
**RUTH PRAWER JHABVALA AS A SATIRIST – A CRITICAL STUDY OF
A NEW DOMINION (1972)**

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ABSTRACT

Ruth Praver Jhabvala has carved a niche for herself in the field of Anglo-Indian Fiction. She is Polish German by birth, English by education and Indian by marriage. Her marriage to an Indian architect and her stay in India made her familiar with the life and manners of her adopted country, India. At the same time her birth and education in West gifted her with western sensibility which endows her with an uncommon insight into the typical traits of Indians, particularly the urban upper and middle classes as they keep undulating between tradition and modernity. Jhabvala's major concern and obsession in all her novels is India. The major themes of Jhabvala's novels are East-West encounter, role of religion in one's life, pseudo modernism, sex and marriage exploitation, and affectation and hypocrisy in Indian middle class people. Being a European writing about India she observed all the Indian characters objectively and depicted them in all her novels as a detached observer. Her literary career is divided in three phases. In the First phase of her writing career she depicted India which enchanted her. The second phase of her literary career portrayed India which was beyond her tolerance and naturally made her bitter and critical about India and its people. In the third phase of her writing career she wrote about India as a promised land which has scope for reconciliation of East and West.

Jhabvala's A New Dominion (1972) is written in the second phase of her writing career. In this novel, she launches a severe attack on westernized Indians and their shallow hypocritical attitude to even pressing Indian problems. This novel is a satirical portrait of Indian inconsistency, selfishness, and false and moral degradation. It depicts the brutality and corruption prevalent in the so called religious centres in India. The purpose of this paper is to study A New Dominion from a satirist point of view.

KEY WORDS: *East-West encounter, Spirituality, Swami Ji, Satire on Westernized Indians, Disillusionment, Quest for identity*

ABBREVIATION: *AND - A New Dominion*

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INTRODUCTION

Ruth Praver Jhabvala has achieved an International reputation as an Anglo-Indian novelist. She is prolific as a literary artist. In her novels, she introduces Indian characters and her settings are also Indian. Her understanding of the Indian scene is more authentic. Her stay in India for a long time helps her in her vision. V. A. Shahane says about her position, “Jhabvala should not be linked with other creative writers in English such as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao or R. K. Narayan, nor with women novelists such as Kamala Markandaya or Nayantara Sehgal. She is in a way unique and the advantages as well as the disadvantages of her literary situation are particular to her.”¹ She is distinctive because she has demonstrated the qualities of a literary artist which are her own. She is ‘insider-outsider’ and at the same time ‘outsider-insider’. From the literary point of view she is ‘outsider-insider’ and from artistic point of view she is ‘insider-outsider’. Her advantage is that she is a European living in India and her disadvantage is that she is not a grass rooted Indian. She traces the Indian characters objectively. She is detached, ironic and satirical while portraying Indian characters.

R. P. Jhabvala has dealt with the themes of East-West encounter, impact of religion on people, love, sex and marriage, and hypocrisy of middle class people. She handles all her themes realistically. She is widely regarded as a major creative writer of fiction about India. She observes the Indian people, Indian society, Indian family and the Indian spirituality. She has portrayed an ironic and satiric and yet sympathetic picture of India. Her novels are neatly divided into three phases. The first phase of her career focused on social intercourse vis-à-vis East-West encounter with special reference to the European attitudes to India. In The Second phase of her literary career she produced novels which were labelled as European novels. The third and final phase of her writing probed the Bohemian European Psyche with Indian characters remains at the periphery. The theme of spirituality forms the axis around which these novels revolve.

Jhabvala’s *A New Dominion* (1972) is written during the dark phase of the novelist’s life in India. In this phase, she portrays her own interpretation of India and its people. The characters in her novels are uprooted from their soil. They are in search of identity through self discovery. They come to India for spiritual quest. This journey for spiritual salvation ends in disillusionment and destruction. Jhabvala satirically portrays this journey that proves shallow and meaningless for the westerners. She has observed India from the point of view of a European, so it was easy for her to present the ironic, bitter, and satirical yet the true picture of India. In an

Interview with Ram Lal Agarwal when she is asked whether she considered herself as an Indian writer, she replied, “No, how could I be? I’m not, am I? There is no getting away from the fact. I write differently from Indian writers because my birth, background, ancestry and traditions are different. If must be considered anything, then let it be as one of those European writers who have written about India.”²

The novel *A New Dominion* is divided into three parts titled, ‘Delhi’, ‘The Holy City’ and ‘Maupur’. The novel is episodic and each episode has a subheading e.g. ‘Gopi Come To Tea’, ‘Red Roses’, ‘Raymond Writes To His Mother’, ‘A Secular State’ etc. James Devise in the *Glasgow Herald* writes that the novel is, “episodic and its fragmentary chapters are devoted to characters in and out of turn.”³ Jhabvala has named this novel *A New Dominion* that is a satire in itself. The title of the novel suggests different themes. If we see at the surface, it suggests that ‘New Dominion’, means a new India. But as we go through the novel we see that India has not changed. The Indians have only adopted the western culture from the artificial point of view. The new westernized Indians are not more than hypocrites. They waver between their tradition and modernity. So the title of the novel is a satire on new westernized India. Yasmine Gooneratne described it as “an Indian chauvinism that has replaced British Imperial arrogance.”⁴ It a satire on India and its people who have not changed even after independence. She depicts the reality of contemporary India in social, cultural, religious, political and spiritual contexts.

A New Dominion is the story of three western characters: Lee, Margaret and Evie who come to India in search of a spiritual quest. They are in search of an identity of their own. The word identity can be discussed in many ways. It may be related to spirituality, financial stability, roots, heritage etc. Their journey to this promising land of India ends in their physical and mental destruction in the hands of a false Guru. Every character in this novel is in search for something. Asha is there for physical fulfillment; Raymond is in search for artistic beauty. Lee is in search for self-realization. Margaret is in search for spiritualization.

The novel begins with a small episode- ‘Lee Travels’, and this is symptomatic of *A New Dominion*. Lee is the central figure. Her main aim in her journey is to lose herself in order to find herself. These three girls Lee, Margaret and Evie are weary of western way of life and its mechanical society and its materialistic trend. To quench their spiritual thirst, they go to different religious centres for spiritual rejuvenation which are headed by many religious Guru’s. All the western girls are seduced by Swami Ji. Through this episode Jhabvala has portrayed the

spirituality of India satirically. The religion in India is preached by bogus and pretentious Guru's. Swami Ji is a symbol of Indian heritage of mysticism. Swami Ji is sensual and materialistic. Lee, Margaret and Evie want to be a part of the ashram. Evie believes that the soul of India embodies in the Swami Ji. Swami Ji is a hypocrite who is one of those hundred Swamis in India who adopt religion because they have no good jobs. He is a false guru, who does not know anything about spirituality. He exploits innocent disciples. Swami Ji seduces all of them, holds them by his charm and claims them as his possessions, corporal as well as spiritual. This depiction of religion by Jhabvala is a satire on spirituality that is manifested and admired in every part of India.

Through Asha-Gopi relationship Jhabvala seems to imply that hypocrisy in sexual affair is a typical feature of the Indian mind. When Gopi marries the girl of his parent's choice, he finds that it is necessary for him to justify his illegitimate sexual relationship with Asha to his friends. Jhabvala satirizes that instead of admitting that it a purely physical relationship, they try to mould it on spiritual level or turn it as brother – sister relationship or mother – son relationship. At Banubai's ashram, Gopi says Asha is "like a mother to me."⁵ (AND 128) When Raymond gives no answer, he says, "I can see from your face, you don't understand! You don't know anything. You have no idea of our culture. In your culture there is nothing- only sex, sex, sex, - so how can you understand what it means to be mother and son, what a beautiful relationship it is for us." (AND 129) Jhabvala ironically comments on this hypocrisy of Indians who are ready to have illegitimate relationships but do not have the courage to accept them publically.

Jhabvala satirically portrays Indian's hypocritical attitude towards sex. She conveys that Indians consider sex as a sin. They make it a secret. When Lee surrenders herself to Gopi, Gopi's attitude towards sex is crude and insensitive whereas Lee's attitude is generous. Lee's surrender to Gopi is an act of Bravado for Gopi, on the other hand for Lee it is a generous effort to his friend. The Indians have strange views regarding the western attitude to sex. They think that western girls are ready to sleep with anyone. When Gopi is in hotel room in Delhi, with Lee, he says to himself, ". . .she must have slept with many, many men, over and over again. This thought suddenly excited and infuriated him." (AND 10) Jhabvala seems to convey that it is the other way round in the novel where all Indians are ready to seduce all western characters in the novel. Another satiric but true picture of India is portrayed through Raymond - Gopi relationship. Raymond has come to India in search of artistic beauty and homosexual fulfillment. He is

fascinated with physical perfections of Gopi. His concern for Gopi is real. But here too, Jhabvala attacks the Indian middle class people who are represented by Gopi. Gopi makes friendship with Raymond because he knows that he is a westerner and rich enough. He uses people in order to achieve what he wants in life. Then he makes friendship with Asha who is a widow, only to have her money and to satisfy his physical needs. He is a parasite who lives on others. His bodily charm hides his cunningness and selfishness. Jhabvala aptly describes this loyalty of Indians towards relationship that is dominated by their materialistic gains.

Raymond's sympathetic attitude towards Shyam, an Indian servant in the novel is a satire on Indian system where servants are maltreated at many places. Raymond wonders about this inequality. In India servants are treated like animals at many places. This incident between Gopi and Shyam brings out the difference between rich and poor in India. R. P. Jhabvala ironically comments that when a European like Raymond can be sensitive to the human rights of a servant, then why Indians can't be sensitive to the rights of their fellow beings.

Mrs. Jhabvala has attacked royalty as another aspect of contemporary India. Rao Sahib has lost his royalty. He has understood this fact. That's why he has turned into a Politician from a Prince. But her sister Asha is not able to accept this fact. Both of them have lost their pride and integrity after losing their royalty. Rao Sahib does not have the courage to stop the illegitimate affair of his sister Asha with Gopi. Like his ancestors Rao Sahib could not save the honour of his family. On the other hand, Asha also has lost her pride in her royal values by having a sexual relationship with Gopi. Rao Sahib and Asha are representatives of that Royal India who have lost their pride and privileges.

Another incident that shatters India's dream of being a new dominion is where we see that Lee wants to help a dog who is suffering outside the ashram. When she tries to do that, Swami Ji stops her from doing that. Swami Ji's notion of suffering is related with evils done in the past. Jhabvala attacks this attitude of Indians who believe that if someone is suffering, it is the result of his evils done in the past. Rekha Jha opines, ". . . Jhabvala comically observes how the India commiserates his present pitfalls and relates them to the evil done in past life."⁶

R. P. Jhabvala bluntly attacks the false beliefs of Indians, when Margaret falls ill and she refuses to take treatment. Raymond wants her to take to the hospital. But in Swami Ji's ashram the illness is diagnosed as hepatitis. She rejects the offer to take her to a doctor because of Swami Ji. At the end, she is taken to the Maupur hospital, but it is too late. Her tragic end is barometer of

the sardonic power that Swami Ji wields over all western girls. Jhabvala's opinion about this impact of false religion is aptly described by Aruna Chakarvarti. Aruna Chakravarti opines, "That is actually a criminal de-sensitization that is brought home to the reader with a shock bordering on terror."⁷

In this novel Jhabvala satirically portrays Indians who are westernized in their ways. They intermix with the westerners. They live luxurious lives. But they are naïve about the native India. They adopt a different pseudo culture of their own. Harish Chandra alias Bob is the representative of bourgeois mentality. Jhabvala portrays him in an ironic and comic vein. Bob is representative of all those Westernized Indians who are influenced by American Culture but they are Indian in their habits and moorings. Mrs. Jhabvala says, "He drank it in the Indian way laying back his head and pouring the liquid down his throat without allowing the glass to touch his lips, the way he held the glass rather daintily between two fingers was also very Indian." (AND 194) His portrayal is a satire on the pseudo culture of all those Indians who adopt the western culture and remain partially western or partially Indian.

Thus we see that *A New Dominion* represents British and American point of views of contemporary India. In it we find that the western girls like Margaret, Evie and Lee are in search of spiritual India. The irony is that they get very opposite picture of their original concept. At the end of the novel we can see whether all the characters quench their thirst for which they are searching. Certainly they are not. But they feel they are gaining. They adhere to whatever they find. Only Raymond is a person who feels that his feelings for Gopi are overwhelming and this tortures him only. At the end of the novel, he prepares himself to go to his homeland. He thinks that it is beneficial for him. Miss Charlotte becomes a victim of politics. She has been in India for 30 years. But in the end she is going to her home and says that home is still home.

Gopi does not know the meaning of love. He is happy with Asha and He is happy with Raymond too. He is having relationship with Asha but ready to marry the girl of his parent's choice. In fact he is a parasite who manipulates every person according to his need. Lee is destroyed by Swami Ji physically and mentally but at the end of the novel she is ready to go back to his ashram. What type of *A New Dominion* it is? Every character is destroyed and not satisfied. Indians and their culture are presented ironically. In this novel, Indians are worst people. The total effect of it is very disappointing. It is well said by Aruna Chakaravarti, "*In A New Dominion*, the image of

India gets darker” as it, “conveys with astonishing intensity the psychic sum total of her twenty years exile.”⁸

A New Dominion depicts the realistic trends of Indian society vis-à-vis western society. The polarity between the two cultures (East and West) is quite obvious and juxtaposed by Ruth Praver Jhabvala. Without being prejudiced the comments of R. P. Jhabvala though satirical are realistic, recommend enough room for reconciliation.

CONCLUSION

Ruth Praver Jhabvala portrays with gentle and good humoured satires, the oddities both of the individual behaviour and social customs. In *A New Dominion* Jhabvala has satirically portrayed both ‘physical and spiritual’ journeys of all Indian and western characters. The Indians and westerners are brought together in association or conflict. Westerners are fed up with their materialistic world and self centred society. They are in quest of meaning of their lives and to find that meaning they come to India, a land of promises. But here, all Swami Ji who preach religion are not genuine. Jhabvala tries to show that in western culture India is considered to be a land of spiritual solace. But through this novel she wants to convey a message that this is not true. Truly it is a satire on Indian Culture, and its people and its fake Swami Ji. Ram Lal Agarwal asks R. P. Jhabvala in an interview, “Which according to you is your best novel?” She replied, “*A New Dominion*.”⁹ This personal reaction is quite significant. Thus we can say that it is a novel in which Jhabvala has satirically portrayed her own interpretation of India that she had while her stay in India.

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