

# *Introduction*

*(Biography, Background, Tradition and Art)*

## INTRODUCTION

### BIOGRAPHY, BACKGROUND, TRADITION AND ART

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, who has German mother, Polish father and Russian grand father and educated in England, married to an Indian and now settled down in the U.S.A., has achieved her universal fame in the world of fiction by her keen awareness of socio-cultural patterns and values, and her profound understanding of man in society, especially that of the turbulent world of the post-Independence Indian perplexity. Born on May 7, 1927, in the city of Cologne, Germany, to Marcus Prawer, a lawyer and Eleanora (Cohn), she, during a short span of 12 years in her motherland, began to receive her education from the segregated Jewish Schools with her brother, Siegbert Salamon Prawer (the professor of German literature at Oxford University, now retired) before the family moved to England in April, 1939 as refugees from the Nazis. The next 12 years before she married to an expatriate from Persia, an Indian architect namely Cyrus S.H. Jhabvala in London on June 16, 1951, she lived in Hendon, a suburb of London, and became a British citizen in 1948. From Hendon County School, she came to Queen Mary College and London University from where she took her M.A. Degree in English literature by writing a thesis entitled "*The Short Story in England, 1700-1750*", in 1951. Just after the marriage, the

Jhabvalas came to Delhi and they had three daughters – Renana, Firoza and Ava. After staying in India for about 25 years, she moved to New York city in 1976.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, from such various cultural barriers, seems to have no roots in any particular identity, but from the European point of view, she may seem an “Outside-Insider”, and while from the Indian artistic view point she appears as an “Inside-Outsider”. No doubt, her “personal factors need not inhibit any evaluation of her artistic vision or the craftsmanship in her novels unless such an evaluation is directed to a comparative study of European and Indian culture”.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, art has no bounds, but an artist must acquire the knowledge of human nocturnal secrets, both in its individual and universal contexts as well as the profound understanding of the social norms and traditions. In this view, Jhabvala as an Indian fiction writer has “knowledge and awareness of the Indian character, the Indian family, the Indian society and the Indian sensibility which assume great significance. This awareness of a group of people, their culture and tradition has to be harmonized with the consciousness of the universal man that is the centre of the art of fiction.”<sup>2</sup>

---

1. S.K. Tikoo, “Jhabvala's Vision and Art in *Get Ready For Battle* and *The Householder*” quoted in *Indian Women Novelists, Set-II, Vol-5*, edited by R.K. Dhawan, (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1993), p. 215.

2. V.A. Shahane, *Ruth Praver Jhabvala*, (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1976 ), pp. 12-13.

In spite of Ruth Praver Jhabvala's divergent cultural background and upbringing, she has firmly remained in tune with her Indian contemporary literary milieu. As an 'Inside-Outsider' she lived in Delhi over the decades and started to write and showed her personal experience of life and society to focus on the Indian urban middle class people and their response to the westerners, and vice-versa as a microcosm of the turbulent world of the post-Independence India. So, "fiction", she says :

"came as naturally as breathing. I've always had cupboards stuffed with unfinished novels, plays and stories. I wrote through my school years and college years and then when I came to India I went on writing."<sup>3</sup>

During Ruth Praver Jhabvala's stay in India, she wrote eight novels, namely – *To Whom She Will*, *The Nature Of Passion*, *Esmond In India*, *The Householder*, *Get Ready For Battle*, *A Backward Place*, *A New Dominion*, and *Heat And Dust*. And besides them, she published four collections of short stories, and also wrote screenplay of *The Householder* and the script of *Shakespeare Wallaha*. Again, working with James Ivory, she wrote the screenplay of *Guru* and *Bombay Talkie*.

---

3. Agarwal, R.G. "An Interview with Ruth Praver Jhabvala," *Quest* : 91(1974), p. 36.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala shot into international fame in the fiction world soon after the publication of her last novel in India – *Heat And Dust* for which she was awarded the Britain's prestigious Booker Memorial Prize for Commonwealth Literature in 1975. In 1976 she won a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship. She received the Neil Gunn International Fellowship in 1979. In 1986 she won a MacArthur Foundation Award. She was given an Academy Award for the Merchant-Ivory film of E.M. Foster's novel – *A Room With A View* in 1987. She reached her culmination of success in the world of film with the winning of an Oscar Award for her best screenplay – *Howards End*, a Merchant and Ivory film.

The time when Jhabvala came to India was full of hazardous perplexity with double events of Independence and Partition. New Delhi, where the Jhabvalas settled down, was full of uprooted refugees from Pakistan. “The ill-fated Partition uprooted millions from their homesteads, and hundreds of thousands of Hindu and Sikh refugees came to Delhi and have since accomplished the miracle of self-rehabilitation in a new environment.”<sup>4</sup> Such blatantly realistic picture of these uprooted families specially in their customs and values, their yearnings and self-realization on the one hand, and on the other hand, the crucial atmosphere at that time in Delhi and the Indians' critical response to the outsiders as well as the outsiders' spiritual solace or ironic motivation are prominently figured in her

---

4. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar , *Indian Writing In English*, (New Delhi : Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., rpt. 1995), p. 451.

novels. “In treatment of both these motifs, Ruth Praver Jhabvala is at her best when she observes acutely oddities of behaviour and response and brings out with gentle irony and good-humoured satire the comedy of what she observes.”<sup>5</sup>

It is no doubt, Jhabvala’s inward understanding with the feeling of her sympathy for these uprooted refugees who survived the holocaust of double events of Partition and Independence, is from the fact that she herself was one of the refugees from the Nazis. These deserted refugees, resembled those Jewish people, the Nazi victims who survived the holocaust before and during the Second World War. So, she expresses :

“I don’t feel like talking much about 1933 and after. Everyone knows what happened to German Jews first and other European Jews after. Our family was no exception.”<sup>6</sup>

These critical conditions and idiosyncrasies of these displaced refugees in India are vividly depicted in her early novels. She writes in her first novel – *To Whom She Will*:

---

5. M.K. Naik, *A History of Indian English Literature*, (New Delhi : Sahitya Akademy, 1982), p. 234.

6. “Ruth Praver Jhabvala's Testaments,” Excerpts from her commemorative lecture on the Scottish novelist Neil Gunn quoted in the *Hindustan Times Magazine*, (New Delhi, 27 July, 1980).

“They had lost almost everything: Their businesses, many of their valuables, all had to be left behind. It was complete disaster, absolute ruin: if it had happened to one man alone it would have been unbearable. But there is consolation in numbers, and there were hundreds of thousands of them. Their relatives, their friends, their neighbours, all were ruined with them, all had to start life afresh: there was no individual disgrace attached to this ruin : it was spiritually bearable. And like almost all Punjabis, they were resourceful, courageous, intensely practical people who faced their situation squarely : there was no help for it, and they had to earn their living; so they started again. They did not care how small or humble were their beginnings, and they worked hard. Within three or four years they were almost where they had been before, and some of them had even bettered themselves.”<sup>7</sup>

As an Eurasian, Jhabvala herself in India feels the sense of isolation and alienation for the family, she married an expatriate Persian family, migrated in India several centuries ago which is still keeping aloof from the Hindu and Muslim compatriots. Such an alien nature in the family of Jhabvalas haunts her but fascinates her in fictitious craftsmanship of literary mosaic which is experienced, not only by the Indian characters who have the feeling of isolation and alienation from their homesteads because of the social innate

---

7. Jhabvala, R.P. *To Whom She Will*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1955). All subsequent references are to this edition.

whirligig and its pressures in the joint Hindu family, like Kanta in her novel – *The Nature of Passion*, but also by the Western characters who feel alienated from their dissatisfied mirage like Indian society that is far away from their yearnings of new life and spiritual solace like Betty in her novel – *Esmond In India*. “The connotation of “Alienation” here is primarily social. Jhabvala’s fictional world depicts the breakdown of a traditional social order which leads to isolation and alienation for a number of individuals in their society.”<sup>8</sup> Etta, in her novel – *A Backward Place*, as an instance, a Hungarian young and glamorous woman who came to India for marriage and new life, is isolated from the Indian society, its traditions and values, and feels herself as an expatriate in India, a place only to end up her life. She, having no blissful marriage here in the Indian society, is trying to break down the Indian social customs and traditions that lead her to isolation and alienation from her surroundings. So, she tempts Judy and tries to pull her into her whirl-pool. Her agony and sense of alienation is evident when she tells Judy :

“Marriages, my dear, are made to be broken, that’s one of the rules of modern civilization. Just because we happen to have landed ourselves in this primitive society, that’s no reason why we should submit to their primitive morality..... My dear Judy, you’ve made a mistake – it could happen as they say to anyone – but if you would only face up to it and get out before it’s too late,

---

8. Jayanti Bailur, *Ruth Praver Jhabvala: Fiction and Film*, (New Delhi : Arnold Publishers, 1992), p. 8.



too late, Judy .... you've got such a terribly phlegmatic nature  
 ..... you just will not realize that life is something to be seized  
 and struggled with, the way Jacob struggled with the Angel. Oh  
 my God, what am I coming to, making Biblical allusions ! It's  
 your frightful puritan influence, Judy .... No, but I'm not joking,  
 I'm absolutely entirely terribly terribly serious, Judy. You must  
 leave him and get out. You're just rotting here. Look at you in that  
 thing, ..... and your hair to and – ugh, you're awful. You've let  
 yourself go. And not only physically, let me tell you as a friend .”<sup>9</sup>

In Jhabvala's initial decade as an expatriate in India, the juxtaposition of her total submission to the Indian customs and traditions on the one side, and the Indian culture's response to her on the other side is one of the sheer raptures. She has no room to refresh the past solemn events in Europe and floats without resistance towards the ocean of Indian culture. So, she says:

“I felt like that for the years. I didn't feel like going back to Europe and in fact did not .... I was pretending to be writing as an insider, as if I wasn't a European at all, ..... But I pretended I know them – no, more I pretended I was them.”<sup>10</sup>

---

9. Jhabvala, R.P. *A Backward Place*: (1965; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), pp. 5-6. (All the subsequent references are to this reprint).

10. *Hindustan Times Magazine*, 27 July, 1980.

With such an encounter with the Indian culture and her total submission to the Indian society Jhabvala herself feels fascination for the Indian customs. This reflection of her mind can be seen in her early novels, like *Esmond In India*, published in 1958. In the novel, Gulab faithfully behaves as a traditional Hindu wife who believes : “It was a husband’s right ..... to do whatever he liked with his wife. He could treat her well or badly, pamper her or beat her – that was up to him, and it was not her place to complain.”<sup>11</sup>

Since her visit to Europe in 1960, her attitude towards the Indian culture gradually changes due to the vast difference between the East and West. India is still under the shadow of the holocaust of the partition and political turmoil, which causes poverty in the country, but Europe of that time, is free from all the ravages of the world war and becomes prosperous. The woman’s inferiority complex in the Indian context is also one of the factors that annoys her. Such a superficial notion of impatient revolted attitude in her mind expressed at the most striking instances of deformity the innate ideas in her later novels.

The characters in these novels are more insisting upon the Western characters, their dissatisfied motifs and their vices on such a chameleon-like Indian society. “Jhabvala, like many of the characters, found that she was ‘strapped to a wheel’ that carried

---

11. Jhabvala, R.P. : *Esmond In India*, (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1983, rpt.) p. 199.

her through the stages, she believes all Europeans who visit India inevitably pass through .”<sup>12</sup> Jhabvala explains the westerners’ experience in India in her autobiographical essay – *Myself in India* which introduced her third collection of stories – *An Experience of India* as :

“There is a cycle that Europeans – by Europeans I mean all Westerners .... tend to pass through. It goes like this : first stage, tremendous enthusiasm – everything Indian is marvellous; second stage, everything Indian not so marvellous;..... Everything Indian abominable. For some people it ends there, for others the cycle renews itself and goes on. I have been through it so many times that now I think of myself as strapped to a wheel that goes round and round and sometimes I’m up and sometimes I’m down.”<sup>13</sup>

Just after the publication of her last novel in India – *Heat And Dust* in 1975, Jhabvala moved to New York City to escape from that ‘WHEEL’.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala’s fiction written in India falls into two phases: the first phase is that of the novels before 1962 which are concerned with the comic mode; values in modern India, an outsider’s view; and the second phase is that of the novels after

---

12. Ralph J. Crane, “Introduction” to *Passages To Ruth Praver Jhabvala*, (New Delhi : Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd. ) P.IX.

13. *Myself In India*, p.13.

1962 which dealt with the ironic mode : novels about Westerners in India. In the first five novels before 1962, namely *To Whom She Will*, *The Nature Of Passion*, *Esmond In India*, *The Householder* and *Get Ready For Battle*, she herself as an Indian like the characters in these novels who eat Indian soil, sing Hindustani music and do hope only for India, expresses in comic vein, by and large, about the mode of living as well as the personal relationship in the urban middle class joint Hindu family system society in Delhi in the period just following independence and partition. Even the titles of these initial comedies of manners, except *Esmond In India*, which is the first novel to introduce the European characters that can be treated as a darker comedy, are taken from Indian folk-lore and the holy books. The title of her first novel *To Whom She Will*, for an outstanding example, itself is taken from the ancient Indian folk-lore – *The Panchatantra*, a sage's moral counsels to the parents for their daughter's marriage 'to whom she will'. This social comedy like the story mentioned in *The Panchatantra*, deals with the personal conflicts of Hari and Amrita and the fruitful marriage with their divergent traditions and modernity in the Indian context. The title of the last novel – *Get Ready For Battle* (1962), is also taken from the Hindu holy book – *The Bhagvad Gita*. It is a domestic comedy, dealing with the poor "Bundi Busti" in the Indian society. So she dives deeply into the Ocean of Indian mores and says :

“The smells and sights and sounds of India – the mango and jusmine on hot night – the spiced food - the vast sky – ... I've tried to write about it. At that time I loved everything there : .... to my shame I have to say – even the beggars, the poverty, they didn't bother me than .. ”<sup>14</sup>

The last three novels after 1962, namely *A Backward Place*, *A New Dominion*, and *Heat And Dust* have altogether the reflection of Jhabvala's mind in comic motivation and profound understanding of the contemporary Indian society. But she also ponders on another world, that is the U.S.A. In these novels the Western characters, like Etta in *A Backward Place*, try to escape from India. Here, the title itself; is ironically entitled as a backward place for the backward people only to live in, that is, India itself. And the title of her last novel in India – *Heat And Dust* itself also ironically signifies the high temperature of the tropical area, i.e., – India, – “HEAT” which ruins not only the physical appearance but also affects the human psyche. The symbol – “DUST” symbolizes the poverty in the country. In this novel, Jhabvala's preoccupation is to show her inward understanding of man in the Indian society as well as the reaction of that society on her, which is the same with that of the narrator in the novel itself, who thinks to help a dying beggar woman. Jhabvala's such strong violent disgust to the dirty Indianess can be seen in the novel when describing the beggar woman :

---

14. *Hindustan Times Magazine*, 27 July, 1980.

“ ... was lying on the outskirts of this mound of refuse .... The animals snuffling around in the refuse also paid no attention to her. Only the flies hovered above her in a cone ... There was a terrible smell and a cluster of flies. I looked down and saw a thin stream of excrement trickling out of her .... I felt – the Hindu fear of pollution. I went home and bathed rigorously, rising myself over and over again ... pollution – infection – seemed everywhere; those flies could easily have carried it from her to me.”<sup>15</sup>

Ruth Praver Jhabvala is one of the pioneer Indian comic novelists in English. Her tradition and art of craftsmanship are somewhat similar to the tradition of the nineteenth century comic English novelists, like Thackeray and Dickens. She writes against the background of the post-Independence India, which resembles in some way the nineteenth century England. She depicts the world of Delhi as Thackeray’s world of London. Like Dickens, she deals with inflated types.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala has also been compared to both Jane Austen and Chekhov. Her earlier books dealt with the same sort of society as Jane Austen did, that is, the leisured middle classes, mostly concerned with eating and marrying. This can be seen in her first novel – *To Whom She Will* in her description of a meal in the family of Saxena : “curried vegetables with cut-lets , curds and chapatis,

---

15. Jhabvala, R.P., *Heat And Dust*, (rpt. Delhi: Hind Pocket Books(P) Ltd). In arrangement With Futura Publication Limited, London, pp. 113-114.

followed by a mountain of very white rice and chicken - curry” (pp.9-10). Like Austen, she possesses a vision of comic and ironic detachment and resolutely, again, has, the restriction of her vision to a small section of society. Above all, she also clearly points out in the novels more about the background, which is not found in Jane Austen’s novels. So, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar says – “Jane Austen worked wonders in her little bit of ivory hardly two inches wide. Hers was a static society, more or less; at least it was recognisably a ‘society’. The tempo of life was slow, conversation flowed at a leisurely pace in country or city, and the tenor of human life was not bedevilled by the modern media or the frenzied bustle and drive of contemporary civilized life. In contrast to Jane Austen’s world, post-Independence Delhi defies definition and containment, and it needs all Mrs. Jhabvala’s talent resolved limitation to locate her own chunks of ivory – less than ivory and rather more than two inches wide and execute her exquisite comedies of urban middle class life in nineteen fifties and sixties.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, she writes of present day India which seems to have a lot in common socially and economically, with nineteenth century Russia whose well - to - do middle - classes anguished with boredom, Chekhov was writing about. In this view of comparative study, she herself gave a reply to Ramlal G. Agarwal in an interview with him in the following words :

---

16. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing In English*, (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, Pvt. Ltd., rpt. 1985), p.453.

“I have not consciously modelled myself on anyone. Unconsciously (or does one say subconsciously ?) more or less every writer I have loved and admired. Any writer who has deeply thrilled me – and there have been many, many, – has as it were entered into me and so has influenced me. But to get back to Jane Austen. The reason I used to be compared to her is because my earlier books dealt ... as hers did ... In my later ones I’ve been mostly compared to Russian writers Chekhov, for example. Again, I feel, not because of any similarity between us – how could there be ? I wish it were so, even by thousandth of a fraction – but because one deals with similar societies.”<sup>17</sup>

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, as a serious artist shows her profound understanding of man in the society as well as her keen awareness of their individual and social problems in the Indian context at the time just after the Independence and Partition. The more and more she dives into the Indian mores and reality, the more and more she becomes serious in her practice of art of fictitious craftsmanship in the Indian theme and situation. Such seriousness in her motif can be seen when she says :

“ Perhaps I do tend to see the ridiculous aspects first, both in situations and characters. But I don’t think I just sit and laugh at them. Especially not in my later books. On the contrary, I’m

---

17. Agarwal, Ramlal G. “An Interview with Jhabvala,” *Quest*; September – October, 1974.



beginning to feel that what is ludicrous on the surface may be tragic underneath. That's especially true in India. All those Indian paradoxes and comical situations that Western writers especially like to exploit and make fun of – e.g. –, the B.A. failed, the banya praying with one hand and giving false weight with the other – well perhaps one laughs at first (I'm afraid I used to laugh more than I should in my early books) – but afterwards you see that it is not comic at all but quite the opposite. Then one stops laughing : at which point perhaps one's writing opens up.”<sup>18</sup>

The East and the West encounter is one of Jhabvala's predominant themes. She is much preoccupied with portraying the predicament of individuals in their relationship to the family and to the social group. Again, the experience of European women married to Indians or of Indian women married to Europeans who are confronted with this inevitable situation of the Hindu joint families is sharply presented in her fiction. Again, Indian poverty, material and spiritual, is Jhabvala's preoccupation. Indian spirituality is an escape from Indian poverty. She says that India demoralises Europeans who came to stay here. This is also a major theme in her novels. She is essentially a novelist of manners rather than of ideas.

In Jhabvala's later novels, as a satirist and ironist, she translates her artistic views into a strong sophisticated weapon to outburst and overcome all the barriers among the people, especially, the East,

---

18. *Ibid.*

the West, with a sharp cool intelligence which can see through pretension and humbug. She views things ironically and her handling of the material is more drastic, straightforward and prosaic. So, she always tries "to combine the comic and the ironic vision and lays bare the follies, foibles, varieties, frivolities and pretences of the sophisticated and not so-sophisticated upper middle class people in ... the chameleon-like society of Delhi." <sup>19</sup>

Jhabvala is very much aware of the variety and complexity of the post-Independence Indian perplexity. Her basic art of literary craftsmanship is to explore the human dignity and portent of such an Indian society under the dark shadow of the conflict between tradition and modernity. To reveal such a contrast of tradition and modernity, she employs the comic views which portray the path of comic characters and evolves the form of a social comedy of manners. She highlights the incongruities of human characters and situations which have social, familial and cultural implications. Such implications became the source of the comic mode. As being haunted her mind by the uprooted hazardous boredom and complexity of the post-Independence Indian society, she creates comedies of manners which study man in a social setting, measuring his behaviour against an implicit norm of values and behaviour inherent in any

---

19. Meena Shirwadkar, "Indian Women Novelists," in *Perspective On Indian Fiction In English*, edited by M.K. Naik, (New Delhi : Abhinav Publications, 1985), p.206

society rather than against an impossible ideal. So, Jhabvala is “pre-eminently a novelist of domestic life, its joys and sorrows, its harmony and friction, its fulfilment and frustration.”<sup>20</sup>

The present thesis aims at an investigation on Ruth Praver Jhabvala’s insights into Indian life by following the tradition of the writers of comedy of manners like Jane Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, Chekhov, etc. This study also attempts to explain the nature of Jhabvala’s art of fiction in Indian context. In the subsequent chapters, each of the novels of Ruth Praver Jhabvala mentioned elsewhere earlier will be discussed in chronological order in detail in the light of the thematic content of comedy of manners.

---

20. Vasant A. Shahane, *Ruth Praver Jhabvala*, (New Delhi : Arnold Heinemann, 1976), p. 30.

The Comedy of Manners - exploited this particular genre of comedy to study and imitate in a vein of humor and satire, the social mannerisms, conventions and artificiality of their particular age and society through delightful observation and witty commentaries on the prevalent temper, follies and external details of the life of certain men and women who were the stereo-types of their depicted. society. R.B. Sheridans *The Rivals* is a perfect Comedy of Manners in the way it holds a mirror to social life, modes and manners of the artificial, fashionable community of the 18 th Century English soci The comedy of Manners emerged during the age of Dryden, the age of Restoration. Therefore it is also called Restoration Comedy. "The Restoration comedy of manners reached its fullest expression in *The Way of the World* (1700) by William Congreve, which is dominated by a brilliantly witty couple." A Comedy of Manners is concerned with social usage and the question of whether or not characters meet certain social standards. Often the governing social standard is morally trivial but exacting. The plot of such a comedy, usually concerned with an illicit love affair or similarly scandalous matter, is subordinate to the play's brittle Sly and compassionate, sad and funny, the fiction of Ruth Praver Jhabvala has, by 1988, enchanted British readers for more than three decades; her North American audience, while somewhat newer, is no less enthusiastic. Siegbart Soloman Praver (1925- ) is the author of a number of literary critical studies suggesting interesting commonalities with his sister's work: for example, *Caligari's Children: The Film as Tale of Terror* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980; New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), or *Heine's Jewish Comedy: A Study of His Portraits of Jews and Judaism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983; New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).Google Scholar. 8. From Ramlal Agarwal, "An Interview with Ruth Praver Jhabvala", *Quest*, 91 (1974) p. 36.Google Scholar. 10.