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THE BLENDING OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN BHABANI BHATTACHARYA'S MUSIC FOR MOHINI

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Abstract:

Bhabani Bhattacharya occupies an important place in the galaxy of Indo-Anglian novelists after the first trio Anand, Narayan and Raja Rao. He is one of the leading Indian English novelists of the older generation.

KEY WORDS:

Tradition and Modernity , Bhattacharya's Music , Indo-Anglian novelists .

INTRODUCTION:

Bhattacharya's second novel, *Music for Mohini*, is a detailed study in the old and the new values of life in Indian Society. The novel deals with Indian Society which is in the melting pot because of various conflicting ideologies each being championed by one group or another. The harmonious blending of tradition and modernity, village and city is the predominant theme in the novel. In order to bring out the virtue of moderation and integration, and to emphasize his major theme of blending the modern and the conventional, the novelist uses the dialectical method of contrast in depicting his characters.

There are two sets of characters: first, those who uphold the old, established values of the past and secondly, those who plead for a change and deviation from the dead past in favour of the new and unconventional value-pattern that suits the modern age. The novelist juxtaposes different antagonistic characters in order to bring at their ideological conflict, and then finally leads them towards a reconciliation so as to create a harmony in life. 'The two strong pillars of orthodoxy' in the novel are old Mother and Jayadev's mother. Mohini's father doubts all traditional beliefs but wears the amulet to ward off evil eye. Mohini, the heroine, comes to Behula with her values established by city standards. But she triumphs the moment of crisis when she accepts the values of the old world, Jayadev, the hero, plans to re-orientate the values and patterns of Hindu life. He yearns for a revival of the values of traditional practices to set the community on the path of real progress.

Jayadev's 'Big House' stands for certain values.
It is 'an old proud house of an old proud family.
A tradition within a tradition'.¹

The House lays certain restrictions on the ladies of the House. The mistress of the House is not allowed to walk in public. Even at a critical moment, when Jayadev is bitten by a snake the mother refuses to allow Mohini to walk in public. She says, 'It is not be coming' (p.170). According to the tradition of the Big House, the bride enters the village only in a palanquin. Mohini too enters the village in palanquin. The

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ladies of the House are not allowed to sit for a meal along with men. Music is tolerated only for the purpose of worship. It is part of the tradition of the House to conserve the family. 'The House lived in the shadow of the family tree' (p.108)

Old mother, Mohini's grandmother too has certain orthodox views. But both are different in their feelings. Old mother does not disregard every thing that is modern, unlike Jayadev's mother. She accepts the change that comes necessarily with passage of time. A clash arises between she and her son over Mohini. She objects sending Mohini to convent. She considers Mohini singing over All India Radio as a 'disgrace to the family name' (p.17). Yet she has an adoptable nature. She comprises with modernity to some extent. She enjoys English pictures. She is also against the rigid old fashions and the fast moving circles of modern life. She is a minor counterfoil to Jayadev for like him, she desires to delve back into the remote past of India for solving the present day problems. The conflict in her mind is resolved when she asked her son to bring Mohini to Calcutta, when she hears of the strict orthodoxy of Jayadev's mother. She disregards extremity both in tradition or in aping of westernism. She is set on a synthesis of the best in both.

Mohini's father, the professor, is a typical city-dweller who mocks at all traditional beliefs. He does not accept any of his mother's stern injunctions as to the codes of behaviour. He considers the old orthodox ways as the yoke of Indians: 'They have enslaved us' (p.166). But he wears an amulet to shield him off from the evil eye. He does not want to sacrifice Mohini to his mother's antiquated outlook. He sends Mohini to a convent. He is determined to mould her in a modern way, which is his way. He eventually sees 'the necessity for a cultural synthesis of a horoscope and a microscope' (p.52).

Mohini's personal encounter with a different attitude to tradition and her response to it occupies the major part of the novel. She faces conflicts, both in her own house and in her husband's house. When the first bridegroom party inspects her from head to top, she feels greatly insulted and questions the necessity of marriage. She asks,

'Why must I get married? So many girls these days remain unwed, they work and earn their living, why can't I do it?' (p.42).

As a bride, she encounters 'new' traditional rituals and wonders whether she would fit into that ultimate and time honoured continuation of rites and ceremonies. As Roop-Lekha, her 'village-bred' 'City-wed' sister-in-law puts it, they have been 'pulled up by the roots'. Though outwardly in action, Mohini adapts herself to village life. The readjustment of her mental values and expectations is a constant, heart-wrenching struggle. The depth of her husband's love gains more importance than before. She even agrees to a company her mother-in-law to the temple and offer blood to appease the goddess and to please Jayadev's mother. At the same time with her city education Mohini builds the spirit of 'modernity' around the conservative code of the village.

The 'music' Mohini faces after her marriage is totally new. It takes time for her to adjust herself in the strange atmosphere. With her sense of confidence she faces the music with fortitude and brings out a total change in the outlook of the inmates of the Big House and makes it musical. She re-establishes harmony within herself through a mental preparation.

Jayadev, the hero is a 'strange mixture of the old and new'. He is the only character who has no internal conflict. He has the true legacy of the past and to that is added the modern culture. He takes concrete steps towards this direction when he rejects the university job to settle down in his village and marries city-bred girl to create harmony between old and the new in his own family, Mohini, for the 'new' and his mother for the 'old'. Jayadev is able to answer the needs of the villagers in spite of his 'city' education. But with his 'city-bred' wife, it is a different issue altogether. After a time he painfully realizes that it is not his work (of village uplift) alone that stands between them. 'The Big House stood between them. The unaccustomed ways of life oppressed her and he who had imposed them on her must face the result, (p.125). This realization gives Mohini the necessary encouragement to participate 'in the great task ahead'. He shatters certain dead practices of the House and the villagers for progress in life. The conflict in the House is resolved by his plans. He is the passive demonstrator of all reforms in Behula.

Jayadev's friend, Harindra stands for an already established synthesis between tradition and modernity. His father had been practicing the old style medicine in Behula for half a century. Being aware of the material benefits of western medical training, he makes his son study in a western style medical school. His wish is to get his son into service in a city hospital and earn high, steady salary. But Harindra resolves to set up a practice in the village. The father sees this as a threat to the sanctity of the Ayurveda tradition which still had strong roots in the village. Harindra faces trials due to his father's deep-rooted orthodox belief. He is forbidden by his father to administer sulfa drugs to his mother, till she is on her death-bed, when all ayurvedic medicines have failed to have effect on her. Finally, he saves his mother by applying the western style medicine.

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The conflict in the minds of the characters is resolved in unity in diversity of live and civilization. Hence, 'a synthesis is achieved in practice as well as in theory'.²

Thus, Bhabani Bhattacharya quite successfully blends the two contrary values-tradition and moderniy-in Music for Mohini, and the novel virtually becomes the novelists plea to such a fusion in every sphere of life.

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2. James Vinson, Contemporary Novelists (London, St. James Press Ltd., 1976), p.136.



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