
Self Denial to Affirmation: A Study of Women in the Novels of

Bhabani Bhattacharya

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ABSTRACT:

Literature is the most explicit record of human spirit. Through it, the essence of our living is made paramount by attaching to an imaginative experience. It is a ever changing process and this change is because of the change that takes place in our lives as well as get reflected in literature,. With the advent of Western education, freedom struggle, changes in economic conditions etc. act as a powerful levers to bring woman out of the cocoon of pride-in-sufferings to look herself as an individual. In the novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya, he has talked about this journey of women from self-denial to self-affirmation through the stages of tradition, transition and modernity. He has provided women with a bent opened to come out from the cocoon to the limelight. Bhattacharya provides a bent of window opened to look at the inner self of the woman and to help them to come out from their cocoon into the limelight. When one peeps into the gallery of Bhattacharya's portrait of women to find a wide range of women from conventional to contemporary one- all of which are quite convincingly set in the local backdrop. The idea and role of woman described gives us an insight into the cultural values, changes and the concepts of traditional Indian society in general. They also stand, raise their voices and protest against the exploitation and oppression in a male dominated society.

KEY WORDS: *Literature, Women, Journey, Self-affirmation.*

Literature is the most explicit record of human spirit. Through it, the essence of our living is made paramount by attaching to an imaginative experience. It is an ever-changing process. This change is because of the change in our life which inevitably reflects in literature. The status of woman in society is no exception to it. With it, the position of woman is undergoing a rapid change in recent times, particularly in India since ages. The personality of typical Indian woman was over-whelming swamped by the male-dominated attitudes

against the backdrop of male-dominated culture. It was assumed that she has no mind, no thinking and even no personality of her own. She is glorified in the sufferings inflicted on her. The woman-in-life and woman-in-literature had no existence than that of a shadowy, silently suffering and pathetic creature, just bearing and rearing children; having neither the strength nor the desire to revolt for her rights.

Though the changes brought by Western culture and education in India, struggle for freedom during 1947, changes in economic conditions has proved as powerful levers to bring woman out of the cocoon of pride-in-suffering and to look at herself as a human being. Since time immemorial, woman has to undergo a traumatic struggle for her as the fetters of prototype image of woman as ‘Sita’, ‘Sakuntala’ and ‘Savitri’ had grown into her being. The portrayal of a woman appears nearer to prototype image of Sita-Savitri-Sakuntala where Sita is the submissive, loving and obedient wife of lord Rama, the hero of Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, taken from a Sanskrit epic. Sakuntla is the chaste, full of patience and enduring wife of king Dhushyanta, the hero of Kalidasa’s Sanskrit play, *Abhigyanashakuntalam*. Whereas, Savitri with her unswerving loyalty rescues her husband Sathyavan from the God of death, Yamaraja is taken from Hindu mythology. These archetype images of women do not care for their identity and always exist in a male-related context of ‘father-husband-son’ as remarked by Manu, the Hindu law giver and quoted by Hunter Women’s Studies Collective as:

Day and night women must be kept in subordination to the males of the family: in childhood to the father, in youth to her husband, in old age to her sons.... Even though the husband be destitute of virtue and seeks pleasure elsewhere, he must be worshipped as God (Sandhu Introduction).

The image and status of Indian woman as depicted in literature since Vedic times to the present day has constantly been under an influence of change and flux. Barring a few scattered periods, woman has more or less been treated as an object of subordination particularly in Indian male dominating society. Even during the emergence of Indo-Anglian Fiction 1930’s which emerged out of a deep source and a great background of ancient Indian culture, woman is subjected to the male dominance. One of the root cause of all this; appears to be the ideas and taboos instilled in the mind of woman from childhood that has resulted from the acceptance as having weaker position in the society. They were only presumed to be the embodiment of ‘self-sacrifice’ – a virtue expected of each and every

woman, but it complicates their life as “the ethic of self-sacrifice is directly in conflict with the concept of rights of women” (Gillian 132).

Change is the law of nature, as all things must change; the image of woman also shows tremors of change particularly during 1950’s. With the emergence of the chain of progressive novelist’s i.e. Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Rama Jha, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Mulkh Raj Anand etc, on a literary front, the prototype image of woman started changing. Writers during this era are deeply impressed by the effects of modernization, industrialization and by the exposure of Western life style on traditional Indian system. Many critics give this credit to Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindra Nath Tagore etc. who encourage women to commit themselves in the freedom movement to convey their spirit in it and express their image to the outer world. Freedom for Indian women not only means freedom from the hands of British government- their rule, their dominance and their cruelty; but also release from the centuries old male dominance, social and cultural norms. Now, woman is not enclosed within the four walls, but is trying to make a slow but steady change within her own home.

Previously, women were presented in a single dimension as a responsible daughter, a sacrificing mother, an obedient wife or beloved and a virgin. But in today’s time and in fiction, they have achieved a separate identity due to the awareness in political, social, cultural and economic fronts. A general analysis of the novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya from *So Many Hungers!* (1947) to *A Dream in Hawaii* (1978) present the most significant aspect of womanhood. He is one of the foremost among Indian writers to write about women’s emancipation and liberation. He is also the winner of the *Sahitya Akademy* award (1967) for his novel *Shadow from Ladakh*. He is the fourth writer to receive the award for a work in English. Speaking of the award Bhattacharya remarks, “It is good to be known abroad. Even so, I must confess that I would like to be known to my country too. The award redresses a balance— so far I have been known in the U.S. and Europe than in my own country” (qtd. in Rao 35). He is a much translated Indian novelist writing in English. He has written not only novels and short stories, but has also translated and edited some of Tagore’s writings, written popular episodes from Indian history and has produced a book on Gandhi the writer.

In his novels, Bhattacharya traces the position of women through the journey undertaken by them from the state of self-sacrifice to self-realization, from self-denial to self-assertion and

from self-negation to self-affirmation. Woman in the novels of Bhattacharya passes through the stage of tradition, transition and modernity. But due to the sublimation of their natural desires in the society, they can't reveal their subconscious self. This revelation of freedom loving side of women was unseen, undiscovered and was like an underwater mass of the iceberg; she is the hub around whom everything gyrates, "She remains the still centre, like the centre in a potter's wheel, circling to create new forms, unfolding the continuity of a racial life, which in turn has encircled and helped her acquire a quality of concentration" (Jung 26).

Bhattacharya provides a bent of window opened to look at the inner self of the woman and to help them to come out from their cocoon into the limelight. When one peeps into the gallery of Bhattacharya's portrait of women to find a wide range of women from conventional to contemporary one- all of which are quite convincingly set in the local backdrop. The idea and role of woman described gives us an insight into the cultural values, changes and the concepts of traditional Indian society in general. They also stand, raise their voices and protest against the exploitation and oppression in a male dominated society. Bhattacharya affirms that his women characters always occupied a special place in his novels and are more superior to man as "women possess more depth, more richness in them than the men folk" (Fisher 66). Sometimes his female character comes forward and takes an active step to come out of her sufferings. Marlene Fisher rightly remarks:

Women are either central characters themselves, or of at least equal importance as the male characters or provide the inspiration and meaning from which a man derives his strength.

This kind of focusing on women, both as individuals and as symbols, is not surprising in Dr. Bhattacharya's works for at least two reasons. One stems from the author's own admitted fascination with and admiration for the Indian woman (66).

In Bhattacharya's first novel *So Many Hungers!* Kajoli is shown as a particularly charming, well-bred young peasant girl of fourteen. She has fancy for pictures of a bright colour and hangs them up all over the mud walls. However almost immediately it was to become impossible for her to enjoy such simple pleasures as firstly her father was dragged off to prison for his efforts to help his country for achieving independence, later her husband Kishore, who was sent to her by her father due to scarcity of food was forced to leave her as a

newly-wed bride to go to Calcutta-in the hope of work, food and wage. Kishore could never come back, as he was shot dead at the outset of his journey by a police guard. Kajoli with her mother, brother Onu and with the entire village became more and more impoverished. They finally decided to go to Calcutta. Along the way, Kajoli was raped and gave birth to a dead child and was taken to a hospital. She was nicely looked after and adequately fed in the hospital, but her mother as well as her brother had to sleep on the city streets and were forced to forage in garbage bins. After Kajoli discharged from hospital, she realizes that how her family had been half-living making her to take a grim decision of selling the last thing she owned- “Herself”. The light-hearted, delicate girl had gone away and was replaced by a more determined, self-affirmed woman of new-found strength. She came out of the brothel and went to march with the patriots by preparing herself to participate in the hunger-strike. And hence at the moment of deepest degradation and shame, Kajoli majestically recaptured her bravery and power she had abandoned long ago. She projected the true spirit of every Indian woman which can walk even in the most difficult situation of life with utmost ease and calmness. Her new found courage to act arises from the depths of her womanly self. She required no more brightly coloured pictures for her because she now possessed a brightly coloured vision of a better tomorrow having undergone through the process of self-realization. She decides to start her life afresh.

With Bhattacharya persistent concern for the social change, he discusses about the changing position of women in Indian society i.e. from her doubts and apprehensions to a state of self-assertion and confidence. Women are shown as having great sense of commitment and adjustment in Bhattacharya’s novels. *Music for Mohini* dwells on the transformation of the female protagonist named Mohini, a care-free, young, tom boyish, city-bred girl into an intellectual, cultured lady of tradition in the Big House of village Behula. It not only talks about the process of her transformation, but also the quality of transformation and the extent of her achievement. After being married for two years, she longs for the love of her husband, Jayadev and a child. For Jayadev, physical love has no meaning as he cares for the upliftment of his country only. This becomes the root cause of her marital discord. Hence leading her to test her adaptability, flexibility and also reveals whether or not she is capable of growth and building a life of service and commitment. She manages in the midst of her typical Indian problems of a daughter-in-law to stand and to help her husband in his self-appointed task of educating the villagers by weeding out the harmful superstitions; she plunges into the job of

teaching the village women. By transforming her attention from family to society, Mohini emerges as a stronger woman of great strength and emancipation. In the words of Rashmi Gaur:

Bhattacharya has portrayed Mohini as a representative of his image of the new woman who is to act as a bastion against the corrupting influence of the west and protect the traditional values of personal and social life from any sudden or violent change. Mohini is expected to be a harbinger of new ideas and new skills in a stagnant society without much freedom to act of her own volition (56).

Bhattacharya's female characters always represent the triumph of the human spirit over famine and over their inevitable accompanying degradation. No matter, his female brigade detracts from its projection as an individual; but on the contrary embodies some symbolic value in their character which gives them their vivacity and charm. In his third novel, *He Who Rides a Tiger*, Chandralekha is true to her name in both her features and actions. At the time when she finds that it is quite impossible for her father, Kalo to dismount from the lie of deceiving the people through transforming themselves from Kamar (lower class) to Brahmins (upper class) acts as riding on a tiger's back. They both undergo such a transformation due to the oppressions, class restraints imposed on them, "We are the scum of the earth. The boss people scorn us because they fear us. They hit us where it hurts badly in the pit of the belly. We've got to hit back" (37). Although, now they become Brahmins but still have longing for their previous lives. Chandralekha is supposed to become the incarnation of the mother of seven fold Bliss. But she finds her position to be suffocating: a gilded cage and wants to enjoy freedom. With her self-assertion, she has the sufficient reasons to revolt against the prevalent mode of behaviour of his father and society as she has been through the same hell of starvation and suffering as his father has undergone. In a way she has suffered more than her father at the hands of society, because she was forced to a brothel. She feels greatest discomfort in riding the tiger of lie and falsehood. But still, she sacrificed her true freedom at the stake of her father's happiness, makes him realize his fault. With the help of her inner will and goodness in her character, she not only comes out as a redeemer; but also helps her father in getting rid of the burden of falsehood-imposter as a Brahmin. She comes out as an undaunted spirit and leads a new life in future free from all vices projecting Bhattacharya's new woman of self-realization.

Bhattacharya makes us look at the female as a ray of hope for mankind. By putting them in the whirlpool of miseries, Bhattacharya proves her strong enough to face any crisis, she may find herself in. For instance, it is Meera and her experiences with taveez (amulet) in *A Goddess Named Gold* that becomes a fable for the responsibilities that freedom entails. She reveals her will and determination for the freedom at the tender age of eleven that makes her exceptional. She expresses her strength of will and determination, her capacity for fullness and her concern for others by joining her fellow villagers for a month in prison following their freedom march and their cries of “Quit India.” Later, at the age of eighteen, she possesses the courage to descend into the well to rescue the child named Nago; the son of Sethji (money-lender). She goes to an extent to unite all the women of the village to march against the Sethji, demanding that he should charge fair prices for cotton saris so that they might exchange their tattered saris for new one. B. Shyamla Rao, an eminent critic comments, “Bhattacharya’s fourth novel *A Goddess Named Gold* may be termed a women’s novel. In essence it is a feminist novel as the liberation of the country from the clutches of the Sethji is accomplished by women only” (58). Even her grandmother is shown as a woman of great insight. Though being an orthodox creature, she brings about the emancipation of the village woman. She suffers from gout, but still manages to participate in procession against Sethji. Her very presence gives courage to the timid village women and frightens the Sethji who does black marketing which proves that in Bhattacharya’s novels, women stand against all the atrocities that befall on them.

During 1950’s, woman underwent a difficult time as they had to encounter with two main contradictions of that time. On one side, they had to play the part assigned by the holy texts, which they could not resist due to social scenario. And on the other side, they were involved in the great freedom movement in which they were assigned with nationwide responsibilities. Suruchi, wife of Satyajit in *Shadow from Ladakh* is one such character, who has to adopt Gandhian principle along with her husband. She also follows the path of the path of becoming ideal women neglecting her own wants and desires. Woman suffers as wife owing to their emotional home loving temperament and treating their husband as God. It is difficult for the wives to rebel against their husband as they have to fulfill their sociological role in life by submitting themselves to the traditional *stridharma*, the duty pertaining to women, who make surrender in favour of their master, their *pati- parmashwar*, an earthly substitute of God to her and her whole life revolves around him. Betty Friedan in

The Feminine Mystique states that “ ... a woman in no way even dream about herself, except as her children’s mother, and husband’s wife’ due to her long apprenticeship in gender roles”(1992:55). For persisting Gandhian ideals, Satyajit becomes self centered and finally decides to become Brahmachari, ‘chastity of body and even thought’ without thinking for once about the impulse of his wife. But being a projection of true Indian woman Suruchi agrees with Satyajit though she always longs for another child throughout the novel. Suruchi always has a regret of it. For an average Indian woman, their dignity and destiny lies with marriage. Beauvoir observes, “Marriage is a destiny traditionally offered to women by society” (444). Suruchi later makes her daughter, Sumita realizes about the true essence of womanhood which she had forgotten under the influence of her father. By showing the affair between Sumita and Bhaskar, Bhattacharya projects the image of new woman who can go to an extent to fulfill their desire and can choose their life partner. The vitality that Suruchi fails as a woman, Sumita gains it. The process which changes her was slow but steady. In the process of finding herself, Suruchi “felt displaced, pulled from the roots of her inner self, and terribly confused... She could well afford to be more concerned with her own Being. With her own becoming” (204) and ultimately find her true position. A wide sea change from passivity to rebellion i.e. from self-sacrifice to self-realization can be observed among the female characters in Bhattacharya’s novels. In his first novel, *So Many Hungers!*, women are shown to be bounded for accepting the customs, conventions and traditions of the society. But in his sixth novel, *A Dream in Hawaii*- a remarkable transformation can be seen in his female characters namely Devjani, Stella, Sujata, Nishi, Frieda, Jennifer etc. as they are more affirmed, confident and independent. This novel is about the metamorphosis of an Indian Professor of Philosophy named, Neeloy Mukherjee into Swami Yogananda It is actually his disciple Devjani who helped him on the mystic path to become a Swami. Although renouncing the world, Neeloy still longs for the love of Devjani. But she is shown as above sexual desires and after helping him on the mystic path, she goes to America for her research work. Women are given more space in the novel regarding taking important decisions of their lives, choosing to have relationship with a person or not-without marriage or not, going abroad for further studies etc. Bhattacharya has openly talked about sex, love and physical desires of a woman. They are no more traditionally bound and represent the class of – New Woman.

Bhattacharya assigns different roles and position to the women in his novels. Although, in his novels, women suffer, submit them at first, but later comes out from the traditional mooring and mark their presence. Awakening of the spirit, recreation of confidence, i.e. liberation of women from weak, fragile being to a stronger personality is seen. Bhattacharya presents women as rising above the custodian existence to a distinct footing and marked that the name of woman with a distinct image and stature. She has come across most of her complexities of being lost through the process of change from self-denial to self-affirmation and now, “Women are on equal footing with men in almost every section of society. Be it the territory of scholasticism or literature, be it journalism or media... be it science or technology, woman’s presence can be felt everywhere” (Singh 150).

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