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An Experience of India: the Story that Every Indian must Read

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Abstract

Winner of the Booker Prize for Heat and Dust, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, a Polish German by birth had lived in India for twenty four years, by virtue of her marriage to an Indian Parsi. She has been a popular writer in the west mainly for her India based novels and short stories.

Comic irony has been her forte, and even when she made fun of India and Indians in her early fiction, Indian readers and critics took it lightly. However, as the magnitude of her sarcasm had hardened into cynicism as the years went by; she created a number of images of India which were not only negative but biased and distorted, they turned against her. Subsequently she left India physically, yet a great part of her oeuvre still continued to be India, and in the same strain. For her Indian reader she has sunk into oblivion, but her images of India continue to damage the reputation of India.

Therefore it is the responsibility of every Indian to read them, protest against them, and correct them is the objective of this paper.

Keyword: Heat and Dust: the novel which won her the Prestigious Booker Prize , which was later filmed with the same name.
Mother India: a book written by Catherine Mayo in 1927, which was banned in India.s

Introduction

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, the last colonial writer of India whom the country lost on April 3d of 2013, was a brilliant writer of short story. Winner of the prestigious Booker Prize for her fiction, and two Oscars for screen writing, and a number of other popular awards, Jhabvala had had a long and successful journey as a novelist, short story writer and screen writer.

This prolific writer who has to her credit eight collections of short stories besides quite a number of uncollected stories, twelve novels and twenty two screen plays said in several interviews that she had started writing at the age of six. She wrote until her demise at eighty six. The fact that Jhabvala started her writing with a short story and ended with the publication of her last story, “The Judge’s Will”, an Indian story, in the March 15 issue of The New Yorker, speaks of the two great obsessions of her life-India and the short story.

She occupies an important place among the Western writers who have written ‘on’ India. Prior to her there had been notable names like Kipling, Forster, John Masters, George Orwell, Kincaid, Rumer Godden and others but Jhabvala has had a very special niche among these writers for more than one reason. Most importantly, her (emphasis added) India is the post Independence India, unlike that of her European counterparts who belonged to the pre Independence era. Further, she has been the only European writer consistently writing on India for more than sixty years. Although she writes about half a century later than Kipling and Forster, her works bear their strong influence in presenting her image of India even in her recent works.

In the preface to her third collection of short stories, An Experience of India, titled “Myself in India,” she mentions of a cycle that all Europeans have to pass through, if they have to stay in India for a long period: “It goes like this: first stage, tremendous enthusiasm – everything Indian is marvellous; second stage, everything Indian not so marvellous; third stage, everything Indian abominable “(7). The three stages, deconstructed in terms of Post-Colonial criticism, aptly correspond to the three major changes in her attitude towards India-- assumption of ‘Identity’- I stage; her ‘Ambivalence’ towards India –II stage; and ‘Alterity’ in unambiguous terms - III stage. The image of India she presents through her fiction is said to have evolved in accordance with the psychological stage she was in, when she wrote a particular work. Nevertheless, even when she was in the first stage, when she assumed

to identify herself with India, her Euro-centric attitude is dominantly recognizable not only in her themes but also tone.

Way back in 1971, Ramlal Agarwal, one of the foremost Indian critics of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala remarked, "Critics and readers treat Mrs. Jhabvala indifferently than harshly. She has been the most neglected writer, writing in and about India." And in 1975 H. M. Williams regretted that she "has not received much critical attention because critics tend to judge her more harshly than they do to native Indian writers who use English". Now in 2013 she has almost sunk into oblivion like her other Anglo Indian compeers. Pointing out the plight of Anglo-Indian fiction, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar says

In its run of a century and more, what are its trophies after all? Who reads—who has even heard of – Crocker or Curwen or Cunningham, Fforde or Fraser or Hockley? Doesn't oblivion already cover them? There is a book on Meadows Taylor by Dr. G. S. Manusukhani, yet who reads Meadows Taylor today? More recently, Edward Thompson, Dennis Gray Stoll, L.H.Myers, J.R. Ackerley, John Masters and Rumer Godden have all written novels on Indian themes. ("Kipling's Ind Themes":72)

There is one strand of truth behind the disappearance of all these writers. That is, their colonial attitude and the consequent ire of the Indian critic. Talking of the pitfalls the writer who deals with the contradictions and dilemmas in a bicultural context, Lloyd Fernando remarks that,

Blessed with a degree of talent, they are deceived into believing they have no responsibility to educate themselves outside their craft. As a result they know less than they should…such writers do not seek wholeness of vision, which is only attainable by going outside oneself into the cultural and spiritual problems of the community in which one lives. (Awakened conscience 331)

Perhaps this observation suits Jhabvala aptly. While her compeer Kamala Markandaya is still adored, not just because she was born in India but for her love of India and understanding of India, but for her outspoken voice among the Indian people and has often been credited by many for bringing recognition to Indian literature. Charles Larson of American University in Washington wrote, "Most Americans' perception of India came through Kamala Markandaya; she helped forge the image of India for American readers in schools and book clubs" (Mark Glassman).

Writers such as Jhabvala have to be read, because the writer has presented a number of unauthentic, distorted, negative and prejudiced images of India. It is the responsibility of every Indian to correct these images she has propagated in the West and for so many years through her volumes and volumes of fiction about India. When Catherine Mayo in her Mother India made a number of deriding comments on the dirt and filth of India, he reacted very strongly. He said that he had no time to read such filth, yet he was under compulsion, under pressure because it has been published abroad. He responded:

This book is cleverly and powerfully written. The carefully chosen quotations give it the false appearance of a truthful book. But the impression it leaves on my mind, is that it is the report of a drain inspector sent out with the one purpose of opening and examining the drains of the country to be reported upon, or to give a graphic description of the stench exuded by the opened drains. If Miss. Mayo had confessed that she had come to India merely to open out and examine the drains of India, there would perhaps be little to complain about her compilation. But she declared her abominable and patently wrong conclusion with a certain amount of triumph: 'the drains are India'.

This preposterous book had been banned in India, when Gandhiji raised his voice as an Indian. Similarly, it is the duty of every individual to respond, and to correct the wrong images that the westerners create about his country through their writings, films or any art for that matter; it is important to correct these images. Similarly it is the duty of every individual to voice out the protest and correct the false images of the country propagated by writers of this category for their selfish ends.

"An Experience of India", the title story of the eponymous collection by this prestigious Booker Prize winner Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, is one such wicked story which illustrates the above arguments the best. In this story Jhabvala accounts a number of the abominable features of the country. The story is a first person narrative by a European woman tourist in India. She visits India on a spiritual quest as she herself states but actually she is after sex and gets lots of sexual experience both with ordinary men and even with a guru in an ashram, a centre for spiritualism. Had the title been "A Sexual Experience of India," it would have been more appropriate because in the course of her wandering in India she has become competent enough to pass a number of statements on the sexual habits of Indian men.

Intrigued by so many of such statements, Ramlal Agarwal in her Interview with Jhabvala, expressed his wonder as to how she came to be aware of the sexual habits of the Indian men which she had describes in detail. She responded: "Mostly, from the many foreign girls I meet, who travel around India. They certainly have some memorable experience in that field here." (Agarwal). The response which is full of sarcasm, throws light not just on the sexual habits of men as she tends to convey, but inadvertently on the nature of the women travelers who share their memorable experience with Jhabvala.

In the story the nameless European woman sets out to India with her husband Henry, who has to attend a conference in Delhi. Both of them take it as a marvellous opportunity to enrich themselves spiritually. They thought, "Here was our escape from that western materialism with which we were both so terribly fed up." ("An Exp 189). The Colonialist Henry's enthusiasm however wanes off soon, and he enjoys only the company of his fellow Europeans in India, for the rest of his stay in India. But the narrator says she has come to India with a purpose: "I had come to India to be in India. I wanted to be changed.: (An Exp.189). Thus the story develops great expectations in the reader (if he/she had not already read the autobiographical introduction), as

to what sort of experience the woman is up to. But all her experiences prove to be mundane, and insane and absurd.

Unlike Henry who travelled by plane and stayed in expensive hotels, she travels "the way every one travels in India, just with a bundle and a roll of bedding which I could spread anywhere and go to sleep. (An Exp.190). This reverse mimicry however gives her unexpected experiences. This is one of the illustrations of how imperfect is Jhabvala's understanding of India. No respectable Indian woman would travel the way this woman travels alone, and sleep anywhere she likes.

Then there are routine cliché descriptions of the tourist ridden account of India: travelling in third class railway carriages, and overloaded old lumbering buses, getting soaked in perspiration soot and dust, eating the food that the poor eat, from way side stalls and, drinking water from disused wells which even the Indian poor don't drink. Once when she got very thirsty in Desert of Rajasthan, she drinks water from an ancient disused well. She says, "It was brown and sort of foul-smelling, and maybe there was a corpse n the well, who knows. But I was thirsty so I drank it." (190).This she thinks is the process of getting Indianized. Although the descriptions are intended to present the poverty of India, the plight of third class travellers, the heat, dust and dirt of India, they reveal that the woman is not a sane enough woman to drink from the stinking water not fit to be drunk even by the Indians. How can then rely on her experience of India is a big question.

In the course of her travels, she moves on from one sexual adventure to another until she picks on an eighteen year old 'sarod' player Ahmed as her lover. She feels gay in his company and for some time thence she forgets everything about her quest and India. Through this short episode, another sexual adventure in the sojourn of this wayward European woman, Jhabvala inadvertently exposes the glaring contrast between the European's and Indian familial bonds. The European woman's sexual attraction is defeated in the hands of the strong familial bond of the Indian. The boy, penitent, returns to the fold of his parents, and the parents too excuse him with their full heart.

The young boy who is married but has not consummated his marriage had fallen an easy prey to the woman's lascivious sexual overture, follows her as if in a delirium. They stay in a hotel for some time, and when she ran out of money she moved with him to Delhi to her husband's house. Jhabvala describes how everyone in the house got shocked to see her appearance

My blouse had got torn in the train all the way down the side, and I didn't have a safety-pin so it kept flapping open and unfortunately I didn't have anything underneath." (An Exp.199)

She introduces Ahmed as her lover and stays in the same house where husband lives. At least the Indian reader is shocked to read such kind of encounters and wonders what sort of experience any foot-loose woman like her can have in India or elsewhere. Can it be interpreted as an experience of any value of validity? No sane European would dream to have such an experience in India.In the encounter so far the woman was only after sex and nothing else. But in spite of her best efforts she could not succeed in finding the 'something' in India, she says, "and even though for the time being I'd failed, I could try longer and at last I would succeed." (203)

Since travelling around the way she had done had failed, she took the spiritual route. In fact in the beginning of her narration she said, ". . . it was a marvelous opportunity . . . for both of us spiritually."(189)

Her inconsistent behavior is evident when she says after these sexual encounters, "I'd met people on and off who had come here on a spiritual quest, but it wasn't the sort of thing I wanted for myself." (203) these two statements are evidence to her confusion and vagueness of her quest.In this phase the woman encounters a swami, a holy woman, and a guru. But there is nothing noble or spiritual about them and the episodes are charged with satirical implications.

The woman is a typical western traveller of Jhabvala's fictional world, more a disillusioned and perverted wanderer rather than a traveller. Her series of encounters with different people, her way of dressing and makeup, her provoking attitude, her getting sick of everything around her, her decision to move back to the west with her husband but for no plausible reason, deciding to stay back everything suggests that she is slightly insane. "Now I feel compelled that I have to do this whether I want to or not," does not depict true India. T.N.Dhar, in his article on this short story comments,

The narrator's description of her experience of India reminds one of a crash course in Indianization which has a predictable movement because it is a touristy, cliché-ridden account of India; travelling in third class carriages, getting soaked in perspiration, soot, and dirt, eating raw chappatis at wayside stations, and drinking water from disused wells.

This common place account is interspersed with a number of generalizations such as "people always speak to you in India" (190). "People in India are so hospitable" (191). "Indian men are very, very keen to sleep with foreign girls"(191). She obliges quite a few, although she is not sure why she did so. She fails to explain her actions. She is a kind of drifter not a quester. She has neither a purpose nor a goal. Her observations are too artificial to be taken seriously. She is not at all a sensitive observer. All her encounters therefore are more sexual rather than spiritual.

The statement as Dhar rightly points out has a ring of disenchantment and mockery, suggesting that India has hardly anything worthwhile to offer to a seeker except sexual contact. As such, the reader gets only contempt and not sympathy for the protagonist. Her experience could not be better either in India or anywhere for a foot-loose woman like her who meddles in the lives of other people. (n.p)

Now in another attempt to gain that something in India the narrator involves herself in spiritual matters. But she is not sure what she wants.

I'd met people on and off who had come here on a spiritual quest, but it wasn't the sort of thing I wanted for myself. I thought anything I wanted to find, I could find by myself travelling around the way I had done. But now that this had failed, I became interested in the other thing. (203)

This is a proof of her inconsistency, confusion and vagueness of her so called spiritual quest. Therefore, her next encounters are with spiritual people –a swami, a holy woman and a guru. She goes to attend the prayer meetings of the swami because everybody around him looks happy and peaceful. But she fails to acquire that peaceful look although she takes to singing hymns, eating vegetables, and wearing a saree. Then she spends some time with a holy woman who narrates stories from Indian mythology and often goes into a state of ecstasy. But she soon gets bored. There is no link between the encounters.

Shepherd thinks that there are a number of gaps signalling the author's incomplete self-analysis, or this essay might be a piece of post-modernist trickery, and is not an essay at all but a story posing as an essay (96-97). Presumably, Shepherd views that this woman feels she 'was doing good' in her sexual adventures because she regarded her experiences as (potentially) liberating. He recallss that Forster's Mrs. Moore and Adela Quested in A Passage to India were also preoccupied with spiritual and sexual possibilities respectively. Finally he remarks "India serves as the need, the excuse, the scapegoat, the catalyst, the opportunity for the Westerner of what is unobtainable at home. The trouble is not itself India, but what the Westerner brings to India, supporting Edward Said's idea of the 'Orient' as a Western construct". (97-98)

The illness she suffers near the end of the story comes as something of a climax to her frenzied quest for experience (and once again one is reminded of the debilitating effects of India)

To look upon this wicked, but entirely believable, story as simply a tale of sexual encounters is to misread it. The point seems to be that only when one gives oneself unreservedly to India does one see the real India – and India quite unlike what many Indians, and some Westerners, would like us to believe (Venugopal).

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