Dimensions of Freedom in Bhabani Bhattacharya’s So Many Hungers

Neetu Chaudhary
Research Scholar, CCS University Campus, Meerut, INDIA

ABSTRACT
The novels written between pre-independence and post-independence period invariably touch upon the national movement for political independence because the long years of struggle and sacrifice have shaped and colored every experience of Modern India. In this scenario Mahatma Gandhi and his ideology can never be lost sight of several writers of this period who have introduced the freedom movement for national independence in their novels. Raja Rao's Kanthapura embodies an earnest record of freedom struggle and the essential Gandhi who led the Indian people. Mahatma's presence is felt everywhere and Raja Rao Projects him through the hero, Moorthy the leading figure of the novel and ‘Gandhi’ of his village folk.

It is with this goal in mind that Bhattacharya selects a variety of significant themes of his time, including the theme of political independence, social problems and tradition-modernity conflict Bhattacharya does not think that a writer should not treat a contemporary social or historical event because he lacks the necessary perspective to understand and evaluate its implications. On the other hand he firmly believes that:-

"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 an imaginative evocation." (Literatures and Social Society, Perspective on Bhabani Bhattacharya, 5)

Keywords—Law, Village, Quit India

I. INTRODUCTION

The aim of the present paper is to show dimensions of freedom in Bhattacharya’s famous novel So Many Hungers!. The novel was published in Oct. 1947, two months after India became free. It would, indeed, be surprising if a novel seeing the light of day at such a momentous period in the history of the country did not deal at least partly with the theme of freedom. No wonder the author, who had witnessed closely the entire national movement, deals with the major events preceding independence. The novel takes up the theme of political independence and its history can be traced through the publication of his various novels. The Civil Disobedience and the Quit India movements have been particularly treated in So Many Hungers! along with the Bengal Famine, which is its main theme some of the important phases of the national movement also are delineated in the narrative. At several places in the novel and also in other novels, Bhattacharya uses the word 'Hunger' as a refrain. One such reference in So Many Hungers! is to the people's hunger for food and freedom. The twin hunger for food and for freedom is the central theme of the novel. The Bengal Famine of 1943 and the Quit India Movement of 1942 figure prominently in the book. In this novel, we find that the masses are still uniting and struggling under Gandhi for the Civil Disobedience and the Quit India Movements.

The plot of the novel is woven out of two main stands—the story of the young scientist and his family, and the story of the peasant girl, Kajoli and her family. Rahoul's story in this novel "is a representation in miniature of the struggle for freedom". He is a staunch nationalist. He realizes quite early in his life, after witnessing the sights and scenes of the Bengal Famine, that to remove colossal suffering is of paramount importance and that the country should be politically independent to manage its own affairs. So he puts his research activities aside and under the inspiration of Devata, his grandfather and a local Gandhi, jumps into the freedom struggle. Devata participates in the Civil Disobedience movement by organizing a large number of peasants and fishermen, who make salt from seawater and in this way defy the law. He and thousands of others are sent to prison for breaking the salt law. The movement spreads over the entire country. It gets such a momentum that almost everyone is ready to break the salt laws and be rushed into prison. Consequently, all over India no fewer than a hundred thousand men and women go to prison in a month.

Rahoul and his younger brother, Kunal are the sons of a lawyer, Samarendra Basu, living in Calcutta. Samarendra's father, Devesh Basu does not live with the family. The small family represents in a way a cross section of middle class Indian society with its variety and contrasts. Rahoul has a D.Sc. degree from Cambridge, where he had carried on research under a distinguished scientist. Before going to Cambridge, he had, like thousands of other young men, contemplated joining the independence movement and seeking arrest, but his father has shrewdly managed to send him away to England. At the time, the story begins, he is on the staff of a college in the city and continues his research on Cosmic Rays. He is happily married and a daughter is born to him. Rahoul's desire is to throw in his lot with the people struggling for freedom and self respect, but for the time being he refrains from action and the impression is created among the British officers that he
is on the verge of a great scientific discovery that will turn the tide of war against the Fascists and Japan. Nevertheless, he is a staunch nationalist and he cannot forget the hypocrisy of the foreigner rulers who talk about the four freedoms, which, so far as India is concerned, do not include the freedom to be free.

Samarendra's father, Devesh Basu, is a Gandhian Character who shows the true feelings of patriotism. He lives in the village, Baruni. The people of the village have so much affection for him that they all call him by the name of Devata. He is incapable of feeling superior to or different from the simple people of the village and is accepted as a friend, philosopher and guide. One cannot think of two characters more diametrically opposed to each other than Devata and his son. The two young men, Rahoul and Kunal are more at home with their grandfather than with their father. Rahoul has been deeply influenced by Devata. Before his father has sent him to Cambridge for study, he had sought the advice of his grandfather and the latter had told him without hesitation that the call of the country came first and that Cambridge could wait. When Rahoul explained that stay at Cambridge would give him sufficient knowledge of the English people to enable him to fight them after his return to India, Devata had asked him to remember that their fight was with the British rulers and not the British people. Devata is especially fond of one peasant family in Baruni. This family consists of a peasant, his wife and three children, two boys Kunal and Onu, and a girl Kajoli, the heroine of the novel. The head of the family and elder boy are in prison for their participation in the national movement of freedom. Devata feels that he is the need of the family and always refers to Kajoli's mothers as his daughter and to Kajoli as his grand-daughter. He shares their simple food and unhesitatingly takes his grandson Rahoul with him to join them at the meal when he visits Baruni. Devata gives the villagers inspiration and guidance when they are in difficulties. When they join the national movement, he advises them to be non-violent. Early in the novel, sometime after Rahoul's first visit to Baruni, Devata himself is arrested and taken to prison. As he is about to be taken away, he speaks these words of exhortation to the villagers:

"The supreme test has come: Be strong, Be true, Be deathless." (63)

Later Devata is taken to Dehradun and when the Quit India Movement is at its zenith, he undertakes a fast in prison.

Rahoul, inspite of his known nationalistic leanings, is left alone for a time by the government because of the possibility of his discovering death ray. His difficulties, however, increase as the days pass. The police is suspicious about his activities and employ a student to spy on him. This student sneaks into the laboratory in the absence of Rahoul and spies into his notes. Rahoul has been warned in time about the police on a wrong track by writing fake notes and pretending to be on the verge of discovering the death ray. Ranouel's heart is with the people of his country fighting for their freedom. The leaders of the people are arrested one after another and imprisoned. The arrest and trial of Nehru in Gorakhpur has stirred the country and his dignified and defiant statement made at the trial has caught the imagination of the people and instilled courage and heroism in their minds. As a result of the scorched-earth policy followed by the British rulers in Bengal in anticipation of Japanese invasion of India and the heinous activities of a few profiteers, thousands of people are rendered destitute and forced to quit their homes and to track to Calcutta in search of food. Rahoul is deeply touched by the sight of their suffering. A few of his experiences stand out prominently. Rahoul is more and more convinced that a foreign government is incapable of solving the problems of the country and that freedom is an imperative need. When students in large number join the Quit India Movement, he feels that it is his duty to be with them. He seeks the advice of his grandfather who is in prison in Dehradun and then takes the plunge. He addresses the students and proclaims the view that British should leave India:

"You have done us some good along with much evil. For the good you have done you have been paid. The accounts have been settled. Now for God's sake, quit!" (67)

The novel portrays the Quit India Movement as it surged in Bengal. The events are described from the point of view of protagonist Rahoul Bose. The novelist has employed the stream of consciousness technique of James Joyce, Virginia wolf and Proust to record the events which led to Quit India Movement and which flew like a stream in the form of synergetic movement in Rahoul's consciousness. The author thus describes these events through the musing and interior monologues of Rahoul.

II. CONCLUSION

Rahoul has a great admiration for his national leaders. Referring to Gandhi's arrest Bhattacharya makes the bitterly ironic comment:

"Odd that a noble-hearted man who had attained the peak of civilization and culture must share the grim lot of thieves, gangsters, cutthroats, for the sole crime of speaking out true faith in democracy: And the bitter mockery..... the prison warden was one who was pouring out his own people's life-blood in a struggle to rescue democracy from its chains." (58-59)

Rahoul comes across Nehru's historic words at his trial in Gorakhpur prison before he is arrested on October 31, 1940, as the second Satyagrahi in the individual Civil Disobedience Movement launched by Gandhi as a moral protest against British government's dragging India into war against the wishes of its people:

"I stand before you sir, as an individual being tried for certain offence against the state. You are a symbol of that state. But I am something more than an individual also." (83)

I, too, am a symbol at the present moment, a symbol of Indian nationalism, resolved to break away from the British Empire and achieve the independence of India. It is not me that you are seeking to judge and condemn but rather the hundreds of millions of the people of India, and that is a large task even for a proud
Empire. Perhaps it may be that, although I am standing before you on my trial, it is the British Empire itself that is on its trial before the war of the world. There are more powerful forces at work today than courts of law; there are elemental urges of freedom and food and security which are moving vast masses of people. (43)

Rahoul reflects over the excitement and enthusiasm of his people who are not afraid of being swallowed up without trial in man-made hell. Indians bubble over with energy, enthusiasm and courage. Their hope knows no bounds. Like Rahoul they are possessed with such ideas:

"The soul of race as the soul of man does not grow only in terms of time-space........... Once in a while, through the catalysis of experience it grows far more in moments than in years. This is such a moment of quick growing, and India after August will never be the India of before."(69)

The British government uses all the might to crush the Indians. All the top leaders are arrested for their participation in the movement. As the news of the national leaders spread to Calcutta, students and people in a very large number, restore to agitation.

"Then the people's revolt unplanned, yet unsanctioned by the national movement. A swift flare up of wrath against the intolerable tyranny that had cast the people's leaders into prison. And Rahoul, like his people had felt the flare up in his blood. And events had snatched him along, forcing him in their frantic rush. (65)

Among the three novels of Bhattacharya which deal with the pre-independence period, So Many Hungers! is one most concerned with the freedom struggle with its tensions and conflicts. Consequently, this novel has comments to make on the alien government and the British people. Bhattacharya is very critical of the British administration and the ruler's attitude towards the people and to the problems of the land. He mentions the Atlantic Charter satirically and hints at the hypocrisy of the ruler who claims to be fighting for democracy while denying democratic freedom to India. The repressive measures taken by the government against nationally minded citizens are referred to in the novel. Devata tells his grandson how the school run by him at Baruni has aroused the suspicion of the government which has as a result appointed spies to watch it.

The novel vividly describes the national movement. The old and the young, irrespective of caste, creed and sex, plunge into it. It is with great difficulty that Samarendra can keep his son Rahoul, a student then away from the movement by sending him abroad for higher studies. The movement spreads in villages because the leaders give top priority to village reconstruction work, since it is thought to be the very basis of Indian way of life to come. When the movement emphasizes the importance of mass literacy, the alien rulers regard it as dangerous for it "would, they known make the trampled ones conscious of their birth right, the right to live as human beings." (99-100)

The novel closes with the words of Tagore, voluntarily seeking imprisonment of men so that the country may be free. Rahoul represents one class of freedom-fighters, the upper middle-class intellectuals. The novel reflects the fact that the national movement embraced all sections of the population—men and women, young and old, intellectuals and workers, people from the cities and people from the countryside. One of the hungers that the novel deals with is the hunger to be free.

REFERENCES


