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## **Different Shades of Indian Widowhood in the Selected Short Stories of Ruth Praver Jhabvala**

**Vinita Kumawat**  
Research Scholar  
Department of English,  
UOR, Jaipur

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### **Abstract:**

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, the Booker prize winning writer, has made a distinct mark of her own in the field of literature through her novels and short stories. In the present paper, two of her stories are dealt with in terms of her portrayal of the various sides of a widow's life in Indian society. Her area of exploration in the selected stories is the social world and its age old rituals and conventions laid down by the ancestors regarding the life of a widow. The question of a widow's identity in the social patriarchal world, her state of life when her spouse dies, her battling with inner wild passions, her resistance to accept the age old rigid norms she is expected to yield to, her attempt to break the stereotypes and come forward as an independent individual are acutely portrayed in the mini world of her selected stories. The stories present the widows' longing for love and company, their attempts to overcome the desolation, hopelessness and the perpetual worthlessness of their life. In one of the stories, when the widow Durga tries to shower her selfless love upon a young boy Govind, it is not easily accepted whereas the relatives and the family keep an eye on her materialistic assets and tries to influence her decisions so that she may renounce the worldly pleasures and leave all the property for them to look after. In the other story, the widow loves and lives with a Dutchman. She is at discomfort with her children and leaves them in order to stay and accompany the Dutchman which her son doesn't approve of much. In the end the widow suffers pangs of exclusion and separatism from her own children but continues living with the Dutchman even against her son's will.

**Keywords: Patriarchy, Identity, Dissatisfaction, Abandonment, Widowhood.**

Ruth Praver Jhabvala is one of the Booker prize winning novelists. Her Polish parentage, German upbringing, British schooling and finally, life in India after marriage complicate the issue of her being called an Indian writer. The 'Indianness' of her fiction and short stories raises critical forums. Jhabvala has sometimes been referred to as an 'inside-outsider', and other times as an 'outside-insider'. She is essentially a European writer who has lived in India for over a quarter of a century. Her stay in India and her experience of life and society in India find artistic expression in her works. The most significant characteristic of her literary achievement is her awareness of human beings, society, moral dilemmas and the aesthetic design of her expression. Jhabvala's knowledge and awareness of the Indian character, the Indian family, the Indian society, the Indian ethics and values, and the Indian tradition and culture render seriousness to her works. She harmonizes the Indian character

both in its individual and universal contexts. When asked in an interview whether she considered herself an Indian writer, she replied: “No, how could I be? I’m not, am I? There is no getting away from that fact. I write differently from Indian writers because my birth, background, ancestry, and traditions are different. If I must be considered anything, then let it be as one of those European writers who have written about India” (Agarwal 2). Her situation was even more complicated because English was not her mother-tongue as well as she wrote about people not her own. She is therefore considered among the ‘Anglo-Indian’ writers.

Jhabvala has so far published four collections of short stories. Her stories deal with Indians, with Europeans living in India and with the inter-racial interaction between Indians and Europeans. In the present paper, two of her short stories are analysed and the basic endeavour is to portray the life of a widow in Indian society. As a short story writer, Jhabvala’s talent is both distinctive and effective. She draws her characters from life and fictionalizes living people. Her art excels in the modes of narration. She adds local flavor or regional colour to her characters and locale. She uses Indian English, typical Indian modes of behavior to give substance to this local colour. Her fiction primarily deals with two themes: East-west encounter and marital dissonance. The widows of the two short stories are either victims of fate or forced marriages.

Widowhood is the only phase which no woman would ever desire. In Indian culture where husbands are treated as Gods, widowhood becomes a curse. The other negative effects of widowhood are feelings of emptiness and alienation. In India, widows are compelled to renounce all the worldly pleasures and are expected to lead a life where no joy can find place. A woman not only desires for the things that marital bliss offers but also an ear that can listen to her grief and confusion, a shoulder she can cry upon, or a hand to hold in fears and desolation. Without a companion, life becomes a burden and utterly worthless for widows. In the two short stories there are widows who cry for different reasons. Durga, the central character of “The Widow” prays for the death of her husband at the beginning of her marriage and the reason stated by her in her prayers is that “he was old and she was young; it was not right” (Out of India 39). The age gap brings her dissatisfaction and she resents not only her mismatched husband but also her family who had married her to him. But her husband was a far-sighted man and could therefore imagine her life after his death. Therefore he drafts his will accordingly and leaves her enough money and property to lead a happy and independent life. Her husband was not a senile old man. He was worldly wise and therefore always taught his young wife to stand on her own, have a mind, be strong. He hated weak women and had left her everything so that Durga could live life as she wished. His last energies had been poured into training her, teaching her, making her strong, and did not expect anything in return from her. He was known as “a mean, spiteful old man, who had made his money (in grain) unscrupulously, pressed his creditors hard, and maliciously refused to support his needy relatives” (Ibid. p. 40). But he was different with Durga. With her, he was gentle and generous. And so when he died, she almost missed him and the relatives had taken it for granted that she was to be treated as the widow-

that is, the cursed one who had committed the sin of outliving her husband and was consequently to be numbered among the outcasts. They had wanted - yes, indeed they

had – to strip her of her silken colored clothes and of her golden ornaments. The more orthodox among them had even wanted to shave her head, to reduce her diet to stale bread and lentils, and deprive her from ever again tasting the sweet things of life: to condemn her, in fact, to that perpetual expiation, that was the proper lot of widows. That was how they saw it and how their forefathers had always seen it; but not how she saw it at all. (Ibid. pp. 40-41)

But with the training given to her by her husband and the money left for her, her status was raised to the queen and everyone knew it. She was not to be managed by others, rather she becomes the “mistress of what was hers and rule her household and wear her fine clothes and eat her fine foods; and out of her abundance she would toss crumbs to [the relatives]” (Ibid. p. 41). Her husband’s prudence saves her from being the victim of age old conventions that deprive a widow from happiness. But there were days when she felt that she had not been dealt with as she had a right to expect and fell into black mood because “even a queen’s life does not bring perfect satisfaction always” (Ibid. p. 41). She wasn’t sure what exactly was bothering her but she realized that “something *had* been left out” (Ibid. p. 41). She was inescapably haunted by vague yearnings and frustrations. On such days Durga needed someone before whom she could unburden herself. She was so lonely inside that even money could not help her, “she brought out broken sentences, broken complaints and accusations, but there was nothing she could quite lay her finger on” (Ibid. p. 42).

At such point, she finds another way of finding inner peace and contentment and moves from materialistic pleasures to spirituality. She looks for a companion in Lord Krishna and therefore brings two little brass images of Krishna – one of Him playing the flute i.e. the lover Krishna and the other as a baby crawling on all fours i.e. the baby Krishna. She looks for fulfillment and this she hopes and expects from Krishna. When Bhuaji used to tell her stories about Krishna, her unspoken hidden emotions used to come out. Durga enjoyed herself, laughing in delight on the stories of naughty baby Krishna. But when they talked about the lover Krishna, “then she sat quite still and looked very attentive, with her mouth a little open and her eyes fixed on Bhuaji’s face” (Ibid. pp. 42-43). Her youthful passion secretly formed a picture of the lover Krishna in her mind and she grew more and more thoughtful. She was “always waiting for him to come alive for her” (Ibid. p. 43) and thinking of Him at night or on afternoons “she felt strange new stirrings within her that were almost like illness, with a tugging in the bowels and a melting in the thighs. And she trembled and wondered whether this was Krishna descending on her, as Bhuaji promised he would, showing her his passion, creeping into her –ah! great God that he was – like a child or a lover, into her womb and into her breasts” (Ibid. p. 43).

But even the worshipping and the short-lived delightful sensations could not satisfy her and she “felt that much had been promised and little given” (Ibid. p. 45). During her dreamy withdrawn days, the relatives took hold of her house and eagerly, greedily, watched her. At such moments she often thought of her husband and imagined him getting angry. But she found herself thinking of her husband with dislike as if she bore him some grudge, though she did not know what for. But somewhere deep inside she hated her husband because of “his old-man smell, and his dried legs, when she had massaged them, with the useless rag

of manhood flopping against the thigh” (Ibid. p. 40). For a young and healthy and hearty woman like Durga, such husband was undeserving.

So when Durga didn't find love in return from Krishna, she started wondering what there was in life that one should go on living it. Even spirituality could not bring fulfillment to her body and soul. Durga not only longed for a young lover but also for a child. She needed someone of her own who could help her overcome the sense of emptiness and console her. And this she starts feeling for Govind, her new tenants' son. Her desire- part sexual and part maternal for the dark youth Krishna get transferred to a real boy. Perhaps Govind becomes a substitute of Krishna. Govind is one of the many names of Lord Krishna. Perhaps Krishna answers her devotion and prayers by sending Govind into her desolate life. He was perhaps a seventeen years old boy with large black eyes and broad shoulders and cheeks showing signs of growth. For Govind, Durga had mixed emotions. Sometimes, she thought of him as a young lover who could rouse her passion and love and other times, she thought of him as her unborn son who could complete her as a woman. She noticed everything in him and later, alone in her room, unwinding herself from her sari and looking at herself in the mirror, she thinks of her husband with a stronger than ever feeling of dislike against him and the grudge that she did not know until now becomes clear to her. She thinks of her dead husband as a useless old man because in the eighteen or nineteen years of their marriage, if he had been capable, she could have been a mother of a son like Govind. She longs to be called “Mama!” and wishes for a relationship where the son and mother would sit together affectionately, more like brother and sister or even two friends, while the son tells her mother everything that had happened to him during the day.

Initially, Govind did not take much notice of Durga and was shy with her, but Durga persevered and would ask him questions to prove to him how interested she was in him, interested like a mother or a favourite aunt. And slowly Govind started responding. He would keep on talking for hours and Durga would just sit and listen and watch him. She used to notice everything in him- his face, his smile, his teeth, his cheeks, his hair, his eyes, his shoulders etc. She felt that “Everything in him was young and fresh and strong- even his smell, which was that of a young animal full of sap and sperm” (Ibid. p. 49). Such feelings attest to the fact that she found in him a young lover who could bring her the long lost fulfillment and happiness. Govind started asking her for whatever he wanted and she was proud to give. At such moments, the mother in her overpowered her emotions and “she was warm and sick with mother's love, she longed to cradle his head and stroke his hair. He was her son, her child” (Ibid. p. 49).

But the relatives could not digest the growing friendship between Durga and the Puris and found it “ominous and unnatural”. One day Bhuaji went to Mrs. Puri to warn her about it but this made Mrs. Puri very angry and she condemned Bhuaji for her evil thoughts that even the pure actions of Durga are misinterpreted and made impure.

One day when Govind asks Durga for twelve hundred rupees for a motor scooter, she could not control her emotions and passion. She feels him “so close to her, so eager, so young, so passionate, and his hand holding hers, she shivered all over her body and her heart

leaped up in her and next thing she was sobbing” (Ibid. p. 52). Tears flowing down her face, she expresses her loneliness and emptiness to him-

She was talking fast, about how alone she was and there was no one to care for. Yet she was young still, she told him- she invited him to look, look down into her face, wasn't it a young face still, and full and plump? And the rest of her too, all full and plump, and when she was dressed nicely in one of her best saris with a low-cut blouse, then who would know that she wasn't a young girl or at least a young woman in the very prime of her life? And she was good too, generous and good and ready to do everything, give everything for those she loved. Only who was there whom she could love with all the fervor of which her heart was capable? In her excitement she pushed against him so that he fell backward and sat down abruptly on her bed. At once she was sitting next to him, very close, her hand on his- if he knew, she said, what store of love there was in her, ready and bursting and brimming in her! (Ibid. p. 52)

But the boy starts crying in a hurt, grieved voice, trembling with tears like a child's because he could not understand Durga's state of mind and emotions. He was just asking for a motor scooter, that's all. And that was the last time, Govind came to see Durga and he also left her empty and dissatisfied like the Lord Krishna. As far as Govind is concerned, Durga is neither a mother-figure nor a beloved for him. She was just a rich middle aged lady for him. Seeing the sudden change in Govind's behavior and her disappointment at her rejection by Govind, Durga was in despair and wept often. She experienced a pain she had never experienced before and “she longed to die and yet at the same time she felt herself most burningly alive” (Ibid. p. 53). Durga wanted a son and it was natural, “for had not God set maternal feelings to flow sweetly in every woman's breast?” (Ibid. p. 53)

And eventually under the frustration and anger, Durga emptied her treasure and gave it away to her relatives. Bhuaji, sorting everything, murmured approvingly to Durga: “That is the way- to give up everything. Only if we give up everything will He come to us” (Ibid. p. 55). This renunciation makes her relatives glad for finally Durga has accepted her lot as a widow:

They were glad for her sake. There was no other way for widows but to lead humble, bare lives; it was for their own good. For if they were allowed to feed themselves on the pleasures of the world, then they fed their own passions too, and that which should have died in them with the deaths of their husbands would fester and boil and overflow into sinful channels. Oh yes, said the relatives, wise and knowing, nodding their heads, our ancestors knew what they were doing when they laid down these rigid rules for widows; and though nowadays perhaps, in these modern times, one could be a little more lenient- for instance, no one insisted that Durga should shave her head-still, on the whole, the closer one followed the old traditions, the safer and better it was. (Ibid. p. 56)

The short story “The Widow” takes up the struggle of a young woman who tries to escape from traditional norms. The story highlights a young widow’s sexual starvation and the various forms through which it becomes manifest in her conduct. What is permissible in the mythological tales, are not approved in the twentieth century society. Durga’s emotions are detested and called “ominous and unnatural”. The story juxtaposes this hypocrisy.

Another short story with a widow as a central character is “The Man with the Dog”. The lady is not named in the story. Here the struggle of an old widow is portrayed who after the death of her husband has been living with a Dutchman named Boekelman whom she loves so much. She accepts that “Yes, I, an old woman and a grandmother many times over- I hunger and burn! And for whom? For an old man” (Ibid. p. 108). The protagonist is not a young woman yearning for sexual pleasures like Durga. Instead the lady took interest in him because “he was a foreigner” (Ibid. p. 109). The lady found everything in him strange and wonderful. She liked his elegant way of dressing up, his lively manner of speaking, his thin hair and reddening face. His ‘Otherness’ attracted the lady. He was

so different from our Indian men who are always a little shy with us and clumsy, and even if they like to talk with us, they don’t want anyone to see that they like it. But he didn’t care who saw- he would sit on a little stool by the side of the lady with whom he was talking, and he would look up at her and smile and make conversation in a lively manner, and sometimes, in talking, he would lay his hand on her arm. He was extra polite with us, he drew back the chair for us when he wanted to sit down or get up, and he would open the door for us, and he lit the cigarettes of those ladies who smoked, and all sorts of other little services that our Indian men would be ashamed of and think beneath their dignity. But the way he did it all, it was full of dignity. (Ibid. p. 109)

When the first time Boekelman kissed the lady’s hand, she felt as if an electric shock went down her spine and she wanted to snatch away her hand and wipe it clean on her sari but gradually she got used to of it and liked it. But afterwards many things changed and he no longer opened the door for her, nor did he kiss her hand. They lived in the same house but the man used to pay rent.

The lady thinks of her early days in her husband’s house. She has faithfully fulfilled all her duties in life toward God, parents, husband, children, servants and the poor and for this she expects to be loved and respected. Though after her husband’s death and her children being scattered in many parts of India, she chooses to stay alone in their town house and spend a lot of time on shopping, visiting cinema and attending tea parties, dinners and other functions. She is not bound by the orthodox conventions regarding a widow. She freely and independently but alone leads her life. So when she stays alone in her town house and when her longing for her children becomes too strong, she pays a visit to them and enjoys the family happiness and love. But her living with Boekelman is not approved of by her children and soon her happiness becomes clouded. She starts growing restless there and unwillingly leaves them with some excuses of urgency. She starts feeling guilty and worse and packs her bag to go back to her town home and lives with Boekelman. The lady has to make a choice

between her own independent life and a life a lady is expected to lead after her husband's death. For this reason the children argue with her and "quarrel and say things that children should not have to say to their mother" (Ibid. p. 108) and thus the grief becomes more than that of parting.

The lady hungers for the old man because she needs a companion to accompany her and to support her. She doesn't want to encroach on her children's private lives and thus decides to live alone in the town house. Though the Dutchman also changes after sometime but she gets used to of him. She loves to watch him sleeping, conversing with him and feels proud to know him in his inner deep essence. She admits that

He is usually asleep before me, and then I sit up in bed beside him and look and look my eyes out at him. I can't describe how I feel. I have been a married woman, but I have never known such joy as I have in being there alone with him in bed and looking at him: at this old man who has taken his front teeth out so that his upper lip sags over his gums, his skin is grey and loose, he makes ugly sounds out of his mouth and nose as he sleeps. It is rapture for me to be there with him. (Ibid. p. 115)

She lives with him because his age complements hers. Without being married to each other, they share each other's personal space. She likes to be with him, to fight with him, to cook food for him and his guests, keeping his rooms clean, laughing at his funny stories etc. Publicly, nobody ever sees them like this and wonder why they live together when they do nothing but quarrel and the lady is not a good company for him. But she enjoys this little time of contemplation and happiness with him and doesn't wish to show it to everyone. She feels pleasure in being with him because his friends know only the outer part "but what is within, the essence, that is known only to [her]" (Ibid. p. 115).

When her son Shammi gets angry with Boekelman and silently asks his mother to throw the Dutchman out of her house, the lady unwillingly decides to do "what he wanted desperately, he and all [her] other children, and what [she] knew he had been silently asking of [her] since the day he came" (Ibid. p. 120). She tells Boekelman to leave. But seeing him happy and comfortable with Lina and at his decision of moving out with Lina, she feels very agitated and makes a sound of contempt. She becomes speechless. But the feeling of insecurity, jealousy and the pain of parting from him overpowers her and she determines that "never would [she] allow him to move to [Lina's] place, even if it meant keeping him here in the house with [her] for some time longer" (Ibid. pp. 121-122). The lady pleads him to stay with her and thus Boekelman continues to stay with the lady and does not move out of her house. But the lady suffers hugely at the hands of the conventions that don't allow a widow to live a happy and peaceful life with another man. Her fate becomes tragic and she confesses that

None of my children ever comes to stay with me...They want me to be what an old-widowed mother should be, devoted entirely to prayer and self-sacrifice; I too know it is the only state fitting to this last stage of life that I have now reached. But that great all-devouring love that I should have for God, I have for B. Sometimes I think:



perhaps this is the path for weak women like me? Perhaps B. is a substitute for God whom I should be loving, the way the little brass image of Vishnu in my prayer room is a substitute for that great god himself? These are the stupid thoughts that sometimes come to me when I am lying next to B. on his bed and looking at him and feeling so full of peace and joy that I wonder how I came to be so, when I am living against all right rules and the wishes of my children. How do I deserve the great happiness that I find in that old man? It is a riddle. (Ibid. p. 123)

Here Jhabvala again brings the similarity between Durga and the old lady whom spirituality failed. Both the widows could not find peace and joy in the brass images of the great god. Rather living beings give them the pleasure and contentment that widowhood requires the most. Govind, in the case of Durga and B. in the case of the old lady, take place of God in their lives and the widows offer their love to them instead of offering it to the God. Because the images do not respond but the living beings do. The society wants the widows to accept the age old traditional roles and manners laid down by the ancestors for the widows but where Durga finally and partially accepts them, surrenders before them and renounces all the worldly pleasures; the old lady breaks the stereotype and continues living with the old man against the wishes of her children.

In the above mentioned short stories, Jhabvala has portrayed alienation and depicted the breakdown of a traditional orthodox social order. She has highlighted the struggle between the traditional and the modern. The context and connotation of isolation between one individual and another in marital relations, in family life, in the society are acutely portrayed. The short stories bring together the wide gap between the materialistic and the idealistic life views. The central figures of both the short stories are women who attempt to assert their individuality among the stifling stagnating social norms and conventions.

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