ABSTRACT

Here, we have made an attempt to focus on the writings of Jhabvala — who occupies a distinguished place among the novelists of Indo-Anglian literary scene, more specifically on her style and her treatment of women characters. Jhabvala uses her creative faculties with rare insight and displays an amazing range of experience and imagination in perceiving the reality of her surroundings. Jhabvala in her fiction presents a blatantly realistic picture of the post-independence familial and social scene of urban India.

KEYWORDS: Writings of Jhabvala, Indo-Anglian Literary Scene, Blatantly Realistic Picture

INTRODUCTION

“Novelists use a combination in varying proportions of what they have experienced what they have discovered and what they have imagined.”1 Ruth Prawer Jhabvala occupies a distinguished place among the novelists of Indo-Anglian literary scene. She undoubtedly ranks foremost among the outstanding novelists of post Independence era and is considered second to none but the big three — Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan. Just like Kamala Markandaya, Nayan Tarashagal, Anita Desai and other female writers, she too has enriched the literary horizon of post-Independence period with varied hues of her fictional mosaic. In spite of her divergent culture and upbringing, she has remained in tune with her contemporary socio-literary milieu. She seems true to the observation that “Women are natural story tellers even when they don’t write or publish.”2

Jhabvala uses her creative faculties with rare insight and displays an amazing range of experience and imagination in perceiving the reality of her surroundings. Jhabvala in her fiction presents a blatantly realistic picture of the post-independence familial and social scene of urban India. Though in its modern sense feminism became conspicuous for the first time in the eighteenth century, its seeds are as old as the human race. A close scrutiny of the term ‘feminism’ — Woman’s Voice against injustice and inequality, tends to unfold the fact that feminism is the result of the culture or of the society shaped and governed by men to suit their needs and interests regardless of women’s basic needs and happiness. Psychology has interpreted feminism in its own terms. Differing from the views on feminism, which are political, social and economic, psychoanalytical feminism though at times overlapping with socialist feminism, is primarily based on Freud’s stress on ‘the instability of sexual identities,’ and approaches the notion of gender as a problem. It is a fact that the true femaleness and maleness are not fully attainable permanently and this suggests a comparative openness, which allows changes in them. Feminism is still in the process of evolution to attain a definite entity.

In the novels of Jhabvala, women feel that they grow smaller everyday trapped in a myth of the wife and the mother. True, the new woman in the works of women writers tries to protest but the psychological odds against which they fight are peculiar. However, when all is said and done the question arises whether these women are simple straw feather idealized and created only to project the ‘Indian image.’ Jhabvala as a major woman novelist is less concerned with personality delineation of her women characters. She is attracted by the double standards of the Indian women. In general,
she can be said to have dealt with distortion of modernity as women’s liberation. Her female characters don’t go against tradition without any firm conviction, they do so in order to pose modern. Jhabvala will be considered as a modern writer of contemporary India. She is neither brutally frank like Nirad C. Choudari, nor traditional in her themes like Mulk Raj Anand or R.K. Narayan. She has chosen for her the subject matter of the aspect of marriage in contemporary Indian life.

Jhabvala is a novelist who is known for her behaviorism rather than psychoanalyst approach. Her characters follow a distinct code of conduct affecting various aspects of their lives. Conflicts delineated in her novels are primarily outer ones, yet she is humane enough to feel the ache at the heart of the humanity. Her characters encounter variegated existential problems such as adjustment between the husband and the wife, between man and society. The problems of her characters arise from their social and cultural interaction. Her writings show her awareness of man and society in their human and moral dilemmas. Her awareness of a group of people, their culture and tradition, at times, transcends the racial barriers and become one with the universal human being. She herself is a European married to an Indian and has lived in India for quite a long time. She displays a deep understanding of her women characters, especially the European ones living in India. This can be studied biographically also. In the beginning of her arrival in India she was very happy about everything she saw around. For that reason her earlier novels have the comic attitude and later ones are satirical.

In her first two novels To Whom She Will and The Nature of Passion, she has taken up the theme in a cosmic mode. In these novels she has depicted a clash between tradition and modernism at a personal and familial level. In fact, modernism of Amrita and Hari in To Whom She Will and of Nimmi Pheroze Battliwala in The Nature of Passion is pseudo-modernism, which loses ground as soon as it faces real problems of life. In both the novels when the parents come to know about the love affairs of their daughters, they don’t lose any time to arrange marriages for them. Irony of the situation is that the girls too accept the proposals made by their parents. Both the novels pose the question whether ‘arranged’ or ‘love’ marriage is conducive to happiness. Jhabvala excels in exploring the comic element in sentimentalized love scenes and also in exposing the hollowness of pseudo-romantic epithets. The transition from conformity to non-conformity is obvious on individual and social planes, but in these novels we find the reversal of the movement from the non-conformist to the conformist. In the beginning, both the female protagonists are non-conformists who are trying to come out of a convention ridden and tradition bound society to an open, uninhibited society free from the shackles of social customs, but in the end, both become conformists and agree to marry according to their parents’ choice. These novels end on a note of reconciliation achieved through marriage. Hari marries Sushila, Amrita marries Krishna Sen Gupta, and Nimmi marries Kuku not for love, but for social and individual graces and for preserving the group values of community and family life.

Jhabvala’s European characters are more impressive than the Indian ones. She has a deep understanding of European life whereas she has only outer knowledge of Indian characters. Being a European, she cannot probe the Indian psyche as deeply as she can the European ones and this is enough for her purpose of writing social comedies. She is a European writer who primarily writes for western audience. She has the knowledge of human heart, both in its universal and individual contexts, along with the understanding of the social and cultural patterns and values. As a European, she views the game of human affairs in an Indian family from an objective and external point of view. Without being prejudiced, she presents a convincing account of the individual life, at a personal, social, and familial level. Her worldliness and down-to-earth approach to life help her in avoiding the pitfalls of sentimentality. She doesn’t falsify or merely idealise life. She portrays the predicament of individuals in their relationship with family and social group. She shows the way for a harmonious life by bringing to light the cause of disharmony. The major theme in her novels is marital dissonance, which arises from maladjustment. In Esmond in India, Gulab cutting across colour and racial frontiers marries
a profligate Englishman. The marriage however fails because their basic attitudes towards life are different. The root cause of their dissonance is not only racial and cultural gap but also temperamental differences. Esmond is selfish and mean, and Gulab is sluttish and unsophisticated. The sharp contrast between the two ways of living and thinking causes awkward and unseemly situations in conjugal life. Though Jhabvala is a European, she is not all admiration for the sophisticated western society. She is more for the traditional view of life, which has stood the test of time. She feels that most Indian women have been adversely affected by the westernised education. In The Householder, Prem’s wife Indu is passive and submissive. She accepts the dictates of the society. She tries to keep her husband happy and works a lot to keep her house nice. Whenever Prem is irritated and scolds her, she keeps her quiet in his presence. Prem is observed in the thought of getting his salary raised, and rent and expenditure reduced. Indu tries hard to be a good housewife, attending to household duties meticulously and tolerates her mother-in-law silently. As H.M. Williams says that Jhabvala, “suggests very skilfully the duality of her school-girlish frivolity and her basic emotional superiority to Prem.” By learning to adjust to each other’s shortcomings and accommodate other’s point of view, Indu and Prem strike a harmonious balance in marital relationship. This adjustment can be regarded to oneself, to family or to society. For happy and harmonious life proper adjustment and mutual understanding are essential. As a woman writer, Jhabvala with her sensitive perception of the human relationship handles the situations from the perspective of relationship between man and woman, in and out of marriage, which naturally is most intimate and hence most complex.

Problems of the expatriates, their psychological turmoil and cultural schizophrenia are dealt with insight and understanding. Jhabvala speaks of the emotional stages, which every European living in India undergoes. Judy of A Backward Place is an exception to this emotional upheaval. She doesn’t dislike India or the Indian way of life. She marries an Indian for love and sticks to him in spite of the testing times they have. Judy tries her level best and almost succeeds in adapting herself to the way of life here. Her positive attitude to life helps her accept its challenges. Her readiness to identify with the lower middle class Indian family in which she lives gives her a sense of belongingness and saves her from cultural alienation. One can see that, “The marriage of Bal and Judy is difficult not because of the difference in race so much as it is because of the clash in their temperaments— between the dreamer and the pragmatist.” She retains her English pragmatism and Anglo-Saxon coolness, but these very qualities, instead of working as barriers in her coming closer to her people, help her put up with Bal’s childish irresponsibility and impractical optimism. In A New Dominion Jhabvala portrays westerner’s attempt to grapple with the spiritual India. In this novel, three girls, Lee, Margaret, and Evie, have come to India to seek spiritual solace from the hollow, pretentious and materialistic life of the West. Unfortunately they come across a spurious Swami. These girls are running away from the vacuous aimlessness of the English society. They look at the swami as a symbol of India’s spirituality and seek complete identification with him. The tragedy is that they don’t know what they want, nor they know where they can find it. They get confused between physical union and spiritual communion. This is the reason why they submit to the lust of the swami. The attraction they feel towards the swami is not devoid of sexuality and that explains their jealousy for each other. In Heat and Dust, Jhabvala portrays the sad and touching story of two English women of two different generations who come to India and become its victims. A young English woman comes to India to reconstruct the story of her grandfather’s first wife Olivia who had an affair with the Nawab of Khatam. While Olivia’s choice was for the Nawab, the narrator allows Chid, a wandering Westerner to use her to satiate his desires. When Olivia became pregnant, she told the Nawab and only then Douglas. She got her pregnancy aborted for the fear that the baby might look like an Indian and thus would betray her to Douglas. It was only when everything became public that she decided to leave Douglas and go to the Nawab. Olivia seems to be lacking in frankness and courage. The narrator is everything, which Olivia is not. If Olivia tried to create a little Europe in her house, the narrator tries to Indianise herself as much as possible. Unlike the English community that lived in India as representatives of the British
Empire and behaved like superior to the natives and led an isolated life, the narrator is not prejudiced against the natives and has in fact come to India to seek a simpler and more natural way of life. The novel shows that the passage of time has not changed human passions and emotions. Changed circumstances and customs might bring different attitudes but the basic instincts and responses remain unchanged. Olivia and the narrator are set apart, separated by fifty years, but get caught in similar situations. If their responses and reactions differ, it is in accordance with their attitudes.

CONCLUSIONS

On the whole, the heart of the matter is Jhabvala’s preoccupation with what India does to the Europeans. It also shows how woman’s stepping out into the wider world has widened her scope and perspective especially when one thinks of the limited world of Jane Austen with whom Jhabvala is often compared. A study of non-Indian women characters in Jhabvala’s novels reveals that women, irrespective of the difference in race, religion, culture, and graphical situations, are prone to be emotional, sensitive, and sentimental. What they long for is emotional fulfilment and stability. Jhabvala presents Western women in India as frustrated souls in search of peace and fulfilment. Dejected by materialistic values of the Western society, they seek anchor and refuge in Indian spirituality. There are numerous impulses and tendencies in human beings, and these traits are described in Jhabvala’s world. She herself speaks about her of characterization, “I use one character and split that character up. I have certain leading figures in my life and I seem to use them again and again presenting different facet of their personality so one person can play the role of fifty.” These characteristics represent the human personality in the fictional world of Jhabvala. Her women characters may broadly be placed in four major categories. First there are women, who are passive or submissive, who accept with unquestioning resignation dictates of the society. They adjust to the texture of personal life, no matter what it may be. They are self sacrificing and modest like Judy in A Backward place or like Indu in The Householder. Second, there are women who are aggressive and assertive. They are dissatisfied and rebellious. They yearn for fulfilment, often identified with love, and when they encounter social conventions as impediment, they attempt to control and change them for example, Etta in A Backward place, Kusum in Get Ready for Battle, and Olivia and the narrator in Heat and Dust. Some women are both submissive as well as idealistic for example Indu in The Householder. She tries to follow the conventional way but she has the idea of individual Freedom. When Prem wants to dominate her, she defies him for the sake of her ideal. Finally, there is a category of women who are aggressive but at the same time idealistic. They can take any drastic step to realise their ideals, as Sarla Devi in Get Ready for Battle. These Four types of impulses reveal the personality of any woman character. However, nobody can have only one type of impulse always. These vary according to the environment and the people concerned. “A person’s behaviour depends not only on the situation in which he finds himself, but also upon the way in which he views himself, and what self attitude he has.” What makes the study interesting is the revelation that women, Western or Eastern, are loveable and loving, sensitive and sentimental, individualistic and assertive and that pride, vanity, jealousy, and selfishness are weaknesses common to both.

REFERENCES

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