



THE IMAGE OF STRONG WOMEN IN BHATTACHARYA'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Bhattacharya's women are not just individuals but symbols. The innocent beings in the beginning mature into experienced beings along with the progression of the theme. They finally emerge as people possessing a will of their own facing the future with confidence and renewed vigour. Kajoli, Monju, Chandralekha, Mohini, Suruchi, Sumita, Devjani, Stella and Jennifer do not fall prey to despair for long. Though bruised and battered in the patriarchal set-up, in the end they emerge victorious. What makes the characters unforgettable is the fact that they are concretely, fully, and realistically portrayed and they are a part of the fictional settings in which they live and breathe. They share many qualities in common – compassion, ability to love, ability to mature both through love and suffering, courage, independence of will along with gracefulness, charm and a sense of playfulness. They have great desire to be fulfilled not only as women but also as human beings living in a community. In spite of all the difficulties they face in their headlong confrontation with reality, their vigour and vitality remain undimmed. This paper focuses on how Bhattacharya presented the strength of Indian women who showed their power without breaking from the familial circle.

Key Words: *suppression, male domination, individuality, power and space, self reliant.*

INTRODUCTION

Indian writers have contributed much for the overall development of world literature with their powerful literary expression and immense depth in characterization. In providing global recognition to Indian writing in English, the novel plays a significant role as they portray the



multi-faceted problems of Indian life and the reactions of common men and women in the society. As the novelists have a special way of seeing and showing the vital cultural and social aspects of life, their presentation of the position of women in India may be considered as an index to the quality of its culture and character of its civilization. Woman, who had taken active part in all important issues related to political and economic matters in the Vedic age, lost her power over all matters with the passage of time. Foreign aggressions and increased patriarchal authority sounded a death-knell to the position of woman by taking away all the liberties she had enjoyed in the past and relegated her to the position of a doormat in the house.

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Woman, who had taken active part in all important issues related to political and economic matters in the Vedic age, lost her power over all matters with the passage of time. Foreign aggressions and increased patriarchal authority sounded a death-knell to the position of woman by taking away all the liberties she had enjoyed in the past and relegated her to the position of a doormat in the house. Her forcible confinement to the inner sanctum of her house denied her any opportunity to bring out her hidden potentialities. Besides, her lack of economic independence made her dependent on her male counterpart catering to his needs and getting smothered under his feet. Her brought-up for centuries in that subjugated state made her subservient to the patriarchal authority. It is this subjugated image of woman that the writers of all ages have presented in their works. She is presented as an object of pleasure who is needed for the continuation of the family lineage and is looked upon only as the bearer and rearer of the male child.

But one finds a virtual change in the life of woman in the twentieth century due to the incessant efforts of social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Eswara Chandra Vidyasagar, Mahatma Phule and the likes. Their relentless fight for the uplift of the poorer and deprived sections of society has boosted the morale of the hitherto suppressed women. These marginalized people raised their voice against the suffering of women and worked for their emancipation from the evil clutches of the caste-prone society. In the wake of the changes that have taken place in the society in the post-independence period, many novelists emerged on the scene projecting the multi-faceted aspects of woman but here too, they confined themselves to projecting woman as a docile girl, devoted wife and doting mother. In

DR. D. RAJANI DEIVASAHAYAM

2 Page



projecting this image, they were no different from their predecessors. After careful observation of the way a woman is treated in the literature written by men, the new woman understood the fact that the male writers failed miserably in presenting a judicious view of the problems and conflicts faced by women. This paved way for the women writers to come to the front with their raised voice and give expression to the diversified experiences of women. These novels written by women are radical in the sense that they explore not simply the suppressed state of woman but her struggle for existence in the male-dominated society fighting against all odds. They have succeeded in creating the new woman who is daring enough to break the traditional norms with her gritty strength and inner potentiality.

Though most women are of the opinion that only a woman can explore the difficult situations they are involved in, there are some male writers who understand women's problems and work for their liberation. In this aspect Bhabani Bhattacharya can be considered as a visionary writer who stands apart from the other writers in dealing not only with the problems faced by women but also in making them find solutions to their own problems.

For centuries woman has remained passive having no idea of any sort of resistance. But the growing demand for social reforms, the revival of past traditions, the increasing awareness of the role of an individual in society, man's suffering for his colonized position under the colonizer and his resistance against the colonizer for his marginalized state in his acquired language are the factors that motivated the woman to raise her voice and fight for her deliverance. On seeing the effects of the resistance of the colonized against the colonizer, she realizes her colonized status for the first time. She understands the fact that none will come to help her. She herself has to find solutions to her problems. So after witnessing man's fight against the colonizer and his deliverance from their iron-grip, woman becomes aware of her situation as the 'other'. Only then does she ponder over the way she has to traverse in her quest for identity. She comprehends reality that her deliverance is not in the hands of a man; she has to raise her voice and make her voice heard. She does not want to remain the subaltern that cannot speak; she feels it her duty to come out of patriarchal authority just as man had done with the colonizers. But at the same time, she does not try to be away from the family circle. She tries to assert her individuality first in the family and thereby in the society. The concept of a woman's protest and its success after a great fight is explored in this thesis at length.

Bhattacharya describes subjects peculiar to the Indian society such as caste system, superstitions, orthodoxy, and age-old traditions (**Music for Mohini** and **A Goddess Named Gold**), poverty, hunger, famine (**So Many Hungers!** and **He Who Rides a Tiger**), industrialization, modernization, and materialism (**Shadow from Ladakh** and **A Dream in Hawaii**), in which the author presents the victimization of woman and her struggle for survival. Her marginalization and her suppression make her subdued; but the writer does not



want the woman to remain victimized. He wants his woman to be strong enough to fight for her rightful place in the society. So he depicts a woman's quest for self. By exploring the woman's psyche, by making her understand the mysteries of life, Bhattacharya portrays woman as the one who is capable of finding a space for herself by using her power in dealing with the conflicting situations that have engulfed her.

Bhattacharya's women are not just individuals but symbols. The innocent beings in the beginning mature into experienced beings along with the progression of the theme. They finally emerge as people possessing a will of their own facing the future with confidence and renewed vigour. Kajoli, Monju, Chandralekha, Mohini, Suruchi, Sumita, Devjani, Stella and Jennifer do not fall prey to despair for long. Though bruised and battered in the patriarchal set-up, in the end they emerge victorious. What makes the characters unforgettable is the fact that they are concretely, fully, and realistically portrayed and they are a part of the fictional settings in which they live and breathe. They share many qualities in common – compassion, ability to love, ability to mature both through love and suffering, courage, independence of will along with gracefulness, charm and a sense of playfulness. They have great desire to be fulfilled not only as women but also as human beings living in a community. In spite of all the difficulties they face in their headlong confrontation with reality, their vigour and vitality remain undimmed.

Besides, they are dynamic and brave enough to take active steps to achieve that fulfillment. Not only that, they represent the triumph of the human spirit over various forces like famine and starvation and their accompanying degradation and over the inevitable crisis that arises when old and new values clash. Their experiences yield them the redefinition and new understanding of personal freedom that follows in the wake of political freedom. Through their strength and courage, they exemplify the ancient Hindu concept of Shakti. Chandralekha, Kajoli, Mohini, Meera, Suruchi, Sumita, Devjani and Sujatha are all expressive of the dynamic process which is female energy.

Bhattacharya presents his women as the embodiment of strength and power. Though exploited on all levels – physical, emotional, and psychological – they rise from their stupor and face life with renewed vigour and confidence. In his first novel **So Many Hungers!** the development of Kajoli as a person from the victim of exploitation and degradation to the woman who asserts her individuality and creates a space for herself in the male dominated society itself speaks volumes of Bhattacharya's positive attitude towards life. Through Kajoli, the author presents the affirmation of life by reiterating his view that even poverty cannot debase the nobler ideas of young women. Even in the midst of troubles and tribulations, Kajoli remains pure and uncorrupted. The author by his portrayal of the life of Kajoli affirms that the human beings are basically good and they prefer the life of righteousness. It is only circumstances that drive them to get involved in leading ignoble lives. But in the midst of all



this suffering and degradation is born a new woman. With her undaunted spirit, Kajoli endures all the sufferings and ultimately succeeds in facing the challenges of life with renewed confidence and determination.

Monju in the same novel turns into a caring woman who caters to the needs of the destitutes by accepting her husband Rahoul's way of life. Ultimately she turns out to be a woman of strength when she comes across the plight of the suffering destitutes on the road. She is so busy with her work that when her husband gets arrested for his involvement in Quit India Movement, she bids heroic farewell with the assurance that she too would follow suit. Probably in future, she may play a positive role in inspiring her father-in-law to join her in helping the destitutes and take active part in freedom struggle as his faith in the British empire has collapsed with the imprisonment of one son and the missing of another son in war.

When the development in Kajoli from the exploited being to the woman who asserts her individuality is on one level, the development of Mohini in **Music for Mohini** is on another level. She does not become the victim of external forces like hunger as in the case of Kajoli. Her victimization is on the emotional plane. The author drives home very dexterously the strength of an Indian woman who can liberate herself from the smothering effects of the senseless traditions and orthodoxy. Though Mohini feels suffocated at the senseless restrictions imposed by her tradition-bound orthodox mother-in-law regarding her life in the Big House, she does not end up a victim forever. She is victimized; she is subjected to humiliation at every step; but she does not give up her fight so easily. In spite of her colonized state, she gets up from her stupor and hits back at the centre.

When Kajoli and Mohini suffer on physical and emotional planes respectively, Lekha in **He Who Rides a Tiger** suffers on the psychological plane. As in the previous novels, in this novel also the author wages war against the caste system in India. As in **So Many Hungers!**, in this novel also, the woman protagonist becomes the victim of circumstances. But in no time, the victimized Lekha rebels against her father's role as MangalAdhikari, the Brahmin. She is, in fact, his redeemer and creates a space for herself not only in her family but in society also. True to her name in features and actions, Chandralekha is the real illumined moon. She is the moon that wanes and waxes with her temperament changing from mildness to seriousness and from seriousness to full grown maturity. Her life from exploitation to rebellion and from rebellion to asserting identity is the crux of Bhattacharya's women characters. On the other hand, there is Poornima who ends her life and appears to be passive. But in her own way, she motivates her brother Biten with her death to find his stand in protesting against the atrocities committed on the colonized sect of the society and fight for their rights. She injects strength and courage in her brother to fight against casteism and other evils that ruin the lives of scores of people in the country.



Like Kajoli, Mohini and Lekha, Meera in **A Goddess Named Gold** has a streak of rebellion in her. She protests against Seth Shyam Sunder, who is a symbol of economic, social, political and religious exploitation. He stocks cloth and sells it at a very high price to the villagers. As a result Meera, along with other members of her group called 'The Cowhouse Five', leads the protest march and demands the sale of a hundred saris at low cost. Wherever there is a crisis in the village, the whole village looks up to Meera for support and assistance. Though the novel deals with the theme of economic freedom of the hungry masses, it clearly shows the resurgence of the village women.

Meera is presented as the symbol of Indian womanhood. But when man's lust for gold and his craving for riches make Meera the victim, she is unable to bear it. She, in no time, understands reality. She understands the fool's paradise in which she has been living. She comprehends reality and finally throws away the touchstone into the river thus freeing herself from bondage. She even rebels against the Seth for keeping her under captivity much against her wishes. She brings a change in the attitude of the Seth with her outburst thus proving her power. Lakshmi, the wife of Seth Samsundar, on the other hand rebels against her husband and finally works to bring him to his senses. She never intends to harm her husband, but when she sees him amassing riches at the expense of the poor villagers, she musters courage and rebels and becomes successful in making him comprehend reality.

In **Shadow from Ladakh**, the author pleads for synthesis of aestheticism and asceticism, spirituality and materialism, Nehruite and Gandhian ideologies. All the characters are drawn on these lines with each character belonging to either of these ways. What Bhattacharya advocates is not that the people belong to one category or the other, but that they possess in them all the traits in equal measure. Only then does a person lead a worthy life. Satyajit and Bhaskar stand poles apart with the former being a shadow of Gandhi and the latter a shadow of a western way of life. The women in their lives bring an attitudinal change in them. Though Suruchi believes that life should not be given up at any cost, still she becomes a victim of the false ideologies of her ascetic-minded husband. But a victimized woman can never be under bondage forever; a day will come when life becomes unbearable for her. That day comes into her life and she raises her voice against her husband. She rebels against him because of his failure as a father. When she sees him bringing up his daughter under his influence, she loses the control she imposed upon herself. As the novel ends, Suruchi is presented as the winner of the game of life. She makes Satyajit realize the unnaturalness of life he has been leading for the past many years ignoring his wife's needs. With her unflinching faith in life and her undaunted spirit, she transforms her husband and daughter. Finally she emerges a winner both as a wife and a mother.



Like Suruchi, Sumita also is liberated from the prison house of asceticism. Though she is presented as a shadow of her father expressing his ideas all the time, as the novel progresses, one finds a development in her both on psychological and emotional planes. She comes out of the influence of her father. Her falling in love with Bhaskar itself is indicative of the fact that she is liberated from her father's ideologies. Just as her father is transformed in the end with the help of Suruchi, Sumita also gets transformed in the end with the help of Nandini and Bhaskar. Apart from that, she even transforms Bhaskar. She brings in him Indianism that was buried beneath the veneer of the Americanism. From a materialistic person, Bhaskar transforms into a normal human being who gives importance to the ideals of Gandhism. They, no doubt, find their own self-identities, at the same time, they also identify with each other. Though there exist many contrasts between Suruchi and Sumita, one major difference between them is that while Suruchi moves from spontaneity and gaiety to asceticism that is thrust on her from external forces, in Sumita one finds the counter movement from asceticism to aestheticism and freedom that brings forth emotional awakening.

Bhattacharya strongly believes that there is great depth and richness in Indian women; hence he beautifully reflects these traits in his women characters. In presenting the women of substance, he is different from the other male writers of his age. Women are discussed in some of their writings as the victims of double colonization who never raise their voice against exploitation but accept everything that happens to them as their fate. Though R. K. Narayan's Savithri in **The Dark Room** protests against the suppression she has been subjected to by leaving the house, her fight does not last till the end; she returns like a broken-winged bird to suffer in silence till the end of her life. Except for Gauri, very few characters of Anand come out into the open asserting their individuality. Their few moments of joy are extinguished by poverty, orthodoxy or disharmony on the part of the elders making them subjects of unrelieved suffering. Raja Rao also depicts women as traditional beings who bow to the dictates of men in their lives.

It is only in Bhattacharya's novels that one finds the true picture of a life-like girl today emerging from the old tradition-bound society. No doubt, she suffers excessively on all planes, but she comes out victorious at the end. At the same time, to assert her individuality she does not come out from the confined positions of her family; rather she stays in the family consolidating her position and asserting her identity. In this sphere Bhattacharya proves to be a traditionalist who advocates that a woman should live in an integrated family where family relations should be given top priority. But at the same time she has to ascertain her individualistic nature and have equal footage in the household and even in the society on par with her male counterpart. She is neither inferior nor superior to man but a woman who occupies an equal position with the men in the family and society. The author projects this opinion in the delineation of his women characters.



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