

**Exploring the Many Facets of Hunger: A Thematic Analysis of Bhabani
Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers***

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Paper Received on 08-06-2025, Accepted on 10-07-2025
Published on 10-07-25; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.3.118

Abstract

This article explores the themes of hunger, human values, moral dignity, realism vs. idealism, human degradation, rural suffering, moral dignity, sacrifice and survival, and social commentary in Bhabani Bhattacharya's novel *So Many Hungers*. *So Many Hungers* was Bhattacharya's debut novel, and despite being his first, he crafted it into a work of monumental stature. The novel garnered him considerable praise and stood as a turning point in his development as a literary figure. The novel, set against the backdrop of the Bengal famine and the Quit India Movement, provides a poignant depiction of the human condition and societal structures during this period. Bhattacharya, as a realist uses hunger as a metaphorical framework to interrogate both individual and collective struggles.

Keywords: Struggles, social alienation, famine, isolation, ethical resilience, and sacrifice and survival.

Introduction:

A profound theme that many authors from various eras have explored in literature is the depiction of hunger. It often symbolises not only a physical lack but also a deeper, more existential yearning. For instance, in modernist literature, hunger is intricately linked with themes of subjectivity, isolation, modernity, and social alienation. Works by authors like Melville, Kafka, Hamsun, and Wright use hunger to reflect on the writer's role in modern society and the pursuit of knowledge or a different way of perceiving reality.

Knut Hamsun's novel *Hunger* is a notable example where the protagonist's experience of starvation on the streets of Kristiania (now Oslo) is depicted with an intensity that broke away from the conventions of the naturalist novel of the 19th century. This work is recognised as an early example of modernist aesthetics and emphasises the affective experience of the body.

McFarlane wrote in 1956, in *Hunger* 'it is as though some of the catch-phrases in Europe some twenty-five or thirty or so years later... were being rehearsed by him' (568). Perhaps most important of these 'catch-phrases' Hamsun's pioneering emphasis on the affective experience of the body. Moreover, hunger in literature can also be seen as a metaphor for various forms of spiritual and emotional starvation, such as the hunger for divine truth or the artist's hunger for expression. In contemporary literature, authors like J. M. Coetzee and Helen Oyeyemi have continued to explore this motif, often linking it to broader social and political issues. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is another example where the motif of hunger drives the action and plot, reflecting the essential role of eating in human life and the universal struggle for survival. These literary works demonstrate that hunger, whether as a physical condition or a metaphorical one, remains a powerful force in shaping narratives and exploring the human condition. It creates a space for readers to engage with the complexities of desire, deprivation, and the search for fulfilment in both material and immaterial forms.

Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers* is a profound exploration of the human condition amidst socio-political turmoil. The novel delves into the various 'hungers' experienced by the characters: the literal hunger for food, the hunger for freedom from colonial rule, and the hunger for human dignity and values. This paper aims to analyse these themes and their representation in the novel.

Hunger and death

Hunger and death are two profound and interconnected realities that have affected humanity throughout history. Hunger, the painful sensation caused by a lack of food, is not just a physical condition but also a social and political phenomenon that reflects the inequalities in our world. It is both a cause and consequence of poverty, and it often leads to death when it becomes severe and prolonged. The characters in the novel *So Much Hunger* explore the concepts of hunger and deprivation. The death of a man due to a lack of food not only represents a premonition of widespread suffering, but it also highlights the fact that he died from starvation. This was reported briefly in the news but largely went unnoticed.

The man's death is a result of food scarcity, a prominent symbol of the widespread suffering and impending hunger crisis looming over society. This incident is not merely isolated; it serves as a grim warning of the many systemic issues of poverty and socio-political turmoil. These issues affect not only the rural

population but also seem to particularly impact the Bengali people during the time of the Quit India movement and World War Two.

The novel also explores various forms of hunger, including a literal hunger for food and a metaphorical hunger for freedom. This exploration underscores human dignity and values. The physical hunger that ravages the body is a stark reminder of other forms of hunger. It effectively portrays the characters in the novel.

Hunger is a contentious theme in modernist literature, and this study addresses its relevance in the works of four major American and European writers. Taking an in-depth look at works by Melville, Kafka, Hamsun, and Wright, it argues that hunger is deeply involved with concepts of modernity and modern literature. (Rees 5)

The man's death, sadly unnoticed, reflects societal indifference to the plight of the poor and marginalised. It underscores the theme that the suffering of one is a premonition of the suffering of many. As clearly seen, hunger does not discriminate and can affect anyone in times of crisis. The author uses realism to reflect the harsh realities of life in India during this period. He focuses on portraying characters who struggle with hunger and their quest for a dignified life amidst political upheaval and war. This portrayal provides a vivid picture of Indian society.

The novel can be seen as a close observation of the human condition. It emphasises that the spirit of suffering is among the masses. Even though they have been tested by extreme adversity, they remain resilient through all the sorrows and problems they face. In essence, the death due to hunger is not only a microcosm of the larger narrative, but it also shows the fight against deprivation and aspirations for a better life. These are the central themes in the novel. This narrative resonates with the universal human experience, showing the struggle and desire for a life of dignity. These concepts are indeed portrayed in the novel.

Human Values

The next concept examined in the novel is that of human values. These values are explored through the characters' responses to extreme conditions of hunger and poverty. The novel delves into the moral and ethical choices individuals make when faced with moral atrocities. It portrays the struggle to maintain dignity, compassion, and integrity in the face of dehumanising hunger. Even in the popular *Hunger Games* series this concept is prevalent:

The changing of rules and situations of the games cannot be separated from the characters presented in the story, which can also be defined as the changing of social values of what considered to be important or not in a society. The social values refer here are values or Americans since the setting is a country that rises up out the ashes of a place that was once called North America. (Sriastuti 14)

The quote highlights the theme of maintaining one's humanity and values in the face of adversity, such as hunger in this case. In the Hunger Games series, the characters are forced to navigate changing rules and situations that reflect shifting social values. This struggle for dignity, compassion, and integrity is a central focus in the story, mirroring the challenges individuals face when societal norms are upended. Similarly, one of the central characters, Rahoul, embodies the hunger for human values. Despite his father's materialistic ambitions surrounding him, Rahoul is drawn towards the ideals of the Quit India movement and Gandhian principles. His character represents the hunger for a just and equitable society where human values triumph over greed and exploitation. There is often an argument that rich people are greedy and do not care for the poor, and that the poor are so preoccupied with their poverty that they cannot think of anything else. However, the author tries to strike a balance, showing that even people with a bit of money can care for others.

Another character, Kajoli, is a peasant woman who represents the hunger for survival and the need for basic dignity in life. The journey she undertakes and the choices she faces highlight the struggles to preserve humanity and the desperation of the marginalised. The novel captures this through her experience with the bread given to her by a soldier. This not only underscores the permanent nature of these struggles but also emphasises the resilience of those facing them.

Instantly, she dug her teeth into the lump, swallowing swiftly, not chewing, not lingering for the feel of bread on her tongue, and swallowing hard. And the soldier clacked his tongue with pity, for his heart was warm. He watched her. In a minute, the bread was all gone, and then the realisation burst upon her that she had eaten all; nothing was left for her brother, and her mother nothing. (Bhattacharya 144)

In this quote, the protagonist is shown devouring the bread quickly and without savouring it, highlighting the desperation and hunger she and her family are facing. The soldier's pity for her reflects the stark contrast in their living conditions. The realisation that she has eaten all of the bread and left nothing for her family emphasises the harsh reality of scarcity and survival during times of conflict.

So Much Hunger critiques the loss of human values and societal degradation, as seen in the character of Sindraba Boss. This character not only profits from the war and famine but also showcases the degradation of values in the pursuit of wealth and power. It is a powerful narrative that uses the backdrop of the Bengal famine and the current moment to explore the various hungers that drive human beings. It illustrates the hunger for freedom, food, and modern values. The novel serves as a reminder of the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring importance of human values, even in the darkest of times.

Moral Dignity

The next concept examined in the novel *So Much Hunger* is moral dignity. This central theme reflects a character's struggle to maintain humanity and self-

respect amidst extreme poverty and hunger. The characters do not abandon or compromise their moral obligations, even in the face of absolute hunger. The Bengal famine and the current moment occur simultaneously, presenting numerous moral choices and ethical dilemmas for individuals.

For example, the character of Rahoul represents the moral dignity of an individual who chooses to align with the values of the current moment, despite his father's materialistic ambitions. Rahoul's choice to pursue a path of non-violence and support for his countrymen, even at the cost of personal sacrifice, highlights the theme of moral dignity. He is described as having full faith in the values of life, which is evident in his actions and beliefs throughout the novel.

Without a doubt, Ghazali, who is Rahoul's girl, seems to embody moral dignity through her resilience and determination to survive without compromising her values in any way. Despite dire circumstances, she resists the temptation to sell herself, choosing instead to maintain dignity and self-respect. Her struggle is a permanent representation of the rural population's fight against dehumanisation.

The novel does not shy away from depicting the loss of moral dignity under any circumstances. Characters such as Samarendra Bose, who profits from the war and famine, show how hunger and greed can lead to moral degradation. Babani uses these contrasting characters to explore the complex relationship between hunger and moral dignity. He ultimately emphasises the resilience of the human spirit in maintaining ethical integrity, even in the most trying of times. While the search did not yield direct quotes from the novel related to moral dignity, the themes are true. There are many other incidents in the novel that illustrate the struggle for the preservation of moral dignity in the face of adversity.

Realism vs. idealism

The next concept in the novel *So Much Hunger* is realism versus idealism. This is a key theme that reflects the contrasting attitudes and approaches of the characters. Given the complex time in which the novel is set, realism is depicted through the unflinching portrayal of the famine's impact on the people of Bengal. The narrative does not shy away from showing the grim reality of starvation and the struggle for survival. This is evident in the detailed description of the suffering and moral degradation that hunger can cause, as well as the exploitation by those who profit from the famine.

On the other hand, idealism is represented through characters like Rahoul and Devesh Bose, who embody aspirations for a better society. They are driven by a hunger for justice, freedom, and human dignity. This stands in stark contrast to the materialistic and self-serving attitudes of characters like Bose. Rahoul, for instance, is torn between his father's ambitions for him and his own desire to contribute to the Quit India Movement.

Here, one can see the impact of idealism. The reality is that people are starving on the streets. Interestingly, the poor are more concerned with realism, whereas the affluent are more idealistic. The novel captures the tension between these two forces and showcases realism and idealism through its characters and interactions. The author uses the stories to explore how individuals respond to the challenges posed by their environment and their own moral compass.

The novel includes direct quotes that show how hunger had debased a warm, innocent spirit, turning him into a hoarder. This illustrates the impact of hunger on individuals. As the famine stalks through the land, villagers begin to die of hunger. Destitute people leave their villages and march towards big cities in the hope of getting food. The mendicant's daughter, Kajoli, her mother, and her little brother, Anu, also join this endless cavalcade of starving masses.

Human Degradation

The next concept is human degradation. The novel profoundly explores the impact of extreme poverty. It portrays dire circumstances, showing the desperation where survival becomes the sole focus, often at the cost of moral and ethical standards. The characters in the novel experience a loss of self and are forced to confront the most basic instincts of hunger and survival.

This degradation is not only physical, as it also shows people wasting away on skeletons due to a lack of food. Moreover, societal structures and relationships that uphold human dignity break under the strain of widespread starvation. The characters in the novel experience a loss of self-worth and are forced to confront the most basic instincts of hunger and survival. This degradation is not only physical, as people waste away to skeletons due to lack of food, but also moral, as the societal structures and relationships that uphold human dignity break down under the strain of widespread starvation. While the search did not yield direct quotes from the novel, the theme of human degradation is central to its narrative. For instance, the character of Kajoli and her family's struggle to survive is a poignant example of this theme.

Rural Suffering

The next concept is rural suffering. Rural Suffering paints a harrowing picture of the experiences in villages. The novel *So Much Hunger* not only portrays the plight of the rural population with stark realism, but it also brings to light the physical and emotional toll. One of the most potent depictions of global suffering in the novel is the journey of Kajoli and her family. The novel describes the desperation of the villagers as well. The farmers, who once fed well, now go into business. "The famished ones must feed well before they go into business—feed on rice, ghee, and milk, so that their bones may put on meat. Hair to be rid of lice, smoothed. There are a hundred other details. It pays. There is no better investment in the whole money market. (Bhattacharya 176)

The quote highlights the extreme poverty and desperation faced by the villagers in the novel. It emphasises the physical toll that hunger and malnutrition take on their bodies, as well as the emotional toll of trying to survive in such harsh conditions. The mention of investing in their physical appearance shows how even basic necessities like food and hygiene become luxuries for these villagers. Overall, the quote underscores the immense suffering and struggle that characterise their daily lives.

Sacrifice and Survival

Another concept in the narrative is a powerful reminder of the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. The rural suffering depicted in *So Much Hunger* serves as a microcosm. The final concept is sacrifice and survival. The novel portrays the many sacrifices that individuals and families make to survive. One of the most striking examples of sacrifice is seen in the character of Ken Kajoli. In a moment of extreme hunger, she consumes an entire piece of bread given to her by a soldier. She swiftly bites into the lump without chewing or lingering. This passage highlights the instinctual drive for survival that can override even the most deeply held values, such as the importance of family. The casual sacrifice of moral goals in the face of starvation serves as a powerful illustration of human guilt. The novel also seems to explore the broader sacrifices made by the rural population as they leave their homes and traditions. It's not only a potent reminder of the resilience of the human spirit, but it also shows that they can survive.

As the war progresses, he collects rice, hoards it, and later sells it at a very high price. He has plans for his eldest son, Rahoul, too. He is proud of his son's D.Sc. degree in astronomy from Cambridge University and wants him to be in the highest post of technical adviser in New Delhi so that he may use scientific knowledge to invent a highly destructive weapon. Rahoul's heart is, however, set elsewhere. Having come under the influence of his grandfather earlier, he is drawn towards Gandhiji's Non-Cooperation Movement. While pretending to do research on the Death Ray, he works secretly for the Quit India Movement¹.

Social Commentary

The final aspect of the social commentary in *So Much Hunger* is the author's examination of societal structures and the impact of historical events. The novel provides a contemporary perspective on the Bengal famine. The character of Samaritan Bose, an affluent barrister and businessman, represents the opportunistic elements of society that profit from the sufferings of others. This contrast serves as a boundary and a model for the loss of human values. As the story progresses, Samarendra Bose collects rice and later sells it at a very high price. His pranks and gatherings at his house, as well as his earlier influence from his grandfather, draw him towards Gandhi's non-cooperation movement. While pretending to do research on a death ray, he secretly works for the crypto movement. The novel also comments on the plight of the villagers, who are depicted as the true victims of the famine, and the socio-political upheavals of the time. Their sufferings and the disruptions of their

traditional way of life are portrayed with empathy and realism. As the famine sweeps through the land, the villagers begin to die of hunger. They are destitute and leave their villages en masse towards big cities in the hope of getting food. The daughter of a mini lecturer, as well as a mother, joins this endless cavalcade of starving masses. Through these narratives, the author seems to critique many societal ills and call for action from those advocating for social justice and reform. The portrayal of the various angles of food failure particularly reflects the multifaceted nature of human suffering and hunger.

Conclusion

Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers* is a profound exploration of the human condition amidst socio-political turmoil. The novel delves into the various 'hungers' experienced by the characters: the literal hunger for food, the hunger for freedom from colonial rule, and the hunger for human dignity and values. The novel serves as a reminder of the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring importance of human values, even in the darkest of times. It provides a contemporary perspective on the Bengal famine and the Quit India Movement, offering a poignant depiction of the human condition and societal structures during this period. The novel's exploration of themes such as hunger, human values, moral dignity, realism vs. idealism, human degradation, rural suffering, sacrifice and survival, and social commentary provides a rich tapestry of the human experience. It underscores the complexities of desire, deprivation, and the search for fulfilment in both material and immaterial forms. The novel serves as a powerful social commentary, critiquing the loss of human values and societal degradation. Through its vivid portrayal of characters and their struggles, the novel invites readers to reflect on enduring human values and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. It stands as a testament to the power of literature to illuminate the human condition and foster empathy and understanding.

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