



THE CONCEPT of ART for LIFE'S SAKE: THE ONLY PREACHING of BHABANI BHATTACHARYA in HIS NOVELS

Dr. Meera Vasani

Assistant Professor (English)

Institute of Infrastructure Technology Research And Management (IITRAM)

Khokhara Circle, Maninagar (East), Ahmedabad, Gujarat, INDIA

Abstract: Literature is an expression of self and society. Many creative writers have used literature as a medium to express the feelings and emotions, from confusion to happiness, from loneliness to self-attainment, and many more. As was said by Edgar Allen Poe "L'art pour l'art"; that is, "art for art's sake" is proved wrong. Bhabani Bhattacharya strongly believes that a writer should depict the life and its truth realistically specially in the fiction. During his stay in London Bhattacharya came in touch with Marxist ideology and was deeply touched by the social life that Indian rural peasants were leading during colonial rule and under feudal system. When he came to India and took the topic on socio-economic and political problems of Bengal of the nineteenth century he was deeply moved by the social life during that period. As said above he strongly believed in expressing his feelings with the medium of creative writing, which he did by writing six different novels on the contemporary situation of poverty stricken rural peasants. His realistic approach places him in the line with Mulk Raj Anand and Khuswant Singh. The present paper is an attempt to analyze his novels based in Indian context and presenting the grim reality of India.

Keywords – Bhabani Bhattacharya, Art for Life's Sake, Social Realism, Human Values

I. Introduction

....I hold that a novel must 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 vague does not appear to me a sound judgment. (Bhattacharya p. vii)

Bhattacharya strongly believes that a writer should depict the life and its truth realistically specially in the drama.

Art must teach, but unobtrusively, by its vivid interpretation of life. Art must preach, but only by virtue of being a vehicle of truth. If that is propaganda, there is no need to eschew the word. (Bhattacharya 395)

The Sahitya Academy Award (1967) winner, Bhabani Bhattacharya has depicted Indian social scene in the context of historical events with major themes like: hunger, poverty, disease, addiction, modernity and major social evils of the society. The intention of the novelist is to arouse social conscience and thereby a hope to awaken the conscience of the exploiter and also shows a belief in the progress of human being towards betterment of mankind.

II. Bhabani Bhattacharya's Novels

So Many Hungers! His first novel is deeply moving which deals with poverty, hunger and exploitation of the peasants in the man-made famine of Bengal in 1943 during the World War. The title is a suggestion of the varied types of hungers being depicted in the novel. B. Syamala Rao in Bhabani Bhattacharya says,

The title of the novel, *So Many Hungers!* Is amply justified. There are indeed many hungers: hunger for food, hunger for affection, hunger for love, hunger for lust, hunger for money, hunger for sacrifice and hunger for the general welfare of all. (Rao 46) In this novel Bhattacharya deals with a specific period of famine, when the peasants were fooled by the opportunists into selling their products at the cheap rates and therefore leading them to starvation. Telescoping the images of rural and urban life, the story revolves around two families: Samarendra Basu and his family in Calcutta and the other is a peasant family from a small village Jharana. The former exemplifies the theme of hunger for freedom and the latter illustrates the theme of hunger for food. People had nothing to eat. Innumerable men and animals died of starvation. Some of

the scenes: hungry infants seen sucking the breasts of their mother who had already died of starvation, mothers selling their daughters and even sending them to brothels for the sake of food, children crying themselves to starvation... presents the graphic picture and a heart-rending scene of starvation and death. Corpses lay by the road, huddling together. Picked to the bone; only the hair uneaten—fluffy baby's hair, man's hair, the waist-long hair of women. (*So Many Hungers!* 142)

The major part of the novel presents the series of snapshots of 1943 Bengal famine. In a personal letter written to Professor K. R. Chandrasekharan, Bhattacharya mentions that the incident of the jackal trying to eat living persons is based on news reports and that the incident of a baby cking the breast of the dead mother on a railway platform is an eye-witness account.

Rahoul is the symbol for the freedom movement going on in India whereas Kajoli, the peasant girl demonstrates the fate of the rural population of Bengal in 1943. Chandrasekharan here states that, the sad tale of Kajoli is a pathetic record of what happened to more than two million men and women who became victims of a famine which was not an act of God, but which was brought about by the rapacity and selfishness of profiteers and the indifference of an alien Government. (Chandrasekharan 11)

Kajoli the innocent girl of fourteen at the beginning is described suffering through out, she lives in a haulm house with her mother and younger brother, Onu. Her father and elder brother have been imprisoned as they took part in the Civil Disobedience Movement. She marries a patriot, who is shot dead leaving her, an expectant mother, to starve or to sell herself to the brothel to save her dying mother. Rahoul another noteworthy character of the novel and the son of Samarendra visits Baruni the village which establishes the link between the narrative lines. His awareness about the man created famine agitates him:

Corruption had grown like an epidemic. Money had become a mad hunger. Flowing in great swollen streams, it made private lakes for the rich, who grew vastly richer. The poor grew proportionately poorer. Never in the land's history had the process that made the rich richer, the poor poorer, gained such ruthless intensity. (*So Many Hungers!* 106)

The horrors of the World War, cruelties of the British government, and the sufferings of the innocent rural people due to the manmade famine and the indifference of the Indian rich towards the hungry destitute create a background to the transformation of an ambitious researcher into a social reformist. He serves as a mouth piece for the author. He is the eye witness of many inhuman incidents:

A soldier dropped a rupee into the begging bowl, which showed a few other silver coins....she stood erect and lifted her face starward...stripping the ragged garment from her breast. So she stood bare, the hooded street light full upon her, a bronze image with eyes reading starward... Another rupee clinked into bowl the girl rose once more and bared herself... (*So Many Hungers!* 84)

Such and many more inhuman behaviour of the soldiers are the evidences of the exploitation and moral degradation during those days. Yet to the heights of the limit is the optimism depicted in the prayers of the villagers. They do not blame anyone for their poverty and hunger. Instead of spending their money on food grains they are found wasting it on buying flowers for the goddess. Here the novelist is blaming the superstitious nature of the illiterate villagers and their belief that by enchanting the names of Gods and Goddesses give them strength to survive. Their faith makes them embodiment of robust life full of energy and fearlessness. Along with this all the characters of the novel are shown listening to the inner voice of their conscience and avoids going on the wrong path. Rahoul listens his inner self and joins the Quit India movement. Kajoli, who was on the way to the brothel hears an announcement by Devesh Basu, who is speaking on the Gandhian philosophy:

Friends and comrades do not betray the flag. Do not betray yourselves. There is violence in your thoughts that is evil enough. Do not make it worse by violence in action...Be strong. Be true. Be deathless. (*So Many Hungers!* 72)

Even at the age of seventy he undergoes the hunger strike in the prison, which provides her a ray of hope to fight against the situation and she stops herself from personal degradation and chooses the right path. Her mother listens her inner voice and sacrifices her life.

Like his first novel *He Who Rides A Tiger* draws its setting during the time of Bengal famine and Quit India Movement. The title is borrowed from the saying *He who rides the tiger cannot dismount*. The story revolves around a single character named Kalo and his lies. He is a simple blacksmith hailing from a small village named, Jharana, with an ambition to give a comfortable life to his only daughter, Chandralekha. He falls victim to the exploitation and decides to take revenge against the society. His life can be divided into three phases as described in the novel:

- a) Kalo leaves the village to escape from poverty and hunger: the background of the conflict
- b) He succumbs to untruth to take his revenge against the society: the conflict

c) He decides to dismount the tiger of falsehood and kill it: the realization.

The poor struggling blacksmith with an ambition of comfortable life went to the town, where he got imprisoned for stealing bananas for three months. He learnt there that the society is full of exploitation and if one need to escape it he has to become an exploiter himself. No other scope for livelihood seen possible he accepts the job as a pimp. At this juncture he found his only daughter sexually exploited and saved her. But these miseries of his and his daughter's life turns him hostile and decides to revenge the society. Finally observing the internal struggle of his daughter he realizes his mistake and throws off the mask and wins happiness. Through this simple story Bhattacharya expresses his concern that the abysmal depth of poverty degrades a man. Harish Raizada, a critic rightly says:

He Who Rides A Tiger exposes the wicked practices of the hollow religion, employed by the vested interests to exploit the blind faith of simple and credulous people. Religion seems to have lost its pristine glory and forgotten its basic ethical values. It is turned into a spiritual trade where people try to buy spiritual merit in exchange of merchandise....yogis are employed to dupe a credulous lady like Radha so that she may permit her wealthy husband to have a fifth wife to save her from widowhood as ordained by the gods. (Raizada 162)

Bhattacharya exposed the social evils which makes the poor suffer miserably. Even the death ritual among the poor and rich in the Hindu religion is marked as a butt of satire. No rights are performed for the destitute, their bodies are thrown like a garbage by the municipal people. On the other hand the funeral procession of the rich are carried by throwing large quantity of rich and copper coins on the streets. The point of caste discrimination is also presented very sharply. Kalo talks about a destitute child, Obhijit,

...like a hungry kamar or an untouchable boy even a hungry Brahmin boy would eat from the garbage cans (*He Who Rides A Tiger*, 218). K. R. Chandrasekharan observes: The juxtaposition of Biten's rejection of the Brahminhood which is his birth right and Kalo's renunciation of the Brahminhood he has created for himself through fraud makes the novelist's condemnation of the system total. (Chandrasekharan, 69)

Along with social political exploitation is also presented in this novel. Instead of supporting urbanization the administration is shown to send them away from the city eg. Evacuation squad strategy. Instead of helping the poor they show off with the temporary method of supporting them. Black marketers are also exposed. Untouchability being the main concern of Gandhiji also finds place in this novel. The protagonist rebel against his caste and excepts the role of Mangal Adikari- the priest, through which gained enough of wealth but the emotional unrest upsets him, finally throws away the mask and proves that if a kamar becomes the priest then God will not shower wrath on either community. Finally the central theme of the novel:

The way of struggle is the true way. The struggle, first of all, against fear. (*He Who Rides A Tiger*, 165)

Individual freedom also is somewhere present in this novel Lekha receives enough fame and name as a daughter of the priest but her individual freedom is at stake. Therefore she is ready to marry an old man and become his fourth wife. Along with this, the novel also emphasizes on the role of human strength and wisdom to face the struggle of life. The victory of the inner conscience of the characters like Kalo and Chandralekha provides a great motivation to the common people and reflects strongly the love of the novelist for human values and humanity in general.

Music for Mohini is the novel which is set in free India. The protagonist, Jayadev feels that along with the political freedom the social freedom is much more important for the real progress of the nation. He wished to free the villagers from chains of the economic bondage and slavery and translate his village into a model. He feels that this task is more important than sitting and writing books. He is happy to have a helping hand named Harindra, the young surgeon, who also shares the same feelings. Harindra stays in the village and severs the same cause. The villagers and their economical constrains along with their social dependency are the targets in the novel. Jayadev is found advocating the importance of literacy to the women in the village. He suggested his wife to help the women to read and write so that they are not further exploited by the land owners. His vision also see that India is struggle hard to fight against the evil of feudal system as he thinks:

The battle for economic freedom, however, was in full swing and ten years hence there would be no landed gentry to live on the peasantry. India was fast moving that way. But then, would the people, fed well, be free in spirit because of their new physical state? The answer was plain. (*Music for Mohini*, 136)

Jayadev is shocked to see that a man and a woman in this society is not free to love and marry the person of his/her choice. The law of caste and society bound them not to follow their heart. The society at that time was water tight compartment that no other caste people are even allowed to peep into the other caste. The individuals have to struggle and ultimately doomed to either forced marriage or to die for the cause. Such evils are discussed in the course of the novel.

Women are constrained to remain in the house performing their household duties. The character of Mohini is the live example for the same. Her whole personality is crushed by the social traditions of Big House at her in-laws. As being literate it is natural for her to react and revolt against all such cruelties. A scene where she climbs a tree to hunt for shelter and affirms her identity presents the scene of women liberation to some extent. She feels alienated in the society. Her husband gives preference to his work only. No time for him to share with his wife her personal feelings.

The marriage between Jayadev and Mohini symbolizes the union of asceticism and aestheticism. Jayadev is an embodiment of ascetic qualities; while Mohini is an incarnation of the aesthetic and emotional side of human life. (Sharma, 103)

Both husband and wife are brought up in temperamentally different environment and so is the thinking of both. Mohini has learnt from her father:

Do not bow down to such insult. You are the new India. The old orthodox ways have been our yoke, have enslaved us. Let us be free. (*Music for Mohini*, 204)

Whereas Jayadev has made her aware of the fact the she will have to adjust herself to a great extent to the traditional life pater of the Big House the symbol of Mother in law. Initially she is unable to bear the miserable life at the Big House. Her mother in law is strict and puts lot many restrictions upon her, which irritates her. Moreover the expectations of her husband to support him pragmatically in the social activities scuffles her. He sees her as Gargi (the learned woman from Ramayana). He believes in spiritual love.

No household dredge nor decorative being but an intellectual striding beside man in a tireless quest for knowledge. (*Music for Mohini*, 71)

Gradually, she discards her impulsive nature and takes a conspicuous and significant step of educating the village women in elementary education. Such sharing brings them closer and happily enjoy the selfless services to the society. This presents the strife and struggle through which the new generation women had to passed and submissively accept the role given to them by the patriarchy.

The fourth novel *A Goddess Named Gold*, is an allegory with the central theme of exploitation and fascination for gold. Meera, the protagonist, is the symbol of peasant class. She is rebellious by nature. She is vociferous against the economic exploitation of the peasant class. Yet she is presented as submissive, superstitious, illiterate, rustic, credulous but kind hearted girl. She believes in her grandpa strongly and desires to bring happiness to the villagers but being naïve is carried away by the words of the shrewd merchant Sheth and cheats the villagers.

Meera herself is a breath-taking combination of intelligence, generosity, patriotism and stupidity. She is the heroine only up to the moment that she goes to the Sheth in response to his summons in order to discuss their mortgaged land, but mere stuffed puppet after she enters into the strange contract with the cormorant and begins playing the fool. (*Chandrasekharan*, 102)

This gullible nature of hers makes her life like. Even the villagers were aware about the selfless nature of Meera and they also learnt the lesson to be saner towards the materialist attraction in the world.

Critics have blamed Bhattacharya for not presenting the central theme of alchemist seriously. The touchstone belief of the common peasants is given more importance. In fact it was the true picture of rural poverty stricken Indian villages were wisdom gave way to superstitions and black magic. Villagers easily fall victim to the traps of Sadhus, Fakirs and Rich. The attempt of the novelist is to warn against such crooked so called seths in free India. The feudal system is also touched in the novel presenting the concern about the freedom which was achieved after paying a very heavy price. The novelist also expresses his concern about the women exploitation in the patriarchal systems. The film show was banned for the women in the novel, they express their anger over the tyrannical attitude of men. They are shown united against the exploitation on them and try to overcome by one or the other means. This is the signal of women liberation in free India. Even Gandhian ideals are interwoven in the novel. An incident when Meera requests him to take revenge upon the Seth, the Minstrel spoke Gandhiji's words:

You cannot right one wrong with another. You cannot fight malice with malice... those who mock at goodness mock themselves; for there is a secret goodness in them also. (*A Goddess Named Gold*, 62-63)

Thus, the novel tries to expose the worthlessness of the miracle and magic deeply rooted in the heart of the simpleton villagers.

Being a keen historian his knowledge of history is clearly reflected in the background of almost all his novels. He was influenced by many Indian writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru as well as by Western writers like Leo Tolstoy, Bernard Shaw, Henrick Ibsen for their realism. The impact of their thinking and works are omnipresent in the novels of Bhattacharya. From a very early age he produced his creative writings. Malta Grover, an important critic of Bhattacharya observed:

Bhattacharya's study of history and his contact with the liberal democratic people of the West made him understand the humiliating position of his own country and people. It roused his anger and made him decide to fight against the forces of imperialism. (Grover 12)

At an early age of 19, he was fascinated by Tagore and translated many of his poetry. When he heard Gandhiji, he became the great admirer of his ideologies and that is reflected in all his novels. Moreover, as his PhD thesis focused on the socio-economic and political problems of Bengal of the nineteenth century, the reflection of almost all the prevailing issues became the background of his most of the novels.

Bhattacharya has followed the realistic fiction writing as Mulk Raj Anand. His all six novels deals with social reality of a particular time. Though they are fully immersed in social realism they also always present human welfare, belief in human values and a sensitive understanding of the contemporary human society.

In his novels, Bhattacharya explores the social and political realities of contemporary life. A faithful picture of various aspects of life in the country is presented in them. His novels however are not merely photographic records of social, political and economic life of the people, but an imaginative picture of life. (Rai 7)

As Bhattacharya's belief was to promote art for the sake of life and present the realist picture in front of the world. But in doing so he has never sacrificed human values, all his characters embody his passion and observation for human values. He has kept the conscience of the characters alive to give them a human touch. His major themes of the novels are hunger, poverty, disease, greed, changing moral values, freedom struggle, East West relations and finally presenting the basic ideologies of Gandhiji.

Finally to conclude, Bhattacharya's one of the greatest critics Chandrasekharan exclaims: "...judging from the number of translations of his works into foreign languages, he has a wider reading public abroad than at home" (qtd. in Nikam 275).

III. References

- [1] Bhattacharya, Bhabani. *So Many Hungers!* Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1978.
- [2] Bhattacharya, Bhabani. *He Who Rides a Tiger*. Delhi: Hind Pocket Books, 1955.
- [3] Bhattacharya, Bhabani. *Music for Mohini*. New Delhi: An Orient paper backs, 1952.
- [4] Bhattacharya, Bhabani. *A Goddess Named Gold*. Delhi: Hind Pocket Books (P) Ltd. 1967.
- [5] Chandrasekharan K. R. *Bhabani Bhattacharya*. New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1974.
- [6] Grover, Malta. "Literature and Social Reality", *The Aryan Path*, Vol. XXVI. No. 9 September 1955.
- [7] Grover, Malta. *Bhabani Bhattacharya as a Novelist of Social Conscience*. Meerut: Shalabh Prakashan, 1991.
- [8] Joshi, Sudhakar. "An Evening with Bhabani Bhattacharya". *The Sunday Standard*. April 27, 1969.
- [9] Nikam, Madhvi. "Realism and Protest in the Writing of Bhabani Bhattacharya". *Contemporary Discourse: A Peer Reviewed International Journal*. Vol. 6, No. 2: Pp. 275-278. July-2015.
- [10] Rai, G. *Bhabani Bhattacharya: A study of His works*. Delhi: B R Publishing Corporation, 1999.
- [11] Raizada, Harish. "Bhabani Bhattacharya: Novelist of Social Ferment" *Response: Recent Revelations of Indian fiction in English*. (ed.) Hari Mohan Prasad; Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 1983.
- [12] Rao, B. Syamala. "Bhabani Bhattacharya: As a novelist" *Triveni*. XL No. 1 April 1971.
- [13] Sharma K. K. *Bhabani Bhattacharya, His Vision and Themes*. New Delhi: Abhinav, 1989.