CHAPTER-VI

A GODDESS NAMED GOLD

The cover-blurbs of the novel, *A Goddess Named Gold* conveniently declare this powerful novel to be a "comedy" but this somewhat oversimplified label is not quite a judgment of value; it is just a broad categorization of the novel to build a popular image for it. A considered analysis of the work brings the realization that it is not just a comedy, though a comedy it certainly is in its essential thematic organization; it is, in all its implications, so much more besides.

The thematic structure and narrative technique in *A Goddess Named Gold* is at once bold and conventional. Its boldness lies in the author's daring to fuse so many levels of meaning in the story and its conventionality is asserted in the retention of a romantic plot in a vestigial form.

When Bhattacharya wrote *A Goddess Named Gold*, India's Independence was over a decade old. Since the country has not reaped the full benefit of the political freedom which she got after a long struggle and great sacrifice, the novelist aims at explaining the true meaning of freedom and the ways in which it can be used rightly for the benefit of mankind. This novel narrates the happenings in a village during a period of a hundred days preceding Independence. The Freedom Movement forms the background of the novel, which presents an interesting picture of rural India. It is a satire on man's greed for wealth and shows how human values like sympathy and kindness are used for earning gold. It is a modern fable, presenting as it does a real picture of tremendous awakening among the people who crave for social and economic equality. The novelist exposes people's belief in superstition and miracles.
The novel shows the way a country should use freedom, which is necessary for the material and spiritual development of its people. But the road to freedom in the country is swarmed with robbers of many kinds. Here one gets a glimpse of Bhattacharya’s vision of the future India. Sohanlal’s words in the novel echo the wish of the novelist: “We must demand what should be ours, the right to live as human beings”. The various characters of the novel embody human values like kindness, sacrifice, freedom, friendship, goodness, purity and protest against the tyranny of the rich for the cause of the poor. The improvement of life is the ultimate goal. The magic power of the amulet is linked with the actual act of love and kindness. This clearly brings out the novelist’s concern for human values. The book awakens the people to freedom and the concomitant social, political and national responsibilities. Bhattacharya warns the people against profiteers and capitalists, amulets and magic formulas. Interestingly, he employs humour and irony, to point out how political freedom is to be used and how social reforms, such as widow remarriage, can be introduced.

Just as after the intense So Many Hungers! came the relaxed Music for Mohini, the low tide following the high, we have now, after the aesthetically intense He Who Rides a Tiger, a novel in a comparatively low key. A Goddess Named Gold, published in New York in 1960, is the first major work in which the focus is on the responsibilities to be discharged by Indians after attaining political independence from Britain and the challenges of democratic governance. The novel has been translated into German (1962), Dutch (1963) and Hebrew (1965).

In this novel, Bhattacharya takes up a theme similar to *He Who Rides a Tiger*. The similarity between the two novels is—the transformation of an individual by the outward pose thrust upon him. In the latter work, Kalo is forced to change due to the inhumanity of upper class people. In the former novel, the story takes the form of a fable where the forces of evil represented by the village Seth impose themselves on the forces of good represented by the simple village girl, Meera. The unravelling of the theme takes place at many levels: the elections to the Board, the simple faith of the villagers, the inequality of sexes and the need for the individual to work out his own destiny. All these, however are interwoven into the main conflict between the impulse of greed and the impulse of generosity.

The theme of the novel centres around Meera the central character of the novel and her "taveez". Her experience becomes a fable for the responsibilities of freedom. "The twentieth century concept of individual freedom rests on a view of the welfare of society as not being apart from the welfare of the individuals that constitute it"1. And it is in Meera’s kind of fundamental generosity of spirit and active kindness towards her fellow human beings of Sonamitti that the concept of “Shakti” is asserted.

The narrative begins with a meeting of the Cowhouse Five, a feminist organization brought into being by some of the more enterprising women of the village, Sonamitti. These women normally assemble in a cowshed in the afternoons when the men are at work elsewhere—recollect the great days of freedom struggle in which they had participated and rejoice that the Independence Day is just a hundred days away. They are also worried that the

prices of sarees have gone up because the Seth has hoarded them so that when the demand rises he can raise the prices very high. They plan to take a morcha to the Seth and strip, if necessary. Meanwhile Nago, the only child of Lakshmi—who is the wife of the Seth, and also a member of the Cowhouse Five—falls in a well, and Meera, the young dynamic leader of the group rescues him.

The next day more than a hundred women gather under the bridge banyan tree and go in a “morcha” to the Seth’s house shouting slogans as they did during the freedom struggle and demonstrate before the Seth, the village profiteer. Lakshmi herself has joined the “morcha” and she threatens to strip. The Seth, who is totally cowed down by the rebellion of his own wife, sells the sarees at a reasonable price. Thus woman power triumphs. But the Seth thinks that his forced generosity is a kind of investment for gaining political power through their votes in the forthcoming elections.

The Seth plans to take revenge against the women of the village by arranging a film show to which only men are allowed and women are kept out. Since the whole village is neck-deep in debt to him, he wields his powers anyway he likes, but Meera thinks of planning another demonstration and asserting the rights of women. She says: “Freedom, four steps ahead. Not for us, women. We live to press our masters’ legs”.

The minstrel, Meera’s grandpa, arrives in the village. He has been a minstrel for ten years, wearing the yellow garb of a “sanyasi” and he is considered a yogi with power to perform miracles. He stands for spiritual power and has great influence over the people of the village. “When he sings
in the street he is of the people”. He is depicted as an ideal prophet who is above his kith and kin, above the petty material concerns, a person who “has to carry a flame in his hand, passing it from age to age”. The minstrel sees the way the things are turning on the eve of freedom. People like the Seth would grab all the power giving nothing to the poor and the lowly. There are elections and the school children are marching through the village chanting, “Vote for Samsundarji!”. The Seth whose actual name is Samsundar tries to get into the District Board—the first rung of the power-ladder. The minstrel thinks of cleansing the villagers’ consciousness so that they welcome the dawn of freedom with a new spirit. He gives a “taveez” to his granddaughter, Meera in the presence of all the villagers including the Seth and says to her:

“the ‘taveez’ holds a stone. The stone has a power. It is a touch stone...Wearing it on your person you will do an act of kindness. Real kindness. Then all copper on your body will turn to gold...Gold with which to do good...An act of real kindness—that is the key, remember”.

To prove that the taveez really works wonders, the minstrel causes, without Meera’s knowledge, the replacement of her copper ring with the gold ring which Lakshmi wanted her to wear—a gift of gratitude. This sets into motion a chain of interesting events.

The Seth, clever to react, thinks of exploiting the existing situation. He puts many copper ornaments of his on the body of Meera and tries to make her

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, A Goddess Named Gold, p.56
2. Ibid., p.60-61
3. Ibid., p.80
his partner in business. He devises many fake acts of kindness, like giving
sweets free to all the village children, but the "taveez" is miraculously silent.
Even a fake rescue of a child fallen in the well is enacted, but nothing comes
out of these "calculated acts of kindness".

Meanwhile, a young city man Sohanlal, son of a soldier who died in the
Second World War, comes to Sonamitti as the driver of a motor-bike which
the Seth has bought for election propaganda. Sohanlal falls in love with Meera
and he does not allow her to go ahead with the ridiculous acts of kindness, and
he tries to warn her against the corrupting influence of 'gold'.

The election fever is at its peak. The minstrel has already warned the people:

"Freedom is the beginning of the road where
there was no road. But the new road swarms
with robbers"\(^1\).

Meera is unable to perform her real act of kindness and the villagers are
disappointed because they, too, like the Seth, wanted their pice to be turned
into gold. Meera's urge is Mahatmaji's urge "to wipe away every tear from
every eye"\(^2\), but now she becomes an object of suspicion and hatred.

Sohanlal tries to persuade Meera to abandon the "taveez". She, too,
realises the truth about her gold ring, when Lakshmi tells her how she slipped
the gold ring on to her finger when she was fantasizing. Meera in despair and
disillusionment, tears the taveez from her arm and casts it into the river.
Bhattacharya has called this casting away of the 'taveez', as Dorothy Shimer
points out, "the key to the whole book"\(^3\).

\(^1\)Bhabani Bhattacharya, A Goddess Named Gold, P.110
\(^2\)Ibid., p.180
\(^3\)Dorothy Blair Shimer, Bhabani Bhattacharya, p.62
The minstrel returns at the proper time, at the break of dawn — it is the
dawn of India’s freedom, too—and tells the people that not the “taveez”, but
the “Freedom is the real touchstone”\(^1\). He also points out that freedom is for
everyone and it can awaken all to life and work its miracle only when acts of
faith are done.

At the suggestion of Sohanlal the people of Sonamitti make the
minstrel their candidate for the election to the District Board, and the Seth, in
keeping with his nature, heaves a sigh of relief, because he can now go back to
his business which he has neglected for long.

The taveez-period in the life of Sonamitti supposed to be a period of
redemption or purification leads the people to realise that the true miracle is in
Freedom, which is actually a call for a united act of faith.

M.K.Naik feels that this novel reveals “a regression manifesting itself
in a refusal to face the real contemporary problems and in seeking refuge in
reductive fancy”\(^2\). H.W.Williams, finds in this “imaginative fable”, “a warning
to Independent India against selling her soul for the sake of modernization,
and progress—so it complements the thesis of *Music for Mohini*”\(^3\). Critics like
Chandrasekharan, clearly maintain that “the novel is an allegory and the
characters take on a symbolic significance”\(^4\). K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar, rightly
observes that “*A Goddess Named Gold* signifies an advance in Bhattacharya’s

2.Dr. M.K.Naik, *A History of Indian English Literature*, (New Delhi:
Sahitya Akademi, 1982) p.130
Orient Longmans, 1976) p.93-94
art as a novelist, for the 'axes' here are hardly visible and the grinding is not audible. The advance in fictional technique characterizing this book, makes it different from Bhattacharya’s earlier realistic novels like So Many Hungers! and He Who Rides a Tiger. This novel is distinguished in its employment of allegorical situations and symbols through which the novelist weaves the threads of the thematic structure of the novel.

The novelist’s purpose is as serious as the real conditions that have been prevailing in India during the last forty years. Bhattacharya himself becomes a kind of minstrel who creates the illusion of the story of a miracle to happen for telling the tale of the hopes and the aspirations of the people of a newly- liberated country as also of the disguised robbers who are bent upon robbing the people of their share of the benefits of freedom and destroying their hopes. A serious truth of life is told through a non-serious mode of narration and the success of the novel lies in the fact that the non-serious and the absurd events are given the colour of seriousness.

The action in the novel centres around the symbolic names of things and persons which the novelist has chosen to signify the two opposing truths of good and evil or service and exploitation. Sonamitti is the name of the village where the action takes place. The name of the village is directly related to the central symbol of gold and possesses in itself subtle symbolic overtones. Literally meaning the land of gold, it symbolizes the inherent possibility of greater prosperity. On the material level, gold refers to worldly possessions: on the spiritual level, to inner goodness and wealth.

Ever since our Independence, a mad race for gold has started and “a mystic value was set on the yellow metal, so that there could be a game for

I.K.R.S. Iyengar, Indian Writing in English, p.418
What is suggested in the novel is the fact that God reigns in heaven and gold on earth, particularly in the present day India where if you possess gold you are the real master. So *A Goddess Named Gold* points to the fact that the lust for gold is the greatest evil of a diseased society and is, therefore, to be warded off from the house of freedom and the image of the real goddess of virtue and acts of faith is to be installed in place of that of the goddess of gold.

Sonamitti, the village, suggests the promise of turning clay into gold, provided the people act with true faith for the well being of all. The Seth, inspired by the supposed miracle of the change of copper into gold thought, "What chance was there that Sonamitti had gold ore in its bowels and the treasures would be revealed to him one day?" This ironically hints at the ways in which the Seth wants to make gold out of clay and exploits every situation for the attainment of his goal. As a result, Sonamitti becomes a veritable land of exploitation—a land whereas the situation deteriorates, the gold of general wellbeing and human relationship changes into the clay of human misery and deception respectively. In other words, Gold becomes the most venerated goddess, worshipped mostly by the greedy and the selfish, and thus weakens our society by jeopardizing the social harmony and by defiling human relationships. Thus, the peculiar name of the village suggests the danger of gold becoming clay if greed and selfishness possess the mind of our people.

Like Sonamitti, the touchstone also embodies a two-fold symbolic significance—that of such as freedom and hope. The touchstone symbolizes

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2. Ibid., p. 28
the hopes of Meera as well as of the poverty-stricken people of her village, on the one hand, and the selfish designs of the greedy Seth, on the other. Hopes of all are tied to the touchstone. They believe that “the touchstone is a field ready to bear golden crop”\(^1\). It is presented as a transforming agent, which can bring about metamorphosis in matters if supported by the purity of the spirit—a real act of kindness.

In *A Goddess Named Gold* there is a close connection between the abstract truths and important characters who grow into fullness and reveal their significance mainly as embodiments of certain values and ideas. A spider ensnaring a red ant symbolizes a predacious moneylender like Seth. He is a symbol of economic, political and religious exploitation. His deeds and thoughts symbolize the blind principle of capitalism, which is at the root of all exploitation. He, like all possessors of gold, represents an impersonal force born of the lust for private possession. That is why he is repeatedly mentioned as ‘Sethji’ instead of being referred to by his personal name. Even his name, Samsundar, combining “Shyam” and “Sundar” meaning black and beautiful respectively, is symbolic. It is a distorted form of Shyamsundar which is the name of Lord Krishna whose apparent blackness is all beauty and purity. As opposed to it, Samsundar, the Seth who poses to be beautiful externally is all black inside. He is a veritable devil who poses to be a demigod, his mind being a big workshop of evil. Lakshmi, his own wife, says that “He is a monster”\(^2\). The Seth has earned a unique reputation: “Speak his name in the kitchen, and the rice pot on the oven would crack into halves, your mid-day

\(^1\)Bhabani Bhattacharya, *A Goddess Named Gold*, p.157

\(^2\)Ibid., p.43
meal would be lost". He has earned his notoriety through his own attempts at
the exploitation of the poor, the whole village being "neck-deep in debt to him
and tethered to his stiff rate of interest". A loan in the Seth’s ledger doubles
itself in twelve months and a year’s interest is charged in advance as soon as
the loan is given. Besides, he is so callous that he does not hesitate to remind
even his wife of the humbler status of her parents and their heavy
indebtedness to him. Fully convinced of his hard-heartedness, the people of
Sonamitti know that “words will melt a ripe coconut, but not the Seth’s heart
in its cast-iron shell". A self-interested man that he is, the Seth advocates the
principle of “Laissez faire” which guarantees full freedom to every individual
to amass wealth for himself and for his descendants.

Meera’s character is presented as a foil to that of the Seth. She is a
symbol of new India who has no self-interest and wants to make Sonamitti
better. Embodying the free spirit of Mother India, Meera appears to be a
strange goddess fighting for gold for all and yet bound in the chains of
artificial ornaments and consequently, is crippled under its weight. She
imbibes in her all the noble and heroic traits of a “Devi” in a human form. She
embodies the goddess, Annapurna, to whom all the poverty-stricken people
look for sustenance.

Like the Rhein daughter in Wagner’s Rhein Gold, Meera is shown as a
victim of a fraud, even though the fraud in her case is economic and
commercial rather than sexual. Although Meera, responds to the lunacy for
gold not for herself but for the freedom of the land of the village-folk from the

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, A Goddess Named Gold, p.92
2. Ibid., p.14
3. Ibid., p.26
ledgers of the Seth as also for their general welfare and development, she is involved in the fraud nevertheless. The gold has possessed the goddess-like Meera, who is “drawn into that charmed circle”\textsuperscript{1}. This symbolises the reality of Indian life in the present century in which gold is most needed for general development and it has also become the measuring rod for judging one’s power and greatness.

Meera’s grandfather—the minstrel, too, is more a symbolic voice than a flesh and blood character. He is the magic-maker—the creator of the touchstone as well as the inventor of the idea of interdependence of the touchstone and the act of real kindness for the miracle of transformation of copper into gold. As such he adds to the element of fantasy in the allegory more than strengthening the note of realism. Though a disciple of an unknown Himalayan Yogi, Atmaram, he himself is known as Atmaram and is a real yogi. Of all the characters of the novel he alone goes against the current of the age and “owning nothing, he had the dignity of a king” and “had more power than a king, for he could take the hearts of people in his fist, he could make them laugh and cry at his will”\textsuperscript{2}. As a carrier of the light of freedom, he works as a counter-force against the powers of the Seth and, in the context of his own times, appears as the voice of Mahatma Gandhi. He repeatedly teaches Meera the Mahatma’s ideal to wipe every tear from every eye. Like Mahatma Gandhi, he lays all emphasis on the right means for the attainment of the right end and tells Meera, “You cannot right one wrong with another. You cannot fight malice with malice”\textsuperscript{3}. As a giver of the touchstone—the pivotal emblem

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{1}Bhabani Bhattacharya, \textit{A Goddess Named Gold}, P.141
  \item \textsuperscript{2}Ibid., p.59
  \item \textsuperscript{3}Ibid., p.60
\end{itemize}
in the allegory, the minstrel occupies an important place in the novel and forms an integral part of the allegory.

In the gallery of female characters created by Bhattacharya, Lakshmi distinguishes herself with a strong consistent character. In a patriarchal Indian village, a woman is supposed to keep quiet, to submit and to suffer but Lakshmi does not wish to reconcile with this sort of fate and marches ahead on the path of struggle for human dignity and for Independence of her country.

While portraying Lakshmi, the writer strove to create not so much a realistic character of a woman of new India, as to enshrine in it his own ideal. However, the longing of the writer to show the woman-fighter, inspiring people for a fight against the conquerors, fully redeems the hyperbolic quality of some of the traits of this character.

A Goddess Named Gold reflects the novelist’s resplendent vision of life. Gold, which generally symbolises material wealth, is here presented as a symbol of the richness of spirit and mind. Likewise, freedom does not stand for opportunity to get prosperity; it is something wonderful, which stimulates man to think and act nobly and thus create happiness for all. Some of the basic human values, such as real acts of kindness, self-sacrifice, freedom, friendship, goodness, purity, dignity, fight for the needy against the tyranny of the rich, etc., have been accentuated throughout the book. All the characters in the book have a bright vision of life.

The minstrel is wisdom personified. Through him, the author expresses his belief in goodness, which alone can root out malice and wrong. The following remark of the minstrel brings out the writer’s conviction that all men have plenty of goodness: “Those who mock at goodness mock themselves; for, there is a secret goodness in them also.” 1. The novel stresses

1.Bhabani Bhattacharya, A Goddess Named Gold, p.60
the fact that people, who make others suffer, cannot have inward peace and happiness. It also emphasizes the greatness and dignity of the downtrodden. The poor old villagers suffer a lot, but their sense of honour and a hopeful vision of the future remain intact. An old father, who is assailed by miseries from all sides and has to leave the village with all his relatives, shows strong will-power, a remarkable sense of honour and unshakable hope. He says to Meera that although they are homeless wretches they have a sense of humour. He shows his optimistic view of life by saying that:

“We shall find work in town, in the cotton mill there. Maybe, we shall pull rickshaws, my son and grandsons and I, while the women work at grindstones, pressing wheat. All will be well with us. Maybe, we shall save money and buy land somewhere and be farmers again. Maybe, I shall at last be able to make a pilgrimage to Holy Benares!”

Bhabani Bhattacharya expresses his belief that the betterment of life should be the ultimate goal of every human activity, and that all other things should only lead to it. According to him, even “freedom is the means to that end.” This end is quite difficult to attain, and man can achieve it only through hard work and love and not through miracles. As a matter of fact, miracles do not take place on their own, but are the creations of man’s labour and love. Thus towards the end of the novel, the minstrel says to the huge crowd of villagers:

“It is up to us to attain miracles...Miracles to make

2.Ibid., p.278
us strong, to make us worthy, to make us full grown people... Remember, friends, all this cannot be cheaply won. The miracles will not drop upon us. It is we who have to create them with love and with sweat...”

These words fill everyone with a new hope and each feels that a true touchstone is within his grasp. The listeners come to have a profound faith in a bright future, feeling themselves released from a past, dead and gone.

As the title of the novel denotes, the work deals primarily with man’s lust for gold, power and possessions. Throughout the book, man’s quest for gold is highlighted and satirized. The Seth, a great merchant of the village of Sonamitti, is obsessed by a love for gold. Ironically and symbolically, he is the husband of Lakshmi who never bothers about gold even as much as an ordinary woman does. She is an embodiment of love for all, and that is why Grandpapa observes: “Lakshmi, there is no gift as precious as your love”.

But, the Seth, is always crazy about gold and wealth. He is always busy in trying to increase his margin of profit and amassing wealth in every possible manner. Money makes him so rigid that there is no place for sentiments in his world. When he comes to know the power of the touchstone, he gives Meera lots of copper to wear on her person so that it may turn into gold, Knowing that “gold has the last word” in this world, he watches Meera “with his enormous hunger” and does his best to get as much gold as possible through her magic.

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, A Goddess Named Gold, P.277-78
2. Ibid., p.70
3. Ibid., p.78
4. Ibid., p.222
The novelist points out that “the gold hunger, once awakened, will not be denied.” However, the author also shows that there are men and women like Meera Bai and Lakshmi who crave for love and fellow-feeling, and not for wealth. He also reveals his belief that man’s hunger for gold is not an end in itself and therefore, should not be considered all-important. It is just a means to fulfil other desires. It not only enables men to escape the cruel clutches of starvation, but also helps them in their old age to satisfy their wish to visit holy places. Meera, observes: “It is the rag woman’s escape from hunger and the old father’s wish for a pilgrimage to Holy Benares.” But, the Five Elders of the village of Sonamitti remark that gold does a lot of good to the villagers by helping them to meet their requirements. Rajaram, one of the characters in the book, affirms that everyone needs a little gold and “Even aged ones have a hunger in us.”

Bhattacharya is aware of the wise villagers’ genuine desire to save India from wolfish exploiters and profiteers like the Seth. The sagacious men of Sonamitti know that “armfuls of gold” is not enough to save the hungry and helpless people. “Fight with the Seths” is more important than gold. It is in this way that India can be saved from all kinds of miseries and hunger. The other two forms of hunger portrayed in the novel are hunger for miracles and spiritual experiences. The illiterate and ignorant villagers believe in superstitions and are very curious to see the strange working of Meera’s

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, A Goddess Named Gold, p.204
2. Ibid., p.162
3. Ibid., p.188
4. Ibid., p.181
5. Ibid.
magical amulet.

“Awe—struck eyes saw that vision and tongues dried up as the unexpected menace took clear shape, but after a long minute a whispered comment came, we hunger for the miracle, whatever else may follow, good or bad”\(^1\).

The second kind of hunger is clearly perceptible in young Meera, the noble granddaughter of the great soul, the minstrel. When she is much worried about performing the miracle with the help of touchstone, there is transparently visible in her the queer hunger which Lakshmi sees in her face. Lakshmi “saw the hunger that was almost spiritual. Meera was like one possessed”\(^2\).

Happiness and enlightenment comes from the social freedom which people seek. The freedom, which matters is that from superstitions, taboos, customs, blind belief, prejudices and dead habits. And this type of freedom is won by Meera, by the symbolic act of throwing the “taveez” into the river. Her copper ornaments are not converted into gold, but the lives of the people may be transformed if the “taveez” of freedom is used with discretion, caution, and compassion. According to the minstrel freedom is a “dead pebble tied to the arm with a bit of string”\(^3\) without the acts of faith. He says that miracles are not dropped but are created by human beings with their love and sweat. The hunger for freedom means the right of a person to live as an individual, without being harassed by political, economic, religious, moral, social

\(^{1}\) Bhabani Bhattacharya, *A Goddess Named Gold*, p.190

\(^{2}\) Ibid., p.234

\(^{3}\) Ibid., p.277
and traditional pressures symbolized by different kinds of Seths. Another character, Sohanlal, says that, the cities rather than the countryside have a greater variety of Seths. For these Seths, freedom “meant a chance of seized fields of trades vacated by the aliens”\(^1\). There exist, too, Seths in politics who blackmail the innocent citizen with the power of their glib tongue.

With the progress of science and technology and proliferation of education, Indian villages have also assimilated new ideas. We see the slumbering villages now awakening into a new dawn but not without the pain that accompanies such a change. Thus, on the one hand we have the people who do not wish to part even with the decadent traditions and on the other, we have the people opening their eyes with wonder and anxiety at the new concepts of science and at fresh ideas.

In short, Bhattacharya in this novel depicts several kinds of hunger, from the lowest to the highest. What is most striking about his treatment of the theme of hunger here is that he repeatedly emphasizes his belief that all men, rich and poor, young and old, are obsessed by hunger of one kind or another. The Elders of the village dwell upon this idea and time and again aver: “We have a hunger in us, dear brother”\(^2\).

Unlike So Many Hungers! and He Who Rides A tiger, A Goddess Named Gold does not concentrate upon hunger for food and sex but, essentially, on another type of hunger—the hunger for gold and material possessions and a longing for miracles to take place and provide a kind of spiritual experience.

A Goddess Named Gold, also refers to the Freedom Movement, though,

\(^1\)Bhabani Bhattacharya, A Goddess Named Gold, p.110
\(^2\)Ibid., p.191
primarily, it embodies the novelist’s concept of the ideal kind of freedom. As in Bhattacharya’s other novels, the Quit India Movement of 1942, is referred to in this work, too. Sohagi and Lakshmi, two of the prominent women of the village, Sonamitti, remember how under the puissant influence of Gandhiji, women left their homes and fields to participate in the country’s struggle for Independence as actively as men did:

“...Gandhiji touched our spirit as it slept. Wakened, we became the equals of our menfolk. Proud, chins up, we marched in a column of our own, across the meadow of Pipili, onward to Kanhan. ‘Quit India!’ we shouted to Engrez aliens in one big voice”.

The stormy struggle made the Britishers tremble with fear. Lakshmi narrates to Meera and others how she took part in the movement with Nago in her womb. She further describes the heroism of Meera’s grandmother who, ignoring her old, painful gout, marched with the lovers of freedom in the heat of the sun and the lash of a heavy downpour. Lakshmi had gone to prison with this grand old woman and two hundred others against the wishes of her husband who had managed to disappear on the crucial day set for saluting the national flag. The women of Sonamitti fought undaunted against ‘the British Lion’ obsessed by freedom, they had the courage to remark about the cruel British rulers: “The Lion? Tail between his legs, he is about to leap across the oceans to his homeland. Our freedom is only a hundred days ahead”. No wonder the men and women of this village are overjoyed on the eve of freedom. The news of Independence electrifies the village and becomes every-

2. Ibid., p.27
body's talk. Astonished and happy, people do not know how to celebrate Independence Day. The minstrel gives people the new greeting, "Jai Hind, Victory to India!" Everyone believes that this great man will sing to the village about freedom, and will not let this memorable day pass by unsung.

The novel expresses the author's lofty concept of freedom and the minstrel is the mouthpiece of the writer; his actions and words embody an ideal concept of freedom. "A homeless, ever-wondering minstrel," he is the incarnation of the true spirit of liberty. He often says that the new dawn of freedom is about to break after hundreds of years, but that will be just an opening to greater works. He often says that the new battle for genuine freedom for all after the political freedom of the country will be a very difficult one. He also believes that freedom is never given; people have to achieve it by their own efforts. They will have to pass through very tough tests to prove themselves fit for freedom. Grandma also takes her share in freedom. She tells them that freedom is for all to share, and that if the right persons are not elected to the various posts and positions, freedom will die soon without giving any benefit to the people. The minstrel points out to the people that for them more important than political freedom is "to win the freedom to be free. It is a state of mind, so Gandhiji tells us." He asserts that freedom is the touchstone with the help of which people can perform great miracles provided they do acts of faith. Conceived of in this manner, freedom will be the greatest boon to mankind and will be the means to a higher end, viz., to enable people to become strong and worthy. He also warns them that political freedom may turn into a curse for the people of the country, if allowed to be misused by

2. Ibid., p.276
unscrupulous capitalists for their selfish ends.

The novel gives a convincing and realistic account of the social life of Indian village during the times in which the action is set. The country had been so much impoverished that the average earning of a farmer in Bengal was less than two annas per day. These poor villagers were also burdened with the dead load of orthodox customs and superstitions. Bhattacharyya has presented an authentic depiction of the caste differences and superstitions prevailing in Indian villages in those days. The Halwai, a middle-aged man of the village, Sonamitti, longs to marry young Meera, but the caste system is an obstacle in their way. Though he knows that their castes differ and the village will never give sanction to their marriage, yet he believes that his wealth can enable him to overcome the caste barrier. Therefore, he tells Meera that there is a way to get themselves married: he can make the five Elders overlook their caste difference by paying them money. The Seth also knows the power of gold to enable man to work a miracle and attain to great heights. It is repeatedly stressed that gold has the last word in the world of today: “Such madness about gold! A mystic value was set on the yellow metal, so that there could be a game for men to play...A race apart from humbler folk; super beings; golden gods!”

Superstitions oppress the villagers as much as casteism. They are obsessed by the fear of apparitions visible at certain places in the night. The Seth, who is more enlightened than most of the illiterate villagers, is terribly frightened when one night he has to pass by a neem tree supposed to be haunted by the bhootni, a female apparition. It is believed:

“Four men of Sonamitti had seen the apparition.

the female of the species, dangling skeleton legs

from its roost. One of them, attack by her, had
gone mad and had to be treated by an Ojha, an
exorcist, brought from Bhimtek twenty miles away.

We read how the villagers utter the sacred name “Ram-Ram” not only
to greet each other but also “to hold evil spirits at bay.” It is their
superstitious idea which leads them to belief in the miraculous power of the
taveez given to Meera by her grandfather. They hold the view that “Miracles
had happened in the past. That could not be denied.” When an enlightened
person like Bajoria doubts the power of Meera’s touchstone, the Seth is
shocked and astonished. He asks him if he has no belief in miracles and fairy
tales. The villagers’ faith in the horoscope is also brought out in the novel.
Then there is the description of the marvellous legend of the talking goat. The
goat was purchased to be slaughtered for meat on the occasion of a marriage
feast. The result of this was that the owner could not dare kill it; rather he
broke down in remorse and fell at the animal’s hoofs. It was believed that a
noble human soul resided in the goat’s body. So by showing all this, the
novelist aims at liberating the innocent and good villagers from superstitions.

A Goddess Named Gold embodies Bhabani Bhattacharya’s view that
people should strenuously work to secure economic freedom through the
Gandhian way of peaceful “satyagraha” and procession. In this novel, the
village women led by Meera and Lakshmi, launch a movement against Seth of
the village to bring down prices for economic relief. It is surprising to note
that the Lakshmi is the wife of the Seth and she is one of the leaders of the

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, A Goddess Named Gold, p.76
2. Ibid., p.77
3. Ibid., p.87
movement because she is wedded to the lofty ideal of economic freedom and prosperity for all. The enlightened and patriotic women are greatly shocked and upset to see that the women of Sonamitti wear sarees patched over and over and jackets prepared from rejected gunny sacks, and to save these clothes for further wear, many of them sleep almost naked at night. What is unfortunate is that this kind of misery prevails in a village of rich black earth yielding a large quantity of good fibre cotton, which is sufficient to provide clothes to the entire district. The cause of all this is the Seth who is the main dealer of cloth in Sonamitti and the six villages around. Exploiting the country wide sari shortage, he corners the supply and raises the prices to appease his lust for gain. He is not only a cloth merchant but also loans out money at a high rate of interest, and thus the villagers are in debt to him. So the women leaders decide to fight against this economic offender who has put the people in unbearable economic slavery. Even Lakshmi, the Seth’s wife “must have her part in the struggle against the tyrant, even though he was her sons begetter”\(^1\). These women protesters decide to strip off their clothes in front of the Seth because he does not pay any heed to these women’s demand for one free sari for every woman for he has no social conscience. Thus through such pictures the novelist asserts that more than gold, miracles and political freedom, India needs economic freedom which can be attained only through a successful struggle against the Seths: “It is the fight with the Seths that will save India, not a miracle, not armfuls of gold”\(^2\).

The corrupt practice of bribery and other unfair dealings, so rampant in Indian society, are among the primary causes of the nation’s slow progress.

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2. Ibid., p.181
We read in the novel of the building contractors' dishonesty resulting in substandard buildings and bridges. Through the Seth, we come to know that these economic offenders, even when caught, are not punished by the Government. Even Seth does not find anything wrong with his profit motives, which he has learnt from the big businessman whom nobody condemns and punishes:

"The trick of cornering the market was not his invention. He had learned it by watching his betters during the rice-famine in Bengal four years before. At that time three million men and women had to die, so that there could be thirty new millionaires, and none condemned the profiteers. His present role, set beside theirs, was a child's prank."

Besides the portrayal of the Seths who exploit the poorer sections in the economic sphere of the society, there are other types of Seths of authority in other fields, such as religious, moral, social and traditional, who take advantage of those who fall within their sphere of influence and dominate them. Through Sohanlal, a minor character, the novelist observes:

"The cities had the greater variety and profusion of them thar the country side. There was the money-Seth, of course, to whom freedom meant a chance to seize fields of trade vacated by the aliens. Then the Seth of politics,...The Seth with a Gandhi cap on his head and the cap itself a deceit."

2. Ibid., p.110
Thus, the writer's message is that if blackmarketing and profiteering are not eradicated from India, the very purpose of attaining freedom may be defeated.

The evils of malpractice like demand for dowry are also touched upon by the novelist. The system of dowry for a girl's marriage causes misery and hardship to Indian families. It is also one of the causes of poverty in our country. Often money alone helps the parents to get a suitable husband for their daughter. There is a reference to an unfortunate old woman who has to suffer excessively because she cannot manage dowry for her daughter:

"Spectacles of misty eyes going blind...A dowry for a maid, well past her marriage age; she had no good looks, but a match could be arranged for eighty rupees..."\(^1\)

A Goddess Named Gold also satirizes the electoral methods actually adopted by politicians. An election is to take place at Sonamitti for the District Board. The Seth decides to contest it. He spends a lot of money and employs all sorts of stunts to purchase votes. He hires propagandists to convince the people that he is a well-wisher and has their interest at heart when actually he is working out devious ways of manipulation to win the elections. He thinks of using the squads of young teachers from the village school to go around crying slogans in his favour. This can be, "arranged at once through Masterji; the learned vulture, up to his beak in debt, would happily lend his services"\(^2\).

Like He Who Rides a Tiger, A Goddess Named Gold only touches upon the theme of synthesis, though in a very effective and interesting manner. The confrontation of the old and the new values acquires a new dimension in this novel for it shows the resurgence of the village women.

\(^1\)Bhabani Bhattacharya, A Goddess Named Gold, p.166

\(^2\)Ibid., p.36
Lakshmi represents the modern resurgent women who fight for their rights and voice a protest against social injustice. She leads the village women in their march against her husband—the Seth who does not sell cloth at a fair price. She believes in the idea of equal rights for men and women and so takes an active part in Meera’s plan to override the Seth and enable the women to view the cinema show. Whenever Lakshmi supports the cause of the poor and pleads vehemently with her husband for sympathy towards them, the Seth yields before her much against his will. She is against her husband because of his greed, money making and unsympathetic attitude towards the deprived. In short, the two are extremely unhappy with each other, being unable to bear each other’s ways. Yet they live together under the same roof, thus bringing out the novelist’s belief in the importance of adjustment in life.

In Atmaram, the minstrel, we see the synthesis of the tragic and the comic, the dreamy and the practical and the social and the asocial. His life is both happy and unhappy, and he composes and sings comic as well as tragic songs:

"The throats of listeners grew thick with feeling when his theme was tragic; but he made mock of bigwigs in doggerel he had composed, there was much laughter”.

He would go away from his home for a long period, and would live in a world of ideas and other-worldliness. But, he would also return home and would teach the villagers a lot of practical wisdom. His giving Meera the amulet is an act of practical wisdom. Escaping from life, he would live on the mountains for months together. However, he takes an active part in the

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, A Goddess Named Gold, p.48
Freedom Movement and is present in the village on Independence Day. He is a Gandhian idealist who wants better life conditions for the masses in the country. He has an ardent wish “to wipe every tear from every eye”. The minstrel goes on “following a middle course” between two ways of life, and exemplifies a happy synthesis of the old and the new elements in his characters.

Meera also combines the old values and the modern outlook in her character. Bhattacharya has drawn in her “a girl from storybooks, both real and unreal”. With the gold that she fancies to get after the touchstone has worked, she plans to help all the people of Sonamitti. The agreement between her and the Seth symbolizes the reconciliation between the well-meaning idealist and the evil-minded selfish materialist—a phenomenon which has been striking at the very root of Indian economy and planning in free India from the very beginning. Their partnership also embodies the mixed character of the planned economy intended for the achievement of the ideal of a welfare state symbolized by the aims of Meera who believes that “we have no choice except to wait for the miracle”. It is the fear of exile from Sonamitti and separation from her life-long friends that made Meera bow down to the Seth’s plan. The real goddess fighting against the powers of gold had to join hands with the devotee of the Gold goddess. The radical in Bhattacharya asserts that “you cannot work with a person and work against that person at the same time.”

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2. Ibid., p.68
3. Ibid., p.101
4. Ibid., p.191
time. You cannot be half here and half there. Her prospective marriage with Sohanlal symbolizes the union of a rural girl with an urban youth. While Sohanlal has served in the army during the World War and seen enough of life, Meera has remained confined to the village. While Meera has deep faith in the touchstone and its power to turn copper into gold, Sohanlal is unimpressed by it. He often pleads with Meera to see reason, but she, because of her genuine interest to help people by the gold acquired through amulet, remains adamant. Sohanlal is an educated youth of the city and she is an uneducated girl of the village. Their marriage signifies the blending of the two contrarieties: city and village, representing the modern and traditional ways of life—respectively. Highlighting the polarities in life and emphasizing the need for their synthesis, Bhabani Bhattacharya remarks:

"Good and evil dwelling side by side, one a foil for the other. Light needed darkness. Ugliness enhanced beauty. Riches were so welcomed because of the all-pervasive poverty. What use was a healer in the absence of ailment? Where was the pleasure in giving if no one would beg and receive?"

Thus, the fabric of allegorical disguise in *A Goddess Named Gold* is so transparent that the readers see the realism of the life of an Indian village on the eve of Independence. The novel also shows the encouraged feelings of men and women to secure economic and social freedom after the "Quit India

2.Ibid., p.257
Movement”. Bhattacharya successfully weaves the two motives in a single plot and the satirist in him hits at the Indian economy and planning which aims at the establishment of a socialistic pattern and at the same time helps capitalism grow from strength to strength. The cooperation among the socialist, the idealist and the capitalist developed allegorically in the novel bears a direct hint at the present political situation in India where the leaders talk at the tops of their voices against capitalism and at the same time depend on it for their election budgets.

The writings of Bhabani Bhattacharya have been deeply influenced by the life and thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi. Each and every novel written by him makes some sort of mention of Gandhi. In *A Goddess Named Gold* Minstrel bears a strong resemblance to Gandhiji. He lives away from his home and family and sings songs of a glorious past from the great “Ramayana”. He has an optimistic vision for the future of a free nation. He refers to Gandhi’s definition of freedom as “a state of mind”.

Bhattacharya is usually regarded as a serious and committed novelist but *A Goddess Named Gold* objectifies and demonstrates his comic vision as well. The comic drama in this novel starts with the “taveez” given to Meera. Through an act of kindness, the “taveez” can transform her copper ornaments into gold. Seth Samsundar discovers this fact and he enters into a contract with Meera who would change the copper ornaments provided by the Seth into gold ornaments. Then, he would share equally with Meera the gains. This discovery takes into its grip, all the villagers including Meera and the Seth. But for bringing about this miraculous change Meera must perform a spontaneous act of real kindness. The Seth, whose hunger for gold increases, now manages the situation to enable Meera to perform a spontaneous act of kindness. With this, Meera’s comic role as “Sona Mai” starts. This appearance
as "Sona Mai" is comic, as with all the copper ornaments around her belly she looks pregnant to grandma.

Her first act of kindness is the distribution of sweets to the village urchins whom the Seth had employed for his election campaign. The next act of kindness is Nago's fall into the well and Meera saving him. But just when the Seth's servant Bulaki starts shouting that Buddu (Nago) had fallen into the well, Sohanlal arrives on the scene and before Meera could make up her mind, proceeds to get down into the well. Consequently, the Seth beckons to Bulaki to produce Buddu.

After these incidents, the kind acts start turning awry. First is the eviction of Old Father who refuses Meera's help and leaves the village. Then comes the drunkard's marriage with the prostitute, which is considered a real act of kindness by the Seth. The drunkard's companions fleece the Seth and the prostitute plying her trade from the backdoor while the marriage party is waiting outside constitute the most comic scenes in the whole novel. The most comic figure in the novel is Seth Samsundar himself whose desire to acquire more wealth and status leads him to lose more and more money without the realization that he is making a fool of himself. Thus the novel overflows with the comic spirit.

Bhabani Bhattacharya, in A Goddess Named Gold brings to the material of Indian English writing a new area of Indian life and literature. The theme of Independence had been earlier dealt with, as in Venu Chitale's In Transit and K.A Abbas's Inquilab, but the originality lies in the approach. He stamps upon his fictional world an impression so vivid and so inimitable that one has but to give it the credit of novelty. Each character of the novel carries with it the impress of his unique art. Generally speaking, in A Goddess Named Gold Bhabani Bhattacharya succeeds in creating an atmosphere that lends
further credibility to his characters and results in a convergence of all the various strains in the story. The artistic purpose underlying the work is clearly the projection through narrative fiction of the dynamics of social adjustment at a sensitive point of time in the history of the nation.