

Struggle for Existence in Bhabani Bhattacharya's Novels of Survival

Dr. Yogesh A. PatilLord Ganesha English School
PGT, Jamner**Dr. Vasant R. Shedge**Department of English
Govt. College of Arts and Science
Aurangabad

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Abstract

Bhabani Bhattacharya, during his early days was an active member of the League against Imperialism. While working as a press attaché for the Indian Embassy in Washington, he published novels like *So Many Hungers* (1947), *Music for Mohini*, *He who rides a Tiger*, *A Goddess named Gold* and *Shadows from Ladakh* (1966). Though influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, Harold Laski and Tagore, he is basically remembered for his social-realist fiction and focuses on the poverty, hunger, pestilence and traditionalism. Through all his novels, he is generally concerned with the future of his country, its social and religious, economic and political regeneration and make rapid all-round development. The presiding concept of Bhattacharya's novels is to guide India in a new social order, established on justice, equality, co-operation and the judicious combination of the old and the modern.

Keywords: pestilence, attaché, survival, hunger, social order.

The presiding concept of Bhattacharya's novels is to guide India in a new social order, established on justice, equality, co-operation and the judicious combination of the old and the modern. The issues analyzed in his novels are mainly anticipated and characters properly depicted symbolizing the expected. He is known as a great social novelist due to his reflections on the changing society and the motionless social norms. Bhattacharya, the earliest of the social realists of Post-Independence Indian English Fiction, is a well-known follower of the ideals of Tagore and Gandhi, while both his fictional theory and practice shows his similarity with Mulk Raj Anand. He represents himself as a realist by showing his trust in the actuality of life. He has offered the theory of social and moral function of art and has pleaded for reality and truth in literature. He presents himself not only as an innovator but also a free user of English language for artistic purpose.

He practices an Indian style, literal translation and onomatopoeic words in order to reflect Indian way of life and Indian sensibility and culture. There is a description of authentic tone and Indianness through a common theme, traditional techniques and typical Indian language of his novels. He portrays life in Indian society exactly as he has contemplated it with a cultivated eye.

Bhattacharya's themes are close to social reality based on real experience. He is concerned with large public issues and social problems as well. Apart from having transparently positive vision of life, explored and expressed artistically in all these fictions, they have an upper most Gandhian figure or philosophy which clinches the crises towards an affirmative solution. K.R. Chandrasekharan points it out in his book on Bhattacharya-

"Every novel makes some sort of mention of Gandhi and Gandhian thought is central to characterization and plots1."

Bhattacharya's novels express socio-political, economic and philosophic ideas. The first novel of Bhattacharya, *So Many Hungers*, set against the background of Quit India Movement and the Bengal Famine of 1943, concentrates on the theme of political and economic exploitation and social status. The novel mainly focuses on the theme of hunger. It is for food as well as for freedom. It creates a detailed graphic picture of the hunger and heavy loss of human lives resulting from the famine. Bhattacharya mentions two levels in *Music for Mohini* - the personal and the city bred, village bred, village-wed girl's representative life. The novel also describes Mohini's adjustment to her lifestyle and to the social level. Jayadev, in the novel, is a representative of old Eastern view of life. He is a quiet scholar and villager. Mohini, his wife, looks fine in the new semi-western outlook. The novel fittingly mentions the psychological interest which lies in the opposition between Jayadev and his excessively conservative mother.

His third novel *He Who Rides a Tiger* deals with an attack both on those who were profited by people's misery during the famine and those who exploited them as caste oppressors. The novel focuses on the theme of hunger. It is a grim satire on Hindu orthodoxy. It tells the story of Kalo, a poor blacksmith, jailed for stealing bunch of bananas who promises a revenge on the society. The fourth novel *A Goddess Named Gold* discusses the Indian social life and satirizes those who are lured of gold. Mira is the prominent character in the novel. Mira's grandfather, a

wandering musician gives her an amulet (taveez) saying that it will turn the base metals into gold if she performs an act of real kindness.

Shadow from Ladakh shows a contrast between two prominent characters-Satyajit and Bhaskar. Satyajit is a follower of Gandhi and Bhaskar is the supporter of modern steel town. Shadow from Ladakh provides an insight into the contrasting contemporary life of India symbolized by Satyajit. He believes in Indian village life as the ideal life. The novel ends on a weak note of co-existence of the two ideologies. In this novel Bhattacharya deals with the theme of East-West encounter. While the east with all its spirituality has not yet completely mastered the change, the West continues to remain commercialized and confused. Bhattacharya's sense of situation and mastery of the narrative mode, the realism of his locale, his judicious use of Indianness and his easily identifiable character types have created a picture of India which fits in the pre-conceived foreign notions of his country.

His concerns are political, economic and social. Bhattacharya attends the tradition of European social realism. Bhattacharya creates the novel of ideas in the Indian setting and makes some meaning out of the experience of colonialism. Bhattacharya's novels are often pre-occupied with the preparation of some sentimental notions or political ideas. In So Many Hungers the novelist pronounces the National Movement and Indian dilemma during the World Wars. Indians are to side with freedom and democracy and not with tyranny and enslavement. So Many Hungers focuses upon the historic Quit India resolution- a very important phase of the freedom struggle. This movement enters a new segment by introducing the prisoners launching hunger strikes in jail. Music for Mohini concentrates upon the need for economic freedom. The protagonist, Jayadev, is shown as the champion of social freedom, clearly understands the fact that social slaveries are deeply rooted in economic bondage. That is why the social uplift is impossible without economic freedom. Jayadev envisions future Indians absolutely free from economic bondage and social slavery.

He Who Rides a Tiger focuses mainly upon the theme of social freedom. Bhattacharya introduces a prominent character, Kalo, who is a champion of social freedom. He performs a miracle in the story and becomes a great exponent of freedom. In A Goddess Named Gold, the novelist preaches that freedom in fullness could be attained in a society only if it is free from political, economic and social bondage. Therefore, everyone has to struggle to build a society free from any kind of enslavement, injustice and exploitation. The social freedom seems to be the main concern of Bhattacharya

that supports to preserve and sustain freedom. Freedom is thus a state of mind as R. S. Singh states:

"Freedom meant to some liberty to indulge in licentious activities, to some profiteering, and to some respite from toil, an escape into inactivity²."

Bhattacharya's next novel A Dream in Hawaii describes the shifting of scenes from India to America and from America to India- a sort of displacement in the post-colonial sense. Bhattacharya has shown the character of Swami Yogananda as the representation of the need for self-introspection leading to a positive change. Yogananda exhibits his progressive views about life and his first message to the people of Hawaii to accept all faiths and beliefs. A Dream in Hawaii introduces a significant Indian philosophy targeted towards complete freedom from desires in order to get its fruits. The novelist has displayed humanistic attitudes resulting into the outcome that exhibits different types of hungers and freedoms. The novelist has attacked broad-mindedness in the western society. If a woman feels liberated because she has sexual freedom then it is nothing but self-deception. A sort of cultural synthesis has been advocated throughout the novel. Bhattacharya even condemns abstinence and rational ideals because they call for an unhealthy repression of human desire and emotions that inhibits the creativity. Bhattacharya has maintained the theme of traditionalism in his every novel. He has developed the situations, actions, characters and many miscellaneous things which come under the impact of traditionalism. The contribution of the traditional and the modern values is the most conspicuous feature of Bhattacharya's writings. Highlighting the significant characteristics, K.R. Chandrasekharan rightly remarks:

"With his progressive ideas and his vision of a glorious future he has also great admiration for the spiritual and cultural heritage of the country. Like the great men whom he admired, particularly Tagore and Gandhi, he is also a builder of bridges between the present and the past³".

Bhattacharya mentions Indian life from 1940 to 1970 in his works. Bhattacharya's So Many Hungers and He Who Rides a Tiger are representative pictures of the Indian socio-political situation during this period. He has dealt with hunger as human degradation. Bhattacharya does not want to annihilate everything old in order to find room for something new. There is a fundamental of dogmatism in his thinking which is shown by the respect he shows for many of our old-fashioned values. Monica Gupta states-

A Dream in Hawaii is a departure for me being an

American novel-American even in Hawaii... The core concern of the story is the current disenchantment in the great society and the intense, fretful strivings to find an answer to one's life to find the path of one's self-fulfillment⁴."

To conclude, his novels examine the impact of famine, freedom, traditionalism and industrialization in India. In short, Bhattacharya narrates the aesthetics of survival-the life stories of Indians and their struggle for existence.

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