



BHABANI BHATTACHARYA : WRITER OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY FICTION

DR. SANDIPAN TUKARAM KIVNE

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Mahila Mahavidyalaya,
Gevrai Dist. Beed [MS]

ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to note down the chief contribution of Bhabani Bhattacharya as the artist of the Twentieth Century Indian English Early Fiction. He no doubt liked to use English as a medium of his expression. He loved writing in English. To him, the creative writer must have full freedom to use the language of his choice. Thus, he became 'Don' of Indian English Writing within no time and achieved paramount significance in Indian English Fiction.

Key Words: Indian English Fiction, English, Medium Of Expression, Don, Language etc.

Bhabani Bhattacharya is one of the significant writers of Indian English Fiction. He was born on 10th November 1906 in Bhagalpur, Bihar. He was a quite precocious child and was fostered by his grandmother. At the age of twelve, he wrote his first article in a Bengali magazine, 'Mouchak'. His liking for writing was not much admired by his father who was a District and Sessions Judge. The later wanted him to prepare himself for government service.

He was educated at Patna University and took his B.A. [Hons.] degree in 1927. He then completed his advanced studies in the University of London from 1929-1934. After his B.A. [Hons.] from the London University in 1931, he was awarded Ph.D. degree on historical research in 1934. He married Salila Mukherji in 1935 and was blessed with three children, a son and two daughters. He worked as Press Attache to the Indian Embassy in Washington, D.C. He was on the staff of 'The Illustrated Weekly of India' as Assistant Editor during 1950-52. He acted as Secretary, Tagore Commemorative Society, New Delhi, in 1959-60. He then accepted the job of consultant in the Ministry of Education, New Delhi in 1961 and continued to work there till 1967. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1967 for his novel, *Shadow from Ladakh*. He got a Ford Foundation grant in 1968-69 to write the prestigious work, *Gandhi*, the writer – the image as it grew to commemorate the birth centenary of the 'Father of the Nation'. He is a member of the Advisory Board of the Akademi. He adorned the East, West Centre, Honolulu as Senior Specialist during 1968-70 and since then, he has been a visiting professor in the University of Hawai, Honolulu.

Bhabani Bhattacharya is an outstanding Indo-Anglian novelist of the present time. He has earned a wide-spread distinction and his books have appeared in twenty six languages, sixteen of which are European. He has won the coveted Sahitya Akademi Award for 1967 for his novel, *Shadow from Ladakh*. He is a fourth writer to receive the award for a work in English. His works comprise Tagore's translations entitled *The Golden Boat*, *Towards*



Universal Man, a commemoration volume published on the eve of the birth centenary of Tagore.

Bhattacharya holds the view that Indian writing in English has been a decisive factor in redressing the balance of false presentation by foreign story-tellers who with their limited possibilities of true experience have seen only the surface of our way of life failing to reach deeper into our spirit. A great critic, L. N. Gupta writes in this regard –

“Pure intellectuals watch the crowds but do not force themselves on them. They visit slums and absorb the misery of their dwellers in their being. They tour the famine-stricken areas. They look into the shriveled faces and sunken eyes of the sufferers. It is a monument of its times. Such is the case with Bhabani Bhattacharya.”
[1969: 54]

Bhabani is of the opinion that unless a writer has keen observation and an eye for nothing the details of general behaviour of folks, he cannot write a social novel. For himself, Bhabani has never missed a single opportunity of observing incidents and happenings.

Bhattacharya himself answers several questions about his novel and medium of experience –

“How did I happen to become a novelist? When I was a student in London in the Thirties, I started writing a novel. Half way through, I thought it was no good and I was not destined to be a creative writer. I was not a student of literature anyway. I tore up the manuscript. However, I wrote some short sketches for ‘The Spectator’. I translated Tagore – Back in India, I found other preoccupations. The characters, even when I had decided how they were going to behave, moved by their own volition often, often defeating my purpose.” [1972: 34]

Bhattacharya’s *So Many Hungers* was published in 1947. It was about a man-made famine that took a toll of two million innocent men, women and children. The story centres round the Basu family, a peasant family, the girl Kajoli, her mother and her brother. Samarendra Basu thinks of organizing a business concern, Bengal Rice Limited, and the unscrupulous Sir Lakshminath helps the company extend its branches to every far off corner of the province. It is this man’s genius that has so well spread the vice of corruption, and hoarded food grains. The fountains of human kindness seem to have almost dried up, only vultures ruled the human habitants.

His another novel, *Music for Mohini* is the story of an arranged marriage and the adjustment which the modern city girl, Mohini, has to make to fit into the traditional pattern of life in her husband, Jayadev’s Big Houser, presided over by his aristocratic iron-willed mother. In this novel, Mohini, a young girl of seventeen is married in the traditional manner after observing the auspicious signs and comparing the horoscopes. Mohini goes to her new



home. Jayadev, the quiet scholar who lives in his ancestral village, and Mohini the young city-bred wife, who adapts herself very well to her new environment are the two forces that put the village on the path of progress and modernization. The superstitious old mother of Jayadev realises in the end her mistake and reconciles herself to the changing times. The characters of Mohini, Jayadev and Heeralal are well drawn with fine precision and facile expression.

The third novel, *He Who Rides a Tiger* was written in 1954, a time when India was making sincere attempt at creating a new social order and came out with a new outlook on life. Here, he once again reverts to the old theme – the Bengal famine. His earlier novels have their roots in rural Vidarbha. He remains an unequalled master in interpreting rural India. Particularly in the novel, the world of fable and reality that delve deep into the minds of our rural fold are skillfully and artistically blended. The novel is an attack on both who profited by people's misery during the famine and those who exploited them as caste tyrants. It is a legend of freedom, a legend to inspire and awaken. Here, he discusses the theme of hunger.

In this regard, Dr. C. Paul Verghese rightly remarks that –

“Food is the primary requisite of human dignity, hunger debases and dehumanizes man. Bhattacharya has dealt quite forcefully with the theme of hunger and the concomitant theme of human degradation in his novels, *So Many Hungers* and *He Who Rides A Tiger*.” [1990: 76]

Bhattacharya's latest novel, *Shadow From Ladakh* was published in 1967. It has for its background the Indo-China conflict. It tells an extremely gripping story of unsurpassed drama on a broad and revealing canvas. It tells what India needs for survival – a meeting point between Gandhian social ethics and tremendous forces of science and technology. It deals with India's conflict following China's annexation of Tibet, is also a variation on the theme of synthesis. Through the relationships of the main characters, Bhattacharya advocates for present day India, a cultural fusion based on a love-match between Gandhian idealism and a progressive people's technology.

The modern militant industrial outlook has its hero an American educated Bhaskar Rao who in his need to expand the steel town, knows no use or purpose in Gandhigram. So, he wants to dispose off Gandhigram, because it is a hindrance to India's industrialization. He brings every pressure to bear, but to his surprise the community of the believers in non-violence stands firm under its great leader, Satyajit. The conflict is complicated by Bhaskar's love for Sunita, the daughter of Satyajit and Suruchi.

Thus, Bhabani Bhattacharya has several themes woven tales of the conflict of modern India. These are not strictly historical or political novels. He has so many themes which he used in his varied novels. To conclude with what S. C. Harrex vies that –

“Although Bhattacharya has a tendency to load his novels with mechanical sociology, over-simplified philosophies and naively symbolic relationship [as in *Shadow in Ladakh*] these defects are

compensated for by the sincerity of his compassion and the relevance of his vision.” [1990: 87]

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