

# Women Characters In Bhabani Bahattacharya's Novels

S. Uma Parvathy<sup>1</sup>, Dr. S. Armstrong<sup>2</sup>, K. Manigandan<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department Of English, University Of Madras, Chennai, India,

<sup>2</sup>Guide and Supervisor, HOD, Department Of English, University Of Madras, Chennai,  
India

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Professor, Department Of English, AMET Deemed to be University, Chennai,  
India

Email: [umap64@hotmail.com](mailto:umap64@hotmail.com)

**Abstract:** *Women's bodies are not abstract symbols but key sites of knowledge and esoteric realization. 'Woman', who is usually relegated to the margins of the social order is a symbol of wisdom and in times of hardship and crisis, when the hegemonic structures of order break down, is the source of recovery, mending and healing. The feminine signifies the transformative power that converts the poison of despair into medicine, re-propelling the energy of life and hopes and this is well portrayed in Indian English literature. Whenever one talks of moulding the English language for depicting Indian ethos, for painting a picture that would reflect the true spirit of the women in the country, its inmost grace, one remembers Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya who have done pioneering work in shaping English to suit Indian needs. One of the striking features of Bhabani Bhattacharya's novels is the importance given to women characters. They are not treated as inferior to men but complex individuals leading an independent life. He has talked about their journey from self-denial to self-affirmation through the stages of tradition, transition and modernity.*

**Key words:** *women, literature, character, traditional, idealisation*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Women's bodies are not abstract symbols but key sites of knowledge and esoteric realization. 'Woman', who is usually relegated to the margins of the social order is a symbol of wisdom and in times of hardship and crisis, when the hegemonic structures of order break down, is the source of recovery, mending and healing. The feminine signifies the transformative power that converts the poison of despair into medicine, re-propelling the energy of life and hopes and this is well portrayed in Indian English literature. Earlier women did not care for their identity and as Manu, the Hindu law giver says:

"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)

Early Indian writers presented the traditional type of woman who was the silent sufferer, always sacrificing as a wife or a widow. She was treated as the weaker sex for long, which was instilled in her by the society. Female consciousness against male domination led to the

birth of 'feminism'. This led to the Women's Liberation Movement. It was well articulated in literature too, as literature is the mirror of society. It seeks to demythologize the myth that man is superior and that women should remain invisible. The depiction of Indian woman in literature, has constantly been changing since ancient times. But things began to change, as more and more progressive writers emerged. They shifted from a single identity as a daughter, sister, mother or wife and recast as multi-dimensional. This was a result of the changes taking place on the political, social, cultural and economic fronts. Exposure to western culture and their involvement in the freedom struggle added to it. Writers of Indian literature like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya who have done pioneering work in shaping English to suit Indian needs, began to change the perspective about women. Among them, one of the most notable is Bhabani Bhattacharya who has written six novels- *So Many Hungers*(1947), *Music for Mohini* (1952), *He who Rides a Tiger*(1954), *A Goddess named Gold*(1960), *Shadow from Ladakh*(1966) and *A Dream in Hawaii*(1978).

One of the striking features of Bhattacharya's novels, is the importance given to women characters. They are not treated as inferior to men but complex individuals leading an independent life. He has talked about their journey from self-denial to self-affirmation through the stages of tradition, transition and modernity. Their portrayal ranges from conventional to contemporary, while maintaining a native backdrop. This gives us an insight into the cultural values and changes in the traditional Indian society. Women are also seen raising their voices and protesting against exploitation and oppression in a patriarchal society. Their portrayal changed – from the stereotyped Sita or Savitri to the ideal. Though still traditional, due to his progressive attitude, they were depicted with considerable freedom. He was influenced by his education abroad, Tagore and Gandhi and the freedom struggle back home.

Bhattacharya wrote about women's emancipation and liberation. He shows them through their transition from self-sacrifice to self-realization, from self-denial to self-assertion and self-negation to self-assertion. He presents them as pure with vitality and high ideals, with a ray of hope for mankind. Marlene Fisher, who was writing an article on the women in Bhabani Bhattacharya's novels, asked him to account for the importance of women in each of his novels, both as individuals and as symbols and he replied, "I think the women of India have more depth, more richness, than the men. The transition from the old to the new, the crisis of value adaptation, strikes deeper into the lives of our women than of our menfolk." Fisher rightly remarks:

Women are either the 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)

Early Indo-Anglian novels show the operation of forces of famine, orthodoxy and conservatism in the lives of girls. Bhabhani Bhattacharya has brought out the sufferings the girls had to face in such circumstances.

In Bhattacharya's first novel, *So Many Hungers*, he depicts the struggle of Bengal during the famine of 1943. It takes us through the life of Kajoli, a charming, young peasant girl of fourteen. She enjoys simple pleasures such as putting up bright pictures on the wall. But soon her life takes a turn. Hunger sends the family in search of food. Fate pushes them to the edge of life, when her father is imprisoned, her husband is shot dead and her mother and brother struggle to take care of her. Eventually, she is forced to sell herself. The young battered woman

does not give up so easily. In the end, she resolves to fight and sells newspapers to earn her livelihood. The young girl transforms into a determined, self-affirmed woman with a new found strength. At the end of deepest degradation and shame, she rises up with her bravery and power. She strides through life with ease, as is the spirit of all Indian women. The author sets her to walk on the path of freedom. Her victory is a testimony to the lofty ideals the author had concerning women.

Bhattacharya mitigates the suffering of woman by his faith in the deliverance from sin by woman. The gradual changes in their lives also highlight the changes taking place on the social front. Initially the woman is lured into the rat trap of seemingly 'golden' opportunities, but just things reach the end of the tunnel, we find the protagonist rising up to face the possibilities and come out unscathed.

'There is a kind of quiet intense burning, an abiding world through and beyond biological barriers. The pure woman though battered and bruised by a male dominated, tradition bound society, is not totally crushed. She looks forward to the time when life can be independent of sexual limitations and boundless in its duration with love, sympathy and joy leading to fullness in experience.' (Shantha Krishnaswamy, *Glimpses of Women in India*)

At the end of the novel, Kajoli fights the evil and begins to sell newspapers to provide for the family.

One of the main characters in Bhattacharya's second novel, '*Music for Mohini*', is Mohini. Acclaimed to be a masterpiece, it depicts the clash between traditionalism and modernism. Mohini's mother and mother in law are conservative, while Mohini, her husband Jayadev, her father and many other characters stand for modernism. Mohini is in total contrast to her sister in law, Roplekha, who is brought up in the village only to marry and move to the city, while Mohini is brought up in the city and moves to the village after her marriage to Jayadev. Mohini is drowned in problems, only to bring out the human richness in her. One can see her transformation from a care-free, tom boyish, city girl to a cultured lady in the Big House of Behula. She yearns for the love of her husband Jayadev and longs to have a child. But Jayadev cares more for the freedom of his country, which leads to discord. But Mohini soon adapts herself to the new life and stands alongside her husband in his social work. She is ready to accept her mother in law with all her traditions, only to win the love of her husband. In the words of Rashmi Gaur:

Bhattacharya has portrayed Mohini as 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.

In this novel, there is a perfect mix of tradition and modernity in Mohini's character. Her father is a modern man but partially based on traditional values. Thus Mohini is a perfect blend of the old and the new, a true image of the Indian woman. This blend helps her to face critical situations in her life. Shantha Krishnaswamy rightly says:

"... through her, the author aims at interlinking polarities, at connecting culture with culture, tradition with modernity, the individual and society."

When Mohini's father is reluctant to get her married and send her to the village, she persuades and convinces him that she will be happy in the village. This shows the change in her attitude to life. She steps into married life on an optimistic note, ready to embrace the urban and the rural values. In the beginning, the customs of the new house, the traditional mother in law and the husband who is an idealist, suffocate her but soon she learns to adapt herself to the situation. Bhattacharya observes, "The Hindu maiden, born and bred in the

ancient starlight of vedic civilization washed by the running stream of the centuries sheathing her limbs and her thoughts in a conventional dress to suit the needs of each passing age was innately unchanged. She had retained all her ancient hunger to offer worship.”

Mohini represents the best in Indian tradition, symbolizing sincerity, familial affection and fidelity. What is special about her character is her ability to rise above the situation and adapt herself to the old as well as the new. Mohini, who grew up in the city, victimized by the superstitious beliefs of the village, her idealistic husband and dominating mother in law, finally frees herself from everything that suffocates her, by bringing together tradition and modernity in her character. Her willingness to sacrifice only shows her strength, fortitude, devotion and dedication. The conflict in her only gives way to spirituality and she is selfless sacrificing woman. She emerges triumphantly from all the challenges that life throws at her. She gives a whole new dimension to the new Indian woman.

Though battered and bruised, she is not totally crushed. At the end of the novel, she is ready to offer a cup of her heart's blood to the ancestral goddess of her family, only to be saved by her husband. She then finds herself pregnant and the novel ends with her going away to bear her child with dreams of returning to help her husband.

Similarly, Mohini's sister in law, Rooplekha also is sent to the city after her marriage. She is traditional but soon learns of the modern ways of life. She thinks that such an amalgamation is necessary. Bhattacharya observes, “We connect culture with culture. Mohini, our old eastern view of life with the new semi-western outlook. The city absorbs a little of the barbaric village, the village absorbs a little of the west-polluted city. Both change unaware. This is more urgent today than ever before. Our new India must rest on this foundation.”

Bhattacharya has loaded this novel with two opposing set of characters – one set following tradition while the other is unconventional and modern. Surprisingly, they are set both in the urban and rural with a combination of both the traditional and modern. But there is more of a compromise between the two rather than a conflict.

The women in Bhattacharya's novels always stand for the victory of the human spirit over anything that crosses their path and the degradation that comes with it. All of them symbolize some value in them which adds to their charm. In his third novel, *‘He who Rides a Tiger’*, Chandralekha is the heroine. Her father Kalo, seeks revenge on the society around him for all his sufferings due to his caste by birth. When he poses as the Brahmin and becomes the chief priest of Siva temple, Lekha is forced to become the Mother of the Seven-fold Bliss. People come to her, expecting her to perform miracles. Shantha Krishnaswamy says:

“At heart she is a warm hearted Bengali girl who looks forward to nothing more than a pact of companionship with Biten, the idealistic reformer, who, eschewing his Brahmanism, was a fellow prisoner with Kalo during the famine riots in Calcutta. Her physicality as the natural woman rebels against this bogus sanctity and tries to reassert itself. One natural consequence is her outpouring of motherly love towards Obhijit, the low caste street waif she adopts.”

Lekha finds herself stifled in the cage and earns for freedom. She is subjected to restraints brought in by tradition. She is not allowed to laugh by an old woman relative. “Laughing, a maiden uncovers a part of her that should be hidden. A maiden is safe only in gravity's cloak.”

Though Lekha too suffers at the hands of the society, being forced to a brothel, she does not find comfort in deceiving the society as an imposter. Her education, refinement combined with her strong will helps her to come out of the falsehood and she redeems her father too.

She comes out as an undaunted spirit and leads a new life, free from all vices. She projects the new woman of self-realization.

## 2. CONCLUSION

The female characters in Bhabhani Bhattacharya's novels dominate the entire novel. They are presented in all forms – as a daughter, sister, sister in law, mother, mother in law, and grandmother. He has portrayed his women characters as the pure woman, but victims of society, inspite of their beliefs. The woman protagonist in all his novels - be it Lekha, Mohini, Kajoli or Rooplekha- are full of noble ideas and they are more refined than the male counterparts. Most of his heroines are natural, noble, pure and simple. The Indian woman endures and prevails. With her inner strength and integrity, she paves her way through “an exploitative, sexually discriminating world – serves as an inspiring light of hope and endeavour.” (Glimpses of Women in India – Shantha Krishnaswamy – Ashish Publishing House)

## 3. REFERENCES:

- [1] Bhabhani Bhattacharya (1964) So Many Hungers- Jaico Publishing House,
- [2] Bhabhani Bhattacharya (1906-1988) Music for Mohini - Orient Paperbacks
- [3] Bhabhani Bhattacharya (1988) He who rides a Tiger - Lucas
- [4] Asian Diasporas(2019) – Women's Studies Quarterly (Vol.47, No. 1 &2 Spring / Summer.Pg 54)
- [5] Dvora Lederman Daniely and Shmuel Lederman (2019),Gendered Cultural Differences and Changes in Gender and Roles among displaced refugees, Indian Journal of Gender Studies, Volume 26 Issue 3.
- [6] Dr.Vishwanath Bite (2015) The Criterion: An International Journal in English — Vol.6 Issue 2.
- [7] Yadav, Sangeeta(2004), From ideal to real :Women in the novels of Bhabhani Bhattacharya and Shoba De-, IIT Roorkee,
- [8] Shantha Krishnaswamy(1983) - Glimpses of Women in India — Ashish Pub Rashmi Gaur Pg.81 – IJMA.
- [9] Meena, SHirwadkar(1979) , Image of woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel– ‘Woman in the family’.
- [10] G.S.Balarama Gupta, Gulberga (1975),Women in my stories , Journal of Indian Writing in English, India. Vol.3, No.2 P. 2.
- [11] Bhabhani Bhattacharya by K.R.Chandrashekhara (1974), Arnold Heinemann Publication, Pg.23.
- [12] Indu Sharma(2014),Self-Denial to Affirmation: A Study of Women in the Novels of Bhabhani Bhattacharya by Indu Sharma, IJMAS Vol. 01,No. 4.
- [13] A study of Feminine Consciousness in the novels of Bhabhani Bhattacharya by Mithlesh- International Journal of English Research, Vol.3, Issue 1, January 2017.