

‘Suffering Selves’ as Projected by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala in her *Heat and Dust* and *A New Dominion*

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ABSTRACT

*Ruth Prawar Jhabvala is an extremely outstanding artistic excelling in the field of fictional writing. This paper beautifully analyses the ‘suffering selves’ in Jhabvala’s works **Heat and Dust** and **A New Dimension**. It neatly examines how far existential philosophy brings to light the sufferings experienced by the characters. Jhabvala is endowed with immense creative powers and heightened sensibility and clarity of vision and rich imaginative capacity and writing at an appreciable level.*

Key words: *Suffering Selves.*

Ruth Prawar Jhabvala occupies a marvelous position in Indian English novel. Born in Germany, she came to England in 1939 at the age of twelve and took an M.A. degree at the London University and married an Indian architect and settled in India in 1951. In spite of her stay in India since 1951, she felt herself to be alien here in India. This is evidently brought by her when she herself says:

“But it is not always easy to be sensitive and receptive to India; there comes a point where you have to close up in order to protect yourself. The place is very strong and often proves too strong for European nerves”.
(P.72)

A European settled in India, she is free from the tendency of the regional writer to romanticize her subject – matter. At the same time she cannot be as remote from the Indian scene as the western writer who flits in search of material. Her Indian vision coupled with her involvement in the Indian situation leads to an objectivity and detachment rare even in Indian writing in English. A prolific and versatile writer, she has written about personal relationship, man-woman relationship and domestic life in her novels. She has to her credit publication of such novels as : **1. To Whom She will** (1955) **2. The Nature of Passion** (1956), **3. Esmond in India** (1958) **4. The Householder** (1960), **5. Get Ready for Battle** (1962), **6. A Backward Place** (1965), **7. A New Dominion** (1972) and **8. Heat and Dust** and also such short

stories collected in **An Experience of India** (1967), **Like Birds, Like Fishes** (1963) **A Stronger Climate** (1963). As a novelist, Jhabvala stands in comparison with Jane Austen. She “looks at life in modern Delhi with amused, yet detached interest and she is lights upon what is bizarre, what is knotted with self-deception and contradiction, what is ludicrous, what is fantastic and occasionally – very occasional – even what is perilously close to tragedy. Jane Austen worked wonders in her little bit of ivory, hardly two inches wide. Hers was a state society, more or less, at least in was recognisably a ‘society’.

No doubt, Jhabvala both as impressive fictionist and creative artist, is of an outstanding calibre and high artistic maturation and she has the rare capacity to open up a closed world and make it clearly visible to perceptive and critically oriented readers. Her literary products are qualified by contextual relevance, structural finesse, organizational tightness, verbal brilliance and artistic control. By introducing humanistic concerns and universal issues, Jhabvala ensures lasting value and quality to her **oeuvres**. As such, she has grown into a great artist of significance, relevance and consequence, taking pride in being an Indian writer in English. Quite significantly, she reflects probably in her novels on the problems and issue of life, human relationships, love and she which are universally experienced by all in all ages in the past and also in the years to come. In

fact, life precedes literature as far as Jhabvala is concerned.

Jhabvala is an extremely outstanding artistic genius excelling in the field of fictional writing. In fact, she is endowed with immense creative powers and heightened sensibility and clarity of vision and rich imaginative capacity and writing and language skills at an appreciable level. K.R.S. Iyengar, the doyen of Indian critics, acknowledges the literary eminence of Jhabvala as:

"He (Iyengar) praises Jhabvala for her "engagingly entertaining art"..... (Sucher, 9)

According to Bellippa, "Jhabvala's art is that which is one of exploiting human incongruities...." (P.9) In fact, Jhabvala's writings become more and more serious as Jhabvala becomes more and more aware of the Indian relatives, which are Indian poverty, both material and spiritual, ignorance, heat, dust and the relentless passage of time. As a creative artist, she absorbs and expresses everything that she has witnessed in the society. In a way, her novels can be termed as richly revealing social documents without the least trace of propaganda literature and she projects herself as the representative spokesperson of the women and men of her time. Her main focus is on the plights and predicaments, stresses and strains, tensions and anxieties, struggles and sufferings and the psychic traumas and hysterical conditions of women. Like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Lorraine Hansberry, the African women artists, Jhabvala refers to the men who cause sufferings to women. Furthermore, in delineating the male characters Jhabvala bestows the same attention and care with which she projects the female protagonists. She writes of the male characters who too suffer alienation as some of her female characters do. As such, Jhabvala draws the attention of women to be an guard against such male characters in real life. Hence, Jhabvala's literature is helpful in guiding women readers to discover their inner strengths through self-definition and self-discovery. Above all, she champions the cause of the women in their struggle for intellectual, moral, spiritual, economic, social and political survival and for their empowerment and emergence as women

capable of doing all that the males are capable of doing, if not better. No doubt, Jhabvala opens in the hearts and minds of the perceptive readers a stronger sense of social justice for she believes in the social justice track for both men and women. In the words of Allan Chavkin,

"To be human is to make decisions and to act in a world full of misery and heartbreak. Maturity comes about only as a result of experience and experience always involves suffering..." (P.162).

Jhabvala's characters Olivia in **Heat and Dust** and Lee and Margaret in **A New Dominion** are the suffering and struggling individuals, passing through anxieties and tensions angst, and experiencing stresses and strains and confronting several hardships. The life of characters gets reduced to one of endless suffering and unspeakable tension. The characters, Olivia in Heat and Dust Lee and Margaret in A New Dominion experience continual struggle against forces of which in the case of some they are ignorant of their cause and effect factors, and in the case of others, they are helplessly tossed about. They suffer from fear psychosis at to their present and their future. Yet again, the environment over which they have absolutely no control, controls them. As such to better appreciate the characters of Jhabvala as the suffering and struggling selves, it is imperative to have a knowledge of what existentialism stands for Existentialism is nothing but a philosophy and cultural impulse with roots in Biblical thought and ancient Socratic concept and its characteristic feature, as indicated by the origin of the word, is concern for human existence especially for the affirmation of freedom and the refusal to subordinate personal awareness to abstract concepts or dehumanizing social structures. It does represent rebellion against established ideas and institutions that inhibit personal freedom and negate responsibility.

Suffering and struggle are part and parcel of the life of the human being in his or her existence. In fact, in struggle remains existence' The human being is afflicted by fate destiny and

is filled with anxiety at the dreadful possibilities of life and the dread of death. It is with such a background Jhabvala's characters like Olivia and Lee can be examined as 'suffering selves' Olivia is a classic sufferer. To begin with, Olivia suffers loneliness in the midst of the other prudish English women. This is evidently brought out here:

"She (Olivia) kept asking herself how it was possible to lead such exciting lives administering whole provinces, fighting border battles, advising rulers and at the same time to remain so dull. she looked around the table..... at Mrs.Crawford and Mrs.Minnies in their dowdy frocks more suitable to the English watering places to which they would one day retire than to this royal dining table; Major Minnies and Mr.Crawford, puffy and florid, with voices that droned on and on confident of being listened to though everything they were saying was, Olivia thought, as boring as themselves"(HD, 15).

Olivia acutely and sharply passes through imposed loneliness which is an existential suffering ;

"She (Olivia) had by that time been in Satipur for several months and was already getting bored Olivia was alone in her big house with all the doors and windows and shut up to keep the heat and dust. She read and played the Piano, but the days were long, very long"(P.14)

This kind of loneliness attenuates her suffering. Stuck within the four walls of her home, Olivia finds no outlet for suppressed emotions, and thoughts. This lonely existence causes her suffering. And life turns out to be struggle with oceans of time glaring at her in her world of loneliness. The only person who relieves Olivia's loneliness and frees her from the monotony of life is the Nawab:

"It was nice to have someone feel the same was as herself; she hadn't so far met anyone in India who did. Not even, she sometimes could not help feeling, her Douglas. She looked at him again where he sat listening

to Major Minnies with attention and with genuine respect (HD, 16).

Olivia constantly wishes Douglas would impregnate her and give her a baby, which in turn will enable her to drive away once and for all her loneliness. But he is not able to make her pregnant and that increases her suffering. The passage reads thus:

"Now it was Olivia who lingered behind. She stopped again by Saunders' grave and knelt to rearrange her flowers. She remained there. It was getting darker, the shadows were gathering . Sadness filled her heart. She didn't know why; perhaps because she wasn't having a baby?" (P.107).

Olivia fully regrets and feels sad that Douglas cannot make her pregnant. On the husband's wedding day, Olivia feels drawn to the Nawab by a strength a magnetism that'she has never yet in all her life experienced with anyone. And the net result is that she becomes pregnant. But then she dreads to face the future. Thus, from the beginning till her death, Olivia experiences only suffering and in struggle alone, she experiences her existence.

In the novel, **A New Dominion**, the protagonist Lee suffers because of her self - deception. Lee remains essentially thus :

"Lee is truthful, with others, of course, but first of all with herself. She wanted her whole life to be based only on truth found and tested by herself"(AND 216-17).

She is enterprising and adventurous. She has come to India" to try and learn" (P.32) and moves freely and unconventionally at all levels of Indian life in order to do so; her search for the meaning of life turns into a process of emotional, rather than intellectual education. With her youth and emotional in experience, Lee tells Asha that she has never been in love and "I don't want to be either" (AND 32) remotely , But the subconsciously sexual nature of her imaginings shows that Lee is physically and emotionally ready for love, despite her desire to rise above "these small things that engulfed people" (P.61) to a spiritual plane. Lee's preconceptions and self-absorption blind her to

the truth about herself and those around her and cause her to suffer and struggle. Quite amusingly Lee writes off the agonizingly sensitive Raymond as a mere tourist and acquiesces to Gopi's egoistic sexual demands in a charitable spirit!. She was glad to be doing this for him" (AND 42). When love comes to her at last, in the shape of the phenomenal and predatory Swamiji, she does not recognize it. To quote here :

"I (Lee) drag myself around. I've never been like this before. Everything is so strange, so dismal; it's as if there no light in the sun, and those glorious Indian nights are dark and drab to me" (P157).

Raymond notices her jealous misery when Margaret basks in the warmth of Swamiji's regard but Lee cannot understand her own condition. When after a prolonged period of deliberate neglect of her by Swamiji, Lee initiates a nocturnal interview with him in the course of which he has sexual intercourse with her, her life subtly alters. However, what is characteristic of Lea is that she still sees her changed condition in spiritual terms. Lee withdraws from the ashram and visits Asha and Banubai at Banaras in an attempt to become her independent self again. "From now on, I'll do without anyone" (P.172). But both at Banaras and Meupar, her feelings go beyond her control. Self deception has Lee in its grip, which is the root cause of her sufferings : "I always felt good in the ashram" (P.183) Finally, Lee's misplaced conception and

confidence in the truth of her perceptions make her life rather pathetic and miserable. Thus, Jhabvala has projected Olivia in **Heat and Dust** and Lee in **A New dominion** as the suffering selves.

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We learn wisdom from failure much more than success. We often discover what we will do, by finding out what we will not do.

~ Samuel Smiles