CHAPTER - I
INTRODUCTION

The period since 1947 has been a period of intense literary activity on the Indian English scene. Besides the old timers, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan, who have also grown in stature by their subsequent works, a whole generation of writers has come up, capable, competent and confident: Attia Hosian, Anita Desai, Balchandra Rajan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Dom Moraes, G.V. Desani, Khushwant Singh, Kamala Markandaya, Manohar Malgonkar, Nayantara Sehgal, Nissim Ezekiel, Shanta Rama Rau and Zeenat Fatehali have, each one of them, made a definite mark in the field of creative writing. And, still further down in time, the generation that has followed this—Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy etc.—has also shown a manifold vitality and freshness which has clearly and unmistakably defined the character of Indian writing in English with the medium no longer a quaint assortment of usages but a living growing idiom of a people. “We can write only as Indians” affirms Raja Rao in the context of English being the language of the intellectual make-up of Indian writers in English.

The preceding and the contemporary scene in Indian English writing is extremely and exquisitely variegated so that when considering only Indian English fiction, too, one sees the sure efflorescence of a number of modes and patterns developing in it. It is not only in the deft handling of insular themes that Indian English writers of fiction have shown their genius and artistic vision: they have occasionally demonstrated that even in the realm of form, as in G.V. Desani’s All About Mr. Hater and Raja Rao’s The Serpent and the Rope, they are not devoid of inventiveness and originality.

Bhabani Bhattacharya belongs to the scene of the 40s, 50s and 60s.
His faith and affinities are, in the context of his times, relatively modern and he shares with his contemporary fellow artists an essential hope in the worthwhileness and future of Indian English writing. His themes are traditional and the approach to his themes is emotional rather than intellectual. In his novels, one notices a great degree of involvement, largely emotional, and the story derives its artistic motivation from this primary affiliation. In this respect, he is different from Raja Rao, or even Mulk Raj Anand, whose creative writing is based on well-defined intellectual posits. Unlike R.K.Narayan, he goes for social realism and is not content only in projecting a manner or creating a likeness.

In fact, of all the major novelists of his time, Bhattacharya himself is the only one whose artistic ambition appears to be modest. This is not intended as a reflection on his simplistic approach to his art, but is meant to emphasize his lack of enthusiasm for artistic cleverness or experiment for its own sake. He is primarily a storyteller and his major interest lies in telling a story well though his story is always cleverly geared to his moral vision, emotional bias and intellectual affinities.

Bhabani Bhattacharya, as we have seen, is one of those Indian fiction writers, who chose English as their medium of creative expression. He wanted to seek a wider audience, that is, a world audience for his works. He produced six novels and a collection of fifteen short stories. His novels had so much impact that, they were translated into twenty-six languages, including fourteen European languages. Bhattacharya exposed the evils that prevailed in the society of his times but was optimistic about the future in prescribing the philosophy of synthesis—the synthesis of the traditional and the modern, the ideal and the real. Most of his readers and critics have realised and maintain that Bhattacharya’s whole career of artistic creation is so significant and
versatile that it places him among the first few and most fertile talents of his age.

Bhattacharya grew up in an age when the nation was struggling for its independence and human rights. This movement affected national life—politics, economic issues, social life and literature. Dorothy Shimer, Bhattacharya’s biographer, wrote that “these were the forces that swirled about Bhabani Bhattacharya as he left adolescence and reached manhood”¹.

The common people were exploited in that age. There was a general feeling of frustration in India. This was the time when our national life was in turmoil. Blessed with an observant eye, Bhattacharya could find plenty of material for his fiction spread out before him. He was moved by the momentous events of his time.

In fact not only Bhattacharya but other novelists of that period, too, were occupied with the various complex social issues that the country was facing. In his writings, Bhattacharya is close to Mulk Raj Anand, in portraying feelingly and effectively the inhumanities perpetrated by man against the underprivileged and deprived. Both the novelists treat their subject matter with realism but they are different in that the former is a reformist who believes in progressive change and improvement whereas the latter is more of a revolutionary who is caustic and acrimonious in his outburst at the prevalence of evil and social injustice.

Bhattacharya believed that “a novel must have a social purpose” and must “place before the reader something from society’s point of view”². His

¹.Dorothy Blair Shimer, Bhabani Bhattacharya, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), p.4
main aim has been "to deal with the problem of social change". His is a novel of protest that registers an impassioned eruption of anger against evils like the caste system, exploitation of the socially and economically weak and profiteering.

All the social evils referred to above were taken as themes by Bhattacharya. The present study titled "The Fiction of Bhabani Bhattacharya: A Thematic Analysis" shows that Bhattacharya chose the major problems of Indian social and cultural life. The great socio-cultural and political processes that India has experienced in recent times are pointed out in his fiction. These socio-cultural and political processes are, the freedom struggle, the fight against poverty, superstition and caste-domination, modernization through industrialization, East-West encounter, the struggle of old and new values (culture) and the conflict between tradition and modernity and rural life and urban existence. Bhattacharya's novels patently deal with all these processes.

The theme of hunger is the major theme, which Bhattacharya has dealt with in all his six novels. The Bengal Famine seized his mind and hunger in one form or another has appeared in all his works. He regards hunger as an external and internal reality of life. Conrad believes that the world rests principally on the idea of fidelity, whereas Henry James considers man's desire to live to be the great truth about life and makes the idea of "living" the recurrent theme in his novels. Bhattacharya's fiction is based upon man's hunger for food, but other forms of hunger are also depicted in his novels—hunger for eternal ethical values, hunger for a happier life for the common people; hunger for sex and wealth; hunger for social prestige, titles, riches and the prosperity of one's children.

1. Sudhakar Joshi, op.cit., p.vii
The theme of freedom is also recurrent in Bhabani Bhattacharya’s fiction. The two themes of hunger and freedom usually go hand in hand in his writings, and both are quite exhaustively explored. This theme is also examined in various forms. Bhattacharya deals with political, economic and social freedom and also freedom of the mind, freedom to be free.

After Independence in 1947, the country was confronted with difficult economic problems, with economic freedom still to be achieved. Thus Bhattacharya turned towards the problem of economic liberation. Besides, social evils, too, largely prevailed in the country. A battle had to be fought against them in order to save India and place her among the developed countries of the world. And this could be possible only when people had attained freedom of the mind and “the freedom to be free”. Hence Bhattacharya stresses on these two varieties of freedom. Synthesis of opposites is also a dominant theme in his fiction. His creative works show the compromise between the various aspects of life, such as Old and New culture and Tradition and Modernity.

Although each novel has different characters and different situations yet most of his themes are recurrent and appear repeatedly in his various works. Bhabani Bhattacharya’s first novel, *So Many Hungers!* (1947) deals with the miserable plight of Kajoli, a village girl, who is driven by hunger to the city of Calcutta which she finds to be worse then her village in more ways than one. On the way, while moving to Calcutta she is raped by a soldier. Faced with the problem of hunger, she decides to be a prostitute, but at last is saved by the reported exhortation of Devata, who adopted her as his granddaughter.

Bhattacharya pictures in this novel the agony of the Bengal Famine. He holds that it was man-made in which two million men, women and children
died and two hundred monster-men like Samarendra Basu, Sir Abalabandhu and Seth Girish, thrived and became millionaires at the cost of the precious lives of poor, hungry people. The novel also deals with Gandhi’s influence on the Freedom Struggle.

Music for Mohini (1952) was written after Bhabani Bhattacharya’s marriage. In his portrayal of Mohini, he was largely inspired by his wife. Jayadev, one of the central characters in the novel and Mohini his wife owe a great deal to Bhabani and his wife, Salila respectively.

The novel deals with the life of Mohini who belongs to the city but has to go to the village after her marriage. The two predominant themes of the novel are those of tradition and modernity and of rural and urban life. The novel also expresses the novelist’s concern for society. There is at the end, a reconciliation of the old and the new values.

Tradition is symbolized by the orthodox mother of Jayadev. Grandmother of Mohini, the Big House and the village Behula whereas Modernity is symbolized by Jayadev, Mohini, her father who is Professor. Heeralal her brother and Harindra who is a doctor. This novel also shows that rural India is plagued by superstition, blind beliefs, taboos and obsolete customs.

He Who Rides a Tiger (1954) has for its background the World-War-II and the famine of 1943. The novel deals with the changing fortunes of Kalo, a blacksmith, who is driven to the city by the severity of the famine, is sent to jail for stealing a bunch of bananas, becomes a corpse-remover and a pimp to make both ends meat, finds his daughter Chandralekha in a prostitute’s house and then takes the help of deception to shatter the pride of the high-caste people. To take revenge he arranges the false “coming” of Shiva from the ground with the help of two seers of gram.
There is a strange combination of superstition and selfishness in the milk-bath episode. This novel shows that superstitions are not the monopoly of the rural people alone; some of the urban people like Motichand, are also superstitious.

A Goddess Named Gold (1960) attacks the greed and profiteering of the rich people and shows the novelist’s concern for safeguarding the country’s freedom. Seth Samsundar, a moneylender and merchant in the village Sonamitti, is the leader of men as opposed to Meera who is the leader of the women. Her grandfather, the minstrel, ties a “taveez” to Meera’s arm, which he says, has power, and when coupled with an act of real kindness, would transform copper into gold. The Seth, instead of doing acts of real kindness, dreams of becoming rich with the help of the “taveez” and Meera’s act of kindness. But her “acts of kindness” unfortunately shatter her image among the people. Disappointed by this she throws the “taveez” into the river. At the end of the story, the village settles down to do serious work, (fighting for Independence) forgetting this temporary madness.

This novel awakens the people to social, political and national responsibilities. Warning the people against profiteers and capitalist amulets and magic formulas, Bhattacharya suggests that only real acts of kindness and generosity can bring about the national good.

Shadow from Ladakh (1966), deals with the Gandhian nation preparing itself to meet the challenge of the Chinese forces. The novel shows the hostilities between China and India. There is conflict between Gandhigram represented by Satyajit and Steeltown represented by Bhashkar. Both find their own ways to tackle war with China. Bhashkar believes in setting up industries on a large scale whereas Satyajit believes in the ideology of Gandhiji’s, truth, non-violence, spinning wheel and cottage industries. Their
aims are common—the preservation of national independence and the removal of poverty, but the means to achieve these goals are different.

The background of the novel is the Chinese aggression of 1962. Bhattacharya through this novel pleads for the synthesis of Gandhian values of moral regeneration and modernism born in the wake of scientific and technological development. For Marlene Fisher, “the union of Bhashkar and Sumita symbolizes that meeting ground” of traditional and modern values. The novel due to its good plot, fine style and a set of beautiful images won for its author the coveted Sahitya Akademi Award.

A Dream in Hawaii (1978), deals with the cultural values of the East and the West. Other themes dealt with in the novel are the sexual permissiveness of the American society, the desire to make money and the spiritual hunger of the Americans. Through the novel, Bhattacharya also presents:

“A critique of the bourgeois value system which believes in making a profitable business venture out of even personal human needs like sex and yoga.”

The novel tries to synthesize the spiritual values of India with those of the materialistic society in the United States. Walt Gregson is a symbol of sexual permissiveness, Dr. Vincent Swift of material wealth and Swami Yogananda of spiritual values.

Steel Hawk and Other Stories (1968) is a work that is totally different from the above six novels. There are fifteen stories in it and the setting in the stories is rural rather than urban. In some of the stories like The Acrobats, The Quack, Steel Hawk, Glory at Twilight, Pictures in the Fire and A Moment of Eternity, Bhattacharya presents a synthesis of the conventional and the unconventional and the ideal and the existing values of life. In others like My Brave Great Uncle and The Faltering Pendulum he deals with the psychology of fear—terror and dread in the heart of a child and fear in the bosom of a childless woman, respectively.

The view of life that emerges from Bhabani Bhattacharya’s works is the view of life of a humanist, a thinker who does not suffer from the aggressive egotism of his ideas, and, of a born artist whose claim to distinction lies in the quiet competence of his method rather than in the more eye-catching experiments and innovations which are often mistaken for “modernism”. It is the modest endeavour of the present study to highlight these qualities by a critical evaluation of his fiction.