CHAPTER III

"THE COUNTERFEIT COIN" | KALO
CHAPTER III

"THE COUNTERFEIT COIN": KALO

The image of the holy man one gets in _He Who Rides a Tiger_ is that of a fake retreating to his original self. Kalo, the low-born blacksmith, who is forced to wear the mask of a holy man, throws it away at the end, again by force of circumstances and gets back to his normal life. This change in him is only articulated verbally. Throughout the novel, he glitters like the "counterfeit coin."

Bhabani Bhattacharya gives a satirical twist to the theme of the novel and the character of Kalo. The social criticism is presented in terms of values embodied in the significant events that occur in the life of the protagonist. As Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly points out:

> In _He Who Rides a Tiger_, Bhabani Bhattacharya is not concerned with mystic experiences of a yogi, but with the deception of an impostor. The spiritual element is treated on the social level where the orche robe of an ascetic becomes the symbol of power.¹

Crude, but intelligent Kalo, a blacksmith in the town of Jharna, centres his life on his motherless daughter, Chandirelekha. During the hunger plague that strikes Bengal Kalo sits idly; there is no work and no work for a smithy in times like these. Jharna is now a ghost town. Hunger and famine drive him from his town Jharna to Calcutta to save his daughter from hunger and starvation. While travelling on the foot-board of a train, on his way to Calcutta, Kalo is tempted to steal some bananas when his hunger becomes unbearable. The novelist says:

He had never been so hungry in all his life.²

Kalo is arrested and tried for his offence. When he pleads with the magistrate that he stole the bananas only to preserve his life for the sake of his family, the latter says in the most inhuman manner;

Why did you have to live?³

He is sentenced to three months imprisonment. Thus Kalo's theft of three bananas to relieve himself of his starvation, results in three months imprisonment.

³Ibid., p. 34.
In jail, Kalo meets a revolutionary young man from Calcutta who is known in prison only by his number, B-10. They become friends soon and B-10 transmits his revolutionary fervour to Kalo and convinces him that an answer to society full of exploitation and inhuman callousness is to hit back:

We the scum of the earth. The boss people scorn us because they fear us. They hit us where it hurts badly - in the pit of the belly. We have got to hit back.

Furthermore, B-10 sets Kalo to know of several ways 'to hit back' - faking a miracle to get a temple raised by exploiting the gullibility of the people and to make them fools by making them worship a bogus image.

After his release from prison Kalo reaches Calcutta where the human misery is so disarming and the situation so hostile to any set of values to which a man like Kalo may wish to cling. Kalo is unable to find work as a blacksmith. He is forced to eke out a miserable existence for sometime by carrying the corpses of destitutes into municipal trucks. But it becomes difficult to get even this loathsome job of collecting corpses because of

4 He Who Rides a Tiger, pp. 72-73.
competition. Despite his struggle against fate, Kalo eventually becomes the procurer for several whorehouses in the city. One day, he is horrified to find his own daughter, Chandralekha, in a harlot-house for which he is a procurer. Though he rescues his daughter from the prostitute's house just in time, his eyes are now opened to the soridness of the game. The meanness and cruelty shown by unscrupulous exploiters rouse his indignation. Society has hurt him not only in the belly but in the soul. He wants to have his revenge on society by perpetrating the fraud already hinted at. He declares a war on society and resolves to be avenged on its pillars for the famine they have caused and the harlot-homes they have kept flourishing.

He was going to be a pillar of society!
A pillar created by two seers of grain. Man, that was the way to avenge himself. A convict and harlot-house procurer become a master of a temple, placing the hand of benediction on the bowed heads of pious folks. So had the wheel of Karma turned. If Kalo finally chooses to ride a tiger, it is because, the society, which he tried earlier, is no lamb.

5 He Who Rides a Tiger, p. 85.
To achieve his purpose, Kalo tries to recall every word of his jail-mate, B-10. By a clever trick, he brings about a miracle - makes an image of Shiva rise out of the soil before hundreds of people.

Shiva's coming. That was the occasion sponsored by a tall, dark, big-built Brahmin in a holy man's yellow cloak and a skull cap, a rosary on his neck. He sat with his legs crossed on a stripped tiger skin spread under the banyan and tirelessly, in a snorous tone, he spoke the charmed words "Namo Shivaya" which his listeners solemnly echoed.⁶

As the 'Brahmin,' Mangal Adhikari, the former smith, finds himself successful beyond his wildest dreams. Here the novelist's purpose is to focus the reader's attention on the issues involved in Kalo's fraud and not on the fraud itself. Ironically enough, for exploding the myth of caste-superiority, Kalo derives strength, in a way, from the same caste-superiority, by himself playing the role of a Brahmin priest and to dispel the superstitions of people of his rank, he makes use of those very superstitions as his tools. He has destroyed an entire system with the help of the belief of the people in the system itself.

As Dorothy Blair Shimer says:

⁶*He Who Rides a Tiger*, p. 77.
Kalo comes to see himself as an avenging instrument. 7

Thus, Kalo, the blacksmith, is metamorphosed into Mangal Adhikari, the Brahmin, with much revered saffron robe, just as Raju, the railway guide is transformed into a spiritual 'guru' in R.K. Narayan's The Guide. Before long, a temple rises on the adroitly contrived fact and the wealthiest and high born men of the city are vying with one another for the honour and 'merit' of giving. Kalo rejoices in hoodwinking his devotees who consists of unscrupulous businessmen and blackmarketeers for whom worship is an atonement for all sins committed and a guarantee of success in fortune hunting. 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. Kalo takes pleasure in seeing them thus polluted and fallen. He confides in Lekha:

The turn of wheel favours us beyond all reckonings ... They're paying. They touch low-caste feet. They pray to God who is no God. What expiation could ever

cleanse their souls? They're polluted, fallen. They're doomed for many lives to come.  

Masqueraded as Mangal Adhikari, Kalo easily succeeds in providing safety and security for himself and his daughter against the onslaughts of Nature (famine) and society (the caste system). Not only is the temple well financed, but money, jewels and food are showered on Kalo and Lekha. The new life is launched and there is no turning back. Here Kalo's predicament is described with the help of an ancient saying, which of course, forms the title of the novel:

He rode a lie as if it were a tiger which he could not dismount lest the tiger pounce upon him and eat him up.  

Kalo knows not how or when to stop. He is ensnared in the circumstances he has created. So far it is an easy success for Kalo. But to continue the fraud becomes increasingly difficult. He could pretend to defy the limits of caste in one rebellious moment, but to accept the role of a Brahmin for a sustained period is not an easy task for a man rooted in the tradition

8 He Who Rides a Tiger, pp. 91-92.

9 Ibid., p. 84.
of rural India. Putting on the sacred thread, which only the higher castes are qualified to wear, itself involves moral struggle. When the crowd gathers round him on the first day with reverence and holy fear, it is a crucial moment for him:

He had closed his eyes. He had held his breath. Clutching the sacred thread in his hands he had passed it lightly over his shoulder and across his bare chest. The darting 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 yester years. Putting on the sacred thread, he had made himself rootless. But does Kalo have the intellectual strength to accept the rootlessness? The novel raises this question very unobstrusively. Kalo's jail-mate and friend, B-10, has the strength to renounce his caste. In fact, he gives up his given name because that would betray his Brahminic origin and prefers to be known by the number he is given in the jail. He, being an educated man, has intellectual conviction to support his castlessness. Kalo, an uneducated blacksmith from a remote village, cannot have the same

10 *He Who Rides a Tiger*, p. 81.
mental preparedness. Therefore, he feels the need to belong much more than, B-10. Since now he cannot belong to the blacksmith caste in which he is most at home, his next attempt is to identify himself with the Brahmins. He tries to rationalise this attempt in his own mind. He argues with himself:

Is not your purpose already served? Have you not had enough? It is better that you rinse the bitterness out of your mouth, purge it from your blood so that you, a self-created Brahmin, may take your place in the new order of living, the place they are offering you. 11

In Bhattacharya's description of the empty rituals, meaningless ceremonies, false worship and selfish behaviour of the devotees and the management of the daily activities in the temple, there is a barbed social criticism which is carefully woven into the fabric of the story dealing with the strange predicament of the holy man:

While men died of hunger, wealth grew; and while kindliness dried up, religion was more in demand. It was only the outward form of religion, the shell of ritual, empty within. That suited Kalo's purpose. 12

11 He Who Rides a Tiger, p. 99

12 Ibid., p. 113.
The milk episode which brings out the selfishness of the people even in their so-called spiritual pursuits, is an example. They would not accommodate a dying man's wish to have an early date to give milk-bath to Lord Shiva. With remarkable detachment and restraint, the novelist makes Kalo narrate the episode to Lakha. When Kalo calls those people 'scoundrels', the reader too thinks similarly about them sharing the gleeful feeling of Kalo that those people deserve the fraud played upon them. Bhattacharya never sounds propagandistic while presenting the rebel in Kalo, clashing with a reprehensible social norm. He cleverly takes the readers through the ascetic's troubles and conflicts. It is not merely an individual's conflict with the surroundings; the conflict is sometimes internalized. These inner conflicts in Kalo are shown through 'inside views' by making him subject himself to searching self-criticism. These inner conflicts which show that Kalo has a better scale of values than the people around him, not only win the reader's sympathy for the holy man, but also add the third dimension to the character.

Affluence does not make the holy man forget his friend and benefactor, B-10, who had given him the
idea of the temple. He remembers the exact date on which he is to complete his term of imprisonment. Accompanied by Lekha, he makes a train journey to the place, meets B-10 as he comes out of jail and takes him to his residence in Calcutta. He narrates how he had raised the temple and become a Brahmin according to his advice and offers him a share of the temple income. B-10 promptly declines the offer as he has different plans for his future. He notices that Kalo has come to identify himself a little too much with the part he has been playing. However, knowing his innate honesty and integrity, he prophesies that the ascetic will tire of the game in course of time.

As time passes, the saffron robe, put on by Kalo as a mask to deceive people, has an adverse effect on him. He overreaches himself and while deceiving the society that he hates, he is also deceiving himself. He stands identifying himself as an ascetic. He becomes rigid about the customs and rituals of worship. At a certain point, Kalo even becomes concerned about pollution from non-Brahminic touch—when an old destitute's imploring hand touched the Brahmin's fore arm, the holy man shouts in a rage:

Rogue! ... How dare you touch me?
I shall have to take a bath at this
late hour to cleanse myself. 13

The novelist rightly says,

was his Brahminism sinking deep into him?
Even if he must keep distance from Viswanath, why could not he be kind? 14

He is so sure of his Brahmin identity that Kalo plans to arrange his daughter's marriage with some Brahmin family. He notices that his friend B-10 and Lekha are in love with each other. He would approve of their marriage only after making sure that he is a Brahmin. But when he asks the young man about his caste, he promptly replies that he belongs to the 'convict caste'. Thus Kalo has deceived not only his supposed enemies, but his inner self. As A.V.Krishna Rao feels:

The mask of Kalo threatens to become the self itself. 15

Meenakshi Mukherjee aptly points out:

what began as a fraud, is passing into reality. 16


14Ibid., p. 112.


Chandralakha acts as her father's conscience-keeper and saves him from the circumstances he has created for himself. She is her father's associate in the temple, but she does not share her father's exaltation at the success of the scheme. She too has enough reasons to rebel against the society. In a way she has suffered more than her father at the hands of society because she was forced into a brothel. But her listlessness over the whole project of her father raises another complicated moral issue: how far is deception justifiable even if it means paying back to a cruel society for what it has given to its defenceless poor? Does Lekha worry about the moral aspect of the venture or is it only the fear of being found out? Or is her indifference the result of the nervous shock that she receives in the brothel? Whatever the reason, the contrast between the attitudes of father and daughter is obvious. Lekha has been feeling that just as the harlot-house had tried to pollute her body, this fraudulent has been working 'inside her, spreading corruption.' Hence she has been the unwilling collaborator. She simply asks, "where will this end?" and again on another occasion she answers:

---

*7He Who Rides the Tiger, p. 92.
I have had enough of this glided cage. You are content with it. How long must it hold me too?  

When her father enjoys the role of a holy man, Lekha moves about mechanically performing her duties completely detached from the whole show:

She (Laksha) was astride with the tiger's back with her father, but she could not ride with his determined ease.  

The metaphor of the title suggests that the mask of an ascetic put on by Kalo, in order to deceive the society, is like the tiger on which he is riding. The final moment of illumination comes to Kalo when he discovers that his own daughter is to be sacrificed at the altar of his ambition, as the temple authorities have decided to transform her into "Mother of Sevenfold Bliss". Lekha, who would rather accept Motichand's loathsome offer of taking her as his fifth wife than the 'Mother of sevenfold Bliss', announces her decision to her father. Kalo is rudely shocked and asks her how she could marry Motichand, that old shark with cast off wives. She replies

18 He Who Rides a Tiger, p. 174.
that it is better to do so than getting for ever 'buried in the temple'. Kalo now understands the gravity of the situation and learns that

... a mask on one's face could eat into one's spirit.20

The magnitude of the sacrifice that Lekha is about to make in order to liberate herself from a living death, forces Kalo to take a bold decision. He has either to dismount the tiger he has been riding and get killed or kill the tiger of the lie and go back to his native place. He prefers to kill the tiger and explode the myth thereby exposing falsehood with falsehood for

... evil has to be faced and fought with its own knives.21

Kalo, who at first sees himself as a social crusader exposing falsehood with falsehood, finally achieves redemption by dismounting the tiger and killing it by cutting 'the fetters of his mind'. With any amount of fortitude, he reveals to the big crowd that has gathered, the bitter truth about himself:

20 He Who Rides a Tiger, p. 122.

21 Ibid., p. 120.
Now listen well, priests and pundits, listen to the truth ... I have installed a false god, for there was no dream at all. I have made you commit sacrilege and blackened your faces. There is no expiation ... A downtrodden, 'kamar' has been in charge of your inmost souls, souls corrupt with caste and cash.22

Thus, the perpetration of the fraud stands self-exposed quite voluntarily. What is more, he has the necessary strength of character to face all the consequences of his honest confession. The crowd sits stunned 'in the grip of shock.' The revelation produces diverse reactions among the audience. Some want to beat him up, some suggest legal action and the prince of blackmarketeers, Abalabandhu, wishes he had a man of genius like Kalo to assist him in his business. A large number of destitutes and men of lower castes who have stationed themselves in the rear are thrilled and happy that one of their class has outwitted the so-called superior classes. Kalo has no means of saving himself from the attack of the insulted people. At this point, help comes to him from the outer fringe of the crowd, in the shape of the poor, the low caste and the destitute men. They come forward to fight Kalo's battle because they feel that Kalo has avenged the wrongs done to them by

22 He Who Rides a Tiger, p. 227.
duping the proud people. The conflict is mainly between
the exploiters and the exploited, and the haves and the
have-nots. B-10, the social reformer, who has renounced
his Brahminism to lead the destitutes in their struggle
for food, has come back in time to 'see him (Kalo) drive
his steel deep into the tiger'. Immediately gratified,
he congratulates Kalo on his success:

You have triumphed over these others and
over himself. 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 awaken. 23

Now Kalo and Lakh having boldly cut themselves loose from
their entanglements, are content to begin a new life, purged
of the past completely and not despairing of the future.

Lakh says:

Baba, after this, whatever happens to us,
wherever we go, we can never again be
unhappy or defeated. 24

As Dorothy Blair Shimer points out:

Kalo has won the allegiance of the masses
of the people and stands supported by the
Brahmin Bikash Mukerji and the Sudra,


24 Ibid., p. 232.
Viswanath, as he faces an uncertain future
with honesty and courage. 25

Bhabani Bhattacharya, by his telling use of irony,
drives home to us the image of the holy man that he seeks
to present in the novel. To give an example, a sentence
most oft repeated is:

I know a man by the look in the face. 26

It is first spoken by a policeman who arrests Kalo for
the theft of bananas. Another person who makes the same
remark to Kalo is Rajani, the procurer who thinks that Kalo
is a fit person to assist in the trade. Lastly, Motichand
speaks the same sentence to Kalo in the disguise of a holy
man. But none of them understands the person. As
K.R.Chandrasekharan feels:

The repetition of the sentence in totally
different situations exposes the fallacy
of the assumption that the face is an
index to character. 27

25 Dorothy Blair Shimer, Bhavani Bhattacharya

26 He Who Rides a Tiger, p. 33.

27 K.R.Chandrasekharan, Bhabani Bhattacharya (Delhi:
The heartless magistrate who asks Kalo at the trial, why he should live at all, is among the earliest of devout worshippers at the fake temple to touch the holyman's feet and implore his blessings. Another striking instance of irony is when the grateful Viswanath, himself a blacksmith, tells Mangal Adhikari, a disguised blacksmith as a holy man:

So long as there are true hearted Brahmans like you, people cannot lose faith in this social order. 28

Bhattacharya's portrayal of the holy man becomes effective by his experiments in using English language not as a yoke carried on his reluctant shoulders, but as the challenge of "using the English language in a way that will be distinctly Indian and still remain English." 29 The device of literal translation of an Indian phrase, idiom or proverb into English is quite frequently used:

You think you are not getting sixteen annas for your silver rupee. 30

People have tongues and tongues will wag. 31

28 He Who Rides a Tiger, p. 122.


30 He Who Rides a Tiger, p. 132.

31 Ibid., p. 172.
Kalo warns Iskha about Viswanath:

We stand on the edge of a cliff. A hundred eyes keep a watch on us, waiting to see if we slip and fall. We have to be wary\textsuperscript{32}.

The novelist comments:

The counterfeit coin needed more glitter than the real\textsuperscript{33}.

These expressions have their unmistakable flavour of the vernacular speech and serve the purpose of bringing authenticity to the Indian dialogues. They also provide a glimpse of the wise sayings of the rural people preserved and transmitted in their every day conversation as also their attitude to life. Above all, they are a general reminder to the reader that the holy man they witness in the novel is firmly rooted in the Indian soil.

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{He Who Rides a Tiger}, p. 111-112.

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 112.