

The Short Stories Of Bhabani Bhattacharya: A Critical Study

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Abstract

The present research paper tries to analyse Bhabani Bhattacharya's short stories in order to draw a conclusion about his technique and potential as a short story writer. Bhabani Bhattacharya is a renowned novelist who has also written some short stories. But, considering the volume of his overall writings, one thing is clear that he did not take much interest in this form of writing. Unlike his novels, where his primary focus is on significant and serious social issues, Bhattacharya is usually at ease and can be seen enjoying narrating his short stories. He focuses on a single protagonist and, to the greatest extent possible, limits himself to one situation.

Keywords: characterization, narrative technique, satire, psychological portrayal, storytelling

Although it is somewhat unfair to compare the short stories written by Bhabani Bhattacharya with the short stories of many famous writers like Anton Chekhov, Somerset Maugham or O. Henry, at least some of his short stories, if not all of them, are certainly close to the stories of Indian greats like R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao or Mulk Raj Anand. He has certainly written some fascinating stories that captivate the readers. However, since Bhabani Bhattacharya did not write enough number of short stories, it would be out of place to compare his capability as a short story writer with R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao or Mulk Raj Anand.

Typical of Bhabani Bhattacharya, the material in his short stories is primarily rural and seldom urban. Like O. Henry, he adheres to the conventional notion of a short story and use narrative language and a narrative plot to advance the storyline so that readers will unconsciously deduce the story's end as they read it. However, the fact often differs from the ending predicted by the readers, leaving them feeling taken aback. A sustained suspense can be felt throughout his stories. Although it cannot be termed as a dramatic suspense in its true sense, a momentum is built up gradually from the start to the finish.

He has to credit only one collection of short stories titled *Steel Hawk and Other Stories*. It was published in 1968 and contains fifteen stories. Interestingly, there are four stories written by him which were published in various journal but for some reason are not included in this collection. These stories are ‘The Crocodile Pool’, ‘Hawkers’, ‘A Palmful of Figs’ and ‘The Baleful Planet’. While it is difficult to classify the fifteen stories into distinct categories, they can typically be divided into two main sets: serious and non-serious. Out of the fifteen stories in the collection, six belong to the serious group and nine to non-serious.

‘Glory at Twilight’, ‘Pictures in the Fire’, ‘Mere Monkeys’, ‘A Moment of Eternity’, ‘The Acrobats’ and ‘She, Born of Light’ are the six stories that belong to the serious category. ‘Glory at Twilight’ revolves round Satyajit. He, till recently, was a prosperous man finds himself shorn of his wealth, status and peace of mind at one stroke of destiny. Following the catastrophe, he travels to his village to attend his uncle Srinath's daughter's wedding, where he is greeted with great joy by the locals, who view him as a millionaire. Unaware of Satyajit's downfall, Srinath asks for a sizable sum of money to be given as a dowry for his daughter's wedding. Satyajit, who is ashamed and unable to repay, borrows money from a moneylender and mortgages his house—the only remaining property in his name—in exchange. When Srinath's house sparkles with joy due to Satyajit's sacrifice, Satyajit asks himself, ‘What now?’ In this sense, Satyajit glows in grandeur at the moment of his demise, much like the sun does at twilight.

‘Pictures in the Fire’ is a story of a man who publishes his writings under his wife’s name, Josephine Brown. The narrator, who happens to be writer himself, meets the real author—Henry Brown. Initially Henry is happy because he believes he has created her. But soon he starts to feel resentful and envious of her as she achieves fame and even starts to like her new persona. The fame of his wife is too much for a man's weak ego to handle. Henry blames the entire female race because he cannot handle her recognition. Thus in this story, Bhattacharya has depicted the disparity in the mental attributes of the human genders. While a woman is delighted to be married to a famous man, a man's pride is crushed when he finds that his wife is getting more importance than him.

‘Mere Monkeys’ is a heart-breaking tale of a mother monkey. Given that they are our ancestors, monkeys and humans share many of the same basic instincts, including love, hatred, anger, and revenge is what the writer tries to convey through this short story. A huge male monkey tosses the mother monkey’s baby in the air and kills it. The narrator is surprised

to see the mother monkey and the brute that killed its baby together with an 'intimate air of friends' the next day. He is disgusted with the mother monkey. But to his astonishment, it was just a trap by the mother monkey who drags the brute into the well and keeps dragging the brute underwater until it drowns the brute, losing its own life in the process.

'A Moment of Eternity' is another heart-breaking tale that depicts the suffering and pain that a mother's soul endures. It is story of a mother who tries to commit suicide after killing her twins. She is tried for her children's murder and attempted suicide and is sentenced to four years of hard labour in prison. Despite being a villain mother in the story, readers nevertheless feel pity for her as the story unfolds to the readers her wretched life that led her to take such step. She prays for madness and wants to die but is destined to stay alive and sane under the heavy burden of deed.

'The Acrobats' is a psychological portrayal of the relationship between a father and his motherless son. For their livelihood, the family is traditionally involved in the profession of performing acrobatics. The boy is very close to the father as he is motherless. The father is drawn to a young servant woman who is constantly staring at him in the guise of babysitting while they exhibit their acrobatic skills. The youngster realizes their romantic glance exchange when the father smiles at the young woman one day when the acrobatic performance is underway. His heart aches unimaginably because he fears that his father will reject him by picking the woman over him. He loses his balance and lands on the stone pavement, breaking his bones and skull. The son is ready to sacrifice anything in this world for the love of his father. However, it is not until the son breaks his limbs that the father finally understands this.

'She, Born of Light' is a narrative with philosophical overtones. It explores the depths of human minds. The love-triangle starts with Suta, a young rural girl, meeting a painter named Dhruva in one of the Ajanta Caves. He reveals his desire to make a picture of hers. He falls in love with her and makes amorous advances towards her in the process. Stunned and horrified by his unexpected behaviour, she decides to leave him, but she subsequently has second thoughts and longs for him. However, she is dejected by the coolness of the painter and returns to Nakul, her once rejected lover.

In his non-serious category stories, Bhattacharya simply presents a situation or character and leads readers to an interesting climax. The first story from this category, 'Public Figure' is a satire on man's hunger for publicity and exposes the means people employ for

gaining publicity. The protagonist announces, against the wish of his daughter and wife, that his daughter is going to donate her jewellery to a fund. His daughter submits to his wish and donates her jewellery along. But he is disillusioned when his daughter's donation gets almost no publicity. He is angry that despite losing jewellery and necklace worth thousands of rupees, he could not publicise it, as he would have liked it.

'My Brave Great-Uncle' is a more of a character-sketch than a story. It is about a fearful old man who makes up stories about ghosts to cover up his fearfulness. The old man is narrator's uncle who claims to ward off ghosts but runs away when asked to sit with the corpse of a dead priest at night. 'Lattu Ram's Adventure' is a comic story in which Lattu Ram, a boy of twelve, finds a lost boy in a fair. He decides to enjoy the thrill of being a kidnapper in this situation by taking the boy along with him. But he could not enjoy it for long as the boy slips from him and goes home. 'Names are not Labels' is a story of an old man who is not happy with the act of changing the name of his bus to a mere label. The fine and witty statement "Names have a spiritual value. They are not just labels" serves as the crux for the entire plot.

'Just Coincidence?' is a short but captivating story. There is a gunshot in a train going to Delhi from Nagpur. Though no one is hurt, the window-glass in compartment in which the narrator, his wife and a forest officer are travelling is shattered. The narrator, his wife and a forest officer had their own versions about the gunshot. Out of the three, the narrator's version is the most startling. He claims that he was reading a novel in which a character shoots a bullet exactly at time of this gunshot and they all wonder if it was just a coincidence. In 'Pilgrims in Uniform' Bhargava, a priest takes rural people all clad in saffron to Puri. After hearing the priest's philosophical discourses, a thief undergoes a transformation. 'The Faltering Pendulum' is a blend of comedy and tragedy. The story that seems to be a tragedy throughout the action ends on a happy note as the pendulum of the protagonist's life swings again. 'The Quack' is a humorous story of a man who deceives people by saying that his medications can treat a variety of illnesses. Though the patients can be cured at a low cost, he drains their money by charging them exorbitantly. Bhattacharya employs sarcastic humour in this in contrast to the hilarious wit of R. K. Narayan.

The collection is named after the story 'Steel Hawk', which is strangely the last story in the collection. It is a story about a villager who goes to see an aeroplane, which has landed a few miles from his village. Bhattacharya has fittingly coined the term 'Steel Hawk' to

describe the aircraft. The story is a portrayal of an exciting experience of the villager. The aeroplane represents modernity and industrialisation. And the villagers eagerly greeting the coming of an aeroplane India's embrace of modernity and industrialisation. Overall, Bhattacharya has written some very fascinating stories proving his potential as a fine short story writer. He has followed the traditional method of storytelling. Both his serious and non-serious stories are a blend of events, character-sketches as well as psychological portrayals.

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