

Studying Human Relationships in the Short Stories of Bhabani Bhattacharya

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Abstract

Bhabani Bhattacharya is a kind of author who writes mostly on human relationships. In *Steel Hawk and other Stories* which were published in 1968 there are various such kind of stories. His themes are traditional but new because he has a different and innovative way of writing. His characters are also very interesting and they are influenced from real human societies. This realistic and idealistic approach is very uncommon. In *A moment of Eternity* we can see a fine blend of realism and idealism. This shows that how he uses the traditional human values as a raw material for his short stories. His experiments with traditional values of life are full of new possibilities and hopes. In some cases we can also find that his characters are alienated and repressed but still there is some sense of optimism in their lives. If they reflect pessimism then this can be a chance of learning for readers. Bhabani Bhattacharya believes that a writer must not impose his school of thoughts on his readers. So in his short stories readers are free to analyze the different situations of life. The story like *public figure* shows that how a man can change in life. This changing is not normal as it can lead him to identity crisis which can be painful. After reading his short stories we can easily locate that there is a kind of synthesis between modernism and traditionalism in most of his writings. Stories like *the steel hawk*, *The Acrobats*, *Names are not table's* and *the quack* are noteworthy as they

reflect real life situations. They are not simply stories but they present the way by which life can treat an individual. It also shows a better craftsmanship of the author.

Keywords- Humanism, realism, identity crisis, modernism

Bhabani Bhattacharya is a kind of writer who writes about the realities of life. *Steel Hawk and other stories* is a short story collection which was published in 1968. He was highly inspired by the writings of Shakespeare and Tagore. His short stories has Indian vision and this is one of the reasons that he is considered as a kind of writer who can mix idealism with realism. This can be found in the short stories like *A moment Of Eternity*. In this story the life of a traditional Indian woman has been shown. There is a woman who is the mother of Sona- Mona. She loses her husband and after this she finds herself in a big trouble. She is a kind of lady who loves her husband more than her life and this is the reason that she also wants to commit suicide. There is a kind of rejection of life as now she thinks that to live without her husband is a futile attempt. There is a very powerful paragraph which defines her mental world where she says –

"We three have no existence apart from yours. In you we three live. In your dying we three die".¹

It clearly reflects that her existence is not possible without the existence of her husband. Even her children cannot resurrect any hope inside her mental world. It is the typicality of an Indian wife who idealizes figures like Savitri who has been mentioned in Indian folk stories. In the story *public figure* we can find the hypocrisy of a man who is considered as a public figure. This hypocrisy is converted in a kind of hunger which is everlasting. This hunger for greed becomes so strong that the man becomes alienated to himself also. Thus the title public figure becomes a kind of irony where a man becomes confused between his inner self and the outer self. This hypocrisy is unfolded in the story by Nalini's mother who says that-

“Tell me how much you have donated to the fund.

If you truly want to support the good cause, you

Should make yourself a pauper and walk the

Streets with a begging bowl” .2

Bhabani Bhattacharya writes about such themes which are often related with society. Here in the above mentioned story public figure he understands the value of a public figure. Leaders and other public figures are powerful but they are associated with the development of the society. The condition becomes different when they forget their responsibilities. In the present story the public figure is greedy and is looking forward for a publicity stunt. Thus hypocrisy is associated with such a public figure. We can notice that in almost all the short stories written by the author there is suspense from starting to the climax. This suspense generates interest among readers. Understanding human relationships is not an easy task as it is always surrounded by complexity especially in the short stories of Bhabani Bhattacharya. In the short story collection *Steel hawk and other stories* we can feel it from the very first story. We have seen in *A moment of Eternity* how a mother suffers from the pain and agony and it leads to her seclusion from the society. She also feels alienated to herself. She can be rightly said as a criminal as she has the criminal instinct inside her. She is a criminal as she kills her own children. Thus Bhabani Bhattacharya has tried to draw a complex nature of human being. We all know that there are several forms of love. Although the mother loves her children but she also loves her husband and she cannot imagine living without her husband. This compels her to think that if her husband is no more she must not think to live alone. This brings madness and to understand this point we will have to understand the psychology of the mother. She also loves her children and it is one of the most important question that how can a mother kill her own children? The story projects the mother’s loss but she herself is responsible for killing her own children. It reminds a tragedy written by

Euripides. The tragedy is entitled **Medea**. Here Medea kills her own children to take revenge from her husband Jason. Her husband has left her and in vengeance she kills Jason's new wife and her own children. Thus in this story also the killing of the children by her own mother takes place. Medea commits this crime only to show her husband that she has her own methods of taking revenge. In *A moment of eternity* the mother kills her own children only to show her grief that her husband died and left her alone. This is also a kind of revenge but this revenge is different. She takes revenge from her own destiny which has left her secluded. She loves her husband more than her own life and this is one of the reasons that she cannot imagine to live alone. She feels rejected in life and that is why she chooses to kill everything which she loves. The emotional turmoil from which she is suffering cannot be expressed in words. Bhabani Bhattacharya has tried to show us the intensity of love which can also instigate violence. It is hardly accepted in the society but passion is always not controlled. This uncontrolled and uncultivated passion rejects the idea which comes from the mind and a person starts thinking from the heart. So there is always a kind of conflict between reason and passion. The law punishes her for this crime in form of four years rigorous imprisonment. Punishment enforced by the law is nothing in front of her sufferings. The movement of the story is linear and it clearly projects the artistic beauty of the author. The linear movement of the story shows the linear movement of human emotions. We cannot deny that the mother is cruel and thus she is like a villain but still we have some sympathy for her because we know that she is suffering from a kind of emotional trauma. In *The Quack* we can find humor as well as irony yoked together. Here hunger and poverty is one of the main themes which the author has talked about. Quackery has been adopted by the leading character in this story because he has no other modes to support his livelihood. The kind of humor which Bhabani Bhattacharya has projected in this story is not hilarious. It has full of satirical tone and thus we can understand the different tough situations of life. One of the main intentions of the

author is that he wants his readers to be more analytical. He has left the judgment of the story in the hands of the readers. We can notice that his art of writing is different from the writings of R. K. Narayan. Both these writers write about humor but in case of Narayan we can see that his humors are hilarious which can amuse the readers. In case of Bhabani Bhattacharya the situation is different. He writes humors to correct the flaws of the society that is why his humors are satirical in tone as well as intensity. The author keeps his readers busy in thinking about the plot and it becomes clear in *Glory at twilight*. Here the narrow-gauge and slow Indian train makes several stops which is unauthorized. There are hardly any reasons for it and it was assumed that the guard was responsible for it as he wanted to pluck pumpkins and ripe melons in between the journey. A few lines from the story is worth quoting here.

“The slow, narrow-gauge Indian train with its awkward freak of an engine had a way of making unauthorized stops for no good reason between fields of corn or at the foot of a village, it was said that the guard signalled a halt to pluck a pumpkin or ripe melon from its stem or to buy fistfuls of green gram from a peasant.”³

It is noteworthy to see that there are few similarities between the writings of R. K. Narayan and Bhabani Bhattacharya as both these writers write about some common themes. We can find the works of both these authors interesting. Both of them talk often about the social evil and inequality. There is a fragrance of Indian culture and rituals in the writings of both these authors. Bhabani Bhattacharya is very typical in choosing words and setting of his short stories. He uses local dialect in most of his writings. It can be best seen in *Glory at twilight*. In this story readers can notice how a young woman welcomes joy with a shrill sound of “ulu, ulu, ulu”⁴. The character sketch of Dogdar sab who waits with his big needle is humorous. He is very influential with his appearing but still we can see that he has little affinity with children. He lacks cherishing the bond with them. *Lattu Ram's Adventure* is a good story and it is often compared with *The Lost Child* written by Mulk Raj Anand.

Bhabani Bhattacharya fails here in maintaining the serious intensity of the subject matter as compared to Anand. We can trace a sense of optimism in the writings of Bhabani Bhattacharya. His characters fight back in their lives and in the whole process of survival they give a glimpse of evolution. It seems that these characters are evolving out with new hopes. If we talk about human relationships we will find that human relationship is a matter of very serious concern as it is not developed instantly. The characters contribute a lot in shaping and making the plot of his novels and short stories interesting and optimistic. Bhabani Bhattacharya is a kind of writer who thinks that the role of art is not only to delight. Thus he believes in the philosophy that apart from giving amusement the role of art should be to teach also. He thinks that aesthetic pleasure is superficial. An artist should project the real problems of life so that readers should identify those problems and take some lessons from it. According to such philosophy-

“Art must teach, but unobtrusively, by its vivid interpretation 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.”⁵

Now looking into the other story entitled *Pictures in the Fire* the author has successfully used the human psychology and thus he has tried to show us how valuable are the human emotions. Here female and male psyche has been projected and contrasted. There can be ethnic differences but it has a little role to play in making bond with two different individuals. Theory of naturalism says that an individual develops a kind of insight on the basis of heredity and environment. It is the environment which acts like a teacher and modifies the behavior of an individual. In this short story Bhabani Bhattacharya has raised a very important issue of racial difference and geographical location. It has been acknowledged universally that human being can have different looks or approach but emotions remain unchanged. It is the product of a good civilization which cultivates individuality in a child.

This story also highlights the problems associated with male ego. Henry brown who is the protagonist in this story is a creative writer. He loves to write creative stories. One day he writes a story and sends it to a magazine under the pen name of his wife. He does it as he fears that the story can be rejected if written under a male name. The story is eventually selected. His wife Josephine Brown pleads him not to do it again but he does it repeatedly. As a result his wife becomes famous as a creative writer. Initially Henry also enjoys it as he thinks that he is the person behind her success but later he generates a kind of jealousy for his own wife. This story clearly pictures the aspects associated with masculine ego. It is interesting to see that the husband his feeling jealous on his own creation. It is a problem associated with masculine dignity as projected by Bhabani Bhattacharya. The husband Henry later blames the whole female race and thus it reflects his frustration. For a woman it becomes a matter of pride when her husband becomes famous but when a wife becomes famous then the problem starts with the husband. It is a very serious issue as it is associated with gender and race. The male ego needs to be corrected however the author has again not given any judgment and it has been left in the hands of the readers to think over the issue. Gender is a thing which is constructed by the society and in a typical patriarchal society a husband is given priority over his wife and the problems associated with gender inequality starts from here. These are the problems which occur frequently in the society. Apart from the short stories we can also see that his novels also talk about the evil and injustice which can be seen frequently in any society. Nobody thinks about the downtrodden which result into the wider gap between the poor and the rich. Gender inequality and racial discriminations are the most burning issues which have been raised frequently by the author in his novels. Almost all the novels written by Bhabani Bhattacharya discuss such social inequalities and other problems. Novels like **He who Rides A Tiger**, **Music for Mohini**, **Shadow from Ladakh**, **So Many Hungers** successfully talks about various problems of the

society. We can see that there is typicality in the writings of Bhabani Bhattacharya. We can see dissociation of sensibility in his novels like Music for Mohini. Apart from this dissociation of sensibility we can also see some personal elements in his short stories. One may argue that he uses both unification of sensibility theory as well as dissociation of sensibility in his writings. This cannot be denied totally as we can see that there is a fine balance between plot and setting of his novels. Characters are also very balanced and they reflect the theme as propounded through the plot. It is very interesting to see that the author has also embedded historical elements in some of his writings. His fantasy moves around the desired climax and it results into generation of interest and humanism among his readers. In the title story of *Steel Hawk and other Stories* we can find a wonderful insight of the author regarding the use of technology narrated through Bishen a cart-man. It talks about feelings generated in young as well as old. Thus there is a beautiful contrast of emotions in this short story. When Bishen describes a steel hawk it is wonderful to find the realistic presentation of an image through words. It can be found rarely as we know that emotions can be generated by the selection of right words. It is one of the most prominent features of the author that he picks the characters of his short stories and novels from rustic life. This rustic life experiences provide a sense of realism to the art created by the author. It is the artistic beauty of the author that he blends various themes together in his writings. His narrative technique suits his mood and the plot moves linearly in a forward direction. We can see that in his short stories a momentum is generated which is slow and steady. This momentum motivates the readers to turn over the pages of the novels and short stories. He succeeds in generating a kind of curiosity in the minds of the readers.

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