

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology  
of Egypt / Egyptology

A Fictional Saga of Ruth Praver Jhabvala: A Backward Place and The  
Householder

<sup>1</sup> Gunia Beniwal <sup>2</sup>Dr. Sunita Rana

<sup>1,2</sup> Department of Maths and Humanities, M.M.D. University, Mullana, Ambala, Haryana, India.

<sup>1</sup> [guniabeniwal.phd@gmail.com](mailto:guniabeniwal.phd@gmail.com)

**Gunia Beniwal, Dr. Sunita Rana: A Fictional Saga of Ruth Praver Jhabvala: A Backward Place and The Householder-- Palarch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 17(9). ISSN 1567-214x**

**Keywords: East and West, Social Isolation, Matrimony, Backwardness, Financial Hardship and Compromise.**

## ABSTRACT

The Fictions of Ruth Praver Jhabvala represents a special bond to Indian literature in English. She was European by birth, married an Indian architect and lived in India for twenty five years. To a large extent her work fits in the Indian English literature as being an outsider she writes about the insider. Her close watch examines the social life of Indians which she portrays in her fiction. She never forgets her roots i.e, European amalgamation with the Indians, which is so much herself. Conceivably, she writes fiction about Indian elite socials, her proficiency in dialogue and plot is extensively high. She knew how to clutch her readers till the end. Jhabvala's first phase of writing was all her love for the country and its culture; her second phase of writing, her fondness for the country had dwindled and thereafter the third phase of her writing, the love was all faded so she decided to leave for America and work with Merchant and Ivory. Most of her fiction has an element of comedy, irony, satire, and detachment and importantly her critical observation of real life scenarios. Jhabvala's fiction outlines the study of 'emotions' as the domestic, matrimonial, relationship, displacement, socio-economic conditions, and quest for emancipation and pretension. Her prime concern is to explore social concerns and conflicts relating to the society she created in her fiction. This paper studies Jhabvala's two fictions namely, A Backward Place and The Householder

## 1. Introduction

*A Backward Place* is an eye-catching drama of three European women who arrived at India looking for replacing customs and mores. The novel's plot has many benefits and burdens of day to day life contradicting the social milieu of a busy town. The novel's plot is set in post-independence India making efforts to find its place and the vision of poverty goes hand in hand. The subject of poverty is divided in two groups by the Europeans, one act in response of having negative impact and other group in the ecstasy over Indian democracy, harmony and high regard of academic thinkers.

The novel *A Backward Place* underlines some of the positive facets of age-old Indian joint family's existence. The novel is just not about foreign characters response towards India but is more to do with the geographical circumstances and its implication is assumed by the novels title. The depiction of Judy's household and her joint family draws attention to value of emotionally involved people in the family rather than building a structure of a household to live in. Judy lives in a joint family and has their support emotionally and economically, unlike Etta who hardly invites anybody to her home (Delhi) for merriment. Jhabvala presents in depth and resonant illustrations of poverty in India. She depicts India as a cultural place of a rough country. Therefore, her illustration of poverty fails to counterbalance the consequences of this social malice.

Etta confers about Delhi or India as an underdeveloped society of an underdeveloped country. "We happen to have landed ourselves in this primitive society, that's no reason why we should submit to their primitive morality" (*A Backward Place* 5). Then again she condemns the Indian sun and confers to Judy- "Don't you know that the Indian sun has put specially in the sky to ruin our complexions?" (*A Backward Place* 7). However, Etta keeps herself far from the outside world and stays within her European furnished room and cries out Delhi as "dull, homely and backward" (*A Backward Place* 34). This sight of India or Delhi as an underdeveloped place is not confined to lower-middle-class towns and districts, but also includes the rural and urban poverty.

Jhabvala portrays ultra-poor in a manner that may be revolting however it is controversial, and in this context the novelist's depiction provides facts to the decency of her imagination. The more quite reality regarding India is that it is under extreme poverty and very delayed. Nonetheless, Judy makes an effort to get use to her husband's pattern of life and to practices Indian customs and mores. Judy's husband Bal's substandard behaviour, inadequate planning and he (Bal) fancies of becoming a great actor who baffles her so much that Judy has to reunite herself to the belief of Bhuaji. Etta, a Hungarian beauty who's prime at her age had many boyfriends and Indian husbands in her catch

however she is lonely which makes her uneasy. Another English character, Clarissa, she is uncommon who comes to India with unreal and impractical vision of spiritualism which later shatters her dream and makes her unsettled. The Hochstads couple who German natives they came to India for an exchange program who live through successfully in India as they never catch a sight of the country. Apart from the Hochstads couple other English characters live in different extents of unpleasantness. All characters have different point of view about India.

Judy blends in to the Indian culture, traditions and mores impeccably. She alters herself to everything Indian from head to toe. For instances, clothing, living, society, climate, thought process, and importantly the spiritual aspect. Judy happily fits into the joint-family and doesn't crave for a posh life but is happy with what she has as a wholesome family as compared to her English family "just three of them, in that tight little house, with the doors and curtains firmly shut to keep the cold and the strangers out." (*A Backward Place* 31). She is pleased to be in the company of her sister-in-law Shanti and her aunt- Bhuaji, moreover, Judy comes from a different society and background as compared to her sister-in-law and her aunt but she shapes herself accordingly while talking to them. Her tremendously adjusting behaviour makes everybody fall in love with her. Judy is independent to support her family as she understands that Mukund, Bal's elder brothers salary is not sufficient for a big family like theirs, to this situation Judy is authentic to her English culture. "She had not in England grown up with the idea that other people were there to provide one with a living." (*A Backward Place* 13) Her parents' advice instills in her not to be dependent, but to be independent. But this does not make her a closed person. She has more open and trusting nature but the conviction that the world did not owe her a living was as strong in her as it had been in them." (*A Backward Place* 13)

Judy while living in England she mistrust in celestial world and often mocks about it but her thought process completely changes after meeting Bhuaji as the old aunt feels Gods's presence in her every work, her morning hymns finds spiritual bliss seeing all this Judy's religious faith indwells. The novelist Jhabvala creates a character Judy who frames a good instance of adaptation of both East and West. It is confirmed from Clarissa and Etta's conversation about Judy- : "She's (Judy) doing very nicely. She has the good sense to realise that the only way to live here was to turn herself into a real Indian wife". (*A Backward Place* 20) Even Etta says yes with Judy's Indianization but sets it very insensitively: "She's (Judy) busy proving that it's possible for a nice healthy English girl to be an Indian wife in an Indian slum". (*A Backward Place* 27)

Judy has the ability to tolerate the ups and downs of life like any other regular Indian wife. She has the integrity to maintain the purity of marriage vows through compassion and thoughtfulness. H.M. Williams, states that “the marriage of Bal and Judy is difficult not because of the differences in race so much as because of the clash in their temperaments between the dreamer Bal and the pragmatist Judy.” The main leads Judy and Bal share same feelings of love, comprehension but somewhere it is Judy’s role for adjustment to unfamiliar circumstances that are brought by her husband Bal in her life, where he should have supported his family financially but he totally neglected his part of responsibility towards his family. The author in the novel says Bal calls himself as an artiste -“was a very small time actor. He had bit parts in a few films and he hung around the radio station to get any parts that were going there, and sometimes he participated in stage productions where he was lucky if he recovered his traveling expenses” (A Backward Place 26). When Bal’s son Prithvi falls sick and Judy asks him to get ice by telling him that housekeeper is not home but it doesn’t affect him (Bal) much however, when his son cries for ice in his sobbing voice and seeing this Judy’s motherly instincts forces Bal to fetch the ice. Bal on purpose ignores hearing to his wife and son because he is more keen to meet Krishan Kuman, the film star. Krishan Kumar, a film celebrity, who spreads and sell dreams of having a great chance in the field of cinema for victims like Bal. Krishan Kumar is a man of delusions of grandeur who spends his money on unwanted extravagance and importantly makes false promises to other poor people to dream of this fancy cinema world. India and its backwardness is not the actors problem all he (Krishan Kumar) seeks for money and his stardom.

Jhabvala is extremely decisive not only with the foreigners who fall short to approach authentic India. The Indians who follow the west in the novel are Mrs Kaul, Krishan Kumar, Guppy and Jumperwala, these people are hypocritical in understanding the struggles of the nation. The author’s sarcasm is focused against the fake modern Indians who come under the harmful domination of the Western society. As Shahane writes, “the induction or incursion of Europeans with their rational, scientific, materialistic heritage into the urban segment of India, Delhi, creates a hybrid, which shows the qualities of Western civilization in a rather poor perspective. In fact, the Europeans inject into Indian perspective their own forms of coarseness, insensitivity, philistinism and the meaninglessness of contemporary civilization” 77. In the novel, Cultural Dais is an institute for the development of art and culture, which becomes unproductive under Mrs. Kaul, the secretary. She calls herself a community welfare worker, ethnicity organizer though in actuality she toils for self-praise. Mrs. Kaul is skilled in organizing parties for the foreigners and

the urbane, sophisticated, high society and supremacy of Indian upper crust. She is swollen with pride with existence of foreigners in her house, her level of comfort, foreign goods around her and her social interaction to fetch a foreign trip. It appears that she (Mrs. Kaul) has soaked up both the cultures but pretence of bracing Indian culture. In the novel the character Sudhir says: Mrs Kaul, bless her, cares none for our noble abstracts but, on the contrary, for some very solid concretes: the Cultural Dais for her stands for social advancement, a place where you can meet nice and interesting people and be in touch and be important, also an opportunity perhaps to wangle a trip abroad. (*A Backward Place* 70)

Etta is a person who has failed to accept the Indian culture. She depicts herself urbane who articulates with intended depth and posh tone. Etta doesn't settle and maintain the sacredness of marriage vows. She split-up saying – “he is very much attached to his uncultured family” (*A Backward Place* 20). Living in India Etta still chases the contemporary customs and mores and importantly she suggests Judy of leaving her husband as he is irresponsible and on this pretext Etta ask Judy to end her marriage-“Marriages, my dear, are made to be broken, that's one of the rules of modern civilization. Just because we happen to have landed ourselves in this primitive society, there is no reason why we should to their primitive morality” (*A Backward Place* 5). Etta finds a rich man again named Guppy- her version of calling him but it is Gupta. She wants a man who could give her a luxurious life and be her admirer.

Jhabvala in all her novels has mentioned about India's weather and even in the novel *A Backward Place* she mentions that the Indian heat is unbearable. To further cite this Etta affirms, “the Indian sun has been put specially into the sky to ruin our complexions?” (*A Backward Place* 7). Etta's extreme dislike regarding the Indian climate uncovers in the unpleasant incident when she draws distinction between Indian sun to her Western sun: Not like your Sun - a real sun, one smeared oneself with some delicious smelling oils and there one lay on rugs and got baked the most beautiful, beautiful golden brown...Did you know when one's skin - our skin - becomes sun tanned one can see a tiny fluff of hair on the forearms and this hair is all gold, like a gold dust - and you know what it smells like? Like the new Monet grass. It really goes; like new Monet grass left out to dry in the sun. (*A Backward Place* 98).

The third European expatriate named Clarissa, she is also English like Judy. She updates Sudhir that she hails “from a family who are rather sticky about who is who”. Even so, she is herself, she says, one of those who “Judge People by their worth not by their birth”. She further says that her lineage had “connections with India for ages and ages- one of my great uncles was a Supreme Court Judge in Calcutta and another was a Chief Commissioner

somewhere...”. Clarissa’s notion ever since she was a child that India was a homeland of spiritual restoration. The author cites this as: “Sudhir felt sad for her. He imagined how she must have come out to India first, spurred on by Romain Rolland and the *Light of Asia* and the everyman edition of the *Bhagavad Gita*, and intent on a quest in which notions of soul and God played a prominent, if vague part; and how valiantly she had kept up this quest, or at least the pretence of it, though she was getting older year by year, and lonelier, and more ridiculous, and soul and God perhaps no nearer”(Nagendra Kumar Singh 90). Clarissa expresses her feelings about India by saying, “my values are spiritual and not material like that of other Westerners” (*A Backward Place* 159).

As Mahle observes, “the author strikes a distinct false note, for Clarissa is a clumsy, often untruthful character and her rapturous outburst about India seems misplaced” 77. Her clean conversations about anything about India is not necessarily observed intense, as she is considered to be humorous and silly. She herself says: “Of course I am mad, anyone’ll tell you I’m completely crackers.” (*A Backward Place* 94) She honestly admires India for her Indianization, “Really I do, do so envy you, Judy, to live here among the simple people and speak their language and be just like them, I think it’s wonderful” (*A Backward Place* 128).

India has indeed created number of challenges for Clarissa to reshape herself. Similar to Etta, even Clarissa doesn’t want to depart from India for other motives. She is frightened of her most conservative, boring, and upper-class relatives as they will ask her for never-ending services like nursing and housekeeping. She alleges unusually distinct from the natives of the West: “We’re like creatures from a different planet absolutely; I really think I must have been Indian in my previous birth -in all my previous births” (*A Backward Place* 155). This specifies that the English character Clarissa is two-faced, deceitful and an uncomfortable woman in India.

Hence, the author’s caustic remarks about Bal, “It would not be true to say that Bal did not worry. But he worried on a higher level” (*A Backward Place* 140). Krishan Kumar, the actor says him inattentively: “Better come and see me in Bombay!” (*A Backward Place* 144). These forgetful words change the circumstances in the world of Bal and he decides to move to Bombay to try his luck. He compels Judy to leave her job at cultural Dais and give up her savings of Rs. 750 and also takes along Bhuaji and his two sons. Therefore, Judy recalls his last visit to Bombay as that was very unpleasant as he had no room to sleep, he moved from one place to another until his bother Mukand brought him back. To this novelist asserts: “It had happened, alas, before: about two years ago when he had a little job in Bombay and stayed on and on long after it was finished, ignoring her(Judy’s) letters and telegrams (he claimed afterwards

never to have got them; which may have been true, for he had not had any fixed address in Bombay but had moved from to friend, sleeping now on the floor of some one's flat or the stairs of some one's houses or even, on hot nights, out on the bench) till in the end his brother Mukand had to be sent to fetch him back" (*A Backward Place* 156). To this Judy says, this point in time the entire family will sleep on the ground of somebody's apartment or on the coastline and still Bal has not grown into the realization of his roles and responsibilities.

*The Householder* (1960) a novel of Jhabvala and in this novel she particularly writes about lower middle class whereas in her other novels she had only written about the elite class. The exclusive novel is written with perception of realism which is praiseworthy. Jhabvala is foreigner herself and she has surprised us by understanding the lower-middle class sectors of society so circumstantially that she puts forward extremely precise depiction of lower-middle class of their social survival. The novel *The Householder* is story of young man who realises gradually to achieve a status of a master of the house. The novelist in this particular novel writes about the domestic circumstances where India is in the new settings of post-independence and presents an existing tale of struggle and settlement with regards to search for identity for both Prem and Indu, the main characters of the novel. The central character Prem, is a teacher in a private college in Delhi and the college is head by Mr. Khanna. Prem is a second class graduate who tutor's Hindi as a subject in the private college and earns Rs. 175/- per month. He is married to a simple girl named Indu who is selected by his parents. He knows about his insecure monetary situation, nonetheless he also knows that he cannot obtain work elsewhere reason begin his poor qualification. Prem lacks confidence in taking up a new responsibility as a husband and wage earner. Prem and Indu could not settle down into a contented bond under one roof. Prem's situation becomes even worst, when he learns that his wife Indu is carrying his child which makes him feels even more hopeless as he is worried about his financial conditions. He (Prem) doesn't have a hold over his students in the class whereas Mr. Chaddha has management skills to organise the students in the class. It is appalling state for Prem as his students in class ignores him thoroughly. This situation lowers his self-esteem; he is unsettled and disturbed of his position, while comparing it with his ally Raj, who is a government officer and his old school friend. Prem senses hopelessness, "where did he belong? It seemed to him that he belonged nowhere, was nothing, was nobody" (*The Householder* 92).

Prem's miserable state is highlighted in the introductory chapter where his outer circumstances reflect his domestic circumstances. He is grading students'

papers, an improper activity for a Sunday night. To notice the table top at which he keeps his paper on it is fragile and feeble which is made from thin cane whereas the kitchen is vacant, bedroom is substandard and importantly Indu's existence in the house is irksome and also the sound from Seigal's house is galling. Both Prem and Indu are estranged from each other, "He felt so alone and lonely, shut up in this small ugly flat with Indu who carried by herself in the sitting room while he had tied and cry by himself in the bedroom" (*The Householder* 24). The indoor ambience of the house is dim, depressed and discomfort.

Prem considers consulting the Principal that he feels extremely shy and doesn't understand how to present his right. After a long wait he decides to meet the principal at his home. He is overwhelmed by the influence of the Principal Mr. Khanna. "He could speak, he was so overwhelmed with shyness. Not only because of what he had some to say, but also because the principal's sitting room always made him feel shy- Everything was new and opulent and comfortable; plump cushions and flowered curtains and a big shiny radio set: Mr. Khanna himself so cheerful and self-confident wearing a nicely launched shirt and mapping up his egg with a piece of toast." (*The Householder* 14)

The fiction also depicts the outline of moral filth, the new social climbers Mr & Mrs. Seigal. Both of them socialise by meeting people, charm them by being an extravagant. This type of life is unacceptable by Prem which time and again upsets him. He makes contact with the Seigals with a purpose to ask them to cut down their rental charges but returns unspoken. Poverty is the main subject of this novel. Alienation, disappointment, disgrace, dishonour are most important characteristics of this fiction. The main lead Prem is not in the balancing position at home. Despite the fact Prem and Indu's home is unfilled and noiseless as compared to the Seigal's house is way more noisy and jam-packed with people: "They were jolly people, and every evening they had visitors. Mr. Seigal played cards with the men, they all sat round a little card table under the lamp, drank whisky and slammed down their cards with gusto; sometimes they laughed and made jokes, sometimes they shouted and quarrelled" (*The Householder* 9). Indu seems to be happy in the Seigals accommodation which is unexpected element in the eyes of Prem.

Initially in the novel the main character Prem was incompatible with his wife Indu, and with the other people who come into his sphere of life, Mr. Khanna (Principal), his colleagues, Mr. Chaddha, Sohanial, Raj and in the end Hans. The defining moment takes place when his wife Indu revisits him after her stay with her parents. Here it can be noticed that the character Prem is over the moon so he plans his mother's departure timely and effective manner. Under no circumstances Prem's mother will never know about her quick departure.



His mother's departing and her style remains intact for instance, she is scattering her stuff out, taking too much room and become the reason for other passengers to criticize her without thinking. Prem is in a rush to see his wife Indu so he quickly sends off his mother. The night his mother departs, Prem and Indu sleep under the stars on the roof top of their apartment. The married couples desire to sleep under the stars is quite evident that they are in closer relationship and level of mutual understanding has increased. "They are not alone as alienate individuals anymore; they belong to a relationship marriage which can itself be ideally described as a place where individual can simultaneously experience feelings of treasured solitude and feeling of complete union with the other. This new, strong relationship gives them confidence and the novel ends on a note of optimism and expectation"(The Householder 2) .

Prem understands in a mature way to take up the household tasks, "The novel is remarkable not only for its masterly explication of slow and painful process of Prem's growth to maturity, but also for its handling of relationship in Indian context"( R.G.Agarwal 46).

## 2. Conclusion

Jhabvala wins all her readers by addressing real issues of society. In the initial stage Jhabvala was mesmerized with India, gradually coming across the realities of the society she thought of writing about household and domestic life of the Indian families. She writes about the backwardness of the country that overpowers each character in both the novels. It has affected both readily and unready for individuals to accept to the circumstances. Jhabvala wrote in 1996 "I must admit that India no longer interests me as a subject. What I am interested now is myself in India"<sup>41</sup>. To this further it is conclusive that Jhabvala has no more fondness for both East and West.

### Primary References:

- [1] Jhabvala, Ruth Praver. A Backward Place. London: John Murray, 2005. Print.
- [2] Jhabvala, Ruth Praver. The Householder. London: John Murray, New York, Norton, 1960.

### Secondary References:

- [3] H.M. Williams, The Fiction of Ruth Praver Jhabvala (Calcutta: Writers Workshop Publication, 1973) 49
- [4] V A Shahane, Ruth Praver Jhabvala. 77
- [5] Singh, Nagendra Kumar. "Society and Self in the Novels of R.P. Jhabvala and Kamala Markandaya." Sarup & Sons, 2005. Print. 90.
- [6] H.S.Mahle, Indo-Anglian Fiction Some Perceptions. 75.

- [7] R.G.Agarwal : ‘Ruth Pravar Jhabvala – A Study of Her Fiction’ ( New Dehli: Sterling publisher, 1990) 46.
- [8] Ruth Praver Jhabvala, An Experience of India.41.