

## CHAPTER FOUR

### HOW I BECAME A HOLY MOTHER

How I Became A Holy Mother (1976)<sup>1</sup>, Ruth Praver Jhabvala's fourth collection of short stories, reflects herself in India. This is clearly seen in the following statements of hers :

However I must admit that I am no longer interested in India. What I am interested in now is myself in India.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the stories in this collection are notable for her self analysis. Unlike Jhabvala's other work in recent years, these stories are not concerned so much with Europeans in India as with Indians themselves. According to John Murray :

The stories in How I Became A Holy Mother are about universal passions but interwoven with India itself. The heat, the vastness, the loneliness of India are all reflected in the lives of the people living in it so that the country is not only an additional character but often the most important one.<sup>3</sup>

'In the Mountains' deals with the lonely, disappointed and emancipated Indian Woman's life. She is living in the Himalayas, not caring for her youthful age of thirty. The story highlights the theme of conflict between the spiritual world represented by the young girl, Pritam and her old companion Doctor Sahib and the physical world represented by the girl's mother and her brother-in-law. In this conflict

inspite of Pritam's mother's efforts to bring her back to the worldly practical life, she chooses, to remain in the mountains. Both the main characters of the story, Pritam and Doctor Sahib, seem to be abnormal.

Pritam can be very moody and whimsical and can scold her poor mother without mincing words :

The prospect of meeting (her) held no pleasure for anyone. (P. 27)

Her feeling for Doctor Sahib are not clear, nor her past infatuation for Bobby. She tries an independent free life in the mountains and lives isolated from her family like a recluse and can discuss free love with Bobby. The Doctor Sahib also has been driven away by his people and lives in her neighbourhood, a strange beggar-like life. She says :

He used to go to the kitchens of the restaurants and beg for food. And they gave him scraps and he ate them --- He ate leftover scraps from other people's plates like a sweeper or a dog.(P. 39)

What can be achieved with such characters?

The next story in the collection, 'Bombay', recreates the life of a middleclass Parsi family in Bombay with their habits, their way of thinking, their diseases, etc. In this story Jhabvala cleverly handles the theme of old age and the generation gap between the young and the old. Nargis is the wife of a big businessman, Mr. Paniwala. Her father a retired journalist and his brother are living together.

The story powerfully paints the picture of the abnormal

Parsis with their diseases and disintegration. The main character of the Uncle (unnamed) is no better than a tramp, a homeless recluse behaving like a beggar. The life of Nargis doesnot improve even after her marriage to Mr. Paniwala :

Everyone should have been happy, no one was. (P.53).

Her son Rusi is ugly to look at and uglier to talk to. There is some mystery about his birth and it is hinted that the uncle might be his father! Jhabvala must have got a good deal of knowledge regarding the Parsis in India from her husband's family which is a Parsi Family. But the image of that community, presented here is far from healthy. It is painful to note the presence of abnormality, disease and death among them which could be accounted for by a lot inbreeding in their families. The title 'Bombay' is off the centre because the Parsis constitute a microscopic minority in the Indian society and in no way could they represent Bombay society.

'On Bail', yet another story regarding Indian middle class life, reveals Jhabvala's feminine sensibility and deals with the theme of the exploitation of women in the male dominated Indian society. It is the story of Rajee, who has extra marital relations with Sudha, and is not on good terms with his wife. His wife, who knows about her husband's immoral relations with Sudha, can not rebel against the established relations, has to suffer at the hands of her husband because she doesn't have any economic freedom. Jhabvala has beautifully depicted the plight of Indian women in the male dominated family structure.

The next story, 'Prostitutes' brings us to the world of cities of India. Here, very realistically, Jhabvala describes the Indian street-walkers and their rich visitors who totally forget their private family life. She depicts the world of prostitutes which is full of loneliness, dangers and anxieties. The story is narrated through three generations of prostitutes. Maji, an old prostitute, Tara, Maji's daughter and Leila Tara's daughter. Besides the theme of prostitution, the story is more serious on deeper levels. The story has more serious theme of co-life of a young woman and an old man. Mukand Sahib, a rich but old man tries to be in the company of Tara, a young woman of thirty five. Though he offers her all worldly things, she doesn't stay with him. Tara says to Maji,

"All I want is that he should leave me  
alone, leave me in peace." (P. 102)

She is attracted towards young people. Thus on a more serious level the story has the theme of a dis-joint between the young and the old. There is nothing special about the feckless, dull life of prostitutes portrayed here.

Her next story in the collection, 'Picnic With Moonlight and Mangoes' describes how the active passions of Indian people damage their social prestige and family life. This is the story of Sri Prakash, a gazetted Government officer blackmailed by Mr. Goel, who charges Sri Prakash with rape of Miss Nimmi, his own daughter. Unfortunately he succeeds and Sri Prakash has to suffer. Thus the story shows the theme of moral humiliation and the exploitation of a girl at the hands of her own father to earn money.

The story 'In a Great Man's House' is a touching study of a family of Muslim singer. Khan Sahib, a typical dominating husband and star musician loves his own comfort and cares nothing for wife Hamida's dreams and aspirations. She wants to attend a family wedding but Khan Sahib's music conference has kept her engaged and he doesn't allow her to go. Her sister Roxana, a poor musician's wife presents great contrast to Hamida. Poverty has made her behave in an abject manner. The story is a powerful picture of a Muslim woman's loneliness and sad plight. She tries to shower all her love on the young daughter of her poor sister because the husband neglects her :

When she was alone, Hamida lay down on the bed again. Khan Sahib seemed to be having a grand time with his visitors. She could hear them all shout and laugh --- He would be stretched out there like a king among them --- of course he wouldn't have a moment's thought to spare for his wife alone by herself in the back room. He would also have completely forgotten about the wedding and her desire to go to it. What were her desires or other feelings to him? (P. 174)

Later, the narrator commenting on the wife's plight says :

She felt so sad, so abandoned to herself,  
without anyone's love or care. (P. 175)

The last story in the collection, 'Desecration' deals with the relationship between Raja Sahib and Sofia, particularly the immoral and illegal side of their relationship. Basically the story is written in a romantic atmosphere and there is synthesis of Hindu and Muslim cultures. No one knows about the marriage of Raja Sahib and Sofia who later on develops a physical attraction towards a police officer and dies in a mysterious manner. Agarwal's comment is perceptive :

'Desecration' is a sad story of a sensitive woman married to an old person. Her husband provides her everything but not the sexual pleasures she needs. The suppression of sexual desires leads to a violent explosion and she finds herself in the power of a sex-maniac --- Sofia is in the power of forces which she cannot control and which are destroying her.<sup>4</sup>

In this story Jhabvala reflects the uncontrolled passions which destroy Sofia. She becomes the prey of suffocated feeling and hunger of passion.

East-West cultural encounter as presented by Jhabvala gets a new dimension in 'How I Became A Holy Mother'.

Spiritual quest has been a very dominant theme of Anglo-Indian writers and in the present story also we come across the theme of spiritual quest, though, of course, it has been presented in an ambivalent manner, ambivalent in the sense that a person brought up in a materialist culture can not accept the spiritual culture immediately. There is a sort of attraction and repulsion in the Western attitude towards Indian spiritualism.

It is the story of an English Woman who has joined an Indian ashram. Katie, tired of London life, gets a letter from a girl friend named Sophie who has found peace in a South Indian ashram. Katie develops an attraction towards Indian spiritualism and comes down to India in search of peace. Though she doesn't like many of the Indian ashrams, she gets settled in one of the ashrams in the Himalayas. Katie's observation regarding the Indian ashram clearly brings out her Western outlook of condescension.

After her visit to India Katie couldn't find Sophie and after a long search she settles down in one of the Indian ashrams in the Himalayas. The ashram is built on the slope of the mountain rows, of Himalayas and it is very clean. The Masterji is described thus :

Master was a big burly man, and as he didn't wear all that many clothes usually only a loin cloth - you could see just how big and burly he was. His head was large too and it was completely shaven so that it looked even larger. He wasn't ugly, not at all (P.4)

This description of the Swami seems to be objective because she just wants to create the physical image of the Swami, and in no way, wants to criticise this particular Swami.

Among the disciples there is a young boy named Vishwa who is going to be the next master of the ashram, its chief boss. Then there is an introduction of Countess, a rich, aristocratic, American lady who has come there to attain spiritual peace. She is given a special treatment in the ashram because she has helped Swamaji during his visits abroad. For Katie she is just an ordinary lady and later on she develops a friendship with her. Here, it is to be noted that Jhabvala is critical of the ashram because Countess is given a special treatment and she is looked at with concern by all the ashram inmates. The very foundation of the spiritual life has been shown crumbling down when Jhabvala refers to the physical relations between Countess and Masterji. An ordinary man, who could not control his passion becomes the head of the Ashram. This is an indication of Jhabvala's critical out look towards Indian ashrams. Masterji, who is attracted towards the material world of the West and who has all the imported things in his room, is the head of the ashram where he teaches the practice of renunciation!

At this point it is to be noted that Jhabvala doesn't criticise Countess, she is presented as the real judge of the Swami. As she doesn't recognise the Swami as a representative of the spiritual world, she turns her attention to Vishwa, who, will be next master in the real sense of the term.



Countess wanted Vishwa to be the man who would be acceptable to the Europeans. She looks at Vishwa from this point of view and naturally, therefore, she doesn't like Vishwa's relation with Katie because she thinks that if Katie-Vishwa relations are encouraged, Vishwa, like Masterji, may also turn out to be a fake Swami, a hypocrite.

However, when Countess realizes the purity of their relations she allows Katie to meet Vishwa during his illness. At the end of the story we learn that :

Master finally settled everything to everyone's satisfaction. He said Vishwa and I were to be a couple and whereas Vishwa was to be the Guru, I was to embody the mother principle (which is also very important) (P.24).

The total impression that the reader gets from the story is that Indian spiritualism is not a practical thing. It is fake and governed by the people who are hypocrites. It is also to be noted here how Jhabvala criticises the Indian spiritual life in particular and Indian life in general. When Katie visits Sophie's ashram she doesn't like it. Her hatred is to be clearly seen in the following observation :

I didn't stay long in that place. I didn't like the bitchy atmosphere, and that Swamiji 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 type. (P. 1)

Here she criticises the Indian Swami but not Sophie, probably because she thinks that the Westerners are superior in character to the Indians. She doesn't like Indian trains and buses which are very crowded and during her travels. She says that she had to be careful with her savings. It reflects on the Indian's habit of cheating others. In the following remark we come to know about Jhabvala's general impression regarding the Indian holy cities and ashrams :

Many of them seem to be in sort of dust bowls, or in the dirtier parts of very dirty holy cities or even cities that aren't holy at all but just dirty. (P. 3)

She is also critical of the disciples in the ashrams who remind her of a lot of school kids who are so full of tricks and fun.

All this shows that neither Katie nor Countess can fit in the so called Indian spiritual set up. Though Jhabvala shares her views with Katie and Countess we have to admit that sometimes she loves and admires Indian life. She likes the huge blue sky, lot of rivers, Indian scenery, mountains, and the snowpeaks.

If we set the things that she likes in India against the things she doesn't like, we find that it is the slender aspect of nature that she likes and the major Indian things she dislikes. This is presented through the cultural encounter on the one hand between Countess and Katie representing the West and the Swami and Vishwa representing the East. There is lot of cultural gap between the two and the Indians are

represented to be the people who do not follow integrity, but indulge in corrupt practices. Therefore a cultural gap between the Indians and the Westerners can not be met out. This view is reflected in one of Jhabvala's articles. In 'Why I Dislike India', she says :

To live in India and be at peace, one must to a very considerable extent become Indian and adapt 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? Would one want to try to become something other than what one is? I don't always say 'no' to this question.<sup>5</sup>

It can be very well said that, 'How I Became A Holy Mother', is just an illustration of these remarks. According to Ramlal Agarwal, it is very pathetic of Katie to become a holy mother :

Katie's acceptance of her role doing one night meditation - shows in the Western countries, is resigned rather than joyful.<sup>6</sup>

Jhabvala criticises not only Indians but also her Europeans. Katie accepts her role without understanding much about it.

There are some Europeans who come to India for mental peace and to shake off their boredom in the materialistic society in Europe. India reacts on them and they become sufferers. Indian poverty, Indian backwardness, and

mannerlessness surprise them. We find some Britishers who want to reform Indian society. Missionaries, Welfare people, teachers devote their life to reform the Indian society.

'Two More Under the Indian Sun', another story dealing with the foreigners in India, has very thin action. Margaret in love with India, lives in a large house and entertains many guests such as the old man, Babaji Margaret and her late husband Arthur thought themselves to be fortunate for being in India :

"As soon as I came here - and I was only a chit of a girl --- as soon as I set foot on Indian soil, I knew this was the place I belonged". (P. 115)

Babaji opines :

"In your last birth, you were one of us. You were an Indian." (P. 115)

However, Margaret's younger friend Elizabeth, married to an Indian Raju, is not very happy :

She had met and married Raju in England, where he had gone for a year on a commonwealth scholarship, and then had returned with him to Delhi. (P. 155)

Raju is angry with Margaret when she criticises the Indian National Congress. Margaret has a very strange opinion about her Indian servants :

We could never think of them as servants, really. They were more our friends. I've learned such a lot from Indian servants.

They're usually rogues, but underneath all that they have beautiful characters. They're very religious, and they have a lot of philosophy - you'd be surprised. We've had some fascinating conversations." (P. 123)

But Margaret feels that Europeans have a lot to do for India. As she puts it :

"It's criminal to be in India and not be committed. There isn't much any single person can do, of course, but to do nothing at all - no, I wouldn't be able to sleep at nights".  
(P. 126)

Whereas Margaret's concern for India sounds artificial because of her ignorance of her enormous problems, Elizabeth is a representative of the foreigners who find themselves 'trapped' in India.

The last collection of Jhabvala's short stories is notable in one respect : most of the stories here concentrate on Indian characters. If A Stronger Climate focuses attention on Europeans in India, How I Became A Holy Mother takes up Indians for exclusive scrutiny. But here again limited groups of a particular caste or religion or profession are chosen for study. Bombay based Parsis, some prostitutes with their wretched lives, Indian officers with their bribery and immorality, muslim musicians and the life lived in their houses - such themes attract her attention here. These characters can not be said to be representative of India. Muslims and Parsis constitute a minority in Indian society and

it is significant that Jhabvala selects them for her enquiry in this collection. The title story 'How I Became a Holy Mother' is the usual rehash of the Jhabvala material on Swamis, Gurus and ashrams. 'Two More Under the Indian Sun' is yet another exercise in establishing the sad plight of the European, stranded and alienated in India.

This last collection does not add anything to what she had said about India in her earlier stories. It is clear her inspiration is waning by the time this collection is published and significantly, having exhausted her 'material' on India, she leaves the country and settles in the U.S.A. for her personal good as well as that of India.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ruth Jhabvala, How I Became A Holy Mother, John Murray, London, 1976. All quotations are taken from this edition.
2. Jhabvala, 'Why I Dislike India', The Times of India : The Sunday Observer, May 10, 1987, P. 9.
3. Blurb on the cover to How I Became A Holy Mother.
4. Ramlal Agarwal, 1990, P. 85
5. Jhabvala, May 10, 1987, P. 9.
6. Agarwal, 1990, P. 87

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