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Reclaiming the Silenced: A Subaltern Reading of Bhabani Bhattacharya's Fictional Universe

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Abstract

This paper explores the subaltern dimensions in the fiction of Bhabani Bhattacharya, one of the most potent voices in Indian English literature. Through a critical analysis of select novels, particularly *So Many Hungers!*, *He Who Rides a Tiger*, and *Shadow from Ladakh*, this study investigates Bhattacharya's engagement with the marginalized and silenced communities in postcolonial India. Employing the Subaltern Studies framework, as articulated by scholars such as Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak, and Partha Chatterjee, the paper examines how Bhattacharya destabilizes dominant narratives by foregrounding the voices of peasants, women, fakirs, and outcastes. The research argues that Bhattacharya not only depicts suffering but also documents resistance, agency, and the complex negotiation of identity by subaltern figures. His literary imagination constructs an alternative historiography from below, countering hegemonic representations of nation, progress, and modernity.

Keywords: Subaltern Studies, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Postcolonial India, Marginalization, Resistance, Voice, Agency, Fiction

Introduction: Literature as a Voice for the Voiceless

Bhabani Bhattacharya occupies a distinct position in Indian English literature for his deep engagement with the oppressed and underprivileged classes of society. His works center on the everyday struggles of those traditionally silenced in official histories—peasants, women, outcastes, and refugees—thus lending literary voice to the subaltern. The Subaltern Studies collective, particularly Ranajit Guha, critiques the dominant historiographical tradition that privileges elite narratives and seeks to

recover the autonomous domain of subaltern agency (*On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India* 3).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's landmark essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" complicates the notion of voice and agency, arguing that in many cases the subaltern is not merely silenced but rendered unintelligible by dominant discourses (287). In this context, Bhattacharya's fiction provides an imaginative space where silenced subjects resist erasure. His novels offer nuanced depictions of class, caste, gender, and colonial/postcolonial power structures, wherein subalterns are not passive recipients of suffering but active participants in their own histories.

As Bell Hooks observes, "Margins have always been a space of radical openness... it is in this space of radical possibility that new realities are born" (*Yearning* 145). In Bhattacharya's narratives, these margins become central, revealing the transformative potential of the silenced.

The Subaltern and the Famine: *So Many Hungers!* as Testimony

Bhattacharya's debut novel, *So Many Hungers!* (1947), presents a grim depiction of the 1943 Bengal Famine—an outcome not of nature but of exploitative colonial economic policy. The novel foregrounds two central characters: Kajoli, a peasant girl who refuses to prostitute herself to survive, and Samarendra Basu, a Western-educated intellectual who joins the nationalist struggle. Through these figures, Bhattacharya constructs a dual axis of resistance: one emerging from grassroots survival, and the other from ideological awakening. Kajoli's moral resistance is both striking and emblematic of the subaltern's agency,"She would not sell her body. She would rather sell fruits, petty wares... something of her own choosing, not the choosing of fate or man" (*So Many Hungers!* 132).

This assertion of selfhood in the face of starvation challenges the trope of the subaltern as voiceless and powerless. Her agency, though exercised in silence, embodies a form of resistance that is moral and economic. Bhattacharya's portrayal aligns with Amartya Sen's later economic analysis, "Famines are not caused by lack of food but by the inability to access food" (*Poverty and Famines* 7).

Moreover, Devata, a Gandhian figure in the novel, facilitates mass awareness among rural communities. His activism represents the ethical core of subaltern mobilization, emphasizing non-violent resistance and community empowerment—tools that lie outside elite discourses of state power.

Caste and Masked Rebellion in *He Who Rides a Tiger*

Published in 1954, *He Who Rides a Tiger* tackles caste oppression in a conservative town in Bengal. The protagonist Kalo, a low-caste blacksmith, returns from prison and adopts the disguise of a Brahmin ascetic. This masquerade allows

him to penetrate the upper-caste social order and expose its hypocrisies. Kalo's transformation is subversive. His performance is a political act that calls into question the legitimacy of caste-based social stratification, "I was born low, but I have risen high. Not by birthright, but by thought and trick. The world bows to garb, not to the soul" (Bhattacharya, *He Who Rides a Tiger* 149).

This satirical critique highlights how religious and caste identities are often performative, upheld by ritual and garb rather than moral substance. Kalo's rebellion is masked and ironic—a form of resistance that reflects Frederic Jameson's assertion, "The political unconscious in literature reveals that class struggle is always already present in the narrative form" (*The Political Unconscious* 20). Spivak's insight into the limits of subaltern speech becomes relevant here. Kalo cannot speak directly against casteism; instead, he performs rebellion through disguise. His silence becomes a mode of communication, reinforcing the idea that subaltern agency may be indirect, ironic, and allegorical.

Subaltern Consciousness in *Shadow from Ladakh*

Shadow from Ladakh (1966) explores the tension between Gandhian ideals and Nehruvian modernity during the Sino-Indian War. While much of the novel focuses on national identity and development, Bhattacharya subtly centers subaltern experiences—especially through the characters of Sumati, a refugee from the northeast, and Uncle Khagen, a rural artisan.

Sumati's story symbolizes the trauma of displacement and the quiet endurance of women who must rebuild their lives after forced migration. Her struggle is internal and spiritual, revealing the gendered dimensions of subalternity. As Raymond Williams affirms, "Culture is ordinary… it is lived, it is practiced" (*Resources of Hope* 4). Sumati's cultural memory, resilience, and ethical clarity embody the lived culture of displaced communities.

Bhattacharya uses structural experimentation—montage, flashbacks, and juxtaposed narrative threads—to mirror the fractured consciousness of the subaltern. Partha Chatterjee argues that the Indian nationalist project often excluded the rural poor and tribal populations from its centralized vision of development (*Nationalist Thought* 44). Bhattacharya resists this marginalization by giving them centrality in the emotional and ethical fabric of his fiction.

Gender and Subalternity: Rewriting Womanhood

Bhattacharya's female characters are not mere victims but active participants in socio-political change. From Kajoli to Meera in *Music for Mohini*, women navigate complex cultural terrains while asserting moral autonomy. Their resistance, while often non-confrontational, undermines patriarchal and colonial binaries.

In Subaltern Studies, the figure of the woman is doubly marginalized. Spivak stresses that even when the subaltern is allowed to speak, "her speech is never fully hers" (Spivak 308). Bhattacharya confronts this dilemma by embedding speech in symbolic acts—Kajoli's refusal, Sumati's silence, Meera's inner questioning.

Martha C. Nussbaum articulates the philosophical foundation for such narratives, "To be human is to be capable of suffering, choice, and agency. Any narrative that denies these to women denies their humanity" (*Women and Human Development* 78). Bhattacharya's fiction affirms these capacities in every female character, presenting them not as metaphors but as makers of meaning.

Rewriting History from Below

Bhattacharya's fiction enacts a historiographic intervention. He resists dominant narratives by depicting how history is experienced at the grassroots. In *So Many Hungers!*, the famine is not an abstract figure of death but a daily negotiation for food and dignity. In *He Who Rides a Tiger*, social reform comes not from political leaders but from the clever resistance of a common man. And in *Shadow from Ladakh*, the future of the nation is envisioned through the labor and sacrifice of rural communities.

Ranajit Guha advocates for recovering "the autonomous domain of subaltern politics" that exists outside elite institutions (*Subaltern Studies I* 4). Bhattacharya does precisely this: he finds the political in the domestic, the ethical in the personal, and the transformative in the everyday.

Conclusion: Literature as Subaltern Historiography

Bhabani Bhattacharya's oeuvre presents an ethically charged realism rooted in the lives of the silenced. His fiction offers a counter-narrative to elite historiography, foregrounding the agency of peasants, women, artisans, and refugees. These are not romanticized figures, but complex, flawed, and evolving characters who negotiate identity and power.

To read Bhattacharya through the lens of Subaltern Theory is to recognize the narrative as a space of resistance and recovery. It is also to acknowledge that literature, in its highest form, does not merely reflect reality—it reshapes the moral contours of history. Bhattacharya reminds us that the soul of a nation is most audible not in the rhetoric of its rulers, but in the quiet endurance of its poorest.

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