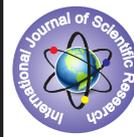


THE PORTRAIT OF INDIAN WOMEN IN THE SHORT STORIES OF RUTH PRAWER JHABVALA



ENGLISH

KEYWORDS: Colonialist, flawed, profundity, fatal, intricacies, recurrent.

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ABSTRACT

Jhabvala has used her experiences as a displaced European, living in India as a base for much of her fiction. 'India' is her recurrent theme whether her setting is in India or New York. She came to India after independence when the social conditions of women in the urban areas especially in the capital Delhi, were undergoing changes. Jhabvala views women with her colonialist eyes and most of the time tries to find fault with every class of Indian women. Jhabvala, taking the advantage of being an insider in a way, must have applied her western values to view and understand the intricacies of Indian womanhood. In many of her stories she satirized and categorized them as social climbers, committee woman, westernized Indian women, empty women who talked tall about Indian culture without being aware of its depth. But Indian tradition, despite its backwardness and many other negative aspects due to historical reasons, has always had its spirit intact. Such an attitude provides for fitful glimpses of the vision of Indian womanhood in her short stories and these are fatally compromised or flawed. The treatment of Indian womanhood in her hands lacks empathy and profundity. It cannot be an authentic representation, because she is ignorant of the historical, social, political, cultural mores of an alien country.

Otherness literally means the quality of being different or strange. 'Othering' is a post colonial concept which permits one to identify oneself as "the human being," and the people who are different as something "other than human". 'Othering' thus facilitates the demonization of people whom the writer defines as different from him, as Ruth Praver Jhabvala sees, when she describes several of her Indian characters. She identifies most of her Indian women characters in her short stories as 'other'.

Jhabvala has used her experiences as a displaced European living in India as a base for much of her fiction. 'India' is her recurrent theme whether her setting is India or New York. She came to India after independence when the social conditions of women in the urban areas especially in the capital Delhi, were undergoing changes. Her favorite themes are clash between tradition and modernism; the question of arranged marriages and love marriages; conformism to non-conformism, social climbing skills of modern women, the vanity and mimicry of the westernized young women. Then there are traditional women, submissive women, victimized women, deluded women, nagging women, tricky women, old women who break the shackles of societal oppression in this age and do the most untraditional things, rich and lazy wives, mothers and mothers in law, and more in the oeuvre of her short stories. Jhabvala views these women with her colonialist eyes and most of the time tries to find fault with every class of Indian women. The problem with her is that she attributes all the negative traits which she imagines or sees in a few Indians to all Indians. And among these, the westernized women are a butt of Jhabvala's ridicule. These anglicized women are a class themselves-not conforming to the traditional pattern of Indian womanhood. These women, as Jhabvala views, are not willfully blind to Indian tradition as well as the social reality of the present day, nor can they be thoroughly western. Yet their westernization has cut off their roots in India. This is revealed in Jhabvala's sarcastic remark:

Everything they say, all that lively conversation round the buffet table, is not prompted by anything that they really feel strongly about but what they think they ought to feel strongly about. (*An Experience of India* 13)

These westernized women in India are well educated and well informed. They can speak with authority and confidence on the problems of this country. Jhabvala feels that whenever they speak on this subject they give the impression that they are speaking of some other country, in which they have no more than academic interest. They imitate the western women in their way of dressing, hair style, their social manners and behaviour. A member of this class is usually

an elegant, well developed woman, with a voice almost as loud as her husband. Her children are away at boarding schools, but all the same she keeps herself busy.

Committee woman are the favorite targets of Jhabvala's satire. The irony is that they neglect familial responsibilities and also deprive themselves of its bliss. In other words, they are no more than snobs doing little good either to the society or to their families. Not a single woman of this class is projected in a positive manner. Jhabvala's repeated satirical statements and the exposure of their hypocrisy and snobbery leads the reader to understand this class only in its derogatory connotations. In reality, we have had in India several instances of social conscious women who have inspired the fellow women to fight injustice and social emancipation. There is recorded evidence that in our struggle for independence, hundreds of Indian women from the rural and the urban areas; illiterate, semiliterate and literate sections joined hands with men. There are instances of many educated women like 'Durga Bai Desmukh from a rural background or Sarojini Naidu, inspired their fellow women in taking part in the movement. Unfortunately these real modern women do not find a place in Jhabvala's fiction; probably they do not serve her purpose of denigrating these women by wielding her irony and sarcasm. Hence only one type of committee women flourishes in her fiction. After all the business of comedy lies in exposing the social foibles.

Sahane points out that when Jhabvala started her literary career in the years of Independence, India was still getting used to its newly acquired freedom and facing the problems it inherited. One of the most apparent features of the country in this period of transition had been the clash between Indian culture and the western influence left by the British. During the first decade of the independence, the urban Hindu society was passing through a state of transition. The rich, who were strongly influenced, began slowly to shake off the conservative outlook of the people especially the younger generation which blindly aped the West. The idea of divorce is also one of the fashionable notions cultivated by the youth. This is the main theme of the story "The Old Lady", in the first collection of Jhabvala's short stories, *Like Birds, like Fishes*. The forces of change in the society prove to be so strong for the orthodox families that they begin to suffer under the strain generated by the situation. Social structure is unable to withstand the strain and shows signs of crack. The traditional joint family has already been breaking up and disappearing.

The dominant women of Jhabvala, the social climbers and society women are viewed as isolated women who think they are not understood by the husband or family. Jhabvala gives the impression

that they are vain women, who are disappointed and frustrated because they feel that their talents are not being recognized by their families. They have a feeling that they are socially conscious and are doing great things. Further they look down upon the members of their families as being irresponsible and without any commitment or goal in their lives. Jhabvala believes that, in the name of cultural renaissance, these westernized social climbers who mimicked the western culture so far are now busy in mimicking their own culture. They cannot display their own culture since they are not themselves aware of it. Having been habituated to mimicking the west, these women now make a mockery of their culture by mimicking their own culture.

Her woman protagonists in stories like "Lekha", "Widow" and "In a great man's house" are lost in their love for life. Owing to the power and the extent of social and familial pressure upon them, they are trapped in inescapable situations. They are sufferers of the delusion. Indians visualize god in the form of mother, who is known for her love and tenderness; and hence they have the tendency to look upon all women as manifestations of the Divine Mother. In spite of several constraints that woman came to be subjected to, in the course of India's social history, the image of Indian 'motherhood' has remained immutable and 'Mother' in India is always put on the highest pedestal. It is against this back drop that our Indian English writers projected Indian women in their writings. It is obviously evident that Jhabvala is an outsider from her portrayal of elderly women in some of her short stories, which cannot be an authentic representation of Indian womanhood. Jhabvala's inadequate knowledge of Indian culture and its mores are conspicuously evident in the story, widow. The way Durga was introduced to the Krishna cult and the sequences that follow are not culture specific. Firstly, Jhabvala's widow seems to be the epitome of the suffering Indian widowhood rather than an individual. Secondly, religion in India is not something that can be injected like a stimulant as it is done in the case of Durga.

A comparison of Jhabvala's widow with that of Raja Rao's widow Javni, shows how an insider has dealt with the theme. An outsider with her foreign culture cannot comprehend the power of religion on the Indian psyche. Raja Rao's portrayal of the Hindu widow takes into account the socio-cultural milieu. Religion is for her a source of solace and inner strength. She blames no one for her wretched condition but confronts life with equanimity and mental equilibrium. Raja Rao's Javni is a servant in a conventional household. She is very conscious of her servile and dependent role, her caste and her social status. In spite of the indignities heaped upon her by heartless relatives and the poverty and loneliness, she is condemned to; she conducts herself with perfect equanimity and contentment. The source of her strength in the face of all odds is her faith in Goddess Talakamma. But Jhabvala's widow appears to be the picture of the suffering Indian widow rather than an individual. She seems to be a projection of the writer's notion about Indian womanhood, rather than reality. Thus Jhabvala's portrayal of the Indian widow is unnatural and lacking in verisimilitude.

Similarly, Shakuntala, in "The Housewife", is a respectable middle aged house wife with sons, daughters and grandchildren. She gives up the security of the home and family, driven by a shameful passion for her music teacher. Through the omniscient narrator, the reader knows that she had been married for twenty five years and her husband loved her more year after year. She performed all the wifely, motherly, grandmotherly and matronly duties with love and to the satisfaction of everyone in the family. Her arms full of bangles, the diamond nose ring and a gold necklace around her smooth soft neck create a perfect image of a respectable traditional Indian woman and mother. At this age she starts taking music lessons and soon music becomes an all-consuming passion with her. The music teacher, although a master in his art, is a shabby and depraved vagabond. She becomes impatient whenever the guru was absent. In an impulse of passion, Shakuntala, like an insane person passes the streets where singing and dancing girls live. At last, she finds him in that depraved locality, and in a wretched room. In ecstasy she submits herself to his

musical and sexual inspiration. It must be pointed that in the Indian culture music and dance are divine arts. They are like spiritualism and a way to self-realization. Classical music and dance forms are treated with great veneration, and so are the gurus who teach them. But Jhabvala slights them. It is a matter of great pain for the Indian reader and critic to see his culture and tradition are desecrated.

If passion is considered synonymous with insanity, it has no national or cultural boundaries. It is true, but every culture has some values. When these values are corrupted by individuals, the society at large will collapse; therefore it is the responsibility of a writer to warn the readers of disastrous consequences. He cannot afford to slight these values on the pretext of entertaining the reader. This becomes even more necessary when the writer has an international readership. There is every danger of the foreign reader to form distorted impressions of the Indian culture through such writings. A great harm has already been done during the pre-independence days through the writings of the British about India. At times it appears that the British writers of the Raj were better. They were all concerned about their predicaments and problems, the purity of their race and the white man's burden of playing the role of a wise Prospero. They had not touched the mother sentiment of India. Jhabvala, taking the advantage of being an insider in a way, must have applied her western values to the Indian womanhood. In several of her stories she satirized social climbers, committee woman, westernized Indian women, empty women who talked tall about Indian culture without being aware of its depth. But Indian tradition, despite its backwardness and many other negative aspects due to historical reasons, has always had its spirit intact. The treatment of Indian womanhood in her hands lacks empathy and profundity. It cannot be an authentic representation, because she is ignorant of the historical, social, political, cultural mores of an alien country.

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