

SEEKING SPIRITUALISM- A STUDY OF BHABANI BHATTACHARYA'S NOVEL 'A DREAM IN HAWAII'

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Abstract

Bhabani Bhattacharya, a novelist of great repute writing in English in India, has been a visiting professor in the University of Hawaii, and had delivered a series of public lectures on Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi at Seattle. 'A Dream in Hawaii' conceived and based on his experiences there, delineates the spiritual seeking and cravings of the frustrated and directionless youths of America. The novel also focuses on the different levels and kinds of seeking and the easy assumptions about spiritualism. The sexual permissiveness, over-indulgence in sex, as well as denial of basic physical needs and sex have been portrayed with a keen perceptive eye. The Eastern philosophy and true gurus hold a great promise yet they too need to acknowledge many more truths. A balanced life, synthesis of East and West, the need to remain true to oneself and to find the purpose of one's life are some of the ideas discussed in the novel.

Keywords: Spiritualism, Sexual Permissiveness, Dilemma, Seeking, Reborn, Transformed

Introduction

A deeply committed writer Bhabani Bhattacharya is one of the outstanding novelists of India writing in English at the great epoch of Indian and world history. His interests in the contemporary problems after the newly acquired freedom of the country and the world problems, after the two world wars in a state of transition, could be seen from his novels- 'So many hungers', 'Music for Mohini', 'He who rides a tiger', 'A Goddess named Gold', 'Shadow from Ladakh' and 'A Dream in Hawaii'.

His concerns for socio-cultural, political, economic problems dealing with the themes of hunger, exploitation, caste discrimination, nationalism, East-West encounter, tradition and modernity, aestheticism and asceticism, materialism and spiritualism are in conformity with his view of novel as an expression of social reality. 'A Dream in Hawaii' is based on the novelist's experiences of the island of Hawaii, where he was appointed as a visiting professor in 1971. As a Walter-Ames professor at the University of Washington at Seattle he had delivered a series of public lectures on Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi in 1973. The writing of the novel 'A Dream in Hawaii' was started just after that. Bhattacharya felt very much at home in these islands. Physically, the islands are midway between American continent and the

continent of Asia. Described through a character of the novel, Dr. Swift, "The idea is this. The entire world knows our Hawaii is a tourist's paradise. So, it is correct. But our Hawaii is a multiple image. The unique East-West mix. The strong interculturalism. You cannot find the like of this ethnic spectrum anywhere else on the globe."¹

1

Neeloy Mukherjee, a professor of philosophy, who had achieved great heights in spiritualism and had thousands of followers after his establishment of ashram called Sadhna in Rishikesh, found an American disciple who insisted and got success in getting his acceptance to visit Hawaii to bring spiritual awareness in Americans. Stella, an instructor in religion, specializing in Hinduism, came to study in India, was overwhelmed after meeting him. Stella Gregson's acquaintance and later on deep devotion, admiration and faith on Swami was ignited by an impulsive decision to see him when she watched a large gathering awaiting his arrival on her visit of Delhi, the capital city of India. Stella could not leave Swami after that as she started having great hopes from him for the society of America. She had felt great inner change and balance and felt she too was reborn after her experience. Her strong desire to help countless Americans, who were directionless and restless, made her to invite Swamito America.

A great devotee of Swami Vivekananda, Neeloy Mukherjee, now Swami Yogananda was almost the image of his guru and one has to know Swami Vivekanand if any knowledge about Swami Yogananda was needed. The Swami could not deny the hard-pressed request of this American student and had to leave his abode of Rishikesh for Hawaii. The place was also chosen by Stella and when the Swami asked the reason for choosing the place, her reply was "no better meeting ground of East and West"² and due to her better connection in the University there. Swami, who had felt after his rebirth as yogi, his ties with previous life and attachments were severed, still had to confirm his lingering doubts about one person-Devjani, his former student and a catalyst in his transformation from Neeloy to Swami Yoganand, who lived in Hawaii.

Devjani, was in Honolulu in Hawaii on a research grant and the Swami's reluctance to move to that place was due to his own dilemma. He had been in love with her but she saw in him a great scholar, a philosopher and in a much higher role of a spiritual guru. She had touched the hidden chords that would have remained silent. An inner fury urges the philosopher after that to win his new identity. Swami leads a life of recluse on the solitary foothills of Himalayas and not long after much start coming to him to get initiation and as part of his religious duty he gives them 'diksha'. Some of them completely denounce the world while others retain their worldly pursuits but are transmuted. He sent a brief note to Devjani 'a firefly tries to be a star.' Devjani too wanted to take diksha but was denied by new born Swami as he could not bear to see her in the yellow robe of renunciation.

The struggles to attain the true renunciation for him were still very hard as he could see his attachments to Devjani through his mind. He followed the hard way of traditional purification after every such lapse which showed him his clinging to his previous self. Five days rigorous

fast, followed by ten days and fifteen days, with each succeeding lapse. After three years, he felt he had won the battle and he was truly reborn. He suppressed his urge to send message to Devjani to come for 'diksha' but still he could see in this his desire to hurt her and wondered at himself.

Stella and Jennifer both were motivated to search to find the meaning of their lives due to the acutely felt lostness in American life. Yellow robed sanyasi from east gave them signs of some promise to find the solutions. But Swami Yogananda knew there was no short cut method as he had not the simplistic beliefs of Bhakti Vedanta or the audacity of Maharishi. He knew walking on the path of spiritual transcendence was like going into dark tunnels before getting the light, one can stumble again and again.

The person like Walt Gregson had no less serious questions with the ingrained idea of the righteousness of enjoying sex life in a way one likes. His curiosity to meet the Swami was to know certain answers of the questions that assailed him, "An Eastern sage may have some solutions to offer to come out of the crisis of super-technological society. A dead rat lies somewhere under its brightly carpeted floor, rotting away the stench rising, filling our nostrils."³

Swami's deep roots in ancient Vedas gave the prompt display of the self-defeating nature of sexual permissiveness silencing all such queries. The novelist's concerns for the indulgences in excessive and abnormal sexual practices depicting the sickness in society is shown through the delineation of characters like Walt, Vincent Swift, Sylvia Koo, Frieda and many other such characters. Walt Gregson, a professor of literature, was interested in his study of sexual habits of American women but he was also seeking its correlations with actual life situation in which he himself was the participant. His obsession with abnormal sexual practices made his wife Stella leave him and seek her own spiritual fulfillment. He could live only with a woman like, Sylvia Koo who was capable of sheer animality and could satisfy him. Dr. Vincent Swift, the president of Hawaii Academy, too, finds solace only in sexual narcissism and self release aided by a view of x rated movies. And a woman like, Frieda believes Kamasutra is the new gospel for America.

The novel is about the spiritual quest of Americans basically due to self-surfeiting nature of their overindulgence in materialistic life and permissiveness. On a deeper level it is a kind of treatise on spiritual quest even of those who are certainly on much higher level than others sunk deep in quagmire of materialism.

2

Swami Yogananda's profound knowledge and faith on Vedantic thought interpreted in new light of contemporary world made him go direct to the hearts and minds of audience. Swami's lectures based on the teachings of Vedanta and Geeta 'on action without desire' and many such topics just mesmerized the American youths. The seeking of thousands of followers in Hawaii is symbolic of the great search going on in the youths after all materialistic pursuits have left a great vacuum in the hearts of seekers.

The novel, however, stresses upon the need to see the difference in superficial knowledge of spirituality and a thirst for deep rooted spiritual quest. The yellow robed yogis, the outward rituals like chanting mantras and smearing the body with ash, sitting on a deer skin often show the great promise and hope to Americans towards the religious and spiritual upliftment of Eastern countries like India, but many of such gurus could not give them the knowledge and idea of deeper levels of spiritual experiences. Once the experience of inner change is felt by a dedicated seeker like, Stella, she puts her full heart and support to that experience to be shared by Americans and others in Hawaii.

Dr. Vincent Swift, the president of Hawaii academy, in spite of his faith on Swami Yogananda, who could be instrumental to bring change in the society, had his own commercial plans to make world centre a profit-making organization. But a true yogi like Yogananda, although convinced earlier by his plans, soon could realize his mistake and left Hawaii and frustrated all his dream plans of the highly profitable project. Walt Gregson who had always challenged Yogananda's way of life started realizing his power and need in America. "The modern was giving way to ultra-modern purpose. There was a new dream of youth and Yogananda seemed closer to that dream than he who claimed to be today's America!"⁴

Swami Yoganand, in spite of his tremendous effects on the captivated Americans and the real change he could make people feel who were close to him, was assailed by his own doubts. He had to remain true to himself above all. It was his desire to remain true to himself that compelled him to check his own detachment from his physical needs that he went to watch the sight of "body's bareness" on Waikiki Beach. "Deliverance was never the reward of an escapist. It had to be won under the stressful impact of actualities."⁵

So apart from the seeking of the west the novel focuses on the constant struggles and dilemmas of Yogananda, who in spite of his victories over his previous self of Neeloy's finds himself stumbling many a times in his own honest self introspection. Even in his sleep his making love to Devjani, showed him his own faltering position, filling him with embarrassment and horror. This making love in his dream, gave him doubt about his own spiritual integrity and he felt the need of more efforts to attain his own depths.

Devjani too, was assailed by doubts about her own wish for Yogananda to attain his spiritual heights. Although bemused and gratified to see her wish fulfilled when she saw him in the role she desired to see, she started yearning for his previous self as she became conscious of her own love and attachments to him after his leaving for new life.

So, the novel shows spiritual aspirations of different people at different levels but asserts the strong need and deep seeking of people due to pressures of materialistic pursuits, sexual permissiveness, sexual denial and too much of commercial attitudes.

The beautiful island of Hawaii, with enchanting natural scenery, is chosen for the spiritual experiences of a great yogi like Yogananda. The pleasure resort of the most materialistic kind, however, could give many unexpected experiences and insights during Swami's presence to Stella, Jennifer, Devjani, Walt and Vincent swift. The Swami, who himself wanted to know the truth of his inner being, had to see himself in close proximity of the physicality.

Conclusion

The novel affirms the writer's faith on honest acceptance of life and acceptance of all needs of body and mind without overindulgence. A dream in Hawaii celebrates the fullness of life and balanced attitudes between the excessive attention and total neglect or denial of any kind that brings disturbing consequences. Eastern countries known for the spiritual attainments and western countries for the material achievements need to learn from each other. Bhabani Bhattacharya had expressed similar views in his other novels holding true to his opinion of the writer's task of transforming society through art. Written in 1975 the novel focuses on the growing attractions of Americans at that time towards Indian gurus, fake or true, depicting their inner needs. The novel also focuses on commercial interests of some fake gurus and a deep and true guru who could leave the temptation of every kind at the peak of his success.

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