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The Theme of Harmonisation and Reconciliation in *Music for Mohini*

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Abstract: Bhabani Bhattacharya's second novel *Music for Mohini* is a study of the conflict of ideas between the older generation and the younger generation. This novel contains references to some superstitious beliefs among the people of Bengal. Widowhood is regarded as inauspicious thereby making a widow to stay away from the reception ceremony of a new bride in the household. The novel also aims at projecting new order in the old ways of life. The old order is being replaced with new ideology. The contrast between the rural and urban civilization is shown in the novel not only for the purpose of highlighting the gap between the two worlds which always create a tension while intermingling with each other but also to serve as a kind of metaphor to highlight those human values of the simple rural community that the upcoming modern civilization lacks in.

Keywords: auspicious, belief, tradition, custom, harmonisation, reconciliation, refugee.

Bhabani Bhattacharya's second novel *Music for Mohini* is no doubt a novel showing the basic differences between urban and rural social systems. Through the story of Mohini, Bhattacharya tries to bring out the conflict between the modern society and traditional society. It is also a study of the conflict of ideas between the older generation and the younger generation. This novel contains references to some superstitious beliefs among the people of Bengal. Widowhood is

regarded as inauspicious thereby making a widow to stay away from the reception ceremony of a new bride in the household. A widow is considered unlucky and she is forbidden to participate in any auspicious occasion. In this way an Indian woman herself stays aloof from all auspicious ceremonies. She has a kind of thinking that she is not to be present at all these social functions. She takes this as a part and parcel of her life but within her there is always a silent desire to join in all those ceremonies. All through the ages the Indian women had to go through all these ordeal of social systems. Mohini's mother-in-law is not an exception in this matter. The novelist's own words are worth mentioning here:

She bowed her head as a bride will, but not before she looked around. Her thoughts were of her new mother, who was not at this ritual of welcome because she was a widow and, therefore, an inauspicious presence. (Bhattacharya 82)

In this way, Mohini's mother-in-law being a woman of old values, is confined to her old beliefs. She will not come out of her self-made cocoon of superstitious ideals. Like every traditional mother-in-law, Mohini's mother-in-law kept herself away from receiving and welcoming her daughter-in-law into her household. Mohini, however, adjusted herself to the new situation. But, however liberated and modern she was, Mohini was bounded by set rules and norms. She could not help agreeing to the marriage arranged for her. She was accepted by her mother-in-law only after confirming that she has on her palm all the eight signs of luck. This is another kind of superstition and established custom. On the other hand, Sudha remained unmarried and she got the nickname "Saturn's Eyeshore" (Bhattacharya 176).

In our society, a girl has less chance to choose her own marriage partner. A woman is always someone's daughter, wife, sister, or mother. She has to change her home and herself as well. As Simone de Beauvoir rightly points out, "[T]he destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage. . . Marriage is the reference by which the single woman is defined, whether she is frustrated by, disgusted at, or even indifferent to this institutions" (451). Like a perfect typical Indian

daughter-in-law Mohini follows her mother-in-law's instruction. She prayed before the holy basil which is very unlikely of her. The custom is very strange to a city-bred woman like her and what she had to do is expressed in the following manner:

After sundown, she carried three little earthen saucer lamps to the holy plant, tulsi, in the inner courtyard, the way the mother had taught her and lit the wicks devoutly, as though she had worshipped in this way all her life. (Bhattacharya 109)

She was in a perplexed state when Jayadev called her Maitreyi. She was not accustomed to the way she was addressed to. She even stitched baby quilts because the mother asked her to do even before she dreamt of a child. It was an odd belief for a newly-wed woman to stitch small quilts and embroider them at the corners with the conch, lotus, wheel and mace. She would serve meal to her husband under the mother's guidance and they would eat later together. She bore everything that her mother told. She told Mohini the sanctity of the bedstead. In a way she was telling Mohini that she should not fail her in giving a grandson. Regarding her views, K. R. Chandrasekharan remarks:

The chief blessing that she invokes in Mohini when she arrives in the house is that she should have offspring. (47)

In this way Mohini is caught between the conflicting ideas of her mother-in-law and her own ideal values. The story of Mohini is held up to a considerable length on which a woman undergoes adjustment and submission in her husband's household to their own belief and tradition. Mohini tried hard to accomplish her mother-in-law's desire. She began to have a kind of fear lest she wouldn't be able to bear a child even after two years of marriage. She mentally prepares herself to tolerate a co-wife in the interest of her husband and her mother-in-law. In this way, she prepared herself to sacrifice in order to prove her wifely virtue. Mohini is in fact a devoted wife and she considered it her duty to please the family, show respect to her mother-in-law and to all naive

village girls even though they are not in her league as she was well educated and a modern woman. She is an example of a modern India, intermingled with the new trends and ideas on one side and the old values and cultures that prevailed as a custom in the society of those times on the other side. In this context the words of Manjusha Kaushik is worth quoting:

Mohini is considered as a selfless woman, she does not neglect the old but whatever the good and relevant is there she accepts. The main problem for Mohini in the Big House is that of the mental adjustment. Even when hardly two or three days had passed of her marriage, she realized that Jayadev is not what she had desired her husband to be. (234)

Mohini couldn't understand Jayadev after her marriage. It was only with great effort that she tried to understand him and to adjust herself in the new environment. She began to realize that Jayadev was not what she had expected. She tried hard to pacify herself as there was no other way to escape from what fate had landed her to and let time to take its own course even if she desired it so.

In a way, we can say that two cultures are interchanged in a marriage and it is certainly the bride that helps in interchanging the cultures. Through her efforts and personal adjustment, a bride always tries to bring certain change; may it be for better or worse. Often in this adjustment of two cultures, it is the women who are trapped. A newly-wed bride often feels uneasy in a new surrounding and a new home. Mohini also felt uneasy and discomfort in the Big House. The Big House is a symbol of tradition, rigidity and old order. Mohini felt like a captive in the Big House just as Biswas felt at Hanuman House in the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* by V. S. Naipaul. Mohini and Biswas both believed that they were misfits in the two houses. Regarding the state of Mohini and Biswas, Dr. J. Samuel Kirubahar writes:

It is quite apparent that both Mohini and Biswas feel humiliated in these houses. Their minds are tarnished, wounded and repeatedly assaulted both

by the inmates of the house and by the people outside. Mohini's state of being barren and Biswas' efforts to fix an identity of his own in the clumsy Tulsidom only results in humiliation. (127)

Both characters make an effort to get a new life free from the shackles of the old order. They have tried to seek an outlet from their shabby existence. Mohini often climbs a tree in the garden and sets herself free from all bondages of the Big House. Her act was a revolt against the strict orders of her mother-in-law. The tree becomes her refuge and she is very happy with herself. Her mother-in-law is not at all ready to accept her action. It is not right for the mistress of the Big House to climb a tree. But Mohini would not listen to her. Describing the self-liberated action and nature of Mohini, the novelist writes:

And this one symbolic act of revolt cancelled out all that submission. Up on her perch she was beyond the reach of the Big House, she was above, the restraints of everyday living. She was integrated and free, free to read, think, feel and dream. (Bhattacharya 146)

The novel also aims at projecting new order in the old ways of life. The old order is being replaced with new ideology. Mohini's father, the Professor, even against the wish of his old mother sends Mohini to a convent school. He is almost repulsive to the idea of consulting "Horoscopes in this age of Microscope". He even let Mohini take her own decision in choosing the groom. Again, in the novel, we find Jayadev as a man who is well educated even though he hails from a village. He is open-minded and rational human being and he is not superstitious at all. Commenting on the liberal and modernised nature of Jayadev, Mohit K. Ray writes:

At one level urban sophistication and rural simplicity are brought into a harmonious whole. But at another, and more important level, Jayadev, Mohini's husband is presented as a fine combination of the wisdom of the East and the rationality of the West. The two main strains of the

music in the novel are the cultural values of the East and the West and the novelist tries to show how they can be orchestrated into a symphony. (18)

The contrast between the rural and urban civilization is shown in the novel not only for the purpose of highlighting the gap between the two worlds which always create a tension while intermingling with each other but also to serve as a kind of metaphor to highlight those human values of the simple rural community that the upcoming modern civilization lacks in. The following views of Neelam Singh and Rashmi G. on contrasting values are worth quoting:

The struggle between the contrasting values that is so Intense and fierce in the beginning gradually reduces and resolves finally into a happy compromise. It is not only the younger character who tries for mutual adjustment but the old characters also realizes and tries to fulfil the demands of the new age. (Singh N. & Rashmi G. 215)

Mohini got support from her husband in many ways. She was able to take up many progressive works because Jayadev was always by her side. Many progressive actions were taken up in Behula in the course of the novel. Mohini introduced so many new things in the village. She taught the women in the village about many new things including the gramophone. She read out newspapers to them. She also read out passages from books, short stories and from magazines. Even old peasant women like Ratan's mother yearned to learn the alphabets. She was an inspirational figure to them.

Social reform and reconstruction programmes were also taken up by the younger generations under the leadership of Jayadev and Mohini. They helped a foreign returned doctor to marry a Brahmin girl, Sudha though they belonged to different castes. They also rescued a young girl from a moneylender when she was about to become his fourth wife. The youths also cleaned a pond full of hyacinth. An enormous crocodile dwelt in the pond and the simple peasant believed

that the crocodile was a Brahmin in a pre-birth. In this way, the young men tried to stop the breeding of mosquitoes in the pond. So the whole village enjoyed the fruit of the action taken up by the young people under the guidance of Jayadev and Mohini.

The arrival of Mohini as wife of Jayadev in Behula is very symbolic. She is the symbol of change. She tries hard to adjust herself to the new surrounding as well as change the mindsets of the villagers for good. With her patience and will power, she tries her best to understand the situation and bring harmony in her life and to the people of Behula village. Mohini stands for life and progress. The importance of allopathic medicine is highlighted in the novel. One woman is cured with allopathic medicines when ayurvedic medicine fails. In this way, the music in Mohini's life became accordant. There is harmonisation and synthesis of old and new ideas.

Mohini is able to reconcile with her husband. Jayadev by nature is silent and scholarly. He is always engrossed in his works and is just the opposite of fun-loving and light-hearted Mohini. However, as the novel progresses, Mohini could understand him and adheres to his need and style. Jayadev, in spite of his silent and brooding mood, could establish a link with Mohini's way of life. A mutual understanding is thus brought between them.

Music for Mohini is however an innovative and successful novel portraying the contrasting values of the old and the new which are in continuous conflict with each other. The novel focuses on certain sociological Indian way of life and suggests the path in which we have to travel in order to achieve harmony and peace in our society. The theme of harmonisation and reconciliation prevails in the novel. It is very much a social novel and the need for social change for a better society is highly reflected in the novel.

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