

Layers of Liberation: Literary Theories in Bhabani Bhattacharya's***A Goddess Named Gold*****Deepshikha Upadhyay¹**

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Abstract: Bhabani Bhattacharya's novel *A Goddess Named Gold* presents a rich canvas where multiple literary theories intersect to illuminate the complexities of social, economic, and ideological transformation in post-independence India. While Marxist literary theory emerges as the dominant analytical framework, the novel equally invites readings through postcolonial, feminist, structuralist, and humanist lenses. This article explores these interwoven perspectives to uncover how Bhattacharya critiques class stratification, religious orthodoxy, gender oppression, and colonial legacies while championing rationalism, grassroots empowerment, and social reform. Through a close reading of the novel and direct engagement with theoretical texts, the essay provides a comprehensive literary-theoretical analysis of *A Goddess Named Gold*.

Keywords: Bhabani Bhattacharya, Marxist theory, feminist theory, postcolonial theory, structuralism, Indian English novel, superstition, class struggle

Introduction: Published in 1960, *A Goddess Named Gold* is Bhabani Bhattacharya's fourth novel and reflects his deep engagement with India's rural transformations after independence. The story centers on Meera, a village girl entrusted with a golden amulet that supposedly brings prosperity and courage. However, the real change emerges not from divine intervention but from human effort and collective consciousness. This novel, while allegorical and symbolic, draws on realistic social conditions and critiques economic injustice, gender inequality, and religious dogma. The critical landscape of the novel invites multiple interpretative lenses, especially Marxist literary theory, which frames the text's central theme of class struggle and ideological liberation.

Marxist Literary Theory: Class Struggle and Revolutionary Awakening The most salient literary theory that governs the narrative of *A Goddess Named Gold* is Marxist criticism. The novel reveals the deep-rooted class divisions in the village community and dramatizes the awakening of class consciousness among the oppressed.

As Terry Eagleton notes, Marxist criticism insists on viewing literature as "part of the superstructure of society" which reflects the material base (Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* 3). In Bhattacharya's novel, the socio-economic base is controlled by powerful landowners who exploit the peasantry through rent, debt, and ideological manipulation. The landlords sustain their dominance by appealing to religious beliefs and fatalism among the villagers. The golden amulet, believed to possess supernatural powers, initially reinforces this passive acceptance of fate.

However, Bhattacharya uses the amulet not to confirm superstition but to gradually dismantle it. The symbolic value of the amulet shifts over time as Meera, guided by Uncle (a Gandhian figure), begins to realize that the true source of power lies not in divine artifacts but in human agency and solidarity. In Marxist terms, this transformation reflects the shift from "false consciousness" to "class consciousness," as theorized by Friedrich Engels and Antonio Gramsci.

Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony is particularly relevant here. The novel illustrates how dominant ideologies perpetuate existing class structures through institutions like religion and folklore. The landowners do not rule merely by force but by shaping what the villagers consider as normal or sacred. Yet, the ideological revolution in the novel subverts this control. As Raymond Williams notes, "Every society has its structure of feeling, which is the lived experience of ideology" (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 132). Bhattacharya captures this shift in lived experience as the villagers start believing in their collective strength.

Postcolonial Theory: Resistance and National Consciousness While Marxist theory focuses on class, postcolonial theory in the novel helps illuminate the lingering effects of colonialism and the struggle for cultural and national identity. *A Goddess Named Gold* is set in a newly independent India, yet the material conditions and power hierarchies remain largely unchanged.

The novel suggests that political freedom has not led to economic emancipation. The villagers still face exploitation under a native elite, mirroring the colonial power structure. Partha Chatterjee's idea of the "nation and its fragments" resonates here, as the novel portrays a fractured postcolonial nation where the benefits of independence have not reached the lower classes (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* 4).

The religious and superstitious beliefs that dominate the villagers' psyche can also be seen as residues of colonial manipulation, where irrationalism was often encouraged to maintain

passivity. Uncle's attempt to rationalize the power of the amulet and redirect the villagers' faith towards action represents a decolonizing move, an effort to reclaim agency from inherited systems of control.

Furthermore, the novel critiques neocolonial structures through the figure of the local elite who now occupy the roles once held by British colonial administrators. This aligns with postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon's assertion that "the national bourgeoisie... is incapable of building anything because it is using the tools of the old colonial regime" (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* 152). Bhattacharya dramatizes this failure through characters who replicate colonial patterns of control in the name of tradition and religion.

Feminist Literary Theory: Gender, Superstition, and Agency A Marxist-feminist reading of the novel reveals the intersections of class and gender oppression. Meera, as the central female protagonist, challenges both patriarchal norms and class hierarchies through her transformation from a submissive girl to a vocal leader.

Initially revered as a vessel of divine power because of the amulet, Meera's worth is tied to a mythical construct rather than her individual identity. Simone de Beauvoir's notion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" is illustrated in Meera's development (de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 283). Her role shifts from a symbolic object of veneration to an active subject of social change.

The use of a female figure as the embodiment of divine change critiques the patriarchal tendency to idolize women symbolically while restricting their real-world agency. The novel deconstructs this dichotomy by empowering Meera to speak, organize, and lead. As Gayatri Spivak warns, the subaltern woman is often spoken for rather than allowed to speak (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 287). Bhattacharya ensures that Meera is not silenced but becomes a vehicle for articulating collective resistance.

Moreover, the women in the village begin to participate in discussions, gatherings, and decisions, challenging the gendered division of labor and voice. This aligns with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's call for viewing women not as a homogenous oppressed class but as agents within specific socio-cultural contexts (Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes" 340).

Structuralism: Myth, Symbolism, and Narrative Form The novel's use of symbols and binary oppositions also invites a structuralist reading. At its core, the narrative centers on a mythic object—the golden amulet—which serves as a narrative device and symbolic catalyst.

Structuralist theorist Claude Lévi-Strauss argues that myths function through binary oppositions such as life/death, light/darkness, or sacred/profane. In *A Goddess Named Gold*, these oppositions manifest as:

- Superstition vs. Rationalism
- Individual belief vs. Collective action

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- Divine power vs. Human agency
 - Tradition vs. Change

By subverting the function of the amulet from a magical solution to a psychological motivator, Bhattacharya deconstructs the myth itself. The narrative demonstrates that what was perceived as miraculous is, in fact, a manifestation of latent human potential. This aligns with Roland Barthes' idea that myth is a "system of communication," a way of giving meaning to social practices (Barthes, *Mythologies* 109). Bhattacharya reconfigures the myth to communicate a radical social message.

Humanism: Ethics, Dignity, and the Spirit of Reform Beyond theory, the novel also embodies a deeply humanistic message. While grounded in socio-economic critique, Bhattacharya's vision is ultimately ethical and transformative. He believes in the dignity of individuals, the value of empathy, and the possibility of change through moral courage.

Uncle's Gandhian ideals of non-violence, self-reliance, and village-based reform echo the principles of humanist literary criticism, which prioritizes individual dignity and moral responsibility. The novel does not promote a violent revolution but advocates a conscious awakening through dialogue, trust, and collective experimentation.

As Matthew Arnold noted, literature should be a "criticism of life," aiming to improve society through moral insight (Arnold, *Essays in Criticism* 37). Bhattacharya fulfills this ideal by encouraging readers to question entrenched systems and embrace ethical action.

Conclusion *A Goddess Named Gold* is a richly layered text that invites multiple literary readings. Its primary framework aligns with Marxist literary theory, where class struggle, false consciousness, and collective emancipation form the backbone of the narrative. However, Bhattacharya's subtle incorporation of postcolonial concerns, feminist awakenings, structuralist binaries, and humanist ethics enrich the interpretative field. Through the evolution of Meera and her community, the novel dramatizes a movement from myth to materialism, from divine dependence to human initiative. Bhattacharya uses the novel as both a literary and ideological instrument to critique and inspire, making it a seminal work in Indian English literature.

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