

Marriage, Modernity, Mohini And Motherhood: Perspectives On Bhabani Bhattacharya's Music For Mohini

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Abstract: The twentieth century India witnessed a prolonged period of social and political upheavals and the impact of this turbulence was reflected in the literature produced during this time. The wave of modernity and the rising spirit of nationalism, the two contrasting ideologies that predominated the social scene of the 20th century, also became a dominant theme for the writers of this age. Another crucial development of the age was the women empowerment movement which demanded equality and dignity for women. The Indian-

English novel was a new literary form that developed in this time, with the social realities and political changes in India being central to its form and content. Bhabani Bhattacharya, an eminent novelist and a keen social observer was one of the pioneers of Anglo-Indian novel writing. As someone who was dedicated to the cause of the society, Bhattacharya also became a champion of women's rights and empowerment. This paper analyses

Bhattacharya's second novel, *Music for Mohini* and attempts to highlight the changing roles of women in Indian society that Bhattacharya sought to represent in his writings and the vision he carried for a better and equal society where women were valued as individuals and had a self-identity, apart from the role that patriarchy imposed on them.

Keywords: women, society, resistance, modernity, women empowerment, Indian- English novel

Introduction:

Bhabani Bhattacharya was a prolific writer of the 20th century who contributed hugely through his social-realistic novels and brought the internal issues and conflicts of the Indian society to light. One of the most distinguishing features of his novels is the centrality of female characters and his feminine sensibilities that are quite remarkable for a writer of his time. The premonitions of feminist movements had begun to make an appearance in the literature by the mid-twentieth century and Bhattacharya was one of the foremost Indian English writers to pen down these gradual transitions in the role of women in India and provide a futuristic view of the Indian society, where women are more than marginalised objects and conduits for

reproduction and carrying forward the hereditary lines. Bhabani Bhattacharya was a social realist, who believed in art for life's sake and as such his works depict the reality of the Indian social scene in the mid twentieth century. This was the time when the Indian feminist movement was in its nascent stages and as a keen observer of the world around, Bhabani not only noticed these changes but also successfully depicted them in his writings. The writings of Bhabani Bhattacharya portray women not in the romanticized alternate realities but in their real social atmosphere where the external changes in India's socio-political reality began to impact the private and public lives of the women as well. As

Bhattacharya himself states, "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" (Bhattacharya, 1977).

Music for Mohini, Bhattacharya's second novel, exemplifies his support of the female upliftment and "highlights the sociological concerns relevant to Indian family life and points to certain direction in which Indians must move if they are to reap the benefits of the political freedom recently won through the freedom struggle" (Anandan, 61). Set in a small village of Beluha in Bengal, the story depicts the life of Mohini, a young music prodigy who gives up her music career after marrying into a rural household and takes up the role of a dutiful woman. At the outset, the story seems like a simple tale of a city-bred girl married off into a village and her efforts at settling into the new rural atmosphere. But a close study of the novel reveals layers of nuance and deeper truths about the Indian society, the institution of Indian marriage and the conflict between traditional and modern ways of thinking. But most significant is the undercurrent of protest and resistance that runs throughout the course of the novel, resistance of women to patriarchy, of the modern mind to the orthodox way of thinking and of the individual to the society. The different characters in the novel, Mohini, her father, Jaydev, Harindra are on their own crusade against the social evils of patriarchy, caste discrimination, superstitions, amorality and such others, and it is through them that Bhattacharya shows the social reality of India of the 20th century. "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 is an assertive woman, seeking recognition and visibility in the society. Enlightened by the English education she received and having been brought up by an

intellectual father, she grew up to be a liberated young woman full of ideas, romantic fantasies and a gift for making music. Things take a turn in the second half of the story, as Mohini is married to a rich Zamindar, Jaydev, and made the mistress of the Big House. Here, traditions and ancient values dominate over the modern culture, and soon Mohini has to relearn ways of living, in the overwhelming presence of her mother in law. Through the novel, Bhattacharya has also discarded the superstitious beliefs that determine the fate of people, especially the women and advocated for a belief based on reason and rationale. Mohini becomes a vehicle for this change and a bridge between the two cultures, a representation of the best of both worlds and the portrayal of the New India, which would move ahead on the balance between the two.

"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 Marriage and Questions of Motherhood:

A large part of the story is dedicated to Mohini's life after her marriage. Mohini's sweet visions about her life after marriage, as the mistress of the big house are soon shattered and the transition from the city life to the rural life proves to be a tougher task than she had envisioned. Even though Rooplekha had warned her of the difference in the two lifestyles, living it was a whole different experience for Mohini. The idealist Jaydev, was so busy in his thesis and ideas about the social reformation in the village that he hardly had any time to spare for her. The reality of the monotony of the married life in the village, coupled with her loneliness due to her husband's busy schedule and her mother-in-law's strict and rigid character places new barriers in Mohini's way to self-assertion and independence. It is when her real struggle

against the patriarchal norms begin. Bhattacharya renders the alienation suffered by Mohini on a more general plane and presents it as “the alienation of a woman, a wife, a mother—an alienation conditioned by society as well as family” (Swain, 2002). She tries to overcome this suffering by making friends with the women and children of Beluha and soon garners respect and admiration from them, even teaching them her subtle methods of revolt, like climbing the tree-perch when life got too cramping, but it is not enough to fill the emptiness that comes from her husband’s cold, uncaring attitude and her mother in law’s strict and admonishing behaviour. Jaydev, for his part is a well-minded intellectual who seeks to reform the society and take India to its ancient days of glory, ‘possessed by his dream of true freedom’ (Music for Mohini, page 84). In this quest of his, he thought of Mohini as ‘Maitreyi, the wife and inspiration of Yagnavalkya, the greatest thinker of his age’, but this put Mohini in a tough spot because she was a modern minded girl with no inclination to learn the ancient thoughts. This created a sort of drifting apart in their marriage as Jaydev busied himself with his task of social reformation, while Mohini was left to do the duties of the house, under his mother’s guidance. Mohini often questioned this neglect and coldness, but only in her thoughts and seldom aloud. “Had he no love for her, no deep feeling at all?” (Page 154). This one question kept recurring in her mind and soon became the biggest cause of her desolation. A marriage and the responsibilities that come along with it are supposed to be a woman’s whole world but for men, marriage becomes just one part of their life, while they continue with the aspects of their life. This disparity between the role of husband and wife, and its effect on the women, is a prominent theme of the novel.

Another important question raised by Bhattacharya is about the importance of motherhood for a woman to gain respect in the family and in the society. In a patriarchal society as ours, bearing a child and carrying

forward the family line has always been considered as the primary duty of a woman, the failure of which results in a complete negation of the woman’s identity and worth. In case of Mohini too, the blessings of motherhood were encompassed in the marriage vow itself. 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). Her not being pregnant even after two years of marriage, thus becomes a cause of shame, humiliation and reproach from her mother in law. Mohini was well aware of the society’s views on barren women and the constant taunts and insults from her mother in law weakened her spirit so much that she began to view herself as ‘the doom of the Big House’, and ‘less in their eyes than the least among humankind’ (Music for Mohini, page 211). However, this misery of Mohini goes unnoticed by both her husband and her mother in law. The widowed mother is so concerned to obtain a grandchild that she leaves no stone unturned to achieve it. Mohini is debased to the level of sacrificing her blood to the goddess to appease her and get her wish granted. Even though Mohini, at first resists these orthodox beliefs at first, she succumbs to the mounting pressure from the mother and finally agrees to the insulting 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 the ritual fails to take place due to Jaydev’s timely intervention, the mother schemes to send Mohini to her maternal home, and get Sudha to seduce Jaydev and produce his heir. But the plan never comes to be fulfilled because Mohini finally gets pregnant. Through the difficult ordeal that Mohini had to pass through,

Bhattacharya places a question on the sanctity of such thoughts and asks if a woman’s worth must only be decided by her womb? He discards such archaic notions and suggests that Mohini, as all other women, have an identity of

her own which needs to be recognised, respected and loved, irrespective of the fact that she can or cannot produce a child. Her status as an equal partner of man and an individual with human rights shouldn't be belittled by just one 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, thus envisions a world where the halo of motherhood that has been long cast over the women is relinquished.

The Conflict Between the Traditional and the Modern:

Although the story revolves around Mohini's life after marriage and her resistance to the old patriarchal norms and ways of thinking that marginalize women in the society, its larger focus is on something more central to the Indian socio-political scene of the time, i.e., the conflict between the two contrasting cultures and ways of thinking, the Indian or traditional and the Western or modern values. The difference in the two cultures has been repeatedly stated in the novel from the beginning to the end. As Mohini had been brought up by an intellectual, modern father and a traditional old grandmother, this clash of ideas between the two ways of thinking always were a part of her life. Her guardians had to adjust themselves fairly when it came to her education and upbringing. 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)

The trope of old grandmother versus the young heroine has been employed successively and successfully in the novel to portray the rigid, unbending and orthodox thinking of the older generation and the new, adaptive and embracing elements of the modern women who are eager to find their place in the new social paradigm. Malta Grover has described the role of

Mohini in establishing a connection between the East and the West as follows: "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). Even Jaydev, to a large extent is a representative of the New India. He believed that,

"India, free to build up her destiny, was not yet truly free. She was like a prisoner held too long in a dark cell. Unchained and released suddenly, she was bewildered by the light. But the stupor would pass. India would renew herself, and her strength would be the strength of the young" (Music for Mohini, 226).

Conclusion:

Bhabani Bhattacharya has displayed a support for women's right to a respectful existence through his novels, and also shown the struggles that they face along the way to achieve a dignified and equal status in a patriarchal society. As a socio-political writer, he has also focused upon the larger issues that predominated the discourse in the India of 1940s, chiefly, the conflict between the Oriental and occidental ideas and way of thinking, and the spread of nationalism to the masses during the end phase of the Indian Independence movement. The present novel under study, Music for Mohini, is one such great example of Bhattacharya's feminist sensibilities and his strong grasp of the

questions that women of the twentieth century were raising, their changing position in the society and the relationship between women empowerment and national movement. In *Mohini*, we find an empowered, well-educated Indian woman who provides a balanced view between the East and the West- an amalgamation of the two cultures.

Mohini's struggles and victories speak of the struggles of thousands of other women who dared to question the patriarchal norms and demand an equal space for themselves, along with a respectful existence. The novel compels the readers to reflect upon the way the women are viewed in the society, and in this way registers a silent but impactful protest against the injustice and inequality that the women of India have been subjected to for hundreds of years. In a way the novel and the novelist, both can be said to be of a feminist tendency, highlighting the encumbrances of a woman's quest for identity and recognition, and as we see towards the end of the novel, a woman can indeed make music even from the discordant notes of her life. Marriage and motherhood, two identities that women have been limited to, are not the only aspects of a woman's life. She is much more than that, an individual who deserves to be recognised as such, an equal partner of man in every way. Perhaps, this is what Bhattacharya hoped to communicate to his readers through this novel, and successfully did so. Dr. Chelliah rightly calls Bhattacharya as 'an objective delineator of Indian social reality' (Chelliah, Page 41) for his ability to coalesce the political and the personal together into one single whole. *Music for Mohini* represents Bhattacharya's views on how women were central to the reconstruction of a new India that would be an assimilation of the best of both traditional and modern values and premediates upon a promising future of women in India. Thus, it can be said in conclusion that it is a significant work in Indo-English writing

which must be appreciated for its portrayal of women at centre of the society and for giving them their due place in literature, paving way for the future writers as well.

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