

QUEST FOR SPIRITUALISM: A STUDY OF JHABVALA'S A NEW DOMINION

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ABSTRACT: *Ruth Praver Jhabvala is a major novelist writing in English today. However, her position is unique. She is not only different from Indo-Anglian novelists like R.K.Narayan, Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya, but also from Anglo-Indian novelists like Rudyard Kipling, E.M.Forster and Paul Scott because of her cultural segregation. She has been an expatriate right from an early age. She is a Pole by parentage, a German by birth, an English woman by education and an Indian by marriage. At the age of 24 years amid the prime of her youth in the year 1951, Ruth Praver left Britain for India as the lovely bride of C.H. Jhabvala, a young and youthful architect, stayed here for the next 25 years and made possible the publishing of her early short stories in **The New Yorker, Cosmopolitan, The Cornhill Magazine** and **Encounter**. She has said, looking back, that “as a writer considers myself exceedingly fortunate to have come here when I did and the way I did” (Agrawal, 36). Her description of this first encounter with India suggests that writing and living blended for her into an intense joy of discovery:*

“It came about instinctively. I was enraptured. I felt I understood India so well. I loved everything.” (NYT, p.5)

Key Words: *cultural segregation, encounter, expatriate.*

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)

A New Dominion comes as a surprise and a pleasant change for her readers. It marks a new phase in Jhabvala's literary career, and a deviation from the norm which marked her earlier works. A New Dominion, is of course, India again but with a new perspective. It is more about the new phenomena of confrontation between the Indian spiritualism and the

Western seekers. It is a sour bid and depression tale about European women tired of materialism; they come to India on a spiritual quest and end up in self-delusion. If Europeans are naive, gullible and weak nerve, the Indians fare no better; they are invariably small minded and sensual with a total absence of any genuine love or fellow-feeling. The theme of this novel does not present the East-West encounter but rather East-West harmony or ultimate compromise. It appears as an Indo-American union. Describing the novel, V.A.Shahane, very aptly writes:

India is no longer conceived negatively or pejoratively but rather in positive and adultery terms-as an ancient country with a rich heritage of philosophical thought and Spiritual insights, challenging, provoking, inviting and inspiring three eager-to-learn Western girls, Lee, Evie and Margret. India is evocative, inspiring, fulfilling and frustrating all at the same time in this novel. (p.46)

India has ever been hailed as a land of spiritual heritage and this country is an abode of spiritual guides. To the Westerners these spiritual values have been a great magnetic attraction which they do not find in their own land of materialistic abundance. The new cult of Indian religion and spiritual authorities which has been the subject of the two of Markandaya's novels, is another prominent aspect of modern India. But whereas Markandaya prefers to be silent, Jhabvala makes no secrets of her aversion to them, to her these religious gurus (swamiji) of post independence era are dubious characters aiming at exploitation of the seekers of soul. In 'A New Dominion' we observe the swamiji duping innocent female protagonist who drift from Western materialized life to experience the spiritual glory of India. Jhabvala shows how Westerners, especially tired of their life in hectic civilization, come to India in seek of spiritual peace and fall easy victims to these dubious gurus. In this complex of East-West confronting relationship, West is represented by three girls- Lee, Margaret, Evie, who are on spiritual quest in the new dominion. They experience joys and sorrows of unexpected intensity; heaven and hell that India's variety encompasses with her high social tradition and rich spiritual heritage. As Shanta Krishna Swamy observes :

A New Dominion opens with the three Europeans girls, Lee, Margaret and Evie, each trying to get spiritual salvation under the guidance of a swami, a holy man . The swamiji, here, the head of the centre for spiritual rejuvenation, is a disturbing study of an ascetic who uses his powers to create illusions of hope and bliss and claims wholly the souls and bodies of all his disciples. He has no qualms, either moral or religious in abusing these girls sexually.(p.325)

Jhabvala, here again, takes the position of an outsider and articulates the experiences of these western women from the point of a woman on a quest. Her vision is ironic and even acidly sarcastic on the degradation of cultural ethics and spiritual heritage of this sub-continent. She brings the Indian and the western values in colloquy through the association or conflict of the characters from distant races in the Indian setting. V.A. Shahne is correct about this aim of Jhabvala when he says :

Her principal endeavor is to depict the various aspects of 'A New Dominion', the reality that is contemporary India in its social, cultural, religious, political and spiritual context. Since the dimensions of this reality are so vast and intractable, she tries to grasp it in fragments through the characters she creates, both of East and West; they not only react to each other, creating a complex of human relationship which is central to the novel. (p.4)

Mrs. Jhabvala vehemently attacks bad and savage social practices of India. Moreover, she exposes moral degradation and hypocrisy among Indians of the new dominion through the heart teasing experiences of westerners' here. The contemptuous attitude of Indians towards western women at nothing more than treating them as free indulging sexual cranks and therefore so many Indians stare at Lee only to persuade her to succumb to their sexual desires. This attitude of Indians is somehow exposed in the form of Gopi's character, who is not satisfied by his friendship with Lee, he wants more. He knows that it would not be a difficult task for him to force Lee, and get some physical pleasure. He takes her to the hotel room and indirectly makes his intentions clear. Initially Lee refuses, but on second thought, and in attempt to clear up all misunderstandings and also in her quest to merge herself completely in the Indian society, she gives in, she says O.K. and unbuttons her blouse. Jhabvala's bitterness and irony is apparent when she writes that Gopi does not waste the time and lies on top of her. Lee suffers rather than enjoying this experience.

But she was glad to be doing this for him, and at the final moment thought to herself that perhaps this was part of the merging she has so ardently desired, while looking out of the window. (AND, p.55)

The entire episode comes out rather badly. Jhabvala perhaps has attempted to bring out a union between physical pleasures and spiritual quest. Lee in her desire to merge herself completely in this unknown Indian society succumbs to Gopi's desire, but to a normal reader, the situation is repulsive and degrading. We find Lee doing this not once but repeatedly to lose herself. The question is: does she find herself?

These relationship of relatively voluntary dominion and subjugation in the novel fall into two categories, blur and family dissolve it refers to the arms of desire on the one hand and spiritual or religious quest on the other. The female disciples and male guru are linked in a relationship of traditionally sanctioned psychological thralldom of woman whose sexual component is only thinly veiled. Thus these three girls are in voluntary thrall to Swamiji the Spiritual guide as he creates an illusion of divinity by singing Rama-Gopala! Hare Krishna! In reality the Swamiji is a knave humbug waiting to victimize these innocent devotees to satiate his fleshy thirst. The foolish devotion of three girls has been aptly defined by S. Krishnaswamy as:

They placed their faith in the 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 treats them as possessions.....(p.325)

Jhabvala's narration about the blind faith of European girls in Swamiji in search of self actualization and spiritual peace is pathetic. If, we examine that how brutally Lee was raped in a hypnotized state of mind by this so called god-man Swamiji we could easily recognize that he wants all his disciples not only spiritually but physically, he wants to possess them with their bodies and souls. The tormented girl Lee narrates the trauma of this rape.

He was terrible, terrifying; he drove right on to me and through me and calling me beastly names, shouting them out loud and at the same time hurting me as much as he could.(AND,p.199)

Lee's sexual harassment by the swamiji is frightening at any standard. After facing this self-destruction Lee's scorn and disgust for her fanatic endeavors for spiritualism is intensely pathetic. Swamiji rouge of first water. It is rouges like him that have brought ignominy to Indian spiritual heritage abroad. The recurrent animal imagery represents a stark contrast to Lee's expectations and sinister Swamiji as a sort of beast or satyr. Such a culmination to the nuanced and thrilling emotionally serves to underline the oft-noted disparities between female romantic expectations and male sexual rapacity. But it is strange that Lee has reached the point of no return in her relation with Swamiji who has no qualms, either moral or religious in abusing her. Though she once breaks out of his magnetic spell and runs under the protective umbrella of rationalistic westerners like Raymond and Mrs. Charlotte, yet her escape is all too brief and in spite of her brutal rape at Swamiji's hands she again returns to his Ashram. Lee's predicament, even at the end of the novel, implicit in her incapability to distinguish between simple bodily pleasures and spiritual bliss, remains as puzzling as ever.

This oddity of *A New Dominion* stems from curious authorial tendency to state everything in duplicate or triplicate. For instance we discover not just one Lee but at least two additional versions of her in the characters of Evie and Margaret, the identical characters whose differences lie mainly in terms of their degrees of commitment to the Swamiji. Margaret has rather a deep faith in Swamiji's spiritual powers deeper even than Lee's because when she contracts infections and deadly diseases she does not admit it. She has lost all her rationality under the spell of Swamiji's mysterious wisdom and spirituality. However, she pins her faith on the holy man's powers of rejuvenation and, though on the verge of death, she rejects Raymond's advice and offer of hospitalization and treatment at all. She argues that Swamiji has explained to her the right cause:

Doctor's don't know a thing. These diseases that people get in India, they're not physical, they're purely psychic. We only get them because we try to resist India – because we shut ourselves up in our little western egos and don't want to give ourselves. But once we learn to yield then just fall away.(AND, pp. 172-173)

In these lines Jhabvala is ironical, bitter and critical of India, and those of Europeans who in their ever lasting quest for spiritualism and a total merger in this world lose their good sense. Margaret goes back to the Ashram only to die in pathetic condition in the store room of a small hospital in Maupur. The entire episode appears to be highly oppressive and one cannot help but think whether this was her way of merging herself completely in this world, the new dominion, never to return.

On the other hand Evie, has her own way of merging here. When we are introduced to her, she is already with Swamiji and almost indispensable for him. She does everything Swamiji wants her to do without of any hesitation. Evie has implicit faith in Swamiji's spiritual power and purity of mind. The incident of reading the Big Book(a book Swamiji has written)in the ashram is a good example of different attitudes of these western characters towards Swamiji. When Lee and Raymond showed their concern towards the critical condition of Margaret due to her deadly diseases, Evie appear to be totally indifferent. She declares that the relationship of the disciple with the Guru is the most powerful and it cancels all other blood-relationships. Her fascination for swamiji appears to be inscrutable, and difficult to describe. It becomes gruesome and grotesque, when in the hospital she tells Lee "We will go soon now. As soon as Margaret dead'. She, forgetting Margaret's suffering adds joy full ."How *happy he will be able to have us back.*"(AND,p.231)Not only this, Evie now considers herself and all those who are in Ashram with Swamiji to be Hindus. As after Margret's death, the question arises of her burial but Evie is firm in her conviction that she was a Hindu. She says:

Becoming a Hindu is not like becoming a Christian. You don't have to take formal baptism or anything, but freely assent to the truth within you.(AND,p.241)

No one could go against what Evie has pronounced to be the ultimate truth and Margaret is criminated the way Hindus are.

Besides these three girls Jhabvala has portrait another western woman character in the novel, Miss Charlotte, a missionary who has dedicated more than thirty years of her life doing charitable work in India. It is through her that we see the other face of Indian society. The condition of old Europeans who continue to live in India even after its independence and also the pathetic condition of poor Indian people. Miss Charlotte's work was and full of dedication. She is neither a seeker nor a lover. She is in India with a definite aim to serve the sick and suffers. Describing her Haydn M. Williams writes:

In a novel full of searchers for spiritual peace(Asha, Lee, Margaret, Evie, perhaps even Raymond in his own way), Miss Charlotte seems the only one to peace with herself, God and India. She may have obtained the goal the seekers look for in vain.(p.258)

Coming to the Indian characters in the novel, we have Banubai(another Indian Charlotte)the great prophetess, has been portrayed by Mrs. Jhabvala with the least ironic streaks. She is a holy woman and, unlike Swamiji, she helps the poor and those middle-class people who come to her with their problems. She advises them and tries to give them peace and solace. Banubai

develops an instant liking for Gopi and disliking for Raymond. It is through her Raymond, that Jhabvala has been able to present the confluence of East and West, spiritualism and materialism. Banubai tells Raymond, "We don't want people like you here." She said, "Only those who truly appreciate our culture are welcome." And says:

For two hundred years you tried to make us believe that you are superior persons. But now the tables are turned. Now that your culture is bankrupt and your lives have become empty and meaningless, you are beginning to learn, where truth has been hidden and stored away throughout the centuries. You are not capable of learning. To learn from us have to be wide open! And full of humility.(AND,p.161)

The novelist has cleverly summed up the East-West relations in the modern world in the above lines. The West hunger for spiritual values in turning to the East. "What can the East offers them," in the question Jhabvala attempts to answer in her *New Dominion*?

Jhabvala exposes the moral degradation hypocrisy and sexuality of Indians like Swamiji, Gopi and others who exploit the western seekers aiming at attaining the Indian glory. V.A.Shahne is right in his assessment of **A New Dominion**:

The Indians in this novel are almost invariably sensual, sex hungry, hypocritical, pretentious, egoistic and self willed except for Banubai, the puzzling prophetess, and Bob, a go-head young man.(p.52)

Thus the morality is at its lowest ebb in the country as the novel is not merely of a few individuals thrown together but of a country in a moment of meeting of two different cultures. It fails to solve the enigma of failure of three women's attempt to build a bridge between the two extremes.

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