Chapter 5
Greed versus Altruism

The opening dialogue of Bhattacharya's novel *A Goddess Named Gold* sets the tone for the clash between tradition and change in the novel:

"What can a woman do? What strength has she against her household king? Tell me, dear sisters."

No one pitied her. No face softened.

"Add the juice of bitter leaves to the kneaded flour of his bread," an edged suggestion came.

"Salt in his bowl of milk," another quickly followed.

"Let your household king go foodless one whole day—and again."

"Think out a hundred ways to make his life a misery, let him cry panting to the Mother of Mercy."

The youngest of the battle group, Meera, said, "Drop powdered chilli into his bath oil. He will rub his limbs with oil and how his skin will smart—wah! The oil will get into his eyes—eah! . . ." (Bhattacharya, *A Goddess Named Gold* 5)."
The man they are talking about is the Seth, Lakshmi's husband and the talk is an indicator of the winds of change towards women's rights. Yet the village women use the traditional term "household king" to refer to the husband, indicating that complete freedom from traditional bonds has not yet been achieved by them. Moreover, the traditional devotion to husband still lingers in the sentiment expressed by Lakshmi in protest: "'Her son's begetter hungry and wretched, a woman's life is not worth two cowdung pellets!'" (Gold 6).

These village women participated in the Quit India Movement. Gandhi wakened their sleeping spirit and they became equals of their menfolk, proud, chins up, marching in a column of their own across the village meadow shouting 'Quit India!.' They were all afield and, wherever they went, women came flocking out of field, barn and kitchen to cry with them 'Quit!.' Lakshmi marched with her first and only son Nago in her womb, she being in her seventh month of pregnancy. Now they are all excited about freedom, which is to come in one hundred days (Gold 6-7).

Lakshmi recalls that Meera participated in the struggle even though she was only ten-eleven at that time. She could not help it, her grandmother being what she was. Mocking her age-old gout, Meera's grandma marched with the younger women in hard sun and heavy
downpour, making them forget the fear they had in their bones. Meera recalls that Grandma locked her up in the kitchen before she went with the tricolour flag, saying that the game was not for a small squirrel to play. But the small squirrel climbed to the roof thatch, pulled off straw in armfuls, crawled out through the hole and came running down the main road, straw on hair and clothes. The women stood in one police van, the men in four others. Meera yelled 'Quit India!' lest she miss the ride to the prison. Grandma saw Meera captured and muttered angrily, but her face glowed with pride (Gold 7-8).

Champa recalls that, before the Quit India Movement, Lakshmi, being a rich man’s wife, was aloof from the village. It was in the prison that she became their true friend and sister. On the very first day in prison she yielded to the spell of Meera’s Grandma. Then she took to her cell-mates, Champa and Munni, peasant wives, and Sohagi, wife of the cartman. Lakshmi is pained to recall that, on the day set for saluting the national flag, an act against British law, her husband disappeared on the pretext of a business trip to town. A stigma has clung to him since then (Gold 8-9).

Now the women exhort Lakshmi to hold her spine erect in the coming struggle against her husband for soris. The women of Sonamitti wear tattered saris and
jackets made from cast-off gunny sack. At night some women sleep almost naked. The irony is that Sonamitti produces enough cotton fibre to clothe the entire district. It is all due to Lakshmi's husband, the Seth, who owns the only clothshop in Sonamitti and the six villages around. Exploiting the countrywide shortage of saris, he has cornered the supply and pushed up prices. He has even bought up in advance the output of the village weaver Dhannu, who needed money for his father's funeral. The Seth is not only a cloth merchant, he also lends money. The village is neck-deep in debt to him. Lakshmi pleads with him to sell one sari each to the village women. When she points out that his price is five times more, he says that the fault is not his. He glares at his wife and the resistance goes out of her. Even after eight years of marriage, Lakshmi is afraid of her husband, more so after her father mortgaged half his holdings against a loan the previous winter (Gold 9-10).

The Seth frequently reminds Lakshmi of the humbler status of her parents and their heavy indebtedness and points out that he married her because of a rare star-conjunction in her horoscope (Gold 10).

Back from prison, Lakshmi is one at heart with her prison friends. They meet in her house for an hour or two at mid-day. They meet in the vacant cowhouse so
that, in case the Seth returned to the house unexpectedly, the women could remain unseen. So they give themselves the name Cowhouse Five, Lakshmi being part of them all (Gold 10-11).

In the last fortnight tension has been building up. The women of the village are ready to fight for cloth under the leadership of the Cowhouse Five. Meera suggests that a hundred women march behind a banner of rags round the village and on to the Seth's clothshop, stamp their feet in unison and cry, "We demand cloth to wear, cloth." If this method does not work they will threaten to strip themselves bare. The bold idea is approved. They will take Lakshmi also along because it is a cause of the people, of the whole country.

Before Lakshmi can reply, Sohagi's baby Govind begins to scream and so she goes out of the shed with him. Lakshmi is miserable. The age-old submission is her inheritance, but she cannot let her friends down either. Just then there is a shriek. Sohagi comes hurting with the news that Nago has fallen in the well (Gold 13-15).

No help is available nearby. But Meera hitches her sari up and seizes the iron bucket. She sits in the bucket and the other women pay out the rope, lowering her into the well. The women recall how, last summer, when a big black cobra bit Ganesh, Meera sucked the blood out and saved him while none of the men
volunteered to do so. At a signal from Meera, the women pull her and Nago up. While Nago is given first aid, Meera lies panting, her rags further tattered. Lakshmi takes Nago into the house and puts him to bed. She returns with a lovely blue sari and a jacket for Meera (Gold 16-22).

Despite her exertion in the well, Meera insists on holding the march as planned. At mid-day a hundred women assemble under the banyan and set out in a procession with a banner of rags, shouting, "We demand cloth to wear, cloth." When they reach his shop and shout, the Seth invites one of them to talk with him. Meera goes into the shop. Returning, Meera reports that the Seth waits to see the hundred women strip themselves bare. The women are dismayed. Lakshmi comes there after having attended to her son's medication. She enters the shop and demands a sari for each woman. Otherwise she threatens to take off her clothes. The Seth merely chuckles. She threatens to strip herself and walk home naked. She removes her jacket and loosens the waist-knot of her sari. Only then the Seth agrees to sell the saris. The women are jubilant (Gold 23-32).

The Seth decides to turn his loss to good account in view of the election to be held to select a district board member for Sonamitti. He can be sure of contracts
and quotas to bring in cash. He has arranged for the first picture play in Sonamitti by Peerless Products Company to promote their Peerless Ghee. Learning that the women of the village are all talking expectantly about the picture play, the Seth, as punishment for the demonstration for saris, decides that the women will not be admitted to the picture play (Gold 33-42).

The Cowhouse Five are infuriated by the Seth's ban on women at the picture play. Meera seeks the advice of Grandma, who shows her a postcard from Grandpapa saying that he will arrive on Thursday, the twenty-third. Meera goes to the Halwai to find out the day. The lecherous Halwai, who has grandchildren, speaks of marrying Meera after paying a fine to the Five Elders for marrying across castes. The Halwai's dead wife is believed to reside still in the house because he did not perform the ritual that would release a spirit from earthly bonds and send it heavenward. Learning of the impending arrival of Meera's Grandpapa the next day, the Halwai tells her the legend attached to his name of Atmaram and of his wanderings in the Himalayas. Grandma debunks the lore as Grandpapa's mischief. Meera has an inspiration to beat the Seth's wily plot against women. She tells the Halwai that Grandpapa's bhajan will be conducted at the same time as the picture play (Gold 43-57).
Grandpapa, the wandering minstrel, arrives. Owning nothing, he has the dignity of a king. He can take the hearts of people in his fist, he can make them laugh and cry at his will. Grandpapa refuses to support Meera's plan to thwart the Seth's picture play. He tells her "You cannot right one wrong with another. You cannot fight malice with malice" (Gold 58–62).

Grandpapa has heard much against the Seth from the villagers. The minstrel decry's the inequality of land ownership everywhere. Meera explains to him how the Seth has insulted the women of Sonamitti and says they have scores to settle. Grandpapa is skeptical, but Meera assures him that a picture play cannot stand between him and the people. He says that Atmaram can be her defence against the Seth's power over her (Gold 66–70).

Seeing some school boys shouting slogans to vote for the Seth, Grandpapa asks Meera about it. She mentions the forthcoming elections. Grandpapa says that the villagers must know about the vote. He explains that, in free India, the wheels of life would run under the power of the people's vote. He urges that the tyrant, the Seth, should not be sent to the district board to speak and act for them. Meera agrees (Gold 70–71).

Grandpapa has visited every house except the Seth's. The Seth meets him on the veranda of Meera's
house. The Seth requests Grandpapa to hold his bhajan in his orange orchard. Grandpapa agrees to hold it that night, after the picture play. The Seth is elated. The Seth excuses his money-lending as public care. He then asks the minstrel for a taveez, an amulet, like the two he gave away on his last visit, bringing good fortune to the recipients. Grandpapa agrees to give him a taveez for a payment. When Grandpapa and Meera are alone, he says that the taveez will protect her and the village from the all-grabbing hand of the Seth by empowering her to make the tyrant to come to terms for a while. Meera does not understand. Grandpapa asks her to send Lakshmi to him. He has a taveez in his palm and it should not be given to the Seth. Lakshmi and Meera come near Grandpapa, who mentions Gandhiji's wish "to wipe every tear from every eye." He says that everyone of us can wipe a few tears from eyes of misery if we try. He exhorts Meera not to be afraid, not to step back, whatever happens. Meera agrees. Grandpapa wants to take a stroll with Lakshmi if she is going home. Lakshmi and Grandpapa cross the road (Gold 72-75).

The Cowhouse Five are gloomy because of the picture play. Even Lakshmi curses the Seth but then, as a traditional wife, she repents and prays for him. A lone monkey appears on the scene. Lakshmi says that one cloth
piece has more value for the Seth than ten picture plays. From these Meera gets an idea. Lakshmi places treacled rice and a bunch of bananas before her door to draw the monkey there. Meera goes to the meadow where the picture play is being shown and announces that hundreds of monkeys have invaded their homes and are helping themselves to grain and tearing up cotton pieces. The men rush out and run towards their houses. Their places are taken by the women of the village who have been waiting in the dark, led by Grandma. When the men perceive that they have been fooled, they troop back to the meadow and see their womenfolk enjoying the picture play. It is played again for their benefit so that the women see it twice. When it ends, the minstrel is at the door to conduct the bhajan (Gold 76-83).

Grandpapa begins the bhajan with a tale from the Ramayana. He concludes it with the Mahabharata story of Krishna plucking the touchstone from Jambuban. Then the minstrel calls Meera to his side. Taking a taveez from his kurta, he ties it to her right arm. He declares that the taveez holds a touchstone. Wearing it, she will do an act of real kindness. Then all the copper on her body will turn to gold with which to do good. Parted from her arm, the touchstone will become a worthless pebble. Everyone hears the words. The Seth
realises that it is the taveez which the minstrel had promised him for a price and in due time. Angry and puzzled, the Seth watches the minstrel pass into the moonlight (Gold 83-86).

The Five Elders ask the minstrel the meaning of the taveez. He merely says, "Maybe this will force the greedy man to make terms." Meera would like to buy tiger fat for Grandma's gout but it costs fifty rupees per jar. Lakshmi thinks that the Seth may buy Meera's taveez for a jar of tiger fat. In the evening Lakshmi suggests to the Seth to make a deal with Meera in return for a jar of tiger fat for her Grandma. The Seth is not enthusiastic. Lakshmi despairs and gives up. But the Seth thinks long and hard, unable to decide (Gold 89-93).

The Seth buys a second-hand motor cycle for business trips and also because a district board member has his touring duty. When Lakshmi says that she knows about the forthcoming elections, he ridicules women's knowledge of such things. In response to his ridiculing, Lakshmi asks why women should not ask to be members of the district board. He thinks that women have short wits. He believes that a knowledge of letters did not make a woman more sensible. The Seth goes to town and buys his motor cycle on condition that the driver,
Sohanlal, serve him as driver (Gold 94-101).

Grandpapa has warned: "Freedom is the beginning of the road where there was no road. But the new road swarms with robbers." Upon hearing of this, Sohanlal, who has become very friendly with Meera and Grandma, agrees with Grandpapa. He adds that there are Seths of several kinds and he lists them (Gold 119). In response to Meera's question, "Have you not seen true men?", Sohanlal replies:

"It will be no surprise if the true men are forgotten on freedom day when it is celebrated two months hence... I can see the flag salute at our Curzon Park. The police have cordoned off the space for men of privilege. They sit in comfort with their backs to the rope barrier watching India step into independence. Those men were the prison guards of yesterday's slavery. They are to be the guardians of tomorrow's freedom." (Gold 120)

Sohanlal agrees with Meera that it is the men beyond the rope barrier who will count finally (Gold 120).

Sohanlal warns Grandma that the Seth will get elected to the district board and even has an ambition to become a Minister. He exhorts her to emulate the
Quit India days. The Seth has offered a three-months' remission of interest from the day he is elected to the district board. Grandma visits an Elder and asks him to speak up so that robbers do not become rulers. He pleads that there are bonds bearing his thumb mark. She warns another Elder that a tiger watches his flock, ready to spring, and assures him that there is always a weapon. One day the school boys' gang shouting for the Seth is countered by a gang of cow-boys shouting against him. The school boys flee. Watching this, Grandma decides to build up Don't Votes. She refines the idea to mean that they must have their own man on the board and fight for his election. Meera suggests Grandma herself. Grandma ridicules the idea, because she is a woman. Meera moots the idea and it spreads. A procession is taken out. The schoolmaster, leading the school boys in favour of the Seth, sees his wife in the Grandma procession and dismisses his gang. The Seth is not perturbed. If he forecloses Grandma's mortgage on her lands, she will be landless and so not eligible to contest. So Lakshmi decides to carry out the minstrel's bidding to save Meera and leave the village because she cannot also bear to watch her husband stepping into the trap (Gold 123-30).
Lakshmi wishes to visit with her parents for a month. The Seth happily sends her away with Nago. Then he summons Grandma for the final reckoning. But Meera comes alone. He looks into Grandma's account as she watches in trepidation. She has visions of herself and Grandma leaving the village as paupers. Moreover she will have to part from Sohanlal in pain. Her hand is restless on the ledger. The Seth notices one beringed finger. He exclaims at the sight of the gold ring. Meera snatches the ring off her finger and tosses it to the desk. He applies a touchstone to the ring and finds that it is really gold. The ring could release one field and render Grandma qualified to contest the election. But Meera says that it is a cheap ring for which she paid only one rupee to the bangle-seller, who said it was copper with a gold wash. The Seth's professional pride is hurt and he asserts that it is a proper gold ring. He declares that it is a miracle. He says that copper has turned to gold and, Meera, rolling back her sleeve, reveals the taveez. The Seth ascertains from Meera that it is the taveez given her by the minstrel with the promise that, on her person, it will turn copper into gold provided she performed some act of real kindness. But Meera cannot explain the words of the minstrel. The Seth is overwhelmed by
the potential of the taveez and sends Meera home, asking her to come back in the afternoon since he needs time to think. He recalls a recent dream in which a clay idol turned into a golden one—the gold goddess. He also recalls that, according to his horoscope, his stars make "gold-mine luck" around his forty-fifth year. The Seth deduces that the taveez will produce gold by transmutation. Soon his assistant Bulaki Rao tells the Halwai about the transmutation of Meera's copper ring into gold (Gold 131-40).

The Seth is sure of the miracle. His only uncertainty is about the act of kindness done by Meera. He decides to enter into a business partnership with Meera. He sends for her. He convinces her that she needs a business partner who has business acumen as well as funds and who will bear the risks involved. He offers her a fifty-fifty partnership. She agrees to it. He produces an agreement. He plays on her sentiment, saying that his son Nago is her brother. He says that she saved him in the matter of the picture play when he tried to deny the women. When she explains that they were merely fighting for equal rights for men and women, he growls, but covers up his reaction quickly. He offers to get tiger's fat for Grandma from Bombay. He asks her to sign the agreement, not thumb mark it. He proposes to invest her with copper rings, bangles, amulets, anklets,
neck-chain, waist-chain, and copper nuggets under the
clothes, next to the skin. Since these have to be
ordered from town, he gives her the copper coins in his
cash box to wear in her waist cloth in case she performed
an act of kindness before the ordered ornaments arrived
(Gold 141-50).

Meera tells Grandma and her friends all that
happened in the Seth's clothshop and shows them the
agreement. She also shows them the copper coins the
Seth has given her to be worn next to her skin. She
decides to use her good fortune to release every piece
of land in Sonamitti from the stranglehold of debt.
She also decides to rely on Sohanlal with his knowledge
and understanding (Gold 151-58).

The news of the touchstone spreads like wildfire
all over the village. There are contradictory
reactions—wonder and skepticism. With Meera having
signed the agreement with the Seth, Grandma can no
longer oppose him in the election. But the Elders have
learnt from Grandma. The Seth cannot be allowed to go
to the district board. But the Elders compete against
one another to be the candidate to oppose the Seth.
Just then the Seth comes in search of Meera. He wants
her to recollect her act of kindness that caused the
transmutation. The Elders take their leave (Gold
159-64).
Meera can recall only one act of kindness. The rag-woman's son Buddhu was standing near the sweetshop at midday licking an empty leaf-cup that a customer had thrown away. Meera came there and saw him. She bought a half-anna worth of jilebi and gave it to Buddhu and wiped his running nose with her sari before going away. Now the Seth orders five basketfuls of jilebi for the next day, to be distributed to all the children of the village by Meera while wearing all the copper ornaments ordered by the Seth (Gold 157-71).

Meera distributes the jilebi but her heart is empty. It is a fake gesture devoid of the feeling she had when helping Buddhu. She leaves the assembly and walks away. Sohanlal joins her. She needs to be consoled because the touchstone has failed. He explains that her earlier help to Buddhu was a real act of kindness. She asserts that the village needs the touchstone gold to wipe out poverty. She needs his help in case the touchstone works. She asserts that the gold will not be hers, but the people's as Grandpapa said. But Sohanlal is against charity. He insists that one's money should be earned by one's own effort. Grandma is happy that the Seth's experiment has failed and hopes he will now leave it to chance. But Sohanlal is not so sure. Sohanlal is baffled by the mistrel's true purpose, but even Grandma cannot tell him (Gold 172-78).
The women of Sonamitti pester Meera with their tales of woe and poverty. Grandma tells them that this is the minstrel's joke, but they will not heed her words. One woman secretly gives Meera a copper coin and wants her to wear it on her person. Meera agrees. The Seth arrives and asks Meera to recall any act of kindness on her part (Gold 180-84).

At the Gay Peacock in town the Seth is mortified to observe that no one in town pays any attention to the touchstone and gold story. As night falls, however, a stranger arrives and wishes to speak to the Seth. His name is Janardhan Jain and he is from Bombay. He wants a half share in the business and offers six thousand five hundred rupees. Finally he begs for a quarter share for the same advance amount. The Seth turns down the offer of partnership from Jain (Gold 185-92).

The Elder, Rajaram, decides to contest the election. With the help of the village constable Hoosiar, the Seth divides the youngsters and only his supporters remain active. The women are a different proposition. Meera, however, cannot physically participate in a march because of the heavy jewellery she is wearing. Moreover, she is no longer enthusiastic about the board since she hopes to solve Sonamitti's problems with gold.
Every woman in Sonamitti now wants Meera to wear a copper coin of hers on her body. Fewer women now participate in the processions. Sohanlal says that failure in the board elections will prove that they are unfit for freedom. He points out that there are eight hundred thousand villages in India, each with its own Seth, waiting to snatch the power from its people. Meera wishes to change the subject and Sohanlal walks away. The barber comes with a proposal of marriage for Meera from Halwai. Grandma suggests that Halwai should marry Buddhu's widowed mother. The barber persists. Grandma says that the coming of the matchmaker unasked is a good omen (Gold 193-201).

Since Meera cannot carry on her body all the coins forced on her by all the women, it is resolved that she will carry fifty coins at a time and that, when they turn into gold, they will be shared equally. The Elders are worried that Rajaram may not be quite effective on the board. They hope that they will learn in course of time. They speculate on what good Meera can do with her gold, like lending money at a fair rate of interest. They fear that she may buy up their lands as the Seth did (Gold 202-07).

The Seth hits upon the idea of forcing Meera to act kindly. So he asks Meera's neighbour, Old Father.
to vacate his house, serving a court decree. Meera offers to speak to the Seth, but Old Father stops her. Everything is sold except a scythe which is missing. Grandma senses danger. So she and Meera keep watch through the night. They see Roghuvir emerge slipping out of Old Father's house with the scythe. Meera persuades him to give up his plan of murdering the Seth. In the morning Meera goes to the Seth and begs him to spare Old Father's family. She offers to make up the loss ten times over. The Seth gives her money to be given to Old Father to pay up. Meera runs homeward. But Old Father refuses to take the Seth's money, "soaked in peasant's blood," because, though homeless, he has his honour (Gold 208-15).

Soon after Old Father leaves, Subhadri, who gave the first copper pice to Meera, takes it back saying, "Better far that we bear a hundred woes than use the accursed gold for our relief." Soon the other women come and take back their pice. Meera learns from Sobagi that the Seth has revealed that he evicted Old Father prematurely in order to get gold through her subsequent kindness. Muni points out that kindness is now on sale to make gold and kindness has now become a threat. Even the rag-woman flees from Meera for fear that the girl may attempt some kindness in order to get gold (Gold 216-20).
The Cowhouse Five have mixed feelings. They know that Meera does not deserve such indictment and that she is not the maker of circumstances but its victim. The election is round the corner. The Cowhouse Five take the message around and a thin procession is again on the road, shouting for Rajaram. However, Rajaram says that the gold hunger has taken its toll. Someone asks if they will never be whole again (Gold 221). Someone answers:

"We need someone to slap us in the face, hard. A slap that will sting into our blood and bone. We need the thunder of a shame to pass from our toe nails to the bristles on our chin. Then we shall again be Rajaram or Harischandra or Chotalal." (Gold 221)

On the second day, Grandma joins the procession. When Sohagi offers her the banner, Grandma declines, saying, "Old people must make way for the young, or else they will become a hindrance." Meera meets the procession near Schoolhouse Lane. The procession falls silent and stops. The people wish that Meera should join them, but don't say so. Meera stares at the procession, turns round and walks away. Grandma has no strength left after that when the procession resumes (Gold 221-23).
Meera sees Sohanlal. She needs him now, yet fears him. He understands that she has seen the procession. She admits that she is despised as the scourge of Sonamitti. Meera cries. Sohanlal lets her cry, because she has to. Sohanlal advises her not to blame the people for seeing the taveez, which is only the means and not the purpose in her heart. He explains that the people have now assigned her to the Seth's world. Hearing the procession approaching, Meera leaves. Later that evening Sohanlal tells the village lads that Meera is selfless, that she wants nothing for herself and that that was why the minstrel gave her the taveez (Gold 223-28).

Passing the well in the backyard of the cloth shop, with its parapet badly in need of repair, the Seth gets a new idea to trick Meera. He speaks to Bulaki Rao and offers him a reward of fifty rupees. Later he sends for Meera and asks her to eat with him. As they are eating, Bulaki Rao cries that Buddhu has fallen into the well. Meera runs across the backyard. A kite is flying high and the thread-reel is lying near the well. Meera urges them to do something. The Seth sends Bulaki Rao off to get a pair of fellows who can swim. Meera peers into the well, recalls the rescue of Nago and remembers the cumbersome jewels on her body. The Seth pleads that he cannot swim. Bulaki Rao returns with
Sohanlal. Taking in the scene, he strips himself and prepares to go down into the well. The Seth objects to this and calls to Meera. The Seth tries several arguments, but Sohanlal dismisses them. As Sohanlal descends, she hears the Seth's words to Bulaki Rao and turns to see Buddhu come out of the latrine at the corner of the yard. The Seth explains that, if she had gone into the well under the urge of her natural impulse, the touchstone would have acted. Meera denounces him and walks away, accompanied by Sohanlal (Gold 238-46).

Receiving the Seth's letter which says that Meera has become "Sona Mai" (Gold Mother), Lakshmi perceives that she has fallen headlong for the touchstone. She prays that she should not suffer overmuch. The cartman, driving her and Nago home from the station, tells Lakshmi about the gold fever caused by the touchstone. She fears that the Seth has made a fool of himself (Gold 247-48).

The Cowhouse Five call on Lakshmi—except Meera. The others object to Lakshmi talking of Meera. Lakshmi suggests that there is probably some mystery behind the touchstone episode. The others say that Meera has moved a world apart from them because of the touchstone (Gold 250-51).
Lakshmi visits Meera, who is no longer boisterous. Grandma grieves that the gold goddess has destroyed Meera. Grandma understands that Grandpapa exploited the Seth's gullibility through Meera, without perceiving that she would never connect Grandpapa with any deceit. Lakshmi agrees that it is so.

The Halwai has turned the people against Meera and her effigy is to be burnt on Monday next. Lakshmi confesses to Sohanlal that she is responsible for all this trouble. She reveals that the miracle of the gold ring is a fake. She slipped the gold ring on to Meera's finger after removing her copper one while the girl was fast asleep and felt nothing. She also reveals that it was the minstrel who told her to give Meera the gold ring. She did it on the day before she went away (Gold 259-61).

Lakshmi tells the Cowhouse Five about the proposed effigy-burning. They react angrily. But their arguments can not convince most people. The Cowhouse Five raid the sweetshop at midday wearing masks, but the Halwai is not there. The servant-boy knows nothing about the effigy. The Cowhouse Five leave disappointed (Gold 262-65).

Sohanlal arrives with news of the effigy near the haunted neem tree. He takes them there in pairs on his
motor cycle. They stop some distance from the neem tree. Lakshmi stays back with Sohanlal. The other four women attack the evil women engrossed in the ritual. Sohagi grabs the effigy. One of the other women seizes a torch. The four women flee, the torch following them. Sohanlal brings his motor cycle up, light beaming, and bars the torch-bearer's path. He summons the women to face the Five Elders for murderous assault. They are frightened and they retreat (Gold 266-68).

The Cowhouse Five take the effigy to Meera's house. The next day Grandma takes it to the fields. She tells Meera's history and asks the peasants if Meera is a witch. Grandma recounts the shame intended for Meera in the person of the doll. Grandma plies them with question after question and takes them to task for their hatred of Meera. An old man, speaking for everyone, expresses regret for all that has happened (Gold 269-71).

The Seth has not recovered fully from Meera's tongue-bashing at the well in the backyard of the cloth shop. But he has not given up hope of discovering some really kind act to be done. He hits upon the idea of a marriage between the Drunk and the Bad Woman of Pipli so that both can give up their evil ways and return to normal life. Bringing this about will be a real act of kindness. Bulaki Rao agrees to be go-between
as well as priest for the affair. But he tells Sohanlal all about it. Sohanlal swings into action at once, because the plan is sheer madness (Gold 272-77).

Grandma tells Sohanlal that the minstrel is in Kusahalpur at a fair, staying in an inn. Sohanlal wants him to be told about the miracle so that he can undo the mischief he has caused. Grandma refuses to make him unhappy. Sohanlal seeks her permission to write to the minstrel. She gives permission and also says that Meera is all Sohanlal's. The letter is written (Gold 278-79).

The Seth has persuaded Meera to accept the proposal for the marriage of the Drunk and the Bad Woman as an act of kindness. All the bad fellows turn up for the wedding. They clamour for more toddy. The Seth has to give the money. The Bad Woman complains that the Seth has made her lose face and demands many ornaments as compensation therefor. The bad fellows return more drunk. Amidst all the commotion Meera strips herself of all her copper ornaments. Sohanlal enters the place. He asks Meera to come and she goes with him (Gold 280-86).

The Seth takes stock:

Obsessed by gold, he had let all his routine work slacken and stop. His second cloth shop
in town was still a plan on paper and his blue-print of a countrywide chain of stores, at least twenty, near-forgotten. And there was the district board of course. So much remained to be done, and he was content to let his energy ooze down his fingertips. Time to set things right. Time for hard, honest donkey's work. (Gold 287)

Grandpapa arrives at break of dawn. He explains the whole riddle based on the greed of the powerful Seth and his yearning for a taveez. Grandma tells him all that happened after his previous visit until Meera came home a few days back without her copper ornaments. However, at night, feeling under her clothes, Grandma had found that the taveez and some of the copper ornaments were still there. She says that Meera has suffered much. She asks the minstrel to end it all. Meera wakes up. Grandpapa tells her not to worry (Gold 289-93).

In the course of a midnight stroll the minstrel visualises for Meera's benefit the danger to be expected if unlimited gold becomes available, using the Cowhouse Five as illustrations. Two of them become rich, acquire property and dislodge the poor. Their riches corrupt their minds, they become competitors and then enemies.
The cart driver becomes lazy and his wife fat and he marries a second wife. The land available is bought up by a few who use hired labour. The labourers cry and the rich mock them. Meera now understands the real meaning of freedom and flings the taweez into the river.

In the morning the village is electrified by the news that the touchstone has been assigned to the river, the Gold goddess put to flight (Gold 299). Bhattacharya comments:

It was like a fable of old come to life. A peasant maid became a king's daughter. Glory and disgrace; glamour and ridicule. The seven weeks' wonder ended on the eve of freedom day. This was the day for which Sonamitti had fought and suffered and waited. Yet in the hour of fulfilment the touchstone, even if gone, was stealing a march on history; mere myth was usurping the emotion that belonged to an epochal reality. There was to be no procession, no public rejoicing. Sonamitti lay in a kind of daze (Gold 299).

The Cowhouse Five bustle in early in the morning and wake up Meera. Lakshmi tells them that the Seth is deep in his plans for the election, which is two days ahead. Grandma says that Grandpapa is up to something.
He will probably sing to the village about freedom. Meera proposes that they should persuade Grandpapa to sing to the people (Gold 299-301).

While washing herself, Meera recalls that, as they walked back from Pipli, Sohanlal had spoken eloquently of "the new Republic that was about to write its name on history's page." At her door he had said, "Meera, it seems there will be real freedom for you too." When he came again at daybreak she asked, "I step into freedom as soon as it comes to my country, do I not?" He answered, "That is one thing. The other is that each of us has to win the freedom to be free. It is a state of the mind, so Gandhiji tells us." Meera is sure that Sohanlal meant the taveez (Gold 301-02).

Word goes round that the minstrel will sing to the village. Everyone arrives, including the Seth. Though he has lost the battle for gold, the battle for power could still be won. Since Meera's Grandma is not a candidate, he will give her fields back to her. The gesture will win the village to his side. To get the minstrel's support, he will announce a half-year's remission of all debts (Gold 302). Bhattacharya describes:

"Jai Hind!" The minstrel greeted his audience. He stood under the flag he had unfurled. Would they let him say five words
or ten before he sang? This day with its
great gift for India's people—a touchstone!
He paused, allowing the hum of astonished
comments to stop. Freedom was the touchstone,
he resumed, his voice stronger. It was a
touchstone for everyone. To possess this
touchstone was not enough, for it could wake
to life and work its miracle only when acts
of faith were done.

His words grew in power. "Brothers, now
that we have freedom, we need acts of faith.
Then only will there be a transmutation.
Friends, then only will our lives turn into
gold. Without acts of faith, freedom is a
dead pebble tied to the arm with a bit of
string, fit only to be cast into the river."

(Gold 303)

The minstrel tells the villagers that guidance will
come from other quarters and that they should hold
themselves in readiness. It is up to them to attain
miracles, creating them with love and sweat and freedom
is the means to that end (Gold 303).

Sohanlal arrives during the bhajan, having changed
his plans to spend Independence day in town. He had
heard Jawaharlal Nehru saying on the radio:
"Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny and now the time has come when we shall redeem our pledge. At the stroke of midnight hour India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance."

(Nehru 304)

Nehru's words inspired Sohanlal to change his plans to fulfil his personal tryst with destiny. So he returned to the village. He now joins the crowd and learns of what has happened during his absence (Gold 303-04).

When the minstrel stops, Sohanlal rises and goes to the foot of the banyan. He proposes that the minstrel will no longer wander but stay, that being his gift to the village. The audience repeats the demand. The minstrel must use his wisdom for Sonamitti by going to the board. The whole assembly shouts for votes for the minstrel. The old man protests but the crowd insists. Meera clinches the issue with an appeal to Grandpapa (Gold 305).

In the confrontation between greed and altruism, Meera is burdened with a veritable cross. Her activities before receiving the taveez from the minstrel are
designed to project her as an altruist and therefore the natural foe of the greedy Seth. But the old minstrel has worked out a stratagem as complicated as the legend of Atmaram.

The result is that Sonamitti becomes Meera's Calvary. She moves up and down weighed down with all those cumbersome copper ornaments, some of them grating against her skin. The minor greed of the villagers adds fifty copper coins to the load. She is dragged here and there to perform deeds of kindness only to be disappointed.

In course of time the villagers who celebrated her as Sona Mai begin to denigrate her and even hate her. They go to the extent of identifying her with the Seth—a second Seth. Even the Cowhouse Five are no longer warm towards her. The final indignity comes when the villagers plan to burn her effigy, with all its traditional connotations.

Only the return of the minstrel releases Meera from her agony. The truth is out and her heavy ornaments are down. Freedom is pronounced to be the taveez, to bring prosperity to the village. A decisive end is put to the Seth's greed when the minstrel is unanimously chosen to be the candidate to represent the village on
the district board. Sonamitti has kept its tryst with destiny.

Asnani says that *A Goddess Named Gold*, essentially a collection of more or less amusing anecdotes strung into a relatively complicated plot, and contrived situations, offers an insight into the real problems that beset the country after independence (32). Raizada, in "Shabani Bhattacharya: Novelist of Social Ferment," describes the change that overtakes the attitude of the villagers towards Meera as a result of the Seth's manoeuvres to create situations to make Meera perform her act of kindness so as to be able to transmute copper into gold:

People are thrown out of their homes and made homeless, children are threatened to be dropped into wells so that she may have a chance of helping them out and display her kindness. As the miseries of people increase, Meera, the beloved of the village, comes to be treated as its scourge, an evil goddess of wealth whose effigy they plan to burn. (164)

Iyengar says, "A Goddess Named Gold entertains as a story, but it also disturbs us with its undertones of warning and prophecy" (420). The warning to Independent India is, as H.M. Williams says in *Indo-Anglian Literature*
1800-1970: A Survey, "against selling her soul" (94).
Narasimh Srivastava, in "Symbol and Allegory in
A Goddess Named Gold," says, "A Goddess Named Gold is
a powerful allegory of the meaning and purpose of
freedom as well as of its failure besides being the
pursuit and worship of the gold goddess" (164-65).
In "Fiction as Allegory: Novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya,"
Radzada says, "A Goddess Named Gold is an allegory of
the threatened exploitation of free India by greedy
capitalists" (94). Asutosh Roy, in "Bhabani
Bhattacharya's 'A Goddess Named Gold'," echoes the same
idea when he says that the novel "warns against the
evils of the profiteering greedy rich men who may
exploit the freedom to serve their vested interest"
([47]).
Note

1 All subsequent references to the text of Bhattacharya's novel A Goddess Named Gold will be indicated by Gold, followed by the number(s) of the relevant page(s) in parentheses, the text used being the Hind-Orient Paperbacks edition of 1967.