



Contemporaneity of Language and Literature in the Robotized Millennium

Vol: 1(3), 2019

REST Publisher

ISBN: 978-81-936097-3-6

Website: <http://restpublisher.com/books/cllrm/>

Culturalistic View of Women in India in the select novels of Jhabvala

Saranya Devi. P, Department of English, Government Arts and Science College, Komarapalayam - 648 183

E mail id: saranyadevpradeep@gmail.com

Dr. G. Keerthi, Department of English, Government Arts and Science College, Komarapalayam - 648 183

Abstract:

Jhabvala describes the fruitful and happy relationships between east and west culminating in marital harmony and joy. Jhabvala is of course, very much concerned with the problems of European men and women trying to get adjustment to Indian society and its mores. Jhabvala uses the novel as a powerful medium for presenting the problems of the Indian society and suggesting ways and means to solve these problems. She has presented India with its more affluent levels where English is often the language of daily living. India forms the basis of Ruth Jhabvala's exploration of India in her novels and stories. Jhabvala's novel reveals world order in which a stubborn identification with one's inherited culture is both realistic and desirable.

Work

Jhabvala came to India as a bride in 1951, and published her first novel within a short period of time. Like any other foreigner, Mrs. Jhabvala was also enchanted and intrigued by the mystic land, India. She observed this unknown society closely and was fascinated by its social and familial setting, which was entirely different from the world she came from. The things that intrigued her were Indian traditions, customs, food, dress and most of the entire clash between the modern and the traditional-bound Indian society.

Jhabvala makes fun of the young Indian generation who while thinking themselves to be modern and westernized try to do things which the traditional Hindu society would not accept, that is falling in love with a boy (or a girl) outside one's own caste, community and social status. They face a vehement opposition and the irony is that tradition wins over modernization. And D.C. Agarwal in one of his articles analyzing the situation writes:

The traditionalists achieve much by hypothecating their individuality and freedom. They achieve a sense of security and belonging. The non-traditionalists, on the contrary have to pay the price for their identity and 'Lassaizfaire', even so it is questionable whether they will succeed in the bargain.¹

In her first two novels assimilation is perceived in terms of a collective identity shared by the members of the family or clan. The family - a microcosm of the clan - is viewed as a functional structure in which each part is assigned a role in accordance with conventional norms. When one part, a young woman, becomes conscious of the limitations of her personal freedom due to these inhibiting norms, a struggle ensues between her and the guardians of the structure. The collective identity is threatened and the generation is alienated. However, as Jhabvala sees it, the Indian family succeeds in resuming its collective identity by stretching its norms, on the one hand, and by including assimilation through the power of wealth and the weight of an established tradition, on the other. Western education and exposure to the Western ideals led the young to declare war on the old. The term generation gap evolved. Modern concepts of material progress and the claims of the individual clashed with the traditional ideals of the collective consciousness, sparking off alienations and dislocating traditional norms. A sensitive exploration of these dichotomies and the assimilations that resolve them, at times, against a background of an Indian struggling to find her feet, is Jhabvala's contribution - a significant and extensive one - to the tradition of expatriate writing. Her first two novels *To Whom She Will* and *The Nature of Passion* have several elements in common. They affirm the worth of cross - generation assimilation and may be grouped together to act, in Renee Winegarten's words as "a cautionary parable"² for young Indian women. Although her primary objective is to depict the bridging of the generation gap in a changing world, there is evident, in these novels, a broadening of perspective. Tradition is represented in the novel as the continuation of a way of life inherited over the generations. Tradition is vested in the family which, as a microcosm of the class, places its members, each according to his position in it, a complex of obligations - religious, social and economic. The role of the female section, in particular, is precisely defined for women are the chief custodians of tradition. Lala Narayan Dass Verma reflects on the role assigned to females in his community and justifies it thus:

The women lived a life apart. They sat together in the inner courtyard and saw to the cooking and the children. This, was right, this was as it should be. A family was not a family, a home, unless there was a women's quarter.... Demure daughters-in-law, stern mother-in-law, widowed aunts, all pounding spices, shifting rice, scolding servants, washing babies..... these constitute the necessary, if unconsidered, background to a man's life.³

Emancipation of women and their movement to the forefront of affairs is modern, Western concept that has to be guarded against as it threatens to destroy the stability of family and community.

In foreign countries this is natural this God-given order had been subverted: Women went out of the house, considered themselves equal with men. Neglected their households, did not care for their children: with the result that they lost the very character of women – were hard and bold, cut their hair short like a man's, smoked cigarettes, dressed themselves in immodest garments. And since the women were no longer women – no longer chaste, modest and home keeping – so it had come about in these foreign countries that the sanctity and stability of the family, and with it that of the whole community were destroyed. For, as Dev Raj was saying, 'It is only through the influence of the women in the home that the strength of a community and its religion are kept up'⁴. While women were regarded as the moral guardians of the family and community, moral strength was clearly not enough to protect them from the pitfalls of the society. The chief characteristic of a female is her exploitability which, in the opinion of the traditionalists, has to be protected by the strength of the male. The moment of a woman steps out of the house she is liable to lose her virtue. As a protection against such a disaster the community elders evolved the system of early marriage. Marriage is the key relationship in this community – one from which all other relationships stem. Parents negotiate on behalf of their children, for marriage is conceived not so much as a union of individuals as that of families. The institution of marriage carries with it all kinds of social implications. Judicious marriages, that are those that are financially strategic, bring in their wake elevations and expansions, injudicious ones – losses and discontent. The upbringing of a daughter is necessarily markedly different from that of a son. From the time they learn to toddle, the boy realises that while he is allowed to run free the girl's steps are counted. She is held closer to the home. Growth, for her, is precluded for growth indicates progression in place of passive conformity⁵. Life for a woman might take a somewhat altered form in the society depicted in Victorian fiction from that of the parvenus in *The Nature of Passion*, but the underlying bias is the same – that a woman's primary role in life is that of wife and mother. The real threat to community values in *The Nature of Passion* comes from within the family in the form of a quest for modernity engaged by its youth. The upholders of tradition find themselves in the midst of a domestic conflict in which they all but lose since, devoid of a meaningful cultural inheritance, they can offer no ideas that can effectively counter the dangerous aspirations of the young. The reiteration of what is and what is not proper by the older women of the family who are the custodians of custom⁶ produces purely negative effects and a stage comes when the solidarity of the family is seriously threatened. The astute Paterfamilias then steps in with the one mighty instrument in Lalaji possession. The power of wealth – used by him in all his battles against the world – is the only weapon with which he can conquer the young. Ruth Jhabvala's first novel reveals world order in which a stubborn identification with one's inherited culture is both realistic and desirable. This identification has its genesis in the ancient code of laws laid down in the Dharma Shastras. An adherence sustained over the centuries to the social order created there of, with its ramifications of caste and class and separations attendant upon them, still shapes and colours the Indian outlook as Ruth Jhabvala sees it. The characters of her novel identify with a well defined area, predetermined by birth and heritage and share a common conviction that only disruption and unhappiness can result from a violation. Although Jhabvala depicts, in the novels, a rigid community code which finds its most concrete expression and test on the familial level, there is a suggestion of potential change within the structure. She gives out, in fact, a strong hint that the structure is not so closed after all and that is the possibility of change that keeps the tradition alive. The human race continuously seeks a revolution in the field of science, politics, arts, philosophy and literature. Change in almost all the above fields is possible but a total revolution is not feasible in the field of moral values. Though social reformers and philosophers have different concepts of improvising the moral aspects of society, man is confined to the already set principles in his society. It is very difficult to say what is right and what is wrong. Good and bad are qualities which belong to objects independently of one's opinions, when two people differ as to whether a thing is good, only one of them can be right, though it may be very hard to know which is right. Psychologically, a man's state of mind does not always coincide with others. In every society, set social principles restrict man from overstepping into areas of trouble, especially in the legal institution of marriage, the family system, social moral codes, etc. Society has inculcated codes which make man to lead a constrained life. If individuals are not allowed to follow their own set of social and moral codes, then society would become chaotic, where virtue and vice would have no meaning. In India, moral social codes do not differ from the rest of the world. The only difference between the two is that the west offers more opportunities to divert from its set social codes with regard to marriage, deviant social conduct etc., In the east, people are conscious of overstepping the traditional values, religious mysticism and overprotected lives. They have not been able to disown the traditional values or accept the western beliefs.

References:

1. Agarwal, D.C. To Whom She Will: Exploration in Modern Indo-English Fiction: in R.K.Dhawan, *Common Wealth Fiction*, New Delhi: Bahri Publication Pvt. Ltd., 1982, p.215.
2. Weingarten, Renee. Ruth Praver Jhabvala: A Jewish Passage to India, *Midstream*, 20, No.3, 1974, p. 75
3. Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction, London: Thames and Hudson, 1976
4. The Nature of Passion, p.102
5. Preclusion of growth for the female is a pan Indian concept. In some communities it even extends to the physical. "A girl grows as fast as a banana plant when you feed her, let her stomach weep a little", runs a Bengali proverb.
6. Foster, E.M. The Hill of Devi (1953), London, Penguin Books, 1965, p.39-40.