Conflict and Compromise in Bhabani Bhattacharya’s Shadow from Ladakh

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ABSTRACT
As the title of the novel suggests, Shadow from Ladakh has been written under the shadow of the Chinese aggression of 1962 and focuses primarily on the theme of synthesis of the steel civilization and the Gandhain way of life. The novel deals with the conflict and compromise between two distinct modes of life represented by Steel town and Gandhigram, the first by Bhaskar Roy and the latter by Satyajit, a true Gandhian in body and soul. Dorothy B. Shimer also expresses this view when she comments: "Bhattacharya emphasizes through the border confrontation that the real essence of the conflict is not the Sino-Indian border war, not the concrete physical confrontation. The opposition is between two ways of life, two sets of values which Bhaskar and Satyajit represent." (B. Shimer, Bhabani Bhattacharya, 76)
The Steel town comes into being in the wake of the Chinese invasion of Ladakh and, as the conflict grows, it spreads to threaten the very existence of Gandhigram, to save which Satyajit decides to undertake his fast unto death. This brings a change of heart in Bhaskar to accept the need and importance of the village, symbolizing a whole concept, propounded by Gandhi.

Keywords—Delegates, Speech, Border

I. INTRODUCTION
The novel begins with Suruchi, the wife of Satyajit, returning from the peace conference in Moscow. The Air Hostess resembles her daughter Sumita whom she expects to be waiting at the airport to receive her. When the plane crosses over the Himalayas she is struck by the moon-lit beauty of the snow-clad peaks and remembers Ladakh which has made headlines on the day she left Delhi. The words of the Chinese delegate still resound in her ears which reflect the typical Chinese attitude when she had said: "Peace, everlasting peace cannot be won without war. War is the only way to world peace. War to end all wars." (8)

At the airport she receives a letter from Sumita that in the wake of Chinese invasion a threat for Gandhigram's existence is brewing at the hands of Steel town and they have been forced to stay in the village. The threat should result in a long drawn struggle and Suruchi is surprised to feel the strange relationship between the happenings in Ladakh and small village, a thousand miles away.

Gandhigram, a small village where Satyajit lives with his wife and daughter, had been found by Vinoba and named after Gandhi after his death. It has emerged as a model village to prove that "want of happiness rather than want of riches ... that is our problem." (14) Happiness is creative and it is the fullness of life that makes one happy, not fullness of possessions.

Satyajit had met Suruchi at Shantiniketan where he had started his career as a teacher after returning from Cambridge. She was his student and once noticing her in a group of early morning he proposes to her and despite their being from different castes the two are married. The relationship grows stronger in intimacy because she loves him as much as no man deserved to be loved more. Then comes Sumita after two years of their marriage.

One day during his visit to Shantiniketan, Gandhi himself proposed to him to work at Sevagram, a model village symbolizing his concept. Life there meant hard struggle because action could be their only means of communication with villagers. Satyajit asked Suruchi to stay back at Shantiniketan but she could not think of living away from Satyajit.

Again they were uprooted from Sevagram and made to settle in Gandhigram, a few hundred miles away. Like the ancient Yogs, Satyajit discards his surname to be casteless. In all his journey of service and sacrifice, Suruchi accommodates with him as if she were clay in his hands to be shaped at will.

Despite all the hardships life is pleasant for the couple but once she notices strangeness in his behavior. The familiar signal of squeezing her hand, whenever he had wanted her, does not come for a long time. Suruchi is determined to find the reality and offers herself without being asked. He responds to her love making but very soon he gets lost somewhere as if he were facing a conflict within himself. Gandhi had given a call for the observance of celibacy by doing the national service. He asks her to marry someone but she decides to stick to him like Ba had done to Gandhi.

Gandhigram was not just a village but a model of a new social order where all were truly equal. All land belonged to the cooperative and food was distributed according to needs. Other needs were fulfilled locally and economic self-sufficiency was the set aim.

The encounter thus becomes an encounter of the East and the West. Satyajit represents the Gandhian thinking of rural development whereas Bhashkar stands...
for modern industrialization. Satyajit finds Bhashkar his equal .... well – built, about his own height, a man who fought hard for whatever he wanted. This time he wants Satyajit's Gandhigram. Bhashkar finds Satyajit a social philosopher in his right, working forward from the point where Gandhi had left.

Sumita reaches the spot to be told by Satyajit of the plan of a blast furnace to be erected there. Bhashkar's remark shows his attitude when he says: "There is no room today for that kind of sentimentality. It's the question of our survival. We have to get steel, more and more, at any price. The pace of production must quicken." (31)

Sumita, also a Gandhian in her way, asks him: "What about human obligations?" (31)

Bhashkar speaks with the firmness of conviction: "Even human obligations must yield ground to national interest." (31)

Bhashkar stands for production irrespective of vice that Satyajit feels, is endemic in all their blue prints, and argues that vice is an essential thing in human life. He says: "Let me tell you, sir : Vice is the darkness that gives value to light. No darkness, and light is hurtful. Let there be some virtue, some vice. Let them be juxtaposed, balanced." (32)

He goes on to add:
"Virtue and vice together give life its colour, savor. That's what I've experienced personally. One without the other could easily destroy us." (33) But Bhashkar cuts him short and adds : "So is vice within limits. With restraint. Vice may well be a way of self realization. It may be ......." (34)

II. CONCLUSION

While working in the United States, Bhashkar had met a visiting minister from India who touched him deeply, when he referred to India's need of rapid industrialization and men like Bhashkar with their dedicated work. So Bhashkar had come from America, working ceaselessly in the Steel town but then comes Ladakh. Bhashkar realizes that it is a manifestation of Mao's designs against India's rapid economic progress, which could be a road block of his imperialistic expansion in the form of influence over Asia, Africa and the rest of the world. The answer could be steel, the spine of economy, the honor of people and shield of their freedom.

As he is lost in his ideas of rapid industrialisation of India, the spell is broken by the call of his Secretary Mrs. Sarojini Mebra who reminds him that he had not taken his food that day. She reaches his chamber with coffee and homemade fruit cake. She is not only his Secretary but a guardian who keeps a motherly watch on his activities. Even in the midst of huge machines and strict official routine, a new type of human relationship grows there and makes life sweet.

In spite of his absorption in his ideas of rapid growth through industrialization and heavy responsibilities Bhashkar is not able to remove Sumita from his mind. A strange looking girl, eyes too big for her face, white garbed, without any adornment, too calm to be attractive but she casts a strange fascination over him and haunts him even in the late hours of night.

Suruchi has always wanted Sumita to be like any other girl but the impact of Satyajit over her is too deep to allow her anything except austerity. While she was in Moscow she wanted to buy a bracelet for Sumita but she instantly gave up the idea when she realized that she was being brought up in the true likeness of Satyajit and these earthly things had no meaning for her. She was not just sharing his ideas but she had become a part of Satyajit's self. In Moscow she also realized that Gandhigram had become a spirit, the spirit of man striving to transcend the physical urges of life.

At home Suruchi refers to the Chinese delegate and her emphasis on war which reflects the current Chinese attitude but Satyajit, a chronic believer in the nobility of human soul, still hopes and believes that a peaceful solution would be worked out. He even asks her not to mention the delegate in the speech, she was to deliver soon after, to the villagers. But the woman weighs too heavy on her mind to be avoided and she mentions her, but with a caution: "We shall not rush to a conclusion .............. We shall give our Chinese sister the full benefit of doubt. At the same time we shall keep our eyes open to realities. We cannot afford to live in a paradise where we think all's bound to be well." (56) She sounds more realistic in her appraisal of the situation than Satyajit whose optimism is soon broken when news of the Chinese aggression comes.

Bhashkar does not take the path of least resistance as suggested by his G.M., Ramaswamy, because he is young and impulsive and impatient. He cannot be above fifty when it is believed that one becomes wiser under the weight of years and he is not sure if, by then, the old urge of youth would remain in him. He can easily acquire the village on the other side of Steel town but he wants to establish that there cannot be two Indias, back to back, gazing at opposite horizons, ready to march off and get further and further apart. He wants India to taste modern materialism, and let life be happier, easier and freer.

He plans to build the meadow house as a weapon in his fight against Gandhigram and his chance meeting with Gopul, the flute boy, and his eagerness to ride a vehicle, gives him the idea that he could get his recruits for the fight from among the people and Gandhigram itself.

Bhashkar's response highlights the emerging conflict between Gandhian set of values and modern industrialization and he says significantly: "Voluntary poverty is no answer to our country's problems." (89) He feels that with industrial progress higher standards can be achieved within a short time. Sumita puts forth the views learnt from Satyajit thus: "We also believe in action. We are trying to build a new social order." (90) This fails to convince Bhashkar and Sumita speaks like a visionary:
"May be we live ahead of the times. May be
we live in an age yet unborn." (91)

But to Bhashkar her happiness is only a myth and he tells her:
"Satyajit is a sage out of the ancient Ramayana. Reborn after three thousand years, and filled with remembrance. With no idea of time having gone by. And you, you are, so to say, his alter ego". (90-91)

Satyajit's philosophy could not be for masses who have to live in the present and struggle for bare survival.

His perception of Chinese problem also differs from that of Satyajit and he calls it neo-imperialism, the result of China's jealousy of India's economic growth. And even if they do not attack India they would keep her strained, forcing to spend a lot on defense. Sumita tries to remind him that there could be another view also and he admits sarcastically: "Yes, The Satryjit way. The way of dangerous delusion." (91)

The lines of conflict have been clearly drawn with two men of great potential and lodged on opposite sides. The conflict promises to be deeply absorbing and the only sad part being the certain defeat of one. As a positive result of the meeting, the flash in the face of Sumita sticks in the mind of Bhashkar and he can't forge even when engrossed in files. A relationship of great value seems to be taking shape without any effort on the part of either.

Mrs. Mehra is more than a mere Secretary to Bhashkar and remains worried about the happiness of her boss. She sends a matrimonial advertisement in a newspaper without the knowledge of Bhashkar and when letters are received she puts the file before him. Bhashkar is surprised to see a file containing letters and photographs and reflects over the irony of situation. Nobody knows how many times the picture will have to travel before it can find acceptance, to give herself body and soul to an unknown man and live with him for all time. He feels that industrialization is a solution of this problem also. For Mrs. Mehra keeping the secret inside her is a problem and she opens out before her husband to reveal her concern like a mother: "There was no choice. The C.E. has a mother; you know that. That mother hasn’t cared so far whether her son gets married or not. It means nothing to her that her son lives just by himself in the twelve room bungalow. What good are all the hundred lights in that sprawling house, its high, red-tiled roof? Without a woman and without children there is only darkness." (98)

The Gandhian in Satyajit is disturbed by the developments on India's China border and he declares to lead a Peace Mission to the disputed land and says: "The demand for peace will be our only weapon. And faith in the spirit of man our only shield." He regards the current crisis as only a temporary aberration after which the two great peoples will be friends again. He includes Sumita in the Mission and she is filled with joy but Suruchi feels hurt because Satyajit has relied more on the daughter. The secret of matrimonial advertisement is leaked and the wives of the big ones start a race to have the C.E. close to them. But every call is refused because the C.E. does not accept social engagements. The ladies change their tactics and try draw close to Mrs. Mehra because there is a feeling that she is the C.E.'s guardian.

REFERENCES