

Bhabani Bhattacharya as an Epitome of Social Activities: A study

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Abstract

The globalized world has been meeting many writers in its journey. Excellent writers have been sustained their name among the readers. Among them, a few are recalled by the readers and critics frequently. A Novelist is a liable humanitarian in the society by meeting the people through his creativities. Bhabani Bhattacharya's imagery threads are dealing with literature for his identity as a first rate writer of novels, who is one of the famous Indian English Novelists although he has written only six novels. These novels have been translated several languages of the world. As a result he is widely known and read in foreign countries. The social evils: exploitation, casteism, hypocrisy, lechery and deceit are the major themes of his novels and women characters are treated well in his entire work. This study may enhance young writers for their betterment in their literary involvement.

Keywords: Exploitation, Casteism, Hypocrisy, Social Evils, Modernity

Bhabani Bhattacharya was born in a Bihari Brhamin family. He studied English Literature at Patna University. He began to write in Bengali for magazines. Later he also wrote in English. He also took to translating Bengali writings into English. His English Articles began to appear in *The Spectator* encouraged Bhattacharya to write in English. Bhattacharya went to London and studied History. He returned home with a PhD degree in 1934. In 1935 he married Sabila Mukherji. In 1936 Tagore offered Bhattacharya a teaching position at Santiniketan, but the latter declaimed it because he did not wish to be overshadowed by the former.

As the freedom struggle gathered momentum, Bengal becomes the centre of nationalist activity. Tagore and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee used their writings to stir up the nationalist spirit. When the Bengal Famine of 1942-43 killed millions of people, Bhattacharya was filled with a range that clamoured to be expressed. Bhattacharya was determined to expose to the world the fact that the famine was artificially created by some greedy Indians and the callous British administrators. The result was his first novel *So Many Hungers!*

So Many Hungers! is a set against the background of the Quit India Movement of 1942 and the Bengal famine

of 1942-43. The hunger for freedom and the hunger for food form the double theme of the novel. There are two stories illustrating the two hungers. One story is that of the family Rahoul Basu, a young scientist and their involvement in freedom struggle. The other story is that of the family of a peasant girl named Kajoli, Whose father is imprisonment for taking part in the nationalist movement, forcing Kajolin to migrate to Culcutta, and suffer hunger like millions of Indians. On the way she is raped by a solidier and loses her unborn baby. Reaching Culcutta, they find that the city is no better than the countryside. In order to feed her starving mother and brother, Kajoli decides to take prostitution. However, at the last moment, she learns that her dadu, Devata, has undertaken a fast-unto-death in Dehra Dun prison. Atall Devata's counsel comes back to her mind and she decides to earn a decent livelihood by selling newspapers. Rahoul is the grandson of Devata, but his father has brainwashed him systematically into a pro-British selfish scientist. However, the nationalist activity he witnesses all round gradually takes his mind back to Devata's teachings and he involves himself more and more in the nationalist movement until he is arrested and jailed. *So Many Hungers!* Focuses on Exploitation—political, social and economic

Bhattacharya's novel second novel *Music for Mohini* presents the theme of tradition versus modernity. The novel is set in the Bengal countryside, five years after the Bengal Famine. It highlights the sociological concerns relevant to Indian family life and points to certain direction in which Indians must move if they are to reap the benefits of the political freedom recently won through the freedom struggle. The heroine Mohini is the daughter of an intellectual in the city. Being motherless, she is reared by her orthodox grandmother, who is keen on getting her married off. Jeyadev, a young intellectual from an illustrious family in the countryside, is chosen as the bridegroom. Going to the village of Behula, Mohini finds that her mother-in-law is more old-fashioned than grandmother. However the village itself is undergoing gradual modernization from tradition because of the vision of some young men led by jeyadev, whose ambition is to synthesis Indian tradition and western thought. The social revolution targets issues like casteism, untouchability and child-marriage and even advocates widow remarriage

The third novel *He Who Rides a Tiger* goes a step further and shows the empty-belly race hitting back at the

rich ones and asserting their esteem and individuality. Kalo, an honest blacksmith, is driven to the city to find employment in order to provide for his motherless daughter. But he ends up in a jail, where an inmate number B-10 befriends him and urges him to retaliate against the boss-folk upon his release. Kalo is released and become a pimp in brothel. One day he finds his own daughter in the brothel and saves her honour. He decides to implement B-10's idea. Accordingly, he works a miracle, making an idle of Shiva rise from the ground at a designed spot. The hypocritical rich people are easily duped. This arrangement threatens to ruin the happiness and the future of his daughter. Kalo plans to give up and dismount from the back of the tiger. An audience of his victims threatens to lynch him, but the arrival of B-10 and the really poor saves Kalo and his daughter.

Bhattacharya's forth novel *A Goddess Named Gold* is constructed on the lines of a parable. It describes the happenings in the village of Sonamitti during the one hundred days before the attainment of Independence. Meera, a spirited girl of the village, is committed to doing good to us many people as she can help. Her grandfather, a wandering minstrel, returns to the village and plants to teach the villagers the real meaning of freedom and put an end to social evils like profiteering and greed. So he gives Meera a *taveez* (amulet) and says that it has the power to transform the copper on her body in to gold provided she performs an act of real kindness while wearing the *taveez* and the copper items. Seth Samsundar, the money lender of the village, hears of this and his greed is a excited. He sees the *taveez* as his great opportunity and enters into a contract with Meera for manufacturing gold from copper. He loads her body with copper ornaments and arranges for her to perform several artificial acts of kindness. The villagers also hang copper or ornaments on Meera's body. But no peace of copper is transformed in to gold. Gradually the village women move away from Meera, making her miserable. At this juncture her grandfather returns and reveals that he actually played a trick on the villagers in under to make them realize that freedom is the real *taveet* and that only honesty and hard work will bring them riches. The villagers are convinced and they prevent Seth Samsundar from contesting in the elections to the District Board.

Bhattacharya's fifth novel *Shadow from Ladakh* is a powerful novelist against the background of the Chinese invasion of India in 1962 and the debate it generated between the adherents of the spinning wheel and those of the steel industry. The characters are also divided between Gandhian ideas and industrialization. The contrasts gradually develop into confrontation, but in the End, The novelist drives home his message that the two are complementary and should work hand in hand with each other. Both Satyajit of Gandhigram and Baskar of Steeldown

are equally committed to the preservation of the freedom and the dignity of India but through constrating methods. The mutual attraction between Satyajit's daughter Sumati and Baskar complicates the confrontation. Ultimately, however, a solution is found whereby Steeldown givesup its plan to swallow Gandhigram and Sumita sees no reason to reject Baskar. It is worth mentioning that *Shadow from Ladakh* is one of the few novels depicting a confrontation between Gandhian ideals and Nehruvian idealism.

Bhattacharya's Six and last novel *A Dream in Hawaii* was a sad failure. It depicts the worn-out them of East-West encounter, this time in an exotic setting, namely Hawaii. The attempt to blend the East and the West fails because the East itself is not really conquered the flesh, despite its glorification of its spiritual ideals. On the other hand, the West is too commercialized to really seek any accommodation with the East. Swami Yogananda perceives that he has not yet conquered his love for the beautiful Debjani. Dr. Swift, the American organizational genius who plans to use Yogananda to found a spiritual center, and his collaborator Dr. Gregson realize that they are miles away from any possibility of the synthesis they have in mind.

The mind of the Bhattacharya the novelist was shaped by a large number of influences since his reading was wide and varied. In Bhabani Bhattacharya, Dorothy B. Shimer lists several writers whose writings influenced Bhattacharya: Romain Rolland, Bernard Shaw, Walt Whitman, John Steinbeck, Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos, Upton Sinclair and Alan Paton (8-9). In fact some of Bhattacharya 's novels have an attitudinal resemblance to Steinbeck's novels.

Bhattacharya himself has stated that Tagore influenced his mind. In an interview with Sudhakar Joshi, published in the *Sunday Standard*, Bhattacharya said:

Tagore appeals to me my school days and my writer's career also began from those days. It was, therefore, quite unlikely that I would miss the impact of Gurudev's aii-pervading personality Bhattacharya met Gandhiji in England in 1931 and, in another interview with Shimer, published him:

India's struggle for freedom had reached one of its peak points. I had been close to that struggle, though not an activist. In India I had attended many meetings in which Gandhi spoke. But this was my first my encounter with the Great man. It was only a little less overwhelming than the one with Tagore. (12)

Sudarshan Sharma, in *The Influences of Gandhi Ideology on Indo-Anglian Fiction*, says, "Being thoroughly familiar with Gandhi's views on varied subject, Bhabani Bhattacharya has been able to touch upon almost all the aspects of *Gandhian Ideology and in the right perspective too*(128-29). Rama jha, in *Gandhian thought in Indo-Anglian Fiction*, says: "the total ethical and moral outlook affirm in his (Bhattacharya's) novels is unmistakably drawn from the Gandhian vision of life"(153). In *Bhabani Bhattacharya : A Study of his novels*, G.Rai points out that Bhattacharya's novels show the influence of Gandhiji in the treatment of non-violence, the freedom struggle, rural life, poverty, corruption, greed, exploitation, superstition and ignorance(6).

A Marxist undercurrent runs through Bhattacharya's novels. Rai points to this(2). So does Shimer(10-11). Bhattacharya was also influenced by British ideas of democracy.

In his interview with Joshi, Bhattacharya has asserted that a novelist should be concerned with social reality.

I hold that a novel should 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 does not appear to me a sound judgement.

His own novels present faithful pictures of Indian society and highlight the problems of Indian society. So his novels are basically social novels. Balram S. Sorot in *The Novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya*, points out that Bhattacharya "touches almost all the aspects of the present day India(16). In *Bhabani Bhattacharya a social Reformer*," H.G.S. Arulandram says that Bhattacharya directs his energies exposing the various social evils of modern India(37). Ashok Kr. Bachchan, in *The theme of Hunger in Bhabani Bhattacharya's novels* says that Bhattacharya made his novels "effective instrument of change" (129). In "Literature and social reality" Bhattacharya asserts that an artist should necessarily teach:

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.(4)

In the preface to *Bhabani Bhattacharya as a novelist of social Conscience*, Malta Grover says that Bhattacharya strives to arouse the conscience of his readers to the exploitation, the wrong and the evils that prevail in

society. Nathan M. Aston in *Bhabani Bhattacharya: A Stylistic of His Novels*, calls Bhattacharya "a novelist of the destitute"(9). Syed Ameeruddin in "Social Commitment in Bhabani Bhattacharya's Novels," says that Bhattacharya is a committed writer with a definite purpose(20). In "Bhabani Bhattacharya and his Novels," R.K. Badal says that Bhattacharya's writing "quivers with an outraged social conscience"(77).

Chandrasekharan justifies Bhattacharya's choice of current social problems for the theme of his novels(5). Bhattacharya himself, in "Literature and Social Reality," asserts that, if a creative writer is moved deeply by events of today, he need not avoid them and he cites Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* as a good example of a true piece of fiction dealing with a current problem (395-96). In "Indo-Anglian," Bhattacharya says:

I suggest that our own history of today is fit material for a novelist. That history need not wait for fifty years before it is declared suitable for fictional projection . . . to put it briefly it would be appropriate for a novelist of today to make the spiritual values of our Five Years Plans the basis of his theme. Those spiritual values expressed through living images, creatures of flesh and blood and feeling, may well give a new direction to our creative endeavour . . . (47)

In, fact in "Literature and Social Reality," Bhattacharya takes Indian writers to task for their indifference to contemporary events(5-6).

In *Bhabani Bhattacharya: His Vision and Themes*, K.K. Sharma says that Bhattacharya is obsessed with the theme on hunger and that freedom is an important and recurrent theme in his novels (41;69), Jasbir jain, in "The Human Dimensions of Stasis and Growth," says "Bhattacharya's novels are essentially about the making of a man—about the need to be honest to one's inner being"(64). K.K. Sharma says that endowed with a "positive vision of life"(13).

Marlene Fisher, in "The Women in Bhattacharya's Novels," points out that women play an important role in Bhattacharya's novels and that, in a letter to her, Bhattacharya admitted that women have more richness and more depth than men (66). In "Women in My Stories," Bhattacharya says that women have in plenty the capacity for value adaptation, which is a human richness (2). Shanta Krishaswamy, in *The Women in Indian Fiction in English 1950-80*, says that Bhattacharya's women are pure women and that they are "the ray of hope for mankind"(60)

In "The Achievement of Bhabani Bhattacharya," Harcharan Singh Boparai states:

He (Bhattacharya) has emerged as a world-class novelist who has presented the birth-pangs of a nation's freedom, and its agonies and aspirations in a historical perspective; who has shown concern for man's Physical, mental and spiritual needs; and who has depicted the human drama at microcosmic as well as epic scale . . . And this achievement is no less great than the achievement of any other world-class novelist writing today.(216)

Bhattacharya's first novel *So Many Hungers!* depicted the first Stirrings of protest in the character of rahoul. In his second novel *Music for Mohini*, a whole gang of youngsters raised the voice of protest. In his third novel, *He who Rides a Tiger*, Bhattacharya goes a step further and makes the protagonist hit back at the exploiters and tormentors. Kalo wages war against a horde of social evils: exploitation, casteism, hypocrisy, lechery and deceit. He targets the very basis on which the rich build their assumed superiority over the have-nots: their caste superiority.

Given Bhattacharya's background, it was inevitable that he should become a novelist with a social purpose. He understands the problems of contemporary Indian society and presents them in his novels. He insists that a novel should be concerned with social reality. Bhattacharya has been called a novelist of destitute. He strives to rouse the reader against exploitation.

Bhattacharya maintains that contemporary Indian history is suitable material for an Indian novelist. He criticises Indian novelists who ignore contemporary events. Hunger is his obsession and freedom is a frequent theme in his novels. His novels describe basically the making of a man. His vision of life is positive. Women play important roles in his novels because he believes that they possess greater capacity than men for value adaptation. In short Bhabani Bhattacharya is a first rate writer of novels.

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