

The Image and Projection of Gandhi in the novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya

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Gandhian philosophy includes Truth, Non-violence, Satyagraha, Simplicity, Love, Brotherhood, etc. Indian English novels written before and after independence were greatly influenced by Gandhism. Mahatma Gandhi is not only a universal figure but also a great thinker. He became first a national and soon enough an international leader of immense political and philosophical significance during the pre and post-independence phase of India. He struggled for the sake of Indian freedom and development. He became an immense source of writing and influenced novelists.

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During period from 1916 to 1950, the Indian novelists were inspired by the emergence of two contexts: the social and political upheavals of the “Gandhian whirlwind” and the era of late modernism in Europe. Conveniently, Bhabani Bhattacharya’s *Shadow from Ladakh* and *So Many Hungers* (1947), Anand’s *untouchable* (1935), Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1938), Anand’s *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942), K. S. Venkataramani’s *Murugan the Tiller* (1927) or *Kandan the Patriot* (1932), and Premchand’s *Karmabhumi* (1931), Rangbhoomi (1924) cover the span from 1930 to 1940 when poverty, slavery and the inhuman exploitation of the masses were at the peak. It was Gandhi who had waged a war against the forces behind these evils and had given new visions to modernize India, instructing and campaigning against old traditions and customs, which is hinted at in the novels of the Indian writers. Meenakshi Mukherjee writes:

Whether Gandhi would be treated as an idea or as a human being, as symbol or tangible reality, is ultimately determined by the point of view of the novelist, and Gandhi’s presence in the novel is justified only if it into the internal pattern of events (Mukherjee 14)

Poverty, Hunger, Pestilence, Caste, East-West Conflict, Reconciliation, and Gandhian principles are some of the major themes that attracted the attention of our Indian writers. These themes serve them as the means for exposing the problems of the Indians and thereby suggest suitable solutions for solving them. Like Charles Dickens, Mulkraj Anand

tries to expose the sufferings of the downtrodden and the miseries of Indian children. Bhabani Bhattacharya exposes the problems of the Indians who are in a dilemma. They do not know whether they have to give up Indian culture or western culture.

Bhabani Bhattacharya is one of the Indo-Anglian novelists and short story writers of the period who were witness to dramatic events of the period and had felt the spirit of those times in their own veins. They have depicted these movements in their writings. His first novel *So Many Hungers* (1947) reflects an aspect of the freedom movement under the leadership of Gandhi. It deals with the Gandhian ideal of rural reconstruction as a step towards winning Swaraj. The novel presents Bengali life both in its traditional, conservative and its dynamic aspects with convincing sincerity and fascinating power. It portrays so simply and realistically the life and manners of Bengalis. It also affords the author with ample scope for description of scenery for delineation of national types and characters, for reflections of social, political, and economic problems. There is no doubt that the novel contains many descriptions of Indian life and manners. The picture of life and manners in the novel expound the main theme more markedly. The main theme reflects the national movement for political freedom under leadership of Gandhi.

There are also themes of hunger for food and rural reconstruction of India after the ideal of Gandhi. Devesh is introduced here as a character with the ideals of Gandhi and the novelist seems to have done it with a purpose. He wants to show how every village or town during that period had one Gandhi of its own to lead the people by staying in their midst. The pictures of life and manners in the novel expound the main theme more markedly. The Quit India movement of 1942, The Bengal Famine of 1943 is described in the novel. But Hunger for freedom becomes the main theme in the novel. Mainly the story moves round the two incidents of National Movement and impact of Bengal famine in the history. Bhattacharya presents realistically agonies and frustrations of The Bengal people during famine. Again he succeeds to show the unshivered determination, hard work, active participation and dedication of people in the National Movement.

Devesh Basu in *So Many Hungers* is shown as a great patriot and freedom fighter. He is a man of simplicity full of Gandhian principles. He detaches himself from his son and family and lives a simple life with the village people. The people of Barini love him and honour him by calling him Devata (God). Devata becomes philosopher, and guide to the people. He educates them, and trains them as freedom fighters. Devesh Basu is completely different from his son, Samarendra Basu who is a famous speculator in the city. Samarendra is greedy, selfish, and money minded. His main aim is to amass wealth for himself and his family. There is not even a tinge of patriotism in him. When World War-II starts, he cleverly makes use of the opportunity to multiply his wealth by speculation in shares. He has not been influenced in any way by his father Devesh. He never cares for nation's good. Money is

everything for him. So Devesh detaches himself from his son and lives a simple life in the midst of village people.

Devesh adopts a peasant's family in Baruni. This family consists of a peasant, wife and three children, two boys named Kanu and Onu and a daughter, Kajoli, the heroine of the novel. The family is influenced very much by the preachings of Devesh. They never deviate from his path and principles. Devesh acts as master to the peasant's family, he refers to Kajoli as his grand-daughter. He educates them, and preaches patriotism. He cultivates moral strength in the country people. He inspires and guides their lives. He shares their joys and supports them in their adversities. He makes them partners in the national movement and suggests to them to be non-violent. He encourages nationalism in his people by saying:

Friends and comrades do not betray the flag. Do not betray yourselves. The supreme test has come. Be strong. Be true. Be deathless, Bandematram! (So *Many Hungers* 269)

These kinds of preaching touch their hearts deeply and strengthen them morally. Kajoli, his adopted grand-daughter always remembers him. Bengal famine makes the peasants leave to city. Kajoli reaches a city along with her mother and brother in a hope to get help from Rahoul but they fail to meet him. Their condition becomes miserable. Kajoli decides to join with a brother to feed her mother and brother. But in the last minute, the shoutings of a newspaper boy remind her Devesh who is going to start hunger strike in Dehra Dun jail-house. She recollects Devesh, a man of Great Spirit who always teaches ethics to be followed in life. She thinks it is not appropriate to her join in the nefarious trade of prostitution. She thinks:

...And she, dadu's grand daughter? Hunger-trapped, she had sold herself. What if dadu knew? What if dadu knew one day? This, the final gesture of her life, would hurt him more than all the oppressions he suffered in jail-house and all the pangs of his hunger battle. (So *Many Hungers* 269)

Then she readily changes her opinion to join in the brothel and makes up her mind to become a sales girl of the newspaper, Hindustan. We can understand easily the cause behind her escape from spiritual fall. The stirring moral lessons of Devesh impact on minds of the village people. Devesh is a Gandhian Character; he inspires the people of Baruni by his speeches and actions. Inspired by his speeches people join voluntarily in national movement. The peasant (whose name is not mentioned) and his son Kanu join in the national movement and go to prison, is just an example to tell the range of influence of Devesh on people of Baruni. It also reveals the novelist's desire to show how every village had one Gandhi of its own to lead people by staying in their midst.

Rahoul is grandson of Devesh. He has a D.Sc. degree from Cambridge where he had carried on research under a famous scientist. Rahoul is attracted to the noble principles of his grandfather and joins in the national movement. He is a staunch nationalist and he cannot forget the hypocrisy of the foreign rulers. Rahoul always follows his grandfather; he visits the village Baruni along with Devish and works for the village people. He develops deep attachment with the village people. He serves the hunger stricken people. He is more and more convinced that a foreign government is incapable of solving the problems of the country and that freedom is an imperative need. He is suspected by the police, he faces the problems by the Government but he never deviates from his path National Movement. He feels that it is his responsibility for him to fight for the sake of his people.

Bhattacharya shows the realistic pictures that have happened in India during the National Movement. The novel reveals that the happenings of the time when everyman voluntarily prepares to go jail so that the country may be free. All classes i.e., poor, middle, and upper classes, old, young, male and female join in the national movement. The theme of hunger for freedom occupies the first place among the other hungers for food, money, etc. in the novel. Bhattacharya has shown the importance of Spiritual strength that, if people are spiritually stronger they can defeat any kind of enemy. Devesh like Bhattacharya emphasizes on the importance of Indian tradition and culture, beliefs and superstitions, he also shows how from very ancient times his people were the inheritors of a very rich folklore. He always gives importance to the spirit of national self assertion or self identification. The novel reveals the truth that the national movement embraced all sections of the population. Even young people join in the national movement. Kunal like young stars join in the army and fight for the British cause as the British government has promised freedom for Indians on a condition of Indians participation in the war. Indians feel the war as crusade on Fascist plague. They think it as their responsibility to rescue peace from the Fascists. Kunal says, "Humanity crusading to save from destruction all that worth living for" (*So Many Hungers* 269).

Kunal is inspired by his grandfather Devesh, as a true patriot, he joins in the army and sacrifices his life for the nation's sake. The story of the novel narrates the sufferings of a whole people of a particular time in particular situation created by the British Government. One of the achievements of the work is that it has been able to convey so effectively the mood and the temper of the native life. Bhattacharya seems to have acquired here an emotional identity with the characters he has depicted. It is for this, besides that the social milieu which the author has described rather in minute detail in the book; it has also shown faint signs of resentment and rebellion of the Indian people against oppression which soon laid the foundation of the Indian National Movement. It is, however, the description of the social milieu which has made this novel. In the minute descriptions of the manners and customs, tradition and culture of the Indian (Bengal) people, the author's purpose of asserting the identity of the nations has been evident.

Bhattacharya's *Shadow from Ladakh* is set against the frictional background between the Chinese and India. The novel reflects the Gandhian thought. The novelist reveals the India's condition which needs new strategies for its development according to the changing conditions in the contemporary situations. Industrialization is inevitable in the competitive context along with the neighbor countries. The Industrial Revolution, ought not to transform Indian life into a mechanical life in the west. Bhattacharya hopes the amalgamation of ideological views with Western thought of industrialization. The two opposite ideologies, the novelist expects as complementary parts, they can play in the building up of the nation. This theme became the central part of the novel. Gandhism is represented by the simple rural community of Gandhigram, established by the veteran Gandhian, Satyajit Sen, while industrialization is represented by a young engineer, Bhaskar who is in charge Steel town, which in the process of its growth to swallow up Gandhigram. The confrontation between Gandhigram and industrialism takes on a political colouring owing to Chinese invasion.

The exigencies of war production make the steel town engineers anxious to take over the adjoin Gandhigram. Gandhigram presents a model of rural India as envisaged by Gandhi. Satyajit has been selected by the founder to guide the destinies of this ideal village and to regulate its life so that it may become an example and a source of inspiration to the rest of the country. The growth of Satyajit till almost the end of the novel is a growth in the direction of asceticism and Gandhian idealism. For all appearances Satyajit is a disciplined Gandhian applying the principles of Gandhian economics and ethics in the regulation of life of Gandhigram and the conduct of his own life. A testing time comes with the launching of Chinese aggression against India.

One point of view in the country is that strength can be met only with strength, but Satyajit represents the opposite point of view, namely that physical force may be conquered by spiritual force. He, therefore, uses a weapon from the armory of the opponent himself, the weapon of non-violence. Gandhigram to be won over gradually to the new way symbolized Steel town. The crisis in the novel comes with Satyajit's commencement of a fast to death to protest against the Government's decision to let Steeltown swallow the village. Bhaskar has, in the meantime, unconsciously undergone a profound change. Bhaskar has had one important moving emotional experience. The four daughters of a Chinese prisoner are temporarily in his care. His kindness inspires in them the deepest gratitude and affection. Their warm adoration touches his heart and he is convinced more than ever that love can conquer hatred. We realize from these developments that the man of steel has after all a human heart and there is something of Gandhi in his nature also. The crisis of the novel is resolved by Bhaskar himself leading a precession of workmen from Steeltown who march to Gandhigram to support the cause of Satyajit. This means that Steeltown has given up its plan to expand at the expense of

Gandhigram. The two are to co-exist. The co-existence, however, is not merely a matter of live- and -let-live; it is a result of compromise and readjustment of values on either side.

The novel makes numerous references to Gandhiji's teachings and his work. Satyajit is a character who tries to mould him and others according to the principles lay down by Gandhi. The seventh chapter gives a resume of Gandhi's work, first in South Africa and later in India. The perfection of the weapon of non-violence, the victory General Smuts, the struggle against the British Government in India, the demonstration of the potency of moral force at Naokhali, are all recapitulated. Gandhigram is a model village in which we find the principles of Gandhian economics and ethics worked out. The village is self-sufficient as all its needs besides food are satisfied by cottage-based industry. In the sphere of education, the village follows the basic scheme of craft-centered teaching advocated by Gandhiji. Gandhigram seeks to build up a new set of values.

Gandhi's championship of celibacy or continence is a doctrine that figures prominently in the novel. Even in the social life of Gandhigram, the creed finds an echo. The major teaching of Gandhiji that figures in the novel is non-violence. Satyajit's plan of forming a Shanti Sena is born of his faith in this creed. Gandhi believed that the human spirit had the power to prevail over armaments and armies. He said that even if one nation were unconditionally to perform the supreme act of renunciation, many of us would see in our life time visible peace established on the Earth. Satyajit believed that the SanthiSena could touch the hearts of the Chinese and draw them away from their aggressive designs. He thought that a few determined idealists throwing themselves between two contending armies would constitute a powerful moral force that could bring about peace. Absence of hatred for the opponent is one of the concomitants of Gandhiji's gospel of non-violence. This idea is emphatically brought out in the novel through several touches. Satyajit strongly opposed Bhaskar but there is no personal hatred involved in the struggle. Sumita reveals Styajit's opinion to Bhaskar in one occasion as "to give hate for hate is only to make the evil grow stronger. To hate is to be defeated in the moral struggle" (*Shadow from Ladakh* 120).

Bhaskar also with his modern ideas has something of Gandhi in him. He conceives the plan of converting Gandhigram through understanding and love by bringing the people of the village and Steeltown together in Meadow house. Gandhian precept is to be seen in his reaction to the presence of the helpless Chinese children in his house. They are no longer citizens of a hostile, alien country but God's children, to be treated with generosity and love. The experience of love is one of the turning points in the life of Bhaskar. The conduct of China in stabbing India in the back and deliberately trying to thwart her progress along the path of democracy naturally claims considerable attention in the novel. The importance of the first border incident near Ladakh is at first minimized by India, but subsequent events gradually reveal the real intention of China. Poisoned of aggression with the qualities they

display in the course of their campaign against India whose democratic way of life is taken by them to be a serious challenge to their new-found ideology. The descriptions given in the novel by Bhattacharya are appreciated by K.R.Chandrasekharan as:

Bhattacharya's description of the aggression is factual and the sentiments he expresses in the novel are sentiments of all patriotic Indians. (*Shadow from Ladakh* 121)

Chandrasekharan points out that Bhattacharya's patriotism and his reverence towards Gandhi and the other National leaders, their reverence towards principles to restore peace in the International Relations. He remarks as:

One remarkable feature of *Shadow from Ladakh* is that while dealing realistically with treacherous Chinese aggression, it also artistically pleads that India should show love and friendship for the Chinese people. (*Shadow from Ladakh* 120)

He again states

It points out how the greatest of our thinkers and leaders have shown their affection and respect for the people of china and their old culture. (*Shadow from Ladakh* 120).

Thus the scope of Gandhian principles and Gandhian philosophy is worldwide phenomenon. Gandhi's life and his teachings are still a source of inspiration for those who are failing to understand the meaning of life in the consumer society of today. The philosophical significance of Gandhian ideology that Indian English novelists presented in the form of essential wisdom in their writings is remedy of ultra-modern despondency, in which man has become senseless, and for him all sort of reforms, globalization, urbanization, society, relations, etc. have no meaning. Convinced that independence had no meaning without a radical, moral and social transformation, Gandhi launched a comprehensive programme of national regeneration.

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