

## Review Article

# Crisis of Identity: Ambivalent Position of Ruth Jhabvala as a Novelist

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## OVERVIEW

Before we begin our study in R.P. Jhabvala's fiction, let us differentiate between two literary terms, often referred to as Anglo-Indian and Indo-Anglian literature. Anglo Indian literature comprises the solid mass of writing, exemplifying the colonial discourse from the British point of view. According to E F Oaten ("Anglo-Indian Literature", *The Cambridge History of English Literature* Vol. XIV Part III, Cambridge University Press, 1967. p. 331.

Anglo-Indian literature, as regards the greater part of it, is the literature of a comparatively small body of Englishmen who, during the working part of their lives, become residents in a country so different in every respect from their own that they seldom take roots in its soil. On the contrary, they strive to remain English in thought and aspiration. By occasional periods of residence in England, they keep themselves in intimate touch with English life and culture: throughout the period of their life in India they are subject to the influence of two civilizations, but they never lose their bias towards that of England, which, in most cases, ultimately re-absorbs them.

**Bhupal Singh as well defines the term, 'Anglo-Indian' thus;**

Broadly speaking, it includes any novel dealing with India which is written in English. Strictly speaking, it means fiction mainly describing the life of Englishmen in India. In a still narrower sense, it may be taken to mean novels dealing with the life of Eurasians who now prefer to be called Anglo-Indians.<sup>1</sup> (*A Survey of Anglo-Indian Fiction*, London, Curzon Press, rpt 1975, p. 1)

The Indo English literature, on the other hand, deals with the Indian ethos, the aspirations, beliefs, conflicts and problems of Indians. They write in English, and imitate the English or European art form but their background is truly

Indian. No doubt many of them write with an eye on the British readership but the sap and juices that feed their art are fundamentally Indian. Thus, whether we read Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Khushwant Singh Salman Rushdie, Malgaonkar, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Kamla Martiandaya, Arun Joshi, Nayantara Sahgal or any other Indo-English writer, he is basically rooted and absorbed in the Indian social, cultural, economic or political milieu of this country.

Once we realize this essential difference between the Anglo-Indian and the Indo-Anglian writers, it would be easier for us to assess the ambivalent image of R.P. Jhabwala as it emerges through her self-confessions, critical remarks, interviews and novels.

Quite a very meaningful scholars consider Ruth Jhabwala an Indo-Anglian writer. The familiar arguments in favour of this position are: most of her locales and settings are Indian; a majority of her characters are Indian; even when there are European characters, they are placed in India and are studied in relation to India and the Indian people; her themes are Indian and sometimes cross-cultural with India being as one of the two sides of the cross-cultural encounter; as compared to Anglo-Indian novelists, her understanding of the Indian scene is closer and more authentic and when she comes to dealing with it, her portrayal is more objective and sympathetic. And then there are the 'technicalities' of her marriage to an Indian and her stay in India for a very long time all of which support her case of being included in the Indian pantheon of writers.

However, a whole variety of arguments and views are expressed by various scholars with regard to her 'placement' in English literature. Thus, for instance, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar and R.S. Singh give her a place in their

books on what is strictly Indian English literature while Meenakshi Mukherji excludes Ruth Jhabvala from her work pertaining to the same art. H.M. Williams is aware of "some confusion over areas of relevance such as whether the novels of R. Praver Jhabvala should be considered 'Anglo-Indian' or 'Indo Anglian'. There are inevitably writers who do not fit into historical-literary categories.

V.A. Shahane firmly asserts that Jhabvala does not come within the fold of the Indo-Anglian writers. Thus she remarks – Jhabvala should not be linked with other creative Indian writers in English such as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao or R.K. Narayan, nor with women novelists such as Kamala Markandaya or Nayantara Sehgal. She is in a way unique and the advantages as well as the disadvantages of her literary situation are particular to her.

**Raji Narasimhan, as well criticizes those who categorize her with the other Indian writers, writing in English.**

Jhabvala writes about India, of course. But that it is a foreigner's perspective and the voice has unmistakable foreign inflexions have come to be overlooked in misplaced magnanimity towards Indo-English.

Karnataka University's collection of essays entitled, *Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English* and *The Image of India in Western Creative Writing*, fairly representative in character of writers writing in either of the two sub-genres, do not include her in either. But, strangely enough, she finds a place in a more recent collection of articles of Indian English literature entitled *Aspects of Indian Writing in English*. Lately, the critical canon seems to be veering towards treating her as a post-colonial expatriate writer who cannot be pinned down to any particular nationality or literary tradition and who, in her deceptively simple literary style, tackles certain post-modernist themes and motifs.

Even a general reading of Ruth Jhabvala's works should lead us to the safe conclusion that she is not one of these Anglo-Indian writers who wrote during the British Raj and even when they wrote on Indian themes and subjects, they wrote in relation to it. That she cannot be seen as a direct descendant of the Anglo-Indian line is due to the fact that she is outside the conceptual framework which bound writers in this tradition to one another. The novelists of the British era who wrote on India, of Indian people, about Indian issues and against Indian settings were essentially writing with Raj as their reference point. Their individual or collective differences with one another generally depended on the 'phase' in terms of which the fortunes of the Empire were seen or the individual

convictions or predilections of the writer concerned. As Mulk Raj Anand writes:

First, I believe many English novelists writing about India have been mostly concerned with themselves and the English community in India, particularly in its relationship with the Indian people, and therefore maturing a kind of regional tradition of the English novel, closely linked with the novels written in or around the metropolis of London. Secondly, .. the attitude of these English novelists to their own fellow Englishmen and women, as well as to the Indians who figure in their books, reflects the general attitude towards Empire problems of the period in which they write. London is, therefore, the key to India in this as in many other ways.

Ruth Jhabvala does not fit in this framework because she stands in no relation to the Empire, or to London, or to the British government as such. Of course, this is more due to the coincidence of her writing at a particular historico-political context when the Empire is non-existent and India is an independent country.

While Ruth Jhabvala may not be a Raj writer in the strict sense of the term, her position as an Indian writer, or as a European writer writing on India, or as a writer in between the two, still remains indeterminate. In this connection, she is sometimes described as an 'inside-outsider' and at other times as an 'outside-insider'. As V.A. Shahane puts it:

These apparently contrary expressions are more meaningful than mere high-sounding literary labels since they impinge on her special personal and literary situation ... From the European literary vantage point, she may seem an 'outside-insider', while from the Indian artistic viewpoint she seems an 'inside-outsider'. Both these positions show a basic change of perspective, though one of the two is inherent in her literary situation.

**We should assess Ruth Jhabvala's position on the basis of three counts-**

- 1 'technical' details regarding Ruth Jhabvala's birth, nationality, marriage, etc.;
- 2 Ruth Jhabvala's own views and responses to the insider/outsider dichotomy as expressed in various interviews, autobiographical writings, etc.
- 3 And, finally, Ruth Jhabvala's image of India as embodied in her novels.

In terms with the thematic development, Ruth Jhabvala's novels can be categorized in three broad categories – Phase One (all-inclusive acceptance of everything Indian), Phase Two (gradual distancing and formation of a deepening negative response to India) and Phase Three (India being used as a metaphor though still a potent and sinister one). To elaborate, in Phase One the Westerners who get into touch with India feel exuberant in their response to it. They love everything that they perceive as Indian – Indian people, culture, festivals, religions and rituals, the flora and fauna, the colours and senses, the clear blue Indian sky and the rising and setting Indian sun. The diversity and multitude of Indian enralls them. Like other Westerners, Ruth Jhabvala fell in love with it when, in 1951, she married an Indian architect C. S. H. Jhabvala and moved over to India. In her numerous interviews and autobiographical sketches, she has given a lyrical account of her rapturous response to the Indian phenomena as she perceived and experienced these. In an autobiographical sketch, she confesses:

I still can't talk about the first impact India made on my innocent – meaning blank and unprepared – mind and senses. To try to express it would make me stutter. I entered world of sensuous delights that perhaps children – other children – enter. I remember nothing of it from my childhood. That way India was – remains till today – my childhood.<sup>5</sup>

These may be the gushing outpourings of a charged literary mind but, as Ruth Jhabvala confesses, these form the staple of response of a typical Westerner in contact with India in the first stage of the celebrated cycle. In the terms of fictional representation, this phase has resulted in the writing of four novels – *To Whom She Will* (1955), *The Nature of Passion* (1956), *The Householder* (1960) and *Get Ready For Battle* (1962). Though *Esmound in India* (1957) is chronologically the third novel in Ruth Jhabvala's writing span, thematically it links with Phase Two of her career when disillusionment with India and everything Indian had started setting in.

We would now better discuss the first phase novels of Jhabvala where she treats India with bonhomie and good will.

## CONCLUSION

Ruth Praver Jhabvala's fiction can be analysed from the position points of two different literary traditions-the tradition of Western (or British) literary response to India as embodied in the literary sub-genre known as 'Anglo-Indian' literature, and the tradition of the Indian writing in English commonly designated as Indian English literature. Ruth Jhabvala's alleged 'ambivalence' basically stems

from the fact that she shares characteristics of both the Anglo-Indian and the Indian English traditions of writing in English.

It is this ambivalence that grants a characteristic feature to Jhabvala's work. While this elusiveness is a source of her strength. It has also been confusing both literary critics and ordinary readers who find it difficult to 'place' her. A resolution of this enigma is particularly important in an enquiry of the present kind which seeks to analyse her image of India, the country of her domicile for twenty-four years but which she left to settle down in New York. This is also important in view of the fact that after leaving India for good she has uttered many unpleasant things about a Westerner's response to India.

A number of critics including Bhupal Singh, E.F. Oaten, Allen J. Greenberger, Benita Parry and others,<sup>1</sup> who have analysed the image of India as portrayed in Anglo-Indian Literature have come to the conclusion that the general image of Indian in Anglo-Indian writing is based on pre-conceived assumptions regarding the East and its denizens. Even in the fiction of 'liberal' writers like Forster this prejudiced image is not entirely free from certain foul assumptions. As Edward Said<sup>2</sup> has noted, the image of the Orient has been a western construct and Anglo-Indian fiction only exemplifies it. An analysis of the image of India in Anglo-Indian fiction provides us an approach route to Ruth Jhabvala's image of the country.

But as compared to the Anglo-Indian Writers, the image of India evoked in Indian English writing is far more authentic. Taking certain aspects of Indian life, the Indian English writers look at these with an operative sensibility that is Indian in essence and integrity.

This literary historical backdrop helps us in assessing whether Ruth Jhabvala is essentially an 'outsider' trying to understand India and portraying the myriad aspects of its life in her works, or an 'insider'. We have reason to believe that Ruth Jhabvala should better be known and evaluated as a writer representing the post-colonial western response to India, a response that is free from the Raj trappings but that is replete with the images embodying orientalism in a changed (and changing) India.

The technical details relating to Ruth Jhabvala's course of life – birth, nationality, ethnic-religious identity, marriage etc. – point to the much-talked about 'rootlessness' in her life. The constant shifting from one place to another – from Cologne to London to New Delhi to New York – has resulted in her lack of identification with any particular country or culture. Also, while she has been asserting her Jewish background in subtle, indirect ways, the fact of her marriage into an Indian Parsi family and her

cosmopolitanism has led to a sifting down of her ethnic-religious consciousness as well. These unsettling experiences seem to have affected Ruth Jhabvala's young mind and resulted in her nursing a feeling of being an 'outsider'. Over a period of time, this has become a part of her sensibility, her vision. The way she looks at India is of a piece with this sensibility. She herself confesses the effect of rootlessness on her work in the following words:

It may have something to do with any background: I was practically born a displaced person, and all any of us ever wanted was a travel document and a residential permit. One just didn't care as long as one was allowed to live somewhere. I'm still like that. I have absolutely no patriotism for, or attachment to, any country whatsoever. None.

If the biological details of Ruth Jhabvala's life 'literalise her outsidership', then some of the interviews that she has given and some of the autobiographical sketches that she has written only reinforce this 'outsidership'. The most important of her biographical sketches is '*Myself in India*' in which she clarifies her position vis-à-vis India, both as a person and as a writer and which may be regarded as her testament of faith. In this sketch, she declares categorically:

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.

Then identifying herself with the Europeans in India, she writes:

India reacts very strongly on people. Some loathe it, some love it, most do both.... But it is not always easy to be sensitive and receptive to India: there comes a point where you have to close up in order to protect yourself. The place is very strong and often proves too strong for European nerves.

In Phase One, Ruth Jhabvala has a lot of admiration for this country. This is the time when after marrying an Indian architect C.S. H. Jhabvala in London, she has moved over to India. She loves everything Indian – Indian people, culture, festivals, religions and rituals, the colours and scenes, the clear blue Indian sky and the rising and setting Indian sun. She also studies at close quarters the complex pattern of interrelationships in the Indian family set-up. In terms of fictional representation, this phase has resulted in the writing of five novels – *To Whom She Will* (1955), *The Nature of Passion* (1956), *Esmond in India* (1957), *The Householder* (1960) and *Get Ready for Battle* (1962). Except for *Esmond in India*, which in terms of our analysis falls in Phase Two, in this period Ruth Jhabvala

observes the Indian scene at close quarters and describes it with a considerable sense of empathy. Thus she has a lot of sympathy for the predicaments of Amrita and Hari Sahni (*To Whom She Will*), Nimmi and her siblings (*The Nature of Passion*), Prem and Indu (*The Householder*) and Sarla Devi (*Get Ready for Battle*). She ascribes the problems that these gentle souls face to the changes that are taking place at social, economic and cultural levels in post-independence India. These changes though welcome and long overdue do entail social dislocations, economic readjustments and emotional strains. In her gentle ironic mode, Ruth Jhabvala takes note of these changes in the Indian society and shows an affectionate regard for her protagonists who are grouping for a resolution of their problems under their circumstances. There are no major European characters in her novels in this phase. The few that appear – Hans Loeuwe and Kitty in *The Householder* and Prof. Hoch in *To Whom She Will* – appear more like caricatures.

In Phase Two, Ruth Jhabvala undergoes a shift in her perspective on India. This is implicit in her following admission:

However, I must admit that I am no longer interested in India. What I am interested in now is myself in India – which sometimes, in moments of despondency, I tend to think of as my survival in India.

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