

Voicing the Devoiced: Ruth Praver Jhabvala and the Gendered Language

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Abstract: Fiction has become a transparent window on the world, unfolding the manifold events that occur in the day to day life. It is a genre that depicts the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusion of wit and humour to be conveyed to the world in the most chosen language. Literature has always been a handy tool for exploring gender relations and sexual differences. Feminist scholarships undertake to deconstruct the social construction of gender and the subsidiary cultural paradigms that suppress it. Gender issues have attracted greater attention in the recent Indian fiction written in English and regional languages. They acquired greater focus in the hands of women writers. The role of women in Indian society and the iconic image of the female in India have continuously passed through an evolutionary process and literature has always been the principal medium to create and articulate this feminine image. Because she is a Polish-German by birth, English by education, Indian by marriage, Ruth Praver Jhabvala's Indianess is very much challenged and questioned. She calls herself a European writer who writes about India. Her novels unleash her ire against the male supremacy that deprives a space for women in society. Her portrayal of India and Indian women is more Indian than many of her counterparts. Her world is largely personal and domestic depicting the suffering and frustrated Indian housewives and her works teach them to establish an identity apart from the one conferred by the patriarchal machines. Jhabvala, in her novels, presents a blatantly realistic picture of the post-Independence familial and social scene of urban India. Jhabvala perceives women especially, and life generally, as submerged in the decadent, materialistic and insensitive male world. But her women recognize the role of man in a woman's life as an exploiting force on several spheres and levels that she has to depend on her own degree or tolerance for survival. Jhabvala lays bare the Indian women as somebody other than the Sati-Savitri of tradition, steeped in orthodoxy, hemmed in by taboos and leading a life of subordination. She displays the Indian women as someone who overcomes handicaps, can live with pain and come out of it, can live as a modern woman, modern in outlook, Indian in origin, and with a strong mooring in traditional values.

Keywords: Feminism, Subjugated Women, Marginalized Women, Patriarchal Dominance, Gender Discrimination

Fiction, in the recent decade, has become the most powerful literary genre depicting the saga of human activities and experiences, unfolding human thoughts and feelings, hopes and dreams in an unmitigated way. According to Robert B. Haskell, "fiction and drama present men and women reacting to each other in the way that is closer to life" (1). Though the visual media is gradually gaining prominence and ground, the influence and popularity of fiction have not ebbed to date. As Henry James has rightly remarked "fiction has become a transparent window on the world", unfolding the manifold events that occur in the day to day life (1). It is a genre that depicts "the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusion of wit and humour to be conveyed to the world in the most chosen language" (Liddel 6). Novel unearths things which we do not know and which we know. The intellectual metamorphoses, the novels bring can never be overestimated as it holds "the world of life under a permanent light" (Kundera 5). This genre that holds a unique place and sway among human beings takes separate roots and direction in strikingly different cultural environments.

Literature has always been a handy tool for exploring gender relations and sexual differences. Feminist scholarships undertake to deconstruct the social construction of gender and the subsidiary cultural paradigms that suppress it. They strive to liberate women from the structures that have been marginalizing them. Feminist consciousness has certainly given a fresh ardour and excitement to literary studies. Women writers have unveiled the prejudices at work in those works dominated by a masculine perspective. Elaine Shaw Walter rightly concludes that the female literary tradition comes from the still-evolving relationship between women writers and their society. Yet women writers still hold that all languages are utterly and irredeemably male engendered, male constituted and male-dominated. Discourse, Lacan proposes is phallogocentric as it proposes logos as its prime signifier, power and source. Many of the women writers struggled to evolve a 'She Language' that would fit the female experience they desired to express as opposed to the patriarchal language – 'He language': a weapon used by the powerful (the male) to oppress and silence the subordinate (the female). Thus, the question of gender has always been very alive and prominent in theoretical debates. Despite their aversion for male theories, the feminists, however, have not been able to completely wrest themselves off their counterparts. Feminists always desire to wrestle their share of discourse from men. Thus, a more meaningful subject for literary writing would focus on the idea of psychic fragmentation of the weaker sex rather than on the theme of social oppression which assumes only a secondary position. The oppression of women is not only a material reality originated in economic conditions but also a psychological phenomenon - how men and women perceive one another.

Gender issues have attracted greater attention in the recent Indian fiction written in English and regional languages. They acquired greater focus in the hands of women writers. The role of women in Indian society and the iconic image of the female in India have continuously passed through an evolutionary process and literature has always been the principal medium to create and articulate

this feminine image. The process of emergence of Indian feminist consciousness, based on principles inherently different from Western feminism, has been at work for over a century. Though many of the Indian women writers often refuse to be branded feminists, one can discern feminist postures, implicitly, if not explicitly in their writing. These writers attempt to depict the feminine suffering and defiant upsurge experience by women under the duress of socio-cultural stress and strains in the traditional and conservative Indian milieu. Issues of gender, involving male and female roles and their interconnectedness with narrative and space, have come to the forefront in the recent Indian novels written by women. Alphonso Karkala observes, “They tried to tell the world the obstacles women faced and the disadvantages they suffered, in an Orthodox Hindu Family” (41). Gender is invariably limited to class, culture, caste and identity in the Indian context. So far as social hierarchy and female subordination are concerned, feminist criticism marks out a broad area of literary studies that are eclectic, original and provocative. While defining the role of man-woman vis-à-vis family and society at personal, social, political and economic levels, the Indian women writers are not impervious to western-European feminist theories. The man-woman relationship is revealed from a gender perspective to explore ideological implications. Gender is viewed as a cultural construct, while sex is biological. . It was Kate Millet who argued in her *Sexual Textual Politics* that ‘no one is born a woman but made a woman’. Thus, while sex is biological, gender is a social construct. Many critics embraced this concept that while “sex” is fixed, “gender” is a mutable and argumentative entity. So there exists a basic *difference* between the two. Gender critics turned essentialism head around and pointed out that identity is not predetermined, but rather subjective. The picture of the suffering women has undergone a radical change in the hands of women writers. Never content with the role stipulated for them by their elders and society, the woman writers voice their protest against anything that stifles their individuality and let lose their ire against a patriarchal framework that always considers women from their perspective and demand that women are constructed to fulfill the requirements of men. Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of the enduring, self-sacrificing women towards the conflicted female characters searching for their individuality and identity. Though dependency syndrome still exists, women project and interpret their experiences from the viewpoint of a feminine sensibility just because the feminine experience of the world is completely different from that of men. Therefore, they write out their different perspectives, what the feminists call “a woman’s point of view” an outlook sufficiently distinct to be recognizable through the centuries.

Quite a few Indian novelists have explored female subjectivity to establish an identity that is not imposed by a patriarchal society. Thus, the theme of growing up from childhood to womanhood is a recurrent strategy in Santa Rama Rau’s *Remember the House*, Ruth Praver Jhabvala’s *To Whom She Will* and Kamala Markandaya’s *Two Virgins*. The Hindu moral code, known as *The Laws of Man*, denies woman an existence apart from that of her husband or his family, and since the publication of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s *Rajmohan’s Wife* in 1864, a significant number of authors have portrayed Indian women as long-suffering wives and mothers, silenced by patriarchy. In mythical terms, the dominant feminine prototype is the chaste, patient self-denying wife, Sita, supported by other figures such as Savitri, Draupadi, and Gandhari. When looking at these narratives, silence or speech can be a useful guide in interpreting women’s response to patriarchal hegemony. Silence is a symbol of oppression, a characteristic of the subaltern condition, while speech signifies self-expression and liberation. The image of women in fiction has changed during the last four decades. They are no longer characterized and defined in terms of their victim status.

Indian women in the past were denied opportunities available in her society. The traditional values, early marriage system and the purdah custom, etc., confined women within the four walls of their homes. The proverbial saying “tota mulier in utero” (woman is nothing but a womb) sums up the attitude of men towards women. For Simon De Beauvoir the situation of women is such that she, a free and autonomous being, finds herself in a world where she is compelled by man to assume the status of an inferior to whatever man imagines her to be. Besides, when a woman defines herself, she starts by saying “I am a woman”. No man would do so. This fact reveals the basic asymmetry between the terms masculine and feminine. Man defines the human, not woman. Being dispersed among men, woman has no separate history, no natural solidarity. She is riveted into a lopsided relationship with man; he is the ‘One’ she is the ‘Other’. She has no identity other than her family. Against this backdrop, The Indo-Anglian women writers attempted to portray women with a voice of their own, a voice that had been suppressed for centuries. The presence of such a desperate, dissolute, and frustrated women in their midst deeply triggered the women novelists to depict the destitute situation of the Indian women, to help them out of all circumstances that stifle and chalk their existence, personality, and identity. According to Susie Tharu, “these writers contested the structures that were shaping their world. They tactically redeployed dominant discourses, held on to older strains and recharged them with new meanings and even introduced new issues, new emphasis, and new orientations” (54). Endowed with the capacity to make free choices, these women do not any longer depend on the choice of the male. Women writers like Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Kamala Marchandya, Nayan Thara Sehgal, Anitha Desai, and Shashi Despande have become powerful paradigms of the struggles that Indian women encounter. Their conflicts, victories and defeats, their struggle against the establishment and the resultant frustration take thematic significance in their works. These writers have eloquently voiced the devoiced by portraying the woman's side of life, the experiences of man’s ‘other’, the marginalized and silenced half. Breaking off from the traditionally made domestic novels that focus on public subjects and public space, women’s novels bring to the centre the ignored and unexpressed lives that have been in the periphery and mercy of male lives. They probe the Indian woman’s new identity which is “anchored in the bio existential reality” and which “walks a razor's edge” (Indira J Patrick 43). Consequently, these women novelists have been able to create interesting personages who successfully expose the oppression inflicted on women in society. India is diverse in culture, caste, and creed but homogeneous in the exploitation of women. Women characters portrayed in their novels symbolize life and growth as well as regression, with drastic decay and death. Equality and liberation are the two words; the Indian women now are familiar with. Nevertheless, she is also conscious of the reality of her life that refuses any easy solution or smooth exist from those limiting structures that keep her always as woman subjugated by the male society. Though they fail in their fight, these characters stand as resilient creature prepared to endure and prevail with the help of their inner strength and

integrity. Self-introspection and self-discovery help them to recognize their veiled inner strength. It is now woman emerges as the ultimate redeemer for, as mother, wife, sister or daughter, she contains in herself the power for sustaining the family. These novelists depict women as the cultural backbone of the family just because of their capability to provide physical, emotional, and cultural vitality to their respective families. As a result, even in a male-dominated tradition-bound society, such women adjust well; can felicitously establish their value system and the inner potentiality enable them to resist all unjust social and opposing and oppressive pressures. Her settling down complacency to the roles of mother, wife, sister, or daughter is not a symbol of defeat but the expression of her autonomy.

Because she is a Polish-German by birth, English by education, Indian by marriage, Ruth Praver Jhabvala's Indianess is very much challenged and questioned. She calls herself a European writer who writes about India. Her novels unleash her ire against the male supremacy that deprives a space for women in society. Her portrayal of India and Indian women is more Indian than many of her counterparts. Her world is largely personal and domestic depicting the suffering and frustrated Indian housewives and her works teach them to establish an identity apart from the one conferred by the patriarchal machines. Jhabvala, in her novels, presents a blatantly realistic picture of the post Independence familial and social scene of urban India. "Jhabvala writes about possibly the only social segment of urban India that she knows at first hand," remarks Shane (231). Her works evoke vividly the first decade of Nehru's India - its political idealism, its vitality and confusion. Jhabvala, with her European sense of irony, was well placed to put this 'unlovely chaos' into fiction. She is probably the first writer in English to see that India's Westernized middle class, so preoccupied with marriage, blend itself well to the style of Jane Austen's comedies of manners. She succeeds in giving an astonishingly true picture of the stereotypical women of Hindu households with the joint family system. Her novels register her protest against the injustice and inequality dole out to women in a society governed and shaped by men to suit their needs and interests regardless of women's basic needs and happiness. Feminism, free sex, alienation, identity crisis and an individual's struggle for freedom are major thematic concerns in her novels. Her women are heroines who voice their dissent through their recognition of, and resistance to male dominance in their relationship with their husbands in the joint family system. The perceptible reality of women in India - woman as mother, sister, daughter, grandmother, friend, mother in law, daughter in law and as a conscious being-in-itself and being for itself - gained Jhabvala considerable recognition as a significant novelist in English. She probes into the subconscious layers of experience of sensitive young men and women in an urban milieu. For Jhabvala, women fall under three categories; Indian women, expatriate women and women in the American setting. Her women characters are acutely aware that they grow smaller every day because they are trapped in the myth of the wife and the mother, the roles assigned by society, and expected to play. The new women, depicted in her novels, protest against all conditions that obliterate their existence and identity, realizing simultaneously that the psychological odds against which they battle are peculiar and finally they subscribe themselves to the Indian image of women. They do not flout or reject tradition and if they do so, it is only with the firm conviction of posing themselves as modern. Jhabvala realized through her experience in India that while the Indian women pretend to be modern on account of their western education, they never consciously deviate from the established conventions and mores, though they initially protest and rebel against such mechanisms that belittle and destroy womanhood. So Jhabvala is not so much interested in character delineation of her women characters but in attacking the double standards of the Indian women. She follows a distinct code of conduct affecting various aspects of their lives. Her characters encounter variegated existential problems such as adjustment between husband and wife, man and society, etc. The Indian ethos is captured in her novels and shows her awareness of man and society in their human and moral dilemmas. Except for *Esmond in India*, Jhabvala's novels portray the Indian family life and its constant preoccupation with finding suitable husbands for young girls. The problems encountered by her female characters spring from their social and cultural interactions. Jhabvala takes up for her portrayal, the theme of disillusionment in its gentlest and the most benign form in *To Whom She Will* and *The Nature of Passion*. The novels symbolize the distinction between the illusion and hard reality discovered by the protagonists. Through the protagonists of these novels, Jhabvala presents an astonishingly true picture of the stereotyped women and their relationships. Even in their constricted world, these women carry out their day to day living with nothing else to occupy their minds, except matters of food, clothing, marriage, childbirth and death. Yet, remote ricochets of the agitated, suffering, uneasy and suffocating lives of women are heard even in their complacent attitudes. The seeds of courage to revolt against the deadpan social mores are discernible in even something as inconsequential as having one's long hair cut short as in *To Whom She Will*. If a husband's way of life does not suit his wife, she will no more suffer everything silently and stay with him forever. Divorce and separation are hinted at and is the proverbial Excalibur perpetually hanging over the man's head. If a widow, even though a grandmother, happens to like a man, there is nothing that can stop her from marrying him; if a husband neglects his wife and expects her to remain passive at home, revolt is expected. However, there are no three dimensional or multifaceted pictures of the Indian women, ranging from Annapoorna, the provider, to Kali, the destroyer in Jhabvala's novels. In her works, one can perceive the first indications of the desire to overthrow bondage and their yearning to be independent. Her women are the forerunners of the Indian women who fight for their liberation and identity. Novelists like Namita Gokhle, Shashi Deshpande and Shobha De, drawing inspiration from Jhabvala, depict women who fight against all limiting frames that restrict their identity as women.

Jhabvala's characters are generally neurotic females, highly sensitive but sequestered in a world of dream and imagination and are alienated from their surroundings as a consequence of their failure to cope up with reality. Rebellious, are her characters. Shoving off the suggestions and opinions of the elders, they embark upon a long journey to establish their identity and existence. Having wandered a long and meandering way, they come to a deadlock, where they recognize that their quest had been either insignificant or thwarted by sexual exploitation resulting in their inability to unravel and solve the mystery that had wrapped their lives.

Jhabvala's early novels present exclusively the Indian women and the conservative social system. These novels render Indian families and the predicament of women. For e.g., *To Whom She Will* and *The Nature of Passion*, unravel the cosmic misunderstanding of the pain of lovers. The novels are rich in reverberations of the undercurrents in the female world and trumpet, though the situation is bleak and gloomy, that the Indian women will, someday, liberate themselves from the clutter of time-worn tradition and breathe the same air as men do. *The Nature of Passion* also handles the collision between tradition and modernism in personal and familial echelons. The novel presents a fictional world, though rich in colours, touches of humour, and interests, that is the symbol of male rapacity on a vast scale. The novel gives vent to the hidden and unleashed passion of Indian women for freedom, liberty and equal status in a patriarchal society in feminine terms. Through Jimmie, Jhabvala sets in motion the silent stirrings in Indian women, who desire to leap beyond the confining walls of their homes, their longing for a share in the world of men and the quest for an identity of their own. The novel is an implicit diatribe on the plight of women in the Indian joint family and the long-cherished desire of the subjugated women for emancipation. But still, a long way has to be traversed; a lot of oppositions have to be encountered before women can establish their place in a society that is dominated by men and his whims and fancies and aspirations ideas. *Esmond in India* revolves on a women's precarious predicament. The novel amply proves that Jhabvala's perception of Indian women is greater than that of Indian men. She pictures, here, the male's excessive possessiveness, bickering, domineering nature; their greed and self-centredness. Jhabvala delineates also the mental and psychological stresses and tortures undergone by those Indian women who wish for emancipation and independence. Though women in Jhabvala's novels do not seem to pay much attention to the age-old conventions and norms in their expression and experience of love, they are bound by the invisible threads of their upbringing, social status, and innate Indian sensibility than by any formal rule of Purdah. As a consequence, her women are not radical enough to set in an insurgency in their attempts to assert their identity. Yet, they have succeeded in creating ripples in the serene, sedate and predetermined lives of the traditional women of India. *The House Holder* presents a marriage that starts off badly by ends as a success. The novel focuses on the strife of the young couple, Prem and Indu, to establish their household and earn a good living to strengthen their social standing and internal integration of family life. Though a feminist, Jhabvala is not a radical who desires to shatter familial bonds. She believes firmly in the solidarity and stability of familial bonding. The novel ends with the emphasis that woman is the pivotal fire in a household provided man proves his manliness in managing resources, gratifying sexual needs, and catering to emotional desires without any intrusion or authoritarian hold on his wife. The woman is fully liberated only when she accepts and performs her duties as a daughter, sister, wife, and mother, daughter-in-law, and mother-in-law. Jhabvala, in her attempts to voice the devoiced, comes to the stark realization that however modern Indian women are, it is quite a daunting task for them to be totally free. Faced with this hellacious reality, the only thing she can do is to express her matriarchal sympathy with the members of her own sex. Jhabvala avers that Indian women's search for identity; the quest for a home, is through self-discovery and self-realization.

In *Get Ready for a Battle*, no more being content with passive, submissive, docile role women play in Indian Society, the women characters, Sarla Deve, Kusum Mehra, and Mala are ready for a final battle for their freedom and identity. Unlike traditional Indian women, these characters are ready for divorce, separation, and self-reliance when these become necessary. If they do not find their husbands' behaviour no more appropriate to them, they are ready for divorce, instead of suffering everything stoically and silently like the orthodox Indian women. Jhabvala in this novel presents the hidden anger and frustration of women against the prevailing system: "You have the office, you have your friends, you drive off in your car and do what you like; while I sit here only and wait for the day to be finished" (*Get Ready for a Battle* 28). These three women are the three different interpretations of the progressive sensibilities of modern Indian women at different degrees of self-actualization. *A Backward Place*, *Anew Dominion*, and *Heat and Dust* outline the psychological turmoil trauma, and cultural schizophrenia of expatriate women.

Heat and Dust narrates the story from a female point of view and unfolds the fatal consequences of religious erosion and the sentimental embrace of India by western women. The novel emphasizes the fact that moral perversity is equally applicable to men and women. But women most often are victims of moral depravity. She is helpless in front of masculine power and often is lured and enthralled by masculine strength and show of love and affection. She is unable to read the hidden intentions of men when they love a woman outside the marriage bond. This happens everywhere and the female search for wholeness, exaltation, and transcendence is often shattered by the macho.

Jhabvala's women protagonists as well as other women characters, despite their freedom in life, suffer from obsessive and paradoxical compulsion of love and unscrupulous infatuations that finally go out of their control. However strong and liberated her women are, in the end, they are all victims of patriarchal machinations. A close survey of Jhabvala's fictional world makes it evident that the exploitation of women has always been the persistent motive of the male world. Jhabvala triggers splinters of self-awareness and identity; self-reliance and individuality to a section of the female world through her novels. Her oeuvre shows how women step out into the wider world and how it had widened their scope and perspective. Yet, Jhabvala is aware that all women regardless of race, religion, culture, graphical situations, or geographical boundaries are prone to be emotional, sensitive and sentimental. They are all victims of the dependency syndrome. Her women characters may be broadly placed in four major categories. First, those women who are passive or submissive who accept with unquestioning resignation the dictates of the society. They are self-immolating mothers, like Judy in *A Backward Place* or Indu in *The House Holder*. Second, there are the aggressive and assertive women, who are dissatisfied and rebellious. Their yearning for fulfillment is often coupled with love and when they encounter social conventions as impediments and barriers, controlling and transforming themselves, they fit themselves into the society; like Etta in *A Backward Place* or Kusum in *Get Ready for a Battle*. The third type is both submissive as well as idealistic. Such women resort to radical and drastic steps for attaining their goals and ideals like Smitha Devi in *Get Ready for a Battle*.

Jhabvala sketches in her novels, the oddities and eccentricities of middle-class India and mirrors how it contains and suppresses women in the name of social mores. The patriarchal hegemony and the subservient slavish position of women are blatantly portrayed by her. In such a society, any attempt by women to redefine themselves and establish their individuality is immediately branded as rebellion and revolt against the hard-handed control of the male. Deprived of self, women are compelled to subscribe to the standards instituted by men, while they themselves are jettisoned out of its frame. Though the situation is murky, Jhabvala presents the inner throbs of Indian women who desire freedom and liberty. The stoic subjugation of women, Jhabvala argues, cannot be contained for long. There will come a time when these women will break themselves loose off any confinement and fight for their rights. The deoiced cannot be kept voiceless for long. Their voice has to be heard and they have to be given their due space in the society- a space apart from the dependency on men. Jhabvala knows that it is not an easy task because man is mostly governed by head and women by heart. She, accepting the challenge, presents a woman's world, a new exciting feminine world revealed through a whole spectrum of women. Her 'New Woman' is the saga of an isolated woman who is frustrated by male absolutism, groping for emotional anchorage. Jhabvala offers a vivid picture of a woman's encounter with patriarchy and a rigid oppressive social system. Her psychic potential deals with the crippling effects of circumstances that prevent a woman's proper development. All her women suffer in their attempt to settle themselves in an ordered world. Jhabvala perceives women especially, and life generally, as submerged in the decadent, materialistic and insensitive male world. But her women recognize the role of man in a woman's life as an exploiting force on several spheres and levels that she has to depend on her own degree or tolerance for survival. Jhabvala lays bare the Indian women as somebody other than the Sati-Savitri of tradition, steeped in orthodoxy, hemmed in by taboos and leading a life of subordination. She displays the Indian women as someone who overcomes handicaps, can live with pain and come out of it, can live as a modern woman, modern in outlook, Indian in origin, and with a strong mooring in traditional values.

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