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Views of Realism in Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers*! and *Music for Mohini*

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Abstract

Bhabani Bhattacharya is rightly metaphorised as one of the four wheels of the Indian English novel chariot- the other three are Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. His fictional contribution spreads over a period of about thirty years and consists of only six novels, viz. *So Many Hungers!* (1947), *Music for Mohini* (1952), *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1955), *A Goddess Named Gold* (1960), *Shadow from Ladakh* (1966), *A Dream in Hawaii* (1978), and a collection of short stories - *Steel Hawk and Other Stories,* which appeared in 1968. Bhattachrarya, in all of his novels, gives an account of the Indian way of life. He refers to various customs, conventions, superstitions and oddities present in the Indian society usually without commenting on their merits. The present study is a depiction of realism in his two novels- *So Many Hungers*! and *Music For Mohini.*

Keywords: Realism, Society, Village-bred, City-wed, Destitute, Untouchability.

Bhabani Bhattacharya is one of the most prominent among the older generation of Indian English novelists. He, like Mulk Raj Anand and Kamala Markandaya, believes that "an artist should delineate contemporary reality rather than recreate the historical or legendary theme" (Srivastava 5). He says that the artist should be a keen observer of truth in life's varied situations so that he may be able to deal with such situations in his works. It has often been maintained that his themes are entirely related to the contemporary life and events in the country and that he writes with intense realism, on problems, trials, and tribulations faced by Indian people. His main object is, no doubt, the presentation of Indian social, economic and political scenario with a view of symbolic reality. Wallace Stevens points out: "Reality is a cliché from which we escape by metaphor" (Stevens 179). Bhabani Bhattacharya does not describe events or settings because they are interesting and picturesque, but because they fit into an imaginative pattern and have a symbolic and realistic significance.

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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 these find expression in the characters of his novels and short-stories, carved out with a pen that never wavers. The reader lives with the characters of the stories and marvel at the author's keen observation of the day-to-day incidents of life. Bhattacharya has written with a spicy language which is at once crisp and facile. He has caught the vein of rural speech and the informal behaviour of the people, their rustic world and their small and simple views about the great things that take place around them. He holds the view that "Indian writing in English has been a decisive factor in redressing the balance of false presentation by foreign story-tellers who with their limited possibilities of true experience have seen only the surface of our way of life, failing to reach deeper into our spirit.

Of the six novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya, the first five are set against Indian social scene in the perspective of world-shaking historical events, where as the sixth one has its setting both in India and America's Hawaii Island. Being a creative artist cum-critic, Bhattacharya presents a vivid image of Indian life which is the result of his deep involvement in life. He criticises the cruelties and inhuman acts of the antisocial and anti-democratic forces of democratic contemporary India.

His first novel *So Many Hungers* (1947) was published two months after India attained Independence. Writing at such a momentous period of history, no other sensible writer could be oblivious of the crucial issues of the day. The novel vividly reflects Indian life and problems. It deals with the hunger for liberty, hunger for food, hunger for authority, hunger for sex, wealth, and for recognition. It depicts the two devils of war and famine which squeeze the blood of human race. Of the two, famine is worse because it keeps man neither completely dead nor alive. On the realistic ground the novel *So Many Hungers!* presents a very moving picture of the torment of body and spirit endured by the people of Bengal during the hideous famine years and the early stages of World War II. The simple and honest villagers of Baruni, nourished on the moral values taught to them by Davata (Devesh Basu), suffer traumatic agonies because of the inhuman and cold attitude of the administration and the vicious and corrupted atmosphere of Bengal's economy.

Bhattacharya deals with the specific period of famine, when the poor farmers were fooled by the opportunists into selling all their grain for a paltry price and were finally reduced to hunger. Bhattacharya traces their movement to the city of Calcutta in search of food and their degradation as well as the tragic deaths of millions of men. He portrays a whole lot of exploiters who never hesitate to use the vulnerability of its victims for selfish gains.

The Indian traders from the cities nearby come to help the British with perfect planning. They know exactly when to go to their doors with the rice and buy their cattle and commodities. They are shrewd like jackals. They are cunning enough to draw everyone in their trap. "Finally, human endurance ebbed. Hungry children cried themselves to death. Streams of desperate men ventured out of their ancestral homes in search of food" (*So Many Hungers*! 111). Hunger uproots millions of peasants

from their soil. The exploitation compels them to leave their birth places. Chandrasekharan's observation in *Bhabani Bhattacharya* in this regard is worth noting:

> *So Many Hungers!* is a severe indictment both of the foreign government for its apathy and neglect and of unprincipled Indians who exploit the situation for their own benefit and who are no better than the vultures and jackals 'waiting for the flesh that dies' and sometimes not even waiting till it dies. The novelist's righteous indignation, his sincerity and his compassion are in evidence all through the novel. It undoubtedly presents an artistic success (Chandrasekharan 32).

While analysing various reasons of hunger he throws light on migration of villagers to the big cities. This has been the problem in India till today. Most of the rural people rush to the big cities in order to get job. They blindly believe that the poor and the needy are cared for in the city. Those who want to work can get work. One can earn his living through honest means. There is enough food and money. Here Bhattacharya wants to show that hunger is same in both places. The people who leave their birth places find it impossible to settle in the city. The same vultures and jackals of the countryside who feed themselves on the miseries of the people exist in the city. Hunger makes the destitutes dig the roots and snatch the green figs of trees in the countryside. Hunger makes the destitutes dig out the garbage cans for peels and stalks and rotten vegetables in the city. In the countryside they catch the fish and crabs to eat, in the city they are compelled to catch the rats to survive. In the countryside they search their food through jungles and meadows. The garbage cans become their food bowls in the city.

Hunger makes them so weak that they even fail to protect themselves from the wild animals. "A woman lay stretched by the tree trunk, groaning, while a jackal crouched and ate her body. The jackal saw Kajoli, grunted and slunk off unhurried" (*So Many Hungers!* 140). Those who survive rush to the great city with the belief that they will definitely get food, shelter and honest means of earning. Kajoli's mother reflects that "…the poor and needy were cared for in the wonder city. And why not? The city had money to spare and jingle. The people had great kindness in their hearts" (*So Many Hungers!* 152).

Devesh Basu, Devata of the village rightly introduces Kajoli as "a well-bred peasant girl with legacy of manners as old as India" (*So Many Hungers!* 37). Like any other rustic girl her dreams are simple. She dreams about her happy married life. She marries a boy from the city, honouring the wish of her father. She enjoys a short period of her married life. She becomes a victim of poverty, hunger and exploitation. The dream of her married life shatters. She loses her husband in a brutal attack of the railway police. Onslaught of war and manmade scarcity of food make her homeless and turns her into a miserable destitute. Her pregnancy makes her life more gruesome. But even in dire poverty and hunger she remains a symbol of endurance. The virtuous girl cannot save her chastity in a sex assault by a sex hungry soldier for two reasons: firstly, as she is too weak to fight or run, and secondly, as she feels guilty of forgetting her mother and brother. When a soldier offers her bread she forgets her mother and

brother and swallows the bread. When she realizes her mistake she is so ashamed of herself that in order to get some more bread for her mother and brother she surrenders to the soldier's hunger for sex. In the brutal rape she gets seriously hurt and loses her child.

Towards the end of the story she decides to sell herself for the sake of her mother and brother. She feels that the body once defiled is defiled; its purity cannot be restored. At least she can save her family and send them back to the village.

> Kajoli had made her grim decision. She would sell the last thing she owned - herself. Mother was dying. She ailed and could not eat the poor fare her son and daughter provided, begging on streets and picking in the garbage (*So Many Hungers!* 191).

The courage to act arises from her inner self and shows a better picture - if not the best - of her future. She regains her strength to fight against the greed and exploitation and gives a blow on the face of the betel seller woman, a brothel agent. Her decision symbolises her conquest over her inner conflict. Her contemptuous smacking slap symbolises her rebuff to the exploitation. K.R. Chandrasekharan in *Bhabani Bhattacharya* says,

> This is Kajoli's exit from the story; ... It is clear that she has grown to her full moral stature and chosen her path, which, one may safely surmise, is the path of dignity and self-respect. Sorrow and suffering have not destroyed her spirit which remains unconquered and unconquerable (Chandrasekharan 21).

Devesh Basu, the grandfather of Rahoul, is modelled on Gandhi as Moorthy is Gandhian in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938). He is called by the villagers of Baruni as Devata, a celestial being. He is a true follower of Gandhi and the congress. After Gandhi's arrest during the Quit India Movement, he organises the national flag *pranam* ceremony and is suspected of sedition by the police. When the police come over to Devesh Basu to arrest him, the villagers of Baruni try to stop the police, but he commands them to be non-violent, Devata says: "Friends and Comrades do not betray the flag. Do not betray yourself. There is violence in your thoughts, that is evil enough. Do not make it worse by violence in action (*So Many Hungers!* 72).

Despite all efforts to repress the Quit India Movement, the patriots remain undefeated. One remarkable aspect of Indian rural life, depicted in the novel, is that the peasants are bound by the sense of oneness, common brotherhood, devotion and their motto of living and dying together.

Bhabani Bhattacharya's another novel *Music for Mohini* (1952) deals with the theme of social rejuvenation of India, particularly its villages. With freedom of India in sight, the author fears that the society caught in the deadly mire of superstitions, blind faith and obsolete customs, may fail to utilise political freedom for the real progress of the country till it undergoes a complete social and cultural transformation. Jayadev, the hero of the novel, wonders:

> What, he wonders, had happened to the ancient quest of the Hindus, the quest for *Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram*? The core, the spiritual content had

> been choked by countries of evil overgrowth. Misguided faith burned like a great lamp of oil that gave a little light but a great deal of smoke. It was this smoke that was pouring over India.... (*Music for Mohini* 179).

The novel portrays a cross section of the contemporary Indian society full of superstitions and irritational orthodoxy. He writes: "Society, rural society was sick with taboos and inhibitions of its own making, the iniquity of caste and untouchability, the situation that passed for religion the wide-flung cobweb of superstitious faith" (*Music for Mohini* 67-8).

Bhattacharya portrays the growth in Mohini from a carefree girl of teenage to the mistress of a house. She is shown as torn between the taboos of village life and her passion for a bright and joyful life. Mohini loves life in all its colours and has contempt for all that is dull and dead. It is hard for her to bear the images of decay. K.K. Sharma describes her thus:

> She is instinctively vivacious, playful and carefree. She loves to laugh, and needs just a slight cause to go into peals of laughter. As a young maid, she is famous for her beauty and melodious voice. When she has a longing for a lover and has really none, she does not feel very miserable. She smiles by musing on love, which is the light and saviour of life; life without love is like jasmine without scent" (Sharma 1979).

Her dream of a perfect happily married life is shattered and she is shocked by the behaviour of her silent, solitary husband. She is totally neglected by her husband and feels lonely. Her mother-in-law is very orthodox and traditional while she herself is modern, city-bred girl, and full of new ideals, thoughts and interests. But her sister-in-law, Rooplekha, suggests to her to cope with the difficulties with courage. Rooplekha is village-bred and city-wed while Mohini is city-bred and village-wed. When Rooplekha goes to the city with her husband, she has to give up her old modesty while Mohini has to traditionalise herself and adjust herself to the atmosphere of her husband's village and the Bighouse. In spite of joylessness in her married life, she does not accept her defeat. She decides to bring happiness to her house. She is ready to accept the traditional way of life of village and her traditional mother-in-law, just for the sake of her husband. Though it was a great task - full of challenges, responsibilities and difficulties, Mohini decides that she would play her part to win the faith and favour of her husband. To be his true partner in life, she throws herself into this great task. Her hatred for her mother-in-law turns into love and she decides to let her follow her own way of life. She becomes ready to co-operate with her to offer her heart's blood in a lotus-bowl to the Virgin Goddess, so that she could bear a son. At the critical moment of this ceremonial offering, Jayadev reaches there and stops it. When Mohini finds that she was already expecting a child, she feels that her life has been fulfilled with diverse notes of music.

Music for Mohini presents the tradition of marriage alliance through matrimonial columns of the newspapers. Conflict can be seen between the Indian ways of life and Westernised outlook through the wrath of old mother at the indecent questions posed during the marriage interviews of Mohini, the heroine of the novel. The practice of

believing in the personality of astrologer is revealed through the character of Govind, the fortune teller. The observation of austerities during the marriage functions, the existence of the joint family system in Hindu Society, the Chanting of Sanskrit and religious mantras, the restraint of food to a Hindu wife before her husband, the dedication of evening meal to goddess Kali have been presented by the author with matchless power. We observe the scriptural belief in the necessity of the birth of a son for the salvation of the father and passing down the name of the father to the next generation. The birth of a child under a particular star and the arrival of a daughter in law, are believed to have their good effects or bad upon the inmates of the family. Restrictions on the marriages of the girl under sixteen, of widow remarriage and the existence of untouchability in the all can be seen as a process of change. On the whole, *Music for Mohini* depicts a realistic picture of "The New India", of the newly emerged free India. Thus realism is the keynote of both novels.

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