



Bhabani Bhattacharya's "Music for Mohini": A Delve in Social Issues and the Clash between Traditional Values and Modernity

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Abstract

Literature serves as a reflection of society and incorporates its cultural elements, a well-known fact in the academic world. Through literature, society's values, virtues, as well as its shortcomings are showcased. Writers aim to portray real-life events within society through fiction, shedding light on the prevailing culture, customs, beliefs, and values. Bhabani Bhattacharya's novel "Music for Mohini" delves into the clash of ideologies and the transformation of culture. Despite the contrasting values depicted, the ultimate goal remains the reconciliation of opposing values for the betterment of society. Bhattacharya's work highlights the struggle between traditional norms and the forces seeking change, ultimately leading to a society adapting to these evolving conditions. The 20th century in India was marked by profound social and political unrest, which had a significant influence on the literature of the era. The clash between modernity and the growing sense of nationalism, predominant ideologies during this time, served as a central theme for writers. Bhabani Bhattacharya emerges as a notable figure among the contemporary Indo-Anglian writers, skilfully using English to convey powerful narratives about the internal struggles of modern India. His works contribute significantly to the social narrative, advocating for a new Indian society free from exploitation and social injustices. Bhattacharya's portrayal of the complexities faced by modern individuals resonates as a poignant reflection of the perplexities of the era. Like his contemporaries, he captures the spiritual distress, aspirations, and challenges of a nation transitioning towards independence. While his literary contributions may not break new ground, they certainly secure him a distinguished place in Indian literature. This article delves into Bhattacharya's second novel, Music for Mohini, shedding light on the evolving roles of women in Indian society that Bhattacharya aimed to portray in his works. He envisioned a society where women were respected as individuals with their own identities, rather than being confined to the roles dictated by patriarchy. Furthermore, it showcases Bhabani Bhattacharya as a dedicated writer and a prominent advocate for social change, delving deep into the pressing issues that plagued Indian society. He solidified his position as one of the key figures among Indian novelists in English, alongside R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Raja Rao, who belonged to the earlier generation of novelists. This article delves into Bhattacharya's second novel, Music for Mohini, shedding light on the evolving roles of women in Indian society that Bhattacharya aimed to portray in his works. He envisioned a society where women were respected as individuals with their own identities, rather than being confined to the roles dictated by patriarchy. Furthermore, it showcases Bhabani Bhattacharya as a dedicated writer and a prominent advocate for social change, delving deep into the pressing issues that plagued Indian society. He solidified his position as one of the key figures among Indian novelists in English, alongside R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Raja Rao, who belonged to the earlier generation of novelists.

Keywords: Metamorphosis, Cultural Synthesis, Reconciliation, Social issues, traditionality, modernity and Ideology.

Introduction

Bhabani Bhattacharya emerged as one of the pioneering English novelists in India, offering a fresh perspective on fiction writing by exploring unconventional themes. He moved away from the predominant focus on India's struggle for independence and the subsequent chaos of post-independence. Instead, Bhattacharya delved into the complexities of rural-urban divide, the clash between eastern and western cultures, and various other facets of human life. In his novel "Music for Mohini," published in 1950, Bhattacharya skilfully weaves together conflicting themes, such as the dichotomy between body and mind and the tensions arising from the clash between eastern and western ideologies. The story is also characterized by its exploration of the traditional rural village life juxtaposed with modernity and rationalism. Additionally, it delves into the intricate relationship between a daughter and her mother-in-law. Throughout the narrative, these conflicts gradually find resolution, ultimately uniting different perspectives. The diverse array of characters adds depth to the story, featuring

not only the inhabitants of the prominent Big House but also the architectural aspects of the setting. She, an early Indian novelist, sought to revolutionize the realm of fiction writing by exploring unconventional themes beyond the customary ones of independence struggle and post-independence chaos. As the story progresses, these conflicts are ultimately resolved, leading to a harmonious union of diverse perspectives. The narrative not only encompasses the inhabitants of the Big House but also encompasses the architectural elements, portraying a rich tapestry of characters and settings. The novel depicts the rural environment as a battleground between urban and rural lifestyles. The author carefully selects characters from various backgrounds, representing both rural and urban societies. These characters are chosen to suit the storyline, reflecting different themes and facets of human life. The author intelligently crafts both male and female characters, portraying them in a compelling manner. For instance, in his novel "Music for Mohini," multiple character pairs exhibit distinct traits.

The music of Mohini unfolds on two distinct levels—the personal journey of Mohini, a city-bred girl adjusting to her new life in the village, and the societal shift from the traditional Eastern perspective to a more modern semi-Western outlook. This novel explores the attempt to blend the 'horoscope' with the 'microscope'. Jayadev embodies the old Eastern view as a scholarly villager, while his wife Mohini represents the new semi-Western perspective. The novel delves into the psychological conflict between Jayadev and his conservative mother, who eventually comes to appreciate the positive changes brought about by her son and daughter-in-law, leading her to embrace modernization.

Mohini and her father, Jaydev Harindra, embark on a personal mission to combat the societal injustices of patriarchy, caste discrimination, superstitions, and moral decay. Through their journey, Bhattacharya skillfully portrays the harsh realities of 20th century India. "Music for Mohini is not merely a catalogue of the social evils of Hindu India to delight a western audience but a portrait of the contrasting values of the old and the new in sharp conflict with each other and ending in a reconciliation and synthesis of the two." (Khunjo, p95). Mohini, a confident and determined woman, strives for acknowledgement and visibility within society. Her exposure to English education and upbringing by an intellectual father has shaped her into a liberated young woman brimming with ideas, romantic fantasies, and a talent for music. However, the course of her life takes a different turn in the latter half of the story when she is married off to a wealthy Zamindar named Jaydev and becomes the mistress of a grand estate. In this new environment, traditional customs and ancient values overshadow modern culture, forcing Mohini to adapt and relearn her way of life under the watchful eye of her mother-in-law. Throughout the novel, Bhattacharya challenges and dismisses superstitious beliefs that dictate the destinies of individuals, particularly women, advocating instead for a belief system rooted in reason and logic. Mohini becomes the catalyst for this transformation, serving as a bridge between two cultures and embodying the best of both worlds. She symbolizes the emerging India, which strives to strike a balance between tradition and progress. "Bhattacharya in this novel Music for Mohini seeks to build a new society which is absolutely free from the dead conventions and blind beliefs and wants people to follow the right of reason so that they never lose their way in the dreary deserts of dead habits." (Chelliah, 39).

Mohini's life takes a drastic turn after her marriage, with her dreams of a blissful life as the mistress of a grand house quickly fading away. The shift from city to rural living proves to be much more challenging than she had anticipated, despite warnings from Roplekha about the stark differences between the two lifestyles. Jaydev, consumed by his academic pursuits and visions of social reform, is often too preoccupied to pay attention to Mohini. The harsh reality of the mundane village life, combined with her isolation due to her husband's busy schedule and her mother-in-law's strict demeanour, creates new obstacles for Mohini's journey towards self-empowerment and autonomy. This marks the beginning of her struggle against patriarchal norms, as depicted by Bhattacharya in a broader context of alienation experienced by Mohini. As "the alienation of a woman, a wife, a mother alienation conditioned by society as well as family" (Swain, 2002). She endeavours to overcome this suffering by befriending the women and children of Beluha. In doing so, she quickly earns their respect and admiration. She even imparts her subtle methods of rebellion, such as seeking

solace in the tree-perch when life becomes too suffocating. However, these efforts fail to alleviate the emptiness caused by her husband's cold and indifferent demeanour, as well as her mother-in-law's strict and admonishing behaviour. On the other hand, Jaydev is a well-intentioned intellectual who aspires to reform society and restore India to its former glory. He is consumed by his dream of true freedom, as depicted on page 84 of "Music for Mohini." In his pursuit, he envisions Mohini as a modern-day incarnation of Maitreyi, the wife and muse of Yagnavalkya, a renowned thinker of his time. Unfortunately, this places Mohini in a difficult position, as she is a progressive-minded woman with no inclination to delve into ancient philosophies. The couple's marriage began to drift apart as Jaydev immersed himself in his social reformation work, leaving Mohini to handle household responsibilities with the guidance of his mother. Mohini frequently pondered this neglect and distance, but rarely voiced her concerns out loud. "Had he no love for her, no deep feeling at all?" (Page 154). The recurring question that plagued her mind soon became the source of her deep despair. While marriage and the accompanying responsibilities are expected to consume a woman's entire world, for men, marriage is just one aspect of their lives, as they continue to pursue other endeavours. This stark contrast between the roles of husband and wife, and its impact on women, is a central theme in the novel. Bhattacharya also raises an important question about the significance of motherhood in a woman's quest for respect within the family and society. In our patriarchal society, bearing children and carrying on the family lineage has always been seen as a woman's primary duty, and failing to fulfil this duty results in a complete negation of her identity and value. In Mohini's case, the expectations of motherhood were already embedded within the marriage vows themselves. The marriage 'mantra' chants "O Indra, king of all the gods, let this lady be the mother of heroic sons" (Music for Mohini, page 78). Mohini's failure to conceive after two years of marriage brought upon her shame, humiliation, and reproach from her mother-in-law. The societal stigma surrounding infertility weighed heavily on her, as the constant taunts and insults from her mother-in-law eroded her self-esteem. as 'the doom of the Big House', and 'less in their eyes than the least among humankind' (Music for Mohini, page 211). Mohini's distress is overlooked by her husband and mother-in-law. The widowed mother is determined to have a grandchild and will do whatever it takes to achieve this goal. Mohini is forced to make a sacrifice by offering her blood to the goddess in order to fulfil her wish. Despite her initial reluctance to follow these customs, she eventually gives in to the persistent demands of her mother and agrees to the degrading task. "Opposite influences clutched her. Her enlightened girlhood was still a part of her fibre. She heard a voice as though her father was speaking. 'Have courage,' it said. 'Do not bow down to such insult.'" (Music for Mohini, 207). However, when Jaydev's timely intervention prevents the ritual from taking place, the mother devises a plan to send Mohini to her maternal home and have Sudha seduce Jaydev in order to produce his heir. Despite the scheme, it never comes to fruition as Mohini eventually becomes pregnant. Bhattacharya raises doubts about the validity of such ideas, questioning whether a woman's value should solely be determined by her ability to bear children. He rejects these outdated beliefs and argues that Mohini, like all women, has her own identity that deserves recognition, respect, and love, regardless of her reproductive capabilities. Her role as an equal partner to man and an individual with

inherent human rights should not be diminished by a single aspect of her life. As Dutta puts it, “Bhattacharya demonstrates sufficient awareness of the need for reorientation of strongly entrenched social values and beliefs by depicting existing gender ideology and simultaneously raising questions which explode such myths of motherhood in woman's quest for self-identity” (Dutta, 89). Bhattacharya envisions a world where the traditional halo of motherhood, long cast over women, is relinquished. The story focuses on Mohini's life after marriage and her resistance to patriarchal norms that marginalize women. However, the larger theme is the conflict between Indian traditional values and Western modern values, which is central to the Indian socio-political scene. The clash of ideas between the two cultures is evident throughout the novel, as Mohini was raised by an intellectual, modern father and a traditional grandmother. This clash of thinking influenced her upbringing and education, requiring her guardians to adjust accordingly. This can be demonstrated from the following argument concerning Mohini's English education. “Her son would not back down. He would mould the girl in a modern way, which was his way. And when his mother used the familiar threat, ‘Send me to Holy City,’ he had merely shrugged his shoulders, and murmured coldly, ‘Please yourself. Mohini has no mother of her own. You know what she means to me. I must do what I think is best for her. There can be no retreat, no compromise.’” (Music for Mohini, Page 22) Malta Grover has outlined how the contrast between the old grandmother and the young heroine effectively highlights the differences in mindset between the older and younger generations, showcasing the evolution of women in the modern social landscape. She also discusses Mohini's role in bridging the gap between Eastern and Western cultures. “Mohini, the heroine, is the bridge between the values of city and the traditions of the village, between sophistication and simplicity, lastly, between the modern and old-fashioned East” (Grover 46). Jaydev, to a great extent, embodies the essence of the New India. He holds the belief that although India has gained independence and the freedom to shape its own future, it is still not completely liberated. It is akin to a prisoner who has been confined in a dark cell for far too long. When finally unchained and released into the light, India finds itself bewildered and disoriented. However, this state of confusion is only temporary. Jaydev firmly believes that India will overcome this stupor and rejuvenate itself, drawing strength from its youthful vigor.

Thus, Bhabani Bhattacharya's novels have not only supported women's right to a dignified existence but have also shed light on the challenges they encounter in their journey towards equality in a patriarchal society. His works have gained recognition for reflecting the societal aspects that often go unnoticed, as well as those that are abundant. His novels before and after independence highlighted the injustices inflicted by the British on Indians, while his other works delved into the disruptions caused by East-West encounters in India. Through his writing, Bhattacharya experimented with various themes and plots, some of which were successful in leaving a lasting impact. As a writer with a socio-political focus, he also addressed significant issues prevalent in 1940s India, particularly the clash between Oriental and Occidental ideologies, and the rise of nationalism among the masses towards the culmination of the Indian Independence movement. The novel being analysed, *Music for Mohini*, exemplifies Bhattacharya's feminist perspective and his deep understanding of the issues faced by women in the twentieth century. It explores their evolving role in society and the

connection between women's empowerment and the national movement. Both the novel and the author can be considered advocates of feminism, shedding light on the challenges women face in their search for identity and acknowledgment. As the novel concludes, it becomes evident that a woman can create harmony even from the dissonance in her life. Marriage and motherhood, traditionally defining a woman's existence, do not encompass the entirety of her being. She is much more than that—an individual deserving recognition and equality as a partner to men in all aspects of life. Bhattacharya effectively conveyed his message to readers through this novel, as noted by Dr. Chelliah who praised him as ‘an objective delineator of Indian social reality’. By intertwining the political and personal aspects seamlessly, Bhattacharya showcased his perspective on the pivotal role of women in shaping a new India that harmonizes traditional and modern values. *Music for Mohini* stands out as a noteworthy contribution to Indo-English literature, emphasizing the importance of women in society and setting a precedent for future writers.

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