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Socio-Cultural Economic Encounter in the Novels of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala

Ashok Kumar

Indian society has been a changeless one. Romila Thapar elucidates how with the prevailing caste system, "each man… had its own role in the large and more complex network of the social structure." (Thapar 30) Man's ultimate destiny lay in the transcendence of the soul to spiritual salvation so that the requirements of the social life were only of transitory value. The Indians maintained that their culture had an essentially spiritual quality and was therefore superior to the materialism of the west. But what irked the wealthy European most, was that India was "on the back of this great animal poverty and backwardness," (*How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories* 11) and the wealthy Indian's apathy for it. The Indian economy had been broad-based before the advent of the English. But the imposition of English laws and English goods drove Indian crafts out of business so that they all returned to the village and agriculture.

The impact of the west on the Indian mind gradually wrought changes in attitude and ideology. Tagore made the first effort to create a new culture by fusing East and West together in his *Gora* in 1923. In the novels of the thirties and forties, the writer's attitudes were mostly biased against the Britisher. Mulk Raj Anand caricatured Englishmen in *Two Leaves and a Bud* and R.K. Narayan found the Englishmen insufferably proud of their economic and intellectual superiority in *The English Teacher*. This bitterness disappeared in the fifties. The hold of tradition was gradually relaxing while a new culture born of the clash between the East and the West was merging imperceptibly but decisively.

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, by virtue of her marriage to an Indian, has taken a keen interest in Indian life. She has gained an intimate understanding of the ideas, ideals and various life-styles of the Indians. As a European she knows that India proves too strong for European sensibility. In her novels, she highlights the incongruous blending of these two modes of life - the Eastern and the Western.

In *To Whom She Will*, Amrita, the heroine of the novel, has been brought up in an Anglicised way in India. Her grandfather, Pandit Ram Bahadur Saxena, is an anglophile. He lives and speaks English but his wife, now dead, had been "small and gentle and old even in middle age,

with her hands folded and the saree covering her head". (*To Whom She Will* 11) Amrita in her pseudo Westernism runs after romance and the idea of love. But the man she fancies herself in love with, Hari Sahni—a colleague at the All India Radio—is far removed in his ways and lifestyle:

> He was simple and unspoilt, and his ways
> the traditional, truly Indian ways which
> had been lost in her family.(30)

Each loved the other or thought so. Hari Sahni aimed at cultivating Amrita's Westernism while she tried to give up her western ways and submit herself wholly to Hari Sahni in the traditional way. Ironically, they are both married to partners arranged for them. Hari Singh "was used to having all his relationship at the back of him, and existence without that support and security seemed impossible to him."(131) Even while plans to elope with Amrita appeal to his romantic side, he cannot find the going easy and leaves his mother and sister to arrange marriage. His sister, Prema, decides to get Hari married soon to Sushila Anand who is 'one of us'. Hari's mother makes sure to make it known to Mrs. Anand that her son had been offered huge dowry but it was not the money only but the girl that they were interested in. Surprisingly, Hari is not gnawed by any guilty complex and readily acquiesces to the marriage. He feels elated because being "on the boy's side"… they "had no responsibilities, they could feast, enjoy themselves and send for their relations all at the expense of the bride's family."(199) Amrita's mother, Radha was just as frantic to find a match for Amrita who was well-educated, and had a secure government job. She believed in the liberation of women "but it is quite different when one thinks of one's own daughter".(127) Jhabvala seems to suggest that the socio-cultural conflict is innate in all such Indians themselves and the economic conflict is often the deciding factor.

In *The Nature of Passion*, the traditional undivided Hindu family of Lala Narayan Das Verma-Lalaji–is threatened by the 'westernized' attitude of his daughter Nimmi and sons Chandra and Viddi. Nimmi, at eighteen, rebels against the narrowness of the life of the women's quarters and the system of arranged marriage with dowry. She longs for a gay emancipated life.

Lalaji's cleverest son Chandra has education taken abroad and is married to an intellectual snob Kanta who detests everything about Lalaji's family-their coarseness, their old-fashioned ways and their rigid orthodoxy.

To Kanta, only the promotion of her husband is of any consequence and she hosts dinner parties to promote him. Nimmi admires her 'liberated' sister-in-law and is introduced to the people who come to one such party. Viddi, the youngest son, is a disenchanted, disaffected bohemian, idling his time in a café with bogus pseudo-artists. He fails, however, to see that they have befriended him only to get as much money as possible out of him.

Lalaji is a corrupt but benevolent emperor of capital whose life is devoted to providing for the welfare of a large united family at any cost. His eldest son, Om is like Lalaji, a hungry capitalist. The pursuit of expanding his business empire for his family gets Lalaji mixed up in a great corruption scandal in which he badly needs the co-operation of Dev Rai, Om's father-in-law and a rival millionaire. Om attends parties not in clubs but at places where young prostitutes provide entertainment. Lalaji clings to the old orthodox Hindu way, its rituals and customs. His shrewdness and his money save Viddi and Nimmi from leaving him and the family and probably ruining themselves.

In *Esmond in India* there is a more direct clash between the Englishman, Esmond and his Indian wife, Gulab. Esmond gives private lessons in Hindi, Indian History and literature to English memsahibs, tourists and rich Indian sophisticates. There is no convincing reason as to why he married Gulab, Uma's daughter and Ramnath's niece. The marriage deteriorates rapidly since the birth of a son Ravi, adored and spoilt by his mother, Gulab and her mother, Uma. Esmond is probably at the stage that Jhabvala describes as finding "everything Indian abominable".(*How I Became a Holy Mother* 9) The marriage becomes a battlefield with Esmond trying to make Gulab bring Ravi in the European way. But Gulab reverts to Indian ways when Esmond is not there. Esmond is cruel with Gulab, pinching and slapping her, but Gulab meekly surrenders, accepting the role of the Indian wife to whom the husband is a God. She resists leaving Esmond till the end of the novel, disgusted and furious only after a servant tries to rape her in Esmond's absence. She then blames Esmond for the attack and leaves him for good with her son, Ravi.

Esmond, disgusted with Gulab, finds consolation in Betty. She was "so light, modern and airy, too. Being with her was almost as good as being in England which was the one place where he wanted most passionately to be.(*Esmond in India* 49) Later, Shakuntala, Hardayal's

bohemian daughter, meets and falls in love with Esmond. She finds "no harm in men and women being friends. In Europe everybody is like that."(148) She allows herself to be seduced by him in her hotel room. After that, Shakuntala finds herself committed wholly to him. Despite Shakuntala's idealism she does not think of marrying Narayan, Ramnath's doctor-son who work among the poor tribals. Ramnath's economic condition deters Hardayal from contemplating a marriage alliance with the other's family. Both families share the common practices of an Indian joint family in which the family sits together to decide vital issues like marriage alliance. Jhabvala notes in her essay 'Myself In India'—that in India "it is the family or clan members who gather together and enjoy each other's company." (*How I Became a Holy Mother* 18)

The Householder centres on the married life of Prem and his young wife, Indu. Prem teaches in a private college owned by the pompous Mr. Khanna and his wife who do not pay their staff well. To Prem, his role of householder is seriously affected by his meagre resources. To make matters worse, Prem's landlord, Mr. Sehgal threatens to raise their rent. Prem is economically deprived in a traditional role of being the householder. Socially, Prem is acutely conscious of his dignity as a 'Professor' and feels shame in his desire for his wife's body. Prem's and Indu's marriage has been an arranged one in which they have not met before. He scarcely knows his wife, Indu. Prem's mother comes to live with them and wants Indu to go away. Prem is too tied to his mother's apron-strings. But he soon becomes aware of his growing love for Indu. The young couple are embarrassed in their love-making with Prem's mother's presence in the house. Prem plans to send his mother to his sister and is so relieved that he cannot wait to see the train go as he hurries to his wife, Indu.

In *Get Ready For Battle* Guljarilal is a rich Punjabi businessman who has adopted western manners. But "he still liked to sit on the floor and eat his food from little bowls with his fingers".(*Get Ready For Battle* 26) He is a shrewd businessman. He decides to buy a piece of land at Bundi Basti for his economic gains unaffected by the slum dwellers who would be ousted. This brings him into direct conflict with his wife, Sarla Devi who is a Gandhian idealist. Gulzarilal's mistress, the widow Kusum Mehra, coaxes him repeatedly to legitimate their relationship. She woos his son, Vishnu and Sarla Devi's brother, Braj Mohan to her side. Vishnu's westernised friends annoy his wife to a degree of causing estrangement between them. More pathetic is Brij Mohan who, though highly educated

and westernised is dragged into his poverty by his addiction to whisky and women.

A Backward Place is the reaction of westernised Indians and expatriates to India. As in *Esmond in India*, Indians and expatriates are brought with direct confrontation. According to Jhabvala, the expatriates are either loving everything Indian or finding everything Indian not so marvellous; third stage, everything Indian abominable. The problems of expatriates of India are all a part of the socio-cultural economic conflict that they suffer. *A New Dominion* develops the theme of disparity that lies between the Indians and the English who visit India after her independent statehood. Raymond is a tourist who has come to visit India. He is sensitive and can enjoy India aesthetically and emotionally. Others like the young girls Lee and Margaret, who have come on a spiritual quest, pass through Jhabvala's European cycle.

Raymond is very sensitive to human rights and is naturally appalled to see the Indians treat their servants, mostly children, so violently. There are other economic disparities that divide the rich and the poor in India. While the middle class homes, Raymond finds, are full of possessions, the poor live in a rather bleak way. Eating was the main pre-occupation of those who could find food while the others died of hunger. On the other hand, the rich like Rao Saheb, added more clout by involving himself in politics where the real power now lay.

Raymond's friend Gopi, who is yet to establish himself, is to be married shortly. He has never seen the girl. A marriage in India, he discovers, is not merely between the couple but involves the two families who meet on the occasion to ascertain that there are no differences between them. Raymond was equally shocked to note that the English in India, even in the present day, speak in a commanding tone and look down condescendingly on anyone who did not belong to their folk. Their wives were just as supercilious as they had once been, meeting only the very select class of Indians, at dinner parties.

Lee and Margaret, the two English girls, who are drawn to India by its promises of spiritual peace do try hard to adopt Indian ways. Lee travels in crowded buses. They even live in 'ashram' and try to merge with India's discomforts. Lee ends up being disillusioned. Margaret falls a victim to India's deathly disease-jaundice. The European finds physical dangers like pollution, unhygienic conditions, dirty streets, heat and dust all round.

Jhabvala's last novel on India *Heat and Dust* further expends on her exposition of how India works on European nerves. In the parallel stories of Olivia and the English narrator, the dilemmas of the West towards the East seem to emphasise what has always been and what will ever be. India is treated with the same suspicion, as being a den of thieves, unscrupulous people. India's dirt, food and water are all to be treated, with care. Olivia at first shuts out the 'heat and dust' in her tastefully done up bungalow. But soon she finds the isolation stultifying and ventures into that heat and dust of India which bogs her down to her doom. The English narrator also leaves the safety of the mission and goes into the heart of India living in a room above the bazaar in the home of an ordinary Indian clerk, Inder Lal. She adopts the Indian ways of living on vegetables and curd bought in the bazaar. In the joint family she learns that the mother-in-law enjoys an enviable position for it is only as mother that a woman in India gets her due place.

India is hot, dirty, over-crowded and diseased to all Europeans. The apathetic attitude of Indians to all life is beyond the understanding of the western mind. The young westerners who come in search of peace enthusiastically, surrender to everything Indian but before long fall victim to India's disease—dysentery and jaundice, grow weak and derelict and reach a stage when they find everything come full circle and the west finds the east beyond its reach.

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala poignantly reveals the tensions that underline East-West relations. The tugs and pulls of culture, disparities in social patterns, economic differences, become the third dimension in their stories. Firstly, they further the construction of the plot in their stories. The protagonist often finds himself in an abyss confronted by these seemingly invincibles. He must overcome these differences. Artistically, they provide the raison d'atre for the hero to extricate himself from this situation. The way of his extrication vary from novel to novel.

Jhabvala has written purportedly for western audiences. By her special position of being in a country other than her own, she has imbibed a ready and detailed knowledge of the culture and social values of each society. Her earlier novels are generally social comedies that do not allow the difference to escalate into the conflict. But the perspective of her later novels changes to the mood of her own exposition in her essay 'Myself In India'. Like herself, her western protagonists assert themselves and return to their old ways. A change to return to their old self means an abandoning

of the effort to understand. The bridge is still to be made so that the novels end at the same point as E.M. Forster's *A Passage To India* ends, 'No, not yet…No, not there' (Forster 317)

It may be said that Jhabvala, being a westerner, has explored the complexity and subtlety of Indian society, its labyrinth of the Hindu undivided family and the tensions that arise out of the old and new, East and West in a sophisticated way. In the earlier books she never favours completely the young rebels or the old conservatives. These novels may be said to fall into pure social comedies in which the plot is designed to ensure happy endings and the emotional temperature is deliberately kept low. But in the novels commencing with *Esmond in India*, the conclusions are left in mid air or on a note of interrogation with problems unsolved. It seems as if Jhabvala is troubled by the divisions in humanity. The stories of her later novels acquire a lasting value because they spring from this tragic vision. The protagonists of these novels seem committed to the belief that wrongs must be righted. In so far as there is latest optimism, the solutions are possible.

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Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, College of Commerce, Patna