



The Message and the Medium: A Study of Bhabani Bhattacharya's Novels

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Abstract: *The present study is an attempt to explore the delineation of the theme of hunger with the dimensions of food, faith and freedom in the novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya. Being the novelist of transition period (1930-1960) in the Indian socio-political era, his writing clearly proves to be a product of his age. It was a period of political turbulence with freedom struggle at its peak; Bengal Famine was at the back drop, of the influence of Gandhi and of a steady with drawl of the British leading to the ultimate moment of Independence. Even after the Independence of the country, India was not free from the colonial mentality. There was not only a political but also the social upheaval that ushered in the era of Indian resistance. With the impetus of rise in socially awakened intelligentsia in India a good deal of literature that depicts the authentic picture of India and at the same time makes the people aware of the problems stars emerging. The novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya belong to this sensitive and enlighten wing.*

Key Words: *Hunger, freedom, orthodoxy, amalgamation.*

Bhabani Bhattacharya is a well-known among Indian writers in English for his use of art as a medium for achieving social reform. Being a novelist with social purpose, he has depicted social, economic and political upheavals in India on the background of contemporary historical events and social conditions. He has observed the social evils like poverty, hunger and exploitation as the prominent features of Indian social scene. The irrational orthodoxy, the shackles of superstitions and the confusion of faiths also appear to become of the undercurrents of the Indian society. Although he presents the social problems but not like a sociologist. He gives his own simple philosophy of life not as a philosopher rather as a true artist or a man of literature. He knows that natural catastrophes and manmade disasters both are equally responsible for the poverty and hunger. Therefore, as an artist he understands that idiosyncrasies

and injustice of unscrupulous men are more destructive and fatal than the blows of the natural catastrophes for poverty and hunger—the two curses of the mankind.

His views on the role of an artist to play in the society can be summed up by what Meera's grandma has told about her husband to Meera in *A Goddess Named Gold* that a song-maker must not live only for himself or his kith and kin. He has to carry a flame in his hand, passing it from age to age. Let him stumble and the flame will falter. Let him fall and there will be the chillness as of death. Bhattacharya is a realist and this realism constitutes the hard core of his writings whether it is *So Many Hungers!* (1947), *Music for Mohini* (1952), *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1955), *A Goddess Named Gold* (1960), *Shadow from Ladakh* (1966) or *A Dream in Hawaii* (1978). Each one of them is an exercise in sheer realism.



Bhattacharya affirms that within him the urge for self-expression always possessed him. This inner compulsion finds its release in the form of his writings. He was of the opinion that the need for self-expression is as much important as a woman that made him a writer. 'Behind every great man there is a woman'—the truism has never been proved as true as in the case of Bhattacharya. Speaking about the writings of his novel, hunger for love always present there be it the love between Kajoli and Kishore, Mohini's longing for her husband Jayadev, Chandrealekha for B-10, Sumita's changing her attributes for Bhaskar etc. Love has been given the power to grace even the dark tragedy of *So Many Hungers!* Through the brief interlude of Kajoli and Kishore, love made them both forget about the backdrop of famine and adverse economic conditions. Love resolves all complications and redeems the principal characters. Love may be at first sight but is seldom blind. It very impetuosity holds all possibility for the transformation. It is the all and end of all women's life. In man, it means synthesis of the sensuous and the spiritual for the truest realization of selfhood as in the case of Jayadev, Satyajit and B-10. Along with hunger for love, hunger for sex, lust, eroticism etc. also finds their space in the novels of Bhattacharya under the aegis of hunger for food of love. Mostly for his main principal male characters hunger for knowledge is the utmost necessity of life. It is the center core around which there whole life revolves. For woman love is far most important, but for men attainment of supreme point of life through knowledge is their only goal in life with which they have no longings remain in life.

A rhythmic pattern is followed by Bhattacharya in his novels: one serious followed by the other light one. *Music for Mohini* follows *So Many Hungers!*, *He Who Rides a Tiger* is followed by *A Goddess Named Gold*, *Shadow from Ladakh* by *A Dream in Hawaii*. There are two concomitants as major themes in the novels as famine and freedom. As mentioned earlier, the first and the third novel have Bengal famine of 1943 as their background. Even in his second novel *Music for Mohini*, Jayadev volunteered his services for preparing hutments for the destitute. He and his family run free meal-booths for the famine struck people. In *Shadow from Ladakh*, he does mention the famine situations that have catastrophic effect on the poor people. Yet the theme of freedom pervades in all his novels. In the last three novels, it is developed more completely as they deal with economic, social, individual and political freedom respectively. This theme of freedom culminates man's emancipation of life as it is the final objective and ideal. Behind the writing of any of his novels, there is an immediate cause that triggered the imagination of Bhattacharya—be it the Bengal Famine, nation's struggle for freedom, faith in Gandhi, the Sino-Indian war or a love affair of a very personal but impassionate nature. Instead of all this the faith of Bhattacharya in human spirit always enlivens in human sufferings. One does not fail to find polarities on mutual antithetical opposing in his novels i.e. rich and poor, city and village, spiritual and material, traditional and modern. Hence, Bhattacharya proves that without contraries, no progression can be possible. It is in this synthesis, culmination of both the contraries—the birth of true things takes place.



Bhattacharya's first novel *So Many Hungers!* deals with the ample of hungers that affect a man not only physically but also morally and spiritually as well. This hunger affects the attitudes of the people—their values, their decadence that has been set in the rural Indian society and results in the perversity, inhumanity and exploitation of the poor innocent folk by the British government police and selfish money minded tradesman like Samendra Basu or Ablabandhu. Among all such atrocities, the faith in the supreme self, the nobility of the character still remains enliven in the character of Rahoul, Kajoli, and her mother. Bhattacharya has dealt with so many hungers while writing this novel. But the two prominent are the hunger for food and freedom, along with the hunger for faith which is a necessary one to survive in such grim conditions with all their variant dimensions. The society as portrayed is severely hit by famine, international fighting and freedom movement making the society astir. There is misery everywhere leading to chaos, upheaval and tension dwelling in the hunger of intense urge for faith manifest over the people to come out from their hunger of freedom and food.

In *Music for Mohini*, Bhattacharya portrays the opposite characteristics of the Indian heritage and Western culture. Through the character of Mohini, writer focuses light on the social evils that has become common and deep rooted in the soil of Indian society. All these social evils of widow pyre, caste system, child marriage, superstitions, and blind faith in religion are attacked by Bhattacharya. By revealing about the glorious past in which woman was honoured and allotted equal position in the society along with men, writer brings the quite opposite characters of Mohini and Jayadev's

mother under the same roof. Where Mohini stands for modernity, freedom from old-taboos and on the other hand Jayadev's mother stands erect for orthodox and superstitions in Indian culture. It is only the faith of Jayadev in synthesis that bring and rescues both of them from their dilemmas which results in the blending of East and West-traditional and modern. Through the act of final redemption of Mohini, Jayadev made his mother to understand the life-negating values of bad tradition and customs:

Values, Mother? There are values beyond your grasp. Since you will always try to reach them with your reason, never with your feelings. Life has punished you... Blind belief shapes your thinking: blind belief cannot make a sentiment. (180)

In his third novel, *He Who Rides a Tiger*, Bhattacharya declares, a crusade over the caste system which became a deep rooted problem in India. He reflects the atmosphere of late 1920's and early 1930's. The air filled with the fumes of man's inhumanity to man. In this novel, the writer has shown that how the repercussions of hunger has resulted in the economic in disparity and conditions like class-war in the Indian society—previously such wars were not visible. We can see that how the people lose their work, wages were too low, people starve and think to migrate to city in search for food and wages and mean while were oppressed and exploited. Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly observes, "Hereafter the conflict becomes simply the conflict between the exploiters and the exploited, the haves and the haves-nots, the proletariat and the bourgeois." He advocates that nothing can be done unless, the down trodden and under privileged people does not rise and



protest for their basic rights and amenities.

Bhattacharya also satirizes the weakness and the meaningless customs in the Hindu religion. He points out the vices from which it has become very necessary to make it free and this can only be gained if people have faith in the basic principles of humanity and compassion in the Hindu religion. In the novel, the fight of Kalo is shown not against an individual, but with the society in a whole. While taking Kalo as a mouthpiece, Bhattacharya focuses light over a curious contradiction of the times. While men die of hunger, wealth grows, and while kindness dries up, religion is more in demand. This is the outward form of religion, mere rituals and empty within. Therefore, Kalo utilizes this weakness of society to take revenge which has shattered his faith in religion, law and human ship. He takes a revenge for all the injustice bestowed upon him and his daughter Chandralekha. Bhattacharya expresses his hunger that people should come out from the dark chambers of their hearts and this caste difference, economic disparity created because of hunger for food should not again be created

Bhattacharya's fourth novel *A Goddess Named Gold* is different from the rest of his novels. Here people hungers more and more for food of wealth. For them wealth, gold and material possessions means more than anything else, "A mystic value was set on the yellow metal, so that there could be a game for men to play. Whoever gained the metal, more and yet more, came up on top and all bowed to him with palms hand" (153). Again, in this novel Bhattacharya made a prophecy that political freedom is important, but more than gaining political freedom—preserving it is far more important. This

prophecy of Bhattacharya comes true in *Shadow from Ladakh*. In which our freedom, integrity is attacked by China.

In his last novels, *A Dream in Hawaii*, Bhattacharya, maintains a positive view regarding the equilibrium to pacify the internal turmoil that takes place in a man. Nobody can deny the primordial urge as it is one of the basic need of man. At the same time without sublimating it, it is difficult to find the absolute peace. Devjani being the mouthpiece of Bhattacharya talks about such synthesis between the two divergent fields as:

I see an East-West encounter on American earth. An encounter of the spirit. American seems to be in the throes of change. Yesterday this was wishful thinking. Today it is believable. (172)

Hence, Bhattacharya's novels present the true picture of India and its teeming millions surging with life and substance. Bhattacharya in his novels deals with social history and reality, Bengal famine and its ill effects, the struggle for independence, social evils such as caste system, untouchability, superstitious faith, prostitution, child marriage etc. But the beauty of the writings of Bhattacharya does not lie in his delineation towards the flaws and evils in the society but in portraying a positive vision of life.

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