

Cross-Cultural Interactions in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's Novels – *Esmond in India* and *A Backward Place*

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Ruth Praver Jhabvala (1927-2013)

Courtesy: <http://pensionerblog.blogspot.com/2014/09/ruth-praver-jhabvala-interview.html>

Abstract

Ruth Praver Jhabvala confines her attention to the Indian middle classes and the expatriates and her novels deftly ring the chimes on the same themes, tracing numerous permutations on family conflicts. The title and themes of the novels coincide with Jhabvala's different experiences in India. *Esmond in India* presents a new dimension in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's creativity. The novel delineates a disaster in marital relationship between an Indian wife and an English husband. Life partners from two distinctly different cultural backgrounds obviously tend to feel the tensions, conflicts and marital misgivings. As a westerner who has close ties with the Indian family norms, Ruth Praver Jhabvala realistically portrays the problems of Gulab. *A Backward Place* is a novel in which Jhabvala for the first time is more concerned with foreigners who happen to come to India. Jhabvala concentrates on their reaction and different attitudes toward the country. The western wife Judy puts up

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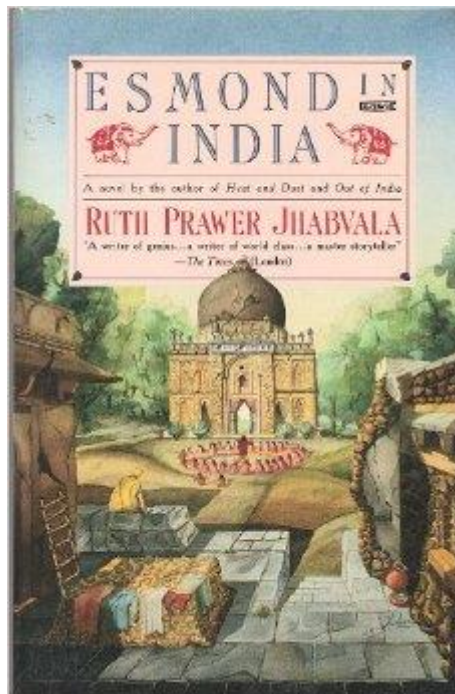
with all hardships and prepares for a battle against a backward place like India. The novel also deals with the different kinds of expatriates who feel differently about India, which is a “backward place” in the eyes of the Europeans. Jhabvala feels the ache at the heart of humanity. She is appreciative as well as critical of both the cultures.

Key Words: Ruth Praver Jhabvala, *Esmond in India*, *A Backward Place*, Clashes between two cultures, Indian middle class, traditions

Focus on Family Life

In her novels, Ruth Praver Jhabvala concentrates upon family life, social problems and personal relationships, with all its opportunities for intrigue, clash between generations and marital feuding. Her novels deftly ring the chimes on the same themes, tracing numerous permutations on family conflicts.

***Esmond in India* – A Complex Fabric**



In her novel *Esmond in India*, the cross-cultural interaction is deftly projected through an inter-racial marriage between a lazy and stupid but beautiful Indian girl and a snobbish and colonial-minded English expatriate. In such a marriage, the thin veneer of superficial modernity is of no avail.

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The world of *Esmond in India* is ideologically confused and confusing. In its complex fabric, modern western modes of life and thought are seen to be closely woven with traditional Indian living patterns. Esmond Stillwood restates the doctrine of Asian inertia and European dynamism. In his initial reaction to India, the East and all that is foreign to him, he avidly studies up on Indian folklore, traditional poetry and history. He is greatly attracted towards Indian art and culture. Esmond Stillwood is an impoverished expatriate, who earns his living by giving private tuitions to foreign ladies, tourists and the elite.

Gulab and Esmond – Conflict in Ways of Living

Gulab is so charmed by Esmond's speeches and marries Esmond against the wishes of her mother, Uma. She is not a true representative of Indian culture and neither is Esmond a true representative of the British in India. Esmond cannot leave his pseudo modernity and self-centeredness, and Gulab cannot free herself from the shackles of her traditions. She has followed modernity only on the surface level in marrying Esmond. She tries to conform to Esmond's household rules and she reverts to her way of doing things the moment he is out of sight, both in the food she eats and in her affectionate and deeply physical way of nurturing their child. Gulab likes the comfortable way of living without any formality.

Gulab loves eating sweets and oily food. The novelist depicts convincingly Gulab's Indian tastes and habits and how they are resented by the very English Esmond.

Esmond loves salads and boiled European food. The couple differs not only in their food habits but also in the way they eat.

The Indian way of dressing is also quite different to the European. Gulab may imitate the European style but she feels comfortable and at ease only in her own style. Jhabavala succeeds eminently in catching and conveying the 'Indianness' of Gulab's mode of living.

Esmond decorates his flat and the furniture is modern but Gulab finds it a hindrance. He is very particular about keeping the house clean and dislikes Gulab's untidiness.

Deterioration of Married Life

The married life of Esmond and Gulab deteriorates after the birth of a son, Ravi. Esmond wants to bring up the child in the European way and keep him away from Indian food.

There are other small problems, like giving a massage to the child and the ‘shaving ceremony’, that highlight the two extreme modes of living and thinking. According to the traditional belief, the ‘shaving ceremony’ is compulsory, but to Esmond it is a barbaric custom. Gulab is neither mentally satisfied nor physically comfortable in her husband’s house.

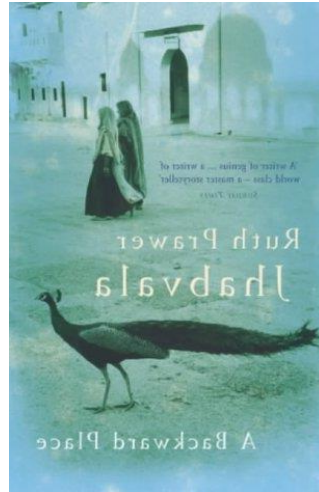
Cultural Clash between East and West in Personal Lives

Jhabvala describes the cultural clash between East and West skillfully and in detail. Esmond and Gulab are brought into very close association with a view to highlighting the differences between them. Although a lover of Indian culture and life, he is unable to understand it completely and cope with its oddities. Esmond likes parties and socializing, whereas Gulab feels happy and contented at home and dislikes attending formal parties.

The root cause of their dissonance is the racial and cultural gap which leads to the severing of their marital ties. Esmond is selfish and mean and Gulab is sluttish and unsophisticated. The sharp contrast between the two ways of living and thinking causes awkward and unseemly situations in their conjugal life. Their relationship is not peaceful. The differences in the life-styles of East and West lead to misunderstanding and discord. Consequently their relations are strained and they drift apart.

Jhabvala probes the mind and heart of her characters trapped in an unhappy marriage. They fail to understand each other’s different life-styles.

A Backward Place



A Backward Place portrays a number of Europeans trapped in India, unable to adapt to its ways and consequently, lead lives of misery and frustration. Judy, the central female figure is married to an Indian actor Bal. She was born in a British society but did not really belong to it. She is already a mother of two children when the novel opens and she is very deeply involved with them. Her husband Bal is the embodiment of undue and flimsy optimism. He is so involved in the world of stage and screen that he does not realize the daily needs of his family. Judy is fully aware of his failings, but she is passionately in love with him. It is only due to her love that she is able to transcend the barriers of English culture as she learns to live in a Hindu joint family.

Judy and Bal

With her quick adaptability, Judy succeeds in claiming the affection of her in-laws. Judy is downright practical and wise, whereas Bal is an irresponsible young man of romantic temperament. The real cause of their dissonance is not racial but temperamental. Judy always tries to shoulder her responsibilities, whereas Bal evades them as far as possible. Judy is also a homely type of woman who has gone out to work not so much out of choice as necessity.

Judy has genuine attachments and affection for her children. Bal merely seems to be acting his part without genuine involvement. This contrast between the two ways of living causes awkward and unseemly situations in their married life.

Bal's immaturity, lack of planning and foolish dreams perplexes her. She gets integrated with the Indian culture. She even wants to look like an Indian. So she starts

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wearing a sari and has grown her hair which she wears in a plain bun. When Bal presses her to go to Bombay, she refuses, not because of her arrogance, but because she does not want to lose the security of her home and job.

Judy's Decision to Stay on

The most striking feature of *A Backward Place* is Judy's decision to stay on with Bal in spite of the fact that she knows all about India and its backwardness. She understands the country of her choice better than others who come there for short periods or those belonging to the country who come under the superficial impact of the west and condemn their own heritage in their false enchantment with modernity.

Foreigners At Home in India

In Judy's character, Jhabvala has portrayed those foreigners, who come to India, and accept the country totally, both physically and mentally, and have no complaints whatsoever. Judy finally agrees to go to Bombay with Bal, leaving behind the security of her job and income. It is Judy's love for Bal and her readiness to adapt and accept, that help her to be happy and contented in the face of adversity and want too.

Presentation of Incongruities

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. Jhabvala dramatizes the clashes between two families or two individuals in the context of the present day changes in urbanised India. The tension in Indian societies today such as those between the young and the old, the upholder of orthodox tradition and the rebels against that tradition characterize the social world of Jhabvala's fiction. These situations are individual in the deepest sense as well as representative of social change and almost archetypal in the universality of their consciousness. The experience of such individuals caught up in the whirlpool of social change is essentially Indian as much as it is universal in a large sense. Jhabvala is much preoccupied with portraying the predicament of individuals in their relationship to the family, to the social group, in a way which demonstrates her Indianness. Jhabvala reveals the pains and predicaments of her characters in a very effective manner, but while doing so she doesn't fail to make light of the situation by injecting into her fictional world doses of humour and irony.

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Use of Irony in Narration

Jhabvala's use of irony must be distinguished from her employment of sarcasm or satire. Irony is a kind of utterance, which postulates a double audience comprising one party that hears but does not understand, and another party which hears as well as realizes the deeper significance of the expression. Jhabvala succeeds in splitting her audience between those who perceive and those who cannot. Her language then becomes 'exclusive' or 'private' to a set of characters, to perceive the meaning that lies beneath the surface statement, the gulf that lies between the appearance of a situation and the reality. Jhabvala uses different forms of irony such as verbal irony or rhetorical irony, but her fiction does not provide many examples of dramatic or tragic irony. She is also ironic in the general sense of that word sometimes used by the New Critics to indicate the total context of a poem projecting several disparate elements of experience. Her fiction is ironic partly because it recognizes and registers the complexities and incongruities.

Conflict between the Eastern and the Western

Jhabvala beautifully brings out the problems and conflicts facing people belonging to the eastern and western parts of the world. They do not come to terms with one another because no sincere effort is made to narrow down the gap separating the east from the west. There is a desire for friendship and relationship and sometimes it appears to be coming from the heart but even then it does not have an element of solidity and firmness because though it comes from the heart, it does not include the heart. The theme of marital conflict in Jhabvala's fiction has a much larger scope than is evident in East-West confrontation or co-existence. Indian husbands and their Indian wives too appear to be falling apart in a purely Indian familial and social situation. This has its roots in the clash of personalities, temperaments and also values. Jhabvala appears to be suggesting that getting married does not mean enjoying the bliss of heaven and this is clearly brought out her novels.

Poetic Moments

Jhabvala does have poetic moments. One has a distinct feeling that she has more of a poet in her than she permits herself to indulge in. She is such a committed, conscientious artist, and there is so much evidence of revisions that the instant rapture of a poet is often lost to her. Jhabvala's style is the 'subject' and not 'the man' and this 'subject' is India in relation

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to a western creative writer's sensibility. This is both natural as well as human. Although technique is in a certain sense discovery or vision, often a point, technique and talent appear to go their own way in different directions.

Simple Language Portraying the Complexity of Human Mind

Jhabvala writes in a deliberately down-to-earth language, emphasizing realization details of incident and object while under playing the complex working of the human mind. She never allows the reader to know the characters from inside. Her approach to the theme and situation of the Indian setup is realistic and photographic. She doesn't dispense with the minimum requirement of art to entertain and engage the readers. She works in the style of a painter who is given visual and imaginative description of life rather than to psychological analysis on exploration of the inner world of the characters and the Indian society to which they belong. Jhabvala's contribution to Indo-English fiction is remarkable.

Shifting Cycles of Cultural Interaction

The theme of cultural interaction which Jhabvala explores through the shifting, turning circles of activity is the predicament of the westerner for whom initial delight in India gradually turns to disillusionment.

Jhabvala is human enough to feel the ache at the heart of humanity. She is appreciative as well as critical of both the cultures. If she is critical of the Indian tendency to sloppiness and self-indulgence, she is equally unsparing in her criticism of the pretentiousness, snobbishness and meanness of the Europeans living in India. The vision of the novelist is ironic and comic, but there is no trace of hatred for anything Indian. This can be interpreted as the novelist's endeavour to come to terms with her adopted country.

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