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I hereby declare that the work embodied in my thesis entitled as "THE FICTIONAL WORKS OF BHABANI BHATTACHARYA: A CRITICAL STUDY", prepared for Ph.D. Degree has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other University on any previous occasion.

And to the best of my knowledge, no work has been reported on the above subject.

And the work presented in this thesis is original and whenever references have been made to the work of others, they have been clearly indicated as such and the source of information is included in the bibliography.

Supervised by: Dr. Jaydipsinh Dodiya

Submitted by: I. G. Purohit

Dr. Jaydipsinh Dodiya
Associate Professor,
Smt. S. H. Gardi Institute of English
& Comparative Literary Studies,
Saurashtra University,
RAJKOT (Gujarat).

I. G. Purohit
Head,
Department of English
B.R.S. College,
Shardagram,
MANGROL (Gujarat).

Date: 25th September, 2007.
Place: Rajkot.
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I have a great pleasure in preparing my Ph. D. Thesis on the novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya. Though Bhattacharya is not a prolific writer, he is a major one among the Indian-English novelists of our time. He has already attracted criticism and interpretation in India and abroad. But not much significant work has been done on his fiction. The present work is a modest attempt to study Bhattacharya as a sensitive writer who has used realism to communicate his humanistic vision of life. It seeks to make his message and his mastery of fictional art known to an august group of readers.

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INTRODUCTION
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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. Prof. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, a pioneer critic of ‘Indo-Anglian Literature’, made efforts through his earlier works ‘Indo-Anglian Literature’, ‘Indian Contributions to English Literature’ and ‘Literature and Authorship in India’, and his latest Indian Writing in English to create an awareness of Indo-Anglian literature.

The term ‘Indo-Anglian’ was used as early as 1883 to describe a volume printed in Calcutta, containing ‘Specimen Compositions for Native Students’. Indian scholars like K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar gave general currency to the term by freely using it in reviews and articles in the twenties and the thirties. The term was adopted by Dr. Iyengar as the title of his first book on the subject.

The term Indo-Anglian refers to original creative writing in English by Indians. Although it has not yet received unanimous approval, it is the term current at the moment. Dr. Iyengar who has given wide currency to the term justifies it for two reasons: that of all the possible combinations of the two words English and India, Anglo-
Indian has an obvious ethnic connotation in Indian life and cannot therefore be used in another context like literature; Indo-English is suitable but cannot be used conveniently both as an adjective and a substantive; Indo-Anglian is, therefore, the only remaining possibility. But Dr. V. K. Gokak feels that Indo-English is a term by which he proposes to describe translations from Indian literatures into English.

John B. Alphonso Karkala writes:

"'Indo-Anglian' which would suggest relation between two countries (India and England) rather than a country and a language, I prefer the term 'Indo-English', to 'Indo-Anglian'." ¹

Most of people concerned with literary studies are not happy with the term Indo-Anglian, although they could not suggest a suitable alternative. A few were prone to suggest the term Indian-English Literature and Indian English Literature. But all said, one would feel that the term Indo-Anglian suits the context best since the soul of the East could well manifest itself through the language of the West.

Indo-Anglian writing has reasons to grow, like American literature or Australian literature or Canadian literature. The only difference between the two beings that, while other literatures are the products of English speaking people, Indo-Anglian literature is written by Indians whose mother-tongue is not English. That is why Dr. Meenakshi Mukherjee says:
“This condition does not obtain in India because much of Indo-Anglian fiction is written in a language that in most cases is not the first language of the writer nor is it the language of daily life of the people about whom the novels are written. Thereby a double complication is involved, making Indo-Anglian literature a phenomenon of world literature without a parallel in the world.” ii

With the consolidation of the British power in India, English, the language of the rulers, began to exercise its influence on the intellectual life of the people. Macaulay’s momentous Minute, making English the medium of instruction and the enthusiasm of Indians like Raja Rammohan Roy accelerated the pace of this influence.

To the educated Indian youth of that generation – a generation finding in English language a gateway to western knowledge, English had a fascination: it was the language of the rulers, and to have a good command of it was to find for one self lucrative jobs; to know English came to be regarded as having a status in society; English provided a window for the Indian intellectuals to have a look at the wide world: it not only created a bridge between India and European nations, it also provided a common medium of communication among the educated of different provinces in India.
Most of the educated young men were content to play sedulous ape to the masters, twisting not only their tongues to attain the 'standard' English pronunciation, but also twisting their modes of living and thinking to suit the western standards. Still many educated young men were there, who studied English with devotion and perseverance, and had, at the same time, an understanding of and respect for their own cultural heritage. Such men were a few, but qualitatively, their attainments in various fields were of a high order.

The cultural contacts between the two countries, even when brought into being by political relations, are never one-sided. The Romans, though they were the conquerors, had yet to learn much from the Greeks, the conquered. Similarly India offered to the British elite a kaleidoscopic panorama of life, a variegated pattern of customs, manners and traditions, and a rich wealth of philosophy, literature and culture. Orientalists like Sir William Jones, Colebrooke, Keith and Wilson brought before the western world India's cultural heritage. Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo gave to the west the perennial message of Indian philosophy.

It is highly gratifying to note that there has been a steady increase in the study of Indian English. But as a subject of academic study, Indian English literature was for long neglected. Till 1907 the term Anglo-Indian literature was used. Anglo-Indian writers were just English writers on Indian themes. As the Calcutta Review puts it:
“A dictionary of Anglo-Indian literature would form a subject of immense interest and instruction not merely to the griffin or the literature who makes India and Indians his interested or idle study, but to the student who wishes to turn over a new page in the history of the human mind and the English language and thought in a country where circumstances, associations and ties are so very different from those of every other land.”

But now the term Indian English literature has come to be accepted in usage in reference to the literature produced by Indians in English. It is gaining attention and recognition. Despite the fact that English is not their mother tongue, many Indian writers in English were able to realize their creative effort through the medium of English. It has been agreed on many literary platforms that freedom is a fundamental need for creative writers. Dr. Bhattacharya remarks:

“The concept of freedom will have to include the medium of expression to which the writer, out of his inner urge, commits himself. It is far more difficult to write creatively in a foreign language
than in one’s own. But that may be regarded as the writer’s own business.”

Several charges, time and again, are brought forward against creative writers who have chosen English as their medium of expression. But it is also said that English has actually established its claim to be considered the youngest of the Indian vernaculars. The current threats to the progress and the very right of existence of this sector of our literary endeavour have no political reason. There are first, certain logical assumptions, and, second, there is a kind of emotional outburst.

The first assumption is that Indian writers cannot use English language adequately as their instrument of communication. The fallacy is evident, since the publishers overseas could not have ventured to publish any work that failed to satisfy such an elementary requisite. Again, there is a consensus of critical opinion in the English-speaking countries that Indian writers have in several instances made a real contribution to the English language and even enriched it in the same way as several writers from the European countries have done.

There is a second assumption that our writers in English will pass into oblivion in the nearest future and so their efforts are futile and unnecessary. Dr. Bhattacharya spiritedly remarks that:

“The vast crowds of literary idols of yesterday have stumbled off their proud
pedestals to lose themselves in the pages of library catalogues. Creative artists do not assess their work in terms of durability. Even Shakespeare cannot have made a conscious and planned bid for immortality; he was conceivably content to write simply for the audience of his time.”

It may be said that there are three types of Indian writers in English: 1. Those who have received their education in English schools and universities; 2. Indians who have settled abroad and are constantly in touch with the living, growing idiom of their country of adoption; and 3. Indians who have acquired English as a second language.

The culture and tradition of India have a distinct entity of their own, and the enlightened youth of India, though well-versed in English, were not to lose their cultural identity. There were not a few among India’s elite who were moved by a genuine desire to present before the western readers a true picture of India through imaginative literature. This literature came to be designed ‘Indo-Anglian Literature’.

II

Various Indian writers have carved out a niche for themselves in different fields of literature. Whatever be their mother-tongue, many Indian writers have chosen English as their medium. Jawahar Nehru
wrote his ‘Autobiography’ and ‘Discovery of India’ in English and not in Hindi. Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu and Shri Aurobindo wrote in English and not in Bengali. Even Dr. Bhabani Bhattacharya chose to write in English only, but not in Bengali. But still, just as there is an American way of writing English, reflecting their own culture and spirit there should be an Indian way of writing English.

Shri Aurobindo has achieved fame through the inspiring and invaluable workmanship in the field of prose, poetry and drama. While his ‘Savitri’ is a cosmic epic and a monumental edifice to the Indian lore, his ‘Renaissance in India’ is a masterpiece in prose awakening the dormant minds to the channels of spirituality and religion.

Rabindranath Tagore is a versatile writer. He is often called the Bengal-Shelley. His creative genius has flowed into the free-flowing strains of mellifluous poetry, effective drama and sonorous prose and thought-provoking novels. While Toru Dutt makes the readers share her troubles and tribulations in her delicate and short-lived career through her artistic poetry, Sarojini Naidu lulls the readers with her sonorous lyrical excellence. Radhakrishnan, the philosopher-statesman, has made indelible mark on Indo-Anglian writing with his oratorical excellence and philosophical precision.

Mahatma Gandhi too exercised a profound influence on our language and literature through his own writing in English and Gujarati. His Autobiography ‘The Story of My Experiments with Truth’ is an imperishable classic. Unlike Jawahar Lal Nehru who loved English
and felt more at home in it than in any other language, Gandhi wrote in his mother-tongue, Gujarati; but not in English.

Nirad Chaudhuri has built up a reputation for himself with his ‘Autobiography of an Unknown Indian’ and ‘A Passage to England’. He has an unusual awareness of the English character and English past as well as of the English landscape. His main purpose in ‘A Passage to England’ is to convey a little of the beauty of the permanence and antithesis of India and England.

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 form of novel. Most of the Indo-Anglian novels are conceived and created in English. Dr. Meenakshi Mukherjee says:

“The novel, the genre of imaginative literature which gives artistic form to the relationship of man and society was conspicuously absent until the nineteen twenties. The earliest Indian novels were written in Bengali as Bengal was the first region to come under the domineering influence of the British. A novel by an Indian writer demands a sense of belonging and direct involvement in
values and experiences which are valid in the Indian context. Thus the Indo-Anglian novel made a diffident appearance in the nineteen twenties then gradually gathered confidence and established itself in the next two decades."

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 level established itself both in quality and quantity with a direct impact on the social and religious aspects of life. In the 19th century fiction writing was rather limited. The first English novel by an Indian was that of Toru Dutt named, ‘Bianca or The Young Spanish Maiden’, which was of course a posthumous publication.


Of these novelists, R. K. Narayan has a distinguished position which neither time nor influence can dare erase. His felicity of expression and free flowing style has won for him an unshaken and unshakable place in Indo-Anglian writing. His mother tongue is Tamil; he settled down in Mysore, where the regional language is Kannada, and he wrote in English. Whereas Mulk Raj Anand completed his education at Cambridge and London, Narayan was educated entirely in
South India. He uses the English language but the thoughts and feelings and stirrings of the soul, the wayward movements of the consciousness are all of the soil of India.

He has written more than a dozen novels, short stories – An Astrologer’s Day and Lawley Road, and essays (Next Sunday). His most famous novel ‘The Guide’ is adapted to the screen into English and Hindi. The most interesting of his novels are ‘Swami and Friends’, ‘The Bachelor of Arts’ and ‘The Vendor of Sweets’. R. K. Narayan has for his novels the background of Malgudi. Hence Malgudi is Narayan’s Casterbridge, but its inhabitants are essentially human and have their kinship with the entire humanity.

Raja Rao is the foremost of the novelists whose works have placed Indian English literature on the map of the world literatures. The reason of his pre-eminence can be examined at two levels. That is historically and artistically: As Makarand Paranjape rightly observes,

.......historically, he is important because his first novel, Kanthapura, was published during the decade of the 1930s when Indian English fiction first began to gain recognition. Artistically Raja Rao is important because of his unique formal and thematic accomplishments.
Raja Rao has very competently employed the internal viewpoint with all its variations in his novels. His first novel Kanthapura is written from the viewpoint of a witness-narrator. His second novel The Serpent and the Rope has been written from the protagonist-narrator’s point of view. The Cat and Shakespeare has the protagonist narrator-cum-witness-narrator. Comrade Kirllov has two witness-narrator Raja Rao and Irene, wife of the protagonist. The first person narrative, in all its variations, establishes an intimacy between the authors as many incidents in the life of the protagonist have a close resemblance with those of the author.

Raja Rao is a child of the Gandhian Age. His ‘Kanthapura’ is the most satisfying of modern Indian novels. Dr. L. S. R. Krishna Sastry describes it as ‘the gamut of the whole of the Gandhian revolution.’ His ‘The Serpent and the Rope’ and ‘The Cat and Shakespeare’ are deeply philosophical. Dr. A. V. Krishna Rao states with reference to ‘Kanthapura’, that Raja Rao has made an effective literary transcript of the Gandhian myth by artistically attuning the reality of his tale to the poetry of truth. Narrated by an Indian granny, the prose is naturally racy with a rhythmic quality and a certain poetic sensibility throughout the novel.

Raja Rao has skillfully shown that the English language can be employed successfully to convey the idioms and the speech flow of the vernacular. He has successfully experimented with the novel form and was shown that this western genre can be adapted to the episode and metaphysical narrative tradition of
classical Indian literature. He has also shown that the novel form, intimately related to time and place at the narrative level can also express an experience that transcends the limits of geography and history.

For his creative contribution Raja Rao has earned the attention of different academic institution from the country and abroad. He had been the recipient of the Sahitya Academy Award (1964), the Padma Bhusan (1969), a fellowship of Woodrow Wilson International Centre – Washington D C (1972), Honorary Fellowship of the modern language Association of America (1854), the Neustadt International Prize for Literature (1988), a fellowship of Sahitya Academy (1997), recently in 2007 posthumously awarded Bharata Ratna – the highest available honour available to an Indian.

Raja Rao’s Major works are imbibed with philosophical content and that is a part of his literary art. He believes man to be “a metaphysical entity”, and his own writings have bearings of Metaphysical Life. To the western educated mind, India represents spirituality, and Raja Rao supports this outlook. Therefore, he presents such a point of view in his fiction for benefit of his western readers.

At the same time he also asserts superiority of Indian philosophy over western thoughts. Among the Indian works that have influenced him are the two classical epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the Buddhist texts in English translation, medieval Kannada poetry, the autobiography of Mahatma

Raja Rao has earned the reputation of an innovator in the field of fiction. As a representative of modern Indian ethos which combines the ancient Indian traditions and modern western attitudes, Raja Rao contributes remarkable techniques of Modern Western Fiction and ages old Hindu methods of literary expression; thus along with Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan. Raja Rao has put India firmly on the map of the world of fiction.

Thus, Raja Rao is not such prolific writer like R. K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand. He writes slowly, revised frequently and his works have been published at great intervals, because he wants to attain perfection.

Mulk Raj Anand has earned both name and fame for himself as the chief spokesman of the Indo-Anglian, ‘Literary Naturalism’ with a proletarian bias. Born at Peshawar in 1905, Mulk Raj Anand had his education at Lahore, London and Cambridge, and took a Doctorate in Philosophy. With such academic attainments, the normal thing would have been for him to accept a Professorship in a Government College or University, and end up in due course as a zone dictator of Higher Learning Unlimited.
But Anand chose instead the hazardous profession of letters. One of his early books was Curries and Other Indian Dishes; after all, as Norman Douglas once remarked, the curry is India’s greatest contribution to civilization! Other early books were Persian Painting, The Hindu View of Art and The Golden Breath (1933) – the last being an introduction to the work of Tagore, Iqbal, Puran Singh, Sarojini Naidu and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya. Then came the novels, in quick succession. Anand had thus early found his voice and vocation.

The first five novels appeared in the following sequence: Untouchable (1935), Coolie (1936), Two Leaves and a Bud (1937), The Village (1939) and Across the Black Waters (1940). He was meantime, as was natural, associated with the Progressive Writers’ Movement in India; and after the War, he finally returned to India and settled down in Bombay. During the last twenty or more years he has been editing Marg, a high-class journal devoted to the Arts, and one of the best of its kind anywhere. More recently, he has published a standard treatise on Hindu erotic art.

There are, however, several novels and collections of short stories: The Sword and the Stick, The Barber’s Trade Union, The Big Heart, The Tractor and the Corn Goddess, Seven Summers, Private Life of an Indian Prince, and Morning Face.

According to him, human behaviour is determined by its social environment. The society, not character, is the destiny of man. His
‘Coolie’ is possibly the foremost folk-epic of the Indo Anglian fiction. Dr. A. V. Krishna Rao says:

“It is a typical novel of this oppressive trend (pro-proletarian) in modern society and becomes multi-dimensional with its philosophy of naturalism and the contemporary national ideas. But beneath the pervasive pessimism, there is an essential under-current of optimism and need for the drastic reform of the rotten society.”

As a writer of fiction, Anand’s notable marks are vitality and a keen sense of actuality. He is a veritable Dickens for describing the inequities and idiosyncrasies in the current human situation with candour as well as accuracy. Of Anand’s early novels at least it can be said that they come fresh from contact with the flesh and blood of everyday existence. He has no laborious psychological or ideological preoccupations, and he is content to let his characters live and speak and act.

Born in South India and educated casually at intervals at Madras University, the intervals being spent in traveling about India and Europe, Kamala Markandya is the most outstanding Indo-Anglian novelist and has about six novels to her credit. She has emerged as a prominent Indian woman writer writing in English.
Her novels draws our special attention. Her *Nectar in a Sieve* is the most widely read and has been for many years on the list of compulsory reading in departments of Asian Studies in most American Universities. She follows unique narrative technique and structure in her novels. Her *Nectar in a Sieve* is an essay in realism. Her other works exhibit, no doubt her artistic skill and poetic brilliance. Indian Writing in English could be summed up as follows:

“There are a few Indian men and women who write English well enough to find publishers in England or the United States. Their works are read by people who believe that nationals of a country are better informed than foreigners. Some have won acclaim from critics. But most critics adopt a more charitable attitude towards Indians writing in English than they do towards their own writers.”

It should be not be mistaken that the Indian writer writes in English to cater to the Westerner’s demand for information about the Indian scene, about India thought or view of the life, but he does it to pour out his soul, his vision, his insight into reality, only to share it with man. Even more than men, women writers gifted with fine talents have made Indo-Anglian literature a matter of pride to us and a source of admiration to the foreigners. The growing interest evinced by the
publishers as well as the readers is a sure sign of the progress and continued hope of achievement in the field of Indo-Anglian literature. C. N. Narasimhaiah rightly says:

“Indian Writing in English is a definite contribution to the composite culture of India. It is primarily a part of the literature of India like other literatures written in various regional languages. It can present the life of a village like Bulashah or Kanthapura, a small town like Malgudi or Kedaram or sweep through continents and eternity itself, and so long as the operative sensibility of the writer is essentially Indian, it will be Indian literature.”

III

The present age may be termed the age of the novel. We are living in a dynamic world which is fast changing. With the changes in life, there are bound to be changes in the forms of literature, techniques of creative writing and even in the devices of presentation. Old order changed yielding place to new, lest one good custom corrupt the world. Whatever changes may take place, either in form or technique, the novelist has to depend on human experience as the basis for the fiction. Whether it be in India, United Kingdom, Russia or America or any part
of the globe, the truth is that ‘man and his experience’ form the subject of any creative writer in fiction writing.

The novel as a genre of literature has always been holding its place and more so in the present set-up. The novel commands a large number of readers than any other form. Thousands of novels are written every year and a sizable number of them get published. Despite the divergent attractions like the cinema, the press and the radio which try to exploit its popular appeal, the novels have managed to hold its place and have its independent existence. Dr. Srinivasa Iyengar says,

“Being modern art form, the novel has gone through a considerable process of cross fertilization and this too is a measure of its popularity and its vitality.”

At present most creative artists are driven to self-expression through the medium of the novel. The novel has taken large strides in England and elsewhere. A plethora of writers – Scott, Jane Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, Hardy, Meredith and Conrad, great writers in the U.K. and on the continent enriched the province of the novel, raised the novel to the dignity of a great form, and almost gained for the novel the status of ‘the epic of democracy’, Arnold Benett points out,

“There is scarcely any aspect of the interestingness of life which is not now
rendered in prose fiction – from landscape painting to sociology and none which might not be... It is, and will be for some time to come, the form to which the artist with the most inclusive vision, instinctively turns, because it is the most inclusive form and the most adaptable.”

Indian novelists writing in English form a very small group. Their total output does not bear comparison with the output in other regional languages. The clear reason is that Indian novels in English have to face the most severe competition before they win a publisher’s contract. The first impediment is bias. Out of hundreds of novels, a couple of novels at best may be selected. It is usual that an American or British novel has a better chance of acceptance than a novel of equal merit from an Asian country.

Another characteristic of the Indian novel in English is its quest for universality. The human mind is responsive to certain common feelings and any successful novelist will build those feelings on suitable plain communication and thereby he can easily win over the readers everywhere. The technique of the novel may be an achievement in itself, in its treatment of the human material.

Indian fictional works have clung to conventional moulds and patterns. There is a lack of inspired experimentation. A false straining after newness is apt to take the form of a surface glitter. However, an
effortless expression of the author’s inner self is worthy of admiration. Some of the novels in the English language are enriched by that radiance. The idea prevails in some strength that a novel may be contemporary in sense that it deals with immediate yesterdays. The creative artist has a compulsion to find an outlet for the living images in him.

The history of today is suitable material for a novelist. Here is a history, not of political developments but of a people’s dream to attain a better life and of the struggle to fulfill the dream. In economic parlance it would simply mean better living standards. It will be appropriate for a novelist to make the spiritual values of our Five Year Plans the basis of his theme. The spiritual expressions through living images, creatures of flesh and blood and feelings may well give a new direction to our creative endeavour. It is not often that a novelist is fortunate enough to live at the turning point of national life. The turning point faces us with its challenge.

Most of the present day Indo-Anglian novelists have taken up their themes from the social set-up and realism is dominant in their novels. The novelist starts from experience, from some direct impression or perception of life. It is justifiable to regard the novel as a unique form of literary expression. It is not possible to isolate the artist from the society in which he lives.

Tolstoy recommends the novelist to cultivate a clear, fresh view of the universe and Stevenson urges him to keep his mind supple,
charitable and bright. Henry James’ writings are instinct with a particularly sensitive appreciation of the values of compassion, charity and sympathy. A coherent attitude towards history and events appears to be far more important as a qualification to write great novels. The novel has changed radically since it came into existence.

IV

Bhabani Bhattacharya, winner of the Sahitya Academi award, is a gifted writer who ranks with some of the best Indian novelists writing in English today. Bhattacharya has both fictional and non-fictional works to his credit, but he is best known for his novels which have received the highest critical acclaim in Indian and abroad.


He has also published the translation of Tagore’s stories and other writings. The themes of his imaginative writings have welled up from his own life. Bhattacharya’s education, travels and experiences as a journalist played significant part in shaping his vision of life. His awareness of social, political and cultural problems was the result of Bhattacharya’s own experiences of life.
Bhabani Bhattacharya was born at Bhagalpur in Bihar in November, 1906. He received his early education at various places. His father was holding a transferable post in the Judicial service in British India and had to move from place to place as a result of his transfer and posting to different stations. A man of shy temperament, Dr. Bhattacharya could devote much of his time to creative writings.

Bhattacharya did B. A. (Hons.) from Patna College, Patna in 1927 and left for London for higher education. He studied History and Literature at King’s College, London. He obtained Honours and Doctorate degree in History from the University of London. His education in London proved very significant in his career as a creative writer. It is in England that Bhattacharya met Tagore and sought his permission to translate his stories into English which appeared under the title The Golden Boat (1930). He was keen to carry on his literary pursuit and become a writer in his life. He had no liking for any Government job. His decision to write in a foreign language was a choice after a careful consideration. He made a very important observation on writing in English:

I have loved writing in English. The creative writer must have full freedom to use the language of his choice. If he decides on a foreign tongue, he will have to cross immense technical hurdles, but that is his headache. I have enjoyed the
The novels of Bhattacharya reveal his Marxist leaning and a liberal humanitarian outlook on the problems of life. He was enormously influenced by Lasky’s lecture on Marxist interpretation of history. Dorothy Blair Shimer has rightly observed:

A strong undercurrent of the early Marxist respect for liberal humanitarianism and the effects of economic pressures on history run through all Bhattacharya’s novels.xii

Bhabani Bhattacharya was also influenced by the ideals of democracy as preached by British statesman. It was very unfortunate that British rulers did not follow those noble ideals in India. His novel, So Many Hungers, has very clearly presented this paradox. Rahoul, the central character of the novel, wonders at the loss of the democratic ideals. Bhattacharya’s experiences of England are reflected in the portrayal of Satyajit and Biren.

Bhattacharya’s knowledge of contemporary history is confirmed by the historical background of his novels. All his six novels have Post-First-World War situation as background. So Many Hungers is set against the backdrop of War and National Movement. It presents a
vivid account of one of the most shocking disasters in history. The action of Music for Mohini is set against the background of rural Bengal. He Who Rides A Tiger, like the first novel, owes its inspiration to the Bengal Famine and the Quit India Movement. A Goddess Named Gold narrates the happenings in a village during the hundred days preceding India’s independence. The 1962 Chinese invasion on India forms the setting of Shadow from Ladakh.

Bhattacharya’s sixth novel, A Dream in Hawaii, is a different from his previous novels in its theme and setting. In his previous novels, the memories of World Wars, the struggle for political freedom, Bengal famine, and Indo-Chinese border conflict form the setting, but A Dream in Hawaii has its sociological and historical importance in the context of the American ethos and culture. Bhattacharya’s latest novel, Socio-Political Currents in Bengal: A Nineteenth Century Perspective (New Delhi, 1980) presents the history of the Nineteenth-Century Bengal.

Bhattacharya has an eclectic temper, which has absorbed influences from diverse sources. Both the writers of the West and the East have enormously influenced his writings. Romain Rolland, Ibsen, Shaw, Walt Whitman, John Steinbeck, and Sinclair Lewis are among the important western writers who influenced Bhattacharya most.

Of all the Indian writers, the influence of Rabindranath Tagore on Bhattacharya was the greatest. He was attracted to Rabindranath Tagore from his school days when his career as a writer began. Bhattacharya himself has admitted his indebtedness to Gurudev:
“Tagore appealed to me from my school days and my writer’s career also began from those days. It was, therefore, quite unlikely that I would miss the impact of Gurudev’s all pervading personality.”

Under the influence of Tagore, Bhattacharya began writing poems and prose sketches in Bengali which appeared in Mouchak. His articles were published in Vichitra, a Bengali magazine, with which Tagore was associated. Tagore encouraged Bhattacharya to go ahead with his writings: “I like your work. Keep on writing. All my blessings.” Bhattacharya admits to have been influenced by the towering personality of Tagore:

Whoever came in contact with the personality of Ravindranath Tagore, even for a brief space, received one predominating impression - that of richness. It was a richness of the spirit and was not limited to genius. There was the super charm softening the intellectual blaze, the innate simpleness belying the sophistication; but above all, the never-failing humanity with which the poet made his forceful impact on all levels of consciousness.
While studying in England, Bhattacharya translated some of Tagore's writing into English in collaboration with Yeats and Brown. The translations of Tagore's stories, sketches and allegories were published in *The Spectator*. He also edited and acted as the chief translator of the Tagore Centenary Commemoration volume entitled *Towards Universal Man* (1961). Bhattacharya declined the offer of a permanent job at Shantineketan. He was afraid; he would lose his identity as a man and as a writer under the shadow of the dominating personality of Tagore. The influence of Tagore is evident on his novels. His *Shadow from Ladakh* and *So Many Hungers* clearly bring out Tagore's impact on the novelist, and they are full of references to Tagore. Tagore’s belief in the harmony of cultures finds a clear expression in *Shadow from Ladakh*:

That was Tagore’s firm belief. Integration - that was the poet’s life-long quest: integration of the simple and the sophisticated; the ancient and the modern; city and village; East and West. In *So Many Hungers* the freedom fighters sing a song by Tagore: “The more they tighten the chain, the more the chains loosen.”

Mahatma Gandhi is the second great influence on Bhabani Bhattacharya. He first met Gandhi in England in 1931 when Gandhi had
been there in order to attend the Round Table Conference. Bhattacharya was overwhelmed by the greatness of the Mahatma. In an interview with D. B. Shimer, the novelist accepts the influence of Gandhi:

India’s struggle for freedom had reached one of its peak points. I had been close to that struggle, though not an activist. In India I had attended many meetings in which Gandhi spoke. But this was my first encounter with the great man; it was only a little less overwhelming than the one with Tagore.\textsuperscript{xvi}

Gandhi’s ideals of truth and non-violence, his love for the people living in the countryside left deep impact on the novelist. The themes and characters of almost all the novels of Dr. Bhattacharya reveal Gandhi’s influence. His characters, like Devish in \textit{So Many Hungers}, Jayadev in \textit{Music for Mohini}, Satyajit in \textit{Shadow from Ladakh}, the minstrel in \textit{A Goddess Named Gold}, are all modeled upon Gandhi. They possess Gandhian views regarding self-control, chastity, celibacy, asceticism, free-mixing and indulgence. Bhattacharya, like Gandhi, believes in “the inherent goodness of the human heart.”\textsuperscript{xvii}

According to Bhattacharya himself, is rooted more deeply in Gandhian thought. But Bhattacharya does not support Gandhism blindly. The corruption and misuses of Gandhian ideals is also
mentioned in some of his novels. People pursue shady deals by means of the Gandhi cap.

Jawaharlal Nehru is another important figure who has left his impact on Bhattacharya, whose novels are full of references to Pt. Nehru. In So Many Hungers, Nehru’s Gorakhpur prison address is mentioned: “Statement of Nehru at his trial in Gorakhpur prison. Banned, it had not appeared in the papers. Yet the words had found wings.” Nehru’s midnight speech is stated in A Goddess Named Gold: “A Touchstone that was freedom’s gift for the people. That was what Jawaharlal Nehru had also meant, his language more direct ‘India discovers herself again,’ he had said, “Are we brave enough to accept the challenge of the future?” Nehru’s philosophy of industrialism and the material progress of the country are represented by Bhaskar in Shadow from Ladakh.

Bhabani Bhattacharya is a novelist who is interested in the problem of social change. He is a realist keen about exploring the realities of life in the country. He has a sensitive understanding of the problems of contemporary Indian Society. He has acquired it from his minute observation of the life of the common people. This type of observation is essential for a writer who wants to write social novels.

Reality to Bhattacharya is the “soul of art”. Art should convey truth – “a truth of emotion, which is the ultimate realism.” According to him, the creative writer’s business is to reveal the truth. The writer does so unlike the philosopher, in no cold statements of dogma but only in
terms of life rendered through the devices of dramatization. In his novels, Bhattacharya explores the social and political realities of contemporary life. A faithful picture of various aspects of life in the country is presented in them. His novels, however, are not merely photographic records of social, political and economic life of the people, but an imaginative picture of life. War, Hunger and Freedom are the major recurring themes of Bhabani Bhattacharya as a novelist.

Bhattacharya is a novelist whose vision of life is perfectly humanistic. He upholds humanism both in principle and practice, and his humanistic attitude to life finds artistic expression in his novels. In an interview, Bhattacharya clarifies his stand as a novelist:

… 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 necessary for art’s sake. Purposeless art and literature which is much in vogue does not appear to me a sound judgment.xix

The novels of Bhattacharya embody, as K. K. Sharma has rightly pointed out, “a transparently positive vision of life,” which is obviously humanistic. Bhattacharya is seriously concerned with the plight of the destitute and the low castes. He draws our attention to the scenes of the rich and the affluent that thwart the prospects of a happy life for the helpless and the poor.
The novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya clearly express his indignation against the sharks and parasites of society. Like a staunch humanist, Bhattacharya explores the causes of human suffering and their possible remedies, pleads for a synthesis of values. He feels sympathy for the poor and the downtrodden and suggests ways and means for the improvement of human life in general.

On account of his preoccupation with the problem of contemporary life, Bhattacharya is usually criticized for being journalistic in the treatment of his themes and characters. It is pointed out that his novels deal with the events of contemporary life and are not rendered artistically. But Bhattacharya justifies his use of contemporary themes. He observes that the true novelist writes because he must. He feels sad that the tragic events of recent Indian history are not adequately reflected in Indian-English fiction. A creative writer can turn an event of the current moment into emotional response, as John Steinbeck does in his The Grapes of Wrath:

A novelist may well be concerned with today, the current hour or moment, if it is meaningful for him, if it moves him sufficiently into emotional response.\textsuperscript{xx}

At the beginning, Bhattacharya’s novels were condemned for their criticism of Indian society. But in course of time he established himself as a novelist. First, he was recognized in the West. Afterwards,
his novels were read in a favorable light in India also. Admiring him as a novelist, K. R. S. Iyengar rightly remarked:

“Dr. Bhabani Bhattacharya’s five novels form an impressive achievement ... he is a much translated novelist. The Sahitya Academi award to him in 1967 was a fitting recognition of his standing achievement in the field of Indian fiction in English.”

As a novelist, he belongs to the group of Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan. Like these major Indian novelists, Dr. Bhattacharya has conveyed Indian sensibility through the medium of a foreign language. His achievement as a novelist lies in his vision of life and its artistic portrayal in the novels. His major themes are hunger, poverty, disease, tradition, modernity, social evils, Tension and pretension, changing values, crisis of character, and the East-West relations. Like a conscious artist, he has discussed the nature of art and literature in general and novel in particular. His views on the nature and function of art find expression in his letters, reviews and articles.

Bhabani Bhattacharya is a powerful creative writer of today. He is a novelist who is least interested in metaphysical abstractions. Personal human relationship also does not attract him much. Actually he is keen about presenting various aspects of social reality. He is interested in social changes which can ensure happiness for the largest number of
people. He pleads for a new social set-up based on justice, equality and co-operation. But his novels are not just journalistic records of social, political and economic life of the people; they are rather sensitive presentations of life in fictional terms.
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iii Bhabani Bhattacharya: Indo-Anglian (from the Novel in Modern India, ed. By Iqbal Bakhtiyar), p. 43.

iv Ibid, p. 42.

v Dr. Meenakshi Mukherjee: The Twice-Born Fiction (The Literary Landscape), p. 18 – 19.


vii Rao, A. V. Krishna. The Indo-Anglian Novel and the Changing Tradition (1972)


CHAPTER - 2

A CRITICAL STUDY OF BHBANIH BHBATTACHARYA’S SO MANY HUNGRS AND MUSC FOR MOHINI
So Many Hunger is one of the finest pieces of creative writing born out of the agonized torment of body and spirit endured by the sacred soil of Bengal during the hideous famine years and the early stages of the Second World War. It portrays vividly the Quit India Movement of 1942, the mass uprisings, acts of sabotage which followed in its wake, the indiscreet and the distressing scenes of human misery and degradation resulting from famine which stalked through the land and killed millions of people. While describing the wrath of Indian masses that, roused to bitter indignation at the arrest of national leaders, indulged in acts of violence and paralyzed the government machinery in towns and villages, Bhattacharya writes:

For ten days the city was in the grip of revolt. A sudden thunderstorm on a dark, deadly gulf of Time. For at that moment the Jap stood firm on the doorstep of Bengal, poised for attack. The national
movement could do no longer wait and
watch the peril and mark time.  

The British who boast of their faith in the “four freedoms” and
“the rights of man,” unleash the reign of terror in India and resort to
inhuman atrocities on Indians to repress their struggle for freedom.
“Authority was bent on smashing every vestige of the movement which
it had now outlawed. Authority was goading, provoking the movement
so that patience lost, it would expose itself, target for gunfire.”  

While in theory the British talk of their “respect for the rights of
all people to choose the form of government under which they shall
live,” in practice they shamelessly crush the just aspirations of Indians
to breathe in free India. Actually, “the champions of freedom abroad
were the eaters of freedom in this land.”  They think that they had
conquered their Indian Empire by the sword, and by the sword they
will hold it.

The novel also portrays the hardships faced by the common man
during the war. The fishing boats of villagers are seized by the
Government for the use of military personnel and villagers are led to
sell grain to the agents of the imperialist government, greedy merchants
and hoarders. To the businessmen like Samarendra Basu and Sir
Ablabandhu, war comes like a veritable windfall. They treat it as the
chance of a life-time. As the war progress, they accumulate rice in their
granaries and hoard it to sell at a higher price later. While describing
the din and clamour in the Calcutta Stock Exchange, the author writes:
Chance slipping off. Chance of twenty years. Not another war for twenty years. War, the most enriching industry. Prices mounting. Steels the favorite counter. The crowd surging. Bee voices buzzing for money-honey. iv

Greedy and callous men and freakish nature join hands to cause famine in Bengal. Bhattacharya gives a very detailed, graphic and moving picture of the hunger for food and the heavy loss of human lives resulting from it. Famine shows such distressing pictures of human sufferings as men have never witnessed before. Mothers unable to bear the death by starvation of their children, bury them alive. Women sit on the pavement eating from a bowl while their famished children sit by and gaze. Men keenly waiting for their turn to get food, breathe their last the moment food is poured in their bowl. There are sights such as make man’s blood curdle with horror:

The jackal had eaten the woman’s left armpit and breast, and a part of the ribs.
She was breathing still, her eyes wide open but vacant. v

We are shown how hunger and starvation reduce people to the levels of animals:
Destitutes and dogs in those days often fought for possession of the rich city’s ten-thousand rubbish-heaps, in which craps of rotting food lay buried. It was not every time that the destitutes won, routing the dogs on the streets and the dog within themselves.

Juxtaposed with this woeful tale of man’s hunger for food is the hateful sight of man’s callous greed for wealth. While the granaries of the selfish and greedy capitalist and black-marketers like Sir Ablabandhu and Samarendra Basu abound in rice, innumerable human beings die for want of it. While the restaurants of the rich city, Calcutta, buzz with life and music, and bulge with food, destitutes in the nearby lanes and on the pavements lie sick and helpless and die of hunger. In this world of wealthy traders, there prevails a callous disregard of all codes of civilized humanity.

If the famine exposes the sordidness and meanness of human soul, it also brings on surface its hidden springs of nobleness. As opposed to the callous and greedy rich people, the helpless and famished destitutes rise above their bodily needs and reveal a hidden core of sympathy and heroism. A semi-starved destitute surrenders his ticket for food so that a more needy man may use it.

A peasant girl abuses the body’s sanctity to feed starving destitutes who call her “mother”. A famished boy, who has fought
against a dog to procure a jam tin lying in a dust-bin, shares his treasure with a youngster looking with pitiful eyes towards him. Bhabani Bhattacharya has thus immortalized in this novel the memory of the hideous famine years in all its sordidness, in all its shadow and simmer.

Bhabani Bhattacharya’s first novel, So Many Hungers, was published in October 1947, two months after India’s attainment of Independence. It would, indeed, be surprising if a novel seeing the light of day at such a momentous period in the history of the country did not deal at least partly with the theme of freedom. At several places in the novel and also in the others novels, Bhattacharya uses the word ‘hunger’ as a refrain. One such reference in So Many Hungers is to ‘the people’s hunger for food or freedom.’ The twin hunger for food and for freedom is the central theme of the novel.

While the hunger of men to be free is one of the themes of the novel and the Quit India Movement forms its background, a more palpable type of hunger, namely, the hunger for food gets more spectacular treatment and possibly steals the limelight. Just as Rahoul symbolizes the Indian working for the liberation of the country, Kajoli, the peasant girl from Baruni, illustrates the cruel fate of the rural population of Bengal at the time when India faced the Japanese peril in the east and an unprecedented rice famine was created by unscrupulous capitalists.
Kajoli is a sprightly and innocent girl of fourteen when the story begins. She lives in her ancestral mud-and-thatch house along with her mother who remains unnamed throughout the novel and a younger brother, Onu, aged ten or eleven. The father, who also has no name in the story, and an elder brother, Kanu, are in prison for having taken part in the Civil Disobedience Movement. They own some land on which paddy is grown with the help of hired labourers called kisans.

Bhattacharya, with his intimate knowledge of village life, includes the cow, Mangala, also in the rural household. The family represents some of the finest qualities of rural Bengal or of rural India. Their life is simple but gracious and dignified. Devata eats with the family often presumably, sharing their plain meal consisting of “steamed rice and lentils, a pinch of salt and a lemon, some baked sweet potatoes and a vegetable curry of sorts, and perhaps some thickened milk in a small brass bowl by way of luxury”.

When Rahoul arrives at the house in the company of Devata, Kajoli receives him in the traditional manner, removing the shoes from his feet, pouring cold water on the feet and washing off the dust. Rahoul is embarrassed and tries to expostulate, but Devata silences him and reminds him that Kajoli is ‘a well-bred peasant girl’ with ‘a legacy of manners as old as India’. viii

The disintegration and ruin that comes to Kajoli’s innocent family is symptomatic of the devastation that affects all Bengal. The economy
of the village is ruined because of the scorched-earth policy followed by
the Government and also by the racketeering in rice done by wealthy
men from the city. All boats in the area are destroyed by Government
lest the Japanese should make a landing on the coast and use them for
their movements. Many villages are evacuated. Greedy merchants with
the needed capital buy up all the available rice with the aim of creating
scarcity and later selling at a huge profit. The villagers who are thus
impoverished take to the highroad leading to Calcutta hoping that the
affluent city will feed them all.

Kajoli has a brief spell of happiness after she is married to the
young man, Kishore. He had been a worker in a cotton-mill in the city,
had taken part in a strike and been imprisoned in the same jail as
Kajoli’s father. The father had taken such a great liking to Kishore that
when the latter was released from prison he sent him to Baruni with a
letter to his wife expressing his wish that he should marry Kajoli. So the
marriage took place. The novelist suggests by a few deft touches how
radiantly happy the young couple were after the marriage. If, for
instance, Kajoli heard a cuckoo singing when she and Kishore were out
on the fields, she would immediately echo the bird’s note, coo-coo-oo,
with the spontaneity and joy of a child.

Kajoli’s happiness is short-lived. As conditions deteriorate in the
village, Kishore decides to go to Calcutta where he hopes to get
employment in a mill. On his way to the railway station he takes a short
cut and climbs up the railway embankment. The Governor’s train is to
pass that way very shortly and, therefore, soldiers are guarding the
track. One of them challenges Kishore. He gets frightened and tries to run away, but the soldier shoots him dead. His sad fate remains unknown to the family right up to the end of the novel. The family thinks that he has gone to Calcutta and when he fails to write, they fear that possibly he has been arrested somehow and sentenced to jail again. Kajoli is now an expectant mother.

There is no rice to eat in the house. Like other people they have been living on roots, figs and whatever else their luck brings them. They sell whatever can be sold, including the cow-bells adorning the cow Mangala’s neck. Their suffering and starvation in no way affect their nobility and purity. Agents recruiting destitute girls for brothels in Calcutta try their best to tempt Kajoli, but she and her mother angrily spurn their offer. The mother does an act of unusual generosity and nobility when she makes a gift of her cow to a young fisher-woman who is attempting to bury her starving child alive in order to make him sleep in peace. The family now finds it impossible to live in the village and, like thousands of other families, begins a long and hazardous track to Calcutta.

What the mother and the two children suffer on the way to Calcutta gives the reader an idea of the plight of the many destitutes who left their village homes and moved towards the capital in search of food. This subject is dealt with elsewhere in the book. Kajoli has a painfully tragic experience on the way for which the novelist does not hold any individual morally culpable. She meets an Indian soldier and begs him for food. He happens to have some bread in his kit-bag and
gives her a portion. She is so ravenously hungry that she devours it rapidly without thinking of her mother and brother.

The soldier offers her some more. As he looks at the emaciated body in tattered clothes, his heart is filled with pity but another force begins to operate on him. He has been separated and feels the hunger for woman. Blinded by desire he grabs Kajoli and leads her to a meadow. Half fancying perhaps that she is his wife he mutters words of endearment and makes love to her. A piercing shriek from her awakens him to his senses and he finds that she is bleeding and unconscious. Stung by remorse and grateful that she is alive he takes out whatever money he has, ties to a corner of her sari and leaves the place in panic. Kajoli actually has an abortion.

As she lies helpless and bleeding, a jackal comes near attracted by the smell of blood and elated at the prospect of eating up the prostrate and almost moribund body. She is providentially saved from that fate by the arrival of little Onu who has been directed to the spot by the repentant soldier. Weak and defenseless himself, Onu somehow manages to drive away the jackal and brings his mother to the scene. This is the most harrowing episode in the whole novel. A critic safely ensconced in his study might be tempted to pooh-pooh the incident as sensational and exaggerated, but what matters is that it is credible to the imagination and has been handled by the novelist with feeling and restraint.
The repentant soldier tries to make amends for the wrong he has done in a moment of blindness. He tells an army doctor who is about to proceed to Calcutta in a military truck that some destitute woman is lying unconscious by the wayside and persuades him with some difficulty to give her professional aid. The kind doctor after examining Kajoli and giving her first aid suggests that she should be admitted into a hospital. He volunteers to take her and the family with him in his vehicle. In a few hours Kajoli becomes a patient in a Calcutta hospital and her mother and Onu find themselves on the streets like so many other destitutes who have flocked to the city. The sad plight of these uprooted men, women and children is a subject which captured the imagination and roused the indignation of Bhattacharya and which he goes back to in He Who Rides a Tiger.

The subject deserves some attention and is discussed elsewhere. The existence of these miserable beings is at the lowest animal level imaginable. Boys fight with boys and sometimes with dogs for the possession of scraps of food. A few Relief Centres including one run by Rahoul provide boiled rice or rice gruel to limited numbers of destitutes. The most sheltered lanes and pavements are used by these people for occupation. The luckier among them mercifully fail ill with dysentery or are hit by a Japanese bomb and are therefore taken to a hospital where they are looked after and fed until they relapse into normal health. Kajoli’s mother is happy and grateful that she is at least temporarily in a hospital and conceals the plight of her son and herself from her lest she should feel distressed.
Ones she is discharged from hospital, Kajoli’s eyes are opened to the miserable plight in which she and her family are. The mother knows that Rahoul is somewhere in the city and is confident that he will help them if only they find him. But she does not know his address and Kajoli discourages her from making an attempt to find him because of her fear that he may not condescend to recognize or to help them. Ironically Rahoul often thinks of them. He had written to their Baruni address but no reply had come. A money order sent by him had been returned to him as the payee had already left the village. Once he passes by Onu when he is hunting for food in a rubbish dump, but can not recognize him. At another time, likewise, he sees the mother walking in the opposite direction, but neither recognizes the other.

Temptation comes to Kajoli as to countless other destitute women like her. A woman who sells betel-leaves and also runs a brothel offers her sixty or even eighty rupees if she agrees to become a prostitute. She spurns the offer, but growing misery of their situation makes her toy with the idea of accepting the woman’s offer so that her mother and Onu may be fed. After days of anxious brooding and vacillation, she finally makes up her mind to sell herself. She takes the money from the jubilant woman and ties it up in a bit of gunny-bag which her mother usually keeps under her head at night. She has planned to go with the betel-woman early one morning.

By an ironic coincident her mother has planned to leave her children the same morning and to put an end to her life by jumping into the river from a bridge. Kajoli is the first to get up and she stealthily
leaves the place. She joins the betel-seller and together they proceed
towards a house of ill-fame for which the woman is obviously a
procuress. On the way Kajoli hears some boys selling newspapers
shouting the most important news of the day.

There is to be a hunger-strike among the political prisoners at
Dehra Dun. She also understands that her dear Devata is to be leader of
the Satyagrahis. This news changes the entire course of her life and saves
her from the jaws of degradation. She sees the image of the revered old
man before her mind’s eye and his parting advice given to the people of
Baruni echoes in her ears: “Be strong. Be true. Be deathless.”

With a pang of remorse she realizes that she has let him down
and debased herself. A few casual words spoken by the betel-seller give
her an idea. The woman remarks that a newspaper which contains such
news will sell like hot cakes and that a boy could earn a commission of
two annas by selling a dozen copies. Kajoli eagerly pounces on the idea
and acts swiftly and firmly. She buys three dozen copies of the paper
and tells the woman that she has changed her mind and will return her
money – minus a loan for payment of deposit for the paper.

The woman is astounded, but Kajoli calls her ‘jackal woman’,
slaps her on the face and leaves her gaping in amazement. This is
Kajoli’s exit from the story; her future is left to the reader’s guess, but 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.

The woman tells Kajoli at the crossroads which the correct way to the brothel is because Kajoli has not yet been to the place and this is to be her first visit to it. Kajoli’s innocence is unmistakably indicated in this brief dialogue. Moreover, the dialogue and the accompanying action take on a figurative significance as the two characters have come to the parting of the ways. The betel-seller’s way and Kajoli’s way are different. There is something providential in Kajoli’s choice of the correct path because she might have been irretrievably lost if she had not seen the newspaper boys and heard their shouting voices precisely at the moment. The story of Kajoli is thus not a story of redemption from sin but of providential escape from moral fall.

The fate of Kajoli’s mother is a matter of conjecture. It is a little unnatural that she resolves to abandon her children to their fate and kill herself. But does she succeed in her attempt? Just at the moment when she is struggling to climb up the rail of the bridge from where she is to hurl herself into the river the police wagon carrying Rahoul to prison comes up to the bridge and the glare of the head-lights falls on deaf ears. As he watches the woman, he sees her pausing and flopping to her feet. At this point we have the enigmatic description:

He saw her face turn about on the stem of her neck as though seekingly. Pulled from her frenzied desperation? Saved? His
anxious eyes clung to the figure till the lorry swung out of the bridge. 

The reader is left to brood over the question whether the mother was saved from death by the appearance of the vehicle at the crucial moment. The author is in no mood to give a neat answer to the question; on the contrary he poses the question deliberately so as to produce the particular artistic effect he has in mind. It is possible to analyze this effect. First one may ask oneself whether preventing the woman from dying would mean ‘saving’ her. What is she to be saved for? In the context, she will be saved only for hunger. This is how the author indicates the thought that passes through Rahoul’s mind as the truck moves away from the bridge:

Another prisoner trying to escape from hunger land, he brooded, with a deep sigh ... 

Death for her would be a liberation rather than punishment. The artist’s central concern is not what is to happen to her but what she has already passed through. The gesture of despair that she makes and the difference of the police guards who do not care to stop the truck effectively dramatize the hell from which she tries to escape.

The novelist is not interested in spelling out the details of her future. Secondly the novelist has the choice of two main alternatives not to speak of other less obvious ones. These alternatives are depiction of
the fate of a whole community, and portrayal of the lot of an individual or a small group of individuals. It is mainly a question of perspective. An individual’s experience may be projected in such a way as to symbolize the experience of a large group, but it is just possible that one may see the trees and not the woods.

In So Many Hungers the emphasis is definitely on the lot of the many rather than any individual’s lot. Against a background which depicts jackals eating even living human beings, a mother trying to put her starving child to sleep by burying it alive, the dead body of a mother lying for hours on a railway platform in the metropolis with her living baby lying by her side, the fate of a single individual is not of great moment.

The artist may intentionally leave the fate of the individual uncertain in order to focus attention on the universal catastrophe. An interesting example of such focusing may be seen in Boris Pasternak’s Doctor Zhivago. In that masterpiece dealing with the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, what primarily concerns the novelist is the disintegration of a society and a social order. Lara, the heroine, is an intensely real character who wins the sympathy of the reader, but at the end of the novel she just disappears without any definite indication of what happens to her. This is what Pasternak tells the reader about Lara’s disappearance:

“She vanished without a trace and probably died somewhere, forgotten as a
The uncertainty of Lara’s fate disturbs us and is intended to do so. The gain which compensates for our harrowing uncertainty is a more powerful realization of the general disorder beside which the fate of the individual pales into insignificance.

III

The Bengal Famine of 1943 and the Quit India Movement of 1942 figure prominently in the book. The plot of the novel is woven out of two main strands - the story of the young scientist, Rahoul, and his family and the story of the peasant girl, Kajoli, and her family. Rahoul’s story is a representation in miniature of 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 became victims of a famine which was not an act of God, but which was brought about by the rapacity and selfishness of profiteers and the indifference of an alien Government.

Rahoul and his younger brother, Kunal, are the sons of a lawyer, Samarendra Basu, living in Calcutta. Samarendra’s father, Devesh Basu, does not live with the family. The small family represents in a way a cross-section of middle-class Indian society with its variety and contrasts. Rahoul has a D.Sc. degree from Cambridge where he had carried on research under a distinguished scientist. Before goin to
Cambridge, he had, like thousands of other young men, contemplated joining the Independence Movement and seeking arrest, but his father had shrewdly managed to send him away to England.

At the time the story begins, he is on the staff of a college in the city and continues his research on Cosmic Rays. He is happily married and a daughter is born to him. Rahoul’s desire is to throw in his lot with the people struggling for freedom and self-respect, but for the time being he refrains from action and the impression is created among the British officers that he is on the verge of a great scientific discovery that will turn the tide of war against the Fascists and Japan. Nevertheless he is a staunch nationalist and he cannot forget the hypocrisy of the foreign rulers who talk about the Four Freedoms which, so far as India is concerned, do not include the freedom to be free.

Kunal, the younger brother, is a spirited lad, affectionate and cheerful, but undisturbed by idealism or patriotic fervor. He joins the army as a junior officer because he loves the adventure and thrill of a soldier’s life. He also tells Rahoul that India will rise in the esteem of her rulers if Indians prove their courage and worth on the field of battle. Kunal figures only in the earlier part of the novel; he leaves home for service in North America and in Italy. Towards the end of the novel Samarendra gets a telegram from the Defence Department informing him that Captain Kunal Basu of the Indian Artillery has been reported missing.
Samarendra Basu, the father, is only nominally a lawyer. He is greedy and not over scrupulous where money is concerned. Having suffered privations in his younger days, his main aim is to mass wealth for himself and his family. There is not even a tinge of patriotism in him; all that he desires is affluence, safety and respectability. When World War II starts, he cleverly makes use of the opportunity to multiply his wealth by speculation in shares. When a beggar mentions casually that a grain of rice would be more welcome to him than money, Samarendra is quick to understand that rice is becoming scarce and that a good way to make money will be by hoarding it and selling at the most appropriate time. As a result a trading concern with the ironic name Cheap Rice, Limed, is formed.

One of the partners in the sordid enterprise is Sir Ablabandhu, a prince among black-marketeers. The technique employed by the company is to tempt all the small farmers to sell not only all their stock of rice but also the unharvested crops, to store the rice safely in a few places and to wait until the cornering has boosted the price.

The famine which results is, therefore, entirely engineered by man. Samarendra’s wealth is ill-gotten and he wants his sons to lead comfortable, self-centered lives. He curries favour with the Governor of the Province and other high-placed British officials. To enhance the prestige of the family and to protect Rahoul, he hints to the Chief Secretary to the Government that he is engaged in research work of great potential value and that any day he might discover a Death Ray which the Allied Powers could make use of in order to win the war.
Samarendra’s dream-castle is shattered in the end. Kunal is reported missing somewhere in Italy and Rahoul is arrested when he joins the Quit India Movement. Ironically it is at this moment of sorrow and defeat that he learns that the British Government has honored him by the award of the title, C.I.E. (Companion of the Indian Empire).

Samarendra’s father, Devesh Basu, is a Gandhian character. Fired with patriotism and full of love for the common people, he has settled down in a village called Baruni. The people of the village have so much affection and veneration for him that they call him ‘Devata’. He is incapable of feeling superior to or different from the simple people of the village and is accepted as a friend, philosopher and guide. One cannot think of two characters more diametrically opposed to each other than Devata and his son.

The two young men, Rahoul and Kunal, are more at home with their grandfather than with their father. Rahoul has been deeply influenced by Devata. Before his father had sent him to Cambridge for study, he had sought the advice of his grandfather and the letter had told him without hesitation that the call of the country came first and that Cambridge could wait. When Rahoul explained that residence at Cambridge would give him sufficient knowledge of the English people to enable him to fight them after his return to India, Devata had asked him to remember that their quarrel was with the British rulers and not the British people.
Devata is especially fond of one peasant family in Baruni. This family consists of a peasant, his wife and three children, two boys named Kanu and Onu and a daughter, Kajoli, the heroine of the novel. The head of the family and the elder boy are in prison for their participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement. Devata feels that he is the head of the family and always refers to Kajoli’s mother as his daughter and to Kajoli as his grand-daughter. He shares their simple food and unhesitatingly takes his grandson, Rahoul with him to join them at the meal when he visits Baruni.

Devata gives the villagers inspiration and guidance when they are in difficulties. When they join the national movement he advises them to be non-violent. Early in the novel, some time after Rahoul’s first visit to Baruni, Devata himself is arrested and taken to prison. As he is about to be taken away, he speaks these words of exhortation to the villagers: “The supreme test has come. Be strong. Be true. Be deathless.”

Later, Devata is taken to Dehra Dun and when the Quit India Movement is at its zenith, he undertakes a fast in prison. The news of the fast reported in the newspapers reaches Kajoli at a most critical moment in her tragic life. She recollects the parting words of advice he had spoken at Baruni and just as the words of the song sung by Pippa in Browning’s Pippa Passers transform the lives of a few characters who happen to hear them, they prompt Kajoli to take a momentous decision which saves her from ignominy and shame. Truly, Devata is her guardian angel. It is the memory of his saintly personality and his
stirring message that give her the strength to stand up with head erect and to face life armed with nothing but fortitude and purity of heart.

Rahoul, in spite of his known nationalistic leanings, is left alone for a time by the Government because of the possibility of his discovering the Death Ray. His difficulties, however, increase as the days pass. The police are suspicious about his activities and employ a student to spy on him. This student sneaks into the laboratory in the absence of Rahoul and pries into his notes. Rahoul has been warned in time about the presence of the spy by a patriotic and devoted research student, Prokash. He advises Rahoul to keep the police on the wrong track by writing fake notes and pretending to be on the verge of discovering the Death Ray.

Rahoul’s heart is with the people of the country fighting for their freedom and particularly with the people of rural Bengal suffering untold agony because of an artificial famine. The leaders of the people are arrested one after another and imprisoned. The arrest and trial of Nehru in Gorakhpur has stirred the country, and his dignified and defiant statement made at the trial has caught the imagination of people and instilled courage and heroism in their minds. As a result of the scorched-earth policy followed by the British rulers in Bengal in anticipation of a Japanese invasion of India and the heinous activities of a few profiteers, thousands of people are rendered destitute and forced to quit their homes and to trek to Calcutta in search of food. Rahoul is deeply touched by the sight of their suffering.
A few of his experiences stand out prominently. A destitute woman lying on the railway platform giving suck to a baby dies, and the dead body lies there for several hours until picked up and disposed of. The baby continues to suck the breast of the dead mother. Another haunting experience is the plight of a destitute woman from the countryside who is stricken with labour pain and has nowhere to go and no one to help her. Rahoul takes her into his house with the help of his mother and his wife and tries to help her, but the woman dies before she can give birth to her child.

Rahoul is more and more convinced that a foreign government is incapable of solving the problems of the country and that freedom is an imperative need. When students in large numbers join the Quit India Movement, he feels that it is his duty to be with them. He seeks the advice of his grandfather who is in prison in Dehra Dun and then takes the plunge. He addresses the students and proclaims his view that the British should leave India:

“You have done us some good along with much evil. For the good you’ve done you have been paid in full. The accounts have been settled. Now for God’s sake, quit!”

A black van drives up early one morning to the Relief Centre where Rahoul has been feeding the destitutes daily and takes him away to jail. At the prison gate he is joined by other detenus. They are
undaunted and full of confidence for the future. As they are led into the prison they sing in chorus the memorable words written by Tagore:

“The more they tighten the chains, the more the chains loosen!”

The novel closes with this incident of men voluntarily seeking imprisonment so that the country may be free. Rahoul represents one class of freedom fighters – the upper middle class intellectuals. The novel reflects the fact that the national movement embraced all sections of the population – men and women, young and old, intellectuals and workers, people from the cities and people from countryside. One of the hungers that the novel deals with is the hunger for freedom.

So Many Hungers is not a novel depicting hungers alone; it gives us memorable pictures of the goodness and nobility of the rural folk, their simple ways and their characteristic attitudes to life. One of the earliest pictures that we see is that of the girl Kajoli showing respect to a visitor by washing his feet. The selflessness and decency of the peasants is indicated where Kajoli shows anxiety to bring food in time for the laborers working in their field and where the mother makes it clear to her son-in-law that whatever rice they have is to be shared with the kisans.
The adherence of the peasants to the highest code of morality known to them is illustrated in the scene in which a young man suggests to a group of hungry destitutes that they break into an eating place and seize whatever food is available. Three old men rebuke him, produce pieces of bread tied up in their loin cloth and tell the youth: “Eat, my son.” Even the little boy, Onu, shows how hunger need not make men selfish. He has been climbing up a tall fig-tree daily peasant, their exodus to the city and their abject misery and degradation.

Paul Verghese in his discussion of the novel considers Bhattacharya’s portrayal of the famine as exaggerated and cheap. The criticism is not valid because most of the situations depicted in the novel are true of life in the country even at normal times not to speak of a time of unusual hardship. Men without shelter, clothes and food are no new phenomenon in our land; myriads of them can still be seen on the pavements of our proud cities including the capital. Beggars hunting for food in garbage-bins are a common sight.

Occasionally one hears of a child being carried away by a jackal and we have in Jim Corbett’s book factual accounts of sick people carried away from their homes by man-eating tigers. There is no incident in the novel which can be said to be impossible and we have the novelist’s word for it that the story is based on factual reports.

We have in the novel a moving human story shown against the setting of a historical situation. Bhattacharya does not tell the story with cold detachment; his feelings are very much involved and he does not
hesitate to apportion blame for the tragedy where it is due. The novel 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 represents an artistic success.

Bhattacharya has dealt with some of the real concerns and problems of a period not far away from us and which the older generations among us have lived through. Yet it has to be mentioned that he does not show any affiliation with any political party or identify himself with any particular ideology.

In this respect he is very different from another contemporary novelist, Mulk Raj Anand, who also deals with similar themes but takes up a definitely leftist position. Bhattacharya reveals his admiration for Gandhi and Nehru and approves of some of the values for which the Indian National Congress stood, but he is no party-man and does not accept in toto the manifesto of any single party. What we have in this novel is a close personal observation of men and events and realistic and bold description of what is observed. The reporting is not merely journalistic because there is selection, organization and control.

The portrayal of characters in So Many Hungers is one instance of the novelist's artistic control over his material. While dealing with a
national crisis and widespread calamity, he has also to enrich the story and to appeal to the reader by portraying individual characters. The artistic problem involved is that of perspective, adjustment of the focus and correctly balancing one interest against the other so that the final effect may be what the artist is aiming at.

In this novel Bhattacharya is fundamentally preoccupied with the general rather than the particular. We have a clue to his purpose in the fact that two characters, one of whom figures all through the story, Kajoli’s father and mother, are not even given names. They are referred to all the time as father and mother. This is unmistakable proof that the author desires them to be regarded as symbols or types even though they may be sufficiently realized as individuals.

Dr. Srinivasa Iyengar remarks about the characters of the novel that though they have been individualized, they are nothing more than ‘algebraic symbols’. xvii This is true of some of the characters but certainly not of all. Where the individualization has not been adequately done, the omission is by design and is not due to technical incompetence. There are characters who stand out prominently such as Rahoul, Samarendra, Devata and Kajoli.

At the end of the novel the individual characters are deliberately pushed aside in fulfillment of the novelist’s design, but after we lay down the book. They remain stamped on our memory. This is particularly true of Kajoli whose innocence, goodness and strength leave an indelible impression on us. Every character is not developed to
the same extent for the ostensible reason that proper balance should be maintained between the story of a mass upheaval and the story of a few individuals.

So Many Hungers deals with many things that are depressing, but still it is not a depressing book. On the one side is the panorama of men and women emaciated by hunger and in rags. There are the vultures and jackals and, not essentially different from them, the greedy and rapacious men. We have the spectacle of boys fighting with other boys and animals for morsels of food ferreted out of garbage bins. On the other side we have glimpses into the hearts and souls of human beings and find therein abundant love, purity, strength and hope. “Be strong. Be deathless”, Devata tells the people of Baruni and at least some of them live up to this advice. A book which thus portrays the triumph of spirit over matter cannot depress the reader; on the contrary it conveys a message of confidence and hope.

V

The art of narration in Bhattacharya’s novels has a historical or contemporary context, which is rooted in character or situation. The narrative of his novels is based on a clash or conflict of the two opposing strands. In So Many Hungers, the national spirit is contrasted with the bureaucratic attitude. The novel has two plots. The one centres round the Basu family with young Rahoul as the chief figure, and the other presents the story of a peasant family with a young girl Kajoli as the chief character.
The first story has Samarendra, his father Devesh, his eldest son Rahoul as the main characters, and deals with India’s struggle for independence in the early forties. The second is concerned with the helpless suffering of the millions from a famine caused by selfish profiteers and indifferent British Government officials. Devesh Basu appears in both the stories of the novel. He is the source of inspiration to Rahoul and Kajoli, the two chief characters of the novel. Rama Jha has aptly remarked:

“The plot of this novel moves on two parallel lines. And both deal with the education of the main characters in the Gandhian way of life.” xviii

The novel also presents a contrast between city life and rural life. In the city, people work in mills and factories and manufacture goods on a large scale. In the rural areas, people work in the field and lead a life of simplicity. From their suffering they learn a lesson of humanity. Devata feels proud of the peasants:

“They are not bright and knowing and civilized like you city-breds, but they are good people. Centuries of hardship and strain have not destroyed their faith in human values.” xix
The statement implies a contrast. The city-breds are educated and superficially civilized, but the rural people learn their lessons from misery and distress. They feel love for the people which urban people are incapable of.

VI

Bhattacharya’s second novel, Music for Mohini, is a detailed study in the old and the new values of life in Indian society. The novel deals with Indian society which is in the melting-plot because of various conflicting ideologies, each being championed by one group or another. Here, Bhattacharya puts forward the view that reconciliation between the contrary ideas and values – modern and traditional – can lead to a happy and harmonious life. In order to bring out the virtues of moderation and integration, and to emphasize his major theme of blending the modern and the conventional, the novelist uses the dialectical method of contrast in depicting his characters.

There are two sets of characters: first, those who uphold the old, established values of the past and secondly, those who plead for a change and deviation from the dead past in favour of the new and unconventional value-pattern that suits the modern age. The novelist juxtaposes different antagonistic characters in order to bring out their ideological conflict, and then finally leads them towards a reconciliation so as to create a harmony in life.
In the earlier part of the novel, as the story unfolds itself at Mohini’s parental home, her father, the Professor, is shown in conflict with Old Mother. Mohini’s father is a highly educated and modern-minded man. He is inspired by the norms and fashions of the modern times. He gets his daughter, Mohini, admitted to a Christian convent school, and also allows her to become a radio singer. He does not see any harm in Mohini’s songs being recorded and sold in open market. But his mother – Old Mother – is very much opposed to this wide publicity of his granddaughter. She is above seventy, conservative and rigid in staunch supporter of the old and established moral values.

The old lady does not like her son’s ideas which appear odd to her. When he does not pay heed to her, she threatens to renounce the world. The situation threatens to turn inflammable, but the Professor handles it tactfully. Though there is a truce for the time being, but the real crisis occurs on the question of Mohini’s marriage. As the Professor is a man of modern ideas, he naturally wants to marry his daughter to an educated, urban bred and cultured boy. He rejects the outright tow proposals because the former party demanded a heavy dowry and the latter one comprises the uncultured lot who examine Mohini physically as if she were an article for sale in an auction.

Then there arrives a third party. This time the prospective groom comes with his friends. All of them are bright young men, good-mannered, gracious and courteous. Having seen the girl, they approve her. The Professor appreciates the boy wholeheartedly, and agrees to
marry Mohini to him. But Old Mother does not like the match at all. There ensues a conflict in the family.

The difference between the mother and the son are, however, soon after resolved when Jayadev appears on the scene and is found to be the most suitable groom for Mohini. He is accepted not only by the Professor and Old Mother, but also by Mohini herself as he combines in him the traditional as well as the modern values in both.

Mohini is happily married to Jayadev and comes to Behula as the new mistress of the Big House. Here she again encounters the old values personified in her mother-in-law. Mohini is a girl of the modern times. She is city-bred, suave, convent-educated and an upcoming radio-star whose songs have been recorded and displayed in public. She is a beautiful girl who likes all the good thing so life. She judges the world around her in terms of aesthetic values. Her heart is full of love for her husband, and she wants to be admired and loved by him in turn.

Jayadev, who is a visionary and an idealist, expects his wife to be different from an ordinary young woman with basic physical needs and requirements. He sees her as “Gargi” or “Maitreyi,” “no household drudge, nor decorative being, but an intellectual, striding besides man in a tireless quest for knowledge.” xx 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 limitation, she endeavours to rise to the expectation of her husband, shares his ideals and renders him positive help in his
programme of social re-construction. Thus Mohini not only comes closer to Jayadev, but also rescues the backward, ignorant and illiterate rural women from the darkness of orthodox living, and shows them a glimpse of the modern times.

Mohini also works for bringing about a fusion of the old and the new values in the lives of the womenfolk of Behula. At first Mohini finds life at the Big House almost unbearable. As she has been brought up in an altogether different type of environment, she has to struggle hard “to retouch her mental values, readjust her expectations” before she is able to accommodate herself comfortably at Behula. Gradually, the struggle between the contrasting values that is so intense and fierce in the beginning becomes less and less severe, and resolves finally into a happy compromise. Both Mohini and her mother-in-law, representing the modern and the traditional values respectively, begin to understand each other better and live amicably.

The synthesis of the old and the new values is also evident in the story of Harindra's family. Harindra's father, the old Kaviraj, has been practicing the ancient Indian Ayurvedic system of medicine for over forty years. He considers this medical system very efficacious as a cure for all sorts of diseases. But his son, Hrindra, is a full-fledged surgeon, educated and trained in a Western-style medical college.

Often he argues with his father that his rigid ideas about the supremacy of the Ayurvedic medical system over all the others are false and funny. He pleads with the old man that modern medicines are
more efficacious in curing diseases. But his father is furious with rage because “here was a challenge to the millennium, ... To think that his son should be a carrier of the alien contamination: ... What madness had come upon him that he had sent his son to town and let him study at a medical school where they cut up live rats and dissected corpses.”

The old man openly ridicules his son and his ideas.

However, later he recognizes the efficacy of the modern Allopathic medical system when he fails to cure his ailing wife. The old man has been trying Ayurvedic medicines on the patient for quite a few days, never allowing his son to treat her with the western medicines. But when her condition deteriorates more and more, and all hopes of her survival are lost, he yields to Harindra's wishes to treat her. The miracle happens and the mother’s life is saved. The old man lives happily with his wife and son, quite reconciled to the modern values and systems.

Thus Bhabani Bhattacharya quite successfully blends the two contrary values – tradition and modernity – Music for Mohini, and the novel virtually becomes the novelist’s plea to such a fusion in every sphere of life.

**VII**

Music for Mohini is a forward-looking novel in which the author dwells on certain sociological aspects of Indian life and suggests the direction in which we have to move if we are to fully benefit by our
political freedom. This theme also figures prominently in A Goddess Named Gold.

Viewed as a story, Music for Mohini portrays the intellectual and emotional development of the heroine, Mohini, from care-free and sheltered girlhood to the position of a wife and the mistress of a prominent and influential house with great traditions. To the extent that it is concerned with the development of a mind, the novel is a study in psychology without the involutions and complexities of a typical psychological novel. When the story begins, Mohini is a girl of seventeen, studying at school and growing up in a home where she is petted and given complete freedom. She is motherless and is brought up by her father who is referred to all through the novel as “Father” or as “the Professor” and her grand mother who also remains unchristened and is called “Old Mother”.

In the opening chapter of the novel Mohini is shown competing with her younger brother, Heeralal, in the childish game of collecting English proper names which sounds funny to Indian ears such as Silverthorne, Longstreet, Rainbird or Slaughter. At the end of the novel she has been married for two or three years and is returning to her parent’s home for a first holiday, an expectant mother and lady of the Big House of Behula. One of the main themes in the novel is the process of her growth and maturation – the metamorphosis of the care-free girl into the life partner of a thoughtful idealist who desires to play his part in the building of the country’s future.
At the commencement of the novel, Mohini is uninhibited, unaffected by any difficulty or worry and therefore radiantly happy. Life is a bed of roses for her. Old Mother and her father are affectionate and indulgent and little Heeralal is a fond brother and playmate.

In a typical scene, the brother and sister fight each other for fun in the absence of the 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 text-book on Ancient India:

“Reaching Benares, Gautama Buddha delivered his first sermon on the Noble Eightfold Path leading to peace. The second sermon stressed the need of detachment from the world’s affairs as the means to freedom. The third, delivered on a mountain-side…”

The Professor is taken aback when he casually looks at the volume she has kept opening front of her and discovery that it is a Bengali novel, The Poisored Kiss. His spontaneous reaction is to pull her ears one after the other as he has done in the case of Heeralal. This seems to be a great humiliation for Mohini, and the grand mother is the first to notice it and speak about it to the father.

Bhattacharya brings out the fact that like other normal girls of her age she has begun to indulge in romantic fancies and to dream of being
loved and in love. He also emphasizes through the delineation of two other juvenile characters, Bindu the cook’s daughter who is only fourteen, and another girl in the neighbourhood whose boy-friend uses kites to send her love-letters secretly, that it is a sign of normal vitality for a young person to entertain thoughts of love.

As a result of Old Mother’s prompting, several proposals for Mohini’s marriage are considered and the conventional inspection of the brides carried out by a few parties. One proposal comes through the agency of a bangle-seller. The bridegroom suggested is a handsome, well-educated and affluent young man in the late twenties by name Jayadev who is the head of an aristocratic family in the village, Behula, called the Big House.

After the marriage ceremony which is described by Bhattacharya in considerable detail, Mohini goes to her new home with Jayadev accompanied by Heeralal and the cook who are to keep her company for a few weeks. After the train journey, when the couple travel towards Behula first in a bullock-cart and then in a palanquin, the reader gets the distinct feeling that Mohini is being transported from a modernistic home in the city to another in the heart of rural Bengal dominated by orthodoxy, convention and ritual.

Music is tolerated only if it is used for the purpose of worship. The ladies of the Big House are not to move out of the house on foot; when they must go anywhere they have to use either a palanquin or a bullock-cart. The main problem for Mohini in the Big House is that of
mental adjustment. Even before two or three days have passed, she realizes that Jayadev is not what she would desire a husband to be.

Mohini has her adjustments to make with her mother-in-law and the Big House too. The mother is personally very considerable and affectionate towards Mohini, but nevertheless expects her to confirm to the time-honoured way of life. She makes the girl understand that now she is the mistress of the house by handing over to her the key of the safe in which all the money and jewellery is kept. The Big House at last becomes inhabited in Mohini's imagination by the spirits of all the ancestors of Jayadev.

A crisis in Mohini's life and in the life of the Big House itself comes when Jayadev is approaching the age of twenty-eight. An astrologer has predicted that Jayadev will die an untimely death at this age unless a child is born to him by then. The mother is naturally most anxious that Mohini should become a mother in order to prevent the misfortune of Jayadev's death and the greater calamity of the Big House coming to its end through the lack of an heir.

Fortunately for Mohini it becomes known that she is already pregnant. The danger of her life once again becomes music for her. What is of primary importance to note is the fact that she has reestablished harmony within herself only by her psychological growth and her change of outlook. A slip of a girl brought up in urban ways, has at last blossomed into a responsible woman, willingly and
cheerfully undertaking the responsibility of guiding the destiny of a family with its roots in the past.

**VIII**

The breaking down of the barriers of caste and the elimination of untouchability are other major steps mentioned in the novel. Being a novel which deals with a marriage and with life both in Calcutta and the countryside, Music for Mohini gives the author plenty of scope for description. The city figures only in the earlier part of the novel and since the incidents in this part take place mostly in the Professor’s home, there is not much room for description of city life. We have a picture of the street on which the house is situated. This is followed by a shrewdly perceptive description of the noisy peddlers and their cries. This description concludes with the sentence:

“The pavement barber, his scissors poised, planted himself in front of the corner-house cookshop named Glutton’s Inn, and yelled in a shrill voice: ‘Head four pice, chin two pice, armpits gratis.’”

Mohini’s first journey to Behula, the plains covered with mustard blossoms, the ride in the bullock-cart and in the palanquin, the uninhibited behaviour of the girls who befriend Mohini, life in the Big
House with its cast-iron discipline and many other things are presented with clearness and force.

The conventional inspection of a prospective bride and the marriage ceremony get special attention in the novel. One of a party of elders who come to see Mohini plies her with a number of questions relating to mythology and religion. The questions concern the number of divine incarnations that the Earth has witnessed, the name of the stars that control man’s destiny and the nature of Yoga. Not quite satisfied with the girl’s answers, the man demands a higher dowry than has been offered. Another party subjects poor Mohini to a grueling physical inspection which is described thus:

“Four pairs of eyes surveyed the girl from foot to head. She had to walk a few steps at the mother’s bidding to prove she did not lack grace of movement. They fumbled with her prettily arranged hair and unloosed it down her back to know its length. They rubbed her face with their thumbs to make sure the fair complexion was natural, not of paint.”

The preparations for the wedding and the ceremony itself are described at some length. Details such as the turmeric ceremoniously carried to the bride’s home, the trayload of gifts including the lovely saris, the arrival of the bridegroom, the ceremony called the Auspicious
Glance during which the bride and bridegroom see each other for the first time, the giving away of the bride by the father to the accompaniment of chanting by the priests and with the holy stone as witness, are given without undue interface with the progress of the narration. The ceremonial reaction of the newly wedded wife at the husband’s place also gets adequate treatment.

Bhattacharya shows his power of observation and his understanding of ordinary men and their life in his description of the journey by bullock-cart to Behula from the railway station. Ganesh, the cartman, urges the oxen forward with these very human words: “Tchuk! Tchuk! Run, good folk. Do not sleep.” He is very eager to prove to Heeralal how fast his oxen can run. On the way, seeing the eyes of the oxen drawing a cart coming in the opposite direction at night, Heeralal takes them to be tigers and raises an alarm. Another cartman encountered on the way has run short of bean-oil for his lamp and wishes to borrow some from Ganesh. Ganesh parts with the oil only after getting the price he demands. All these touches add life and colour to the narration.

IX

Bhattacharya likewise appreciates the service of the professional story-teller who goes round the villages giving lucid and colourful expositions of stories from the Puranas and other sources. These performances aided by music and wit keep our legendary lore alive and help to reinforce religious faith. Ceremonies also have their value. For
instance, the ceremony of a sister anointing her brother or brothers, as an incident in the novel illustrates, subserves the purpose of giving colour to life and evokes tender fraternal feeling.

Bhattacharya is not an iconoclast who wants to demolish everything old in order to find room for something new. There is a core of conservatism in his thinking which is proved by the respect he shows for many of our traditional values. Regarding the place of woman in society and in the home, his attitude is not one of radical feminism. He is conscious of the fact that the Hindu woman has an ‘ancient hunger to offer worship’ – that is worship to the husband.

Marriage changes a girl’s attitude fundamentally; she no longer desires to live for herself and is willing to make the necessary sacrifices and adjustments that her situation demands. This is precisely what the heroine does in the novel. Old Mother narrates on one occasion how Mohini’s mother came from an affluent family but after marrying the struggling professor, she had accommodated herself to her lot and had borne her poverty with a smile. The following comment made by the author while describing the wedding ceremony, has no trace of disapproval:

A hundred thousand Hindu maids each bridal day of the year give their hearts to their unknown husbands, asking nothing in return but approval. xxvii
To a Hindu woman as depicted in the novel, April is not the cruelest month. She does not seek barren love; the primary object of marriage is to beget children. Children alone make the survival and perpetuation of traditions and values possible. Bhattacharya makes numerous references in the novel to the craving of a woman for children. In the light of the central importance attached to offspring, the quotation from the marriage mantra with which the seventh chapter closes, has structural and artistic significance:

O Indra, king of all the gods, let this lady
be the mother of heroine sons. xxviii

During the brief period of agony and suspense when Mohini fears that she is not going to bear a child, she even prepares herself to tolerate a co-wife, Sudha, if fate should will so - in the interest of her husband and the family. This is a measure of the self-sacrifice that a wife is capable of. The novelist makes use of this detail to emphasize the solidity and goodness of some of our traditions.

If the descriptions of meals in the novel are any indication, Bhattacharya is a connoisseur in food. The reader gets a taste of the noonday meal in the Professor’s house. We enjoy the marriage feast vicariously through the palate of Heeralal - ‘fish and meat and pawn rissoles and curried lobsters and sweet rice with almonds’ and especially the ‘lobsters, as fat and long as cucumber.’ xxix The festival meal at the Big House on the arrival of Mohini is described with similar gusto and relish.
Music for Mohini presents us a picture of a microcosm governed by conventions but it also proclaims that below the plaid surface there is the simmering of discontent. The voice of protest is audible and we get the feeling that it will rise in volume and intensity till it is listened to.

X

The most outstanding among the characters of the novel are Old Mother and Jayadev’s mother who have their orthodoxy in common but are nevertheless sharply distinguished from each other. Old Mother is gentle and capable of winking at heterodoxy. She always states her point of view and sometimes uses the weapon of asking her ‘childling’ to send her away to the Holy City. If, however, she loses the battle she accepts defeat quietly and there that matter ends. Mohini’s mother-in-law is made of different metal. She is rigid and uncompromising in her view and in her we have the bastion of orthodoxy in the novel.

When she is challenged and defeated in the end by Jayadev, she does not change her views. She only accepts the logic of the situation and concedes that her son has his convictions as she has hers. In spite of her formidable exterior, the mother has her human side which is revealed deftly in the novel. When she asks Mohini to give her blood to the goddess, she also volunteers to offer the same sacrifice, ‘not that it would count – as an example, an encouragement.’
Mohini is reminded of her grandmother, who, when she had refused to drink a bitter quinine mixture once during her childhood when ill with malaria, had encouraged her with the offer to drink some of the medicine herself and done so for some weeks. Mohini tells herself that all mothers are like that. There seems to be a great inconsistency in the mother’s character when she fabricates a mean and unscrupulous plot to save her son’s life and thereby ensure the perpetuation of the family. She encourages the luckless Sudha to act the part of temptress so that she might become the mother of Jayadev’s child. Sudha agrees but the plan is foiled by the intervention of Providence. This degradation of the mother’s character, however laudable her objective, is a flaw in her characterization.

Mohini’s character is convincingly drawn. As mentioned earlier, the evolution of her personality ending with the harmony which she achieves through her capacity to change and to compromise is one of the themes of the novel. The boy, Ranjan, is introduced as a means to bring out the tenderness and the mother instinct in Mohini in the same way as the destitute boy Obhijit is introduced in He Who Rides a Tiger. One cannot help feeling that the character of Jayadev is only imperfectly realized. The novel says a good deal about his ideals and aspirations but gives little evidence of his ability to translate them into action. The temple episode reveals his moral courage, but not his capacity for leadership and positive action. As we lay down the book we wonder whether all his plans are not going to meet with the same fate as his projected thesis.
Music for Mohini is a novel with rather restricted scope dealing with a limited area of life and experience. Many themes are named and suggested, but only one of them is effectively developed. The rebuilding of a new society for Free India and a reorientation of values through a blending of past and present are among the issue raised. The only theme that is properly dealt with is the theme of a girl’s mental growth and adjustment to her new role as wife. Cultural integration is only academically discussed and not fictionally rendered. The young reformers of Behula so not strike us as more effective than members of a school or college Society for rural service. Jayadev, we are told, will boldly come out as their leader when they have gained sufficient popular support. The novel unfortunately does not give us the feeling that this condition is likely to be fulfilled.
References:

i  B. Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers (New Delhi, 1978), P. 65.

ii  Ibid., P. 67.

iii Ibid., P. 40.

iv Ibid., P. 17.

v  Ibid., P. 146.

vi Ibid., P. 178.

vii Ibid., P. 111.

viii Ibid., P. 25.

ix Ibid., P. 214.

x  Ibid., P. 214.


xii B. Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers (New Delhi, 1978), P. 73.

xiii Ibid., P. 212.
xiv  Ibid., P. 215.


 xvi  Dr. Bhattacharya mentions in a personal letter written to K. R. Chandrasekharan.


 xviii Rama Jha, Gandhian Thought and Indo-Anglian Novelists (New Delhi, 1983), P. 158.

 xix B. Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers (New Delhi, 1978), P. 24.

 xx  Music for Mohini, P. 71.

 xxi  Ibid., P. 108.

 xxii Ibid., P. 140.

 xxiii Ibid., P. 9.

 xxiv Ibid., P. 19.

 xxv Ibid., P. 47.
xxvi  Ibid., P. 87.

xxvii Ibid., P. 74.

xxviii Ibid., P. 74.

xxix  Ibid., P. 70.

xxx  Ibid., P. 213.
CHAPTER – 3

Bhabani Bhattacharyya’s He Who Rides a Tiger and a Goddess Named Gold: A Critical Study
He Who Rides a Tiger also presents the blending of the traditional and the modern values. Casteism or castelessness? Faith or no faith? The pendulum remains swinging from one extreme to the other throughout the story, and is finally set at rest with a synthesis of all the contrarieties.

Through the story of Kalo, the hero of the novel, Bhabani Bhattacharya illustrates that neither a rigid adherence to the established social code nor an abrupt break from it is beneficial to man. The true happiness and fulfillment in life can be attained only after a moderation of temperament – with a due regard for the established conventional and an equal awareness of the requirements of the modern age.

Kalo, the blacksmith of Jharna town, is a simple man. He has a firm faith in the traditional values of life. The caste hierarchy is sunk deep in his spirit and his “roots were deep in the age-richened soil of his own caste.” Though unable to understand the validity or the utility
of the established social order, Kalo has never questioned its existence. His is a simple set of values.

Honesty, hard-work and faith in law and justice are the core of his being. He is “a man of accepted convention” after sometime, an unhappy turn of events and odd circumstances shake his faith in the existing social set-up. He wants to know why there is so much injustice and inhumanity in society. And when he is at loss to find an answer, the very “questions spread like some corroding acid over the faith, the values by which he had lived.”

The oppressive awareness of his low birth, poverty, hunger, three month’s rigorous imprisonment for a petty offence, his work as a brothel-house agent, and last but not the least, Lekha’s degradation and humiliation in the harlot-house, are the factors which turn Kalo into a social rebel.

Disillusioned about the sense of social justice, Kalo metamorphoses himself. He casts away the old values by which he has lived his past life and wages war against the entire social system:

His battle was with the accuser, the centuries-old tradition, from which had come the inner climate of his being ... Kalo had not only to deny but to eradicate the values by which he had been bred. He
had to cut his social taproot and give up his inheritance. iii

He renounces his caste and becomes a twice-born by wearing the nine-stranded sacred Brahminic thread across his chest. In this way, the slow-witted and conservative “Kamar” revolt against “tradition.” He feels himself free from his spiritual bondage:

With that gesture he had thrown off the heavy yoke of his past and flouted the three thousand years of his yesterday. Putting on the scared thread he had made himself rootless. The terror of that act was followed by a deep sense of release. He had transcended the station that birth and blood had assigned him. Exhilaration and new courage filled him. iv

With his “release” from the oppressive bondage of class and caste, Kalo emerges as a modern man. No more does he think a Brahmin superior and God’s chosen one. He starts believing in the modern man’s faith in equality between man and man, and tells Viswanath: “All men are born equal.” v

But this situation does not continue for long, and soon afterwards, the past starts haunting him. Though Kalo in the Brahminic garb moves on a new plane in society, the “Kamar” within him remains
alive and intact. There erupts a battle between his two contradictory faces: Mangal Adhikari and Kalo, representing the new and the old ways of life respectively. Sometimes Kalo feels that “a true god was in the sanctum. The trick by which he had installed a fake was unreal, false, better forgotten. Kalo as Mangal Adhikari had truly attained reincarnation.” vi But at other times, he also identifies himself with Viswanath, and thus has “nothing but irreverence for the temple and all it stood for.” vii

This inner conflict continues in Kalo’s mind until it becomes unbearable to him. The moment comes when Kalo has to make a manly decision “to kill the tiger” viii and thereby descend to solid earth from his lofty seat. His daughter, Chandra Lekha, bent upon destroying herself for his sake, further forces his decision, and finally, he reveals the astounding truth: “I who made this temple was not born a Brahmin.” ix The crisis of his spirit ends and Kalo becomes his real self again.

Although “out of the nine-petalled stone lotus” Kalo walks “down to the soft earth,” x and thus returns from where he had started his journey, he is no more the Kalo of the past now. There is a big change in him. His outlook has been broadened. He is disillusioned and awakened. No more does he feel inferior to any one in caste or social status:

Never again would the smith be despised, mocked, trampled upon. Never again. For
the fetters of his mind had been cut. The look in his eyes was clear and undazzled.

Thus Kalo comes to synthesize the old and the new in his personality. The blending between the traditional and the modern values is also evident at the end of the novel when B-10 and Viswanath return and stand united with Kalo in his hour of decision. Both of them are two facets of Kalo’s self, the former representing the unconventional and the latter symbolizing the conventional elements in Kalo.

He has his leanings to and attachment for both of them. B-10 is an ideal man and a hero for him. Though he has not known B-10 for long, yet he says: “I have faith in him.” He finds himself identical with B-10 in the sense that both are craftsmen, working with their hands. Besides B-10, Kalo has in him something of Viswanath also.

Bhattacharya expresses that “a curious fellow-feeling rose sometimes in him and cut the distance between them.” It is the spontaneous fellow-feeling between two persons of the same caste and profession out of which Kalo, despite his Brahminic posture, has “identified himself with Viswanath.”

As soon as both Viswanath and B-10 leave him, Kalo is faced with an utter emotional crisis. The moment of their rejoining him is the moment of Kalo’s emerging victorious out of this spiritual crisis. Thus
there is a blending of the unconventional and the conventional elements in Kalo’s person.

The union of Chandra Lekha with B-10 is another instance of the blending between the traditional and the modern elements of life in the sense that it will be a union of the lowest and the highest. While the possibilities of this marriage are being explored, Kalo underlines Bhattacharya’s own philosophy of synthesis when he observes: “In life, sometimes, a big compromise has to be made.”

II

He Who Rides a Tiger is the third novel written by Bhabani Bhattacharya. It has a good deal in common with So Many Hungers. The Indian freedom struggle and the Bengal Famine of 1943 are the two major themes introduced in the earlier novel. The misery and degradation produced by the famine make a more powerful impression on the reader’s mind than the other theme because of the novelist’s dramatic treatment of it.

In He Who Ride a Tiger, the Quit India Movement is mentioned and lies in the background, but the spectre of the famine looms large on the horizon. The two novels are in a way twins and owe their inspiration to the same sources. There is, however, great difference between them with respect to the treatment of the theme and the final effect aimed at and produced. While the earlier novel focuses attention on the national movement and Bengal’s travail and their cataclysmic
effect on the teeming millions of people, the later novel is more concerned with the history of one mind or at the most of two or three minds.

The famine is the Valley of the Shadow of Death through which they have to pass before they attain their full stature as human beings. The hero, Kalo, in particular, chastened and purified by his experiences and sufferings, learns the secret that to be true to one’s own self is the greatest achievement of man. It is when he liberates himself from the chains that enslave the spirit that his friend, Biten, congratulates him and tells him: “Your story will be a legend of freedom…”

Kalo is a dark-skinned blacksmith in the small town, Jharna, competent in his trade, industrious and ambitious. His pretty wife dies of childbirth. The baby daughter is named Chandra Lekha - a name casually suggested by the priest when he came to the smithy for some work before the confinement. As the girl grows up under the tender care of the rough artisan, she displays unusual intelligent and she has inherited her mother’s good looks. Kalo sends her to the local English Convent School where her presence is frowned upon by the girls belonging to the higher castes.

Kalo is criticized for his presumptuousness both by the high-caste people and the people at his level. As Chandra Lekha moves up from one class to another at school, her father is filled with pride and joy. He is at times conscious of his own mental backwardness and desires to improve himself by reading his daughter’s books at night when she is
asleep. In her final year at school, Chandra Lekha takes part in an all-State essay writing competition, and to the great joy of her father, her essay is adjudged the best and she gets a gold medal.

Kalo takes it out of its casket every day and spends some time fondly looking at it. The features which are clearly brought out in the story at this stage are the low station occupied by father and daughter and their consciousness of it, the girl’s unusual cleverness and attainments and the touching tenderness of their mutual affection.

The Shadow of the Bengal Famine now begins to fall over Jharna town. Food grains become scarce and unemployment becomes more and more acute. Weavers and other tradesmen sell their implements for a pittance and leave the town. Kalo does not find enough work and his hammer and blowpipe which he affectionately calls Thunderbolt and Swollen Cheek, become idle. Petty traders from the cities take advantage of the situation and buy implements and household articles at bargain prices. Agents from brothels also roam from place to place trying to snare away good-looking and impoverished girls.

One such agent talks to Chandra Lekha when she is alone in the house in insinuating language and for the time being induces her to sell a pair of gold bangles that she is wearing. Kalo surveys the whole position and decides to go to Calcutta where he hopes to find work in some smithy or workshop. He leaves his daughter with a heavy heart in the care of an old aunt. He has no money even to buy a railway ticket; all that he has with him is a little treacle rice in a cloth bundle.
Traveling on the foot-board of a train, he is tempted to steal some bananas from a carriage when he is ravenously hungry. He is arrested and tried for this offence. The magistrate is most harsh and unimaginative: when Kalo pleads that he stole so as to preserve his life for the sake of his family, he asks: “Why did you have to live?” Kalo is sentenced to three months’ imprisonment with hard labour and taken away to jail.

In the prison Kalo shares a cell with a young man from Calcutta whose real name is revealed to be Bikash Mukherji at the end of the novel but who, like all other prisoners, is known in the prison by his number, B-10. B-10 is under sentence of imprisonment for the offence of having protested against a policeman beating up and killing a hungry destitute in the city who had stood before and eating-place and stared at the food.

A bond of sympathy is immediately established between the two men. B-10 transmits his revolutionary fervour to Kalo and convinces him that the right answer to a society which has shown so much inhuman callousness is to hit back. Very casually he mentions to Kalo one of several ways in which to retaliate; the way is to fake a miracle, to get a temple raised by exploiting the gullibility of people and to make fools of them by making them worship a bogus image. This idea lurks in the soil of Kalo’s mind to germinate and to sprout into a mighty trace in due course.
In depicting the life of Kalo during the period immediately following his release from prison, Bhattacharya gives a harrowing account of the plight of destitutes in Calcutta. One of the first acts after arriving in Calcutta is to write to Lekha telling her that he is in the city and vaguely mentioning that he has suffered greatly. He does not wish to cause her distress by revealing the truth. Kalo now remembers what the brothel-agent had told him at Jharna, namely that if ever he was in trouble about finding a job, and he could seek the help of one Rajani Bose who would give him work and fair wages.

Kalo reluctantly takes up the work, begins to earn unexpectedly high wages and is able to make a handsome remittance to Lekha at home. At this juncture an incident takes place which marks a turning point in his life. One night, in one of the brothels for which he has been working as tout, he sees a rich customer enter one of the rooms. Immediately after that he hears the plaintive, protesting cries of a woman. The voice sounds strangely like that of Chandra Lekha. Within a couple of minutes the customer leaves the room in anger.

Driven by a strange foreboding, Kalo enters the room to find to his horror that girl is none other than his daughter. He hurriedly leads her out of the hell and takes her to his poor habitation. The tale told by her touches the tenderest chords in him. The meanness and cruelty shown by unscrupulous exploiters rouses his indignation. Society has now hurt him and his, not merely in the belly but in the soul. He must have his revenge.
The next development is the erection and inauguration of a temple on the hallowed spot. Money and materials pour in from all sides, especially from the black-marketeers and speculators for whom worship is an atonement for all sins committed and a guarantee of success in future undertakings. A magnificent temple is built and it attracts large numbers of worshipers. Kalo, already wearing the sacred thread and passing for a Brahmin, also assumes a recognizably Brahmin name, Mangal Adhikari.

A pujari is appointed as Kalo knows little about the ritual of worship and has, anyway, to pretend to be so concerned with more important matters that he has not time for pedestrian work. A Board of Trustees is constituted to manage the financial and administrative work of the temple. The revenues swell; important men like the rich merchant, Motichand, and Sir Abalabandhu, become associated with the temple and touch Mangal Adhikari’s feet is the magistrate who had sentenced Kalo to hard labour for stealing bananas.

Affluence does not make the new Brahmin forget the friend and benefactor who had given him the idea of the temple, namely B-10. Accompanied by Lekha he makes a train journey to the place, meets B-10 as he comes out of the jail and takes him to his residence in Calcutta. He narrates how he had raised the temple and become a Brahmin according to his advice and offers him a share of the temple income. B-10 promptly declines the offer as he has different plans for his future. Truly he is now riding a tiger and cannot get down from its back. He is playing the Brahminic role with gusto.
On the contrary, Lekha goes about her new work quietly without showing any elation or exuberance. Mangal Adhikari once rebukes a destitute for having touched him and thereby polluted him. He notices that his friend B-10 and Lekha are in love with each other. He would approve of their marriage only after making sure that he is a Brahmin.

But when he asks the young man about his caste he promptly replies that he belongs to 'the convict-caste'. He does not disclose even his real name, and suggests that he may be called Biten – which is only B-10 with a slight modification. Biten is re-employed at the garage where he had previously worked and he visits his friend's frequently.

The finale to the drama comes with Kalo’s realization that his beloved child is about to ruin herself for his sake. The shock of this realization opens his eyes. He sees himself and his moral fall. He had started with the idea of revenge but had deceived not only his supposed enemies, but his own inner self.

One of the concerns of the novelist is the sketching of the background. The background of He Who Rides a Tiger is partly political and mainly economic and social. The Quit India Movement, people being imprisoned for the crime of loving their country, defiance of bans, hunger-strikes in jails, are the reminders in the novel of the political situation in the country.
That World War II and the threat of a Japanese invasion also form part of the background is suggested by the presence of British soldiers in the city. The casual attitude of the thoughtless British soldiers to the spectacle of hunger and suffering and their enjoyment of boys fighting for crumbs of bread suggest the image of India they are forming and that they will carry with them when they leave the country.

The Bengal Famine of 1943 which figures prominently in So Many Hungers is present here also and forms the springboard for the main action of the story. The Government is blamed for its inept handling of the situation. Adequate measures have not been taken for the defence of the country against the Japanese. There is no rationing of food grains and no attempt at price control of checking of cornering. Boats have been destroyed as a precautionary measure.

The helplessness of the people of the countryside is revealed by their frantic attempts to reach Calcutta. They attempt to travel on the foot-boards of trains and are often beaten up and driven away by policemen. Kalo’s own experience shows the nature of the ordeal endured by thousands. Some who travel on foot-boards fall by the wayside like the stranger whom Kalo sees struck down by the girder of a bridge and falling into the river.

Bhattacharya brings to bear all the resources of his art when he gives us a view of the plight of the destitutes in the city. Many of the
pictures given are reminiscent of those in the earlier novel but there is no actual repetition. We see hungry men beaten up by the police for presuming to stand before a food shop and to stare at the food displayed therein. Men die in such large numbers that the bodies have to be taken away by the truckload. The piercing cry of people begging for a morsel of food can be heard - a ‘wait from the bowels of Bengal.’

The novelist’s delineation of the ordeals of the destitutes in He Who Rides a Tiger varies from his treatment of the same subject in So Many Hungers, not so much in detail but in emphasis. In the later novel the accent visibly shifts from mute, passive suffering to protest and rebellion. This is understandable because the story of Kalo is a story of protest. The starving men, whom old Viswanath joins, rend the air with the cries, “Food for all!”, “Work for all!” and “Jail for the rice profiteers!”

Biten is arrested and jailed because he protests against the brutal behaviour of the police towards an innocent and emaciated man whose only crime was to be hungry. Another point of difference concerning emphasis is that He Who Rides a Tiger gives much more prominence to one type of hunger – “the hunger of the all-owning few for pleasure and more pleasure, a raging fever of the times.”

Kalo’s retaliation against the ‘hungry’ rich is sparked off by the incident of his daughter narrowly escaping from becoming a victim to
this variety of hunger. These subtle touches account for the difference in tone between one novel and the other.

He Who Rides a Tiger is a novel of protest not only against a political and economic system which degrades the human being but also against an established social order which labels men as superior and inferior by virtue of the accident of their birth. The caste system comes in for chastisement in the novel, the symbol and agent of protest against the tyranny of caste, it should be carefully noted, in not Kalo the blacksmith, but Biten the Brahmin.

The story of his rebellion against caste is given as an inset story. His sister, Purnima, is hastily given away in marriage to an elderly widower when the parents discover that a young man, Basav, of a lower caste is in love with her. Her unhappy married life leads her to commit suicide. When Basav taunts Biten about his cruel incident, he renounces his Brahminhood forthwith, breaks and throws away his sacred thread and takes a vow never more to speak about his caste.

This accounts for his refusal to name his caste when Kalo questions him about it. Biten takes the risk of losing the girl whom he loves, in sticking to his resolve never more to refer to his caste. Bhattacharya shows good artistic judgment in avoiding explicit fulminations against the caste system and by exposing and ridiculing it in a dramatic manner. The juxtaposition of Biten’s rejection of the Brahminhood which is his birthright and Kalo’s renunciation of
Brahminhood he has created for himself through fraud makes the novelist’s condemnation of the system total.

As the denunciation of the caste system is one of the purposes of the novelist, he alludes to it in several places in the story. The system is so well entrenched that Chandra Lekha’s attending school meets with criticism both from the high caste and the low caste people of Jharna. The point emphasized by Bhattacharya here is that caste has become a habit of thinking as much as a way of life and therefore extremely difficult to eradicate. How the feeling of superiority engendered by belonging to a high caste can intoxicate and turn the head is illustrated by the ironic case of Kalo himself.

To begin with he puts on the cloak of Brahminhood is part of a deliberate trick. The victims of the hoax are to be primarily the very classes whose ranks he joins surreptitiously through the backdoor. But in a very short time the Brahminhood affects his mind and he out – Herods Herods when he rebukes the kamar, Viswanath, for polluting him with his touch. Although this is a temporary state of intoxication in Kalo, the incident illustrates the arrogance of the higher caste people. The treatment of Obhijit by the pujari’s wife is another example of the tyranny of caste.

IV

He Who Rides a Tiger marks a departure from So Many Hungers in the sense that though the background is common, the former highlights
the growing protest in the country. The protest is chiefly against two evils – the evil of exploitation which results in hunger and degradation and the evil of caste. Two characters symbolize the protest, Kalo that against exploitation and Biten that against caste. Biten becomes Kalo’s mentor and guide. Both have witnessed the ill-treatment of the have-nots by the haves and Biten’s advice is forcefully conveyed in these words:

We are the scum of the earth. They hit us
where it hurts badly – in the belly.
We've got to hit back. xxii

Together they have watched the convicts in the prison forced to work the mustard-oil press, their bodies bathed in perspiration and pouring out their hatred in the song they sing in chorus: “Eat this, the oil of our bones, eat ...” Kalo eagerly seizes hold of the idea of the false temple casually and flippancy thrown out by Biten. When the temple has been built, the novelist makes this significant comment on its genesis!

Out of that song the temple grew, and
the battle began a new phase, not a battle of survival but attack, hard hitting. xxii

Even the gentle Lekha approves of the idea of revolt although she is not quite convinced about the method adopted. She actually surprises
her father with her better remark that food profiteers should be sent to jail or preferably hanged. The development of Kalo as a rebel is described in such a way as to suggest that the rebellion in him is a product of a pernicious system which has to be challenged:

A small rebel was born when he sold his tools and set off for the big city. The rebel grew eyes and ears in court and prison, with the help of B-10, gave it a mouth and a protest. Out of that protest he had acted mutinously, challenging man and god.

Biten’s imprisonment is the price he has to pay for protesting against the callous treatment given to the hungry by the authorities. The agitation to which desperate men resort when they are no longer able to bear the pangs of hunger is graphically represented in the novel. When Kalo and Lekha are comfortably settled in the temple, they one day see a procession of destitutes carrying a banner and shouting: ‘Food Food! We demand food for the hungry!’

Viswanath, the old kumar joins the procession though he himself is now safe in the protection of Mangal Adhikari. The trustees of the temple discharge him from the service for this act of rebellion. Bhattacharya indicates that the protect against hunger becomes a broad-based movement with which all patriotic people begin to identify.
themselves and also that it becomes merged with the larger movement for national freedom:

“Something had seized the people so that their apathy was broken. Great demonstrations were to be seen in the streets almost every day. They were not composed of down-and-outs; among the hunger-marchers were men from workshop, students from colleges, and clerks from office.” xxv

These demonstrations are linked to the Quit India Movement by the fact that the Committee which controls them includes men who were in jail earlier. Describing them and their aims the novelist writes:

Imprisoned in the great Movement that shook the country two years before. Imprisoned for no crime save the one of loving their country and asking a better way of life for it, a life free from hunger and indignity, a life built by hard self-denial which was a joy because each iron today was the framework of a secure, happier tomorrow.

The protest against the caste-system depicted in the novel is all the more effective and touching as Biten, the main symbol of this protest, is himself a Brahmin. The story of his repudiation of caste has been summarized already. When Kalo persistently questions him about his caste, he tells him that he belongs to ‘the convict-caste’. After he falls
in love with Lekha, Kalo suggests that he should wear a sacred thread so that people may take him to be a Brahmin. Otherwise Lekha's marriage with him will pull down the very foundations of their present status by forcing them to quit the temple.

The only condition stipulated for his winning the hand of Lekha is that he should just wear the scared thread. The alternative to compliance with this request is losing the girl whom he loves and adores. But Biten has no hesitation in refusing to comply. In this episode Bhattacharya dramatizes the protest against the caste system. The end of the novel hints that Biten's fight against the evil is not merely theoretical; his marriage with Lekha is a foregone conclusion.

V

Bhattacharya seems to suggest through an important episode in the novel that ritualistic worship even in a false temple with a faked image can be of help to a dedicated worshipper by serving as an anodyne against sorrow and by aiding the growth of mental powers through concentration. Lekha, knowing as she does all about the unreality of the temple, seeks refuge in its rituals when her lover Biten leaves her. The questions agitating her mind are thus enumerated by the novelist:

Would the temple bring her peace?
Would her piety be no less potent than Brahminic invocation, investing the
The answer comes almost immediately. A series of miraculous things happen to her. One day an aged mendicant comes to the temple. He has told a passer-by that he is seeking the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss. As soon as he sees Lekha, he rushes towards her, prostrates himself at her feet and beings chanting:

Thou who art the secret breath in all
created beings, Hail to thee, Mother, and
hail, and hail, hail! xxvii

A week later an exactly similar incident occurs, the seeker this time being a saffron-clad woman ascetic. Another day a handsome youth, son of a millionaire, arrives in a big Chrysler car and after greeting Lekha with a verse from the same litany as the one from which the mendicant and the bhairabi had quoted, announces that he has decided to renounce home and parents and become a Yogi. All these independent happenings and the new radiance on Lekha’s face show that she has undergone a spiritual transformation and has become sanctified.

There is, however, serious ambiguity in the situation. The change in Lekha and her obvious saintliness can be explained with reference to her intensified piety. But the novelist does not want the reader to accept this simple explanation. He brings in other factors which an entirely
different kind of explanation not only possible but necessary. The change in her may at least partly be due to the compassion and affection she has begun to feel for the destitute boy, Obhijit, whom she adopts as a brother.

We have the suggestive episode of the photographer trying to take a photograph of her face at a moment when it most truly expresses the spirit of compassion. Such a moment arrives when Lekha is looking naturally and un-self-consciously at the boy when he is trying to look at her through the lens of the photographer’s camera. The photographer, who is carefully watching the scene, quickly takes out a pocket camera and takes a snap of Lekha. He knows he has captured an image of the spirit of true compassion. The radiance in Lekha’s face which has been recognized by the mendicant and other seekers could very well be due to the transforming power of human feeling.

Another possible explanation for Lekha’s accession of glory is the change wrought in her by Biten’s demonstration of his love. His impulsive embrace has the immediate result of producing revulsion in her as she is thereby transported in her imagination to the brothel from which her and releases her from the mental imprisonment which her position in the temple involves. It is strangely when she has attained fullness of feeling as a human being that other people see the divinity in her. The irony of the situation is brought out by the novelist in these words:
And now that she was a woman like any other, with a woman’s feelings and needs, she was addressed as Mother of Sevenfold Bliss! The moment she became a woman, she was falsely deified. xxviii

These are Lekha’s thoughts reported by the novelist, but it may not be wrong to take these words as an expression of his own view of the matter.

VI

A Goddess Named Gold (1960) deals with happenings in a village during the period immediately preceding India’s attainment of freedom. The preoccupation of Bhattacharya in this novel is with the way in which a country should use freedom and what benefits may be derived from it. Evidently he is looking back on the decade or so which has passed after the attainment of his art; his assessment of what the people have achieved and what they have failed to achieve. Gold in the popular connotation is material wealth, but gold may also symbolize richness of mind or spirit.

The gift of freedom should not be looked upon as a means for the acquisition of prosperity alone; it is the golden key which can open magic doors and admit us into a realm in which men think noble thoughts and do kind deeds so that happiness may be the portion of all.
The novel is an allegory and the characters take on symbolic significance. The narration, however, is sought to be enlivened by the use of the elements of comedy and farce. The note of seriousness is reintroduced towards the end of the novel.

The novel opens exactly a hundred days before 15th August, 1947. The scene is a village called Sonamitti (the name means “Golden Soil” or “Land of Gold”). We are introduced to a group of six women of the village who call themselves the Cowhouse Five because their almost daily meetings take place in the unused cowshed in the house of one of them, Lakshmi.

The women are of different age and represent different levels of rural society. A common bond knits them together; they are all ardent nationalists and have been in fail for participation in the quit India Movement. Lakshmi’s case is unusual because she and her husband are poles apart in temperament and outlook. The husband, whose name is Shamsunder, but who is known as the Seth or Sethji, is a clothe-merchant and money-lender. He is a worshiper of Mammon and has avoided taking part in the nationalistic movement.

The Cowhouse Five, trained in the methods of satyagraha, are trying to evolve a method of fighting the Seth for his open exploitation of the current scarcity of cloth and his refusal to sell it to the villagers at fair prices. The novelist makes use of this opportunity to focus attention on some of the social evils following the famine 1943. Cornering of
stocks and boosting of prices are a legacy from that dark period in the history of Bengal.

Having a monopoly of the cloth trade in the group of five villages to which Sonamitti belongs, the Seth controls the market so efficiently that no ordinary villager can afford to buy his requirements of cloth. The resulting hardship is indicated by the novelist when he mentions that the blouses of some of the women are made out of the jute cloth from old gunny-bags. Their saris are worn out and need immediate replacement. The group considers various ways of compelling the Seth to sell them saris at a fair price.

The youngest of the Cowhouse Five is the heroine Meera, a girl of sixteen, living with her grandmother who is known for her patriotism and her leadership. She is an unusually gifted girl. She was only eleven at the time of the Quit India Movement. Nevertheless she had insisted on joining an anti-Government demonstration and had got arrested along with the others. She had also demonstrated her resourcefulness and altruism on another occasion by saving the life of a man bitten by a cobra by sucking out the poisoned blood with her mouth. Meera suggests that the women of the village should join together, organize a protest march to the Seth’s shop and demand that he should sell a hundred saris at a fair price.

Another woman suggests that if the Seth does not relent, they should threaten to strip themselves naked and march through the streets in order to rouse his conscience. These suggestions are accepted
by the group. The material that the novelist uses here is based on incidents connected with the struggle for independence. The mood of the women and their way of thinking truly reflect the tempo and spirit of India immediately before independence. Incidentally this episode is a rehash of a short story, “Desperate women” written earlier by Bhattacharya.

Dr. Srinivasa Iyengar thinks that the novel is an expansion of the story but it is not so. The novelist makes use of older material as he does in Shadow from Ladakh, but the episode is by no means of central importance in the novel. Before the proposed demonstration against the Seth takes place, an accident happens which brings out the nobility of the heroine’s spirit. Nago, the only son of the Seth and Lakshmi, falls into a well while flying a kite.

No male assistance is available on the spot. As the agitated women are confusedly discussing what could be done, Meera acts spontaneously. With the help of the other women, she rescues the boy in time. In spite of the strain she has endured, she insists on joining the demonstration which takes place as planned at midday.

The procession and the slogan-shouting have no effect on the Seth. Even Meera’s threat to strip herself does not intimize him, but when his own wife, Lakshmi, begins to divest herself of her sari, he relents and as a result two bundles of newly arrived saris are sold away on the spot to the assembled women. The Seth curses himself for his softness, but the novelist makes us understand that he has acted, not
under fear, but out of farsightedness. He has decided to contest the
election to the District Board which is to come off as soon as the country
is free and he naturally wants to win the good will of the people of the
village.

The sale of saris therefore is not an act of kindness but a
calculated step in self-aggrandizement. The Seth is also clear in his
mind as to what he is to do as a member of the District Board: his sole
aim is to gain power and influence so as to make money. The women
have incidentally given him a useful idea. He could also organize a
procession of schoolboys who will parade the streets shouting the
words, “Vote for Shamsunder”. The women nevertheless, have to be
taught a lesson.

The Seth has made arrangements for a free cinema-show in the
village sponsored by a company which manufactures vegetable ghee so
as to advertise their product. He decides to keep the women out. This
could be a severe punishment to any villager because of the rarity of
such shows in the countryside. The women are depressed by this
development and consider thwarting the Seth’s purpose.

An important character now appears on the scene. He is Meera’s
grandfather – one of a considerable number of characters in the novels
of Bhattacharya who, for some reason, are left unnamed. He is a
wandering minstrel who visits his family and village only occasionally
for a brief stay, and about whose wanderings and activities, little is
known. He is a regular visitor at important fairs, and travels a lot
earning his fare by entertaining passengers with his story-telling and songs.

There is a certain air of mystery about him; an aura of greatness surrounds him. Many believe that in his previous birth he was Atmaram, a disciple of a great sage living on the Himalayas, that by a kind of instinct he had gone up to the same religion and been recognized and greeted by the sage as Atmaram, that he is now in touch with his old master and that in course of time he will be fully initiated in saintly lore.

Everyone in the village except his own wife believes the story and similar stories which the minstrel tells them. Old Grandma alone, though greatly attached to the man, takes his stories with a pinch of salt. The minstrel is an unusual character and he plays a vital part in this novel which deals with India's freedom. It may very well be, that he is a veiled representation of the Father of the Nation, a homeless wanderer at home with large crowds, a man among men but deified by a grateful and admiring people. There is no novel of Bhattacharya which does not contain a reference to the Freedom Struggle and Mahatma Gandhi.

The attitude of the minstrel becomes the distinct point of important developments. Meera tries to make use of him as a counter-attraction to the cinema show so that the Seth's plan may be frustrated but the old man would not approve of any spiteful action. He however promises to have a story telling session after the cinema show. Before
the session, the minstrel promises to give the Seth a taveez or amulet to be worn round the arm that will enable the wearer to realize these words all his wishes. Therefore everyone assembled, at the story-telling, and Atmaram ties a taveez round the arm of Meera. As he does so, he speaks these words.

Wearing it on your person you will do an act of kindness. Real kindness. Then all cooper on your body will turn to gold ...

Parted from our arm, the touchstone will indeed, be a worthless pebble. Sometimes after the presentation of the amulet, the minstrel does a puck-like act. Meera has been wearing a gold ring on one of her fingers and has refused the gift of gold ring earnestly offered by Lakshmi. Lakshmi is all the time eager to show her gratitude towards Meera for having saved her son’s life. The minstrel knows the situation and mischievously suggests to Lakshmi that she may replace the copper ring on Meera’s finger with gold one when she is asleep. Lakshmi does this and then goes home to her father’s place for a few weeks’ stay.

The Seth has a grudge against Meera’s grandmother and he wants to punish her by seizing her piece of land which has been mortgaged to him. He summons Meera to this shop to tell her about his intentions. When she is at the shop, he makes the discovery by chance that the ring on her finger is gold. She herself knows nothing about the
substitution done by Lakshmi. Consequently both are convinced that the amulet has power.

The Seth’s fertile brain begins to work and he formulates a plan to explore Meera’s possession of the amulet. It can be achieved only with powerful backing from some one like him. Alone, she may not be able to find enough copper to be transmuted. She needs a partner who will procure all the copper and spend all the money that may be necessary to perform acts of kindness. He offers to be her partner in his enterprise and they may share the proceeds equally. Meera accepts the proposal. Her desire, however, is not to win gold for herself. All the gold that she makes is to be distributed among the people of the village. She is to use the power of the amulet only for altruistic purposes. The main problem is to know what precisely are the acts of kindness that will make the amulet function. The Seth has to make experiments. The description of these experiments gives the novelist the opportunity to introduce comedy and farce.

The account of the desperate experiments performed at the instance of the Seth is also used by the novelist to indicate the basic difference between an act of real kindness and a flamboyant motivated act devoid of the spirit of compassion. Compassion is a theme dear to the heart of Bhattacharya. There is no novel of his which does not refer to this virtue or depict touching examples of it.

The destitute girl in So Many Hungers who earns money by exposing her body to the Public gaze and spends it all on the hungry
children of the neighbourhood, the English soldier who strokes the hair of the ragged and dirty one and gives him a half-rupee coin, and the old low-caste woman in He Who Rides a Tiger who offers beans to Lekha when she has tried to steal pumpkins from her roof are some memorable examples of this virtue. In the present novel, the episode of Meera rescuing Nago from the well and her saving the man who has been bitten by a cobra and her touching kindness to the cow, Soondri, suffering from labour pains and finally dying of it, are parallel cases.

There is another touching portrayal of compassion in which Meera, after watching the poor boy Buddhu, hungrily licking the leaves thrown by customers in front of the sweetshop, buys some sweets promptly and gives them to the boy to eat. The deeds of supposed kindness suggested one after another by the Seth are ludicrous parodies of these spontaneous acts. The description of these acts amuses and entertain us and at the same time embody a veiled lesson in ethics pointing out negative examples of the virtue in question.

Meera is encumbered with ornaments made of copper with gold coating. She is asked to wear them as far as possible in such a way as to touch the body in order to give the best chance for the amulet to work. She has them on her arms, round her neck and about her waist. Her movements are necessarily cumbersome. When her grandmother sees her for the first time with her bulging abdomen, she misunderstands the situation and thinks for a moment that she has got into a scrape and is pregnant. One can not help feeling that by attempting comedy, the
novelist has produced farce and that the farce not only detracts from the seriousness of the real theme but also destroys all traces of realism.

Among the calculated and elaborately staged acts of kindness arranged by the Seth, is the distribution of sweets to all the urchins employed by him for his election campaign. The plan is a failure. The boys gratefully receive the sweets offered to them and ask people around them. “Vote for Meera Bai.” Meera knows that the feeling with which she gave a palmful of jalebi to Buddhu is missing. The Seth’s investment in sweets has been lost.

In spite of the failure of the amulet, the Seth, Meera herself and these people continue to have faith in its virtue. There is the possibility, they tell themselves, that some other type of kind act will meet the requirements and make the charm work. Several friends of Meera implore her to wear copper coins brought by them. They are to be restored to them after they change into gold.

Acts of kindness devised by the Seth are repeated. One of them is a cruel caricature of the incident in which Meera saved the Seth’s son. The Seth orders the parapet wall of the well near his shop to be knocked down pretending that it needs repair. He tempts the poor boy Buddhu, to fly kite near the well and on the pretext of having something to talk about, he summons Meera to the shop. Bulaki Rao, the Seth’s fox-like assistant, is to contrive everything in return for a handsome fee. As the Seth and Meera are in the shop talking, Bulaki Rao raises a hue and cry and announces that Buddhu has fallen into the well.
In a highly amusing but improbable scene, the Seth does his best to encourage Meera to descend into the well with the right kind of feeling needed to make the amulet do its work. She is inclined to oblige, but time seems to stand still and we have interminable talk going on, giving enough time for a person to get drowned twenty times. In the meantime Sohanlal, the Seth’s driver, arrives on the scene. He is in love with Meera and he does not allow her to make the attempt. In fact, to the Seth’s chagrin, he proceeds to get down. Knowing that the trick has failed, the Seth asks Bulaki Rao to produce the boy and he comes out of the latrine where he has been asked to hide himself. The trouble with this exaggerated farce is that it has no similitude.

Typical of the Seth’s Machiavellian approach, is his attempt to create the right atmosphere for an act of kindness by Meera, by threatening to evict old Father and his family from their ancestral home. As the Seth expects, Meera intervenes and offers money to the old man to redeem his mortgaged house. But he refuses to accept it knowing that it is the Seth’s money. His self-respect does not allow him to accept a favour from the greedy tyrant; he and his family therefore, leave the house and the village for ever.

When the story comes to be known, there are angry protests and Meera also is condemned for her part in the expulsion of Old Father. Even her friends turn against her as they believe that she has become an accomplice of the Seth on account of her desire for gold.
The last attempt made by the Seth to make the amulet show its power turns out to be a crisis in Meera’s life. Two of the most notorious people in the village, a drunkard and a prostitute, are persuaded to marry and the marriage is to be solemnized in the presence of Meera. There are clear signs that far from being an act of goodness, the marriage is going to be a fiasco if at all it takes place.

The drunkard and his friends pester the Seth for money to buy liquor with. The bride is busy practicing her trade even up to the hour scheduled for the marriage ceremony. Meera’s eyes are opened. She strips herself of the copper ornaments and throws them in a heap on the ground, and disappears from the place. This seems to be the end of the Seth’s fantastic dream, but he still clings to hope, thinking that Meera may yet be persuaded to continue the experiments.

With the arrival of the minstrel on the eve of Independence Day, we come to the denouement of the novel. He conjures before Meera’s mind a picture of a new India that has attained material prosperity, but which also suffers from the evils of such prosperity. The picture that Meera sees is one which illustrates Goldsmith’s words, “where wealth accumulates, and men decay.”

With the clear object of testing and provoking Meera, her grandfather suggests to her that after becoming the goddess of plenty, she should get married to a fabulously rich man from Delhi, a man who has several elephants for sale. Meera’s reaction of this taunt is sharp and immediate. Her grandfather’s suggestion seems to be an insinuation
that she is hankering after wealth or position, but she is clear in her own mind that she had accepted the amulet only out of a desire to do good to others. Enraged by the insinuation, she wrenches the amulet from her arm and throws it into the river.

Towards the end of the novel, the minstrel explains the symbolism of the taveez. The village is celebrating Independence Day and people are assembled under a banyan tree. The old man tells them that the freedom which they are celebrating is the touchstone. It belongs to every one of them but will yield results and transmute copper into gold only if acts of faith are performed. When he is asked to define acts of faith he modestly replies that he does not have wisdom enough to give guidance, but he is sure that miracles can be performed if they all hold themselves in readiness:

“Remember, friends, all this cannot be cheaply won. The miracle will not drop upon us. It is we who have to create it with love and with sweat. Freedom is the means to the end.”

The novel ends with the decision of the villagers to use the newly won freedom in the right way by electing the minstrel to the District Board. The discomfited Seth does not show any external sign of disappointment. He goes on placidly smoking his hookah, as if nothing in the world has happened to him. The novelist also hints that the
minstrel has a reasonable chance of winning the election as his wife is not likely to be his rival.

VII

In view of Bhattacharya's concept of a novelist's function, it is most natural that he should pay attention to conditions in India after the achievement of freedom and give expression to his hopes for the future. As he does in So Many Hungers and He Who Rides a Tiger, he gives reminiscences of the Quit India Movement.

The aspects of the struggle that are referred to here are the free participation of women and leveling of social distinctions brought about by common suffering, particularly jail life. As the solemn day appointed for the handing over of power approaches, there is a feeling of thrill and exaltation among the people. The hopes of Sohanlal, the common man, embody the aspirations of the people who look forward to an era of plenty in which all the wealth of the nation will belong to the people.

The novel, however, contains a warning that freedom is not an automatic passport to greatness or plenty. It only provides an essential climate in which the endeavour of the people will fructify. The minstrel administers a warning in words which presumably represent Bhattacharya's own views:
Freedom is the beginning of the road where there was no road. But the new road swarms with robbers. xxxi

Meera reports the minstrel’s elaboration of his reference to robbers:

Yes, there were the robbers, Seths of many kinds. The cities had a greater variety and profusion of them than the countryside. There was the money-Seth, of course, to whom freedom meant a chance to seize fields of trade vacated by the aliens. Then the Seth of politics, ready to dupe the people with the power of his glib tongue. The official Seth, a man of arrogance ready to change masters without a change of mentality, human chattel open to the best offer. The Seth of religion with gods for sale. The Seth with a Gandhi cap on his head and the cap itself a deceit. And several others on the list ... xxxii

In A Goddess Named Gold at least three of these types are included. Shamsunder combines in himself the roles of ‘the money-Seth’ and ‘the Seth of politics’ while the village constable, Hoosiar Singh, stands for
‘the official Seth’. The novel gives expression to a stern warning that if the wrong men are allowed to grab power, freedom will mean nothing to the people. Discussing the Seth’s ambition to become a Deputy Minister in course of time with Meera’s grandmother, Sohanlal makes the caustic comment:

Free India will die a hundred deaths.
Beware lest one such death takes place at the polling booth of this village. xxxiii

Bhattacharya uses the minstrel as a mouthpiece to voice some of his own views on the use of freedom and the conditions in which freedom can be of value. The minstrel assures the people of Sonamitti that freedom is capable of bringing about miracles. No miracle, however, can happen without effort. The taveez presented to Meera is only a symbol of freedom. What the old man had told Meera about its properties was not meant to be taken literally.

It was only a figurative way of indicating that freedom will enable us to make our lives golden provided we are capable of right feeling and right action. “Without acts of faith” explains the minstrel, “freedom is a dead pebble tied to the arm with a bit of string, fit only to be cast into the river.” The novel also lays emphasis on the idea that freedom is not merely political freedom or economic freedom, but freedom of the mind. The minstrel refers to Gandhiji’s definition of freedom as ‘a state of mind.’
Bhattacharya also uses a phrase which he is very fond of and which he uses again and again in his work starting with The Indian Cavalcade – ‘the freedom to be free.’ Meera’s throwing away of the taveez into the river is interpreted by herself as a sign that ‘she had won the freedom to be free’. xxxiv It is precisely this ‘freedom to be free’ that Kajoli and Kalo attain in the two earlier novels.

A Goddess Named Gold also gives a glimpse of the novelist’s vision of the India of the future and expresses his views on the dangers facing the country, and the duties of citizenship. Through Sohanlal the author gives the advice that no one in a free country should be content to live on charity. Sohanlal tells Meera:

“We must demand what should be ours, the right to live as human beings.” xxxv

He gives a warning through Meera’s grandma that there is no ‘easy end to our woes’. It is wrong to expect that freedom will act like magic and solve all ours problem for us. One of the tasks facing us is the elimination of unpatriotic exploiters of different types, the parasitic Seths. The building up of material resources alone will not make us happy or secure. As Sohanlal tells Meera:

You can not have gold enough to save all India! It is the fight with the Seths that will save India, not a miracle, not armfuls of gold. xxxvi
The novelist’s optimism about the ultimate liquidation of all exploiters by the people is conveyed through this passage:

The days of the Seths were numbered.
Soon would the people, vested with their new power, fully waken and their thunderous wrath would make every tyrant whine for mercy. xxvii

Bhattacharya’s fears for the immediate future and his hope in the final triumph of democratic values are embodied in the vision conjured before Meera’s eyes by the minstrel in the course of a midnight stroll just before the girl throws away the taveez. To make Meera visualize the problems of the future he gives her an imaginative view of what might happen to her own intimate friends, the Cowhouse Five. Two of them acquire more and more property in the village thereby dislodging the poor and get substantial houses constructed for themselves. Their growing affluence corrupts their minds: they begin to compete with each other and become bitter enemies.

The cart driver’s wife becomes rich and as a result her husband gives up his work, stays at home and ‘passes the day sleeping on a soft bed.’ The woman herself grows fat through over-eating. This makes the ex-cartman cast his eye on comely women and he seeks a second marriage. Apart from what happens to individuals there is a general transformation of the economic set-up in the entire village. Instead of
most people having their own pieces of land, the land is bought up by a few very rich men who use hired labour for cultivation. Gradually tension builds up between the workers and the haves and have-nots is described in language reminiscent of Jonathan Swift:

The Bathgowns were perplexed; they could not tell what the trouble was about. The men in loincloth cried that the new freedom was for all to share. The Bathgowns laughed in honest disbelief. Every tear would be wiped from every age, the toilers cried, gazing ahead into the far blue horizon. The Bathgowns asked, eyes snapping in fun. Have you buckets enough to collect so many tears?

The sarcasm in the minstrel’s description of Sonamitti as a land of gold and his provocative suggestion to Meera that she should marry a millionaire at last make her see that he has been pulling her leg and she shows her sense of release from the bondage of illusion by casting away the amulet. The vision thus contains a warning that freedom should not be regarded as an Open Sesame. It only creates an environment in which men can show forth the best in them and live on terms of equality with their follow-men, practicing virtues like compassion. The greatest benefit conferred by freedom is the liberation of man’s mind and spirit.
The most important question we have to raise while evaluating A Goddess Named Gold is whether or to what extent the novelist has followed his own dictum in the writing of this novel. Are the incidents and the characters true to life and is the message of the novelist conveyed unobtrusively without impairing the impression of reality? Regarding the most important episode in the novel, namely, the presentation of the amulet to Meera and her subsequent attempts to make it function, it has no credibility even in the setting of a most backward Indian village.

The Indian peasant is a hard-boiled realist seasoned by centuries of harsh experience and is not the type of person to be fooled into believing in a taveez that could work as the philosopher’s stone. The spectacle presented in the novel – that of a sensible girl burdening her body with all sorts of copper ornaments and attempting to pull off the trick and the entire village sharing her faith in the amulet and adding to her burden is too crude to be true even in a land of fakirs and magicians.

Monstrously incredible is the episode of the Seth laboriously trying to tempt Meera to get into the well to rescue Buddhu who has been concealed in a latrine. Realism is again scattered to the winds in the scene which depicts the prostitute playing her trade through the back door up to the minute when she is to be married to the drunkard. To make this even more incredible, ‘the brother of a cockroach’, Bulaki
Rao is the chief beneficiary of her enterprise and industry, as he is depicted counting the money he has made through the transaction. The novel abounds not only in improbabilities but also in sheer impossibilities.

IX

The characterization again is seriously affected by the novelist’s didactic intention. Meera herself is a breath-taking combination of intelligence, generosity, patriotism – and stupidity. She is a heroine only up to the moment that she goes to the Seth in response to his summons in order to discuss their mortgaged land, but a mere stuffed puppet after she enters into the strange contract with the cormorant and begins playing the fool. The reader shares the sorrow and disappointment of Sohanlal at the spectacle of her gullibility and folly.

The old minstrel himself is a bundle of contradictions. Whatever his symbolic significance, he is not a character from life. As his wife herself points out, he is a fabricator of cock-and-bull stories and yet we are to suppose that the whole village is ready to fall at his feet and to worship him. He is the embodiment of wisdom and has the prophet’s vision and yet he places his innocent grand-daughter in a situation in which she plays the dancing bear at the behest of the Seth. “An earthworm has become a cobra!” He explains, but he has himself been responsible for the mischief. The decision of the village to elect him to the Board again is one of those numerous situations in the novel in which, to quote Lytton Strachey, ‘unreality has reached its apotheosis.’
Shamsunder, the Seth, is nothing but a caricature of the greedy exploiter. We are to believe that he corners not only mill-made saris but even those made by the local weaver, and raises the prices to such an extent as to make it impossible for anyone in the village to buy from him. Who buys saris from him then, and what does he sell on ordinary days when women do not come in a procession to the shop threatening to stand naked before him?

There is inherent contradiction in the novelist’s making such a shrewd and calculating businessmen as the Seth to foolishly swallow the bait and invest on the mythical taveez. In an attempt to make the character objectionable, the novelist actually makes him ridiculous. If the Seth is not intelligent, he cannot be such a menace as he is made out to be, and India’s fight against the Seths would become all too easy.

The reader’s credulity is taxed too much in the scene in which the Seth is tricked into leaving the site for the cinema show by the story of monkeys invading his shop and damaging the cloth. Equally incredible is the episode of the hard-hearted man scampering away from a certain margosa tree out of fear of ghosts. As if the spectacle of the man fleeing in panic from an imaginary ghost were not enough, the author lays it on heavily with a trowel by making him slip on a banana peel and lie sprawling on his back. After performing all these feats the Seth discovers that the report of the invasion by monkeys has been grossly exaggerated.
A group of men mockingly ask him where the monkeys are and the wryly answers: “They hundred monkey fellows.” The Seth then thinks to himself, “Why blame those fools? Had not he himself been as gullible as any offspring of ass?” xxxix The trouble is that in writing this unfortunate episode, the author seems to assume that the readers are also as gullible as one of these ‘offspring of ass.’

X

Improbabilities abound in the novel. One cannot help feeling that despite the novelist’s avowed creed, he is in this novel enjoying a holiday from realism. The unreality, for instance, of the strange contract which Meera enters into with the Seth is magnified by the pompously real language of the agreement that the Seth has drawn up, apparently without the assistance of a lawyer:

You, hereafter called the proprietor, grant and assign to the sponsor, that is myself, the sole and exclusive license to produce gold out of you by every legitimate means and to collect, deposit and vend the product. The proprietor is agreeable to giving the sponsor all cooperation asked for and acting as directed, within the limits valid by law and equity.

It is difficult to escape the feeling that what we have here is unintentional caricature and not realism. Yet another instance of disregard of probability is the incident of Old Father’s eviction. The old man had shown no scruples in borrowing money from the Seth, but
when Meera offers him money obtained from the Seth to enable him to redeem the mortgaged house, he refuses to touch it and chooses to leave the village without the slightest idea of where he is to go.

While the old man is thus exhibited as a paragon of rural virtue, his gentle son is represented as being so much roused by righteous indignation as to attempt the murder of the Seth. His idea of murder, however, is to walk towards the Seth’s house in the small hours of the morning with a sickle in his hand as if the potential victim were waiting with his door open for the throat-cutting to be duly performed. The farce becomes complete when the enraged young man promptly listens to Meera’s plea and returns home, his mission unaccomplished. Perhaps for him, the better part of valour is discretion.

Dr. Srinivasa Iyengar is of the opinion that A Goddess Named Gold: “signifies an advance in his art as a novelist”. It is difficult to see here any advance in the right direction. The narrative technique used is the same as employed in the other novels, the point of view being that of the omniscient author. This novel differs from the others only in the sense that it has been given the form of an extended allegory.

Allegory is an outmoded device and its employment, far from marking any advance in craftsmanship, is a retrogressive step. The use of symbols is a different matter. Felicitously suggestive symbols could give a new dimension to the narrative and enrich it. An appropriate symbol, it should be remembered, is a symbol that needs no explanation. The use of the taveez as a symbol in the novel is highly
laboured and artificial. No one could divine what the symbol signifies without the elucidation given by the minstrel. Even after we get the benefit of the explanation we do not feel the aptness of the symbol.

The statement that freedom is a taveez which can work miracles only when acts of faith or kindness are performed remains a platitudinous utterance which does not touch our feelings. The defect of the novel is that it fails to render in terms of fiction an idea which the author wishes to propagate. In fact it does not even teach us anything because all that it does is to make a cold statement at the end about the virtues of freedom. The allegory tires us and the symbols refuse to come to life.

A Goddess Named Gold is the least effective of Bhattacharya's novels. It does not have the range and intensity of So Many Hungers, the psychological insight and depth of passion of He Who Rides a Tiger or the quiet harmony of Music for Mohini. It deals with a tremendously important theme, but does not do it adequate justice. The narrative is burdened with the allegory as Meera's body is encumbered by the copper that she carries about.

The seriousness of whatever message the novelist desires to convey is destroyed by the admixture of elements which are incompatible with one another. The comedy degenerates into farce and characterization is often reduced to caricature. The novel is good only in patches. The character of the heroine is convincing until she is
transformed into a puppet by the taveez. This is the only transformation or miracle effected by the amulet in the novel.

The most readable parts are those which contain the farcical elements, but the amusement which farce provides hardly blends with the seriousness of purpose with which evidently the novel is written. This novel probably represents an experiment in technique tried out by the novelist, and the fortunate fact that it is not repeated in the next novel indicates that he was not satisfied with the result.
References:

i  He Who Rides a Tiger, P. 16.

ii  Ibid., P. 53.

iii Ibid., P. 71.

iv Ibid., P. 81.

v  Ibid., P. 110.

vi Ibid., P. 100.

vii Ibid., P. 115.

viii Ibid., P. 226.

ix Ibid., P. 225.

x Ibid., P. 232.

xi Ibid., P. 226.

xii Ibid., P.141.

xiii Ibid., P. 115.
xiv Ibid., P. 115.

xv Ibid., P. 182.

xvi Ibid., P. 242.

xvii Ibid., P. 32.

xviii Ibid., P. 49.

xix Ibid., P. 162.

xx Ibid., P. 52.

xxi Ibid., P. 34.

xxii Ibid., P. 112.

xxiii Ibid., P. 122.

xxiv Ibid., P. 161.

xxv Ibid., P. 175.

xxvi Ibid., P. 201.
xxvii  Ibid., P. 205.

xxviii  Ibid., P. 208.

xxix  A Goddess Named Gold, P. 85.

xxx  Ibid., P. 303.

xxxi  Ibid., P. 119.

xxxii  Ibid., P. 119.

xxxiii  Ibid., P. 123.

xxxiv  Ibid., P. 302.

xxxv  Ibid., P. 176.

xxxvi  Ibid., P. 197.

xxxvii  Ibid., P. 224.

xxxviii  Ibid., P. 297.

xxxix  Ibid., P. 82.
CHAPTER - 4

BHABANI BHATTACHARYA’S SHADOW FROM LADAKH AND A DREAM IN HAWAII: A CRITICAL STUDY
CHAPTER - 4

Bhabani Bhattacharya’s
Shadow from Ladakh and A Dream in Hawaii:
A Critical Study

I

In his most recent novel, Shadow from Ladakh, Bhattacharya has a challenging theme; India at the time of the Chinese invasion of 1962. The title itself sets the pace of the writing, and the military situation casts its shadow almost everywhere, whose phrases and sentences read like excerpts from the reports of political or military correspondents:

In slow stages they (the Chinese) had surreptitiously annexed sixteen thousand square miles of territory that had been an integral part of India. Their claims were mounting still ... news had just come that Chinese armed forces have encircled our check-post in Galwan Valley ... While the pass at a height of fifteen thousand feet was subjected to a fierce frontal assault, a strong column took a secret jungle route an outflanked the defending garrison ... ¹
Words and snatches from Mahatma Gandhiji’s or Nehru’s speeches, recapitulation of recent Indian and world history – help to evoke the appropriate historical background; the main characters in the novel tend to merge with the figures of history; and types, symbols, myths and individuals mingle and fuse to throw us off our guard.

If the whole action of the novel is something of a shadow play cast by the Chinese peril, many of the characters are shadows too – shadows chasing shadows. Satyajit is Gandhi’s shadow and Bhaskar, the Chief Engineer of Steeltown, is almost a Nehruistic symbol or shadow.

Satyajit’s Gandhigram is distantly patterned after Gandhi’s Sevagram, and Bhaskar’s Steeltown could like wise be one of the dream edifices of Nehru, one of the ‘new temples’ in the secular India of Nehru’s imagination. Gandhi or Nehru? Recalling the earlier American dilemma, Jefferson or Hamilton? Is peaceful co-existence possible between Steeltown with its blast furnaces and Gandhigram with its spinning wheels?

Again, there was China, Mao’s armour-plated expansionist absolutist China and Nehru’s democratic vision was instinct with explosive possibilities. And the spiritual confrontation was of even greater consequence than the other. Mao’s China trying to annex India, Steeltown trying to swallow up Gandhigram, and this was no matter of conquering square miles alone “but a way of life, an inner spirit”.

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The plotting of the novel is structured out of contrasting situations, images and symbols. Mao’s China and Nehru’s India: danger to Ladakh and Nefa, and danger to Gandhigram: Meadow House in Steeltown, Mud Hall in Gandhigram: water cooler here, earthen pot there, the writ of New Delhi, and Satyajit’s “fast unto death”. And even the two girls in Bhaskar’s life Rupa and Sumita – are compared to the turbine and the spinning wheel respectively, the India of the epic age.

The confrontations are sharp enough, and are ranged at various levels but where is the resolution of the conflict, even the possibility of it? Satyajit and his wife, Suruchi, had come under the influence, first of Tagore and Shantiniketan, and later of Gandhi and Sevagram. These influences have not been wholly harmonized. Bhaskar too is not all Pittsburgh and Steeltown and ruthlessness: he can play the flute: he loses his heart to the children of Chinese alien: he can soften and yield.

There is a Satyajit in Bhaskar and a Bhaskar in Satyajit – not on the surface but deep within. Does Gandhigram symbolize the past or the future? Does Steeltown portend death or new life? What will be the use of the confrontation between Steeltown and Gandhigram, or between China and India? Can the tiger and the deer live together, enacting fellowship and harmony?

Bhaskar and Satyajit take extreme positions, but patient sufferance is Suruchi’s badge, as it was Kasturba’s. It is Sumita – so very close to Satyajit being his daughter, and so much drawn irresistibly towards Bhaskar whom she loves that serves as the link. Even as the
wonders of technological change inflame his imagination, Bhaskar is
not quite unaware of the dangers of such progress.

India needs the big machines, not spinning wheels. Change, not
tradition. Not the heritage of philosophic inanity, but the dynamism of
technological progress even with all its inevitable chaos. Yet all that
could be oversimplification. He knew the pattern and all the other
patterns in Steeltown – at every level. Section Twelve longing to be
Eleven. Insatiety, frustration, intrigue, graft.

What are the alternatives, then? Put the clock back, or march
headlong towards the abyss? Isn’t there a third, and the same, way as
well? Isn’t a ‘conscious amalgam’ of the two opposing ways of thinking
and living capable of realization?

No trite answer is possible. Bhattacharya’s answer is Sumita, who
is molded in her father’s image and will yet marry Bhaskar. She will
bring Gandhigram and Steeltown together. But Sumita is, after all, only
a novelist’s creation, the image of his faith and hope. She is a flower that
one hope will blossom in the deserts of contemporary hate and
disillusion.

Again, if Sumita can bring Steeltown and Gandhigram together,
cannot the same force of love bring together China and India as well?
The five little Chinese girls who worship the framed eleograph of Mao
undergo a change of heart in the course of a few days and go down in a
row before Bhaskar in a gesture of leave taking “eyes closed ... and each
pair of joined palms held flowers.” It is but fancy again, a poet’s fancy yet why should this not hold the key to the future at all?

In this, as in his other novels, Bhattacharya has his ‘axes’ to grind out the novel doesn’t suffer seriously on their account. There is some exercise in whimsy in the matrimonial advertisement and its consequences, and there is pointed satire in the description of the visit of the Deputy Minister to Steeltown, the stir among the ‘society ladies’ and the ceremonial offer of trinkets to the Defence Fund.

The satirical and humourous sketches entertain us in due measure, the backdrop of history makes us sad and serious by turns, but it is the human action that involves us in its intricacies and ramifications. Shadow from Ladakh takes us to the heart of the darkness, and also points to the dim beckoning light at the far, far end of the tunnel.

II

In Shadow from Ladakh, Bhabani Bhattacharya focuses his attention mainly on the theme of synthesis. The novel throughout is an attempt to bring about the integration of Steel civilization and the Gandhian way of life, East and West, Gandhian asceticism and Tagorean Aestheticism, the old and the new values, village and city, village and city, India and China etc. In short, the novelist is primarily concerned with what he describes as Tagore’s lifelong quest: “Integration that was the poet’s
lifelong quest: integration of the simple and the sophisticated: the ancient and the modern city and village, East and West.”

The novel deals in detail with conflict and compromise between two distinct modes of life represented by Steeltown and Gandhigram – the first stands for the modern, Western industrial civilization, while the second represents the old Eastern values of life. Early in the novel, we read that Steeltown, which has come into being as a result of Chinese aggression, begins to spread so far as to threaten the existence of Gandhigram centering around Satyajit, Sumita and others. Naturally, the people of Gandhigram decided to fight against Bhaskar, the central figure of Steeltown which is also called Lohapur.

Satyajit and Sumita treat the situation as emergent and do not think it proper to leave Gandhigram even for two or three days. Gandhigram follows the ideas of selfless service and self-help and thus is also called Sevagram which primarily aims at teaching people through action alone. When men from Lohapur begin to probe Gandhigram and measure parts of it with a long metal tape, the inhabitants of the village are greatly upset, seeing that the town people will never be able to comprehend the values and ideals for which Gandhigram stands.

After a short period the two – Satyajit and Bhaskar Roy, the soul of Gandhigram and Lohapur respectively meet each other and express their different viewpoints. Bhaskar, a young man dressed in the western way, emphasizes the importance of steel for India by asserting
that it means economic progress, machine tools and is, therefore, the only means to fight poverty and hunger, and defend the country’s freedom. He believes in change, not tradition, not the heritage of philosophic insanity, but the dynamism of technological progress even with all its inevitable chaos. Also he detests the social frontiers and takes every chance to cross them.

On the other hand, Satyajit, a social philosopher, wants to go forward from the point where Gandhi left off and is opposed to the western way of life. But the America trained engineer believes in the industrialization of American techniques. He thinks that the Gandhigram type of village life should be ended, and that it should be merged into the pattern of Lohapur. The village craftsman will find it easy to adopt new techniques, and the tillers of the soil will easily become unskilled millhands. He wishes to achieve the integration of East and West, the old and the modern.

Thus it will be possible to capture the spirit of Gandhigram, not merely the acres of earth. In order to materialize his plan, Bhaskar starts building a house in the meadow near Gandhigram’s dooryard. This house is to belong both to the village and to Steeltown, and so it would be their meeting ground.

Throughout the novel, Bhabani Bhattacharya concentrates upon the problem of bridging the gulf between the old and the new, East and West, and the different cultures so as to bring about their integration. The novelist reproduces Gandhiji’s and Krishnamurti’s ideas about the
free mixing of cultures. It is stressed that all cultures should flow freely without any restrictions. As a matter of fact, there should be a healthy synthesis of these. That is why Gandhi asserts that Indians should not merely feed on the ancient culture of their land; they should enrich their old traditions with the experience of the new times. But the foreign elements in their turn should be conditioned by the spirit of the soil.

Preoccupied with the theme of synthesis, the novelist shows how the clash between Gandhigram and Steeltown, embodying two contrary thoughts and modes of life, disappears gradually bringing about a true adjustment between them. All this is the result of the understanding and sympathy that grows between Bhaskar Roy and Satyajit. Towards the close of the narrative, the crisis caused by the assault of Steeltown on the Gandhigram village is resolved. The workers of Steeltown go to Gandhigram and proclaim that they are brothers of the men of Gandhigram.

Quite a large number of millhands, both men and women, go to Satyajit's house to get the latest news about his health, and speak in friendly ones to the village folk who surround them. The villagers cordially welcome the visitors and take them to the fields, small workshops, schools and the mud dwellings.

The synthesis of East and West, of materialist and spiritual values, is also achieved through the marriage of Bhaskar Roy and Sumita who embody two contrary ways of life. Bhaskar is educated in the West. He had travelled widely in Europe and seen cabaret and
night-clubs. He understands only the body and mind, and not the soul and high morals. Before meeting Sumita, his body had never tried asceticism. Naturally he sometimes feels restless and finds it difficult to work seriously and continuously. At such moments, he would ask himself if he is a machine, a thing of steel. Apparently, he has a typically westernized outlook on life. On the other hand, Sumita is typically Indian in her views. Their marriage is, in fact, the integration of body, mind and soul of western materialism and Indian spiritualism.

The reason why Bhaskar Roy and Sumita can come so close to each other in such a short time is that though the young engineer has lived in America for some years, he is essentially Indian. His westernization is superficial, while his Indianization is genuine.

In this novel, Bhattacharya focuses on the synthesis of asceticism and aestheticism. In more ways than one, he points to an integration of Gandhian asceticism and Tagorean aestheticism. Satyajit is an amalgam of the two. He is a true Gandhian believing in, and practicing, simplicity of life, social service, village uplift, non-violence, truthfulness, fast as a means of penance, a spiritual strength, rejection of materialism, brahmacarya, etc. He devotes himself to the task of creating a model village with the hope that it would be a replica of Sevagram, the village of service that the Father of the Nation had founded.

Naturally he names it Gandhigram. By his words and actions, he preaches to the people the Gandhian ideal of basic compulsions -
simple living, voluntary poverty, self-help and celibacy, use of moral force as a weapon to combat evil and an infinite capacity to bear suffering and death rather than retaliate.

The marriage between Satyajit and Suruchi is significant. It symbolizes the union between Satyajit and Suruchi in the true sense of the term. On the other hand, Suruchi, though devoted to her husband and to the vow of brahmacarya and his impact, is an incarnation of the aestheticism of Tagore. No wonder when he comes in contact with her as a teacher at Shantiniketan, he feels that the fullness of life of which the poet has spoken has “taken shape before his eyes, sari-draped on a reed mat”.

Suruchi is such an embodiment of the fullness of life as Satyajit’s early married life is a perfect union of asceticism and aestheticism. However, after some years, the ascetic in him becomes dominant and subdues considerably the other side of life in him and her. Both of them vow to practice brahmacarya before they have fully satisfied their emotional and physical urges.

Shadow from Ladakh presents an interesting adjustment of two entirely contrasting old classmates, Bires and Satyajit. An antithesis of ascetic Satyajit, Bires is given to gaiety of life, to the philosophy of “Eat, drink and be merry.” When he comes to know through Satyajit that Sumita has given up the grab of austerity, he is exceedingly happy and looks forward to seeing her beauty in a blue sari. He is the masculine counterpart of Suruchi and therefore always loves and worships her in
his heart. Strictly opposed to ‘Satyajitism’, he makes a correct prophecy about Sumita in her presence, “One day you will be rescued by something more elemental than Satyajitism. You may fight it, but at last you’ll give way.” He is deeply in love with life.

That is why when he marks a change in Sumita, a change from ascetic austerity to love for life, he tells Satyajit that she is like her mother at the age of twenty, and that he should completely surrender himself to her and should not force upon her a heavy guiding hand. But notwithstanding their different attitudes and ideas, the two understand each other very well and are great friends, deeply concerned about each other.

Written under the impact of Chinese aggression on India, Shadow from Ladakh is deeply concerned about harmonious relationship between India and China. Satyajit, the central figure in the novel, wants that the clash between the two countries should end and that there should be harmonious relations between the two, as there were in the good old days. He tells Suruchi that there existed warmth of feeling between them in the past and that was the reason why Tagore was so much interested in China.

Bhattacharya is of the view that Indians and Chinese can and should live peacefully. Thus the Chinese girl Erhku Roy comes closer to the Indians even when there is an armed clash between the two nations on their borders for territorial gains. She has perfect understanding with, and great attachment for Satyajit, Suruchi and Bhaskar. She loves
and follows Mao and Gandhi simultaneously. She always keeps with her the photography of Mao and the spinning wheel of Gandhi.

To conclude, Bhattacharya's concept of compromise and integration finds a convincing expression in this novel. Through Mrs. Mehra, he asserts that adjustment is essential for and inevitable in life: Life is all compromise. One yields a bit here and gets it back elsewhere. But synthesis, in Bhattacharya’s opinion, means the acquiescence of life in its totality and not the denial of it in any form or the suppression of identity. His idea of synthesis is clearly embodied in his observations on the adjustment between Gandhigram and Steeltown:

There was one way left for Gandhigram. It must make readjustments. That would mean acceptance of life in its totality. But not the Steeltown way; that also was denial of life deep under the surface. Let license be chastened by restraint. Let restraint find its right level by a leavening of freedom. Let there be a meeting ground of the two extremes; let each shed some of its content and yet remain true to itself.

III

In Shadow from Ladakh, the novelist makes artistic use of parallelism and contrast in order to focus attention on what he wants to communicate. Satyajit is contrasted with Bhaskar and to a less extent with Bireswar. Satyajit is a prisoner of his own scruples and moral principles and never able to live a full-blooded life. On the few
occasions during his residence at Cambridge, when he yields to his instincts, he is overcome with remorse and expiates by chastising his body. Bhaskar and Bireswar are differently made. Bhaskar particularly regards such affairs as mere ‘moment of life’.

Bireswar is a critic of Satyajit’s asceticism and reproaches him for having destroyed the happiness of Suruchi. He actually falls in love with her and discontinues his annual visits to Gandhigram lest his feelings should come to be known. At one stage Satyajit feels that Bireswar would have been a more suitable husband for Suruchi and even toys with the idea of encouraging her to join him. It is on Bireswar’s advice that Satyajit decides towards the end of the novel to give up his unnatural asceticism and to live a normal life if he survives the fast.

There is a similar contrast between Sumita on one side and Rupa and Jhanak on the other. Sumita is a better example of Satyajitism than Satyajit himself. Her life has become one of dedication. The dedication has acted as a restraining force and has hampered her natural development. She has become an ascetic woman.

According to her mother, ‘ascetic woman’ is a contradiction in terms and ‘no girl wants a life of dedication.’ In contrast with her Rupa refuses to accept any kind of restraint and lives an uninhibited life. Not that she does not recognize the finer ingredients of love, but she refuses to make such ado about an occasional human lapse. Jhanak
represents in the novelist’s words ‘a woman’s primal urge to be nothing but a woman’. iii

Suruchi defends her and refuses to join the chorus of censure directed against her in Gandhigram. She rejoices when in the end Jhanak is free to love and to marry the man of her choice. There is no doubt that the novelist’s concept of sexual morality is not the traditional Indian concept; he gives as clear hint that our ascetic code will have to be revised in the new era of industrialization.

The use of parallelism is seen when the novelist reinforces his ideas by making a number of characters embody them. Suruchi’s deeply-felt conviction is shared by Bhaskar, Bireswar, Rupa and Jhanak. Together they represent the opposition to Satyajit’s stern code of morality and the repression it enforces.

IV

Another artistic device used in the novel is a subtle balancing of effects by first depicting a movement in one direction and then a counter-movement in the opposite direction. In Suruchi we see the movement from freshness and spontaneity towards asceticism that is imposed from outside. In Sumita we witness the counter-movement from asceticism cheerfully accepted, towards fullness of life and freedom that follows mental awakening. And since in the final analysis the message of the novel is that of compromise and equilibrium, this balancing of forces provides it with the appropriate setting.
The reconciliation between Gandhigram and Steeltown with which the story ends is the most appropriate conclusion to a novel which advocates the way of integration and synthesis. That the central message of the book could be missed by an imperfect understanding of its conclusion is illustrated by the following criticism of the novel in a paper by Paul Verghese:

But the lack of depth in his treatment of problems of human relations is a weakness of his art. For example, though his fifth novel, shadow from Ladakh, provides an insight into the contrasting contemporary life of India symbolized by Satyajit ... and Bhaskar ... it ends on a weak note of the co-existence of these two ideologies. The inclusion of Chinese aggression as a major incident in the novel and the references to Gandhian idealism and Tagore's ideal of international brotherhood only add to the topical interest of the novel. A philosophical base rather than the prop of a topical event would have strengthened the discussion of the conflict of the two ideologies...
Thus Bhabani Bhattacharya has tried to compare and contrast Mahatma Gandhi’s views and Rabindranath Tagore’s views quite tactfully.

V

Bhabani Bhattacharya scores a fresh triumph in this novel. Even though a legitimate extension of his earlier thematic concerns, it breaks new ground in structural vitality and an intimacy of suggestiveness that function together to invest and an intimacy of suggestiveness that function together to invest the novel with a deep philosophical, cultural and social significance. Here he extends his vision beyond the problems of his country to the problems of the sick western civilization of today. The novel analyses those of the permissive society in America, the most advanced of the western countries.

The plot of the novel is centred round the personality of Swami Yogananda, a learned professor of Vedantism, who has turned yogi at a very young age. He is taken from his retreat ‘Sadhana’ in the Himalayan foot-hills of Rishikesh to the beautiful island of Hawaii by his American disciple Stella Gregson to teach the relevance of Vedanta to the soul-tormented people of America.

The plot is divided into two narratives which run parallel to each other—one concerning Yogananda’s external life describing his contact with his struggle to overcome his desire for Devjani. Both the narratives
are in the form of dreams or fantasies “a wish-fantasy of Devjani suggestive of the allegorical device used. While the contact with the acquisitive and permissive society of America strengthens Yogananda’s faith in Vedantism and its value for rudderless modern civilization, his confession before Devjani of his intense feeling for her and his experience with Sylvia Koo, sublimes his impure desires and releases him from his old self of Neeloy Mukherji forever.

The irony of the situation is that Swami Yogananda’s experience in Hawaii proves beneficial not only to the people of Hawaii, but also to the Swami himself. On the one hand, it arouses the spiritual awakening among materialistic Americans. On the other it resolves the Swami’s own psychic aberrations. Swami Yogananda who returns to India after his brief stay in Hawaii is a transformed Swami whose soul is no more racked by doubts about his sanctified personage. The novel is thus an allegory of Swami Yogananda’s fulfillment of his real self by his contact with the west.

Bhabani Bhattacharya analyses the malady of the western society through the characters of Walt Gregson, Frieda, Sylvia Koo, Dr. Vincent Swift and Jennifer. Marriage is reduced to a convenient contract. For the young and unmarried, dating and mating were the same. Virginity became a sin when you were over sixteen. Virgin girls and virgin boys beyond their teens are all too rare anyhow. Americans have no wish to improve their quality of life. As Frieda remarks, “Change is our concern. We disavow the old mores in our search for self-validation”.
Dr. Vincent Swift, the prototype of the American culture - vulture and Jennifer, the young socialite represent America’s voracious appetite for dollars and superficial culture. The wish to turn “The world centre for yogic disciplines named after the Swami as Yogananda into a profit-oriented big business concern of five million dollar mark. Without caring for the true spirit of Vedantism or wishes of the Swami whom they wish to institutionalize, they try to import from India a hata-Yogi, an astrologer and an exorcist to add to the variety of the spiritual merchandise at the Yogi Centre. During his stay in Hawaii, Swami Yogananda is able to assess the causes of the crisis in the super technological and acquisitive society of America.”

A Dream in Hawaii is the fictional equivalent of “A passage to America,” for within its structural framework, it accompanies 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 troop to India on a JAL flight, when he dissociates himself form 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 forms the basic thematic construct of the novel, along with his Devjani’s compulsive quest for the identity reinforced with intermittent flash-backs into the intimate pasts of the various characters, both Indian and American.

Neeloy Mukherjee, the professor of Indian philosophy is metamorphosed into Swami Yogananda, by the cumulative effect of his
own spiritual hunger and the need and desire of his student paramour Devjani, who helps him, find his new identity in which he never feels fully at home, though he does carry his Swamihood with delectable grace. The garb of an ascetic is meant to help him achieve the union between the Vedantic thought that he teaches and its practical working out in his life, handsome and spiritual as he is, he remains thoroughly human throughout, playing his roles of a teacher and an ascetic with a verse and gusto that never let him lapse into a banal and incredible mediocrity.

A Dream in Hawaii affords numerous examples of chronological involutions which are deftly manipulated by Bhattacharya. The protagonist (Swami Yogananda) is picked up at a specific point in time and through intermittent flash-backs, the reader is provided with the information about the earlier phases of his life. The past of the other characters, which come in close contact with him, is also revealed. The technique followed throughout the novel can be defined thus: a character enters the scene, the narrative is suspended to relate his past, and then, there is a return to the ‘narrative present’. 

Thus in Chapter Two, we have Walter Gregson come to ORVIS AUDITORIUM to attend Swami Yogananda’s lecture. The narrative is interrupted to relate his relationship with Stella, and then we return to the Auditorium. In Chapter three, we find Jennifer on the beach. By means of a flash-back, we learn about the incident of her chance-seeing the advertisement and their chance-going to Kennedy Theatre.
At the end of the chapter, we are back to the beach and find Jennifer drive back home. Again in chapter six, we find Devjani recapitulation her mother’s moral turpitude. She leaps through years in a moment and recollects the scene in Varanasi where the monk who visited Neeloy’s class as a guest lecturer once every month had remarked meaningfully. “There is Yogi deep within Neeloy. One day the Yogi will asset himself powerfully and then perhaps Neeloy will be gone forever”.

The comment has set Devjani’s mind working and she had seen in Prof. Neeloy the guru image. Her bold words “A star cannot be a firefly” had served as a catalyst in his transformation. Man’s active existence, is a continuous to-and-fro movement. Life proceeds, as also recedes, and the present is inexplicably entangled in the past. Obviously, no event in the present can be analyzed independent of the casual happenings in the past. In A Dream in Hawaii, Bhattacharya makes a judicious use of flash-back and montage technique so often used in cinematography in an attempt to capture truth.

The novel is about the conflicting needs of Neeloy Mukherjee unable to submerge his identity completely into that of Swami Yogananda. He is made to conform to a role imposed on him by Devjani. It is she who in the main is responsible for the birth of Swami Yogananda by leading him to deny the sensual aspects of life, nay, by recognizing only the spiritual being in him. Ironically enough it is only when he has achieved fame and success as a Swami that he realises the
truth of his inner being which continues to be Neeloy surviving against all outward impositions and control.

A Dream in Hawaii is not the dream about the international cultural centre, but it is Swami Yogananda’s dream which brings back to him the consciousness of Neeloy. The Swami’s journey back to his ashram is a journey of self-realization - a process he begins with his confession to Devjani. Sylvia Koo takes up the role because Walt Gregson wants to strip the holiness off the Swami. And it is her visit which awakens the dormant Neeloy in the Swami.

In this novel the central figure is Swami Yogananda, a youthful charismatic reincarnation of the great Swami Vivekananda, who cuts an idealistic swath through the American student community, represented as eagerly seeking the spiritual sustenance offered by Eastern Philosophies. “The great society was desperate for spiritual leadership. An enormous Vacuum remained.”

The twenty chapters of the novel fall into a neat thematic and structural pattern, almost half of them are concerned with the depiction of the surfeit of sex as a symptom of the sick society, while the other half explores the true nature of spiritualism and salvation, which the author believes, are not reached through self-denial, but only through self-fulfillment. Virtually all the characters in the novel are either sexually aggressive or sexually sublimated.
Neeloy Mukherjee—turned—Yogananda and Devjani represent sexual sublimation. Jennifer, the young and rich American society girl, is unable to achieve a satisfying sexual and emotional relationship with the adults of her own age and class and so she seeks and even finds tenderness in the sexual embrace of a New Delhi teen-aged gigolo and the shoe-shine boys at the sunset beach in Hawaii. Stella Gregson feels revulsion for the kind of completely uninhibited four-letter organist sex demanded by her husband, Walt Gregson and so turns to the Indian Yogi to seek fulfillment of her spiritual needs.

Dr. Vincent Swift, the president of Hawaii Academy, after the death of his faithful wife, remains single only to seek solace in sexual narcissism and self-release aided by a view of X-rated movies. Devjani’s mother whose, scientist-husband finds no times for her in the midst of his professional engagements seeks solace in an adulterous relationship with the family doctor. Walt Gregson, the professor of literature seeks correlations between the portrayal of sex in contemporary American fiction and the real life situations in which he himself is a participant. His quest for sexual thrills and orgies leads his freedom form one bed-partner to another.

He keeps longest with Sylvia Koo for the simple reason that she exudes sex at the level of sheer animality without a single redeeming trace of human feeling or scruple. And then there is Frieda who believes that KAMASUTRA is the new gospel for America. She has a taste of heavenly ambrosia from an Indian Charlatan-guru, who thrills her with the display of tremendous sexual prowess. She feels cheated when
Yogananda refuses to oblige her with the gift of similar seminal ‘heavenly ambrosia’.

The other side of the coin depicts the spiritual hunger of these sexual delicts, a hunger to understand what makes them human, a desire to satisfy their “higher” urges, and what could be a better proposition than to have a handsome Indian Yogi at the centre of the stage, directing their feelings and telling them about the significance of desireless action and Vedantic concept of Ultimate Reality.

But then it has to be remembered that Yogi discipline – is not a mere ritual, a matter of burning incense or wearing Yellow garbs or sitting on a dear skin or mouthing inane cliches. Naturally therefore, the psychic barrier separating the Indian from the American mind acts as a deterrent to the intimacy of initiation into the secrets of the soul and super-consciousness. That is the reason that Stella, Jennifer and Walt in spite of their great need of Yogananda, can at best touch his thoughts at the mere periphery. Yogananda must return to India and wait for Devjani to accept him only as Neeloy and to wonder whether a firefly is any way less glorious than a “Star”!

The technique employed by Bhattacharya in this brilliant novel serves his purpose well. The use of Conradian shifts in time mingling and fracturing past, present and future – brings out vividly the salient features underlying the psychic and spiritual make-up of his graphic human portraits.
Bhattacharya wrote his novel “A Dream in Hawaii” in the declining years of his life and it is interspersed with very obscene and vulgar passages of pornography. Though in his other novels, he dealt with sex and the institution of prostitution, he never degraded himself to such abysmal depths of obscenity. It deals with the tensions and pretensions of the modern world, nay, the ultra modern world with its sick hurry and divided aims.

In the interval between life and death, man is tossed between materialism and mysticism, myth and reality, the transient and the permanent, and the sense of disillusionment amidst the stark realities of life. Bhattacharya deals, in main, with the two poles of life, Kama (physical desire) and Moksha (spiritual bliss or salvation). The novel also highlights the two aspects – Tamas (darkness) referring to the bodily pleasures and Jnana (light, enlightenment) referring to the realization of the ultimate reality.

The novel centres in three characters – Swami Yogananda, Dr. Vincent Swift ad Devjani. Bhattacharya has in mind the clash of values between the East and the West-India and America. He is disillusioned by the American way of life and he brings into the force their ways of life – the transcendental meditation, permissiveness, Hippie culture, the use of tranquillizers, the Krishna consciousness and Hare Ram, Hare Krishna cult. Whole pages are devoted to sex and “Kamasutra” on one hand and Yogas and Meditation on the other hand. The novel reads like
a diagnostic report of the intellectual crisis beseezing the affluent west, but the story and air of satire pervades the work, it is kept under prudent control and it does not stand in the way of the reader cultivating the sympathy Yogananda deserves and the affection and respect Devjani demands.

Money is a great power, neutral by itself, like any weapon or instrument, dependent on the hand that wields it. Forces which have continued to monopolise its use are far from being spiritual – they are mostly demoniac. Mystics with meager spiritual powers fall easy victims to these forces. Money engulfs them and slowly but surely drowns them to the abyss of the vital lures. They do not have the capacity to transform the forces and make them work for true spirituality. It is significant that Yogananda attracts Vincent Smith, the man with the five million – dollar mark scheme.

Bhattacharya presents American life in its true colours – the new permissive age, free from inhibitions and taboos. Hawaii is a tourist’s paradise. It is a multiple image – the unique East-West mix and the strong inter-culturation. Sex is as cheap as mass-produced drinks. There will be at least one reported case of rape every nine minutes. Western society is a complex of fantastic contradictions. Marriage is reduced to a convenient contract. Dating and mating are the same for the young and unmarried. Change is their concern. They have no respect for anything they do not have to pay for.
Bhattacharya refers to the magnetic influence of four personalities on the Indian scene: Gautama Buddha, Vivekananda, Gurudev Tagore and Gandhi. Vivekananda’s interest in contemporary man is as intense as his absorption in the abstract thoughts of Vedanta. Bhattacharya is disillusioned at the callous indifference of the Indians towards Gandhi and his ideals. He emphasizes upon the two forces that have swayed the lives of the Americans – The gospel of Hare Krishna Movement and the concept of Transcendental Meditation.

Bhattacharya makes minute references to Kamasutra, the ancient classic of India. It starts with instruction on the ways lovers have to kiss - twenty one ways are prescribed. The next section is devoted to love play, the wide variety of techniques to be used for the partner’s arousal to the right pitch. The final pages are devoted to the thirty three ways of performing the sex act. There are occasional descriptions of the beauty of nature in Hawaii islands.

Bhattacharya depicts the characters of Walt Gregson, Stella and Sylvia Koo and Jennifer with a purpose, no doubt. References to pubic hair, the different sizes of the navel, the art of fucking and the sex-act and vulgar expressions like, “Jerk your juice in my hole, you bastard,” mar the beauty of the novel. There is no doubt a few flashes of Bhattacharya’s idiomatic English style, “Truth a word made senile through over-use. An old suppressed sorrow is burning cinew in its ashes.”
The plot of the novel is as simple as a short story and it has necessitated several digressions, mostly unconnected with the story. Bhattacharya makes a satiric hit at the inexplicable permissiveness of the Americans which leads them nowhere. In trying to attain something, they land nowhere and are utterly disillusioned. The inner core of the novel brings the eternal truth:

From Darkness lead us to Light.
From the Unreal lead us to the Real.
From Death lead us to Immortality.

The novel deals with the cultural values of the east and the west, though not in the stereotyped portrayal of the materialistic west and the spiritual East. Other themes dealt in then novel are the sexual permissiveness of the American Society, the desire to make money and the spiritual hunger of the Americans. Through the novel Bhattacharya also presents a critique of the bourgeois value-system which believes in making a profitable business venture out of even personal human needs like sex and yoga.

On the surface it appears to be a novel about two cultural traditions, but in reality it is about the conflicting needs of man. “A Dream in Hawaii” is not the dream about international cultural centre, but it is Swami Yogananda’s dream which brings back to him the consciousness of Neeloy. The Swami’s journey back to his ashram is a journey of self-realization – a process he begins with his confession to Devjani.
In this novel, the central figure is Swami Yogananda, a youthful, charismatic, reincarnation of the great Swami Vivekananda, who cuts an idealistic swath through the American student community represented as eagerly seeking the spiritual sustenance offered by Eastern philosophies. Much rather didactic discussion swirls about Yoga, Vedanta, Zen Buddhism and East-West accommodation of Philosophies.

A Dream in Hawaii is the fictional equivalent of “A passage to America”, for within its structural frame work, 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 trip to India on a JAL flight when he dissociates 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 forms the basic thematic construct of the novel, along with his Devjani’s compulsive quest for the identity reinforced with intermittent flash-backs into the intimate pasts of the various characters, both Indian and American.

The technique employed by Bhattacharya in this brilliant novel serves his purpose well. The use of Conradian shifts in time mingling and fracturing past, present and future brings out vividly the salient features underlying the psychic and the spiritual make-up of his graphic human portraits. He also presents a critique of the value system
which believes in making a profitable business venture out of even personal human needs like sex and yoga. He scores a fresh triumph in this novel. Even though a legitimate extension of his earlier thematic concern, it breaks new ground in structural vitality and an intimacy of suggestiveness that function together to invest the novel with a deeper philosophical, cultural and social significance.

The experience of Swami Yogananda in Hawaii to give a direction and purpose to the current lostness in American life is a dream which begins with his arrival in the paradise of the Pacific and ends with his abrupt departure from there.

The double plot in *A Dream in Hawaii*, consisting of the exterior and interior actions has been conceived on two different levels corresponding with their respective purposes. The exterior action is satirical in tone and traditional in form. The interior action is lyrically conceived, the stress being symbolic rather than mimetic. It is in the form of interior monologue of the "Stream of consciousness Technique" novel. It is time the dead rat stinking under the nylon rug was cast away and the whole place cleansed and fumigated.

**VII**

The study of a creative writer, howsoever exhaustive, remains incomplete and lop-sided unless he is viewed primarily as a craftsman. In other words, the tools in his smithy that help him in his work, viz. plot structure, characterization, form, technique of narration and
language, etc. need also be discussed elaborately besides the themes he writes upon.

Bhabani Bhattacharya is also essentially a craftsman. Whenever his acute sensitivity makes his creative urge afire, and a peculiar theme strikes his mind, Bhattacharya weaves the pattern of his story around it. In this process, he manipulates the plot, creates the characters and tells the story in his own way, handling the language so as to serve his specific purpose effectively.

Since the entire gamut of a story is covered by its plot, Bhattacharya takes considerable pains in knitting the plots of his novels. Being aware of the plot as “particular temporal synthesis effected by the writer of the elements of action, characters and thoughts that constitute the matter of the invention.” he makes his plots compact, organic and economical. Instead of being loosely connected pieces of detachable harmony, his plots are well-knit and coherent.

Nowhere does the novelist stuff his novels with irrelevant or incoherent material. The action of the story, in his case advances its latent thought-content with the help of various characters. The characters, originally created to fit in the action-plan, affect and mould in it the course of its development, but are themselves also changed in term by the events and incidents of the story.
A Dream in Hawaii also has similar surprising twists in its story. In the earlier part of the book, Yogananda’s abrupt denial of Devjani’s request for initiation against his inner wish creates a sense of mystery in the novel. Later on, Walt’s sending of Sylvia Koo to seduce Yogananda in order to lower his prestige, and then, his unexpected shock and sorrow at the success of his plot and Yogananda’s sudden decision to return to India give us good examples of the mystery-element in the novel. All these instances help the plot to develop and conclude convincingly by providing it the necessary turns and twists.

One major characteristic of Bhattacharya’s plot is that though they tend to be tragic in the beginning, they finally end happily. Every crisis is resolved in the end, and the novels usually end with an atmosphere of calmness and serenity. Each of his novels has various sub-plots which serve as different episodes in play. The characters are usually assigned their respective roles, and the situations arise out of the character’s development. These elements obviously point to the dramatic quality of his novels.

VIII

Characters generally reflect the mind of their creator. E. M. Forster is of the view that the novelist “makes up a number of word-masses roughly describing himself ... gives them names and sex, assigns them plausible gestures, and causes them to speak by the use of inverted commas, and perhaps to behave consistently. These word-masses are his characters.”
Bhabani Bhattacharya, too, creates characters to represent his ideas. In a way, his characters are more or less types, denoting certain ideas or values. Kajoli’s father and mother in So Many Hungers have not been given any names. They simply stand for any and every father and mother. But this does not mean that Bhattacharya’s characters lack individuality.

Bhattacharya is a novelist with a social purpose. He presents a realistic picture of the contemporary society, and hence his characters are bound to be real people. He frankly confesses to Sudhakar Joshi that most of his characters “have shaped themselves from the real earth.”

While writing a novel, Bhattacharya does not create characters before the invention of a story. On the contrary, he thinks of a theme and then introduces the characters and events according to the requirements of the plot. The development of character, in his case, is not in the hands of the author. His characters develop independently of the writer’s intentions. Their personalities are influenced and molded by the turns and twists of the plots.

Bhattacharya’s novels also abound in characters that uphold a certain value-pattern in the beginning of their careers but change and readjust themselves to the requirement of the new times. They shed their rigid adherence to the old ideas and practices to a great extent, and also accommodate modern values as times passes. Examples of this type are Satyajit, Bhaskar, Sumita, Yogananda, Walt and Devjani, etc.
Actually these are the characters that have some vitality. They are not mere cardboard figures or caricatures, but real living people.

**IX**

In matters of narrative technique, Bhattacharya uses both the conventional and the modern methods in fiction. As a true artist, he does not adhere to any single point of view for the presentation of his stories. Though he prefers, for the most part, to narrate the stories from the traditional omniscient point of view, yet at times he resorts to interior monologues to reveal the inner experiences of the characters.

Bhattacharya’s last novel, *A Dream in Hawaii*, particularly opens with the musings of the protagonist, Yogananda. The internal monologue that takes place within Yogananda’s mind at once illustrates to the reader what is passing in his mind. The reader is able to see things as Yogananda sees them, and his thoughts are also identical with those of the hero. The writer does not try to intrude, and if he intervenes at all, he does it merely for the sake of a retrospective introduction of the hero and his surroundings. As one proceeds with the novel, Stella Gregson is found busy in Indianizing Jennifer’s big living-room in order to receive Swami Yogananda. Her ideas, plans and recollections are all conveyed in such a way that the reader finds himself identifying with her and her experiences.

Nowhere does he become conscious of the writer’s presence in the narrative. The fact stands out that in this novel Bhattacharya
frequently uses the stream-of-consciousness technique with its stress upon the interior monologue, though for artistic purposes, he mingles it with other conventional narrative methods, too.

In one of his short stories, A Moment of Eternity too, the stream-of-consciousness technique has been employed. The story opens at the moment when the heroine is standing in the court of justice, waiting for the decision to be announced. As soon as the judge starts reading the judgment, her thoughts fly back to her past life. The moment prolongs into eternity. An entire panorama of the bygone days with all the intricate details of happenings and incidents flashes before her inward eye at that moment. She does not remain conscious of her surroundings at all. The reader comes to know the true sequence only at the end. Before it, the whole narrative seems illogical and incoherent.

However, the stream-of-consciousness mode of narration, despite its successful use in A Dream in Hawaii and one or two more novels, is not his forte in general. He depends, to a larger extent, upon the traditional narrative methods. The stories in most of his novels are told from the neutral omniscient point-of-view. He enters into the hearts and minds of each one of his characters, and expresses their feelings and thoughts, adjusting them to their respective nature and temperament.
References:

i  K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, Indian Writing in English.

ii  Shadow from Ladakh, P. 289.

iii  Ibid., P. 274.


v  Forster, P. 116.

vi  Ibid., p. 64.

CHAPTER - 5

A CRITICAL STUDY OF BHABANI BHATTACHARYA’S SHORT STORIES
Besides the novels, Bhabani Bhattacharya also has fifteen short-stories to his credit. Collected in Steel Hawk and Other Stories, they project a cross-section of life in India and abroad, and are concerned with a deeper emotional meaning, conveyed through their widely individual dramas.

Since Bhattacharya is pre-occupied with certain other issues in these sketches, the theme of blending is not in evidence in all of them. In some of the stories, however, the writer does present a synthesis of the traditional and the modern values as well as the idealism and the realism.

In Steel Hawk and other Stories we have a collection of fifteen short stories written by Bhattacharya. The stories show considerable variety of theme and tone ranging from light-hearted comedy to somber tragedy, from flights of sheer fancy to the keenest observation of facts and from a study of a monkey’s mind to the exploration of the depths of the human soul.
The Acrobats

Viewed symbolically, The Acrobats is a typical example of the blending of tradition and modernity. This story centres round two acrobats, the father and the ‘Boy’. The father is old, mature and experienced, and embodies tradition in his nature, whereas the Boy is young and inexperienced, and represents modernity. Just as modernity is the offspring of tradition, similarly, the Boy is the child of the father acrobat. Both are supplementary and complementary to each other, and their life becomes as self-sufficient whole only when there is a complete harmony between them.

The father and the Boy live and perform their acrobatic feats together. Notwithstanding their relationship and difference in their age, they live like true companions, and there is a deep understanding between them. The father has undivided love for his child and the latter, too, has constant devotion to the former. Still there is a gap of age between the father and the Boy. The Boy is shocked and annoyed to see his father paying special attention to the young woman and neglecting him. The spirit of companionship between them disappears. The Boy grows silent and feels isolated, while the father remains engrossed in his own musings. In short, the old man and his offspring, the young boy, lose the harmony which existed between them earlier.

The Boy sees his father and the woman ogling together daily and, at last, he can not tolerate it any longer. In order to show his unhappiness, he breaks the law of balance while performing upon the
pole, and comes down with a thud. His right leg is broken. He is taken to hospital in an unconscious state. When he gains consciousness in the hospital, he finds his father caressing his legs.

He tells him that the mishap took place because of that young woman standing in the balcony. The father can now understand some of the pain, the protest, the ravaged feelings, and the core of his son's inward storm. There is a violent struggle in his mind, and at last, he decides to forsake the woman. Accompanied by the boy, he leaves the place for good. Thus he is again united with his son. Bhattacharya remarks:

He sat with his face lowered, fighting his sore battle, stamping out a strident call of his blood and the warmth of a dream. With his strength of a lion, Father fought his battle.

In the days and weeks that followed the young woman in the balcony stood leaning out over the brass rail for long spells, watching the bend of the street with tremulous expectation. She never saw the acrobats again.¹

Actually this union of the father and the Boy signifies the synthesis of traditionalism and modernism. The story suggests that the blending of two polarities is a necessity for a smooth and harmonious living.
The Acrobats is a subtle study in psychology. A father, who is a skilled acrobat, trains his motherless son in his profession. They give performances on the streets. The boy balances himself on a pole which is supported on the father’s shoulder or in his open mouth; he skillfully turns his body on the top of the pole lying alternately on his back or on his belly. The performance is given again and again in front of a particular house. The boy looking down into his father’s face notices that he is looking with longing eyes on a servant-maid standing on a balcony.

The next time they give the performance, the son takes revenge. In a rebellious mood, he relaxes his muscles deliberately on top of the pole, loses his balance and comes crashing down on the stone pavement. He luckily escapes death. The father learns his lesson and the acrobats are no more to be seen in this street. The story is told with great economy. The deep attachment between father and son, the sadness and jealousy felt by the boy and their common respect for the memory of the dead mother are brought out with breath-taking force.

The Quack

Another short-story, The Quack, conveys the key-idea that human mind is prone to have faith in the traditional, the miraculous and the visionary things despite a deep awareness of the modern, the ordinary and the real facts of life. In other words, the author maintains here that
the old and the new or the ideal and the real elements are synthesized in human nature.

The old man who meets the author in the audience, shows him his decaying teeth. Although he knows well that nothing can be done for his teeth because the dentist has already told him about it frankly, yet he is hoping against hope. His faith in the miraculous black powder, the so-called gift of a great yogi to the quack, makes him fall a prey to the quack and buy four packets of that powder. Describing the anomalous situation, Bhattacharya writes:

An old man standing by my side, four packets tightly clutched in his fingers, turned his face to me with a grimace. “Look at my teeth,” he pulled down his lower lip with his fingers to reveal the decay. Nothing can be done for them, the tooth-doctor says. True. What can you do with tree whose roots are gone? He caught my questioning glance on the packets he held and the grimace deepened.

“All the same, as there is naught else to be done, why not hope a bit against all hope? Why not give every stupid thing an honest trial? Quackery? Yes. I am no
trustful ass. But....what if it just happens to be otherwise this time? Just for once? Whoever can tell such things for sure?”

**Steel Hawk**

Perhaps the most remarkable and the powerful story in the collection, *Steel Hawk*, very emphatically highlights the blending of the old and the new, the ideal and the real elements in Indian life today. In this story, “Cart” signifies the old, considered ideal by people like old Grandma whereas the Steel Hawk stands for the modern that is very much real today.

Grandma is the virtual symbol of synthesis. Since she is countless years old, she represents the old, traditional outlook of the past. But she is not altogether rigid in her attitude towards the modern times. She has always been a great admirer of the new inventions of modern science. In her early youth, she had felt immensely happy at the sight of a railway engine, and had exclaimed:

“Truly, such a thing exists! To see this I must have earned merit by a hundred and one good deeds.”

This old lady is excited over the news of the Steel Hawk that has landed in the village pasture. She is as much anxious to know about the
“flying wonder” as she had felt excited about the railway engine at the age of fourteen. Unable to move out because of gout, she asks her grandson, Bishan, to rush to the village pasture to have a good look at the Steel Hawk.

Bishan acknowledges Grandma’s curiosity about the wonders of modern science and technology:

“Old Grandma, poor soul. Mad about tricky machines, stark mad! Same today as in her long-ago days, when the railroad first came this way!”

Grandma is thus not only of the past, but she has also got a spirit that readily accepts the present times. Bishan observes:

Grandma could look at the flying wonder and go riding it in her fancy, zooming away mightily and shooting from sky to sky life as crazy star. Grandma has that sort of mind. She had it when she was young, and she still had it when her hair was without one black strand, all teeth gone, and sadness and pain written on her brow in each of the hundred wrinkles, graven deep.
Bishan does not despise the old lady because, like him, she, too, has a natural bent towards modernity. This factor creates a deep understanding and perfect harmony between them. He broods: “Grandma’s spirit was catching up with him! She who was of Yesterday was possessed by Today. Then how could one who was of Today be otherwise?” Bishan sees in his fancy this “aged Grandma, with her modern dream, riding the Steel Hawk, soaring atop!”

There is also a synthesis of the traditional and the modern elements in Bishan’s character in the story. As a village cart man, he represents the old ways of life. But he does not adhere rigidly to the obsolete ideas and attitudes. The modern age has influenced his mind too. He fancies himself riding the aeroplane along with his Grandma. Commenting on his reveries, the author remarks:

> Impatient cow-bells tinkled into his reverie while he leaned against the fat, white flanks of an ox, but his neck remained craned, his mind remote. For the cartman of Sonamitti village had yielded to the impulse of the age and was riding the Steel Hawk with his Grandma, zooming away mightily.

In Bhattacharya’s story the villagers wisely welcome the steel bird as they had welcomed the iron horse a few decades earlier. The Steel Hawk is a symbol of modernity and its acceptance by the villagers
represents India’s acceptance of industrialism – a theme which prominently figures in Shadow from Ladakh.

**Glory at Twilight**

In the opening story, Glory at Twilight, Bhattacharya brings to light the fact that human nature has blending of the traditional and the modern elements: idealisms and realism in it. Both these elements play a vital role in making human life a whole. Satyajit’s character in the story embodies this idea. He shows the spirit of benevolence while deciding to help uncle Srinath even in his own lean times, and thus acts as an idealist. But at the same time, he is also well aware of the drab realities of life that he must face in future. Describing his predicament, Bhattacharya writes:

> Fallen from his castle in the clouds, Satyajit must treat the earthly ways of humble folk. But he could not deny the old man altogether. He must send some help. He had pondered over the amount. He had to ponder over each rupee before he spent it. ix

The spirit of idealism makes Satyajit mortgage even his last remaining property for Srinath’s sake. When the old man tells him that the village money-lender will advance a loan only after, he has got Satyajit’s house and pond as securities, Satyajit consents to do it despite
his awareness of the danger involved in it. He tells Srinath: “Let the money-lender pay on those terms.” Satyajit, however, realizes the hardships he will have to face in future for the anxiously remarks: “What now?” This is a question that is natural for every man who has a realistic attitude to life.

**Pictures in the Fire**

Pictures in the Fire is a story dealing with the psychological analysis of human nature. Bhabani Bhattacharya also uses it to express his ideas of integration. According to the author, dream elements and stark realities are closely woven together in the texture of man’s life. Whenever the humdrum facts of the day-to-day life become oppressive to man, wishful thinking provides him with a respite, and temporarily diverts his attention.

He wanders into a beautiful dream-world, and dreams of the good things of life. But after a short while, man descends on earth and is again ready to face the hard challenges of life with renewed zeal and replenished faith. The same process goes on continuously throughout his life.

The foreigner, who happens to meet the author in a slit-trench during the World War days, is worried and tired. The author sees “weariness in his white face, lines of strain plain enough in moonlight.” He considers the man as mad, thinking that the “war had torn his nerves and taken his senses. The frenzied look was unmistakable.” In
fact, the man is very much disturbed and fatigued within because of the
tremendous devastation and destruction caused by the war.

Scared by the Japanese’s air-attack on Calcutta, he takes over in a
trench to save his life, and has to pass an idle half hour. Fretted by the
tenseness of the situation, he indulges in wishful thinking since he
thinks that a “mad night like this is good for wishful thinking.” xiv
Wandering in his dream-world, the man idealizes himself.

Fancy makes him a celebrated writer. But he has no wish to enjoy
his success. He acts selflessly and all that he creates goes in the name of
his wife, Josephine Brown, who becomes very popular. When the lady
opposes it, he replies in the high sounding moral tone befitting an
idealist:

I enjoy this work, don’t you see? That’s
good enough for me. Then there is an
extra reward - it’s exciting to see your
name in print. One day, may be, I’ll
write something first rate. The critics
will have many good things to say
about Josephine Brown. Wait and you
will see! xv

But even in his dream, he is unable to see himself undermined or
ignored. His feet still tread the solid earth of actuality. The inherent
realism comes to surface. Since he, too, is a human being, he also aspires for fame and fortune. He thus makes a self-discovery and reflects:

“He felt a great need of fame for himself. Perhaps that need had always been there, unknown and dormant. He had simply repressed it. Now it was going to torture him.”

As soon as the tense half-hour of the dark night passes, and the siren sings, “All clear!” he again becomes conscious of the real world around him. The author remarks:

Our eyes met, he seemed at last to take notice of me. The sadness lifted quickly from his face and it broke into an amused smile. All at once he began to chuckle.

“Picture in the fire!” he breathed.

A Moment of Eternity

A Moment of Eternity is another story where Bhabani Bhattacharya presents the blending of idealism and realism – the two attributes of the traditional and the modern values. The heroine of this story, Mother of Sona-Mana, is a traditional Indian woman, completely devoted to her
husband. She says: “I could bear the Seven Hells to give him the least relief. Oh, I could die a hundred deaths so he could be happy for a day.” 

None else matters for her besides him. When she comes to know of the fatal disease he is suffering from, she neglects even her children and devotes all her time and energy to his treatment. She lives on an idealistic plane, and thinks herself in terms of Savitri, the ideal wife, described in the ancient Hindu lore:

“I felt Savitri in me, Savitri, who is ever in every woman. I could not be defeated, not unless I was lost, destroyed.”

Drawing her strength from this belief, she untiringly looks after her ailing husband. When the dying man asks her to take good care of the girls after him, she firmly asserts:

“We three have no existence apart from yours. In you we have three lives. In your dying we three die.”

In her bid to imitate Savitri of the ancient times, she first kills both of her baby girls and then attempts to commit suicide by eating opium. She is, however, rushed to hospital where she regains consciousness. It
is “at this time that all images began to be sharp again in my mind. No
madness was left. Sanity burned me.”  

Realities of life stare her in the face. She realizes what a heinous
crime she has committed. As this sense dawns upon her, she faces her
trial boldly, and is prepared to face her conviction gladly. While in jail,
she realizes that there is no way to escape from life, and that she will
have to live in this world, enduring all the pangs of the bitter memories
of her past life:

If not death, then madness, for that also
could defeat memory. With each drop of
my heart’s blood, with each nerve and
cell and sinew I prayed for madness.
Sanity remained a huge burning light in
my brain. It gave vividness to all I saw
with the eye within. It sharpened all I
heard, to the least undertone of Sona-
Mona’s voices, their crying and
laughing, their sniffing from a touch of
cold and their deep quiet breathing in
sleep.  

She, Born of Light

She, Born of Light is an impressive story with philosophical
significance. It is the story of Suta, a peasant girl, who meets Dhruba, a
painter from a far-off city at the entrance to one of the Ajanta caves. He is fascinated by her and calls her Aloka-Suta, i.e., Child of Light. He wants to paint her picture as the Buddhist monks of yore had painted the pictures on the cave walls.

One day he shocks her by a demonstration of his desire for her and she is about to leave him, but she changes her mind and continues to pose for him. By a strange reversal of roles she feels longing for him ‘but the Shilpi in him’ dominates and he calmly goes son with his painting. He tells himself that after completing the picture he will be free to seek fulfillment with Suta – “Aloka-Suta no more Suta”.

But ironically he loses her because he awakens her to her womanhood, and then disappoints her by his artist’s coolness. She quietly goes back to her once discarded lover, the simple Nakul. The story shows the influence of Tagore’s philosophy. In numerous writings Tagore pleads for fullness of life and reconciliation between the claims of earth and heaven.

Aloka-Suta sheds her imagined halo of glory and becomes plain Suta just as the fairy of the Prince’s imagination stands revealed as Kajori, a daughter of the nomads in Tagore’s story, The Fairy Reveals Herself. Jayadev in Music for Mohini and Satyajit in Shadow from Ladakh also err by seeking impossible ideals in their wives. Their minds are illumined when they realize that true fulfillment comes only when they come to terms with life.
**Mere Monkeys**

*Mere Monkeys* is an unusual story which makes a powerful impact as it represents the operation of almost human feelings in a monkey’s mind. A male monkey deliberately throws down on the ground and kills a baby monkey that is being fondly nursed by the mother, to clear the ground for his overtures. The next day the mother is seen with the male brute apparently responding to his courtship. What she actually does is to tempt him to jump to and fro over a deep well several times. When the most appropriate moment arrives, she leaps after him, grabs him when he is right over the middle and pulls him down along with her to a watery grave.

**Public Figure**

One of the stories, *Public Figure*, deals with an incident which is reproduced in Shadow from Ladakh with minor alternations. Both in the short story and in the episode in the novel, the author satirizes the hypocrisy and craze for publicity exhibited by certain persons who donate jewellery to the country’s Defence Fund. This theme seems to be an inversion of the theme in “Kaumudi’s Renunciation”, an article in Gandhiji’s *Harijan* which describes the magnanimous surrender of all her ornaments by a girl, Kaumudi, near Calicut in response to the leader’s appeal. Bhattacharya refers to this incident in his book, *Gandhi the Writer*. 
Thus, Bhabani Bhattacharya acts in his short stories also, as a builder of bridges between the two contrary, yet essential elements of life: tradition and modernity, and idealism and realism. He recognizes their dialectics, analyzes it, and then, suggests a synthesis of the two.

Bhattacharya’s short stories, on the whole, show his seriousness of purpose as a writer even as the novels do. They give us a glimpse of his personality, his awareness of the human predicament, his interest in what goes on in the inner chamber of the human mind and his philosophy of moderation and compromise.
References:

i  Steel Hawk and Other Stories, P. 99.

ii  Ibid., P. 103-4.

iii Ibid., P. 139.

iv Ibid., P. 137.

v  Ibid., P. 142.

vi Ibid., P. 142.

vii Ibid., P. 143.

viii Ibid., P. 143.

ix Ibid., P. 12.

x  Ibid., P. 23.

xi Ibid., P. 23.

xii Ibid., P. 59.

xiii Ibid., P. 60.
xiv  Ibid., P. 66.

xv   Ibid., P. 66.

xvi  Ibid., P. 66.

xvii Ibid., P. 67.

xviii Ibid., P. 77.

xix  Ibid., P. 81.

xx   Ibid., P. 81.

xxi  Ibid., P. 83.

xxii Ibid., P. 84.
CHAPTER - 6

CONCLUSION
Bhabani Bhattacharya is one of the major Indian English novelists of our time. He has six excellent novels to his credit, besides a number of works on other subjects. He is not a master of comic mode like R. K. Narayan, nor does he possess the philosophical range of Raja Rao. But he is without doubt a sensitive artist who has used realism so as to present his humanistic vision of life. He has received the Sahitya Akademi Award, and the Prestige Award of the universities of New Zealand, and his works have been translated into a large number of Indian and foreign languages, including Chinese and Russian.

Bhattacharya is a realist who is keen on exploring the realities of life. He has a sensitive understanding of the problems of contemporary Indian society. His intimate knowledge of Indian rural and urban life is an outcome of his minute observation of the life of the common people.

Realism is a remarkable feature of Indian-English novel, in which Indian sensibility is expressed through a foreign language. Indian novelists show a passionate awareness of life in India – the social awakening and protest, the poverty and hunger of the peasants, various dimensions of the struggle for independence, the tragedy of partition, social and political changes along with the disturbed inner life of the
sensitive, suffering individuals. Different Indian-English novelists have treated different aspects of social life.

Bhattacharya’s novels present a real picture of various aspects of life in the country. Freedom, poverty, hunger, disease, tradition, modernity, social evils, distress and pretension, changing values, crisis of character, East-West relations are the major themes which appear and reappear in his novels. So Many Hungers deals with the theme of various kinds of hungers—hunger for food, hunger for love and affection, hunger for lust, hunger for money, hunger for fame, hunger for self-sacrifice, and hunger for the welfare of the people in general.

The novel presents a true picture of contemporary life. Music for Mohini is a social novel. It deals with the social life of the people during post-independence period. The novelist severely attacks the evils of superstition and orthodoxy, casteism and untouchability and pleads for a change. His He Who Rides A Tiger has a Marxist leaning. It presents a picture of life in India before independence. Here the caste system has been exposed in a dramatic manner. It is a satire on Hindu orthodoxy.

A Goddess Named Gold is an allegory. But it reveals the novelist’s talent for realism. Here one finds a real picture of India that is timeless and India that is changing. It is a successful novel on Indian rural life. The theme of poverty, starvation and exploitation of Indian masses has made its appearance in the novel. A clash of two ways of life, the modern and the traditional, the urban and the rural is the chief concern of the novelist in Shadow from Ladakh. The problems of unemployment,
poverty, untouchability and taboos are treated here in terms of art. It also mentions development schemes like river-valley projects, electrification programmes, industrialization, and population explosion.

A Dream in Hawaii is slightly different from his other novels. Here he describes what is happening in the West and the East, the West's blind acceptance of all that the East represents, its disenchantment with material progress, its use of spiritual means to attain worldly targets, India's interest in the higher things and the gullibility of the people. Thus, Bhattacharya presents a realistic picture of various aspects of Indian life. He is, no doubt, a realist. But his novels are never photographic or journalistic in the treatment of life. They are more truly sensitive portrayals of social, political and economical life of the people.

Bhattacharya is a very powerful writer devoted to the cause of the country. He highly admires India's spiritual and cultural heritage. His novels examine the importance of man in national and international perspectives. His broad humanism has made him a writer of great relevance.

'Humanism' literally means 'devotion to human interests'. It suggests a spirit that is concerned with the welfare of mankind; it opposes suffering and indignity of man in all forms. Humanism seeks to improve the conditions of human life. The writers and artists expose the oppressors of mankind and make the people aware of their rights and needs. Bhattacharya is actually a humanist in this light.
Bhattacharya’s approach to life is always positive. There is always an affirmation of life amidst suffering. He upholds the policy of compromise between the two opposite ways of life-orthodoxy and modernity, materialism and idealism, spiritualism and industrialism. His humanism is also evident from his choice of hunger and freedom as the recurring themes. The various types of hunger and his plea for different kinds of freedom are essentially an outcome of his humanistic vision. Freedom is necessary for men to realize his potential for a complete life.

Bhattacharya is a realist. His novels communicate a humanistic vision of life. He is also a creative writer who is conscious about his art. Because of his preoccupation with the contemporary problems of life, he is dismissed as a propagandist whose style of writing is journalistic. Critics point out that his novels are merely journalistic reports on the current problems of life and are not rendered artistically. Truly speaking, Bhattacharya is a conscious artist who holds definite views on the nature and function of art and literature in general and of novel in particular.

He is really a very powerful writer with sincerity and dedication to his art. His theory of fictional art is relevant to his own fictional writings. His greatness as a writer rests on his neat plot-construction, his portrayal of fully realized characters, and his masterly handling of language. The aesthetic features of his novels show that Bhattacharya is really an appealing artist.
The narrative of his novels is based on a clash or conflict of the two opposing strands in the novel. The plot of So Many Hungers is based on a contrast between the forces of nationalism and those of bureaucracy, the simplicity of the village life and the sophistication of city life. Orthodoxy and modernity are sharply contrasted in Music for Mohini. The novel has a well-made plot. It brilliantly depicts the plight of a city-bred girl who is married into a rural family still reigned by orthodoxy and superstition and feudalism.

Mohini has a progressive outlook whereas her mother-in-law is conservative. The novel brings about a contrast between the Indian heritage and the western culture. The plot of Shadow from Ladakh is concerned with a conflict between the two ways of life represented by Gandhigram and Steeltown. Bhaskar advocates Westernism, whereas Satyajit represents the ideals of Eastern culture. The East-West encounter forms the basis of A Dream in Hawaii. The plot has two parallel narratives – the one present. Yogananda’s external life and the other is concerned with his inner life.

Bhattacharya’s art of characterization is another important feature of his novels. The central characters of the novels have been very successfully portrayed. Kajoli, Rahoul, Mohini, Kalo, Meera are the fully realized characters. As Bhattacharya is a social novelist, some of his characters embody his ideas. Meeta, Satyajit and Bhaskar, Rahoul and Devata, Jayadev are definitely social reformers.
The author appears to be pushing them in a particular direction. Meera represents the revolutionary spirit and she wants to change the face of the whole village. Satyajit and Bhaskar stand for spiritual and material power respectively. Rahoul and Jayadev strive to root out social evils and wicked practices from the lives of the people. The use of parallelism or contrast is a favorite device of Bhattacharya’s art of characterization. Two characters are usually placed in contrast or in comparison to set off each other. Devata and Samarendra Basu, Mohini and Sudha, Kalo and Biten, the minstrel and the Seth, Yogananda and Vincent swift stand contrasted in the different novels of Bhattacharya.

Bhattacharya is a writer with an eye for minute details of the rural scenes. He has keenly observed incidents and happenings around him. He has caught the vein of rural life and rural speech and depicted them in a natural and precise fashion. Like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and Khushwant Singh, Bhattacharya has used literal translation of Indian terms and proverbs. He has also coined a few new compound words.

Bhabani Bhattacharya has now come to occupy a place of prominence among the Indian-English novelists of older generation. He was not recognized as a writer when his novels were first published. He was condemned for his denunciation of Indian society. Thus we can say that Bhattacharya is one of the major Indian-English novelists of our generation. His contribution to Indian English Fiction in particular and Indian Literature in general is really excellent.
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