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The New And Old Values Of Life In Bhabani Bhattacharya's Novel Music For Mohini

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Received-11.11.2022, Revised-17.11.2022, Accepted-24.11.2022 E-mail: aaryavart2013@gmail.com

Abstract: *In Music for Mohini, Bhabani Bhattacharya has done a detailed study of the old and the new values of life in Indian society. There are two sets of characters: first, those who uphold the old, established values of the past and secondly, those who plead for a change and deviation from the dead past in favour of the new and unconventional value-pattern that suits the modern age. Mohini also works for bringing about a fusion of the old and the new values in the lives of the womenfolk of Behula. Both Mohini and her mother-in-law representing the modern and the traditional values respectively, begin to understand each other better and live amicably. The synthesis of the old and the new values is also evident in the story of Harindra's family. Jayadev's is thus message of synthesis between the old and the new values.*

Key Words: New and Old Values, Society, Conflict, Superstition, respectively, understand, amicably.

In *Music for Mohini*, Bhabani Bhattacharya has done a detailed study of the old and the new values of life in Indian society. The novel deals with Indian society which is in the melting-pot because of various conflicting ideologies, each being championed by one group or another. Here, Bhattacharya puts forward the view that a reconciliation between the contrary ideals and values-modern and traditional-can lead to a happy and harmonious life. In order to bring out the virtues of moderation and integration, and to emphasize his major theme of blending the modern and the conventional, the novelist uses the dialectical method of contrast in depicting his characters.

There are two sets of characters: first, those who uphold the old, established values of the past and secondly, those who plead for a change and deviation from the dead past in favour of the new and unconventional value-pattern that suits the modern age. The novelist juxtaposes different antagonistic characters in order to bring out their ideological conflict, and then finally leads them towards a reconciliation so as to create a harmony in life.

In the earlier part of the novel, as the story unfolds itself at Mohini's parental home, her father, the Professor, is shown in conflict with Old Mother Mohini's father is a highly educated and modern minded man. He is inspired by the norms and fashions of the modern times. He gets his daughter, Mohini, admitted to a Christian convent school, and also allows her to become a radio singer. He does not see any harm in Mohini's songs being recorded and sold in open market. But his mother-Old Mother-is very much opposed to this wide publicity of his granddaughter. She is above seventy, conservative and rigid in outlook. She has a blind faith in orthodoxy and superstition, and is a staunch supporter of the old and established moral values.

The old lady does not like her son's ideas which appear odd to her. When he does not pay heed to her, she threatens to renounce the world. The situation threatens to turn inflammable, but the Professor handles it tactfully. Though there is a truce for the time being, but the real crisis occurs on the question of Mohini's marriage. As the Professor is a man of modern ideas, he naturally wants to marry his daughter to an educated, urban bread and cultured boy. He rejects outright two proposals because the former party demanded a heavy dowry and the latter one comprises the uncultured lot who examine Mohini physically as if she were an article for sale in an auction. Then there arrives a third party. This time the prospective groom comes with his friends. All of them are bright young men, good-mannered, gracious and courteous. Having seen the girl, they approve her. The Professor appreciates the boy wholeheartedly, and agrees to marry Mohini to him. But Old Mother does not like the match at all. There ensues a conflict in the family. Bhattacharya describes the discord as follows:

"His voice was joyous and proud. "Mother, we've found the right match for our girl. Look up the



almanac for an auspicious day."

Old mother was silent for a time, her face withdrawn and grave.

"Why, surely, you approve-"

"No, childling," She shook her head with quite decision. "He is not the right sort for our Mohini. He and his friends have no respect for elders. They smoked cigarettes in your presence, didn't they?"

...No, our girl has not been trained up in their un-Indian way, even if she has read at a Christian convent school. She will be a misfit in that fast circle."

"But, Mother, the groom-"

"The groom belongs to his circle. He has his roots in that soil. They are all alike. No tradition, no true culture. Apes of Westernism!"

His patience gave way. His face darkened. "Let our girls remain unwed," he cried harshly, "rather than be sacrificed to your antiquated outlook."

Old Mother's face was a picture of rage. Her eyelids flickered and her gentle mouth stiffened:

"send me away to the Holy City. I won't have no mouthful of your food, or let water pass my lips."

As a consequence of this difference in outlook the issue of marriage is left unsettled, and Mohini remains unwed. The differences between the mother and the son are, however, soon after resolved when Jayadev appears on the scene and is found to be the most suitable groom for Mohini. He is accepted not only by the Professor and Old Mother, but also by Mohini herself as he combines in him the traditional as well as the modern values in being both **"a great scholar and master of Behula village."**

The Professor also synthesizes the old and the modern values in his character. That is why he often yields to Old Mother's outdated notions and somewhat silly actions. Out of his traditional love for his mother, he cannot "bear thought of Old Mother going away" and thinks: "Better let her have her own way in the house." He knows full well that the path of compromise is the better one, and that one cannot always do without the old values of life. In order to live happily with the old lady he even lets her tie an amulet to his neck-chain. When with the old lady's help, Mohini's marriage is settled with Jayadev, the Professor gratefully acknowledges:

"The old customs and conventions are not too unsound," he said. For once the son, out of his heart's fullness, graciously conceded to his mother's wisdom. "They seem to suit our mental climate."

Similarly, Old Mother is also well aware of the limits of her powers. She, too, does not rigidly adhere to her outdated and conservative ideas always. As soon as she sees the tension mounting in the family, she realizes the danger and immediately relents in her attitude to accommodate the new beliefs and practices. In most of the matters, however, she tries to have her own way. Despite all her sour defeats over Mohini, Old Mother feels content when her son agrees to have a charm tied to her neck-chain:

"Old Mother took one good look at the slim gold chain on his neck with its pendant amulet. He mocked many of the old beliefs, but the amulet was there to shield him from the Evil Eye. He had firmly refused to wear it until she had wielded that weapon of hers, "Send me away to the Holy City." It was, indeed, one of her major triumphs."

Even the Old Mother is not very rigid in her attitude towards modern values. The novelist observes that "Old Mother had compromised with modernity" and was "of the old and of the new." This old lady upholds old values and orthodox ways only as a habit, otherwise she is often ready to compromise with the spirit of the new times. Bringing this fact to light, Bhattacharya remarks:

"Every Sunday evening the family went to the cinema, often an Indian film, though Old Mother, with all her orthodox heart, enjoyed English pictures as well- the "shadow-show" was to her mind a wonder of wonders, the supreme achievement of the Western people."



Thus the novelist synthesizes the old values with the new ones in the persons of the Professor and the Old Mother, showing that **"on many points of orthodox living they had reached a fair adjustment."**

Mohini is happily married to Jayadev and comes to Behula as the new mistress of the Big House. Here she again encounters the old values personified in her mother-in-law. 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 relayed in public. She is a beautiful girl who likes all the good things of life. She judges the world around her in terms of aesthetic values. Her heart is full of love for her husband, and she wants to be admired and loved by him in turn.

Jayadev, who is a visionary and an idealist, expects his wife to be different from an ordinary young woman with basic physical needs and requirements. He sees her as "Gargi" or "Maitreyi," "no household drudge, nor decorative being, but an intellectual, striding besides man in a tireless quest for knowledge." Though frustrated in her ambition to lead glamorous life, Mohini does not give vent to her dissatisfaction. She is resilient by nature and soon overcomes her dejection. Though aware of her limitation, she endeavors to rise to the expectation of her husband, and even starts taking lessons from him in Sanskrit. Though she is fatigued with these "tiresome" lessons, and has to abandon them, she is not disheartened. She knows that her married life can be peaceful and meaningful only if she adjusts herself to the wishes of her husband, shares his ideals and renders him positive help in his programme of social reconstruction. 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 shows them a glimpse of the modern times.

Mohini also works for bringing about a fusion of the old and the new values in the lives of the womenfolk of Behula. The village women identify the young mistress of the Big House with themselves. They exclaim:

"Their own, 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!"

By identifying herself with the women of the village, she brings the Big House closer to the ordinary houses of Behula. Mohini thus tries to prove worthy of her husband and establishes deep communion with him. Bhattacharya describes this communion by making Jayadev sit on the very tree-perch on which Mohini used to sit daily. It is a symbolic act, suggesting a union of beings.

At first Mohini finds life at the Big House almost unbearable. As she has been brought up in an altogether different type of environment, she has to struggle hard "to retouch her mental values, readjust her expectations" before she is able to accommodate herself comfortably at Behula. She is ridiculed by the women of Behula for her clothes. Her mother-in-law is stern and exacting and puts a number of restraints upon the young girl. Mohini's wearing of a gay-coloured sari, as it becomes a new bride, irritates her. She likes to see Mohini all covered by a white cotton sheet instead of a mill-made sari. The Mother tells her that modern songs make no sense and that she should sing only religious songs. Again she objects to her son's bride climbing a tree perch as it is a very unbecoming thing for the young mistress of the Big House. She does not like Mohini wearing the glass and lac bangles instead of those made of pure gold. Thus "there was no end to prohibitions" and restrains on Mohini. Subdued by these prohibitions, Mohini strives hard to adjust to the old ways and modes of life in the rural society and in this process she, too, changes unawares. Bhattacharya affirms:

"Yes, the young mistress of the Big House took deeper colour from her new life everyday. Slowly she fitted herself to the rural design. Her sprightliness, her quick girlish laugh, she easily subdued. The mother was a ruthless teacher."

Owing to her mother-in-law's sternness and old world spirit, Mohini sometimes feels sore about her behaviour, but with the passage of time she begins to realize that the Mother is not completely devoid of the basic qualities: compassion and sacrifice. She, therefore, overcomes initial hurdles and develops a great love and sympathy for the old lady:



"Yet, 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."

The struggle between the contrasting values that is so intense and fierce in the beginning becomes gradually less and less severe, and resolves finally into a happy compromise. Both Mohini and her mother-in-law representing the modern and the traditional values respectively, begin to understand each other better and live amicably.

The Mother also realizes that it is the age of the young men and women with their new ideals and aspirations, and hence she, too, changes. She starts molding her ideas so as to cope with the requirements of the new age. She is reconciled to her son and Mohini as soon as she comes to know from Harindra of Mohini's pregnancy. Both the old and the young mistresses of the Big House thus reach at the perfect harmony with each other. Commenting on their adjustment, Bhattacharya remarks:

"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 workaday life, was a covering shell."

It is not that Bhattacharya always makes his younger characters submit before the aged ones in his bid to present the mutual adjustment. He makes his old characters also realize in their turn genuine demands of new age. Jayadev's mother too begins to feel that her son is right and justified in his ideas and actions, and that the values to which she rigidly adheres count no more in the modern times. The only possible way to end all discord in life seems to her in a compromise between her old beliefs and the new values of life upheld by her son and daughter-in-law. She and Jayadev have previously been in constant conflict with each other because of their contrasting ideas and outlooks. She has been an ardent supporter and defender of the family traditions, whereas Jayadev has a liberal outlook. He knows that the conflict between him and his mother is an inevitable and difficult one as it is not a clash of personalities, but that of values, of tradition and modernity.

Subsequently, this conflict turns serious when the mother attempts to make Mohini offer her heart's blood to the Virgin Goddess. Jayadev, who comes to know of the incident in time, 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" and that the whole village looks towards the people of the Big House for a proper way of living. The infuriated mother, too, in her turn, scolds him that he is degenerate and she is ashamed to have him as her son. She further says: "now your mind. Heresy holds you. Old beliefs old morals, old values mean nothing to you." Jayadev makes it clear to her that there are "values beyond your grasp, since always try to reach them with your reason, never with your feelings. Life has punished you... Blind belief shapes your thinking; blind belief cannot make a sentiment." Thus there is a fierce ideological tussle between the mother and the son. But soon the mother realizes that her son's path is the right one:

"For the first time, she could see her son clearly. His ideas, his point of view, molded by the new spirit in the land, were different from hers and opposed to them, but they were, nonetheless, true ideals."

This realization or the "moment of insight" brings the mother nearer to Jayadev, and there prevails an atmosphere of cordiality and mutual understanding in the Big House. The discord between the mother and the son, the mother-in-law, and the daughter-in-law, and the husband and the wife ends. Bhattacharya concludes:

"At last, 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-purpose for a while. Her life was music-the guest for every woman, her deepest need."

The synthesis of the old and the new values is also evident in the story of Harindra's family. Harindra's father, the old Kaviraj, has been practicing the ancient Indian Ayurvedic system of medicine for over forty years. He considers this medical system very efficacious as a cure for all sorts of diseases. But his son, Harindra, is a full-



fledged surgeon, educated and trained in a Western-style medical college. Often he argues with his father that his rigid ideas about the supremacy of the Ayurvedic medical system over all the others are false and funny. He pleads with the old man that modern medicines are more efficacious in curing diseases.

But his father is furious with rage because "here was a challenge to the indigenous system of Ayurveda, the system that had prevailed for the millennium, To think that his son should be a carrier of the alien contamination:... What madness had come upon him that he had sent his son town and let him study at a medical school where they cut up live rats and dissected corpses."

The old man openly ridicules his son and his ideas. However, later he recognizes the efficacy of the modern Allopathic medical system when he fails to cure his ailing wife. The old man has been trying Ayurvedic medicines on the patient for quite a few days, never allowing his son to treat her with the western medicines. But when her condition deteriorates more and more, and all hopes of her survival are lost, he yields to Harindra's wishes to treat her. The miracle happens and the mother's life is saved. The old man lives happily with his wife and son, quite reconciled to the modern values and systems.

Jayadev, the chief protagonist in the novel, believes in the integration of the traditional and the modern values. He is both a "great scholar and master of Behula village." As a "scholar" he is sensitive to modern liberal and progressive ideas, while as the master of the Big House he symbolizes the old traditions in his personality, though rooted in the past, he does not lose sight of his vision of the new dawn:

"In some ways he was one with his ancestors, those strange men in ageing oil paint. Yet he was unbowed, unfettered by his inheritance."

Jayadev embodies in his character the best of the Indian and the Western values. He is deeply devoted to the task of creating a harmony between the Oriental and the Occidental value-pattern. "It was his dream to reorientate the values and patterns of Hindu life."

Jayadev is well-versed in the old Indian culture, but his desire is to extract the essence of our tradition, and blend it with the spirit of our own times. He has a keen desire to build up a new society based on the integration of the best elements of all thoughts and beliefs in India:

"Jayadev would break the crust of the vulgarity and reveal ancient thought in its true splendor. But the new man of his vision, growing to his full stature, was not to be a hollow reincarnation, not a spiritless copy of ancient Hindu man. That were as stupid as Hindu moulded in a western pattern."

He dreams about a fusion of the past with the present. It is his earnest wish to create "a profound union of today with yesterday." Jayadev does not altogether negate the importance of the past in the modern times, but thinks that it is only because of yesterday that today exists.

He wants to reshape the Indian society, but also recognizes the significant role of the ancient lore in the whole process of social reconstruction. He emphasizes:

"Look back that you may look forward. Look to the roots of India in this fateful hour of flowering. Use the buried material of the past to write the new social charter."

Jayadev's is thus message of synthesis between the old and the new values. The Professor, too, sees him as the product of this synthesis and tells Mohini: "He has true legacy of the past, in inner health, a source of graceful living, and to that he has added our modern culture." "There is an autobiographical touch about Jayadev's character." The author and his persona are identical in their attitude to life.

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