

A study of feminine consciousness in the novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya

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Abstract

Being a novelist with a social purpose, Bhattacharya has depicted the social, economic and political changes in India on the background of the contemporary historical events and social conditions. Bhattacharya has produced six novels. Bhattacharya gives an account of the Indian way of life in each of his novels. He refers to various customs, conventions, superstitions and oddities present in the Indian society usually without commenting on their merits. One of the striking features of the novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya is the prominence given to women-characters in them. Women are usually presented by him as highly significant if not central characters. They are not treated as inferior to men, although they happen to live in a male-dominated society.

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1. Introduction

Being a novelist with a social purpose, Bhattacharya has depicted the social, economic and political changes in India on the background of the contemporary historical events and social conditions. Bhattacharya has produced six novels. They are: *So Many Hungers!* (1947)^[3], *Music for Mohini* (1952), *He who Rides a Tiger* (1954), *A Goddess Named Gold* (1960), *Shadow from Ladkh* (1966) and *A Dream in Hawaii* (1978). Bhattacharya gives an account of the Indian way of life in each of his novels. He refers to various customs, conventions, superstitions and oddities present in the Indian society usually without commenting on their merits. One of the striking features of the novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya is the prominence given to women-characters in them. Women are usually presented by him as highly significant if not central characters. They are not treated as inferior to men, although they happen to live in a male-dominated society.

His first novel, *So Many Hungers!* depicts the struggle of the peasantry of Bengal against the man-made famine of 1943. It also presents Bengal during the early stages of the Second World War when a few black-marketeers started hoarding rice. The hunger, which was the result of famine, cost more than two million lives. The fight of man against hunger produces two types of images- man at his noblest and at his worst as well. A destitute boy fights with a dog to take control of the leftovers in a dustbin. He defeats the lesser animal outside for the sake of the animal inside him, i.e., the hunger. To quote the words of the writer:

Destitutes and dogs in those clays often fought for possession of the rich city's ten thousand rubbish-heaps, in which scraps of rotting food lay buried. It was not every time that the destitutes won, routing the dogs on the streets and the dog within themselves.

Kajoli is a 14-year-old peasant girl, who lives with her brother, Onu, and her mother. Her father and brother, Kanu, are arrested during the Quit India Movement, Kajoli's family represents the people of rural Bengal, who find it extremely difficult to face the hunger and walk towards Calcutta, the city of dreams. They find their poverty and misery to be a hundred fold in the heartless city. They see tired and famished skeletons languishing on pavements and vultures roaming to eat dead bodies here and there. They face different types of humiliations which gradually lead

them to evil. Kajoli leaves her ailing mother and goes in search of food. She becomes a helpless victim of a soldier's lust.

Hunger not only drives Kajoli and her family out of their village in search of food, but also tries to force her to sell herself. To survive, she distributes bread to the destitute of the famine affected and maintains the purity of her spirit by helping others. K.K. Sharma remarks: "Kajoli is also an incarnation of faith in the nobleness and fullness of life. She has inherited the fundamental values and manners of India, unaffected and undefiled by modern attitudes and notions."

The author's affirmative vision is evidenced in the manner in which he has allowed her to walk into freedom. Had he been negative in his thinking, he could have concluded the novel on a different note landing Kajoli in the brothel. In his refusal to think of such a course, the author has revealed an abiding faith in the essential goodness and spirit of man which prevail over all sorts of debilitating and degenerating influences. The fact that he has chosen to illustrate the triumph of the human spirit by means of a woman may bear testimony to the lofty ideas he has had concerning women. Indeed, he has not failed to acknowledge the presence of certain evil things in the society in the shape of the betel-woman and others. Ironically enough, the betel-woman becomes a catalyst in bringing about the change in Kajoli unwittingly and unwillingly.

In *He who rides a Tiger*, Bhattacharya employs a lie to expose the truth about caste and religion as they obtain in the society. The protagonist of the novel is Kalo. His sufferings and thirst for revenge on the society constitute the main theme of the novel. Kalo's beautiful daughter, Chandralekha appears to be very intelligent.

The women characters in Bhabani Bhattacharya's first novel, *So Many Hungers!*, have been found to be relatively passive. They are inclined to accept the customs, conventions and traditions that prevail in the society unquestioningly. The change from *So Many Hungers!* To *He Who Rides a Tiger*, it has been observed, is a change from passivity to rebellion. While commenting on that change, Bhabani Bhattacharya observes:

So Many Hungers! follows the famine up to its peak point, its climax. In the storm of death that almost suddenly swept the city streets and filled them with human debris, there was no room for any kind of counteraction....certain gaps were

left - the famine was multifaceted. These gaps were filled out in *He Who Rides a Tiger*, which was written with a different perspective.

Chandralekha is the victim of distortion like Mohini in *Music for Mohini*. When her father poses as the Brahmin Mangal Adhikari and becomes the chief priest of Siva temple, Lekha too, being his daughter is forced to perform the role of the Mother of the Seven-fold Bliss. Many people come to her from far and near expecting her to perform miracles. She adopts a little waif Obhijit, whom she has picked up from the street during the famine. She has a motherly love for him. This motherly tenderness flows in her so much that she is ready to face the wrath of the entire Brahmin crowd and to accept banishment from the temple and suffer poverty. Shantha Krishnaswamy remarks:

"At heart she is a warm hearted Bengali girl who looks forward to nothing more than a pact of companionship with Biten, the idealistic reformer, who, eschewing his, Brahmanism, was a fellow prisoner with Kalo during the famine riots in Calcutta. Her physicality as the natural woman rebels against this bogus sanctity and tries to reassert itself. One natural consequence is her outpouring of motherly love towards Obhijit, the low caste street waif she adopts."

Earlier, Lekha and her father are driven to Calcutta because of hunger. Her father has been sent to jail for a while. To solve the problem of their livelihood, Lekha has been lured to a harlot house. But just at that time, her father saves her.

K.R. Chandrasekharan has taken exception to the view expressed by Mrs. Meenakshi Mukherjee that Chandralekha is the liberator in the novel perhaps needlessly. Of course, it is true that Lekha remains rather passive in her attitude throughout the novel. Nonetheless, the liberation resulting from Kalo's confession would perhaps have eluded him in her absence. Hence, we may safely argue that she is the de facto liberator of the novel, though her Father may be credited with that achievement nominally. In fact, in regarding Chandralekha as the conscience-keeper of Kalo also a similar objection is likely to be raised. Does he not have a conscience of his own to check him? Why does he need another conscience-keeper? The fact, however, remains that he does not choose to listen to his conscience for his own reasons. Perhaps it is overwhelmed by his all-consuming passion for revenge. But thanks to her education, refinement and innate gifts, Chandralekha is able to keep her conscience intact. And her father has to depend on it in a large measure for judging the propriety-or lack of it - of his own attitudes and activities.

In *Shadow from Ladakh*, Bhabani Bhattacharya attempts syntheses between conflicting ideologies. He makes some women instrumental in these syntheses along with men. These women include Satyajit's wife, Suruchi, and his only daughter, Sumita. The pride of place accorded to them in the building of bridges on a par with men may testify to the supreme regard Bhattacharya has for them.

Bhattacharya has shown that the Gandhian principles of asceticism led women to suppress their personal desires. Suruchi was educated at Shantiniketan. There she meets Satyajit and they get married. Suruchi shares her aesthetic values with Satyajit and life becomes a sweet music for her with him. Satyajit, who had come under the influence of Tagore and Shantiniketan, now has the influence of Gandhi and Sevagram. He adopts Gandhiji's principles of asceticism. The real problem begins, when Suruchi finds to her dismay that Satyajit has started avoiding her and their home. He feels ashamed and guilty of himself, whenever he

feels attracted towards her. She felt she had lost her womanly dignity by this attitude of her husband. But Satyajit's asceticism was anti-life as his friend Bires has pointed out. He put his ideals to test at the cost of his wife's happiness. She had to suppress her wish for a son and all her womanly urges, and finally she had to allow her own daughter to be brought up in Satyajit's pattern. She has a blind adoration for her father and follows his asceticism. It is very painful for her when she sees Sumita dressed like a widow and wearing no bangles.

K.R. Chandrasekharan has aptly said that Sumita is a better example of Satyajitism than Satyajit himself. As a mother, she feels sorry for her daughter, Sumita, when she finds that she is caught in the same net as her father. She is eager to bring about a change in Sumita as well as Satyajit. Sumita is a faithful reflection of Kasturba's self-effacing personality.

Bhattacharya has dealt with two modes of life in the plot of the story. They are Gandhigram and Steeltown. The Gandhigram is represented by Satyajit, who is a true follower of Gandhiji and Bhaskar represents the Steeltown. There is a fierce conflict between them as they both have totally different ideas and attitudes. Gradually the clash between them grows weaker and at last it completely disappears. Ultimately, the two different modes of life intermingle with each other. This synthesis is significant as it denotes the understanding between Bhaskar and Suruchi.

Dorothy Blair Shiner is inclined to give the credit for fusing the worlds of Steeltown and Gandhigram to Sumita alone, though she could not have brought about that achievement in isolation. The softening in the rigidity of Satyajit has been influenced largely by his wife, Suruchi. Suruchi is the author's mouthpiece in advocating the integration of contrary views under the influence of Rabindranath Tagore. Marlene Fisher has commended her welcome transformation into a full, mature, most attractive woman with a strong sense of her identity.

Music for Mohini is the second novel written by Bhabani Bhattacharya. And it is widely acclaimed as his masterpiece. It portrays an attempt at rural reconstruction as advocated by Mahatma Gandhi. It also presents a clash between Indian traditionalism and modernism and attempts their synthesis. Such a synthesis is achieved by means of two sets of characters that stand for different values. Mohini's Old Mother and Jayadev's Mother stand for the conservative values presented in the novel. Jayadev, Mohini, Rooplekha, Harindra, Mohini's father and Heeralal stand for modernism. Bhattacharya portrays the growth in Mohini from a carefree girl of teenage to the mistress of a house. She is shown as torn between the taboos of village life and her passion for a bright and joyful life. Mohini loves life in all its colours and has contempt for all that is dull and dead. It is hard for her to bear the images of decay. KK Sharma describes her thus:

She is instinctively vivacious, playful and carefree. She loves to laugh, and needs just a slight cause to go into peals of laughter. As a young maid, she is famous for her beauty and melodious voice. When she has a longing for a lover and has really none, she does not feel very miserable. She smiles by musing on love, which is the light and saviour of life; life without love is like jasmine without scent.

Her dream of a perfect happily married life is shattered and she is shocked by the behaviour of her silent, solitary husband. She is totally neglected by her husband and feels lonely. Her mother-in-law is very orthodox and traditional while she herself is modern, city-bred girl, and full of new

ideals, thoughts and interests. But her sister-in-law, Rooplekha, suggests to her to cope with the difficulties with courage. Rooplekha is village-bred and city-wed while Mohini is city-bred and village-wed. When Rooplekha goes to the city with her husband, she has to give up her old modesty while Mohini has to traditionalize herself and adjust herself to the atmosphere of her husband's village and the Bighouse. In spite of joylessness in her married life, she does not accept her defeat. She decides to bring happiness to her house. She is ready to accept the traditional way of life of village and her traditional mother-in-law, just for the sake of her husband. Though it was a great task - full of challenges, responsibilities and difficulties, Mohini decides that she would play her part to win the faith and favour of her husband. To be his true partner in life, she throws herself into this great task. Her hatred for her mother-in-law turns into love and she decides to let her follow her own way of life. She becomes ready to co-operate with her to offer her heart's blood in a lotus-bowl to the Virgin Goddess, so that she could bear a son. At the critical moment of this ceremonial offering, Jayadev reaches there and stops it. When Mohini finds that she was already expecting a child, she feels that her life has been fulfilled with diverse notes of music.

Harish Raizada's comments on the incident may be significant. He says: The timely arrival of Jayadev — symbolic of modernism - saves Mohini from her annihilation just as the impact of modernism can save the New India and its political freedom from being stultified by the degenerate orthodox society. He also regards Jayadev's admonition to his mother in the context as the author's warning to the stubborn mentors of the orthodox Indian society.

Unlike other contemporary writers, Bhabani Bhattacharya has presented the Indian woman as the pure woman in his novels who has been victimised in spite of her high ideals and vitality. This concept of the innocent victimized Indian woman is a constant feature of his novels. He has also created some woman protagonists in his novels. They are full of noble ideas, which are more refined than those of their male counterparts. He has effectively portrayed the role of motherhood in his fiction. He feels that a woman in her capacity as a mother is capable of great deeds. As a mother, she is a symbol of gentleness, love and sacrifice. He shows that the woman as a wife is also human and is an equal partner of man. Most of his heroines are pure and simple.

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