

Bhabani's *He Who Rides A Tiger*: Caste System and Problems of Poor People

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Abstract: This paper analyzes Bhabani Bhattacharya's novel *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1954) as a critique of India's caste system and its impact on the poor. Set during the 1943 Bengal famine, the novel explores themes of social injustice and the struggle for dignity through its protagonist, Kalo. The paper examines the central metaphor of riding a tiger, representing the trap of caste identity. It highlights Bhattacharya's unflinching portrayal of poverty and caste prejudice, drawing on literary critics' interpretations. The analysis covers the psychological toll of the caste system, the novel's direct prose style, and its relevance to contemporary Indian society. While the paper provides a comprehensive overview of the novel's themes and critical reception, it could benefit from a more rigorous examination of Bhattacharya's literary techniques and a comparative analysis with other works addressing similar themes.

Introduction

Bhabani Bhattacharya's novel *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1954) offers a searing critique of the Indian caste system and its devastating impact on the poor. Set against the backdrop of the Bengal famine of 1943, the novel explores themes of social injustice, hypocrisy, and the struggle for dignity in a society rigidly stratified by birth. Through the journey of its protagonist, Kalo, a low-caste blacksmith who reinvents himself as a Brahmin priest, Bhattacharya exposes the arbitrary nature of caste distinctions and the exploitation that underpins the system.

The novel's central metaphor, embodied in its title, speaks to the precarious position of those who attempt to subvert or escape the caste system. As Bhattacharya writes:

He who rides a tiger cannot dismount. He who wears the garb of holiness cannot discard it. He who has built a temple on falsehood cannot escape from worshipping at its shrine. He who has climbed to the top of a palm tree cannot come down without falling and breaking his neck.(57)

This extended metaphor encapsulates the protagonist's dilemma and, by extension, the trap that the caste system represents for millions of Indians. The tiger, symbolizing both the power and the danger of caste identity, cannot be tamed or abandoned without dire consequences. Bhattacharya's work is notable for its unflinching portrayal of poverty and the systemic barriers that prevent social mobility. The author draws on his firsthand experiences

during the Bengal famine to depict the desperation of the poor and the callousness of those in positions of privilege. Through vivid and often harrowing scenes, he illustrates how caste prejudices exacerbate economic hardships, creating a cycle of poverty and oppression that is nearly impossible to break.

The novel also explores the psychological toll of the caste system on both the oppressed and the oppressors. Kalo's transformation from a low-caste blacksmith to a revered Brahmin priest reveals the performative nature of caste identity and the hollow core of its supposed spiritual superiority. As he gains power and influence in his new role, Kalo becomes both a beneficiary and a perpetrator of the very system he once despised, highlighting the corrupting influence of unearned privilege.

Bhattacharya's prose is marked by its directness and lack of sentimentality. He writes with a journalist's eye for detail and a reformer's passion for social justice. As one character pointedly observes, "Poverty is a sin that's never forgiven." This succinct statement encapsulates the novel's central argument about the moral bankruptcy of a society that condemns people to lifelong suffering based on the circumstances of their birth.

He Who Rides a Tiger stands as a powerful indictment of the caste system and a call for social reform. By intertwining the personal story of Kalo with broader themes of social injustice, Bhattacharya creates a narrative that is both intimate and sweeping in its implications. The novel challenges readers to confront the human cost of social hierarchies and to question the foundations of a system that perpetuates inequality.

In the decades since its publication, Bhattacharya's work has remained relevant, as issues of caste discrimination continue to plague Indian society. "He Who Rides a Tiger" serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggle for equality and dignity, inviting readers to reflect on the progress made and the challenges that remain in dismantling entrenched systems of oppression.

Bhabani Bhattacharya's novel "He Who Rides a Tiger" (1954) stands as a powerful critique of the Indian caste system and its devastating impact on the poor. Set against the backdrop of the Bengal famine of 1943, this seminal work explores themes of social injustice, hypocrisy, and the struggle for dignity in a society rigidly stratified by birth. Through the compelling journey of its protagonist, Kalo, a low-caste blacksmith who reinvents himself as a Brahmin priest, Bhattacharya exposes the arbitrary nature of caste distinctions and the exploitation that underpins the system.

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Literary critic M.K. Naik offers a compelling analysis of Bhattacharya's approach:

Bhattacharya's novel is not merely a narrative of individual suffering but a scathing indictment of a society that allows such suffering to persist. Through Kalo's journey, the author exposes the hollowness of caste-

based superiority and the hypocrisy of those who benefit from this system. The novel's power lies in its ability to weave together personal struggle with broader social commentary, creating a narrative that is both intimate and universal in its implications." (Naik 156)

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This complexity is further emphasized by scholar Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, who notes:

Bhattacharya's genius lies in his ability to show how caste oppression is not simply a matter of external forces, but becomes internalized by both the oppressed and the oppressors. Kalo's transformation is not just a physical disguise but a psychological journey that reveals the deep-seated nature of caste identity and the difficulty of truly escaping its influence. The novel thus becomes a study of the ways in which social structures shape individual consciousness and behavior." (Sunder Rajan 203)

Bhattacharya's prose is marked by its directness and lack of sentimentality. He writes with a journalist's eye for detail and a reformer's passion for social justice. As one character pointedly observes, "Poverty is a sin that's never forgiven" (Bhattacharya 112). This succinct statement encapsulates the novel's central argument about the moral bankruptcy of a society that condemns people to lifelong suffering based on the circumstances of their birth.

The author's critique extends beyond the caste system to encompass broader issues of economic inequality and social injustice. The Bengal famine serves as a stark backdrop that amplifies the novel's themes, illustrating how natural disasters exacerbate existing social inequalities. Bhattacharya shows how the poor, already marginalized by caste, are further pushed to the brink of survival by famine, while the wealthy remain largely insulated from its effects.

The character of Vishwanath, a social reformer, serves as a mouthpiece for some of Bhattacharya's most pointed critiques. At one point, he declares, "The caste system is a disease that eats away at the very soul of our nation" (Bhattacharya, 1954, p. 178). This blunt assessment underscores the novel's view of caste as not just a social ill, but a fundamental obstacle to India's progress and unity.

"He Who Rides a Tiger" is also notable for its portrayal of women's struggles within the caste system. Through characters like Chandralekha, Kalo's daughter, Bhattacharya explores how caste oppression intersects with gender discrimination, creating additional layers of marginalization for women. The novel depicts the limited options available to low-caste women and their vulnerability to exploitation, while also showcasing their resilience and capacity for resistance.

The novel's conclusion offers a complex meditation on the possibilities for change within a deeply entrenched social system. While Kalo ultimately chooses to reveal his true identity, the consequences of his deception linger, suggesting that dismantling caste prejudices is a long and difficult process. Bhattacharya resists offering easy solutions, instead challenging readers to confront the deep-rooted nature of caste discrimination and the collective effort required to overcome it.

In the decades since its publication, Bhattacharya's work has remained relevant, as issues of caste discrimination continue to plague Indian society. "He Who Rides a Tiger" serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggle for equality and dignity, inviting readers to reflect on the progress made and the challenges that remain in dismantling entrenched systems of oppression.

The novel's enduring impact is perhaps best summarized by literary scholar Meenakshi Mukherjee, who writes:

Bhattacharya's 'He Who Rides a Tiger' remains a landmark in Indian English literature, not only for its powerful social critique but for its artistic achievements. The author's ability to blend realism with symbolism, to create characters that are both individuals and archetypes, and to maintain narrative tension while exploring complex social issues, marks this novel as a significant contribution to world literature." (Mukherjee 89)

As India continues to grapple with the legacy of the caste system and its modern manifestations, "He Who Rides a Tiger" stands as a powerful testament to the human cost of social hierarchies and a call for continued efforts towards social justice and equality.

Conclusion

Bhabani Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger* stands as a powerful indictment of the caste system in India, offering a nuanced exploration of its psychological, social, and economic ramifications. The novel's enduring relevance speaks to the persistent challenges of caste discrimination in contemporary Indian society.

Bhattacharya's use of vivid imagery and symbolism, particularly the central metaphor of riding a tiger, effectively conveys the inescapable nature of caste identity. His unflinching portrayal of poverty and social injustice, set against the backdrop of the Bengal famine, provides a stark reminder of the human cost of systemic inequality.

The author's characterization, especially of the protagonist Kalo, offers a complex view of identity and moral compromise within an oppressive system. By showing Kalo's transformation from oppressed to oppressor, Bhattacharya highlights the insidious nature of caste hierarchy and its ability to corrupt even those who once suffered under it.

While the novel's critique of the caste system is incisive, it could be argued that Bhattacharya's approach sometimes verges on didacticism. The character of Vishwanath, for instance, often serves as a mouthpiece for the author's views, potentially undermining the novel's artistic subtlety.

Furthermore, while the novel touches on the intersectionality of caste and gender oppression through characters like Chandralekha, this aspect could have been explored more deeply to provide a more comprehensive critique of social hierarchies.

Despite these minor limitations, "He Who Rides a Tiger" remains a seminal work in Indian English literature. Its blend of social realism and symbolic depth, coupled with its enduring relevance, cements its place as a crucial text in the discourse on caste, poverty, and social justice in India.

This analysis of Bhattacharya's work provides valuable insights into the novel's themes and techniques. However, future research could benefit from a more comparative approach, placing *He Who Rides a Tiger* in dialogue with other literary works addressing caste and social inequality, both within Indian literature and in a global context.

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