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Social Justice as a Prominent Theme in the Novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya

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Abstract

In present scenario, peace is usually taken for granted by many people without going into the details of what made it (Peace) the most cherished ideal of almost all the societies. Its importance has only been realized by the humanity after going through a dreadful phase of history, full of violence, wars, massacres, genocide and so on. Moreover, the meaning of peace is misunderstood by many as mere absence of war; rather it has a wider connotation. Peace is an absence of violent conflicts of all kinds including war, riot, massacre, or simply physical attack. Sometimes, violence is rooted in the very structure of society, which is termed as "Structural Violence". This structural violence can take many shapes such as caste- based violence, class- based violence, ethnic violence, racism, communalism, colonialism etc. The elimination of structural violence necessitates the creation of a just and democratic society. Structural violence emerges out of the unequal and unjust structure of the society. So to eradicate structural violence, a society needs to employ the tool of social justice. This paper is an attempt to understand this structural violence ingrained in Indian social fabric during the independence and the post independence period and to hear its resonance in the novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya. She is an outstanding Indian English writer, globally known brilliant scholar was a socialist and reformist to the core. Almost all his novels are remarkably known as social fables, as contemporary Indian society is very authentically and sensitively represented in his fiction. Bhattacharya was having a profound knowledge of contemporary (from 1945 to 1975) social crisis, as the topic of his research thesis was also related to Indian socio-political perspectives of the time period. Through his novels he proclaims, when justice is denied to any particular person or

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community or sections of society, the reverse circumstances leads to anarchic situations and the society directly or indirectly becomes responsible for converting its people to social rebels, a threat to national peace and security. Therefore, through his novels, he motivates the countrymen to establish equality and maintain social justice to promote the feelings of love and harmony in different sections of society. To inspire the countrymen for setting up an equal and just social order, he frequently emphasise them to follow the teachings of great ancient minds. He quotes Gandhiji's socialism, marxism, Tagore's humanism, Nehru's rationalism, liberalism and practical approach, to create peace and harmony in the society and ensure social justice.

Keywords- Peace, Justice, Structural Violence, Ethnic Violence, Communalism, Racism

Bhabani Bhattacharya is an outstanding Indian English novelist and globally renowned scholar. She was a true socialist and a sincere reformist. During his literary career, he wrote both fictional and non fictional works, but he is remarkably known for the marvellous piece of his fiction. Though he has only six novels to his credit, all his novels are so realistic and heart touching that they captivate the human emotions and enraptures the readers even today. The themes and issues, which he has raised in his novels, are contemporary and universal as well. In his each and every novel, he deals with the social issues of great significance. They better represent the contemporary world and are also prominently significant in present context. He was a great conscious artist, as he observed the problem of Indian land very sensitively and mirrored them in his novels very authentically. Being a social realist, Bhattacharya proclaims "I hold that a novel must have a social purpose. It must place before the reader something from the society's point of view. . . . Purposeless art and literature which is much in vogue does not appear to me a sound judgement" (Joshi, 22).

Bhattacharya was having a profound knowledge of contemporary social structure of Indian society. His acute concern to work for the upliftment of the poor and up gradation of lives of bourgeois can be understood in the terms that even the topic of his research was actually an attempt to understand the socio-political perspectives or fabric of his time. He was completely aware that a minute observation of the society and a sensitive understanding of the problems of contemporary society are necessary to make a social change. G. Rai aptly remarks in this regard, "A careful observation of the details of life of contemporary people is essential for a writer who wants to write social novels" (6). Bhabani Bhattacharya himself realizes:

Unless a writer has keen observations and an eye for details of general behaviour of the folks, he cannot write a social novel. I have developed this habit and I have not missed

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a single opportunity of observing incidents, happenings, where I can gain something for the writer in me. . . . (Chandrasekharan, 34)

There is no doubt that a panoramic view of contemporary society is reflected in his novels, but he is especially known as a novelist of poor, down-trodden and oppressed ones. In all his novels, he expresses his concern for the people, who belongs to the lowest strata of society. He is anxious to provide rights and privileges to deprived ones. His protagonists can be seen fighting for the cause of social justice. They raise their voice against the injustice and inhuman treatment caused by the haves.

Through his novel, *A Goddess Named Gold* (1960), he makes his readers aware of the structural violence prevalent in society in the forms of corruption, casteism, communalism, illiteracy, poverty, hunger, unemployment, exploitation and superstition. The foremost of all evils is the evil of corruption that was existing in contemporary society in each and every spheres of life as- business, politics, religion, bureaucracy etc. Through the protagonist of the novel *Minstrel*, Bhabani Bhattacharya addresses the corrupt people by calling them robbers and warns the villagers to be cautious against them. He says, “Yes, there were the robbers, Seth of many kinds. The cities had a great variety and profusion of them than the countryside” (*Goddess Named Gold*, 119).

He further adds that there was the money seth, the seth of politics, the official seth, the seth of religion, the seth with a Gandhi cap on his head and several others on the list. Another example of corruption in the form of bribe is hinted at through the dialogues of Seth and Halwai in the novel. Halwai tells the seth about a contractor, who used low-quality cement for the construction of the bridge, which he had got from a dump of the military disposals. In spite of knowing all this wrong doing, Halwai does not oppose; as he has got his share in his deals. He says boastfully that let him supply it why should he be care, so long as he gets his thirty percent. When Seth tries to make him a realization of his guilt by saying that using low-grade building material may be harmful for anyone passing through the bridge, as the structure can topple into the river. Then Halwai exposes the real face of corruption that was widespread in society from top to bottom. He remarks, “The crocodile will not lose his skin; he will simply have to part once more with some of his gains. Let us take business or politics- the bridge is just one item among many others, each giving his ten percent” (*Goddess Named Gold*, 170).

Bhabani Bhattacharya indicates at the problem of hoarding and black marketing of necessary items by creating an artificial shortage. He gives an instance of Seth Samsunder, a shrewd and fraud money-lender and cloth merchant. He befools the simple villagers and the villagers are neck deep in debt to him. Many peasants complaint, “A loan standing in Seth’s ledger doubled itself in a twelve month. When we paid out twenty rupees, the figure he

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entered in his book was forty. . . a year's interest charged in advanced as soon as the loan was given. The debtor could whine or howl but had no option" (*Goddess Named Gold*, 67).

Whoever approaches him, he frightens him by saying, if they dislike his term, they can contact to the big money lender of the town or Imperial bank, but uneducated and ignorant villagers, unaware of the bank rules, has no other option than to tolerate his exploited ways. He does not leave any single opportunity to exploit the villagers. They had become a puppet in his hands. The seth is aware that he owns the only cloth shop in Sonamitti and six villages around. He intentionally creates the artificial shortage of cloth by cornering of the whole supply of mill cloth and pushing up prices, the condition of village women become so miserable that some of them even sleep naked at night to save their sari to further wear. The novelist states: "All this happens in a village of rich black earth yielding a hundred bale of good fibre cotton, enough to cloth the whole district" (*Goddess Named Gold*, 9).

Another example of corruption in government sector is also mentioned in the novel, *So Many Hungers*, (1947). When Kunal, the brother of the protagonist Rahuol applies for a government job and what he finds out that the candidate has been selected earlier. Kunal says, "A government post had been advertised. Every applicant was asked, as usual, to remit a fee of five rupees, which would not be refunded. There must have been a thousand applicants. . . . And the selection had in effect been made before the fees poured in" (*So Many Hungers*, 55).

Thus, Bhabani Bhattacharya states that people are generally helpless against exploitation. However, Bhattacharya notices a positive change in villager's outlook. Being a champion or strong upholder of social justice, he inspires the people to raise their voice against corrupt people, exploiters, shrewd manipulators, who are taking advantage of simple gullible masses. In this regard the comment of B. Shyamla Rao is very significant, "A war is to be declared on the money lenders, hoarders and smugglers, who are a bane to the society and who have become an impediment for the uplift of the poor and progress of the country" (*So Many Hungers*, 5).

Bhattacharya also describes that how winds are changing swiftly in society. Not only men but women also are ready to fight against exploitation and corruption, as they cannot afford to be timid and submissive in new India. All the village women in the novel, *A Goddess Named Gold* protest under the leadership of Meera, launch a movement to pressurize the Seth, the exploiter and hoarder. Being agitated, he becomes ready to sell the sari at a fair price to the women on the spot. Thus, we notice an awakening spirit in women.

Besides this, the evil of casteism that was deeply rooted and still prevalent in society finds expression in the same novel, *A Goddess Named Gold*, the barber who was regarded the match-maker according to ancient customs, comes to visit Meera's Grandma with the

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proposal of Halwai's marriage with Meera. Meera was a girl of sixteen and the offer was to marry with an adult, the father of two grown up girls. Halwai belonged to an upper caste and in the opinion of Barber, Meera will gain caste status after marrying with him. Even gold cannot give her this rise in caste status. It will be honorable for Meera to be his wife.

The evil of casteism becomes more harmful, when it comes in the form of untouchability, which is the prominent theme of the novel, *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1955). These evils actually symbolize immorality and decadence of high society. The novel is a life journey of an untouchable, Kalo, a blacksmith, who exposes the hollowness of upper cast society, dominated by caste and money. Bhattacharya sadly remarks that wealthy people squander thriftily with both hands for false rituals and practises, but are indifferent to the cries of hungry children. Kalo, who has always believed in honesty and hard work and who had a great faith in law and justice, was so much tormented by hollow caste system of society that he becomes a rebel. He violates the cast system, poses to be a Brahmin by wearing the sacred thread across his chest. In this way, he cheats the men of high caste or so called noble birth. K. R. Chandrasekharan reveals his miserable plight in a touching manner, "The development of Kalo as a rebel is described in such a way that the rebellion in him is a product of a pernicious system which has to be challenged" (Chandrasekharan, 70-71).

The structural violence in the form of casteism and untoucability is attacked by Bhattacharya in his novel *Shadow from Ladakh* (1966) and *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1955). We notice that the protagonist Satyajit Sen in *Shadow from Ladakh*, discards his surname and prefers to be called as simply Satyajit. He also marries with a girl, who does not belong to his caste. He follows Gandhian ways to abolish caste system in society and this way demands justice for untouchables. He himself sets examples in society by living in the colony of untouchables to make them feel dignified. Thus, Satyajit Sen is the mouthpiece of Bhabani Bhattacharya and sets high examples of social reform. He was also a great follower of the teachings, as enunciated by our great ancient minds like Tagore Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave. When the whole country was burning in the fire of communal violence, another bitter aspect of social realism, he adopts the Gandhian ways by undertaking fast and penance in order to restore love, peace and harmony in the society. In this way, he makes a plea to the country for communal peace.

Another example of same kind we can notice in *He Who Rides a Tiger*, (1955) when at the end of the novel, Kalo is disillusioned and a broader outlook develops in him. Now he does not have inferiority complex regarding his caste or social status. In an emphatic way, he condemns the whole caste system: "Never again would the Smith be despised, mocked, trampled upon, never again. For the fetters of his mind had been cut. The look in his eyes was clear and undazzled" (*He Who Rides A Tiger*, 238). In this regard G. Rai rightly comments:

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Kalo is, thus, seriously concerned with social problems. He sincerely endeavours for the freedom and equality of his people. He successfully upsets the old order, rises to the top using society's own strength against it. He leads wealthy people corrupted by caste and creed to think that God is not Brahmin by caste and that even a chamar can go to heaven, at the end he becomes. . . .an emancipator to the people of his own class. (*Rai*, 66)

In his novel, *Music for Mohini*, (1952) which is a pure social fable, he talks about social reconstruction programme by launching a programme against untouchability. The novelist states, "All untouchability- there are different sorts under different labels almost everywhere is being brought to an end. Mankind has a new charter of equal right for all" (*Music for Mohini*, 189). Besides this, in the same novel, Bhattacharya projects the social realities of post independent society. Bhattacharya says that the society is still chained in the shackles of superstition and orthodoxy. He states the reason, "Society, rural society was sick with taboos and inhibitions of its own making; the inequities of caste and untouchability, the ritualism that passed for religion, the wide flung cobwebs of superstitious faith. It was all an outgrowth of centuries of decadence . . ." (*Music for Mohini*, 92).

In the novel, Bhattacharya has created two different sets of characters. The first group belongs to old, rigid and orthodox people. The other group belongs to the idealists like Jayadev, Mohini, Harindra, who are the mouthpiece of Bhattacharya in the novel. They want to create a social setup based on justice and equality. Through the fictional village 'Behula', which is a prototype of rural India, Bhattacharya exposes all social evils, which were firmly rooted in the contemporary India.

Through his novel, *So Many Hungers* Bhattacharya also draws the reader's attention towards the problem of illiteracy in society especially in rural areas by revealing the fact that Meera's grandma was the only woman in the whole village, who could read and write. Thus we come to know that the literacy rate is very alarming in Indian villages. Being uneducated and ignorant, the people especially the women easily believe in fanciful and incredible stories. Being simpleton, they're easily convinced, duped and exploited by the manipulative minds. This problem of illiteracy is still plaguing our society. The illiteracy is the root cause of orthodoxy and superstition. How can we forget the latest rumours of Choti Katwa and Monkey Man, that created fear in the minds of people. Many states gripped with the fear. Many innocent people from different parts of the country were severely beaten on the basis of doubt. This is very pathetic that people even in 21st century illogically believe in these fanciful, incredible stories.

As it is said, that the problem of illiteracy is the root cause of many other social concerns, one such problem is population explosion, which still remains a major social concern for the country, as it causes all other evils such as- unemployment, hunger, poverty,

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poor health, pollution, global warming etc. According to latest U.N. data, the current population of our country is 1.37 billion, very high in comparison of resources existing in a developing country. Our honorable Prime Minister also expresses his deep concern over this issue of population explosion in his Independence Day, 2019, speech. Bhattacharya in his novel *Shadow from Ladakh* expresses his anxiety over the problem of growing population of country and other related menaces. Bhattacharya remarks:

Each tick of the clock meant an opportunity used or lost. Each five tick or it could be four- signalled the birth of an Indian child. A child to be fed, clothed, reared educated; given cultural fare, given employment, given his due share of human heritage. Sixteen hours- that was nearly sixty thousand ticks of the clock. More than twelve thousand babies born in that span of time between the Himalayas and the Cape. Had production risen over that period to meet the new born demand. (*Shadow from Ladakh*, 34)

On the basis of above analysis we can say that social justice is the underlying theme of all his novels. He completely understands the need of harmonious existence and the structural violence prevalent in society in various forms such as- caste- based violence, class- based violence, ethnic violence, racism, communalism, colonialism etc. The foundation of a just and democratic society is necessary for the abolishment of prevailing forms of Structural violence, which emerges out of the unequal and unjust structure of the society. So to eradicate structural violence, a society needs to employ the tool of social justice.

Social justice works mainly on the basis of the principle of equal treatment for equals. Societies, where likes are treated alike, rewards are distributed on the basis of efforts and skills employed by a person, is needed. A system, where special needs of some sections of society are recognized by the states to ensure harmonious and peaceful existence, is required. The balanced use of these principles would help in the creation of an inclusive society. Peace which is understood as the harmonious co-existence of contended people would be a product of such a society. It can never be achieved once and for all, because Peace is not an end-state, but a process involving an active pursuit of the moral and material resources needed to establish human welfare in the broadest sense of the term.

The contemporary relevance of the themes of Bhabani Bhattacharya can be estimated in the sense that all these aspects of social realism, which he has included in his novels, are still comprised as the resolutions comprised by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals- To end poverty and hunger everywhere; to combat inequalities within and among countries; to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies; to protect human rights and to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls The society and the world aspire to achieve them all by 2030.

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