



Indianness in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's Fiction

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Abstract: *This paper brings out Indianness in Jhabvala's fiction. 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. The Indianness 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. The Indianness of the Indian art of fiction in English is therefore very much a part of that art itself.*

Key words: *Indianness, Indian society, cultural fragmentation.*

As Shahane opines, "Jhabvala should not be linked with other creative Indian writers in English such as Mulk Raj Anand, Rajarao or R.K. Nayan, nor with the women novelists such as Kamala Markandaya or Nayanatara Sahagal."¹ She is in a way unique in her treatment of subjects. She can view the state of human affairs in an Indian family from a point view which is both objective and unsentimental.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, born in Germany and raised in England and moved to India in the fifties. Later, she got married to settle for the better part of her life. Jhabvala has acclaimed a worldwide identity as one of India's leading writer of fiction. Ruth Praver Jhabvala is known to the world with her novel *Heat and Dust* (1975), a post colonial novel. The novel runs between 1920s and 1970s as the narrator recollects the scandalous and discreditable history of her grandmother

and her own experiences in India. Her novel *Heat and Dust* was awarded the prestigious Booker Prize in London. This novel seems to have become Ruth Praver Jhabvala's major obsession 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."²

She is essentially a European writer who has lived in India and given to her experience of life and society in this country in an artistic expression. Sometimes several problems arise in evaluating the works of creative writers dealing with India who are not really Indian in the usual sense.

But Jhabvala's knowledge and awareness of the Indian character, the Indian family, the Indian society and the Indian sensibility assume great significance. As Vasant Says "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.”³ The advantage of her is because she is basically a European living in India, she can be detached, ironic, and satirical. She can view the Indian society from the point of view which is objective and unsentimental. According to Reed “Jhabvala is equipped to deal with the mysteries of Indian Psyche. He continues, she is 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.”⁴ While speaking about her experience of living in India Jhabvala says:

“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.”⁵

While she was in India she cannot but believe the harsh realities of India in different aspects of Indian life. She says: “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.” Jhabvala says “another approach to India’s basic conditions is to accept them.” this seems to be the approach favoured by most Indians. Jhabvala is also very critical of the validity of the

westernized Indians’ attitude to the problem 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 Indian’s 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 herds, cunning and compassion – but what is more important is that they feel they for a family, a social unit in which individuals either conform or revolt. About the joint family life in India Jhabvala says:

“There is 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.”⁶

Jhabvala’s creativity as a writer lies in her being intensely aware of her limitations. She writes about the urban India only that she knows at first hand. Apart from dealing with the upper class, she also delineates the rising commercial bourgeois. 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 basic endeavour is to portray the human portent of this society caught in the conflict of a change from tradition to modernity.

Jhabvala excels in presenting incongruities of human character and situations. These congruities have social, familial and cultural implications and consequently they become the source of the comic.

The Indianness of Indian writers in English or European writers on India has often been raised in relevant critical forums. The problems of Indian sensibilities, Indian culture and tradition, Indian value-patterns, Indian way of looking at life have been considered the heart of the matter in creative writing. It is of course true that Indian creative writing, specially 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, one 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.

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. 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 example, 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. Jhabvala shows her deep awareness of this aspect of Indian society.

The novels dramatize the clashes between two families or two individuals in the family 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 characterise the social world of Jhabvala's fiction.

Jhabvala is preoccupied with portraying the predicament of individuals in their relationship to the family, to the social group, in a way which demonstrates her Indianness.

The other dimension of this Indian familial setting which Jhabvala presents with considerable power and acute sense of inward understanding. The experience of European woman 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.

The interaction between two cultures, European and Indian is Jhabvala's special theme. In fact, it is her forte since it is in this area that her personal experience in India is transformed into art. In revealing autobiographical essay, 'Living in India' published in London Magazine in September, 1970, Jhabvala writes: "I have lived in India for most of my adult



life. my husband is Indian and so are my children .I am not , less so every year.”

Jhabvala in this personal memoir has spoken of her varied reactions to this country and its people. She knows that India reacts strongly on foreigners and they either love it or loathe it or do both. She has herself passed through this cycle of great enthusiasm for India where everything seemed marvellous to the other extreme where everything appeared so abominable. The cycle renews itself, but for how long? In this context Jhabvala writes: “however, I must admit that I am no longer interested in India. What I am interested in now is myself in India.” This confessional mood paves the way for outlining the process of her creativity and the way it transforms life into art. Jhabvala echoes the sentiments of Virginia Woolf.

Jhabvala's creative self seems to be the sole occupant of her especial, individually designed room, from where she could view the outside world. This outer weather affects the inner weather of Jhabvala's sensitivity. The her attitude to India and the world of her fiction hardens; she grows critical, ironic, even bitter. Sympathy is replaced by antipathy because the room is no longer her own, her close preserve; it is invaded by the outside atmosphere. It loses itself in a larger India and the creator of fiction becomes one with her created world. She writes about the way India overwhelms her: “India swallows me up and now it seems to me that I am no longer in my room but in the white-hot city streets under white –hot sky.”

The heat in India is oppressive, yet Jhabvala envisions many figures in it which take hold of her imagination and creative self. She realizes that religion and religious devotion are potent forces in India. The Indian sky is huge,

expensive, clear which seems to dominate the destiny of man. Jhabvala greatly admires Indian devotional songs of the Bhakti cult on the themes which draw parallels between man's love of God and man's love for women.

Khuswant singh calls ‘the adopted daughter of India. She is sincere in resisting false fables, and desires to avoid the mere appearances such as a sari-which will make her look like Indian. She is also tempted to be defiant and European but in the end she visualizes a possibility of merging with the Indian earth.

“Of course, this can't go on indefinitely and in the end I'm bound to lose- if only at the point where my ashes are immersed in the Ganges to the accompaniment of Vedic hymns, and then who will say that I have not truly merged with India?”⁷

Jhabvala's later reaction to Europe, the continent of her birth and upbringing, is not one of nostalgia bit restlessness- a restlessness which impels her to return to India, the country of her voluntary residence. “I do sometimes go back to Europe. but after a time I get bored there and want to come back here. I also find it hard now to stand the European climate. I have got used to intense heat and seem to need it.”

She may perhaps be considered a European writer on India yet her creative work provides ample evidence of her Indianness, the aesthetic design of her art, moulded by her experience of life in India. In the early years of her experience of this country seems to try to transplant a little Europe of her own in India , but with the passage time the plant has grown into a tree with a native growth , which is watered and nourished by the Indian earth.



Jhabvala's great merit as an artist is that she has eminently succeeded in giving artistic expression to this sense of mild alienation in her awareness of man and society in India. Man and society in India today are involved not merely in change from tradition to modernity but in a process of cultural fragmentation. She portrays this change with an acute awareness and sensitivity.

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