

The Theme of Freedom in the Novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya

B. Bala Nagendra Prasad

Assistant Professor
AITS, Rajampet
Andhra Pradesh, India

The theme of freedom is an important recurrent idea in Bhabani Bhattacharya's novels. The two themes of hunger and freedom usually go hand in hand in his fiction, and both are quite exhaustively voiced. The novelist examines the theme of freedom in its various forms just as he did with the theme of hunger. He deals with political, economic and social freedoms, as also with the freedom of the mind. This paper critically explores Bhattacharya's treatment of freedom in some of his novels. This paper portrays how the novelist deals with Freedom Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement and Quit India Movement in his novels. Also, the objective of the paper is to highlight the significant impact of the Indian Independence Movement on the novelists belonging to the pre-independent and post-independent India.

Bhattacharya lived in a period in which entire India was fighting for freedom from the British rule. By the time he was a young boy, Gandhiji had assumed the leadership of the Freedom Movement. Bhattacharya who happened to live through the eventful first forty-seven years of the present century, inevitably, was preoccupied with thoughts of political freedom. After Independence in 1947, the country was fraught with difficult problems; economic freedom was still to be achieved. Bhattacharya's interest in freedom can be attributed to these factors. It was natural for Bhattacharya to be drawn towards the theme of freedom.

So Many Hungers! was published in 1947, the year India achieved freedom. The author, who witnessed closely the entire National Movement, deals with the major events preceding Independence. *So Many Hungers!* deals with the hunger for liberty, hunger for food, hunger for authority, hunger for sex, wealth, and for recognition. The Bengal famine of 1943 and The Quit Movement of 1942, it has as its central theme man's —hunger for food and political freedom. Civil Disobedience and the Quit India Movements have been particularly treated in this book. Along with the Bengal Famine, which is its main theme, some of the important phases of the National Movement also are delineated in the narrative.

Rahoul is happy and hopeful to know that the Allied Powers have declared war against Germany. He whistles in joy to indicate that the Great War will preserve man's freedom in consonance with his ideas. He himself always craves for freedom for all and longs to lead and organise the freedom fighters of the world. But Rahoul is not happy, since he is unable to understand how England can fight for democratic freedom, while she is denying freedom to India. He says to Kunal, in anger and disgust: "But the champions of freedom abroad were the eaters of freedom in this land." It is ironical that Indians living in bondage are asked to fight for world freedom. However, he deeply desires that freedom should prevail in Europe and Asia. He tells his wife, Monju, how he feels sore because of his having missed opportunities to fight for freedom. He says to her: "I had an urge those days to join the army of liberation. Ralph Fox went. Many others I knew went. I kept back. I had an excuse: science. I could serve humanity better that way. And I came back to my homeland. Some sore in me throbs now and then, A greater war of liberation has started, the greatest ever. What am I to do this time?"

The National Movement, stretching over a large portion of the novel, occupies a very significant place as its theme. Though the novelist mainly magnifies the Quit India Movement, the other phases of the National Movement, such as the Civil Disobedience Movement and the breaking of the Salt Law are also referred to. Devata actively participates in Civil Disobedience Movement. He organizes a large number of peasants and fishermen, and defies the law by making salt from sea-water. He is sent to prison for breaking the Salt Law.

The novel exquisitely portrays the National Movement. The old and the young, irrespective of caste, creed and sex, plunge into it. It is with great difficulty and intelligence that Samarendra can keep his son, Rahoul away from the movement by sending him abroad for higher studies. The movement spreads in villages, since it is thought to be the very basis of the Indian way of life to come. When the movement emphasizes the importance of mass literacy, the alien rulers regard it as dangerous. For, "it would make the trampled ones conscious of their birth-right—the right to live as human beings."

Also, the novel deals with India's dilemma during World War II. The dilemma is resolved by the decision to fight with the British people against the Nazis. It is felt that Indians are to oppose the British rulers, and not the British people who are in danger of losing their liberty. Indians are to side with freedom and democracy, and not with tyranny and enslavement.

The novel refers to Jawaharlal Nehru's trial in Gorakhpur Prison. His statement during the trial is circulated. The statement emphatically brings out Indian nationalism, determined to achieve independence for the country. It is stressed that the British Empire will not be able to suppress the freedom-loving millions of India. Also, it emphasizes the fact that nothing is more powerful than the elemental urges of freedom, food and security. Nehru's statement causes a tremendous excitement throughout the country.

The novel focuses upon the Quit India resolution, a very important phase of the National Movement. After suspending the demand for freedom for a short period owing to World War II, it is felt that the Independence Movement should no longer mark time, but should strongly press for freedom. No historian can describe these barbaric events with that much of liveliness, clarity and aptness with which Bhattacharya presents them in this novel. To suppress the rebellion, the police swing their lathis and open fire on the masses mad for freedom. The Government is determined to smash the movement and to outlaw it. On the other hand, the patriots are convinced that enslaved, enfeebled India will be a blot on world freedom. Thus the storm is in full fury, and many freedom fighters go underground. Terror prevails alike in cities and -villages. In spite of it, people are ceaselessly busy in destroying Government property. Thousands move from place to place carrying with them the tricolour national flags. Most of the flags have a number of holes in them made by bullets. The flag-saluting ceremonies are organised even in villages, and leaders like Devata "spoke the new mind, the new words, of the national movement". Women participate in these ceremonies as enthusiastically and courageously as men. All look, behave and act like true fighters. To them, the tricolour flag is an emblem of the national movement, as an image of stone is the emblem of a god or goddess. Indians bubble over with energy, enthusiasm and courage. Their hopes know no bounds. Like Rahoul, they are possessed with ideas such as these:

"The soul of a race, as the soul of a man, does not grow only in terms of time-space.....Once in a while, through the catalysis of experience, it grows far more in moments than in years. This is such a moment of quick growing, and India after August will never be the India of before..."

Though Indians have lived in bondage for long, the alien rulers' terrorizing policy strengthens rather than weakens them. Indians are no longer resilient to the atrocities of the British. The students are on the verge of revolt and are ready to resort to terrorist activities. They become one with the masses, the soldiers of 'Free India'. In many families, there are no adults to work in the fields, to earn livelihood, and to look after the family. The freedom struggle assumes new, terrible dimensions:

“Meantime they stayed in prison, sixty thousand men and women and the bulk of them were peasants. A thousand killed, twice as many wounded. Many had been hanged after a hurried trial—peasant lads had gone to the rope-crying with their last breath, Victory, victory to freedom!”

The Quit India Movement shows a new dimension with the prisoners starting hunger strike. Freedom fighters carry on the movement even in jails. What is said of Devata, Kajoli's father, Kanu and Kishore is true of all the patriots: “Undefeated, all. No jail-house could ever break their spirit.” The hunger strikes inside the jails tremendously keep up the pace of the Quit India Movement. The entire country asks in roaring shouts the alien rulers to quit. Indian wives display immense courage when their husbands are imprisoned. As self-possessed as men, they are prepared to follow their husbands way by defying the British. The following conversation between Rahoul and Monju at the time of the former's arrest illustrates this:

Monju spoke with knowledge of his arrest—Father had told her in advance, to avert shock. She was calm and strong with some hidden strength.

“So you begin your new journey?”

“Monju,” you knew it was only a question of time.

“Darling” -- the softness of her voice caressed him—

“I, too, shall go your way soon—.”

“You, Monju?” The voice ached.

A pause, and then: "I am not the silly thing I used to be, you know that."

Yes, he knew. She had grown fast. Once the process started, women grew faster than men. Monju was free from misgivings, completely fearless, Rahoul was proud of her.

Crowds of freedom fighters go to the prison-houses with a sense of victory singing songs of freedom and with no mark of defeat in their voices. Devata go to prison several times and spend a number of years there. Prisons and shackles cannot cower their spirit of freedom. The book ends with the description of inspired people singing loudly in chorus the following immortal lines of Rabindranath Tagore:

“The more their eyes redden with rage, the more our eyes open; the more they tighten the chains, the more the chains loosen!”

The last two pages of the novel are significant as they reveal the novelist's lofty ideal of freedom. When Rahoul is being taken to prison, Rahoul reflects upon these varieties of freedom: “There it was, the freedom from want, even if the four of them, the charter of rights of a hunger-tossed century, did not include the freedom to be free.” He realises that freedom is not a dew dropping from heaven all itself, nor is it something to be obtained from far-off lands. It is to be achieved by persistent struggle and is to grow out of man's spirit. This realisation about freedom dawns upon him suddenly on hearing Tagore's song, and he feels stimulated and exulted. He becomes confident that this type of freedom will surely be attainable by Indians:

“Listening, Rahoul began to lose his sadness, for in that instant he saw past the clouds of pain—he saw the horizon of the east illumined by a new dawn.

Freedom could not drop from the skies, nor be asked from lands beyond the seas; but there, in the vast swamp of suffering and struggle, would it break into bloom, growing out of the seeds of the spirit. It was the four-petaled lotus of the people”

Music for Mohini is strikingly different from *So Many Hungers!* in that it concentrates upon social freedom. Bhattacharya affirms that social freedom is all-important for the real progress of the people because without it even political freedom is ineffective. It is this form of freedom which is the actual foundation of all other types of freedom. Hence, the novelist presents the hero of the novel, Jayadev, dedicated to social freedom which is of utmost significance for India after she has achieved political freedom.

Jayadev is a social reformer and wants to make his village Behula a model village socially. He knows that this task is more important for him than writing books, and he also knows that it involves a lot of strain and struggle. But it is worth doing at all costs, for without social freedom, as he tells Mohini, political freedom is more or less meaningless: “Our political freedom is worth little without social uplift...That means struggle.” He wants her to teach the village women how to read and write, and thus to impart them the first elements of knowledge. Jayadev is very happy to come in contact with the young surgeon, Harindra, who understands the social problems of the country pretty well. This foreign-returned doctor, whose ideas agree with Jayadev's, makes up his mind to live in Behula so as to work wholeheartedly for its social freedom.

In addition to social freedom, Bhattacharya stresses the significance of a few other varieties of freedom, such as freedom experienced after realising a vision or after completing some great work; economic freedom; and individual freedom. Owing to his determination to bring about social freedom, he is not able to have freedom to enjoy the company of his beautiful wife. He knows that it is the completion of a work, and not the neglect of it, that can impart man the freedom to fulfil his personal desires: "Neglect your work, be less intense.....and never would you recapture your vision. Having reached your aim, having dedicated your vision to your people, you would be free, free to be fulfilled with—no Maitreyi, but Mohini, just Mohini.” He tells Mohini that work obsesses him, and this stands between her and him. Absorbed in work, he will lose sight of everything else. Naturally, he appeals to her to help him to complete his work and thus enable him to get freedom: “Let my work be done soon, that I may be free, free.” He knows that it is only after completing his important work that a man can taste and enjoy the “fruit of release”, “the fruit of freedom”.

The novel emphasizes the need for economic freedom. Jayadev clearly understands the fact that social slaveries are rooted in economic bondage, and hence social emancipation is not possible without economic freedom. Jayadev is happy to see the country struggling hard to attain it. He visualises the future India with people free from economic bondage and social slaveries. He thinks:

“The battle for economic freedom, however, was in full swing and ten years hence there would be no landed gentry to live on the peasantry. India was fast moving that way. But then, would the people, fed well, be free in spirit because of their new physical state? The answer was plain.”

In this novel, Bhattacharya affirm his interest in individual freedom. He expresses his belief that human happiness is possible only if the individual is free. Mohini, Harindra and Sudha suffer a lot for want of individual freedom. Jayadev is shocked to see that man or woman is not free to love and marry the person of his or her choice. No wonder he screams in anger and disgust: “Was there to be no individual freedom in Behula?” Harindra and Sudha suffer

terribly, since they are not sanctioned the freedom of marrying each other because of the difference in their castes. However, the young man is determined to fight for individual freedom, for “the fundamental right of a man or a woman to choose a mate outside his or her caste.” Like Sudha and Harindra, Mohini, too, has to bear all kinds of miseries, for she is denied individual freedom. Her whole personality is squeezed and crushed by the social conventions and traditions of the Big House to which she belongs after her marriage. Naturally, she often thinks of reacting and revolting against all that. She escapes to the garden and climbs a tree to seek refuge against negation of life: “Here she expressed her right to be herself.”

The novelist treats the theme of social freedom quite exhaustively in *He Who Rides a Tiger*. Kalo is a greater champion of social freedom than Jayadev. He is able to perform a miracle and becomes a great exponent of freedom. A low-caste blacksmith, he suffers immensely because of his low-birth. Terribly upset, he resolves to work hard for the social emancipation and to take revenge on the wealthy who ill-treat them inhumanly. He wishes to raise Chandra Lekha as high as the upper class people who have debased and maltreated her. Kalo wants to fight with the entire upper class. He installs a false Shiva in the great city of Calcutta to put the true temples into the shade by the false one. He wondrously befools the rich and makes them worship the false God in his temple and bow to Him. In his disguise of Mangal Adhikari, he is soon believed to be a true-hearted Brahmin under whose guidance and influence people can never be able to lose faith in social order and religion.

In this novel, Bhattacharya highlights man's need for individual freedom. Though Lekha achieves immense fame and wealth as the daughter of Mangal Adhikari, she is not free to live in her own way. As a matter of fact, she is placed in a very dangerous situation like that of riding the tiger. Naturally, she deeply desires to get rid of the life of strict restrictions. To achieve freedom, she is prepared even to marry an old man:

“For the remaining hours of that day Lekha's burden was lifted. Wearing the vermilion mark of marriage at the central parting of her hair, as a woman must, she would gain freedom, freedom to live her own way.”

She knows that it is really very unfortunate to marry an old man but to live as his wife guarantees some sort of personal freedom. So she decides to come out of pit just to fall into another for the sake of getting the right to be free. Kalo, her father, is also unable to live without personal freedom for long. That is why he discloses his real identity by proclaiming that he is a kamar named Kalo, and not a Brahmin. His life of prosperity, prestige and power as Mangal Adhikari, suffocates him and he wants freedom to live his own life in his own way.

While Bhattacharya's earlier novels concentrate upon India's fight for political and social freedom, *Shadow from Ladakh*, deals with preserving the country's political independence at all costs. The book is occasioned by the unfortunate political event of China's shameless invasion of India in 1962. Indians are determined to protect their freedom. Threat to man's freedom and his tremendous effort to save it is the main subject of the novel. The Chinese had made fantastic claims and were not ready to give up an inch of the land they had taken. Then the Chinese troops entered the unguarded parts of Indian borders where they set up strong check posts. “Each mountain pass changing hands could be a pistol pointed at the heart of India. It was not the pistols alone. Behind them were the troops—the reports said that their number exceeded a hundred thousand.” Nothing less than supreme sacrifice was required to defend the country's freedom. Against the massive attack of the Chinese using 'the human-sea technique', Indians fought heroically. While thousands sacrificed their lives, millions donated

liberally cash, gold and goods. The entire nation felt that it was an obnoxious attack on its freedom.

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Bhabani Bhattacharya was born in Bihar to Bengali parents. In 1927 he graduated with a degree in English literature from Patna University. In 1928 Bhattacharya moved to England to continue his studies. His initial intention was to continue studying English literature at King's College, London. While in London, Bhattacharya contributed to a number of journals and newspapers. He published in *The Bookman*, the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Spectator*, which at the time was edited by author of the bestselling *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, Francis Yeats-Brown, who would become a close friend. Both he and Tagore urged Bhattacharya to use English as a medium of expression for his fiction, rather than Bengali. In 1930 Bhattacharya translated Tagore's *The Golden Boat* to wide acclaim.