

## Ruth Praver Jhabvala: Role of an Expatriate Woman in English Fiction

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**ABSTRACT:** *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. She has her own style and technique in portraying the different aspects of Indian society. She often portrays the predicament of individuals in their relationships with their families. It is the experience of European women married to Indian men and Indian women married to Europeans that has also been her concern as a writer. The portrayal of interaction between two cultures, European and Indian, seems to be her forte. The major themes in Jhabvala's fiction are east-west encounter and marital dissonance which are mutually interlinked in their negative context. In the positive context, these may be described as fruitful and happy amalgam of the east and west, culminating in marital harmony and joy. The clash of wills and personalities is dramatically portrayed in her novels.*

**Keywords:** *predicament, marital dissonance, happy amalgam.*

### INTRODUCTION

Ruth Praver Jhabvala born on 7th May 1927 to a polish parents in Germany came to England with her family in 1939. Educated in England. Ruth Praver Jhabvala is often described as an “inside outsider” and “outside insider” Heat and Dust and Three Continents. She won the Booker Award for her novel Heat and Dust for the year 1975. ; To Whom She Will, Esmond in India, A Backward Place, A New Dominion are some of her other novels. Ruth Praver Jhabvala mirrors the social back-ground of India in her works. Jhabvala's technique is delineating the picture of the poor plight of poverty of the country. In this respect she has assumed a universal place and position. The major themes in Jhabvala's fiction are East West Encounter and marital dissonance. It has social, cultural and spiritual dimensions.

#### i) Comparison with contemporary writers

“Novelists use a combination in varying proportions of what they have experienced what they have discovered and what they have imagined.”(1) Ruth Praver Jhabvala occupies a distinguished place among the novelists of Indo-Anglican literary scene. She undoubtedly

ranks foremost among the outstanding novelists of post Independence era and is considered second to none but the big three — Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan. Just like Kamala Markandaya, Nayan Tarashagal, Anita Desai and other female writers, she too has enriched the literary horizon of post- independence period with varied hues of her fictional mosaic. In spite of her divergent culture and upbringing, she has remained in tune with her contemporary socio-literary milieu. She seems true to the observation that “*Women are natural story tellers even when they don’t write or publish.*” (2)

## ii) Jhabvala as Inside -outsider and Outside- insider

Ruth Praver Jhabvala is often described as an “inside outsider” and “outside insider”. Jhabvala came to India at the age of twenty-four as the young bride of a Parsi architect. Her creative urge found its artistic expression during her long stay in India. She stayed in India for more than twenty years. In her novels she repeatedly discusses the theme of interaction between the two cultures, namely European and Indian.

Jhabvala’s pre occupation with India confers on her a distinguished position in the world of Indian-English literature. She remarkably deals with the problems of the expatriates, their psychological turmoil and cultural schizophrenia with insight and understanding. She has written novels like *Esmond In India*, *A Backward Place*, *Heat and Dust* and *Three Continents*. She won the Booker Award for her novel *Heat and Dust* for the year 1975.

Jhabvala uses her creative faculties with rare insight and displays an amazing range of experience and imagination in perceiving the reality of her surroundings. Jhabvala in her fiction presents a blatantly realistic picture of the post- independence familial and social scene of urban India

Jhabvala’s 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 the entire political, social and economic issues .She has discussed the plight and dilemma of those foreign characters that come India in search of spiritual peace but all they get is disease and depression.

She 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'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 Indian that she knows at First hand. (3)*

### iii) Description of India through her novels

Jhabvala is a novelist who is known for her behaviorism rather than psychoanalyst approach. Her characters follow a distinct code of conduct affecting various aspects of their lives. Conflicts delineated in her novels are primarily outer ones, yet she is humane enough to feel the ache at the heart of the humanity. Her characters encounter variegated existential problems such as adjustment between the husband and the wife, between man and society. The problems of her characters arise from their social and cultural interaction. Her writings show her awareness of man and society in their human and moral dilemmas. Her awareness of a group of people, their culture and tradition, at times, transcends the racial barriers and become one with the universal human being. She herself is a European married to an Indian and has lived in India for quite a long time. She displays a deep understanding of her women characters, especially the European ones living in India. This can be studied biographically also. In the beginning of her arrival in India she was very happy about everything she saw around. For that reason her earlier novels have the comic attitude and later ones are satirical.

Her first novel; *To Whom She Will* presents a very beautiful picture on Indian society –its rites and customs, taste and temperament and above all, marriage and love with an element of illicit relationships. The nature of *Passion* deals with a modern young girl, Nimmi, who wants to discard the ago-old customs and rites, myths and tradition. She fights for the cause of woman's emancipation. She attends club regularly, plays tennis, keeps bob cut hair, and attends lectures on English Romantic poets. But on the other hand, her community is dead against all her western activities. Through Nimmi, the novelist wants to satirize these silly youngsters who have false pretensions to modernism and independence. They should always bear in their mind that their sentiments, emancipations, individuality, anti-traditional responses, mental processes are conditioned by a social structure of parental affection. Both *Esmond in India* and *A Backward Place* ring the note of east-west encounter. *Esmond in India* tells the story of Esmond Stillwood, an Englishman, Who marries Gulab, the beautiful Indian girl. But the marriage fails due to the different nature in both the character Esmond is selfish and mean. Gulab is rough and unsophisticated. In *A Backward Place*, Juddy, an English girl, marries an Indian actor BAL. But this marriage also does not succeed because of their different mentality. *The Householder* is a domestic comedy which shows Jhabvala's acute perception of remote village life, the conflicts between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law- the one with domineering accusations and the other with tacitum enmity. The novel revolves round the life of Prem, a sensitive young man and a teacher who is absolutely surprised by the strange city and also by an early marriage. R.P.Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* won her the prestigious Booker Prize in 1975. It deals with the sad and moving story of two English women who paid their visit to India and in return they became the victims of this country. The narrative technique of the novel is equally important. It moves backward and forward from 1923 to the present with ease and felicity. It reminds of *The God Small Things*, a novel by Arundhati Roy. The narrator of the novel is

unnamed up to the end. Nissim Ezekiel in his famous article “Distorting Mirror” views that Jhabvala has made the country stranger in her imagination overheated by hatred. As a matter of fact, if we judge her works, we come to the conclusion that her early works are richly devoted to India and she can be seen loving this country. But latter on, she becomes blunt and cold to this strange land. She observes:

“I suppose it could be put down to my change of attitude towards India. I lived every thing during my first years here really loved it and was wildly excited by it and never wanted to go away from here. But later that changed. I saw a lot I didn’t like. I’ll go further: a lot that horrified me.”

While Ruth Praver Jhabvala mirrors the social background of India in her works. She has achieved an international reputation as the most popular novelist of social and economic problems of the present century. Novelist of passion, she emerges as a social realist, a prophet and a crusader of evils in her novels and stories right from her first novel *To Whom She Will* (1955). Her idea of cosmopolitan humanism is so compact and comprehensive that it embraces the entire gamut of human experience. Thus all her novels are the novels of social realism, responsibility, involvement and creative tension and its resolution. Her love for India as a past glory is not a romantic aspiration of the novelist but it is basically the result of an expatriate’s understanding and familiarity with the Indian traditions and culture. India is presented and portrayed as a country passing through the criss-crosses of the conflicts between tradition and modernity.

Description about India through Jhabvala’s vision

Thus, disillusionment, disappointment or distress and death are the inevitable dark harvest of Jhabvala’s characters like Child and his companions, Lee and Margaret. C.Paul Verghese also holds the same view when he says that Jhabvala depicts this picture of fake Sadhus simply because it.

*“enables her to attempt a satirical portrait of India and ridicule the Pseudo-idealism and pseudo-romanticism of Indians and the westerners who are in love with India and come to India seeking spiritual solace.”(4)*

Ruth Praver Jhabvala is essentially a European writer who has lived in India and given to her experience of life and society in this country as artistic expression. She usually presents the traditional undivided family as a “given” and only by implication criticizes it. It is the grand work of several novels and hovers on the background of the others. Sociologically, the family is the most important component of the Indian society and one of the chief guardians of social conservatism. The undivided family is the epitome of traditional middle-class, the old ruling but protecting the young and the young protesting and usually yielding, though occasionally breaking away like the sparks shot off from a cart-wheel. The major theme in her novels is marital dissonance, which arises from maladjustment. By bringing to surface the causes of dissonance, Jhabvala has tried to bring about the ways which will result in marital consonance. Mostly her novels deal with the initial experiences of married life. This is a stage which needs proper adjustment though it is not

always easy, as two grown-up people, brought up in different circumstances and situations, come together and want to establish their identity. Each wants to dominate. Unless there is proper understanding, marital harmony cannot be achieved. All her novels create a macro-world, a world fully familiar to many Indians. The world has been recreated and represented through the medium of the ludicrous and the humorous.

## CONCLUSION

The major themes in Jhabvala's fiction are 'East West Encounter' and marital dissonance' which are mutually interlinked in their negative context. The theme of East-west encounter in Jhabvala's fiction has social, cultural and spiritual dimensions. In the social context. Indians and Europeans meet fall in love, get married, and face either mutual dissonance or familial friction. In the socio-economic themes, it is the poor, the unemployed, the 'jobless', the down-trodden who suffer most and fail to find out to make their both ends meet. Here the novelist does not prescribe any remedy to redress this socio economic melody. Most of the characters presented by her are the middle-class people who wander between two worlds-one of so-called unfulfillment materially, mentally, and spiritually and other of fulfillment just barely. On the whole, the heart of the matter is Jhabvala's preoccupation with what India does to the Europeans. It also shows how characters out into the wider world has widened their scope and perspective especially when one thinks of the limited world of Jane Austen with whom Jhabvala is often compared. Jhabvala's creative work has no philosophical concerns and concept which alone push literature to the level of higher significance. In the words of Mathew Arnold, it may be said that her work lacks high seriousness, or she fails to apply the touchstone method in her novels.

Verghese also feels that Jhabvala's "*understanding of India is not deep and she just skims over the surface of the Urban life India*" (p.33)

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