Chapter - 4

GOLDEN LOTUSES
Women have traditionally played a complex and striking role in Indian society. Indian women have showed their mettle in every sphere. In the modern times, women have progressed without any stop and proved their worth as well as spirit in every field far better than the male. In Indian English Literature, Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Shobha De, Bharati Mukherjee and Manju Kapur and many more female novelists have left their indelible imprint on the Indian readers. Their vast contribution to English literature is not only remarkable but excellent too.

Freedom for Indian women meant more than mere freedom. Freedom is not only from the hands of British rulers and their cruelty but actually their release from centuries of male-domination as well as social and cultural norms. Now, woman is not enclosed within four walls but she has tried to effect a slow but sure change within her own home.

In earlier fiction, women were represented in a single dimension-a responsible daughter or an all sacrificing mother, an obedient wife or a beloved and a virgin. Earlier, they were considered weak, emotional and only confined to the household works. But today women have achieved a separate identity as well as a distinguished place in fiction, due to their awareness in every field whatever-political, social, cultural or individual. The novelists through their writings have tried to bring freedom to the female from their age long subjugation by men.
One of the striking features of the novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya is the prominence given to women-characters in them. Women are usually presented by him as highly significant—if not central-characters. They are not treated as inferior to men, although they happen to live in a male-dominated society, Bhattacharya himself confesses to his admiration for Indian women, when he says:

I think they have more depth, more richness, than the men. The transition from the old to the new, the crisis of value adaptation, strikes deeper into the lives of our women than our menfolk [82].

The two aspects of Indian woman as the heart of family life — as wife, mother, daughter-in-law and mother-in-law and also as the symbol of the ideal motherhood as the life-force itself, are strongly represented and combined in Bhabani Bhattacharya’s characters. The success of his female characters results from the process of his imaginative creation of them that lends them a life of their own beyond the particular context in which they appear. The significant content of a novel by Bhabani Bhattacharya and its artistic center of interest are to be found in the women characters. Marlene Fisher rightly points out:

Although the novels of Bhattacharya tend to be centered around his female characters, their themes touch broadly upon some of the most vital aspects of men and women alike — particularly men and women as members of society [83].
It would be hard to improve upon the description of Kajoli, the protagonist of his first novel, *So Many Hungers*. He says:

The women wore gold on their rounded arms. And not one of them could boast half the looks Kajoli had. What fate! Bhagwan! A golden lotus wasting in mud and filth. The heart grew sick at such utter injustice (SMH 180).

Hunger has been a notorious corrupter of human beings. Even the strongest of men have faltered under its impact. But Kajoli stands firm in the face of it without allowing her image being sullied in the least. Kajoli is a guileless country girl from a peasant family of Baruni, a village in Uttar Pradesh. Her parents revealed patriotic fervour to an uncommon degree. They had been in jail for participating in India’s freedom movement. Kajoli claims that her mother was in jail twenty years back in connection with Gandhi’s Satyagraha Movement and her elder brother, Kanu, was born in jail.

Kajoli’s early life was relatively calm, though the freedom-struggle presented her with a handful of problems. As a young girl she is said to have had a keen fancy for bright colours. Kajoli’s elder brother, Kanu, is in jail along with her father. Onu is her younger brother. Her mother is an unnamed woman who has been presented as a symbol of the ideal Indian womanhood. As they are interested in the country’s freedom, they have the advantage of knowing a Gandhian leader of the freedom movement, Devesh Basu. Kajoli holds him in high esteem. When he takes leave of the villagers on being arrested and taken away, he tells them, “Friends and comrades, do

Those words made a deep impression on Kajoli. They keep reverberating in her ears long after she heard them. When Rahoul, grandson of Devesh Basu, visits their house, Kajoli has the opportunity of receiving him in the traditional manner. She removes his shoes and pours water on his feet to wash them, Rahoul feels a little embarrassed at her behaviour. But Devesh Basu tells him that Kajoli is a well-bred peasant girl with a legacy of manners as old as India. He also adds, “How could she give up her manners and properties to suit your new-fangled city ideas?” (SMH 28).

Kajoli is fortunate to have the protection of her mother in her early years, when her father and elder brother are lodged in prison for the interest evinced by them in the country’s freedom movement. While in prison, her father happens to become intimate with a young man named Kishore, who was sent to jail for taking part in a strike. He happens to think that the young man will make a good husband for Kajoli. On Kishore’s release from jail, he calls on Kajoli’s mother with a letter from her father. Kajoli’s mother has no difficulty in approving of the marriage proposal and a happy marriage follows soon enough. She readily accepts the proposal as an ideal Indian woman.

The young couple have a brief spell of happiness after the marriage. We are told that Kajoli echoes a cuckoo’s note, ‘Coo-oo’ joyously, when she hears the birds sing while she is in the fields
accompanied by her husband. But Kajoli’s happiness does not last long. Conditions become more and more difficult in the village due to famine, and Kishore goes to Calcutta, leaving pregnant Kajoli behind, in search of a livelihood. But the trip becomes ill-fated. He is shot dead by the soldier who thought that he would be a militant. But the news of his death does not reach Kajoli. They presume that he has perhaps been arrested again and sent to jail.

The conditions of privation and poverty prevailing in the village present untold hardships to Kajoli and others. One clay, their beloved cow, Mangala, being famished, makes the mother grow wild eating the beans planted by them. The mother is seen screaming and beating the animal. Kajoli finds it hard to believe that Mangala has done such a thing and her mother has lost her cool. She says, “Do you want to creek her heart? Look at her eyes, mother” (SMH 114).

And she is said to have flung her arms over Mangala and buried her face against the rough russet skin, weeping brokenly. The incident reveals the tender nature of Kajoli. Though they have sold everything including the bells tied to Mangala’s neck, for keeping their body and soul together, they do not think of selling away the cow. Yet the mother decides the gift away the animal to a destitute fisher woman who is seen trying to bury her child alive as she is unable to bear the sight of his suffering from hunger.

The mother, however, bluntly refuses the help offered by a pimp woman as she is keen on living in honour and dignity. Soon, Kajoli, accompanied by her mother and brother, Onu, leaves for Calcutta.
But their arrival in Calcutta does not bring any solace to them. Kajoli goes in search of food leaving her mother and brother behind. A soldier helps her with some bread and tries to molest her taking her to a lonely place. And a piercing shriek by Kajoli brings him to his senses, she is seen lying in a pool of blood. Bhabani Bhattacharya has expressed his unease at a critic’s desire to know if Kajoli has actually been raped by the soldier. He has maintained that it is not necessary to know this. He has also added that it won’t be fair on Kajoli to speculate on the matter further [84]. According to the novelist, the incident was devised with an artistic purpose.

The soldier is quick to repent the manner in which he treated Kajoli and he does his best to make amends for it. He informs the army doctor about a woman lying uncared for and persuades him to extend medical attention to her. Of course, he hides away his own role in bringing about that plight to Kajoli. She is taken to an army hospital in a military van and treated with all care. She gets good food in the hospital. The kind of attention received by Kajoli in the hospital presents our army men in a splendid light and testifies to their chivalry, Kajoli’s mother is able to locate her in the hospital in some time.

On her discharge from hospital after a month, Kajoli is deeply distressed to find the hellish conditions in which her mother and brother have lived during that time. When she is seen talking with her mother in a depressed tone, a betel-woman happens to overhear them. She tries to make friends with them offering betel leaves and
food. She sounds exceptionally kind and generous. She is all praise for Kajoli’s looks and says that she has a golden image.

The betel woman meets Kajoli every evening. She also finds an opportunity to tell her about an attractive offer of becoming an inmate in a nearby brothel. Kajoli is able to understand the motive behind the betel woman’s facade of generosity. However, Kajoli takes a grim decision herself for rescuing her mother and brother from the jaws of poverty. Kajoli informs the betel-woman of her decision. While walking towards the brothel in the company of the betel-woman, she hears the newspaper boys shouting the news of the day: the prisons of Dehra Dun, led by Devesh Basu, are on a hunger strike. The news has already arrested Kajoli’s attention and her thoughts have fled to her early life. Devesh Basu’s inspiring parting words came to her mind.

Kajoli decides to try selling newspapers and tells the betel-woman about her decision. She tries to persuade her to stick to her earlier decision, but in vain. Kajoli assures her that the amount received from her will be returned intact. It can be presumed that the spirit of the fighter in Kajoli asserts itself leaving her free to live a life of dignity and honour. The change vindicates her true mettle. K. K. Sharma says, “This last act is significant, as it suggests that she beats evil and moral death embodied in the betel-woman and returns to healthy life” [85].

The author’s affirmative vision is evidenced in the manner in which he has allowed her to walk into freedom. In his refusal to think
of taking Kajoli to the brothel house, the author has revealed an abiding faith in the essential goodness and spirit of man which prevail over all sorts of debilitating and degenerating influences. The fact that he has chosen to illustrate the triumph of the human spirit by means of a woman may bear testimony to the lofty ideas he has had concerning women. Indeed, he has not failed to acknowledge the presence of certain evil things in the society in the shape of the betel-woman and others.

K. R. Chandrasekharan has commended the manner in which the spirit of Kajoli has remained unconquered and unconquerable in the face of sorrow and suffering [86]. Bhabani Bhattacharya has concurred with Chandrasekharan’s view that Kajoli is ‘a pure woman’ comparable with Thomas Hardy’s Tess [87] as both of them remain virtually pure in spite of the attempts to seduce them. K. R. Chandrasekharan has called the story of Kajoli the story of her providential escape from moral fall rather than a story of redemption [88].

Kajoli has been able to resist such demeaning influences of hunger, owing largely to the author’s attempt to present a positive vision. He has also cited some examples of a few who have tried to help others when they are in dire need themselves. Kajoli’s mother’s generous gesture, in gifting away her beloved cow, Mangala, to a needy woman, may be among them. Another example is found in a destitute surrendering his food ticket to a hungry man. A young girl showing her bare bosom repeatedly in order to earn a few rupees to
buy bread for some hungry destitutes who regard her as their mother.
While illustrating the essential dignity of man, such instances suggest
the author’s desire to remain positive in his approach unmindful of
the obvious presence of the forces of evil in the society of his time. As
Harcharan Singh Boparai says, “When hunger smothers love, dignity,
sympathy, pity and higher values of life, it turns man into an animal;
when it brings them forth it makes him an angel” [89].

The women characters in Bhabani Bhattacharya’s first novel,
*So Many Hungers* have been found to be relatively passive. They are
inclined to accept the customs, conventions and traditions that
prevail in the society unquestioningly. The change from *So Many
Hungers* to *He Who Rides a Tiger*, is a change from passivity to
rebellion. While commenting on that change, Bhabani Bhattacharya
observes:

*So Many Hungers* follows the famine up to its peak point,
its climax. In the storm of death that almost suddenly
swept the city streets and filled them with human debris,
there was no room for any kind of counteraction....certain
gaps were left—the famine was multifaceted. These gaps
were filled out in *He Who Rides a Tiger*, which was written
with a different perspective [90].

The most significant woman character in *He Who Rides a Tiger*
is Chandra Lekha who is the only daughter of its protagonist, Kalo.
The name is suggested to Kalo by a brahmin priest. He also sends her
to a mission school which is meant for children of high castes. The
desire expressed by Kalo’s wife before her death to send her child to the mission school at any cost, regardless of its sex, seems to have influenced Kalo’s decision in this regard more than anything else.

Kalo’s daughter, Chandra Lekha, is occasionally ill-treated by her classmates who belong to high castes. One day Lekha flies into a fit of fury and slaps a girl for making derogatory comments on Kalo. She believes in the goodness of her father and his profession. Yet the fact that she has resorted to beating up the girl may testify to the spirit of rebellion she has in her. The regard she has for her father’s feelings prompts her to hide away the incident from him.

The ill-treatment by her classmates does not prevent her from doing well in her studies. She does her father proud that way. Kalo also tries to learn things by going through her books after she goes to bed. Lekha’s brilliance as a student does not make her slight her father’s profession. In fact, she wishes that she were a boy so that she can be helpful to her father in his work. Kalo himself does not think of giving her training in his work as she is a girl and also she gets many prizes at school. Lekha’s education in the mission school is not at all appreciated either by the lower or by the upper classes of the society.

Lekha stands first in Bengal in an essay writing competition and wins the Asoka Memorial Medal. Kalo is overwhelmed with joy when he sees her name published in the paper, *Hindusthan*. He expects his daughter to be complimented by the inspector of schools, the magistrate and several others. But no one is seen. The author
It was as though nothing had happened to Jharna town” (HWRT 13).

Anyhow, Kalo basks in the sunshine of his daughter’s achievement. He keeps the medal below his pillow and touches it before going to bed. He loves Lekha so much that his very existence is for her.

The Second World War hits the entire Bengal and makes life extremely difficult for the poor. Along with many others, Kalo also finds himself idle. He feels deeply depressed as he thinks that he is able to give his daughter nothing but suffering. But she has never complained. Kalo realises that she has inherited not only her mother’s good looks but also her good nature.

Kalo plans to go to the city of Calcutta hoping to get a job. He leaves Chandra Lekha behind, with a heavy heart, in the care of an old aunt. Lekha thinks of selling her medal to buy food. She is aware that her father would not approve of such an action as the medal is a source of pride to him. He used to tell her that it was not just a piece of silver but a sacred amulet. Yet she finds it impossible to avoid selling it off, she sells it to a trader for three measures of rice.

Lekha has no news from her father for several months after he leaves for Calcutta. At that time, Kalo is in prison for three months for stealing bananas. Lekha is very much worried. Besides, she has an evil dream about her father. Soon, she receives a letter from Kalo saying that he is safe. But he hides away the fact that he was in jail for fear of upsetting her. The letter brings her immense joy and makes
her forget hunger.

Lekha writes a letter to her father and waits for a reply. Long after, she gets a reply along with two ten rupee notes. Lekha and her aunt are able to have food with the help of it. But the fact that her father has been able to find his feet at last appears more important to her.

Meanwhile, a fat woman who pretends to be coming from Calcutta appears before Lekha and tells her that her father has met with an accident and is hospitalized. She also says that Lekha’s father wants to see her and the hospital authorities have sent her to bring Lekha. She is able to trick Lekha into believing that she is speaking truth and Lekha accompanies her. On her arrival in Calcutta, she lands in a brothel against her wishes. She has to spend two days in the brothel with her door locked and windows closed without having any food. She finds it impossible to starve and has a few mouthfuls of food most reluctantly. On the next day, the woman arranges a feast for her. Along with her feeling of disappointment at not seeing her father, she feels a sense of relief, as she knows that he has not met with an accident and been hospitalized.

The fat woman uses both persuasion and coercion to make her yield and live the life of a prostitute in the brothel. But providentially, Lekha’s father himself gives her a helping hand. Recognising her voice when he hears her scream, on someone making advances towards her, he comes to her rescue. He has been working in that brothel.

Lekha’s stay in the brothel for a few days may make the readers
wonder if she can be considered unpolluted. The author himself suggests the possibility of the orthodox society holding such a view, when he says, “Even to have breathed the air of the harlot house would mark a woman as fallen” (HWRT 71). The positive quality of the author’s vision of life has promoted such an occurrence. Indeed, Bhabani Bhattacharya is an artist with a design on the reader.

The untold hardships caused to Chandra Lekha apparently bring about a new resolve in Kalo to wreak vengeance on the society which inflicted them on her. He says, “She was society’s scum in a truer sense than he. Her suffering had been incomparably more than his. She had to hit back. Would she? Would she?” (HWRT 87).

Consequently, Kalo goes about executing the plan suggested by Biten. Lekha is aware that her father’s attempt is to practise sheer deception. Yet she does not feel like opposing the plan. In fact, she goes to the extent of complimenting him on the cleverness revealed in it. The voice of her conscience remains muted for the time being by the force of circumstances.

Perhaps such an unholy plan would not have originated in Chandra Lekha herself. And she would not also have helped promote it if she were to take the vital decisions involved in it. The role played by the male-dominated society in such cases is evident at this point of the novel. Women are left helpless spectators, when men go about taking important decisions and implementing them.

Surely, the voice of a strong conscience cannot be suppressed for too long. It is bound to assert itself sooner or later. When Kalo
makes himself instrumental in the setting up of a Shiva temple installing himself as its master, flying in the face of established customs and conventions, Lekha is confused as well as alarmed. Kalo himself is far from sure that she will cooperate in his endeavours. It is her respect and affection for him that makes her keep silent in the face of his attempts to dupe himself and others in a manner that is not worthy of a conscientious person. Kalo believes that she has been wronged by the society and she has to hit back. He notices a peculiar look in her eyes as if she feared him. He finds no frankness in her face. She was withdrawn, deep inside, beyond his reach (HWRT 87), says Bhabani Bhattacharya.

The comment may suggest the author’s views on her relative strength. Chandra Lekha is too deep for her father. Her superiority seems to spring, partly at least, from the kind of education she has received, while Kalo remains relatively shallow and rustic. He knows only too well that her views are likely to be more true than his own. Yet he seems to have deliberately avoided taking into consideration her conscientious objection to his practices, as he finds no other way of wreaking vengeance on the society. Chandra Lekha also seems to have deliberately avoided making her views explicit for quite some time.

Only when Kalo exceeds the limits of propriety in pursuit of his goal, Chandra Lekha begins to speak out. When Kalo is angered by the touch of a blacksmith, Vishwanath, and uses abusive language against him, Lekha is shocked. Her very look addressing him as
'Baba’ is enough to force him make amends for his misbehavior towards the man by using a conciliatory tone.

When Vishwanath is introduced to her by Kalo as a God-sent uncle, Lekha proves the essential humility of her nature by touching the man’s feet. Notwithstanding his *brahminical* pretenses, Kalo has consideration for a member of his community. In defense of his seeming misbehavior earlier, Kalo tells Lekha:

“We stand on the edge of a cliff. A hundred eyes keep watch on us, waiting to see if we slip and fall. We have to be wary, in our difficult position we cannot be familiar with a menial. Do you understand?” (HWRT 114).

Lekha’s awareness of brahmins may reveal that she is not prejudiced against their community by any means, though her father develops grudge against them. Lekha’s objection to her father’s plan is based on her aversion to his practice of deception to an unacceptable degree. While Kalo allows his own conscience to remain muted in the thick of his retaliatory activities, he allows himself to listen to the voice of Chandra Lekha’s conscience whenever it is heard.

Lekha’s freedom from caste-based prejudices is borne out by her attitude towards Biten, a brahmin by birth who has severed his links with *brahminism* for his own reasons. Lekha is broad-minded enough to hold him in high esteem though he has no caste-affiliations. The fact that Bhabani Bhattacharya has credited her with such a broad outlook may prove the supreme regard he has for
women as well as his belief in their superiority.

Lekha is not upset by Biten’s blunt refusal to wear a sacred thread to be considered eligible to marry her. Instead, she is embarrassed by her father’s insistence on such an absurd condition. T. N. Dhar suggests that it is prompted more by Kalo’s fear of economic insecurity and less by his genuine fascination for brahminhood [91].

Chandra Lekha is not in favour of getting married to a brahmin. She shudders at the thought living a life of deception in the company of a person who actually deserves her affection and respect. But such considerations do not matter to Kalo. He is keen on playing his part in a thorough manner. It is difficult to approve his new manner. The author says, “She, who agreed with her father’s impulse of revolt, felt confused of his method. Was he hitting back, truly?” (HWRT 108).

Kalo is not deep enough to understand and appreciate the inhibitions felt by his daughter in the matter, in spite of the affection he has always had for her. But Lekha, being an affectionate daughter, sympathizes with him, notwithstanding his follies and foibles.

As the only daughter of the chief priest of the temple, Chandra Lekha commands enormous reverence. Her absorption in the rituals of the temple brings her a kind of relief. Biten’s attempt to embrace her on an occasion rouses the woman in her. Biten misunderstands her revulsion and leaves her. After Biten leaves her, she becomes a woman like any other. But she is considered ‘the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss’ by the devotees. The author pinpoints the irony of the situation
in which people begin to deify Chandra Lekha when the woman in her
is awakened (HWRT 209).

Lekha’s attitude towards the orphan boy, named Obhijit reveals
her essential nobility and compassion. The comforts of her new life do
not make her neglect the interests of the needy. The rhetorical
question attributed to her by Biten “Is it a crime to demand food for
the hungry?” (HWRT 170) may suggest that her heart is throbbing for
the poor as much as the author’s.

The question may testify to her strong views, notwithstanding
her passive nature. In a male-dominated Indian society, such strong
words from the mouths of women are rarely heard. The exalted
position assigned to women by Bhabani Bhattacharya in his novels
has apparently made him credit his women characters with such
views.

Meanwhile, Motichand, one of the trustees of the temple, plans
to desert his third wife, Radha, with the help of a fake astrologer. His
idea is to marry the beautiful Lekha. He is very much fascinated by
her looks. He tells Kalo about his desire to marry her. Neither Kalo
nor Chandra Lekha feels in favour of Motichand. Yet they are aware
that he will make a dangerous enemy. The author says:

Ten thousand maids in Bengal prayed for such a rich,
high placed husband. But Lekha was unlike them in
temperament and needs. She had no craving for the good
things of life. She wore few ornaments and only plain
cotton clothes. The rest was a load cast upon her
unwilling head (HWRT 222).

The temple authorities decide to formally install Chandra Lekha as the mother of Sevenfold Bliss. But for Lekha, the status is suffocating. The only choice left before Lekha is of agreeing to be married to Motichand. She knows that he is a despicable character and it is impossible for her to respect him as a married woman should respect her husband. Her plan is only to punish him in all possible ways. Lekha tells her father about her deliberate decision in the matter. He is totally confused. He has not expected such a decision from her. Her plan is to get married to Motichand soon after being installed as the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss.

That is the closest Chandra Lekha is capable of going towards hurting her father’s feelings. Being a decent and dignified person, she has utmost regard and respect for the sensibilities of others. As suggested by T. N. Dhar, her decision to get married to Motichand becomes the proverbial last straw that breaks the camel’s back [92]. And Kalo’s daring confession brings a pleasant surprise to Chandra Lekha.

Shanta Krishnaswarne rightly points out that Bhattacharyya “affirms again and again that the woman need not be a victim; she can play a positive role in the development of society” [93].

In Shadow from Ladakh, Bhabani Bhattacharya attempts syntheses between conflicting ideologies. He makes some women instrumental in these syntheses along with men. These women include Satyajit’s wife, Suruchi, and his only daughter, Sumita. The
significance given to female characters in this novel testifies the novelist’s high regard for women.

Suruchi, as introduced by Bhabani Bhattacharya, is a beautiful woman with vitality and a melodious voice. The manner in which she appears for the first time in the novel as India’s representative at the peace conference held in Moscow impresses on the reader that she is an accomplished lady with a forceful and winsome personality. B. Shyamala Rao says, “That she was a woman of radiance and beauty is evident from Satyajit’s impulsive proposal [94].

Suruchi was a student at Shantiniketan when she met Satyajit. He was working as a teacher there. Their differing caste affiliations did not come in the way of their marriage, thanks to Satyajit’s lofty ideas and ideals. A daughter was born to them and she was named Sumita.

Satyajit is selected by Vinoba Bhave to be in-charge of Gandhigram. The couple begins their new life there. Satyajit tries to follow the Gandhian principles in full. Suruchi is intelligent and compassionate. In recognition of her outstanding ability, she is chosen to represent India at the International Peace Congress held in Moscow. She advocates India’s case competently.

She reveals uncommon debating ability in countering the charges made by the Chinese delegate, Mrs. Tung Pao. She shows extraordinary courage of her convictions and faces the highly provocative comments made by the Chinese delegate without losing her head. Thus she brings credit to the fair sex. Her exemplary
conduct at the Peace Congress may be an eloquent testimony to the excellent opinion Bhabani Bhattacharya has of women.

Satyajit tells Suruchi of his decision to lead a life of abstinence *brahmacharya* as suggested by Gandhiji. Suruchi finds it difficult to do so at an early age of twenty nine. He offers her full freedom to marry again if she wishes. But she does not favour that choice. She would be his companion in ideas, even if they were so very strange [95].

She is firm about remaining his companion, even if they have to behave like strangers. Bhabani Bhattacharya says that her faith in the ‘Stone God’ Satyajit is strong and her surrender complete [96]. Once she becomes tense and breaks her glass bangles with a stone. Satyajit’s friend, Bireshwar watches her do so. He tries to convince her of the lack of propriety in her action. He also blames her for cooperating with her husband’s irrational desire to observe *brahmacharya*. She is eager to have two sons and has even chosen their names - Ajoy and Sanjoy. She finds it difficult to appreciate how one’s dedication to national service could gain strength from the state of celibacy (SFL 23).

She is sad to note that her husband lacks Bireshwar’s zest for life. But she remains a loyal partner to him both at home and in society. Suruchi strives to the best of her ability to lead a simple life as desired by her husband. She avoids wearing gold or silver in accordance with Gandhigram’s rules. Bhabani Bhattacharya describes her as a ‘humble, self-effacing....ideal wife’ (SFL 274) who
has modelled herself on Sita.

Satyajit trains his daughter, Sumita, also according to his rigid principles. His wish is a law for Sumita. K. R. Chandrasekharan has aptly said that Sumita is a better example of Satyajitism than Satyajit himself [97]. She is said to be tall, fair and shapely. She shows the least interest in coloured clothes, ornaments or coloured beads unlike the girls of her age. She has no relish for the beautiful things of life. She wears only white robes like a widow. She walks bare-footed. She is nick-named as ‘anti-life’ by Bireshwar. Suruchi is depressed to find her daughter falling in line with her father’s wishes entirely. She is eager to see her daughter adorned like other girls. But she tries hard to bring about a change in Sumita as well as Satyajit. A.V. Krishna Rao finds her a faithful reflection of Kasturba’s self-effacing personality [98].

Rupa and Jhanak stand in contrast to Sumita. Both the girls live an uninhibited life with no regard for customs or conventions. Jhanak feels free to love and marry a man of her choice in disregard of the restrictions of Gandhigram. People in the village consider her a disgrace to the principles of Gandhigram. But Suruchi sympathises with her and admires her courage to lead a life of her wish. She is aware that she lacks Jhanak’s guts. She feels that ‘an ascetic woman is a contradiction in terms’ (SFL 289). In her view, no woman likes to live the life of an ascetic. Bhabani Bhattacharya seems to share her view in that regard. He says that Jhanak represents ‘a woman’s primal urge to be nothing but a woman’ (SFL 274). In her heart of
hearts, Suruchi has an aversion to Satyajit’s code of morality. Her deeply-felt conviction in that regard is supported by Bhashkar, Bireshwar, Rupa and Jhanak.

A change in the attitude of Sumita becomes visible gradually. She comes to know about the recreational activities in the Meadow House opened by the opponent of her father and Chief Engineer of Steeltown, Bhashkar. She pays a visit to the Meadow house along with her friends. She is fascinated by the activities there and she becomes a regular visitor to Meadow house. As observed by A. V. Krishna Rao, the moment of her encounter with Bhashkar is as dogmatic as frigid [99]. But in some time, she begins to like him. Sumita feels ashamed of her own ugly feet, when she sees the beautiful feet of a dancer at the Meadow House.

Bhashkar finds her too plain and simple. He feels that she is completely against sophisticated tastes. His comment that a little lipstick will make her look good brings an awareness in her of her own looks. Bhashkar takes her to a deserted temple and asks her opinion about a beautiful, sculptured piece of love. She says that she knows nothing of the art of sculpture. He finds her unresponsive to the sculpture of love. He understands that they belong to two different worlds. But he is very much impressed by her simplicity and the sterling qualities of her head and heart. Though he is a man with a Western outlook, he is fascinated by her simplicity. He is aware that the complex, she suffers from, is her father’s.

Gradually, Sumita shows signs of awakening of the woman in
her. She begins to evince interest in colours and ornaments. She tries to make herself appear attractive. She begins to admire beautiful things. Suruchi, who does not wish her life to be repeated in her daughter, is very delighted to see the change in Sumita. She decides to encourage Bhashkar’s love for her daughter. She sympathises with his efforts to conquer Gandhigram, effecting a peaceful penetration by means of the Meadow house.

Though Suruchi accepts her husband’s principle of abstinence, she is never happy about the torture being imposed on her. She feels that she is not a Kasturba, but an ordinary woman with normal urges. Though she surrenders herself to her husband completely, she emerges as a full and a mature woman who does not lose her true identification. She finds that, unlike Gandhi, her husband is not at peace with himself.

Satyajit’s apple-cart of asceticism is, however, upset by Jhanak, who shows interest in boys and elopes with one of them. Satyajit himself is occasionally tempted by the urges of the flesh. He is said to have had resort to penance by fasting for suppressing his carnal desires. Ultimately, he decides to give up the life of abstinence.

Sumita and Suruchi extend their full support to Satyajit in his fast unto death to save Gandhigram from being taken over by Steeltown. One cannot help thinking that Bhabani Bhattacharya has put his own words into Suruchi’s mouth, when she says:

The great city with its giant machines had something to gain from the small centre of spiritual life. Productive
power needed the balancing force of self-abnegation......Let there be a meeting ground of two extremes; let each shed some of its content and yet remain true to itself (SFL 273-274).

Bhashkar’s love for Sumita brings about a wholesome transformation in his view of Gandhigram, He abandons his plan to annex Gandhigram to the Steeltown. Bhashkar is able to appreciate the logic behind Sumita’s assertion that men of Gandhigram are incapable of hatred and that hate is the vice of city people. Yet she realises the need for Gandhigram getting exposed to every wave of thought, the full force of the modern age, yet stand rocklike in unshakable strength of conviction. She also observes, “Isolation is no answer. Isolation meant fear of defeat” (SFL 174). In the words of Lila Ray, “The new-industrialization comes to an understanding with ancient ethical tradition in the love of Bhashkar and Sumita. In them India stands united and strong” [101].

Dorothy Blair Shimer is inclined to give the credit for fusing the worlds of Steeltown and Gandhigram to Sumita alone, [102] though she could not have brought about that achievement in isolation.

The softening in the rigidity of Satyajit has been influenced largely by his wife, Suruchi. In fact, H. G. S. Arulanandrum considers her the author’s mouthpiece in advocating the integration of contrary views under the influence of Rabindranath Tagore [103]. Marlene Fisher has commended her welcome transformation into a full, mature, most attractive woman with a strong sense of her identity
Meena Shirwadkar states:

In the end, both the women not only come out of the Gandhian or rather the ascetic principles of Satyajit but go beyond it to blend the ascetic and the aesthetic (Gandhi and Tagore) ways of life, or Gandhigram and Steeltown (Gandhi and Nehru), the spinning wheel and the turbine (East and West). Women in this novel serve to bring about social harmony [105].

Bhabani Bhattacharya has been well-known as a novelist closing the gap between conflicting ideologies. The interest the protagonists of his novels evinces in the syntheses of divergent tendencies testifies to the author’s own passion for fusion. But he does not confine to drive home this interest through men alone, though he is aware that the society in which he has been living is a male-dominated one. He involved some of his women characters also in the process of amalgamation in a manner characteristic of him.

In *Music for Mohini*, for instance, the protagonist of the novel, Jayadev, displays immense interest in synthesizing divergent trends ably assisted by his wife, Mohini, and his sister, Rooplekha. The conservative values of the village and the progressive values of the city are sought to be blended.

Mohini is born and brought up in an urban environment. She lives in the city of Calcutta along with her father, grandmother and brother, Heeralal. She is seventeen at the opening of the novel.

Mohini’s father, however, prefers to get her educated in a
convent school brushing aside his mother’s opposition to the proposal. Mohini’s interest in music also becomes a source of embarrassment to her grandmother. She is invited to sing in All India Radio. She accepts the invitation with the consent of her father. She earns a reputation soon as a gifted radio singer. K. K. Sharma describes her:

She is instinctively vivacious, playful and carefree. She loves to laugh, and needs just a slight cause to go into peals of laughter. As a young maid, she is famous for her beauty and melodious voice. When she has a longing for a lover and has really none, she does not feel very miserable. She smiles by musing on love, which is the light and saviour of life; life without love is like jasmine without scent [106].

Mohini’s urban qualities are revealed on various occasions in the novel. She does not believe in the process of arranged marriage. Arranged marriage appears to be commercialized to her. The dowry system and bridal interviews are thought to be humiliating by her. During some of the bridal interviews which were reluctantly arranged by her father, she is said to have gulped down her tears of shame (MFM 42).

But the Old Mother is far from pleased with her reputation. She believes that the modern world is a manifestation of evil. She is against Mohini’s singing on radio. She feels that it is a disgrace to the family. She even threatens to leave them if Mohini is allowed to sing,
she is distressed to know that Mohini’s songs are sold in the bazaar for a few rupees a piece. She wants the black discs containing her songs to be destroyed.

Mohini dreams to become a film star. One day, her father finds her reading a novel entitled, *The Poisoned Kiss*. Though he does not take it seriously, he is rather unhappy about the novel she has chosen to read. He does not make any fuss about it. But the Old Mother reacts differently when she comes to know of it. She understands that Mohini has grown up and come to the marriageable age. She asks him to look for a match for her. She insists on the matching of the horoscopes before an alliance is fixed up. But her son regards the idea as a joke as he attaches no importance to horoscopes. This may well be Bhattacharya’s own view.

Mohini’s marriage with Jayadev of the village of Behula is fixed after the matching of the horoscopes to the complete satisfaction of both the parties— Mohini’s Old Mother on the one side and Jayadev’s Mother on the other. But Mohini’s father has fears whether she will be able to live in peace in the rural environs. He wonders, “Will Mohini put up with village life?......New thoughts, new customs new tastes, all so very old — will she adapt herself?” (MFM 56). But Mohini assures her father that she is in favour of the alliance. When the Father expresses a doubt whether she is trying to please the Old Mother, she answers decisively, “You have taught me to speak my heart boldly, haven’t you, father?” (MFM 62).

Despite her father’s unwillingness, she chooses to marry
Jayadev who lives in a village. Shashikala Singh observes:

Mohini’s willingness to settle in a rural atmosphere reveals the first change in her attitude to life. There are signs of a true Indian woman in her. There is Mohini in every Indian girl with all her contradictions and the ultimate reconciliation of things Indian code values [107].

The character of Mohini seems to have been shaped by the differing perceptions of her father and grandmother. They have apparently helped her to attempt a synthesis of the diverging trends in her later life. Shanta Krishnaswamy aptly says, “. . . through her, the author aims at interlinking polarities, at connecting culture with culture, tradition with modernity, the individual and society” [108].

At the outset, Mohini finds the atmosphere in the Big House rather suffocating. Jayadev’s mother (called the Mother) appears to be a woman of iron will. She is rigid and conservative to an exasperating degree. She is tougher than the Old Mother in the city. Initially, Mohini’s reaction is rebellious. She fears that it is impossible to get adjusted to her ways. The Mother allows her to sing only devotional songs. She is expected to wear only cotton sarees. The Mother forbids her to sit for a meal along with men. Only vegetarian food is cooked and served in the Big House. She is fond of fish. The ladies of the house are not allowed to go out walking. They must go either in palanquins or in bullock carts. Yet she shows great fortitude and prepares herself to make adjustment with the stern rules and traditions of the Big House. K. R. S. Iyenger comments on Mohini’s
transformation:

She throws herself into new tasks, and she strikes roots into the soil of Behula. The strain is nothing, what matters is the sense of fulfilment alone. She is thus able to establish rapport with her husband readily furthering the causes so dear to him [109].

To her utter dismay, Mohini notices that Jayadev cares little for her feelings. She understands that he is fully involved in a social reformation programme. He feels that his personal life is unimportant when compared to the crisis faced by his country’s social freedom. He lacks time even to attend to his personal needs. Jayadev expects Mohini to lead a life of abstinence till he discharges his duties and responsibilities towards the nation. He wants her to share his scholarly pursuits. He calls her Maitreyi. Mohini feels depressed as she fails to get the desired love from her husband. She suppresses her human urges and adjusts herself to the new ways of life.

Jayadev’s sister, Rooplekha, also suffers after marriage. She points out the similarities and dissimilarities between them when she says to Mohini, “You are city-bred, village-wed, I am village-bred, city-wed, we share one common lot; we have been pulled up by the roots (MFM 92). The words of Rooplekha further elaborate the vision of Bhattacharya when she says:

We who are so wed, serve some real purpose. It’s as though we made a bridge between two banks of a river. We connect culture with culture, Mohini, our old Eastern
view of life with the new semi-Western outlook (MFM 94-95).

Jayadev’s mother tells Mohini about the ideals the Big House stands for. She eats with her left hand, having dedicated her right hand to Lord Shiva. The act is meant to ensure safety to the heir of the family. The Mother shows more attachment to the tradition than to the people. She will not allow disgrace of any kind to the tradition of the Big House. She is keen on retaining the sanctity of the tradition. The Mother has strong belief in horoscopes. She teaches Mohini how to conduct herself as the mistress of the Big House. She also hands over to her the key of the wardrobe in which the entire money and jewelry are kept.

According to Roop Lekha, the difference between the Mother and others lies in her intensity and her absolute adherence to her family tradition. As for Jayadev, she considers him a curious admixture of the old and the new. One may be inclined to think that his interest is heavily slanted in favour of modernism. Bhabani Bhattacharya’s interest in synthesis is once again evident here.

Mohini was sandwiched between a similar combination in her own house as her father’s progressive outlook is a counter to the traditionalist approach of Old Mother. The experience she has had in encountering the contrasting approaches in her own house naturally stands her in good stead in dealing with the new situation in the Big House. She transcends both these cultures and emerges as a new woman. What is achieved by her seems to be a wholesome
compromise between the divergent approaches favoured by the two cultures.

Jayadev tells Mohini about the importance of social uplift. While striving for reforms in the village with the help of Harindra, Jayadev insists that there is no room in the Big House for crazy beliefs. His opinions must naturally have made a deep impression on Mohini. The attitudes and activities of Jayadev and Harindra serve as a source of inspiration to Mohini. She tries her best to help her husband in his social work. She educates the village women to read and write. Though her inability to rise to the expectations of the mother-in-law depresses her a good deal, she finds great relief and pleasure in getting involved in social service activities. She is enabled to escape from the suffocating atmosphere of the Big House to a considerable extent.

The love and admiration she has for Jayadev makes her ignore the hardships faced in the Big House. She is willing to absorb new ways of thought and habit and cultivate new interests for his sake. He does not want to be defeated by discomfort and desolation (MFM 105-106).

Though she does not get due recognition and attention from her husband, she tries to be close to him and share his work. Mohini tries to mingle with the women of the village and understand their problems. She also tries to find solutions to them. She gets a sense of relief and satisfaction from her work.

Jayadev attains the age of twenty-eight. Mohini is not pregnant
still. The Mother expects her to offer her blood to the virgin goddess because of her superstitious belief in such a custom. The offer involves the cutting of the skin of her bosom for collecting her blood in a lotus leaf bowl. The Mother says that if Mohini fails to beget a child, both Jayadev and the Big House itself will be in danger. She is willing to give her own blood, along with Mohini’s, to have a grandson for herself. She also vows to give a set of gold nose-rings to the Goddess, if her wish is fulfilled. Mohini, who does not share the Mother’s belief, feels like revolting against her. Her city education makes her say that she belongs to the New India and has nothing to do with the old enslaving orthodox ways.

Mohini recalls the words of her husband and her father. But Mohini also remembers her Old Mother’s words. When she thinks of it all, she feels greatly confused. Finally, she decides to act according to her mother-in-law’s wishes. The news of her mother’s wish regarding the offer of blood to the virgin goddess reaches Jayadev through Sudha. He loses no time to come to her rescue. He tells his mother firmly, “Values, Mother? There are values beyond your grasp. Since you will always try to teach them with your reason, never with your feelings. Life has punished you” (MFM 180).

Jayadev’s words in the context should be convincing enough to anyone. And luckily for Mohini, the Mother also relents on hearing them. Harish Raizada’s comments on the incident may be significant, when he says:

The timely arrival of Jayadev - symbolic of modernism -
saves Mohini from her annihilation just as the impact of modernism can save the New India and its political freedom from being stultified by the degenerate orthodox society [110].

He also regards Jayadev’s admonition to his mother in the context as the author’s warning to the stubborn mentors of the orthodox Indian society. Mohini gives her consent to her husband’s marriage with Sudha to beget a son for the family. But everything ends on a happy note when it is known that Mohini is pregnant.

The Mother also feels repentant. She is overwhelmed with joy when she comes to know of Mohini’s pregnancy. She also repents for the callous manner in which she has treated Mohini. Mohini’s own joy knows no bounds, she is ready to make any sacrifice for the sake of Jayadev and the Big House. When Mohini returns to her parent’s house the author says, “The Big House lived in her, a part of her inmost self, at last, there was no discord….Her life was music the true quest of every woman, her deepest need” (MFM 188). K. R. Chandrasekharan writes about Bhattacharya:

Regarding the place of woman in society and in the home, his attitude is not one of radical feminism. He is conscious of the fact that the Hindu woman has an ancient hunger to offer worship - that is worship to the husband. Marriage changes a girl’s attitude, fundamentally; she no longer desires to live for herself and is willing to make the necessary sacrifices and
adjustments that her situation demands. This is precisely what the heroine does in the novel [111].

The world of a typical Indian woman is usually confined to the walls of her home. It is seldom that she reveals either social or political awareness. More often than not, she models herself on Sita and identifies her interests with those of her husband. Her opinions are usually her husband’s and she does not appear to have a mind of her own. But the women presented in A Goddess Named Gold are of a different class. They reveal social and political awareness to an uncommon degree. They organize themselves into a group in order to fight for the welfare of their Motherland. The author’s idealism is in full flow in the characterisation of those women. B. Shyamala Rao comments:

Bhattacharya’s fourth novel A Goddess Named Gold may be termed a women’s novel. In essence, it is a feminist novel as the liberation of the country from the clutches of the Sethji is accomplished by women only [112].

The group of six women formed to fight for the well-being of the nation is called The Cowhouse Five’ (defying arithmetic). They participate in nationalistic activities against the wishes of their family members. They even go to jail. They shout slogans to protest. The women of the Cowhouse Five feel that Gandhiji has liberated them with a purpose in the New India. Gandhiji roused them from their sleep, made them equals of their men folk and did them proud. Lakshmi, wife of the Seth, was pregnant when she participated in the
freedom movement.

The most prominent among them is Meera. She may be regarded as the heroine of the novel. She, along with the other five women, holds their daily meetings in an unused cow-shed of the house of one of them, Lakshmi, wife of the greedy Seth Samsunderji. The other women are Bimla, Champa and Munni, wives of peasants and Sohagi, wife of a craftsman. They are of different ages and levels of the society. A common feature among them is that they fight for the nation and are strong in their nationalistic leanings. They are imprisoned for their participation in the Quit India Movement.

Meera is brave and broadminded. Meera saves the life of a person bitten by a cobra. She reveals her resourcefulness as she sucks out the poisoned blood with her mouth. She is always ready to extend a helping hand to anyone who is in need. The villagers are full of praise for her.

She lives with her grandmother who is also known for her leadership and participation in nationalistic activities. Her grandmother has had the pride of participating in the Quit India Movement. Meera’s grandfather is a wandering minstrel who visits them rarely.

Bhattacharya is able to present a woman with a difference in the Seth’s wife, Lakshmi. She is also a member of the Cowhouse Five. She is an ardent nationalist who is against her own husband in her attitude. Seth Samsunderji, her husband, a cloth-merchant and money-lender, is notorious in the whole village for his cunning and
selfish activities.

But unlike him, Lakshmi is a good-natured woman. She is kind and has a helping nature. Her husband is not interested in the nationalistic movement and does not like his wife's participation in it. His only aim is to make money by hook or crook. On a crucial day fixed for saluting the national flag, the Seth is said to have absconded. He pretends to be away on a business trip. But the people of the village know that he is in hiding. Presumably, he does not want to invite problems by saluting the national flag.

The Seth has huge stocks of cloth under his control. He hoards it and plans to sell it making huge profits. The condition of Bengal is so horrible that women wear blouses made of jute cloth taken from old gunny bags. The women come to know about the huge stocks of cloth with the Seth. They try several ways to make the Seth sell the cloth at a reasonable rate but their efforts are in vain. The Seth remains unmoved.

His wife, Lakshmi, tries to convince him of the need to sell the stocks. But he refuses to yield. The author says:

“Under her husband’s implacable will she was a lump of clay. The habit of submission was her age-old inheritance. A woman had to obey her husband and household king” (AGNG 19).

These lines reveal Bhabani Bhattacharya’s awareness of the presence of a male-dominated society in which woman feels thoroughly helpless.
Meera comes out with a plan to organise a protest-march to the Seth’s shop to make him sell a hundred Saris at a fair price. She says that the demonstration should include the women of the entire village. If the Seth refuses to sell the stocks, they hold out a threat that they will walk naked. The women including the Seth’s wife, Lakshmi, agree to join the demonstration. But before the actual demonstration takes place, an incident happens. The Seth’s son, Nago, has accidentally fallen into a well. Meera dares to jump into the well and saves the boy at the right moment with great difficulty. One of the fellow-women, Munni, is astonished to see Meera coming out of the well. She looks like a king’s daughter.

Then, Sohagi and others plan to walk back. They are sad, as they think that the demonstration will not take place because of the effort to rescue Nago. But Meera does not give up. The women say that they are limbless without Meera. Each of them pays homage in her heart to the girl of sixteen, bowing to her strength of spirit. The marchers approach the front of the Seth’s shop.

The Seth is greatly annoyed at the sight of his wife, Lakshini, among the marchers, He orders her to go back home. He tells her sternly, “Your bread-giver will gasp in poverty, remember that. The child of your womb will turn one clay into a whining beggar boy” (AGNG 33). Meera’s threat to strip herself naked does not make any impact on the Seth. But then, his wife announces her decision to take off her clothes. The threat has the desired effect on the Seth. He takes out two bundles of new saris and the stock is sold out in no time. The
women are exhilarated at the success of their demonstration.

The entry of the minstrel brings in a change in the course of the novel. He offers an amulet to Meera which, he says, has the power of converting copper into gold on the performance of an act of kindness. The minstrel does a mischievous act. He comes to know that Lakshmi is eager to gift a gold ring to Meera for rescuing her son, Nago, from the well. The minstrel makes her exchange the copper ring on Meera’s hand with Lakshmi’s gift of gold ring, while Meera is sleeping. Lakshmi, then, leaves the village for her parents’ place.

The Seth is amazed to find the gold ring on Meera’s finger in the place of the copper ring. She herself is equally amazed at the sight of it. The Seth persuades her to have a business deal with him. She gives her consent to the deal, as she desires to help the poor people with the share of the profit. Her desire was to wipe every tear from every eye. And hardly any villager is convinced of her integrity and sincerity in the context. Almost everyone believes that she has joined hands with the Seth only for making profits.

Seth wants to contest in the election. The people believe that if he wins, there will be nothing but corruption. Sohanlal, who loves Meera, has a better understanding of the working of her mind. He tells people that a proper person has to be elected. He feels that they will be unfit for freedom, if they fail to do so. He tells Meera, “You cannot have gold enough to save all India! It is the fight with the seths that will save India, not a miracle not armfuls of gold” (AGNG 181).
Meera understands the selfish nature of the Seth soon and abandons her plan to cooperate with him. The arrival of the minstrel on the scene brings a welcome change in the state of affairs of the village. In order to test Meera’s attitude towards wealth, the minstrel indicates his plan to get her married to a wealthy elephant-merchant. When Meera hears his words in the context, she reacts vehemently. She takes away the amulet from her arm and flings it to the nearby river. The minstrel who keeps watching her is elated at the sight of that act. He feels convinced that Meera is not a silly thing as suspected by many.

Meera now looks forward to a bright future, full of possibilities as she has now freed herself from alien powers just like Mother India. Shanta Krishnawamy comments:

Meera in *A Goddess Named Gold* gets down from her artificial posture as Sona Mai, the goddess of gold and desires to settle down to a peaceful life in the village under the watchful and benevolent eye of her grandfather, the wandering minstrel who is elected unanimously to the village board. Reform is definitely in the air in Sonarnitti what with the minstrel and Meera the one on the village Committee and the other leading the ‘Cowhouse Five’, is the total woman brigade that brings colour and change to the village [113].

The minstrel teaches the people that the country lacks in a proper understanding of the real meaning of freedom. He says that it
is not to be misused to gain material wealth, He wants it to be used for gaining something purposeful. Meera is able to impress on the minstrel the need for his staying back in the village to serve its people. She is determined to dedicate her own life, too, for their service.

The decision of the villagers on the candidate to contest the District Board election goes in favour of the minstrel, dashing the hopes of the Seth. A chastened man, the Seth, appears to take it in his stride and remains calm. The feelings of his wife, Lakshmi, are ambivalent in the context. While sharing the Seth’s air of depression, she is also happy about the choice of the people in the matter. She compliments Meera on prevailing on the minstrel to remain with them.

Of all the women-characters in the novel, Lakshmi alone seems to have escaped unscathed at the hands of the novelist. The views expressed by Elena Kalinnikova on her are unexceptionable. Kallinnikova says:

In the gallery of female characters created by Bhattacharya, Lakshmi distinguishes herself with a strong, consistent character. To keep quiet, to submit, to suffer that is the lot of a woman in a patriarchal Indian village. However, Lakshmi does not wish to reconcile with this sort of fact and marches ahead on the path of struggle for human dignity, for independence of her country [114].
The novelist, while portraying Lakshmi, also strove to create not so much a realistic character of a woman of New India, as to enshrine in it his own ideal [115]. K. R. S. Iyengar makes a perceptive comment on the essential theme of the novel, when he says:

The obtrusive Seth and the elusive minstrel between them effectively polarize the action of the novel, while the pure, brave, unspoilt, unselfish but adventurous Meera is poised between the two, now an unconscious instrument for evil, now and a conscious instrument for good [116].

In defence of the lack of consistency in the characterization of Meera, Bhabani Bhattacharya has argued that he has not meant to idealize any of his characters, though he said that all women characters are safe in his hands [117]. Perhaps, one is not entirely justified in insisting that a writer should always maintain an air of high seriousness in his portrayals.

The unique achievement of Bhabani Bhattacharya in the novel is of crediting some of the significant women-characters of the novel with an unusual degree of patriotic fervour and the spirit of service, consistent with his understanding of women. He has expressed the view that women have thought more in terms of nationalism than men and have a great sense of service to their country.

Bhabani Bhattacharya’s last novel, *A Dream in Hawaii* portrays the conflicting principles of the East and the West. Aestheticism and spiritualism of Orientals attracted the Westerners. Spiritualism and human civilization are said to be closely connected. Bhattacharya
endeavored to uncover this point of view through his novel *A Dream in Hawaii*. The three characters in *A Dream in Hawaii*, who are central to the theme of the novel are Swami Yogananda, Devjani and Walter Gregson.

When Devjani’s father leaves for Canada, Devjani feels that her mother badly needs some diversion. She thinks of going to a movie with her and asks Rajib to buy the tickets. Rajib has a desire to marry Devjani. But the latter is not sure about her own feelings. She thinks of making up her mind in the matter in consultation with her mother. Rajib brings the tickets and they drive to Devjani’s house in Rajib’s car. She thinks of springing a surprise on her mother. Leaving Rajib in the car at the gate she goes to the back of her house calling out for her mother. Her mother usually takes a nap at that hour. Devjani thinks that she will be greatly delighted when she wakes up hearing the unexpected call from her. Devjani glances into her mother’s bedroom through the window, its curtain being half-drawn. She is taken aback by what she sees inside. Her mother is found in the company of a man, who happens to be Rajib’s father.

Devjani finds it hard to absorb the shock of the moment. She begins to abhor the very sight of her mother. When Devjani sees her again she blames it all on her husband with an easy conscience. Owing to a feeling of revulsion against her mother’s illicit relationship, she sends up an application to the Benaras University for admission into its M. A. Philosophy course. Her father has left enough of money in her bank account to enable her departure from Calcutta.
Professor Neeloy Mookherjee, who interviews her, wonders why she has thought of leaving Calcutta University where she obtained a First in Honours. Devjani tells him that his book on Vedanta has made her seek admission in Benaras University. She adds that she is fascinated by his ideas and their lucid exposition. She is all praise for the manner in which he projects the ancient Vedanta into modern experience.

Devjani is rather confused and worried to note her own hunger for the spiritual life. Presumably, it is promoted by the shock she has had in Calcutta. She is aware that she has always had a materialistic outlook. The impulse cannot he ascribed to genes or environments.

Devjani develops immense admiration for Neeloy Mukherjee in course of time. And at the earliest available opportunity, she tells him that he should try and live Vedanta as Swami Vivekananda did. A comment made by a monk from the Vivekananda ashram who visited his class as a guest lecturer has put the idea into her head. He says, “There is a yogi deep within Neeloy. One day the yogi will assert himself powerfully and then....perhaps Neeloy will be gone forever” (ADH 89). Laughter is said to have greeted the strange remarks, the loudest being from Neeloy himself. He does not appear to have taken the prophecy seriously. But Devjani does not take it lightly.

But Neeloy takes Devjani’s suggestion in all seriousness, though he does not believe that he is worthy of such an exalted opinion, Yet, Devjani insists that he is of a superior class. She says that he must try and fulfil her expectations for “those of us who need
guidance and do not know where to turn: whom to seek out for direction.” Again, Professor Neeloy is about to burst out laughing. He has difficulty in containing himself Devjani appears grave. Yet he says, “A firefly cannot be a star.” Devjani’s response to the comment is sharp. She says, “And a star cannot be a firefly” (ADH 92).

The professor finds himself facing a crisis. He has to remake himself. One day, Nirmala, a classmate of Devjani, finds the professor staring at the latter. She believes that the professor is fascinated by Devjani. In fact Devjani herself feels the touch of his gazing eyes. But she feels that his look passes through her as through glass to some point far beyond. When Nirmaia asks for Devjani’s address in Calcutta, with a view to informing her of the professor’s interest in her, Devjani says:

“You don’t understand. Neeloy….Neeloy is like Swami Vivekananda. If only you could see that!”

Nirmala is amazed. She asks, “You are not suggesting he may renounce the world?” (ADH 94).

Devjani assures her that he will. Soon, at the start of a lecture. Professor Neeloy says that his students and his colleagues laid down his future life.

Everyone in the class, except Devjani, thinks that the Professor’s words are spoken in a lighter vein. But Devjani knows that he has found himself. Professor Neeloy takes leave of them all in a calm and undramatic manner.

Devjani is left in deep depression on the departure of Neeloy.
She comes to understand that he has set up an ashram in Rishikesh and become a famed ascetic with the name, Swami Yogananda. Devjani is greatly delighted when she receives a note from ‘Swami Yogananda’ which says that the firefly is trying to become a star. Later Devjani receives a fellowship from the East-West Center at Honolulu for her higher studies. Before her departure from Benaras she sends a note to Swami Yogananda.

After being at Honolulu for about a year, Devjani receives an award from Harward University, USA, for doing research. And she gets exposed to the Western environment which brings about a radical change in her attitude to life. She receives an invitation from her friend Nishi to Hawaii, She is informed about the setting up of a World Center for Yogic Disciplines named after Swami Yogananda. Nishi asks her to witness the exciting events about to happen in Hawaii, Devjani is sure that Swami Yogananda is the right person for such a role. She is aware that he has not used for the colourful wrapping needed for that merchandise. She is sure that he does not exult in his holiness like other gurus.

Before leaving for Hawaii, Devjani visits her parents and spends nearly a month with them, her aversion to her mother having worn off. She also has the pleasure of seeing her mother going abroad with her father. On her arrival at Honolulu, she receives a warm welcome. She contacts Swami Yogananda on telephone and is greatly pleased to know that he remembers her well enough.

Later Devjani calls on Swami Yogananda and is accepted as his
disciple. When she comes to know about Dr. Swift’s plan to make the World Center a multi-coloured set up like a rainbow, she is sure that Swami Yogananda will not approve it. She tells Stella Gregson about the reasons for holding such a belief. Stella feels it is the fault of India’s educational system that has promoted such a belief in her. She says:

A scientist had little concern for the humanities. A creative writer had no use for the sciences. In America knowledge at all levels was getting more and more interdisciplinary. A year at the East-West Center hadn’t been long enough for a shift in Devjani’s orientation (ADH 157-158).

When Swami Yogananda decides to return to his ashram in India, she is able to appreciate the reasons that prompt him to take the decision. She listens to Swami Yogananda’s confession on his inner aberrations involving her, without losing control over herself.

In fact, the influence the West has had on her is revealed by her attitude towards Kamasutra and the sex-crazy professor Walter Gregson. Her friend, Nishi, is amazed to find a copy of Kamasutra among Devjani’s belongings. Devjani says that she has not read it yet, as she received it just before leaving from Harvard. Even if we are inclined to accept the veracity of her statement, the very possession of the work reveals her attitude towards sex.

One is amused to find Nishi reading the work in a single sitting, indicating her own leanings. And, amusingly enough, Devjani’s
attention swings like a pendulum between Swami Yogananda and Walt Gregson. The spiritual leanings revealed by Devjani while she was studying at Benaras seem to have vanished soon enough. Indeed they served a mighty purpose in making her instrumental in the transformation of Professor Neeloy Mookherjee to Swami Yogananda.

Obviously her interest in spirituality is a passing phase which is terminated by her exposure to the Western culture in the United States. On her visit to Hawaii, Swami Yogananda is surprised to see that she has not got married as yet. He is inclined to think that her strong hunger for spiritual life has defeated all other feelings and needs. He thinks that she has been steadfast and true to herself even though she is denied the guidance she has wanted and deserved.

One cannot help thinking that Swami Yogananda’s understanding of her nature is suggestive of his relative ignorance about the ways of the world. Devjani considers it curious that many Americans are in need of light from the East, while she herself, born of that light though, is intent on finding out what America can give her. Ironically enough, she is accepted as a disciple of Swami Yogananda, when she is bereft of all spiritual leanings. When she observes that there will be many demanding the privilege of initiation by Swami Yogananda, he finds an occasion to indicate what he feels about Dr. Swift. He says:

I shall send them to Swami Vincent Swift, He has only to wear a saffron cloak. The perfect guru to ask for in America!...He knows how to walk in glamour. He knows
how to build up splendour. He is also a superb business executive…Here in America its splendour that attracts. In India it’s self-denial (ADH 187-188).

But Devjani’s impressions about the West are different. She tells him that everything she sees contradicts his assertion. According to her, the America of his vision does not exist. What is suggested in the process is an attempt on the part of Bhabani Bhattacharya to synthesise the divergent trends of the East and the West. The ascetic leanings of the East, in his view, are unrealistic as they constitute the violation of certain basic human urges which have to be honoured. The Western on the other hand, is overly attached to the demands of the flesh. Its attitude obviously lacks in sobriety if not in spirituality. And, while there has been an increasing awareness of their limitations in the people from the West, the Orientals perhaps continue to gloat over their spirituality.

What is attempted in A Dream in Hawaii by the author seems to be a portrayal of his own convictions in regard to the East and the West. Presumably, he is not inclined to think that a slight deviation on the part of an Indian from the path of an ascetic should not be magnified out of proportion. Perhaps, that is the reason for his soft corner for Swami Yogananda and Devjani even as they reveal the influence of the West on them in their attitudes. Bhabani Bhattacharya has maintained that all his women characters, including Devjani, have been safe in his hands [118].

Towards the end of the novel, one feels that Devjani has become
more powerful than ever before, as she holds the key to Swami Yogananda’s success or failure. For, if only she wills, she seems to be capable of converting Swami Yogananda into a man of the world. But she chooses to conduct herself with remarkable restraint and dignity, while confronting the crisis faced by Swami Yogananda. When Stella Gregson asks her about the meaning of Swami Yogananda calling himself Neeloy while speaking to her, her response sounds like a riddle. She says, “It may be that one cannot exist without the other” (ADH 245). She also says, “Swami Yogananda has a great need of Sadhana at this time. The ashram must possess him, if possible” (ADH 245). The author says that her voice has a clear note of uncertainty.

The special consideration Bhabani Bhattacharya has for women and his belief in their superiority have been attributed to various reasons. According to Marlene Fisher, “They are the author’s own fascination with and admiration for the Indian woman and the significant and complex role women have traditionally played in Indian society” [119].

But she has not taken into account the author’s awareness of the need for emancipating the Indian woman, born of his zeal as a reformist. Nor has she made a mention of the salutary influence of Bhattacharya’s wife, Salila, on him that might have inspired him to hold the Indian woman in high esteem. Crawford Cromwell says:

She (Salila) brings ideas, scenarios and her own artistic imagination in the character formation of those
unforgettable women who occupy such commanding roles in all his novels.... The exquisite female characters are subtle embodiments of gifts and graces so richly found in this leading lady, Mohini has her beauty and playfulness; Chandralekha has her charm and compassion; and Suruchi, her strong sense of identity and individuality.

His observations, rather assertive as they are, reveal his belief that Salila’s influence on the author has been profound. The air of certainty conveyed through them would have been appreciated better if they were made by Bhabani Bhattacharya himself. Shanta Krishnaswamy writes:

Bhabani Bhattacharya creates the woman protagonist as a finer human instrument than the male. She is wondrous, light, ethereal being filled with radiance, with possibilities. She is pure in the sense that she is close to nature as in tune with her instinctual urges. She is also pure in the sense that she is filled with noble ideals. Through her, the author aims at interlinking polarities, at connecting culture with culture, tradition with modernity, the individual and society.

Bhabani Bhattacharya has presented the Indian women as the pure women in his novels who has been victimised in spite of her high ideals and vitality. This concept of the innocent victimised Indian woman is a constant feature of his novels. He has also created some
woman protagonists, who are noble in character. His women are more refined than those of their male counterparts.

Hardly any male novelist before Bhabani Bhattacharya has chosen to champion the cause of women as much as he. His attitude differs from that of a radical feminist inasmuch as he acknowledges the existence of a male-dominated society, even as he sincerely believes in the superiority of women. And the extremist stances of feminists could hardly have suited his genius. In any case, by virtue of his genuine interest in the well-being of women, he has earned a pride of place among the male-writers of Indo-English fiction. His achievement in this regard is unique indeed. Marlene Fisher rightly remarks:

Dr. Bhattacharya’s female characters represent the triumph of the human spirit over famine and starvation and their accompanying degradation and over the inevitable crises that arise when old and new values clash [122].