

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 11 : 10 October 2011

ISSN 1930-2940

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Depiction of Indian Culture in the Works of Bhabani Bhattacharya

Reenu Kumar, M.A. (English Literature), M.B.A. (Finance and Retail)

Abstract

This paper “Depiction of Indian Culture in the works of Bhabani Bhattacharya” discusses post-independence Indian Culture in the works of Bhabani Bhattacharya. Bhabani Bhattacharya is a champion of social change and human betterment. In his novels he tries to understand the problems of contemporary Indian society and portrays the realities of life in the country. The research paper tries to throw light on his perception of Indian society and culture from 1947 to 1978 that he has acquired from his keen and critical observation of the life of the common people, especially the rural folks and tribes of India.

Introduction

Bhabani Bhattacharya is a foremost realist of post-Independence Indian English fiction. He has witnessed the great Indian upheavals in the wake of freedom movement prior to Indian Independence in 1947. His novels and other works have been translated in more than 24 foreign languages and at least 16 of which are European and thus, through the translations, he has attained a worldwide renown. In India, too, he has been conferred with the coveted Sahitya Academy award in 1967 for his novel ‘Shadow from Ladakh’.

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As a novelist, he belongs to the celebrated group of writers- Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K Narayan. 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 and major social evils of Indian Society. Tension and pretensions, changing values, crisis of character and East-West relations and their day to day encounter are dealt with in his novels.

The novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya appeared at intervals between 1947 and 1978 and thus his productive period spreads over a span of 30 years. 'So many Hungers' (1947), 'Music for Mohini' (1952), 'He who rides A Tiger' (1955), 'A Goddess Named Gold' (1960), 'Shadow-from Ladakh' (1966) and 'A Dream in Hawaii' (1978) are his novels. Steel Hawk And other Stories (1968) is a collection of his short stories. Gandhi The Writer: The Image as it Grew (1969) is a literary biography. The themes of his various novels and stories emanate from his own life and its experiences. Bhattacharya's education, travels and expressions reveal his vision of life and the base of all his creative writings. His awareness of social, political and cultural problems is the result of Bhattacharya's own experiences of life.

Indian Culture and Religious Beliefs

Bhabani Bhattacharya as a person has an eclectic temper and therefore, he has absorbed influences from diverse sources. Both the writers of the West and East have enormously influenced his writings. Romain Rolland, Henerik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw are among the important western writers who have influenced Bhattacharya most. Of all Indian writers the influence of Rabindra Nath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi was the greatest. He was attracted to Tagore from his early school days when his career as a writer first began.

Tagore's Influence

Under the influence of Tagore, Bhattacharya began writing poems and prose sketches in Bengali. Tagore encouraged Bhattacharya to go ahead with his writings and later on when he was studying in England, Bhattacharya translated some of Tagore's writings into English in collaboration with Yeats Brown. The translation of Tagore's stories, sketches and allegories were published in 'The Spectator'. He also edited and acted as one of the chief translators of Tagore Centenary Commemoration Volume - 'Towards Universal Man' (1961). The influence of Tagore can be felt in almost all his writings. His 'Shadow From Ladhak' and 'So Many Hungers' clearly bring out Tagore's impact on the novelist, they are full of references to Tagore. Tagore's belief in the harmony of different cultures finds a clear impression and expression in 'Shadow From Ladak'.

Gandhi's Influence

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Mahatma Gandhi is the second great influence on Bhabani Bhattacharya. He first met Gandhi in England in 1931 when Gandhi had been there to participate in the Historic Round Table Conference. Gandhi's ideals of truth and non-violence, and his love for the poor and peasants left deep impact on the novelist. The themes and characters of almost all his novels reveal Gandhian influence on him as a writer and thinker. His character Devish in 'So Many Hungers', Jaydev in 'Music For Mohini', Satyajit in 'Shadow From Ladhakh', all follow Gandhian ideals. They all praise Gandhian views regarding self-control, chastity, honesty, celibacy, simplicity and asceticism of inner as well as the outward life like Mahatma Gandhi.

Belief in the Inherent Goodness of Humans

Bhabani Bhattacharya believes in the inherent goodness of the human heart. He also believes in the efficacy of Gandhian device of using fast to attain social and political as well as purely human objectives of life. Satyagraha, non-violence, and peaceful strikes are the Gandhian means to fight against the socio-political injustice of any kind. Shadow from Ladhakh is deeply rooted in Gandhian thought and practice of life.

But at the same time Bhattacharya is well aware of gross misuse of Gandhian thought and ideals in the real practical life. People often pursue shady deals by means of the Gandhi cap. Jhunjhunja, the unprincipled businessman in the same novel, is a glaring example of this misuse and corrupt practice. He visits the Samadhi of Gandhiji whenever he earns profit and money in his business deals.

A Champion of Social Change

Bhabani Bhattacharya is basically a champion of social change and human betterment. He is a realist, keen about exploring the realities of life in the country. He has a deep understanding of the problems of contemporary Indian society. He has acquired it from his keen and critical observation of the life of the common people especially the rural folks and tribes of India.

In his *Sunday Standard* interview Bhattacharya observed – “Unless a writer has keen observation and an eye for details of general behavior of folks, he cannot write a social novel. I have developed this habit and I have not missed a single opportunity of observing incidents, happenings where I can gain something for the writer in me.” 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 final business is to reveal the truth.

In his novels, Bhattacharya thus explores the social and political life of the people. His novels are but an imaginative pictures of life. War, hunger and freedom, redemption of the common man are the major recurring themes of Bhabani Bhattacharya's novels.

So Many Hungers

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‘So Many Hungers’ is a product of social realism. This novel is inspired by the 1943 famine of Bengal. Bhattacharya recalls – “The great famine swept down upon Bengal. The emotional strings I felt (more than two million men, women and children died of slow starvation amid a man made scarcity of food) were a sheer compulsion to creativity. The result was the novel ‘So Many Hungers’.

Music for Mohini

His second novel, ‘Music for Mohini’ deals with the problems of India after independence. The action of the novel covers the period after 1948. It takes up a social problem which remains relevant even today. The conflict between orthodoxy and modernity is emphatically treated herein. Mohini is the central character of the novel. A psychological study of the intellectual and emotional development of Mohini, who grows from girlhood to womanhood, is the chief concern of the novel. She is a modern sophisticated girl who has fully absorbed in her personality, the time honored values of Indian culture and religious beliefs. On other hand, her mother-in-law represents orthodoxy. Our attention is drawn again and again to several absurd beliefs and practice of contemporary Indian society. The novelist, vehemently, pleads for a change. It is a social novel as the novelist severely attacks social evils and seeks to solve social problems like casteism, widow remarriage, child marriage etc. In this novel, Jayadev is a social reformer. He is bent upon seeing his village a model village. Political freedom without social freedom is meaningless. The novelist attacks worn out and age old tradition of the Indian society which obstructs the progress of the country—“Society, rural society was sick with taboos and inhibitions of its own making: the inequalities of caste and untouchability: the ritualism that passes for religion, the wide flung cob-web of superstitious faith. It was all an outgrowth of centuries of decadence. The purity of ancient thought had been lost in misinterpretation until the dignity of man had become a mere play thing of vested interest.

He Who Rides a Tiger

‘He Who Rides a Tiger’ presents a true picture of Indian society before independence. The Bengal famine and the quit India movement are the inspiring sources behind this novel. The novel describes the poor and the needy, but fills the bowls of the sadhus in saffron loin cloth. They do not care for the cries of the children dying of hunger. While men died of hunger, wealth grew; and while kindness dried up, religion was more in demand; it was only the out ward of religion the shell of ritual empty within.

A Goddess Named Gold

‘A Goddess Named Gold’ is Bhattacharya’s next novel which narrate the happenings in a village during a hundred days preceding independence of India. The freedom movement forms the background of the novel. It is a very impressive novel on the life and its vagaries of rural India. It is a satire on man’s lust for gold and wealth and it emphatically shows spiritual and so called

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religious values and rituals are employed for purpose of gold and wealth creation. It is a modern fable, presenting a real picture of tremendous awakening among the people who crave for social and economic equality. The novelist is very successful in exposing common man's belief in superstitions and miracles.

Shadow from Ladakh

The main theme of 'Shadow From Ladakh' is concerned with India at the time of the Chinese invasion of 1962. It gives an account of a politically conscious Indian family. The theme of the novel presents an excellent contrast between rural and urban life, between the spinning wheel and the spindle. The novel shows people's concern for the freedom of the land. It also examines the question of Tibiti freedom and reflects the Indian national characters. Indians as a race and nation believe in the universal brotherhood.

Focus on Contemporary Reality

Thus, it is clear that the novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya explore socio-cultural and political realities of life in the contemporary India. They closely examine the social and economic problems of the people arising out of hungers, poverty, famine, exploitation, war and people's urge for peace and universal brotherhood under the backdrop of age old Indian culture and tradition in its true sense. He is a novelist whose vision of life is perfectly humanistic and peace loving as is the cultural message of India since the very inception of it. He upholds humanism both in principle and practice, and his humanistic attitude to life finds artistic expression in his novels. As a novelist Bhattacharya is very purposeful.

Positive Vision

His novels embody, as the critic Dr. K.K. Sharma has pointed out, 'a transparently positive vision of life which is essentially humanistic. Through his novels, Bhattacharya explores the causes of human suffering and their possible remedies plead for a synthesis of human, cultural and religious values. He feels sympathy for the poor and destitute, the helpless and downtrodden and suggests possible ways and means for the improvement of human life in general. And here lies in the universal charm and significance of Bhabani Bhattacharya as a novelist and writer, thinker and great humanitarian.

Conclusion

The research paper discusses the achievement and assessment of Bhabani Bhattacharya as a novelist and his contribution towards the development of Indian English fiction. It emphasizes on the projection of India and Indian culture in the novels of Bhattacharya. His novels are important literary documents as they are written under the backdrop of our national freedom movement under the leadership of Rabindra Nath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nerhu. The trio

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of these great men has influenced Bhattacharya the novelist the most. As a novelist of contemporary Indian life, his entire emphasis is on the presentation of the critique of the then Indian society and its socio-cultural aspects in its entirety.

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Reenu Kumar, M.A (English Literature), MBA (Finance and Retail)
Assistant Professor
Sagar Institute of Research and Technology Excellence
Bhopal 462021
Madhya Pradesh
India
Reenu.kumar@yahoo.com; Reenu.hora@yahoo.com

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