A Study in Post-Colonial Spirituality in Bhabani Bhattacharya’s

* A Dream in Hawaii

— Ms. K. Nathiya

Abstract

Bhabani Bhattacharya brings out the binary opposition not only in the East – West encounter but also within the East and within the West separately. This multidimensional conflict determines the social and spiritual aspects of the post-colonial life. Transference, displacement, and alienation constitute the post-colonial experience of not only the Indians settled or born abroad, but also of the Indians in India due to the Western impact.

The basic conflict in human nature is presented by Bhattacharya in *A Dream in Hawaii* involving movement between realms. The “movement” may be different from that of the Indians abroad, born or settled there. It is that of the natives like Yogananda experiencing alienation within their own culture due to the cross currents of emotional and spiritual problems.

In *A Dream in Hawaii*, the shifting of scenes from India to America and in flashback from America to India is like displacement in the post-colonial sense. The binaries within the character Yogananda and within the post-colonial Indian culture are pitted against the binaries of the American culture in particular and the Western culture in general.

Post-Colonial writing attempts relocation of the self and retrieval of the native culture from foreign dominance. Whether it is a travelogue of a Western writer of Indian origin or Indian writer aiming to reach out to the Western readership, there is an interaction between the Eastern and Western sensibilities. The degree of cultural amalgamation or conflict depends upon the maturity of the sensibility of the writer. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak refers to “the specific intellectual” and “the universal intellectual”. The question is whether the intellectual - writer of a travelogue, novelist, or philosopher - can rise above the limited sphere of his specific culture and attain the universal level.

The Post-Colonial Indian English writers of fiction have been engaged in this intellectual exploration depicting both the specific Indian culture and the hybridization of Indian culture on account of the Western impact. These culture cross-currents have been vibrant in the post-Independence times, the writers giving literary expression to culture displacement and discontinuity. As Jahan Ramazani says, “post-colonialism is concerned with what has been called ‘the location of culture’.

The “location” may not sometimes be specifically geographical on account of universal values. Cultural reversal and displacement may result in what Spivak calls “the binary
opposition, the Western intellectual’s longing for all that is not west, . . . the so called non-West’s turn towards the West. (Spivak 3)

It will be interesting to see this displacement or transfer of literary sensibility in the writings of Indian writers of fiction in English with special reference to Bhabani Bhattacharya’s *A Dream in Hawaii* (1978). Ever since Indians began writing in English, the East-West Encounter has been a major theme engaging their attention. After India’s independence from British rule, the influence of the British and Western institutions and habits continue to be prevalent.


Bhabani Bhattacharya in *He Who Rides a tiger* (1955) describes the social and religious hypocrisy resulting from the Bengal famine in the post-independence India. Due to hunger and ill-treatment, Kalo avenges on the society by transforming himself into Mangal Adhikari the brahmin and performs a “miracle”: a Shiva linga emerging from the ground. By means of this feat, he plays upon the popular credulity to miracles and reaps dividends.

His daughter Lekha also a victim of society becomes the mother of the sevenfold Bliss and the object of adoration. Bhabani Bhattacharya attacks the superstitions and rituals corrupting the Hindu society. Kalo says: “While men died of hunger wealth grew and wild kindliness dried up religion was more in demand.” (130) It’s only the veneer of religion since the same people would not bother to look at destitute dying. The novelist exposes falsehood in religion through the words of Biten: “Food for the soul is produced and sold like food for stomach, and through the ways of the two trades are different, you pay for both with hard cash. The temple is a market and the priest a dealer. People are always ready to pay well for feeding the inner man.” (43)

The novelist describes people’s belief in the Yogis and mothers. Lekha takes recourse to rituals for slogans to overcome the grief caused by Biten. Referring to Lekha’s touching the forehead of a sick child with her toe and the death of the child, Orvelle Prescott says: “Mr. Bhattacharya deplores the suffering caused by blind acceptance of the caste system, and yet pities
the blind believer.” (5) Whether it is the caste system or hunger or superstition, Bhattacharya exposes the binary attitude concerning religion in the post-colonial India.

In Raja Rao’s *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), the real problem for the central character Rama, consequent upon his sensual involvement with Madeleine and Savitri, is to attain inner harmony. Man, entangled in the web of *Maya*, takes as serpent what is after all a rope. As Rama tells Madeleine, “The Guru brings you the lantern; the road is seen, the long, white road, going with the statutory stars.” (192) The search for the Guru and inner harmony, rendered by Raja Rao in highly complex vedantic and aesthetic terms, can also be seen in the real life experience of the Westerners and the Westernized Indians in the post-colonial times.

Contemporary man, caught in the whirlpool of the dehumanizing life, looks desperately for succour, seeking peace either in drugs or in the proliferating cults. Taking advantage of this situation, self–seeking Mammon-worshippers-Gurus, Maharishis, and Yogis – have launched spiritual movements and established posh “ashrams” to preach instant meditation. As a result of these perversions and ungodly activities, the very meaning of meditation- *dhyana*- as enunciated in the great Hindu scriptures like the Vedas and *Bhagavad Gita* – is lost on the contemporary man. The concept of Guru, enunciated in the Holy Books, has taken on such perverted meaning in the popular understanding the Peter Brent says: “For Indians, particularly those of the middle classes, there are only two directions they can go to prove that they can love, and be loved. One is towards homosexuality, the other towards the Guru - the two not being mutually exclusive.”(8)

Referring to the “Swami” in Indian English fiction, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar says: “ sometime the Swamy or Sadhu has no more than a decorative role; he is there because Western readers look for him in the novels on India.” (10) However, whether it is treated seriously by Raja Rao or in sarcastic terms by Bhattacharya, the Swami motif in Indian English fiction constitutes the binary opposition in the post-colonial Indian English fiction between materialism and spirituality.

In Bhabani Bhattacharya’s *A Dream in Hawaii* (1978), as in Raja Rao’s *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), the quest is that of an academic for spirituality despite his sensual involvements. The binary opposition of the sensual and the spiritual determines character and action. Instead of leaving the reader lost in the web of Advaita philosophy, Bhattacharya brings him closer to the contemporary predicament. Swami Yogananda, following his erotic adventures with his student Devjani at an Indian university, gives up his professorship and dons saffron robes.
At the invitation of the East-West Center, he goes to Hawaii to give a course of lectures on Eastern Philosophy—“to present Universal Religion in its Vedantic concept”. He is engaged in a relentless quest for “reality behind the appearances which were maya, the stuff of illusions.” (8) Several disturbed souls like Jennifer, the socialite and Stella Ph.D. student in Hinduism, caught in “the crisis in a sick society”, look up to him for spiritual help. There are others like Professor Walt Gregson, the estranged husband of Stella and Dr. Vincent Swift, the culture-vulture, who question Yogananda’s true credentials to spirituality. Yogananda has taught philosophy for six years in the Indian universities before becoming “Swamy”, and at thirty he is “one of India’s famed spiritual leaders” (29). He would like to be different from others of his kind and hence he is clean-shaven unlike the bearded sadhus.

In spite of his discourse on *Bhagavad Gita* to a captivated American audience and his attempt at *dhyana*. Yogananda is haunted by disturbing memories of his affair with Devjani at the India university and even in Hawaii he looks for her. He utterly fails to achieve the kind of detachment that is prescribed in chapter vi (“The Yoga of Meditation”) of *Bhagavad Gita* as being the essential requisite for prayer. The Lord says: “So, with his heart serene and fearless, firm in the vow of renunciation, Holding the mind from its restless roaming, Now let him struggle to reach my oneness.” (12)

Swami Yogananda, despite his saffron robes, has failed to hold his mind “from its restless roaming.” In the words of the author of the novel, “The process of sublimation had its own rules, he would point to himself. His submerged mind could not be controlled, nature’s compulsions could not be denied.” (44) Even as a Swami Yogananda lay asleep, “he was in the act of making love. That act possessed him.” (44)

Ironically, Yogananda’s attempts at spiritual experience take place in the enchanting atmosphere of the beautiful island of Hawaii, a pleasure resort of the most materialistic kind. The sight of “the body’s bareness” on the Waikiki beach makes him feel “enchanted”. The result is spiritual disenchantment for him. The “reality” that he is searching for proves an illusion. The Guru that the disturbed Americans see in him is himself torn by doubt about his own spiritual integrity and he returns to India. While the effect of Swami Yogananda’s experience on the reader is one of the comic, what is ultimately significant in Bhattacharya’s presentation in *A Dream in Hawaii* is the Kiplingesque awareness that East is East and West is West.
Bhabani Bhattacharya brings out the binary opposition not only in the East-West encounter but also within the East and within the West separately. This multidimensional conflict determines the social and spiritual aspects of the post-colonial life. Transference, displacement, and alienation constitute the post-colonial experience of not only the Indians settled or born abroad, but also of the Indians in India due to the Western impact.

The basic conflict in human nature is presented by Bhattacharya in *A Dream in Hawaii* involving movement between realms. The “movement” may be different from that of the Indians abroad, born or settled there. It is that of the natives like Yogananda experiencing alienation within their own culture due to the crosscurrents of emotional and spiritual problems.

In *A Dream in Hawaii*, the shifting of scenes from India to America and in flashback from America to India is like displacement in the post-colonial sense. In India, when Yogananda comes from Rishikesh and lectures in Delhi, the unsophisticated crowd might have applauded him without understanding the profundities involved. But the applause from the American audience is of lost souls in search of a spiritual mirage.

When Swami Yogananda says, “Our Ancient philosophy is boldly modern in its own way. The West has read that same story in our ancient temple sculptures at Konarak, at Khajuraho!”(18), Stella feels, “Within him the East and the West so readily coalesced!” (18) Ironically, this coalescence goes counter to Yogananda’s preaching of *dhyana* which leaves him confused. It is not the external East-West conflict but the inner turmoil of his own soul that disturbs Yogananda. This is the basic binary opposition. “Another level of binary opposition is in Stella with her vain spiritual yearnings as Yogananda’s disciple and her conflict with her materialistic husband Walt.

While Stella is looking for solace in philosophy, Walt is seeking “correlations of life and literature as part of his study.” (21)

Walt tells Stella that he would like to “ask the Swami one or two questions in the context of what he calls crisis in a sick society: that is, our American society.” (24) As Walt asserts, “The crisis we know are beyond his limited range of experience.” (27) The disturbances deep within the soul of Yogananda are evident. Stella recalls that as soon as Swami Yogananda is received at the airport, by members of the India Association, he inquired about Devjani. In the flashback is given an account of Yogananda’s lecture on Eastern philosophy at the Indian University where Devjani was a student. “The instructor has an unseemly impulse: To undo the braided hair and let the
disheveled mass cascade over her bosom!... An odd wish for a man trying to explain vedantic monism!” (13)

At the Kennedy Theatre of the University of Hawaii, following the applause at Swami Yogananda’s lecture, Stella reflects: “The Swami’s Relentless quest was directed to the core of reality behind the appearances which were maya, the stuff of illusion.” (8) The suggestion is which is reality and which is illusion is Swami Yogananda himself.

Dr. Vincent Swift is introduced to Swami Yogananda by Stella as “our topmost exponent of cultureways.” (52) Hawaii is the “unique East-West mix. The strong inter-culturation.” (56) When confronted by Dr. Swift to comment on the celibacy of the Indian yogis, Swami Yogananda is bewildered. As Swift says to Yogananda, “One expects from an alien analyst of our sick ways something more than hackneyed repetitions.” (60) Dr. Swift ridicules Yogananda’s visit to America to reenact the visit of Swami Vivekananda. “Now, could it be that Swami Yogananda’s mystical experience which made him reborn is relevant to a certain memorable day in the Vivekananda story? A day that is exactly a hundred years old?” (62)

Yogananda has come to America to represent Universal Religion in its vedantic concept. Dr. Swift would like to set up an institute offering practical help to reduce inner tension—such help drawn best from Indian know-how and wisdom. Dr. Swift would expect Yogananda himself shed a little of the Ancient India in him absorb a little of Modern America. He feels that is the only way to harmonize diverse culture: “world culture could have no reality unless based on the broadest spectrum of interchange” (144). Such mutually opposed views concerning cultural interaction causes insurmountable obstacles. The binary opposition makes the lofty ideal of “world culture” only a dream. This seems to be the ultimate message of Bhabani Bhattacharya in the novel.

Referring to the ecstasy of the dancers of the Hare Krishna Movement, Stella wonders:

Our American society with its contradictions! Violence in its most brutal forms rages through the nation and tries to destroy every civilized norm. Yet a great search goes on widening, the search for… shall I say, a new world aching to be born? Two contrary ways running parallel. Where will victory be? (72)

In addition to the other binaries of characters and ideas in the novel, the basic contradiction within the American culture itself is paradoxical: the dualism of violence alongside an impassioned search, “a search rooted in depths of longing for the new world yet to be born”(73), as Stella says. The dualism is also the result of a paradoxical presence of Puritanism and permissiveness in the
American society. Another paradox is in the super technology hitting at the very roots of traditionalism, resulting in counterculture.

Whatever the vain attempts of an Indian Swami like Yogananda, himself torn between contradictions, to cure the “sick society”, the binaries within himself and within the post-colonial Indian culture are pitted against the binaries of the American culture in particular and the Western culture in general. Consequently, the opposition remains.

Works Cited

-----------------------------