



VISION OF SOCIETY AND SOCIAL REFORMATION IN BHABANI BHATTACHARYA'S NOVELS

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Abstract

*Bhabani Bhattacharya is well-known among Indian writers in English for his use of art as a medium for achieving social reforms. He occupies a significant place in Indian English fiction. Being the writer of transitional period in the Indian socio-political history, Bhattacharya, through his writings proves himself to be the product of his age. He has depicted the socio-political and economic changes in India on the background of the contemporary historical events and social conditions. Bhattacharya has written six novels such as *So Many Hungers!* (1947), *Music for Mohini* (1952), *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1954), *A Goddess Named Gold* (1960), *Shadow from Ladakh* (1966) and *A Dream in Hawaii* (1978). Bhattacharya, in each of his novels, gives an account of various customs, conventions, superstitious and oddities present in the Indian society. Bhattacharya's education, travels and experiences as a journalist shaped his vision of life. It helped him to write exhaustively on social problems. He was extremely aware of the social, political and cultural problems of the then society and his writings were endowed with a positive vision of life. He has an unshakable trust in life's invincibility, values and worthiness. He is seriously concerned with the plight of the destitute and the low-caste people. This paper intends to present the humanistic self of the author who aimed at social reformation and upliftment of the voiceless and the poor through his fictional works.*

Keywords: Social problems, Value judgement, Reformation, Humanistic Vision, Caste system, Religious Untouchability, Exploitation

Introduction

Literature, in common parlance, holds the mirror of society and literary artists often convey their message towards society through their works. Bhabani Bhattacharya is one such well accomplished and outstanding novelist who has made a culture interpretation of Indian ethos through his work. Almost all his novels do make a social document of great value and endorse a vision for the creation of a new society in India that is free from social evils, exploitation, suffering and variegated forms of hunger, both internal and external. Bhabani Bhattacharya is basically a social philosopher who strives to express the social problems confronting society and the conceivable remedies through the novel. His novels have an extraordinary responsibility in depicting the social and political issues that prevailed after the Indian Independence. He empathises from the point of the people who are greatly affected by the outcomes of Indian Independence. His novels are the results of his anger and aggression against the brutality of the British government as well as the inability of the Indians who failed to live in unity and discriminated against the people from oppressed class or community. Bhabani Bhattacharya mocks arts for the sake of art. In an interview with Sudhakar Joshi, he says: "I hold that a novel must have a social purpose. It must place before the reader something from the society's point of view. Art is not necessarily for art's sake. Purposeless art and literature which is much in vogue do not appear to me a sound judgment." Bhattacharya can rightly be called the doyen of the Indian-English novel for his futuristic vision and humanistic outlook of the Indian social reality. Bhabani Bhattacharya's fictional corpus includes six novels— *So Many Hungers* (1947), *Music for Mohini* (1952), *He who Rides a Tiger* (1955) *A Goddess Named Gold* (1960), *Shadow from Ladakh* (1966) and *A Dream is Hawaii* (1978). Besides, he has also written a number of short stories collected in the little Steel Hawk and other Stories (1968). In this edifice of creativity, the foundation rests on the themes of social reality, clash between tradition and modernity, East-West encounter, progressivism, concern for the common man, Indianness, humanism, exploration of the self and the problem of identity of the post-Independence Indian nation and Indian man. S.P. Swain writes: "The fictional world of Bhabani Bhattacharya posits an engaging picture of the human being torn between two worlds – the self and the society. The fettered self-struggling for emancipation from the stranglehold of a chaotic society appears to be a dominant trait in Bhabani Bhattacharya's novels. The individual struggles for self- liberation but is silenced by the buffets of societal values, falters and then puts up a faltering fight but never yields".

Social Realism & Reformation in Bhattacharya's Novels

Reality, according to Bhabani Bhattacharya, is the soul of art which should convey truth—a truth of emotion, which is the ultimate realism. To put it differently, the creative writer's final motto is to unveil and present the truth irrespective of anything. Unlike the philosopher who presents only doctrine, the writer portrays the naked reality of life rendered through the devices of dramatization. Bhattacharya, in all his novels, explores the social and political realities of contemporary life. A true picture of various aspects of life in the country is presented in them. His novels, however, are not nearly photographic records of social, political and economic life of the people, but an imaginative picture of life. Bhattacharya's debut novel, *So Many Hungers* (1947), is largely focused on the human desire for food,

but it also examines other human desires in great detail. It's a narrative about many different kinds of hunger, not just how many people are hungry. The title of the novel shows different kinds of hunger. B. Shyamala Rao justly says, "the title of the novel, *So Many Hungers!* is amply justified. There are indeed many hungers. - hunger for food, hunger for affection, hunger for love, hunger for lust, hunger for money, hunger for sacrifice and hunger for the general welfare of all" (46). 'Hunger' is the central character of this novel. If there is any protagonist, it is hunger. All the human characters are peripheral. They represent different types of hungers. At the inner periphery there are three characters: Kajoli, her mother and her brother Onu. They are victims of hunger for food. At the outer periphery we have Samarendra, his elder son Rahoul, younger son Kunal and Rahoul's wife Manju, Samarendra's father Devesh, Kajoli's father and brother, the soldier and the black marketeer Abalbandhu. Samarendra is a victim of hunger for money. Rahoul is a victim of so many hungers - hunger for research, hunger for freedom, and hunger for happier life of common man. Kunal has a hunger for adventures. Manju is hungry for her sweet home. Devesh Basu and Kajoli's father and brother have hunger for the freedom. The soldier is a prey to sex. Abalbandhu is not a victim of hunger for money but he makes others victim of his hunger for money. A new global order built on timeless ethical norms and higher aspirations is the starting point for Rahoul. Despite being a scientist, he is really a thinker and an idealist who longs to witness the dawn of a new era characterised by higher principles and values. He worries about the Allies during World War II because they are only interested in winning the war, not in fighting for ideas and principles. War, hunger and freedom are the major recurring themes of Bhattacharya as a novelist.

Poli Reddy writes: "The source of Bhattacharya's world-wide popularity lies in the fact that his work embodies not only the sufferings and aspirations of individual heroes and heroines but also the agonies and expectations of ancient people busy in the quest of their national and international destiny" (28). Bhattacharya's social conscience does not like to see exploitation in any form and he strives to arouse the conscience of the reader to the wrongs, evils, sufferings, miseries of hunger that prevail around us. The novel *So Many Hungers* presents a heart- rendering account of the sufferings and hardships of the people of Bengal during the war years when famine stalked through the land and millions died of starvation and Bengal being an Eastern Province is in constant danger of Japanese attack: "The Battle Fleet of Japan ruled the waves of the Bay. That was the great peril. The wide thrusting Bossom of Bengal lay bared to the sea unguarded" (SMH 52). What is noticeable here is that people particularly peasants lead an utterly miserable life on account of the havoc caused by war. The novel highlights the dehumanizing effects of poverty and starvation and the corrupting influence of man's lust for money. Hunger and poverty have the power to debase humanity, to an unfortunate and unimaginable level. K.R.S. Iyengar rightly comments:

“The novel really (as the tiles forcefully proclaims) unfolds the story of a largely man – made hunger that took a toll of two million innocent man, women and children in Calcutta and Bengal. While the hoarders the profiteers and black marketeers piled a thundering trade, authority was apathetic, the wells of human pity seemed to have almost dried up and only the jackals and the vultures were in vigorous and jubilant action. The novelist paints the naked horror of it all with a pitiless precision and cumulative detail.” (412-413)

Bhabani Bhattacharya in one of his interviews said that *So Many Hungers* is an offspring of his emotionally disturbed self in the hunger-stricken society: “The great famine swept down upon Bengal. The emotional stirring, I felt (more than two million men, woman and children died of slow starvation amid a man-made scarcity). Were sheer compulsions to creativity? The result was the novel *So Many Hungers*” (127). The novel beautifully presents an authentic picture of life in rural India in contrast with the sophisticated life of urban India in contrast with the sophisticated life of the changing social environment. While K.K. Sharma considered it to be Bhattacharya’s “affirmative vision of life” (26), K.R. Chandrasekharan found the novel portraying “the triumph of spirit over matter” (34). Iyengar obviously commented about the stark portrayal of reality in this novel: “*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).

In *Music for Mohini* the novelist presents the conflict between the two different cultures of East and West and reconciliation is suggested as a form of adjustment. The author deals with caste distinctions and poverty in *Music for Mohini* by blowing up “the citadel of old traditions and superstitions which menace India’s progress” (Gupta 19). Published in 1952, *Music for Mohini* is a magnificent work in dealing with the tensions and conflicts of the Indian society at “a moment of transition, of search for a new way of life” (52). It is indeed a forward direction to be followed to fully benefit by our political freedom. It is quite apt to say that *Music for Mohini* presents the older generation clinging to tradition while the intellectuals are struggling to throw away old things and running towards western ideas. 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 whereas 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. 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. As K.R. Chandrasekharan says that 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. 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).

In *Music for Mohini*, Bhattacharya does neatly show the need for restructuring the society for retaining and promoting political independence without relentlessly disturbing traditionalism. The novelist’s aim in this novel is to show that India is unable to free itself from the clutches of orthodoxy and superstition even after independence. Here in this novel, Bhattacharya has made a sincere attempt to represent the conflict between the old values and the modern values as symbolized by the old Mother and Mohini respectively. And his major concerns are nothing but the need for a change in the social outlook and reorientation of social values. The main focus of the novel *Music for Mohini* is not merely on Mohini but or the social set – up rather than the intelligent diversity. Having an intimate knowledge of human nature and a keen insight into the common motives and passions, creative power and dramatic sympathy, the author confers on his characters some degree of reality. Commenting on this characterization, K.R.S. Iyengar remarks: “It is the difference in the intellectual level of husband and wife and the consequence of this gulf that forms the integral part of the theme of the novel *Music for Mohini*” (325). The psychological conflict in Mohini after her marriage only reawakens her spirituality without doing any harm to anyone. As a selfless sacrificing woman, Mohini’s respect for elders, her love and faithfulness to her husband and her commitment to the village people exemplify the characteristics of a typical Indian woman. She eventually experiences a feeling of ecstasy and joy: “At last there was a discount. Life was music- a note of song for the old mother in her, a note for Jayadev and his rebel gods, a note for the Big House and Behula village, torn and at cross – purpose for a while, her life was music – the true quest of every woman, her deepest need” (188). This is the harmony and music in Mohini’s life. Balaram Sorot rightly comments in this respect: “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 such a fusion in every sphere of life” (51-52). The novel reveals “a new consciousness and the Indian heritage as contrasted with western tradition and culture” (Chandrasekaran 36). While giving a complete picture of the orientation of the social life in the post-independence India that is unable to shake off the bonds of superstition and irrational orthodoxy, Bhattacharya beautifully describes the utter chaos existing in the Indian society:

“Society, rural society (and nine – tenths of Indian was rural) was rick with taboos and inhibitions of its own making: The inequities of caste and untouchability, the ritualism and passed for religion, the wide flung. Cobweb of superstitions faith. It was all an outgrowth of centuries of descendancy. The purity of ancient thought had been lost in misinterpretation until the dignity of man becomes a mere plaything of vested interest” (67-68)

Bhattacharya in his 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’s observation is apt to mention: “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” (95). What Bhattacharya here advocates is 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. R.S. Sharma wonderfully comments on Bhabani Bhattacharya’s vision of social reformation: “Bhattacharya is a thinker-artist who not only watches closely the actual social events and embodying them in his novel, but at the same time suggesting to the society as it ought to be. There is not only criticism but protest in his novels which moves us by its ringing sincerity. He cannot help speaking out the truth but the manner in which he does it, is very artistic” (42).

The Indian freedom struggle and the Bengal famine of 1943 are the two major themes introduced in his earlier novel. In *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1954), the Quit India movement is once again brought into focus and it forms the background and the shadow of feminine is also made to loom large on the horizon. This novel is almost like a more replica of the earlier novel because it attacks the social reality of the caste and class system and also the dehumanizing effect on the growth of individual character. As Kunjo Singh has put it: “He Who Riders a Tiger is a moral fable of human depravity and degradation to get out of the moral morass of fraud and falsehood” (93). The novel is undoubtedly the best illustration of social realism because in this novel the treatment of the problem “hunger” is made more effective by showing 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. Bhattacharya confesses rather candidly: “My creative writing had its true genesis in the hunger hit streets of Calcutta where the great famine raged. I had an intense need of release from the agony of traumatic experience” (Srivastava 220).

The story of *He Who Rides a Tiger* is based on the ancient saying, “He who rides the tiger cannot dismount”. But in the novel, the situation of the protagonist Kalo is different. Kalo has the guts and courage to alight from the tiger during the time of his critical moment. This novel is considered to be the masterpiece of Bhattacharya. Written against the backdrop of World War II and the Quit India movement, this novel effectively portrays the political scenario such as hunger strikes, defiance of bans etc. all of which depict the vicious incidents of the political situation before independence. Kalo in *He Who Rides a Tiger* is different in his revolt against the injustice and hit back the people who are the cause of his suffering. The novel deals with the theme of man-made hunger that caused mass exodus of destitute, 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. 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” (93). 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 corrupted 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. In the words of 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 mumbo jumbo – gives the novel an entire and piquant quality all its own” (93). 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. 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 thus 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.

Conclusion

Bhabani Bhattacharya is of the view that literature should be instructive: “Art must teach but unobtrusively, by its vivid interpretation of life. Art must preach, but only by virtue of its being a vehicle of truth. If that is propaganda, there is no need to eschew the word”. He is true to his purpose of writing and his brilliant character depiction, vivid portrayal of contemporary society and realistic presentation of people’s problems and challenges capture readers’ attention and delight. Bhattacharya’s creative works are the output of his social and cultural environment. Strongly influenced by Tagore and Gandhian ideals and inspired by the vision of a just social order, he wrote novels for social purpose and political values. His vision of humanism is evident in the treatment of everything in his novels. As a humanist, he pleads

for human freedom, freedom of thought, freedom of choice, freedom of speech, freedom of civil liberties, freedom of the mind along with political, economic and social freedom. While his novel *So Many Hungers* deals with India's political freedom, *He Who Rides a Tiger* reveals the novelist's belief that man loves freedom above everything else and *Music for Mohini* focuses on social freedom. As a writer Bhattacharya is endowed with an affirmative vision of life and an unshakable trust in life's invincibility, values and worthiness. This affirmative vision is reflected in his belief in the bright side of human existence with which his novels conclude, in his faith in the unfathomable richness and sacredness of man's spirit which cannot be crushed by adversity and humiliation, and in his conviction that the evil forces in man and social treachery and corruption only test and underline the sterling qualities and the resplendent spirit of man. In conclusion, it may be worthwhile to say that Bhabani Bhattacharya's uniqueness as a creative writer lies in his dexterous presentation of social reality and incorporation of ideas leading to social reformation through his narratives.

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