

The Blend of Humour and Character Interactions in Bhabani Bhattacharya's "Shadow from Ladakh"

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Abstract

Bhabani Bhattacharya stands out among the current generation of Indo-Anglian writers. He effortlessly showcases his talent in felicitous English, displaying both ease and compassion. Bhattacharya skilfully crafts a compelling drama that delves into the internal turmoil of modern India, making it a prominent theme throughout his work. As one of the most renowned contemporary Indian-Anglo novelists, Bhattacharya cannot be dismissed as a minor essayist. In the realm of Indo-Anglian literature, he is a remarkable writer who can easily rival his peers. He is undeniably one of the influential literary forces who have made significant contributions to the development of Indian fiction in English. Being an observer of both Pre-and Post-independent India, Bhattacharya, like many of his contemporaries, captures the spiritual anguish, challenges, desires, contradictions, anxieties, disappointments, and hopes of his nation. While his fictional output may not claim to break new ground, it is undeniable that he has carved out a distinguished place for himself in Indian literature.

Keywords: Bhabani Bhattacharya, committed writer, social reformer, modernity.

Introduction

Bhattacharya's novel, "Shadow from Ladakh," explores the intriguing blend of humour and character interactions. It delves into the shocking invasion of China against India in October 1962. Originally published in 1966 by Crown Publishers, this book is set against the backdrop of the Sino-Indian War and addresses a range of topics, including China's presence in Tibet and the social and moral aspects of life. The novel's skilful incorporation of humour and character dynamics within a wartime context offers a nuanced perspective. Notably, "Shadow from Ladakh" was honoured with the Sahitya Academy Award in 1967.

The author of "So Many Hungers" asserts that their work is deeply rooted in Gandhian philosophy. The narrative centers around the theme of synthesis. "A Dream in Hawaii," the sole significant book initially released in the United Kingdom or the United States, failed to gain a large global following (1978). Featuring Swami Yogananda as the main character, this novel depicts American students as hopeful and eager to explore spiritual nourishment in Eastern philosophies, exemplified by the portrayal of Swami Vivekananda as a youthful, charismatic reincarnation. "Spiritual leadership was lacking in the vast community. A significant void remained." Serving as a microcosm of Indian society in transition, Bhattacharya's works mirror this through their characters. His viewpoints are nuanced, conveyed through situations rather than mere statements to drive his arguments. He delves into the dynamics between individuals and society, as well as one's connection with oneself and fate. According to him, art should carry a social purpose. Despite the bitterness in his writings, his perspective remains compassionate. Hunger, poverty, illness, and the struggles of the underprivileged are just a few of the themes he addresses. Other subjects include

the clash between tradition and modernity, societal issues, racial tensions, and cultural conflicts between East and West. When it comes to Indian issues and occurrences, most Indo-Anglian writers aim to provoke a change in people's perceptions and viewpoints. Regardless of their success, what truly matters is that they have raised awareness within society. The Indian population, with its vast numbers, has been able to express their emotions, as well as the various challenges they face. While there have been many exceptional Indo-Anglian novelists before Bhattacharya, such as Khushwant Singh, Manohar Malgaonkar, and female authors like Kamala Markanday, Nayantara Sahga, and Praver Jhabvala, these individuals possess a greater level of insight and sensitivity compared to others. Although Bhattacharya may not be a widely recognized name, he is still highly respected as an author. In other words, he falls somewhere in the middle among established Indo-Anglian novelists and emerging writers who are gradually making an impact on contemporary Indo-Anglian literature. While no other author has explicitly declared that "Art must have a social purpose," Bhattacharya has done exactly that through his writings. Across his five novels, he not only believed in this notion but also put it into practice. His perspective aligns with Shaw's belief that art should be didactic in order to serve a purpose. Bhattacharya's works, such as "So Many Hungers" and "He Who Rides a Tiger," delve into the theme of poverty, while "Music for Mohini" attempts to bridge cultures through the medium of music.

The novel 'Shadow from Ladakh' by this particular author skilfully combines simplicity and complexity in a manner that is not commonly seen in literary pieces. This section of the book stands out from the rest as it delves into superstition and the pursuit of wealth. The characters find themselves in

conflict with the norms of society in this particular scenario. The author demonstrates a firm understanding of the storyline and effectively utilizes it. Anand Markandaya's writings, along with Kamala Markandaya's, touch upon the theme of hunger in various ways. In 'Coolie' and 'Untouchable,' Anand delves into the degradation of human nature due to poverty and hunger, as well as the struggle of impoverished individuals for a better life. Even in his later works, he continues to explore the same theme, highlighting the suffering of the unfortunate peasant entangled in the web of superstition and tradition.

If we try to observe other novels, "Nectar in a Sieve" and "A Handful of Rice" written by Kamala Markandaya extensively explore the themes of poverty and hunger. These novels vividly portray the mindset of rural individuals succumbing to natural disasters and the exploitation of unscrupulous individuals. In the story "A Handful of Rice," Ravi, a young boy from the countryside, faces numerous hardships, struggles, and despair. Similar to Mulk Raj Anand, these authors skilfully present a genuine depiction of human experiences without resorting to propaganda. "So Many Hungers," published in 1947, the year of India's independence, quickly became a bestseller after being translated into various languages. According to L. N. Gupta, it strongly condemned the British Raj for its numerous transgressions.

The impact of World War II on the people of India was particularly severe in Bengal. The constant threat of Japanese airstrikes caused immense suffering in the region. The country was torn apart by armed conflict and famine, which disproportionately affected the impoverished population. Tragically, over two million people lost their lives due to the man-made famine. The story focuses on Kajoli, her mother, and her brother, who are entangled in the events surrounding the Basu family, a rural peasant family. Samarendra Basu, the founder of Bengal Rice Limited, plans to expand his corporation with the support of the corrupt businessman Sir Lakshminath.

The brilliance of this individual has allowed corruption to flourish and food grains to be stored efficiently. Vultures once again rule over human settlements as compassion seems to have vanished. An Australian novelist describes it as a story of the Bengal Famine, shedding light on the human culpability, especially the greedy upper-class parasites who exploit the situation for their own gain. The narrative, depicted with brutal accuracy and intricate detail by Bhattacharya, is chilling, with scenes like a Jackal feeding on a pregnant woman's belly as she cries out in agony. Iyengar views "So Many Hungers" as a condemnation of human cruelty towards one another, offering a poignant portrayal of people facing extreme hardships. As a writer, you have masterfully conveyed this story, leaving a haunting impact on the reader. The book provides a truthful and vivid account of the most terrifying disasters in history. Following India's complete independence and transition into a Republic, the author penned his second novel, 'Music for Mohini.' Consequently, the story is set in post-Independence India, highlighting the clash between Eastern and Western cultures and suggesting a potential resolution. In 'Music for Mohini,' the author delves into topics such as caste and poverty, asserting that it challenges the longstanding traditions and beliefs of ancient India. Gupta argues that it erodes the last stronghold of these ancient Indian rights and convictions. A review in the New York Times said the book "blends the tale of a lovely girl's marriage with the perpetual difficulties of

that caste-ridden country and its divorce from various kinds of imperial control." Moreover, most attacks fail to make any reference to the United Kingdom at all. The Chicago Tribune praised this work by saying that "India as described by Rudyard Kipling, Rabindranath Tagore, and others has become to us a multifaceted image". A local resident has now brought these diverse images into clear focus. Bhabani Bhattacharya presents us with a portrayal of Modern India in a book that can be compared to Pearl Buck's 'The Good Earth.' After an arranged marriage, Mohini finds herself navigating the challenges of her aristocratic and strong-willed mother, as well as her husband Jayadev's adherence to traditional ways of life in their grand residence. Following the traditional practice of studying auspicious signs and matching horoscopes, seventeen-year-old Mohini enters into a conventional marriage. Mohini has now arrived at her new home. As a young wife from the city, Mohini becomes the driving force behind the modernization of her husband's ancestral village, alongside Jayadev, a quiet scholar, and his family. Eventually, Jayadev's superstitious grandmother realizes her mistake and embraces the changing times. The characters of Mohini, Jayadev, and Heeralal are portrayed with depth, showcasing a range of emotions and skills. The introduction to the novel was written by Australian writer Harrex, who believes that the synthesis of the present and the past can resolve the conflict between tradition and modernity. Both theoretically and practically, this synthesis is achievable. Ultimately, Jayadev's reunion with Mohini brings them back together, and he transforms into a reformer for the village. Significant changes have occurred in Indian society since the release of "He Who Rides A Tiger" in 1954, and these changes are evident in the film. The author revisits the topic of the Bengal famine, which he has previously addressed. His earlier works were influenced by his time spent in the rural areas of Vidarbha. When it comes to depicting rural India, he remains the undisputed authority. Novels like "A Goddess Named Gold" skilfully blend myth and reality, delving deep into the mindset of our rural population. Similar to his previous book, 'He Who Rides a Tiger,' this one also beautifully portrays rustic life in the countryside. Sudhakar Joshi's writing highlights the author's compassionate exploration of the fundamental yet complex challenges faced by Indians, including poverty, traditionalism, and the country's efforts to eradicate poverty through industrialization. The tale of the Tiger Rider vividly depicts his condemnation of those who exploited the famine-stricken population, serving as a myth of liberation meant to awaken and inspire people. In this section, the author approaches the issue of hunger from a different perspective, captivating readers from the very beginning.

The plot of this novel is propelled with unrelenting velocity by a potent combination of emotion and anxiety. The captivating characters, depicted in a crystal-clear and vibrant manner, contribute to the sheer enjoyment offered by this narrative. Notably, this work presents a somber satire addressing the most devout followers of Hinduism. Dr. Iyengar asserts that "the pace of life in Calcutta, the contrast between city vices and refinement, the stress of mass movements and public frenzy, the dominion of superstitious beliefs and hype all contribute to giving the floor a unique and flavourful aroma and flavour". There is a famous Chinese proverb that says, "He who rides the tiger cannot get off." Kalo, a skilled blacksmith from a country, seeks retribution against a rigid society divided by caste by orchestrating a miraculous event. He cleverly disguises himself as a Brahmin

priest and builds a new life for himself and his daughter. The story reaches a gratifying climax as the power of the human spirit triumphs over materialistic values. When the truth about his deception is revealed, members of the lower castes embrace him as a brother, leaving the traditionalists in a state of confusion and frustration. In terms of comprehending Indian society, culture, and religion, no other Western writer can rival Bhattacharya. His authority and knowledge on India surpass that of any Western writer. Bhattacharya's profound understanding of India highlights the significance of human dignity, which is intricately linked to the availability of food because "hunger debases and dehumanises man," says Dr. C Paul Verghese. Bhattacharya addresses the pressing issues of hunger and the degradation of humanity head-on in his literary pieces, including "So Many Hungers" and "He Who Rides a Tiger." In 1960, he penned his magnum opus, "A Goddess Named Gold," which offers profound insights and an enjoyable reading experience. This captivating work sheds light on how profound spiritual principles like spontaneity and selflessness can be utilized for personal financial gain. Set in rural India during the period of independence, the narrative unfolds like a contemporary fairy-tale, meticulously introducing each character, including a captivating young woman, an itinerant musician, and a mystical artifact. Iyengar adds, "It entertains as a tale, but it disturbs in that it serves as a warning and as a prophecy." My grandfather, a wandering musician, grants the amulet the ability to transform everything into money as a reward for performing good deeds. In a selfless act, she intervenes to save the life of a young child. With India's newfound independence, Seth Samsunderji joins forces with Meera in a mutually beneficial business partnership. Eventually, Meera follows suit and casts the amulet into the flowing stream. Shortly after, the minstrel returns to emphasize that true freedom is the ultimate measure of success. According to H.C. Harrex, "He Who Rides a Tiger" and "A Goddess Named Gold" by Bhattacharya are social narratives, similar to "The Guide," showcasing the author's formal expertise. One story revolves around an untouchable who masquerades as a Holy Brahmin, while the other is a fairy tale about a necklace that turns copper into gold whenever the protagonist performs acts of kindness. While "He Who Rides a Tiger" employs humour to expose the injustices and hypocrisies of the caste system, "A Goddess Named Gold" suggests that unity within the community is a superior model for independent India, rather than the greed of landlords. Bhattacharya's most recent book, 'Shadow from Ladakh,' was published in 1967 and delves into the Indo-China Conflict. It presents a profound and comprehensive narrative, infused with unparalleled emotion. This book highlights the need for India to find a common ground between Gandhian social ideals and the immense scientific and technological advancements in order to thrive.

The narrative delves into the intricate details of India's ongoing battle with China and how the country is navigating through it. It specifically focuses on a politically aware Indian family, providing a comprehensive portrayal. S. C. Harrex suggests that the conflict between India and China regarding Tibet is also a manifestation of the broader issue of syntheses. Bhattacharya, through his connections, advocates for the cultural fusion of Gandhian idealism and progressive technological advancements.

Before the conclusion of the story, we are introduced to Satyajit, an Indian villager who firmly believes that village life is the epitome of existence, and Bhasker, the innovative Chief Engineer of the steel plant who received his training in

the United States. Bhaskar Roy, the modern-day hero representing the militant industrial perspective, has been educated in the United States and is deemed insignificant in Gandhigram due to his ambition to develop the steel town. Consequently, Gandhigram becomes the target for destruction as it obstructs India's industrialization efforts. Despite exerting immense pressure on the peaceful community, Bhaskar is astonished to witness their unwavering unity under the leadership of Satyajit.

Complicating matters further are Bhaskar's conflicting emotions towards Satyajit and Sumita, the daughter of Suruchi. Bhabani Bhattacharya skilfully crafts a captivating narrative that revolves around this central issue, providing a profound exploration of the conflict in modern India. This narrative delves into two significant conflicts—the Chinese-Indian dispute over Ladakh and the steel village controversy—each carrying deep historical and political significance. The interconnectedness of these conflicts lies in the fact that the way of life for inhabitants on either side acts as a deterrent for China's potential aggression across borders. Few high-budget novels set in India today address the nation's present-day political and economic challenges as effectively.

Dr. Bhabani, a skilled author, has demonstrated remarkable proficiency and empathy in his fluent English writing. As stated by Dr. Paul Verghese, Bhattacharya possesses a clear vision of a society focused on welfare. Throughout his life, he has been deeply engaged in political, economic, and social matters, leaving an indelible impact. The significance he attributes to human dignity is unwavering, extending to both domestic and international contexts. In this aspect, he shares a common ground with Mulk Raj, as they both embrace the European tradition of social realism.

"Art must teach, but unobtrusively, by its vivid interpretations of life. Art must preach, but only by virtue of its being a vehicle of truth. If that is propaganda, there is no need to eschew the word."

Bhabani Bhattacharya firmly believed that a work of fiction should possess certain qualities. His understanding of art, specifically in the context of writing fiction, was driven by high moral standards. However, he rarely managed to achieve this ideal, except in a few of his novels. M K Naik, a renowned historian of Indian English Literature, argues that Bhabani Bhattacharya had a tendency to be satisfied with presenting overly tidy and mechanized contrasts, and settling for simplistic romantic resolutions.

Nevertheless, Bhabani Bhattacharya's most famous novel demonstrated that he could indeed achieve his own perception of what constitutes a good work of fiction. *So Many Hungers* showcased Bhabani's unique style, thematic depth, and skilful narrative choices, which were unleashed with great impact. The novel possessed realism, served a social purpose, and effectively displayed what needed to be shown to the readers. However, his other novels rarely attained the same level of distinction.

Bhabani Bhattacharya gained recognition by attempting to reflect, like a mirror, the aspects that our society overlooked and the abundance we possessed. His novels before and after independence revolved around the injustices inflicted by the British on Indians, while his other works explored the East-West encounters that disrupted the lives of individuals in India for an extended period. A few of his novels ventured into experimental themes and plots, with varying degrees of success, leaving a lasting impact.

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