

EAST WEST ENCOUNTER IN BHABANI BHATTACHARYA'S *A DREAM IN HAWAII*

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Abstract

Bhabani Bhattacharya's A Dream in Hawaii (1978) reveals the encounter of values between the East and the West. It shows man's struggle to attain total inner peace. The novel deals with the tensions of the ultramodern world, "with its sick hurry and divided aims" (Rao 105). The narrative is a protest against the permissiveness and occultism in the contemporary American society. The story is woven around Swami Yogananda who is professor turned Yogi preaching spiritualism to the Western civilization. Bhabani Bhattacharya in A Dream in Hawaii extends his vision beyond the problems of India to the problems of the sick Western civilization. He very vividly describes the predicament of the materialistic society in need of spiritual food and sustenance. In spite of their spectacular success on the material plane, most Americans are going disenchanted with their values. Thus, in all his novels, Bhabani Bhattacharya makes a protest against different social problems and successfully illustrates them through his maxim that art must have a social purpose. Through his keen observation and interest, he shows a microcosm of India in his novels.

Key Words: *spiritualism, encounter, predicament, materialistic values...*

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Bhabani Bhattacharya's *A Dream in Hawaii* (1978) reveals the encounter of values between the East and the West. It shows man's struggle to attain total inner peace. The novel is written in America in the declining years of Bhattacharya's life with periodical illness. It deals with the tensions of the ultramodern world, "with its sick hurry and divided aims" (Rao 105). The narrative is a protest against the permissiveness and occultism in the contemporary American society.

Swami Yogananda is a Professor turned Yogi. He preaches the spiritualism of the East to the Western civilization. He thinks modern science and technology as essential for the progress and prosperity of the world. Devjani is a typical Indian girl with deep faith in moral values of the East. She is a pure, modest and simple girl and is shocked to know about her mother's illicit love-affair. In Swami Yogananda who was known in past as Professor Neeloy Mookherji, she sees a potential *guru* capable of helping her spiritual crisis. She induces him to renounce the world to lead a spiritual life and preach *Vedanta* to humanity. She establishes a close communication with Yogananda and desires the blending of the Western materialism and the Eastern spiritualism in him. Even after renouncing the world, the Swami finds it difficult to overcome his love for Devjani. His subconscious mind revolts against his attempts for spiritualism and forces him to make love to Devjani in his dream. Yogananda lives in a make-believe world so that he will have no desire for physical love. But his belief proves to be a bubble when Sylvia Koo dressed like Devjani induces him to make love to her in his sleep. He feels ashamed and is convinced that spirituality cannot be expressed by a man who is physically starved. He confesses Devjani that she has been haunting in his dreams. He decides to return from America to India in a hope to lead the life of a common man. Devjani also understands his dilemma and approves his decision to leave America.

Walter Gregson is a typical Western man with his faith only in materialistic values. He has no faith in high moral values of life and pleads for free sex. Despite his sensual pleasure, Walter is not content within. His inner self agitates for something else than mere physical pleasure. Gradually he realises that it is a social crisis in America. With the help of Stella, he arranges a meeting with Swami Yogananda. He defends the Western outlook about sexual permissiveness:

The right to enjoy sex - that's normal. Abstinence – societal or self-imposed - that's normal. In our permissive society abstinence has no validity. (Bhattacharya 59)

Swami observes that Walter is torn within, despite his vehement self-assertion. He recognises the importance of high spiritual values essential for the Western man.

Bhattacharya feels that since the Western society, despite all earthly comforts, is sick and disenchanted, it is the Indian value system that can provide it some solace. In the West the spiritual thirst remains unfulfilled. That may be the reason for the ecstatic and warm reception accorded to Indian Swamis in the West. Swami Yogananda goes to America and is accorded warm reception because he attempts to orient *Vedanta* to the needs of society today.

It is easy to understand why such ecstatic welcome is accorded to Swami Yogananda in Hawaii. Most of the American characters in the novel suffer from malaise of the Western society and seek his intervention so that they can get some peace and tranquility. Jennifer is a young cynical woman who is famous for her cock-tail and dinners. She feels that Yogananda would be able to help her. In the same manner Stella Gregson feels that Yogananda would be able to give her deliverance from the type of life her husband demanded. Devjani too, seeks her self-fulfillment through spirituality. As a student of philosophy at the BanarasHinduUniversity, she finds Neeloy Mookherji a person who can blow a gust of wind in her inner void. She realises that life cannot be wholesome without blending the physical and the spiritual:

Let there be no misgivings, mused Devjani. It was in her American experience that she would find the values she searched for. All the same, she had to admit that this hour with Swami Yogananda she was aware of an inner strength she had not felt before. (186)

Though Yogananda renounces the world at the suggestion of Devjani, he finds it difficult to overcome his love for this vivacious woman who has been attracted towards spirituality by her mother's sexual perversion. Yogananda confesses her:

At Sadhana, where I was so far away from your presence, you were in my dreams at night. Year after year. The truth is that I never got away from Neeloy. (232)

Towards the end of the novel, Walter, a highly materialistic man turns towards spirituality. He realises the spiritual aspect of life as against worldly and the mundane. He begins to feel the futility of his research in the sexual habits of the American women. He feels very bad that he was finally responsible for the nasty exit of Swami Yogananda from America. Thus Walt understands the need for spiritual nourishment of life.

Bhabani Bhattacharya in *ADream in Hawaii* extends his vision beyond the problems of India to the problems of the sick Western civilisation. He very vividly describes the predicament of the materialistic society in need of spiritual food and sustenance. In spite of their spectacular success on the material plane, most Americans are going disenchanted with their values. A pervading meaninglessness in life leads many people to sex, violence or drugs. The materialistic achievements of the Western people have made human life more comfortable, but at the same time they have proved equally disastrous to mankind. The material progress implies the loss of spiritual nature of Western man. This society is outwardly glamorous but is actually stinking. Caught in a malaise, they turn to the East for inner peace and solace. Stella, who persuades Yogananda to come to America needs his benediction. Her personal life is far from happy because she cannot adjust with a person like Walter. While on teaching assignment to India, she comes across Yogananda. She says that this meeting with Swami was no casual encounter.

Stella's friend, Jennifer is in the beginning highly skeptical about the role Yogananda could play in America. His lecture leaves her spell-bound. She attends his next lecture and the next and the next. Thus, she attends in all seven lectures. This socialite young woman, who has lost her husband in a car accident tries fulfillment in sex with men from her own class but she gets no satisfaction. She looks towards Yogananda to give direction to her life.

A Dream in Hawaii presents a convincing picture of the present-day seeking and frustrations of the people of the West. One of the major scholars of Bhabani Bhattacharya,

G.Rai focuses on the intention of the novelist as, “the novel is mainly concerned with the growing sense of disenchantment of the people with the materialistic culture and their frantic search for inner peace” (Rai 45).

Swami Yogananda’s stay in Hawaii does not only make America see its sickness but also makes the Swami see his own inner sickness. In *A Dream in Hawaii* Bhattacharya gives the message that there should be the “integration of values”(Pathak 89): traditional and modern; the Eastern spiritualism and the Western materialism.

Thus, in all his novels, Bhabani Bhattacharya makes a protest against different social problems and successfully illustrates them through his maxim that art must have a social purpose. Through his keen observation and interest, he shows a microcosm of India in his novels. He has not only preached the purposive literature through his views on art, but also followed implicitly through all his novels. He exposes the hypocrisy of man, the outdated traditions, orthodoxy, superstition, poverty and hunger of the sons of the soil and presents the inhuman horror with naked truth. His novels are devoted to the exploration of social reality, economic problems of hunger, poverty, famine, exploitation of man by men, imperialism and nationalism and a number of other problems of the country before and after Independence. Bhattacharya makes the masses aware of their birthright to live as human beings

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