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Ownership Of Land And Migration In Bhabani Bhattacharya's Novel "He Who Rides A Tiger"

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Abstract: Bhabani Bhattacharya's He Who Rides a Tiger (1955) offers a sharp socio-political critique of postcolonial India through the intertwined themes of land ownership and migration. Set during the Bengal famine of 1943, the novel portrays the struggles of Kalo, a lower-caste blacksmith, whose experiences of poverty, caste-based exclusion, and injustice highlight the structural inequalities of Indian society. This paper examines how landlessness functions not only as an economic deprivation but also as a form of social invisibility, stripping individuals of dignity and autonomy. Migration, often seen as a sign of progress, is instead depicted by Bhattacharya as a forced response to famine, caste oppression, and systemic exploitation. Through close textual analysis of Kalo's transformation—from a starving villager to a holy man who subverts social hierarchies—the article reveals how the novel critiques entrenched power structures of caste, class, and religious hypocrisy. By connecting the historical context of the Bengal famine and zamindari system with contemporary concerns of rural displacement and land reforms, the study underscores the continuing relevance of Bhattacharya's narrative. Ultimately, the paper argues that the novel is not only a record of oppression but also a vision of resistance, dignity, and survival from society's margins.

Index Terms - Land ownership, Migration, Socio-economic changes, Rural transformation, Agricultural displacement, Cultural adaptation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Bhabani Bhattacharya's novel He Who Rides a Tiger (1955) is a powerful work of post-independence Indian literature that engages deeply with the social, political, and economic realities of rural and urban India. Set against the backdrop of Bengal during and after the 1943 famine, the novel critiques the oppressive structures of feudalism, caste hierarchy, religious superstition, and urban corruption. Through its protagonist Kalo, a lower-caste blacksmith, Bhattacharya explores the lived experiences of deprivation and marginality, revealing how systemic inequality drives both suffering and resistance.

A central axis of the novel's narrative and thematic exploration is the question of land ownership and the resulting phenomenon of migration. In India, especially in the mid-20th century, land was not merely an economic resource but a social identity—a determinant of power, caste position, and personal dignity. The

village economy was structured around this unequal distribution of land, where zamindars (landowners) held control over both property and people, while the landless majority remained entrapped in cycles of servitude, starvation, and voicelessness.

Kalo's story unfolds in this environment of rural injustice. Denied not only land but also respect, opportunity, and freedom, he is forced to migrate to Calcutta, not out of aspiration but desperation. His journey reflects the larger historical reality of rural-to-urban migration in India during the famine and early post-independence years. However, Bhattacharya does not present migration as a simple escape or a solution. Instead, he portrays it as a complex negotiation of identity, survival, and rebellion, where old hierarchies reappear in new forms.

This article aims to explore how Bhattacharya's novel links the theme of land ownership to the compulsion of migration, and how both forces shape the protagonist's transformation. It examines how the lack of access to land strips individuals of autonomy, and how migration becomes not only a strategy of survival but also a platform for social critique and resistance. Through this lens, the article will argue that He Who Rides a Tiger offers a nuanced portrayal of landlessness, mobility, and empowerment, rooted in the historical and cultural contexts of India's transition from colonial rule to an independent yet unequal society.

2. Land Ownership in Rural India

In He Who Rides a Tiger, Bhabani Bhattacharya exposes the harsh realities of rural land distribution and the embedded caste system, highlighting how land ownership becomes the foundation of social power, economic control, and moral authority. The novel is set in a Bengal village during the early 1940s, where land is concentrated in the hands of a few powerful landlords, while the vast majority—including the protagonist Kalo—remain landless labourers or artisans, vulnerable to both economic hardship and social humiliation.

The zamindari system, a legacy of British colonial land policies, had by the 1940s created a rural elite class that dominated village life. In the novel, this system is represented by figures of wealth and privilege who exploit the labour of the poor without offering them rights, respect, or a fair share of resources. Bhattacharya writes vividly about the inequality in access to food, shelter, and dignity, where landowners thrive even during the famine, while the landless starve.

"The men who owned land were gods; the men who tilled it were worms."
— He Who Rides a Tiger

This line illustrates how landownership equates to divinity and social dominance, while those without land are dehumanized. Kalo, despite his skills as a blacksmith, is still considered lower caste and socially irrelevant because he owns no land. His identity is shaped not by his labour but by his absence of property.

Kalo's caste identity compounds his landlessness. Bhattacharya uses Kalo's character to show how land distribution in India is deeply intertwined with caste hierarchy. Dalits and lower-caste groups were historically denied the right to own land, reinforcing their economic dependence and social subjugation. Even in post-independence India, land reform efforts had largely failed to dismantle this structure. Kalo's treatment in the village reflects this historical continuity.For instance, when Kalo attempts to speak up or assert his agency, he is silenced by the landowning class and religious authorities, who view his rebellion as both a caste transgression and a threat to their feudal control. This clearly reflects the reality that landownership is not just about wealth—it is a gatekeeper of voice, power, and legitimacy.

The novel is set during the Bengal famine of 1943, a man-made catastrophe that killed millions. Historians such as Amartya Sen have argued that the famine was not due to food shortage alone but due to entitlement failure—people had no means to access food, especially the landless labourers and artisans. Bhattacharya brings this crisis to life through Kalo's hunger, humiliation, and eventual escape.

"The famine had stripped men bare—not just of food, but of hope."

Bhattacharya's depiction is not just literary but political—he critiques a system that allowed landowners to hoard resources, while denying basic survival to those who worked the land but did not own it.

Kalo's lack of land is the primary cause of his migration to Calcutta. His journey is not just geographical but ideological. Having suffered the consequences of landlessness—hunger, caste humiliation, voicelessness—he begins to question the very morality of a society built on unequal land rights.His later strategy of posing as a holy man to expose the hypocrisy of society is rooted in this awakening. Bhattacharya suggests that true liberation lies not in acquiring land alone, but in challenging the ideological structures that tie land to human worth.

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3. Consequences of Landlessness and Forced Migration

In He Who Rides a Tiger, Bhattacharya does not portray landlessness as a mere economic condition—it is a crushing existential crisis that defines the lives of the oppressed. The novel delves deep into how being landless strips a person of autonomy, dignity, and voice, ultimately forcing migration not as a choice, but as a compulsion born from systemic injustice. For Kalo, the protagonist, migration to Calcutta is not a hopeful journey but a desperate act of survival—a symbolic escape from a rural world that offers only hunger, humiliation, and servitude.

One of the most compelling aspects of the novel is its graphic depiction of famine and the emotional trauma of helplessness. The Bengal famine of 1943 is more than a historical backdrop; it is the lived nightmare for landless people like Kalo and his daughter, whom he calls "little tigress".

"Hunger, a living thing that crept into your belly and clutched it, gnawed it like a rat." — Bhattacharya, He Who Rides a Tiger

This vivid imagery captures the physical agony of hunger, while the lack of land (and thus, food security) pushes Kalo into the role of a beggar—something he finds unbearable. For a man with pride in his craftsmanship as a blacksmith, landlessness leads to a loss of identity.

In one heartbreaking moment, when his daughter asks innocently,

"Why don't we eat today, Baba?"

Kalo is struck silent—not because there is no food, but because there is no hope of ever having a future in a system that robs him of even the right to feed his child.

Migration, in the context of the novel, is not romanticized. Kalo's decision to leave the village is not motivated by opportunity, but by total breakdown of rural life.

"When the land offers you no bread and the sky offers you no rain, you walk."

This is not just literal migration—it is symbolic of the break with old systems, the severing of ties with a society that condemns people like Kalo to death simply because they have no land, no caste status, and no connections. Bhattacharya subtly critiques both the economic failure and moral collapse of rural India during this time.The city of Calcutta, though seemingly a place of possibilities, quickly reveals itself to be just another site of exploitation—only now masked by modernity and bureaucracy. Landlessness in the village is replaced by homelessness in the city. The migrant becomes a statistic, a shadow, drifting among slums and footpaths.

Kalo's early days in the city are filled with humiliation, as he realizes that his skills have no value in the urban economy, and that he must adapt to a world that runs on appearance, pretense, and power games. His landlessness, once a symbol of caste-based exclusion, now becomes a mark of invisibility in the crowded city.Bhattacharya uses this transformation to comment on how migration without empowerment leads to a different kind of oppression—urban anonymity. In both the village and the city, Kalo has no land, no home, no status.

However, Bhattacharya also presents a powerful twist. Migration, while initially disempowering, becomes the catalyst for Kalo's transformation. After witnessing the hypocrisy of the rich and the religious elite, he adopts the disguise of a holy man—using the tools of deception to challenge the social order.

In one key scene, Kalo realizes:
"They want gods, and I will give them one. Let them bow before me, the one who once begged at their door."

This is a moment of profound subversion. Kalo, once a landless, hungry artisan, now becomes a symbolic figure of power, though still without property. His return to the village, not as a blacksmith but as a godman, is an act of resistance—a reversal of roles that exposes the moral rot of the elites who revere superstition more than truth.Migration, thus, is no longer just an escape—it becomes a stage for protest, for reinventing identity, and for exposing social injustice.

4. Urban Migration: Illusion of Empowerment and Emergence of Resistance

Migration to the city—especially for rural poor like Kalo—is often imagined as a transition from bondage to freedom, from backwardness to opportunity. However, in He Who Rides a Tiger, Bhabani Bhattacharya destroys this myth. The novel reveals that urban spaces are not liberatory for migrants like Kalo, but merely new arenas of systemic exploitation, where caste and class structures are replaced by corruption, greed, and spiritual hypocrisy. Kalo's experiences in Calcutta reflect a painful journey from hope to disillusionment, before he reclaims agency through an act of symbolic rebellion.

When Kalo arrives in the city, he is not empowered by opportunity, but instead **stripped of all identity**. As a skilled blacksmith in his village, Kalo had dignity—however minimal. In Calcutta, **no one cares about his past or his craft**. He is just one of the many faceless migrants, drifting through streets, hungry and jobless.

"The city devours you with open jaws. It asks nothing, offers nothing. You are one among the swarm."

This line encapsulates Bhattacharya's urban critique. Urban migration does not offer dignity to the rural poor. In fact, it renders them invisible. Kalo begins to understand that without wealth, position, or the ability to manipulate urban systems, he is still voiceless—just as he was in the village.

Kalo's journey takes a dramatic turn when he observes the **double standards of Calcutta's spiritual elite**. In a society where superstition holds power, he witnesses how **the rich and powerful use religion for self-promotion and social control**, while the poor remain excluded.In one key scene, Kalo watches a **self-styled holy man** giving blessings to a wealthy merchant while ignoring the suffering of poor beggars outside the temple.

"Is God deaf to the cries of the hungry? Or does He hear only through gold?"
— Kalo (internal reflection)

This is a moment of awakening for Kalo. He realizes that in this urban world, truth has no value unless it is cloaked in illusion. The illusion of piety, when packaged with performance and symbols, commands respect and obedience.It is here that Kalo's plan is born—he decides to become what the system worships, not to gain wealth, but to **expose the hypocrisy** of a society that reveres deception over truth.

Kalo begins to **grow** long hair, wear saffron robes, and adopt the posture of a wandering ascetic. With the help of a journalist who supports his silent rebellion, he crafts an identity that society will blindly follow—a holy man. This transformation is not about faith, but about flipping the system on its head.

"They kneel before what they fear, and fear what they don't understand. Let them kneel."

This is not mere trickery. Bhattacharya shows that Kalo's disguise is a form of protest. He uses the very tools of social manipulation—religion, appearance, authority—to reclaim the agency he was denied both in the village and the city.His followers include wealthy businessmen, bureaucrats, and even political leaders—those who once turned away from the hungry and landless now seek his blessings. The irony is profound.

Perhaps the most dramatic moment in the novel is Kalo's return to his village—the place where he was once a landless, voiceless untouchable. Now, he returns not as a blacksmith, but as a spiritual leader, followed by thousands. In a striking scene, the very people who once humiliated him touch his feet, unaware of his true identity.

"The blacksmith of hunger now wore the mask of a god. And they bowed."

This moment captures the novel's most powerful irony: social power in India is based not on truth, but on performance, perception, and symbols. Kalo's return is not an act of revenge, but of exposure. He does not seek to punish but to make society confront its blindness and bigotry.

By the end of the novel, Kalo has not acquired land. He remains materially poor. Yet, Bhattacharya makes a radical point: true empowerment comes from resisting the ideologies that enslave. Kalo's resistance is intellectual and symbolic. He uses society's own tools—faith, superstition, fear—to challenge its morality**.** Through Kalo, Bhattacharya suggests that while land and migration are physical issues, the real chains are mental and cultural—casteism, religious dogma, and moral blindness. When these are challenged, even a landless man can become a force of transformation**.**

5. Conclusion

In *He Who Rides a Tiger*, Bhabani Bhattacharya crafts a nuanced and multi-layered narrative that explores the deeply entrenched injustices of Indian society through the intertwined themes of landlessness and migration. His protagonist, Kalo, begins as a landless blacksmith—a victim of feudal oppression, caste humiliation, and famine-induced poverty. Through Kalo's journey from a starving villager to a holy man commanding social authority, Bhattacharya presents a compelling critique of the systems that deny dignity to the poor while glorifying illusion and status**.**

The ownership of land in the novel is not just an economic marker, but a symbol of caste privilege, control over resources, and social visibility. The lack of land renders the lower classes not only vulnerable to hunger, but also invisible in the eyes of power. Kalo's forced migration to the city mirrors the real-life exodus of millions during the Bengal famine and beyond—people who left their homes not in search of opportunity, but in search of bare survival. Yet, even in Calcutta, the promise of empowerment remains illusory, as caste, class, and moral corruption take on new urban forms.However, Bhattacharya does not leave his protagonist in victimhood. Kalo's strategic performance as a holy man becomes a **radical act of**

resistance. He uses the very instruments of societal control—religion, superstition, and spectacle—to subvert the values of a society that denied him justice. In doing so, Kalo **reclai**ms agency not through violence, but through irony and intellect**.**

What makes *He Who Rides a Tiger* enduringly relevant is its ability to speak across time. The problems it highlights—rural landlessness, caste-based exclusion, forced migration, and the moral failure of both feudal and modern institutions—continue to shape Indian society even today. Land reforms remain incomplete, caste violence persists, and urban migration continues to be driven by desperation rather than opportunity. Bhattacharya's novel challenges us to recognize that true transformation requires more than economic policy—it requires a moral reckoning with how we assign value, dignity, and power in society. In the end, Kalo's story reminds us that riding the tiger of resistance is dangerous, but not resisting at all is worse. To question unjust systems, to turn their tools back upon them, and to force society to confront its own hypocrisy—this, Bhattacharya suggests, is the only path to liberation.

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