



# Get Ready For Battle: Women Protagonist's Outrage Against the Patriarchal Society

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## Abstract

The Postcolonial era in Indian English literature witnessed an upsurge in women's writing as a powerful medium of modernism and feminist statement. The women writers have added a new dimension to Indian-English fiction with their exquisite perception of men and matters. Ruth Praver Jhabvala (7 May 1927 - 3 April 2013) occupies an important place as the one who always searches for the dignity of humanity, equality and women's survival. She excels in portraying incongruities of human behaviour, the stereotyped familial, social, and cultural implications. Marital harmony or discord, the pursuit of wealth, family togetherness and feuds, crises of feminine identity and homelessness—these are among the situations that she repeatedly explores in her fiction. The present research paper is a critical study of Jhabvala's *Get Ready for Battle* (1962) which highlights women protagonist's outrage against the norms of patriarchal doctrines which hampers their very own existence.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial, Feminine Consciousness, Self-reliance, Feminine Alienation and Absorption.

## Introduction

The post-Independence era marked the great beginning of the literary emancipation of women. It witnessed the creative release of sensibilities which deserves due recognition by virtue of self-sufficiency. The period gave an opulent and convincing lot of novelists in the area of Indian fiction in English in the post-Independence period. Several prolific and highly talented novelists including Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sehgal and Shashi Deshpande have enriched Indian fiction in English. Their chief contribution lies in their exploration of moral and psychological dilemmas and the resultant repercussions of their characters along with their efforts to cope with the challenges and reach a new harmony of

relationship with themselves and their surroundings. The bitterness of past of deprivation and denial and the exhilaration of liberation and decolonization inspire their genuine creativity and enrich their works.

Consequently these women novelists have been able to create interesting personages who successfully exposed the oppression inflicted on women in society. They have also prevailed in driving home the fact that society requires a massive change to avert suffering of women. Ruth Praver Jhabvala, a Polish Jew refugee, brought up in Germany, educated in England and married to an Indian reveals a strange love-hate relationship with India in her fictive role as an outsider- insider. She deals with the social and economic problems of the society and writes about the social segment of urban India that she knows well. Jhabvala's novels fall into two distinct and evenly matched groups- viz. comedies of urban middle class Indian life, especially in undivided Hindu families and ironic studies of the East - West encounter.

Before taking an analytical study of the novel *Get Ready for the Battle* we can quote a few lines from an article by Haydn Moore Williams.

... her (Jhabvala's) close personal experience of Indian life and her exclusive interest in it as a novelist as well as her ability to identify very closely with Indians take her very close to indigenous Indian writers like R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao. Khushwant Singh sites her together with Narayan, as a final interpreter of contemporary India in fiction and as one who is free from the political alignments and extreme nationalism of other Indian Writers. ( Williams,1981),

Jhabvala adopts a staunch feministic approach in her delineation of characters. Traditional patriarchal Indian society confines woman to the taboo-ridden path. Jhabvala as a Post-colonial woman writer indulge in exploring the feminine consciousness of the women characters, their evolution towards an awakened conscious and how eventually this leads to the enrichment of their inner self in a male-dominated society. This is quite evident in her *Get Ready for the Battle* (1962). The novel portrays the bitter survival of Sarla Devi, a middle aged woman fretting under her oppressive, materialistic husband Gulzari Lal who is counting on nothing but his wealth and her obedience. Jhabvala presents a confrontation between the materialistic husband and an ideal woman. Sarla Devi vehemently opposes her husband who wants to buy poor's land at Bundi Busti. Gulzari Lal leads an unethical life and lives with his mistress. Gulzari Lal is happy in his relations with the bewitching Kusum, the widow of major Mehra and grandmother.

Being a social worker and adopting a Gandhian ideology, Sarla Devi couldn't withstand her husband's illegal and immoral behaviour. She has been living an isolated life for a decade in her brother, Brij Mohan's house. She spends her time in serving the poor. She is ready to face odd circumstances and not afraid of getting divorce from her husband if he intends to do so. Meanwhile Gulzari Lal induces to divorce her in order to live freely with his mistress Kusum. Her resilience is shown in her words: 'If you like, she said meekly. 'I am ready to sign anything you want.' (39) Gulzari Lal is the representative of

those who regard money their God. His family doesn't consider him a good person. It is quite ironical that in spite of disassociating from legal wife for the lust of money and adultery, he holds a significant place in the society.

Literature as well as society around us reinforce the image of the Indian woman as *pativrata*, as paragon of all virtues. Yet the same society does not chastise a husband for marital disloyalty. In her conversation with Mrs. Bhatnagar and Mrs. Das, Sarla Devi confirms her life long ideals: "people of Bundi Basti are my duty and responsibility and I have never yet shirked my duty and responsibility." (128) Mrs. Bhatnagar is a widow of a highly affluent family and works for the society for bringing hygiene to the downtrodden class. She also holds the view that the slum dwellers of Bundi Basti should be migrated to a place away from the present site. Mrs. Bhatnagar and Mrs. Kaul are the stereotype committee women who appear like monstrous creatures.

Kusum pressurizes Gulzari Lal, who is also a grandfather to divorce his wife Sarala Devi, so that they could once again return to a conjugal life. In fact, Gulzari Lal has been tamed. He begins discussing the divorce proposal with Sarala Devi at her brother's house. The proposal for divorce is put forward by Kusum and Gulzari Lal to Sarala Devi and then to Brij Mohan. However, ironically Gulzari Lal is happy and contends to have a widow mistress in his house to perform the tasks of his living wife. And as a result, Kusum gradually enlarges her domain in Gulzari Lal's house by exerting her influence over Vishnu, Mala and the little daughter, Preeti. She accomplishes her task with adroitness and swiftness. So, when she conveys Gulzari Lal's desire for divorce is completed on Gulzari Lal's next visit to Sarala Devi, who unhesitatingly signs the papers that estrange her permanently from her husband. Later, she turns her attention to social work. So, she vigorously strives for promoting the cause of the poor slum dwellers for their permanent settlement on the land they have illegally occupied in the Bundi Busti colony. So, before signing the divorce papers, Sarala Devi, instead of discussing with Gulzari Lal the more vital question of her life regarding the divorce, pleads with him for saving the poor encroachers of the land. She becomes pathetic when she learns that the slum dwellers had behind her back struck a deal with Gulzari Lal to accept some money and vacate the land. Sarla Devi becomes the thread of Indian spirituality. Sarla Devi seeks to dissociate herself from marital life and worldly attachments, and immerse herself in religion. In India a divorce woman is least respected. It is her serenity, calmness and stoic acceptance that Sarla Devi easily accepts not only divorce but her husband's mistress. Besides she has been entitled as *The ideal of all women* by her son's friend. Gautam tells her son, Vishnu: "How I admire your mother- she has shaken off everything, all the things that due to her—your mother for me is the ideal of women."(16-17)

In the novel two persons who call Sarla Devi “a mad woman” are her brother Brij Mohan and her daughter in law Mala. She is against Sarla Devi because of her uncaring approach towards her husband Gulzari Lal. Mala has possessiveness for her husband Vishnu. She is like traditional Indian housewives. This was the thought Gulzari Lal had seen in Mala and selected her for his son. But, Mala is very possessive, she shows her angry nature when Vishnu decided to stay away from his father`s home and business. She complains angrily about her loneliness in order to become sole mistress of Gulzari Lal`s house. On Mala`s proposal Kusum recommends Gulzari Lal for a separate business of Vishnu. At her request, Gulzari Lal permits his son to have a factory for making fountain pens at Chandnipet with the co- existence of his friend Joginder Singh. This makes Kusum the queen of the house.

Sarla Devi is depicted as a someone who stands for her ideals whereas Kusum, the second wife of Gulzari Lal is cunning enough to take advantage of the situations in life. She can not live a life of a widow all her life. She somehow not only induces Gulzari Lal to marry her but also becomes the queen of the house by letting the son of Gulzari Lal to start a new business and to shift at other place. She becomes successful in being the legal wife of Gulzari Lal as well as becoming the master of the house. Jhabvala has paved the way for the inner sentiments of Kusum to explore out. In fact, divorce, separation and woman`s self reliance are the tenets of Jhabvala`s writing. If a husband`s ways of life do not suit his wife, it is no more requisite for her to stay with him; if a widow, even though a grandmother, happens to like a man, there is nothing to stop her from marrying him; if a husband condemns his wife and presumes her to sit passively at home, the revolt must be created at that time. This is the picture of feminine awareness with courageous self judgments that Ruth Praver Jhabvala clarifies and we notice the female personalities as individuals. One can agree with Shahane who says that, “the novel Get Ready for Battle is not all about battles, fights, quarrels and conflicts. It is a very adroitly designed novel of domestic life and familial relations which are sometimes marked by an intensity of emotions and other times by jealousies and prejudices” (Shahane,1976). Two minor women characters Toto and Ushi symbolize the new growing fashionable and club attending wives of modern social circles of India. These two married women are the leaders of the young generation, who move freely among the boys, enjoy smoking cigarettes and tasting wine. This tinkerer westernized young society becomes a part of modern India and exposes the narrow sense by such people. Jhabvala reveals the predicament of her female characters and their utmost urge for rejuvenation and feminine awakenings. In addition to Sarla Devi, most of other women displays a stark tension between the old tradition and the new modernity. The novelist has created a fictional world of the domestic ease and sensuous petition in Indian set-up but her vision is ironic and that of a social realist. In a male dominated society of patriarchal order, the novel concentrates on the theme of feminine alienation and absorption.

Sarla Devi seems to be losing her battle and requests for help on deaf ears of her own son Vishnu does not yield fruits. She stands alone, her ability to live every moment falls in contrast with lazy Vishnu, Mala and most of the other characters of the novel. She might be defeated but not lost. In the words of Yasmine Goonaratne: “She is the symbol and epitome of what Ruth Jhabvala regards as the opposite reaction to the Indian greed and callousness. She describes in her article The Indian Spirituality- not grabbing at the world but wanting nothing whatsoever to do with it.” (Goonaratne, 1983). But because of the code of behaviour by which she lives does not give up her struggle and care for the downtrodden people. Therefore, H.M. Williams points out: “Sarla Devi is the dedicated idealist devoted to the ideals of the Geeta and Mahatma Gandhi.” (Williams, 1976).

Jhabvala expresses anguish at the exploitation of women in the male dominated society. Brij Mohan, Sarla Devi's brother epitomizes an indecent, lustful and immoral life. His maidservants are at the receiving end of his indecent lust. This is the reason why Sarla Devi rebukes him. One morning Brij Mohan throws out Tara, his young maid-servant along with her old woman, alleging that she wants more and more presents and gifts. This act of her brother enrages Sarla Devi. She requests him to allow her to stay again. But her plea has no effect on him. She is very much angry with him at his immoral habits and vices. She does not hesitate to remind his brother of his immoral act. She boldly tells her brother the way he exploits the maidservants:

But what do you want from her? She is ready for all your pleasures. She will sing for you. When you want her, she pours your drinks for you, she serves you. She lies on her back for you..... What more is there you want? (137)

Sarla Devi also shows vital concerns for the prostitutes. She rebukes her brother for the ill treatment meted out to them by her brother Brij Mohan. She says to her brother in strong words: “The poor girls does not come here for pleasure. I hope you pay her properly.”( 138)

Ruth Praver Jhabvala expresses her concern with regard to the treatment given to the girls in tradition bound Indian society. Sumi is a young unmarried girl and the sister of Mrs. Shankar. Sumi lives with her sister, though her parents live in Mathura. Mr. Shankar is a middle class man holding a government job in New Delhi. Sumi wishes to lead a life of freedom. She denounces Mala's objection to her free moving with Vishnu, Mala's husband and Gautam in strong words:

Sumi began to pout. She decided that Mala had no right to talk to her in this way and it was time to stand on one's dignity. 'I am not a child.' She said. What is wrong? We are not in purdah, we are free like western women. I can go where I like with my friends. (77)

## Conclusion

To be brief and exact, *Get Ready for Battle* symbolizes the feminine call to womenfolk of India for readiness to fight their battle for their full emancipation from the time honoured patriarchal dominance over them. Jhabvala's female protagonist Sarla Devi proves herself to be as resilient, persuasive and resourceful as ever. The positive attitude of Sarla Devi is an outcome of her inner strength which can withstand all oppression. In *Get Ready for Battle*, no more being content with passive, submissive, docile role women play in Indian society, the women characters, Sarla Devi, Kusum Mehra, Sumi, Mala are ready for an ultimate battle for their freedom and identity. Unlike traditional Indian women, these characters are ready for divorce, separation and self-reliance when these become necessary. Instead of a meek surrender like the orthodox Indian women, they are ready to confront for their liberation and emancipation. Jhabvala in this novel presents the hidden anger and frustration of women against the prevailing system. Sarla Devi sternly conveys her emotions to Gulzari Lal in these words:

“You have the office, you have your friends, you drive off in your car and do what you like; while I sit here only and wait for the day to be finished.” (28)

These characters reveals different interpretations of the progressive sensibilities of the modern Indian women at every walks of life. Jhabvala triggers splinters of self-awareness and identity; self-reliance and individuality through the portrayals of her women characters in novels after novels. By adapting to submissive idealism like Sarla Devi, Jhabvala's women resort to radical and drastic steps for the attainment of their goals. To sum up, Jhabvala is aware of the position of women in Indian family and the novel *Get Ready for Battle* portrays the change that is brought in her attitude in the changing cultural context.

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