

Relevance of Bhabani Bhattacharya's Writings in India Today

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Abstract

Bhabani Bhattacharya is of the opinion that unless a writer has a keen observation and an eye for noting the details of general behaviour of folks, he cannot write a social novel. As for himself, Bhattacharya never missed a single opportunity of observing incidents and happenings around him. He is perhaps the only Indo-Anglian novelist who has dealt with seething tensions of the teeming millions, both before Independence and after Independence. Though he belonged to early 20th century and depicted the then social, political picture in his writings, one cannot deny the fact that Bhattacharya was a visionary. He could see the future picture of India. The problems being faced by modern India today are almost the same which we come across in Bhattacharya's novels.

Bhabani Bhattacharya is one of the older generation Indian novelists writing in English. Born on the 10th of November 1906 in Bhagalpur (Bihar), Bhabani Bhattacharya's parents - Promotho and Kiranbala belonged to the well-to-do, and educated Brahmin families. Bhabani Bhattacharya was a precocious child and started writing at a very early age. While still at school, he began to compose couplets and poems for reciting in informal gatherings or getting them published in magazines. When he was only twelve, one of his early efforts appeared in the famous children magazine - *Mouchak*. He pursued his creative activity even during his studies in London.

He is a gifted writer and ranks with some of the best writers of Indo-Anglian literature. His novel *Shadow from Ladakh* (1966) won him Sahitya Academi Award in 1967. His other novels *So many Hungers* (1947), *Music for Mohine* (1952), *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1954), *Goddess Named Gold* (1960), *A Dream in Hawaii* (1978) have earned 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. Around the central theme

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Bhattacharya has woven an eminently moving tale of the conflict of modern India.

Bhattacharya as an outstanding Indo-Anglian novelist earned worldwide distinction. His books have appeared in 26 languages, 16 of which are European. He is the fourth writer to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award for a work in English, the others being R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Verrier Elwin. His wide range of experience in and around the world and his close association with men, manners and their personalities have enabled him to grasp the innate significance of humanity and all this finds expression in the characters of his novels and short stories carved out with a pen that never wavers.

Bhabani Bhattacharya is of the opinion that unless a writer has a keen observation and an eye for noting the details of general behaviour of folks, he cannot write a social novel. As for himself, Bhattacharya has never missed a single opportunity of observing incidents and happenings around him. He is perhaps the only Indo-Anglian novelist who has dealt with the seething tensions of the teeming millions both before Independence and after Independence.

If we make the survey of Bhattacharya's novels, it is noticed that his major novels were published in the two decades i.e. 1947 to 1967. *So Many Hungers* was published in the year of Independence i.e. 1947 and *Shadow from Ladakh* which earned him the Sahitya Akademi Award (1967) was published in 1966. Other novels *Music for Mohini*, *He who Rides a Tiger* and *Goddess Named Gold* were also published during the same period. It means that the social and political depiction in these novels is from the early half of the last century.

So Many Hungers which was published in 1947, became a best-seller in various translations. 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." The novel 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 manmade famine that took a toll of two million innocent men, women and children. The story centres round the Basu family, a peasant family - the girl Kajoli, her mother and her brother.

Samarendra Basu thinks of organising a business concern - Bengal Rice Limited and the unscrupulous Sir Lakshminath 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 the human culpability involved, particularly of the grasping parasites (mostly upper - class) who exploit the famine to make black market 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 pregnant woman, tearing at her swollen belly while her screams slash the air."

In *So Many Hungers*, Bhattacharya depicts 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 of 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* is the story of an arranged marriage and the 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. Jayadev is a quiet scholar living in his ancestral village, and Mohini the young city-bred wife adapts herself very well to her new environment. These two are the forces that put the village on the path of progress and modernization. The superstitious old mother of Jayadev realises in the end her mistake and reconciles herself to the changing times. The characters of Mohini, Jayadev and Heeralal are well drawn with fine precision and facile expression. This is aptly summed up by H. 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,

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 Bhattacharya once again goes back to the old theme - Bengal famine. His earlier novels have their roots in rural Vidarbha. He remains an unequalled master in interpreting the rural India. Particularly in the novel *A Goddess Named Gold*, the world of fable and reality that delve in the minds of our rural folk, and are skilfully and artistically blended. The novel is a masterly satire on those who live by the lure of gold. It tells how high spiritual values like spontaneous kindness are sought to be prostituted for the purposes of gold.

The novel, *Shadow from Ladakh* has the background of Indo-China conflict which is still going on. The novel tells us what India needs for survival a meeting point between Gandhian social ethics and tremendous force 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. It provides an in-sight into the contrasting contemporary life of India symbolized by Satyajit who regards Indian village life as the ideal life and by the westernized American trained Bhaskar, 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.

Bhabani Bhattacharya, though belonged to early 20th century and depicted the then social, political picture in his writings, one cannot deny the fact that Bhattacharya was a visionary. He could see the future picture of India. The problem being faced by modern India today are near about the same which we come across in Bhattacharya's novels. The problem of hunger is not irrelevant in our country even today though we talk of self-reliance regarding the food grains in India.

Dr. D. C. Paul Verghese notes, "Food is the primary requisite of human dignity, hunger debases and dehumanizes man. Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandaya have dealt quite forcefully with the theme of hunger and the concomitant theme of human degradation ..." We get a summary movement of the plot of such novels through what Prof. Shiv K. Kumar writes, "The story of the teeming million of this country who face periodic outbursts of hunger and famine and encounter all the evil consequences of such calamities: moral lapses, trafficking illicit relationships and all the ghastly scenes that accompany a famine in India. Characters in these novels, go in search of food and employment to distant parts of India only to have nostalgic memories of their home towns." Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers* and *He Who Rides a Tiger* are representative pieces of this new type of novels. The novels of the hunger theme have imparted to the Indo-Anglian novel a sharp awareness of the basic predicament of Indian masses today - both rural and urban.

The theme of hunger continues even today i.e. 21st century, almost in all the parts of India. Due to government's negligent attitude and anti-farmers policy hundreds and thousands of farmers in the country are committing suicide. The number of farmers' suicide is alarming in the Vidarbha region in the state of Maharashtra. The same alarming number is found in the state of Punjab and Andhra Pradesh also. The news-items regarding the farmers' suicide appear in daily newspapers.

Consumerism, which was very limited to middle class society earlier goes down to the lowest section of the society today. The above fact becomes evident with the growing use of mobile phone and other electronic items among the people like sweepers and farm labourers. About 50% of the Indian society has become the victim of this consumerism and subsequent degradation. The picture is not at all different from that of the *He Who Rides a Tiger* or *So Many Hungers* where the harsh reality of life has been depicted. The gap between the rich and the poor is the same as it was during the days of Bhabani Bhattacharya's novels. The prices are increasing everyday and the government appears to be thoughtless about the controlling of the prices of goods and rationing and letting loose a ring of black-marketers and hoarders. The hoarders, profiteers and black marketers are making a thundering trade. The authorities are apathetic; the wells of human pity seem to have almost dried up. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the dance of death is all around the Indian society. One is reminded of Shelley's lines

*Death is here and death is there
 Death is busy everywhere
 All round within beneath
 Above is death – and we are death !*

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