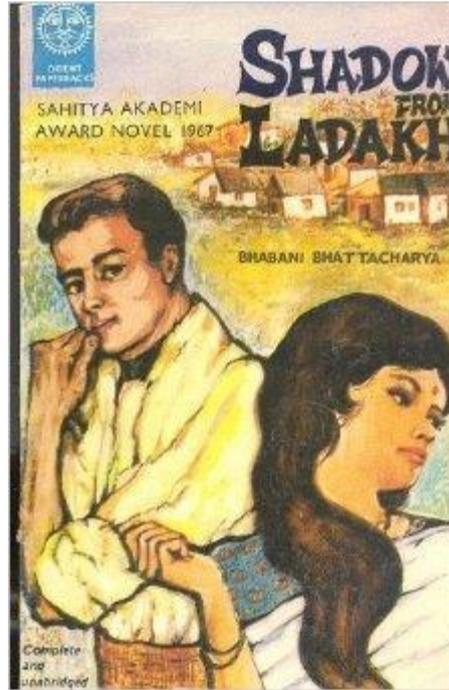


**Bhabani Bhattacharya's *Shadow From Ladakh*
"An Amalgam of Hungers - Both Internal and External":
An Analysis**

Dr. P. Aishwarya Vidhya, M.A., Ph.D.



Bhabani Bhattacharya - An Authentic Interpreter of Human Experience

Bhabani Bhattacharya occupies significant position in Indian English fiction and his vision of life is perfectly humanistic. He is a novelist advocating humanism both in principle and practice and his humanistic attitude to life finds artistic expression in his novels. His commitment to the philosophy of humanism forms the very basis of his creative enterprise.

As an authentic interpreter of human experience, he sees to it that his themes are related to contemporary life and events in the country and he is particularly interested in India's Freedom, the upheaval that came in Bengal in the wake of this struggle, the man-made famine in Bengal and the problems and trials faced by the country after independence. He writes with intense realism and passionate sincerity in a language that is highly individualized. Bhabani Bhattacharya writes about the socio-political and economic

conditions prevalent in his times. He has such six novels to his credit: 1. *So Many Hungers* 2. *Music for Mohini* 3. *He Who Rides a Tiger* 4. *A Goddess Named Gold* 5. *Shadow from Ladakh* and 6. *A Dream in Hawaii*.

The Theme of Hunger - *Shadow from Ladakh*

Bhabani Bhattacharya has raised his voice and protested against social evils of Indian society, probing deep into the various facts of human life. He believes rather strongly that literature and reality are very much linked with each other. Bhabani Bhattacharya's preoccupation is with the theme of hunger and he regards hunger, external and internal, as the fundamental reality of life. With such through grasp of his basic theme, his *Shadow from Ladakh* explores and communicates the theme of hunger in all its ramifications.

Human hunger is not confined to food alone. There is hunger for political freedom, hunger for external values, hunger for an ethically oriented life for the common people, hunger for love and sex, hunger for wealth hunger for social status and hunger for prosperity. In brief, it may be stated that this novel *Shadow from Ladakh* is an absorbing survey of all these aspects of hunger.

Bhabani Bhattacharya – Not a Pessimist

Professor Chandrasekaran looks upon Bhabani Bhattacharya not really as a raw, crude realist but as one who combines both realism and romanticism in his writings. He says with the due degree of stress that Bhattacharya's fictional writings have their own authenticity, their own credibility from the social or sociological point of him. According to him, Bhattacharya is not a pessimist; in spite of all evils and corruptions, India seems to be for Bhattacharya a land of both promise and achievement. He is of the view that the novel should have a social purpose and he presents "all pictures of poverty and squalor, superstition and dogma, materialism and spiritualism" (Sharma 17). Gandhi's humanism, his concern for the oppressed and suffering section of humanity, his commitment to truth and non-violence, his essential opposition to superstitions and dogmas, his concern for the real sufferings of the people get projected in his fictional world.

In his book on Bhabani Bhattacharya, K. R. Chandrasekharan rightly comments thus:

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“Bhattacharya is a realist and at the same time a visionary. He depicts life in the country as he has seen it with his observation eyes. Poverty, corruption, ignorance and superstition, exploitation and dumb suffering are among the evils that he has noticed and depicted. In the other hand, he sees ground for hope because the country is in a position to shape its own future and it has the basic material needed for reconstruction and development. An economy which ensures equitable distribution of necessities, a social order which gives equality to man, a religious attitude which gives no quarter to superstition and meaningless ritual and a mental outlook which promotes harmony at home and abroad”. (P 172)

Caste Differences, Deep-Rooted Superstitions, Dowry and Bribery

Bhattacharya has realistically depicted the glaring evils of caste differences, deep-rooted superstitions, evils of dowry and bribery, poverty and hunger deeply rooted in the Indian societal system.

He portrays two typical forms of hunger in the novel *A Goddess Named Gold* - hunger for miracles and hunger for spiritual experience. Both illiterate and literate, the ignorant and well informed, villagers and townsfolk believe in superstitions and are very curious to see the queer functioning of Meera’s magical amulet. They want the miracle to happen, regardless of its consequences:

“Awe-struck eyes saw that vision and tongues dried up as the unexpected menace took clear shape, but after a long minute, a whispered comment came, ‘we hunger for the miracle, whatever else may follow good or bad’” (P 207).

Trying to Achieve Something Great

Another kind of hunger is explicitly perceived in young Meera, the magnificent granddaughter of the splendid soul, the Minstrel. When she is very worried about performing the miracle with the help of the touchstone, one notices the queer hunger in her foe achieving something really great. Lakshmi, the wife of Seth, staring at Meera’s face, “saw the hunger that was almost spiritual. Meera was like one possessed” (P 255). Bhattacharya, in this novel, *A Goddess Named Gold* sketches different kinds of hunger, from the lowest to the highest.

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He emphasizes his belief that all men, haves and have-nots, young and old, are obsessed by hunger of one kind or the other.

Internal Hunger

In *Shadow from Ladakh* Bhattacharya's concern is "for a conscious amalgam of the internal and ideal with the external and real" (Sharma 36). The novel does not concentrate upon external hungers for food, wealth and sex though these varieties of hunger find an adequate treatment. But what is repeatedly brought out in the canvas of this novel is man's hunger for moral grandeur and idealism. However, the novel does not ignore the basic hunger for food. For instance, Bhaskar Roy, a major character in the novel, decides to leave America for India when he hears a visiting, Indian Minister in Washington talking about India's problem of famine. The minister says, "you see, ours is a problem of sheer survival. We are on the edge of a precipice and we stand dizzied. Mind you, this is not just a figure of speech. Any day we may go hurtling to our doom-literally. How old were you when the famine struck?" (SFL 36). Bhaskar is infatuated by America and its life style. But after hearing the minister's remarks on India's problem of survival, he pulls himself away from America and comes back home.

The world is largely inhabited by the ordinary men, preoccupied with the problem of hunger more than anything else. Describing the early revolutionary struggle in Peking, Bireswar, a minor character in the novel *Shadow from Ladakh*, observes:

"... but it failed to give the common man what he needed above all else: an acre of earth to till, a bowl of rice to eat... hunger raged as before" (PP 186-87).

Attack against Profiteers and Economic Offenders

As in his earlier novels, here too, the novelist directs his attack against profiteers and economic offenders who are the very cause of scarcity of food and famine. Breswar gives Satyajit an account of his friend Jhunjhuria, a big wheat trader who makes a fortune by indulging in shady transactions thereby creating "hunger for a thousand man and women" (SFL 210).

Bhaskar, the American trained Chief Engineer in the steel plant, like his creator, the novelist Bhabani Bhattacharya, is obsessed by the problem of famine. As a devotee of steel,

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he lives in steel town. But to him, steel is not an end in itself. It is a means to achieve higher ends. It is the core of all armaments and is necessary to preserve the country's political freedom. More than that, it is indispensable for ending hunger and poverty. Bhaskar says to Satyajit, the Gandhian,

“... steel means economic progress. Machine tools, tractors, big industrial plants locomotives. Steel to fight poverty and hunger” (P 30).

The young Chief Engineer is absolutely confident of bringing about economic prosperity with the help of steel. For him, steel is synonymous with life devoid of hunger and misery; increase in the betterment of human life. He asserts:

“Two hundred ton of steel ingots in each round of smelting; the means of life for two hundred new-born babies. The babies would not eat steel. But steel was the spine of the economy. Steel was food and clothing and dwelling steel was culture and art and ritual. And steel was soon to the honor of the people, the shield of their freedom” (*Shadow from Ladakh* 37).

Satyajit, the central character of the novel, is “an embodiment of man's hunger for idealism” (Chandrasekharan 110). His desire for good and more dignity is insatiable. He is so much preoccupied with the abstract word, idealism, that he does not think of his wife and daughter as human beings made of flesh and blood. Bhaskar, who falls in love with his daughter, feels that he “had no right to make his daughter a sacrificial offering simply to indicate his own moral grandeur” (P 138). Satyajit is dedicated to asceticism and Gandhian ideal of Gandhiji. Getting in touch with Tagore and his Santiniketan, he becomes devoted to Gurudev's ideals of aestheticism, world religion-the religion of man, and the fullness of life. He believes that economic upliftment is not at all important; there were other values not less vital”(14). In fact, he has an enormous hunger for inner richness, purity and happiness. To achieve it, he, under the influence of Gandhiji, takes the *bramacharya* vow complete chastity of body and thought-after having only one child, a daughter.

Man's Hunger for a Woman

Shadow from Ladakh, no doubt, discusses in an uninhibited way the man's hunger for a woman and vice versa. Bhaskar, like every man in the world, needs a woman to give himself to her completely and to take some sort of refuge in her whenever he feels exhausted

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with work, boredom and frustration. Shocked by the news of Sumita's selection to represent a peace mission to Ladakh he longs to be "Submerged in Rupa" (128), another young women-half-American and half-Indian with whom he is quite intimate. Even Sumit, who is brought up by her father on ascetic ideals longs for Bhaskar, and Bhattacharya reveals their passionate hunger for each other in these words:

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

But she did not want to leave. And when he did not return after what seemed a long time, she cried his name in a desperate wail:

Mr. Roy!

He must have been right by the door, for it opened instantly. He said in astonishment, 'You're still in wet clothes! Then why did you call me? And in his eyes as they lay fastened on her, the hunger returned" (147).

Even a born philanderer like Bireswar gives himself completely to young Suruchi. He has never taken a woman seriously in his life until he has the incredible, shattering experience of love: "... for the first time I found myself in love! In love with a woman in her entirety-not just her face, her shape, her voice... well, I was in love with that, and in addition with the invisible, the innermost. I had never before imagined such an absurdity could happen to me, of all people. I became lost in Suruchi. All my past life stood before me in stark futility and all my future" (P 204). After his *bramacharya* vow, Satyajit and his wife, Suruchi occasionally suffer, since both of them are deprived of the fullness of being. They try to control basic urge, but cannot get rid of it and hence it surges up within them at times. Satyajit's over-busy life immensely helps him to observe asceticism peacefully, but Suruchi usually hungers for the normal men-women relationship and is usually much worried about her daughter's leading a life of forced asceticism, killing the natural flow and fullness of life. In short, then novel explores the variegated human hungers, both internal and external. Unlike Bhattacharya's earlier novels, it lays stress on the internal, hidden hungers in people, though it also dramatically delineates the obvious physical hungers.

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Dr. P. Aishwarya Vidhya, M.A., Ph.D.
Assistant Professor in English
Ethiraj College
Chennai 600008
Tamilnadu
India