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BHABANI BHATTACHARYA'S THEORY AND PRACTICE OF FICTION

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Abstract:

Winner of Sahitya Akademi Award Bhabani Bhattacharya has distinct opinion on the purpose of fiction. He considered fiction to be a tool for social transformation. He professes that 'the creative writer's final business is to reveal the truth' and does the same in his novels. He opines that fiction needs to speak for the oppressed and offer a message that can aid in the resurgence and restructuring of society; therefore he explores social, economic and political realities of contemporary Indian society in his fiction. All his novels can be seen as an example of how he has put his theory of fiction into practice.

Keywords: *Literature, Fiction, Realism, Art, Social Context, Social Purpose, etc.*

Introduction:

Born on 10th November 1906, in Bhagalpur, Bihar, Bhattacharya spent several years in Puri where his father lived in his childhood. His literary journey started with writing poems at a very early age. When he was just twelve, Bhattacharya contributed an article to a renowned Bengali magazine Mouchak. Influenced by Tagore's persona and writings, Bhattacharya met Tagore and obtained his consent to translate the great man's writings in a book form. And this is how *The Golden Boat*, a compilation of Bhabani Bhattacharya's translations of Tagore's poems, was published in 1930. His other published works include: *Indian Cavalcade* (1944), *So Many Hungers!* (1947), *Music for Mohini* (1952), *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1954), *Goddess Named Gold* (1960), *Towards Universal Man* (1961), *Shadow from Ladakh* (1966), his fifth novel, for which he received the Sahitya Akadmi Award in 1967, *Gandhi the Writer: The Image as It Grew* (1969), and his novel titled *Dream in Hawaii* (1978). After accepting a position as a visiting professor at the University of Hawaii, Bhattacharya relocated to Hawaii. He died in October 1988 at the age of eighty-two. Bhabani Bhattacharya's fiction occupies a special place in Indian literature. The fact that his novels have been translated across the world into twenty-six languages is a testimony to his eminence as a creative writer. He is an extensively read Indian English novelist worldwide. R. K. Srivastava writes about his stature and popularity as a writer, "His growing popularity may be evidenced from the increasing number of languages into which his novels have been and are being translated. The source of his world-wide popularity lies in the fact that his work embodies not only the sufferings and aspirations of individual heroes and heroines but also the agonies and expectations of an ancient people busy in the quest of their national and international destiny" (Srivastava).



Bhattacharya has discussed the art and purpose of literature expansively. He has distinct views on art and literature. Though he did not put his views on the objectives of literature methodically in the form of a book like E. M. Foster, he is the only Indian English Novelist apart from Mulk Raj Anand to have opined in detail on the purpose of literature on various occasions like in his articles on literature, his interviews etc. This paper attempts to infer and examine Bhattacharya's take on purpose of fiction. Bhattacharya emphasized on reality in literature. But he was clearly against the common belief that reality has to be at the root of all creative endeavours. He considers it as a half-truth. He stresses that the difference between modern age literature and the literature of the past is in its form and not in the content it deals with. In his article 'Literature and Society', Bhattacharya states, "The change, on the whole, is more in the form than in the basic content. Cinderella continues to have her wonder nights. The Prince of Grandma's fairy tale still tries to create a thrill or a heart throb. There is a difference in the setting. The old simplicity that was the essential charm of the fairy tale has been lost in a labyrinth of motives, a complex of reactions. There is a new intellectualism, but it is only a veneer" (Bhattacharya).

According to Bhattacharya, literature should depict the social context. He is an advocate of the idea that a writer should write with a feeling of social commitment and that art must have a social purpose. He contends that it is the duty of a writer to expose the issues that are pervasive in society in order to uncover the truth. He views fiction as a tool for enacting social change. Dorothy Shimer quotes him: "My chief purpose is to deal with the problems of social change," he has said. "I see fiction as a means to this end" (Shimer).

Bhattacharya laments that "a great mass of writing, readable, technically superb, shows the deceptive face of the 'real' without the true spirit." In his opinion, a novel needs to speak for the oppressed and offer a message that can aid in the resurgence and restructuring of society. He was adamant that fiction could not be regarded as significant if it did not depict the social realities of the day. It must also express the differences that exist in society. In his writings, Bhattacharya deals with social issues and is more concerned with presenting the entire picture of the society rather than with individual's personal history. He certainly avoids portraying the fate of an individual in a particular human situation in his fiction, and keeps away from personal and private issues. He is more interested with depicting the larger picture of society rather than with any individual's personal account. In his commentary on the decision to write on current social issues concerning society, Bhabani Bhattacharya makes it apparent that the social condition is what draws a writer's attention and forces itself onto the page through that writer. He states, "Those writers who are not escapist get inevitably drawn to the material of contemporary realities. The state of flux in current Indian life seeks expression in our writing..." (Bhattacharya).

He believes that in order to write a novel with a social purpose, the author must pay close attention to the people in his immediate environment and capture their way of life. His account of events needs to be based on the first-hand experience he gleaned from his observations of society. He affirmed in an interview with Sudhakar Joshi: "unless a writer has keen observation and an eye for the details of general behaviour of folks, he cannot write a social novel." Bhattacharya's works captured the imagination of ordinary people by depicting the chaos produced by the Second World War and partition. There was enough material



available for his thematic presentation in the contemporary society as he realised that – so long as the imagination people is not stirred, the seeds of reform will keep lying on the road to be trodden upon by the unwary traveller.

His writings, written with a revolutionary mentality, gave the underprivileged class a voice by depicting their struggles for survival and their miseries. The novels of his day shifted from being romantic to being mostly socially relevant. Bhattacharya believed that rather than romanticizing everyday life and creating idealized versions of it, writers should be more grounded in reality and write about real-world issues and situations. Mulk Raj Anand's admission of his approach to literature is entirely applicable to Bhattacharya as well. One writes perhaps because one love and wants to make contacts with other human beings... I have written... about the agony of aloneness of people, in the depths of degradation, in wretchedness beyond wretchedness, forced upon human beings by other human beings through causalities often unknown to them both.

His writing was motivated by the social challenges of the day, and his creative energies were stimulated by witnessing and being a part of the pain and struggles of a significant portion of contemporary Indian society. This creative impulse manifests itself in the way he handles the material and the environments in his fiction. He concerned himself mostly on the social and economic problems of contemporary Indian society since he believed and reiterated that a novel should have a social purpose. He considered fiction to be a tool for social transformation. Without offering any commentary, he provides a thorough description of the social ills, superstitions, and cultural practices that exist in contemporary Indian society. He exposes this civilization in all its foolishness with honesty. According to him, all creative writers who concern themselves with social realities represent the socio-political environment with a sense of devotion and hope to use their writing to effect social change. Unlike journalists who simply record occurrences in words, they use deliberate fiction to depict society's inner workings in an artistic manner that reveals the reality. He was adamant that a creative writer's main goal should be to address societal issues and that art need not necessarily be for art's sake. He opines, "The creative writer's final business is to reveal the truth. He reveals it, unlike the philosopher, in no cold statements of dogma but only in terms of life, rendered through the devices of dramatization" (Bhattacharya).

Bhattacharya saw that the contemporary society, torn as it was by bureaucratic oppression and corruption, social inequalities, political intrigues and communal fervours had enough material for his thematic treatment to arouse the people's imaginations. He knew that the novel would be the most effective tool to achieve his goal. In an effort to effect the intended societal change in the attitudes, behaviours, and lifestyles of the common people, he attempts to plant seeds of reform in the minds of his readers through his fiction. He was adamant that any work of fiction created with this intention not only serves to depict prevalent societal difficulties and realities from the detached perspective of a third party, but it also serves as a tool for social change and has the potential to be extremely influential in social control. He believed in 'Art for life's Sake' and not in 'Art for art's sake.' He condemned literature and art that lacked purpose. He doesn't mind being labelled even as a propagandist when he states, "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” (Bhattacharya).

He argues in favour of exploiting current events and circumstances to create fiction, contending that writers should take into account prevalent reality when choosing their subjects. Bhattacharya mocks the argument that a writer cannot be objective if he takes his material from contemporary reality. He contends that if a writer writes about current issues, he will be in a better position to do the subject justice because his personal experiences will be more vivid and trustworthy than memories from other sources if he writes about historical events that he did not personally witness. He expresses, “It has been argued that the novelist should not draw his material from contemporary reality, since he is too close to it to be able to read its meaning and access its inward nature. This is absurd. The creative writer has a well-developed sensitivity, though this does not mean that he understands or shares all emotions. The things he witnesses, the things he experiences, are likely to move him more intensely than what may be called recollection at second hand. Even the historical novel relies as much on the writer’s personal experience as on imaginative evocation” (Bhattacharya).

He complains the fact that Indian writers have not employed our history or current affairs as a theme for their works to the same extent as Western writers who have depicted major events of their times in great detail. He would like writers in India to write on the times they are living in. He claims that significant events like the two World Wars, Indian freedom struggle, the resultant partition, famines etc., have not received enough representation from Indian writers in their work. He questions:

The inescapable fact is that a great number of novelists have felt no strong creative stirrings even when they have lived at the very centre of big events, events that are not only historic in value but also exquisitely rich with the stuff of human passion. That, for instance, has happened often to our Indian writers. War has washed over our borders and the effect has been felt all over the subcontinent. The struggle for freedom has rocked the land. Famine of kind conceivable only to a Dante’s imagination has actually taken place. The tragedies of partition have been beyond anything that a writer could “invent.” But where is the creative expression of all these happenings?

He employs art to truly depict the social realities of today's world. He does not think it is appropriate to judge people or circumstances. He believed that no piece of art should support or denigrate any particular circumstance or individual. It is the duty of a writer to maintain the work's credibility by presenting people and situations in an appropriate balance. He declares:

Art is not a pulpit or platform from which one may uphold and denounce. Further, literary art is not black and white. The most heroic character must have his feet on common earth; and the dastardly villain, even more difficult to create, needs to be redeemed by the “human touch.” Otherwise, credibility is lost. The willing suspension of disbelief on the reader’s part is withdrawn.



Bhattacharya espoused the democratic principles of social justice and equality. The Marxist idea of the fight for class justice and Gandhi's empathy with the oppressed class served as inspiration for him in writing his fiction. The social status of the poor upset him. He was moved by the perpetual poverty of the poor and the atrocities inflicted on them by the moneylenders and landlords. He also deeply empathized with their tireless work and selfless hearts in the face of such oppressive social surroundings. He has been successful in striking artistic balance by depicting the rural India's eternal agonies, distress, poverty, illiteracy and privation on one hand and its unwavering determination, persistent valour, purity of heart and compassion for fellow sufferers on the other. He advocates on behalf of the 'have-nots', the economically and socially disadvantaged people of the society. And introduces his readers to the gloomy and painful side of these people in order to awaken the conscience of his readers. His fiction aims to highlight the predicament of the helpless, oppressed peasants and displays his passion for social justice. L. N. Gupta aptly observes:

Pure intellectuals watch the crowds but do not force themselves on them. They visit slums and absorb the misery of their dwellers in their being. They tour the famine-stricken areas. They look into the shrivelled faces and sunken eyes of the sufferer. They share their distress. But they do not use amplifiers to blare their benefaction. They suffer quietly. The process involves a cycle of seething tensions. The end product is a major work, say a great novel in the case of a fiction writer. It is a monument to its times. Such is the case with Bhabani Bhattacharya.

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Literary Cognizance

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online) Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)

**An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism**

Vol.- V, Issue- 2, September 2024



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To Cite the Article: Thorat, Pravin. “Bhabani Bhattacharya’s Theory and Practice of Fiction.” *Literary Cognizance*, V - 2 (September, 2024): 40-45. Web.

