural phenomenon in the novel. The narrative technique unearths the then prevalent condition of Bengal and its people. The money lenders, and the black marketeers contribute to the predicament of the people. The character Girish appears to be the Grocer of the village. Samarendra Basu who owned the Cheap Rice Limited shows his hunger for money. The physical setting of the novel deals with the man-made famine in Bengal and the misery of the people. In this respect, Ecocriticism explores the different underlying constituent parts in the novel like man’s relationship with nature, natural suffering of the people, dominance of the rich, exploitation of the poor so on and so forth.

As Bhattacharya writes: ‘The rains are heavy, and grass grows aplenty’ (80). Moreover, a poster reads: ‘The soil of India is rich, ...’ (61). It elucidates a pragmatic view of nature in the existence of man in general and for the period of crisis in particular. This refers to the sublimity in nature. The huge natural habitat perpetually stands for the survival of mankind. Be it the production of natural and organic food or fertility of soil the human beings considers nature as part of their sustainable development. In this way, Bhattacharya celebrates the beauty and truth of nature and its production

Glen A. Love writes in *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology and the Environment*: “Ecocriticism, unlike all other forms of literary enquiry encompasses nonhuman as well as human contexts and considerations” (3). Further, the book reads: “Ecocriticism is developing as an explicit critical response to this unheard dialogue and attempts to raise it to a higher level of human consciousness” (18). In the Introduction he says: “My benchmark is ecological relevance. In a real world of increasing ecological crisis and political decision making, to exclude nature except for its cultural determination or linguistic construction is also to accept the continuing degradation of a natural world that is most in need of active human recognition and engagement” (8). Hunger and crisis, here conceptualise the aspect of socio-environmental tyranny. Since there was no import from outside during the famine, people started living on bananas, wild yam etc. As Bhattacharya writes about the village girl Kajoli: ‘And she picked up her sugar-cane and put it between her teeth as if for solace’ (74). For instance, pumpkin is considered to be the ‘peasant food’ (135). At one time, the city youth Rahoul says: ‘I feel hungry because of the pumpkin’ (98). The novelist also refers to ‘lotus seeds’, ‘young bamboo shoots’ and ‘wild mushrooms’ (100). The character, Kajoli ‘had used every inch of earth that was her own’ (110) in growing ‘bhendi’ i.e. ladies fingers, beans and egg-plants. It seems that the whole of Baruni village was absorbed in the stock of Nature’s biotic food. Nature acts a source of inspiration. It exhibits intrinsic values. The aspect of hunger prevails as an existential reality in the novel. On the other hand, nature exists as a prolific source of human development and survival.

Environment captures human experience and values. It encompasses the living and the non-living. The literary articulations always refer to the holistic configuration of nature and its objects. Loretta Johnson in "Greening the Library: The Fundamentals and Future of Ecocriticism" writes: "Do authors impute certain values and make assumptions when they present the environment and non-human life in their works" (1). The leading figure Rahoul says: '... The empty stomach was due to no blight of nature, no failure of crops... It was man-made scarcity, for the harvest had been fair...' (105). K.K. Sharma writes in Bhabani Bhattacharya: His Vision and Themes: 'Bhattacharya is obsessed with the theme of hunger' (41) and engrossed 'with a positive vision of life'(13). The novel reads: "The empty stomach was due to no blight of nature, no failure of crops. 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" (146). In the novel the word 'hunger' serves as a metaphor that offers multiple meanings. It symbolises exploitation, suffering, a prospect to understand nature in its totality, hegemony of a particular class, oppression and sustenance.

Bhattacharya addresses distinct human expressions towards nature and its fundamentals. He unearths discrete human countenance and episodes. The novel traces the symbolic significance of Mangala, the milk cow, who was not just an animal to the children rather they grew up on her milk. He manifests the regard and the respect of a peasant family towards a cow. The cow seems to be so hungry that it eats the beans. As he writes: "Day on days she had watched and craved and suppressed her hunger. Suddenly, today, Mangala had lost herself" (157). In this respect, he also deals with the melodious tune of the Cuckoo: "'Coo-oo!' sang the Kokil on tree top, showering the bliss of joy on a dismal world, soothing the hurt of pain torn spirits. 'Coo-oo'" (133). He further writes: "there was such passionate joy in the bird voice, deep yet penetrating, that it was like a sweet throbbing ache" (128). The characters namely Kajoli and Kishore seem to be bewitched by the richness of the birds voice. Nature provides solace to man. It nourishes and nurtures the human beings. Whether be an epidemic or a pandemic or a famine or malnutrition the consequences are the same. The humanist concern is of utmost importance. In the wide gulf of suffering and struggle, man grows out with a spirit of self-possession. Nature provides nutrition, happiness and health to human beings. Man-nature binary foregrounds ideas on individual expression, collective strength, creative outlook, realm of experience and reformative mental faculty. Through his portrayal of varied human expression and experience he captures the statutory relevance of the environment on the life of man.

Experience and expression are the two sides of the coin i.e. ecocritical assessment of Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers*. In one hand, there is the experience of writing and reading, and on the other the question of expression. As a scholar in this line, one is concerned with the issue of representation. The representation is complex and multiple. There is a negotiation of the experience, thought and activism the best principle of which one finds in the novel discussed.

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