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## 6. Women in Cross - Cultural Matrix in Jhabvala's A Backward Place

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### Abstract

At the age of 24 Jhabvala came to India as a wife of a young architect from Parsi community. During her twenty-four year stay in India, her creative urge found its artistic platform. Her literary work reveals her interest in India and Indian culture. Every now and then, she turns to the topic of interplay between the two cultures, namely European and Indian. She has discussed the subject of expatriates in India and the institution of marriage between Indian and European culture. She scrupulously studied the impact of Indian culture on European expatriates. Her obsession with India grants her a distinguished place in the domain of Indian-English literature. Though she denies the labels, she clearly and unequivocally states that she is practically a European writer.

**Keywords:** India, Indian, culture, marriage, Judy, Bal, English, European, country, writer.

### Introduction

Indian writing in English owes a great deal to the historical trend of juxtaposition between the two antithetical cultures, namely the Oriental and the Western. It is natural for the Indo-English writers to focus on the cultural and psychological crises and on the reactions and reactions that emerge as a consequence of the East-West confrontation.

In addition, there are authors who are unable to embrace or reject the country but who preferred to be sentimental about it in their writings from abroad. Ruth Praver Jhabvala, one of the most acknowledged women writers of India, belongs to this class of fiction-writers.

One may identify Jhabvala as both an 'inside-outsider' and an 'outside-insider'. These phrases encroach on her literary and personal scenario. From a European point of view, she may seem an 'outside-insider' while she appears an 'inside-outsider' from an Indian artistic point of



view. She is basically a European novelist who has lived in India and made an artistic expression of her experience of life and culture in this country.

As a woman novelist with her emotional touch of the human relationship, Jhabvala deals with situations from the viewpoint of the interpersonal relationship between man and woman-in and out of marriage-which is of course the most intense and therefore the most complicated. The issues of expatriates, their psychological instability and cultural disorder are discussed with depth and wisdom.

### Peeping In

Jhabvala talks of the emotional phases that every European who lives in India is going through. An exception to this emotional upheaval is Judy of *A Backward Place*. She doesn't like Indian way of life or India. She marries an Indian for love, and despite the turbulent times they have, she sticks with him. Judy strives her level best, and almost succeeds in adjusting to Indian lifestyles. Her optimistic approach towards life enables her to handle life's ups and downs. Her ability to affiliate with the lower middle class Indian family she lives in, grants her a sense of solidarity, and prevents her from the issue of cultural alienation. It can be noticed that the marriage of Bal and Judy is challenging not so much because of the disparity in race as because of the confrontation between the dreamer and the pragmatist in their temperaments. She maintains her English pragmatism and Anglo-Saxon coolness, but these very attributes allow her to deal with Bal's childish irresponsibility and unrealistic hopefulness instead of serving as obstacles in her getting closer to her people.

Judy can be content because she is neither like Etta, who hates India, yet is trapped there nor Clarissa, who in her deep love for India is a victim of self-deception. Though adapting Indian ways of life and dressing, she maintained her English qualities such as imperturbability and calm composure.

Judy is happy in her home which has not even a sofa because she finds it just the opposite of the house she lived in as a child with her parents. She enjoyed the open life in India and finds in her home, a refuge from loneliness, insularity to the psychological disintegration that has haunted her mother in Britain.

Judy is cautious, hard-working and realistic to the core. Her too much of pragmatism is in a way balanced by Bal's impracticable dreams. She saves for future yet loves to listen to Bal's hopes and ambitions. She insists on Bal's attending to their sick son, refuses to invest on his

unfounded dreams, rejects his idea of all. Her maturity of mind and balanced behavior check Bal's childish and unsteady attitude. She sticks to her decision to work in spite of Bal's protests and theatrical outbursts. She loves him so much that she likes him even when she is quarrelling with him. (222-23)

Judy is so strong and determined that all efforts of Etta to make her regret her marriage to Bal prove vain. She appreciates the very English room, her wardrobe and elegance of Etta, but does not allow them to influence her or dismay her. Clarissa applauds her that she had "had the good sense to realize that the only way to live here was to turn herself into a real Indian wife". (25) Her ability to adapt and identify with the country she wants to live in, her genuine attitude and contentment are fruitful for her.

After much thought and consideration, Judy decides to go with Bal to Bombay, putting aside her job and income. Her first response to Bal's proposal that they should all go to Bombay, however was rebellion. Her English-self leaped to the surface. She "felt herself so very adult and sensible and very English. English people did not behave like that, the moment give up everything they had and go wandering off in search of no one know what". (219) Religious faith and spiritual peace in Bhujji gave her explanation about her fears and doubts about their future. So, she accepts the challenge by consoling herself to find a job in Bombay though "it would mean going around... and wait about in people's offices and be told 'no' many times over, but even that would not be so bad. She had done it before, she could do it again". (223)

In Jhabvala's *A Backward Place* there is no issue with characters like Judy, who embrace India and adjust to it. But, in the same novel, Etta and Clarissa find it difficult to deal with India. Etta, a Hungarian middle-aged woman, has come to India because of her marriage to an Indian student. The marriage proved to be a failure and after that Etta had several love-affairs. Her current affair is with Mr Gupta, a wealthy hotel owner. Etta is aware of her fading attractiveness and struggles to maintain the affection of her latest lover. The rapid changes in her age, coupled with her fear of losing hold on Gupta, make Etta feel desperate. She is frustrated because she is trying to resist India instead of being absorbed by it. She dislikes the country, depicts it as a primitive society of primitive morality. She feels that "the Indian sun has been put specially into the sky to ruin our complexions". (7) Confused and imprisoned in a country which she hates, Etta becomes depressed and even hysterical at the thought of isolation and loneliness awaiting her.

Etta is at least confident about her dislike for India, but Clarissa is not assured of her reaction and responses. She acknowledges love for India, wears sarees, admires Judy for her endeavour to be an Indian wife, and praises her house, but falters to use their rather primitive bathroom. She pretends to be too busy chasing the eternal values to care for worldly matters. Yet she lives comfortably on the hospitality of her rich friends. Though she claims to be as free as a bird, she is a prisoner to her own delusions about India.

Clarissa fails to come to terms with the real India, because it has nothing to do with the idealized portrayal of India she created in her imagination after reading the literature of Vivekananda and Romain Rolland. She is a victim of self-deception as she speaks about the kind of connection between these Indian people and herself while the fact is that she is being chased by urchins and plagued by beggars with whom she unashamedly loses temper. So there is something pathetic about Clarissa.

When all her efforts to win Gupta fall short, Etta's suicide attempts have a touch of theatricality. She telephones Hochstadts after she has taken a few pills. They didn't panic because they were clever enough to know that Etta didn't take a lot of pills. Probably she had planned, at least and pretended herself that she intended to finish the bottle, but by the time she had consumed a not-too-many dreadful number, she had thought of the Hochstadts and had picked up the telephone. It was not unlikely that she had bethought herself of the swallowing and the only factor she had been imprecise about just exactly at what stage to call them. (226) And thereby Jhabvala treats Etta's pretentiousness with ironic enjoyment, consequently Etta generates sympathy rather than disgust.

The more Etta despises the country, the more difficult it becomes for her to survive in it. Clarissa pursues Etta with relentlessness, if only to make herself comfortable. Clarissa is poor and has none else to turn to, and that is why she sticks to Etta. Yet Clarissa doesn't hesitate to pass offensive remarks towards Etta behind her back. Both Etta and Clarissa are stranded in India and are being accused of staying there. Etta keeps feeding her contempt for the backward place. Clarissa has come to India seeking spirituality as she formulated it from Romain Rolland's "Life of Vivekananda".

So, Judy in *A Backward Place*, succeeds in adopting herself to India and thus avoids the confrontation. Her love for the wild and reckless Bal rounds off her angularities. Clarissa and Etta however suffer from their refusal to embrace India.



Judy in *A Backward Place*, maintains her pragmatism through embracing herself with Indian culture. Clarissa who has arrived to India, captivated by Romain Rolland's interpretation of the country is soon disappointed. Yet she courageously tries to go with the current unlike Etta, who limits herself to her little flat by shutting out the Indian scene and becomes a psychological ruin.

Jhabvala's novels also demonstrate the transforming picture of India as it is observed by the westerner. In *A Backward Place*, Judy's love and reception of Bal, with all his quirks is symbolic of her embracement to India, in all its reality. Clarissa is disheartened but not disgusted. But Etta hates the very milieu and badly yearns to go back.

### Conclusion

In terms of her fiction, whatever Jhabvala's relationship with India and Europe may be, India seems to be her theme as well as obsession. Her understanding of various facets of Indian life defines the Indianness of her fiction. Her close personal experience of India life and her special interest in it as a novelist as well as her capability to identify very closely with Indians, notably with Indian women, take her closer to native writers like R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. Her resourceful work offers abundant indication of her Indianness. She offers us in her literary corpus, the experience of European women married to Indians or of Indian women married to Europeans who are threatened with the unavoidable circumstances of the Hindu combined-families.

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