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Representation of the West in the Short Stories of Ruth Praver Jhabvala

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Abstract:

Social parameters undergo a drastic transformation when political parameters change. India had long been a colony of Britishers who fleeced it thoroughly for two hundred years. Every kind of atrocity was tried on Indians by the Britishers but Jhabvala presents in her short stories a very different and surprising aspect of India. In her stories, the westerners are the victims of Indian society, Indian culture and even Indian climate. In this paper we shall find out the contrasting manner in which Jhabvala has presented west in her short stories.

Keywords: British, western, civilization, Indian, psychological, sufferer.

‘The Western World’, also known as ‘the West’ and ‘the Occident’, is a term referring to the countries of the Americas, as well as all the countries of the western and Central Europe, Baltic States and Croatia, Australia and New Zealand.

The concept of the western world has its roots in Graeco-Roman civilization in Europe and the advent of Christianity. In the modern era, western culture has been heavily influenced by the traditions of the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, the enlightenment and shaped by expansive colonialism is the 16th-17th century. Its political usage was temporarily informed by mutual antagonism with the Soviet bloc during the cold war in the mid to the late 20th century (1944-1989). In the contemporary religious and respectively cultural meaning, the term ‘Western world’ refers to the countries of Europe as well as countries of European origin in the new world

like United States of America, Canada, Saint Pierre and Miquelon, Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, British Virgin Islands, Australia and New Zealand.

When we talk of the west, we mean that part of our planet where civilization is advanced, technology is developed, people are broad-minded and bellies are full. But when we examine minutely, we find that the west is that part of our planet where mind is wavering between doubt and faith, where people are succumbing to depression and tension, where human beings are too busy to share joys and sorrows of one another, where marriages end in divorces, where beautiful wings of butterflies and seven colours of rainbow are meaningless because your eyes are ever fixed on the computer.

In western society, there is a great pressure on minds and many people become depressed. Scientists from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois found in a cross-cultural study of mental health that depression- which they say is both genetically and environmentally determined is more likely to manifest itself in more individualist western societies but that more collectivist, eastern cultures provide more understanding and social support. “Such support seems to buffer vulnerable individuals from the environmental risks or stressors that serve as triggers to depressive episodes” said John Chiao, lead author of the study in a statement, “Western cultures are more likely to value uniqueness over harmony, expression over agreement and to define themselves as unique or different from the group.”

Researchers studied the genetic data (the variants of the serotonin transporter gene associated with depression) of population from 29 countries and found more prevalence of depression in western population. The actual depression in East Asian countries like China and Korea, as well as Singapore, was significantly lower than individualistic nations, such as the United States and Western Europe, the study (by Joan Y. Chiao and Katherine D. Blizinsky) said.

India attracts the westerners as a place of spiritual heights, as a shelter from the tensions of the world. The narrator in the story ‘Gopis’, says-

‘My early circumstances had been the same as Lucia’s: divorced parents, two Christmas dinners every year erupting into the same kind of fights...

India had been for me, as it is now for Lucia, a higher world, an escape from this lower world in which I had grown up.' (75)

Despite this attraction, the westerners have a very contrasting concept about east. They speak disparagingly about eastern traditions and customs. They turn up their nose at the superstitious nature of eastern people. They comment slightly on the backwardness of this region. In her Booker prize winning novel *Heat and Dust*, the title stands for India. Some Indian critics were very angry when the book was published under this title. They raised the question whether India was nothing but heat and dust.

This paradoxical view is seen in their religious beliefs also. They want to believe in God, they want to take shelter from the tensions of their busy lives; they need a protective power because they are always feeling insecure. When they come to eastern countries like India, they are amazed to see the strong faiths of its people. Indians can remain half hungry. They can live in tents or huts instead of houses. They can pass winter season without warm clothes. They can tolerate worst tragedies of their lives as will of God. But westerners are unable to do so though theirs is the most widely followed religion.

In the west, the individual is the basic social unit. This individuality cuts the root of family system. The westerners want to live a family life but don't want to sacrifice their individuality. The result is that they have fancy houses but broken families.

Westerners have plenty of food but not enough time to cook it. So, their markets are full of ready to eat food packets. This packed food contains many preservatives which are harmful to health. That's why today they have fast food and slow digestion. The abundance of food is useless because obesity, diabetes and blood pressure do not permit to eat them.

Unlike India where man is the head of the family and woman is the follower, west has created equality for men and women. This equality has encouraged ego in both of them. Neither of them wants to compromise. This is a cause of the increasing divorce cases of the western world. Ironically the thing which was created for the good of the society is proving harmful for it.

The west always tries to be the elder brother of the rest of the world but it ignores its elder ones. There is no place in the home for the old ones so they have to pass their old age in old age homes, established by the government or the NGOs.

The western side of our sphere is possessing the taller buildings than the eastern side. At the same time, it is possessing the shorter tempers. Tolerance, brotherhood and broad-mindedness are just hollow words pronounced there. Because of the short tempers, their relations do not last long. Children do not obey their parents and make their own world in adolescence. They do not allow their parents to interfere with their matters.

Western world has big shopping malls. People get good salaries, so they are always busy spending money in shopping. They purchase more and more things but enjoy them less.

The west is very proud of its developments in the field of medical science. The reason behind that pride is that Allopathy has done some miracles and has added years to life notwithstanding the fact that it is unable to add life to years. The side effects of allopathy are more dangerous than any other branch of medicine. That's the reason why western people come to India seeking treatment of their incurable diseases as we can see in newspaper clips¹ showing some sick western people.

The westerners are planning to make their colonies on the moon and mars but they have trouble crossing the street to meet new neighbors.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala has given many paradoxical examples in her stories. As we see that westerners form an image of India in their minds on the basis of books and stories but when they really come to India, their impressions are different-

“He said we lived in the India made up in the 19th century by the German professors and that in keeping our eyes fixed on mystical and mythical abstractions, we failed to look down at earth and the people crowding it. It was only, he said, when something unpleasant happened to us, like a sickness, jaundice or whatever, or some fat shopkeeper cheated us or some youth groped us on a bus, or a thief made off with our cards-it was only then when we recognized that we were living in a real place, in a city like

any other; and at once our noble, our spiritual India became degraded into a country of thievery and lechery.” (83)

In Ruth Praver Jhabvala's stories, we do not see western people in the west but western people in India. There are some stories that are set in England and America but most of them have Indian background. As the scene of Jhabvala's stories is India after independence, so these westerners do not come here in the tradition of white men in colonies. They come to India as officers of high commission and ambassadors. Sometimes they come as missionaries and social activists. Western women, in Jhabvala's stories, come to India as tourists or as spiritual aspirants. Some women come here as brides of Indian husbands like Ruth Praver Jhabvala herself. These western people of her stories publicly pay tribute to Indian culture, art, architecture, dance and so on. They have some carefully selected Indian friends and serve Indian curries at their parties. But their natural inclinations tend to speak disparagingly of the weather, the servants and -after the Indian friends are gone home of the Indian character.

In the story ' A Star and Two Girls ', we see two English girls behaving in contrast with the Indian girls. Jhabvala writes –

They (Indian girls) all wore plain white saris and no jewellery and sat very demurely with their eyes cast down so that it was evident at one glance that they were virtuous. The two English girls, on the other hand, were not a bit demure but looked around them with bright eyes and were ready to talk to anyone who talked to them. (p.46)

These two girls give us a glimpse of the young generation in western society where they believe in freedom of every kind, where they are not bound by relations. In Jhabvala's stories we see western families that are mostly broken. Long lasting marriages are not seen there. The ego of husband and wife is stronger than their relation. They give up each other and marry again for their own pleasures. But the worst sufferers in these cases are children. These children of broken families often develop psychological diseases. They are frustrated because they don't get proper parental love and care. See the trauma of such children in the story “Gopies–

My early circumstances had been the same as Lucia's: divorced parents, a couple of sets of step – parents, two Christmas dinners every year erupting in the same kind of fights ... (75)

Ruth Praver Jhabvala has devoted a complete story collection to her western characters. The collection is named *A Stronger Climate*. The stronger climate denotes the Indian climate which proves strong for western nerves. Westerners are not accustomed to the heat and dust that they have to face in India. Jhabvala divides the stories of this collection into two parts namely the seekers and sufferers. By this division, she means that the westerners to India seeking peace, solace and spiritual upliftment but they suffer here from bacterial diseases like dysentery and cholera because Indian food doesn't suit their digestion system. The hot climate of India gives them many skin diseases also. Many western women become the disciples of Indian sadhus and saints. Some of these sadhus and saints are frauds. These frauds exploit the western women physically. They are betrayed mentally and spiritually too. For example, in the story 'A Spiritual Call', Daphne has come from U.K. where she had everything. She had a job there, she was full of self-confidence but when she comes to India, she becomes just a secretary to Swamiji, she is only taking dictations. She does only what Swamiji asks her to do. She no longer is able to take her own decisions. She has lost all her self-confidence. She always seems to be hypnotized.

Jhabvala's story 'In Love with a Beautiful Girl' depicts the hopeless passion of an English Youngman Richard for an Indian girl Ruchira. Richard is ready to formulate his future according to the demands of Ruchira only if she marries him. But she is taking him very lightly. She has found an Italian man to play with. The feelings of Richard are of no importance for her. Thus, Richard is a seeker of love in an Indian girl and proves to be a failure.

In Jhabvala's story 'The Young Couple', Cathy is an English young woman who marries an Indian young man named Naraian. She comes to India very enthusiastically with many dreams. Although in England, Cathy had enjoyed parties and company, here she always prefers to be alone with Naraian. She doesn't care for the friends of Naraian. On the other hand, Naraian loves being with his friends and quite often seems to forget that Cathy is there with him. Cathy has been a demonstrative girl and likes kissing and holding hand with Naraian when others are looking. In England Naraian had enjoyed this behaviour of Cathy but in India Naraian takes care to see that there is a decent few inches of space always between them. Besides the friends, there

is the family of Naraian. Although the whole family is very happy to have an English daughter-in-law, Cathy finds herself to be a misfit in the family. Jhabvala writes-

But she felt frustrated. Also perhaps, a little bored and lonely. She met plenty of people but they were all Naraian's friends or his family, so that she began to feel almost as if they were forming a ring round her out of which she could not break.
(p. 55)

In the story 'Passion', Betsy is madly in love with Har Gopal who is a married man with three children. He comes daily at the flat of Betsy, while returning from his duty as a clerk, makes love and goes back to his family and children. Betsy is ready to do anything for him to give up her job, to live in poverty, to cook herself, to wear a sari. But Har Gopal wants only a distant friendship with her. He does not like the idea of complete devotion. She wants to be his forever but he cannot tolerate it. He is not possessed by the passion like Betsy.

In the story 'A Young Man of Good Family', Georgia has almost the same story. She is in love with Ranjit who is a young man of Good family. The family of Ranjit is quite modern in its attitude and has no objection to his Indian or western girlfriends. Ranjit enjoys the company of Georgia for a long time but when the question of marriage comes, the whole family turns against it. It is clarified to him that having western girlfriends is one thing and marrying them is another thing. The matter of girlfriends is limited to Ranjit only while marriage is a family concern and he has to choose his wife carefully from a rich and reputed family. 'An Indian Citizen' is the story of Dr. Ernst who loves all the Indian things, Indian culture, Indian music, Indian people, Indian food and so on. He visits some Indian families but he is welcomed nowhere. He visits the house of Mrs. Chawla who is learning vocal music. She respects and even pampers her music teacher but does not pay any attention to Dr. Ernst. She is not a good singer still Dr. Ernst complements her. But Mrs. Chawla takes her complements as comments and speaks out in a quite snappish manner:

At last we are allowed to enjoy our own cultural heritage. Now that we are no longer under the heel of foreign imperialists.
(p.158)

Then she glares at him for a moment as if he too, poor Dr. Ernst has ambitions to be a foreign imperialist. Dr. Ernst speaks about the baneful influence that results from the forcible grafting of one culture on to another and thence proceeds to eulogize all aspects of Indian art, architecture, music, dance, drama, food, dress, customs and ceremonies but she does not listen anything. Finally, Dr. Ernst gets up and goes out.

Then we have the case of an English woman Miss Tuhy in the story 'Miss Sahib. She has been a teacher in India before independence. When all the English people have to go back, Miss Tuhy also has to leave her job as a teacher in India. After that, she sails for England -not because she in the least wants to, but because it is what everyone seems to expect of her. In England she easily gets a teaching job but she is not happy. She cannot love her English students the way she loved her Indian pupils. She misses their playfulness, their affection, their sweetness by comparison the English children strike her as being cool and distant. So, she with her savings returns, improvidently, to India. She does not get her job back but she is happy just by living in this country.

Thus, Jhabvala shows the selfless attachment of some westerners with India. She paints the western people and their families in her own style but all of them are appealing to her readers.

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