



VARIEGATED FORMS OF THEME OF 'HUNGER' AND 'FREEDOM' AS PROJECTED IN BHABANI BHATTACHARYA'S SHADOW FROM LADAKH: AN APPRAISAL

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Bhabani Bhattacharya is one of the most prominent among the older generation of Indian novelists in English. His themes, truly speaking, are out and out related to contemporary life and events in the country, particularly laying emphasis on India's freedom, the upheaval that came in Bengal in the wake of this struggle, the man-made feminine in Bengal and the problems and trials faced by the country after Independence. He is a gifted author writing with intense realism and passionate sincerity in a language that is highly individualized.

Bhabani Bhattacharya was born on November 10, 1906 in Bhagalpur (Bihar), to promotho and Kiranbala Bhattacharya-his parents belonging to well-to-do and educated Brahmin families. He was gifted with the art of writing couplets, poems and articles even during his school days and his very first article 'Mouchak' got published in a Bengali Magazine at the prime age of 12. Graduated with Honours from Patna University, he joined King's college, University of London. During his stay in London as a student, he had translated a number of Tagor's stories and sketches which were published under the title **Golden Boat** by Allen and Unwin in 1932. It was in London that he had a meeting with Mahatma Gandhi, who along with Tagore, left a great impact on his life and works.

The movement for the political freedom of the country stated gaining momentum from 1936. The common people of India attached no significance to political Independence and they accepted slavery quite complacently. But among the thinking classes, the urge for political freedom got intensified after the First World War. Bengal became the centre for these activities. The writings of Rabindranath Tagore and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee created a profound awakening amidst the people. The entire country soon came under the leadership of Gandhiji. As a result, of the World Wa-II and the famine of 1942-43, more than four million Indians died. Bhabani Bhattacharya was deeply stirred by these happenings and the agonies and sufferings of the nation got reflected in his writings. His very first novel **So Many Hungers** (1947) is a socio-political novel which deals with hunger for food and the hunger for freedom and his second novel **Music for Mohoni** (1952) is a forward looking novel in which the author dwells on certain sociological aspects of Indian life suggesting directions for the fullest benefit of political freedom. His third novel **He Who Rides a Tiger** (1954) has for its background the quit India movement and the Bengal famine whereas his fourth novel **A Goddess Named Gold** (1960) vehemently criticizes the greed and profiteering of the rich people and shows the novelist's concern for safeguarding the country's freedom. His fifth novel **Shadow from Ladakh** (1966) won the Sahitya Academy Award in the year 1967, while **A Dream in Hawaii** (1978) dealt with the cultural values of the East and the West, though not in the stereotyped portrayal of the materialistic West and the spiritual East.

Every great writer is seized of a theme, a personal and compelling experience. Bhabani's preoccupation is with the theme of hunger and he regards hunger, external and internal as the fundamental reality of life. **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 hunger for political freedom, hunger for external values, hunger for an ethically oriented life for the common people, hunger for sex and wealth without any concern for moral and social prestige-titles, riches and prosperity. In a word, this novel **Shadow from Ladakh** is an excellent survey of all these kinds of hunger, where Bhabani Bhattacharya's concern is for 'a conscious amalgam of the internal and ideal with the external and real' (Sharma 36).

The novel does not concentrate upon external hungers for food, wealth and sex though these varieties of hunger do find an adequate treatment. But it concentrates on man's hunger for moral grandeur and idealism. Besides, it concentrates on the ideal man-woman relationship. Instead of man's urge for sex, the novel stresses the need for a healthy companionship, each partner finding fulfillment and wholeness in the other. However, the novel does not ignore the basic hunger for food. For instance, Bhashkar Roy, a major character in the novel, decides to leave America for India when he hears a visiting Indian Minister in Washington talking about India's problem of famine.

The Minister says,

"you see, ours is a problem of sheer survival. we are on the edge of a precipice and we stand dizzied. Mind you, this is not just a figure of speech. Any day we may go hurtling to our doom-literally. How old were you when the feminine struck" (SL 35).



Bhashkar is infatuated by America and its lifestyle. But after hearing the minister's remarks. On India's problem of survival, he pulls himself away from America and comes back home. The world is largely inhabited by the ordinary men, preoccupied with the problem of hunger more than anything else. Describing the early revolutionary struggle in Peking, Bireswar, a minor character observes:

“...but it failed to give the common man
what he needed above all else; an acre of earth
to till, a bowl of rice to eat....Hunger
raged as before” (SL 186-87).

As in his earlier novels. Here too, the author directs his attack against profiteers and economic offenders who are the very cause of scarcity of food and feminine. 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 basic problem of hunger. Bhashkar, The American trained chief Engineer in the steel plant like his creator, Bhabani Bhattacharya is obsessed by the problem of famine. A devotee of steel, he lives in Steeltown. But to him, steel is not an end in itself it is a means to achieve higher ends. It is the core of all armaments and is necessary to preserve the country's political freedom. More than that, it is indispensable for enduring hunger and poverty. Bhashkar says to Satyajit, the Gandhian, “.....steel means economic progress, machine tools, tractors, big industrial plants, locomotives, steel to fight poverty and hunger” (SL 30). The young chief Engineer is absolutely confident of bringing about economic prosperity with the help of steel. For him, steel is synonymous with life devoid of hunger and misery; increase in the production of steel means decrease of hunger and betterment of human life.

Satyajit, the central character of the novel is ‘an embodiment of man's hunger for idealism’ (Chandrasekharan 110). His desire for goodness and moral dignity is insatiable. He is so much preoccupied with the abstract word, ‘idealism’, that he does not think of his wife and daughter as human beings made of flesh and blood. Bhashkar, who falls in love with his daughter, feels that he “had no right to make his daughter a sacrificial offering simply to vindicate his own moral grandeur” (P 138) . He believes that economic upliftment is not all important; there ‘were other values not less vital’ (P 14). He cares little for material possessions. “It was inner satisfaction that had counted. He had been restless at Cambridge, shaken by storms within. At one time, he had been obsessed by the idea of becoming a Buddhist monk and living in a monastic abode-in Ceylon may be, or Thailand” (SL 14). In fact, he has an enormous hunger for inner richness, purity and happiness. To achieve it, he, under the influence of Gandhiji, takes the brahmacharya vow-complete chastity of body and thought-after having only one child, a daughter.

Shadow from Ladakh discusses in an uninhabited way the man's hunger for a woman and vice-versa. Bhashkar, like every man in the world, needs a woman to whom he completely gives himself and takes some sort of refuge in her whenever he feels exhausted with work, boredom and frustration. Shocked by the news of Sumita's selection to represent a peace mission to Ladakh, he longs to be ‘submerged in Rupa’ (P 128)- another young woman-half American and half-Indian-with whom he is quite intimate. Even Sumita, who is brought up by her father on ascetic ideals longs for Bhashkar and Bhattacharya reveals their passionate hunger for each other here:

“He left the room, closing the door behind him,
but Sumita did not start taking off her
wet things. She sat like a piece of stone.....
and about her the hurricane blew. As she
relieved the moment she felt a curious
misery come sweeping on her, and a strong
urge to cry, to wash off the misery in
a flood of tears. It was hard to control
the impulse. She could not understand herself,
and needed help, and yet would have shrunk
from help. If only she could be alone a while;
if only he would leave!
But she did not want to leave him” (P 147).

Even a born philanderer like Bireswar gives himself completely to young Suruchi. He has never taken a woman seriously in his life until he has the incredible, shattering experience of love: ‘.....for the first time, I found myself in love! In love, with a woman in her entirety, -not just her face, her shape, her voice....well, I was in love with all that, and in addition with the invisible, the innermost. I had never before imagined such an absurdity could happen to me, of all people. I became lost in Suruchi. All my past life stood before me in stark futility and all my future” (P 204). Both Satyajit and Suruchi try to control



the basic urge, but cannot get rid of it and hence it surges up within them at times. Satyajit's over busy life immensely helps him to observe asceticism peacefully but Suruchi usually hungers for the normal man-woman relationship. Thus, in short, it may be said that the novel **Shadow from Ladakh** explores the variegated human hungers, both internal and external.

Besides, Bhabani Bhattachary examines the theme of freedom in all its variegated forms. He deals with political, economic and social freedom as also with the freedom of the mind- "the freedom to be free" (Sharma 38). While his earlier novels concentrate on India's urge for political and social freedom, **Shadow from Ladakh** deals with people's concern to preserve the country's political Independence at all costs. The novel is occasioned by the unfortunate political event of China's ruthless invasion of India in 1962. Indians are determined to protect their hard won freedom. Threat to man's freedom and his tremendous effort to save it is the main subject of the novel. When in 1962, the Chinese Troops began to march on the Indian territory, Indians including the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, were thrown into a state of bewilderment and shock. Nehru had known for years what had been happening in Aksai-chin. But he firmly believed that every thing would be settled in a friendly way. Notwithstanding India's best efforts, the month-long negotiations for border settlement had ended in a failure. The Chinese had made fantastic claims and were not ready to give up inch of the land they had taken. Then the Chinese troops entered the unguarded parts of Indian borders where they set up strong check posts. "Even mountain pass changing hands could be pistol pointed at the heart of India. It was not the pistols alone. Behind them were the troops-the reports said that their number exceeded a hundred thousand" (SL 168). Nothing less than supreme sacrifice was required to defend the country's freedom. Against the massive attack of the Chinese using 'the human-sea technique' Indians fought heroically.

The act of Chinese blasting their way across the Himalayas towards Indian earth struck the country with horror and grief. Jawaharlal Nehru exhorted his countrymen to fight fiercely against the cruel and invasion: "History has taken a new turn in Asia and perhaps in the world, and India has to bear the burnt of it and fight this menace to its freedom" (P 256). The Indians did all they could do to preserve their freedom. All the leaders and enlightened men expressed their indignation in the same tone as Nehru did:

"...And now we have this shameful attack on our freedom, our democratic values, our philosophy of international peace and progress- and above all these, our fight against poverty, our hard struggle to build up the country's economy. A supreme effort alone can meet the challenge. That effort is going to be made. The soul of the people has been stirred to a new awakening" (PP 281-82).

Shadow from Ladakh also examines the problem whether or not two opposite modes of life can exist freely side by side. The two ways of life represented by steel town and Gandhigram are hostile to each other, for each one feels that it may lose its freedom because of the other. Steel town is modeled after the Western style of living with emphasis on the importance of steel and materialism, while Gandhigram follows rigidly the Gandhian pattern of life with stress on **Ahimsa** and 'plain living'. Bhashka and Satyajit, the two central figures representing the two forms of life, are determined to follow their different ways, for each thinks that adherence to his particular mode of life is the surest means of attaining freedom to reach a higher and better plane of life. Neither of them would give up even a little bit of his own mode of life which he considers to be ideal for the full growth of human life. Towards the close of the novel, the writer shows that even the opposite way of life can co-exist harmoniously by presenting Satyajit and Bhaskar as understanding each other sympathetically without sacrificing their freedom. The novel reveals the author's faith that freedom, in spite of being indispensable for the dignity and development of human life, is not an end in itself, but a means to achieve higher goals. Through Satyajit, he affirms that "certain values transcend freedom" (SL 30).

To conclude, though not a prolific writer with abundant humanism and leftist learnings like Mulk Raj Anand, nor a comic genius with artistic detachment like R.K. Narayan, nor a creative artist with astonishing depth like Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya is endowed with a positive vision of life. Bhabani's achievement as a novelist can best be assessed by study of the entire corpus of his works. He is an artist the agony, hunger and poverty of his countrymen but also the birth pangs of a nation fighting for its freedom. His sense of realism makes him explore the stark realities of life and it may be said that Bhattacharya is deeply concerned with the destiny of the society as a whole.

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