

## Jhabvala's World: Influences on Writer's Sensibilities as an Artist

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### Abstract

*Like many other Indian writers in English, Ruth Praver Jhabvala has achieved reputation as one of the popular writers of fiction. Having come from England as a wife of an Indian architect, and lived in India for long years naturally provided adequate material to Jhabvala to express her feelings and emotions on Indian lifestyles, especially that of middle-class women. We often find an East-West encounter in the stories of Jhabvala which are full of social problems having cultural and spiritual dimensions.*

**Keywords:** insider, outsider, East-West encounter, writer's world

Ruth Praver Jhabvala has achieved international recognition as one of India's leading writers of fiction and short stories. Born off Polish parents in Germany, educated in England, Ruth Praver Jhabvala (1927) married an Indian and lived in India for more than three decades. These facts of her life impinge upon her personal and literary situation in relation to Indian society. She enjoys the unique privilege of being an 'insider' as well as an 'outsider'. From the European point of view, she may seem an 'outside - insider', while from Indian artistic point of view, she appears an 'inside - outsider'. This places her in a unique literary situation which has its own advantages and disadvantages. The advantages lie in her special position of being a European living in India. The disadvantage lies in her not being a genuinely grass - rooted Indian. Being a European living in India, she can view the human affairs from a detached point of view. This helps her in avoiding the pitfalls of sentimentality or superficial involvement with varieties of Indian religious or mystical beliefs. Jhabvala as an artist is always conscious of the stark reality of India. Jhabvala's novels and short stories are nothing but the delineation of her emotive and intellectual responses to these problems. Jhabvala is more at home with the half educated Indian joint families. All these approaches of Jhabvala, the person, find subtle expression in her fiction and short stories. Ruth Praver's experience of growing up in Britain included the taking of a degree in English at the University of London. It is possible that the time she spent in the

Reading Room at the British Museum overwhelms all other memories, but she continued to write fiction, which 'came as naturally as breathing'. The theme of loneliness and isolation that runs through her ironic comedy "A Birthday Party" was to remain untouched until, six years after her departure from Britain, Ruth Jhabvala wrote her first novel of expatriation, *Esmond in India* in 1957.

In 1951, she left Britain for India as the 24-year-old wife of Cyrus Jhabvala, a young Parsi architect. The first stage of Ruth Jhabvala's experience in India invariably described by her in terms of 'excitement', 'rapture', and 'love' included the birth of the Jhabvalas' three daughters and the publication of four novels, *To Whom She Will* (1955), *The Nature of Passion* (1956), *Esmond in India* (1957) and *The Householder* (1960). It lasted nine years, during which time she never left India, but entered with increasing delight into the experiences it held out to her.

Ruth Jhabvala consistently bases the conflicts that arise between Indians and Westerners in her novels upon the complexities of culture, history and psychology, avoiding the simpler more obvious of color. Her Indian characters, as seen by western eyes, range from the comic to the beautiful; her Westerners as seen by Indian eyes, range from the sexually titillating to the grotesque. By using descriptive terms that are non-associative in terms of color, she keeps her subject clear of the superficial, the boring and - a trap into which many third world writers fall - the merely racist or sensational. Once they have crossed the initial barrier set up by what is unfamiliar or foreign, her characters respond to one another as individuals. Those who are unable or reluctant to do so reveal their immaturity, or the falseness of their claims to liberalism or spirituality. Prem in *The Householder*, Gopi in *A New Dominion*, Nalini in *A Course of English Studies*, Clarissa in *A Backward Place* and the swamy in *An Experience of India* are characters on both sides of the cultural 'fence' who, when angry, uncertain or excited, comically reveal cultural prejudices that betray their immaturity, and their superficiality of their wanted sophistication or spiritual poise. The prejudices that distorted human relationships in India's colonial past and are reflected in E.M Forster's *A Passage to India* and the lesser novels that immersed

from the past are dwarfed, in Jhabvala's picture of the new India, by a theme that is found equally impressive and more moving in its tragic implications of a world and our times. There begins to emerge as early in her second novel, *The Nature of Passion*, an impression of India as a mysterious presence, half medieval, half modern, intensely spiritual, immensely old, and scarred by poverty that looks ironically down through its storied centuries upon the antiques of the present breed of business tycoons and shallow socialites who multiply in her new 'society'.

As time and experience revealed how much there is and always will be to learn about India, Ruth Jhabvala's lens shifts from the comic things of Indian life to focus more and more searchingly on those who pretend that such knowledge is easily acquired or inherited by birth. Her portraits of 'experts' on India include a number of Indian characters such as Har Dayal in *Esmond in India* and Pandit Ram Bahadur Saxena in *To Whom She Will* to present a picture of India to their youthful relations and Western frames that is severely limited by the narrowness of their own views and experience. Gopi in *A New Dominion* is possibly Ruth Jhabvala's most satiric study of an ignorant Indian who sets himself up as an authority on India's cultural traditions, deeming himself better qualified by his 'Indianness' to penetrate essential truths by any Western seekers acquire a deeper ironic shading when they begin to include westerners to seek to interpret India to the Indians, characters such as Professor Hoch in *To Whom She Will*, *Esmond Stillwood* in *Esmond in India* and the western experts on yoga who Prem encounters with wondering perplexity at a party in *The Householder*. In 1960, Ruth Jhabvala paid Britain a brief visit and found, on her return to India that her attitude to India has altered. Some of the sources of her discontent are found in her fourth novel, *Get Ready For Battle*. The only one among the eight she has published to center almost exclusively upon India's extreme poverty, and upon the exploitation of her poor and helpless by the corrupt, the wealthy and the hypocritical.

Ruth Jhabvala's disillusionment with the India that she had begun by loving so passionately found additional expression between 1960 and 1975 in three collections of short stories - *Like Birds, Like Fishes* (1962), *An Experience of India* (1966) and *A Stronger Climate* (1968). In these short stories, Ruth Jhabvala focuses upon one or more stages of the 'cycle' the examples of which are the stories like 'An Indian Citizen', 'Miss Sahib' or 'The English Woman'. For her novel, *A New Dominion*, she selects a time-span identical with the period of time it takes her to Western characters, Raymond and Lee, to experience the intense effects of a full turn of the wheel of torture and

disillusionment. In *Heat And Dust* the experiences of a English woman in the India of 1923 are recreated and analyzed.

Her published work after 1975 has included numerous short stories some of which are reprinted in the collection *How I Became A Holy Mother* (1976) and focused on the experiences off the lonely ageing, exploited an unhappy woman at every level on the Indian social scale they are written with an insight and skill that indicate how much Ruth Jhabvala's world has opened out since 1960. Many of her characters in these stories are Indian, a few are Westerners. One story, 'Bombay' is the compassionate and searching study of the conservative Parsi community. It is a subject that she never touched before in all her years of writing. Another, 'The English Woman' is a story of a westerner who prepares after many years in India to return to England. There seems to echo here a new freedom and lightness of spirit carried over from the last words of *An Experience of India* and *Heat and Dust* a suggestion that nothing is resolved or decided except the decision to keep moving, travelling and striving towards greater self-knowledge and hidden heights of artistic achievement. As an account of her literary career makes evident, the major and minor concerns that find place in Ruth Jhabvala's novels arise from personal or observed experience. It is no doubt, tempting to speculate on the extent to which her fiction reflects her personal life. But her characters are so closely interwoven with the interests with a particular work that such kind of speculations become irrelevant. In a sense majority of things, she has written springs from the fact that her marriage to a young Indian architect brought her to India in 1951 and kept her there for 24 years.

A short story writer like a dramatist portrays and paints the real picture of life. It is expected of a short story writer to be objective, realistic, detached. Jhabvala is one fully appreciated for being so and at the same time being aware of the limitations imposed upon her work by a fixed and set western eye. She does look at things in India from the viewpoint of a European and also expects the reader to be a Westerner. She is constantly conscious of her Western values and of her Western leaders. These factors have affected to a large extent of the theme and technique of her stories. The problem of Westernization results in the East-West encounter which forms part of the Indian experience. It is through the Indian experiences that Jhabvala presents the images of Indian Woman characters on the contrasting lines and finally ask to follow the moral of the Western individual woman.

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