



BHABANI BHATTACHARYA AS 'A COMMITTED WRITER' AND 'A CELEBRATED SOCIAL REFORMER' PROBING DEEP INTO RELEVANT PROBLEMS AND CRUCIAL ISSUES AFFECTING THE INDIAN SOCIETY: AN APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT



This paper is a humble attempt to project Bhabani Bhattacharya as a committed writer and a celebrated social reformer probing deep into the relevant problems and crucial issues affecting the Indian society, who established himself as one of the four pillars of the Indian novelists in English – the other three being R.K.Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, belonging to the older generation of the novelists. It neatly examines how Bhabani Bhattacharya has made, as a well-accomplished and outstanding novelist, a culture interpretation of Indian ethos through his work bringing home the point that literature in the manifestation of human emotions is out and out rooted in the reality of its times and a literary artist as a spokesman of a free spirit like Bhabani makes a social document of great value endorsing a vision for the creation of a new Indian society quite free from social evils, exploitation, suffering and variegated forms of hunger, both internal and external, thereby creating a human landscape that stands out as a paradigm of the predicament of a puzzled and even bewildered modern man.

Keywords: *Bhabani Bhattacharya, Committed Writer, Social Reformer, Problems and Crucial Issues, Indian Society.*

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Bhabani Bhattacharya is one of the four pillars of the Indian novelists in English – the other three being R.K.Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, belonging to the older generation of the novelists. It is common knowledge that literature in the manifestation of human emotions out and out rooted in the reality of its times. Likewise, a writer is a spokesman of a free spirit who helps him / her in interpreting several social realities – good, bad and indifferent. Bhabani Bhattacharya is one such well accompanied 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, thereby creating a human lands cape that stands out as a paradigm of the predicament of a puzzled and even bewildered modern man.

Not only is Bhattacharya an Indo – Anglian novelist of considerable merit and destruction but also, like Mulk Raj Anand, a highly – educated and widely – travelled person. He has been a journalist, a member of the Indian diplomatic corps and a University teacher, but for more than anything else, he has been “a writer a writer of fiction with a penchant for details , a flair for history and an awareness of social , political and cultural problems” (Singh 2). His fictional corpus includes such notable Six novels as 1. *So many Hungers* (1947), 2. *Music for Mohini* (1952), 3. *He who Rides a Tiger* (1955) 4. *A Goddess Named Gold* (1960), 5. *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, allegorization versus historicity of facts, 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. In the words of Monika Gupta “Bhattacharya can rightly be called the doyen of the Indian – English novel in modern Indian for his futuristic vision, humanistic outlook historical

perspective of the Indian social reality and his well – defined theory of the craft of fiction” (Preface).

Deeply Committed to a social purpose, Bhattacharya ridicules art for art’s sake. 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” (P1)

This note of faith in societal values and in man’s hope for survival despite all the bludgeonings of fate, lends grandeur and magnanimity to the protagonists in the fictional world of Bhattacharya. No doubt, *So Many Hungers* portrays the unflinching faith of the individuals in human values even in the teeth of all miseries and privations. Human suffering does not snatch them away from values which they cherish high in life. The novelist is of the opinion that suffering and hunger enable and strengthen the nobility of the self of either Rahoul or Kajoli. Rahoul says: “In the agonies of war, the soul would be cleaned ” (P 9). The characters like Rahoul and kajoli justify the latent potentiality of their spirit by self – transcendence. “There was a streak of light” in Rahoul’s “unward gloom” (183). The picture that Bhattacharya presents in the novel is rather ghastly and grim. Its heart – rending rights of human misery and suffering more one to tears but at the same time, it conveys to us the assertion of life amidst hunger, the flickering of light in the ashes. The two fundamental strands of the Indian society – the materialistic and the westernized modern society of the urban folk and the traditional and unsophisticated society of the rural folk are as conflict within the self of the individual generating the dilemam of existence.

Reality to Battacharya is “the soul of art” says Pico Iyer (P 49) Art should convey truth – “a truth of emotion, which is the ultimate realism” (Battacharya 394). As Bhattacharya puts it, “the



creative writer's final business is to novel the truth" (39). The writer does so unlike the philosopher, in no cold statements of dogma/doctrine but only in terms 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. 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- moving 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, 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" (S M H 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 un-imaginable 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" (PP 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. He means thus:

"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*" (SMH 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. It is "a widely acclaimed modern Indian classic depicting the inhuman atrocities committed on human beings by their own species during a man made crisis. While K.K.Sharma considered it to be Bhattacharya's "affirmative vision of life" (P26) K.R.Chandrasekharan found the novel portraying "the triumph of spirit over matter" (P 34). K.R.S .Iyengar obviously commented thus:

"*So Many Hungers* is an impeachment of man's inhumanity to man and a dramatic study of human beings trapped in a unique tragic predicament" (P 414) .

Thus, in *So Many Hungers*, Bhattacharya refers to the people's hunger for food and for freedom.

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 on the social set – up rather than the intellectual 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* ” (P 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 an 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 ” (P 188).

This is the harmony and music in Mohini's life. Balaram S.Sorot rightly comments thus:

“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 ” (PP 51-52).

The novel *Music for Mohini* mainly deals with the woman's world and it primarily projects the basic hungers in man – woman relationship. Mohini's hunger for food while going to her husband's house for the first time and the passing reference made to the Bengal famine of 1943 are fitting examples of man's hunger for food. Bhattacharya presents several kinds of hunger in this novel such as the worshipper's

hunger for good, the barren woman's longing for a child, the lovely wife's craving for her husband etc. In the words of G.Rai, “The rural – urban clash is an important feature of the novel” (P 95). The traditional ways of life stand in sharp contrast to the modern method of living. 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 thus:

“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. Cob-web of superstitions faith. It was all an outgrowth of centuries of decadence. The purity of ancient thought had been lost in misinterpretation until the dignity of man becomes a mere plaything of vested interest” (MM 67 – 68).

Bhattacharya seeks to build a new society which is astutely free the dead conventions and blind beliefs. He wants people to follow the light of season, so that they never lose their way in the dreary deserts of dead habits. Behula and the big House symbolically represent India.

He who Rides A Triger has the same background as that of *So many Hungers!* 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*, 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” (P 93).



The novel is “among the aptest illustrations of social realism” (Abbas 145), for here in this novel , the treatment of the problem of 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 novel *A Goddess Named Gold* deals with happenings in a village during the period immediately preceding India’s attainment of freedom. The preoccupation of Bhattacharya in this novel is with the way in which a country should use freedom and what benefits may be derived from it” (Chandrasekaran 86) The novelist here also speaks about the advent of freedom , of the beginning of a new era in Indian with reference to a village called Sonamitti. It depicts the social and political situation of our country at a time when India is on the threshold of freedom. It is an expression of faith sanctity and supremacy of people’s power.

There is no denying the fact that his novels do have the hard core of didacticism in them and yet they are works of art, giving us interesting stories, credible characters and largely realistic situations. It is generally held that Bhattacharya, as a novelist, almost specializes in patent and ready – made solutions. With the only exception of *A Dream in Hawaii* this holds good in the case of all his novels. However, he makes no secret of his intention when he says:

“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” (P 395)

It is historically and sociologically understood that Bhattacharya’s novels give us a clear and comprehensive view of his positive attitude towards life. “ Everything that is old is not rotten and

everything that is new is not always good, it is only our honesty of mind, sincerity of purpose and our penchant for mutual understanding that can load us to our cherished goals. Our sense of fairness or justice must be tempered with love and Compassion. Bhattacharya’s novels do indeed Constitute an affirmation of life” (Singh 175). No doubt, the message of integration or synthesis remains fundamental to Bhabani Bhattacharya’s novels.

To conclude it may be said that Bhattacharya has made in his novels very conscious effects in highlighting all kinds of penury caused by famine and hunger, taboos, exploitation in the name of religion and caste and unwholesome aspects of rural society. He tries to remove the old, the orthodox and the traditional, heralding the new and the modern by bringing about a synthesis of the two. In his novels, individuals are always presented relations. He has created the protagonists like Kajoli, Jayadev, Meera, Satyajit and others who are more concerned with what happens in society rather what concerns them as individuals. He pleads for the underdogs and victims of the present social order. Bhattacharya is, no doubt, a committed writer by conscious insertion who uses novel as a weapon to propagate humanism, by probing deep into the various facts of human life and relevant problems affecting the Indian society.

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