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BHABANI BHATTACHARYA'S SHADOW FROM LADAKH: A CRITICAL STUDY

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BHABANI BHATTACHARYA'S *SHADOW FROM LADAKH*: A CRITICAL STUDY

In his most recent novel, *Shadow from Ladakh*, Bhattacharya has a challenging theme; India at the time of the Chinese invasion of 1962. The title itself sets the pace of the writing, and the military situation casts its shadow almost everywhere.

Words and snatches from Mahatma Gandhiji's or Nehru's speeches, recapitulation of recent Indian and world history – help to evoke the appropriate historical background; the main characters in the novel tend to merge with the figures of history; and types, symbols, myths and individuals mingle and fuse to throw us off our guard. If the whole action of the novel is something of a shadow play – cast by the Chinese peril, many of the characters are shadows too – shadows chasing shadows. Satyajit is Gandhi's shadow and Bhaskar, the Chief Engineer of Steeltown, is almost a Nehruistic symbol or shadow.

Satyajit's Gandhigram is distantly patterned after Gandhi's Sevagram, and Bhaskar's Steeltown could like wise be one of the dream edifices of Nehru, one of the 'new temples' in the secular India of Nehru's imagination. Gandhi or Nehru? Recalling the earlier American dilemma, Jefferson or Hamilton? Is peaceful co-existence possible between Steeltown with its blast furnaces and Gandhigram with its spinning wheels?

Again, there was China, Mao's armour-plated expansionist absolutist China and Nehru's democratic vision was instinct with explosive possibilities. And the spiritual confrontation was of even



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greater consequence than the other. Mao's China trying to annex India, Steeltown trying to swallow up Gandhigram, and this was no matter of conquering square miles alone "but a way of life, an inner spirit".

The plotting of the novel is structured out of contrasting situations, images and symbols. Mao's China and Nehru's India: danger to Ladakh and Nefa, and danger to Gandhigram: Meadow House in Steeltown, Mud Hall in Gandhigram: water cooler here, earthen pot there, the writ of New Delhi, and Satyajit's "fast unto death". And even the two girls in Bhaskar's life Rupa and Sumita – are compared to the turbine and the spinning wheel respectively, the India of the epic age. The confrontations are sharp enough, and are ranged at various levels but where is the resolution of the conflict, even the possibility of it? Satyajit and his wife, Suruchi, had come under the influence, first of Tagore and Shantineketan, and later of Gandhi and Sevagram. These influences have not been wholly harmonized. Bhaskar too is not all Pittsburgh and Steeltown and ruthlessness: he can play the flute: he loses his heart to the children of Chinese alien: he can soften and yield. There is a Satyajit in Bhaskar and a Bhaskar in Satyajit – not on the surface but deep within. Does Gandhigram symbolize the past or the future? Does Steeltown portend death or new life? What will be the use of the confrontation between Steeltown and Gandhigram, or between China and India? Can the tiger and the deer live together, enacting fellowship and harmony?

Bhaskar and Satyajit take extreme positions, but patient sufferance is Suruchi's badge, as it was Kasturba's. It is Sumita – so very close to Satyajit being his daughter, and so much drawn irresistibly towards Bhaskar whom she loves that serves as the link. Even as the

wonders of technological change inflame his imagination, Bhaskar is not quite unaware of the dangers of such progress.



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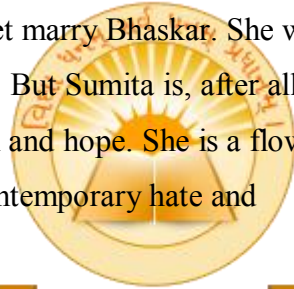
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India needs the big machines, not spinning wheels. Change, not tradition. Not the heritage of philosophic inanity, but the dynamism of technological progress even with all its inevitable chaos. Yet all that could be oversimplification. He knew the pattern and all the other patterns in Steeltown – at every level. Section Twelve longing to be Eleven. Insatiety, frustration, intrigue, graft.

What are the alternatives, then? Put the clock back, or march headlong towards the abyss? Isn't there a third, and the same, way as well? Isn't a 'conscious amalgam' of the two opposing ways of thinking and living capable of realization?

No trite answer is possible. Bhattacharya's answer is Sumita, who is molded in her father's image and will yet marry Bhaskar. She will bring Gandhigram and Steeltown together. But Sumita is, after all, only a novelist's creation, the image of his faith and hope. She is a flower that one hope will blossom in the deserts of contemporary hate and disillusion.



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Again, if Sumita can bring Steeltown and Gandhigram together, cannot the same force of love bring together China and India as well? The five little Chinese girls who worship the framed eleograph of Mao undergo a change of heart in the course of a few days and go down in a row before Bhaskar in a gesture of leave taking "eyes closed ... and each pair of joined palms held flowers." It is but fancy again, a poet's fancy yet why should this not hold the key to the future at all?

In this, as in his other novels, Bhattacharya has his 'axes' to grind out the novel doesn't suffer seriously on their account. There is some exercise in whimsy in the matrimonial advertisement and its consequences, and there is pointed satire in the description of the visit of the Deputy Minister to Steeltown, the stir among the 'society ladies'



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and the ceremonial offer of trinkets to the Defence Fund.

The satirical and humourous sketches entertain us in due measure, the backdrop of history makes us sad and serious by turns, but it is the human action that involves us in its intricacies and ramifications. *Shadow from Ladakh* takes us to the heart of the darkness, and also points to the dim beckoning light at the far, far end of the tunnel.



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