

Women's Participation in Indian Nationalist Movement: An Assessment through Bhabani Bhattacharya's *A Goddess Named Gold*

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Abstract

*This research paper analyses the Indian nationalistic freedom movement in Bhabani Bhattacharya's A Goddess Named Gold and the role of women in Indian freedom struggle. In the novel *A Goddess Named Gold*, Bhattacharya brings women activists into focus of his novel. In the previous novels, the role of freedom activists goes to men like Rahoul and Prokash in *So Many Hungers!*, Jayadev and Harindra in *Music for Mohini* and Bitten in *He Who Rides a Tiger*. Yes all the girls characters Kajoli, Mohini and Chandra Lekha show the embers of this spirit of struggle for the freedom. Meera, the protagonist of the novel A Goddess Named Gold has spirit for patriotism and leadership. In this novel, when a man is bitten by a Cobra, Meera sucks the poisoned-blood with her mouth and saves the life of that man. Even before the demonstration against the Seth takes place Nago, the only son of the Seth and Lakshmi falls into a well, while flying a kite. No man is visible for help. Other women are confused but Meera acts spontaneously. With the help of other women, she rescues the boy in time.*

Keywords: *Bhabani Bhattacharya, nationalism, patriotism, freedom struggle, economic freedom*

Parable, fable or a fairy tale, *A Goddess Named Gold* (1960) apparently speaks directly to the people of many cultures, and many levels of sophistication for it has been widely translated into other languages bringing the book to the readers in such diverse lands as Russia, China, Israel and France. Commenting upon the novel in *Swarajya*, Prema Nand Kumar opens her review by saying that the novel stands out with a purpose, sustained by high seriousness and alive with symbolism. She, then, refers to the response of India to independence. She says:

The ‘amulet’ is the gift of freedom which Gandhiji and the band of brave warriors, who had stood with him in fair and foul weather alike, have made to us. But what are we making of this ‘freedom?’ We have idealists like Meera among us, but there are Seths, too, there are ever ready bureaucrats (the Bulaki Raos) who are willing to translate the whims of Idealists.... Where are acts of faith in all embracing statism? Where are the ‘acts of Kindness’ in a permit license-quota ridden regime? We need faith in ourselves..., in short, to hearken to the minstrel--grandfather’s words.... ‘Remember friends, all this cannot be cheaply won....’(p.4)[1].

The subject matter of the novel is concept of freedom and faith. The novelist emphasizes on the maintaining freedom through self-reliance and faith in country prospect. Dorothy Blair Shimer rightly said that the main theme “is the people’s preparation for nationhood” (p. 67)[2].

In this novel, Bhabani Bhattacharya deals with the theme of economic freedom of hungry masses and warns against the evils of profiteering which, if not completely eradicated may defeat the very purpose of freedom and lead to many more problems. With the freedom insight people have to work with solidarity and faith to ameliorate their lot and make their country prosperous. They have also to be on their guard against the greedy rich men who may exploit freedom for their selfish ends. Atmaram, the holy minstrel, remarks with foresight: “Freedom is the beginning of the road, where there was no road. But the new road swarms with robbers” (p. 110) [3].

The novel is symbolic and allegorical. The novelist throughout the novel used two masterpiece techniques to narrate the story. Even the title of the novel is also symbolical and allegorical. Srivastava (1982) interprets this novel in the following words: “At the levels of values and ideas, the title of the novel itself is highly symbolic.... it hints at the identification of gold and goddess— wealth and worship on the one hand, and on the other the conflict between the ideas of the Seth and Meera— the former being the very embodiment of capitalism and the latter, the true emancipator” (p. 151)[4].

The novel opens exactly a hundred days before 15th August, 1947. The scene is a village called Sonamitti. Readers are introduced to a group of six women of the village who call themselves the ‘Cowhouse Five’ because their daily meetings take place in the unused Cowshed in the house of one of them, Lakshmi. The women are of different age, and represent different levels of rural society. A common bond knits them together. They are all ardent nationalists and have been in jail for participation in Quit India Movement.

Meera, the protagonist, is the youngest of the Cowhouse Five. She is a girl of sixteen, living with her grandmother famous for her patriotism and leadership. Meera is an extraordinary gifted girl. She was just eleven at the time of Quit India Movement. But with her grandmother, she participated in the

demonstrations against government and went to jail. Meera suggests that the women of the village should join together, organize a protest march to the Seth's shop and demand that he should sell a hundred saris at fair price. Another woman suggests that if the Seth does not relent, they should threaten to strip themselves naked and march through the streets in order to rouse his conscience. These suggestions are accepted by the group. It is quite apparent that "the material that the novelist uses here is based on incidents connected with the struggle for independence. The mood of the women and their way of thinking truly reflect the temper and spirit of India immediately before independence" (p. 88) [5].

Before the Quit India Movement, Lakshmi had been aloof from the village. She is rich man's wife but in prison she becomes their true friend and sister. During those four weeks Lakshmi remembers, she had fitted herself into her right place in life. Her cowshed is the meeting place for an hour or two at mid-day. Now with all the women of the village, denied cloth, she is ready at last to fight for it. They, who had stood their ground before the muskets of Red Turbans and flung their battle cry at fury creased faces, could no longer be overpowered by the trader. They have to lead. The village constable Hoosiar Singh tries to stop them,

'Have you a permit for the procession?' 'What permit?' the women retorted hotly. 'It is a crime to walk the village road? We must fly in the air like birds or crawl in the fields like lizards? This is your father-in-law's property, this road and the others?'

'The old tale is to be retold!' The constable.... gave a slow nod of comprehension. 'The British Lion is to be tickled again....'

'The Lion? Tail between his legs he is about to leap across the oceans to his homeland. Our freedom is only ahundred days ahead. Where do you live? Do you hear nothing?'(p.27)[3].

The procession and the slogan shouting have no effect on the Seth. Even Meera's threat to strip herself does not intimidate him, but when his own wife, Lakshmi begins to divert herself of her sari, he relents and the saris are sold. The women have won the battle of saris. The Seth curses himself for his softness, but the novelist makes us understand that he has acted not under fear, but out of foresightedness. He has decided to contest the election to the District Board, which is to come off as soon as the country is free and he, naturally, wants to win the goodwill of the people of the villages. The Seth is also clear in his mind as to what he is to do as a member of the District Board. His sole aim is to get power and influence as to make money. The women have given him a useful idea.

An important character now appears on the scene. He is Meera's grandfather. He is a wandering singer who visits his family and village only occasionally for a brief stay. He comes back after three years wandering the countryside, singing for the people the songs of India's great past, her demanding present

and her challenging future. Meera's grandfather tells her of his role in life, we can hear Bhattacharya enunciating his own philosophy of the function of the poet in society:

He has to be above our petty battles. A song-maker must not live only for himself or his kith and kin. He has to carry a flame in his hand, passing it from age to age. Let him stumble and the flame will falter.... (Meera realizes that) He belonged not to her, not to Grandma, but to all the people; or else he would not be a true minstrel... (pp.60-61)[3].

The Minstrel is an unusual character and he plays a vital role in this novel which deals with India's freedom. It may very well be that he is a veiled representation of the father of the Nation, a homeless wanderer at home with large crowds, a man among them but deified by a grateful and admiring people. "There is no novel of Bhattacharya which does not contain a reference to the freedom struggle and Mahatma Gandhi" (p. 90)[5]. Although the Minstrel remains above the 'petty battles' of the village during his three days visit, he alerts Meera, and through her, the Cowhouse Five, to the responsibilities of citizenship in an independent nation. He also ultimately contributes the elements about which will coalesce the forces of selfishness and greed. He reminds at first to Meera and Lakshmi that it is the wish of the father of nation to wipe the tears from every eye.

For a time, the Cowhouse Five promote Meera's grandmother an opposition candidate for the election to the District Board. Later, they turn to the young Meera herself. Having been established as intelligent and energetic prime movers in the life of Sonamitti, the introduction of women as likely candidates for office in popular elections is readily accepted by the reader as by the villagers perhaps so well indeed that there is some disappointment when the election swings in another direction at the conclusion of the action. Nevertheless, the women of the village remain throughout, the strongest motivating forces in all aspects of village life.

The selfishness and greed epitomized in the character of the Seth, are sublimated in the general life of Sonamitti until the Minstrel performs an act that brings them to the surface where they can be exorcized. Cleansed, the village will be prepared to meet the dawn of a new India. Before leaving the village, after an evening, singing some of the episodes of great Ramayana, the Minstrel in spite of having promised to the Seth, ties to Meera's arm a *taveez*, a magic amulet. As he does so he speaks these words:

Wearing it on your person, you will do an act of kindness. Real kindness. Then all copper on your body will turn to gold.... An act of real kindness--that is the key, remember (p.80)[3].

Miraculously, the amulet appears to assert its power immediately, for the gold washed copper ring Meera has been wearing is found to have been changed to pure gold. Only much later it is revealed that the Minstrel does a Puck like act. He bids Lakshmi to replace the copper ring of Meera by gold when

she is asleep. Lakshmi does the same and goes to her father's for a few weeks' stay. The Seth's fertile brain begins to work, and he formulates a plan to exploit Meera's possession of the amulet. He convinces her that a laudable objective like making gold out of copper can be achieved only with powerful backing from someone like him. Numberless occasions are invented by the novelist's imagination into the mind of the Seth for the impulsive kindness to flow from the bosom of Meera.

When miracle is not repeated, The Seth manoeuvres to create situations to make Meera perform the acts of kindness. The people are thrown out of their lands and made homeless, children are threatened to be dropped into wells so that she may have a chance of helping them out and display her kindness. Meera, the innocent as well as intelligent girl, is the true granddaughter of the Minstrel. Whether, it be election or the gold, she never thinks of herself but for the general good of the people. Two traders in the village, the Halwai and the Seth, have the money power, and they adore it and put it to selfish use. The Halwai has great faith in money power, believing heat in money. But Meera holds the opposite view. To her gold is as good as clay, as is suggested by the name of the village Sonamitti, and money is significant only that it relieves the needs of people. Earning money is Seth's life breath, an end in itself. But for Meera it is a means of new beginning. She wants Sonamitti a bright-jewel. The gold which becomes a mania for the Seth, a mystical and magical charm for the greedy and materialistic people, is useful for relieving the material hardships of the people in the eyes of Meera. Gold is the symbol of freedom from the people like the Seth. It can help a poor villager to have a thatch on the hut walls. It is an escape from hunger including the religious wish of the old people. In fact, influenced by the words of Mahatma Gandhi, she wants to wipe the tear from every eye. "Thus Meera's idealism, inspired by Gandhism, is wedded to materialism, the Gold goddess (p.56)[6].

The village considers Meera a pawn in the hands of the Seth and she is alienated by them. Meera, not knowing the trick played by her grandfather, has unflinching faith in the prophecy made by him and goes on playing according to the stupid schemes of the Seth. When Grandma and other women of the village take out a procession to canvass for their own candidate against the Seth for District Board Election, Meera remains isolated from them. She is so much possessed by her faith in the transforming power of the amulet that she does not respond ever to the same advice of Sohanlal,

Listen Meera.... You cannot have gold enough to save all India.... It is the fight with the Seth that will save India, not a miracle, not armsful of gold. You did have your share in the fight, a big share (p.181)[3].

As the miseries of the people increase, Meera the beloved of the village, comes to be treated as its scourge, an evil goddess of wealth whose effigy they plan to burn. Lakshmi comes back, takes Sohanlal into her confidence and thwarts all the plans of greedy villagers. Finally, Meera tears the amulet from her

arm and casts it into river when she comes to realize that no good can come from putting kindness on sale.

The holy Minstrel returns to the village in time to clear the misunderstanding. He disillusiones Meera by making her visualize the ghastly spectacle of Sonamitti if its people come to possess the gold through miracle. How they turn idle and lazy without any hard-work to do to earn their livelihood, and how they quarrel and compete with each other to possess more and more of gold. Terrified with this view of her village of gold turning into hell, Meera throws the amulet into river. Towards the end of the novel, the Minstrel explains the symbolism of *taveez*. The village is celebrating Independence Day and people assemble under a banyan tree. The old man tells them that the freedom that they celebrate is the real touchstone. It belongs to everyone of them but will yield results and transmute copper into gold only if acts of faith are performed. The acts of faith can be defined as hard labour and unity for the mass welfare. Miracle can be performed if they all hold themselves in readiness:

Remember, friends, all this cannot be cheaply won. The miracle will not drop upon us. It is we who have to create it with love and with sweat. Freedom is the means to that end (p.278)[3].

The novel also lays an emphasis on the idea that freedom is not merely political freedom, or economic freedom but freedom of the mind. An eminent critic, Dr. Ram Sewak Singh, an eminent critic pointedly states:

Freedom meant to some liberty to indulge in licentious activities, to some profiteering, and to some respite from toil, an escape into inactivity. In the true sense freedom meant as Jawaharlal Nehru had said on August 15, 1947 freedom from ignorance, superstition and poverty; but the people of Sonamitti misunderstood it and brought them to despair. Atmaram the minstrel had foreseen it and warned them against it; Freedom is the beginning of the road where there is no road. But the new road swarms with robbers [7].

The Minstrel refers to Gandhiji's concept of freedom as a concept of mind. Bhattacharya also uses a phrase that he is very fond of and uses again and again in his work, 'the freedom to free.' Meera's throwing away of the *taveez* into river is interpreted by herself as a sign that she had won the freedom to be free. It is precisely this freedom to be free that Kajoli and Kalo attain into earlier novels.

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