
IMPACT OF GANDHI ON WOMEN IN BHATTACHARYA'S FICTION

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Abstract: The position of women in India has been subject to great changes over the ages. From being equal to her male counterpart on all planes in the ancient age, to the position of living behind the purdah in medieval ages to the level of fighting for equal rights in this modern age a woman has to traverse in the path paved by the social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Jyothiba Phule, Mahatma Gandhi etc. Today women prove their mettle in almost all fields - be it political, economic, government or social sectors. The seeds for the emancipation of women from the vicious grip of the male dominated society were sown by these reformers in the form of women education, abolition of child marriages, encouraging widow remarriages active participation in politics and fighting against evils like dowry system, sati and the likes breaking the physical, emotional and psychological barriers. Highly influenced by the principles and ideals of Gandhi the writers of the Gandhian era presented in their writings the position of women in India, her struggle for existence and her turbulent journey to find space for herself in this male dominated society. Since Gandhi has greater influence on the society of his age, the writers of that period have presented the impact of Gandhi on both men and women who have exhibited courage in fighting against all odds and find rightful place for themselves in the society. Bhabani Bhattacharya is one such writer who as an advocate of women's rights presented the power and space of Indian women in almost all his novels. This paper focuses on Gandhi's impact on people during freedom struggle and its influence on women folk and their decision to come out of their shells and fight for their rights.

Keywords: Gandhian Philosophy, Influence, Suppression, Emancipation, Women Power.

Introduction: Mahatma Gandhi is such an enigmatic socio-political personality whom no one can ever ignore or forget. He has left an indelible mark in the history with his simple living and great ideologies and every aspect of human consciousness is highly influenced by his glowing personality. There is absolutely no discipline that he had left untouched. Gandhi is a multi-faceted personality. He has been the only Indian who attained worldwide fame not only a good human being but also a great leader. His message is a source of inspiration and strength to the people of all times. He always felt the pulse of India and its people on whom he could exert a tremendous influence and preach his ideology. As a writer of great significance, he has influenced many writers of different disciplines such as history, politics, philosophy, literature, sociology and so on and all these books are focused on his ideals and ideologies. While musing on the Indian English Literature, one can easily find Gandhian influence on the writings of all the Indian English writers belonging to the age in between 1930 - 1960.

Gandhi has given new strength and new confidence to Indian languages that suffered contempt, neglect, indifference and disgrace for a long time. He insisted on high thinking and simple living and these qualities were reflected and highlighted by the Indian English writers of the time. They, in their writings portrayed the real picture of the then society from various angles thereby presenting the influence of Gandhi on Indian villages and towns giving us a chance to probe on how Gandhi and his ideologies brought a sea change in their thoughts and their way of living. The writers of various languages who made Gandhi a part of their stories were either directly or indirectly in touch with Gandhi in those days. Gandhi in those days was so much a part and parcel of any literary genre of that period and he made an appearance in many dramas, novels, stories and poems. In many cases, the Gandhian writers especially

the novelists and short story writers made Gandhi a character in their novels or presented a local personality in the image of the Mahatma. Their writings were immensely burdened with Gandhian idealism, life style, his teachings and anti-colonial stands. Gandhi's insistence on humble living and ideal thinking are reflected in the writings of the trio – Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan – portrayed the real picture of the then society from various perspectives. Almost all their novels represent events which are distinct features of Gandhi's preaching – unity among all religions, protests of non-violence, abolition of untouchability, spread of universal brotherhood, religious tolerance, honesty, integrity, belief in truth etc.

His strong belief that Swaraj can be achieved with the unity of people is the crux of Raja Rao's **Kanthapura**. The novelist reiterates that community development is possible only by following Gandhi's teachings and applying his principles. Same views are expressed by Bhattacharya but in a different way. He grew up in an age when the nation was struggling for its independence and human rights. Since this movement has affected every segment of our national life like political, economic, social and literary, Bhattacharya was fully engrossed with the feeling of nationalism which was reflected in all his writings.

As Bhattacharya believes that novels should have a social purpose, his stories are not only filled with historical realities, but also with social evils such as poverty, corruption, ignorance, superstitions, exploitation, greed, sexual perversion etc. In presenting these problems, Bhattacharya is much influenced by Gandhian thought. The Gandhian view of life is presented in each of his first five novels in minute detail. The characters follow Gandhian ethics like truth, non-violence, peace, chastity and self-control. Devta in *So Many Hungers!*, Jayadev in *Music for Mohini*, The Minstrel and the Grandma in *A Goddess Named Gold*, Satyajit in *Shadow from Ladakh* are presented in the image of Gandhi. In *So Many Hungers!* the author presents a character called Devta on the lines of Gandhi who upholds the Gandhian ideals of non-violence and passive resistance. *Music for Mohini* pleads for rural uplift, social reconstruction and adult education as preached and practiced by Gandhi in his life. In *He Who Rides a Tiger* the protagonist fights for the cause of the poor and the downtrodden for whom Gandhi waged untiring war throughout his life. *A Goddess Named Gold* has a Gandhian character, the wandering minstrel, who guides the destiny of a small village with his songs of a glorious past and promise of a bright future which would be the outcome of economic development in free India. *Shadow from Ladakh* is deeply saturated with Gandhian references, thought and imagery. The village Gandhigram practically stands for Gandhian ideals and principles of Non-violence in contrast to the materialistic progress of the Steeltown. In the novel the author pleads for the synthesis of Gandhian values of moral regeneration and modernism born in the wake of scientific and technological development.

Almost all the novels of Bhattacharya are deeply rooted in Gandhian philosophy and ideology and all deal predominantly with the common man and conflict with the dominant forces in society in a simple, direct and natural manner. Apart from this, Gandhi's influence on Bhattacharya is so profound that he has written two books on Gandhi, *Gandhiji, the Writer: The Image As it Grew* (1969) and *Mahatma Gandhi* (1977) in which he shows how Gandhi paved the way for the writers of his age to focus on the realistic portrayal of life in India: "Inspired by him, they turned towards the depiction of the life of the common man, the poor and the illiterate, particularly in the villages. Their prose style became less ornamental, less designed for the highbrow scholar.... There was a reaction against obsolete values. The writers drew largely on life for their themes and new horizons opened up before them" (Bhattacharya, 1969: 228-29). He believes that all the sufferings of man emanate from the oppression of man by man, of the weak by the strong, and of the innocent by the cunning. In novel after novel he zealously exposes and attacks the social evils of contemporary society, and exhorts his fellow countrymen to a more compassionate concern for human welfare. His conscience always prompts him to highlight the evils of society and thereby arouse the social conscience of his readers: "He feels that once this awareness is brought about, man will change his attitudes and act more compassionately and responsibly as a good citizen. Both Gandhi and Bhattacharya are deeply concerned with the moral and social uplift of the people, and are against all forms of exploitation of man by man" (Grover, 1991:9).

Though the author presents various types of hunger in his first novel *So Many Hungers!*, his main focus is on the twin hungers for food and freedom. The plot of the novel is woven round two families – the young scientist Rahoul and his family and the peasant girl Kajoli and her family, the former exemplifying the theme of hunger for freedom and the latter illustrating the theme of hunger for food. The two families are swung apart – Rahoul’s in the city of Calcutta and Kajoli’s in the village of Baruni. Devesh Basu, reverentially addressed as “Devta”—the grandfather of Rahoul and the godfather of Kajoli, supplies the bridge between the two families. Among the varieties of hunger depicted in the novel, the author is more concerned with the hunger for food that has ruined the lives of millions of people victimizing them to the core: “Though the theme of hunger for freedom with its tensions and conflicts is placed in the forefront and runs like a thread all through the novel, it is the hunger for food that gets more spectacular treatment and possibly steals the limelight of the novel” (Reddy, 1990:61). K. R. Chandrasekharan rightly points out: “Bhattacharya is at his best when he depicts the plight of the ruined peasants, their exodus to the city and their abject misery and degradation” (1974: 28). One can say that the disintegration and final ruin that comes to Kajoli’s innocent family is only symptomatic of the devastation that affects all the famine-hit areas in the world.

Kajoli, the most memorable character in *So Many Hungers!* is in many ways the very soul of the novel. This tender, playful, vivacious girl becomes a victim of perpetual misery and exploitation, but by displaying extraordinary capacity for endurance and suffering, wins our pity as well as admiration. Devta’s introduction of her as ‘the well-bred peasant girl whose manners are as old as India’ indicates the essentials of Kajoli’s character. It is she who rises in protest against the exploited and corrupted society. A courageous and bold girl that she is, she is made of a sterner stuff, who like her mother and younger brother, never sheds a tear though Dadu, her father and her only earning brother Kanu, are taken away to jail, and the family has to suffer grievous hardships. Devta’s war against injustice, fraud and slavery of all kinds motivates Kajoli to rise to the occasion and feel spirited. Her fighting spirit is evident in the incident in which she hides the tri-colour flag when the red troop army comes to the village. Her love for freedom of the nation and of the society is deeply rooted in her that she is provoked to take active part in the national struggle. When the villagers are arrested for their participation in freedom movement, “Kajoli saw, pained, exalted tears in her eyes, but a gleam too, for she felt a power in her” (72). When she hears from others about her grandfather’s demeanour when he gets down the police van with handcuffed hands pleading with the villagers not to resort to violence for his arrest, “her breath deepened and her fists clenched and unclenched” (72). Her pride in her Dadu for facing gunfire bravely makes her courageous enough to face the traumas of life. When her father and brother are arrested, she and her mother show great courage by giving a heroic farewell to them.

In the absence of Devta, the poor and ignorant peasants yield to the temptation of money, as they have had no leader to guide them. It is in these circumstances that Kajoli comes out as a symbol of national zeal, clad in tri-colour sari. She takes up the responsibility of guiding people when Devta is in prison. She never loses spirit when she has to take up the rugged work in the fields in the absence of her brother. The fearlessness and undaunted spirit, which makes her survive the days of crisis, is the legacy that has been passed on to her by her grandfather. In the days of immeasurable suffering, she repeatedly ponders over the words of Dadu: “Do not betray yourselves. The supreme test has come. Be strong. Be true. Be deathless. And she listening, had felt a power in her” (77). Though living in dire poverty, she maintains the dignity of her womanhood and proves that the angelic beauty in her is indestructible and it gets more refined every time it is put to test.

But the hardships they have faced made Kajoli to accept the betel woman’s offer. It is at this juncture the author makes his characters discover their potentialities and strong resolutions. As a writer who presents the social problems and offers solutions to them, he makes his characters involve themselves fully in their struggle for freedom and resist the oppressive forces thus working for social change. At the crucial time, Kajoli saves herself from moral degradation. On the way to the brothel house, she hears the newspaper hawker shouting about Devta’s fast unto death in the jail. The memory of Devta’s teaching, “Be strong, Be true, Be deathless” (72) awakens her latent indomitable faith and courage. The words of her father “You made pronam to the flag, you are a fighter” (192) infuse her with inner strength. With

the reverberating words of her grandfather and father echoing in her ears, she realizes the resurgence of that old fighting spirit in her. She rises in protest against the way of life she has unwillingly chosen. From the casual remark made by the procuress, she figures out that one can make a decent living by selling newspapers. She realizes the perilous path she has chosen though totally disinclined to it. She revolts against the immoral life she was tentatively about to choose and decides to join the freedom war by selling the newspaper 'Hindustan'.

'United we win, divided we lose,' goes the saying. In *A Goddess Named Gold*, one can hear the voice of the Mahatma in the words of the Minstrel who advises the people to perform the real act of kindness if they want to bring transformation in the society. He further states that there is no taveez to hard labour, so the people should work unitedly and devotedly without any discrimination of caste and creed for the prosperity of the nation. Following the footprints of the Minstrel the women in Sonamitti join hands together in their battle against exploitation. The inter-personal relationships among the members of the Cowhouse Five is so great that in their discussions on the matters related to the uplift of the village, one finds the bond of firm friendship that keeps them united in their struggle for survival. They remember the days when the spirit of Gandhi touched them. It is this spirit that runs through their veins and prompts them to timely action. Their fight and consequent victory over the Seth brings them out of their timidity. They become all the more courageous since their fight is not confined to the village alone, it has gained national recognition.

Bhattacharya's fifth novel *Shadow from Ladakh* can be considered as a novel of protest and resistance. It brings to light the author's views about Gandhi's technique of passive resistance. Satyajit Sen and Bhaskar Roy who represent Gandhigram and Steeltown respectively are the concrete symbols of Gandhian and Nehruite ways of life – one believing in simple living and cottage industries whereas the other in western ways of life and industrialization. Satyajit's reaction to the two aggressions – China's aggression on India and Bhaskar's attempt to annex the land of Gandhigram to the Steeltown – is the same; he tries to resist the aggressor in the Gandhian way of inflicting pain on oneself rather than on the adversary thereby bringing a change in the adversary's heart. His determined resistance is evident from his resolution to take the Peace March to China; "He would take a Peace Mission Shanthi Sena, to the Himalayan snowlines, traveling first by railroad and bus to Kashmir's capital city, then marching afoot across Ladakh to the disputed territory close to Aksai-Chin, the Shanthi Sena would be armed with the lost slogan of brotherhood between two nations" (67). Syamala Rao believes that Bhattacharya accepts Satyajit's attitude, not Bhaskar's:

The core of the novel deals with the conflict of values and ultimate triumph of the Gandhian principle. Bhattacharya has depicted two modes of existences, two ways of life – the industrial complex and the rural serenity. Bhattacharya's mind is imbued with the Gandhian way of life and in the novel it is certain that he does not back Bhaskar, but Satyajit, who is an 'avatar' of Gandhi himself, a miniature Gandhi" (1978: 68).

Bhattacharya, as a social realist favours synthesis – the combination of spinning wheel and machine, and the teachings of Gandhi and ideologies of Nehru. Gandhigram, a microcosm of rural India, stands for Gandhian ideals and it stands for Satyajit's beliefs. The mechanized Steeltown is the embodiment of westernized outlook of life and it stands for Bhaskar's highly sophisticated mode of life. By presenting the conflict between Gandhigram and Steeltown, the author brings out the conflicts in the major characters of the novel. The two places are not merely two localities but concrete symbols of Gandhian and Nehruite ways of life, with one believing in rustic living and small-scale industries, and the other in modern way of life and industrialization. The two places are associated not only with the past, present and future of the nation but also with the attitudinal changes in the main characters of the novel, especially Suruchi and Sumita. Just as the rural Gandhigram gives way to the expanding Steeltown in the end, Suruchi and Sumita become free from their life of austerity. When Suruchi becomes aware of her inner strength that forces her to resist the hypocritical life of her husband Satyajit, Sumita undergoes a radical change in her relationship with Bhaskar. With the progress of the novel, Sumita frees herself from the self-proclaimed austerity to become a normal woman who possesses all passions and desires of

life. Both women assert their identity by resisting male authority that has been responsible for their emotional suppression for long.

Thus Bhattacharya undisputedly favours Gandhian approach to solve the national problems and the problems related to women. Gandhi wants men and women to strike a balance between them in all matters, whether it is private life or public life or career fulfillments. If there is a harmonious balance between them in all spheres, the women problem does not arise as they identify themselves with each other and become a harmonious whole. Bhattacharya presents this powerful image of woman on Gandhian principles in his fiction. Though he presents a moving sketch of the victimization of his women characters, still he does not end their lives on a pessimistic note. Each of his novels ends with the woman facing the world with supreme confidence.

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