

The Excellence of Ruth Praver Jhabvala's Artistic Vision and Technical Skill: a Comparative Study of Her Novels

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***Abstract:** Ruth Praver Jhabvala, a world class fictionist and story teller of the present century, has distinctive achievements as a literary artist. Though she is a European, her marriage to an Indian architect and stay in India has given her deep insight into India's social, political, religious, economic, moral and cultural life. Her knowledge about the Indian social and cultural ethos can be marked by the variety of themes that she has undertaken in her novels. She has cultivated and demonstrated the literary qualities which are her own and which primarily emerge from the interaction between the peculiar Indian milieu and the Western set up. However, even having the literary situation her distinction is modified and narrowed down by the rather limited quality of her literary achievement, which is, in part, the inevitable result of her choice, and in part, the artistic outcome of her creativity. This peculiar paradox of her attainments as an artist, is in a way rooted in the environs of her literary effort, and is co-extensive with the range and quality of her fiction. The present paper is an exploration of her artistic vision and literary craftsmanship.*

***Key Words:** peculiar, paradox, exploration.*

Ruth Praver Jhabvala has achieved an international reputation as an Indian novelist. Her eight novels which appeared in quick succession, deals with the themes like, love and marriage in the bourgeois society, East–West encounter, pseudo-modernism in Indian society, the post-independence Indian ethos, affectation and hypocrisy in the Indian middle class society. She handles her themes with dazzling assurance and presents penetrating and compassionate picture of human relationship ironically and realistically. Though Ruth Jhabvala has made a significant contribution to the Indian English fiction, she has not received proper attention from the critics of literature. The characters in her Novels deal with their identity-crisis and how they handle the trauma and possible success, failure or resistance of subjects who in their confrontation with the culture of the other negotiate their new identities. Jhabvala's literary works are concerned with the diasporic postcolonial situation of the lives of Europeans, who are caught between the Indian traditions that they have left behind and a totally different western world that they have to live in, culminating in an

ongoing struggle to adjust between the two worlds of the two cultures. Concerned mostly with the disappointment, failure and at-times success of Europeans immigrants in India, Jhabvala's works abound with female characters who, on being displaced, struggle to survive in the unfamiliar surroundings they are entangled in. Her work deal with the common motif of exclusion, loneliness and the search for an identity and fulfillment.

Jhabvala came to India as a wife of an Indian architect, Cyrus S. H. Jhabvala. In her novels, we find a glimpse of her architectural vision which she gets as wife of an architect. As in *The Householder*:

Over the shops there were wooden verandas and arched windows set in thin crumbling walls. (The Householder.p.131)

One of the most puzzling phenomena of the literary world is the intriguing problem of Jhabvala's identity and classification. She has been variously regarded sometimes as an 'outside-insider', and other times as an 'inside-outsider' and other times as an 'adopted daughter of India'. Highlighting the importance of this problem in relation to Jhabvala, David Rubin writes:

The solution to this puzzle of national identification not idly speculative for on its hangs the far most complex mystery of Jhabvala's sense of her own identity and its relation to the world she has created and ultimately of the real value and meaning of her fiction. (p.672)

As a European writer, Jhabvala's persistent emphasis upon painting the minute details or events adds to the charm of her art. The Western-reader likes comprehensiveness and thoroughness in the subject because it helps the Western readers to understand Indian scene and setting. Her area of observation is very wide and she renders all that she observes in a comprehensive coverage. Sometimes this tendency in producing an actual scene is carried to an excessive degree, consequently an Indian reader is almost bored, but the Western reader who is unfamiliar with the scene is very much delighted and thrilled with the vivid description. The following detailed description of Gulab's sluttishness and her epicurean taste has been described with minute details:

The milk that servant brought them did not have enough sugar in it, so they sent him to put in more, they both liked things to be very very sweet. Half way through Gulab thought, it would be nice to flavour the remainder with rose essence to vary the taste. When they had finished, both have white milk moustaches and they had a good laugh at one another before Gulab wiped their mouths first lovingly his then carelessly her own with the end of her sari. The new servant since he had nothing else to do, continue to watch them. Ravi tickled Gulab and then Gulab tickled Ravi. She yawned, she stretched

herself; she felt contented. Ravi sat on her and rode her as a horse and she laughed. The new servant also laughed, an animal sound, and Gulab lifted her to ask him what did he want, had he nothing better to do than to just stand there and look? (EII,p.14)

When one writes about India as a European and in English as I do, one writes inevitably not for Indian but for Western readers. Problems of communication present themselves; how to translate the idiom of one language into another; how to present a scene to an audience unfamiliar with its most obvious ingredients (such as temples, bazaars and motor cycle-rickshaws.). Keeping in mind her Western readers, Ruth Jhabvala has adopted the technique of minute and vivid description of scenes. She persistently emphasizes upon pointing or describing minute details of apparently unimportant scenes or events. As one notices in the following description of Tarla's drawing-room in *To Whom She Will*:

A fan turned softly from the ceiling, not really necessary in that cool room, but providing a sweet titillating breeze. An enormous Persian carpet covered, the marble floor; it was patterned all over with tiny flowers in pink and green and blue, dainty and fresh and poignantly artificial. The divans were almost at floor level and matched the brocaded silk of the curtains; green and crimson horsemen glittering against a somber background. There was a long low cabinet with bronze grill work twisting behind the glass and on it a tea-set, red and gold, fine as breath, curved shallow cups with long handles pointing upwards. (TWSW, p.25)

It has been observed that her characters are like windows, through which her readers can see the changing image of Indian society. Through her characters she was able to touch almost all the important aspects of Indian Society. A clear clash between traditional and modernization can be understood with the close treatment of relationship between the characters of her novels. She closely connected her characters with all the customs like marriages, child births and mundan ceremony. She has discussed the plight and dilemma of those foreign characters who come India in search of spiritual peace but all they get is disease and depression.

Jhabvala wrote about all her characters like a detached observer. Initially she wrote as an observer writing about things which enchanted her and later on about things she knew too well and found them to be beyond her tolerance and naturally she became bitter and critical. Her criticism always comes through one of her Indian characters. Jhabvala excels in presenting incongruities of human characters and situations. The incongruities have social, familial and cultural implication and consequently in all the novels they become the main source of humour. V.A. Shahne analyzed this aspect of Jhabvala's novel wrote:

Jhabvala merit as a creative writer lies in her being intensely aware of her limitations. She writes about possibly the only social segment of urban Indian that she knows at First hand. (p.231)

Her first phase novels are seen chiefly as satirical portraits of Indian inconsistency, selfishness and immorality. The social documentation is precise; the Indian ethos is captured mainly through explication. With the exception of 'Esmond in India', they are particularly not involved with Europeans but portray rather Indian family-life and its constant preoccupation with finding suitable husbands for younger daughters. The first two novels, 'To Whom She Will' and 'Nature Of Passion' treat the theme of disillusionment in its gentlest and most be benign form: the comic mismatching of pairs of lovers who, as the novels progress, discover the difference between illusions and hard realities. Highlighting the Jhabvala thematic perspective Neeta Gupta has observed:

There is an abundance of drab and dreary details of daily living yet amidst all his Jhabvala skillfully unravels the complex web of human relationships –fathers and sons ,fathers and daughters ,brothers and sisters,sisters and sisters, aunts and uncles, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, husbands and wives-and so on. (p.59)

Characters in the novels of Ruth Jhabvala are generally neurotic females, highly sensitive but sequestered in a world of dream and imagination and alienated from their surroundings as a consequences of their failure or unwillingness to adjust with the reality. They often differ in their opinion from others and embark on a long voyage of con-temptation in order to find the meaning of their existence. Having wondered for long , they usually arrive at a juncture where either they find that after all their urgency has been in some essential manner very significant or sometimes simply damaged by the sexual exploitation and unable to solve the mystery that envelops their suffers. Her characters build a large spectrum. The women characters in 'A New Dominion' are main source to expose the moral degradation, brutality and corruption prevalent in the so called religious centre's and spiritual god-men (swamiji) of India :

They placed their faith in Swamiji, thinking he will bring succour to their tormented souls and transform them into new unified beings at peace with themselves and the world. Instead we have a sordid picture of selfish manipulation, social abuse, midnight orgies and callousness verging on cruelty. The Swamiji treat them as his possessions. (S.Krishnaswamy,p.325)

In Ruth Jhabvala's novels we find a different structural technique. Her first novel To Whom She Will has been divided into 39 Chapters. Each new chapter begins with separate scene and incident. But the whole novel has a single action having a good beginning, middle and

an end. The central themes of the novel are marriage, love and parents' opposition in adopting the modern ways of life. Her second novel *The Nature Of Passion* has been divided in three parts. Part one mainly deals with the Lalaji's 'rajasa' passion; part two with the westernization of young generation; part three deals with the consequences of blind imitation of western culture and parents' protection of their children. *Esmond In India* has been divided into 32 chapters. In this novel Jhabvala has successfully projected the problems related to the meeting of East and West. The plot of the novel is well knitted. Again her novel *Get Ready For Battle* has been divided into four chapters. The first chapter deals with the worldly and political life of Gulzari Lal and Sarla Devi. The Post-Independence Indian ethos has been projected in rest of the chapters. The division of the novel *The Householder* in three chapters is quite significant. The first chapter deals with the nature of house, home; and the problems and conflicts in the life of a new housewife and a householder. The second chapter delineates their moments of separation and third deals with their reunion as matured partners of life. *A New Dominion* has been divided in three parts with different locales. The setting of the first part is in Delhi, the second part is in the holy city of Banaras and part three is in an imaginary town of Rajasthan i.e. Maupur. Each part has been divided in sub-chapters with short titles like 'Lee Travels', 'Asha Is Bored', 'Gopi Comes To Tea', 'Lee Meets Asha', 'Asha Opens Her Heart', and 'Lee And Gopi Eat Kababs'. One scene changes swiftly like the scenes of the films. It also gives us a glimpse of her cinematographic technique that she used later on in writing her film-scripts and screen plays.

If we penetrate through her creative mind we could easily observe her vision of observing Indian milieu. Her novel 'To Whom She Will' is a portrait of Indian society that emerged in wake of Independence. The plot of *Amrita* appears to endorse the wisdom of that institution dear to oriental conversation, the marriage 'arranged' by the family elders between young people who lack the experience or are denied the opportunity to choose partners for themselves.

I agree that in this country an exaggerated stress is laid on such matters. But you know that I myself am not hidebound in this way; that indeed I have allowed two of my own daughters to marry outside their immediate community, and in one case quite distinctly beneath her own level of, shall we say, breeding and fortune..., the discrepancy between two families, wide. It is a gulf that I cannot find it in my conscience to allow you to bridge. (TWSW, p.7)

'The Nature of Passion' is both a novel of manners as well as morals. Its title implies an attempt on Ruth Jhabvala's part to penetrate the passions of the Indian women and to express them in her own feminine terms. From the beginning context of the novel the tension between tradition and modernity is established and Jhabvala portrays the morally, intellectually and aesthetically bleak characters dominating the scene. When Lala Narayan

Das muses about the marriage of his most beloved daughter Nimmi, Jhabvala forcefully underlines the subservient position of women in Indian social set-up as:

A woman is woman and her duties of a manIt is a woman's fate to leave the house of her father and go to a husband's house, to bear his children, to look to the comforts of his family (TNOP, p .112)

A rigorous survey of her fiction makes it clear the exploitation of the women folk has always been the persistent motif of the male power through their mechanism has changed as per the need and convenience of the hour. It is an equally noted feature in her novels that the awareness for self-identity and self-reliance has reached only the middle-class households and the average protagonists are still in a slumber of slavery and predicament to male dominance. The phenomenon of the feminine sensibilities has reached its full exposition in Jhabvala's novels of all the phases where socio-cultural ethics and morality have lost their relevance and women flit from continent to continent with a confessional independence and individuality. A long range of protagonists-Judy, Lee, Olivia, Lousie, Marietta, Harriet, Angel, Lara, Elsa and Renata-are sexuality misused victims of the enigmatically enchanting womanizers but all find themselves in a vicious and mysterious dilemma of indefinable urge to be possessed by their charismatic males even at the cost of lives. Thus Jhabvala articulates the powerful elemental passions and every woman vicariously share the fact of her protagonists and here in lies the beauty of her novels. Due to her creativity in literary world she has been compare both to Jane Austen and Chekhov. In an interview she said:

I have no consciously modelled myself on anyone. Uncounsciously (or does one say subconsciously?) more or less on every writer I have loved and admired. Any writer who has deeply thrilled me- and there have been many, many- has as it were entered into me, and so has influenced me. But to get back to Jane Austen. The reason I used to be compared to her is because my earlier books dealt with the same sort of society as hers did- i.e., the leisured middle classes, mostly concerned with eating and marrying. Also perhaps my way of looking at things may have been somewhat similar to hers- a sort of detachment?.....Again, I feel, not because of any similarity between us how could there be! I wish it were so, even by thousandth of a fraction- but because one deals with similar societies. Present day India does seem to have a lot in common, socially and economically with 19th century Russia. Especially the well to do middle classes, anguished with boredom that Turgenev and Chekhov were always writing about. (Ramlal Agarwal, p34)

Thus Jhabvala's pictorial imagination takes every small movement of men. Her technique seems curiously similar to be that of Robert Browning in his famous dramatic monologues. Browning too projects a visual perspective in Fra Lippo Lippi or Andrea Del Sarto and it

functions as an 'objective correlative' to the moral perspective. Thus minuteness and precision in Jhabvala's fiction contribute to the physical reality. It is the essence of the whole visual organization of her fictional world.

Being a European and writing about India, Jhabvala is well familiar with the European as well as Indian trends of literature. Hence her mode of expression is a queer blending of two trends of literature. Besides her Indian readers, as a writer, she is deeply conscious of her Western readers too and this awareness has profoundly affected her craft of fiction:

When one writes about India as a European and in English as I do, one writes inevitably not for Indian but for Western readers. Problems of communication present themselves; how to translate the idiom of one language into another; how to present a scene to an audience unfamiliar with its most obvious ingredients (such as temples, bazaars and motor cycle-rickshaws.) (NYT, p.36)

Jhabvala has tried to translate Indian phrases and idioms into English to give them a realistic authentic tone. In *To Whom She Will*, Radha speaks to Tarla. 'You with all your committee-shomittees,' 'you must know somebody'. The variation of committee is authentic Indian style. The following dialogue reveals the translation of Indian proverbs:

Poverty and want are terrible things. In the Panchtantra it is written, 'It is better to be dead than poor.' (TH p.12)

One more example of Indian English is worth mentioning here:

*'You talk as it is my fault that you are.'
Before he could finish, she had asked,
Then whose fault is it? (TH p.23)*

Another translation of Indian idioms can be cited here thus,

They (girls) should be remorse and soulful, like goddess they should be. (Ibid.p.23)

The following translation of Indian poems is worth appreciating.

*My granny's gone to the market
For four bowls she did pay, but
one get broken on the way.' (TH p.138)*

Ruth Jhabvala has also either translated herself or quoted the English translation of Sanskrit poems. Lala Hardayal in his parties recited Sanskrit poems:

*O swollen hath the mango sprouted and budded and bloomed.
O swollen hath our love sprouted budded and bloomed.(EII,p.63)*

And again:

*And do the thought, O lord of hearts,
Ne'er fly to me
Who sit and long, and long for thee?
Induc'd by thy arts
I pine in love's valley
When thou didst once dally
Midst oranges blossoms that cloud the clear sky
As the tear cloud my eye.(Esmond In India,p.63.)*

As a genius novelist, technical embellishments it is noteworthy that her artistic vision and craftsmanship have progressively matured and enriched along with the novelist's passage through the successive phases of her literary career. Technically, she initiated her novels with single plot, and flat stories articulating and emancipation of characters. In her novels Jhabvala introduced not only double but also triple protagonists at a time. The triple protagonists and the masquerade of three and even four generation in flashback are really innovative advancements in the field of novel-writing. In addition to this her mild irony and comic portrayal of the Indian woman turned into satire in due second phase of expatriate femininity and finally this has been replaced by acid sarcasm in the portrayal of the self delusions and disasters of western women in modern times. With the progressive maturity of Jhabvala's vision and skill her focus has probed deep into the feminine soul and psyche of the females with an artistic excellence. It is no exaggeration to state that with these literary embellishments and her superb theme of search for self definition of woman, Jhabvala is certainly a notch or too above not only the contemporary women novelists by also her predecessors in India and abroad.

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