

Bhabani Bhattacharya as an Objective Delineator of Indian Social Reality Succeeding Admirably in Coalescing the Ideological and the Human, Political and the Personal: An Analysis

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Abstract: This paper attempts to project Bhabani Bhattacharya as an Indo-Anglian novelist of considerable merit and distinction occupying a significant place in Indian English fiction and as a writer of fiction with a penchant for details, a flair for listing and awareness of social, political and cultural problems. It beautifully colours his wide range of experience in and around the world and his close association with men, and manners through his literary creations which all present a time picture of India and its teeming millions surging with life and substance and reveals how all his writing has a social purpose as he himself is an objective delineator of Indian social reality reflecting in all respects the most vital aspects of Indian life in all its social, political, economic and cultural manifestations.

Keywords: Social and cultural problems wide experience portrayal of India social reality.

Bhabani Bhattacharya, an Indo – Anglian novelist of considerable merit and distinction, occupies a significant place in Indian English fiction. Just like Mulk Raj – Anand, he too in a highly educated and widely-travelled person. He has been a journalist, a member of the Indian diplomatic corps and a university teacher and more than this, he has been “writer of fiction with a penchant for details, a flair for listing and an awareness of social , political and cultural problems” (Singh 2). In his novels, Bhattacharya presents rather richly relevant details in respect of World War II, the Bengal Famine of 1943, the struggle for Indian Independence and the 1962 Chinese Invasion of India. The literary world has done great honor not only granting the Sahitya Academic Award for his novel **Shadow from Ladakh** but also translating his writings into several other languages including French, German, Italian, Russian, Polish, Czech, Serbo – Croatian. (Yugoslav), Chinese, Swedish, Danish, Finnish, Dutch, Hebrew and Sinhalese. He has to his credit publication of such notable novels as 1. **Music for Mohini** (1952), 2. **He who Rides a Tiger** (1955), 3. **A Goddess Named Gold** (1960), 4. **Shadow from Ladakh** (1966) and 5. **A Dream in Hawaii** (1978).

Bhattacharya believes strongly that unless a writer has keen observation and an eye for nothing the details of general behavior of folks, he cannot write a social novel. For himself, he has never missed a single opportunity of observing incidents and happenings L.N Gupta rightly Comments:

“Pure intellectuals watch the crowds but do not force themselves on them. They visit slums and absorb the misery of their dwellers in their being. They tour the famine – stricken areas. They look into the shriveled faces and sunken eyes of the sufferers. They share their distress. But they do not use amplifiers to blare their benefaction. They suffer quietly. The process involves Cycles of seething tensions. The end product in a major work say, a great novel, in the case of a fiction writer. It is a monument of its times. Such is the case with Bhabani Bhattacharya” (P 39).

Bhabani Bhattacharya’s wide range of experience in and around the world and his close association with men, manners and their personalities have enabled him to grasp the innate significance of humanity and all this funds expression in the characters of his novels and short stories carved out with a pen – that never waves. No doubt , the reader at the author’s keen observation of the day–to–day incidents of life. Bhattacharya stresses the point that art or literature must have its own credibility and that any art or literature without credibility may be all fake or puerile. He comes back to his basic state when he declares:

“The stern realist is addicted to ideas: he wants to make life better: He dreams of a great destiny for humankind and out of its ignominious end under nuclear fission. And his pen is a powerful weapon for his fight” (P 6).

From these lines, it becomes clear that ‘realism’ is the first article of his literary faith and that he looks upon art or literature as an effective instrument to be used for the purpose of bringing about desirable socio – cultural changes and ushering in an egalitarian society.

For Bhabani Bhattacharya, writing is his first love and full time career and almost all his novels present a time picture of India and its teeming millions surging with life and substance. He does not believe in the dictum of art for art’s sake. All writing for him has a social purpose. His outlook is highly constructive and purposeful. He regards art as a criticism of life which reviews current values and he conceives the novel as an idiom of compassion which is designed to have a curative social effect. He is one such novelist who has an avowed purpose in writing the novels with his manifesto and declaration that “art must have a social purpose”. Not only did he believe in it but also follow it rather implicitly in all his five novels. In this respect, his thinking falls in link with the thinking of Shaw who said, “If art is not didactic, it is useless”. As a writer, Bhattacharya is said to have been greatly influenced by Tagore and Gandhi as well as Shakespeare and Steinbeck. His novels reveal his Marxist tendency and a liberal humanitarian outlook on the problems of life. As Dorothy Blair shimmer observes, “A strong undercurrent of the early Marxist pressures on history an through all Bhattacharya’s novels ” (P 8)

Generally Speaking, human life is not possible without social relationships. These relationships are organized by the so – called social institutions. Yet man has the power to exceed himself , to make himself more entirely and profoundly than he is. He has the balance and rhythm because of his” sense of the intellectual, ethical and aesthetic order and the synthetic impulse of its mind and life” (Gupta this aspect of humanity is reflected in the novel **So Many Hungers** In one of his interviews, Bhattacharya admitted:

“The great famine swept down upon Bengal. The emotional stirring I felt (more than two million man, women and children died of slow stagnation and a man made society) were a sheer compulsion to creativity. The result was the novel **So Many Hungers**” (Verges 27)

This novel **So Many Hungers** is predominantly women round the theme of hunger. S.C. Harrex has rightly commented as: “This novel is a harrowing account of a famine in Bengal (Unfortunately ever – relevant) and a passionate indictment of the human culpability involved , particularly of the grasping parasites (most upper – class) who exploit the famine to make black market fortunes. The story is told from the point of view of the starving peasants who migrated to Calcutta a when they died in the streets and is calculated to shock the readers’ sense of humanity in scenes such as that which describes a Jackal perched on the thigh of a pregnant women, tearing at her swollen belly, while her screams slash the air” (P17). Bhattacharya has painted here the naked horror of it all with a pitiless precision and cumulative detail. In the words of Dr. Srinivasa Iyengar.

“**So Many Hungers** is no doubt an impeachment of man’s inhumanity to man, but it is also a dramatic study of a set of human beings caught in a unique and tragic predicament. The story has been effectively told and the tragic pangs of the real mass starvation described in the guise of fiction, moves the reader deeply. The novel describes a factual and vivid account of the most shocking disasters in history” (93)

The novel **Music for Mohini** does present the conflict between the twain cultures of East and West and reconciliation is suggested as a form of adjustment. The author deals with caste distinctions and poverty here in **Music for Mohini** blowing up “the citadel of old traditions and Superstitions which menace India’s progress” (Gupta 19). Published in 1952, **Music for Mohini** is the novel dealing with the tensions and conflicts of the Indian society at “a moment of transition, of search for a time way of life” (MM 52). It is indeed a forward direction to be followed to fully benefit by our political freedom. It is quite apt to quote the words of Majorie B. Synder who finds modern India revealed in **Music for Mohini** as a sociological battleground in which the older generation clings to traditionwhile the intellectuals are struggling to throw away charms and bangles to open themselves and their country to western ideas” (P61). The characters and the incidents pictured in **Music for Mohini** represent the forces of the past and the present and point to the utter desirability of achieving a kind of spiritual harmony or adjustment that is so essential for the survival and growth of India.

In **Music for Mohini** Mohini and Jayadev, of course, are the two really important characters in this novel but the other personages who do also play their own roles here are father, her grandmother, Jayadev’s mother, Herinda and Sudha, Mohini strikes us as a peculiar blend of submission and revolt, humility and defiance where as Jayadev has a settled and definite social ‘philosophy of his own as: “It was his dream to reorientate the values and patterns of Hindu life”. Jayadev launches a crusade against blind beliefs and superstitions to re-weigh social values. And Mohini’s father represents the modern temper that would brook no dilly – dallying with human dignity and freedom. Mohini’s grandmother symbolizes old, conservative values

and sanctions while Mohini's mother –in-law is a stern and exacting woman, austere and orthodox in all respects dedicating her right hand to Lord Shiva for the well-being of her son Jayadev. Harindr's father, an iron pillar of orthodoxy, does practice the "Indian system of medicine in its antique purity" (P128) As professor K.R. Chandrasekharan says, "one of the major concerns of Bhattacharya in this novel is the need for a change of social outlook and reorientation of social values in India. No doubt, Jayadev and Mohini are "the two symbols of modernism" (Reddy 80). Jayadev questions the life – negating values of bad tradition and customs:

Values Mother? There are values beyond group, since you will always try to reach them with your reason, never with your feelings has life punished you..... Blind belief shapes your thinking. Blind belief cannot make sentiment" (Bhattacharya 180).

The Psychological conflict in Mohini, instead of doing harm to anyone, only reawakens her rather spiritually. Mohini is portrayed as a selfless sacrificing woman whose respect for elders, love and faith fullness to her husband and her commitment to the village people exemplify the characteristics of a typical Indian woman. This is the harmonious music in Mohini's life. Balaram S. Sorot rightly remarks:

"Bhabani Bhattacharya quite successfully blends the two contrary values tradition and modernity–in **Music for Mohini** and the novel virtually becomes the novelist's plea to a such a fusion in every sphere of life" (P52).

Highlighting the synthesis of asceticism and aestheticism and exposing the hollowness of superstitions and old beliefs of the people of Bengal. Bhattacharya in this novel **Music for Mohini** seeks to build a new society which is absolutely free from the dead Conventions and blind beliefs and wants people to follow the right of reason so that they never lose their way in the dreary deserts of dead habits. The novel clearly illustrates Bhattacharya's belief in human values. He is very keen on setting up a society out and out free from all evils like casteism, untouchability, ignorance and orthodoxy where man can live happily with dignity and self – respect. Kunjo Singh rightly holds as:

"**Music for Mohini** is not merely a catalogue of the social evils of Hindu India to delight a western audience but a portrait of the contrasting values of the old and the new in sharp conflict with each other and ending in a reconciliation and synthesis of the two " (P 95).

Thus, Bhattacharya here in this novel **Music for Mohini** advocate that one has to bridge the gap between the old eastern way of life and the new semi – western way of life , pleading for restructuring the Indian society in all respects

The novel **He who Rides a Triger** has the same background as that of **So Mary Hungers**. While the Indian freedom struggle and the Bengal Famine of 1943 are the two major themes projected in his earlier novel, in **He Who Rider a Tiger**, the Quit India Movement is once again brought into focus and it forms the background and the shadow of famine is also made to loom large on the horizon. The novel deals with the theme of man-made hunger that caused mass exodus of destitutes, the plague – stricken people bereft of any possessions from Jharna town and other villages to the city of gold – Calcutta in search of food. The treatment of the problem of hunger is made more effective by showing the trials and tribulations of Kalo and his daughter in the face of hunger. Hunger presented here is of two kinds: the hunger of the rich, black – marketeers and the oppressors for sexual pleasure and the hunger of the poor to meet the bare necessities of life. Kh. Kunjo Singh has commented:

"**He who Rides A Tiger** is a moral fable of human depravity and degradation to get out of the moral morass of fraud and falsehood" (P93)

Kalo's hunger is essentially a by- product of the economic crisis precipitated by the two world wars, famine and Colonialism. In the heart – rending Sufferings of Kalo and his daughter, one has a comprehensive view of human suffering caused by a system that is 'corrupt with cash and caste'. **He Who Rides a Tiger** is nothing but an attack on both who profited by people's misery during the famine and those who exploited them as caste tyrants. As a legend of freedom, a legend to inspire and awaken , it is a grim satire on Hindu orthodoxy. In the words of Dr.Iyengar ,

"The tempo of life in Calcutta , the complex of urban vices and urban sophistication, the pressure of mass movements and mass hysteria , the reign of superstition and numbo jumbo – gives the novel an entire and piquant quality all its own " (93)

Food is the primary requisite of human dignity; hunger debases and dehumanises man. Bhattacharya has dealt quite forcefully with the theme of hunger and the concomitant theme of human degradation in his novels **So many Hungers** and **He who Rides a Tiger**. Kalo's fight in **He who Rides a Tiger** is not with an individual but with the social forces that create savages and wicked human beings. H. M.Williams observes rightly as :

"In rage against the corrupt system, against the acquisitive society, Kalo perpetrates a successful masquerade by turning himself into a miracle working Brahmin"(P93).

The wicked and the evil – doers have nothing to do worth good or bad actions ; they eat well , utter God’s name for pomp and show and sleep peacefully. Kalo discerns this abominable difference in society vividly:

“While man died of hunger, wealth grew; and while kindness dried up , religion was more in demand .

It was only the outward form of religion, the shell of ritual, empty within (HWRT 117).

The novel **He Who Riders A Tiger** justifiably explores and exposes the social evils in the Indian society and mocks at the classification of the society in terms of caste and creed. While in **He Who Rides a Tiger**, the social theme is developed in terms of irony in order to dramatize the iniquities and hypocrisies of the caste system, in **A Goddess Named Gold**, the moral supremacy of communal unity over landlord’s selfishness is proposed as a model for independent India. Written in 1960, it is the best novel on Indian village life and makes a most illuminating and satisfying reading experience. It is a masterly satire on those who live by the lure of gold. It tells us how spiritual values like spontaneous kindness are sought to be prostituted for purposes of gold. It is a modern fable of rural India and the close – textured fabric of its life on the eve of Independence in 1947. This novel deals with the theme of economic freedom of the hungry masses and warns about the evils of black marketing and poverty and pleads for the eradication of the same, failing which the very purpose of freedom will get defeated leading to many more hungers.

A Goddess Named Gold is a women’s novel , for the liberation of the people from the clutches of sethji is accomplished by women alone. Past history of India presents myriad examples of the fortitude of Indian women in solving the problems faced by the country. The courageous decision of the women to resolve the crises proves their mettle. A war is declared on the money – lenders, hoarders and smugglers who have become a curse to the society and a hindrance for the upliftment of the poor and the progress of the country. It is this courage convocation of the women of Sonamitti that helps them to liberate themselves – from Seth Sam Sunder whose lust for gold knows no bounds. In short the theme deals with the confrontation between the hard core hoarder and young energetic and zealous village belle Meera on the other. This is central to the whole novel which deals with the life and predicament of people in a pre- independent Indian village, giving a vivid picture of the life of the people in the country side which is marked by poverty, starvation and exploitation. Bhattacharya confidently expresses that man’s hunger for gold is not an end in itself but it is only a means to achieve other things. The novelist here in this novel **A Goddess Named Gold** too, portrays two typical forms of hunger – hunger for miracles and hunger for spiritual experience. By endorsing that the main theme of **A Goddess Named Gold** is the people’s preparation for nationhood, D.B.Shimer rightly commented:

“The ultimate test of nationhood will be the moral fiber of villagers ... impoverished, illiterate,

Superstitious perhaps, but hard working basically intelligent and wise in tradition” (shimmer 67).

The novel **a Dream in Hawaii** deals with the tensions and pretensions of the modern world. The novel centres round three characters – Swami Yogananda, Dr. Vincent Smith and Devjani. Bhattacharya has in mind the clash of values between the East and the West – India and America. This novel needs like a diagnostic report of the intellectual crisis besetting the affluent west. Through this novel, Bhattacharya also presents “a critique of the bourgeois value system which believes in making a profitable business venture out of even personal human needs like sex and yoga” (68). The theme of **A Dream in Hawaii** is in many ways a continuation of the theme of **Shadow from Ladakh**.

The novel **Shadow from Ladakh** has for its background the Indo – China conflict and tells what India needs for survival – a meeting point between Gandhian social ethics and tremendous forces of science and technology. The theme presents a considerable amount of truth of a politically conscious Indian family. S.C.Harrex rightly comments:

“the Indo – Chinese border conflict following China’s annexation of Tibet, is also a variation on the theme of synthesis. Through the relationships of the main characters , Bhattacharya advocates for present day India a cultural fusion based on a love – much between Gandhian idealism and a progressive people’s technology ” (51).

Around the central theme, Bhattacharya has woven an eminently moving tale of the conflict of modern India. This is not strictly a historical or political novel through the story is woven round two great conflicts namely the Chinese – Indian over Ladakh, and the conflict between the steel town and Gandhigram. In a sense, the two conflicts are related with the ways of life for which Gandhigram stood, an industrially mighty India cannot be built attempting adventures across the border.

Bhattacharya in the novel **Shadow from Ladakh** shows how the modern sophisticated civilization has encroached upon the simple and modest lives of the poor through the characters of Bhaskar Roy and Satyajit. He wakes Gandhigram a microcosm of India. Gandhigram is a concept in which there are no caste and class barriers. **Shadow from Ladakh** highlights the concepts of basic education, voluntary poverty, Bramacharya, truth, non–violence, fair distribution of wealth, self-purification by fasting and satyagraha” (P132). At the very beginning of the novel, one is made to realize that the steel town which has come into existence as a result of the Chinese aggression begins to expand around Satyajit, Sumit and some others. Bhattacharya is preoccupied with

the vision of a new India. The most important issue raised by him is related to the future of the nation and its place among the developed nations of the world. He is very keen on ushering in a new social order in India based on justice, equality, cooperation and judicious harmony.

Bhattacharya affirms that the ideals of the Steel town or those of the Gandhigram alone are not sufficient enough for the development of a nation. The two represent two different modes of life but the two are equally impotent. The novel thus stresses on the necessity for a true adjustment between the two. The novel shows that a comprehensive understanding between Bhaskar and Satyajit leads to the disappearance of the opposing natures of the steel town and Gandhigram. Bireswar has rightly reworked:

“You and he, facing each other like day and night. The eternal clash – light against darkness and darkness against light. Could we have one and not the other? Could we sleep if it is only light? Or waken if darkness is without end? you who think of yourself as the light, Satyajit, you are futile without Bhaskar” (SFL 358).

Towards the end of the novel, the novelist resolves the conflict between steel town and Gandhigram. In the words of K.R. Chandrashekar, “**Shadow from Ladakh** is a deeply philosophical novel with a message of great relevance to the future of the country” (P126). No doubt, this novel **Shadow from Ladakh** is a novel with a message for a harmonious co-existence of people of different natures, attitudes and kinds in India. If India is to progress as a developed country, it should learn its lessons from the past and move the nations of the world. A better understanding among the different classes and types of people alone would help in furthering the national interests. Bhattacharya subscribes to such a societal harmony through this novel **Shadow from Ladakh**. Dr. Paul Varghese states that “Bhattacharya has the vision of a welfare society at heart. His concerns are clear and unambiguous; they are political, economic and social. In other words, dignity of man both in national and international contexts is uppermost in his mind. In this, he follows the traditions of European social realism as does Mulk Raj”.

Prof. Chandrasekharan looks upon Bhabani Bhattacharya not really as a raw, crude realist but as one who combines both realism and romanticism in his writings. In his words, Bhattacharya’s writings have their own authenticity their own credibility from the social or sociological point of view. In her book on Bhabani Bhattacharya, Dorothy B. Shimer goes to the extent of saying that the novelist looks upon art as “the conduct for arousing social awareness and concern that may lead to reform (P 11). This novel is nothing but a clear call for world peace, for co-existence of contrary ideas and social systems **Shadow from Ladakh** is indeed, a plea for integration.

Let it be concluded with what S.C. Harrex views that “Although Bhattacharya has a tendency to load his novels with mechanical sociology, over – simplified philosophies and naively symbolic relationship as in **Shadow from Ladakh** these defects are compensated for by the sincerity of his compassion and the relevance of his vision”. In brief, it may be said that Bhabani Bhattacharya succeeds admirably in coalescing the ideological and the human, the political and the personal. In fact, Bhattacharya being an objective delineator of Indian social reality has discussed extensively the most vital aspects of Indian life in all its social, political, economic and cultural manifestations.

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