
Dramatic Novel: A Perspective on Bhabani Bhattacharya's Fiction

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Abstract

The dramatic novel is a literary form in which the interconnection between plot and character is so seamless that the actions of the characters shape the narrative's progression and resolution. Edwin Muir notes that in a dramatic novel, "both appearance and reality are the same, and that character is action, and action, character" (Muir 47). Bhabani Bhattacharya, a prominent figure in Indian English fiction, exemplifies this form. His novels demonstrate a careful construction of plot, crisis, climax, and resolution, often mirroring the five-act structure of classical drama. This paper explores Bhattacharya's fiction as an illustration of the dramatic novel, examining the interaction of character, action, and causality, and how these elements reflect social, historical, and ethical concerns in mid-20th century India.

Keywords: Bhabani Bhattacharya; Dramatic Novel; Character and Action; Indian English Fiction; Narrative Structure

1. Introduction

A novel assumes a dramatic structure when the gap between characters and plot disappears, resulting in the inseparable development of both (Muir 41). In this form, the specific traits of the characters influence the unfolding action, which in turn transforms the characters, culminating in a resolution. E.M. Forster's notion of causality—"the cause-effect syndrome"—is fundamental to this interaction (Forster 116). Shakespearean dramaturgy exemplifies this principle, and several classic novels, including those by Bhattacharya, follow similar patterns.

The dramatic novel differs from the conventional novel in that it relies heavily on **conflict, tension, and climactic resolution** rather than simply narrating events. Edwin Muir asserts:

“The end of any dramatic novel will be a solution of the problem which sets the events moving... bringing about an equilibrium, or issuing in some catastrophe... Equilibrium or death—these are the two ends towards which the dramatic novel moves. The first generally takes the form of a suitable marriage” (Muir 58).

In Indian English literature, the dramatic novel is relatively recent, as the novel itself has a brief history in the country. Among Indian English novelists, Bhattacharya stands out for his consistent use of the dramatic structure. His narratives are marked by crises, suspense, and resolutions that often restore equilibrium, reflecting the essential traits of a dramatic novel (Sorot 111).

2. Dramatic Elements in Bhattacharya's Fiction

2.1 Interdependence of Plot and Character

In Bhattacharya's novels, characters are not merely conduits for action; their traits, motivations, and ethical dilemmas actively shape the trajectory of the narrative. This interdependence is the hallmark of dramatic fiction. Characters undergo transformations that are both **psychological and situational**, and the unfolding events are a natural consequence of these transformations.

For instance, in *So Many Hungers!* the character Kajoli faces moral dilemmas shaped by famine and social inequality, and her decisions directly influence the unfolding of the narrative. Similarly, in *Music for Mohini*, Mohini's courage and autonomy propel the plot, resulting in crises that reflect broader societal and familial conflicts.

2.2 Historical and Social Context

Bhattacharya's novels are deeply rooted in historical and social realities. The backdrop of **World War II, the Bengal Famine, the Quit India Movement, and post-independence socio-economic challenges** provides both a dramatic setting and a source of tension. The historical context does not merely serve as a backdrop; it actively interacts with the characters' lives, creating the cause-effect sequences essential to dramatic novels.

For example, *He Who Rides a Tiger* situates personal dilemmas against the larger canvas of the Bengal Famine, demonstrating how historical forces intensify the dramatic tension and ethical choices of the characters. This integration of historical realism with dramatic construction gives Bhattacharya's fiction a distinctive Indian flavor.

2.3 Major Works

2.3.1 *So Many Hungers!*

The novel begins with peaceful social settings, introducing major characters like Devata, Samarendra, Rahoul, Kajoli, Kunal, and Monju. Historical events such as the

Quit India Movement (1942) and the Bengal Famine (1943) trigger human tragedies that catalyze the plot. Kunal's disappearance during World War II, Rahoul's arrest, and Kajoli's moral dilemmas escalate the crisis. Bhattacharya resolves the narrative with social and personal reconciliation, demonstrating equilibrium as the end of the dramatic arc.

2.3.2 *Music for Mohini*

Mohini's conflicts with her mother-in-law form the core of the narrative tension. Bhattacharya uses crisis and suspense to dramatize familial and societal expectations. The narrative resolves when Mohini's moral courage and Jaydev's timely intervention restore harmony, illustrating the interaction of character and action in achieving narrative closure.

2.3.3 *He Who Rides a Tiger*

Kalo and Chandra Lekha's separation and subsequent trials showcase Bhattacharya's skill in weaving historical events, ethical dilemmas, and interpersonal drama. The narrative tension reaches its peak when Lekha agrees to marry to protect loved ones, only to be resolved by Kalo exposing the temple hoax, highlighting the dramatic resolution through character agency.

2.3.4 *A Goddess Named Gold*

The novel presents multiple layers of action, including the Cowhouse women's protest and the talisman hoax. Crisis arises from social injustice and the exploitation of women, resolved through the intervention of Atma Ram, reflecting Bhattacharya's use of dramatic irony and moral closure to ensure resolution.

2.3.5 *Shadow from Ladakh*

Set against the Sino-Indian conflict of 1962, the narrative incorporates political, cultural, and romantic tensions. Bhattacharya constructs dramatic suspense through the interplay of individual agency and structural constraints, ultimately resolving conflicts through reconciliation and ethical compromise.

2.3.6 *A Dream in Hawaii*

Through the narrative of Swami Yogananda and Devjani, Bhattacharya explores personal transformation and ethical dilemmas. Dramatic tension arises from the characters' conflicting desires, moral decisions, and cross-cultural encounters. The narrative resolves through spiritual harmony and ethical realization, demonstrating the moral dimension of Bhattacharya's dramatic structure.

2.4 Subplots and Multi-layered Narratives

A key feature of Bhattacharya's dramatic novels is the use of **subplots**. These secondary narratives function as episodes in a larger dramatic scheme, adding

complexity and texture. Subplots often highlight social, cultural, or ethical issues, reinforcing the main narrative while providing multiple points of engagement for readers. For instance, the secondary storylines in *So Many Hungers!* illustrate rural suffering, gender inequity, and political struggle, enriching the primary narrative arc.

3. Theoretical Perspective

The dramatic novel, according to Edwin Muir, is characterized by a **cause-and-effect logic** where actions stem naturally from character traits, and crises drive the narrative toward resolution. Bhattacharya's novels exemplify this principle, demonstrating a clear exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement, similar to the five-act structure in classical drama.

E.M. Forster's idea that causality is central to the novel finds concrete realization in Bhattacharya's fiction. Characters are not static; they respond to external crises and internal dilemmas, driving the narrative forward. This synthesis of **dramatic structure, ethical dilemmas, and historical context** makes Bhattacharya's fiction uniquely suited for analysis within the framework of the dramatic novel.

4. Themes in Bhattacharya's Dramatic Fiction

1. **Social Justice:** Bhattacharya consistently engages with issues of inequality, famine, and oppression.
2. **Moral Agency:** Characters face ethical dilemmas that shape their actions and influence the plot.
3. **Historical Consciousness:** Historical events are not mere backdrops but active catalysts for conflict.
4. **Personal and Spiritual Transformation:** Many characters undergo ethical or spiritual growth, culminating in dramatic resolution.
5. **Familial and Societal Relations:** Conflicts between generations and social norms generate both tension and narrative progression.

These thematic concerns, combined with dramatic structure, allow Bhattacharya to deliver socially conscious narratives that are both emotionally engaging and morally instructive.

4. Conclusion

Bhabani Bhattacharya's novels are exemplary models of the dramatic novel in Indian English literature. His narratives demonstrate the inseparable relationship between character and plot, effective use of crisis and resolution, and the orchestration of multiple subplots. By employing a dramatic structure akin to classical Shakespearean drama, Bhattacharya ensures that each novel maintains narrative cohesion, emotional

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intensity, and moral clarity. His works stand as a testament to the enduring relevance of the dramatic novel in conveying complex social, historical, and ethical themes.

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