INTRODUCTION

Every society is the product of clashes and conflicts of two cultures, the old and the new, the east and the west. As literature is the mirror of the age, Indian creative writers treated the theme of conflicts in their creative writings. Sarath Kumar Ghose is the earliest of Indian English writers to deal with the theme of clash between tradition and modernity. In his novel The Prince of Destiny, he portrays Bharath, the hero of the novel, as the harbingers of the synthesis between east and the west.

In the general sense, tradition is a continuous process of handing down from generation to generation, conventions, beliefs, habits and even superstitions through oral and written practice. It plays a significant role in the advancement of humanity. In the literary context, tradition becomes a body of customs, beliefs, skills or sayings, handed down from generation to generation or age to age. As S.N. Ganguly rightly remarks, “Tradition, and this is one of the most important functions, helps man in this selective behaviour. The human potential is realized significantly in a changing world and civilization only through the help of tradition”. (1)

Society is the base for tradition. As society is dynamic, it undergoes changes in course of time. As a result tradition is also modified. The development in humanity causes change in tradition by way of creating new ideas. The spirit of reform and revolt gives way to modernity. In the literal sense modernity pertains to the present and recent times. It is about the current age or period. According to Balram S. Sorot, “… modernity is that spirit of newness and uniqueness, be it in the field a conscious questioning – a break from the set patterns established theories and beliefs or all sorts of influences”. (2)

The Indian English novel has been a vivid portrayal of different attitudes which pleaded for the balance of tradition and modernity. In Mulk Raj Anand’s The Big Heart, Ananth, the hero of the novel emphasizes the values of modern technology and the traditional human values. In R.K. Narayan’s novels, the conflict takes the form of the clash between the older generation and his son Balu in The Financial Expert., Raju and his mother in The Guide, Jagan and his son Mali in The Vendor of sweets. There is a blend of tradition and modernity in the novels of Raja Rao like Kanthapura and The Serpent and the Rope.

Bhabani Bhattacharya, as a representative writer of contemporary period has treated the theme of tradition and modernity very well in his novels. He analyses the impact of both tradition and modernity on the human society in a wider perspective. Balram S. Sorot writes, “While in the
novels of the Indian – English writers in general, the problem of conflict or synthesis between tradition and modernity figures as a secondary theme, in the writings of Bhabani Bhattacharya it assumes the significance of the dominating issue in contemporary Indian life. The author analyses the political, religious, social and economic problems of modern India through the perspective of this basic conflict in our ethos”. (3)

In his first novel So Many Hungers! Bhabani Bhattacharya, dealt with the old and new values through Basu’s family in Calcutta and Kajoli’s family in Baruni. In another novel, He Who Rides a Tiger, the author presents the blending of the traditional and the modern values through the story of Kalo and his daughter Chandra Lekha. The theme of confrontation of the old and the new values acquires a new dimension in his novel The Goddess Named Gold. In Shadow from Ladakh the central theme is the synthesis of Indian spiritual values and the western modernism. In his last novel, A Dream in Hawaii, the novelist projects the view of integration through the principle character, Swami Yogananda.

Music for Mohini, Bhabani Bhattacharya’s second novel, has the conflict of tradition and modernity as its main theme. As Malta Grover remarks, “He has not only responded to this theme the conflict of tradition – modernity in its varied aspects but has transcended it.” (4) The novelist deals with the varied aspects of both rural and urban areas. The first part is set in the city and the rest in Behula Village. As the title of the novel indicates, Mohini is the central character in this novel. She is the principle character who faces the conflict from the beginning of the novel to the end. The conflict intensified after her marriage with Jayadev and her stay in a remote village of Bengal, Behula.

Regarding the theme of the novel, G. Rai prints out, “The central theme of the novel is the tie or tussle between orthodoxy and modernity which remains a glaring problem in Indian society even today. The rural – urban clash is an important feature of the novel. The traditional ways of life stand in sharp conflict with those of modern ways” (5) Bhabani Bhattacharya analyses the impact of both tradition and modernity on the human society in a wider aspect.

The central character, Mohini, lives in city with her father, grandmother and brother at the beginning of the novel. The story begins with Mohini’s modern out look at her parental home in city. Her father is a Professor and a man of modern views, while her grandmother is conservative and rigid in outlook. The old mother is quite contrary to her son and grand daughter, She protests her son’s ideas, whenever her son does not hear her words, She threatens to renounce the world. Regarding Mohini’s school education, there arises a conflict between the old mother and her son. The Professor wants to send Mohini at an English convent, but the old mother sternly opposes her son and says”. Let Mohini be trained at home, let her learn classical Sanskrit, the language of Gods, the precious vase that holds the essence of true knowledge and wisdom”. (MFM, P.20). But Mohini’s father did not agree. He would mould the girl in a modern way, which was his way. For the old mother, convent education is meaningless and harmful to her grand daughter. But atlast, ”she compromises with her son.

As Mohini is a good singer, she gets a contract to sing for All India Radio once a week. The old mother is very serious about this and begins to quarrel with her son. On the other hand,
the Professor is very happy and proudly remarks that as Mohini’s father, he will soon be a celebrity himself. But to the old mother that is shameful for the family. She feels it a disgrace for the family tradition. In this context, She expresses her conventional view as, “A fellow, good or bad, saint or lout, can go to the gramophone shop and buy a shiny black disc for three rupees and it is as though he buys a little of our girl, for her voice is truly a part of herself. Terrible! Even her name is printed, there on the disc, for every eye to feel.” (MFM,P.19).

In the matter of horoscope, mother and son have different opinions. The old mother believes in horoscope and wants her son to make it for Mohini. But the Professor has no belief in it. He regards it a joke. He argues that in this age of microscope, who needs a horoscope. He mocks at the view of astrologer that the life story of every person is being controlled by the stellar beings. Though he mocks at many of the old beliefs, he wears amulet for his mother’s satisfaction. Bhattacharya remarks that clashes like these are frequent between them, but they can compromise. It is common, “Over Mohini developed a clash between mother and son, even though on many points of orthodox living they had reached a fair adjustment.” (MFM, P.20)

The novelist brilliantly brought out the confrontation between the old and new ideas, the traditional Indian and the modern western ways of life in this novel, when a suitable husband for Mohini is being searched out. The attitudes of old fashioned elders and modern youngsters in the ceremony of bride showing is the realistic representation of Indian society. The first party was an old fashioned party of elders, who came at dusk, the traditional bride showing hour. They didn’t bring the bridegroom with them. They asked questions in ancient culture and yoga and demanded more dowry.

Through some incidents in the novel Bhabani Bhattacharya points out the ill-manners of some people in bride – showing. Regarding the second party, the novelist points out, “Four pairs of eyes surveyed the girl from foot to head. She head to walk a few steps at mother’s bidding to prove she did not lack grace hair and unloosed it down her back to know its length. They rubbed her face with their thumbs to make sure the fair complexion was natural, not of paint.” This indecent behaviour made Mohini shameful. (MFM P.49) Her father couldn’t bear this, so he asked them to quit.

The third party comprised only youngsters. The bridegroom came with his friends, to make his own choice. As they were all modern young men they joked and appreciated Mohini’s voice on the radio. They asked about Tennis, films, the novelist presents the contrast between traditional elders and modern youngsters. Though her father is happy with the third party, the old mother is annoyed by their modern way of questioning. She rejects the proposal by saying that the groom has no tradition and culture. However all the clashes disappear soon, and they are on harmonious terms. Balram S.Sorot comments, “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.” (6)

Soon after her School education, Mohini is married to a handsome well educated Youngman, Jayadev. He is both a great scholar and master of Behula village. The attitude of Mohini towards Jayadev provides interesting insight into the novelist’s attitude towards traditional Indian women. Though Mohini has education of a new kind and is dare enough to reveal her
mind, her sensibility is coloured by her traditional inheritance. Bhattacharya observes, “The Hindu maiden, born and bred in the ancient starlight of vedic civilization washed by the running stream of the centuries sheathing her limbs and her thoughts in a conventional dress to suit the needs of each passing age was innately unchanged. She had retained all her ancient hunger to offer worship.” (MFM, P.65).

As a scholar, Jayadev is sensitive to modern progressive ideas, while as a master of the Big House he symbolizes the old traditions in his personality. He dreams about a fusion of the past with the present. For Mohini, a city bred girl, the Big House is contrary to her expectations. She has to adjust herself to the new environment, which is full of traditions. As K.H. Kunjo Singh remarks, “Music for Mohini dwells on the intellectual and emotional development of the heroine, Mohini, from care–free and sheltered girlhood to the position of wife and the mistress of a prominent and influential house with great traditions and orthodoxy.” (7)

Jayadev, who is a visionary and an idealist, expects Mohini to be different from an ordinary young woman. He looks at her as the vedic women like Gargi and Maitreyi. He wishes his wife to share his scholarly pursuits and be an intellectual betterhalf. To adjust herself to the wishes of her husband, Mohini endeavours to rise expectation of Jayadev and starts learning Sanskrit from him. She shares his ideals and renders him help in the social reconstruction programmes. Moreover, She identifies herself with women of the village and establishes communication with her husband. She begins to share his responsibility and becomes one with him. The novelist views, “He belonged to the people what right had she to claim him for herself alone?. She would be his true partner in feeling, in faith and in dream. “ (MFM, P.152). In this way the clash between herself and her husband is resolved.

The village of Behula is a typical backward village of India, during pre-independence period. Its people are superstitious and conservative. They have blind faith in religious beliefs, horoscopes and irrational religious rites and ceremonies. In the village, a beautiful village girl Sudha’s life is ruined by her uncle due to horoscope and she is nick named as “Saturn’s Eyesore” and she remains unwed.

Mohini’s mother-in-law is a typical Indian traditional woman and feels proud of her family tree. As Mohini has been brought up in an altogether different type of environment. Convent education and a radio star, she finds her life at the Big House unbearable. He mother-in-law is stern and puts a number of restraits upon Mohini. She has to struggle hard to adjust herself. Bhattacharya writes, “An old proud house of an old proud family. A tradition within a tradition. And here she was, sprung out of shallow soil, forced by circumstance to be mistress of the ancient house and trustee of an alien tradition. The struggle to retouch her expectations, hurt fiercely.” (MFM, P.128).

Her mother-in-law advises her not to use face powder, not to wear sleeveless blouses, not to wear glass bangles. She insists her to sing only religious songs and to wear a plain cotton saree. The widowed mother in law has kept a fair of wooden sandals of her late husband in the family prayer room and offers worship to them daily. Many taboos like this make life colourless and monotonous for Mohini.
Mohini’s sister-in-law, Rooplekha, combines in her character the traditional and modern values. When Mohini doubts the fusion of the city and the village representing the modern and the traditional values, Rooplekha remarks that such an union is necessary. Through the character of Rooplekha, Bhattacharya asserts his vision of India, “We connect culture with culture. Mohini, our old eastern view of life with the new semi–western outlook. The city absorbs a little of the barbaric village, the village absorbs a little of the west–polluted city. Both change unaware. This is more urgent today than ever before. Our new India must rest on this foundation”. (MFM, P.111).

There is another conflict between the old and the new values in the story of Harindra’s family. Harindra’s father the old Kaviraj is a practitioner of Ayurvedic system of medicine, while his son Harindra is a surgeon, educated and trained in a western–style medical college. The old father often argues with his son about the supremacy of Ayurveda, that had prevailed for the millennium. The old man gives his wife Ayurvedic medicine and never allows his son to treat her. Harindra argues “There are many good drugs in our Ayurvedic system. We know them, we use them, not the home products but those made in modern laboratories. What’s wrong in using in the fight against disease the best that east and west have to offer? Medicine knows no race or nationality.” (MFM, P. 166).

Through this story of Harindra, Bhattacharya reconciles the old values and systems with the new values and systems. The reconciliation starts in Mohini’s family also. For Mohini, the Big House is in the shadow of the family tree. She comes to know that her mother in law has dedicated her right hand, for her son’s longevity. She tells Mohini about the horoscope of her son that he should have a child within two years after his marriage. Only a child can save his life. Mohini strives hard to adjust to the old ways and modes of life in the rural society and in this process, she too changes unaware.

Though Mohini does not believe superstitions and old beliefs, she begins to fear superstitions and old beliefs, she begins to fear about her husband. She begins to realize that the mother is not completely devoid of the basic qualities of compassion and sacrifice. She develops a great love and sympathy for the old lady. So she becomes ready to give her skin from her bosom to satisfy the Devi in the temple. Mohini views, “Perhaps she saw the wrong side of this old tapestry of tradition and missed the design of 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.” (MFM, P.204).

Jayadev opposes his mother regarding blind beliefs, horoscope and superstitions. The conflict turns serious when his mother attempts to make Mohini offer her heart’s blood to the virgin Goddess to get rid of her barrenness. Jayadev sternly opposes the act and says, “We are not slaves of the stars. There is no room in the Big House for crazy beliefs. The village looks to us for ideals and a way of living. The pattern we set is not our private affair, it carries the strongest social sanction.” (MFM, P. 211) The infuriated mother scolds her son for displeasing the Goddess. She curses her fate for her son’s deeds. She struggles hard to control herself and she decides to leave the matter to her fate.
After a few days, mother comes to know from Harindra of Mohini’s pregnancy. She realizes that it is the age of the young men and women with their new ideals and aspirations. She starts changing her ideas to cope with the new age. At last the mother agrees that her son’s path is the right one, “for the first time she could see her son clearly. His ideas, his point of new, moulded by the new spirit in the land, were different from hers and opposed to them, but they were, none the less, true ideals”. (MFM, P.220)

Bhattacharya in Music for Mohini depicts the two contraries, tradition and modernity, old and new and arrives at compromise between them. He resolves the conflict between mother and son, father and son, husband and wife, daughter-in-law and mother-in-law and ends in compromise. There are two sets of characters in the novel, the first set of characters uphold the old, conventional values of the past like old mother, Mohini’s mother in law and Harindra’s father. The second type plead for a change and reform and unconventional values of modern age like Jayadev, Mohini’s father, Mohini and Harindra. As Shashikala Singh comments, “Even though, Bhattacharya reveals the conflict between the old and the new cultures, there is more of a compromise than a violent confrontation”. (8)

Bhabani Bhattacharya perceives the conflict of old and new values both in rural and urban societies. Regarding the urban side, Mohini’s family in the city, represents both traditional and modern values. Mohini and her father represent modern values but the old mother represents traditional values. At the rural side, Jayadev and Harinadra represent modern values but Jayadev’s mother and Harindra’s father represent traditional values. So the conflict is not limited to village but it extends to the city also. As C. Tamilarasani points out, “Traditional elements are not limited to village not the modern spirit to the city. There is a mingling of these elements in both rural and urban areas. Bhattacharya deals with the interaction of the two sets of values with exquisite deftness”. (9)

After independence there was a great concern for country’s stability and development. So Bhattacharya reflects the benefit of political freedom in the novel. The social evils of pre-independence time should be eliminated. The novel Music for Mohini was published in 1952. Hence certain major social reforms like prevention of child marriages, widow remarriage, elimination of caste system and untouchability are mentioned in this novel. Dr. K.R. Chandra Sekhar rightly remarks, “Music for Mohini is a forward looking novel in which the author dwells on certain sociological aspects of Indian life and suggests the direction in which we have to move if we are to fully benefit by our political freedom”. (10)

In this novel Jayadev fights superstitious beliefs and blind belief in astrological predictions. He educates the villagers about the new social changes. Harindra the young medical man, takes up social work with other interested people and fights against the social evils. Social reformation and reconstruction programmes are being taken up by a few youngmen with the help of Jayadev and Mohini. The words and deeds of the hero, Jayadev, reflect Gandhian views on social reconstruction. Dr. P.N. Bhatt rightly remarks, “Jayadev in Music for Mohini, reveals Gandhian views on Social reform. It is the story of a fight against old superstitions, taboos and religious orthodoxy. Jayadev believes that political freedom without social and economic freedom has no value. The rural society is sick with the set taboos of caste, untouchability and the blind belief in superstitions. He wants to reorient the set values of rural folk.”(11)
Jayadev and his friend doctor Harindra take active part to bring positive change in the attitude of the villagers. Jayadev insists Mohini to take part in the social work and teach women folk about the social evils. He forms a group of active young men to carry on the constructive works in the village. His involvement in the reformatory activities is the symbol for modern values in the post – independent India, which is the dream of Gandhiji. As Rama Jha observes, “Music for Mohini deals with the protagonist Jayadev’s passionate involvement with the Gandhian constructive programmes in the village Behula. As a practical idealist Jayadev is trying to turn Behula into a model village rid of superstitions, caste -system and exploitation of women”. (12)

In all aspects, Bhabani Bhattacharya represents the contemporary situation and suggests solutions for the development of Indian society. As a committed writer, he strongly pleads for reformation in the society through his novel Music for Mohini.

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