

Social Realism in Get Ready for Battle by Ruth Praver Jhabvala

Abstract

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, though a European by birth achieved an international reputation as an Indian novelist for her marriage to an Indian architect and her consequent long stay in India gave her a deep insight into the post-independent Indian society. Her fiction presents a realistic picture of the familial and social arena of the fifties- a period that was marked almost by a complete metamorphoses of the Indian social values and structure. Jhabvala depicted the ethos and hypocrisy of the Indian middle class society with dazzling assurance and gave a penetrating and compassionate picture of the human relationships-ironically and realistically. She displayed an amazing range of experience and imagination in perceiving the reality of her surroundings. The predicament of the individuals in their relationships with their families often finds a convincing portrayal in her fictional world and the series of incidents widen and diversify the social picture. The current paper is a study of her novel Get Ready for Battle. In this novel Jhabvala explores the inner life of a Punjabi family and goes on to portray the struggle between the materialistic thoughts and ethics.

Keywords: Society, Life, Materialistic, Family.

Introduction

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, with a rich experience of three different cultures - Germany, India and United states, was a writer par excellence. Jhabvala's long stay in India after her marriage to an Indian Parsi Architect gave her a deep insight into the post - independent urban social life of India in its myriad forms and nuances. The concept of social reality as reflected and depicted by Ruth Jhabvala in her fictional works is dynamic and variegated. As has been stated by Trilling, her works are "a perpetual quest for reality, the field of its research being always the social world, the material of its analysis being always manners as the indication of the direction of man's soul" (Trilling 212). Tensions exist in every sphere of modern India and the sympathetic and realistic touch of this gets illustrated in T.D. Bruston's remark for he comments.

Between the unbiased class and their village kinsmen, between minority groups and those who are still sick to uphold monolithic class barriers, between the masses and in public officers, between students and teachers, and most strikingly, between the young and the middle aged (and often bewildered) parents and guardians, the conflicts are re-enacted in a million forms in modern India. (Bruston 202)

The post independence times in India have become superficial and profundity has gone out of the lives. Westernization and a blind modernization have created a hollowness in the society and this has led to a pseudo-modernistic Indian society. This new formed modern society is losing its ancient heritage and stability and has come to have only a slight impact on the Indian elite class, who are still undecided about their social and personal norms.

Objective of the Study

With the advent of westernization, the human values and ethics are diminishing and are at the receiving end. The clash that takes place between the traditional and western outlook is one of the major themes of the post-independence Indian Fiction. The name of Ruth Praver Jhabvala is important in this context because she is herself a westerner by her upbringing, so when she depicts the clash between the two outlooks then it presents an alternate point-of-view,

Review of Literature

The researcher has read various authors and critics who have written about the clash between Indian and Western civilization values. Of

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the late, the clash that is depicted in the literature is more in the terms of religious ideology. The researcher did not come across any important work that has been written lately on the issue with reference to Ruth Praver Jhabvala. The important works on the writer include: Vasant A. Shahane's *Ruth Praver Jhabvala* (1971) and Yasmine Gooneratne's *Silence, Exile and Cunning: The Fiction of Ruth Praver Jhabvala* (1983). Another important book includes Hayden Moore Williams *The Fiction of Ruth Praver Jhabvala* (1973). There are some journal articles available on Jhabvala, but nothing worthwhile has been published on her lately.

The satirical onslaught of Ruth Jhabvala on the Westernized Indian Society is sharp and incisive and she has demonstrated her great power as an artist in exposing the hollowness of today's modern society. The young sophisticates at the party dance to Western music, drink alcohol, flirt and talk politics with knowledge borrowed from *Time* and *Femina*. The intellectualism they flaunt is not only hollow but is cruelly divorced from the India outside their flat where people are victims of the unholy alliance of brutal capitalism and liberal progressive "do-goodism." According to Charvaka, the founder of Indian materialism, "East, drink and be merry, death comes to all closing our lives" (Krishan 281). This is the motto of the materialistic school of thought. Vasant A. Shahane comments: "Jhabvala, like George Bernard Shaw and E.M. Foster, is deeply conscious of the value of money in modern life and the fact that all idealistic schemes of restructuring civilization will need money for their implementation in practical life" (Shahane 106).

In *Get Ready For Battle*, Jhabvala has demonstrated the artistic and social preoccupation of a materialistic civilization. The lives of individuals and families in a monetary society are convincingly depicted. The value patterns that arise from this basic motif are successfully projected in the personal dilemmas and the familial predicaments of the post-independent urban India. Here she explores the inner life of a Punjabi family - a family which is not only too conscious of its social prestige but, considering the existing mores of the Indian society is also disintegrating from within.

Gulzari Lal, a mature individual, is no nouveau riche but he envies and secretly fears the very rich, the very successful, the utterly ruthless: "He felt some pity for himself when he compared himself to other men - the well off businessmen who came to his parties" (GRB 140). He possesses an "inbred courtesy, a dignity" that lends grace to all his relationships, including those pertaining to his business and wayward family (Gooneratne 146). To these qualities he adds others - "virtues - that is, his realism, his capacity for hard work, his shrewd business sense, his balanced view of life" (GRB 37). Despite all this, Gautam tells Vishnu that Gulzari Lal seems to be "the worst type of man, attached to money and money - making and existing not as a man but only through the things he possesses, like his car, his house, his mistress. Woman and gold as Sri Ramakrishna has said, these are the worst

temptations in the life of man, and your father has not only tasted them but has swallowed them whole" (GRB 17).

Gulzari Lal depicts the extreme materialistic tendencies of the rich, corrupt bourgeoisie of the post-independent India, where even in a social gathering, like a party, the materialistic interests hold a prominent place in the minds of people. Gulzari Lal hosts a lavish party "for a municipal engineer who had sometime in the future to pass some rather tricky plans of Gulzari Lal's" (GRB 7). The materialistic interests of those present are "etched in acid" (Gooneratne 147).

No one was bored, for almost everyone in the room could be of use to some else and this was stimulating. There was a commissioner who was stimulating to a number of fairly high - ranking civil servants, who were in their turn stimulating to a number of middle ranking civil servants, and so on, down to the municipal engineer for whom the party was made by the presence of the Vice-Chairman of his board. An overall stimulus was provided by a Maharaja, an imposing figure who, now that his kingdom and a good deal of income were gone, was taking an interest in business affairs; he was really of no importance to anyone, but his presence made everyone feel that they had got into good company and had come a long way from where they had started. (GRB 7)

The materialistic society has a variegated spectrum, and relationships have lost their purity. Selfish desires and individualism has entered every sphere. Money has come to hold its grasp on every phase of modern society and the modern man has a strong materialistic approach to everything. Feelings and sincerity have come to be mere high-sounding words, for nowadays, these sentiments too have money as their motivation. Idealism is only much talked of, but in reality only few people like Sarla Devi follow these idealistic principles in life. The harsh social reality is that a real brother, is ready to be non-interferable in a sister's affair if it means money and comfort for him.

In *Get Ready For Battle*, Brij Mohan, the brother of Sarla Devi, has been reduced to sponging off his sister. He has reached this state partly, as a result of dissipation and calamity of the partition of India and Pakistan but more so because of his laziness and addiction to whisky and women. He cherishes, "when my compensation comes I shall be a different man. Then people will treat me again with the respect which is due to me" (GRB 52). He feels that it is his duty to "look after his sister" (GRB 92) and he thinks that "a sister's happiness should be dearer to a brother than his own" (GRB 92). When the issue of divorce between Gulzari Lal and Sarla Devi crops up, he tries to maintain a stern dignity and firmly believes

that "a woman from a family like ours... cannot be so easily divorced" (GRB 50). He further comments that we talk of modern ideas, but "what have all these to do with a brother's feelings? (GRB 51). When this very brother senses Gulzari Lal's offer of money in exchange of divorce, he sees it as his last chance to pursue a lavish life and reacts: "What is divorce? It is only a legal term and it has nothing to do nowadays with a family's honour and prestige. These are not at all affected by divorce." He stood and drew himself with full dignity : "I am now willing, "he said, "to give my consent to your divorce" (GRB 150).

Taking divorce is a modern idea, which is new to the traditional Indian social norms. In olden times, even when husband and wife lived apart for years together, they never thought of divorce. But, with the changing times, concepts changed, and a person like Gulzari Lal revises his ideas about divorce. "His objection to it had always been social not moral: he considered that legal divorce was still too new-fangled an idea to be introduced into a family such as his. To keep a mistress was different: it was an old established custom and one that he had every right to follow. Kusum, however, had now become modern and decided that mistresses were no longer socially feasible and that remarried widows were" (GRB 34-35).

Apparently, Gulzari Lal has a social status which he strives to maintain, but beneath that appearance there is the man's lust for flesh, money and comfort - the morality of the affluent, which has broken up the family.

In India, the customary practice is that the aged grandparents stay with their children and grand-children which is a mutual transaction of giving and receiving love, affection and care. It is rare that the grandparents may give up the pleasure of living with their grand-children and prefer to stay, if their partners are not alive or have departed from them, in the company of strangers, or begin conjugal friendship with people of their age.

Another social change is visualised in the breaking up of large families into small units under the impact of materialisation. Vishnu, son of Gulzari Lal and Sarla Devi, values a money-ridden society and has a quest for monetary and professional self-reliance. He inherits Gulzari Lal's commercial outlook.⁷ His materialism is acquired by him; rather than ingrained in him: "From birth you have been on the one track your father put you on, the key has been turned and you run round and round" (GRB 17). Vishnu wants to break-up and set his own commercial world. He longs to escape the secure slot in life that his father has designed for him. His spirit, although as free and aspiring as his mother's has no religious bent; he will make his bid for independence and for personal fulfilment, but his choice, when it comes, will be for a life lived within established conventions, for a business which will probably be as successful as his father's though of a different kind, and independent both of it and of him (Gooneratne 146).

Sarla Devi is the symbol and epitome of what Ruth Jhabvala regards as the "opposite reaction" to the Indian greed and callousness. Jhabvala describes

her in one of the articles as "That Indian spirituality - not grabbing at the world but whatsoever to do with it" (Jhabvala, Moonlight) - that is quite as much a part of Indian experience (Hartley 273). As a woman of conscience, Sarla Devi is an excellent foil for other characters in the novel, none of whom pursue any ideal higher than the advancement of their own prosperity. She lives in great simplicity on the rooftop of the house of her slovenly bachelor brother, Brij Mohan, and spends her hours in contemplation and in selfless work for the poor and the absurd. She has moved beyond the stage of the householder and yearns to be free even "from her own body and from the sense of others." She desires "only a disembodied state of acceptance", but she is "tugged back by her compassion into a world where nothing (can) be accepted and everything (has) to be fought against."¹¹ She has indeed reached a stage which is far beyond the bounds of worldliness and the shackles of self-interest. Almost a saint, she treats the pleasures and pains in this world alike and is non-attached to the ephemeral gains and losses of this earthly paradise. According to her brother, Brij Mohan, "she is a saint . . . For herself she wants nothing, only for others, always for others. If someone comes to her and says give me your jewels, give me your clothes, your food, the house you live in, she would give without one thought, she would strip herself of all" (GRB 91).

Sarla Devi is a Gandhian idealist devoted to the poor. Her consuming thirst to work for the betterment of Indian society has wrecked her marriage (Williams 40). The saint in her seeks the apparently unattainable horizons and her vision expands and encompasses the orange of the evening sky. Nobility of spirit, as Sarla Devi is, in the context of materialistic Delhi, both "unnatural" and "insane." The contrast between the simple, unaffected disposition of Sarla Devi and the social workers of audacious and ostentatious habits is evident when Sarla Devi visits Mrs. Bhatnagar, the widow of a rich industrialist and much respected for the wide variety of social work in which she is engaged. She is "the President of the All-India Society for Bringing Hygiene to the Depressed Classes, Vice-President of the All-India Care for Widows Association, Secretary of the All-India Rehabilitation Centre for Immoral Women and Treasure of the All-India Home-Crafts for Industrial Workers Society" (GRB 96). When Mrs. Bhatnagar informs Sarla Devi that American jeeps will take social workers out to the new site to which the colonists were to be shifted, Sarla Devi inquires if the jeeps were also to be provided to transport the inhabitants of the homes at the new site to their places of work in the city. Both Mrs. Bhatnagar and her companions realise that they have "someone very unpractical" (GRB 117) to deal with.

Mrs. Bhatnagar, a Delhi socialite, loved to lead a life where opulence reigned supreme, but she belongs to the older generation. The younger generation is represented by Ushi, her daughter, Toto Saxena, her son-in-law besides Vishnu. Gogo and other. They make the new world of high class and fashionable social life of Delhi. The lives they lead are a thoroughly permissive one which is very different

from the harsh social reality of the country where the poor stand with old tins waiting for the waste food.

Social realism of Ruth Jhabvala is reflected in her expression of the Indian poverty and the wide gulf between the rich and the poor. As a post-colonial social realist Jhabvala has given a faithful and poignant description of the suffering people who are always haunted by the devil of poverty and who find themselves consigned to the dustbin of filth and garbage. These landless poor who dwell in slums are exploited by the wealthy, corrupt and the hypocritical.

In *Get Ready For Battle*, Jhabvala has put forth a horrifying picture of the social reality of Indian society by giving a vivid description of a slum area, Bundi Basti, which was just off a busy main thoroughfare in Delhi:

There was a sea of huts, side by side; row by row, tiny squat of huts crowded one against the other. The colony was built out of the salvage that came down floating from a more prosperous world - rags and old bicycle tyres, battered tins and broken bricks. Walls were made of dried mud or of tattered matting, roofs were a patchwork of old tiles, rags and rusty sheets of tin held down at the corners by stores - there were narrow lanes between the row of huts. The earth was streaked with funnels of dirty water, vegetable waste and peels were trodden into the mud and scratched up again by mangy dogs and pigs and a few sick chickens. And the lanes were all crowded with people carrying on domestic lives in public (GRB:114)

The poor dwellers of the Bundi Basti are likely to be ejected under the pretentious plan of slum clearance and they fear at the prospect of being uprooted from that area because the Government and Municipal Officials along with the rich want them out of the way so that they could make profit from the vacated land and this prosperity of their will thrive on human misery.

Sarla Devi comes into open conflict with the members of her family in an effort to present the take-over and development by her husband's firm of the land occupied by the colony of poor people. For the cause of the down-trodden she even talks to her son, and pleads him to be more active and alive for their cause. "And what homes," she said bitterly. "There is the double disgrace that people should have to fight for their homes and then that they should have to call such places home . . ." (GRB 106). "Oh, Vishnu, Vishnu, why are you like that? You are my son, you are as beautiful as Krishna and strong as Arjun. But your conduct is that of a little merchant's son" (GRB 106).

Vishnu's friend, Gautam is a non-conformist and he denounces what he calls Vishnu's "one-track mind". He also subscribes to the motifs of youth, idealism, nature and freedom which will finally

culminate in man's real happiness. Whereas Vishnu dreams of starting a factory for manufacturing screws and spare parts, Gautam looks forward to "the unity of man and nature, achieving a higher state of manhood through environmental education (Shahane 111). Gautam is a visionary who thinks that "no man is poor "because he can observe "all our gifts, all our riches - the sky, the sea, the mountains and the sun - everything is there for us to seize and enjoy . . ." (GRB:152).

In *Get Ready For Battle*, Ruth Jhabvala skillfully portrays the two contrary social aspects of the modern post-independent India - the this - worldliness of the Gulzari Lals and the Vishnus and the other - worldliness of the Gautams and the Sarla Devis.

In the novel, the tendency to grab land, the maneuvers of the rich to undo the landless poor who dwell in slums and all, the usual class disparities are dealt with minute details. The class structure is based on socio-economic disparities. While the lower classes are concerned with their own welfare and preserving their identity, be it by way of raising their settlements or living collectively and harmoniously in the joint family system, the rich are busy asserting their class superiority by demonstrating their affluence socially in the form of tea-parties and get-togethers and privately by their indulgence in drinking, sex and gorgeous living.

In the final analysis, we find that in *Get Ready For Battle*, a powerful current of social realism with different dimensions of social reality of the Indian society is portrayed. Ruth Jhabvala's response to the social reality has a distinct flavour of its own. She effectively deals with the various sociological aspects of the Indian society - the Indian sensitivity, family institution and culture. She presents a horrifying picture of the socio-cultural reality in her depiction of the poor and the deprived who have been suffering at the hands of the upper caste and the rich. Money has come to hold its grasp on every sphere of modern life such as social gatherings, relationships in the family, friendships etc. Idealism is only much talked of but in reality people, who follow idealistic principles are termed "unnatural" and "insane." The intellectualism is bookish and moral hollowness is prevalent amongst the younger generation. The youngsters craving for a "better" way of living, yield to something even more superficial and shallow. Thus, we find that Ruth Jhabvala is a keen observer of human life and mind and is also a powerful visionary.

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