CHAPTER - II
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MAN AND SELF

... any one who has seen life with any sort of perceptivity knows there are no villains or heroes. Every villain has something of hero in him, and every hero something of villain, and you never know which is going to come out ....... One needs an elemental understanding of life before one dares to become a novelist.  

Richness of Human Spirit

Kajoli, now an expectant mother, one of the many victims of the Bengal famine of 1943, leaves her ancestral home at Baruni for Calcutta, hoping to find food. Alone in the fields, while searching for food, she chances to meet an Indian soldier and begs him for food. With all his pity, compassion and goodwill, the soldier readily offers her some bread. While she is greedily eating the bread, the soldier watches her keenly; but suddenly he is overtaken by a strong biological urge – a desire to possess her body. Separated

from his wife for over a year and therefore sexually starved, the soldier is pinched by the hunger for woman. He grabs Kajoli and leads her to a meadow nearby, to satisfy his lust. Bhattacharya observes:

The soldier was a man of feeling. But he desperately needed a woman. It was over a year since he had been separated from his wife. And in that instant he was back home with his wife... He spoke words of caress, words lain buried in his feelings. The soldier was lost in twilight, half dream, half reality... 2

An alarming cry from Kajoli brings the soldier back to his normal senses and he finds her bleeding. Stung by a sense of remorse and feeling terribly perturbed over what he has done in a moment of weakness, he takes out whatever money he has with him and ties it to a corner of her sari and then rushes away in panic. Meeting a small boy, as he moves a few yards away, he informs him of the wretched condition of the woman, not knowing that the boy is none other than Kajoli’s own brother. To make further amends for the wrong, he persuades with great difficulty an army officer, whom he meets quite accidentally, to give her immediate

2 Habani Bhattacharya, Na Mary Humara, (Bombay: Jaise, 1964), p. 199.
professional aid as her condition warrants immediate medical care and attention.

This episode in *So Many Hungers* reveals man's weakness as well as his strength. What the soldier did in a moment of weakness— an abject surrender to the temptation of flesh— is not justifiable in any way. It is an act to be condemned. But at the same time, the soldier exhibits his strength of character also—his capacity for feeling remorse over what has been done in a fit of impulse. His inherent and fundamental goodness urges him on to make amends for the wrong. In other words, he is not completely lost: he proves that he is still a reasonably normal specimen of humanity. Bhattacharya observes:

Remorse stabbed him. What had he done? The soldier was God-fearing, honest with himself. At home, he had been a devoted husband and a loving father...What devil had seized his soul? The soldier was wretched.

What is evident from this episode is that in dealing with man we are dealing with a complex material, a compound of divinity and bestiality, of altruism and

*So Many Hungers*, p. 154
egoism. Though capable of erring, he has in him the power and potential redeeming himself. Also, this episode demonstrates Bhattacharya's simultaneous awareness of man's weakness and his essential goodness. However, this 'double standard' in man, does not dishearten him because he has immense faith and confidence in man as all humanists have. Humanists may differ in their beliefs as to whether man is primarily rational or volitional, static or evolving, improving or degenerating, individual or social, simple or complex, determined or free, wise or stupid, but yet they all agree on certain essential traits in man: that man is good, ultimately and irreducibly good; that each man is an end in himself; that every man has a nature that remains uniquely his own and that each man is a unique being having an irreducible ultimate value.

Sailing in the main stream of humanist tradition, Bhattacharya admires and even exalts man. Whatever be the immediate troubles and misfortunes that a man may be confronted with, his future is bright, for he has the necessary dimension of spirit. This dimension of spirit exhibits itself in myriad forms — now blossoming as the spirit of sacrifice, showing love and compassion to fellow-beings, now exhibiting a capacity for adaptation and renewed life and now mellowing in
self-fulfilment and self-realisation. And it is this rich spirit in man which sustains him and propels him on.

Man vs. his Predicament

The world is a testing ground and life itself is a challenge. And that is why Bhattacharya, in his novels, places man in a variety of predicaments so that the best in him may come to light. The disturbed conditions during World War II, the 'Quit India Movement' of 1942, and the Bengal famine of 1943 - these in *So Many Hungers*; the difficult task of rebuilding a new order of society for India and the efforts taken in integrating old and new values and ways of living - these in *Music for Mohini*; the undesirable caste system of labelling men as superior and inferior by sheer accident of their birth and the emptiness and futility of mere religiosity - these in *He Who Rides a Tiger*; political freedom and the use and abuse of it - these in *A Goddess Named Gold*; the need for blending divergent


sets of values and the urgency for coping with the
calldenges of the changing times — these in Shadow from
Ladakh⁷; the current disenchantment of the Great Society
and the intense and fretful strivings to find an answer
to the problem of one's life, and to find the path of
one's self-fulfilment — these in A Dream in Hawaii⁸;
all these while forming the thematic backdrops in the
novels, place man in and pose him with one predicament
or other. But Bhattacharya has so worked out his cha-
racters and plots that despite these trying conditions,
they demonstrate and vindicate the fact that humanity
has not cast the richness of spirit away.

Self-respect and Dignity

"Human richness can take a hundred different
forms"⁹ — observes Bhattacharya in one of his articles.
Take for example, Kajoli, the heroine in So Many Hungers.
The widespread Bengal famine threatens her with innum-
merable domestic problems and hardships; reduces her to

⁷Bhabani Bhattacharya: Shadow from Ladakh,
(New Delhi: Hind Pocket Books, 1966)

⁸Bhabani Bhattacharya: A Dream in Hawaii,
(Delhi: Macmillan, 1978)

⁹Bhabani Bhattacharya: "Women in my Stories",
The Journal of Indian Writing in English, Vol. 3, No. 2,
(1973), p. 2
abject poverty and privation; misfortune shatters
her peaceful life at Baruni; and ill-luck mars her
happy married life; and at last she is lured by a
procuress to a brothel, to sell her body for a few
rupees, which money, she hopes, will help in feeding
her starving mother and brother. She, after a great
hesitation, decides to become a prostitute and leaves
the house. But when she, on her way to the house of
ill-repute, casually hears the news of Devata's
hunger strike at the Delhi prison, is suddenly re-
minded of his words:

Friends and comrades, do not betray the
flag. Do not betray yourselves. The
Supreme test has come. Be strong. Be
true. Be deathless! 10

Her benighted conscience is illumined and a sense of
remorse tortures her for having temporarily yielded
to the words of the procuress:

Released from the deadening shock that had
smashed her into surrender, Kajeli felt a
great tide of shame overwhelm her, so that
her skin tingled and sweat broke out on her
palms. And the hundred words of the
woman, as she recalled them, crawled upon
her flesh like hundred scorpions. 11

10 In Black Eagles, p. 204
11 Ibid., p. 205
The sense of dignity and self-respect, which was lying dormant so long, asserts itself in her and the assertion prompts her to become a newspaper seller, however low-paid the job may be. By choosing a path of dignity and self-respect, she reasserts her full moral stature. It is a triumph of the spirit over the flesh.

Food is a primary requisite of human dignity; hunger debases and dehumanises man. That is why hunger is the theme of a large number of Indo-Anglian novels. 12

so writes Paul Verghese. But hunger has not debased and dehumanised Kajoli 13 and her spirit. Sorrow and troubles have not destroyed her spirit; instead they


13 It is the erroneous reading of the text in that it is not Kajoli but another destitute of whom Ram Behak Singh writes: "Kajoli exposed herself.... Herself a destitute, 'Kajoli had the bearing of a princess' while distributing bread slices to the destitutes from the basket in the crook of her arm - the bread she bought with the money she had earned by selling her shame, abasing her body's sanctity." Ram Behak Singh, "Bhabani Bhattacharya: A Novelist of Dreamy Wisdom", Samathali Patrika, Vol. 15, (July 1969), pp. 42-45.
have become the touchstone to what her inner richness and make it shine the better. Instances are numerous to cite, how even minor characters are endowed with self-respect and dignity. For example, Kajoli's mother, when she comes to understand that the betel-seller has come to their house with an intention of tempting Kajoli to become a prostitute, gets wild and shouts in great anger: "Do not pollute my doorsteps ever again". 14 and her contempt for that jackal of a woman is so great that she throws away the meal that is being cooked with rice, lentiles, and shee brought by that woman and thrusts her finger into her throat in order to vomit the sweet that she has already eaten saying: "I ate dirt from the hand of a whore". 15 Again when an old man holds out a fruit skin to eat, very pathetically she declines the offer saying:

Do not slight us so, my son. We are not beggers, nor scavengers. We left the village because of bad times. 16

One more episode in A Goddess Named Gold. The Seth threatens to swat the "Old Father" and his

14 So Many Mothers. p. 155
15 Ibid. p. 156
16 Ibid. p. 166
family from their ancestral home. Meera comes to
the rescue of the old man to redeem the mortgaged
house. Knowing that it is the Seth's money, the old
man's self-respect does not permit him to accept any
favour from the greedy tyrant. And he declines the
offer:

Happily would I accept help, my daughter.
Happily would I take what our brethren
give. But not one pie of the Seth's money,
soaked in peasant's blood. 17

so saying he and his family leave the house and the
village for ever, not having any definite plan for
their future. A superb example of man's self-respect
and dignity.

Change in Attitude and Outlook

"It is fullness of life that makes one
happy, not fullness of possessions". 18 - Bhattacharya
quotes Tagore's words in Shadow from Ladakh. Both
Jayadev in Music for Mohini, and Satyajit in Shadow
from Ladakh develop a kind of anti-life tendency –

17 A BANISHA DALI. p. 214
18 Shadow from Ladakh. p. 14
negation of the bliss of married life. While their wives Mohini and Suruchi stand for all joys of life and for fulfilment Jayadev and Satyajit nourish a strange idea that the joys of life can be postponed. Jayadev, a well-educated, forward-looking youth with a genuine zeal for bringing about certain reforms in society is very kind to Mohini but does not respect her feelings as a woman. Even within three days, she discovers that Jayadev is not what she would desire a husband to be. The study of the ancient lere has given Jayadev, an idea — which he wants to put into practice — that he and Mohini could be like Yajnavalkya, an ancient sage and his intellectual wife, Maitreyi. As a result of this, he expects his wife, to share his scholarly pursuits. Repeatedly he tells Mohini that he would like her to be his saintly Maitreyi so long as he is engaged in his work and that she could become his dear Mohini as soon as the work is over. But in him there is a see-saw movement — sometimes the forces of life getting upperhand and sometimes the other. As a result, there is unsteadiness and even imbalance, Bhattacharya observes:

A man closer to life, more attuned to reality, would have achieved an inner balance with little strain, fulfilling
the claims of both his mind and heart. But Jayadev, detached from the world, shrank from life, afraid of his own awakened spirit with its needs and demands. 19

The reason for this imbalance is his wrong notion that love on the physical plane and love on the intellectual plane can be kept apart.

Satyajit also has the same tendency. As a result of this, he experiences a kind of conflict and restlessness. Imbued with Gandhian asceticism, he decides to observe strict 'Brahmacharya' soon after the birth of his daughter, Sumita. This decision breaks the heart of his wife, Suruchi, who stands for full life and wishes to have a son. Suruchi wants to live like a woman and it is her firm belief that suppression of natural instincts cramps the personality and destroys the joys of living.

But at the end of both the novels, the heroes, Jayadev and Satyajit, realise that true fulfilment comes only when they come to terms with the whole of life. Jayadev learns that life should not be postponed even when one is engaged in pursuit of ideas.

19It is ironical that Satyajit, p. 151
however scholarly they be. And Satyajit's complete surrender to Suruchi indicates the change in his attitude and outlook, though after many years. They realise that such ambivalence - keeping love on the physical plane and love on the spiritual plane apart - is never possible. Experience has taught them that real love does become possible only when these planes converge. Bhattacharya records Satyajit's change thus:

His [Satyajit's] newly won release would seek expression in the honest acceptance of every human need. 20

Dewjani's father, a famed nuclear scientist at Calcutta's Saha Institute, also negates the bliss of married life. While his wife Mamoni - Jewelesque Mother, as Dewjani calls her - stands for all joys of life and fulfilment, basically fulfilled as a wife, the 'father' is so much absorbed in work that he disappoints his wife, by not respecting her feelings as a woman. And for this negligence he is to pay the price. She has an affair with her family doctor when her husband is away in Canada on an assignment with the Canadian Atomic Energy Commission. She

20_Emaoy Ariz Ladakh, p. 553
defends her lapse thus:

"You don't have to forgive me, Devjani, because you can't. May be you will, one day, when you have more knowledge and understanding of life". She paused, then spoke as if to herself, "If only he had listened to my pleading!"

"Pleading?"

"Let me go with you, I begged and I begged, in vain."

Devjani's eyes narrowed with scorn. "You seem to think he went on a holiday. You don't care about his work, his dedication, do you?"

Mother burst out in sharp anger, "Work, work, work! How I hate the word!"

"His work means nothing to you?"

"Nothing whatever. It is at the cost of my own needs. Constant self-denial is not my idea of life. I have endured just about too much", 21

A few months later, Devjani's experiences at the East-West center, Hawaii, make her understand the meaning of her mother's words. Her sympathy for her mother is recorded thus:

The man of science dedicated to his work knew nothing about the depths of longing

21 A dream in Hawaii, pp. 55-56
In the heart of a vivacious woman like Ma-moni. 22

Bhattacharya seems to feel that the fault lies not with Ma-moni but with her husband.

Life needs continuous adaptation to new situations and crises in the challenges of the changing times. Man is an entity in whose constant attempts at renewal and adaptation lies the meaning of life. The old mother in the Big House in *Music for Mohini* stands for strict adherence to and preservation of all traditional values, while her son, Jayadev, is for building a new order based much on the principle of integration. His desire is to extract the essence, the best of our deep-rooted tradition and fuse it with the spirit of the modern times. When he takes on himself the task of building a new society, he has to fight with many conservative therefore antagonistic forces, especially his mother. At the end of the novel, the old mother understands her son and his thinking. Her adaptation is recorded thus:

His /Jayadev's/ ideas, his point of view, moulded by the new spirit in the land, were
different from hers and opposed to them, but they were, nonetheless true ideals... In that moment of insight the mother almost understood her son and, through him, the new revolt, the restless spirit of the new dawn. 23

In one of his short stories, Bhattacharya, brings out the wonder evoked in the mind of rural folks in India by the arrival of the aeroplane. Simple minded men and women go on foot and by bullock-cart to the aerodrome to have a look at the wonder. One of the grandmas remarks:

Truly, such a thing exists! To see this I must have earned merit by a hundred and one good deeds ! 24

Commenting upon her change of view and adaptation to new things, Bhattacharya says:

Grandma's spirit was shaking up his conservative nature. She who was of Yesterday was possessed by Today. 25

This awareness - an awareness which places

23 Anila In Mohini, p. 230
25 Bhattacharya's "Women in My Stories", p. 4
faith in modern science and technology - helps man to have faith in himself as a master of his destiny and therefore to reject fatalism which has plagued him for centuries, weakening his faith in himself and depending too often on superstition. Acceptance of science and its benefits means better prospects and more comforts. In one of his unpublished articles Bhattasharya happily refers to the rejection of fatalism:

If I refer more specifically to India, I see the Green Revolution as something that has not merely changed the color of the fields. The revolution is beyond the material plane; it is deep in people's thought, in the people's attitude. Over a span of thousand years, the Indian peasant was a fatalist. "What is written on their brow must happen." But he has been jolted out of his apathy into a new awareness, a re-awakening. He has seen crop-yields expand five fold by the application of modern techniques. He has seen his more receptive neighbors reap unheard-of harvests. A mechanical process, just technique, is as powerful as fate! That realisation, dawning for the first time in the year 1970, started a chain reaction. It set the farmer's expectations afire. The rural change in India with its seven hundred million people is now a vivid sight in the landscape of Asia's most challenging decade. For, the revolution on the cornfields swept over to the industrial sector. It had to produce more fertilizers, more tractors. And since ox-carts were no longer adequate to carry the ever-mounting bags of grains, a great
boost was given to motorized transport. The social dimensions of all this change are being analyzed - and dramatized - by intensive research projects. 26

Again, there is a telling change in man's attitude towards family planning. Bhattacharya expresses happiness over this thus:

True, the pressure of population on lands leads to constant sub-division of the available acreage; and individual holdings shrink in size. The problem is being met by Industrialisation. Along with these goes family-planning. Happily, the peasant man and woman have shown a freedom from inhibition in this regard. 27

Adaptation

In Mohini's case, adaptation demands sacrifice, accommodation and even development, both emotional and intellectual. Born in a city in the house of a professor with forward looking ideas and liberty, Mohini leads a carefree life - a life uninhibited and


unaffected by any difficulty or worry. But when she is married to Jayadev, a dreamy idealist, she becomes, the mistress of a very prominent and influential family of the Big House in the village of Behula, with a great tradition of Aryan culture which the family had preserved even in the face of invasions by Pathans, Mughals, Mahattas and the British. There seems to be many a discordant note at the beginning of her married life. She is for life and all its joys and pleasures, but her husband approaches her as a teacher, not as an ardent lover. As a result of this, she spends restless, wry, blissless nights, and dull long hours without a chance to participate in life. Added to this, she has to adjust to her mother-in-law who stands for adherence to all traditional values and ways of living. The Big Mother is personally very kind, loving and affectionate towards Mohini, but nevertheless does not yield an inch to her non-conforming way of life. Mohini is not allowed to sing secular songs, wear costly saris and even put on lovely glass and lac bangles that she loves. But as the time passes, she learns her position in her new house; adapts to new situations and crises in her life. She learns to modify her stand and accepts the necessity to preserve the ideals, cherished by the Big House. The apex of her mental adjustment and development
and the identification with the Big House is seen when she agrees to such a sacrifice — as allowing her husband to marry her rival Sudha as his second wife for the perpetuation of the family tree, when she finds that she is barren and therefore cannot beget a son. Her intellectual adjustment is also seen when she begins to help her husband — though she may not be able to share in his scholarly pursuits — in his social reconstruction programmes, by conducting classes for women in the village and giving them adult-education. And this self-adjustment helps in a way to bring her husband closer to her. She shows remarkable capacity for adaptation. Finally there is music in her life:

At last, there was no discord. Life was music — a note of song for the Old Mother was in her, a note for Jayadev and his rebel gods, a note for the Big House and Behula village, torn and at cross-purposes for a while. Her life was music — the true quest of every woman, her deepest need. 28

Answering the charge of a critic, Bhattacharya observes in one of his articles:

28 _Music for Rabindranath_, p. 232
... While he was moved by Mohini's capacity for change, for creating music in her life out of the many discordant notes, Charles Poore deplored the numerous problems that the heartless author had poured on 'her shapely head': My answer is that those problems were meant to serve a purpose: the making of a wide spectrum of Mohini's inner richness!" 29

The mental adjustment - resulting in adaptation - of Suruchi and Sumita, her daughter, is quite interesting. For there is a reversal of attitude in them. Suruchi stands for all the joys of life. While her husband wants to observe strict 'brahmacharya' soon after the birth of Sumita, she wishes to have a son. In other words, she wants to live like a woman. It is her firm belief that suppression of natural instincts cramps the personality and destroys the joy of living. "An aesthetic woman is a contradiction in terms" 30 - so says Suruchi. Though many a time, she rebels against the denial of life, she has the potential in her to sublimate her instinct and sacrifice herself at the altar of Satyajitism - a change from aestheticism to asceticism.

30 Shadow from Ladakh, P. 289
In Sumita's case, it is a mental development from asceticism to aestheticism. Sumita is an example of Satyajitism. Her life has become one of dedication. She moulds her life into that of an ascetic woman, according to the wish and expectation of her father. But as days pass by her encounter with life and its realities heightens her awareness of womanhood, especially after her second visit to the temple with Bhashkar in a torrential rain; and her trip to Delhi and her consequent meeting with Nandini who tells her of her own love-affair. She is gradually drawn to fullness of life and freedom and the marriage of Sumita with Bhashkar becomes a foregone conclusion.

In Devjani's case also there is a remarkable adaptation in her mental outlook. She has a revulsion for sex and nudity which she developed the moment she saw her mother naked in bed with their family doctor. Added to this she has a number of inhibitions. With these she comes to America to pursue her research work at the East-West Center, Hawaii. But within a few months of her stay at the center, there is a telling change in her attitude to life and living. Her friend, Nishi's advice sets her thinking. Nishi says with all her sincerity and love for Devjani,
You will change fast, Devjani. You will get Americanized. Don't look shocked! After all, it does not make sense to keep on living in India when you are in America. Not that you give up your Indian identity. You adapt yourself to a new lifestyle within certain limits. What limits? That's a good question. You will have to find the answer for yourself. For every individual the answer has to be different. 31

Yes, she has in her the necessary dimension of spirit to adapt herself to new situations and even a different lifestyle. In that moment of insight, now mentally matured enough to understand things in the right perspective, she is able to even compromise with her mother's sexual lapse.

The aversion that had tormented her having worn off, she could glimpse at least one of Ma-moni's broken dreams ... The man of science dedicated to his work knew nothing about the depth of longing in the heart of a vivacious woman like Ma-moni. 32

Again the change in her outlook is recorded thus:

An amazing change in her own outlook!
One day Nishi would try to make her wear

31 A Dream in Hawaii, p. 97
32 Ibid., p. 97
a bikini, she felt sure, and she looked into her own mind for signs of resistance. There was none. Somewhere on Waikiki Beach she had shed her aversion to nudity. She could not tell how it had happened and when. Not a word of protest came from her when several months later Nishi said one day, "What you need for your happiness, Devi, is a steady date — like me."

Self-denial and Sacrifice

Self-denial and sacrifice are the qualities indicating the richness of spirit. Man, however selfish and egotistic he may be, shows his capacity for self-denial and sacrifice so that others may be benefited. It is the affection, love and interest for and identification with the Big House and its welfare that makes Mohini accept self-denial — abstaining from eating fish, singing songs for recording, wearing only cotton sarees, etc. Moreover the greatest sacrifice that she could make is of expressing her willingness to persuade and allow her husband to marry Sudha, so that the Big House may have a heir, though the possibility of herself begetting a son is not completely ruled out. A supreme act of sacrifice showing human ability to rise to the occasion at a time of crisis in life.

35A Dream in Hawaii, pp. 98-99.
Satyajit’s offer to pledge his house and pond so that his friend’s daughter’s marriage celebrations can take place as scheduled, Kaloo’s decision not to marry again, though he is young, for the sake of his daughter Chandralekha, Chandralekha’s final decision and acceptance to become Motichand’s fourth wife so that she can save her father from his immediate troubles, and bring up Obijit, a destitute boy, Nandini’s decision to marry Ashok, her betrothed, though he has lost his eyes in the battle field; these are some of the many instances which go to prove man’s capacity for self-denial and sacrifice.

A few more telling examples to validate the point. While giving an account of the life of Prince Dara,

34 Satyajit, a character in Bhattacharya’s Short Story “Glory at Twilight” was once wealthy but now a bankrupt. His friend, thinking that Satyajit will help him as he did previously, arranges for his daughter’s marriage. When Satyajit comes to learn that the marriage is going to be stopped in the event of his failure to give the dowry, he decides to pledge his house and pond—the only possession he hopes to leave his new-born son—and sees to it that the marriage is celebrated as planned.

35 *He Who Rides a Tiger*, p. 7.
36 Ibid., p. 229.
37 *Shades from Ladakh*, p. 326.
Bhattacharya glorifies the nobleness of the mind.

He writes:

What a dismal procession! The Emperor's brother riding a filthy elephant like a disgraced beggar. But even in this terrible condition Dara retained his nobleness of mind. As he was passing by, a fakir on the road-side shouted at: 'O Dara! when you were master you always gave alms. Today I know that thou has naught to give me.' The prince replied by drawing off his dingy dark-coloured shawl, and threw it down to the fakir. 38

Another episode is recorded in So Many Hungers. Kajoli's mother comes forward to give away her cow, Mangala, to a fisherwoman, who is trying to bury her child in the sand alive, so that she can free her child from starvation and suffering. Commenting upon this episode K.R. Chandrasekar writes:

The greatest act of sacrifice recorded in the novel is the giving away of the cow, Mangala, by the mother to the fisherwoman who has become demented through suffering. The immeasurable value of the sacrifice is emphasised by three considerations; the plight of the giver who herself is facing starvation, the affection that the entire family feels for the cow which is accepted.

38 Bhabani Bhattacharya: Some Memorable Yesterdays, (Patna: Fastak Shandar, 1941), pp. 41-43.
as a member of the household and the
certain knowledge that the recipient of
the gift will promptly sell the animal
to be butchered.

This is the great act of sacrifice, no doubt;
but there is another episode in the same novel, out-
shining it in its value and significance, i.e. the
bosom-showing episode. A girl earning money by abusing
the sanctity of her body. She is a nameless, even
faceless character, though she resembles Kajoli much.40
The young woman is seen through the eyes of Bahoul,
a key character in the story. At every now and then
she rises to her feet, strips the garment from her
breast; she stands bare, arms up-flung, the hooded
street-light full upon her figure. A minute goes by.
She draws her sari back to her bosom and sinks on her
knees, face lowered. The soldiers who are watching

39K.R. Chandrasekar, *Bhabani Bhattacharya*,

40It is the erroneous reading of the text in
that it is not Kajoli but another destitute of whom
G.S.Balarama Gupta writes: "She (Kajoli) had sold
her shame, the convention-bound men would decry her,
she had abused the body's sanctity." G.S.Balarama
Gupta, "Bhabani Bhattacharya's *Fe Many Hungry* :
A Study" in *Aspects of Indian Writing in English*
this, throw coins at her begging bowl when the act is repeated now and then. By this shocking method, she is able to earn six rupees. She picks up her bowl, walks away, goes to a bake-shop and buys bread for all the money. Then she distributes all the bread to a large number of destitute boys, who are not related to her in any way. A sickening episode but illustrating the largeness and greatness of human heart. Appraising the significance of this episode, Bhattacharya writes:

The girl overcame her shame as she devised the only way she could to earn good money—on her, a destitute girl, so many lives hung. She has sold her shame, abused her body's sanctity—that will be society's stern judgment, Rahoul knows. But as he walks out of the alleyway, he feels that he has glimpsed the sanctity of human spirit and is dazzled by too much beauty. And I also, envisioning the image of the nameless, faceless destitute girl on Calcutta's Red Road, feel dazzled by the image of richness, the common one made uncommon in her illumined moments of inner beauty. 41

Struggle for Integrity

The struggle of Kale, the hero, in He Who Rides a Tiger, is a struggle for integrity. To be

41 Bhattacharya's "Women in My Stories", p.6
true to one's own self is the greatest achievement in life. Kalo's establishment of his true-self by liberating himself from the chain that has enslaved his spirit and by resolving his inter-personal tension, proves his worth and dignity. Kalo, a blacksmith of Jharna town is driven by hunger and famine to Calcutta in search of job and food. On his way, he is jailed for three months for stealing a few bananas. Out of the jail, hunger forces him to collect dead bodies for disposal and also for sometime serving as a procurer to a brothel. To his great shock, he, one day, finds his daughter, having been trapped into the same brothel and he saves her just in time. Totally embittered, he prepares a revenge. He creates a fake temple and makes a living for himself and his daughter passing himself off as a brahmin priest. Very soon he becomes powerful, wealthy, influential and revered. In course of time his easily acquired prosperity, opulence, and social prominence show signs of corroding his true self. But every now and then, he pricked by qualms of conscience. As a result of this, he is tormented by a moral and spiritual conflict between love of ease, power and prestige on one side and desire to be true to himself on the other. He is riding on a tiger. He should either dismount from the tiger and
get killed or kill the tiger of deceit and face the consequence. In his struggle, he is able to kill the tiger of deceit and make-believe; he acts dramatically - discloses his real identity before a big gathering, a mixed gathering of all castes. While the caste Hindus fret and fume for having been cheated by a blacksmith, congratulations come from other people. Biten congratulates him thus:

You have triumphed over those others - and over yourself. What you have done just now will steal the spirit of hundreds and thousands of us. Your story will be a legend of freedom, a legend to inspire and awaken. 42

Commenting on this novel Shiv K. Kumar observes:

It is through his low-born but honest and magnificent blacksmith, Kalo, that Bhatacharya presents his humanistic philosophy. 43

Kesey is Kalo's counterpart in A Dream in Hawaii: for in him also there is a struggle for

42 *He Who Rides a Tiger*, p. 252
integrity. Neeloy is a young teacher of philosophy in an Indian University, who, at the suggestion of his student, Devjani, whom he admires and loves secretly, becomes a yogi. Popular soon, this teacher-turned-yogi, Swami Yogananda sets up an ashram at Rishikesh and attracts a large number of disciples, native and foreign. Stella, an American tourist, becomes an ardent admirer and at her request he goes to America to give discourses on yoga. In America his lectures are well attended and very soon he becomes a much-sought out guide, providing spiritual nourishment to the Americans who feel they have lost their moorings. One Dr. Vincent Swift, the proto-type of the twentieth century Culture - Vulture, begins to associate himself with Swami Yogananda and persuades him to found in Hawaii a World Center for Yoga - an institution to rival the Hare Krishna Movement and Transcendental Movement which have established firm roots in America. Swami Yogananda, though reluctant in the beginning accepts the proposal after much hesitation.

While the details are being worked out and steps being taken to build the World Center on a massive scale, Swami Yogananda is racked by doubts...
about his sanctified persona for he is unable to forget and therefore root out from his mind the desire to possess Devjani, who is already in Hawaii as a research student at the East-West Center. While so many people have so much of faith in Swami Yogananda, Walt Gregson, a votary of sexual permissiveness who believes that sex alone matters in life, suspecting Swami Yogananda's seeming detachment and celibacy uses his mistress Sylvia Koo to awaken the dormant, deep-buried sexual desires of Sami Yogananda. When he is half-asleep and only half-conscious, Swami Yogananda finds Sylvia beside him and taking her to be Devjani, caresses her. Back to his normal self, the next moment, Swami Yogananda rejects Sylvia and takes a decisive step, a step that bewilders all his associates - to discard the yellow garb so that he could be true to himself. He kills the tiger of self-deception; sees the impostor disintegrate by making a plain confession to Devjani. He says to Devjani,

You have to know the truth. Swami Yogananda has ceased to exist. This man you see is Hesley Mookherji. The yellow garb he still has to wear must be discarded. 

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44 A DREAM IN HAWAII, p. 232
To the surprise of all, he leaves America so that back in India, he could be Neeloy, just Neeloy again. To be true to oneself is the greatest achievement in life. Neeloy establishes his true-self by resolving his inter-personal tension and proves his worth and dignity.

If Kalo and Neeloy show their integrity only after a hard struggle, Biten shows it from the beginning itself. Biten renounces his brahminhood when he comes to know of the suicide of his sister, Purina who got married, much against her wish, to a brahmin widower when she was in love with a boy from lower caste. He breaks and throws away the sacred thread and takes a vow, not to speak about his caste at any cost. His integrity and steadfastness to his principle is so great that he is prepared even to lose Chandralekha, the girl whom he loves ardently by not revealing his caste.

Self-reliance

If Neera in *A Goddess Named Gold* becomes an active partner in the Seth's efforts in transmuting
copper into gold with the help of the taweez given to her by her grandpa, a wandering minstrel with a note that if she does any act of real kindness, the taweez will acquire the power of turning copper into gold, it is done with an altruistic motive - a genuine desire to distribute the gold among the people of the village. Already she has shown her love and compassion for them by saving a man bitten by a snake by sucking out the poisoned blood from the bite; and by saving a small boy, Nago, who has accidentally fallen into a well by descending into the well fearlessly, risking her own life. But when all her plans and efforts to perform acts of kindness - real kindness - however wisely and cleverly contrived - fail, she throws the amulet into the river. A new insight comes to her. She realises the profound importance of hard work and self-reliance and depends no longer upon miracles or amulets.

"Everyone of us could wipe a few tears from eyes of misery, if we tried." Bhattacharya quotes, Gandhiji's words. But this needs hard work and lot of

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45 A Goddess Named Gold, p. 18.
46 Ibid., pp. 17-19.
47 Ibid., p. 75.
confidence in one's self. Hard work and confidence in turn lead one to prosperity and sometime even to overcome the inferiority complex. Kunal's letter to his father Somendra Basu, from the war-front testifies this:

"Our soldiers from India have won a great victory. I am proud to say", he wrote.
"I don't mean their victory over the enemy, I mean the victory, as it were, over themselves. You see, dada, they have killed their own foe - the sense of race inferiority." 48

Love and Compassion

Love and Compassion for others especially for those who are suffering, — a dear theme to Bhattacharya — spring from the innate goodness of heart and from the elemental understanding of life and genuine respect and regard for fellow-beings. Instances are too numerous to cite in Bhattacharya's novels. Below is a random sampling. Taking pity on a destitute Indian boy, a white soldier gives him money to feed his hungry stomach, Bhattacharya says:

48 So Many Moments, p. 107
The soldier stopped, looking down. His blue eyes grew deep with compassion. He smiled and spoke words of which the boy could make nothing, and he passed a gentle hand over the little beggar’s dusty mop of hair. Then he gave him a half-rupees piece. 49

The army doctor helps Kajoli and takes her in his official van to Calcutta much against the rules, when he finds her bleeding and needing immediate medical attention. 50 Two destitute boys fight at first for a discarded jam-tin with bits of jam sticking to the sides but soon come to an understanding saying, "Lick this side; the other side belongs to my mouth. Lick." 51 Again another two destitute boys fight at first for plucking figs but soon decides to go halves everyday. 52 Manju and Rahoul bring into the house a destitute woman who is lying on the pavement uncared for, at the time of her confinement. 53 Jayadev opens a

49 So Many Hungry, p. 196.
50 Ibid., p. 158.
51 Ibid., p. 178.
52 Ibid., p. 120.
53 Ibid., p. 175.
relief centre to feed the destitutes at the time of the widespread famine. 54 Chandralekha takes pity on a destitute boy, Obijit, and brings him up. 55 Viswanath steals the milk after the milk bath to the God is over - the milk is supposed to be poured into the river Ganga - and distributes it to the destitutes; 56 Shohanlal saves a wounded soldier at the warfront, risking his own life. 57

To these we may add Bhashkar and his love and compassion for an enemy's daughters. Bhashkar, with his American training and highly westernised outlook heads a steel production unit at Steel Town. It is his firm belief that steel is the only shield that can protect the infant democracy against all enemies, threatening her freedom and security. He is for 'a tooth for a tooth and an eye for an eye'. In the wake of the Chinese aggression against India in 1962, a

54 *Music for Mohini*, p. 123.
55 *He Who Rides a Tiger*, p. 200.
57 *A Godess Named Gold*, pp. 120-121.
Chinese show-maker is arrested along with the other enemy citizens as a preventive measure. Quite ironically, the four daughters of the Chinese shoe-maker are given asylum in Bhashkar's house until their father is released and sent back to China. Bhashkar is a bit reserved, cold and uncomfortable in the beginning; so are the children too. But very soon a closer relationship blossoms and Bhashkar wins their love and affection. The children are so much overwhelmed with Bhashkar's love and affection that they begin to worship him as they used to offer ritual worship to the portrait of Mao. Sometimes by massaging his body and thereby helping him to relax and to keep fit, they show their love and affection and more than that their gratitude. There is a remarkable change in Bhashkar and his attitude. His inherent goodness of heart is kindled; his latent tenderness is roused. He begins to feel and acknowledge that love can conquer hatred. The Chinese children's love for Bhashkar and Rupa is expressed by one of the girls thus:

All that love and joy and ... I don't know the words, Rupa, but may be you understand all that feeling has gone into our bone and blood. When we are back in China and the people ask us about India, we will tell them the truth, Rupa. 38

38 Shades from Ladakh, p. 334
Voluntary Service

Another way of showing fundamental goodness is rendering voluntary service, especially to those who need help. Rahoul, at the time of the Bengal famine opens a relief centre for the destitutes and feeds their starving bodies. 59 Once he resigns his job so that a needy one may rush for the vacancy;

The one sort that truly counts – helping to solve a fellow’s food problem. Well, then – a smile as though of pride played on his face – I have resigned a post so that another chap may be free to rush for the vacancy.

Again Rahoul and Monju, his wife, help a destitute who is about to give birth to a child on the street by bringing her into their house and giving her medical aid. 61

Jayadev opens a relief centre to feed the destitutes at the time of famine, though, by doing so, he is depleting his family income. 62 The Headmistress

59Mary Aungava, p. 195
60Ibid., p. 39.
61Ibid., p. 174.
62Habba Aaz Rahimi, p. 125
of a school also opens a relief centre, allowing her students to take active part in running the Centre. There is a joy in serving others and such service may sometimes demand a bit of sacrifice. An old man who has been fed so long with a foodcard expresses his desire to return the ticket, so as to enable a more needy man to use it. He says to Rahoul:

I have eaten for two weeks. Now I can live without food for a time ... I can give my place to a more needy person unfed at the kitchen. Don't deny me this one job.

I beg. 64

Rahoul is simply stunned. His feelings are recorded thus:

The richness of the human spirit! Rahoul could have laughed at the oppressive dread he had felt. He gazed at the bent, half-naked figure receding down the street, and it filled him with wistful pride and joy, standing out in his mind as a signal of hope and deliverance for the hunger-stricken masses of Bengal. 65

Change in Heart

Temptation may come to man in any form:

63 In the Flee & Fiver, p. 60
64 On Many Illus, p. 195
65 Ibid., pp. 195-96
some yield to it and some have the innate greatness in them to overcome it. Schanlal goes to the house of well-known prostitute: he reaches her door-step; but his thoughts about Meera his beloved coupled with his reason prevent and save him from his lower passions. He acknowledges this to Meera, saying,

I reasoned all wrong. I thought evil could be mended by evil. I heard you whisper in my ears 'No'. I hesitated and you spoke again, 'No'. Then I had to turn back from evil. 66

And Meera is no other than his own conscience.

There is also a change in the evil intention of Ram Lal. Ram Lal goes along with a band of pilgrims, posing himself as a pilgrim, with an evil desire — a desire to steal all the gold from the pilgrims when they are unaware. But when he hears the discourse, given by Bhargava, their leader, about the image of Jaganath at the temple of Jaganath, he is racked by qualms of conscience and a sudden change comes over him.

He [Ram Lal] sat down and wept in silence. Presently he felt relieved, as though he

\begin{quote}
66 A Sadhanu Named Gold, p. 246
\end{quote}
Self-fulfilment and Self-realisation

Self-fulfilment is a great bliss which a man strives to attain in his life. In *So Many Hungers* Bhattacharya presents self-fulfilment at different levels. Rahoul, a key character in the novel is interested in the political freedom of his country and hence his mind is set on joining the freedom movement, especially at the time of the 'Quit India Movement' of 1942. But he is unable to join the movement and court arrest immediately. His excessive love for his family, especially for his wife Monju and new-born daughter; and his father's clever way of keeping his son away from the national politics by persuading him to concentrate on his research work of discovering a death-ray, which itself is a national service, prevent him from joining the struggle. But as time goes by, the urge in him for self-fulfilment becomes stronger, the larger interest takes the upper hand over the smaller interest and he joins the movement and courts arrest.

*67 Feral Bank and other Stories, p. 121*
That hour when he is arrested becomes the greatest hour of happiness in his life. And that is his hour of self-fulfilment.

Rahoul’s father, Somendra Basu is nominally a lawyer, greedy and overscrupulous where money is concerned. His only concern is the welfare of his family, especially his two sons, Rahoul and Kunal. Having suffered poverty and privation in his early life, he is so careful and calculating that his only aim is to amass wealth for himself and his family. And he succeeds in doing so during the Bengal famine exploiting others. A redeeming feature in him, however, is that he does not care or even wish to increase his physical comfort. All his money and wealth is only for his sons. He feels that his sons should not experience the poverty and privation that he had suffered in his early days. Commenting upon him, Bhattacharya observes:

His sons should have all the condensed pleasures he himself wanted in vain ... Whatever the cost, he would take care of that. That way, through his sons, he would fulfil himself. 68
Yes, he does have a sense of self-fulfilment but that self-fulfilment brings to him a self-realisation also - the futility of having too narrow an interest, an interest in his own family. The realisation comes to him when he hears the news of Rahoul’s arrest and the report of Kunal being missing at the war front. Quite ironically it is at this time of sorrow and defeat that he comes to learn that the British Government has honoured him with the award of the title, C.I.E., (i.e.) Companion of the Indian Empire.

To counter-balance this character, Bhattacharya presents Devash Basu, Somendra’s father as a patriot to the core. His love for the common people is so great that he settles down at Baruni and dedicates his entire life to the cause of the village. His identification with the village is so great that he becomes the guiding star and spirit of the village; and the peoples’ reverence for him is so complete that he is called ‘Devata’, a celestial being. Not only is he the guardian angel of the villagers, but he teaches them Gandhian ways of living, himself setting an example, and makes them self-reliant and self-respecting individuals. When he is about to be taken away to prison, his message to his beloved people is: “The Supreme
test has come. Be strong. Be true. Be deathless.\textsuperscript{69} It is his saintly personality and stirring message that help the people face life with courage and fortitude. For example, it is the casual reminder and remembrance of his words that saves Kajoli from degradation. Davesh Basu achieves self-fulfilment through a life of dedication - a full life dedicated to the cause of others.

\textbf{Man Invincible}

These examples throw ample light on Bhattacharya's attitude towards man. To Bhattacharya man is a compound of divinity and bestiality, of altruism and egoism, and of 'ahimsa' and 'himsa'. In a sense he is a realist because he takes full cognisance of man's weaknesses - his lust, greed, selfishness, and cruelty. But this does not lessen his faith and confidence in man. For great is his belief that man is the maker and breaker of his own destiny: that he is an entity in whose persistent endeavour at adaptation and renewal lies the meaning of life: that he is potentially capable of rising from baser passion

\textsuperscript{69}BE MARY ANNAUR: P. 204.
to fantastic heights of sacrifice and glory in self-fulfilment; that he is capable of solving many a problem with the help of reason, imagination and scientific method; and above all that he has the richness of spirit in him and that richness of spirit helps him to emerge from the ordeal more lustrous than ever before. That is why Bhattacharya admires man and even exalts him. In answering some queries regarding his concept of man, Bhattacharya writes:

70 In my letter to Bhattacharya dated October 20, 1978, inviting his comments on some of my findings, I wrote “I shall be much thankful to you if you could offer your valuable comments on the following:

1. The complexity of man surprises you. Man seems to be a compound of divinity and bestiality, of altruism and egoism and of `himsa' and `ahimsa'. Am I right?

2. I find that it has been your firm conviction that with all his limitations, vices, shortcomings etc., man has certain self-regarding virtues which give him worth and dignity as an individual (e.g. the soldier raping Kajoli and then helping her). Am I correct?

3. You have immense faith in Man and in his inherent good nature. That is why life force is propelling him on good forces triumphing over evil and dark urges in life. You seem to admire, even sometimes adore man for this obvious reason. Am I right?

4. You seem to pretty agree with the Proteggersan dictum ‘Man is the measure of all thing’. Am I right?
As for your statements and your question 'Am I right?' my plain answer is that you are absolutely right. 71

When all is said and done, man cannot live all alone. For he is an integral part and member of a larger community i.e., society and his well-being depends largely on his establishing a satisfactory relationship with others in society.

71 Bhattacharya's letter to me dated November 13, 1978 from Manchester, USA, vide Appendix.