
LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 14:6 June 2014
ISSN 1930-2940

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From an Outsider's Standpoint: Review of Ruth Praver Jhabvala's Fiction

Dr. J. G. Duresh



Ruth Praver Jhabvala (1927-2013)

Courtesy: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/apr/03/ruth-praver-jhabvala>

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:6 June 2014

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Family Suffered under Genocide, Racial Oppression and Displacement

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, an accomplished author and adept screenplay writer, enjoys the most unique renown of obtaining the Booker Prize as well as the Oscar Award twice. Born to Polish Jewish father and German Jewish mother on 7th May 1927 in Cologne in Germany, Jhabvala has borne the brunt of genocide, racial oppression and displacement. Jhabvala's family was one among the last batch of refugees which fled Nazi regime in 1939 and migrated to England. The family settled in Kendon near London where she pursued her studies. Her father, a lawyer, on the revelation of the horrid fact that forty members of his family had died during the Holocaust, committed suicide. In 1947, she met Cyrus H. Jhabvala, an Indian Parsi architect, entered into wedlock with him and settled in New Delhi. Jhabvala lived in India for twenty four years till her migration to New York in 1975. She died in 2013 in New York leaving behind her husband and three daughters.

A Prolific Writer

Jhabvala's literary career dawned with the publication of her debut novel *To Whom She Will* in 1955. Being a prolific writer, she brought out several novels and volumes of stories, of which the prominent are: *Esmond in India* (1958), *The Householder* (1960), *A New Dominion* (1972), *Heat and Dust* (1975), *How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories* (1976) and *My Nine Lives : Chapters of a Possible Past* (2004). Jhabvala won the prestigious Booker Prize for her novel *Heat and Dust* in 1975. She has a long standing collaboration with Merchant Ivory Productions for which she penned 23 screen plays. Fortunate enough, she secured the Oscar Awards for writing screen play for *A Room with a View* in 1986 and for *Howards End* in 1992.

Focus on Insider-Outsider

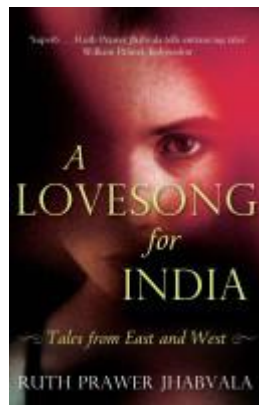
From the very onset of her literary career, Jhabvala perpetuated the perplexing position of an inside-outsider. Regardless of her quite long sojourn in India, she turned down the tag 'Indian author' and asserted that she is "a European living permanently in India"(James Winson 720). She wrote about the grim and appalling Indian realities, essentially for the Europeans who have fascinating views and admiration for Indian culture and its spirituality. Her writings substantiate that there is an unbridgeable breach

between the East and the West. Her aloofness with India is well articulated in her emphatic statement that she is “no longer interested in Indi”(Jhabvala 9).

A Variety of European and Indian Characters

Jhabvala has portrayed a wide variety of characters, both Indian and European. Many of her European characters are gullible and simple who are allured by Indian spirituality and philosophy. With the unflinching hope of spiritual rejuvenation and recuperation, they reach India and quite on the contrary they are exploited and victimized and their efforts become futile. It seems that Jhabvala edifies the Europeans to be in the know of the hazards and the impending dangers in visiting India including the non-salubrious climate and the fake spirituality. Of course, Jhabvala has displayed a tinge of sympathy and streak of humanism in carving the Indian women characters, yet her presentation of Indian male characters as uncivilized, cunning, lazy and voluptuous is lopsided and clichéd.

Depiction of India



A prudent reading of Jhabvala’s writings reveal how she has presented India as overcrowded, fowl smelling and treacherous. She has viewed the country as a land of poverty, intrigues, sexual adventures and delusions. Her writings are replete with vignettes of dilapidated houses dirty and filthy lanes, hungry beggars, suffering women, unscrupulous sadhus and sanyasis, dilly-dallying youths and begging children with mutilated organs. Enraged by her illustration of India, the Jewish Indian poet Nissim Ezekiel berated her fiction as “monstrous distorting mirror” (Ramlal Agarwal 27).

Praise for Joint Family System and Enduring Patience of Indian Women

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Despite her scathing attack on certain aspects of Indian culture and society, she holds aloft Indian joint family system and the most enduring patience of Indian women who swim against the current to hold the family together and remain a repository of traditional values. Though Jhabvala has travelled far and wide in the country, the strong points of Indian culture and society elude her vision and all she could perceive are squalor, poverty, heat and dust and harsh social realities. To cap it all, nowhere in her writings Jhabvala offers a solution to overcome the Indian social maladies. Meenakshi Mukerjee's succinct observation that Jhabvala looks at "people from the outside and describing them in a style that is consciously devoid of solution" delineates the kernel of her oeuvre.

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