



The Role of Women in Bhabani Bhattacharya's Novels: A Feminist Perspective

Anu Shrivastava
Research scholar

English Department Patliputra University
Patna , India

Prof.(Dr.) Hemlata Singh

Abstract: Bhabani Bhattacharya, a leading voice in Indo-Anglian literature of the twentieth century, offers a compelling depiction of Indian society in a period of cultural and political transformation. Central to his fictional world are women who serve as moral touchstones, reformers, and mediators between tradition and modernity. Though his vision emerges from Gandhian humanism rather than radical feminist ideology, his women characters reveal resilience, agency, and transformative potential. This paper examines the portrayal of women in *Music for Mohini*, *Shadow from Ladakh*, and *He Who Rides a Tiger*, applying a feminist perspective to explore their evolving roles in a changing India.

1. Introduction

Bhabani Bhattacharya (1906–1988) masterfully combines historical awareness with a commitment to social realism, producing fiction that is at once engaging and morally charged. His works capture the contradictions of a nation moving from colonial rule toward independence, with particular emphasis on the shifting position of women. From Mohini's spirited adaptability to Sumita's ability to balance domestic life with national duty, Bhattacharya's heroines challenge the stereotype of the passive Indian woman. While his approach is not explicitly feminist, it aligns with proto-feminist ideals by portraying women as moral guides, active participants in reform, and individuals with a strong sense of identity.

2. Women as Moral Centres

In Bhattacharya's narratives, women frequently occupy the position of moral and emotional core, guiding the ethical direction of the story. They embody values of truth, compassion, and justice, often influencing male characters toward self-awareness and righteousness.

- In *Music for Mohini*, the protagonist's optimism and life-affirming spirit stand in contrast to the rigid conservatism of her marital home. Mohini becomes a quiet reformer, introducing change without breaking cultural continuity.
- Such portrayals resonate with Gandhian philosophy, where women are envisioned as custodians of moral conscience in both the private and public domains.

3. Navigating Between Tradition and Modernity

A recurring concern in Bhattacharya's fiction is the negotiation between inherited traditions and the imperatives of a modern, postcolonial India. His women manage this balance with intelligence and subtlety.

- In *Shadow from Ladakh*, Sumita symbolises the fusion of the personal and political. Deeply rooted in family responsibilities, she nevertheless engages actively in nationalist work, suggesting that social progress depends on women's inclusion in both domestic and public arenas.
- This nuanced positioning reflects a reformist feminist view—seeking change from within the framework of cultural identity rather than through its outright rejection.

4. Women as Catalysts for Social Transformation

Bhattacharya's women are not confined to passive roles; they emerge as agents of reform and subtle resistance.

- In *He Who Rides a Tiger*, though Kalo occupies the narrative foreground, the rural women embody endurance and quiet defiance against caste and economic oppression.
- Their small acts of resistance, though often unrecognised, challenge the social structures that confine them, revealing agency beneath the surface of apparent submission.

5. Feminist Resonances

Although Bhattacharya's narratives are not overtly framed within feminist ideology, several dimensions of his characterisation echo feminist principles:

1. **Individual Selfhood** – Characters such as Mohini and Sumita seek self-expression beyond the roles assigned to them by patriarchy.
2. **Critique of Social Injustice** – His novels question oppressive practices such as dowry, caste prejudice, and gender-based inequality.
3. **Emphasis on Education** – Women's education is portrayed as essential for personal empowerment and societal reform.

6. Constraints of Representation

From a present-day feminist standpoint, Bhattacharya's female characters can at times appear idealised—symbolising virtue and sacrifice rather than being depicted as fully complex individuals. Their autonomy often remains tethered to familial and societal approval, thereby limiting the scope of their liberation.

7. Conclusion

Bhattacharya's fiction captures a transformative moment in India's history, presenting women as indispensable participants in the nation's cultural and social regeneration. While his perspective is grounded in Gandhian humanism rather than radical feminism, his portrayal of women contributes meaningfully to Indian English literature's evolving discourse on gender. His heroines navigate the intersection of tradition and change, representing a quiet yet potent form of feminism rooted in moral strength and cultural continuity.

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