Chapter-VII

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Jhabvala's novels and stories are about Indians and Westerners in India. In her first five novels about Indians Jhabvala has mainly dealt with marriage, money, the Indian wife, the Indian householder and the Indian social reformer. The titles of these novels, except Esmond in India, indicate Jhabvala's approach. She presents Indians in terms of Indian codes of conduct for businessmen, wives, householders and social reformers. Indian society, for all its progress in science and technology, is traditional to the core. It still works according to the ethical and moral stipulations as expressed in sacred books. Therefore, the Indian girls are to be married in a class and caste to which they belong, the Indian businessmen need have no pangs of uneasy conscience as it is his nature to make more and more money, the Indian wife has to put up with the tyrannies of her husband, the Indian householder must live up to the duties expected of him and a social reformer must continue to work, treating gain and loss alike. Indians accept these codes almost instinctively. Hari in To Whom She Will accepts his selfish nature because he thinks it is his fate; Gulab in Esmond in India accepts the duties and obligations of a wife as they
are defined by tradition: Prem in The Householder tries to live up to the traditional role of a householder and Sarla Devi in Get Ready for Battle accepts the philosophy of “treating alike pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat, then get ready for battle.”

Jhabvala’s depiction of the working of these codes in modern times is in terms of the major concerned of the novel like appearance and reality, snobbery, uneasiness, illusions, fantasy and other effects of money and the dangers of passions which tend to be willful, imperious and impatient.

All through her work Jhabvala shows a concern for reality. Her characters, on the other hand, are seduced by mere appearance. Amrita feels drawn towards Hari because he seems to be unsullied by the vulgarity of opulence. Nimmi is attracted towards Phiroz because he seems to her to be the quintessence of the modern man. Esmond married Gulab because he thought that her eyes were deep, sad and full of the wisdom of the East. Jhabvala described her character’s fascination for more appearance, and their slow disillusionment.

Her novels about Westerners in India show the Western involvement in post-Independence India. In these novels Jhabvala deals with the various reasons for which Westerners come out to India and how their attitudes towards India are conditioned by the nature of their stay in the country and by their native sensibilities. In her novels about
Westerners in India Jhabvala emphasized the fact that Westerners are no longer here as conquerors but as the conquered ones.

In her novels about Indians as well as in her novels about Westerners in India, Jhabvala presents vivid portraits of certain aspects of Indian society. Her area of exploration is the social world and the material of her analysis is manners. To Jhabvala, reality is whatever is external and hard, though it could be gross and unpleasant. She writes the novels of character which are concerned with expressing the modes of existence rather than the images of experience. Her work is devoid of thrills, violence and esoteric elements. Jhabvala is never a mere casual observer of the Indian scene. She writes mainly about the middle class because this is the class she knows best. She shows a characteristically Western awareness of social problems.

Indian critics have said that Jhabvala deals with surfacial life, that her characters are static and that her fiction is a monstrous distortion. In fact the very titles of her novels about Indians show that she is concerned with Indian wisdom and philosophy. Though she writes about the middle class society and about Westerners in India, she shows an admirable awareness of Indian problems by and large/ She is aware of India poverty and of the indifference, callousness and moral squalor that afflict the middle class. She succeeds in presenting the willies, wavering and drifting lives of Indian youth, the bickering and possessive Indian mothers and the rising callous and unscrupulous middle class in
post-Independence India. The charge about "static" characters is not wholly untrue. Her characters are definitely static and there is certainly some exaggeration in her depiction of characters and situations. All her characters have exaggerated traits which creates an impression that they are meant to be caricatures. But static characters and exaggerations are necessary for the kind of novel Jhabvala writes. She writes about anti-heroes who are terribly conditioned by their religious, social and economic traditions and oppressed by sweltering heat. Small wonder if they lead false and empty lives. It is not Indian alone who are depicted in this manner but also the English and the Americans who abandon themselves to the weird charm of the East. She takes a group of men and women and describes them as they move from day to day. The boredom of routine life and desperate refuge in ashrams, which promise peace but make life more complicated, from the bulk of her fiction. Jhabvala adjusts her prose to suit her purpose. Not for nothing is her prose so slow and devoid of poetic embellishments. It is the slow, dull, false lives of her characters described in slow, simple, economical prose which creates a cumulative effect of total futility and aimlessness. Jhabvala has an eye for the ridiculous but she is also aware of the fact, that what is ludicrous on the surface is tragic underneath. Jhabvala's characters are given just enough definite traits to carry on. Their deeds and adventures, their tragic predicaments, or the rowdy pranks in which they deport themselves are not mere
episodes in a literary farrago: these are, unmistakably, pages torn from the daily register of life as it goes on.

A kind of puerility marks the entire behaviour of America and Nimmi, two of Jhabvala's heroines. A kind of looseness of 'willessness' is the hallmark of Hari and Viddi. Greed is the driving passion of Lalaji. Sloth and sloppiness rule the world of Gulab. Sarla Devi is a little too unworldly and Kusum is a little too coquettish. In an article on dickens, George Orwell says: "His characters are struggling to make their souls, whereas Dickens' people are present far more often and far more vividly than Tolstoy's, but always in a single unchangeable attitude, like pictures or pieces of furniture." Perhaps unchangeability is the cause of the popularity of Dickens' characters. And so it is with Jhabvala's. Hari, Viddi, Inder Lal are characters who in spite of their 'flatness' leave a lasting impression. "India always changes," Jhabvala has said time and again. It certainly changes Westerners, though they do not gro. On the contrary, there is a marked diminution in them. Etta, Clariss and Judy from A Backward Place and Margaret, Evie and Lee from A New Dominion might have lived a full life in their countries, but here in India they sink to the bottom of degradation and sloth. Moreover, India changes them much in the same way. So there is always a static pattern of action in Jhabvala's novels.

Jhabvala's fictional strategy in creating her fictional world is to take a central character and build around him or her a set of incidents
which are so arranged as to reinforce the validity of the kind of world she creates. Jhabvala's art consists in recreating a typical social context by slow, careful accumulation of details. The details include small actions, dress, decorations, gestures, the words that are used with a special frequency, the choice of food, etc. The massive accumulation of detail leads to the establishment of a cultural identity of the people she writes about. As an outsider, Jhabvala's first business is to know and then to impart all she knows in terms that would make her readers see and hear and feel a lively sense of actuality. Jhabvala fastens herself instinctively on to the truly revealing aspects of life in India. In her first five novels Jhabvala is mainly concerned with the presentation of Indian codes of conduct. In order to do so she plays up certain character traits and introduces extreme situations. The situations are so arranged as to highlight. The character traits. They are continuously reshuffled and redistributed to suggest a mode of existence. This individuals or their psychology. She is interested in social life. A part of her fictional strategy is her art of juxtaposition of highly incongruous characters. In her novels about Westerners in India, Jhabvala is concerned with various attitudes the Westerners in India adopt towards this country. So she takes up characters that represent these attitudes and brings them together in situations that would highlight their attitudes. But while her characters are busy reaffirming and reinforcing their various points of views Jhabvala is busy showing how the overall reality of India affects them. In A New
Dominion and Heat and Dust Jhabvala employs more sophisticated techniques. A new Dominion uses the combined technique of direct narration, epistolary from and autobiography to present its characters. In Heat and Dust Jhabvala employs the strategy of two parallel stories to distinguish between the temporal and the timeless aspects of life in India.

Jhabvala's distinctive achievement as a novelist lies in the fact that, while Indian writers writing about Indians mores tend to deviate from the British tradition of the novel and evolve a more indigenous form especially suited to Indian life, but not universally acceptable to the Western readers, she works within the British tradition and presents Indian life in terms that would be acceptable to the Western readers. Though an outsider, Jhabvala shows an unusual insight into Indian mores. She sees India in a western perspective. Radha and Uma, the two anxious mothers in To Whom She Will and Esmond in India, for example, are presented ironically rather than sentimentally as they would be by Indian writers. What is sentimental for Indian writers is comic to her. The material that would get melodramatic treatment from Indian writers gets ironical treatment from her. She never allows her Western sensibility to be overwhelmed by the Indian scene.

For over a quarter of a century Jhabvala's novels and stories have been the Westerner's window on India. Her technical skill, her
unusual Insights, her cool and controlled brilliance and her sustained work have carved for her a place in the front rank of the writers of the world. Fortunately, she has started attracting serious critical attention in the English speaking world.

In almost all her stories and novels Jhabvala assumes the role of an 'omniscient' narrator. This is clearly a traditional and natural mode of narration. In this method Jhabvala tells a story with a perspective, or several perspectives without, of course, personally getting involved in any of them. She is present at the side of her characters, in the author's corner of their scenes; she watches them and comments on their actions, modes of feeling and thought processes. She is at the centre, but the centre is outside the varied and overall circles of her creations. She thus seems to be an outsider for a while, yet she plunges into the small circles, enters the consciousness of her characters and then describes what she has observed and assessed so meticulously.

As a European writer, Jhabvala's persistent emphasis upon painting or describing minute details of apparently unimportant scenes or events is a significant quality of her art. The western intelligence thrives on comprehensiveness and thoroughness in the subject under review. As an artist Jhabvala inherits this western intellectual discipline and projects it on her fictional canvas. She is also conscious that she is writing for western audiences who are not familiar with Indian culture.
or modes, and therefore her comprehensiveness receives additional impetus. Her area of observation is very wide and she renders all that she observes in a comprehensive coverage. Sometimes this tendency towards reproducing an actual scene is carried to an excessive degree with the result that in Indian reader is almost bored, but he western reader, who is unfamiliar with the scene, is very nearly thrilled.

Jhabvala's world signifies space—the space that is India, the India moulded by her experience and fictional art. Her endeavour, however, should be classified as 'time-art' since the narrative mode of her fiction is conceived in terms of history or a sequence of time. Jhabvala's mode of narration follows the traditional time-span, the individual's or family's cyclic development or decline. The time-dimension in her fictional art is so dominant that her art does not show any substantial spatial development and it is far remote from the concept of space-time polarity as reflected in the novels of Virginia Wools.

Jhabvala can't be linked with other creative Indian writers in English such as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao or R. K. Narayan, nor with woman novelists such as Kamala Markandaya or Nayantara Sehgal. She is in a way unique and the advantages as well as disadvantages of her literary situation are particular to her. The advantage lies in her special position of being a European living in India. The disadvantage, too, lies in her not being a genuine, grass rooted Indian. She can view the game
of human affairs in an Indian family from a point of view which is both objective and unsentimental.

John Reed, while reviewing An Experience of India, finds Jhabvala better equipped than even E. M. Forster to deal with the mysteries of Indian psyche. She is, unlike E. M. Forster, 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 environment with varieties of Indian religious or mystical beliefs.

She writes about possibly the only social segment of urban India that she knows at first hand. The general assumption that she writes about only the sophisticates upper class is rather an unfair exaggeration because her writing in A Backward Place portrays the lower middle class with sympathy and understand. She also delineates the rising commercial bourgeois which is by no means relly sophisticated. Thus, in widening the sphere of her social and cultural setting in her fiction, Jhabvala show her awareness of the variety and complexity of the post-independence Indian society. Her urban India is not urban, n fact, it may even be described as a back water or more specifically A Backward Place. It is, of course, involved incharge and ferment, and therefore, her basic literary endeavour is to portray the human portent
of this society caught in the conflict of a change from tradition to modernity. George Meredith says that comedy depicts men and women in society, that the setting of comedy is primarily urban, and that the comic writer presents a social and cultural outlook with a view to measuring man's behaviour against an accepted norm. Man's conduct is to judged against a norm, rather than an ideal, and this norm often approximates to a sense of proportion, a value.

Jhabvala excels in presenting in congruities of human character and situations. The congruities in human behaviour are shown in the character and demeanor of Lalaji sitting in his office and receiving persons who would call upon him for help. The problem of Indians 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. Indian creative writing, specially fiction, has to be judged primarily as art and only secondarily as an expression of social ethic or values. The Indianness or the Indian art of fiction in English is therefore very much a part of that art itself.

However, the Indianness of Jhabvala's friction raises some appropriate issues since she is not really an Indian at least by birth. Her polish percentage, German upbringing, British schooling, and finally, life in Indian after marriage and living in New York only heighten the
complexity of this problem. Then we can assume: how far Indian is Ruth Prawer Jhabvala.

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 instance, Indian society has always been more on '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 wet 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.

In fact, many of her novels and short stories are primarily concerned with portraying either the fulfilment or the frustration of individuals in the undivided Hindu Joint family system. The Nature of Passion is almost like a family chronicle and in this sense essentially Indian. It is also Indian in the way in which it dramatizes the clashes between two families 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
he rebels against that tradition characterize the social world of Jhabvala's fiction.

There is another dimension of this Indian familial setting which Jhabvala presents with considerable power and acute sense of inward understanding. The experience of Europeans women married to Indians or of Indian women married to European who are confronted with this inevitable situation of the Hindu joint families is sharply presented in her fiction. Gulab's marriage to Esmond has not changed her life, style. She looks forward to the spicy food that her mother or the cook prepares for her and Esmond simply dislikes the strong smells of spices.

The interaction between two cultures, European and Indian is Jhabvala's special theme. In fact, it is her fort since it is in this area that her personal experience in India is transformed into art. Her assertion: "I have lived in India for most of my adult life. My husband is Indian and so are my children. I am not, and less so every year," presents 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. Her echoes of the sentiments of Virginia wools can be heard in relation to 'a room' of one's own.

Her attitude to India and the world of her fiction hardness; she grows critical, ironic, even bitter. Empathy is replaced by antipathy
because the room is no longer her own, her close preserve; it is invaded by the out-side atmosphere. Jhabvala greatly admires Indian devotional songs of Bhakti cult on the themes which draw parallels between man's love of God and man's love for woman.

Jhabvala's seems to Khuswant Singh very Indian, and he calls her the 'adopted daughter of India.' Her later reaction, the continent of her birth and upbringing is not one of nostalgia, but restlessness of restlessness which impels her to return to India, the country of her voluntary residence. The growth of Jhabvala as an artist in fiction shows the working of a process of isolation-alienation in a mild form, and its transformation into art. In Jhabvala's world the context and connotation of alienation is primarily social. Her novels depict the break down of a traditional social order thereby highlighting the alienation or isolation between one individual and another in marital relation, in family life, in the society at large.

As a European writer in India, she is placed in a position which is naturally subjected to the pressures of alienation. As a representative of western culture and tradition, she inherits a life-view which does not seem native to the son of the soil. She consciously as well unconsciously brings to bear upon the Indian ethos the western rational and scientific attitudes which inevitably become the criteria for judging Indians, their
moral behaviour and their emotion or sensuous responses to environment. This situation is a source of her strength as well as her weakness as an artist. She is at best portraying conflicts of individuals and domestic problems which are social or familial manifestations of alienation. The implications of alienation in Jhabvala’s fiction so far beyond the boundaries of domestic life.

Man and society in India today are involved not merely in a change from tradition to modernity but in a process of cultural fragmentation. She portrays this change with an acute awareness and sensibility. She also endeavours to counter balance her portrayal of aspects of India’s spiritual reality. This in indirectly an artist’s endeavour to get over the process of alienation at work in her creativity.

The transformation of isolation of kind of alienation into art is the most significant quality of Jhabvala as a creative writer. In this sense she is different from Indian writers in English such a G. V. Desani and Kamala Markandaya.

The major themes in Jhabvala’s fiction are East-West Encounter and marital dissonance, which are naturally interlinked in their negative context. In the positive context these may be described as fruitful and happy relationships between East and West culminating in marital harmony and joy. Jhabvala portrays both these aspects, but the
elements of encounter and dissonance dominate her human world. In her each and every novel this conflict between a growing sense of individualism and the orthodox tradition of a man ridden Indian society is genuinely representative of the post-second war phase in Indian society. The satirist in Jhabvala artistically endorses G. B. Shaw's estimate of the British institution of marriage as a convenient solution of Britain's acute housing problem of allotting one room for two people.

Jhabvala exposes this tormented aspect of the Indian society today which is caught in the vertex of a major conflict between the old and new. The new society woman in urban India is a phenomenon in itself, but what is significant in Jhabvala portrayal is a deeper awareness of this society woman's personal predicament. In her search for the outer life there is a hidden sense of frustration, a sense of failure of the inner life. Mrs. Kaul in A Backward Place or Sarla in Get Ready For Battle amply demonstrate the Indian society lady's personal perplexities.

The theme of East-West encounter in Jhabvala's fiction has social, cultural and spiritual dimensions. In the social context Indians and Europeans meet, fall in love, get married and face either mutual dissonance or familial friction. In the cultural context they face the problems of adjustment of diverse backgrounds. Jhabvala is of course very much concerned with this aspect. In the spiritual context she
portrays Europeans who are fascinated with gurus, the torch bearers of India's ancient spiritual heritage.

Jhabvala as an artist in the realism of fiction thus seeks three kinds of reality, the social reality, the cultural reality and the spiritual reality. She is preeminently a novelist of domestic life, its joys and sorrows its harmony and friction, its fulfillment and frustration. Since she is concerned with a money-civilization in its domestic setting, she seeks to present the material reality which is significant in the metaphysic of her art. In this way Jhabvala's quest for the material reality is supplemented by, and harmonized with her search for a spiritual reality. This dual quest finally leads to the basic unity of her art in which the real and the ideal, the material and the spiritual are harmonized into a unified vision of her art.

Ruth Prawar Jhabvala has been compared with Jane Austen, E. M. Forster and Chekhnow. A Master of both the comic and the serious, her richly ripe Indian comedy of manners deprives here a certain section of affluent (wealthy) society particularly comprehensible to the tempting to an evil action of an imperial presence.

She draws contrast between two very different families and their daily lives their quarrels, their politics their love affairs, their expectations—
she brilliantly and wittily crystallizes some of the confusions that bedeviled India at the down of independence.

In this way it can be said that she is writer of genius— a writer of world class— a master story-teller. Rao's vedantic philosophy and Narayan's rituals are not the characteristics of her novels. Social, traditional mythical and superstitious views are her perspectives. Shyam M. Ashani rightly sumsup:

She writes about the furious social scuffing in the present day India. All her novels are full of local colour and clamour, dealing with the young who are inert romantic and none-too-wise and the old who are cool calculating and rigid. She describes the head on collusion between the traditional and the modern, the East and the West and the confusion that follows in the wake of these collision.³
The crisis of human relationship is deeply projected through mixed marriage. The sharp contrast between the two ways of living and thinking causes awkward and unseemly situations in conjugal life.

The theme of pseudo-modernism and false display of the woman's craze for their emancipation is repeated in his novels. The life-style of the Indian society is ambiguous. The Indian society heritage and stability, but is not ready for a change. Modernity has had only a superficial impact on the Indian elite class, who are still undecided about their social and personal norms.

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