

# FREEDOM AS EXEMPLIFIED IN BHABANI BHATTACHARYA'S *A GODDESS NAMED GOLD*

*Dr. Indu Sharma*  
*Assistant Professor*  
*Department of English*  
*Cluster University of Jammu, Jammu India*

**Abstract:** In a country like India, with long years of subjugation by foreign powers, political consciousness and nationalism became a pre-occupation in the mind of writers like Bhabani Bhattacharya which forced him to write a novel, *A Goddess Named Gold* (1960). The aim of this paper is to bring out the philosophy of Bhattacharya towards freedom which seems to awake the countrymen towards the freedom—economic, social, political, individual, etc. of its people to save independent India from being exploited by the greedy capitalist and profiteers who possess hunger for wealth to satisfy their greedy ends.

**Key Words:** Freedom, Exploitation, Independence, Greed.

In a country like India, with long years of subjugation by foreign powers, political consciousness and nationalism became a pre-occupation in the mind of writers like Bhabani Bhattacharya which forced him to write a novel, *A Goddess Named Gold* (1960). In this novel the chief emphasis Bhattacharya seems to awake his own countrymen towards the economic freedom of its people to save independent India from being exploited by the greedy capitalist and profiteers who possess hunger for wealth to satisfy their greedy ends. In this novel, Bhattacharya aims to explain the true meaning of freedom as K. R. Chandrasekharan an eminent critic remarks: The preoccupation of Bhattacharya in this novel is with the way in which a country should use its freedom and what benefits may derive from it... and representing through the medium of his art his assessment of what the people have achieved and what they have failed to achieve. (86)

The title of the novel is highly allegorical and symbolical as it refers to gold in literal sense and to freedom in symbolic sense. Gold which generally symbolizes material wealth is represented as the symbol of the richness of spirit and mind in the novel. In the same way, freedom does not stand as the opportunity for becoming prosperous; it is something which stimulates man to think and act nobly and thus creates happiness for all. An eminent critic, Narsingh Srivastava in his article, "Symbol and Allegory in *A Goddess Named Gold*" remarks that the novel is highly allegorical:

At the levels of values and ideas, the title of the novel itself is highly symbolic... it hints at the identification of gold and goddess—wealth and worship on the one hand, and on the other the conflict between the ideas of the Seth and Meera—the former being the very embodiment of capitalism and the latter, the true emancipator. (Srivastava 151)

The novel narrated the happenings in a village, Sonamitti hundred days before Indian Independence. In spite of its rich, black and futile soil, it had its joys and sorrows, its moments of grief and exaltations, its sufferings and redemption. The name Sonamitti is symbolic meaning a land of golden soil or land of gold. It is also symbolic of India which can yield gold with the hard work by her people, but its political freedom can be turned into "a curse for the people of the country if allowed to be misused by the unscrupulous capitalists for their selfish ends" (Srivastava 94). Even the names of the main characters of the novel are highly symbolical i.e. the Seth Samsundar is shown as a symbol of economic, political and religious exploitation; Meera is drawn as a symbol of new India which can be easily exploited by the greedy Seth.

The plot of the novel revolved around a touchstone given to Meera by her sagacious grandfather named Atma Ram. It was believed that the amulet would enable Meera to turn copper into gold, provided she acts as a natural and spontaneous expression of herself. But, the Seth Samsundar, a money-lender tried to lure Meera in the pretext of helping her for carrying out the task of spreading goodness in the society by converting all the copper into gold.

The main theme of the novel is about the true concept of freedom and faith i.e. the proper way to preserve and sustain freedom by having faith in country's prospect. Some of the basic values of human beings that are required in need to attain true freedom is kindness, self-sacrifice, friendship, goodness of inner self, purity of mind, dignity, fight for the down-trodden section of the society, revolt against corruption, etc. that all comes under the aegis of hunger-matrix of freedom, faith and food. One of a renowned critic, Dorothy Blair Shimer points out in her book *Bhabani Bhattacharya* that the main theme of the novel, "is the people's preparation for nationhood." She further remarks that, "the ultimate test of nationhood will be the moral fiber of villagers... impoverished, illiterate, and superstitious perhaps, but hard-working, basically intelligent and wise in tradition" (67). The mood of Bhattacharya while writing this novel truly reflects the tempo and spirit of India immediately before Independence.

The novel began with the episode of the rescue of a child and the sale of hoarded saris. There is a Cow House Five, a group of six women including Meera, Lakshmi, Sohagi, Champa, Munni and Bimla because of their daily meetings taking place in unused cowshed in the house of Lakshmi. The women in this group are of different age and belong to different strata of the society. But are all united with the common knit bond of nationalism, they had been in jail for taking part in the nationalist movement.

In this novel, Bhattacharya stressed that freedom in all its perspectives could be attained in a society if it is free from political, economic and social bondage. Therefore, everyone has to struggle to build a society free from any kind of servitude, injustice and wrong deeds. But, first and foremost, the social freedom seems to be the main concern for Bhattacharya to preserve and sustain freedom. For the writer, the political freedom is not the end. In fact, it is the beginning, as there is a long way to go. India has attained freedom through the course of protracted struggles against nature, British government and social forces. Bhattacharya understood that after gaining Independence, India had to formulate its government for the proper functioning of the country

In the opening chapter of the novel, Bhattacharya spoke about the Quit India Movement of 1942 in which thousands of people, men, women and children took part with great zeal and fervour. He gave a reference in the novel regarding the struggle for the political freedom by the people when they marched under the distant but direct leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, for the sake of freedom: Those days-Sohagi remember? Gandhiji touched our spirit as it slept. Wakened we become the equals of our men folk. Proud, chins up, we marched in a column of our own, across the meadow of Pipli, onward to Kanhan. "Quit India!" We shouted to the Engrez aliens in one big voice. (8)

India at that time was in a dire need for the political freedom. It would be quite unnatural on the part of a nationalist like Bhattacharya that while writing about the novel; when India stood at the threshold of freedom, he missed to give its reference. Bhattacharya embodied his views regarding freedom in the novel that the people had to work strenuously to secure every sort of freedom through the Gandhian way of peaceful Satyagraha and procession. With the freedom movement lead by Mahatma Gandhi, the national upsurge for the freedom movement became more and more marked with the fervour of hunger in the mind of every Indian. Thus, the hunger for freedom was not merely a freedom struggle or a political struggle, but an experience that became a part of the lives of almost all the sensitive and enlightened Indians.

In this novel, Bhattacharya has brought women folk to the fore front. He presented women as powerful characters who fought against all the atrocities and at every level whether on the national front i.e. during freedom movement against the British government or at local front while protesting against Seth a local profiteer. The women of the village Sonamitti under the guidance of the Cow House Five fight and demonstrated against the British rulers and the local profiteer. Meera, the chief protagonist resided with her grandmother who was known for her patriotism, heroism and leadership qualities. Though Meera was only eleven during the Quit India Movement of 1942, but still obsessed with the hunger for freedom and had her own share of participation in the freedom struggle. Nevertheless, she had insisted her grandmother on joining the anti-government demonstration and got arrested along with other women. Meera's grandmother also believed that freedom was never given; people had to achieve it by their own self-efforts. Meera was shown as the symbol of freedom and it was with her guiding force that the village women got inspiration to unite and fight against Seth, a moneylender named Seth Samsundar. Her character was presented as a foil to that of Seth because she had no self-interest. She wanted to make her village a better place to live in. Meera believed in action and not in words and hence possessed great faith in the combined will of the people, when it came to organize a protest march to the Seth's shop for demanding saris on fair price.

A common bond that knit all the women was that they were all ardent nationalists. Lakshmi, the wife of Seth Samsundar was shown as poles apart from her husband. Where she fought for the rights of the people, freedom of the country; he himself became the epitome of greed, want, lust-in short hunger for wealth. She had gone to prison with Meera and took part in the Freedom Movement when her son Nago was in her womb. Lakshmi had participated in the Freedom struggle against the wishes of her husband who managed to disappear on the crucial day set for saluting the national flag, "an act against the Englishman's law" (11). Meera's grandmother was also shown as a caricature of freedom fighter, full of heroism, who in spite of her old age, painful gout, marched with lovers of freedom in hot sun and heavy downpour. The village women were aware of the fact that individual and collective suffering of people as well as sacrifice has the power to transform the society in the same way as Marxism advocates the restraining of social environment through the empowerment of the working masses.

In the novel, Bhattacharya embodied his belief that people had to work strenuously to secure economic freedom. The women of Cow House Five felt that economic freedom is so important and felt shocked as well as upset to see that the women of Sonamitti village had to wear patched saris and jackets prepared from rejected gunny sacks. To save their clothes from further wear, many of them sleep almost naked at night. Unfortunately, but true, this misery prevailed in a village of rich black earth yielding a large quantity of good cotton fiber which was sufficient to provide clothes to the entire district. The cause for all this is Seth, who was the chief cloth dealer in the village Sonamitti and six around ones.

By exploiting the countrywide sari shortage, he hoarded the supply and raised the price to earn more and more wealth, so that he could satisfy his hunger for money. The sole motto of Seth was to quench his hunger for money by gaining power and means of production without thinking at once for the honour of poor village women.

The procession undertaken by the village women although did not make any special impact on Seth. It is only the Lakshmi's threat of stripping off her clothes in full view of all to Seth made him yield to her demands. They collectively launch a movement against the Seth to bring down the prices of the saris for the economic relief. Hence, the women leaders decided to fight against this economic offender because of whom the entire village was under the grip of unbearable economic slavery.

For Bhattacharya, social freedom is the most important for the good governance of the people. In the novel, Bhattacharya criticized the mentality of men who treated women as inferior and wanted to teach them a lesson whenever they protest against the injustice bestowed upon them. In the novel, Seth was nothing but a caricature of the exploiter. For teaching a lesson to the women of Sonamitti, he organized a cinema show in which women were not allowed. Through this, Bhattacharya pointed out towards the age old men's conventional attitude towards woman, "Loosen the reins of restraint and the women will get out of hand.... Children and women are alike in a way. Spare them and they get spoilt (44). Bhattacharya advocated for the liberation and freedom of women. For him, women were not meant to be treated as chattel.

With the elements of irony and humour, Bhattacharya pointed out that political freedom can be used for spreading social reforms, such as widow marriage, girl education, fight against casteism, etc. in the society. For him, freedom from caste differences and superstitions should be granted as soon as possible for the betterment of the society. Again, exploitation of women should be stopped. In the novel, a Halwai; a middle aged man of the village longed to marry Meera, but it was the caste system that comes in his way. He was aware of the caste-system and knew that the people of village will not sanction him to marry Meera. Hence, he told Meera that by bribing the Five Elders in the village; he will marry her. Again, the halwai was twice the age of Meera— his younger girl was even older than Meera. When, Meera's grandmother advice him to marry a widow instead of Meera, he became angry. Bhattacharya strictly condemned this mentality of men, and advocates in favour of women to choose their life partner.

The true essence of Bhattacharya's concept of freedom and the conditions in which the real freedom could be attained in the novel was carried out by minstrel, Atma Ram (Meera's grandfather). According to him, the new battle for genuine freedom after the achievement of political freedom of the country will be difficult one. *A Goddess Named Gold* emphasized the idea that freedom was not meant to be taken as political or economic freedom but the freedom of true minds. Freedom means the right of a person to live as an individual, without being smothered or ground down by political, economic, religious, moral, social and traditional weights symbolized by the Seth of different kinds who are within exploiting our country:

Freedom is the beginning of the road where there was no road. But the new road swarms with robbers....there were the robbers, Seth of many kinds. The cities had a greater variety and profusion of them than the country side. There was the money-Seth, of course, to whom freedom meant a chance to seize fields of trade vacated by the aliens. (124)

It will be a difficult task to make the country free from these corrupt people who are like a leech eating the roots of the country. For Bhattacharya, these self-seekers should be curbed if the freedom is to be used as a means to attain higher objectives in the nation's life.

Freedom, for Bhattacharya meant to enjoy the true essence of freedom right person had to be elected to the various posts and positions. And if the same will not be carried out, then the freedom will die soon without giving any benefit to the people. They had to pass through the tough tests of greed, superstitions, snobbery, etc. for becoming fit for achieving freedom. Towards the end of the novel, the minstrel presented his profound and ideal concept of freedom to the villagers. He gave assurance to the people that freedom is capable of bringing out miracle and no miracle can be performed without faith. He pointed out that freedom will be the greatest boon to mankind and has the power to achieve higher ends i.e. to enable people to become strong and worthwhile. Hence, giving amulet to Meera was only a symbol of freedom for which she has to perform some real act of kindness. When minstrel tells about the properties of amulet, it is not meant to be taken as literal but symbolical.

Likewise gift of freedom should not be looked upon as a means for the acquisition of prosperity alone, the freedom to be free; on the contrary it is the golden key which can open magic doors and admit into a realm in which men think noble thoughts and do kind deeds so that happiness may be the portion of all. Bhattacharya affirmed that it is through hard work, patience, tolerance, faith, dedication, rational thinking, and scientific approach and not by laziness can make India strong. People should not forget their past, the hardships for attaining freedom, and sacrifices of freedom fighters. An eminent critic, Dr. Ram Sewak Singh, an eminent critic pointedly states: Freedom meant to some liberty to indulge in licentious activities, to some profiteering, and to some respite from toil, an escape into inactivity. In the true sense freedom meant as Jawaharlal Nehru had said on August 15, 1947 freedom from ignorance, superstition and poverty; but the people of Sonamitti misunderstood it and brought them to despair. Atmaram the minstrel had foreseen it and warned them against it; Freedom is the beginning of the road where there is no road. But the new road swarms with robbers. (Rao 151)

In the novel Bhattacharya pleads that it was easy to gain freedom, but it will be very difficult to preserve it. Therefore, the true essence of freedom could be gained by electing the dedicated people at the various higher positions in the independent India. This was the faith of Bhattacharya through which India can get freedom from all kinds of miseries and hungers:

Listen, Meera, with your gold you will save this village. You will save the seven villages. But there are eight hundred thousand others. Each has a Seth of its own. Each Seth wants to snatch the new power from the people. You cannot have gold enough to save all India! It is the fight with the Seth that will save India, not a miracle, not armfuls of gold. You did have your share in the flight, a big share. (205)

Thus, the novel *A Goddess Named Gold* presents a picture of a village society which is still governed by strange beliefs and conventions. The people are terribly handicapped by want and misery. Hence, the novel can be called as an expression of hunger matrix of 'faith' in the sanctity and supremacy of people's power to bring a drastic change in the society. For bringing change, political freedom is not enough; as the 'freedom' has to be properly nourished, and that it can be preserved and strengthened by the 'food' of peace, solace, fellow-feeling, unity, love, knowledge and progress the hunger matrix.

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