

Socio-cultural Background and Its Impact on Ruth Praver

Jhabavala

Dr. Geeta Kapil

Associate Professor

Vidyant Hindu P.G. College

Lucknow

India

Abstract:

The post-independence Indian novels in English, written mainly by women share as their group characteristic a strong social sense since almost all of them deal with the socio-cultural variety, the various currents and cross-currents, grades and shades of the multi-dimensional Indian reality. In the light of this observation Ruth Praver Jhabavala becomes prominent for us. She comes to write in the fifties and remained in India for full twenty-five years- the period that is marked almost by a complete metamorphoses of the Indian social values and structures, her handling of certain segments of the complex socio-cultural Indian reality has been seemingly so successful that critics have been lured to call her an 'inside-outsider' despite her own assertion that she should not be considered an 'Indian writer' but as 'one of those European writers who have written about India' The present study mainly consists of pre-migration phase of her creative activity where there appears to be a deep appreciation verging on nostalgia for everything Indian. Her German roots make it easy to appreciate the traditional set up of the Indian society. Therefore, the focus is mainly on the novels written in the first phase of her literary career when she was romantically involved with India and to reassess the validity and authenticity of Jhabavala's vision of the Indian socio-cultural reality. This is a critico-analytical study based on the major themes of her novels and investigates if the change in theme involves corresponding shifts in style and also a corresponding maturity of vision or is it just of mere cosmetic value for the audience in the West. Thus if once the novel is supposed to be realistic, it must stand the acid test of credibility. We as Indians are familiar with our milieu and we know also the moment in which Jhabavala has written her novels. We must, therefore, judge the society she paints and the characters she creates on the test of credibility.

Key-words: Expatriate, Post- Independence, Socio-cultural, Sensibility, Urban.

From the vantage point of today, it appears quite fascinating to take a backward glance at the trials and tests through which the Indian Fiction in English has come out successfully to present its credentials as a powerful expression of the Indian reality in all its variegated shades and moods. The linguistic medium is common but the works are so disparate and finely differentiated from region to region and period to period that to study them is both complex and interesting. The panorama that unfolds is inviting enough to critics to undertake their own exercises in understanding the complex Indian Sensibility which the creative writers present in their works.

With these preliminary observations we may now proceed to take a closer look at the problems of an Indian Writer writing in English who has to cope with the phenomena of 'inside-outsider' or 'outside-insider. An off shoot of the American habit of coining exotic terminology for matters of critico-aesthetic significance, the two phrases present the dilemma of the expatriate Indian novelists or the writers writing in India but with foreign roots. Since this work is a study of Ruth Praver Jhabvala who is European of German-Jewish stock married to an Indian, it would be proper to dwell on the issue in some detail. But before doing that it is equally proper to have a short hindsight view of 'the moment' which provides 'the local habitation and a name' to the artistic world of Jhabvala. The long history of wandering had given the Jews a racial habit of allocating and reallocating themselves in distant lands. The Jewish strain in Jhabvala's vein could easily feel at home in India. Initially she was happily placed in Delhi almost immediately after our independence. Her Indian stay for more than a score in the growing capital of India enables her to see the changing face of India which must have fascinated her imagination because India in those days was a strange amalgam of tradition and modernity, orthodoxy and enlightenment, pettiness and nobility, jealousies and magnanimous benevolence. While the senior generation of the Indian novelists writing in English could continue their stories of class and cast tussle through the socio-economic and ritualistic tension, Jhabvala being an 'outside-insider' could easily find her fictional material through, what M.R. Arnold calls, 'a hotch-potch world of -inconsistencies' of the Indian social system. Her experience of the Indian social problems being partial, the best option before her was to concentrate on what she should see and feel around her own home and circle. The fact that the Indian novels written by women of the fifties present a clear cut difference in their choice of themes. Attia Hosain, Kamla Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal and Jhabvala try to record the familial tensions in which women have to be involved sometimes actively but very often as passive spectators. Jhabvala's vision could realize the complexity of the Indian social scene but her narrow experience stints

her efforts at exploring the creative possibilities of the rich fictional material lurking behind the surface realities of the Indian life. She confines, therefore to the domestic frictions and hypocrisies of the Indian middle class life. The writer is inevitably an expression of his days. As Joan Rockwell aptly asserts:

‘I think that the patterned connection between society and fiction is so discernible and so reliable that literature ought to be added to the regular tools of social investigation. I think it can be shown that literature is the product of society rather than the crystallised result of private fantasy.’

Jhabvala’s position is different from her contemporaries due to her birth, parentage and cultural background. She herself delineated her position as a European writer writing about India.

“I write differently from Indian writers because my birth, background, ancestry and traditions are different. If I must be considered anything, then let it be as one of those European writers who have written about India.”

It is a generally accepted fact that her stay in India exhibited a kind of love-hate, or like-dislike for things basically a part of the Indian reality. Various described as an inside-outsider, and outside-insider, the fact remains that she could not adjust herself in India for different emotive and cultural reasons. During her stay in India, she kept herself away from the ground realities surrounding her though she kept on observing the behaviours of Indian along with their tradition and life-style. This close observation of the author, resulting in the early novels written on the life surrounding her during her stay in India was not devoid of an ironic smile. The ironic tinge is attributable to her previous cultural background underlying the incongruity present in the Indian life situations. It is because of her ironic detachment and ‘ivory tower’ that she is often, though not always exactly compared to Jane Austin but is like a gentler Mary MacCarthy. The position of Jhabvala in the Indian context also poses a matchless problem of cultural encounter in the area of literary criticism.

Her life as an expatriate in England is a subject of description in her ironic comedy ‘A Birthday in London’. The theme of loneliness and isolation, emerging from her personal impression of different cultures, remained untouched until six years after her departure from England. Ruth’s first novel about India was ‘Esmond in India’ in which her expatriate encounter with India is not without excitement. A reading of the novel discloses the fact that she came to love and like most of the things she encountered in India. In fact, the position of the writer was determined by the large extended family of her husband’s Punjabi, business partner which provided her an

opportunity to observe the Indian life and particularly the Hindu life at close quarters. The joint family system, so common for an Indian, deeply impressed her European consciousness. She had seen the European system of family which kept people in isolation and loneliness. She observed minutely the family quarrels, traditions, behaviours and their customs. The joint family that removes the boredom and loneliness also enhances the ennui when it becomes a barrier in the identity of the individual. In the triangle of love in India, the third side of the triangle is not an individual but a more powerful and less defined force, represented by the joint family. This familiar Indian institution serves several purposes in the Indian English fiction. In the fiction of Ruth Jhabvala, this phenomenon gives opportunity for the study of human group behaviours, it symbolizes an expensive pre-industrial way of life, and it represents a deeper entrenched force of orthodoxy against which the individual may find himself helpless. This set of descriptions may be taken as a criticism of the Indian way of living reached after a lifelong endeavour of an Indian. But the position of Ruth Jhabvala as an expatriate enables her to move beyond this conclusion and her romance with India could not last long. She gives an explanation of this change which is based on her own experience and her observation of the western people in India. She perceives a cycle of intense emotional variations to which she finds all sensitive westerners who spend any appreciable time in India as being inevitable:

‘There is a cycle that Europeans- by European I mean all Westerners including Americans tend to pass through. It goes like this: first stage tremendous enthusiasm- everything Indian is marvellous, second stage, everything Indian is not so marvellous, third stage, everything Indian abominable. For some people it ends there, for others the cycle renews itself and goes on. I have been through it many times that now I think of myself as strapped to a wheel that goes round and round and sometimes I’m up and sometimes I’s down. When I meet other Europeans, I can usually tell after a few moments conversation at what stage of the cycle they happen to be’

Her description of the cycle can, for certain, be correlated to the development of her career as a novelist. The novels of the first phase like ‘To Whom She Will’, ‘The Householder’, ‘A Backward Place’ are written in the period of her initial romantic involvement with India. The attitude of Ruth Jhabvala towards India changed after her visit to England. She was disillusioned with India’s extreme poverty and corruption which found expression in her novels like ‘The Nature of Passion’ and ‘Get Ready for Battle.’ With the two novels one phase of her encounter with India was over and the process of disillusionment got complete. ‘A New Dominion’ and ‘Heat and Dust’ forecast the final escape of Jhabvala from India to New York

where she got settled in 1975. Her attitude towards India kept on changing with her geographical displacement and shifting new experiences in India. The last phase of her cycle and the final detachment from all things Indian comes in the novels like *The Three Continents*; the novel which travels along with the writer from India to Europe and then to America.

The geographical displacement brings a change in her fiction along with her position as a writer. For two decades, Jhabvala had been specializing in the fictional case studies of European under the Indian sun and the chemical reactions that set in. In 'Heat and Dust' the things have changed. It is said that 'Heat and Dust' can be compared to 'A Passage to India.' The shadow of Forster looms heavily on 'Heat and Dust' though the symbolic representation is supplied by social realism. There is much of formal levelling in 'A Passage to India' as its aim was to present the intellectual discussion and political moves in the Indian society under the British rule. All though Jhabvala is too competent a novelist to need to borrow from a well-known classic like 'A Passage to India' but the similarity invite interesting speculations. Meenakshi Mukherji sums up the whole matter in this way:

'Forster's symbolic vision is unique to him and Jhabvala can be compared to him at the level of special realism. 'A Passage to India' is only superficially a novel about a particular society at a particular point of time. Beyond the local and temporal it is a novel about universal human experience; 'Heat and Dust' does not have this extra dimension.'

The symbolic structure of 'A Passage to India' can be contrasted to the realistic, down to earth language of 'Heat and Dust' emphasising realistic details and of incidents and objects ,while underplaying a complex working of human mind.

In order to understand and appreciate the works by writers having bipolar sensibilities, it is necessary to take a cursory look at their peculiar problems and situations in which they have to fashion out their creative works. In the case of Jhabvala, she looks at India from expatriate perspective which involves the question of belonging and unbelonging to a particular place about which she writes in her literary works. The question of the excess of belonging is also involved when a writer for analysis has several cultural experiences in her background. This question becomes more pertinent in the study of fiction as it is bound to be deeply grounded in space and time. As an expatriate, the theme of cultural differences are ever with Ruth Jhabvala in one way or the other. In her novels, the east-west tension is explored at personal and psychological level. Jhabvala trespasses the more obvious issues of race and colour. This cross-cultural theme is the favourite among many Indo- English novelists. As early as 1909, Sarat K.

Ghose wrote a novel *The Prince of Destiny* dealing with the theme of cultural interaction. In the intervening half-century a number of novelists have attempted to study this encounter at different levels of sensibility. In some novels, the West appears as a character, in some others, as an attitude or a set of values. During the Gandhian era, this theme appeared in the conflict between pre-industrial modes of life and mechanization. In the years following independence, however, a number of novels have appeared where the conflict between the two cultures is not on a social but on a personal level, whose theme in broad terms may be called an individual's search for identity in a changing India. The work of the women novelists, such as Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and Ruth Jhabvala offers a more sensitive picture of this theme. Specially the case of an outsider like Jhabvala about the motif takes a very special significance for the Indian readers, the insiders. This is due to our curiosity to know what the others think about us. Likewise the reaction of the native views for such a writer holds similar significance. This dialogic activity pertaining expatriate writing becomes more meaningful in the case of Jhabvala because she made a new home both physically and emotionally in India. Jhabvala looks at the life in Delhi with amused yet detached interest and sheds light upon what is bizarre, what is knotted with self-deception and contradiction, what is ludicrous, what fantastic and occasionally even what is close to tragedy.

The metro-base of her fiction is obvious in the milieu finding representation in her novels. The milieu of her novels is made up of very rich social climbers, culture peddlers, and businessmen, various types of commercial and political brokers and foreigners of various hues. The validity of this representation is the metropolitan life of Delhi, and one finds the general public living in the real India, the countryside, is totally missing from the frame. But such a value judgement of right and wrong will not be contextual for the analysis of her fictional works of her early period in India. One cannot blame Jhabvala for what she has not written but the point made is that the world portrayed by her is not Bharat, the people living in countries, but Indian, the people living in big cities. The presence of the foreigners in her novels also underlines the nature and content of her outlook. In her novels the foreigners show an unease in the Indian situation. They feel that they are trapped in this country and find it hard to escape. The question is whether the foreigners have the option of going back or they are condemned to live the life of an exile. One has to distinguish in the case in hand, between the ploy of a metropolitan and the idea of criticism. The question of sincerity is always linked with the question of sensibility in the literary studies. The case of Jhabvala is not an exception.

But the works of a creative artist should not be judged from one particular point but should be regarded as a work of art. Vasant A. Shahane aptly remarks:

National quintessence is as important a source of literary art as universal human passion common to all mankind. It is, of course, true that Indian creative writing has to be judged primarily as art and not secondarily as an expression of social ethic and values. However, the ethic or values are inextricably linked up with the aesthetic form of the great art of literature and 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 same standard may be applied while judging the art of Jhabvala. The mediated world of Ruth Praver Jhabvala impinges on our experience is through the consumption of her novels.

The novels of Jhabvala invite such danger as they stand mediating in our knowledge of ourselves, that is, the knowledge of Indians about India. In that case the aim of any critical study is to examine the mediation, its validity and its production as works of art; that is to say, it is no longer a question of the moral analysis of the mediation but rather how the said mediation is formed and how it functions.

Works Cited

Forster, E.M., A Passage to India, Penguin, (1979).Print.

Jhabvala, Ruth Praver. :

A Backward Place, New Delhi, Orient Paperpacks. (1965).Print.

A New Dominion, London, John Murray, (1972).Print

An Experience of India, 'Myself in India', John Murray, London. (1966). Print.

Esmond in India, London, John Murray. (1978).Print.

Get Ready for Battle, London, John Murray (1962).Print.

Heat and Dust, London, Murray, (1975). Print.

The Householder, London, John Murray. (1960).Print.

The Nature Of Passion, London,Penguin Books (1956).Print

The Three Continents, London, John Murray, (1987). Print.

To Whom She Will, London, George Allen and Unwin (1965). Print.

Mukherji, Meenakshi, 'Journey's End for Jhabvala' in Explorations in Modern Indo- English Fiction (Ed. R.K. Dhawan), Bahri Publications Pvt. Ltd.,New Delhi, (1982).Print.

Rockwell, Joan, Fact in Fiction: The Use of Literature in the Systematic Study of Society, Routledge and Kegan Paul Books (1974). Print.

Shahne, V.A, Ruth Praver Jhabvala New Delhi, Arnold Heimann, (1976).Print.