Ars Artium: **An International Peer Reviewed-cum-Refereed Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences**
ISSN (Online) : 2395-2423 • ISSN (Print) : 2319-7889
Vol. 5, January 2017
Pp. 39-44

Depiction of Woman as an Epitome of Sacrifice for Social Reconstruction of India in Bhabani Bhattacharya's *Music for Mohini*

*–Rajesh Kumar Sharma**

Abstract

In Indian English fiction Bhabani Bhattacharya, like Mulk Raj Anand, is a socially conscious artist. He believes that "an artist should delineate contemporary reality rather than recreate the historical or legendary theme" (Srivastava 5). In the novel *Music for Mohini* he feels that what was political liberty worth to the common man if it was not part of a renascence in social life? If freedom is to be made effective, India must reorient her national life on a new social basis where the woman has to sacrifice her comforts in the social rejuvenation of India. Mohini, the heroine of the novel, is symbolic of "the New India," of the newly emerged free India. The present study is a thorough depiction of woman's sacrifice of her comforts and adoption of alien customs and conventions for the sake of societal and cultural development of the nation. The study also depicts how a woman plays a role of a bridge between cultures, customs and conventions.

Keywords: Ambivalence, Culmination, Vivacious, Glimpse, Savage, Social-reconstruction.

Indian English fiction written between the advent of Mahatma Gandhi and winning of freedom tend to show preoccupation with the nationalistic movement. The writers begin to look at the problems of country with greater realism. There is also a growing concern about the shape of things to come out and steps to be taken in order to ensure the societal stability in which there should be mutual understanding of man and woman. Bhabani Bhattacharya's *Music for Mohini* (1952) is one of the important works of that time. It is his second major work that he had started writing soon after his marriage in June 1935. *Music for Mohini* is a forward-looking novel in which the woman is depicted as the epitome of sacrifice along with the vision of freedom from

* *Assistant Professor, Department of English, College of Engineering, Shaqra University, King Abdul Aziz Street, P.O. Box: 860, Postal Code 11911, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Email: archiraj99@gmail.com*

the alien customs and conventions. The author dwells on certain sociological aspects of Indian life. He wants his countrymen to awake and bring social freedom to the woman equal to the man.

When the story begins, Mohini is a motherless girl of seventeen, studying at a school and growing up at her home in Calcutta, where she is patted by her father, the professor with modern ideas and her grandmother referred as Old Mother. In a typical scene the brother and sister fight each other for fun in the absence of father, but when he suddenly and unexpectedly enters the room, the boy pretends to be working on a sum and Mohini pretends to be reading a textbook on Ancient India. The professor is taken aback when he casually looks at the volume she has kept open in front of her and discovers that it is a Bangla novel. This reminds the readers of Lydia Languish, the heroine of Sheridan's drama *The Rivals*. The Old Mother notices that Mohini is no longer a child but a woman, and she urges on her son the need to get her married without much delay.

As a result of Old Mother's prompting, several proposals for Mohini's marriage are considered and the conventional inspection of the bride is carried out by a few parties. One proposal comes through the agency of a bangle-seller that the bridegroom suggested is a handsome, well-educated affluent young man in the late twenties by name Jayadev and he is the head of the family called the Big House in the village Behula. She has been very favourably impressed by a learned article by Jayadev in the journal *Maya* and particularly by a photograph of the young man that shows him to be extremely handsome. Calcutta-bred Mohini also has been captivated by the photograph and has prepared herself mentally to leave the city and live in Behula. The match seems perfect to Old Mother and to Mohini herself. Only her father hesitates. How can his city-bred, freedom-loving daughter be happy in a village among the old-world folk? Wonder of wonders, however, even the horoscopes of the young couple auspiciously conjoin. Jayadev's mother has approved of the match because she has ascertained that all the eight signs of luck such as fingers of the wheel, the conch, the elephant and so on are present on the Mohini's palm.

So the marriage is agreed upon and the traditional observations precede the ceremony. After the final vows has been taken under the sheltering bridal shawl, husband and wife see each other, face to face for the first time:

> Jayadev gazed, while Mohini's head dropped, her face flushed….. His looks meant little. She prayed only for his approval, his contentment. A hundred thousand Hindu maids each bridal day of the year give their hearts to their unknown husbands, asking nothing but approval (*Music for Mohini* 85-86).

So Mohini leaves this home where love and security, wit and wisdom, laugher and music, old ways and new have surrounded her throughout her life. She will recall Old Mother's final words again and again during the years ahead. These words have a close similarity to the moral lessons given by the sage Kanva to his adopted daughter Shakuntala in the great poetic drama *Abhijnan Shakuntalam* by an ancient Indian poet Kalidasa:

> Honour your mother-in-law as though she were your mother, and abide by her will. Answer her hot words with absolute silence. Sweeten your speech when you talk to your neighbours. Words dipped in honey cost nothing. Bend yourself to the customs and traditions of the village….. (*Music for Mohini* 90)

Mohini is caught in the dilemma of being too westernized for some prospects and too old-fashioned for others. She seems precisely at the crossroads between the ways of Old Mother and those of independent India and emancipated womanhood. Mohini bids farewell to her modern home of Calcutta for ancient Big House of Behula village. There follows the overnight train-trip, where the couple travels in separate compartments for men and women. The tortuous trip by bullock-cart and the final slow progress in palanquins borne on sweating human shoulders. Mohini's journey into her unknown life may be seen as symbolic; her future, a probing into India's ancient village-centred past, which is at once past, present and future of Indian culture. The firebreathing train symbol of modern technology is first link to the countryside.

Jayadev, the scholar, dreams of Mohini as a link between past and future of India. Will she not become a modern-day Maitreyi, the paragon of Vedic womanhood, wise and strong, equal participant in the struggle to make life the meaningful and free? Her mother-in-law is a symbol of what the Big House has stood for all through its long history of many centuries. After the loss of Jayadev's father in a flood the widowed mother has lived entirely for the Big House and the value that it represents. She is austere, dedicated and strong as steel. The family eats only vegetarian food. This causes hardship to Mohini who is accustomed to eating fish. When the ladies of Big House are to go out anywhere, they have to use either a palanquin or a bullock-cart. We have a humorous exaggeration of the rigours of life in the Big house in the report which the cook makes to the Old Mother and the father on her return to Calcutta:

> The little mother (Mohini) had nothing but herbs to eat. The tongue pined for fish with a riverful of fish almost within the sight….. The little mother was worn with toil. There was no sleep for her at night for the scream of jackals, *hua-hua-hua*, the hiss of pythons, the wolf prowl of bands of robbers yelling *reh-reh-reh*! The sun was a bare man-height in the skies when the little mother must be up and doing. The woman of Behula mocked her city clothes and the mother-in-law was a tigress (*Music for Mohini* 173).

Jayadev's study of ancient lore has given him the idea that he and Mohini should be like the ancient sage Yajnavalkya and his intellectual wife Maitreyi. He expects her to sympathize with and to share in his scholarly pursuits and to give him the necessary moral support to carry out his programmes of social reform.

> I want to make Behula a model village socially. Our political freedom is worth little without social uplift. (I hate the world!) That means struggle. If we win, as we must, Behula will be an example for all Bengal. In this difficult undertaking you, too, Mohini, have your part (*Music for Mohini* 170).

Mohini stands for life and therefore, rebels against the coldness and artificiality of the pattern sought to be imposed upon her. A crisis in Mohini's life comes, as well as in the life of the Big House, when Jayadev approaches the age of twenty-eight. An astrologer predicts that Jayadev will die an untimely death unless a child is born to him by them. The anxious mother asks Mohini to offer blood to the Goddess in a lotus leaf bowl so that she may be blessed with grandson. Mohini's sophistication makes her rebel. Jayadev comes to know and gives his moral support to Mohini. Jayadev stops her mother from doing the ritual, and happily it is also known that Mohini is already pregnant. At the domestic level there is complete harmony between Mohini and Jayadev.

Bhattacharya is a thinker-artist who not only watches closely the actual social events and embodying them in his novel, but at the same time suggesting to the society as it ought to be. There is not only criticism but protest in his novels which moves us by its ringing sincerity. He cannot help speaking out the truth but the manner in which he does it, is very artistic. He tells about his depiction of reality in literature:

> The creative writer's final business is to reveal the truth. He reveals it, unlike the philosopher, in no cold statement of dogma but only in terms of life, rendered through the device of dramatization (Bhattacharya, *The Aryan Path* 395).

Mohini becomes the link between city and village, in another words new and old ways. Jayadev, who is too much the scholar, he and his philosophy need a conscious agent to force it into action. At one point Jayadev muses: "Thought had to be related to action….. The philosopher had to step out of his temple of silence and lead his people across the valley of conflict to end social slaveries. Social slaveries were cactus growths that would renew themselves over and again unless the roots were cut, roots that were deep in economic bondage….. A hungry man could not be free in spirit" (*Music for Mohini* 185).

It is in the life experience of Mohini that the philosophy is brought into dramatic action. Mohini becomes the culmination of so many symbols of social upliftment as Malta Grover writes:

> Mohini, the heroine, is the bridge between the values of city and the traditions of the village, between sophistication and simplicity, lastly, between the modern and old-fashioned East (Grover 46).

Though frustrated in her ambition to lead glamorous life, Mohini does not give vent to her dissatisfaction. She is resilient by nature and soon overcomes her dejection. Though aware of her limitations, she endeavours to rise to the expectation of her husband, and even starts taking lesson from him in Sanskrit. "She knows that her married life can be peaceful and meaningful only if she adjusts herself to the wishes of her husband, shares his ideas and renders him positive help in the programme of social reconstruction. Thus, Mohini not only comes closer to Jayadev, but also rescues the back-ward, ignorant and illiterate rural woman from the darkness of orthodox living and shows them a glimpse of modern times" (Sorot 68).

Mohini starts teaching the womenfolk of Behula. The village women identify the young mistress of the Big House with themselves. They are influenced by the humane temperament of Mohini. She brings the Big House closer to the ordinary house of Behula. The greater shadow of her mother-in-law is always there. She is the ruthless past reincarnated. She eats with her left hand as she had dedicated her right hand to Shiva to bring the blessing of long life on her son. It is unbecoming for a woman to sing loudly in the hearing of others. Plain cotton saris, made on handlooms, are preferred to fine mill-made muslin. Even the style of her hair dressing is regulated by custom. The house seems to be permeated by the presence of the ancestors.

Mohini, the heroine of the novel, is symbolic of the new India, of the newly emerged free India as the voice of her father reminds her when she prepares herself for the blood-giving ceremony. Mohini's Marriage and the festivities accompanying the ceremony are symbolic of India, gaining freedom and the festivities in its wake. Her responsibility as the new mistress of the house, of the village Behula is similar to that India's wooing the village which comprises the real country. How Mohini is able to generate life and light in the Big House, which is socially decaying and stubbornly bound by iron-tradition, will show how far free India will be able to uplift and transform her villages socially? The city-bred and village-wed enlightened girl Mohini has to play a significant role in changing the face of backward Big House and the village. Her sister-in-law Rooplekha who unlike her is village-bred and city-wed emphasizes the role, their situation demands them to play in the reconstruction of free India.

Rooplekha tells her story to Mohini from her experience. By that way they share the common lot. They have been pulled-up by the roots. For Rooplekha, city has as little mercy for an alien as the country for Mohini. No more, no less. And Rooplekha tries hard to fit in city ways. Being a maid of the Big House, she had to be married to a youth of equal status. No one suitable was found in Bengal villages, so the mother gave her against her will to a city youth, a surgeon in a Medical College in Calcutta. She was just sixteen. Her husband's relatives came to see her, smart women with enameled faces and they gave her a look and cried ironically about her beauty and the old fashioned sari and blouse. They also laughed at her village inflection. In a word she was a savage for them and misfit. She had been vegetarian and in city she was expected to eat eggs, fish and meat. It was very hard for her to move with her face bare and mix freely with his friends.

Then she made up her mind and began her struggle. It was a strain to give up her ideas, her customs and manners, and adopt theirs. She had plenty of patience. She gave up her old modesty. She ate fish and meat though at first the smell and taste sickened her. But it was all worthwhile for her husband's sake. She could not let her down. She had to make her happy. She advises Mohini that she will have to adjust herself the other way about. She has to rid her mind of its cozy city furniture, as it were or else, there will be much ugly talk and scornful behaviour. Mohini is not able to understand the purpose of Rooplekha and sharply reflects her city idea that there should not be such bothering because according to her "city and village are apart.

Perhaps they should stay apart; perhaps this marriage is wrong. We girls suffer, not the man" (*Music for Mohini* 126).

Rooplekha, the village-bred, wiser and experienced girl, gives the basic message of their marriage to Mohini:

> Shall I answer you? We who're so wed serve some real purpose. It's as though we made a bridge between two banks of a river. We connect culture with culture, Mohini, our old Eastern view of life with the new semi-Western outlook. The city absorbs a little of the 'barbaric' village, the village absorbs a little of the 'West-polluted' city. Both change, unaware. They are less angry with each other. This is more urgent today than even before. Our new India must rest on this foundation (*Music for Mohini* 126-27).

Convent-educated girl Mohini feels herself very small in comparison to the village-bred but wiser girl Rooplekha as she never read such things at the school. Owing to her mother-in-law's sternness and the old world spirit Mohini sometimes feels sore about her behaviour. But with the passage of time she begins to realize that the Mother is not completely devoid of basic qualities: compassion and sacrifice. She, therefore, overcomes initial hurdles and develops a great love and sympathy for the old lady. The mother also realizes that it is the age of the young men and women with their new ideas and aspirations. Mohini feels proud of Jayadev and her mother-in-law when her mother-in-law tells the unfortunate famine afflicted Bengal. The large numbers of uprooted people thronged into Behula. The master of house did everything in his power to alleviate their suffering. He gave away all the rice in the granary and even sold away priceless family heirlooms to help the starving Kisans.

The novel, *Music for Mohini*, as was said in the beginning is the depiction of woman's sacrifice of her comforts for the sake of societal and cultural development of the nation. Even then the clear-cut message of the novelist makes it a novel that represents the rebuilding of free India and the reorientation of values by the sacrifice of woman by adjusting herself in oddities accordingly. The study represents how a woman adopts alien customs and traditions to make a promising society free from old fetters into freedom of mind and faith in fraternity.

Works Cited

- Bhattacharya, Bhabani. "Literature and Social Reality." *Perspectives on Bhabani Bhattacharya,* ed. Ramesh Srivastava. Ghaziabad : Vimal Prakashan, 1982. Print.
- Bhattacharya, Bhabani. *Music for Mohini.* Delhi : Orient Paper Backs, 1984. Print.
- _ _ _. "Literature and Social Reality." *The Aryan Path*, XXVI. Sep. 1955. Print.
- Grover, Malta. *Bhabani Bhattacharya as a Novelist of Social Conscience.* Meerut: Shalabh Prakashan, 1991. Print.
- Sorot, Balram. *The Novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya.* Delhi: Prestige, 1991. Print.

❑❑❑