

Ruth Praver Jhabvala's Technique as a Novelist

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ABSTRACT

Ruth Praver Jhabvala has achieved an international reputation as an Indian novelist. Though she is a European, her marriage to an Indian architect and stay in India have given her deep insight into India's social, political, religious, economic, moral, and cultural life. Her knowledge of the Indian social and cultural ethos can be marked by the variety of themes that she has undertaken in her novels. Her artistic excellence, as a novelist lies in the method of handling her material. Due to her 'dual nationality', she is equipped with two types of consciousness i.e., native consciousness and the consciousness acquired from Western civilization. Her eight novels which appeared in quick succession deal with the themes like love and marriage in the bourgeois society, East-West encounter, pseudo-modernism in Indian society, the post-independence Indian ethos, affectation, and hypocrisy in the Indian middle class society. She handles her themes with dazzling assurance and presents a penetrating and compassionate picture of human relationships ironically and realistically. Though Ruth Jhabvala has made a significant contribution to Indian English fiction, she has not received proper attention from the critics of literature. The present paper is a vivid analysis of her literary craftsmanship.

KEYWORDS

Ruth Praver Jhabvala; Dual Nationality; Novelist; Native consciousness.

Being a European and writing about India, Jhabvala is well familiar with the European as well as Indian trends of literature. Hence her mode of expression is a queer blending of two trends of literature. Besides her Indian readers, as a writer, she is deeply conscious of her Western readers too and this awareness has profoundly affected her craft of fiction:

When one writes about India as a European and in English as I do, one writes inevitably not for Indians but Western readers. Problems of communication present themselves; how to translate the idiom of one language into another;

how to present a scene to an audience unfamiliar with its most obvious ingredients (such as temples, bazaars, and motor cycle-rickshaws.) (1)

Keeping in mind her Western readers, Ruth Jhabvala has adopted the technique of minute and vivid descriptions of scenes. She persistently emphasizes pointing to or describing minute details of apparently unimportant scenes or events. As one notices in the following description of Tarla's drawing-room in *To Whom She Will*:

A fan turned softly from the ceiling, not really necessary in that cool room, but providing a sweet titillating breeze. An enormous Persian carpet covered, the marble floor; it was patterned all over with tiny flowers in pink and green and blue, dainty and fresh and poignantly artificial. The divans were almost at floor level and matched the brocaded silk of the curtains; green and crimson horsemen glittering against a somber background. There was a long low cabinet with bronze grill work twisting behind the glass and on it a tea-set, red and gold, fine as breath, curved shallow cups with long handles pointing upwards. (*To Whom She Will*, p.25)

As a European writer, Jhabvala's persistent emphasis on painting the minute details or events adds to the charm of her art. The Western reader likes comprehensiveness and thoroughness in the subject because it helps the Western readers to understand the Indian scene and setting. Her area of observation is very wide and she renders all that she observes in comprehensive coverage. Sometimes this tendency in producing an actual scene is carried to an excessive degree, consequently, an Indian reader is almost bored, but the Western reader who is unfamiliar with the scene is very much delighted with the vivid description. The following detailed description of Gulab's sluttishness and her epicurean taste has been described with minute details:

The milk that servant brought them did not have enough sugar in it, so they sent him to put in more, they both liked things to be very very sweet. Halfway through Gulab thought it would be nice to flavour the remainder with rose essence to vary the taste. When they had finished, both have white milk

moustaches and they had a good laugh at one another before Gulab wiped their mouths first lovingly his then carelessly her own with the end of her sari. The new servant since he had nothing else to do, continue to watch them. Ravi tickled Gulab and then Gulab tickled Ravi. She yawned, she stretched herself; she felt contented. Ravi sat on her and rode her like a horse and she laughed. The new servant also laughed, an animal sound, and Gulab lifted her to ask him what did he want, had he nothing better to do than to just stand there and look? (*Esmond In India*, p.14)

Thus, meticulous attention to every small movement of characters, their actions their gestures is an interesting aspect of her craft of fiction. The following description of Mrs. Shankar in *Get Ready For Battle* and Gautam's reaction to the situation has been vividly described so that the whole psychic reactions of Gautam are exhibited before the readers:

Just then Mrs. Shankar appeared arms akimbo in the door-way; birds she had to guard against, she shouted, and children who knew no better, but now the grown men stood and ate the mulberries of her tree ... Vishnu felt very much ashamed, he drew out his handkerchief and hastily wiped his stained mouth and hands. "Sister said Gautam calm and righteous. 'God has given them to be eaten'. 'I think it is better if I go', Vishnu murmured. (*Get Ready For Battle*, p.17)

Thus, Jhabvala's pictorial imagination takes every small movement of men. Her technique seems curiously similar to that of Robert Browning in his famous dramatic monologues. Browning too projects a visual perspective in Fra Lippo Lippi or Andrea Del Sarto and it functions as an 'objective correlative' to the moral

perspective. Thus, minuteness and precision in Jhabvala's fiction contribute to the physical reality. It is the essence of the whole visual organization of her fictional world.

As Jhabvala's novels mainly deal with domestic life, love, and marriage, she has employed a simple narrative methods in her novels. Her novels resemble the film scripts which she was going to write. Jhabvala the author does not intrude; the story is told through the character themselves largely by dialogues. There is irony and satire achieved in this non-intrusive way with some skill. In her novels, she has portrayed hypocrisy, class consciousness, corruption, and blind imitation of Western life. She has described all these situations in Indian society by a simple narrative method. Her modes of narration are direct and comprehensive. Her role is the role of an omniscient narrator. Either the character in her fiction speaks or the novelist describes or comments in the third person. Mortimer Raymond praised her part of narration thus:

A writer of genius...a writer of world class...a master story-teller whose interpretation of the Indian scene is one aspect of remorselessly intelligent yet decently sympathetic understanding of human relationship. (2)

Among the nineteenth-century novelist, the conventional vogue of writing was to separate their character's descriptions from setting descriptions. The reader becomes almost bored with the description of the body, scenic beauty and minor details of body movements. Modern novelists make description an organic art. Jhabvala's art of fiction demonstrates this organic quality. She deftly interweaves different scenes, character analysis, and her mode of narration.

Since food is one of the fundamentals of life, the food habits of

Indians and their fondness for spicy food can be an interesting subject for her. Like Somerset Maugham, Jhabvala tends to give too much attention to the food and eating modes of the characters in her novels. The following description of Rai Bahadur's dinner cites an example of Indian's epicurean taste:

The servants moved noiselessly over the marble floor, filling up the water glasses and holding the trays with food for the dinners to serve themselves. They ate curried vegetables with cutlets and curds and chapattis, followed by a mountain of very white rice and chicken curry. (*To Whom She Will*, p.10)

Again, in *A New Dominion* the episode "Lee and Gopi Eats abab" provides us a vivid description of Indian food habits and modes of eating:

Gopi liked seeing her eating. She made swift and neat dipping movements into chutney and other side dishes and chewed and licked her fingers and enjoyed just like an Indian. She could eat the hottest food and bit into fierce green chilies with relish. (*A New Dominion*, p.48)

Thus, her detailed description of Indian food habits exhibits the contrast between Indian and European tastes. They discern the sensuous character of an individual.

Jhabvala is a skilled artist in employing the environment as a means for revelation of character e.g., a person who has over-decorated, opulent drawing rooms or bedrooms hammed with furniture and ornate curtains may be considered a sophisticated upper-class person. Jhabvala's delineation of the environment as a means of portraying her character, and their crisis or conflict, is a significant aspect of her art of fiction. In *Get Ready For Battle*, Sarla Devi and her daughter-in-law Mala are depicted in the moments of crisis. While Sarla Devi speaks

with sincere passion, Mala is 'too excited, too angry, too hot to listen.'; 'her face is flushed and her ripe bosom goes up and down'; the room is warm; she opens the French window leading to the verandah and rushes out: "It is intensely hot on the verandah; heat seeped from the stone floor and the tall pillars. And the garden, and the beautiful green, lay dead in the white sun". (*Get Ready For Battle*, p.65)

Again, in, *To Whom She Will* environment corresponds with the passion of the individuals. The following description of Hari and Sushila's marriage is worth noticing:

And suddenly they began to throw flowers over him, from all sides they come, the petals, a sweet and sickly shower falling over his head and face and shoulders. It was all over a high-pitched voice sang a hymn, the sobbing was near to him now, he felt himself surrounded, his mother his sisters, more flowers came falling on him; he had led her round the fire seven times and now she was his, and though he still could not see her, hardly even thought of her. He was suddenly so happy, he felt he had never been so happy in all his life. (*To Whom She Will*, p.238)

Her European inheritance enables her to respond intensely to the tropical sun of India. The scorching red hot sun of the Indian sky is her constant obsession. It becomes unbearable for a European who is used to a cool and clean climate. The order of her life is completely shaken by this torturous heat; and losing her temper she shouts, quarrels, and gesticulates:

...in anger and hatred so much so that the heat seems to disintegrate her personality. Under its influence she makes love to all kinds of men or vice-versa in cheap restaurants or turns inculcably 'spiritual'. The heat distorts her quest for India and spiritual disillusionment is the

inevitable dark harvest of her frustrated efforts. (3)

Thus, the environment plays an important part in Jhabvala's fictional world. She writes about the impact of the Indian summer day and heat on Western men and women:

Only those who have lived through endless Indian heat know their effect on one's behavior. The Western characters in my novels are amazed at themselves. They yell as servants...' my God' they ask what's happening to me? My Western characters who of course include myself have reason to be applauded at the transformation to which they are being subjected. Along with this behaviour their most cherished principles and feelings seem to be changing. (4)

One of her European characters Esmond, in her novel *Esmond In India* scolds and rebuffs his servant bitterly:

Today they have a new servant. Having new servant was nothing new to them, for they had one practically once a month. Esmond was very impatient with servants. So, they never stayed long... The long succession of new servants had started. (*Esmond In India*, pp.13-14)

Thus, the encounter between persons of East and West in her novels has been projected against this environmental background. Thus, Jhabvala's portrayal of this kind of environment is linked with social and moral judgment. In this way her technique becomes a part of her vision; it becomes a discovery.

The exploration of the sensibility of the Western expatriate in India based on the personal history of her displacement naturally enables her to transform India into a fictional world of spirit in which her protagonists seek assimilation but rarely succeed. The Punjabi Hindu families in, *To Whom She Will*, Etta Lee and Margaret in *A New Dominion*, Hans in *The Householder*,

and Chid, and the narrator in *Heat and Dust*, all discern the assimilation and adaptation in alien soil but few of them succeed.

During the early phase of Jhabvala's experience of India, the description invariably is in terms of 'excitement', 'rapture', and 'love'. The fruits of this experience are visible in the lively recreation of Hindu family life in the first two novels. The mode employed in the portrayal of these characters is realistic, comic, and sometimes mildly satiric. She is quite conscious of the fact that these characters are full of follies, whims, and idiosyncrasies. They inhibit her imaginative world and give it substance and solidity. The social background in Jhabvala's novels is given great importance along with the characters who inhabit it and enact their various comedies, tragic comedies, and farces.

Dialogue is the index of a person's personality traits and modes of life. In Jhabvala's fiction, the dialogues between Indians and Englishman emerge from this amorphous social fabric partly because it arises out of the coming together of two desperate cultures;

Hans said, Is your wife beautiful?
Prem bent his head and toyed furiously with his coffee spoon. He did not know how anyone could come to put such an indecent question.

'Indian women are all so beautiful',
Hans said, 'When I walk in the street, I fall in love at least one hundred times'. (*Esmond In India*, p.32)

Jhabvala has tried to translate Indian phrases and idioms into English to give them a real authentic tone. In *To Whom She Will*, Radha speaks to Tarla. 'You with all your committee-shomittees,' 'you must know somebody'. The variation of the committee is authentic Indian style. The following dialogue reveals the translation

of Indian proverbs: Poverty and want are terrible things. In the *Panchtantra*, it is written, 'It is better to be dead than poor' (*The Householder*, p.12). One more example of Indian English is worth mentioning here: 'You talk as it is my fault that you are.' Before he could finish, she had asked, Then, whose fault, is it? (*The Householder*, p.23). Another translation of Indian idioms can be cited here thus, "They (girls) should be remorse and soulful, like goddess they should be." (*Ibid*.p.23)

The following translation of Indian poems is worth appreciating:

My granny's gone to the market
For four bowls she did pay, but
one gets broken on the way.' (*The Householder*, p.138)

Ruth Jhabvala has also either translated herself or quoted the English translation of Sanskrit poems. Lala Hardayal in his parties recited Sanskrit poems:

O swollen hath the mango sprouted
and budded and bloomed.
O swollen hath our love sprouted
budded and bloomed. (*Esmond In India*, p.63)

And again:

And do the thought,
O lord of hearts,
Ne'er fly to me
Who sit and long, and long for thee?
Induc'd by thy arts
I pine in love's valley
When thou didst once dally
Midst oranges blossoms that cloud
the clear sky
As the tear cloud my eye. (*Esmond In India*, p.63.)

Jhabvala's use of language of in situational segments of English may be termed, in linguistics as a 'register'. In a few places, Jhabvala uses varied 'registers' to project the peculiarities of characters and situations and to highlight the comic tone. The pompous use of language in Mr.Chadha's talk at the principal's tea party in *The Householder* is remarkable:

Mr. Chadha, now leaning back, folding his hands over his stomach and looking up at the ceiling 'that a sense of comradeship should be fastered among us...' A sense of comradeship, moreover, said Mr.Chadha, 'that will survive and triumph over any buffets of fortune that it might be our fate to encounter.' (*Heat And Dust*, p.61.)

Mr. Chadha's Indian snags of Victorian pompousness and ponderous moral tone have been presented quite remarkably. This 'register' is of course different from Jhabvala's registers as third-person narrator. She also used other registers marked by philosophical ideas as reflected in some of the novels as *Get Ready for Battle*, *The Householder*, and *The Nature Of Passion*.

Since Jhabvala has dealt with domestic comedy with an ascent on irony or social satire; her language rarely attains any poetic height. F.R.Leavis has spoken about her novels as dramatic poems. Her use of imagery may at best be called 'casual' or 'illustrative'. It illustrates, that it never transforms them. 'Irony is a kind of utterance,' says H.W. Fowler. It is a significant tool of Jhabvala. It also helps Jhabvala in the objective treatment of her themes. She uses different forms of irony such as verbal irony or rhetorical irony and dramatic irony. Besides the use of irony, we find in her the traits of a good satirist. She often comments on Indian poverty, squalor, and obsolete traditions. Following are the examples of her satiric tone: "All imitation, we are a nation of imitators." (*To Whom She Will*, p.43). "That is to say, she has been brought up to a shattered and idle existence and taught never to think for herself. Spiritually she is still in 'purdah'." (*ibid*, p.44)

In *A Backward Place*, she comments on the marriage traditions of India:

Marriage, 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 the primitive society that's no reason why we should submit to their primitive morality. (*A Backward Place*, p.5)

The narrator comments on the adverse conditions of livelihood in Indian society in *Heat And Dust*:

Oh, but I have seen some terrible sights in India. I have lived through a Hindu-Muslim riot and a small-pox epidemic, and several famines and I think I may rightly say I have seen everything that you can see on this earth. And through it all I have learned this one thing; you can't live in India without Christ Jesus. (*Heat and Dust*, p.5)

Again, Major comments in *Heat and Dust*:

...it is all very well to love and admire India –intellectually, aesthetically, he did not mention sexually but he must have been aware of that factor too-but always with a virile, measured, European feeling. One should never, he warned, allow oneself to become softened by an excess of feeling; because the moment one exceeds one's measure –one is in danger of being dragged over to the other side. (*Ibid*. p.171)

Besides it, we find a peculiar picturesqueness in her novels. As a stage director she vividly describes the paraphernalia of the scene:

The tonga turned without warning into a side street. A car behind had to brake suddenly and painfully and nearby run into a coolie who was stolidly crossing the road with a basket of orange on his head. The driver of the car stuck his head out of the window scold at 'tongawala'... another turning and the stalls and shops and cars and cries were left behind, another, and now there

were tall yellow houses, heavy with respectability. (*To Whom She Will*, p.5)

Jhabvala came to India as a wife of an Indian architect, Cyrus S. H. Jhabvala. In her novels, we find a glimpse of her architectural vision which she gets as the wife of an architect. As in *The Householder*: Over the shops, there were wooden verandas and arched windows set in thin crumbling walls. (*The Householder*. p.131)

One more example of her architectural vision can be cited from *The Nature of Passion*:

The nursing home was very expensive and very modern one. Each room has its own bathroom and veranda. The floor was grey and white mosaic, gleamingly scrubbed, there was a little bed-side table of thin old stainless steel... (*The Nature of Passion*, p.18)

In Ruth Jhabvala's novels, we find a different structural technique. Her first novel *To Whom She Will* has been divided into 39 Chapters. Each new chapter begins with a separate scene and incident. But the whole novel has a single action having a good beginning, middle, and an end. The central themes of the novel are marriage, love, and parents' opposition to adopting the modern ways of life. Her second novel *The Nature of Passion* has been divided into three parts. Part one mainly deals with the Lalaji's 'rajasa' passion; part two with the westernization of the young generation; part three deals with the consequences of blind imitation of western culture and parents' protection of their children. *Esmond In India* has been divided into 32 chapters. In this novel, Jhabvala has successfully projected the problems related to the meeting of East and West. The plot of the novel is well-knitted. Again, her novel *Get Ready for Battle* has been divided into four chapters. The first chapter deals with the worldly and political

life of Gulzari Lal and Sarla Devi. The Post-Independence Indian ethos has been projected in the rest of the chapters. The division of the novel *The Householder* into three chapters is quite significant. The first chapter deals with the nature of the house, home; and the problems and conflicts in the life of a new housewife and a householder. The second chapter delineates their moments of separation and the third deals with their reunion as matured partners in life. A *New Dominion* has been divided into three parts with different locales. The setting of the first part is in Delhi, the second part is in the holy city of Banares and part three is in an imaginary town of Rajasthan i.e. Maupur. Each part has been divided into sub-chapters with short titles like 'Lee Travels', 'Asha Is Bored', 'Gopi Comes To Tea', 'Lee Meets Asha', 'Asha Opens Her Heart', and 'Lee And Gopi Eat Kababs'. One scene changes swiftly like the scenes of the films. It also gives us a glimpse of the cinematographic technique that she used later on in writing her film scripts and screenplays.

Heat And Dust is a remarkable achievement of Jhabvala from a technical point of view. It won the famous 'Booker Prize'. The scenes in the novels swiftly move flash-forward and flash-back. The story runs between past and present, between 1923 and present, near about 1975. The narrator tells Olivia's story in her diary and records her own story simultaneously. The two stories of different times and places have been depicted marvelously. Both stories are parallel to each other. Thus, the novelist has applied cinematographic technique in this novel which she was soon going to follow for her screenplays.

Thus, her technique of projection of Indian life, the end structure of her novels, reminds us that she is not only an analyst of life in India but a student of European masters of the novel. Literary allusions and literary parodies are the sources of

constant delight in her fiction. In *A Backward Place*, Dr. Hotchstadt quotes E.M.Forster. *The Nature Of Passion* and *Get Ready For Battle* to have allusions to *The Gita*. *To whom She Will* takes its title from *Panchtantra*.

Thus, Ruth Jhabvala has adopted European trends and simultaneously gave it Indian colour to give it a realistic touch. We can sum up her unique vision and unique position among creative writers in India. To quote her:

Something I would like to do is to combine my three backgrounds: my European background because it was continental, and then I had an

English education. Then, I had a 25 year immersion into India... So, if I can put all these elements together, that's just fine by me. (5)

C.P. Snow in a review of her works praises her technique and 'art' of writing thus:

Someone once said that the definition of the highest art is that one should feel that life is this and not otherwise. I do not know of a writer living, who gives that feeling with more unqualified certainty than Mrs. Jhabvala. (6)

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