



Portrayal Of Women In Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Esmond In India*

Dr. Twinkle B. Manavar

Assistant Professor

Department of English,

Smt. J. C. Dhanak Arts & Commerce College, Bagasara – 365440 (Guj.), India

Abstract: Women Writing in English in India present the dilemma which modern women are facing nowadays. The women have to suffer due to their self-will and individual ideas. In the novels of Jhabvala, there are girls who have to suffer due to the blind imitation of western culture. Jhabvala presents their modernity with great irony. Through the description of the Indian woman, which Jhabvala gives in her different novels. The paper focuses on Jhabvala's portrayal of women, especially those women who desire eagerly for modernity. Her women characters try to be modern and refuse to comply with their surrounding because of their fascination for modernity. Here Jhabvala presents a vast picture of modern Indian society through her female characters. Jhabvala wants to highlight vivid facets of women's nature. In *Esmond in India*, Jhabvala portrays different types of women with their nature and attitudes such as – Gulab, Uma, Shakuntala, Madhuri, Lakshmi, Indira and Betty. All these women are different in their nature, manners and attitudes to life. Jhabvala highlights how Westerners come to India with the bright hope of finding a spiritual peace and inward solace and satisfaction but finally, they leave it all disappointed.

Index Terms - Dilemma, blind imitation, modernity, irony, portrayal, fascination, vivid facets, attitudes, spiritual peace, inward solace, disappointed.

I. INTRODUCTION

In her novel, *Esmond in India*, Jhabvala reveals Indian social and domestic problems, the clash between the values of the East and the West, marital disintegration, and the impact of India on the European consciousness. Jhabvala is especially aware of the position of women in Indian family and the novel portrays the change that is brought in her attitude in the changing cultural context.

The major themes in Jhabvala's fictions are East-West encounter and marital dissonance, which are mutually inter-linked in their negative context. In her novel, *Esmond in India*, these two themes are treated with dexterity and keen awareness of their complexity. In the novel, Gulab marries a European, Esmond Stillwood, and their marriage is far from being a marriage of true minds. The initial attraction India holds for Esmond evaporates in the course of time and he feels caught and trapped in India. Here, the problem arises from the social and cultural interaction. In the novel, the marital dissonance arises from maladjustment which at last results into the marital disintegration.

Jhabvala speaks of the cycle of emotions every European living in India undergoes. In the novel, *Esmond in India*, Jhabvala has concerned herself with the European community in India. India seems to be a fabled land to the foreign eye. Jhabvala highlights how Westerners come to India with the bright hope of finding a spiritual peace and inward solace and satisfaction but finally, they leave it all disappointed.

II. DISCUSSION

Jhabvala, in most of her novels, displays a deep understanding of her women characters. Especially, oriental women are adjustable, gentle, accommodative and service-minded. The Indian woman does not bother about her own happiness and comfort. She is totally bound to the happiness of her family. Moreover, Indian women are passive and self-sacrificing. Though, nowadays there are some kinds of changes in the manners of modern Indian women due to the impact of the western culture. In Indian culture, woman acquires a place of respect. Yet, it does not mean that the Indian women are safe and secured in their position. As Romila Thapar points out, “the role, status and position of woman has been far from static, ranging from what is thought to have been a position of considerable authority and freedom to one of equally considerable subservience” [1]. There are various factors, such as sociological, psychological and historical – to decide woman’s fate and place. Jhabvala, in *Esmond in India*, portrays different types of women with their nature and attitudes such as – Gulab, Uma, Shakuntala, Madhuri, Lakshmi, Indira and Betty. All these women are different in their nature, manners and attitudes to life.

Gulab, Esmond’s wife and Uma’s daughter, is the main figure in the novel. She marries Esmond, an Englishman against the wishes of her elders. She meekly surrenders to her husband’s wishes. Her husband, who is fond of English way of life, wants Gulab to bring up their son Ravi in the European way that she does not prefer. Esmond wants her to be his companion and expects her to be an asset in his career, as an expert on Indian culture, but Gulab dislikes moving out and she feels uncomfortable in the company of foreigners. The marriage becomes a battlefield with Esmond and Gulab after sometime. Gulab, with her oriental taste for carrot halwa, spices and hot red curries and her typically Indian bashfulness and indifference towards modern furniture, is a contrast to her husband. She reverts to Indian ways in the absence of Esmond, lavishing sweet and sentimental love on the child, eating rich spicy Indian food, lying on the floor and using all the strong scents that Esmond finds stifling. Esmond is often cruel to Gulab, also he is savagely sarcastic, pinching and slapping her but Gulab meekly surrenders accepting the traditional role of the Indian wife for whom the husband is a God. Esmond treats Gulab with contempt but Gulab bears his contempt with meekness. She believes, “It was a husband’s right to do whatever he liked with his wife. He could treat her well or badly, pamper her or beat her – that was up to him, and it was not her place to complain” [2].

Though Gulab is totally bound to her husband’s wishes and completely surrenders to him, he treats her very badly. He thinks that he has married to an animal. Even her mother Uma thinks of her thus, “Gulab and her Ravi trapped like two chickens in Esmond’s flat” [3]. Looking at Gulab’s passivity her uncle Ram Nath points out:

Our women are so, what can you do with them . . . so like animals, like cows. Beat them, starve them, maltreat them how you like, they will sit and look with animal eyes and never raise a hand to defend themselves, saying do with me what you will, you are my husband, my God, it is my duty to submit to my God [4].

Gulab bears Esmond’s contempt passively and refuses her mother’s suggestion to leave Esmond. As Vasant A. Shahane observes, “it is difficult to reconcile Gulab’s utter passivity to Esmond’s assaults upon her individuality and self-respect to the strength of her will and determination which impelled her to defy her family and marry him” [5]. Even her mother fails to understand her. Jhabvala herself gives the clue to the puzzle when she says, “Gulab was never, in anything, decided, probably because she did not form decisions about anything but followed whatever her instinct dictated to her” [6].

At last, Gulab determines to leave Esmond because once, in the absence of Esmond, her servant tries to molest her by touching her breasts. Gulab believes that it was Esmond’s duty to see that she was safe in his house and that no stranger could cast insulting eyes on her. If the servant dares to attempt to molest her, it must be because of the scant respect and concern Esmond shows to her. She clings to the Indian tradition throughout her life, she considers herself defiled and therefore she cannot remain in his house any longer. Thereafter she immediately takes decision to leave Esmond and his home as early as possible and decides never to come back to him. Yasmine Gooneratne observes, “in the character of Gulab, Ruth Praver Jhabvala projects for the first time a mystic vision of India” [7].

Uma, the mother of Gulab and the sister of Ram Nath is introduced as a widow in the novel. She loves her daughter Gulab and grandson Ravi and only lives for their sake. She believes in God and also often visits astrologers. She also talks to Swamiji who reads chapters from the Gita to her and then makes her sing devotional songs with him. She is very kind-hearted woman whose house is full of people – the Brahmins, the pilgrims and the social workers come to stay in her house. She often talks about the Gita to her sister-in-law, Lakshmi. There is a reference to Uma's faith in God when her servant, Bachani tells Gulab about Uma:

All morning she prayed, at four o'clock she got up and she walked over the whole house and the garden and into the quarters at the back, praying. She would not talk with anyone . . . Afterwards she went down to the Jumna to bathe, and how she prayed as she sprinkled the water! God surely must have heard her, she prayed so loud [8].

Gulab also knows that once her mother starts praying, she does not stop for many hours. And next day she arrives at some new decision. In her present concern for her daughter, 'she could speak only to God, no one else knows what goes on in a mother's soul.'

Uma compares her actions with those of Arjuna in the battle of Mahabharata where intense activity is supported in eternal calmness. She believes, "Before the Lord, what respect can any of us claim, when before Him we are all smaller than the smallest of all the insects" [9]. She also requests Shakuntala to paint a beautiful picture of Siva-Parvati for her prayer-room. She also believes in astrologers, to her everything is written in the stars, it is a very ancient science. Man is a victim of time that relates to the planets under which a man is born.

Whenever Uma meets Gulab, she advises her to leave Esmond and come to stay with her. Gulab bears the scolding of her husband meekly, but her mother does not tolerate it. Uma tells her Gulab that she is just an owl. She opposes Esmond saying, "Who is he to come and teach us modern scientific ideas? What does he know about our children and how they have to be tended in our country and climate?"[10]. She believes that Gulab and Ravi are not satisfied with Esmond. Above all, she is a very bold and courageous woman and very kind-hearted by nature.

Shakuntala, a daughter of Har Dayal and Madhuri; a friend of Gulab, is a bright, young and romantic girl. She has finished her college and she likes tennis, boating, swimming and joins to the Debating Club. She is also very much fond of gramophone that has been with her from college days and has played at parties in the hostel and at picnics. She is very frank who goes for the blind imitation of western culture and gets chance to flirt with Esmond. Then she joins in the parties of Westerners in which she drinks, smokes and goes to picnic with them. She is led into her father's sophisticated circle of expatriates and rich Indians and she meets and then falls in love with the flamboyant Esmond. She competes herself with the Billimoria sisters who are more westernized than herself. She believes that there is no harm in men and women being friends; in Europe, everybody is like that. She admires ideals of others but never wants to be an idealist. She indulges in self-deception and thinks of Gulab to be slow and stupid and therefore misfit for Esmond. She even praises Esmond and Betty for their grace, fairness and frank behaviour with each other.

Once, Shakuntala accompanies a group of English ladies to Agra with Esmond as a guide. She falls deeply in love with Esmond, she tells him, "I have always dreamt of meeting someone like you, all my life I have dreamt of it" [11]. She also tells him, "I do love you, from the very first moment I saw you I loved you. I cannot hide it any longer, if I do, it will break me, my heart will burst. . . . I would never keep anything secret from you – on the contrary, I want you to look deep, deep into my heart and my soul" [12]. Her love for Esmond is so intense. She tells him,

Esmond, I know you are married and also you have a child, but I tell you all this means nothing to me. I only know you have come into my life and now it is my duty to give everything I have to you, to adore you and to serve you and to be your slave. . . . Let me be your slave, please allow me, I want to humble myself before you [13].

She allows herself to be seduced by Esmond in her hotel-room and finds herself completely committed to him. The irony is that when Shakuntala surrenders herself completely to Esmond, Esmond wants to leave for England with his girl-friend Betty.

Madhuri, Har Dayal's wife and Shakuntala's mother, is beautiful with fragile body but strong personality. She is materialistic and hypocritical by nature. A friend of her who had once said to her, "If you went to Europe, no one would believe you are Indian – you would be taken for Italian or Spanish" [14]. She is a dominant figure in her house. All the members of her family, except Shakuntala, obey her and admire her. She is so materialistic that even her daughter, Shakuntala tells her that "you can think about nothing except clothes and tea-parties and going for shopping in the car" [15].

Madhuri is a domestic ruler and her personality pervades the whole house. Her husband, Har Dayal is always with her and her life is governed by her ideas and tastes. She hides her feeling of enmity to Ram Nath, Gulab's uncle and Har Dayal's friend, because he refuses the proposal of marriage of her son Amrit and Gulab. For revenge, she also refuses Ram Nath's proposal for marriage of his son Narayan with Shakuntala. Though Har Dayal wants Shakuntala to marry with her friend's son Narayan, yet he feels helpless. Madhuri is proud of having a foreign daughter-in-law.

Lakshmi, Ram Nath's wife and Uma's sister-in-law, a fat and old lady always looks lost and unhappy. She always worries about her son Narayan who is a doctor in a small village. In the novel, she appears complaining her husband every time for her son. Every time she waits for a letter from her son, Narayan. She complains to her husband saying that:

When I think of other doctors, how easy their work is how much they earn, they live comfortably here in Delhi with their families, they eat well, they sleep in soft beds, they drive round in big cars and go often to cinema. And my poor son, who is the best and cleverest of them all, has to spend his life among dirty peasants and villagers, far away from his own family, work all day and also in the night and he is paid hardly enough for his needs. And what prospects has he? . . . [16].

Though, she is not a religious woman like Uma, yet she believes in stars and horoscope. Her lack of interest in religion comes up on surface when her sister-in-law, Uma tells her about the Gita. She states,

Please do not tell me what is written in the Gita! I have heard nothing but Gita, Gita, Gita all my life – when my husband went to prison, when all my jewels were taken from me, my clothes, my property, when I had to come and live in this house with such neighbours, always the Gita said it was a good thing [17].

She becomes very angry when Har Dayal and Madhuri refuse the proposal of Narayan's marriage with Shakuntala. Above all, she is a woman who complains and worries only for her son.

Indira, Amrit's wife and Madhuri's daughter-in-law, is a beautiful, calm and polite woman. She is an obedient lady who always obeys her husband and parents-in-law. She dislikes Shakuntala's frank nature and her decision to join the trip to Agra. She believes that it is so important for a girl to always look nice and behave like a lady. In the beginning of the novel, Indira seems not to take decision quickly when she wants to purchase a marriage-gift for her friend. Above all, she is a very smart and obedient lady who loves her husband.

Betty, an English girl-friend of Esmond, is very frank who is always engaged with her friends and their glorious parties. She likes smoking, drinking and wandering with his friends. When Esmond feels dissatisfaction with Gulab, he goes to Betty. To him Betty is very light, modern and airy and being with her is almost as good as being in England. Esmond finds consolation in Betty. Betty tempts Esmond to leave India and join her for England where she would give him some financial help.

Women Writing in English in India present the dilemma which modern women are facing nowadays. "The women have to suffer due to their self-will and individual ideas. The women have to suffer as Indian women are passive and self-sacrificing. There are various factors, such as sociological, psychological, physical and historical – to decide woman's fate and place. In the novels of Jhabvala, there are girls who have to suffer due to the blind imitation of western culture. Jhabvala presents their modernity with great irony. Through the description of the Indian woman, which Jhabvala gives in her different novels" [18].

III. CONCLUSION

Jhabvala's female characters are more effective than her male characters in the novel. Jhabvala wants to highlight vivid facets of women's nature. Jhabvala's portrayal of women, especially those women who desire eagerly for modernity, is not without a prick. Her women characters try to be modern and refuse to comply with their surrounding because of their fascination for modernity. Here Jhabvala presents a vast picture of modern Indian society through her female characters. Gulab is mute, passive and meekly surrenders to her husband's wishes while in contrast to her; Uma is a bold and courageous woman with her religious attitude. Shakuntala, in contrast to Gulab, is a talkative girl who blindly imitates western culture and she has to suffer at last. Madhuri, a beautiful and fragile lady with her strong personality, is materialistic and hypocritical. Lakshmi, an unhappy woman always worries about her son. Indira in contrast to Shakuntala is a beautiful, calm and polite lady with her obedient nature. Betty in comparison to Shakuntala is a frank girl who is engaged in parties and friends. In this way, Jhabvala covers a vast range of female nature in the novel.

IV. REFERENCES

1. Romila Thapar, "Looking Back in History," *Indian Women*, ed. Devaki Jain (New Delhi: Publications Division, 1976), P. 7.
2. Jhabvala, Ruth Praver. *Esmond in India* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 199.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
5. V. A. Shahane, *Ruth Praver Jhabvala* (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1976), p. 97.
6. Jhabvala, Ruth Praver. *Esmond in India* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 199.
7. Qtd. Yasmine Gooneratne, *Silence, Exile and Cunning* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1983), p. 114.
8. Jhabvala, Ruth Praver. *Esmond in India* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 17.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 160.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

18. Manavar, Twinkle B. A Thematic Study of Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Esmond in India*, *Get Ready for Battle* and *Heat and Dust*, M. Phil. Diss. (Rajkot: Saurashtra University, 2001).

