Chapter – III

CONFLUENCE OF MIND AND BODY

MUSIC FOR MOHINI
Music for Mohini is Bhabani Bhattacharya’s second novel. In this novel Bhattacharya dwells on certain sociological aspects of Indian life and suggests the direction of Indian life and suggest the direction in which the Indians have to move if they are to fully benefit by their political freedom.

Music for Mohini deals with the theme of the social rejuvenation of India, particularly its villages which constitute the nine-tenths of the country. With freedom of India in sight, the author fears that the putrid Indian society caught in the deadly mire of obscurantism, superstitions, rituals, blind faith and obsolete customs, may fail to utilize political freedom for the real progress the country till it undergoes a complete social and cultural transformation. Thinking of the degenerated Indian society, the hero of the novel reflects:

Society, rural society (and nine-tenths of India was rural) was sick with taboos and inhibitions of its own making: the inequities of caste and untouchability; the ritualism that passed for religion; the wide-flung cobweb of superstitious faith. It was all an outgrowth of centuries of decadence. The purity of ancient thought had been lost in misinterpretation until the dignity of man had become a mere plaything of visited interests. (67-68)
He feels “what was political liberty worth to the common man if it was not part of a renascence in social life?” (67). If freedom is to be made effective, India must reorient her national life on a new social basis. Jayadev is determined to make his own contribution “to India’s developing struggle for social freedom, the fountain of all freedoms” (124). The freedom he envisions must release a spiritual be re-weighted. He considers the present moment in India’s history to be the most suitable moment to end all slavery, not least of all the slavery of the spirit: “The proud nation that would soon step onto the world stage could not afford to be half-slave, half free” (68).

The novel portrays the intellectual and emotional development of the heroine, Mohini, from carefree and sheltered girlhood to the position of a wife and the mistress of a prominent and influential house with great traditions. An interesting point to note is that this novel was published between Bhattacharya’s two masterpieces, So Many Hungers! and He Who Rides a Tiger. However, Music for Mohini belongs to a different category. As Dorothy Shimer observes, Music for Mohini is “undoubtedly Bhattacharya’s most light-hearted novel.”

When the story begins, Mohini is a motherless school-going girl of seventeen, growing up in her Calcutta home, where she is given complete freedom by her father, a professor with modern ideas, and her grand mother, referred to as Old Mother, who represents traditional views and values. As already mentioned, one of the main themes in the novel is Mohini’s growth.
and maturation, the metamorphosis of the carefree girls into the life partner of a thoughtful idealist who desires to play his part in the building of the country's future.

The bridegroom suggested for Mohini is a handsome, well-educated and affluent young man in his late twenties, Jayadev. He is an odd mixture of old-world ideals and Gandhian activism. He is the head of an aristocratic family called the Big House in the village Behula. His widowed mother, a staunch pillar of orthodoxy, has been pressing him to marry and the proposal of marriage to Mohini comes after the two horoscopes have been carefully compared and the planets found to be in favourable conjunction. Mohini’s father is reluctant to marry her to a person living in a village as he fears that she may not be able to adopt herself to the conditions of life in a village with its taboos and restrictions.

Old Mother, however, insists that the proposal should be accepted. She has been impressed by an article written by Jayadev in a journal and particularly by a photograph of the handsome young man. Mohini is also captivated by the photograph and is prepared to leave the city for the village Behula. The father gives in to the wishes of his daughter and mother, and the marriage is arranged without Jayadev and Mohini even seeing each other.

After the marriage ceremony, Mohini goes to her new home with Jayadev. They are accompanied by Heeralal and the cook, who are to keep
her company for a few weeks. After the train journey, the couple travel in a bullock cart and then in a palanquin. This shows that Mohini is being transported from a modernistic home in the city to a home in the heart of rural Bengal dominated by orthodoxy, convention, and ritual. When Mohini observes the manner in which she is welcomed by the people of the village and the rites with which she is received into her new home, she realizes that she has entered a new world which involves new responsibilities. Her mother-in-law represents the old values, whereas Mohini is a girl of the modern times. She is city-bred, suave, convent-educated, and an upcoming radio star whose songs have been recorded and displayed in public. She is a beautiful girl who likes all good things of life. Her heart is full of love for her husband, and she wants to be admired and loved by him in turn. Jayadev is a visionary and an idealist. He expects his wife to be different from an ordinary young woman with basic physical needs and requirements. He sees in her Gargi or Maiteryi, “no house-hold drudge, nor decorative being, but an intellectual, striding besides a man in a tireless quest for knowledge” (71). Though she could not lead a glamorous life, Mohini does not express any kind of dissatisfaction.

She tries her best to rise to the expectation of her husband. She knows that her married life will be peaceful and meaningful only when she adjusts herself to the wishes of her husband, shares her ideals and renders him positive help in his programme of social reconstruction for his sake she is ready to undergo any ordeal: “For his sake she would absorb new ways of
thought and habit and cultivate new interests” (105-106). Jayadev is an idealist and Mohini knows “how hard to be an idealist’s wife! If he were like other young men. No! How compare him with others! He was far above them all” (128-129). Though she thinks that “she would much rather have the common place things of life, like other girls. She was not made to be an idealist. She couldn’t bear the strain,” the very next moment she realises, “she could. She must. Her husband needed her help. How could she fail him? In the great task ahead she should play her part. She would be his true partner in his feeling, in faith and in dream”(129). Thus, Mohini not only comes closer to Jayadev but also rescues the backward ignorant and illiterate rural women from the darkness of orthodox living, and helps them have a glimpse of modern time. The women of the village begin to identify the new mistress of the Big House with themselves: “their own, their joy, their joy, their joy and pride, and she was so human, without any of the plumage of the rich, whose distant look bespoke that they tried the blue pathways of the sky”(150). Thus, maybe indirectly, Mohini helps Jayadev in realizing his vision. Jayadev teaches the people to believe that they are not the slaves of the stars, that the old crazy beliefs should be rejected completely, and that the new ideas guaranteeing human happiness should get the strongest social action. According to Jayadev social freedom is as important as political freedom. He thinks,

Great and exciting days lay ahead. India, free to
build up her destiny, was not yet truly free. She
was like a prisoner held too long in a dark cell. Unchained and released suddenly, she was bewildered by the light. But the stupor would pass. India would renew herself. (183)

That Jayadev is not just a man of words but a man of action is proved when Jayadev vehemently and publicly opposes his mother when she tries to compel Mohini to offer her blood to Devi so as to get rid of her barrenness. He is against all superstitious beliefs and wants to cleanse society of them. Though in the initial stages his mother is shocked at his revolutionary ideas and ways, ultimately she is able to understand him correctly and through him “the new revolt, the restless spirit of the new dawn” (183). Thus Jayadev paves the way for social freedom.

As already mentioned, at first Mohini finds her new environment unbearable. As she has been brought up in an entirely different type of environment, she has too struggled hard “to retouch her mental values, readjust her expectations” (108). Before she can accommodate herself comfortably at Behula, her mother-in-law is stern and puts a number of restraints on the young girl: “There was no end to prohibitions.” (130). Subdued by these prohibitions, Mohini strives hard to adjust to the old ways and modes of life in the rural society. In this process, surprisingly, she too changes unawares:
Yes, the young mistress of the Big House took deeper colour from her new life every day. Slowly she fitted herself to the rural design. Her sprightliness, her quick girlish laugh, she easily subdued. The mother was a ruthless teacher.

(130)

Mohini realizes that the Big House exists in association with the traditions of the family:

This house lived always in the shadow of the family tree, nothing mattered so much as the family tree. The tall, gilt-framed portraits of ancestors that seemed to hang on every wall had a rich vivid life beyond canvas and point. An old, proud house of an old, proud family. A tradition within a tradition. (108)

The weird old looks of the Big House make it oppressive to live in:

The evenings unlit by a moon in the sky were oppressive, almost unbearable. The Big House was a pebble clutched in the iron block fist of night. Dim Kerosene lamps, scratched the darkness tiredly. Dull bursts of cricket chirp, jinn! With frog songs for variation, deepened the immense, listening silence. Then, the
ancestors of the house brooding on the high walls slipped down and trod the long corridors back and forth, the clop-clop of their wooden sandals . . . echoing from wing to wing. (132-133).

The Big House defies any change in its traditional setup because of Jayadev's mother. Rooplekha, Jayadev's sister, tells Mohini,

My mother is the usual orthodox Hindu woman, only she is more intense than others, and all her faith is pinned to family tradition. No deviation for her, not one inch. stern willed, though tender at heart, she is a simple soul, with singleness of purpose, a one-eyed mind. She exists for the Big House; she wouldn't have it changed the least way. Even the age-grey walls are not to be time-washed because Mother loves to see them absorb time. (94)

Mohini has her adjustments to make with her mother-in-law. The mother is personally very considerate and affectionate towards Mohini, but expects her to conform to the time-honoured way of life. She insists on every member of the family following the family traditions. With the passage of time Mohini begins to realize that the mother does have certain
basic human qualities like compassion and sacrifice. She overcomes her hatred and develops a great love and sympathy for the mother:

... Mohini told herself, perhaps she judged the mother too harshly? Perhaps she saw the wrong side of this old tapestry of tradition and missed the design? Duty and compassion were not at odds in the mother; the key to the design was sacrifice which was a right and privilege, not a duty alone. (173)

Gradually both Mohini and her mother-in-law, representing the modern and traditional values respectively, begin to understand each other better:

Meantime, in the Big House, a sweet intimacy built on their common dream linked Mohini with the mother. It was as though they were two conspirators filled with one secret. Everything else, the movements and gestures of work a day life, was a covering shell. (144)

A crisis in Mohini’s life and in the life of the Big House comes when Jayadev is nearing twenty-eight. An astrologer predicted that Jayadev will die an untimely death at this age unless a child is born to him by then. The mother, who has strong faith in horoscopes, is anxious that Mohini should
become a mother in order to prevent the calamity. She feels relieved when she guesses that Mohini is pregnant. She is so happy that she wants to follow the practice of sticking a piece of bamboo to the hair of the girl as a charm to protect the child in the womb and prevent any mishap. Mohini does not have faith in charms. The mother becomes very angry when she notices the charm missing. She tells Mohini that the only way to save the family is to pray to the goddess of birth and to vow to give her a nose ring when her wish is fulfilled. If that is not enough, she should cut the skin of her bosom and offer blood to the goddess in as lotus-leaf. Mohini’s sophistication makes her rebel against the suggestion and she becomes unhappy and restless. Jayadev comes to know of her predicament and gives her moral support by declaring that he has no faith in the astrologer's prediction. He snubs the mother and tells her that they are not slaves of the stars, that there is “no room in the Big House for crazy beliefs”(179), and that the whole village looks towards the people of the Big House for a proper way of living. This attitude infuriates the mother and she says that she is ashamed to have him as her son. She further says, “I know your mind. Heresy holds you. Old beliefs, old morals, old values mean nothing to you”(180). Jayadev wants his mother to understand that there are “values beyond your grasp, since you’ll always try to reach them with your reason, never with your feelings. Life has punished you . . . Blind belief shapes your thinking: Blind belief can’t make a sentiment”(180). Thus there is an ideological tussle between the mother and the son. At this critical stage an
accident occurs which affects the course of events. Jayadev is bitten by a
snake. The mother is shocked. But, fortunately the snake is a non-poisonous
one and Jayadev is safe. The mother considers the snake-bite a warning and
requests Mohini to offer prayers to the goddess immediately. Mohini’s
acceptance of the ordeal reveals the compromise she is willing to make with
orthodoxy and tradition. But, the offering to the goddess is not made.
Jayadev’s intervention is the success of the son’s progressive attitude over
the mother’s orthodoxy. But at the same time Mohini decides to accept and
love the Big House. She is even prepared to allow her husband to marry
Sudha in order to beget a son. But, fortunately it becomes known that
Mohini is already pregnant.

The mother also realises that Jayadev’s path is the right one: “His
ideas, his point of view, moulded by the new spirit in the land, were
different from hers and opposed to them, but they were, nonetheless, true
ideals”(187). This realization brings the mother closer to Jayadev, and the
Big House experiences an atmosphere of cordiality and mutual
understanding. The discord between the mother and the son, the mother-in-
law and daughter-in-law, and the husband and wife ends:

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

(188).

With the synthesis between the modern and the old, symbolized by the reconciliation between Jayadev and the mother, life becomes sweet music for Mohini. This is made possible because she succeeds in re-establishing harmony within herself by her psychological growth and change of outlook. Thus a slip of a girl brought up in urban ways blossoms into a responsible woman, willingly and cheerfully undertaking the responsibility of guiding the destiny of a family with its roots in the past.

Bhattacharya, being a novelist of social conscience, finds a lot of evils which he thinks ought to be scrapped and purged from the society. He has no patience with a lot of dead weight, like superstitions, orthodox traditions and customs, which we have inherited from the past and which are choking the current of national life. But instead denouncing all this, he makes his stand clear by his light hearted humour. Instead of criticizing the two old women in *Music for Mohini* for their old fashioned beliefs and practices, he makes us laugh heartily at the absurdities of these women. We know that all their thinking is askew and they believe in matching horoscopes or looking for the lucky signs in the bride’s hand before the marriage or other silly old beliefs, but we also know that their hearts are in the right place. In spite of the fact that Bhattacharya avoids making the old women detestable, he never abstains from showing how they and the other they represent have run to seed.
Music for Mohini (1952) is perhaps the least didactic of Bhattacharya's novels and hence aesthetically the most satisfying. It is an interesting story of a lighthearted girl in search of happiness, into which Bhattacharya weaves the conflict between tradition and modernity.

There is every possibility that Bhattacharya should have written this novel from his own personal experience—either about his daughter's marriage or from his son's marriage. The author at every stage appears to be driving towards a climax but fails to achieve it. There is an attempt at reconciliation of the theme of the East and West. But the reader is at a loss to know whether it is fulfilled after all. The characters are simply drawn away according to the situation, but they do not have the mettle to control it.

Bhattacharya's aim was to show that India could not free itself from the shackles of orthodoxy and superstition even after Independence. The novel Music for Mohini is a true replica of the India of the post-war Independence still making abortive attempts to come out of the mire of tradition and orthodoxy. The aim of the novelist is no doubt good but how far he has succeeded in implementing his idea is a matter to do debated. A sincere attempt has been made in the representation of the conflict between old values and modern ones as indicated by the old mother and Mohini respectively. The need for a change of social outlook and reorientation of social values is Bhattacharya's major concern.
There is nothing intricate about the plot, nothing serious about the design. There is no suspense or anxiety in the continuity of the story. It is thus a weak novel and does not easily fit into the pattern of Bhattacharya's other novels. The relationship between characters, between daughter or son and father, and husband and wife is not properly represented. They clamour for a full-bodied existence. Some of the most unnecessary incidents which have nothing to do with the main plot also have a great part allotted to them in the story. All these have proved to be an impediment for the development of the characters. Greater importance is to be attached to the artist's individual sensibility but not to his systematic accumulation of realistic social detail. Bhattacharya does not limit himself to the Indian culture. He makes a sincere attempt for a merger of the different cultures of the East and of the West. But the novel registers a revival of the old conventions and habits. Dr. Iyengar feels that, "it is the difference in the intellectual level of husband and wife and the consequences of this gulf that forms the integral part of the theme of the novel Music for Mohini."^2

Although for sometime Mohini is alone and intellectually at bay, that cannot be considered the main current of the story. Importance and stress are greater on the social set up than on the intellectual divergence. Both the hero and the heroine play their part, but at no time do they meet at a common point. They are bred and brought up under two entirely different atmospheres but finally prove themselves to be slaves of superstition.
Mohini is not an ideal heroine as probably conceived of by Bhattacharya, but is simply elevated to the status of a heroine.

Instead of concentrating on the main characters, Bhattacharya gives unnecessary importance to certain minor characters that do not in any way help the development of the plot and the story. However the main crux of successful characterization centers on the writer's talent for vivid description and his ability to bring about an effective realization of the appearance and manners of his people. Besides, an intimate knowledge of human nature, a keen insight into the common motives and passions, creative power and dramatic sympathy are all the pre-requisites of a novelist who wishes to confer on his characters any degree of substantial reality. In this respect Music for Mohini may be said to satisfy the criteria.

Here Bhattacharyas fails to portray the various relationships in a convincing and competent manner, while he does so in He who rides a tiger and Shadow from Ladakh, with reference to parent-child and marital relationships. In his other novels, he expounds the Gandhian philosophy, implicitly or explicitly, but here he makes scant reference except to that of the contrast between the city and village modes of life. The total impression of the novel is dependent on the character-creation. But here it detracts from his design. None of the characters is invested with full bloom.

However, as a family story with usual heart-breaks, differences in ideologies, sweet memories, happy sentiments, sharp divergences,
realization of stark realities and amity, fellow-feeling and understanding

*Music for Mohini* has a mastery, all its own.

Dr. Chandrasekharan remarks that his novel is a study in psychology without the involutions and complexities of a typical psychological novel. There is very little movement and action in the story. The artistic imagination of the novelist is not sufficiently and markedly kindled in this novel. One tends to agree with Dr. Chandrasekharan, according to whom, "There is much in the novel to entertain, to delight and even to provoke. But the music, we hear, is only the soft and subdued melody of the flute and not the varied harmony of a rich orchestra."

Bhattacharya seems to suggest the significance of the title when he writes "Her (Mohini's) life was music—the true quest for every woman, her deepest need" (232). As long as she was in the company of the old mother and father, and her affectionate and indulgent brother Heeralal, her life was quite musical, ringing pleasant notes of bliss and serenity and nothing to worry. In fact it was the music showered by gods and goddesses on this heavenly damsel walking on earth. Her life was a bed of roses. She had a musical voice and she was often singing on the radio and people would hear her songs with rapt attention. But she had to face a different type of music after her marriage in the Big House. It took a little time for her to adjust herself to the discordant notes of music in the strange atmosphere. But her sense of confidence enables her to face the music with fortitude and she brings out a total transformation in the
outlook of the inmates of the Big House and makes it musical. She is indeed the 'Goddess of Music'.

Through and through Mohini struggles, “to make harmony of the discordant elements in her own life” and finally comes out successful, triumphant. However, on a broader social scale, harmony must be established between the old and the new ways of life, between East and West. Mohini has to adjust to strange village customs much as Rooplekha (Jayadev’s sister) had to enter the bewildering life of the city. When Mohini speaks against village – city inter-marriages, Rooplekha replies: “we who’re 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 new semi-Western outlook.” This is more urgent to-day than ever before. Our new India must rest on this foundation: ‘A bridge between two banks of a river’; ‘connect culture with culture.’
References:


