



## CROSS CULTURAL ENCOUNTER IN RUTH PRAWER JHABVALA'S SHORT STORIES

Dr. VALARIA SETHI

Associate Professor, Department of English, Dayanand College, Hisar, Haryana

Email: [valariasethi@gmail.com](mailto:valariasethi@gmail.com)



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### Abstract

Ruth Praver Jhabvala has achieved an international reputation as a novelist and short story writer, though she seems better known abroad than in India. Her writing career now spans almost forty years and has so far produced ten novels, five volumes of short stories and seventeen screenplays. Her achievement as a literary artist is distinctive and rather limited at the same time. It is distinctive because she has cultivated and demonstrated the qualities of a literary artist which are her own and which naturally emerge from a social and cultural milieu peculiar to herself. However, her distinction is modified and narrowed down by the rather limited quality of her literary achievement, which is, in part, the inevitable result of her choice and in part, the artistic outcome of her creativity. This peculiar paradox of her attainment as an artist is, in a way, rooted in the environs of her literary effort, and is also coextensive with the range and quality of her fiction.

**Keywords:** Cultural, diversity, interaction, encounter, values, detachment, individual.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala has sometimes been described as an 'inside-outsider' and other times as an 'outside-insider'. Shahane says that these apparently contrary expressions are more meaningful than mere high-sounding literary labels since they impinge on her special personal and literary situation.<sup>1</sup> She is essentially a European writer who has lived and continues to live, in India and who has given to her experience of life and society in India an artistic expression. From the European literary vantage point she may seem an 'outside-insider', while from the Indian artistic view point she seems an 'inside-outsider'. Interaction between two cultures, European and Indian, is Jhabvala's special theme. In fact, it is her forte since it is in this area that her personal experience in India is transformed into art. She has awareness of man, society, human and moral dilemmas and the aesthetic design that she projects on her experience.

This awareness also includes her knowledge of the human heart, both in its individual and universal contexts, as well as the inward understanding of the social and cultural patterns and values.

As far as her short stories are concerned, any general account of Ruth P. Jhabvala's short stories must take into consideration the diversity of character, situation and point of view which is typical of her work. Her characters not only include the range of those representing the Indian joint family but also include Indians living abroad and a variety of English folk, young and old, living in India and thereby representing the cultural interaction. Her plots center on domestic situation and everyday occurrences. But what is of fundamental importance in her stories are people's perception – perceptions of themselves, of others and of the world at large. A dexterous highlighting of point of view

demonstrates the idea that what a person sees, and the way a person sees, are largely preconditioned through the circumstances of heredity and environment. Jhabvala's fictional India is created through a process of montage and there emerges from her short fiction a world which is composite, fragmentary and unstable. And her being an outsider gives a kind of objectivity to this representation of cultural interaction.

A story for her "is... like a poem... You can't cheat on a poem. It's one cry from the heart - just one - only that has to come out true and right."<sup>2</sup> Her first volume of short stories *Like Birds, Like Fishes*, appeared in 1963 and a second collection *An Experience of India* was published three years later, and takes its prevailing mood and a new direction from the essay that forms an introduction to the book, "*Myself in India*." This title story uses the cycle of response to India as the basis for a fictional account of a western woman's travels in India in search of self-fulfillment. The story that seems to be the most deeply personal to the author, in this collection, is "*The Housewife*" in which a most moving exploration of the theme of artistic commitment is discreetly embedded in a domestic drama of middle-class marital infidelity. Another study of Westernized Indian woman is "*A Course of English Studies*." As the theme of East-West encounter in Jhabvala's fiction has social, cultural and spiritual dimension, these three stories present one or the other in different ways.

Perhaps the most astonishing piece included in her collections of short stories is not really a short story at all but a personal essay about the author's struggles with India and with herself. This essay "*Myself in India*", which originally appeared in the 'London Magazine' and has subsequently been included in several journals and two of Jhabvala's collections: *An Experience of India* and the volume of selected stories, *Out of India*. There is a confession of personal inadequacy, of an irritability, of an inability to cope with India. This story posing as an essay, starts with the admission that 'something is wrong'<sup>3</sup> she speaks about her overwhelming sense of oppression and then offers a number of possible explanations. She names a number of difficulties,

which she says she simply cannot forget and is something one can never really recover from. But then she refers to the oppressive heat which seems to slow the passage of time, and she describes herself cowering in her room during endless hot afternoons. She dramatizes herself as a kind of prisoner, physically intimidated by climate, morally intimidated by India's poverty and psychologically intimidated by the apparent impossibility of escape or release. And then there is her isolation: she finds she fits in with neither ordinary Indians nor westernized Indians whom she regards in some way as bogus. This leaves her an outsider, a foreigner without a home, a mere resident and nothing more in this land of her adoption.

Jhabvala in this personal memoir has spoken of 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. She has herself passed through this cycle of great enthusiasm for India where everything seemed marvelous to the other extreme where everything appeared so abominable. The cycle renews itself, but for how long? In this context, Jhabvala writes: "However, I must admit that I am no longer interested in India. What I am interested in now is myself in India... (p. 8)." This confessional mood paves the way for outlining the process of her creativity and the way it transforms life into art. Her creative self seems to be the sole occupant of her especial, individually-designed room from where she could view the outside world. It helps her to maintain an attitude of ironic detachment since it is a room itself as, for example, when the air conditioner works, it is cool and comfortable. It creates the right atmosphere for Jhabvala's sense of the comic. But sometimes the electric power fails, the room-cooler ceases to function, the atmosphere becomes warm and oppressive. This outer weather affects the inner weather of Jhabvala's sensitivity. Then her attitude to India and the world of her fiction hardens, she grows critical, ironic, even bitter. Empathy is replaced by antipathy because the room is no longer her own, her close pressure; it is invaded by the outside atmosphere. It loses itself in a larger India and the creator of fiction becomes one with her created world. She writes about the way India

overwhelms her, "India swallows me up and now it seems to me that I am no longer in my room but in the white-hot city streets under a white-hot sky (p. 16)."

The heat in India is oppressive, yet Jhabvala envisions many figures in it which take hold of her imagination and creative self. A smiling leper being driven in a cart by another leper and the image of Shiva being worshipped by people show aspects of India which are human and divine at the same time. She realizes that religion and religious devotion are potent forces in India. Even old, semi-starved widows, masquerading as Krishna's milkmaids, dance in the countryside. And the Indian sky is huge, expansive, clear, which seems to dominate the destiny of man. 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. She is sincere in resisting false labels, and desires to avoid the mere appearances such as a sari – which will make her look like an Indian. She is also tempted to be defiant and European, but in the end, she visualizes a possibility of merging with the Indian earth. "Of course, this cannot go on indefinitely and in the end I'm bound to lose – if only at the point where my ashes are immersed in the Ganges to accompaniment of Vedic hymns and then who will say that I have not truly merged with India (p. 20)"? Jhabvala's later reaction to Europe, the continent of her birth and upbringing, is not one of nostalgia but restlessness – a restlessness which impels her to return to India, the country of her voluntary residence. She says, "I do sometimes go back to Europe. But after a time, I get bored there and want to come back here. I also find it hard now to stand the European climate. I have got used to intense heat and seem to need it (p. 20)."

Another story, in the same collection is *The Housewife*, where Jhabvala's characters come alive and triumphantly register the verisimilitude. Here Shakuntala embodies the motif of musical passion. She is apparently a matronly housewife, married to a prosaic sensible man and supervising a middle-class household. Her daughter, Manju, is already married and has a small baby, Baba. In this ordinary humdrum household, an extraordinary poetic motif

is inducted in the shape of a music teacher and as a corollary, Shakuntala's intense passion for music. She had her music lessons from the teacher and the experience opened out new vistas for her soul:"... But it was true that with her music she lived in a region where she felt most truly, most deeply herself (p 135)." It is this intense involvement in music which finally leads her to surrender herself, body and soul, to the teacher. Shakuntala is deeply touched by the teacher's suggestion that she may give a public performance, and this kindles a sensitive chord in her being. The death of the teacher's wife and his subsequent visits to cheap restaurants and low women compel Shakuntala to save his soul. Then she cannot be contained by the conventions of a middle-class home, her husband, daughter or Phupha ji. Shakuntala involuntarily follows the dictates of her spirit, her longing for music and her involvement with the teacher's soul. She goes to the restaurant and finds him drumming his hand on the table. He leads her to his poor house and she surrenders herself to him, to music and the musician. "He was about the same age as her husband but lean, hard and eager; as he came on top of her, she saw his drugged eyes so full of bliss and he was still smiling at the tune he was playing to himself. And this tune continued to play in her too, he entered her at the moment when, the structure of the rage having been expounded, the combination of notes was being played up and down, backwards and forwards, very fast (p. 161)." In this key passage the theme, the characters, the events in the story find their highest consummation. The climatic moments, the moment of union and ecstasy is the essence, the primary motif of the story. Shakuntala's whole being is merged in music and the man who embodies it.

She becomes one with him, body and soul. The sexual experiences only concretizes the spiritual merge that marks her instinctive responses to the teacher, the hindered soul, the companion in bed and of experience itself. The housewife in Shakuntala transcends her convention-bound self, and is united in body and spirit with art, life and the person who embodies this harmony. Thus "The Housewife" is a story in which is reflected the inevitable conflict that arises between a woman's artistry and her domestic and personal life. Though

the story does not depict the cultural interaction directly, the autobiographical element of story present some of author's own experiences in her own domestic life which are again experiences of an outsider in India.

Another story "A Course of English Studies" is a skillfully designated story narrating Nalini's experiences in a university in England. She inherits the sophistication of her family, the refinement of her parents, the exclusive educational environment of Delhi's Queen Alexandra College. Yet, she is open and receptive to all the influences of a modern University in an English setting. Her life takes on colour and excitement and she is involuntarily drawn to a middle-aged lecturer in English, Dr. Norman Greaves. Their shopping expeditions lead her to sitting on the crossbar of his bicycle and driving into rain and the country. Their love is rather odd, since Norman tells Nalini that he's getting old: 'I'll be forty in May. Forty, mind you (p.116). She, however, tells him: 'Sometimes you look like a little boy. A little boy lost and I want to comfort him (p.116).' The love links between female adolescents and middle-aged men are sometimes genuine, though psychologically inexplicable. Nalini's love of picnics finally drives her to a quiet hut which serves her and Norman as a secret shelter. Nalini asks Norman what he feels about her and he replies: 'As a Vision and A Glory (p.121).' He cannot articulate his sense of glory for 'there aren't any words beautiful enough (p. 121).' While Nalini gets excited and even ecstatic, Norman feels worried over their growing intimacy. They sleep together but they cannot think together, not even feel the same sentiments. They have a minor skirmish, a wordy duel of lovers over Norman's wife, Estelle. Nalini asks Norman to get a divorce and he talks of his four children. This dissonance is, however, smoothly ironed out and Nalini speaks to Norman: 'I'll take you with me to India (p.130).' Nalini confides in Mrs. Crompton, her stoical landlady, who believes that betraying women is man's principal sport. She, however, relents and allows Norman to meet Nalini in her room. But Norman himself is an incomplete man, afraid of wife, society and conventions. He tells her, 'I want us not to see each other anymore .... I am a wretchedly weak person and you must forgive me (p.133).'

Nalini still adores him as an artist while he is afraid of life's passions and wishes to return to the citadel of conventions, his wife. 'She is my wife, you know, Nalini' (p. 133). Nalini cries in bed at the abrupt end of her love affair, talks with Mauve about the Anglo-Saxon vowel changes and finally decides to go back home and listen to Miss Subrahmaniam's lectures at dear old Queen Alex....

'A Course of English Studies' is obviously a picture of adolescent love, not merely comic and ironic but rather steeped in the pathetic. Nalini's surplus age of sentimentality is typically Indian: she responds very emotionally to Norman's personality, though he is neither very young nor very handsome, nor very romantic. How and why is Nalini so much attracted to Norman is a pertinent question, and is part of Jhabvala's mode of ambivalence. For a time, he appears to be deeply drawn to her, seeing in her the glory and vision of a new world, but later, is afraid of her, of bare reality. For Nalini, the experience is one of intense passion, a plunge into the unknown; for Norman it becomes only an affair, a casual dip into the sensuous and sensual to be quickly covered up by conventions. The anemia of British academe and the adolescence and immaturity of a college girl play their part in the tragicomedy of 'A Course of English Studies'.

In this way, Ruth Jhabvala represents the interaction between two cultures in a very effective way through her short story characters – like Shakuntala, Nalini, Norman and the authoress herself. Here she perfectly utilizes her position of being an outsider- a European living in India and this gives her objectivity in dealing with human affairs of Indians as well as foreigners in her works.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Vasant A. Shahane, *Ruth Praver Jhabvala*, Indian Writers Series, No. 11 (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1976), 11.

<sup>2</sup>Yasmine Gooneratne, *Silence, Exile and Cunning: The Fiction of Ruth Praver Jhabvala* (New Delhi: Orient Longman Limited, 1983), p.234.

<sup>3</sup>Ruth Praver Jhabvala, "Myself in India," *An Experience of India*, ed. John Murray 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (1996; rpt. Great Britain: Lewis Reprints

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Limited, 1971), p.12. (All subsequent references to the text of this and other stories are from the same edition and the page numbers in such cases have been given in parenthesis immediately following the quotation).