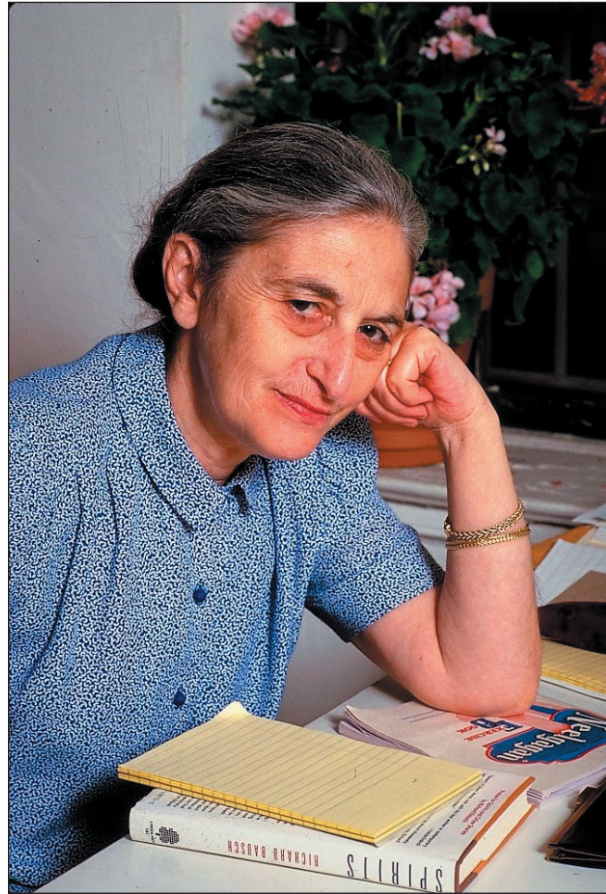


**The Artless Art of Ruth Praver Jhabvala's Short Stories**

*Review by Ramlal Agarwal*

RUTH PRAWER JHABVALA has been highly regarded by the Western literary world. However, she has been severely criticized and badly neglected by the Indian literati. C. Paul Verghese and Meenakshi Mukherjee did not consider her an Indian writer in English and did not discuss her work in their studies of Indian writing in English. However, C. Paul Verghese, in a short note on Esmond in India published in *The Journal of Indian Writing in English*, commented, "I am certain that Mrs. Jhabvala's understanding of India is not deep, and she just skims over the surface of urban life in India." He further says, "Her preoccupations are only with superficial concepts of Indian life." Verghese further says that Jhabvala suffers from a lack of empathy and an inability to get inside the skin of her Indian characters owing to the linguistic and cultural gap between them and her. Dr. V.A. Shahane, Prof. and Head, Dept. of English, Osmania University, says in his monograph on Jhabvala (Arnold-Heinemann), "In Ruth Praver Jhabvala, the bushes are neat and green, but they do not burn." The most vitriolic attack came from some of the most prominent literary critics, Eunice de Souza, Meenakshi Mukherjee, and Nissim Ezekiel.



Reviewing *A New Dominion*, Eunice de Souza wrote, "What Ms. Jhabvala does is create a set of Indian ducks she can attack with impurity. In a review of *How I Became a Holy Mother*, Meenakshi Mukherjee says that Jhabvala repeats herself again and again and that her style too consistently reduces any distances. The reader never really gets involved because of the deliberately dead-pan tone, and her devices of detachment preclude all possibility of our knowing the characters from inside." In a review of *Heat and Dust*, Nissim Ezekiel says, "Jhabvala's major weakness as a novelist is her inability to create any genuinely complex or even simple inner life for her characters." He also found fault with Jhabvala's prose.

The reason for such reactions lies in Jhabvala's predilection for exploring hollowness, failure, and disgust. and all through her work, she does exactly that. Her Indian critics think that she deliberately creates lame

ducks to malign India. Jhabvala neither maligns Indians nor deals with Indians superficially. It is her art and technique that create that impression.

Jhabvala does not take her characters under the microscope. She just follows them and records their deeds. Therefore, her narrative runs on its own steam. Moreover, Jhabvala does not strain to deck it with linguistic frills; therefore, there are no stains of effort, and her narrative acquires a natural flow.

Ruth was a Polish-German Jew, born on May 7, 1927, in Cologne, Germany. The persecution of Jews in Germany forced her family to move to London as refugees. She did her M.A. at London University, where she fell in love with an Indian architect, Cyrus Jhabvala, and married him. The couple came to India in 1951 and settled in an old, quiet place in Delhi. **Ruth started looking around and writing about what touched her most and suited her sensibility.**

The first story in her first collection of short stories, *Like Birds, Like Fishes*, is called "The Old Lady." It is about a traditional old lady and her daughter Leila, affected by the winds of change blowing in post-Independence India. Leila is married but wants to divorce her husband, Krishna, because divorce is common in the West. The old lady believes that girls must not talk about or even think of divorce in India. She thinks her mother is an old-fashioned woman and lacks dignity since she keeps talking with servants. The mother, however, keeps suffering because she is convinced that her daughter is headed towards disaster. The foolishness of Leila deals a stab in her heart as it does in the hearts of the readers.

Another story from the same collection is called "The Award." It is about a fake poet and a fake scholar looking for an award and a raise in salary. It makes the reader aware of the pseudo-literary culture and pseudo-literary scholarship creeping into the academic life of society.

Being a Westerner, Ruth came into contact with many Westerners living in post-Independence India. If she could see through the hollowness that pervaded the lives of a section of Indian society, she could also see through the hollowness that pervaded the lives of some Westerners living in India and write about it as she does about Indians. The stories in her second collection, *The Stronger Climate*, deal with them.

In a story called "Miss Saheb", Jhabvala portrays an English lady, Miss Tuhy, a teacher by profession. She has to retire early as she is not qualified enough for the new setup in independent India. But she does not want to leave India, as she thinks England is too cold and people are too reserved. With her meager resources, she stays in an unclean place. Sharmila, the granddaughter of her landlady, is very friendly with her. Tuhy helps her with her lessons. Sharmila gets married and becomes the mother of several children. She quarrels with her husband and returns to her mother. Her children become a great nuisance as they keep quarrelling and shouting. Tuhy finds that Sharmila, too, is growing more and more slothful. Her degeneration becomes the cause of Tuhy's unhappiness and engulfs her life.

"An Experience of India," in her third collection, is also about degeneration and a stubborn will to go through it. An English lady comes to India with a stubborn will to merge with India. **In India, she is raped by**

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**a so-called holy man, catches diseases, and falls ill.** Her husband wants her to return home, but she decides to stay.

In “How I Became a Holy Mother”, in her fourth collection, Jhabvala depicts a woman who agrees to be a part of holy shows abroad to rake in money.

Jhabvala’s stories depict characters who are hollow, frustrated, and suffering. She depicts them as they are, in the most subtle and unobtrusive manner.