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## Research Article

# THE FICTIONAL ART AND ARTISTIC VISION OF BHABANI BHATTACHARYA: AN APPRAISAL

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to project Indo- Anglian Literature as an integral part of English Literature enjoying a distinct place in the literary landscape of India with a focus on Bhabani Bhattacharya's Fictional Writings ensuring a great concern for oppressive and crippling social, political and cultural forces and Gandhian Humanism and his concern for the oppressed, neglected, suppressed suffering sections of humanity ushering in a strong plea for social freedom and societal emancipation.

#### Key Words:

Art and vision, integral part, creative writing, fiction, political and social issues, suffering masses, plea for social freedom.

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## INTRODUCTION

Indo-Anglian literature forms an integral part of English literature and it has attained a distinct place in the literary landscape of India. The term 'Indo-Anglian' refers to original creative writing in English by Indians various Indian writers have carved out a name for themselves in different fields of literature. Despite all forms of literature, the only possible literary form through which a writer can hope to keep himself in constant touch with the common readers is 'fiction'. Usually writers get themselves established through this 'novel' technique. That is why the bulk of Indo-Anglian literature is in the novel form. Most of the Indo-Anglian novels are conceived and created in English. The first Indian novel to be published in English was Raj Mohan's *Wife* in 1864. Although writing of poetry was on the ascent, the novel established itself both in quality and quantity with a direct impact on the social and religious aspects of life.

It is generally held that "Indian English novels bring out social issues like class, caste, race and gender discriminations" (Nikam xii). Romesh Chaudar Dutt's *The Lake of Psalms*, Tagore's *Cora* are excellent pieces of work where caste, racism and culturalism all are attacked and criticized to the core.

R.K.Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts* is an attack on superstitions and rigid norms and traditions in India. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is a social protest against untouchability. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, *The Village* deal with the social problems for the protested against the human predicament itself be it economical, social, political or even individual. Bhabani Bhattacharya wrote about the social conditions prevalent in his time. The socio-political and economic situations had left deep impact on his mind which stimulated him to have such six novels on his credit as

1. So Many Hungers
2. Music for Mohini
3. He Who Rides a Tiger
4. A Goddess Named Gold
5. Shadow from Ladakh
6. A Dream in Hawaii

He is said to have probed deep into various facts of human life through his characters by drawing one's attention towards the social economical and moral crises of his times. No doubt, using social protest in his novels as an instrument not only to raise voice against injustice but to create among the Indian masses of their own sufferings and societal problems in life.

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It is universally acknowledged that “the very driving force behind Bhattacharya’s fictional writings has been his great concern for oppressive and crippling social, political and cultural forces. He has been in the vanguard of authors addressing themselves to social issues and his grounding in cultural history and political science has helped him as an artist to look beyond narrow, temporary problems to issues that surmount time and place” (Shimer 117). Truly speaking, in his novels, Bhattacharya gives us considerable relevant details in respect of World War II, the Bengal Famine of 1943, the struggle for Indian independence and the 1962 Chinese invasion of India. He believes that slavery, poverty, lack of education, religious dogmas, political gimmicks and an obsessive greed for undeserved Wealth have pushed Indian society into a state of stupor from which it has to be savaged. Seen in this light his novels partake of a kind of Universally that is both outstanding and irresistible. He is “a writer of considerable sensitivity and charm who has depicted a cross-section of Contemporary India during a period of transition and rapid development and has reflected the intricate pattern of present-day life with a remarkable understanding and clarity” (Quoted in Singh, 3). In an interview with Sudhakar Joshi, he states:

“I hold that a novel must have a social purpose. It must place before the reader something from the society’s point of view. Art is not necessarily for art’s sake. Purposeless art and literature Which is much in vogue does not appear to me a sound judgement” (Pvii).

Gandhi’s humanism, his concern for the oppressed and suffering section of humanity, his commitment to truth and non-violence, his essential opposition to superstitions and dogmas, his stress on the need for purity and uprightness in thought, speech and conduct and his avowed objective of attaining Self-Sufficiency through austerity – all these get their due share in the fictional world of Bhabani Bhattacharya. In the words of K.R. Chandrasekharan, “Bhattacharya is a realist and at the same time a visionary” (P172). The very first novel *So Many Hungers* deals with the theme of hunger for food and hunger for freedom which form the central themes of the novel. It is nothing but the story of a young scientist, Rahoul and his family and the story of a peasant girl, Kajoli and her family. Rahoul’s story in miniature represents the struggle for freedom. The sad tale of Kajoli is likewise a pathetic record of what happened to more than two million men and women who were the victims of a famine, which was not an act of God but the result of the rapacity and selfishness of profiteers and the indifference of the British Government. K.R.S.Iyengar has considered the novel as “an impeachment of man’s inhumanity to man” and “a dramatic study of a set of human beings trapped in a unique tragic predicament” (P414).

Music for Mohini is a forward-looking novel in which novelist dwells on certain sociological aspects of Indian life and suggests some suggestions for those who are to benefit by their social freedom. Marjorie B. Synder finds modern India revealed in Music for Mohini as a sociological battleground in which the older generation clings to tradition... While the intellectuals are struggling to throw away charms and bangles to open themselves and their country to western ideas”. The characters and incidents pictured in this novel represent the forces of the past and the present pointing to the utter

desirability of achieving a kind of spiritual harmony or adjustment that is very much essential for the survival and growth of India. Mohini strikes us as a peculiar kind of submission and revolt, humility and defiance while Jayadev has a settled and definite social philosophy. The novel deals with the life of Mohini who belongs to the city but goes to the village after her marriage. There is a conflict between tradition and modernity, between the rural and urban ways of life. The novel has a balanced structure and expresses the novelist’s deep concern for the society.

Music for Mohini primarily deals with social freedom. Bhattacharya frequently affirms that social freedom is all important for the real progress of the people because without it, even political freedom becomes ineffective. It is social freedom which forms the basis for all other freedoms. The novelist therefore presents in this novel Jayadev as a man dedicated to social freedom. Though thrilled with love for his newly – wedded wife, this visionary philosopher desists from getting lost in it. He endeavours to “accelerate the process of social emancipation and uplift” (Sharma 106).

Jayadev feels and believes that his contribution is to make India’s struggle for social freedom – “the fountain of all true freedom” (MM 123). According to him, without social freedom, political freedom is more or less meaningless “our political freedom is worth little without social uplift... That means struggle” (MM 127). Jayadev is shocked to see the unspeakably miserable and helpless condition of Indian villagers. The cruel caste-system tortures them mentally and emotionally. He decides to make people free from the fetters of caste and creed. But it is easier said than done. Mohini and he notice that even the revolutionary Harindra cannot find it easy to marry his beloved Sudha because of the difference of caste:

“But what of the rock like barrier of caste.  
Even the bold impulsive Harinda would  
find caste hard to surmount, even  
Sudha’s great-uncle would be against  
the marriage” (MM 158).

By marrying a Brahmin girl, Harindra, will defy a timeless social practice. He intuitively knows that Sudha is a revolutionary with an inspiration for social emancipation. Music for Mohini is a novel of tensions – tensions between mind and body – the cravings of the flesh and the demands of the spirit. It is a tension between the mind of the husband and the body of the wife, a tension between East and West, village and town, tradition and modernity, the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law. Marital discord between husband and wife forms the thematic focus of the novel a Mohini and her husband, Jayadev, play their part but at no time in their life, do they trust at a common point. Prof. Srinivasa Iyengar observes: “It is the difference in the intellectual level of husband and wife and the consequences of this fulf forms the integral part of the theme of the novel music for Mohini” (P52).

Music for Mohini does present rather beautifully a microcosmic picture of convention-ridden society and the novelist no doubt, presents a brilliant synthesis of the old and the new in the character of Mohini. In fact, he has presented the finest values of Indian womanhood in Mohini’s character! Mohini is portrayed as a selfless sacrificing woman. As in the case of every Indian woman, Mohini’s life too revolves round

her family. Though an image of modernity, she also possesses all that is good about the tradition. Her immense respect for elders, her love and faithfulness towards her husband and her commitment to the village people exemplify the characteristics of a typical Indian woman. The novel closes on an optimistic note with Mohini in the family way. Her reunion with her husband and the coming of a child bring ultimate happiness to Mohini. She eventually experiences a feeling of ecstasy, of ultimate joy: "At last there was no discord; Life was music... her life was music... the true quest of every woman, her deepest need" (MM 188). This is the harmony in the music of Mohini's life.

Bhattacharya's third novel *He Who Rides a Tiger* like first novel *So Many Hungers* deals with the theme of hunger born of the World War II and the famine of 1943 which was aggravated by the monsters of imperialism. While in *So Many Hungers* the general picture of starvation is particularized by showing the plight of Kajoli, her mother and their search for food, in *He Who Rides a Tiger*, the treatment of hunger is made more effective by showing the trials of Kalo and his daughter in the face of hunger. The novel deals with the theme of man-made hunger that caused mass exodus of destitute, the plague stricken people bereft of any possessions from Jharna town and other villages to the city of gold-Calcutta in search of food. Hunger is of two kinds: the hunger of the rich, black-marketers, the oppressors for sexual pleasure and the hunger of the poor to meet the bare needs of life. As the prisoner B-10 says:

"Two great hungers had struck the land of Bengal in the wake of war: the hunger of the masses of people uprooted from their old earth and turned into beggars, and the hunger of the all-owning few for pleasure and more pleasure, a raging fever of the times uprooted women with their own kind of hunger had to soothe the other hunger, had to cool the raging pleasure-fever with their bodies" (*He Who Rides a Tiger* 53).

However, it is not the horror that keeps our interest alive in the novel but Kalo's sustained struggle to salvage the dignity of the masses, to conquer the conquerors and finally to conquer his own self. Bhattacharya's purpose was to make Kalo a flag bearer of Marxian revolution. *He Who Rides a Tiger* may be considered a socio-economic argument of the novelist, for the novel focuses on the Bengal Famine, the darkest period in the history of Bengal. A pestilence takes its place on a large scale. The narrator himself says, "A plague took the land in its grip, the plague of hunger in the wake of war" (HWRT 18). The worst part of the pestilence is that the peasants sell their lands for food, the weavers sell their looms, artisans dispose of their tools and fishermen sell their boats as firewood. The people of the villages are rendered workless oppression of hunger drives Kalo to Calcutta to get employment, leaving behind his daughter with her grandmother in the village. On his way to Calcutta, he finds a large number of indigent people lying dead near railway line under the *lusns naturae*. He sees painfully that "ravenous men and women with whoops of joy fell on his food and in a minute not a grain was left (P29). He feels unbearable starvation. His daughter Chandra Lekha is also hit extremely hard by starvation and suffers more on account of it. The novel *He Who Rides a Tiger* explicitly depicts how the rich people are savagely indifferent to the hungry men and are greatly responsible for their miseries. Kalo, the Central figure of the

novel, and his daughter Chandra Lekha suffer a lot owing to the caste system and the economic pattern of society. He overturns the age-old social order by investing himself with Brahminhood and attaining to a high social status. He ironically tells the so-called protectors and custodians of society: "A downtrodden Kamar has been in charge of your inmost souls, souls corrupt with caste and cash!" (P227). He becomes the champion of the downtrodden and a legend of freedom'.

Kalo's fight is "not with man, but with the social forces that make savage and wicked human beings" (Gupta 104). The evil-doers have nothing to do with good or bad actions; they eat well, utter God's name for show and sleep peacefully. Kalo sees this obnoxious difference in society:

"While men died of hunger, wealth grew; and while kindness dried up, religion was more in demand. It was only the outward form of religion, the shell of ritual, empty within" (P113).

It is beyond doubt that hunger does not make a difference between man and men, between man of the highest caste and of the lowest. The indigent and hungry people have no barrier of caste and creed. They have only the problem of how to extinguish the fire of starvation. The novelist metaphorically delineates Kalo's triumph over society. Chandra Lekha believes that her father is not the only man who can fight heroically; she too can attain the dignity of standing on her legs. Lekha and her father Kalo combat not against corrupt and immoral men but against the society that makes them so. The symbolic title of the novel also presents the theme of starvation. To ride on the tiger's back indicates man's effort to ride on hunger. Just as the tiger is a dangerous animal and promptly kills man, so is hunger. The novelist has skillfully dealt with the pestilence of hunger and its endurance through his protagonists, Kalo and Chandra Lekha.

Every great writer is seized of a theme, a personal and compelling experience. Bhattacharya's preoccupation external and internal, as the fundamental reality of life with such a thorough grasp of his basic theme, his *Shadow from Ladakh* explores and communicates the theme of hunger in all its ramifications. Man's hunger is not confined to food alone. But there is the hunger for political freedom, hunger for eternal values, hunger for an ethically oriented life for the common people, hunger for sex and wealth, hunger for social and moral values, hunger for social status and hunger for riches and prosperity. In a word, the novel is an absorbing survey of all these aspects of hunger. In *Shadow from Ladakh*, the novelist's concern is for "a conscious amalgam of the internal and ideal with the external and the real" (Sharma 36). As in his earlier novels, here too, the novelist directs his attack against profiteers and economic offenders who are the very cause of food and famine. Breswar gives Satyajit an account of his friend Jhunjhuria, a big wheat-trader who makes a fortune by indulging in shady transactions and thus creates "hunger for a thousand men and women" (SL 210). In fact, the novel is interspersed with such references to the basic problem of hunger. Bhattacharya also examines the theme of freedom in its various forms in *Shadow from Ladakh*. He deals with "political, economic and social freedom as also with the freedom of the mind- the freedom to be free" (Sharma 38). This novel, just like Bhattacharya's earlier works focusing on India's urge for political and social freedom, deals with

people's concern to preserve the country's political Independence at all costs.

A Dream in Hawaii stands out as a satisfying expression of the philosophical cultural duality of the East and the West. Besides dealing with the theme of East and West encounter, Bhattacharya dilates upon the relationship between religion and art: "Religion and art have the same intent: to go beneath the surface forms to seek, to find basic truths and ignite them" (DH 12). A Dream in Hawaii is the fictional equivalent of 'A Passage to America' for within its structural framework it encompasses the period that begins with the celebration of Swami Yogananda's 'hundredth' birthday in Hawaii, when he leaves his ashram, Sadhana, in Rishikesh to accompany Stella Gregson, his American disciple and his return to India on a Jal flight, when he disassociates himself from Dr. Vincent Swift's mercenary dream of a World Yoga Centre at Hawaii. Yogananda's short stay in Hawaii and his hypnotic impact on the American youth form the basic thematic construct of the novel. This theme is juxtaposed with yogananda's and Devjani's quest for identity and there are also intermittent flashes on the past lives of the various characters in this novel, both Indian and American. Bhabani Bhattacharya scores a fresh triumph in this novel A Dream in Hawaii as it does explore deeper philosophical, cultural and social values.

Bhattacharya brings a new awareness to the arena of Indian life and literature through the novel A Goddess Named Gold. The lure of gold that became hard food for Midas is taken up as a suggestive title by Bhattacharya for this novel. The novel teaches the fact that it is through patience, hard work and sweat of the brow and not indolence that India can become full-grown and strong. Freedom is not to be taken as an end in itself, it is a means to the realization of higher goals.

To conclude, despite the sordidness of hunger and poverty looming large in his novels, Bhabani Bhattacharya is essentially an optimist. His novels signify a note of triumph that there is a bright future for man. Man according to Bhabani, should make efforts at all levels to bring out a change in the structure and pattern of the society. Art, in his opinion, is for life, which has a social purpose to fulfill. That is why Bhattacharya through his works exposes the cannibalism of man, the cruel stranglehold of tradition, the blind self-deception of orthodoxy, the obstinate unthinking faith in industrialization and the hunger for gold. While presenting the birth pangs of a nation fighting for its freedom, he also presents the agonies and aspirations of his countrymen. His artistic concern encompasses man's physical, mental and spiritual needs. He never emphasizes any one of these at the cost of the other and so his approach is integral and anthropocentric.

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