

## CHAPTER ONE

### LIKE BIRDS, LIKE FISHES

Ruth Praver Jhabvala's first collection of stories came out in 1963 and was entitled : Like Birds, Like Fishes. These eleven stories, most of them already published in reputed American magazines, deal with her own experience of India. Only one story, 'A Birthday in London' has a foreign setting. V.A. Shahane thinks that this first collection is :

representative of one of the major segments of the theme, structure and spirit of her short stories.<sup>1</sup>

The characters in these stories are Indian social climbers, misfits in Indian society, mystics and hypocrites. These stories meaningfully allude to superstitions, legends and myths of India as well as the economic and other social problems of modern Indian society.

Her first story in this collection, 'The Old Lady' deals with the theme of restricted marriage bonds and the efforts of revolt of a young emancipate, Indian woman who wants to divorce her husband. Leila is the emancipated woman who is disputing with her traditional old mother about divorce. Indian marriage bonds are full of restrictions. According to her mother an Indian woman must not think of

leaving her husband because marriage is a sacred bond. She wants Leila to be happy, so she invites Leila's husband, Krishna, for lunch to develop happy relations between Leila and Krishna. Krishna is also reluctant to take divorce.

Two generations of Indian womanhood are juxtaposed here to bring out the tension. The old, religious mother, who holds marriage bond sacred abhors her daughter's impious stand regarding marriage bond. Leila thinks it to be brittle when she says,

Our attitude of mind is wrong, we  
don't understand that divorce is a  
natural thing in any enlightened  
society. (P.15)<sup>2</sup>

If on one hand, the mother represents out-dated moral stand regarding marriage, the daughter Leila, stands for the young, superficially modern generation. Jhabvala's ironical stance exposes the situation beautifully and the pathos of it is brought out in the final remark made by the child, Munni :

"Grandmother, you know very well  
Mummy says we mustn't be too  
kind to Daddy." (P.20)

Thus, the mother's egoistic attitude has corroded the child's mind and that is something to be worried about.

The next story, 'A Loss of Faith' shows us a lower middle class Indian salesman, Ramkumar and his family of two sisters, three brothers, grandmother, widowed aunt, uncle, uncle's wife and children. Surrounded by these kith and kin, poor Ramkumar has almost lost his identity and towards the end of the story his dream is broken into pieces. V.A. Shahane is

not right when he remarks :

'A Loss of Faith', however, operates on the surface, and there is no real attempt to probe into the depths of Ram kumar's soul.<sup>3</sup>

Jhabvala has definitely understood the Indian lower middle class life. Look at the following description of the hero's home :

He felt as if everything were closing in on him—the Muslim wives fighting upstairs, the crippled astrologer and, in his own room, the monstrous shapes of his mother, his wife, his grand-mother, the shrill voices, the quarrels, dirt and poverty and moneylenders who had to be cajoled (p.37)

The picture here is highly realistic. In one place in the story Ram. Kumar's widowed aunt is meted out a typically brutal treatment :

They Pinched her and pulled her hair and poked her with sharp cooking-irons 'Evil eye', they called her, 'Killer of your husband, bringer of death'. She had to accept everything, for it was true she was a widow and guilty of the sin of outliving her husband (p.24)

The observation clearly shows Jhabvala's firm grasp of the reality of Indian lower middle class life.

"The Award", reflects the true picture of Indian hypocrites. Dev Prakash gets the Sahitya Academi Award for his writing. Dev Prakash is sentimental poet who writes a poem like :

"My Country is rose in my heart,  
The rose is weeping but not tears,  
ah my heart: no tears  
Drop by Drop my rose weeps out  
its blood". (p.45)

There is a young junior lecturer writing a thesis on the psuedo-romantic sensitive poet Dev Prakash. Jhabvala very comically makes fun of Dev Prakash and the junior Lecturer. When Dev Prakash is analysing his poem his eyes are filled with 'new tears'. He was abroad for twenty five years in the Post-Independence days. His sister and his mistress represent the modern Indian women who enjoy the parties. Dev Prakash always indulges in nostalgia for London life and his love affair with Isabel in London. Jhabvala criticises Indian researcher who researches for increment. There are two classes, higher class represented by Dev Prakash and his family and the junior lecturer is the representative of middle class. According to Ramlal Agarwal :

'The Award' is a study of the mediocre. Mediocrity, like snobbery, makes for uneasiness and self consciousness, and is a natural target for irony, a mode in which Jhabvala excels.<sup>4</sup>

Dev Prakash poses to be a great patriot as is obvious from his ordinary poem but Jhabvala exposes his hypocrisy and shows him to be a mediocre hypocrite who knows which way his bread is buttered. His sister Usha stands for the rich, educated society woman of new India who is fond of the dinner parties where :

The food was always too heavy  
and too much, the guests too rich  
and too fat; and nobody had anything  
at all to say. (p.43)

She is highly contemptuous of the young lecturer and Jhabvala sharply notes :

There was nothing studied about  
the way she ignored the existence  
of the young man, his  
insignificance was too real for  
her to have to take up an  
attitude about it. (p.44)

'The Widow', the next story in this collection, deals with the theme of widowed life of a woman in Indian society. Jhabvala points out the custom of early marriages and problems of widows in India with the superstitions, influences of legends and myths on established Indian society. Durga is the wife of an old man who has a large estate. When he dies Durga becomes the owner of his property. At first all the relatives abuse her but for property they start praising her. She is an unfulfilled woman, so she takes interest in religion, particularly believes in Krishna's myths and waits for his arrival to fulfil her desire. Every day she worships Lord

Krishna but can't get his company as a lover or a boy. She accepts, afterwards, the Puri family as tenants. The Puris have a son, Govind whom she likes as her soul-mate but fails to make him that. At last she gives all her valuables and also her estate to her relatives and her neighbours and leaves home for ever to join the ashram where milkmaids are playing, laughing, talking, dancing and singing songs about Lord Krishna. Her neighbour Bhuaji says to her :

That is the way to give up every  
thing. Only if we give up every  
thing will He come to us. (P.78)

The existence of material aspect and spiritual aspect is a dominant characteristic of Hindu society. Jhabvala presents the expectations of the Hindus from a widow and her position in society.

The story is a subtle and preceptive study of the Hindu, undivided joint family and the plight of a widow in it. The suppressed sexuality of Durga and her final frustration have a touch of pathos about them. On the other hand, the greed and possessiveness of the relatives and neighbours are also brought out beautifully. Jhabvala's sure grasp of her material makes it effective.

'The Interview', deals with a young man of lower middle class family. He wishes to appear for an interview, but in fact doesn't. Jhabvala describes in detail the picture of Indian joint family with the treatment to daughters-in-law by mother-in-law, their quarrels and practical problems. Her main focus is on the uncertainty and hesitation of the young man who wishes to face the interview. At the time of the interview

panic seizes him and he pathetically asks them :

'Please excuse me - bathroom'(P.111)

He leaves the office and his fancy runs riot in sensually visualizing the big breasts of his sister-in-law under the satin blouse. V. A. Shahane calls it :

A genuine picture of a half  
baked Indian youth, rendered  
with remarkable sarcasm and  
sheer good fun.<sup>5</sup>

Jhabvala portrays her hero unheroic with powerful satirical flourishes and points out the modes of Indian people. This story is notable for Jhabvala's observation and accurate rendering of small details such as : the Indian offices, interviews, peons and clerks therein. As he prepares to go home, the young man visits an eating house and observes some Sikhs there, who :

had finished eating : They licked  
their fingers and belched deeply. (P.113)

This observation speaks volumes for Jhabvala's intimate knowledge of an Indian's eating habits.

The title story 'Like Birds, Like Fishes', highlights the theme of adolescent responses of a lower middle class young boy, Raj of nineteen and a just married young girl, Nilima of seventeen. Nilima belongs to high class family and her husband is an officer who attends the night college to get promotion. Nilima is bored by loneliness in her room so she calls Raj for company. She likes to talk, to play cards with him. Raj leaves his college and thinks about the adventurous life like that of his friend Dev. Dev is an adventurous young

boy who travels all over India and does what he wishes. Once Dev sends a letter to Raj in which he compares his life with birds and fishes:

'Like Birds, Like Fishes, so man also'(P.136)

Raj is haunted by this letter and is always thinking about adventurous life. When Shankar, the elder brother of Raj, knows about his relation with Nilima and his absence in the college, he scolds Raj. Raj leaves his house and comes to Nilima's house. He tells her about his plan to go to some remote place. She also decides to go with him and thus escapes from her loneliness. But her decision flogs at the railway station and she returns to her husband without Raj.

This story is about young people who build airy castles of romance but in reality it is very difficult for them to realize them. The story fails to achieve desired effect probably because Jhabvala is not successful in realizing her characters. Nilima makes an impression of an abnormal girl who doesn't know what she wants from Raj. Her dislike for her husband is not adequately motivated. On the other hand, the pathetic loneliness of Raj is properly realized here.

In 'Lekha', Jhabvala indirectly reveals the main character through another woman's narration. The main theme is the scandalous love affair of the heroine of the story, Lekha. Jhabvala examines the attitudes of modern Indian women of the upper and middle classes. Lekha is a nervous and nervy girl of twenty, married to an officer in the Ministry of valuation. She is a traditional woman who wears a cotton sari at a fashionable dinner party, puts a tikka mark on her forehead, stains the palms of her hands and soles of her feet with henna



to make them bright and underlines her eyes with black kohl. Jhabvala reveals the contrast between tradition and modernity in the higher middle class society. Lekha is very religious and fasts on holy days, bathes in Jamuna and celebrates all the Hindu as well as Musilm festivals.

Then, Lekha falls in love with Govind, a skilled musician, who spends his time in coffee houses. She says that her husband is good and kind, but Govind has roused her soul. Through the character of Lekha the writer suggests that the demand of passion is powerful than other worldly material things. Yasmine Gooneratne makes the following perceptive comment on the story :

Among many stories in all four collections which examine critically or satirically the attitudes of 'modern' Indian women of the upper and middle classes, "Lekha" is outstanding in the range of its references to the Indian social and cultural scene, its insight into female psychology, and its evidence of an early interest in technical experiment<sup>6</sup>

Jhabvala's next story, 'Sixth Child', deals with an Indian's craving for a son. Indians wish to have a son not only to inherit the property but for the religious importance. In Indian society there is need of a son to preside over the funeral obsequies and to pour the ghee to feed the cremating fire. Babu Ram, a cloth shop owner has five daughters but wishes to have a son. All his relatives and friends are

anxious and advising him to have patience. During the sixth pregnancy of his wife he visits many temples with her and gives feast to five hundred brahmins and prays to God for a son. Then he confesses the sins committed in the past among which is his beating of an old man. He asks forgiveness of the old man and takes him home, where he finds his sixth issue, another daughter.

The story has two points - (1) The hero's foolish but pathetic craving for the son. (2) His sense of repentance for the sin of driving away the old man. He is sure that a son will be born to his wife if he brings back the old man. Jhabvala exposes his ignorance finally by giving him another daughter.

The last story in this collection, 'My First Marriage', has a subtle plot with a complex web of human relationships. A young girl in high class society elopes with a poor unpredictable and immoral young man, M. She marries him and knows that he is already married and also has children. The Daddy and Mamma visit her modest home at Niripat and are shocked beyond belief. They scold her and try to persuade her to return but she has full faith in M. Then M. turns a sadhu and tells the meaningful stories to the people. People believe the miraculous power of God in him. At last M. disappears suddenly and the girl returns to the house of her parents to marry Rahul, her first lover. Vasant Shahane rightly points out that :

This (main experience in the story)  
could have been a rewarding  
experience for psychoanalytical

exploration, but Jhabvala doesn't touch even its fringe. The result is that the story is a dismal failure.<sup>7</sup>

'The Alien', is a fine study of Peggy, an English girl, who after her marriage to Dev, an Indian, finds herself trapped in his Indian household. The cultural differences between the two are so sharp that everything appears strange, and meaningless to her. Dev's brother, his wife Sarala and the mother-in-law present a formidable army of strange people to Peggy. These Indians shout at one another, overeat themselves, openly talk of sex, criticise Peggy's English dress, even play jokes on her flat chest and hint that she should have begotten babies. Their behaviour is crude and Peggy helplessly loses herself in thinking nostalgically about her life in England.

The story presents a powerful picture of the cultural encounter of the English girl with a set of Indians. Jhabvala's intimate knowledge of higher middle class Indian families makes the story full of lively touches. Indian beliefs, customs, eating and dressing habits, the horror of Indian heat are brought out with such accuracy that one feels tempted to say that in Peggy, Jhabvala might have created her own plight. Alongside an autobiographical essay, 'Introduction : Myself in India', this guess gains considerable ground because many things experienced by Peggy are seen to have struck Jhabvala herself as she confesses in the essay.<sup>8</sup>

Jhabvala's India as presented in her first collection of stories is peopled with interesting Indians. Nine out of eleven stories deal exclusively with India and Indians and her preception of things Indian. She is especially effective

in rendering the Indian reality in small observations about Indian manners and mores. The modern educated Indian woman's divided soul, clash between traditional and western values, the Indian's proverbial sloth, inactivity and penchant for talking endlessly on any issue, their lack of purpose, the superficial life lived by the higher class Indians - these motives receive a convincing treatment here.

Although she is successful in presenting a convincing picture of high middle-class life in India, Jhabvala's appreciation of the lower class characters is obviously superficial. The India presented in her first collection, thus, is limited to the clubs, officer's houses, Indian joint families living in and near the city of Delhi. Many of the stories are strangely inconclusive and a faulty perception of the Indian Characters' motives makes them behave absurdly. There is very small action in these stories and after keeping aside the book, what we remember is Jhabvala's accurate observation of superficial and small details of her limited India.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Vasant A. Shahane, Ruth Praver Jhabvala , Arnold Heinemann, New Dehli; 1976, P. 144.
2. Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Like Birds, Like Fishes and other stories, Panther Books, Granada Publication Ltd., London, 1984.  
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3. Shahane, 1976, P. 166.
4. R.G. Agarwal, Ruth Praver Jhabvala : A Study of Her Fiction, Sterling Publisher Private Ltd., New Delhi, 1990, P. 82.
5. Shahane, 1976, P. 173.
6. Yasmine Gooneratne, Silence, Exile and cunning : The Fiction of Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Orient Longman Ltd., Bombay, 1983, P. 237.
7. Shahane, 1976, P. 171.
8. See her An Experience of India, John Murray, London, 1966.

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