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Poetics of Resistance: Representation of Waste in the Poems of Sukanta Bhattacharya

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Abstract

Sukanta Bhattacharya is one of the youngest and one of the most well-read poets in the history of Bengali literature. He wrote during a time marked by the imperial rule, the second world war, and the devastating Bengal famine of 1943, and brought attention to lives that were often ignored and treated as expendable. This paper aims to explore how the poems of Sukanta Bhattacharya use the idea of waste to reflect the harsh realities of Colonial Bengal in the 1940s. Generally, waste is thought of as something purely material, something that is thrown away and never thought of. However, in literature, the representation of waste can expose much about how societies function, especially in terms of power, disparities, and exclusion.

This paper uses ideas from Julia Kristeva and Giorgio Agamben, and shows how Bhattacharya's poetry challenges the demarcation between what is valued and what is discarded. The figures that appear in Bhattachrya's work; starving individuals, overburdened workers, and marginalised urban populations; are shown as being pushed to the edges of society, almost like waste itself. His poems move away from romantic aesthetics and focus on the stark realities of hunger, labour, and survival in a biased society. At the same time, Bhattacharya gives them a voice, forcing us to confront their existence and humanity. Through close readings of poems such as "Deshlai Kathi" ("The Matchstick"), "Cigarette", "Ekti Moroger Kahini" ("Story of a Rooster"), and "Shiri" ("Stairs"), it shows how ordinary objects and everyday experiences become powerful symbols of exploitation and resistance. Ultimately, this paper argues that Bhattacharya transforms waste into a space where dignity prevails and from where resistance can emerge.

Keywords: Waste, Colonial Bengal, Bengali Poetry, Sukanta Bhattacharya, Resistance.

Waste is something most of us are taught to not look at too meticulously. It is what we throw away from our homes, as well as from our consciousness. Yet, waste often denies to remain hidden when it comes to literature. Waste emerges, not merely as discarded material, but as a powerful reminder of what societies choose to exclude. In literary studies, waste is recognised not simply as a result of consumption but also as a deeply political class, one that exposes how power structures choose what, and who, counts.

The idea of waste extends far beyond material things in colonial societies. Entire populations of marginalised, evicted people are inhumanly treated as surplus lives that can be used up as per convenience, and then cast aside without a second thought. It is within this social, political and historical context that the poetry of Sukanta Bhattacharya emerges

with immediate relevance. Bhattacharya, writing in the early 1940s, in a war-torn, famine-struck colonial Bengal, refuses to look away from the severe torments of the people. Bhattacharya is often referred to as "Young Nazrul" and compared to Kazi Nazrul Islam for his unwavering rebellious spirit. He depicts a world that is raw, unsettling, and profoundly human. His verses are filled with hunger, fatigue, degeneration, and rage; showcasing the lived realities of multitudes of people during that time. Bhattacharya uses the idea of waste in a way that is both intensely material and sharply metaphorical. His poetry draws attention to those who are treated as nonessential, and at the same time reinstates their dignity by making them noticeable.

Waste may seem straightforward, but scholars like Mary Douglas and Zygmunt Bauman show that it is socially constructed. Mary Douglas famously argues that dirt is "matter out of place", suggesting that waste emerges from systems of classification rather than from inherent qualities (Douglas 44). What we call "waste" reflects systems of order and hierarchy, and shows what is excluded and what is included. In colonial contexts, this extends to human lives as well. Building on this, Zygmunt Bauman contends that modernity produces "wasted lives" (Bauman 6). The poor and the impoverished are treated as expendable. Bhattacharya's poetry draws attention to this dimension, portraying lives that are rendered disposable within a capitalist-imperialist system.

The concept of abjection, developed by Julia Kristeva, provides a useful framework for understanding Bhattacharya's imagery. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva defines the abject as that which must be expelled in order for the subject to maintain its identity—bodily fluids, corpses, decay (Kristeva 4). The abject is both repulsive and fascinating, weakening boundaries between self and other, life and death. Bhattacharya's poems re filled with such images. He talks about starving bodies, decaying environments and the physical realities of deprivation and exclusion. These images are extremely uncomfortable, producing disgust and repulsion in the minds of the readers. Yet, Bhattacharya urges his readers to look into these images, and to think about the unimaginable sufferings of the marginalised and deprived people. The abject, in his poems, becomes a site of visibility, forcing recognition of those who have been excluded from the domain of being human. His poetry forces us to confront our disgust, and to find out the relevance of the "wasted" lives in building the economy. In doing so, he transforms the abject into sites of recognition, and demands attention and ethical engagement with those who are usually pushed aside. He doesn't allow his readers the comfort of distance, but draws them into a confrontation with the realities of marginalisation.

Giorgio Agamben's notion of "bare life", developed in *Homo Sacer*, refers to individuals who are reduced to mere biological existence, are denied political rights and social recognition (Agamben 8). Their elimination from mainstream society does not have any consequences. In colonial Bengal, the conditions of famine and exploitation produced subjects who were rendered as waste by the privileged upper classes. As long as there was food on the tables of a certain section of the population, what happened to the rest did not matter at all. Bhattacharya's poetic subjects, such as starving children, overworked labourers, malnourished adults, all embody this condition of bare life. Yet his poetry resists their negligence, and gives them a voice and reconstructs their platform. Together, these theoretical perspectives showcase how Bhattacharya's poetry treats waste as both a material reality and a symbol of resistance. His work not only represents waste but also challenges

the system that produce it. As Frantz Fanon observes, colonial systems often reduce the colonized to a state of deprivation and invisibility (Fanon 90).

The Bengal Famine of 1943 resulted in the deaths of millions, exposing the failures of the colonial system. Scholars have shown that the famine was not merely a natural disaster but a consequence of policy decisions and wartime priorities (Chatterjee 74). The famine entirely transformed the sociopolitical landscape of Bengal. Malnourished, hunger-stricken children littered the streets searching for a mere morsel of food. Scavengers hunted on the lifeless bodies strewn across the roads. However, the presence of these starving bodies was treated as a source of disruption rather than that of crisis. As Achille Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics" suggests, power operates through the ability to determine who may live and who may die (Mbembe 11). Bhattacharya challenges the power structure by depicting scenes in his poems that acknowledge the human cost of political decisions and transform anonymous sufferings into lived experiences.

Calcutta during the colonial rule served as a site of economic activity as well as a space for deep inequality. Farmers and industrial labourers sustained the city through their untiring efforts, but they remained excluded from its benefits. Their lives were defined by exhaustion and exclusion. If lucky, they received the leftovers, that is, the "waste", after everything was consumed by the social elites. Bhattacharya captures this reality through vivid imagery. Everyday objects become symbols of labour and consumption, hence resonating Karl Marx's notion of commodification of labour, where human life is reduced to economic value (Marx 125). Workers, like objects, are used and then abandoned. Colonial strategies often forbade poverty through laws such as Bengal Criminal Law Amendment Act, targeting vagrancy and disorder. Such measures made poverty a criminal offence, and reinforced hierarchy by removing subaltern lives from public places. Bhattacharya's poetry attacks this segregation by bringing the sufferings of the poor to the centre. His work challenges dominant narratives, and proclaims the significance of the marginalised.

The poem "*Deshlai Kathi*" ("The Matchstick") turns to one of the most ordinary and easily overlooked objects: a matchstick. In our daily lives, the matchstick serves the most insignificant use. When ignited, it burns briefly, and then it is immediately discarded. This makes it an appropriate metaphor for labour under exploitative systems, where individuals are valued according to the functions they perform (Marx 125). However, Bhattacharya turns this apparent simplicity into something more complex. "*Aami ekta chotto deshlai-er kathi, eto naganya hoyto chokheo pori naa, tobu jeno mukhe amar ushkhush korchhe barood, bukey amar jwole uthbar duronto uchchhash…emni bohu nogor, bohu rajyake dite pari chharkhar korey, tobuo abagya korbe amader?*" (I am just a small matchstick, so small that you might not even notice me, but there's fire on my mouth, my heart ignites with the desire to burn fearlessly…I can burn down many such towns, many such cities…will you still ignore and disrespect us?) The matchstick is not merely an object of consumption, but also a carrier of fire. It has the power to illuminate, and also the power to destroy. This dichotomy resonates with Zygmunt Bauman's idea of "wasted lives", where people who are considered to be redundant still possess concealed agency (Bauman 13).

The poem subtly gestures towards the possibility of a revolution, and suggests that what is treated as waste may become the impetus required for change.

In the poem "Cigarette", Bhattacharya highlights the lengthy process of consumption. The cigarette does not fade instantly, but it burns slowly until only ash remains. This gradual

wearing away over time serves as a powerful metaphor for the process of exploitation. Moreover, the cigarette can be read as a metaphor for the body itself under colonial modernity. Just as the cigarette is consumed, the body of the labourers is gradually worn down. This aligns with Agamben's notion of "bare life", where existence is reduced to survival without dignity. "*Din aar ratri, ratri aar din, tomra amader shoshon korchho sorbokkhon, amader bishram nei, mojuri nei, nei kono alpomatrar chhuti…tai aar noy, aar amra bondi thakbo naa…barishudhdho puriye marbo tomader, jemon kore tomra amader puriye merechho etokaal.*" (Day and night, night and day you exploit us, we don't rest, we don't get paid, we don't even have a few days' leave…so we won't remain captive anymore…we will burn you down along with your homes, just like how you have burned us for so long.) These lines from the poem clearly indicate that if the downtrodden unite, their collective fire can burn down the exploitative power structures that rule the society; for the society is built upon the blood, sweat and tears of these marginalised souls.

In "*Ekti Moroger Kahini*" ("Story of a Rooster"), Bhattacharya creates allegories to criticize structures of power and sacrifice. The rooster, an apparently irrelevant creature, becomes a symbol of those sacrificed for the sustenance of others. Its death is normalised, even ritualised, reflecting how certain lives are deemed inherently expendable. A rooster gets a place in a huge mansion amidst discarded packing boxes, and looks at the spread of food. However, it does not realise that it is also about to be a part of that luscious spread of delicacies arranged on the expensive table. It is there to satisfy the hunger of the powerful rich capitalists. Here, the poem resonates strongly with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial critique, particularly her question of whether the subaltern can speak (Spivak 271). The rooster, like the subaltern subject, exists within a system that denies its agency. Yet, by making the rooster the focus of the poem, Bhattacharya provides it with visibility and recognition. The literal image of the "*astakunrh*", or the dump yard, and the starving people scavenging in it for a few morsels of wasted food and competing with the stray dogs, shows the horrific reality of hunger and poverty, and also highlights the stark contrast between life inside and life outside the mansion.

In the poem "*Shiri*" ("Stairs"), Bhattacharya turns to spatial metaphor to represent social hierarchy. Unlike the matchstick and the cigarette, the staircase symbolises established, permanent structure. The staircase, often connected with upward movement, here becomes a site of struggle and exhaustion. "*Amra shiri, tomra amader mariye protidin onek uchute uthe jao, tarpor phireo takao naa pichhoner dike…tobuo amra jani, chirokal aar prithibir kachhe chapa thakbe naa, amader dehe tomader ei podaghaat*" (We are stairs, you step on us and rise to new heights every day, but you don't look back at us even once…still we know that your oppressive footsteps on our existence will not remain hidden from the world forever.) Each step represents labour, effort, and the burden of survival. For those at the bottom, ascent is not a promise but an endless, unattainable task. Each step of the staircase represents the downtrodden and the marginalised workers who are shamelessly stepped upon by the power-hungry aristocrats to rise to the top of the social pyramid. Once they reach the top, they do not bother to look back at those who made their ascent possible. Even today, the image of the staircase, or the space underneath the staircase, often referred to as "*shirir tola*" in Bengali, is associated with the space set aside for the household help or the workers. Not a proper room, but an extra space in the entire house for the extra member who ironically ensures the smooth working of the household. However, Bhattacharya represents a promise

for rebellion in the lines of the poem. He believes that the true faces of the oppressors will be revealed in front of the entire world one day, and the people upon whose backs their success depends, will pull away the philanthropist masks from their faces.

In all these poems, waste functions not only as a metaphor but also as a process. Most of Bhattacharya's poems are told from the perspective of the oppressed. Bhattacharya consciously chooses objects and figures that are overlooked, unrecognised, or discarded. Bhattacharya redefines the boundaries of poetic representation by focusing on what is neglected. While his poetry vividly depicts disposability and marginalisation, it also gestures towards resistance. It does not simply depict wase, it reclaims it. By bringing the marginal into the centre of poetic attention, he transforms waste into a site of meaning, visibility, and potential change.

Sukanta Bhattacharya's poetry gently but persistently brings us closer to what is discarded, and urges us to get over our discomfort in confronting hunger, exhaustion and lives pushed to the margins. In doing so, he asks us to reconsider what we mean when we label something, or someone, as waste. Across his poems, waste is never just material. The backdrop of the Bengal Famine of 1943 makes this especially clear, where human lives were treated as expendable. Yet Bhattacharya does not depict these realities in abstract terms. He turns to the most ordinary objects, such as a matchstick, a cigarette, a rooster, a staircase, and assigns them symbolic value that represents the process of exploitation.

Bhattacharya's oeuvre is remarkable in the sense that it does not sugarcoat discomfort. The images of burning, hunger, and sacrifice stay with us long after we have finished reading the poems. They echo what Kristeva defines as the disturbing presence of the abject, and what Agamben calls the reduction of life to mere survival. But Bhattacharya does not simply represent them as silent survivors, he gives them a voice. All his poems have a latent warning: a day will come when the arrogance of the power-hungry will burn in the fire of the sufferings of the downtrodden.

Bhattacharya's poetry does not offer solutions to the problems of the marginalised. Instead, it gives a new dimension to the way we perceive what is discarded. It asks us to notice what we overlook, to question the systems that determine what is considered as value, and to recognise the humanity within what is cast away. We live in a world where inequality continues to shape lives in evident and indiscernible ways. Today, these representations feel as crucial as ever. Bhattacharya wrote during the last few years of the colonial rule, however, all the issues that were raised by him in his work stand relevant till date. His poems ignite within us the spirit of revolution and togetherness, and do not let us sit comfortably. He shows us that nothing, and no one, is ever truly insignificant.

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