



BHABANI BHATTACHARYA AS AN ADEPT IN EXAMINING THE THEME OF FREEDOM IN ITS VARIED FORMS: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to project Bhabani Bhattacharya as one of the four pillars of the Indian novelists in English (the others being R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao), whose fictional world posits an active picture of the human being torn between two worlds – the self and the society and the fettered self struggling for emancipation from the stranglehold of a chaotic society. It neatly attests to the fact that Bhabani Bhattacharya's novels signify a note of triumph that there is a bright future for man, with a focus on the significance of various kinds of freedom and spiritual freedom and individual freedom.

Keywords: Chaotic Society, Fettered Self, Triumph, Bright Future, Fight for Freedom.

Bhabani Bhattacharya, one of the four pillars of the Indian novelists in English (the others being R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao) belongs to the older generation of the novelists. The fictional world of Bhattacharya posits “an picture of the human being torn between two words – 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” (Swain 1). His fictional corpus includes six novels and fifteen short stories. He has to his credit publication of the following novels:

1. **So Many Hungers** 2. **Music for Mohini** 3. **He Who Rides a Tiger** 4. **A Goddess Named Gold** 5. **Shadow from Ladakh** and 6. **A Dream in Hawaii**. Bhattacharya was deeply stirred by the movement for political freedom, spirit of social freedom, the Bengal famine of 1942 – 43 and the Second World War and the agonies and sufferings caused there upon got reflected in his writings. “For his futuristic vision, humanistic outlook, historical perspective of the Indian social reality and his well – defined theory of the craft of fiction, Bhattacharya can rightly be called the doyen of the Indian – English novel in modern India” says Monika Gupta.

Bhabani Bhattacharya was born on November 10, 1906 in Bhagalpur (Bihar). His parents – Promotho and Kiranbala Bhattacharya – belonged to well – to – do, educated Brahmin families. When he was six years old, he went to school in Puri – a seaside town on the coast of Bay of Bengal. Even while at school, he began to compose couplets and poems and some of them got published also. His first article, ‘Mouchak’ was published in a Bengali Magazine at the age of 12. He graduated with honours from Patna University and joined King's College, University of London for higher studies. During his stay in London, he translated a number of Tagore's stories and sketches. These were published under the little **Golden Boat** by Allen and Unwin in 1932. It was in London that he got in touch with Mahatma Gandhi. Both Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi left an indelible impact on his life and works. After obtaining Ph.D Degree, Bhabani Bhattacharya returned to India in December 1934 and devoted himself fully to his writing career.

The very novel of Bhabani Bhattacharya is **So Many Hungers** which was published in 1947 in England by Victor Gollancz. Being a socio – political novel, ‘hunger for food’ and ‘hunger for freedom’ form the central themes of this novel in which the quit India movement of 1942 figures prominently. It is the story of a young scientist, Rahoul and his family and the story of a peasant girl, Kajoli and her family. Rahoul's story in miniature represents the struggle for freedom. The sad tale of Kajoli is likewise a pathetic record of what happened to more than two million men and women who were the victims of a famine, which was not an act of God, but the result of the rapacity and selfishness of profiteers and the indifference of the British Government. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar considers the novel as “an impeachment of man's inhumanity to man’ and ‘a dramatic study of a set of human beings trapped in a unique tragic predicament” (P 414).

Bhabani Bhattacharya examines the theme of freedom in its various forms. He deals with political, economic and social freedoms as also with the freedom of the mind – “the freedom to be free” (Sharma 38). Bhattacharya lived in a period in which entire India was immersed in the struggle for freedom from the yoke of slavery. By the time he was a young boy, Gandhiji on whom he later wrote a full book, had assumed the leadership of the Freedom Movement. Indeed, any sensitive mind, living through the eventful first forty – seven years of the present century should inevitably have gathered deep imprints of thoughts on political freedom. After independence in 1947, the Country was confronted with difficult economic problems. Thus, it was natural for Bhattacharya to be drawn towards the problem of economic freedom also. His earlier novels do concentrate on India's urge for political and social freedom.



In **So Many Hungers**, Rahoul's heart is with the people of the Country fighting for their freedom and particularly with the people of rural Bengal suffering untold agony because of an artificial famine. The leaders of the people are arrested one after another and imprisoned. When students in large numbers join the Quit India Movement, he feels that it is his duty to be with them, he seeks the advice of his grand – father Devesh, who is in prison in Dehra Dun and then takes the plunge. He addresses the students and proclaims his view that the British should leave India. As they are led into the prison, they sing in chorus the memorable words written by Tagore, “The More they tighten the chains, the more the chains loosen”. Rahoul thus represents one class of freedom – fighters the upper – middle – class intellectuals. Bhattacharya believes in the social character and significance of art and literature. He once said:

“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 vogue does not appear to me a sound judgement” (Josi 30).

Shadow from Ladakh deals with people's concern for preserving the country's political freedom at all costs. This novel is occasioned by the unfortunate political event of China's invasion of India in 1968. Indian were determined to protect their hard – won freedom. Threat to man's freedom and his tremendous effort to save it is the main subject of the novel. When in 1962, the Chinese troops began to march on the Indian territory, Indian s including the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, were thrown into a state of bewilderment and shock. Nehru had known for years what had been happening in Aksai – Chin. But he firmly believed that everything would be settled in a friendly way. Despite India's best efforts, the month –long negotiations for border settlement had ended in failure. The Chinese had made fantastic claims and were not ready to give up an inch of the land they had taken. Then the Chinese troops entered the unguarded parts of Indian borders where they set up strong checkposts:

“Even mountain pass changing hands could be pistol pointed at the heart of India. It was not the pistols alone. Behind them were the troops – the reports said that their number exceeded a hundred thousand” (SL 168).

Nothing less than supreme sacrifice was required to defend the country's freedom. Against the massive attack of the Chinese using ‘the human – sea technique’, Indian's fought heroically. The act of Chinese blasting their way across the Himalayas towards Indian earth struck the country with horror and grief. Nehru declared it a threat to the country's freedom and exhorted his countrymen to fight fiercely against the cruel and crude invasion:

“History has taken a new turn in Asia and perhaps in the world, and India has to bear the burnt of it and fight this menace to its freedom” (SL 256).

The Indians did all they could do to preserve their freedom. While thousands sacrificed their lives, millions donated liberally cash, gold and goods. The entire nation felt that it was an obnoxious attack on its freedom'. All the leaders and enlightened men expressed their indignation in the same tone.

.... And now we have this shameful attack on our freedom, our democratic values, our philosophy of international peace and progress and above all these, our fight against poverty, our hard struggle to build up the country's economy. A supreme effort alone can meet the challenge. That effort is going to be made. The soul of the people has been stirred a new awakening” (SL 281).

The novel examines not only the question of the preservation of India's sovereignty but also that of Tibet's freedom.

Music for Mohini (1952) primarily deals with social freedom. Bhattacharya frequently affirms that social freedom is all important for the real progress of the people because without social freedom, even political freedom becomes ineffective. It is social freedom which forms the basis for all other freedoms. The novelist therefore presents in this novel Jayadev as a man dedicated to social freedom. Though thrilled with love for his newly – wedded wife, this visionary philosopher desists from getting lost in it. He endeavours to “accelerate the process of social emancipation and uplift” (Sharma 106).

Jayadev feels and believes that his contribution is to make India's struggle for social freedom – “the fountain of all true freedom” (MM 123). Jayadev is a social reformer and wants to make his village Behula a model village. He knows pretty well that this task is more important for him than writing books and he also knows that it involves a lot of strain and struggle. But it is worth doing at all costs, for without social freedom, as he tells Mohini, political freedom is more or less meaningless:

“our political freedom is worth little
without social uplift ... That means
struggle” (P 127).



He wishes to seek Mohini's help to achieve his ideal. He wants her to teach the village women how to read and write and thus to impart them with the first elements of knowledge. It is essential to materialize the great plan, as there can be no hope unless ignorance, the chief enemy of the common village folk is eliminated. Jayadev is very happy to come in contact with the young surgeon, Harinda, who understands the social problems of the country pretty well. This foreign – returned doctor, who thinks awoke with Jayadev makes up his mind to live in Behula so as “to work whole – heartedly for its social freedom” (P 39). Realizing that abstraction has to be presented in human terms, Jayadev firmly decides to

“to step out of his temple of silence and lead his people across the valley of conflict and discord to end social slaveries” (MM 138)

Jayadev rightly thinks that social freedom is possible only when social slaveries, which are like cactus growth, are cut and rooted out completely. In no time, he launches a social programme according to which an old man can remarry only when he chooses a widow. He has a good knowledge of ancient Hindu books, which approve of marriage between a widower and widow. Only in the later degenerate ages, the widow was deprived of her freedom to marry again. Jayadev also intends to bring about social revolution by banishing the evil custom of early marriages. Though quiet and calm outwardly, Sudha is a girl obsessed by a quest for social freedom. She has an enlightened girlhood under the guidance of her father, who, though dead now, is still a source of inspiration to her to dream of a new India free from the tyrannical social shackles that immeasurably hamper the progress of people and deprive them of happiness. She often feels as if she was hearing the voice of her father urging her to strive frantically to achieve freedom by flinging aside fearlessly the burden of orthodox customs:

“Great and exciting days lay ahead. India, free to build up her destiny, was not yet truly free. She was like a prisoner held too long in a dark cell. Unchained and released suddenly, she was bewildered by the light. But the stupor would pass. India would renew herself...” (MM 181).

Jayadev publicly opposes her mother when she tries to make Mohini offer her blood to Devi so as to get rid of her barrenness. He is against all such superstitious beliefs and wants to exterminate them. Though at first, her mother is deeply shocked by her son's revolutionary ideas and ways, it is through him that she understands “the new revolt, the restless spirit of the new dawn”

(P 187). Besides social freedom, Bhattacharya stresses the significance of a few other kinds of freedom such as economic freedom and individual freedom. Jayadev has the vision of bringing about a new social order ensuring human beings a happier life.

To conclude, Bhabani's novels signify a note of triumph that there is a bright future for man. Man, according to him, should make efforts at all levels to bring out a change in the structure and pattern of the society. Art, as Bhabani would affirm, is for life. It has a social purpose to fulfil. That is why Bhattacharya through his novels exposes the cannibalism of man, the cruel stranglehold of tradition, the blind self – deception of orthodoxy, the obstinate faith in industrialization and the hunger for gold. His achievement as a novelist can best be assessed by study of the entire corpus of his works in which he has presented the birth pangs of a nation fighting for its freedom at all levels.

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