INDIAN CULTURE IN THE NOVELS OF BHABANI BHATTACHARYA

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Abstract:
Of the present Indo-Anglian writers, the name of Bhabani Bhattacharya needs special stress. He is a gifted writer and ranks with some of the best writers of Indo-Anglian literature. His novel ‘Shadow from Ladakh’ won him the award of the Sahitya Academy for 1967, while his other novels ‘So Many Hungers’, ‘Music for Mohini’, ‘He who Rides a Tiger’, A Goddess Named Gold’, have earned for him an abiding place in Indo-Anglian fiction. His ‘Shadow from Ladakh’ was written with the modern political and economic problems of India as background. He has done his job with his accustomed ease and sensitivity in felicitous English. Around the central theme, Bhattacharya has woven an eminently moving tale of the conflict of modern India. Bhabani Bhattacharya is an outstanding Indo-Anglian novelist of the present times. He has earned worldwide distinction and his books have appeared in twenty-six languages, sixteen of which are European. He has won the coveted Sahitya Akademi Award for 1967 for his novel ‘Shadow from Ladakh’, which is a deserved honour done to the genius of Dr. Bhattacharya. He is the fourth writer to receive the award for a work in English, the other three being R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Verrier Elwin. Speaking of the award he remarks, “It is good to be known abroad. Even so, I must confess that I would like to be known to my countrymen too. The award redresses a balance—so far I have been better known in the U.S. and Europe than in my own country.” It is a pity that Indians recognize the worth of Indian writers only after due recognition from the west. We have been accustomed to recognize talent only after it is applauded in other countries in other countries. There is another tendency among our literary critics to scoff at the writing of our own writers even when they produce something good and closer to our life.

Index Terms Shadow of Ladakh, Sahitya Academy Awards

The time has come perhaps when Nissim Ezekiel has to revise his opinion when he sells that “except for a few, the output of the majority of the Indo-Anglians belongs to the category of occasional writing and does not merit serious consideration.”

In a letter, written by a young Russian woman engaged in literary research at the Institute of Asian Studies in Moscow, to Dr. Bhabani Bhattacharya, she writes, ‘To speak of Indian contribution to English literature is meaningless: English is one of the languages of India. Those Indians who write creatively in that language make a contribution to Indian literature.’ It is no doubt a bold statement, but it contains a plain truth. James H. cousins said “. If they (Indians) are compelled as an alternative to writing in their own mother tongue, let it be not Anglo-Indian, but Indo-Anglian-Indian in spirit, Indian in thought, Indian in emotion, Indian in imagery and English only in words.... Let their ideal be the expression of themselves but they must be quite sure that it is their self, not merely faint echoes and shadows, from others or from the transient phases of desire…”

It is a strange thing to be a Bengali, born at Bhagalpur (Bihar), writing in an alien language and living in Maharashtra. Writing is his first love and full time career. All the novels of Bhattacharya present a true picture of India and its teeming millions surging with life and substance. He does not believe in the dictum of art for art’s sake. All writing for him has a social purpose. His outlook is highly constructive and purposeful. Smt. Lila Ray writes, “As we read his writing, we hear the dialogue between man and his situation, between man and man, between man and ideas he lives by.”

Bhabani Bhattacharya has stated that he regards art as a criticism of life which reviews current values and he conceives the novel as an idiom of compassion,’ which is designed to have a curative social effect. S.C. Harrex, the Australian writer feels that “his own novels conscientiously, reflect these views. Their subject matter and themes derive from modern Indian history and the problems of contemporary Indian society and they embody the programmes free forms as well stinging social criticism.” This approach, initiated in modern Indian fiction in English by the early novels and short stories of Mulk Raj Anand (from 1935-47) is a feature of the majority of Indian post-independence novels.

So Many Hungers (1947), Bhattacharya’s first novel, is primarily devoted to man’s hunger for food, though it also closely analyses man’s other urges. It is a story not only about so many hungry people but also about so many types of human hunger. It begins with Rahoul’s hunger for a new world order founded on eternal ethical values and higher ideals. Though a scientist, he is essentially a man of ideas and ideals and ideals, and is haunted by the desire to see the advent of a new epoch dominated by higher values and ideas. This is the reason why he becomes fretful in his heart when he discovers that the allies during World War II are fighting for victory only, and not for values and ideals.

Bhattacharya’s Music for Mohini (1950) is a novel of tensions-tension between the mind and the body the mind of the husband and the body of the wife, tension between East and West, village and town, tradition and modernity, astrology and rationalism, the daughter in law and the mother in law. Ultimately all tensions are resolves and there is the marriage of true minds. We have a big band of characters, major and minor, sharply diversified as in the old mother and the lady of the Big House. The Big House itself is a major character, like the Elizabethan Great House replaced by the Court.

‘He Who Rides a Tiger’ (1954) has for its background the World War II and the famine of 1943. The novel deals with the changing fortunes of Kalo, a blacksmith, who is driven to city by the famine, is sent to jail for stealing a bunch of bananas, becomes a corpse remover and a pimp to make both ends meet, finds his daughter Lekha in a prostitute’s house and then takes the help of deception to wreak vengeance on the high caste people by arranging Shiva’s “coming” from the ground with the help of two seers of gram. It also castigates the traditional and religious-minded people, and their hypocritical ideas and ways of life in acharming but forceful manner. The Times of London considered it “a rare and beautiful novel” whereas for The Sunday Times (London) it crystallized “the heart and tragedy of India.”

Bhattacharya’s fourth novel, A Goddess Named Gold (1960), has its affiliations with both “So many Hungers” and “He who Rides a Tiger,” but it is by no means a repetition of either. Actually, A Goddess Named Gold signifies an advance in Bhattacharya’s art as novelist, for the ‘axes’ here are hardly visible and the grinding is not very audible. Also, he novel derives form Bhattacharya’s earlier short story, ‘Desperate Women’. In this story, Lachmi’s child, Nago, slips into the well, and is saved by the brave resourceful Meera Bai: the women now demonstrate before to release the hoarded saris for sale, and the excited women cry: ‘Lachmi Bai Ki Dii‘. The novel begins with this episode of the rescue of the child and the safe of the saris. Lachmi reappears as Lakshmi, Meera Bai becomes Meera, and they (along with four other) become the Cowhouse Five (defying arithmetic). There is also Meer’s grandmother, and there is a roving grandfather, who is referred to as the minstrel. Lakshmi’s husband is Seth Samsundarji, whose pursuit of wealth and power, at any cost, comes in conflict at various points with minstrel’s half-mystic, half-realistic them effectively polarize the action of the novel, while the pure, brave, unspoil, unselfish but adventurous Meera is poised between the two now an unconscious instrument for evil, now a conscious instrument for good.

“Shadow from Ladakh” (1967) is set against the menacing background of the Chinese aggression against India starting in October, 1962. Comparing the novel with “So Many Hungers” the novelist himself declares that it is rooted more deeply in Gadhian thought. Synthesis is undoubtedly the central theme of the novel.

“A Dream in Hawaii” (1978) is the only major work not to have been published first in England or the United States and not to find a wide international readership. In this novel the central figure is Swami Yogananda, a youthful charismatic reincarnation of the great Swami Vivekananda, who cuts an idealistic swath through the American student community, represented as eagerly seeking the spiritual sustenance offered by Eastern Philosophies. “The great society was desperate for spiritual leadership. An enormous Vacuum remained.”

Bhattacharya’s novels are a microcosm of Indian society caught in crucible of traditional and changes. His views are balanced and he conveys them through the medium of situation rather than statements. His novels centre in the dictum that Art must have a social purpose and he depicts the life of man in relation to Society, in relation to himself, and in relation to Destiny. His outlook is sympathetic, although there is embitterment in his novels. He deals with the theme of hunger, poverty, disease, the sufferings of the poor, tradition and modernity, social evils, tensions and pretensions, changing values of modern civilization, interracial relations, crisis of character and East-West cultural relations.

Most of the Indo-Anglian novelists have written their novels with the avowed purpose of bringing out a transformation in the attitudes and perspectives of Indian problems and events. Whether they have succeeded in doing so is not of deep significance, but that they have brought a social awareness is remarkable. They have voiced forth the weal and woe and the varied problems faced by India and its teeming millions.

Bhattacharya may not be considered one of the foremost Indo-Anglian writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Narayan and Raja Rao, who form a separate trio by themselves, but he has an individual place of his own and certainly is a more sensitive artist than Khuswant Sinig, Manohar Malgaonkar and other women novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantra Sahga, Prawer Jhabvala and Anita Desai. Thus he stands in between the leading Indo-Anglian writers and other writers whose literary achievement is slowly gaining place in the galaxy of the contemporary Indo-Anglian fiction. But Bhattacharya is the one novelist who has an avowed purpose in writing the novels with his manifesto and declaration that “Art must have a social purpose.” Not only did he believe in it, but he followed it implicitly in all his five novels. In this respect he is like Shaw who says that if art is not didactic, it is useless.

Bhattacharya’s novels ‘So Many Hungers’ and ‘He Who Rides a Tiger’ are predominantly woven round the theme of hunger, while the theme of cultural synthesis is taken up in ‘Music for Mohini’. His novel ‘Shadow from Ladakh’ has for its essence the integration of simplicity and sophistication. His novel ‘A Goddess Named Gold’ is a variation in in theme as it deals with superstition and lust for gold. It is a struggle between man and society. He has a remarkable grip over the story and he does it with telling effect.

The theme of hunger runs through the novels of Anand and Kamala Markandaya also. Anand’s novel ‘Coolie’ and ‘Untouchable’ deal with the human degradation caused by hunger and misery of the poor and their struggle for a better life. His later novels too are a variation on the
same theme and drive home the plight of the unfortunate peasant whirled round by the wheel of superstition and conventions. Kamala Markandaya’s novels ‘Nectar in a Sieve’ and ‘A Handful of Rice’ are novels on the same theme of poverty and hunger. The attitude of rural people submitting themselves to the vagaries of natural catastrophes as also the wishes of unscrupulous men is presented here. The novel ‘A Handful of Rice’ has for its background the struggle of Ravi, a village boy with his trials, tribulations and despair. Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandaya are content with presenting a convincing picture of human existence, without allowing themselves to be propagandists like Mulk Raj Anand.

‘So Many Hungers’ was published in 1947, the year of independence. It became a best-seller in various translation. L. N. Gupta states, “It was a terrible indictment of the British Raj for all their crimes which aggregated into the disastrous famine of Bengal in 1943. It deals with the period of the Second World War as it affected India. Of all the provinces of India, Bengal was more immediately involved in the war with the constant threat of the imminent danger of Japanese air-blasts. It was shaken to the roots by the two diabolical forces of war and famine which sucked the blood of the have-nots.”

It was a man-made famine that took a toll of two million innocent men, women and children. The story centers round the Basu family, a peasant family, the girl Kajoli, her mother and her brother. Samarendra Basu thinks of organizing a business concern, Bengal Rice Limited, and the unscrupulous Sir Lakhaminath helps the company extend its branches to every far off corner of the province. It is this man’s genius that has so well spread the vice of corruption, and hoarded food grains. The fountains of human kindness seem to have almost dried up, only vultures ruled the human habitats. That is why S.C. Harrex the Australian writer says, “This novel is a harrowing account of a famine in Bengal (unfortunately ever-relevant) and a passionate indictment of te human culpability involved, particularly of the grasping parasites (mostly upper-class) who exploit the famine to make blackmarket fortunes. The story is told from the point of view of the starving peasants who migrated to Calcutta when they died in the streets and is calculated to shock the readers’ sense of humanity in scenes such as that which describes a Jackal perched on the thigh of a pregnant woman, tearing at her swollen belly, while her screams slash the air.”

Bhattacharya paints the naked horror of it all with a pitiless precision and cumulative detail. Dr. Srinivasa Iyengar states, “So Many Hungers’ is no doubt an impeachment for man’s inhumanity to man, but it is also a dramatic study of a set of human beings caught in a unique and tragic predicament. The story has been effectively told and the tragic pathos of the real mass starvation described in the guise of fiction, moves the reader deeply. The novel describes a factual and vivid account of the most shocking disasters in history.”

His second novel ‘Music for Mohini’, was written after India attained full independence and became a Republic. Thus it takes for its background the post-Independence scene in India. It presents the conflict between the twain cultures of East and West and a reconciliation is suggested which may be taken as a form of adjustment. So in ‘Music for Mohini’, he deals with caste distinctions and poverty. L. N. Gupta remarks, ‘Music for Mohini’ blows up the citadel of old traditions and superstitions which menace India’s progress.” Reviewing, this novel, The New York Times observed, “It blends the story of an attractive girl’s marriage with the eternal problems of that caste-ridden land and its divorce from various kinds of imperial rule. And the main brickbats are not hurled at Britain.” The Chicago Tribune showered its praise on this novel by stating that “India as presented by Rudyard Kipling, Rabindranath Tagore and others has become to us a multiple image. Now these diverse pictures are brought into focus by a native son. In a splendid novel that may rank with Pearl Buck’s ‘The Good Earth’, Bhabani Bhattacharya gives us Modern India.”

‘Music for Mohini’ is the story of an arranged marriage and she adjustment which the modern city girl, Mohini, has to make to fit into the traditional pattern of life in her husband Jayadev’s Big House; presided over by his aristocratic iron- willed mother. In his novel, Mohini, a young girl of seventeen is married in the traditional manner after observing the auspicious signs and comparing the horoscopes. Mohini goes to her new home. Jayadev, the quiet scholar who lives in his ancestral village, and Mohini the young city-bred wife, who adapts herself very well to her new environment are the two forces that put the village on the path of progress and modernization. The superstitious old mother of Jayadev realizes in the end her mistake and reconciles herself to the changing times. The characters of Mohini, Jayadev and Heeranal are well drawn with fine precision and facile expression. This aptly summed up by S. C. Harrex, the Australian writer that “the main theme of the novel is the idea of synthesis, a profound union of today with yesterday, whereby the conflict between tradition and modernity will be resolved.” Synthesis is achieved in practice as well as theory. Finally, Mohini and her mother-in- law are agreeably reconciled and Jayadev is transformed, through conjugal and moral stimuli, from an ascetic intellectual into a village reformer.

The third novel ‘He Who Rides a Tiger’ was written in 1954, a time when India was making sincere attempts at creating a new social order and came out with a new outlook on life. Here he once again reverts to the old theme—the Bengal famine. His earlier novels have their roots in rural Vidarbha. He remains an unequalled master in interpreting rural India. Particularly in the novel ‘A Goddess Named Gold’ the world of fate and reality that delve deep into the minds of our rural folk are skillfully and artistically blended. It contains, like his other novel ‘He Who Rides a Tiger’ some superb descriptions of rural fold, Sudhakar Joshi writes, “His novels have a penetrating and sympathetic analysis of the simple but insurmountable problems of Indian life. His themes generally revolve round poverty, hunger, pestilence, traditionalism caste, India’s struggle against poverty, industrialization and the resulting controversy of Gandhian panacea versus rapid industrialization.

He Who Rides a Tiger’ is an attack on both who profited by people’s misery during the famine and those who exploited them as caste tyrants. It is a legend of freedom, a legend to inspire and awaken. Here he discusses a variation on the theme of hunger. It has a fascinating beginning. The story runs rapidly surging with emotion and agitation. Its sharp and vivid characterisation and untainted realism make this novel a very interesting one. It is a grim satire on Hindu orthodoxy. Dr. Iyengar says, “The tempo of life in Calcutta, the complex of urban vices and urban sophistication, the pressure of mass movements and mass hysteria, the reign of superstition and jumbo-gives the novel an entire and piquant quality all its own.”

The novel is based on an ancient saying “He who rides a tiger cannot dismount.” A humble village blacksmith named Kalo takes his revenge on a rigid, caste-ridden society and makes a living for himself and his daughter by faking a miracle that begins as a fraud and ends as aa legend-
and passing himself off as a Brahmin priest. The story ends with a note of triumph for the soul over flesh. Eventually, when the fraud is detected, other low caste people hail him as their brother and the outraged upholders of caste and custom panic. *He Who Rides a Tiger* is a skillful, entertaining and an illuminating fictional glimpse inside the corner of India - Bhattacharya writes of Indian and the social cultural and religious world in which they live with an authority and understanding that no western writer can hope to match.

Dr. C. Paul Verghese rightly remarks that “Food is the primary requisite of human dignity; hunger debases and dehumanizes man. Bhattacharya has dealt quite forcefully with the theme of hunger and the concomitant theme of human degradation in his novels *So Many Hungers*’ and *He Who Rides a Tiger.*”

His fourth novel *‘A Goddess Named Gold’* written in 1960 is the best novel on Indian village life and makes a most illuminating and satisfying reading experience. It tells how high spiritual values like spontaneous kindness are sought to be prostituted for purposes of gold. It is a modern fable of rural India and the close-textured fabric of its life on the eve of Independence in 1947. The characters are introduced one by one in a leisurely manner and we see among them a pretty girl, a strolling minstrel and a magic talisman. Dr. Iyengar states “It entertains as a story, but it also disturbs as a warning and as a prophecy.”

Meera’s grandfather, a wandering minstrel gives her an amulet and tells her that it will acquire the power to turn base metals into gold, if she does an act of real kindness. She rescues a child. Seth Samsunderji seeks to profit out of India’s new found freedom and enters into a business deal with Meera on a fifty-fifty basis. Meera gets disgusted with it finally and throws the amulet into the river. The minstrel returns soon and explains that freedom is the real touch-stone.

H. C. Harrex states *‘He Who Rides a Tiger’* and *‘A Goddess Named Gold’* are social fables and as such are Bhattacharya’s most formally sophisticated works like Narayan’s *‘The Guide’*. The former is the story of an untouchable who successfully poses as Holy Brahmin, the plot of the latter is a variation of fairytale in which the heroine and her fellow villagers believe that her amulet has the magical power to transform copper into gold whenever she performs a true act of kindness. In *‘He Who Rides a Tiger’* the social theme is developed in terms of irony in order to dramatis the iniquities and hypocrisies of the caste system, while in *‘A Goddess Named Gold’* the moral supremacy of communal unity over landlord’s selfishness is propose as a model for independent India.

Bhattacharya’s latest novel ‘Shadow from Ladakh’ was published in 1967. It has for its background the Indo-China conflict. It tells an extremely gripping story of unsurpassed drama on a broad and revealing canvas. It tells what India needs for survival—a meeting point between Gandhian social ethics and tremendous forces of science and technology. It deals with India’s conflict with China and her response to the challenge. The theme presents a considerable amount of truth of a politically conscious Indian family. S. C. Harrex rightly remarks that the Indo-Chinese border conflict following China’s annexation of Tibet, is also a variation on the theme of synthesis. Through the relationships of the main character, Bhattacharya advocates for present day India a cultural fusion based on a love-match between Gandhian idealism and a progressive people’s technology.”

It provides an insight into the contrasting contemporary life on India symbolized by Satyajit who regards Indian village life as the ideal life and by the westernized American trained Bhasker, the forward-looking Chief Engineer in a steel plant, who feels India’s future lies in industrialization, ends on a weak note of co-existence of these two ideologies.

The modern militant industrial outlook has its hero an American educated Bhasker Roy who in his need to expand the steel town, knows no use or purpose in Gandhigram. So he wants to dispose off Gandhigram, because it is a hindrance to India’s industrialization. He brings every pressure to bear, but his surprise the community of the believers in non-violence stands firm under leader Satyajit. The conflict is complicated by Bhaskar’s love for Sumita, the daughter of Satyajit and Suruchi.

Around the central theme, Bhabani Bhattacharya has woven an-eminent moving tale of the conflict of modern India. This is not strictly a historical or political novel though the story is woven round two great conflicts, namely the Chinese- Indian over Ladakh, and the conflict between the steel town and Gandhigram. In a sense the two conflicts are related, with the ways of life for which would deter an aggressive China from attempting adventures across the border.

Very few major novels have been written in any Indian language with the modern political and economic problems of India as background. A gifted writer like Dr. Bhabani has done this job with his accustomed ease and sensitivity in felicitous English.

Dr. Paul Verghese states the “Bhattacharya has the vision of a welfare society at heart. His concerns are clear and unambiguous; they are political, economic and social. In other words, the dignity of man both in national and international contexts is uppermost in his mind. In this he follows the traditions of European social realism as does Mulk Raj.”
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