

**Culture as Contention: A Cultural Materialist Reading of Bhabani
Bhattacharya's Novels**

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of culture, ideology, and resistance in the novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya through the lens of cultural materialism. Drawing upon the frameworks of Raymond Williams, Jonathan Dollimore, Alan Sinfield, and Antonio Gramsci, the paper argues that Bhattacharya's novels not only reflect historical realities but actively participate in socio-political critique. Through a detailed analysis of six major novels—*So Many Hungers!*, *Music for Mohini*, *He Who Rides a Tiger*, *A Goddess Named Gold*, *Shadow from Ladakh*, and *A Dream in Hawaii*—the study demonstrates how Bhattacharya uses fiction as a vehicle of ideological resistance, critiquing colonialism, caste hierarchies, economic exploitation, and the distortion of Gandhian ethics. The paper asserts that Bhattacharya's narratives resonate with cultural materialist concerns by refusing aesthetic isolation and engaging directly with power structures and class dynamics.

Keywords: Cultural Materialism, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Indian English Fiction, Ideology, Resistance, Raymond Williams, Subaltern

Introduction: Literature as Ideological Terrain Cultural Materialism: Theoretical Foundations, Cultural materialism, a theoretical offshoot of Marxist criticism, emphasizes the embeddedness of literature in the ideological and material structures of society. It examines literary texts not as isolated aesthetic artifacts but as active participants in socio-historical processes. Raymond Williams, a key proponent, conceptualizes culture as both a product and a producer of material life, arguing that "culture is ordinary" and profoundly political (*Marxism and Literature* 19). Jonathan

Dollimore and Alan Sinfield further assert that literature is a site of ideological struggle where dominant, residual, and emergent ideologies contest for space (*Political Shakespeare* xv).

Bhattacharya's Literary Vision and Ideological Intervention

Bhabani Bhattacharya's fiction offers fertile ground for a cultural materialist reading. Emerging in the wake of India's struggle for independence, his novels are deeply concerned with power, class, and cultural transformation. His works do not merely mirror historical realities; they interrogate them, foregrounding resistance from below and demystifying hegemonic ideologies. His fiction critiques capitalism, caste oppression, and the betrayal of Gandhian ideals, making his oeuvre an exemplary case for exploring literature as ideological intervention.

Famine, Colonialism, and Class in *So Many Hungers!*

Set during the Bengal Famine of 1943, *So Many Hungers!* (1947) offers a searing indictment of colonial economic policies and indigenous class exploitation. Bhattacharya does not depict hunger merely as a natural calamity but as a constructed crisis enabled by market hoarding, imperial apathy, and social callousness. As Gramsci posits, hegemony functions by normalizing exploitation, and Bhattacharya resists this by unveiling its mechanisms (*Prison Notebooks* 12).

Kajoli's transformation from a passive rural girl to an assertive street-seller symbolizes subaltern agency. Refusing to commodify her body despite starvation, she asserts economic and moral autonomy. Her resistance parallels Stuart Hall's observation that cultural resistance often emerges from the margins, challenging the dominant through lived experience (*Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies* 284). Bhattacharya uses Kajoli's journey to dismantle bourgeois moralities and elevate the ethical dignity of the oppressed.

Negotiating Modernity in *Music for Mohini*

In *Music for Mohini* (1952), Bhattacharya examines the tension between tradition and reform in postcolonial India. Mohini, the Western-educated protagonist, enters a rural patriarchal household and attempts to implement modern ideals. Her early failure illustrates what Williams describes as the collision between the residual and the emergent (*Resources of Hope* 12).

Rather than imposing reform, Mohini learns to negotiate cultural change from within. Her husband, Jayadev, a reformist zamindar, also struggles between ethical action and inherited privilege. The novel critiques the elitist abstraction of reformers while valorizing grassroots engagement. In doing so, Bhattacharya envisions a dialogic reform process, echoing Gramsci's concept of the "organic intellectual" who emerges from and works within the oppressed classes.

Subversion of Caste and Religion in *He Who Rides a Tiger*

He Who Rides a Tiger (1954) presents a scathing critique of caste-based hypocrisy through the story of Kalo, a blacksmith who masquerades as a Brahmin priest to expose religious exploitation. Bhattacharya constructs Kalo as a subaltern trickster who weaponizes the very ideology that once oppressed him.

The novel destabilizes the sacred-profane binary by showing how caste is performed rather than inherent. As Eagleton observes, “the aesthetic is ideology made apparently autonomous” (*Ideology of the Aesthetic* 62). Kalo’s role-playing reveals how religious symbols serve the elite and can be repurposed to dismantle hegemonic structures. His final confrontation with the priests unmasks their power as a cultural fiction.

Satire and Developmental Myths in *A Goddess Named Gold*

A Goddess Named Gold (1960) satirizes India’s post-independence development rhetoric and exposes the complicity of superstition in capitalist exploitation. The myth of Meera’s magical power to turn things into gold becomes a parable for the state’s illusory promises.

The novel critiques how religious and nationalist narratives are commodified to pacify the rural poor. The villagers’ blind faith mirrors what Terry Eagleton critiques as the aestheticization of ideology. Bhattacharya exposes how power masks itself in spiritual rhetoric, rendering the oppressed complicit in their subjugation. Meera’s final act of rejecting divine status restores her agency and breaks the ideological spell.

Ideological Conflict and Cultural Synthesis in *Shadow from Ladakh*

Winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award, *Shadow from Ladakh* (1966) explores ideological contestations during the Sino-Indian conflict. It stages a dialectic between Gandhian ethics (represented by Birtimohan) and Nehruvian industrialism (embodied by Satyajit). The symbolic conflict between Gandhigram and Steeltown reflects the national struggle to reconcile tradition with progress. Rather than privileging one ideology over the other, Bhattacharya advocates synthesis. The novel exemplifies Williams’s idea that cultural change must arise from negotiated consciousness, not authoritarian imposition. Bhattacharya does not reject industry but insists it be tempered with ethical accountability and community-oriented goals.

Spiritual Charlatanism and Decolonial Ethics in *A Dream in Hawaii*

A Dream in Hawaii (1978) critiques the spiritual vacuum of globalized modernity. The protagonist, Dr. Vidyasagar, a scholar disillusioned with Western psychology, encounters Eastern mysticism commodified for Western consumption.

The guru figure in the novel parodies the export of Indian spirituality as a global commodity. Bhattacharya uses irony to critique the Western romanticization of the East and the Indian elite's complicity in this spiritual marketplace. The novel aligns with cultural materialist views on the ideological function of culture, revealing how even spirituality becomes a site of ideological distortion and class manipulation.

Conclusion: Bhattacharya and the Ethics of Engagement

Bhabani Bhattacharya's novels exemplify literature as cultural praxis. His works traverse famine, caste, gender, superstition, and industrialization to unveil the ideological substrata of Indian society. He avoids simplistic binaries and instead foregrounds contradictions, struggles, and negotiations. His protagonists often represent emergent consciousness, struggling against hegemonic norms to forge ethical alternatives.

Bhattacharya's alignment with cultural materialist principles lies in his rejection of literary isolationism. His narratives engage with material realities, foreground agency, and resist the aesthetic containment of political critique. As Williams notes, literature must contribute to the "long revolution"—a cultural transformation grounded in justice, dignity, and collective well-being (*Resources of Hope* 32).

In viewing culture as a contested space, Bhattacharya's fiction participates in the historical struggle for social meaning. His enduring relevance lies not only in the social themes he explores but in the ideological clarity with which he confronts them.

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