



PROJECTION OF WOMEN'S SELF-DENIAL & REPRESSION: A GENDER STUDY THROUGH BHABANI BHATTACHARYA'S 'SHADOW FROM LADAKH'

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Abstract

Men & women are the equal partners in a nation's growth & development. In their parallel contribution lies the key of the success of a nation. We cannot deny the fact that women population is around 50 percent of the overall world population. So, naturally a woman has every right to be treated equally with man in each & every sphere of life. But unfortunately even in 21st century while we have become more & more refined race as a human, women empowerment & gender equality still remain as one of the goals of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, to be achieved by 2030. So how can we say ourselves progressive & refined, when we are not able to give justice, equality & due share of respect to our equal partners, who have struggled hand in hand in nation building process since time immemorial. Her support & contribution cannot be overlooked, as she was never lagging behind, whether it is a family, social or national front. But whereas on the one hand, Indian women have become so progressive that the women bikers of C.R.P.F. are marking their presence at the Republic Day parade 2020. They are showcasing their daredevil stunts and amazed the world, but their voices are still unheard in many provinces of the nation. Their role & opinion in decision making is still negligible among many sections of the world. If she has to achieve something in society, her path is still full of challenges & blocks.

Since independence several measures are taken by constitution makers & several schemes are launched by central as well as state government especially during the last few decades to open up new venues for women so that they can showcase their talent & give equal participation in nation making. But the situation in this regard is still precarious, as changes in this front are very slow, many literary artists and thinkers have tried to probe the psyche of women to know that where in lies the reason of women's hindered growth. Bhabani Bhattacharya is one such literary figure, who understands feminine sensibility & projects female emotions vividly in all of his novels. Women's voice & her urge to get equal status in society can be heard in all his novels.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Repression, Self-Denial & Self Abnegation

Since independence several remarkable measures are taken by institution makers to

upgrade the living standard of Indian women. Several schemes are launched by central & state

government especially during last few decades to open up new opportunities for women, so that they can progress or move forward to change their life scenario positively. But what is the reason that women's situation is still precarious in many sections of society. Her voice is still unheard. She has to repress herself sometimes for the family or the society. She is not living her life according to her parameters. She is still fighting for self-identity. As dedicated daughters, sisters & wives, they are supporting their families and as true nationalists, they are serving the society & nation by becoming educators, managers, bureaucrats, leaders & more recently they are giving their remarkable contributions in defense services also, which is always supposed to be a male arena. In spite of all these achievements, she is still mentioned as a weak persona so, how can a woman progress & equally contribute in nation making?

The thoughts of Swami Vivekananda on the relevance of gender equality in a nation's progress beautifully sum up that the growth & development of a nation is not possible without the equal participation of both men & women.

"There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing"¹

Many literary artists and thinkers have tried to probe the psyche of women to know that where lies the reason of women's hindered growth. Bhabani Bhattacharya is one such literary figure, who understands feminine sensibility & projects female emotions vividly in all of his novels. In this regard, Indu Sharma remarks: "He is one of the foremost among Indian writers to write about women's emancipation and liberation."²

Bhattacharya believes in the dictum 'Art for Life's Sake', that's why, the theme of all his novels are inspired from contemporary social scenario, but his themes are relevant even today. As we go through his novels, we find that Women's voice & her urge to get equal status in society are echoed in all his novels. Very sensitively, he captures womanhood in all its shades. In his novel *Shadow from Ladakh*, the readers get a chance to meet a

long line of women characters. The characters like Suruchi, Sumita, Rupa, Jhanak and Nandini are portrayed authentically in the novel. The comment of Neelam Singh is appropriate in this regard:

"Bhattacharya's novels depict his immense admiration for Indian women as he gives them either a vital position or at least an equal importance. His women characters also imbibe high principles and are pure in body and spirit, and yet they are endowed with exuberant verve."³

Through the main character of the novel, Suruchi, who is wife of the protagonist Satyajit, Bhattacharya projects the theme of a woman's self-denial and repression. Though other female characters are also examples of self abnegation in the novel, the centre of attraction for the novelist is Suruchi. At the onset of the novel, Suruchi is portrayed as a beautiful & vivacious lady with a melodious voice. She comes to pursue her education at Shantiniketan, India's ancient foreign university. There, she meets her future husband, who is working as a teacher at Shantiniketan. He is portrayed as a fickle minded person by Bhattacharya, as he is not able to decide what he should pursue in his life. After receiving scholarship, he went to Cambridge for higher studies and return back to India only after three years reporting that he was restless at Cambridge. In search of fullness of life, he came to India and decided to live at Shantiniketana, a world university amid natural surroundings, a home & temple in one. Previously, he was also obsessed with the idea of becoming a Buddhist monk in Ceylon and Thailand. Material worlds & riches were having no meaning for him, as he was in a pursuit of inner satisfaction. Bhattacharya reports that he yearns not for wealth & materialism in his life, but for peace & happiness. Satyajit remarks:

"Happiness cannot compete with wealth.....happiness is creative; it has a source of riches within itself. It is fullness of life that makes one happy, not fullness of possessions."⁴

On the one hand, we find him on such a higher plane with ideas too noble & sophisticated, but

very soon we find him to be attracted towards a simple beautiful girl. The attraction was so intense that his brain was struck only with that single image and his eyes were returning to see her again and again. Bhattacharya ironically remarks:

'Here was an astonishing fact. The fullness of life of which the poet had spoken seemed to have taken shape before his eyes, sari draped on a reed mat!'⁵

This was the first impact of Suruchi on Satyajit, the heating moments of their first encounter at Shantiniketan. Both are married in spite of their caste differences. Very soon, they are blessed with a daughter named, Sumita. Bhattacharya reports that the couple was happily living & enjoying the conjugal bliss amid the peaceful natural atmosphere of Shantiniketan. The rising action in the plot of the novel starts, when Satyajit is selected by VinobaBhave, a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, to be in charge of Gandhigram. It was a dream village based completely on Gandhian principals. The story of Suruchi's self-denial & repression starts from the moment, when Satyajit tells her his decision of following Gandhian principles wholeheartedly. One of the Gandhian ideals is Brahmacharya- a life of complete celibacy or a vow of chastity. Suruchi finds it shocking to take a vow of celibacy & follow Brahmacharya at the early age of twenty nine. Though Satyajit offers her full freedom to live her life according to her own ways, as it is against the Gandhian ideology of non-violence to impose your wills & wishes on others. That's why, he makes her free to go for other options. But she can never be free of the web of age old customs and practices, which are deeply rooted in her persona and she seeks her future only with Satyajit & no one else. Bhattacharya remarks:

"She would be his companion in ideas, even if they were so very strange."⁶

Here starts her journey of self -denial. Many times in her life she feels suffocated in the web of imposed ideals & crushed impulses. She suppresses her desire to be a complete woman & a mother of two sons Ajoy and Sanjoy. Being overwhelmed, once she tells about her desire to her only daughter Sumita, but how could she understand an elder

women's desire at this tender age. It is incomprehensible for her. On the other, it is incomprehensible for Suruchi how one's dedication to national service can gain strength & vigour from the state of celibacy.

However, Suruchi completely adapts herself according to Satyajit's rigid principles. She starts to lead a simple life, as wished by her husband. Thus, she represses her own self and crushes her woman instincts. But her crushed desires agitate her time & again. Through Bhaskar, another major character in the novel, who is portrayed as a contrast to Satyajit, rightly comments that one cannot crush his or her natural instincts. It will certainly come to the fore. This is natural human instincts to aspire for a fulfilled life. He proclaims: "Whatever was artificial, imposed from without by a dominating personality, had no chance of permanence."⁷

Bhattacharya gives a sensitive account of women's intrinsic desire to decorate her. He comments: "She wore no gold or silver on her person, there was no place for costly jewelry in Gandhigram- but.....women can do without food, but not without trinkets of this kind or that."⁸ When this issue is raised in the meeting of village council, Suruchi raises her voice of dissent & expresses her viewpoint to the village council. She says that jewelery looks brilliantly beautiful on a young women's physique, as it decorates her persona. Suruchi asks as to how a village council can understand a woman's feelings'. At this came Satyajit voice of disapproval, "We have no place for nonessentials. Besides, such things will encourage frivolity."⁹

Thus Suruchi's voice is suppressed & true to Satyajit's belief, she kept her arms bare. When the village women persuasively gifts her two white conch shell wristlets, at once she gets fascinated, but at the next moment cries abruptly-'No- oh no!' This is the inner voice of her repressed self, which comes to the fore time & again in the novel. Consequently, she remains unadorned, crushes her desire to decorate herself even at the time of youth. She accepts defeat for herself, but this defeat rankles her again & again at different occasions in the novel. Angry with her predicament,

she strips her own arms. But how can she imagine her daughter unadorned. That is the reason, when one day she notices the bare arms of Sumita, while she was busy with spinning wheels, she was struck with horror. She remarks that the bangles and beads are gone. Then filled with self-reproach, she takes a piece of stone, sits on bare earth & struck her wristlets again & again, as her arms have become plump and wristlets are tight. She reddens her arms, punishes herself by saying how can she adorn herself when her daughter's arms are bare. When Bireswar, a close friend of Satyajit and another important character in the novel, notice her doing so, he cries to know the reason for this awkward behavior. She replies miserably that she is now too old to wear trinkets or jewelry.

In the same chapter, we find another example of repression, when Suruchi feels the similar ache again in her heart. During her tour to Moscow, she is fascinated towards a beautiful bracelet of garnets at a departmental store. She begins to imagine that it will look pretty on Sumita's arm. Being curious, she has almost bought the bracelet, but soon is confronted with ground reality. She thinks that how can Sumita accept to wear garnets, when she has no use of even coloured beads? Even she will feel sorry for her that in vain she is living in Gandhigram and sharing her life with Satyajit, an epitome of Gandhian virtues. Then Suruchi reveals herself in dismay:

"Shared? That was not the right word. She was part of Satyajit. (no doubt) the nail on his toe. A strand of hair on his scalp. And it had needed distance for her to find herself after long years had passed."¹⁰

This agonizing self-revelation symbolizes her poor self image, which is outcome of continuous denial of her instincts as a woman. When Satyajit offers her a chance to participate in the conference of 'World Peace Congress' as a delegate, she rejects, as she is not ready to go there. At this, Satyajit replies that she should not underrate herself. But this is his vision about her. Suruchi always feels otherwise. She only sees herself as a shadow or an echo of Satyajit and nothing else. How could she feel confident & strong, when she

herself is crushing her core & even her elementary impulses? Satyajit himself admits later on in the novel, 'how she was vested with beauty & grace at the age of nineteen, when she stepped into his life and how she had endured, unprotesting, the hard impositions he had made'?¹¹

Another instance of repression & self-denial we notice in the novel, when Bireswar comes to see off Suruchi at the platform, on her departure to Gandhigram after attending the meeting of World Peace Congress. Bhattacharya reports that Suruchi was also having tender feelings for Bireswar. She loves his zest for life, his vigour & strength to face life. When he comes with the proposal of accompanying her through the journey, she is overwhelmed with emotions. She keeps waving to him totally oblivious that the platform has passed. At this, a fellow passenger, who was an old, experienced woman, guessed her soft feelings for the departed person and asks abruptly about her relation to the person. She informs to the lady that he is his husband's brother, then abruptly is bound to think why he has not mentioned him as his own brother. Bhattacharya comments that she has cultivated a habit of ignoring such type of inward prodding. The readers come to know that both Suruchi & Bireswar like each other. Later on in the novel, Bireswar even admits his inward feelings for his wife before Satyajit and also discloses that he had waited long, for many years to get a note of consent from Suruchi, who never cared to give even a faintest response or a sign of understanding to him. Bireswar tells Satyajit that if she has wished so, the life story of the three would have been different and he would have lost his wife.

Suruchi's views about the episode of Jhanak are also the expression of her repressed self. Jhanak, is a dalit girl, who defies the values of Gandhigram by deciding to go for a love marriage. She was adamant to fulfil her desires. when the members of village council protests and decides to punish her by observing three days fast as a penance to pray for her redemption. Suruchi forebears everything, but after reaching home, Suruchi had a hot debate with Satyajit on this matter. She marks her protest before Satyajit by saying 'what is wrong, if a young girl wants to

follow her normal instincts. She cries out in anger: "What rights have you to sit as judges, knowing nothing about a young girl's mind? Jhanak is just normal. That's all."¹² She also further adds: "Who could hold her back from her urge, a woman's primal urge to be nothing but a woman?"¹³ A firm voice of dissent comes from her core:

"No, she would not stop Jhanak, who had something she herself had never possessed: courage; the resolve to grasp life between her hands; and the boldness to fight tooth and nail to secure whatever she deeply wanted."¹⁴

When Sumita turns eighteen, Suruchi seems concerned for her marriage. At this, Satyajit asks Ruchi, if she has not realized that Sumita want a life of dedication. She is different from the other girls. The every-girl category does not apply to her. At this Suruchi counters: "No girl wants a life of dedication".¹⁵ When Sumita interposed by saying that she prefers to be different and does not want to follow the set path, Suruchi smiles at her daughter and speaks softly: "No, Sumita you are not different; you cannot be! She turned to her husband, and the smile lingered. "You've molded me into something that you have wanted me to be. Now it's the turn of your daughter!"¹⁶

After her journey to Moscow, Sumita notices that her mother had become a riddle since she has returned from Moscow. She should be satisfied & proud of herself at this remarkable achievement, while she is noticing a new kind of discontentment is in her mother's behavior, which broke to the surface once in a while. But a women's discontent was incomprehensible for Sumita at this tender age. Actually, she was again concerned about the marriage & future of Sumita. The questions that will Sumita ever marry? When will she marry? What would happen if he goes on the footsteps of her father & marry a man, who is eager to fashion himself after Satyajit's ideals, were haunting her? Horrified at her imagination, she is at once tensed and a note of anger and dissent comes to the fore. She cries:

"She could not let that happen. She could not let her own life be repeated in Sumita.

All these years she had stood aside in humility, resigned and helpless."¹⁷

Being a mother, she is always concerned about the future of her daughter. She never wants that the void that is created in her life must be repeated in Sumita's life. Sumita, was a true daughter of Satyajit, wrapped in asceticism, from top to toe-nail. She is called Anti-life by Bireswar. That's why, Suruchi is much concerned regarding her future. But she notices a positive change in her person after her meeting with Bhaskar and later on with Nandini, a lively and zestful niece of Bireswar. Nandini remarks: "The barefooted beauty is going to see herself in a new mirror".¹⁸

Sumita takes off her white garb and feels a new urge to decorate her. Suruchi's joy knows no bounds, when she observes her decorating herself, preferring coloured clothes, adorning herself with jewelry and bright slippers. A girl who was famous in whole Lohapur as a barefooted girl, now has understood the value of well cared, smooth & pretty feet. First, in her life she has felt the value of bright clothes. She feels:

"Clothes did something to the body; that was beyond doubt. And the body did something to the clothes. Her own coarse homespun (that she was wearing since long time).....was just drapery. It concealed you. There had been no thought ever in your head that sari could be more than that, more purposeful."¹⁹

The story of the novel reaches to its peak; when Satyajit starts doing a long series of fast unto death to save the sanctity of Gandhigram following the footsteps of Mahatma. Everyone in the novel seems concerned for his degrading health. Suruchi & Sumita are perplexed and Bireswar is also concerned and angry as well at this irrational behavior of Satyajit. Bireswar, who is the mouthpiece of Bhattacharya in the novel, then gives a very balanced explanation of the situation. Very convincingly, he explains Satyajit the real meaning of following Brahmacharya and also defends the stand of Suruchi authentically. He explains Gandhian principle of Brahmacharya word by word to the readers. He clarifies:

“Brahmacharya- control over the senses, observed in thought as much as in deed. It was harmful to suppress the body, Gandhi had said, if the mind was allowed to go astray. Where the mind wanders, the body must follow sooner or later.....it is better to enjoy through the body than to be enjoying the thought of it”.²⁰

Bireswar accuses Satyajit by saying that he has deserted the whole life of his wife. Suruchi had to live a life of self-abnegation and what he has done all through his life. Was he a true Gandhian follower? Was he following Gandhian ideology in letter & spirit. Was it not a breach of faith to go again and again for moral lapse & do penance a number of times in your life. What is the use of following such principles, when you have no control over your carnal desires or you are not able to control your impulses? You had let your mind be corrupted. Bireswar clarifies that in his grip of passion each & every time he has acted like a man possessed of by the charm of one or other woman and deserted them. A rake could not have acted more inhumanly, harshly, as he has treated them. He says that his fasting is purposeless, futile, uncivilized. It would be better to enjoy the wonders of life. At the end of the novel, Satyajit fills with self-reproach and blames himself for the injustice that he has done to his wife. He miserably admits before Suruchi:

“All these years I have deserved nothing from you and yet my demands have been limitless. At last I see it all with clear sight. And it is too late.”²¹

Bhattacharya reports the readers that tears could have burst out from the eyes of Suruchi, at this emotional outbreak of Satyajit. But nothing happens as her conscience has been trampled into pieces, as it is too late for new beginning. None can return her past years, her time of youth. Now, he is talking about the honest acceptance of every human need, when the years of their life had passed much too quickly and again & again he repeats that ‘it is too late Ruchi’. The silent question in his looks pierced her conscience and she started crying. He at once moved to see her

crying & reminded that incident when he had made a ruthless proposal of complete abstinence and she had replied “You can demand anything from me”.²² Indu Sharma rightly comments:

“In his novels Bhattacharya traces the position of women through the journey undertaken by them from the state of self sacrifice to self realization, from self-denial to self-assertion and from self-negation to self-affirmation.”²³

On the basis of above analysis, we can say that through his novels Bhattacharya projects the journey of a woman vivaciously. Sometimes she is victimized; sometimes she is taking a stand and raising her voice against injustice. At one moment, she is submissive, on the other, she is dominating. On the whole, his novels can be called a beautiful picture gallery having wide range of sparkling women characters delineated minutely & convincingly.

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