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Representation of Indian Religion in the Short Stories of Ruth Praver Jhabvala

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Abstract

India, with its plethora of religions and cultures, has been an enigmatic place for foreigners. Hinduism, a way of life more than being a religion (as proclaimed by the Supreme Court of India), has often been misunderstood by outsiders. Sometimes a biased attitude is reflected in the literature produced by these foreigners. A person like Thomas Babington Macaulay, who himself admitted that he had no knowledge of Sanskrit or Arabic, had the foolish courage of saying that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. In this paper we shall analyze the representation of religion in the short stories of Ruth Praver Jhabvala.

Keywords - Religion, Culture, Hinduism, Foreigner, Knowledge, Representation

Religion has existed in this world since the very beginning of humanity, though its face has undergone a continuous change. Every corner of this globe holds its own religious faith with its own name. India is a vast conglomeration of creeds- Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Jain, Buddhism, Vaishnav, Shaiv, Jew, Parsi and so on. In her short stories, Ruth Praver Jhabvala deals mainly with Hindu religion often depicting its dark side. The recurring scene in her short stories is of a Swami or Sadhu, who is generally a fraud, beguiling the gullible masses and exploiting them mentally and physically. The western disciples of these Sadhus are particularly shown being exploited. Her story collection *A Stronger Climate* is divided into two parts- the seekers and the sufferers, implying that the westerners come to India seeking spiritual upliftment, but they get frustration and become sufferers.

Nowhere in her stories, has she depicted a flawless inspiring personality like swami Vivekanand or Ramkrishna Paramhansa who were the harbingers of ‘Vasudhaiv Kutumbkam’ and who remain unrivalled in their insightful approach towards the diverse manifestations of life and soul. Nowhere does she talk of the invaluable reservoir of knowledge accumulated in the Vedas, the Puranas, the Bhagvad Gita, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata.

The proud patriotic Indians have every reason to get angry with Ruth Praver Jhabvala on this point but they cannot deny the drawbacks that have been put forward by her. All the bright things have their dark aspect also. We shall not hesitate in accepting the negative points of our nation if we are proud of positive ones. So let us study some examples delineated by Jhabvala in her stories.

India is full of temples. The number of temples even surpasses the number of schools, colleges and hospitals. Every Indian village may not have its own school but it surely has its temple. Jhabvala discloses the secret behind the construction of these temples in her story ‘Expiation’. She says that temples are constructed out of black market money donated by rich people. Now this is entirely a one-sided approach. The whole money that is used in the construction of temples is not black money. Ninety nine percent of Hindus don’t have any black money but all of them donate as much as their resources permit, when a temple is constructed. So Jhabvala’s statement is just partially true.

The same story describes how there is always a reason for ceremony in Hindu religion. Birth is a reason for ceremonies and feast but no less important reason for feast and ceremonies is death. Bablu is hanged for a heinous crime of kidnapping and murder. His elder brother carries his ashes to the pious land of Allahabad “...and there was a beautiful ceremony as ashes were committed at the confluence of those very holy rivers- the Ganges, the Jumna and the Saraswati” (19).

The story ‘Farid and Farida’ is a scorching satire on the blind religious faiths in India and the hollowness of holy persons. Farida leaves London after a bitter quarrel with her husband and comes to India. For twenty years, her husband Farid hears nothing about her “...but now, they said, she was a holy woman sitting under a tree in some holy place in the Himalayas and people came from all over India to take blessings and good vibrations from her. Ludicrous, he thought. She might fool all the world, but she couldn’t fool him. Or could she?” (20).

The same story presents a positive point of the simple gullible common masses of India. The fanatics among the Hindus and Muslims fight, in the name of religion, on the issues of constructing temples and mosques. But under the huge banyan tree, sits Farida without a building having the tag of any religion. Here all the people are pilgrims, seeking a little bit of peace and solace. Jhabvala writes:

They were Hindus and she was a Muslim but that didn’t matter, Allah and Ishwar were equal here and no one questioned which of them was responsible for the mountain peaks rising against the immaculate sky, or the sun that set in orange glory on one side and rose in pink effulgence on the other. (23-24)

Ashrams of India are often criticized by Jhabvala for their unhygienic conditions and nauseating atmosphere. In the story, ‘How I Became a Holy Mother’, Katie comes to India at the request of her friend Sophie. She visits some ashrams and comes across the same abominable surroundings. Finally she reaches the ashram where Sophie lives. Let us see her reaction in her own words-

...I didn’t stay long in that place. I didn’t like the bitchy atmosphere and that Swami ji was a big fraud, anyone could see that. I couldn’t understand how a girl as sharp as Sophie had ever let herself be fooled by such a type. But I suppose if you want to be fooled you are. I found that out

in some other ashrams I went to. There were some quite intelligent people in all of them but the way they just shut their eyes to certain things, it was incredible. (1)

The above statement of Katie is expressive of Jhabvala's own attitude towards the ashrams and Swamijis of India. She has visited many ashrams and sadhus during her stay in India. She met with many disciples- both Indian and European- of sadhus. She found that these disciples were being exploited by their guru. Many young men and women, shattered by the tensions of life, reached these so called holy places, in hope of getting rid of their frustrations. The guru promised them to guide them on the condition of complete surrender before him but their surrender resulted in horrible mental and physical exploitation.

In her essay "Myself in India", Jhabvala has drawn an exaggerated picture of blind faiths in India. It is a superstitious belief that the deities will ensure the success of a project if we pay them a sacrifice of animals or human beings. In the above mentioned essay people are laying foundations of a new bridge. They invoke Lord Shiva to help them in construction work. In order to please Lord Shiva, they kill a boy. They hack him to pieces and bury the pieces into the foundation dug for a new bridge. There is a priest with them who is quite naked (like Lord Shiva himself) except for ash smeared all over him; he is reciting some holy verses over the foundation, to bless and propitiate.

Jhabvala feels that God is present everywhere in India. Religion is such a potent force here because life is so terrible. Or one can say that life is so terrible because, the eyes of the spirit turned elsewhere, there is no incentive to improve its quality. Innumerable people are facing acute poverty and starvation. Crops are destroyed sometimes by drought – how are the farmers to be consoled? Incurable diseases are there- how are the poor patients of leprosy, tuberculosis, cancer or immune deficiency, to be consoled? God is the only inspiration of their tolerance. So writes Jhabvala:

God seems more present in India than in other places. Every morning I wake up at 3 a.m. to the sound of someone pouring out his spirit in devotional song; and then at dawn the temple bells ring and again at dusk, and conch shells are blown and there is smell incense and of slightly overblown flowers that are placed at the feet of smiling, pink-cheeked idols. I read in papers that the Lord Krishna has been reborn as the son of a weaver woman in a village somewhere in Madhya Pradesh. (18)

Another source of solace for Indians is their faith in reincarnation. There are vast chasms of economic disparities. Laborers toil night and day in scorching sun and chilling cold still they starve. On the other hand, there is a long list of millionaires, multi-millionaires and billionaires. How is this social dissonance to be endured? The theory of reincarnation teaches that the present condition of a person is the outcome of his deeds during his previous life and whatever he is doing in present life, will have its consequences in the next life. Let us see the words of Ruth Praver Jhabvala from the same essay-

Another approach to India's basic conditions is to accept them. This seems to be the approach favored by most Indians. Perhaps it has something to do with their belief in reincarnation. If things are not to your liking in this life, there is always the chance that in your next life everything will be different. It appears to be a consoling thought for both rich and poor. The rich man stuffing himself on pilao can do so with an easy conscience because he knows he has earned this privilege by his good conduct in previous lives and the poor man can watch him with some degree of equanimity for he knows that next time round it may well be he who will be digging into that pilao while the other be outside the door with an empty stomach. (9-10)

Hindu religion avers emphatically that the last rites of a person are to be performed by a son. And if it does not happen, the person does not get salvation. So when a woman is pregnant for the first time,

she and her family pray to the god for granting them a son. They go to all the temples of all deities, appealing for a boy. When the delivery comes, everybody is gripped by suspense. Labour pain increases, suspense increases. Then comes out the infant and everybody wants to know the same thing. If it is a boy the whole environment is exulted- sweets, cheers, congratulations, merriment. If it is a girl, everything turns gloomy- consolations, sympathies, preachings- let us accept whatever god has given us. If two girls are born, they hope that the third, fourth, fifth or sixth will be a boy.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala's story 'The Sixth Child' is a fine example of this trend in India. The story begins with the starting of labour pains of Babu Ram's wife. All the women relatives of the town have gathered at his home. He gets out of his house to go to his shop but downstairs he meets the first floor tenant, who says to him, 'so it has started' and then, 'well, let us hope this time...' (190)

Within the house and outside the house, everyone sympathizes with him. When Babu Ram comes into streets, he meets his neighbor. Now let us see the words of Jhabvala,

"God will be good to you" his neighbor –himself the father of four sons- confronted him. "He knows five daughters is enough for anyone." And he laughed with the easy heartiness of a man to whom the topic doesn't matter much. Babu Ram also tried to laugh, but as it mattered a great deal to him, could not do so at all heartily. (191)

Although Babu Ram loved his five daughters very much yet there were all obvious reasons why he must have a son. Who otherwise, would preside over his funeral obsequies and pour the ghee to feed the cremating fire? Who would carry on the shop, the properties? But there were also other reasons, less obvious and closer to his heart.

The whole day, he remains at his shop and fancies that he will sit there with his son very soon, that he will play with his little boy very soon. He imagines his little boy copying him, wearing a dhoti kurta like him, following him down the stairs of the house, on their way to the shop, treading in his footsteps and trying to look just like him- tucking in his chin, frowning as he adjusted his hat, clearing his throat in a proud parody of a father. In the evening, he leaves his shop in hurry, but what happens when he reaches home, let us see-

When he reached the house, Babu Ram's haste left him and he walked upstairs very slowly. All his elation, all his certainty had gone...his wife lay asleep with her head turned sideways and her hair straggling loose on her pillow. Next to the bed stood the cradle. Nobody said anything, so he knew it was another girl...at last one of the women got up and took the baby out of the cradle and said, 'we must welcome what god has given us.' (202)

Bathing in river Ganges and bathing in the confluence of three rivers in Allahabad is believed to be very pious in India. It is said that all the sins are washed away in the water of these rivers. This holy bath is considered essential after eclipses. Then there is a tradition of observing fast. All these acts had a great significant role in the past. The water of river Ganges contains a virus named Bactriophage and drives away many bacterial diseases and observing fast is salutary for digestive system. Both these acts and many others were annexed to religion because a major part of Indian population has been uneducated. They might not follow what was wholesome for their health but they would certainly observe whatever religion dictated to them. But Ruth Praver Jhabvala refers to these things a bit sarcastically;

Durga knew about God, of course. One had to worship him in the temple and also perform certain rites such as bathing in the river when there was an eclipse and give food to the holy men and observe fast days. One did all these things so that no harm would befall and everybody did them and had always done them: that was God. (63)

Krishna is the most popular deity in India. He is worshipped in different forms. Some people worship him as a child named Laddu Gopal. They bathe him, feed him, dress him, put him to sleep and wake him up just as they do to their children. Some devotees worship his grown up form. Many women become his Radha or his Meera. For them, he is a lover. Ruth Praver Jhabvala refers to both these forms in her story “The Widow”:

Maya Devi had retired from the world to pass her days with the baby Krishna, whom she had made her child and to whom she talked all day as to a real child and played with him and cooked for him, bathed his image and dressed it up and put it to sleep at night and woke it up with a kiss in the morning. And there was Pushpa Devi, for whom so many advantageous offers had come but she rejected all of them because she said she was wedded already, to Krishna and he alone was her lord and her Lover. (65)

The love tale of Radha and Krishna is often quoted for describing an ideal couple of lovers. Ruth Praver Jhabvala often refers to this mythological couple in her stories. She describes the couple of Lekha and Govind in her story “Lekha”:

There she was looking up at Govind with her big-big eyes which appeared even bigger because she had underlined them with black kohl; the two of them seemed to have a lot of talk about. I must say, they fitted well together, both of them so odd in their appearance and so different from us. They looked like a couple of Hindu mythology- the sort of Radha and Krishna couple you see on calendars or in historical films. (176)

Thus we see that Ruth Praver Jhabvala has described in her stories various outer aspects of Indian religious activities while the essential inner spirit of Indian religion escaped her pen. After reading her stories, no one can deny that she observed the contemporary Indian society very minutely. The typical dialogues that are delivered at the birth of the sixth female child prove the fidelity of her observation. Jhabvala satirized the devotion of Hindus towards cow but ‘Koe Knuffelen’, a Dutch expression for cow hugging, is prevailing today even in western countries because it soothes frayed nerves and calms the human body. Today the west is calling it cow cuddling therapy but ancient India connected it with religion so that people may do it devoutly, continuously and undoubtedly. Similarly Jhabvala mocks at the tradition of keeping fast in India and most of us, we foolish Indians, have discarded this tradition but Japanese cell biologist Yoshinori Ohsumi got the Nobel Prize in medicine in 2016 for his theory of autophagy. He proved that human cells recycle and renew their content if we observe fast. The logical vindication of ancient religious knowledge of India can go on infinitely but here we can come to a conclusion that Jhabvala, during her long stay in India, should have tried to go deep into the ancient Indian wisdom. In that case, her depiction of Indian Spirituality would not have been so shallow.

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