

LANGUAGE IN INDIA
Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow
Volume 9 : 9 September 2009
ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.
Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.
Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.
B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.
A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.
Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.
K. Karunakaran, Ph.D.
Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

Chandra Lekha in *He who Rides a Tiger*
by Bhabani Bhattacharya

J. Madhumitha, M.A.
Poornavalli Mathiapparanam, M.A., M.Phil.

Chandra Lekha in *He who Rides a Tiger* by Bhabani Bhattacharya

J. Madhumitha, M.A.
Poornavalli Mathiapparanam, M.A., M.Phil.

Bhabani Bhattacharya's Women Characters

Bhabani Bhattacharya is successful in portraying woman characters. Bhattacharya presents the picture of Indian woman full of vitality, high ideals and a ray of hope for humankind. Usually his novels depict different types of alienated woman characters, who seem to be at war with both the Self and the Society. Likewise, in his novel *He who Rides a Tiger*, Bhattacharya portrays the woman character Chandra Lekha to reveal his affirmative vision of life.

He Who Rides a Tiger

He who Rides a Tiger is based on the ancient saying, "He who rides the tiger cannot dismount". This novel is considered to be the masterpiece of Bhattacharya. The choice of this title for a narrative that focuses on a female character is, indeed, interesting with several possible interpretations. The visual imagery that comes before our eyes is that of Kali, a Hindu goddess widely popular in Bengal, who rides a lion/tiger. She is known to be ferocious and is vehemently assertive against all dangers, distracters and evil forces. An apt backdrop for the chief character of this novel. But then the western saying links the content to a male, by using *he*. The author appears to champion the rights of women to seek and gain their rightful place, and thus through the use of *he* appears to bring a sense of unity between men and women in their saga of fight against adversity.

Times (London) describes *He who Rides a Tiger* as 'a rare and beautiful novel'. The fusions of social and artistic concerns of the author are found in this novel. In this novel Bhattacharya has depicted the sufferings of people during the Bengal Famine. To describe this sufferings and miseries he has used the character of Lekha and her father Kalo as an effective tool.

Chandra Lekha, the Chief Character

In *He who Rides a Tiger*, Chandra Lekha the chief female character suffers the terrible tragedies on account of the catastrophic famine. She lost her mother at her birth. She loved her father more than anything in the world. Her father gave her all the possible things he could and he also named her Chandra Lekha, the moon-tinted one, which no

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 9 September 2009

J. Madhumitha, M.A.

Poornavalli Mathiapparanam, M.A., M.Phil.

Chandra Lekha in *He who Rides a Tiger* by Bhabani Bhattacharya

other Kamar did. He sent her to the local English convent school even when his fellow caste men and other high caste men criticized him. But Lekha was also subjected to caste discrimination throughout her studentship in school.

The Plight of Occupational Castes

Kamar caste is an occupational caste associated with making iron implements. They are distributed in villages and towns as blacksmiths. Within the *varnasrama dharma* of traditional Hindu society, they kind of occupy middle rank, but they could be treated by the members of the upper castes of the region as a sort of low caste, with some of the disadvantages that are imposed by this system on low castes.

In Bengal they are usually called karmakars. The question that was faced by a kamar caste member in the early part of the twentieth century was whether one should give up their caste duty of performing the job of blacksmith and move over to other soft professions through acquiring school education. Jobs were not easy to get, and were very few. Often children of the landed gentry and members of castes such as Brahmins, who have had a long history of formal schooling and were thus more prepared to receive schooling and benefit by it consistently, got almost all the well paying jobs available then in the market.

The Indian process of affirmative action, that is, caste reservation for admission to schools and colleges and thereafter in government service, was not effectively introduced in states such as West Bengal for such groups as Kamars, compared with the South Indian provinces,. However, earning your daily bread, although it is not much, is still possible through mastering your *varnasrama dharma* duties for such occupational castes. Going to school and to prosper based on schooling was still a distant dream then for many occupational castes.

Dealing with Contradictions and Tragedies

Bhabani Bhattacharya, by name obviously a Bengali Brahmin, takes up the contradictions and tragedies of life among such occupational caste groups. He brings in also other complexities such as the “fate” of women in such social conditions. Ultimately, however, it is the story and the characters’ predicaments take over, leaving behind the social issues.

“A kamar girl puts on the feathers of learning! A sparrow preens as a parrot”... “What if the motherless girl is dizzied by her knowledge?” (11,12). Even though she wins “Ashok Memorial Medal” in an essay competition, defeating Calcutta’s participants, she does not win the attention of her own town folk simply because she is the daughter of a

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 9 September 2009

J. Madhumitha, M.A.

Poornavalli Mathiaparanam, M.A., M.Phil.

Chandra Lekha in *He who Rides a Tiger* by Bhabani Bhattacharya

blacksmith. But Lekha doesn't lose her hope and continues her studies to fulfill her father's dream. Even when her father leaves her to the city, she comforts him by giving the words of confidence.

The Fighting Spirit Against All Odds

In this novel, the author also brings out the wonderful fighting spirit of human kind through the character of Lekha. She has not only a purpose in life, but also the power to achieve it. She also has an unflinching faith in her capacity to attain her goal. Though she does not hear anything from her father for a long time from the city, her faith in him does not waver. Naturally when his letter and two ten rupee notes reach her after a long, unexpected gap of time, she is not surprised:

Lekha knew her father's strength of purpose, the metallic stuff at the core of his being. How could she have lost faith in him even for one eye-flick? Happiness flooded into her with that thought. With Baba (father) safe in the great city, fighting his battle, Lekha could hold her own. She would reduce for one-meal-a-day to five bare mouthfuls, saving the rice in stock. Better days could not be far off (59).

Lekha is infused with fresh confidence and dreams of having a better future. She also dreams of making a living in the city with her father. She also thinks about the great schools in the city. But, unfortunately, one day Lekha becomes a victim to the evil of prostitution and Kalo comes to her rescue in time. A woman had decoyed her to the city with the false story that her father met with an accident, was in hospital and had sent for her. Lekha was saved in a minute's time by her father. She was extremely shocked by this incident. The meanness and cruelty shown by unscrupulous exploiters arouse their indignation. Society has hurt them not merely in the belly but in the soul. They must have their revenge.

Father and Daughter

So, Kalo disguises himself into a Brahmin-Mangal Adhikari accompanied by Lekha. By performing a miracle both the father and the daughter were transformed into a priest and a priestess.

Kalo and Lekha not only "defile" their god and religion but also take full revenge on the victimizers. They were worshipped by the people with dignity and full of respect. But Lekha's position after sometime became suffocating. She is not at all happy with this life and wants to come out of it. She finds herself in a gilded cage and wants to enjoy

freedom: “I have had enough of this gilded cage. You are content with it. How long must it hold me too?” (182).

Pretending to be a Guru : Pretensions of Possessing Impressive Magical Powers

This actually is an unusual feeling, for many such gurus, saints and sages who began with simple beginnings, even today continue to adorn their divine mantle, and are successful. There does not seem to be any need for them to resort to abnegation. The author Bhattacharya seems to introduce this feeling and frustration in Lekha for a purpose to move forward.

In order to get freedom and liberty, Lekha breaks the communion with her father. Even being her father’s associate in the temple she never enjoyed her father’s exultation at the success of the scheme. She has sufficient reasons to revolt against the prevalent mode of behavior perpetrated by the society. She has been through the same hell of starvation and suffering. In a way she has suffered more than her father at the hands of the society, because she was forced into a prostitution house. She continually suffered from several disasters and so she argues with Kalo about her personal freedom.

Lekha is troubled in mind to find that her father has apparently lost his original simplicity and rectitude. She feels unhappy for the hypocritical part she too has been playing. It has become difficult, indeed for her to dismount from the tiger’s back. In her desperate need for some solace, she throws her heart and soul into her work in the temple and feels genuine piety.

For Chandra Lekha her new glory was a fairy tale. Not much more than a year had passed since she had been a mere smith girl, curled up in a shell of her own. But now, she stood in a sanctuary where people came swarming for a darshan, a sacred glimpse of her, as though a divine light shone in her (220). Lekha’s position in the temple makes her so venerable in the eyes of the congregation that people at last wish to deify her and install her as the ‘Mother of Sevenfold Bliss’. Lekha gets her spiritual status promoted.

Harish Raizada rightly focuses the make-believe world which has been created by daughter and father. He writes:

Bhairabis and mendicants are bribed to create a spiritual halo around a simple girl like Lekha and popularize her as the ‘Mother of Sevenfold Bliss’. Newspapers like ‘Swadesh’ by business are used to publicize her psychic personality so that people in search of miracles may throng before her and make liberal gifts of their earnings to her (7).

Bhabani Bhattacharya's Handling of the Narrative

Does Bhattacharya make fun of such happenings in the society? Or does he simply describe the “reality” around him? There is neither direct criticism nor even sarcastic humour that we notice in the writings of K. S. Venkataramani, a doyen of Indian creative writing in English, when he describes the street-side astrologers and other fortune tellers, et al. There is no doubt that Bhattacharya feels strongly for Lekha and vividly describes her emotions and her earnest yearning to get out of it all. The sympathetic handling of Lekha's turbulent life certainly reveals he is for Lekha.

The people who come to the temple chant the lines over and over again until their ecstasy increases, their eyes gleam and limbs tremble. “Thou who art the secret breath in all created beings. Hail to thee, Mother, and hail, and hail, hail! Thou who art the joyous light in all created beings, Hail to thee, Mother, and hail, and hail, hail! Thou who art the core of bliss in all created beings, Hail to thee, Mother, and hail, and hail, hail!” (206, 207).

Mother Worship

Mother cultus is a very important and influential cultus in Hinduism. This has a long tradition and history, and through this route many changes and reformation have happened from within in Hinduism and Indian society. Note that even Arabindo approved of it in modern reascent Hinduism. Bhattacharya, coming from a province where such cultus existed for centuries see the recurrence of such movements even in modern times. He exploits this ongoing trend to bring in other issues of personal and social suffering.

Clever Moves

Kalo discovers to his horror, that his own daughter is going to be sacrificed as ‘Mother of Sevenfold Bliss’. In the meantime Motichand, a greedy and hypocritical Trustee of the temple who has got rid of three wives and is living with the fourth wife wants to marry Lekha. Lekha also decides to marry him, because it is better to do so than getting forever buried in the temple. He is also rudely shocked and asks Lekha how she could marry Motichand, the old shark with his cast off wives. Lekha replies him that the burden of her present position has become intolerable for her, and her father also shows no signs of quitting the game, and so she decides to sacrifice her life's happiness and fit into the scheme of things by marrying Motichand. She says to her father:

“You wish that I stay buried in the temple? Forever? ... Marry me to a Brahmin?” passion rang in her voice. I cannot play that game with a person whom I am supposed to hold in respect. She could marry Motichand, but no respect would be involved. She could deceive the Brahmin, Motichand with an easy heart (231). Kalo realizes that Lekha is going to ruin herself for his sake by marrying him. When Kalo refuses to her decision Lekha further adds:

“You should approve. I would at last be with you in your battle. The proud man would have a casteless spouse! He would eat food served by her contaminating hand. Then.....” she hesitated, a flush of bitter struggle on her face, “Then a child to complete he disgrace”. Is this not what you have expected of me? Don’t you see the benefits? I shall have a rich husband. You will be safe with your temple. One day my husband will hear the truth from my lips. Everything. How he will burn! And he will be helpless! How proclaim his shame to the world? (231).

Lekha feels herself not fit for a divine role. She was all too earthly, too human. At first she is not able to make a decision. But at last she thinks that by giving herself to Motichand she would pay her debt of love to her father. She even after facing all these miserable situations comforts her father by uttering these words, “All will be well. Yes, Baba, all will be well” (232).

At Long Last, Some Freedom

Hope in her is not drained and her words reveal her utmost confidence in life. Even though she came across several disasters her thoughts were new and confident which reveal her positive approach in life. Even in this terrible situation of marrying an old man, or becoming the ‘Mother of Sevenfold Bliss’ and losing her freedom, she has strong faith in life and says ‘all will be well in future’. At all costs, she does not contemplate suicide or run away somewhere to save herself. This shows her affirmative vision of life. She sees only life before her: In spite of it Lekha would not accept defeat. She steeled herself in her decision... Life stood before her not death. There was a new strength in her, a new awareness, with which to face the challenge of an unknown future (230, 231).

But Kalo does not want his girl to marry an old man and so he acts dramatically on the day of the ceremony for the installation of Lekha as the ‘Mother of Sevenfold Bliss’, and stuns everyone by revealing his true identity and by narrating all about the fake miracle of raising the Shiva image. The high class people shout at Kalo in anger whereas the low class people cry victory to him because one of their class has outwitted the so-called superior castes and has made the mighty ones eat dirt.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 9 September 2009

J. Madhumitha, M.A.

Poornavalli Mathiaparanam, M.A., M.Phil.

Chandra Lekha in *He who Rides a Tiger* by Bhabani Bhattacharya

Lekha also felt exultation in her heart. The happening was too overwhelming for her to bear. She, brimming over with high spirits and happiness, says: “Baba, the people cry victory to you! Baba, a hundred temples are worthless to us than this moment! Baba, after this, whatever happens to us, wherever we go, we can never again be unhappy or defeated” (244). Then, Lekha walks out of the temple with her father to go back to her old way of life, seeking the peace which is the fruit of being true to one’s own self.

Struggle as the Main Theme

Thus, like all other Bhattacharya’s protagonists, Lekha is also eternally engaged in struggling and fighting against the injustice that they face in various walks of life. The end of the novel showing Lekha’s undaunted spirit to lead a new life in future free from all vices, brings out the novelist’s bright view of life.

Lekha is bestowed with a fresh confidence in her capacity to fight her own hard battle successfully. Chandra Lekha is true to her name in features and actions. Like a digit of moon that waxes and wanes, her temperament also changes from mildness to seriousness as occasion demands. Her character is steady. She feels greater discomfort in riding the tiger than her father, and she has less inclination to ride. Her acceptance of the position into which she is forced is passive.

Lekha is an image of suffering, who is also subjected to traditional restraints. The caste restrictions and her role of priestess in the temple add to the suffering of this motherless girl. But she bears them silently. She has the role of an ideal companion woman in the development of Kalo’s activities. K.H. Kunjo Singh comments on her character:

Lekha works as redeemer by getting rid of the burden of falsehood the imposture as a Brahmin and as a goddess by desiring to link her life with Biten for the emancipation of the downtrodden people. She is deified as the ‘Mother of Sevenfold Bliss’ and portrayed as an embodiment of succor and sacrifice. Though deified, Lekha has the primal urge of woman and she wants to be a human being. She is sensitive, introspective and intriguing” (103). She has a strong belief that her father is not the only person who can fight heroically; his daughter too can stand on her own legs. Thus, through her character, the novelist brings out the view that fight is the only means to live ‘happy and virtuous life’. ‘The way of struggle’, she says to herself, is the true way. The struggle, first of all, against fear ... (33).

J. Madhumitha, M.A.
Poornavalli Mathiakaranam, M.A., M.Phil.

Department of English
PSGR Krishnammal College for Women
Peelamedu
Coimbatore 641 004
Tamilnadu, India
poornavallimathiakaranam@gmail.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 9 September 2009

J. Madhumitha, M.A.

Poornavalli Mathiakaranam, M.A., M.Phil.

Chandra Lekha in *He who Rides a Tiger* by Bhabani Bhattacharya