



REVIEW ARTICLE

RUTH PRAWER JHABVALA'S PORTRAYAL OF HER FEMALE PROTAGONISTS OLIVIA AND LEE AS SUFFERING SELVES IN HER FICTIONAL WORLD: AN APPRAISAL

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 25th November, 2017
Received in revised form
23rd December, 2017
Accepted 19th January, 2018
Published online 18th February, 2018

ABSTRACT

This article is a humble attempt to show how the women novelists in English developed a style of their own in terms of dealing with men and matters through a world of expressions and experiences by making a remarkable contribution to poetry and fiction in Indian English Literature in general and in particular, how Ruth Prawer Jhabvala has made a notable contribution to Indian English fiction in particular with a focus on her fictional forte and artistic vision, especially her skill in the portrayal of her female protagonists as suffering selves.

Key words:

Contribution, remarkable,
East and West encounter,
Keen and minute observer,
Urban sensibility,
Suffering selves,
Sensitive and receptive,
Spiritual idealism.

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Citation: Dr. Chelliah, S.2018. "Ruth prawer jhabvala's portrayal of her female protagonists Olivia and lee as suffering selves in her fictional world: An appraisal", *International Journal of Current Research*, 10, (02), 65145-65148.

INTRODUCTION

What is generally held is that women have made remarkable contribution to poetry and fiction in Indian English literature but they have not made any notable distinction in prose and drama. No doubt, in English literature, so many distinguished women novelists like Jane Austen, George Eliot, the Bronte Brothers, Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf surpassed men writers rather qualitatively and numerically. They are said to have established their own 'great tradition'. Falling in line with their thinking, in India too, Toru Dutt, the renown Poetess, wrote a novel in English and since then, many women novelists like Raj Lakshmi Debi, Cornelia Sorabji and Iqbalunnisa Hussain have made their mark in Indian Fiction in English through publication of such early noticeable works of their as *The Hindu Wife Between the Twilight* and *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household* respectively. Only after the Second World War, women novelists of worth and quality began enriching Indian fiction in English.

In fact, there has been a galaxy of accomplished women novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Attia Hossain, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai whose works are said to be now an integral part of literature, especially Indian English literature. Truly speaking, Indian women novelists in English have developed a style of their own. Each one is different from the other and each one of them has her own world of experiences, her own way of looking at men and matters. "Nayantara Sahgal, for instance, depicts her world of experiences in 'her own very individual style. No other writer is so much concerned with the life of young men and women in Indian cities as Anita Desai is. No one else is so much concerned with the difference of ideologies, thought and philosophy of the East and the West as Kamala Markandaya or Ruth" (Kumar 255). Among those accomplished novelists, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala is considered to be a keen and minute observer of Indian scene and Indian character. She is "the Indian – or Indo-Englian – approximation to Joseph Conrad, but hers is a feminine contemporary urban sensibility in contrast to that of the masculine Victorian novelist of the sea and of lands beyond the seas. Living in Delhi in the years after Independence, Mrs. Jhabvala has had opportunities of exercising her powers of close observation on a milieu that changes chameleon – like from local to cosmopolitan, from

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traditional to conventional, from naïve to sophisticated; only sometimes one hardly knows which is which" (Iyengar 451). Though she had lived in India since 1951, she still feels herself to be an alien here. Jhabvala herself says:

"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" (P 31)

A European settled in India, she is free from the tendency of the regional writer to romanticize her subject-matter. At the same time, she cannot be as remote from the Indian scene as the Western writer who flits in search of material. Her Indian vision coupled with her involvement and detachment rare even in Indians writing in English. A characteristic that marks her works is her understanding of those Indians and foreigners attracted by spiritual ideals. Jhabvala, the creative artist, with verve and vitality, absorbs and expresses everything that she witnesses in the society and Establishment of her period. In a way, her fictions can be termed as some revealing social documents without the least trace of propaganda literature. In fact, Jhabva's writings become more and more serious as Jhabvala becomes more and more aware of the Indian realities which are Indian poverty, both material and spiritual, ignorance, heat, dust and the relentless passage of time and Indian spirituality is an escape from Indian poverty. As such, Jhabva is affected by society and the Establishment, and she intends and wants her fictions to have social relevance and consequence. Moreover, she wishes that her literary works provide the necessary and needed correctives and the healthy and definitive prescriptions so that the society and the Establishment would mend and alter for the better. In this context, the assertion of Harry Levin is apt quoting here:

"Literature is not only the effect of social causes; it is also the cause of social effects..." (P7)

Yet again, Austin Warren's assertion in *Theory of Literature* deserves to be quoted and studied in conjunction with the pithy and pointed statement of Harry Levin:

"The writer is not only influenced by society; he influences it. Art not merely reproduces life but also shapes it."

So much so, the fictions of Jhabvala qualified by moral earnestness, intellectual intensities and social expectations prove to be a genuine and objective study of the society and the Establishment. It precisely because of her sound sense-phronesis ethical stature – arête ... and benevolence ... eunoia and by her fictions being marked by depth and clarity of vision that she occupies the first shelf in Indian writing in English. Furthermore, Jhabvala's literary products *A New Dominion* and *Heat and Dust* gain lasting value mainly because she reflects on the problems and issues of life, which are universally experienced by all in all ages in the past and also in the years to come. In fact, life precedes literature as far as Jhabvala is concerned. By introducing humanistic concerns and universal appeal, Jhabvala ensures lasting value and quality to her *Oeuvres*. As such, she has grown into a great artist of significance, relevance and consequence, who takes pride in being on Indian writer in English. The major themes that draw the attention of writers the world over including Jhabvala are not the age old subjects of birth, growth, maturity, passion, union, new birth, mutability, decay, death and rebirth. On the

other hand, on the familial ground, it is human relationships, which have suffered a serious jolt because of the accent on materialistic and animalistic sides of life. And it is sex first and love next. The argument currently prevalent among the intellectuals is where there is satisfactory sex, there is bound to be love and not otherwise. Consequently where there is no satisfactory sex, there is bound to be violence and death. This vein of thinking began in the sixties of the twentieth century when post-modernism made its mark. This is so very true of Lee in *A New Dominion* and Olivia in *Heat and Dust*.

Jhabvala, therefore, concentrates on the psychic angle of her men characters, who are solely responsible for the mental crisis passed through by the female protagonists. The family relationship has touched an unhealthy feat because of sexism, or over-sexed or under-sexed condition and the beastly animalism in men characters. There is the stress on life that is rooted in a mechanical and daily dull routine. The tempo of life is something of a fast phase and it is fast living and nothing else. Therefore, the tragedy of men and women is that they have lost their self-respect, honor and dignity and as a consequence, they lost their separate and distinct individuality. In such a context, notwithstanding the phenomenal and material gains and high standard of living, men and women suffer from mental conflicts and as a result of the persistent psychic strains and stress, they turn into neurotic beings.

It is with such a perspective on the art of writing that one assesses the merits of Jhabvala as a creative artist. In fact, she projects herself as the representative and perfect spokesperson of the women and men of her time. Jhabvala's main focus is on the plights and predicaments, stresses and strains, tensions and anxieties, struggles and sufferings and the psychic traumas and hysteric conditions of women. Like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Lorraine Hansberry, the African American women artist, Jhabvala refers to the men who cause sufferings to women. Furthermore, in delineating the male characters, Jhabvala bestows the same attention and care with which she projects the female protagonists. She talks of the male characters, who too suffer alienation, as some of her women characters do. As such, the attention of women to be on guard against such male characters in real life. Hence, Jhabvala's literature is helpful in guiding women readers to discover their inner strengths through self-definition and self-discovery. Above all, she champions on the cause of the women in their struggle for intellectual, moral, spiritual, economic, social and political survival and for their empowerment and emergence as women capable of doing all that the males are capable of doing, if not better. In fact, Jhabvala opens in the hearts and minds of the perceptive readers a stronger sense of social justice, and a more Christ-like humanity. And it is precisely because she believes in the social justice track for both men and women.

A women, who resists femininity, feminine temperament, status, and role is thought to court neurosis, for femininity in her fate as anatomy is destiny. In so evading the only identity nature has granted her, she courts nothingness. This is precisely the state of mind of Lee of *New Dominion* and Olivia of *Heat and Dust*. The point that is made here is that the whole balance of male sexual aggression towards the female is hereby subsumed under a huge abstract force only concerned with the continuation of the species. This attitude gave rise to a whole battery of military diction, which psychology has ever since employed to describe sexuality as surrender, dominance and mastery. The words of Freud are apt quoting here:

“The male pursues the female for the purpose of sexual union, seizes hold her and penetrates into her by this you have precisely reduced the characteristic of masculinity to the factor of aggressiveness....” (131).

This is What Gopi and the Swamji do as far as Lee in *A New Dominion* is concerned. Ruth Praver Jhabvala's characters Olivia in *Heat and Dust* and Lee and Margaret in *A New Dominion* are the suffering and struggling individuals. They pass through anxieties and tensions and experience stresses and strains and confront several hardships. The life of the characters gets reduced to one of endless suffering Allan Chavkin writes:

“To be human is to make decisions and to act in a world full of misery and heartbreak. Maturity comes about only as a result of experience, and experience always involves suffering” (162).

The characters, Olivia in *Heat and Dust* and Lee and Margaret in *A New Dominion* experience continual struggle against forces of which in the case of some they are ignorant of their cause and effect factors, and in the case of others, they are helplessly, tossed about. They suffer from fear psychosis as to their present and their future. Yet again, the environment over which they have absolutely no control controls them. As such, to better appreciate the characters of Ruth Praver Jhabvala Olivia Lee and Margaret as the suffering and struggling selves, it is imperative to have a knowledge of what existentialism stands for and what is meant by naturalism. Existentialism is nothing but concern for human existence. It represents rebellion against established ideas and institutions that inhibit personal freedom and negate responsibility. In sheer struggle, the human being finds the meaning and substance of existence. According to existential philosophy, suffering and struggle are part and parcel of the life of the human being in his or her existence. In fact, in struggle lies existence. And the human being is filled with nausea when he or she is not able to probe beyond the mysteries. The human being is afflicted by fear of destiny, and is filled with anxiety at the dreadful possibilities of life and the dread of death. It is with such a background one can examine Jhabvala's characters Olivia in *Heat and Dust* and Lee in *A New Dominion* as suffering selves. Olivia is a classic sufferer. To begin with, Olivia suffers loneliness in the midst of the other prudish English women. The textual passage reads thus:

“She (Olivia) kept asking herself how it was possible to lead such exciting lives – administering whole provinces, fighting border battles, advising rulers ... and at the same time to remain so dull. She looked around the table ... at Mrs. Crawford and Mrs. Minnies in their dowdy frocks more suitable to the English watering places to which they would one day retire than to this royal dining table; major Minnies and Mr. Crawford, Puffy and florid, with voices that droned on and on confident of being listened to though everything they were saying was Olivia thought, as boring as themselves” (*Heat and Dust* 15).

Olivia acutely and sharply passes through imposed loneliness, which is an existential suffering and the textual passage makes interesting reading:

“She (Olivia) had by that time been in Satipur for several months and was already getting bored. Usually the only people she and Douglas saw were the Crawfords (the collector and his

wife), the Saunders (the medical supt.) and Major and Mrs. Minnies. That was in the evenings and on Sundays. The rest of the time Olivia was alone in her big house with all the doors and windows and shut to keep the heat and dust. She read and played the piano, but the days were long, very long. Douglas was of course extremely busy with his work in the district...” (P14).

This kind of loneliness attenuates her suffering. Douglas is not in the least worried about her lonely existence. He is absorbed in his official routine and daily schedules. He finds little or no time to give Olivia the happy companionship. He never shares her feelings and thoughts. Stuck within the four walls of her home, Olivia finds no outlet for suppressed emotions and thoughts. This lonely existence causes her suffering. And life turns out to be a struggle with oceans of time glaring at her in her world of loneliness. Olivia wishes that Douglas would impregnate her and give her a baby, which in turn will enable her to drive away once and for all her loneliness. But he is not able to make her pregnant and that increases her suffering. On the husband's wedding day, Olivia feels drawn to the Nawab by a strength, a magnetism that she has never yet in all her life experienced with anyone. And the net result is that she becomes pregnant. But then she dreads to face the future. Thus, from the beginning to the end, Olivia experiences only suffering and in struggle alone, she experiences her existence.

In the other novel *A New Dominion*, the protagonist, Lee suffers because of her self-deception. Lee remains essentially thus:

“Lee is truthful, with others, of course, but first of all with herself. She wanted her whole life to be based only on truth found and tested by herself” (*New Dominion* 217).

Such an approach to life and to the Indian experience should make Lee a reliable observer. She is enterprising and adventurous. She has come to India “to try and learn” (P32) and moves freely and unconventionally at all levels of Indian life in order to do so: Lee will sleep in the house of a chance acquaintance met on a train, or dine by invitation at a Maharajah's mansion as the spirit moves her. Lee's search for the meaning of life turns into a process of emotional inexperience. With her youth and emotional inexperience, Lee tells Asha that she has never been in love and “I don't want to be either” (P32). The subconsciously sexual nature of her imaginings shows that Lee is physically and emotionally ready for love, despite her desire to rise above “these small things that engulfed people” (P61) to a spiritual plane. Lee's preconceptions and self-absorption blind her to the truth about herself and those around her and cause her to suffer and struggle. Self-deception has Lee in its grip and is the root cause of her sufferings. Thus, Ruth Praver Jhabvala has projected Olivia in *Heat and Dust* and Lee in *A New Dominion* at the suffering selves.

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