

Ruth Praver Jhabvala CBE Insight into the Old, Perception of the New: Thematic Concerns in her Novels.

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Abstract

Ruth Praver Jhabvala CBE, in her novels opens before us a wide vista of Indian society, customs, western men and women, confrontation of both the East and the West, role of religion, pseudo modernism, affectation and hypocrisy in the contemporary Indian middle class. The paper seeks to analyze the thematic concerns in her Novels of the first phase. The intent of this paper is to seek how as a European she observes the Indian social milieu in her novels.

Keywords: European perception, confrontation of East and West, Indian society and manners.

Introduction:

Ruth Praver Jhabvala (1927-2013) born in Cologne to a Polish father and German mother, immigrated to Britain, earned a degree in English Literature from London University. In 1951 she moved to India after marrying Indian architect Cyrus Jhabvala. Though a Polish by birth, she made commendable contribution to the Indian English Novel. Her love for writing brought her international fame in the World.

She is the author of several novels, her first being *To Whom She Will* (1955) *The Nature of Passion* (1956), *Esmond in India* (1958), *The Householder* (1960), *Get Ready for Battle* (1962), *A Backward Place* (1965), *A New Dominion* (1972), *Heat and Dust* (1975), *In Search of Love and Beauty* (1983), *Three Continents* (1987), *Poet and Dancer* (1993) and *Shards of Memory* (1995).

Her insightful novels were almost written in the style of "comedy of manners". After residing in India, she began to elaborate her experiences about modern India. Apart from her novels she also wrote a number of scripts for film and television, many with Merchant Ivory production. *The Householder* with screenplay by Jhabvala was filmed in 1963. In 1975 she won the prestigious Booker Prize for her novel *Heat and Dust*. Further the Merchant Ivory production of *Heat and Dust* as a film in 1983 won Jhabvala the BAFTA AWARD for Best Adapted Screenplay, 1984. With dozen novels at her hand, 23 screenplays and eight collections of short stories this extraordinary woman novelist of rare ingenuity received the MacArthur Fellowship 1984. She also received the Academy Award in 1986 for Best Adapted Screenplay adaptations of E.M. Forster novels - *Howards End* (1992) and *A Room with a View* (1985). Jhabvala was honored with CBE in 1998.

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A Polish by birth Jhabvala made commendable contribution to the Indian English Novel. Her first novel *To Whom She Will* (published in the United States was *AMRITA*) was released in 1955. In *New York Herald Tribune Book World Review*, Nancy Wilson Ross welcomed the publication as a fresh and witty novel about modern India. Jhabvala the Indian Jane Austen minutely depicts the Indian Society and social manners. She keenly studies the tightly conventional, traditional Indian World. Highlighting both the worlds of the East and the west, the diehard conventions and the modern, with acute observation the 'outsider insider' delves deep into the Indian panorama of customs, trends and manners, all set in an almost accurate picture with endless, curiosity. The satirical perspective when describing Indian family, India's struggle to adapt to a new social mobility are remarkably penned down. The novels also narrate about the parallel stories of colonial and contemporary India. Her first departure from Indian subject matter occurred. In *search of Love and Beauty* (1983) which portrays Austrian and German refugees searching for spiritual truths in New York.

Jhabvala very realistically projects the situation of Indian woman caught in a web of social change from tradition to modernity. Though being foreigner, her perception and acute observation of Indian sensibility is remarkable. She presents the true picture of the lower middle classes, their customs, norms and how they are engrossed in their traditions.

Far from the suffering rural peasantry of Kamala Markandaya, Jhabvala's characters dwell in a mundane, materialistic and cosmopolitan world of Delhi. She concentrates upon the conflicts between the elders and their modern adolescent heirs, immature fancies and romanticism the collision between the traditional and modern, the vulnerability of expatriate sensibilities and family conflicts. Her sharp penetrating Polish eyes can well scrutinize the Social Taboos and institutions. In an interview with Ramlal Agarwal, Jhabvala reveals that she writes about "the leisured middle classes, mostly concerned with eating and marriage."

Discord in Matrimony

The woman in her novels represents the matrimonial crisis and a lot of disharmony and disruption in the matters of love and sex. In *Esmond in India* and *A Backward Place* matrimonial crisis is treated with a keen awareness of its complexity. In *Esmond in India* Gulab has married a European, Esmond Stillwood. They have differences in ways of living, cultural patterns and values. The cultural conventions lead to marital dissonance and break up of human bonds.

Another novel of Jhabvala's *A Backward Place* describes the struggles and sufferings of an English girl Judy, married to an unsuccessful Indian actor Bal. Judy represents the class of women, who are economically independent and thus she is the bread winner, as her handsome film - actor husband is usually without work. Bal is certainly an unsuitable husband for Judy. Bal who dreams of becoming a film hero neglects Judy and their son Prittur.

The emotional lapses completely disturb the matrimonial relationship. The marriage of Bal and Judy differs not because of the difference in race but because of the clash in their temperaments. In *To Whom She Will* *PREMA* and *SURI* betray for a lack of matrimonial harmony. Marriage could be merely an adjustment rather than real involvement in human relationship. In this novel the social theme is explored through the complexities and complications which parents, as the responsible agents of social institution induct into marriage. The reconciliation that makes the final marriage possible is quite ironically brought about when *AMRITA* who in the about beginning loves *Hari*, is

apparently reconciled to the notion of marrying Krishna Sen Gupta.

In *Get Ready for a Battle*, SARLA DEVI a Gandhian idealist devoted to the poor, cherishes higher values of life and finds it impossible to live with her materialistic husband Gulzarilal. Her consuming thirst to work for the betterment of Indian society wrecks and ruins her marriage. Though woman of the late sixties she is woman of the approximating to that of this millennium.

THE INDIAN DOMINION and WOMAN FROM THE WEST

In *A New Dominion* a western group of women characters LEE, MARGARET and EVIE unite and take to Indian mysticism. The falsity and frivolity of fashion, the mundane materialistic approach of the English middle class society diverts these women weary with western ways towards an experience for spiritually rich India, her godmen, her swamis, who they feel will bring succour to their tormented soul.

Heat and Dust, a profound and powerful novel, winner of the Booker Prizes is set in colonial India during the 1920s, *Heat and Dust* tells the story of OLIVIA, a beautiful woman suffocated by the propriety and social constraints of her position as a wife of an important English Civil servant. Longing for passion and independence Olivia is drawn into the spell of the NAWAB, a minor Indian prince deeply involved in gang raids and criminal plots. She is intrigued by the Nawab's charm and aggressive courtship, and soon begins to spend most of her days in his company. But, she becomes pregnant, and unsure of the child's paternity, she is faced with a wrenching dilemma. Her reaction to the crisis humiliates her husband and outrages British community, breeding scandal that lives in collective memory long after death.

Jhabvala in drawing her characters takes the pragmatic and rationalistic approach. The eyes of this foreigner, turn sardonic on seeing the immature swings of hollow sentimentalism, pseudo-westernism, and the blind imitation of the West that leaves the Indian youth nowhere. She projects the complicated norms of the Indian society. She instead of creating new realms for the new woman or creating for us new role models like Sahgal, gives us the actual realities in India.

She brings before us the most hard boiled conservative domestic kingdom of the ladies as in Lalaji's household (*The Nature of Passion*); the mothers in law. whose surviving motive and only ambition left in life is to give vent to her years of frustration by suppressing the daughter-in-law (*The Householder*); the male perspective that no woman could be superior to him (as PREM in the *Householder*); and the westernized foppish culture Snobs who resent the coarse old fashioned, ways and rigid orthodoxy and think that only fluent English and smart clothes make a person cultured and superior than the common man.

Jhabvala's women are routine figures believing in the predictable domestic life, who do not strive to achieve something great but satiated with parental wishes. In her world of fiction marriage becomes a social compromise and is based on mutual adjustments. Her heroines AMRITA, NIMMI, SHAKUNTALA young, immature, inexperienced coloured in the pseudo-western culture, turn to be romantic minded but lack the strength of will, or the higher consciousness and will to fight all vicissitudes as the women in Kamala Markandaya. They are the "Sleeping Beauties" waiting for the Prince Charming. Jhabvala but always provides a resolution to their conflicts and problems in making the views of the elders prevail. Consent of the parents, respecting their wishes and marrying in one's own community indicate several aspects in a woman's life in the Indian social context.

Her familiarity and knowledge of the Indian Family life, the Indian Society and the Indian sensibility assumes greater dimensions as this awareness and familiarity with a group of people, their culture and tradition have to be harmonized with the consciousness of the universal woman that is at the center of the art of her fiction.

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