

FICTIONAL WORLD OF RUTH PRAWER JHABVALA: A PERSPECTIVE

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Ruth Praver Jhabvala has achieved world-wide recognition as one of India's leading writers of fiction. Her novel *Heat and Dust* (1975) was awarded the prestigious Booker Prize in London. *Heat and Dust* is India again in her variegated fictional cosmos. 'Heat' and 'Dust' seem to have become Ruth Praver Jhabvala's major obsession, also the source and substance of her creative imagination. The India of her fictional cosmos seems to be almost an objective correlative of her aesthetic emotions, the central concern of her creative imagination.

Should Ruth Praver Jhabvala be described as an 'inside-outsider' or 'outside-insider'? These terms impinge upon her personal and literary situation. From the European point of view she may seem an 'outside-insider,' while from the Indian artistic view-point she appears an 'inside-outsider.' She is essentially a European writer who has lived in India and given to her experience of life and society in this country an artistic expression. However, several critical problems arise in considering and evaluating the work of creative writers dealing with India who are not really Indian in the usual sense.

In this context Jhabvala's knowledge and awareness of the Indian character, the Indian family, the Indian society and the Indian sensibility, assume great significance. This awareness of a group of people, their culture and tradition has to be harmonized with the consciousness of the universal man that is at the centre of the art of fiction.

In my view Jhabvala should not be linked with other creative Indian writers

in English such as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao or R. K. Narayan, nor with women novelists such as Kamala Markandaya or Nayantara Sahgal. She is in a way unique and the advantages as well as disadvantages of her literary situation are particular to her. The advantage lies in her special position of being a European living in India; the disadvantage, too, lies in her not being a genuine, grassrooted Indian. She can therefore be detached, ironic and satirical. She can view the game of human affairs in an Indian family from a point of view which is both objective and unsentimental. John Reed, while reviewing *An Experience of India*, finds Jhabvala better equipped than even E. M. Forster 'to deal with the mysteries of Indian psyche.' She is, unlike E. M. Forster, not really involved in the mysteries or muddles that India or Indians present to a creative western writer. Her worldliness and down-to-earth approach to life indirectly aid her in avoiding the pitfalls of sentimentality or superficial involvement with varieties of Indian religious or mystical beliefs. Of her experience of *Living in India* Jhabvala writes:

The most salient fact about India is that it is very poor and backward. There are so many other things to be said about it but this must remain the basis of all of them. We may praise Indian democracy, go into raptures over Indian music, admire Indian intellectuals—but whatever we say, not for one moment should we lose sight of the fact that a very great number of Indians never get enough to eat. . . can one lose sight of that fact ? God knows, I've tried.

While leading her own comfortable life in the four walls of an air-conditioned room, Jhabvala as an artist cannot get away from what she believes to be an overwhelming aspect of the stark reality of India: "All the time

I know myself to be on the back of this great animal of poverty and backwardness. It is not possible to pretend otherwise. Or rather, one does pretend, but retribution follows."

The problem that India, as a stark reality or as a spiritual reality, presents to a European evokes different responses. The reactions may assume the forms of affirmation or negation or ambivalence. All these areas of emotive and intellectual responses to this country are endowed with fictional art in *A Backward Place*.

Jhabvala writes: "Another approach to India's basic conditions is to accept them."

This seems to be the approach favoured by most Indians. Jhabvala is also critical of the validity of the westernized Indians' attitude to the problems of their country, in fact of their whole way of looking at life: "Everything they say, all that lively conversation round the buffet table, is not prompted by anything they really feel strongly about but by what they think they ought to feel strongly about."

While Jhabvala seems dissatisfied with this unreality in the sophisticated,

westernized Indians' attitude to India, she feels more at home with the semi-educated, but deeply involved Indian joint families which breathe a genuine get-togetherness. Members of such families have their joys and sorrows, loves and

hatreds, cunning and compassion—but what is more important is that they feel they

form a family, a social unit in which individuals either conform or revolt. About this joint family life in India Jhabvala says:

There is actually something very restful about this mode of social intercourse

and it certainly holds more pleasure than the synthetic social life led by westernized

Indians. It is also more adapted to the Indian climate which invites one to be

absolutely relaxed in mind and body, to do nothing, to think nothing, just to feel, to

be. I have in fact enjoyed sitting around like that for hours on end.

All these approaches of Jhabvala, the person, expressed in prose in 'Living in India,' are very subtly given artistic expression in her fiction.

Jhabvala's merit as a creative writer lies in her being intensely aware of her limitations. She writes about possibly the only social segment of urban India that she knows at first hand. The general assumption that she writes about only the sophisticated upper class is rather an unfair exaggeration because her writings, as in *A Backward Place*, portray the lower middle class with sympathy and understanding. She also delineates the rising commercial bourgeois which is by no means really sophisticated. In fact, this is the new rich class which has risen from the brink of want and bare necessities and which is hungry for culture, refinement and a respectable social status. Thus, in widening the sphere of her social and cultural setting in her fiction, Jhabvala shows her awareness of the variety and complexity of the post-independence Indian society. Her urban India is not urbane; in fact, it may even be described as a backwater or more specifically a 'backward place.' It is, of course involved in change and ferment, and therefore, her basic literary endeavour is to portray the human portent of this society caught in the conflict of a change from tradition to modernity.

Jhabvala's art of fiction pursues the path of the comic and evolves the form of a social comedy of manners. George Meredith says that comedy depicts men and women in society, that the setting of comedy is primarily urban, and that the comic writer presents a social and cultural outlook with a view to measuring man's behaviour against an accepted norm. Man's conduct is to be judged against a norm, rather than an ideal, and this norm often approximates to a sense of proportion,

a value. All writers of comedy present a point of view in which this norm is implicit, and for measuring eccentricity, abnormality, idiosyncrasy you must have a moral yardstick in view. The incongruities of human behaviour clearly indicate •departures from this norm.

Jhabvala excels in presenting incongruities of human character and situations. These incongruities have social, familial and cultural implications and consequently they become the source of the comic. In *The Nature of Passion* Nimmi speaks of her college and the lecture on Keats's poetry and Om makes fun of the whole business of girls going to college.

'This College,' said Om talking more loudly, 'it is only a waste of time and of good money, and will perhaps even give her wrong ideas. Look at that one there,' he said thrusting his chin towards Usha massaging her father's legs. 'How much money was spent on her education, and what has it led to now ? A betrothal today, a marriage tomorrow, children the day after. Only with her we were lucky: she is too stupid to get any harm out of education.' Usha laughed. She had failed many times to pass her Inter and reference to this always moved her to good humoured laughter.

The idea of sending girls to college in Lalaji's family touches the chord of the conflict between the old and the young, orthodoxy and reform, tradition and modernity. But this difference in values is presented comically and in a sarcastic

The incongruities in human behaviour are shown in the character and demeanour of Lalaji sitting in his office and receiving persons who would call upon him for help.

'Please command me,' he said, and they went through the preliminary formula

of disinterested affection. The visitor declared that his sole purpose in coming was to regale his eyes on Lalaji; Lalaji said that it was too long a time since he had had the pleasure of seeing his visitor (though as far as he could remember he has never seen him before). The visitor solicitously enquired after Lalaji's health and after the health of his family; Lalaji equally solicitously enquired after that of his visitor and his visitor's family. They continued in this strain for some five minutes, both very cordial and both of them thinking: of something else.

This small incident of social give-and-take precisely portrays Jhabvala's acute observation of Indian, specially Punjabi, modes of behaviour. 'Please command me' is a literal English translation of *Hukm Kijiye*, an expression which is quite often used by urbanized Punjabis and Hindi-speaking people in that area. However, the novelist shows her ironic mode in clarifying the difference between the sweet surface graces of the two Punjabis and their real, submerged motives.

The 'Tndianness' of Indian writers in English or European writers on India has often been raised in relevant critical forums. Sometimes this question itself has been considered pedantic and insubstantial because creative literature deals far more with the universals in human passion and reason than what may doubtfully come into the category specified as 'Indian.' At other times the problems of Indian sensibility, Indian culture and tradition, Indian value-patterns, Indian way of looking at life have been considered the heart of the matter in creative writing. National quintessence is as important a source of literary art as universal human passion common to all mankind. It is of course true that Indian creative writing, especially fiction, has to be judged primarily as art and only secondarily as an expression of social ethic or

values. However, the ethic or values are inextricably linked up with the aesthetic form of the great art of literature, and should not be considered in isolation. The Indianness of the Indian art of fiction in English is therefore very much a part of that art itself.

However, the Indianness of Jhabvala's fiction raises some pertinent issues since she is not really an Indian, at least by birth. Her Polish parentage, German upbringing, British, schooling and finally, life in India after marriage only heighten the complexity of this problem. After knowing all these facts-of her life, a critic may ask: how far Indian is Ruth Praver Jbabvala ? This question is different in tone and quality from the other, as for example, how far Indian is Kaniara Maran-4aya or Santha Rama Rau ?

The Indianness of Indian creative writing in English will "have to be judged by the awareness of the author of certain specific and special characteristics of societies and cultural patterns in India. For instance, Indian society has always been more an 'in-group' society than its counterpart in the West. Although the joint family system is breaking down under various economic, industrial and social pressures, Indian society even in urban areas still retains this 'in-group' feeling, mental outlook and the get-togetherness of family ties. The atomization of the West has not yet affected the spirit of Indian society and the heart of the emotionally generous individual. Jbabvala shows her deep awareness of this aspect of Indian society. In fact many of her novels and short stories are primarily concerned with portraying either the fulfilment or the frustration of individuals in the undivided Hindu joint family system'. Lalaji in *The Nature of Passion* behaves almost like a

benevolent Pater familias and the welfare and happiness of his children and members of the family is very dear to his heart. The Nature of Passion is almost like a family chronicle and in this sense essentially Indian. It is also Indian in the way in which it dramatizes the clashes between two families or two individuals in the family in the context of the present day changes in urbanized India. The tensions in Indian societies today such as those between the young and the old, the upholders of orthodox tradition and the rebels against that tradition characterize the social world of Jhabvala's fiction. These situations are individual in the deepest sense as well as being representative of social change and almost archetypal in the universality of their consciousness. The experience of such individuals caught up in the vortex of social change is essentially Indian as much as it is universal in a larger sense.

Jhabvala is much preoccupied with portraying the predicament of individuals in their relationship to the family, to the social group, in a way which demonstrates her Indianness. Lalaji's second son, Chandra Prakash, a government official who is married to Kanta, is in part alienated from the family and in part still allied with it. He looks forward to his career as the head of the department and his wife is deeply conscious of their patiently acquired Western culture. He considers himself intellectualized and therefore different from his father and brothers who know only the craft of the ledger, how to make money. He and his wife both, however, need the money, and the financial help the joint family, and specially Lalaji, provides. The dislike of the commercial class is thus combined with a peculiar sense of dependence on that class and this is an instance of a perceptive awareness of the contradictions of the present day Indian society which is amply reflected in Jhabvala's fiction.

Jhabvala presents with considerable power and acute sense of inward understanding. The experience of European women married to Indians or of Indian women married to Europeans who are confronted with this inevitable situation of the Hindu joint families is sharply presented in her fiction. Gulab's marriage to Esmond has not changed her life-style. She looks forward to the spicy food that her mother or the cook prepares for her and Esmond simply dislikes the strong smells of spices. European women such as Peggy in 'The Aliens' are in for cultural shocks when her sister-in-law enters her room and opens all the drawers without even asking her. This is not merely a minor question of social manners or surface formalities, but one which highlights the difference between the individualistic European families and the socially close-knit Indian families. Jhabvala shows her keen awareness of this difference in the characters, and the situations they are confronted with, in her fiction. In this context she is both European and Indian thereby underscoring her distinctive position among creative writers in English on India. In 'The Aliens' Jhabvala reveals the pains and predicaments of Peggy, an English girl married to Dev, and obliged to live in a joint family of Punjabi Hindu businessmen. She feels rather isolated in the family because she is up against the coarseness of her mother-in-law!

Some of the spilt water came trickling into Peggy's lap. She got up and murmured, 'Excuse me, please'—which was unnecessary but she made a point of keeping up her manner. She went back into the study where her writing-paper still lay on the desk. She sat down and suddenly she was writing very fast: 'Oh I can't tell you how fed up I am with it all and how awful it is and the heat and everyone

shouting all the time and they are all so—'at which she stopped, not because there wasn't plenty more to say but because she wasn't sure whether the word she wanted was spelt c-o-r-s-e or c-o-a-r-s-e. And with this halt she came back to her senses, and tearing off the sheet of paper, crumpled it in her hand. She knew she would never send any such letter: how disappointed Mum and Daddy would be, worried too, of course, and sad for her, but most of all they would be disappointed. English people didn't behave like that, they never grumbled and moaned.

Peggy with her English background is up against the insensitivity and coarseness of men and women of a money-civilization. However, she does not

There is another dimension of this Indian familial setting which

1. Jhabvala's new narrative techniques in *Heat and Dust* are discussed in Professor Gooneratne's essay published in her *Diverse Inheritance* (p. 65 etc.). She points out how these narrative techniques derive from Jhabvala's work on the scripts of the Merchant Ivory films. Professor Gooneratne's essay is extremely perceptive about Jhabvala's recent development as a novelist.
2. Raymond is a benevolent if somewhat comic version of E.M. Forster, also, and in *Heat and Dust* the other homosexual Englishman Harry may be a malicious caricature of a type of homosexual Englishman in India represented by E.M. Forster and Ackerley of *Hindu Holiday*.
3. V.A. Shahane, *Ruth Praver Jhabvala* (Arnold Heinemann, India, (1976).