Chapter – IV

A LEGENDARY HERO

HE WHO RIDES ATIGER
Bhabani Bhattacharya’s third novel, *He Who Rides a Tiger*, has for its background the Bengal famine and the Quit India Movement. However it does not treat the Bengal famine with the depth and concentration with which *So Many Hungers!* does. The novel focuses on the darkest chapter in the history of Bengal: “The dark year started three or four months after Chandra Lekha won her silver medal. It was almost darkest in the history of Bengal. A plague took the land in its grip, the plague of hunger, in the wake of war 1943”:

The Japanese army stood poised at the eastern front, facing a wall of resistance. But no barricades had been put up against the enemy within the borders: no rationing of food grains, no price control, no checking of the giant sharks who played the cornering game on a stupendous scale.

Barns were empty – the peasants had been induced to sell off their grain. Markets were empty - the grain was hidden away. The tillers of the soil, reduced to starvation, had no recourse but to sell land, to buy back the produce of that land. And now rice was five times the old rate.

Weavers sold their looms to traders from big cities who scoured the countryside for bargains. Artisans sold their tools. Fishermen’s boats were chopped up for firewood to
sell. The plague washed up in fierce sides. Bengal was dying. Jharna was dying. (18)

Kalo, the protagonist of the novel, is a poor village blacksmith. He performs a miracle by avenging himself on the wealthy and high caste people, and becomes a legend in his own life-time.

In his turn, Kalo, chastened and purified by his experiences and sufferings, learns the secret that to be true to one’s own self is the greatest achievement of man. When he liberates himself from the chains that enslave the spirit, his friend Biten congratulates him: “Your story will be a legend of freedom” (232).

Kalo has a firm faith in the traditional values of life. The caste hierarchy is deep in his spirit. An interesting point is that people from other communities also seek his advice:

.... Men of his community and other communities nearby come trustfully to him for counsel whenever a festive day was to be celebrated, a quarrel to be settled, or a death to be mourned. His words were calm and wise. His decision had the weight of finality. His strength seemed based on an inner metal, which people recognized, and they knew Kalo could be relied upon. Because of an odd whim, he did send his daughter to school and kept her unmarried, but even so his heart was truly with his own people whose life
he shared. His roots were deep in the age-richened soil of his own caste. (16)

Though unable to understand the validity or the utility of the established social order, Kalo never questions its existence. Honesty, hard work, and faith in law and justice are the core of his being. He is “a man of accepted conventions” and his roots run “deep into age old habits of mind and belief”(43).

Kalo’s wife dies in childbirth. The baby daughter is named Chandra Lekha, a name casually suggested by the priest, when he came to the smithy for some work before the confinement.

As Chandra Lekha grows up under the tender care of the rough artisan, she displays unusual intelligence. Kalo sends her to the local English Convent School where high-caste girls frown upon her presence. Kalo is criticised both by the high caste people and by the people of his own caste. But Kalo doesn’t react to their criticism. In fact as Chandra Lekha moves from one class to another, he is filled with pride and joy. When Chandra Lekha wins a prize in an essay writing competition, his joy knows no bounds. What we can clearly notice in the story at this stage are the low station occupied by the father and daughter and their consciousness of it, the girl’s unusual cleverness and achievements, and the touching tenderness of their mutual affection. The shadow of Bengal famine begins to fall on the town Jharna. Food grains become scarce and unemployment becomes
more and more acute. Kalo does not find enough work. Small traders from the cities take advantage of the situation and buy implements and household articles very cheaply. An important aspect of the working class people that the novelist presents is their lofty, unbending ideals. Even ravenous hunger fails to subdue the poor. Wicked traders want to purchase young girls at high rates for brothels in Calcutta, but the starving poor people, Kalo and others, spit on their faces. When one such trader is insulted by Kalo, the former mutters to himself, "The low born people won't bend but they will crack. God had sent his mighty hunger to teach the low born people a true lesson" (19). The attitude of the village folk shows that they have a set of simple values with "faith in the law, that instrument which served out justice even to the poor" (33). Even in the most desperate state of hunger, they don't commit suicide, because they believe in the preservation of life in a dignified manner:

For days and months they had prayed hard, prayed to all the gods in temples and in heaven. The gods would not listen. They would not even bless the slow dying with death's quick thunderbolt. Kill yourself and be relieved? That would be sinful. You could not take a life, not even your own" (26).

Kalo decides to liberate himself and his daughter from hunger. He leaves his daughter in the care of his old aunt and starts his journey to Calcutta. As he travels on the foot-board of a train, he is tempted to steal
some bananas from a carriage. He is arrested and tried for the offence. The magistrate is very harsh towards Kalo. When Kalo pleads that he stole in order to preserve his life for the sake of his family, the magistrate asks him “Why did you have to live?” (34).

In the prison Kalo shares a cell with Bikash Mukherji, who is known in the prison by his number B-10. B-10 is in prison for having protested against a policeman killing a hungry destitute who had stood before an eating-place and stared at the food. B-10 succeeds in instilling his revolutionary fervour in Kalo and convinces him that the right answer to a society which has shown so much in human callousness is to hit back. B-10 casually mentions to Kalo how one can retaliate: to fake a miracle to get a temple raised by exploiting the gullible people, and to make fools of them by making them worship a bogus image. Kalo likes this idea and wants to implement it at the earliest.

As mentioned earlier, the helpless hungry people cling to life, flinging away all that is dead in them. Thus when Kalo is released from jail, he is not at all depressed and broken hearted; rather he is filled with vigour and freshness: “Kalo felt queer. A new warmth, the power of life itself, replaced the chill of dread he had been feeling. He was no longer a number in a jail. The deadening yoke was off his shoulder” He was liberated at last. The destitute people trudged the road of misery, growing smaller until they were invisible. The train rushed past them on its way to the big bright city of hope” (45-46).
After his release, for sometime he takes up the job of carrying corpses of destitutes into municipal trucks and unloading them at the cremation ground. Kalo finds the job very harrowing:

That night he lay in a dark wet alley, paved with cobbles, between tall shapeless buildings when he shut his eyes he could see the skeletons in their shrivelled bags of skin, their hollowed cheeks and starry eyes. Cold sweat smeared his limbs as he strained to rid himself of the vision. He had been better off in jail where at least he did not have to carry corpses.

Other skeletons, still with a spark of life, lay huddled along the window less wall of Storehouse No. 5 of Bengal Rice Ltd., where big quantities of grain lay hoarded. Tomorrow there would surely be more work. The municipal truck might again be short of a hand. Kalo’s mouth twitched with distaste at the same moment his ears picked up an enchanting radio voice cascading down from a high Window. “So much moonlight! Moon flooding! Earth’s near to heaven!” it sang.
He grimaced at the mocking of the words.

Moonlight indeed! It was pitch dark. And if this was near heaven, he wanted no part of it. (47)

A more harrowing experience awaits him when one morning he notices a man “Making a mental inventory of the prostrate derelicts” (47). Kalo thinks that the man is a relief worker and hopes that there would be help. But Kalo is shocked when the man offers him a rupee and after one more look at a group of near-corpses says, “See which of those have passed out. Carry their bodies to the bullock cart which will be here soon – the cartman will help you. Then go with him to other beauty spots like this and clear them up” (48). Kalo is petrified when he is told that this is a private job, that the bodies go to that man’s house, and that man is a doctor. When Kalo asks the cartman what the doctor’s purpose is, he is told that he will strip off the skin and flesh and clean the skeletons and export them. Kalo is silenced and he walks away:

That night Kalo could not sleep because of the torment in his mind. His head was on fire. How long could he go on this way? He would sink; sink, until he was lost in that mass of misery on the streets, until his skeleton, which had more value than his living body, would sail across the black water to schools of medicine. Or, with some luck, he would just manage to live, never earning enough
to go back home and bring Lekha to the city. But what good would it do to bring her here?

Among the bodies he had taken to the cart there had been a girl of Lekha’s age. Kalo shuttered as he remembered her young face (48).

The very next day, Kalo decides to write a letter to his daughter which he has been postponing for a long time. He writes a long letter and puts it along with two crumpled rupee notes in an envelope. In his letter he confesses to Lekha what all has happened: “He had passed through a hard time and had been too ashamed to write about himself” (48). He is confident that his daughter will not hate her father, a thief: “She would feel an ache for him, imagining his sufferings” (48-49). He suddenly begins to shudder as he begins to fear that something might go wrong with her. This is one of the various occasions when the immense love of Kalo for his daughter is described:

... If she was dead, he himself would not want to live. Chandra Lekha was the very spark of his being. She was the reason for his existence. He lay on his back for hours, staring into the heavy bulging face of the night. At last he sat up, breathing fast. He was ready to born in hell for ten thousand years for Lekha’s sake. (49)
Not able to continue in the present job, Kalo reluctantly takes up the work of procurer for a group of brothels in the city. Kalo finds it almost impossible to be a harlot-house agent but circumstances compel him to take up the job. He feels that his job as a harlot-house agent is as bad as his earlier job:

... Kalo lifted his hands to his mop of hair. But the mop was gone. Around the bare saucer on top, the hair was cropped close, convict’s hair. On the street Kalo stopped at a pavement shop and bought a cheap white cap of homespun cotton which he put on his head before he resumed his walk. He felt better wearing the cap associated with the great name. At another shop farther on, he picked up a little mirror to look at his face. His face seemed transformed! He was transformed. He was beginning a new life, not the way he planned. He could never overcome his loathing for the work. Since his wife death Kalo had lived as a celibate, stern ascetic defense in his mind. He would have sickened at the sight of a fallen woman. Today he an agent for them. He, Kalo was helping them sell their living bodies no less dead than those he had given the doctor for the skeletons! (53-54)
One day an incident takes place which marks a turning point in his life. One night, he hears the protesting cries of a woman from a room in the brothel. Kalo enters the room and finds to his horror that the girl is Chandra Lekha. He immediately takes her to his residence. Though the young girl has undergone a nightmarish experience, her honour is unsullied. The girl narrates the events leading to her stay in the brothel house. Kalo is shocked and begins to analyse his life. The oppressive awareness of his low birth, poverty, hunger, three months rigorous imprisonment for a petty offence, his job as a brothel house agent, and, above all, Chandra Lekha’s humiliation and degradation in the brothel house turn Kalo into a social rebel.

Kalo casts away his old values and wages a war against the entire social system: “His battle was with the accuser, the centuries-old tradition, from which had come the inner climate of his being... Kalo had not only to deny but to eradicate the values by which he had been bred. “He had to cut his social taproot and give up his inheritance” (71).

Kalo renounces his caste and becomes a twice born by wearing the nine-stranded sacred thread across his chest. He feels himself free from his spiritual bondage:

He had closed his eyes. He had held his breath.
Clutching the sacred thread in his hands he had passed it swiftly over his shoulder and across his
bare chest. The daring of that gesture made him tremble. With that gesture he had thrown off the heavy yoke of his past and flouted the three thousand years of his yesterdays putting on the sacred thread he had made himself rootless.

The terror of that act was followed by a deep sense of release. He had transcended the station that birth and blood had assigned him. Exhilaration and new coverage filled him. (81)

Kalo succeeds in making the miracle happen and a temple is erected on the hallowed spot. Money and materials pour in from all sides, especially from black marketeers for whom worship is an atonement for all sins committed and a guarantee of success in future undertakings. Kalo assumes a new name, Mangal Adhikari. A Board of Trustees is constituted to manage the financial and administrative work of the temple. The revenues swell; important men like the rich merchant Motichand and Sir Abalabandhu became associated with the management. Among the worshippers who come to the temple and touch Mangal Adhikari’s feet is the magistrate who had sentenced Kalo to hard labour for stealing bananas.

Affluence does not make Kalo forget his friend B-10. When B-10 is released from jail, Kalo offers him a share of the temple income. B-10 declines the offer as he has different plans for his future. He thinks that
Kalo has come to identify himself a little too much with the part he had been playing but he is confident that Kalo will tire of the game in course of time. Kalo is not only deceiving the society that he hates but seems to be deceiving himself. He is like a man riding a tiger, proving the ancient saying that "He who rides a tiger can't dismount". There are indications in the novel that in spite of his best attempts to assimilate Brahminism, Kalo remains in his heart of heart, the simple blacksmith. He converts the top storey of his house into a temporary smithy and works there secretly so that the urge in him to do his true work may be satisfied. He takes pity on an old blacksmith, Viswanath, who comes to beg as a destitute. Kalo gives him work as a gardener.

Kalo as Mangal Adhikari is faced with a serious problem concerning Lekha. She is now of marriageable age. Kalo suggests to B-10, who now calls himself Biten, that he should wear the sacred thread and call himself a Brahmin so that he may marry Lekha without shocking public opinion, but B-10 is firm in his refusal.

In the whole drama Lekha seems to be the worst sufferer. She is bored with the game of make-believe that her father and she have been playing. She loses interest in her duties in the temple. When one day Biten declares his love and is about to embrace her, his gesture produces revulsion and fear in her, as she is reminded of her traumatic experience in the brothel when a rich man tried to make love to her. Mistaking her reaction to be a sign of coldness, Biten leaves her and does not reappear till
almost the end of the novel. Lekha is shocked at Biten’s behaviour. Her sorrow increases when she finds that her father has lost his original simplicity. She is unhappy about her hypocrisy also. She realises that it is now very difficult for them to dismount from the tiger’s back. In order to find some solace she begins to take genuine interest in her work in the temple.

In the meanwhile Kalo’s past starts haunting him. Though he moves on a new plane in society, the “kamar”- within him remains alive and intact. A battle erupts between his two contradictory faces, Mangal Adhikari and Kalo, representing the new and the old ways of life respectively. Sometimes, Kalo feels that “a true god was in the sanctum. The trick by which he had installed a fake was unreal, false, better forgotten. Kalo as Mangal Adhikari had truly attained true incarnation” (100). But at other times, he also identifies himself with Viswanath and thus “had nothing but irreverance for the temple and all it stood for” (115). The inner conflict continues in Kalo’s mind until it becomes unbearable to him.

Lekha’s position in the temple makes her so venerable in the eyes of the congregatin that people want to install her as the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss. Lekha agrees and preparations for the ritual begin. Meanwhile, Motichand, a trustee of the temple, wants Lekha to be his fourth wife. When he makes the proposal both Kalo and Lekha are scandalised. However Lekha has second thoughts. The burden of her present position has become intolerable for her, but since her father shows no signs of
quitting the game, she decides to sacrifice her life’s happiness and fit into her scheme of things by marrying Motichand. She announces to her father that sometime after her installation as Mother of Sevenfold Bliss she will marry the hated man.

Kalo now realises that his beloved daughter is about to ruin herself for his sake. The shock of this realization opens his eyes. On the day of the ceremony, when the whole congregation is assembled and he is asked to make a speech, he stuns everyone by revealing his true story: “I who make this temple was not born a Brahmin” (225). The crisis of his spirit ends and Kalo becomes his real self again.

He is no more the Kalo of the past. His outlook has been broadened. He is disillusioned and awakened. No more does he feel inferior to anyone in caste or social status: “Never again would the smith be despised, mocked, trampled upon. Never again. For the fetters of his mind had been cut. The look in his eyes was clear and undazzled” (226).

In the meantime, Kalo has learnt that Biten is a Brahmin by birth who has repudiated his caste because of a domestic tragedy and his real name is Bikash Mukherji. Biten congratulates him and tells him, “You have triumphed over those others – and over yourself. What you have done just now will steel the spirit of hundreds and thousands of us. Your story will be a legend of freedom, a legend to inspire and awakens” (232).
Thus through the life history of Kalo, Bhabani Bhattacharya expresses his conviction in a positive, bright view of life. Kalo, a low-caste blacksmith, upsets the social order by investing himself with Brahminhood and rising to the top. He does not undermine society but becomes a part of it and uses its power by accepting its rules and by fully comprehending its purpose. He has the power to save his daughter from a living death, when she decides to be Motichand’s fourth wife. He brings himself and his daughter to a true life by proclaiming boldly to the world that he is a mere swindler, and not a sacred Brahmin and a true devotee of Shiva, the great god. The novelist metaphorically describes his triumph over society: “They had come back in time to hear him, to see him drive his steel deep into the tiger. The scum of the earth had hit back, hit back where it hurt.” His brave confession is cheered by the common-folks repeated loud cry ‘Victory to our brother’. At this moment, towards the end of the book, Chandra Lekha is brimming over with high spirits and happiness. She has an overwhelming realisation of a sort of eternal victory: “Baba, after this, whatever happens to us, wherever we go, we can never again be unhappy or defeated” (234). The moments of great triumph and joy in the life of Kalo and Chandra Lekha also become an integral part of the life of Biten.

The union of Chandra Lekha with B-10 is another instance of the blending between the traditional and the modern elements of life in the sense that it will be a union of the lowest and the highest. While the possibilities of this marriage are being explored, Kalo underlines
Bhattacharya’s own philosophy of synthesis when he observes: “In life, sometimes, a big compromise has to be made.” (182)

Bhattacharya gives a pathetic picture of innumerable indignities and cruelties to which human beings were subjected during the famine. It deprived mankind of everything and made them do anything depraved. While some indulged in luring the young innocent lasses to prostitution, others made money by whatever be the method that was employed then. The law of the jungle prevailed and morality and honesty ceased to exist. Emphasising the affirmation of life in Bhattacharya’s novels K.K.Sharma remarks:

“Even in the midst of ghastly and heart-rending scenes of human sufferings and tortures, life asserts itself sparkling amid ashes. From this assertion of ethical values and the synthesis of the old and the new and of opposite extremes emanates Bhabani Bhattacharya’s final vision of the affirmation of life.¹

Bhattacharya successfully exploited the plot in the novel. The theme of the novel touches the core of the human heart. The novel mirrors the naked horrors of the famine, the ruthlessness of society and above all the psychological and superstitious temperament of the people. It is an irony of the human nature that the rich people, who treat the poor as the meanest
creatures crawling on the surface of the earth, do not mind offering any amount for worshipping God with the sincere hope that He would bless them in their immoral acts and unlawful and immoral transactions.

The novel sets its aim against the orthodoxy and superstition of the people. Another major factor is against the religion which can easily be cashed in India any time. This is represented in the milk-crisis. It also condemns capitalists like Sri Abalabandhu who have absolutely no human values.

The essence of the novel is that fraud never triumphs over conscience. On the spur of the moment and the heat of oppression, although a man does surrender himself to the lowest temptation and trickery in life, he cannot consciously feel any solace till he clears himself of the shackles of degradation and ruin. He feels restless and goes back to his ethical plane.

Bhattacharya presents a deep insight into the fact that no one knows to what abysmal depths poverty degrades a man. Man loses all sense of values and becomes a slave to circumstances. The novel begins at a leisurely speed, but the events later quicken and tone up the spirit of the novel. But the readers are not prepared for the sudden and abrupt ending of the novel—of Kalo’s confession. It may be taken as an offspring of his pecuniary frenzy and sudden force.

The plight of the destitutes in the novel reminds us of similar echoes from So many Hungers the absence of rationing of food grains, non-
chalence to prices and hoarding. Boats are destroyed and the poor people look at the city as a lighthouse and proceed there by travelling on foot boards of trains. The fate of the millions is written in the face of Kalo. Thus *He who rides a tiger* has a three dimensionl view: the political, economic and social background. It is in main a social novel. The Quit India Movement, the imprisonments, defiance of authority and hunger strikes dominate the political atmosphere. The economic crisis consequent on the Bengal famine of 1943 and the social injustices and inequites of the various classes in the society are an echo of the economic and social background. Amidst this setting, Bhattacharya gives a clarion call to the nation and his words have come out prophetic: “This is a century of the Common man ‘Vox populi Vox Dei’. His wirl prevails. We are humble servants of the masses, you and I. Our private sentiments don’t count”?

Bhattacharya is a novelist whose vision of life is perfectly humanistic. He upholds humanism both in principle and practice, and his humanistic attitude to life finds artistic expression in his novels. In an interview, Bhattacharya clarifies his stand as a novelist:

‘…..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 necessary for art’s sake. Purposeless art and literature which is much in vogue does not appear to me a sound judgment.’

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The misreading of the novel towards its close and the erroneous conclusions drawn by Meenakshi Mukherjee are brought to light emphatically and meaningfully by Chandrasekharan in his study of Bhattacharya. The transformation in Kalo is indeed brought about by his daughter Lekha, who is an ineffectual angel beating in the void her luminous wings in vain. She knows she cannot imbibe the spirit of the masquerade and so comes out of its clutches and is prepared to incur the displeasure and sharp reaction of her father. In a way, she is his liberator because she has opened his eyes to the truth. The supreme “sense of belonging” overwhelms her.

The novel evoked both favourable and unfavourable critical response. K.A. Abbas considers it to be “an exposure of the hypocrisy of charlatans posing as miracle-makers, and the gullibility of the mass of our people”.4 He further observes that the novel is “among the aptest illustrations of social realism.”5 Meenakshi Mukharjee points out similarity between He Who Rides a Tiger and The Guide: “The Guide and He Who Rides a Tiger both deal with men whose holiness is only a convenient disguise, but in both these novels the men undergo such transformation that the fraud ceases to be a fraud.”6 S.I. Hemenway feels that here “good too easily triumphs over evil”.7 M.K. Naik is unhappy with the “romantic touch in the final scene of the exposure”8 and Kalo’s being author’s “mouthpiece at times”.9
Meenakshi Mukherjee states that this novel deals with the deception of an imposter. But if at all there is a deception, it is not the deception of Kalo against anybody, it is only the deception of Kalo against himself, in fact against his own inner self.

Again Mukherjee has misread the proposition when she remarks that Kalo had “submerged wishes” to become a Brahmin. Nowhere is he seen consciously trying to become a Brahmin. On the other hand, whenever he is unconsciously pulled towards Brahminism, he resists the pull with all his strength. He does not choose the Brahminical role; it is thrust on him because it is part of the trick suggested by Biten. He never bothered himself about higher status; he only desired sweet revenge and material gain. He was just playing the role of an actor and his unconscious attempts at overloading it were clinched by his daughter Lekha at the right time and place. Lekha never likes to leave her “nativity” to transform herself into a “new stratum” of society and it is she that awakens Kalo too from his temporary “darkness” (tamas). It is true that Kalo reminds us of Raju, who transforms himself into a Swami in R.K. Narayans *The Guide*. In both, holiness is only a convenient disguise. While in Raju the identification lasts for a short period, in Kalo it is cast off in the end.

Bhattacharya gives suggestive, meaningful and significant names to his characters in this novel in keeping with their roles. Kalo is a variation of Kamar, the blacksmith. Chandra Lekha is true to her name in features and actions, like the moon, which wanes and waxes, her temperament also
changes from mildness to seriousness as occasion demands. Biten is a funny variation of B-10 and his attitude is biting on the ways of society and so suggests an equally biting reaction. Rajani is the anchor of hope. Sir Abalabandhu, which means the friend of the helpless, is a negation of his own name in action. With the same name, Bhattacharya introduced this typical, unscrupulous businessman is *So Many Hungers* earlier.

The institution of prostitution and the principle of bigamy are the two other aspects that Bhattacharya condemns with vehemence. In these days of family planning, while bigamy becomes criminal, prostitution flourishes, thus making the “karma bhoomi” a land of immorality and decadence.

In conclusion, we can agree with K. R. Chandrasekharan when he says,

*Thematically* *So Many Hungers*! and *He Who Rides a Tiger* start from the same point but branch off in different directions. The former is concerned all the time with large issues, with the destiny and the fortunes of a whole nation or of a large section of the population. It produces an impression of massiveness and has epic dimensions. The latter novel, while showing the larger issues in perspective, is more concerned with the history of an individual, the travails through which he passes and the ultimate liberation of spirit that he achieves.
Because of the preoccupation with one mind there is concentration which makes the story more gripping, but what is gained in intensity is lost on account of the circumscription of the scene and restriction of scope.\textsuperscript{10}
References:


10. K. R. Chandrasekharan, Bhabani Bhattacharya (New Delhi: Arnold – Heinemann, 1974) 83-84