

Cultural Differences and Conflicts in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *A Backward Place*

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Abstract:

East – west encounter and cultural conflict has been one of the most favorite themes of Anglo – Indian writers. Ruth Praver Jhabvala is one of the well known women novelists of India, who belongs to this category of fiction writers. Jhabvala's *A Backward Place* describes the culture of the two worlds in a balanced way. Jhabvala neither acclaims the Indian traditional way of life nor disapproves the western life. The novel revolves around a small group of expatriates and their associates. The hopes, feels and aspirations of the host of characters are presented amid the hustle and bustle of a large city. This paper focuses on how Jhabvala explores the contradictions in their attitudes and lifestyles and the interplay between culture and individuality.

Key words: cultural conflict, traditional way, expatriates, interplay, individuality.

A Backward Place is Jhabvala's sixth novel published in the year 1965, eleven years after the publication of the first novel. It is interesting to find the conversion in her moods and attitudes towards India, where she had come initially as a bride. Her life in India can be divided into three phases: in the first stage she found enthusiasm in everything in India: in the second stage everything in India was not so marvelous and in the third stage everything in India became abominable. *A Backward Place* was written during her second phase of writing, where we could see the image of India being turned negative and the less sympathetic.

The important thing about this novel is that Jhabvala for the first time is more concerned with the foreigners, who come to India. She focuses on their reactions and attitudes towards India. We could see that there are more foreign characters dominating the entire story, while there are only a few Indian characters that remain in the background. Another important feature that catches our attention is that all the main characters are women characters and Jhabvala has tried to view Indian society through each of these characters. She has brought out the problems of adjustment faced by the westerners living in India and which leads to cultural alienation and cultural clashes.

The novel revolves around the experience of three western girls in India. Judy is the main character. Besides Judy, there are two more women characters in the novel, Etta and Clarissa. If a foreigner wants to live a happy life in India, the best solution according to Jhabvala is that he/she must become an Indian and adopt Indian attitudes, habits beliefs and assume an Indian personality. This is the category where Judy fits in. she is an English woman who had come to India after marrying an Indian young man Bal at the age of nineteen. Judy gets into a traditional lower – middle class joint family with an old aunt Bhuaji, brother – in –law Mukand and sister – in - law Shanti. As a foreigner Judy had enough difficulties on Indian land, but her positive attitude to life helped her to accept the challenges of life in India. Bal was a film artist, but his earning was not enough to support the family and so Judy had to go out to work to cope with the financial matters. Shanti, Judy's sister – in –law envies her for going out to work for in those days it was against Indian culture.

The other two women characters in this novel are Etta and Clarrissa. Etta, a young Hungarian girl like Judy comes to India after marrying an Indian student. Though being in India for more than twenty five years and marrying three Indian boys one after the other, she never liked India and describes it as a primitive society. She creates a little Europe for herself in Delhi in the backdrop of an unfriendly Indian expanse. Etta appears to be the type who can never adjust in India.

Clarissa, an expatriate, comes to India on her own for the admiration of the spiritual aspect here. She is a seeker in India in search of rather than an elusive objective. Clarissa describes herself as a free and mixture of Sadhu and artist. Her unhappy family background and the cold attitude of her relatives make it impossible to live the kind of life Clarissa wants to lead

in England. She hopes that India is a better place to live in and also to provide the appropriate locate for the spiritual quest. In the cultural Dias library she utters while holding Romain Rolland's *Life of Vivekananda* "Do you know that it was this book that really and truly finally decided me to come to India?,(148). She sits down in the floor with the book in her lap, Sudhir a person who works in cultural Dias states that it was not suitable for an English lady to sit on the floor. This incident shows how Indians feel that the English are more superior to the Indians. Clarissa, at times, claims that she does not belong to any culture. But at times when the nostalgic sense too is found she says, "When I get fed up with the city, I go tramping off into the hills. Oh those hills of mine" (153)

We could see that Clarissa is tossed between the two familiar cultures, the one in which she was born and the other which she tried to adopt. Above the professed love for India there is a quest for a comfortable life.

There is another category of foreigners who come to India for a short span of time on a specific mission. Hochstadts, an old German couple live in Delhi. Dr. Hochstadt is a famous economist who comes to India as a visiting professor for a period of two years. Their experience in India and their knowledge of its culture is limited by the very short time they have spent in India. But the Hochstadts are mature and realize that to live a happy life in India, they should try to be an Indian as much as one can be. They even accept the difference in the culture of the East and the west for they know that it is fatal to come to India and expect to live a western life. The Hochstadts maintain their western views yet they seem to appreciate the Indian art and philosophy.

Apart from the foreign characters there are a few Indian characters in the novel, which appear to be insignificant when compared to the foreign characters. Bal, Judy's husband is a typical Indian youth, who was full of plans and a dream of becoming a famous actor. Sudhir, is a Bengali youth a graduate who failed in the struggle of life. He does not get a proper job and had to suffer a lot to get the job of the cultural secretary. Jayakar, an old retired man, is the friend of Sudhir. Bal, Sudhir and Jayakar belong to the lower middle class of Indian society.

Guppy or Gupta is a rich man, owner of a big hotel, represents the typical business class of Delhi Guppy is so traditional at home, but feels free outside. Another important character in

the novel is Mrs.Kaul who is a modern sophisticated, educated, middle-aged lady, full of energy and ambition and she is also pictures as western women or as a representative of modern Indian ladies who imitate neither western culture in their pursuit to become western or modern but neither remains Indian nor a westerner.

Cross cultural marriages play a vital role in shaping a link between two cultures. Having married an Indian, Jhabvala herself was in a better position to understand and bring out the difficulties encountered by people in cross cultural marriages or relationships and the complicated differences in race and location. Judy, an English girl, marries an Indian actor whom she meets at London where he came as an Indian delegate to a conference of international youth. She settles with him in Delhi Judy is seen happy with her identity of an Indian wife. She adopts herself into Bal's joint family because she finds a relief from the dreary predictable cycle of her life in England.

At a time Judy hates to be dependent on her brother – in - law Mukund because she was not grown up in England with the idea that other people are there to provide for one's living. Judy, though she has a disturbed family background and after undergoing an intense struggle between her western rationality and an emotional and impulsive Indian response she decides to adapt the Indian culture of wearing a sari and seeing god in a cow. Etta also marries an Indian youth but even after being in India for twenty five years, she never could adapt Indian culture. Etta considers the typical educated Indian family as “uncultured”.

A Place Backward reflects Indian culture and Indian family life in contrast to the western culture and their way of living. Jhabvala highlights some of the positive aspects of traditional Indian joint family life. The description of Judy's home and the joint family system brings out the significance of people living together with their relatives. Judy lives with her husband, two children, and brother - in –law, sister – in – law, their children and an old aunt Bhauji. This is in contrast to Judy's childhood home in the western land where her mother locked herself up at home and looked at the television and grew lonelier and lonelier till it was unbearable and finally she finds a hook in the lavatory.

Jhabvala gives a very detailed description of the backward condition of India, the society and its landscape. Etta talks of Delhi as a primitive society of a backward nation. She even curses

the Indian sun and always shuts herself away from the outside world within the European furnishings of her room. For the western expatriates, the dull and dry landscape of India becomes unbearable by the sweltering heat of India. The common scenes in India are seen through the eyes of expatriates. The expatriates face difficulties like communication problem, the narrow road, the lane crowded with shoppers and littered with discarded peels, the smell of urine and ripe fruits. They could also not bear the sight of the beggars, lepers, mothers with starving babies, crippled children and deformed old men. Mrs.Hochstadts could not see or hear them; she would never pay any attention to the things around her. This shows the outlook of the westerners towards India and the Indians. But for Judy, the people got used of her and they accepted her as one among them, she had accepted and the culture accepted her.

Mrs.Hochstadts speak to Etta about the “cultural theatre” where the westerners were permitted to meet and speak with the Indian intellectuals, learn from them and in return teach something of western values. Etta was not interested in the cultural matters whereas the Hochstadts show interest in cultural harmony. The difference in opinion between the two westerners on the Indian land is highlighted here.

Jhabvala has also brought out the image of modern India by means of the cultural Dias in Delhi. The cultural Dias runned by the a modern day socialite, Mrs.Kaul welcomes only the foreigners and the upper–class Indians for the cultural meets while plebian looking people were not encouraged to attend such meetings.

The modern educational system and unemployment problem has been shown through Sudhir who lives dissatisfied life. He had to spend two years looking for a job and forced to adopt the Indian method of finding work, constantly waiting outside the offices to find preferment, Sudhir, a pessimist and a cynic is shown in contrast to the ever optimistic and enthusiastic Bal, Judy’s husband.

The Hochstadts, Etta, Clarissa and Judy represent different strands of western attitudes to India. The Hochstadts epitomize the westernness who takes an academic interest in India. Clarissa embodies the westernness who takes the attitude of patronizing superiority .Etta an embittered and unintelligent woman. The Hochstadts and Judy represent the extreme situations in which the foreigners find themselves because the Hochstadts are in India only for a short span of time

while Judy has settled down in an Indian family. The real problem of accepting and adjusting the alien culture or the clash of two cultures revolve around Etta and Clarissa. It is natural that an individual with his/her unique background is likely to get disillusioned in another country that has a different culture, this is what happens to Etta, Clarissa, Judy and the Hochstadts.

The exclusive feature of Jhabvala's novels is that they give significant descriptions of both Indian as well as the westerners' experiences about each other's culture. Jhabvala never fails to bring out the contradictions inherent both in Indian and western cultures. The contradictions and conflict in culture takes place as a result of the coming closure of Indian and western cultures. Finally it has become clear that the exposure to a different culture does not remain a distant dream but becomes a compulsion in the terms of post-modern existence of globalization.

Works Cited

Jhabvala, Ruth Prawar. *A Backward Place*. Great Britain: Fireside, 1965.