



**INDIVIDUALITY IN CONFLICT WITH SOCIETY IN BHABANI BHATTACHARYA'S "MUSIC FOR MOHINI"  
AND "SHADOW FROM LADAKH"**

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**ABSTRACT**

Bhabani Bhattacharya has exhibited a remarkable skill in presenting conflict in the life of his major characters of his novels- a conflict between individual longings and the restrictions imposed by the society on them. The conflict between spiritualism and materialism propounded by the east and the west respectively can clearly be perceived in almost all novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya. He seems to be advocating all the affirmative aspects of life which are essential for a balanced living style and negating the useless superstitious beliefs of society which can hinder the happiness of people. In the novels "*Music for Mohini*" and "*Shadow from Ladakh*" the major characters face a conflict originating from their longings and the restraints put on them by their social surrounding. The aim of this paper is to bring about the conflict of the major characters of these two celebrated novels and the authenticity with which the writer has portrayed their individual traits. His marvelous understanding of Indian life and the outstanding psychological treatment of the characters leading to their education of life become a source of interest for the readers.

**Key-words: Conflict, Individuality, Society, Psychological, Education, Understanding**

## INDIVIDUALITY IN CONFLICT WITH SOCIETY IN *MSUIC FOR MOHINI* AND *SHADOW FROM LADAKH*

Bhabani Bhattacharya is one the most popular writers of the Anglo-Indian fiction. His novels *Shadow from Ladakh*, *Music for Mohini*, *He who Rides A Tiger*, *A Dream in Hawaii*, *So Many Hungers* and *Goddess Named Gold* have received world-wide acclamation by the readers and the critics alike. In 1967 he received the most coveted the Sahitya Academi Award for *Shadow from Ladakh*. He has earned great esteem among the Indian writers as a social-realist novelist. *Music for Mohini* and *Shadow from Ladakh* present a contrast and conflict in the life of the major characters who embrace two opposite modes of life-namely the traditional and the modern. His mixing of the philosophy of eastern spiritualism and that of western materialism has remained a unique characteristic of his novels. He advocates the affirmative aspects of life which lead to a happy life and discards the negative societal assertions which prove to be a hindrance to the individual happiness. He disapproves the negative impulses in people such as self-denial, self-effacement and self-abnegation. This negativity in individuals or imposed on them by society can prove a havoc for them. Like Tagore, Bhabani Bhattacharya too has shown faith in the sacredness of life and human dignity-the faith that Tagore himself has expressed in his own words, "*Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bounds of delight....No I will never shut the doors of my senses. The delights of sight and hearing and touch will bear thy delight. Yes, all my illusions will burn into illumination of joy and all my desires ripen into fruits of love.*"(1). Bhattacharya himself says, "That was Tagore's firm belief-integration-that was the life-long quest: integration of the simple and the sophisticated; city and village; east and west". (2) It is also noteworthy here that Bhabani Bhattacharya started writing in English other than Bengali under the influence of Tagore and M.K.Gandhi. His characters fall into two broad categories-the orthodox and the progressive. Their seemingly antagonist ideals bring them face to face with a conflict which lead to their understanding of life resulting in the adjustment to their social milieu. The beauty of the novels under consideration lies in the fact that the social restraints imposed on the characters don't lead them astray. Rather they come up with maturity and bring about a synthesis between tradition and modernity.

The major theme of *Music for Mohini* is to present a contrast between the orthodox Hindu concept of life and the western progressiveness. G.Rai writes, "*The central theme of the novel is the tie or tussle between orthodoxy and modernity which remains a glaring problem in Indian society even today*". (3). Here too we have two sets of characters that hold different ideals. Whereas the old mother of Mohini, the mother of Jayadev, the father of Harindra hold the traditional old value system, Mohini, her professor father, Sudha and Harindra hold faith in western values. Bhabani

Bhattacharya is extremely against the useless and dead rotten beliefs of the past and attacks the hypocrisy prevalent in Indian society as it suffocates people and hinders their happiness. This suffocation can further lead to cruelty and inhuman practices. The restrictive laws of society become unbearable and cause stress in life. The writer is a visionary. He imagines an India free from all such evils. Human life needs to be re-fashioned and should be converted to new social set-up based upon humane and fruitful ideals for the all-round development of every individual. Change is permanent and it should be accepted. There should be no place for hypocrisy and cruelty arising out of superstitions of the past. It does not mean that Bhabani Bhattacharya has no regard for Indian culture and traditions. He just opposes the narrow-mindedness which proves stressful for an individual. No one can tolerate the superstitious beliefs in the present fast-changing world.

The conflict between the orthodox and progressive thinking starts first of all at Mohini's house at Calcutta. Her father is a professor and wants to educate her in a modern way. His desire is to send Mohini to a convent school where she can have modern education. He wishes to, "*mould the girl in a modern way, which was his way* (p.16). But his mother is against this idea and says, "*Let Mohini be trained at home, let her learn classical Sanskrit, the language of Gods, the precious vase that holds the essence of true knowledge and wisdom* (p 18). She is an orthodox Hindu lady and rigid in her ideology. She is against everything which is modern and contrary to her beliefs. In her opinion Mohini's singing on All India Radio would be a matter of disgrace for the family. Ultimately she compromises with the decision of her son and Mohini receives education in modern atmosphere. This confrontation gets intensified when it is time for the selection of a good match for Mohini. Who can think of the possibility of a love-match for the girl? Again it is considered shameful if a matrimonial advertisement is given in the newspaper. However the family can depend on a snake-charmer, bangle-seller or a fortune-teller for finding a suitable match for their girl. There come two matches for Mohini-one holding traditional beliefs and the other having faith in modernity. Both these parties are rejected –the former because of the inadequate knowledge of Indian culture and the latter because of the old mother's disapproval as they embrace extremely modern ideas. Mohini is not allowed to say anything. She can utter anything in case she is asked to do so. She cannot look up when she sits before the people who come to see her. They examine her from head to toe in a manner that she feels insulted. Facing such humiliation is quite common in our Indian society. Mohini' father, is modern in his ideas," *the bridge of transition between old and new*"(p.43 ). But his family represents the old value system. He decides to marry his daughter in a family that upholds the traditional as well as modern outlook regarding life. This is a family of Behula

and it is known as Big House of Behula. Here again Mohini faces the same conflict between the old and the new-between her own modern impulses and the restrictive constraints put on her by her orthodox in-laws. Life becomes almost a torture for her youthful longings. Her mother-in-law exhibits more rigidity than her grandmother. The Big House is *“masterful physical representation of the psychological and social forces of traditional India (p.43)*. Jayadev understands Mohini’s position and warns her that the Big House of Behula is, *“a way of living, stern discipline and iron tradition (p.78)*. Mohini finds herself unable to bear the psychological torture that the superstitious mother-in-law put on her. Although she gradually learns through experience that in order to establish harmony in life she will have to adapt herself according to her new surroundings. In order to create a congenial atmosphere in her married life she accepts the old value system. Her transformation is the result of her education of life that she has received by passing through the psychological conflict between her own progressiveness and the orthodox ideology of her mother-in-law.

But Jayadev's transformation is yet to take place. No doubt his outlook is modern, still he finds himself unable to break off with the chains of the superstitions that his mother has always upheld and imposed on the family. He believes in both the value patterns-the east and the west. He has to learn how to strike a balance between these two. He wants to create a harmony of these two opposite ideals of life in him. His sister Rooplekha says while talking about the nature of Jayadev, *“A strange mixture of the old and the new is he, my brother..... You see, the new learning holds him as much as the old, so that his heart is set on a synthesis, as he calls it. He would have a harmony of cultures of India. He reads modern and ancient thoughts in today’s light. He seeks in ancient thought sanction for the west influenced ideals of our time. And he finds it” (p.94)*. Undoubtedly Jayadev's ideas are revolutionary. He wants that people should liberate themselves from all shackles of the useless beliefs of the past. There should be no place for bigotry and hypocrisy in the society. This is certainly the influence of Tagore. Mohini surrenders her own progressive ideas to the superstitious beliefs of her mother-in-law and is ready to offer her blood to the Goddess in order to get rid of the curse of barrenness. Jayadev is highly critical of such inhuman and meaningless activities. At one place while talking to his mother he says, *“we are not slaves of the stars”* and that *“there is no room in this Big House for crazy belief. The village looks to us for ideals and a way of living” (p.179)*. His mother does not endorse his ideas and rebukes him saying, *“Heresy holds you. Old beliefs, old morals, old values mean nothing to you”*. However they develop understanding of each other and the mother finally is able to recognize the utility of her son's logical

ideas. She ultimately admits, *"His ideas, his point of view, moulded by the new spirit in the land were, nonetheless, true ideals"* (p.187).

Again the same conflict can be perceived in the case of Kabiraj and his son Harindra. Whereas Kabiraj is in favor of practicing the orthodox way of medicine, Harindra strongly advocates the use of modern means of curing diseases. Kabiraj even regrets for sending his son to city for medical education. Harindra is quite open-minded. He does not mind even the old useful remedies of the past. He assertively tells his father,, *"what's wrong in using in the fight against disease the best that east and west have to offer?. Medicine knows no race or nationality, father, No greater blessings for our people than the sulfa drugs"*(p.140) . However Kabiraj gradually realizes the importance of the modern medical medicine when his wife falls ill. He requests his son *"Harindra save your mother. Don't let her leave us, my son. Tears run down his face"* (p.144).

Thus in *Music for Mohini* the novelist has successfully presented as Syed Ameerudin puts it, *"His (Bhattacharya's) intense disgust for the cruelty and hypocrisy of Indian social life' with its castes(4)creeds, dead habit sand custom and its restrictive religious rites and practices"* . There can also be seen in *Music for Mohini* a reconciliation between tradition and modernity. As is expressed by James Vinson'" *A synthesis is achieved in practice as well as in theory"*. (5) In the same way the characters of *Shadow from Ladakh*

Again in *Shadow from Ladakh* there is a conflict between two different modes of life represented by Steel Town and Gandhigram which stand for modern industrial civilization and Eastern values of life respectively. Bhasker wants to promote the production of steel. So he makes a plan for the expansion of the Steel Town towards Gandhigram. But this is not a simple affair as Gandhigram is a symbol of conservative values. The major hindrance in the way is Satyajit who is the soul of Gandhigram. . Bhaskar knows that the use of force will prove futile. So he meets the soul directly. They express their opposing views. Bhaskar says that the expansion of steel production will bring about economic prosperity and remove poverty. He emphasizes the need, *"to capture the spirit of Gandhigram"*(p.58). In his opinion Gandhigram is, *"burdened with the ideas of a neo- saint, did not know what it Missed. There would have to be new windows through which it could look upon the pageantry of life"*(p.57). But Satyajit disapproves this idea. For him industrialization is an evil. Suruchi, the wife of Bhaskar, is practical and thinks sanely that either of the two opinions cannot be accepted in totality. Shimer finds , *"that these opposing forces, represented by Bhasker and Satyajit cannot remain unalterably opposed is overshadowed from the very beginning.... there must inevitably be resolutions of opposites, an accommodation to differing points of view"*(81).It's only the acceptance of both modes of life which can cause happiness in life. Bhaskar and Satyajit would still

take time to develop such an understanding. Satyajit does realize the importance of Steel Town and he also accepts the reality of materialism but he cannot allow Bhaskar to enter into his village-Gandhigram. Bhaskar fails to see the values that Gandhigram stands for especially its spiritual ideas,” *He could not see values that lay beyond values that steel town would do well to possess. The great city with its giant machines had something vital to gain from the small center of spiritual life. Productive power needed the balancing force of self-abnegation. Or else the rot of corruption would prevail. Materialism, the gospel of unlimited accumulation, could* Rather a healthy union of these two should take place. Tradition should not be destroyed only for sake of modernity. Traditions should be humanized. Individual dignity should not be sacrificed at any cost. At the same the old beliefs which have lost significance with the passage of time and which prove a hindrance to the progress of human beings should be removed and new meaningful ideals should be welcomed. and Satyajit feel the need of reconciliation between their opposite ideas. Satyajit expresses his desire of creating an adjustment between the old and the new before Dalai Lama : *“A relic of the old world cannot live within the shell of the new; under the hard pressures it’s bound to be crushed into pulp.”* (p.308) Bhaskar tells Satyajit: *“Virtue and vice together give life its color, savor. That’s what I’ve experienced personally. One without the other could easily destroy us.”*(p.29)

The conflict gets resolved towards the end of the novel when the decision of going on fast unto death until Bhaskar is not ready to take his step back-withdrawing his plan of expanding of Steel Town towards Gandhigram. Bhaskar realizes the importance of the spiritual ideal which Gandhigram stands for. He is completely transformed and urges his men: *“you have to be those people, always. Try to see what they stand for.”*(p.370) One can see a parallel transformation of Satyajit who becomes ready to leave all rigidity now.

Thus in *Music for Mohini* and *Shadow from Ladakh* the growth of characters is achieved presenting them in conflict with society as a whole. Although they get education of life from the reality of their experience and their education leads to their transformation still they face great hardships and mental unrest due to the clash between their personal ideology and the restraints laid down by the social surrounding. Malta Grover observes,” *He (Bhattacharya) has not only responded to the conflict of tradition –modernity in its varied aspects but has transcended it”*. (6) A society cannot develop without the development of its each member. Individuality must not be sacrificed for useless practices. Nor society should impose itself on individuality. A healthy union of the two can play a gigantic role in shaping a balanced and meaningful life.



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