



## PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN THE FICTIONAL WORLD OF BHABANI BHATTACHARY WITH REFERENCE TO SO MANY HUNGERS AND MUSIC FOR MOHINI: A NOTE

A.D.Sudha

*Asst.Professor in English, G.T.N. Arts College, Dindigul.*

Bhabani Bhattacharya is one of the most prominent among the Indian novelists writing in English. As he has dealt with epoch-making events, his novels do constitute a social document of great value. Perhaps, he is the only Indo-Anglian novelist who has dealt with the seething tensions of the teeming millions both before and after Independence. The after math of Independence in the wake of Chinese aggression on the Indian borders is highlighted in his novel '**Shadow from Ladah**, which won for him the coveted. Sahitya Akademi Award. He has to his credit publication of such popular novels as **1. So Many Hungers** (1947), **2. Music for Mohini** (1952) **3. He Who Rides a Tiger** (1954), **4. A Goddess Named Gold** (1960) and **5. Shadow from Ladakh** (1966).

'Portrayal of women in literature' signifies the public view of women as represented in literature and the artists' private understanding of woman as an individual and also as a member of society. The broadly general image of women in literature identifies the real status accorded to women in society as mother, wife, daughter, in that order in a familial setting. Outside it, she is accepted as a professional, but when she protests against injustice and exploitation, she is grudgingly termed activist and seen as rebel or deviant. While some of the Indian writers focus on the traditional image of women as home-maker or social outcast, others identify a new group which is marked by its struggle for identity and attainment of individual aspirations. Such is termed 'a group of New Woman', a person who is neither subjugated nor deified but a human being desirous of living in society as a responsible member with equal rights and freedom to purchase her own goals. The portrayal of woman in literature emerges out of the existing world. It also exists in the mind and imagination of the writer. In every age, woman has been seen primarily as mother, wife, mistress, sex object – their roles in relationships to men. In India too, both men and women writers have seen women in these relationship.

Bhabani Bhattacharya is one such writer who has richly voiced the voices of women in his writings. Some of the major incidents pertaining to women in **So Many Hungers** signify Bhattacharya's skill in portraying women's condition with intense reality. The most significant features of the portrayal of women by Bhattacharya is that it generally revolves round the themes of hunger, poverty and exploitation. The protagonist of the novel **So Many Hungers**, Kajoli is suffering miserably from the hunger of food'. Her reference for starvation to prostitution symbolizes the spiritual values of the rural women with their tottered rags which hide precious gems and thus, the well-portrayed character has become universal – unfettered by time and space. She is one of the Bhattacharya's favourites in whose portrayal he has shown his greatest skill.

Kajoli is a peasant girl, who is driven by hunger to the city of Calcutta. On the way, she is raped. Faced with the problem of feeding her mother and younger brother, she decides to be a prostitute and accepts money from a procuress. But she is saved at the last movement by the reported exhortation of Devta to be brave. The novelist believes that, characters, in stead of being the spokesmen of the novelist, should be from real life and must have a flesh-and-blood existence. Kajoli in **So Many Hungers** is a peasant girl who has all the qualities associated with a rural woman. Respectful to elders, she is simple, chaste, pure, selfless, generous and is prepared to suffer miseries for high ideals of Devata rather than to succumb to the temptation of a procuress. She is, no doubt, an embodiment of rural spirit and preserves her dignity, and power. Facing the vicissitudes of life, she wavers momentarily but is victorious at the end. Kajoli is the very incarnation of the true womanhood of India. The bedge of forbearance is hers and she combines in her both the brittleness and strength. She is tested by adversity and has a legacy of manners as old as India and she is indeed the 'tri-colour flag'.

In **Music for Mohini**, Bhabani Bhattacharya portrays the character of Mohini – a motherless, mischievous, carefree and impulsive girl of seventeen – who matures as she is married, leaves the city for the village, and is transformed into an understanding and considerate wife. Putting aside the myth that the city-bred women are misfits in rural areas, Bhattacharya portrays Mohini's character quite convincingly. Mohini's nobility is in her path of reconciliation and compromise for she realizes the necessity of a harmonious music in the midst of discordant notes. Actually, Bhattacharya's **Music for Mohini** is a portrayal of tensions – between the mind and that body, the mind of the husband and the body of the wife, the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law. Ultimately tensions are resolved and there is the marriage of true minds. In short, it deals with the marriage of Mohini and Jayadev, which gets accomplished, despite the intellectual divergence between the two.

Bhattacharya portrays an interesting picture of the ways of women in the pre-independent India. The mothers never liked their daughters to be sent up to schools for education. They insisted on early marriage. The faith and trust in horoscopes – the



eight signs of luck and symbol are graphically described and the part played by the match-makers (mediators) is worthy of appreciation old mother sternly opposes Mohini for being sent up to schools. She would say,

“Let Mohini be trained at home; let her learn classical Sanskrit, the language of the Gods, the precious vase that holds the essence of true knowledge and wisdom”. (p.34)

Marriage alliances through matrimonial columns have become part of the progressive India. There is the belief that an amulet will guard his health; it will strike the Evil Eye sightless”. Among Indians, the house is the lamp, man is like oil, the women is the wick and happiness the living flame. There is every possibility that Bhattacharya should have written this novel from his own personal experience either about his daughter’s marriage or from his sons’ marriages. The conflict between tradition and modernity, symbolized by the orthodox mother, Big House and the village Behulaon on the one hand and Mohini on the other. Among the other women characters, mention must be made of Bindu, Meera and barber women, who still have a place in the minor incidents that go to make the texture and structure of the novel. But Mohini is not an ideal heroine as probably conceived of by Bhattacharya, but is simply elevated to the status of a heroine. The portrayal of Mohini, mother and Sudha plays a dominant role in the novel, **Music for Mohini**. Maintaining a balance among all the characters, Mohini just acts as a mere connecting link to the several phases in the story and the various events and incidents that take place in the story. Mohini is projected as one having a graceful face, black hair with a love for the warmth and colour of life. She is indeed an ‘apsara’ – a peerless beauty of heaven. The bare expression of her will had the force of command. Despite her unshaken faith in her husband the inherent womanly quality in her would not permit. Sudha even to have a glance at her ‘scholar’. She had a captivating capacity in narrating the stories. She loved the legends and the lore of the world of Hindu Gods and the epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

She became the victim of the everybody’s comment that she was a barren woman. She was considered the doom of the Big House, the destroyer of an ancient line. She was as sick in body as in spirit. The prestige of the old mother and the Big House weighed more with her than her own concern. She was like a prisoner (like India) held too long in dark cell. The portrayal of Mohini wins the sympathy of all the readers for she has passed through several trials and tribulations – mostly mental slaughters of a tradition – bound Big House. Jealousy which is a marked trait in most women appears to be lurking in her and does not make itself manifest even in the direst necessity. She would yield to circumstances rather than complain against them. She resigned herself to fate, which is inscrutable and which cannot be modified by the will of man. But finally Destiny comes to her rescue and makes her life a bed of roses. Bhattacharya has brought a new dimension in the portrayal of the old mother (Mohini’s grandmother). She is the symbol of old orthodox life with an inter-mixture of modernism.

To conclude, let it be said that Bhabani Bhattacharya’s female characters represent the triumph of the human spirit over famine and starvation and their accompanying degradation and over the inevitable crises that arise when old and new values clash. Each one of these characters exemplifies, to a greater or lesser degree, the ancient Hindu concept of Shakti all are expressive of that dynamic process of history which is female energy. In any case, the fact remains that Bhattacharya’s depiction of the Indian woman in his fiction is both sensitive and sympathetic. The significant content of the novel and its artistic centre of interest are to be found in his art of portrayal of women.

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