

Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Esmond in India*: An Alien Perspective

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Abstract: *The paper focuses on the clash between the values of the East and the West. It highlights the differences in their life-style, religions and the way of living. Their way of living in respect of food, clothing, bringing up of children and housekeeping are totally different. Therefore the problem arises from their social and cultural interaction. This leads to the alienation. The paper presents the identity crisis which Esmond faces during his staying in India. A European like Esmond, who loves India and wants to settle down in India, is unable to develop a lasting love for India. At last, he longs to go back to England and dreams of his new journey. Jhabvala speaks of the cycle of emotions every European living in India undergoes. She draws special attention to the problems of the couple united in a mixed-culture marriage.*

Key Words: *clash, social and cultural interaction, alienation, identity crisis, cycle of emotions, European.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Ruth Praver Jhabvala is pre-eminently a novelist of domestic life, its joys and sorrows, its harmony and friction, its fulfillment and frustration. She seeks three kinds of reality: the social reality, the cultural reality and the spiritual reality. She uses the novel as a powerful medium for presenting the problems of the Indian society and suggesting ways and means to solve these problems. It is reflected in her novels that she was fond of living a very simple and peaceful life far away from the maddening crowd. Her experience of India included the publication of novels like *To Whom She Will*, *The Nature of Passion*, *Esmond in India*, and *The Householder*. She was engrossed in India so much so that she never left India, but entered with deep interest into the experience of social problems about India.

Jhabvala has been consistently using India as her fictional focal point in her writings. Her awareness of certain aspects of Indian life establishes the Indianness of her fiction. Her long association with India seems to have given her deep attachment with India. As Vasant A. Shahane points out, "her creative work provides an ample evidence of her Indianness [1]. Jhabvala speaks of the cycle of emotions every European living in India undergoes. She says, "First stage, tremendous enthusiasm – everything Indian is marvellous; second stage, everything Indian not so very marvellous; third stage, everything Indian abominable [2].

2. DISCUSSION:

In *Esmond in India*, Esmond seems to have passed through all the above stages. Esmond, an Englishman marries an Indian beauty called Gulab and takes pride in his son. He settles in India by giving private tuitions and also acts as an important guide for the historical places. He has deep knowledge of Indian history, Indian culture and Indian literature. Yet, he creates a little Europe of his own in his own home. He wants Gulab, to bring up their son Ravi in the European way. He even insists that Ravi should sleep in his room and not with Gulab. He believes that if the child sleeps with Gulab, there would be far too much petting and unhygienic sharing of beds. He has now trained Ravi not to wake up in the night; or if he did wake, to keep quiet and not disturb his father. Once he looks down at the boy. Ravi is as dark as his mother; he looks completely Indian. Here, the novelist points out:

At first, when Ravi was born, Esmond had been very happy about this: he had wanted an Indian son, a real piece of India, as he had wanted an Indian wife. Now, however, he thought wistfully of fair sturdy little boys with blue eyes and pink cheeks. Angels not Angles, he often found himself murmuring, quite out of context; Angels not Angles [3].

Esmond's European tart is revealed through his home, a neat little flat with neatly arranged furniture. He takes in lunch cheese salad and sits alone at his smart little dining table –

Everything on the table was colourful and modern – the bright table-mats, the painted drinking-glass, the earthenware plates of a rich dark green – so that it looked rather like a beautifully photographed full-page

advertisement in an American magazine. It was very different from Gulab's spicy meal eaten on the floor out of brass bowls [4].

Esmond dislikes Gulab's Indian habits. He also objected to oil – “filthy habit, do you think I want all my cushions and walls patched with grease? [5]. The novelist points out: “In the beginning, five years ago when they were first married, he had taken her everywhere. She hated going out, he knew, but he had forced her to accompany him to all his parties. . . . He found that her absence was far more impressive than her presence [6]. This suits him as he wishes to avoid taking her out on such type of formal occasions. He escapes cleverly by giving evasive replies when questioned about his wife.

Esmond faces the identity crisis during his staying in India as Dev, Adit and Sarah too face such identity crisis in Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird*. In *Esmond in India*, Esmond yells at his servants, ill-treats his wife and wonders what is happening to him. He thought of himself as – “trapped-trapped in her stupidity, in her dull, heavy, alien mind, which could understand nothing: not him, not his way of life nor his way of thought [7]. Now he thinks about Gulab that he has married to an animal. Esmond hates Gulab so intensely that the strain of living with Gulab is becoming increasingly intense. At last, Esmond wants: “And no wife. At least, no wife like Gulab. It always came back to that same thing. She, even more than lack of money, strangled his life and his personality [8].

Now, Esmond faces existential problem in India. His momentary affair with Shakuntala, the vain romantic girl does not make him feel involved, whatever comfort he gets comes from his English girl-friend Betty. At last, he longs to go back to England and dreams of his journey with Betty.

The novel interprets the clash between the values of the East and the West. Jhabvala has presented the differences in their life-style, religions and way of living. The failure in marriage is due to their different attitudes towards life. Their way of living in respect of food, clothing, bringing up of children and housekeeping are totally different. Thus, the problem arises from their social and cultural interaction. Esmond's relationship with his wife and Shakuntala does not last long because of the cultural disparity. Now, he decides to leave India for England as he feels alienation in India. Jhabvala, in her article 'Living in India' observes:

To live in India and be at peace one must to a very considerable extent become Indian and adopt Indian attitudes, habits, beliefs, assume if possible an Indian personality. But how is this possible? And even if it were possible – without cheating oneself – would it be desirable? Should one want to try and become something other than what one is [9].

3. CONCLUSION:

To conclude, the East and the West meet, but cannot blend and mingle. The novel, which is concerned with matrimonial adjustment between the East and the West, depicts the failure of such type of social and cultural adjustments. The initial attraction India holds for Esmond evaporates in the course of time and he feels caught and trapped in India. Here, the problem arises from the social and cultural interaction. In the novel, the marital dissonance arises from maladjustment which at last results into the marital disintegration.

Jhabvala speaks of the cycle of emotions every European living in India undergoes. In the novel, *Esmond in India*, Jhabvala has concerned herself with the European community in India. India seems to be a fabled land to the foreign eye. Jhabvala highlights how Westerners come to India with the bright hope of finding a spiritual peace and inward solace and satisfaction but finally, they leave it all disappointed.

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4. *Ibid.*, p. 32-33.
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