Chapter 2

Thematic Study of Bhabani Bhattacharya’s Novels
So Many Hungers!
Music for Mohini
and
He Who Rides a Tiger
Themes

- hunger for food, sex, money
- hunger for political freedom, imperial expansion
- hunger for dignity and self-respect
- hunger as a spiritual weapon employed by freedom fighters
- revolt against social and economic injustice
- human degradation caused by hunger
- patriotism

Music for Mohini
by Bhabani Bhattacharya

- conflict and harmony between the cultures of city and village, East and West and tradition and modernity
- maturation of a young girl into responsible married woman
- the necessity of mutual understanding for domestic harmony
- self-perfection as a panacea for social troubles

He Who Rides a Tiger

- importance of education for social elevation
- poverty and exploitation
- the issues of un-touchability and secularism
- degradation of political and economic system
- explosion of the myth of class superiority and repudiation of meaningless superstitions
- callous and selfish attitude of the so-called religious people
- conflict between the exploiters and the exploited
Thematic Study of Bhabani Bhattacharya’s Novels

So Many Hungers!

So Many Hungers! was published in October 1947, two months after India’s Independence. The central theme of the novel is hunger for food and for freedom. The Bengal Famine of 1943 and the Quit India Movement of 1942 are prominently painted in the novel. The plot of the novel is woven around the story of the young scientist, Rahoul, and his family and the story of the peasant girl, Kajoli, and her family. Rahoul’s story represents the struggle for freedom. Kajoli’s story is a pathetic record of what happened to more than two million men and women who became victims of a feminine and selfishness of profiteers and the indifference of an alien Government.

The novel has a composite plot weaving out of two main strands – the story of Samarendra Basu’s family with young Rahoul as the principal character and the story of the peasant family with the young girl Kajoli as the central character. The two stories represent the freedom movement and the agonies of the famine respectively.

“Rahoul’s story is a representation in miniature of the struggle for Freedom. The sad tale of Kajoli is likewise a pathetic record of what happened to more than two million men and women who became victims of a famine, which was not an act of God, but which was
brought about by the rapacity and selfishness of profiteers and the indifference of an alien Government.¹

Rahoul and his younger brother, Kunal are the sons of a lawyer named, Samarendra Basu. This family represents a cross-section of middle-class Indian society with its variety and contrasts. Rahoul has a degree from Cambridge where he had carried out research under a distinguished scientist. Before going to Cambridge, he had joined the Independence Movement and was to be arrested, but his father had managed to send him away to England. At the time the story begins, he continues his research on Cosmic Rays. He is happily married and a daughter is born to him. Rahoul’s desire is to throw in his lot with the people struggling for freedom and self-respect, but for the time being, he refrains from action and the impression is created among the British officers that he is on the verge of a great scientific discovery that will turn the tide of the war against the Fascists and Japan. Nevertheless he is a staunch nationalist and he cannot forget the hypocrisy of the foreign rulers.

Kunal, the younger brother, is enthusiastic, affectionate and cheerful. He joins the army as a junior officer because he loves the adventure and thrill of a soldier’s life. He also tells Rahoul that if Indians prove their courage on the battle-field, then India will rise to the day of Independence one day. He leaves home for service in North Africa and in Italy.
Samarendra Basu is greedy where money is concerned. His main aim is to grab wealth for himself and his family. There is not even a tinge of patriotism in him. All that he desires is affluence, safety and respectability. When World War II starts, he cleverly understands that rice has become scarce and that a good way to make money will be by hoarding it and selling at the most appropriate time. As a result, a trading concerned with the ironic name Cheap Rice Limited is formed. One of the partners in the sordid enterprise is Sir Abalabandhu, a prince among black-marketeers. The technique employed by the company is to tempt all the small farmers to sell all their stock of rice to store it safely in a few places and to wait until the price is boosted. It means that the famine is entirely engineered by man. Samarendra’s wealth is ill-gotten and he wants his sons to lead comfortable, self-centered lives. He curries favour with the Governor of the Province and other high-placed British officials. To enhance the prestige of the family and to protect Rahoul, he hints to the Chief Secretary of the Government that he is engaged in research work of great potential value; and that any day he might discover a Death Ray which the allied powers could make use of in order to win the war.

Gold rush in Clive Street. A motley crowd surging by the Stock Exchange, the tall, massive, dark-brown door opens only to privilege. On the road, on the concrete pavements, shadowed from the angry sun by mammoth cement-grey structures, a big motley crowd surging, voices buzzing, brains pounding at full pressure. Inside, the brokers, the brokers’ agents, sub-agents, booking
orders from clients in the motley crowd, clients too excited to sit still at home or in office with telephone to mouth, pouring orders, buying, selling, buying again. Bees darting and buzzing for money-honey! (SMH: 18)

Samarendra’s dream is shattered in the end. Towards the end of the novel, Samarendra gets a telegram from the Defence Department informing him that Captain Kunal Basu of the Indian Artillery has been reported missing. Rahoul is arrested when he joins the Quit India Movement. Ironically it is at this moment of sorrow and defeat that he learns that the British Government has honoured him by the award of the title, C.I.E.

Samarendra’s father, Devesh Basu, is a Gandhian character. Fired with patriotism and full of love for the common people, he has settled down in a village called Baruni. The people of the village have so much affection for him that they call him ‘Devata’. He does not feel superior to or different from the simple people of the village and is accepted as a friend, philosopher and guide of the society. Rahoul and Kunal are more at home with their grandfather than with their father. Rahoul has been deeply influenced by Devata. Before his father had sent him to Cambridge for study, he had sought the advice of his grandfather. When Rahoul explains that stay at Cambridge would give him sufficient knowledge of the English people to enable him to fight them after his return to India, Devata asks him to remember that their quarrel is with the British rulers and not the British people.
Devata gives the villagers inspiration and guidance when they are in difficulties. When they join the national movement he advises them to be non-violent. Devata is fond of a peasant family in Baruni. This family consists of a peasant, his wife and three children, two boys named Kanu and Onu and a daughter, Kajoli, the heroine of the novel. The head of the family and the elder boy are in prison for their participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement. Devata feels that he is the head of the family and always refers to Kajoli’s mother as his daughter and to Kajoli as his grand-daughter. He shares their simple food and unhesitatingly takes his grandson, Rahoul with him to join them at the meal when he visits Baruni. Early in the novel, sometime after Rahoul’s first visit to Baruni, Devata is arrested and taken to prison. As he is about to be taken away, he speaks these words of exhortation to the villagers:

“Friends and comrades, do not betray the flag. Do not betray yourselves. There is violence in your thoughts; that is evil enough. Do not make it worse by violence in action.” (SMH: 72)

Later, Devata is taken to Dehra Dun and when the Quit India Movement is at its zenith, he undertakes a fast in prison. The news of the fast reported in the newspapers reaches Kajoli at a most critical moment in her tragic life. She recollects the parting words of advice he had spoken at Baruni and just as the words of the song sung by Pippa in Browning’s Pippa Passes transform the lives of a few characters, which happen to hear them, they prompt Kajoli to take a
momentous decision, which saves her from ignominy and shame. Truly, Devata is her guardian angel. It is the memory of his saintly personality and his stirring message that gives her the strength to stand up with head erect and to face life armed with nothing but fortitude and purity of heart.

Rahoul is left alone for a time by the Government because of the possibility of his discovering the Death Ray. His difficulties, however, increase as the days pass. The police are suspicious about his activities and employ a student to spy on him. This student sneaks into the laboratory in the absence of Rahoul and pries into his notes. Rahoul has been warned in time about the presence of the spy by a patriotic and devoted research student, Prokash. The leaders of the people are arrested one after another and imprisoned. The arrest and trial of Nehru in Gorakhpur has stirred the country, and his dignified and defiant statement made at the trial has caught the imagination of people and instilled courage and heroism in their minds. As a result of the scorched-earth policy, followed by the British rulers in Bengal in anticipation of a Japanese invasion of India and the heinous activities of a few profiteers, thousands of people are rendered destitute and forced to quit their homes and to trek to Calcutta in search of food. Rahoul is deeply touched by the sight of their suffering. A few of his experiences stand out prominently. A destitute woman lying on the railway platform giving suck to a baby dies, and the dead body lies there for several hours until picked up and disposed of. The baby continues to suck the breast of the dead mother. Another haunting
experience is the plight of a destitute woman from the countryside, who is stricken with labour pain and has nowhere to go and no one to help her. Rahoul takes her into his house with the help of his mother and his wife and tries to help her, but the woman dies before she can give birth to her child. Rahoul is more and more convinced that a foreign government is incapable of solving the problems of the country and that freedom is an imperative need. When students in large numbers join the Quit India Movement, he feels that it is his duty to be with them. He seeks the advice of his grandfather who is in prison in Dehra Dun and then takes the plunge. He addresses the students and proclaims his view that the British should leave India. A black van drives up early one morning to the Relief Centre where Rahoul has been feeding the destitute daily and takes him away to jail. At the prison gate he is joined by other detainees. They are undaunted and full of confidence for the future. They are led into the prison and they sing in chorus the memorable words written by Tagore.

The opening lines of this novel push us into a world that is threatened almost with extinction by the 1939-45 international war:

A meek, measured voice, wingless. A voice too bleak for passion, fire. History had yoked it to its purpose, though, with a sudden urge that made it dynamic. The British Prime Minister, Rahoul knew, was a bitter-hearted prey of logical circumstance. Yet Rahoul, rapt, held in a spell, felt the far, flat voice cast across ether pound, as it were, on his ears: For the second time in a generation Great Britain is at war with Germany …
Listening, he felt a tingling through his nerves, down his spine, down to knee-pits. Tautness knit him. (SMH: 5)

The episode where Rahoul addresses the peasant woman – Kajoli’s mother – as Mother is also symbolic of the synthesis of the traditional and the modern values, in the sense, that Rahoul, a sophisticated man of the town, mixes up with a woman of common clay, and also that, as an educated and city-bred man, he establishes his kinship with the simple and uneducated village woman. Bhattacharya expresses his idea through the dialogue between them:

“Father is well? Moher?” She asked out of politeness. “Bau-ma (daughter-in-law)? The little one?” “Yes Mother, they are well.” Mother! The word had slipped his tongue without thought. Happiness came upon him that he had broken out of his class sophistication and called a simple peasant woman mother. What was there in this woman of a Bengali village, not unlike others of her kind, that he had the urge to call her mother?

The peasant mother had tears in her eyes because of his kindness. (SMH: 97)

The novel closes with this incident of men voluntarily seeking imprisonment so that the country may be free. Rahoul represents one class of freedom-fighters – the upper middle class intellectuals. The novel reflects the fact that the national movement embraced all sections of the population – men and women, young and old, intellectuals and workers, people from cities and people from the
countryside. One of the hungers that the novel deals with is the hunger for freedom.

While the hunger of men to be free is one of the themes of the novel and the Quit India Movement forms its background, a more palpable type of hunger, namely, the hunger for food gets more spectacular treatment and possibly steals the limelight. Just as Rahoul symbolizes the Indian working for the liberation of the country, Kajoli, the peasant girl from Baruni illustrates the cruel fate of the rural population of Bengal at the time, when India faced the Japanese peril in the East and an unprecedented rice famine was created by unscrupulous capitalists. Kajoli is a sprightly and innocent girl of fourteen when the story begins. She lives in her ancestral mud-and-thatch house along with her mother, who remains unnamed throughout the novel, and a younger brother, Onu, aged ten or eleven. The father, who also has no name in the story, and an elder brother, Kanu, are in prison for having taken part in the Civil Disobedience Movement. They own same land on which paddy is grown with the help of hired labourers called Kisans. Bhattacharya, with his intimate knowledge of village life, includes the cow, Mangala, also in the rural household. The family represents some of the finest qualities of the rural Bengal or of rural India. Their life is simple but gracious and dignified. Devata eats with the family often presumably, sharing their plain meal consisting of steamed rice and lentils, a pinch of salt and a lemon, some baked sweet potatoes and a vegetable curry of sorts, and perhaps some thickened milk in a small brass bowl by way of luxury.
When Rahoul arrives at the house in the company of Devata, Kajoli receives him in the traditional manner, removing the shoes from his feet, pouring cold water on the feet and washing off the dust. Rahoul is embarrassed and tries to expostulate, but Devata silences him and reminds him that Kajoli is a well-bred peasant girl with a legacy of manners as old as India.

“Devata spoke. ‘Do not rush to sell your grain. Think it over.’ So he spoke.”

The word was a command.

Devata had pondered well before he reached that vital decision. True, the peasants had been offered a fair price, and they were tempted to sell off all surplus stocks. But what about the kisans who had no stocks at all? Where would they get their rice? And the fishermen, dispossessed of their boats? The artisans – the weaver who clothed Baruni, the blacksmith who forged ploughshares and sickles, the carpenter who chistelled the woodwork of ploughs and cartwheels? Devata was worried. If you let the rice above the growers’ immediate needs be drained off, village economy would soon go to pieces. (SMH: 63)

The disintegration and ruin that comes to Kajoli’s innocent family is symptomatic of the devastation that affects all Bengal. The economy of the village is ruined because of the scorched-earth policy followed by the Government and also by the racketeering in rice done by wealthy men from the city. All boats in the area are destroyed by Government lest the Japanese should make a landing on the coast and
use them for their movements. Many villages are evacuated. Greedy merchants with the needed capital buy up all the available rice with the aim of creating scarcity and later selling at a huge profit. The villagers, who are thus impoverished, take to the highroad leading to Calcutta hoping that the affluent city will feed them all.

Kajoli has a brief spell of happiness after she is married to the young man, Kishore. He had been a worker in a cotton mill in the city, had taken part in a strike and been imprisoned in the same jail as Kajoli’s father. The father had such a great liking for Kishore that when the latter was released from prison, he sent him to Baruni with a letter to his wife expressing his wish that he should marry Kajoli. The novelist suggests by a few deft touches, how radiantly happy the young couple were after the marriage. If, for instance, Kajoli heard a cuckoo singing when she and Kishore were out on the fields, she would immediately echo the bird’s note, coo-coo, with the spontaneity and joy of a child.

Kajoli’s happiness is short lived. As conditions deteriorate in the village, Kishore decides to go to Calcutta, where he hopes to get employment in a mill. On his way to the railway station, he takes a short cut and climbs up the railway embankment. The Governor’s train is to pass that way very shortly and, therefore, soldiers are guarding the track. One of them challenges Kishore. He gets frightened and tries to run away, but the soldier shoots him dead. His sad fate remains unknown to the family right up to the end of the
novel. The family thinks that he has gone to Calcutta and when he fails to write, they fear that possibly he has been arrested somehow and sentenced to jail again. Kajoli is now an expectant mother. There is no rice to eat in the house. Like other people, they have been living on roots, figs and whatever else their luck brings them. They sell whatever can be sold, including the cow-bells adorning the cow Mangala’s neck. Their suffering and starvation in no way affect their nobility and purity. Agents recruiting destitute girls for brothels in Calcutta try their best to tempt Kajoli, but she and her mother angrily spurn their offer. The mother does an act of unusual generosity and nobility, when she makes a gift of her cow to a young fisher-woman, who is attempting to bury her starving child alive, in order to make him sleep in peace. The family now finds it impossible to live in the village, and, like thousands of other families, begins a long and hazardous trek to Calcutta.

When the mother and two children suffer on the way to Calcutta, gives the reader an idea of the plight of the many destitute, who left their village homes and moved towards the capital in search of food. This subject is dealt with elsewhere in the novel. Kajoli has a painfully tragic experience on the way for which the novelist does not hold any individual morally culpable. She meets an Indian soldier and begs him for food. He happens to have some bread in his kit-bags and gives her a portion. She is so ravenously hungry that she devours it rapidly without thinking of her mother and brother. The soldier offers her some more. As he looks at the emaciated body in tattered clothes,
his heart is filled with pity but another force begins to operate on him. He has been separated from his wife for over a year and so he is sexually starved and feels the hunger for woman. Blinded by desire he grabs Kajoli and leads her to a meadow. Half-fancying, perhaps that she is his wife he mutters words of endearment and makes love to her. A piercing shriek from her awakens him to his senses and he finds that she is bleeding and unconscious. Stung by remorse and grateful that she is alive, he takes out whatever money he has, ties it to a corner of her sari and leaves the place in panic. Kajoli actually has an abortion. As she lies helpless and bleeding, a jackal comes near attracted by the smell of blood and elated at the prospect of eating up the prostrate and almost moribund body. She providentially saved from that fate by the arrival of little Onu who has been directed to the spot by the repentant soldier. Weak and defenceless himself, Onu somehow manages to drive away the jackal and brings his mother to the scene. This is the most harrowing episode in the whole novel. A critic safely ensconced in his study might be tempted to pooh-pooh the incident as sensational and exaggerated, but what matters is that it is credible to the imagination and has been handled by the novelist with feeling and restraint.

The repentant soldier tells an army doctor that some destitute woman is lying unconscious by the wayside and persuades him to give her professional aid. The kind doctor, after examining Kajoli and giving her first aid, suggests that she should be admitted into a hospital. He volunteers to take her and the family with him in his
vehicle. In a few hours Kajoli becomes a patient in a Calcutta hospital and her mother and Onu find themselves on the streets like so many other destitutes who have flocked to the city. The sad plight of these uprooted men, women and children is subject which captured the imagination and roused the indignation of Bhattacharya and which he goes back to in He Who Rides a Tiger. The subject deserves some attention and is discussed elsewhere. The existence of these miserable beings is at the lowest animal level imaginable. Boys fight with boys and sometimes with dogs for the possession of scraps of food. A few Relief Centres including one run by Rahoul provide boiled rice or rice gruel to limited numbers of destitute. The most sheltered lanes and pavements are used by these people for occupation. The luckier among them mercifully fall ill with dysentery or are hit by a Japanese bomb and are therefore taken to a hospital where they are looked after and fed until they are recovered. Kajoli’s mother is happy and grateful that she is at least temporarily in a hospital and conceals the plight of the son and herself from her, lest she should feel distressed.

Once she is discharged from hospital, Kajoli’s eyes are opened to the miserable plight in which she and her family are. The mother knows that Rahoul is somewhere in the city and is confident that he will help them if only they find him. But she does not know his address and Kajoli discourages her from making an attempt to find him because of her fear that he may not condescend to recognize or to help them. Ironically, Rahoul often thinks of them. He had written to their Baruni address but no reply had come. A money order sent by
him had been returned to him as the payee had already left the village. Once he passes by Onu when he is hunting for food in a rubbish-dump, but cannot recognize him. At another time, likewise, he sees the mother walking in the opposite direction, but neither recognizes the other.

Temptation comes to Kajoli as to countless other destitute women like her. A woman who sells betel-leaves and also runs a brothel offers her sixty or even eighty rupees if she agrees to become a prostitute. She spurns the offer, but the growing misery of their situation makes her toy with the idea of accepting the woman’s offer so that her mother and Onu may be fed. After days of anxious brooding and vacillation, she finally makes up her mind to sell herself. She takes the money from the jubilant woman and ties it up in a bit of gunny-bag which her mother usually keeps under her head at night. She has planned to go with the betel-woman early one morning. By an ironic coincidence her mother has planned to leave her children the same morning and to put an end to her life by jumping into the river from a bridge. Kajoli is the first to get up and she stealthily leaves the place. She joins the betel-seller and together they proceed towards a house of ill-fame for which the woman is obviously a procuress. On the way Kajoli hears some boys selling newspapers shouting the most important news of the day. There is to be a hunger-strike among the political prisoners at Dehra Dun. She also understands that her dear Devata is to be leader of the Satyagrahis. This news changes the entire course of her life and saves her from the jaws of degradation. She sees
the image of the revered old man before her mind’s eye and his parting advice given to the people of Baruni echoes in her ears.

With a pang of remorse she realizes that she has let him down and debased herself. A few casual words spoken by the betel-seller give her an idea. The woman remarks that a newspaper which contains such news will sell like hot cakes and that a boy could earn a commission of two annas by selling a dozen copies. Kajoli eagerly pounces on the idea and acts swiftly and firmly. She buys three dozen copies of the paper and tells the woman that she has changed her mind and will return her money – minus a loan for payment of deposit for the paper. The woman is astounded, but Kajoli calls her jackal-woman, slaps her on the face and leaves her gaping in amazement. This is Kajoli’s exit from the story; her future is left to the reader’s guess, but it is clear that she has grown to her full moral stature and chosen her path, which one may safely surmise, is the path of dignity and self-respect. Sorrow and suffering have not destroyed her spirit which remains unconquered and unconquerable.

Against the background of the nation’s struggle for freedom and the struggle of thousands of people for sheer survival, the novelist has portrayed a simple rustic character, which represents the noblest type of freedom – freedom of the spirit.

Society is not all bad. There are good elements in it which do not hesitate to come to the rescue of the famished and the desperate. The soldier who commits rape upon Kajoli, and the military doctor
who takes utmost care of her, are the symbols of the societal self. They are gifted with the fundamental human values. The soldier has ethical conscience. He feels deeply for crime he has perpetrated to this famished pregnant girl. But he feels a bit relieved and relaxed when he is able to save her by placing her in the hands of a military doctor. Thus, virtue compromises with vice and the individual self reconciles with the societal self. The character delivers itself from gross mundane values and rises above to evince its intrinsic nobility and goodness, its strength and endurance.

Bhattacharya presents a positive vision of life issuing out of the characters’ socio-moral and socio-ethical sense values. In *So Many Hungers!* is this sense that prevails over one’s utter feeling of desolation and desperation, culminating at times in self-abnegation or self-effacement. The serious and complex lifestyle has a bright side too.

In the hour of midnight the lone mother stood on the pavement of a strange city and saw bright silver streaking the edges of a massive pitch-black cloud. (SMH: 152)

The novelist has suggested the spiritual consolation and solace that human beings derive from the world of nature. The grief-stricken self harrowing in misery and despair gets solace from the natural objects. Thus, Kajoli’s mother is comforted and soothed by the sight of a swarm of fire-flies:
The mother gazed, and her heart was comforted by the tender beauty, and it was as though the tiny points of light were a sign, a message from the Image of Light. On to the city of a million Lights! The city of humanity. The city of civilized living. (SMH: 139)

Bhabani Bhattacharya is undoubtedly a prominent Indo-English fiction writer. He presents pestilence as hunger, not in fragments but in its wholeness. He not only delineates the gruesome scene of famine in Bengal, but depicts its physical and moral aspects in depth. He portrays a positive vision of life. In an interview with Sudhakar Joshi he says that

…the novel should have a social purpose. ²

His stories abound in social and historical realities, quite often bitter and gruesome, such as the Bengal famine of 1943, the tragedies of the freedom struggle and partition, and the evils of poverty, corruption, ignorance, superstition, exploitation, greed, sexual perversion, etc. Besides them, the novelist has a constant faith in life and its worthiness.
Music for Mohini

Music for Mohini portrays the intellectual and emotional development of the heroine, Mohini, from a care-free and sheltered girlhood to the position of a wife and the mistress of a prominent and influential house with great traditions. To the extent that, the novel is concerned with the development of a mind, it may be called a study in psychology. When the story begins, Mohini is a girl of seventeen, studying at school and growing up in a home where she is petted and given complete freedom. She is motherless and is brought up by her father who is referred to all through the novel as father or as the professor and her grandmother who also remains unchristened and is called Old Mother. In the opening chapter of the novel Mohini is shown competing with her younger brother, Heeralal, in the childish game of collecting English proper names which sound funny to Indian ears such as Silver Throne, Longstreet, Rainbird or Slaughter. At the end of the novel, she has been married for two or three years and is returning to her parent’s home for a first holiday, an expectant mother and lady of the Big House of Behula. One of the main themes in the novel is the process of her growth and maturation – the metamorphosis of the care-free girl into the life partner of a thoughtful idealist who desires to play his part in the building of the country’s future.

Music for Mohini is a novel of tensions – tensions between mind and body – the cravings of the flesh and the demands of the
spirit. It is a tension between the mind of the husband and the body of the wife, a tension between East and West, village and town, tradition and modernity, the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law. Marital discord between husband and wife form the thematic focus of the novel. Mohini and her husband, Jayadev, play their part, but at no time in their life, do they trust at a common point. Prof. Srinivasa Iyengar observes that it is the difference in the intellectual level of husband and wife and the consequences of this gulf forms the integral part of the theme of the novel.

At the commencement of the novel, Mohini is uninhibited, unaffected by any difficulty or worry and therefore radiantly happy. Life is a bed of roses for her. Old Mother and her father are affectionate and indulgent. In a typical scene, the brother and sister fight each other for fun in the absence of the father, but when he suddenly and unexpectedly enters the room, the boy pretends to be working on a sum and Mohini pretends to be reading a text-book on ancient India. His spontaneous reaction is to pull her ears one after the other as he has done in the case of Heeralal. This seems to be a great humiliation for Mohini, and the grand-mother is the first to notice it and speaks about it to the father. With her knowledge and experience of the world, she has noticed that Mohini is no longer a child but a woman and she urges on her son the need to get her married without much delay.
Bhattacharya brings out the fact that like other normal girls of her age she has begun to indulge in romantic fancies and to dream of being loved and in love. He also emphasizes through the delineation of two other juvenile characters, Bindu, the cook’s daughter who is only fourteen, and another girl in the neighbourhood whose boy-friend uses kites to send her love-letters secretly, that it is a sign of normal vitality for a young person to entertain thoughts of love. As a result of Old Mother’s prompting, several proposals for Mohini’s marriage are considered and the conventional inspection of the bride is carried out by a few parties. One proposal comes through the agency of a bangle-seller. A bangle-seller, like barber, has access to several families and his position thus makes him useful in Indian life as a match-maker. The bridegroom suggested is a handsome, well-educated and affluent young man in the late twenties by name Jayadev who is the head of an aristocratic family in the village, Behula, called the Big House.

His widowed mother, a staunch pillar of orthodoxy, has been pressing him to marry and the proposal of marriage to Mohini comes after the two horoscopes have been carefully compared and the planets found to be in favourable conjunction. Jayadev’s mother has approved of the match because she has ascertained that all the eight signs of luck such as figures of the wheel, the conch, and the elephant and so on are present on Mohini’s palm. She had made no secret of her determination earlier that she would accept as her daughter-in-law, only a girl who possessed all these signs.
Mohini’s father is reluctant to marry her to a person living in the countryside as he fears that she may not be able to accommodate herself to the conditions of life in a village with its taboos and restrictions. Old Mother, on the other hand, is insistent that the proposal should be accepted. She has been very favourably impressed by seeing a learned article written by Jayadev in a journal, Maya, and particularly by a photograph of the young man which shows him to be extremely handsome and graceful. Calcutta-bred Mohini has also been captivated by the photograph and has prepared herself mentally to leave the city and to live in Behula. The father in the end gives in to the wishes of his mother and his daughter, and the wedding is arranged even without Jayadev and Mohini seeing each other.

After the marriage ceremony which is described by Bhattacharya in considerable detail, Mohini goes to her new home with Jayadev, accompanied by Heeralal and the cook who are to keep her company for a few weeks. After the train journey, when the couple travels towards Behula first in a bullock-cart and then in a palanquin, the reader gets the distinct feeling that Mohini is being transported from a modernistic home in the city to another in the heart of rural Bengal dominated by orthodoxy, convention and ritual. The manner in which the bride is welcomed by the people of the village on the way, the rites with which she is received into her new home, all suggest to Mohini that she has entered a new world which involves new responsibilities. Her mother-in-law is a symbol of what the Big House has stood for all through its long history of many centuries.
After the loss of Jayadev’s father in a flood, the widowed mother has lived entirely for the Big House and the values that it represents. She is austere, dedicated and strong as steel. She has kept a pair of wooden sandals, which had been used by her late husband, in the family prayer-room and offers worship to them daily. The family eats only vegetarian food. This causes hardship to Mohini who is accustomed to eating fish. Many taboos make life colourless and monotonous. The ladies of the Big House are not to move out of the house on foot; when they must go anywhere they have to use either a palanquin or a bullock-cart.

We have a humorous exaggeration of the rigours of life in the Big House in the report which the cook makes to the old Mother and the Father on her return to Calcutta:

The little mother (Mohini) had nothing but herbs to eat. The tongue pined for fish with a riverful of fish almost within sight, and this the season for roes, the bellies of fish fat, and white with roes! The little mother was worn with toil. There was no sleep for her at night for the scream of jackals, *hua-hua-hua*, the hiss of pythons, the wolf prowl of bands of robbers yelling *reh-reh-reh*! The sun was a bare man-height in the skies when the little mother must be up and doing. The women of Behula mocked her city clothes and the mother-in-law was a tigress. (MFM: 129)

The main problem for Mohini in the Big House is that of mental adjustment. Even before two or three days have passed, she realizes that Jayadev is not what she would desire a husband to be.
Roughly speaking, Mohini stands for vitality, life, and her husband – at least one side of him – is anti-life. On the very first night, as soon as he enters the bed-chamber, he begins to speak to her pompously, in words that he has carefully rehearsed, trying to hide her idea of his lofty conception of the relationship between husband and wife.

Mohini is so much disappointed and angered by his behavior that she bites the flower garland adorning her neck tearing away the jasmine blossoms one after another. It is only when he notices her reaction that he realizes the foolishness and artificiality of his pose and warms up to her as a woman and as his wife.

Jayadev’s study of ancient lore has given him the idea that he and Mohini should be like the ancient sage, Yagnavalkya, and his intellectual wife, Maitreyi. He expects her to sympathize with and to share in his scholarly pursuits and to give him the necessary moral support to carry out his programmes of social reform. He is disillusioned very soon when he finds out that there is nothing of the scholar in her. She starts learning Sanskrit from him, but is tired of the exercise. Jayadev is disillusioned very soon and withdraws into the shell of reserve. He is kind to Mohini but does not always respect her feelings as a woman. Hardly three days after their arrival at Behula, he wanders away from the house at night, and when he returns and enters the bedroom, he finds her standing by the window singing a sad song about the lover who has cast away his beloved. The import of the song awakens him to a realization of his mistake and the plight.
What takes place in the mind of Jayadev is a see-saw movement, with the forces of life and anti-life tendencies alternately getting the upper hand. In this respect his character is a first sketch of that of Satyajit in *Shadow from Ladakh*. When the opposing forces within him struggle for supremacy he becomes confused and unhappy. He tells himself and he tells Mohini also that he would like her to be the saintly Maitreyi as long as he is engaged in his scholarly work and that when that work is over and he can return to normal life she can again become his Mohini. Briefly, the mistake of Jayadev is to assume that love on the spiritual plane and love on the physical plane can be kept apart. It takes time for him to learn that such ambivalence is not possible.

Mohini stands for life and therefore rebels against the coldness and artificiality of the pattern sought to be imposed on her. But she also has to learn and to grow. She understands as time passes that she also has to modify her stand and make adjustments if she is to play her role as a wife and as the mistress of an illustrious house. She has her duties to her husband. If she is unable to share his scholarly preoccupations, she can at least help in a practical way in furthering his programme of social work. She makes a significant beginning by conducting classes for the women of the village and giving them some elementary general education. Husband and wife now have a common interest in selfless public work; this sharing of interest brings them closer together and puts an end to the reserve on one side and
suspicion on the other. Gradually, good-matured but impulsive girl is transformed into an understanding and competent wife.

Mohini has her adjustments to make with her mother-in-law and the Big House too. The mother is personally very considerable and affectionate towards Mohini, but nevertheless expects her to conform to the time-honoured way of life. She makes the girl understand that now she is the mistress of the house by handing over to her the key of the safe in which all the money and jewellery is kept. At the same time she reminds her that she has to subject herself to a sort of reorientation. She discourages her from singing secular songs, advises her to wear only cotton saris and asks her to put on gold bangles in the place of the lovely glass and lac bangles that she loves. Time and again, the mother harps on the theme of the family traditions. The Big House at last becomes inhabited in Mohini’s imagination by the spirits of all the ancestors of Jayadev. The atmosphere becomes stifling for her and she craves for escape into light and freedom.

A crisis in Mohini’s life and in the life of the Big House itself comes when Jayadev is approaching the age of twenty-eight. As may be expected, the mother has staunch faith in horoscope. An astrologer has predicted that Jayadev will die an untimely death at this age unless a child is born to him by then. The mother is naturally most anxious that Mohini should become a mother in order to prevent the misfortune of Jayadev’s death and the greater calamity of the Big
House coming to its end through the lack of an heir. About two years after the marriage, when the mother guesses from the appearance and looks of Mohini that she is pregnant she is filled with gratitude and joy. In accordance with the practice in rural Bengal, she sticks a chip of bamboo to the braided hair to prevent any mishap. Mohini does not have faith in charms. As a result, she throws away the bamboo chip when the little boy, Ranjan, asks her why she is wearing it. The mother is vexed and angry, when she notices that the charm is missing, and asks her in anger: “Are you barren, then?” She also tells Mohini that the only way to save the family is to pray to the goddess of birth and to vow to give her a nose-ring set with pearls when her wish is fulfilled. If that is not enough, she should cut the skin of her bosom and offer blood to the goddess in a lotus-leaf bowl. The mother promises to join her in the sacrifice by offering her blood also, so that she may be blessed with a grandson. Mohini’s sophistication makes her rebel against the preposterous suggestion and she becomes very unhappy and restless. Jayadev comes to know about her predicament and gives her moral support by declaring that he has no faith in the astrologer’s prediction and that he does not wish her to bow to superstition by complying with his mother’s wish. At this critical stage, an accident takes place which affects the course of events. Jayadev is bitten by snake one day. Luckily the snake is non-poisonous and not harmful. The mother considers the snake-bite to be a warning and she urges on Mohini the need to placate the goddess immediately. Mohini’s acceptance of the ordeal is a measure of the
compromise she is now willing to make with orthodoxy and tradition in fulfillment of her role as the lady of the Big House. By an unexpected development the offering to the goddess is not made. Sudha, a frustrated girl who had dreams of marrying Jayadev and who cannot forgive Mohini, informs Jayadev about the blood-offering and he prevents it in the nick of time. This is a token that the son’s progressive attitude has at last defeated the mother’s orthodoxy. But ironically the defeat of orthodoxy coincides with its victory because Mohini has at last made the requisite adjustment within her mind. She has come to accept and to love the Big House and she is prepared to make any sacrifice to cherish its ideals – even the sacrifice of allowing her husband to marry her rival Sudha as his second wife in order to beget a son.

Fortunately for Mohini it becomes known that she is already pregnant. The danger of her being superseded by Sudha is removed and life once again becomes music for her. What is primary importance to note is the fact that she has re-established harmony within herself only by her psychological growth and her change of outlook. A slip of girl brought up in urban ways, has at last blossomed into a responsible woman, willingly and cheerfully undertaking the responsibility of guiding the destiny of a family with its roots of the past.

One of the major concerns of Bhattacharya in this novel is the need for a change of social outlook and reorientation of social values
in India. As a necessary corollary to his implied plea for change, he presents to the reader a picture of society today and invites attention to many beliefs and practices which have become strongly entrenched. Some of these concern with norms of personal etiquette, other relate to social behavior, while some other relate to religion. Orthodoxy is a phenomenon which covers all these aspects. The two strong pillars of orthodoxy depicted in the novel are Old Mother and Jayadev’s mother. The former is less flexible than the latter who is more capable of making concessions and showing tolerance. Old Mother condemns the recording of Mohini’s songs for commercial purposes. She had tried to prevent Mohini from being sent to an English convent School for study and even used the threat of renouncing the world and living in the Holy City of Benares, if she were to be overruled. Old Mother counsels rejection of a marriage proposal for the sole reason that the suitor’s friends who have come to see the bride smoke before elders and thus show disrespect. Mohini has the desire that Jayadev should visit their house just once so that she might see him and form an impression of him, but she knows that her grandmother would not bear such thing.

Bhattacharya mentions some social customs, norms and behaviors which have become strongly established. One such practice is that of a suitor’s friends or relatives inspecting the bride and subjecting her to an examination as if she were a candidate at an examination.
Music for Mohini contains references to some superstitious beliefs among the people of Bengal. Even the city-bred Heeralal interpreted the itching of his back as an omen of a sound beating to be received. Widowhood is regarded as inauspicious and, therefore, a widow is not to take part in the reception of a new bride into the household. A bamboo chip worn in the braided hair is imagined to ward off evil and to protect the pregnancy of a woman.

Bhattacharya is not an iconoclast who wants to demolish everything old in order to find room for something new. There is a core of conservatism in his thinking which is proved by the respect he shows for many of our traditional values. Regarding the place of woman in society and in the home, his attitude is not one of radical feminism. He is conscious of the fact that the Hindu woman has an ancient hunger to offer worship – that is worship to the husband. Marriage changes a girl’s attitude fundamentally; she no longer desires to live for herself and is willing to make the necessary sacrifices and adjustments that her situation demands. This is precisely what the heroine does in the novel. Old Mother narrates on one occasion how Mohini’s mother came from an affluent family but after marrying the struggling professor, she had accommodated herself to her lot and had borne her poverty with a smile.

To a Hindu woman as depicted in the novel, April is not the cruelest month. She does not seek barren love; the primary object of marriage is to beget children. Children alone make the survival and
perpetuation of traditions and values possible. Bhattacharya makes numerous references in the novel to the craving of a woman for children. In the light of the central importance attached to offspring, the quotation from the marriage mantra with which the seventh chapter closes:

“Either thy husband’s home with all lucky omens. Care for his servants and his cattle. May thine eyes be ever without anger. Care for the happiness of thy husband. May thy beauty be bright, thy mind full of good cheer. Worship thy gods. O Indra, king of all the gods, let this lady be the mother of heroic sons.” (MFM: 63)

During the brief period of agony and suspense when Mohini fears that she is not going to bear a child, she even prepares herself to tolerate a co-wife, Sudha in the interest of her husband and the family. This is a measure of the self-sacrifice that a wife is capable of. The novelist makes use of these details to emphasize the solidity and goodness of some of our traditions.

Music for Mohini presents us not only a picture of a microcosm governed by conventions, but also proclaims that below the placid surface, there is the simmering of discontent. The voice of protest is audible and we get the feeling that it will rise in volume and intensity till it is listened to.

The novel not only indicates that the old order is being challenged but also suggests the shape of things to come. Even the
gentle Professor, Old Mother’s childing, unfurls the banner of revolt when he is provoked. He insists on Mohini’s going to an English Convent School in spite of his mother’s usual threat.

Certain major social reforms are mentioned in the novel. Widow re-marriage is one of them. The old money-lender tries his best to marry a young girl. The reformist group intervenes and prevents the marriage. They canvass the idea that when a widower wishes to marry, he should be compelled to marry a widow. Man should not be given a privilege that is denied to woman. Another reform that is mentioned is the prevention of child marriages and the fixing of the lower age limit for a girl to be married at fourteen. Bhattacharya must have been aware while writing the novel that we have a law in our statute books called the Sharda Act but it does not seem to operate. The breaking down of barriers of caste and the elimination of untouchability are other major steps mentioned in the novel.

Being a novel which deals with a marriage and with life both in Calcutta and the countryside, Music for Mohini gives the author plenty of scope for description. The city figures only in the earlier part of the novel and since the incidents in this part take place mostly in the Professor’s house; there is not much room for description of city life. We have a picture of the street on which the house is situated. This is followed by a shrewdly perceptive description of the noisy peddlers and their cries.
This description concludes with the sentence:

The pavement barber, his scissors poised, planted himself in front of the corner-house cookshop named Glutton’s Inn, and yelled in a shrill voice; “Head four pice, chin two pice, armpits gratis!” (MFM: 19-20)
He Who Rides a Tiger

While the wealth of the country has been drained, while industrial and other outlets and development have been choked and thwarted, the agriculture which has been made the overburdened sole source of subsistence for the mass of the people has itself been placed under crippling conditions and condemned to neglect and deterioration. Herein, and not in any natural causes outside human agency or control nor in any mythical causes of a non-existent over-population, but in the socio economic conditions under imperialist rule lies the secret of the extreme poverty of the Indian people.

Kalo is a dark-skinned blacksmith in the small town, Jharna, competent in his trade, industrious and ambitious. His pretty wife dies of child-birth. The baby daughter named, Chandra Lekha – a name casually suggested by the priest when he came to the smithy for some work before the confinement. As the girl grows under the tender case of the rough artisan, she displays unusual intelligence and she has inherited her mother’s good look. Kalo sends her to the local English Convent School where her presence is frowned upon by the girls belonging to the higher castes. Kalo is criticized for his presumptuousness both by the high-caste people and the people at his level. As Chandra Lekha moves up from one class to another at school, her father is filled with pride and joy. He is at times conscious of his own mental backwardness and desires to improve himself by reading his daughter’s books at night when she is asleep. In her final year at school, Chandra Lekha takes part in an all-State essay-writing
competition, and to the great joy of her father, her essay is adjudged the best and she gets a gold medal. Kalo takes it out of its casket every day and spends some time fondly looking at it. The features which are clearly brought out in the story of his age are the low station occupied by father and daughter and their consciousness of it, the girl’s unusual cleverness and attainments and the touching tenderness of their mutual affection.

The shadow of the Bengal famine now begins to fall over Jharna town. Food grains become scarce and unemployment becomes more and more acute. Weavers and other tradesmen set their implements for a pittance and leave the town. Kalo does not find enough work and his hammer and blowpipe which he affectionately calls Thunderbolt and Swollen Cheek, become idle. Petty traders from the cities take advantage of the situation and buy implements and house-hold articles at bargain prices. Agents from brothels also roam from place to place trying to snare away good-looking and impoverished girls. One such agent talks to Chandra Lekha when she is alone in the house in insinuating language and for the time being induces her to sell a pair of gold bangles that she is wearing.

The plague washed up in fierce tides. Bengal was dying. Jharna was dying. Kalo sat idly in his workshop and watched the road. People were flying from the hungry town. Many were going to the capital city to seek a living. He watched for customers but none came. The
people had exchanged their pots and pans, furniture and trinkets for fistfuls of food grain. Twenty cartloads of household utensils had moved out of town. Traders were still a-prowl with small rice bags and cash. (HWRT: 20)

Kalo surveys the whole position and decides to go to Calcutta where he hopes to find work in some smithy or workshop. He leaves his daughter with a heavy heart in the care of an old aunt. He has no money even to buy a railway ticket; all that he has with him is a small bundle of clothes and some treacled riceballs.

Travelling on the foot-board of a train, he is tempted to steal some bananas from a carriage when he is ravenously hungry. He is arrested and tried for this offence. The magistrate is very harsh and unimaginative. When Kalo pleads that he stole so as to preserve his life for the sake of his family, the magistrate asks, why did you have to live? Kalo is sentenced to three month imprisonment with hard labour and taken to jail.

In the prison Kalo shares a cell with a young man from Calcutta whose real name is revealed to be Bikash Mukherji at the end of the novel but who, like all other prisoners, is known in the prison by his number, B-10. B-10 is under sentence of imprisonment for the offence of having protested against a policeman beating up and killing a hungry destitute in the city who had stood before an eating-place and stared at the food. A bond of sympathy is immediately established between the two men. B-10 transmits his revolutionary fervor to Kalo
and convinces him that the right answer to a society which has shown so much inhuman callousness is to hit back. Very casually he mentions to Kalo one of several ways in which to retaliate; the way is to fake a miracle, to get a temple raised by exploiting the gullibility of people and to make fools of them by making them worship a bogus image. This idea lurks in the soil of Kalo’s mind to germinate and to sprout into a mighty tree in due course of time.

In depicting the life of Kalo during the period immediately following his release from prison, Bhattacharya gives a harrowing account of the plight of the destitute in Calcutta. Many of the details given in *So Many Hungers!* are repeated in the present book and others of an equally lurid type are added. Kalo is unable to find work as a blacksmith. He lives miserably for some time by carrying the corpses of the destitute into municipal trucks. One of his first acts after arriving in Calcutta is to write to Lekha telling her that he is in the city and vaguely mentioning that he has suffered greatly. He does not wish to cause her distress by revealing the truth. Even the loathsome job of carrying dead bodies becomes less lucrative because of competition. Kalo now remembers what the brothel agent had told him at Jharna, namely that if even he was in trouble about finding a job, he could seek to help of one Rajani Bose who would give him work and fair wages. Having no alternative, he seeks and finds this man. The work that he offers is that of procurer for a group of brothels in the city. Kalo reluctantly takes up the work, begins to earn unexpectedly high wages and is able to make a handsome remittance.
to Lekha at home. At this juncture an incident takes place which marks a turning point in his life.

One night, in one of the brothels for which he has been working as tout, he sees a rich customer entering one of the rooms. Immediately after that he hears the plaintive, protesting cries of a woman. The voice sounds strangely like that of Chandra Lekha. Within a couple of minutes the customer leaves the room in anger. Driven by a strange foreboding, Kalo enters the room to find to his horror that the girl is none other than his daughter. Not willing to lose a moment lest the keeper of the house should block their way, he hurriedly leads her out of the hell and takes her to his poor habitation. She has undergone a nightmarish experience but her honour is unsullied. She tells her father how the woman had decoyed her to the city with the false story that he had met with an accident, was in hospital and had sent for her. She had resisted the woman and refused to submit to degradation. The cruel woman had lashed her on the back with a whip and tried to break down her resistance. Her father had arrived in time and saved her. The tale told by her touches the tenderest chords in him. The meanness and cruelty shown by unscrupulous exploiters rouses his indignation.

He remembers the oft-repeated words of B-10 in prison:

We are the scum of the earth. The boss folks scorn us because they fear us. They hit us where it hurts badly – in the belly. We’ve got to hit back. (HWRT: 73)
The society has now hurt him not merely in the belly but in the soul. He must have his revenge.

In one of the suburbs of the city a vast crowd has assembled to witness a promised miracle. The man who has foretold the miracle is sitting in an attitude of fervent prayer, occasionally sprinkling water on the ground. A young girl is seated by his side. Both wear robes pertaining to an ascetic order. The holy man has had a dream that at a certain hour an image of Lord Shiva will miraculously rise from the earth. A temple is to be built on the spot to bring the solace of religion to the people of the great city. The man has a striking resemblance with Kalo because he is Kalo himself. He wears the sacred thread like a Brahmin. The girl by his side is Chandra Lekha. The promised miracle takes place and a stone image of Shiva – the phallic image – slowly emerges from the ground. The onlookers are thrilled and happy because the god has chosen this spot in the city as a habitation. A large group of destitute is also among the audience. They have the hope that at least the deity will put an end to all their sorrows and tribulations.

Food! Food! Food for the hungry! The cry filled the air of the great city. Something had seized the people so that their apathy was broken. Great demonstrations were to be seen in the streets almost every day. They were not composed of down-and-outs; among the hunger marchers, as Biten called them, were men from workshops, students from colleges, clerks from offices. Volunteers took their turn to march. Biten had joined two
or three of these processions, and it appeared that he belonged to a Committee that directed them. (HWRT: 166)

The next development is the erection and inauguration of a temple on the hallowed spot. Money and materials pour in from all sides, especially from the black-marketeers and speculators for whom worship is an atonement for all sins committed and a guarantee of success in future undertakings. A magnificent temple is built and it attracts a large number of worshippers. Kalo, already wearing the sacred thread and passing for a Brahmin, also assumes a recognizably Brahmin name, Mangal Adhikari. A pujari is appointed as Kalo knows little about the ritual of worship and has, anyway to pretend to be so concerned with more important matters that he has no time for pedestrian work. 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, become 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 the new Brahmin forget the friend and benefactor who had given him the idea of the temple, namely B-10. 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. He meets B-10 as he comes out of the 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 also 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 he will tire of the game in course of time. Kalo has over-reached himself and while deceiving the society that he hates, he is also deceiving himself. He has more or less persuaded himself that he is a Brahmin. Truly he is now riding a tiger and cannot get down from its back. He is playing Brahminic role with gusto. On the contrary, Lekha goes about her new work quietly without showing any elation or exuberance. Mangal Adhikari once rebukes a destitute for having touched him and thereby polluted him. He notices that his friend B-10 and Lekha are in love with each other. He would approve of this 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. He does not disclose even his real name, and suggests that he may be called Biten – which is only B-10 with a slight modification. Biten is re-employed at the garage where he had previously worked and he visits his friends frequently.

We are given indications by the author that in spite of his best attempts to assimilate Brahminism, Kalo remains in his heart of hearts the simple blacksmith. He insists on doing his true work by himself. He converts the top story 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, Vishwanath, who comes to beg as a destitute.

Kalo gives him work as gardener and tells him that he will set him up as a blacksmith in due course of time. He also takes to his home a destitute boy who has been separated from his parents and stranded in the city and gives him the Brahmin name Obhijit. Lekha is very fond of the boy whom she treats as a younger brother and wants to bring up in the ways of respectability. Vishwanath has no faith in the temple. His approach is logical and humanitarian. He creates a storm in the temple by one of his characteristic acts. According to usage, the milk that has been used for the ritual bath given to the image every day is collected and thrown into the sacred Ganga. Vishwanath begins to steal the milk and distribute it after boiling, to destitute children in the neighbourhood. This is considered as sacrilege. Mangal Adhikari is touched by the humanity of the gesture and supports Vishwanath. The trustees and the worshippers who pay for the milk through endowments create a chaos but he rides out a storm and finally establishes the custom of using the sanctified milk for feeding the hungry children.

Mangal Adhikari is faced with a serious problem concerning Lekha. She is of marriageable age and as the Manager of a prosperous temple he has to find a suitable Brahmin bridegroom for her. He suggests to Biten that he should wear the sacred thread and call
himself a Brahmin so that he may marry Lekha without shocking public opinion, but the later is obstinate in his refusal. The person who suffers most is Lekha. She has become bored with the game of make-believe that her father and she have been playing. Therefore she goes about her duties in the temple mechanically without the least enthusiasm. Once when Biten and she are together alone, he declares his love and is about to embrace her. This gesture has the psychological effect of producing revulsion and fear in her as it reminds her of her painful experience in the brothel when the rich owner of a jute mill tried to make love to her. Noticing her reaction and mistaking to be a sign of coldness, Biten leaves her and does not reappear till near the end of the novel. Lekha has been so far idealizing and worshipping him but now she had realized that her golden image has feet of clay. Biten is no more a god, but he has awakened the woman in her. She is troubled in mind to find that her father has apparently lost his original simplicity and rectitude. She is unhappy about the hypocritical part, she too has been playing. It has become difficult, indeed, for them to dismount from the tiger’s back. In her desperate need for some solace she throws her heart and soul into her work in the temple and feels genuine piety. Bhattacharya suggests through this that genuine faith and worship are states of mind which can be induced. A temple which has been erected on fraud can become true temple even to the perpetrator of the fraud. The phenomenon is parallel to that depicted in R.K. Narayan’s novel, The Guide, where the tourist guide an ex-convict turned into a Swami, gets
into a state of mind where he becomes a true man of God at least momentarily.

Lekha’s position in the temple makes her so venerable in the eyes of the congregation, that people at last wish to deify her and install her as the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss. She agrees and the elaborate preparation for the ritual begins. In the meantime, Motichand, a greedy and hypocritical Trustee of the temple who has got rid of two wives and is living with the third, casts his eyes on Lekha. He thinks she will make an excellent fourth wife. When he makes the proposal, both Kalo and Lekha are scandalized. Lekha, however, has second thoughts. The burden of her present position has become too intolerable for her, but since her father shows no signs of quitting the game, she decides to sacrifice her life’s happiness into his 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.

The finale to the drama comes with Kalo’s realization that his beloved child is about to ruin herself for his sake. The shock of this realization opens his eyes. He sees himself and his moral falls. He had stated with the idea of revenge but has deceived not only his supposed enemies, but his own inner-self. His desire for integrity which had been present in his mental make-up all the time now reasserts itself. He decides to act and to act dramatically. On the day of the ceremony for the installation of the Mother, when the whole congregation is
assembled and Mangal Adhikar is asked to make a speech, he stuns everyone by revealing his true story that he is no Brahmin and the temple no true temple. He graphically describes how he faked the miracle of the image of Shiva sprouting from the ground. The image which he had got made had been placed on the top of a tin containing two seers of gram and both had been covered with earth. When the water sprinkled on the ground by the man of God had soaked down to the tin and made the gram germinate, the stone image had been gradually pushed up. The revelation produces diverse reactions among the audience. Some wants to beat him up, some suggest legal action and the prince of blackmarketeers, Sir Abalabandhu, wishes he had a man of genius like Kalo to assist him in his business. A large number of destitute and men of the lower castes have stationed themselves in the rear. They are all thrilled and happy that one of their classes has outwitted the so-called superior caste. Vishwanath and Biten are also with them. They raise the cry, Victory to our brother, which resounds like a war-cry. The presence of this crowd unnerves the orthodox who are powerless to do anything. In the meantime Kalo has learnt that Biten is a Brahmin by birth who has repudiated his caste because of domestic tragedy and his real name is Bikas Mukerjee. Biten congratulates him and tells him that his story would be legend of freedom one day.

At the end Kalo and Lekha walk out of the temple forever presumably go back to their own way of life, seeking the peace which is the fruit of being true to one's own self.
Meenaskhi Mukerjee compares Kalo with Raju in The Guide. She states,

“Both (He Who Rides a Tiger and The Guide) are stories of a man who deceives society by passing for a spiritual man, in both the man is carried away by his deception until a point comes when it is difficult to undo the enormous lie. But the superficial similarity hides a very fundamental difference. If both of these novels deal with the theme of a man, wearing a mask, in one the man at the end throws, away the mask and goes back where he began. In the other the man finds it more and more difficult to tear off the mask until he finds that the mask has become his face. In Bhattacharya’s book Kalo’s deception is a deliberate act of revenge against society. Raju in The Guide on the other hand, drifts into the role of a Sadhu will-nilly, and once he finds himself cast in the role of an ascetic he attempts to perform the act with gusto, partly for the sake of self-preservation, partly because it suits his personality wonderfully.”

One of the concerns of the novelist is the sketching of the background. The background of He Who Rides a Tiger is partly political and mainly economic and social. The Quit India Movement, people being imprisoned for the crime and loving their country, defiance of bans, hunger strikes in jails, are the reminders in the novel of the political situation in the country. That World War II and the threat of a Japanese invasion also form part of the background is suggested by the presence of British soldiers in the city. The casual attitude of the thoughtless British soldiers to the spectacle of hunger
and their enjoyment of boys fighting for crumbs of bread suggest the image of India they are forming and that they will carry with them when they leave the country.

The Bengal Famine of 1943 which figures prominently in So Many Hungers! is present here also and forms the springboard for the main action of the story. Adequate measures have not been taken for the defiance of the country against the Japanese. There is no rationing of food grains and no attempt at price control or checking of cornering. Boats have been destroyed as a precautionary measure. The helplessness of the people of the countryside is revealed by their frantic attempts to reach Calcutta.

In short, He Who Rides a Tiger is a novel of revolt and revenge as well as self-expiation. It deals with the theme of East-West encounter. While speaking of the 1943 famine that ravaged Bengal and left millions of people either dead or diseased, Bhabani Bhattacharya makes a specific mention of the Second World War that, among other factors, was largely responsible for the outbreak of this famine. And it is here that, in a particular context, the novelist speaks of the East and The West, of the Indian technology as it was in the hoary past and the West’s acquisition of it in the present age:

The world had plunged into a mighty war, like the one the epic Ramayana described. Western man had found the buried secrets of ancient Indian’s arms and weapons: the Viman, aerial cars, battling from cloud cover; the Sabdavedi, cannon balls flying to a target by
sound; the *Brahmastra*, a wonder missile, which burst and released a mist that put a whole army to sleep. (HWRT: 24)

**REFERENCES:**


