



Indian Spiritualism, Social Evil and Superstition in R .P. Jhabvala's Fiction

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Ruth Praver Jhabvala is one of the finest and most distinguished Indian novelists in English. In Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust*, the narrator Anne observes that India is a magnet for Europeans in search of a certain spirituality that they have failed to find in western religions. In particular, she meets a young Englishman named Chid. He has become a Hindu ascetic. Hindu scriptures attract Chid alias Chidananda. However, his experiences in India are not all rosy. He suffers hardships in India. He finds it impossible to live simply under trees as instructed by his guru. Nevertheless, he has to seek shelter at night in cheap hotel rooms. Finally Chid's dalliance with Indian spirituality is over. After the long pilgrimage, he no longer wears his orange robe but has acquired a pair of khakhi pants, a shirt, and a pair of shoes. Now he has become a Christian boy from a Hindu ascetic.

Indian spiritualism also gives an Indian image in Jhabvala's novels. Many westerners visit India in search of the spiritualism and spiritual solace. For instance, in *Heat and Dust*, Chid alias Chidananda. He too has been attracted by Hindu scriptures. He arrives in India in search of the spiritual experiences. For months, he lives in the great temples of the south. Like an Indian pilgrim, purify himself. He tries to live like Indian saints or Sadhus. She also presents the Indian spiritual world full of sinners and rascal. She presents spiritual reality of India and the westerner's responses to it; her novels deal with gurus, Swamis, the temples, the chanting of hymns. Her religious Indian characters with shaven head, cast off clothes, beads, begging bowl and a set of high-sounding slogans suggest sinners in saffron instead of a person's holiness.

There is presentation of religious and cultural life of Hindus. The practice of suttee was a part of Hindu religion in those days. For instance, a grain merchant's wife has burnt herself on the pyre of her dead husband. Douglas rushes there, but it is too late to save the woman. He arrests the instigators of the crime. In Jhabvala's *New India* (1923), there may not be actual instances of the suttee practice. There is still a lot of Veneration among the people for this old custom. In the novel, Inder Lal's mother takes Olivia junior to a cluster of little shrines under some trees. '...Inder Lal's mother devoutly joined her hands before the shrines. She decorated one of them with a little string of roses and marigolds. She told her that on the certain days of the year, she and her friends come with sweets, milk, and flowers to worship these widows. She thought that the widows have made the highest sacrifice...'

The writer also depicts European response to Indian religious tradition and spirituality. For instance, when Olivia junior is taken to visit a little Hindu shrine made out in a small room, she reacts: "it was no more than a hole in the wall and one had to stop to get through the opening. Several other people crowded in with us." Regarding the deities in the shrine: "The principal god-he was in his monkey aspect, as Hanuman - was kept in a glass case; there were two other gods with him, each in a glass case; there were two other gods with him, each in a separate glass case. All were made of plaster-of-Paris and dressed in bits of silk and pearl necklace" While Inder Lal was making his obeisance to the three gods, Olivia junior was anxious to get out as it was stifling in there with no ventilation and all these people crowded in. As a final ritual, Olivia junior is given "bits of rock sugar and a few flower petals, which I did not of course like to, throw always so that I was still clutching them on the bus back to Satipur. When I thought Inder Lal was not looking, I respectfully tipped them out of the side of the bus, but they have left the palm of my hand sticky and with a lingering smell of sweetness and decay that is still there as I write."

The picture of religious places presented by the author gives an idea of Indian religious rituals. A bow of reverence or homage toward God is a part of Indian religious culture. A Hindu shrine is generally crowded

one. An idol of God symbolizes an image of a god. For instance, Hanuman's idol in the shape of monkey is found in Indian shrines.

Jhabvala depicts Indian superstitions in the novel. Both educated and uneducated people of India are victims of superstitions. For instance, once Inder Lal's wife is suffering from some psychiatric ailment, she is not given medical treatment. The commonly accepted assumption is an evil spirit possesses her. A local quack is called in to set it right. This so-called evil spirit has to be driven out by applying a red-hot iron to various parts of her body. The treatment results into Ritu's blood curdling screams. Through Inder Lal, Lal advocates science and medical treatment; he is defensive and tries to justify this cruel and irrational treatment. When Olivia junior (the narrator) mentions the kind of cruel and irrational treatment given to Ritu, he is defensive and tries to justify it.

When even this treatment fails, Ritu is sent on pilgrimage in the company of her mother-in-law and child, as a pilgrimage is believed to be the cure for all physical or mental ailments. Even child, a westerner approves such cruel treatment. Thus in modern India, even in educated classes of which Inder Lal is a representative, aspirations for science and rationality co-exist with superstitions and irrationality. The novelist satirises the rigid orthodox and superstitions of Indian society. Tikka Ram illustrates the rigid caste system. Even at the time of death, he wants to know whether he is going to be hanged by a chamar or a man from some other caste. Miss Tiezz is a westerner. She is also in the grip of orthodoxy. She believes that a westerner cannot lie in India with Christ Jesus and she will die according to the will of God. Ritu's marriage with Inder Lal is possible according to horoscopes. This arranged marriage results into disharmony between the two. Olivia Rivers, the central character of the novel, is also superstitious. When she sees the grave of the baby of Mrs. Saunders, she feels fear that her child may also die in the same way. This shows that even the Westerners are not exception in the matter of Indian orthodoxy. In this respect, A. Shahane makes a statement, 'Jhabvala tries to transplant a little Europe of her own in India'

Inder Lal's mother is an advocate of suttee- an evil social custom. Her character favours this social custom. There may not be actual instances of the suttee practice in Jhabvala's new India but women like Inder Lal's mother still speak of it with a lot of admiration and the act of burning itself is taken as heroic. Once she takes Olivia Junior to a cluster of little shrines. She devoutly joins her hands before the shrines. She decorates one of them with a little string of roses and marigolds. She tells her that she and her friends come with sweets, milk, and flowers. Then they worship the widows who have made the highest sacrifice. She has the greatest reverence for that ancient custom. Inder Lal's mother is ever regretful that the custom has been discontinued by legislation. Jhabvala deals with religious and cultural life of Hindus. She reveals certain specific instances of social iniquity. For instance, there is the practice of suttee. A grain merchant's wife has burnt herself on the pyre of her dead husband. A district administrator, Douglas rushed to the scene, but it is too late to save the woman. He arrests the instigators of the crime who are the woman's sons, brother-in-law, and a priest. This evil custom suggests superstitious nature of Indians.

In *A Backward Place*, the couple named Bal and Judy are central figures. Bhauji is dependent on Bal's family. She is a poor old widow. She is ignorant and superstitious. For instance, she says: "...at Gwalior an illiterate village girl deaf and dumb from birth had suddenly opened her mouth and recited, in the original Sanskrit, a whole section of the satapatha- Brahmana; while in Namli, in the district of Ratlam, a rich landlord notorious for vile ways was carried away never to be seen again on a tongue of flame that had leaped out from the sky." These lines show superstitious nature Indian people. Even after the development of science and technology, people still believe or have faith in miracles. The instance of the illiterate village girl is not reasonable. Science or medical field disapproves such unbelievable incidents. The writer also focuses old social customs. Some are like social evils. In poor and uneducated classes, girls are married at very tender age. For instance, Dr. Mukherji asserts that her sweeper's daughter has been married off at the tender age of twelve. The author presents one social traditional custom related to arrange marriage. For instance, Radha wants her daughter Amrita to marry Lady Ram Prashad's America returned son. As per the traditional custom, the bride is first shown to Lady Ram Prashad. After her initial approval, Amrita could be allowed to meet the bridegroom.

Reference

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