

TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN BHABANI BHATTACHARYA'S *MUSIC FOR MOHINI*

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Abstract

Bhabani Bhattacharya's Music for Mohini (1952) is an attack on the social traditions and blind religious faiths that have hindered the progress of our country. The background of this novel is the post-Independence scene in India. Mohini is a city-bred, convent-educated girl who wants to be loved by her husband. Jayadev wishes her to be an intellectual and striding like a man who is in quest of knowledge. In Music for Mohini, Bhabani Bhattacharya protests against the age-old orthodoxy and superstition and urges India to free herself from its shackles. The novel is a true reflection of post-Independent India making attempts to come out of the outdated values. Bhattacharya shows that in an Indian marriage, caste is more important than love. Through Music for Mohini, Bhattacharya suggests that the rural India is still unable to shake off the shackles of superstition and orthodoxy. Age-old ways and beliefs still linger in the rural society.

Key Words : *social, religious faith, orthodoxy, superstition, outdated values...*

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Bhabani Bhattacharya's *Music for Mohini* (1952) is an attack on the social traditions and blind religious faiths that have hindered the progress of our country. The background of this novel is the post-Independence scene in India. Bhattacharya presents the real problems of the country and the place of women in society and in the home. He challenges older order and suggests the shape of the things to come.

The narrative begins with the description of the parental home of Mohini, a motherless girl of seventeen. Her father, who is referred to all through the novel as the "Professor", admits Mohini to a Christian convent school. He wishes his daughter to become a radio singer in which she is really interested. The conservative Old Mother of the Professor has a blind faith in orthodoxy and superstitions. She does not like the idea of Mohini's songs to be recorded and sold in open market. The Professor has conflicts with his mother. When he does not agree with her, she threatens to leave the house. He agrees with her tactfully. He wishes his daughter should marry to an educated and urban-bred boy. He rejects some proposals because they expect heavy dowry and examine Mohini as if she is an article to be sold in an auction. Meanwhile, they get a proposal from Jayadev who appears to be the most suitable groom for Mohini. With the help of the Old Mother, Mohini's marriage is settled with Jayadev.

After a happy marriage, Mohini comes to the Village Behula, as the new mistress of the Big House. She has to face the traditional and conservative atmosphere preserved by her mother-in law. Mohini is a city-bred, convent-educated girl who wants to be loved by her

husband. Jayadev wishes her to be an intellectual and striding like a man who is in quest of knowledge. She has to adjust herself with her husband. She keeps herself busy in rescuing the illiterate and backward rural women from orthodoxy and superstition. Besides her husband, Mohini has to adapt herself to the out-dated and conservative superstitions of her mother-in-law. Jayadev has already made her aware to adjust herself to the heavy demands by her: "Demands that you'll find unreasonable. Some of them will have to be met with patience and a spirit of give-and-take" (Bhattacharya 78). Her mother-in-law puts hard restrictions on her clothes, songs and her hobbies. She thinks that women should wear only white cotton saris; sing only religious songs and should not wear glass bangles. Mohini tries to accommodate with the changes that are unexpected to her. Jayadev, a man of liberal outlook has differences of opinions with his mother. However, he has to make compromise with her many times. He protests when he comes to know that his mother is attempting to make Mohini offer her heart's blood to the virgin goddess to cure her of her supposed sterility. Jayadev stands vindicated when a little later it is discovered that Mohini had already borne the child for three months before she was to appease the goddess. Mohini finds that Behula did not belong to her. It was not easy for her to absorb this culture as she was brought up in the city in the house of a professor. She had to spend restless nights and long dull days without a chance to participate in that life. Even Jayadev behaves with her as a teacher and not as a lover. She longs to get back to her father to the city to sing for radio. But after she knows that she was soon to bear a child, an heir to Jayadev to preserve the long tradition of the family, that she feels her life is music.

In *Music for Mohini*, Bhabani Bhattacharya protests against the age-old orthodoxy and superstition and urges India to free herself from its shackles. The novel is a true reflection of post-Independent India making attempts to come out of the outdated values. The major concern is to make drastic reform in society. A number of outdated customs and traditions hold the ignorant villagers in their clutches. These are so deeply rooted in their minds that no body can easily escape from it. One of such practices is that of the suitor's relatives and

friends inspecting a bride and examining her. One of the relatives of the party who comes to see Mohini asks a number of questions on the divine incarnations that the earth has witnessed, the name of the stars that control man's destiny, the nature of Yoga and so on. When they could not get satisfactory answers, they insist on a huge dowry. She is thus insulted and treated like a commodity. The dowry and the bride showing episodes are humiliating experiences. See for instance the following:

She had to walk a few steps at the mother's bidding to prove she did not lack grace of movement. They fumbled with her prettily arranged hair and unlooses it down her back to know its length. They rubbed her face with their thumbs to make sure the fair complexion was natural, not of paint. Mohini gulped down her tears of shame. (42)

Bhabani Bhattacharya becomes furious with the orthodoxy and superstition prevalent in India. K.R.Chandrasekharan points it out:

One of the major concerns of Bhattacharya in this novel is the need for a change of social outlook and reorientation of social values in India. As a necessary corollary to his implied plea for change he presents to the reader a picture of society today and invites attention to many beliefs and practices which have become strongly entrenched. Some of these concern norms of personal etiquette, others relate to social behaviour while some others relate to religion. Orthodoxy is a phenomenon which covers all these aspects.(Chandrasekharan 44-45)

The Professor is a champion of new ideas and his mother that of the old ones. The Old Mother takes her son to task for not getting a horoscope prepared for Mohini. With her abiding faith in old values, as any typical Indian would do, she is worried that her granddaughter, though seventeen, is still unmarried simply because her father has not

cared to get a horoscope prepared for her. She complains that girls younger than Mohini have been already married off and if she is allowed to stay at home it would be a cause of laughter in the town. The mother has other complaints as well. She is angry that her son has allowed Mohini's song to be recorded on shiny black discs. But the Professor is pleased by her achievement and feels proud of the fact that Mohini has made a name for herself in the world of music. In many cases the mother threatens to go away to Benares. The Professor who had always refused to wear an amulet, at last, obliges her by wearing it. Though he mocks at many of her old beliefs, the mother feels that her son is secure because the amulet is there to shield him from the 'evil eyes'.

Music for Mohini shows glimpses of religious orthodoxy. The villagers strongly believe in astrology and palmistry. Sudha, a beautiful girl remains unmarried because of her uncle's belief in astrology. He rejects many proposals because according to him the girl is under the influence of the Saturn and she had to wait till its influence passes away. As a result, she remains unmarried. Mohini is accepted as Jayadev's bride only after the mother has satisfied herself that she has on her palm all the eight signs of luck.

The Mother of the Big House becomes greatly agitated when Mohini fails to provide an heir to the family even after two years of her marriage. She fears that according to Jayadev's horoscope, he will not survive after twenty eight years unless he has a child. Believing Mohini to be barren, she takes her to the temple of the goddess of births and attempts to make her cut her skin of her bosom and offer the goddess her blood in a lotus-leaf bowl to get rid of the curse of sterility from her. But she is saved from this ordeal at the last minute by the providential intervention of Jayadev. He is always against the old traditions and customs: "Values, Mother? There are values beyond your grasp. Since you will always try to reach them with your reason, never with your feelings. Life has punished you... Blind belief shapes your thinking: blind belief cannot make a sentiment." (180)

The Mother's blind and almost unreasonable reverence to tradition is so deep that she had dedicated her right hand to Lord Shiva at the holy city of Benares, some twenty years ago for the speedy recovery of her sick son. Since then she has not used her right hand at meals as it should not be defiled by the touch of her mouth. She even takes her meal with her left hand. She thus keeps her vow with great austerity. She does not even bother for the stunned looks of her relatives and friends for her superstitious nature.

The women in the village have to follow many restrictions. A woman is not supposed to sing loudly. She should prefer plain cotton saris made on handlooms to mill-made muslin. Men and women do not eat together except on very special occasions. Jayadev's mother lives to preserve the old traditions of the Big House. The only blessing she gives to Mohini when she first arrives in the house is that she should have offspring.

The central theme of the novel is not only a clash between tradition and modernity but also "that of the urban and rural cultures, the superstitious beliefs of the rural folk as against the values of modernism in the city dwellers" (Khatri 65). The novel exposes some superstitious beliefs in the people of Bengal. A widow is considered as inauspicious and is not supposed to take part in the perception of a new bride into household. A crocodile is regarded as a re-incarnation of a devout Brahmin capable of offering worship at a temple in silent hours of the night. A pond which the crocodile is supposed to inhabit becomes a sacred pond. The priest of the temple objects to the cutting and removal of the hyacinth growing on the water lest the devout crocodile should be offended.

Mohini has to suppress all her desires and compromise with the tradition of the Big House. She is disappointed and remains dissatisfied in her married life. Jayadev wishes to see her as Gargi or Maitreyi- bodiless thinker, and not a woman even for a moment. Her dreams about her husband are shattered. She does not exhibit her happiness but pretends as if she is interested in the style, discipline and tradition of the Big House. She is like a bird in a cage as her life and routine is controlled by her mother-in-law. Mohini's life without love is

like jasmine without scent. She could have been a film star with her cinematic face and sensitive voice. Her magic voice is ignored by Jayadev. However, she does not want to keep herself lonely because she knows “Only idle minds have time to feel lonely.” (107) In such circumstances, Mohini musters up courage to face the situation thus:

But she had her husband. For his sake she would absorb new ways of thought and habit, cultivate new interests. She set her mouth; life was a serious business, and she was no doll in silk and satin...She had duties to discharge, responsibilities. How could she let herself be defeated by discomfort and desolation? (105-06)

Bhattacharya is well aware of the fact that social reform is important for the progress of the people: “Our political freedom is worth little without social uplift...that means struggle.”(127) He wants the people to awake to the need of bringing about social reform. He knows very well that a country that is caught in the deadly mire of obscurantism, superstitions, rituals and obsolete customs cannot make progress. Jayadev wishes Mohini to help him in his mission. He completely devotes himself to the emancipation and upliftment of the villagers:

How could he pause and give himself to his private life at this great moment of history when India, proud with the freedom which he had often dreamed, must reorient her national life on a new social basis? He, too, in his way had his contribution to make to India's developing struggle for social freedom, the foundation of all freedom. This in his heart he believed. (123-24)

Jayadev guides Mohini to teach the village women to read and write. He feels that the ignorance and illiteracy of the villagers should be eradicated: “We're fighting ignorance and superstition, aren't we? We're fighting the false clayfoot gods.”(203) Jayadev is very happy

to see that Harindra, a foreign returned doctor is working in a village to serve the people. He believes that social slaveries are like cactus growth that would renew itself time and again until the roots are cut. His social programmes are: an old man can remarry only when he chooses a widow, banishing the evil custom of early marriage, encouraging inter-caste marriages etc. Jayadev is a social reformer and aims at making Behula a model village. He fights against caste system, untouchability and superstition. Jayadev upholds the values of nationalism and humanism against obscurantism and inhuman customs and rebels against the manmade inequality, oppression and exploitation.

Bhattacharya shows that in an Indian marriage, caste is more important than love. Harindra, a medical practitioner desires to marry Sudha. He is a non-Brahmin, while Sudha is a Brahmin. The caste becomes an obstacle in the way of their marriage. To marry, he has to defy a long time social practice. The villagers of Behula would consider it as an act of sacrilege. Jayadev feels that they should be encouraged towards a revolution: "But what of the rock like barrier of caste? Even the bold impulsive Harindra would find caste hard to surmount, even Sudha's great-uncle would be against the marriage." (158) Jayadev knows that inter-caste marriage is a necessity to make people progress socially. He feels an urge to encourage Sudha to take a revolutionary step against this social evil: "Circumstances and perhaps temperament had cut her out for a social rebel. Only a lead was wanted, a direction. Sudha, aware of her strength, would be a revolutionary force." (162) She had to suppress her passion because of the social slavery of women. Here, Bhabani Bhattacharya shows a ray of hope to take people out of their dark world. As K.R.Chandrasekharan views:

Music for Mohini presents us a picture of a microcosm governed by conventions but it also proclaims that below the placid surface there is the simmering of discontent. The voice of protest is audible and we get the feeling that it will rise in volume and intensity till it is listed to. (Chandrasekharan 50)

The young men in Behula form a group under the leadership of Jaydev. Their aim is to change the existing order. The conservatives in the village call them “ruffians.” In typical Indian villages, widow marriage is considered a bad thing. But Jayadev and his friends determine to root out this evil from their neighbourhood. When Jayadev’s mother comes to know about this social programme, she feels upset and remarks that a widow cannot marry against social sanction. They are thus bent upon stopping child marriage. They want that no girl under sixteen should be allowed to marry. Another social programme they want to implement in Behula is that of abolition of the evil of untouchability. They feel that untouchability is like a sore of the rational social fabric. But to convince the untouchables of this equal status for all is a rather gigantic job for Jayadev and his friends. Even the untouchables look with suspicion at their reformist zeal. Battacharya points out the fact that even these untouchables have a caste system. A scavenger would not like to call a leather worker a brother.

Jayadev’s heart grieves to find the people of Behula in ignorance and rolling in the mire of superstition. As an initial step towards the upliftment programme, he exhorts Harindra, a surgeon to come to Behula and gives him a helping hand. Many hindrances come in their way, but they encounter unexpected triumphs. Once, Harindra’s mother falls sick of pneumonia. The father treats her in the old manner and the situation worsens. But he would not allow Harindra to treat her. When all his attempts to cure her fail miserably, he allows Harindra to treat her. And finally, the old sick mother is saved by Harindra with the aid of his sulfa drugs. He also saves Sudha from typhoid. Later, with the silent approval of Jayadev, Harindra and others, the pool that is a fertile breeding ground for mosquitoes, is cleverly leveled and their campaign to rid the village of malaria is at last crowned with success.

Through *Music for Mohini*, Bhattacharya suggests that the rural India is still unable to shake off the shackles of superstition and orthodoxy. Age-old ways and beliefs still linger in

the rural society. The clash between orthodoxy and modernity remains a glaring problem in Indian society even today. The novelist is very intimate with the customs and beliefs observed in the villages. He wants the establishment of ideal society which is absolutely free from dead conventions and blind beliefs. He desires that people should live by the light of reason and may never lose their way into the dreary deserts of dead habits.

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