

ARTISTIC VISION OF EAST-WEST ENCOUNTER IN THE WORKS OF ALICE MUNRO AND RUTH PRAWER JHABVALA

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Abstract:

A sincere effort has been taken to bring together two of the most popular writers of the East and the West, namely Alice Munro, a Canadian novelist and short story writer, and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, a Polish by birth who later on settled in India marrying an Indian and wrote mainly about India, Indians and Western women in India. The specificities of social life, customs, cultures, traditions, family surroundings, etc. have conditioned the artistic vision of the two writers. The present paper develops to show women's relationships with their husbands, daughters and others in their families. The paper also studies how they develop their women characters' mindset from girlhood to womanhood, and show how correspondingly the characters change their attitude and sensibilities. The two writers are typical in the sense that they are endowed with the consciousness of the problems faced by women in their domestic domain and in society. Effort has been taken in this paper not to bring in mere parallels, but to integrate the unique artistic vision of both the writers by putting them on the right track.

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Alice Munro and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala wrote novels on India. The specificity of social life, customs, cultures, traditions, family surroundings, etc. have conditioned the artistic vision of the two writers. They are typical in the sense that they are endowed with the consciousness of the problems faced by women in their domestic domain and in society. Effort has been taken in this paper not to bring in mere parallels, but to integrate the unique artistic vision of both the writers by putting them on the right track. First the place of women in contemporary society and their familial relations are visualised by both the authors. Though they belong to two different countries and cultural traditions, they have developed their own perceptions concerning women, their urges and needs on the basis of human equality and dignity, keeping in view, their actual social conditions. Although the common denominator in each of the writer is the deplorable condition of women, each in her own unique way studies the problem from her own cultural perspective.

The study of the mother-daughter relationship, the relationship between women living in the same families, the problems women generally face as they live with their husbands, their submissiveness to their domineering husbands, their trials to sally away from the mainstream, their search for self-fulfilment and their final homecoming in order to find some measure of adjustment and accommodation within the existing situations are some of the common areas of interest shared by both the writers. In both writers, human love pervades their stories in which sisters are bound by mutual love and affection, and stepmothers and stepdaughters are tied together by cords of indescribable love. As wives, the women figures, shower upon their husbands abundant love in spite of the fact that there are problems to be resolved.

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's writings deal mainly with the Indians and their ways of life and hence there is a tendency on the part of the critics to call her an "Anglo-Indian" writer. The other part of her works deal with the Indian women living abroad, and a variety of English folks, young and old, living in India. As many of her English women in India accept the Indian ways of life and try to assimilate Indian culture, they

are studied along with the Indian women characters. About this problem of categorization Jhabvala herself has said: "Sometimes I write about Europeans in India, sometimes about Indians in India, sometimes about both, but always attempting to present India to myself in the hope of giving myself some kind of foothold" (qtd. in James Winson 720).

This double vision gives her (Jhabvala's) works richness and power, and a sense of naturally controlled irony. Sastry points out that "The East-West encounter is one of the basic themes in many of her short stories" (164). Her plots centre on domestic situations and everyday occurrences. The fundamental importance in their stories is people's perceptions of themselves, of others, and of the world at large. They demonstrate what a woman sees in her family and around her and how finally she behaves as a meek, mild and domesticated ordinary woman. The two writers endowed with a unique and rare vision of life and an incredible power of transmuting their personal experiences into artistic creations which are beautiful and realistic vignettes of family life.

Generally, a woman's identity is defined in terms of her relationship as a mother, a daughter, a sister and a wife. It means virtually a woman does not have an identity of her own. Living in society postulates human relationships which can become a source of vibrant, fulfilling experience to the individuals or can lead to frustration and anguish. Munro has rightly understood this psychological factor and hence familial connections are very strong in her stories. Her portrayal of women characters from different generations throws light on her understanding of the importance of human relationships. In Munro, mothers are portrayed as sick and crazy. But in spite of the sickness and the hysterical nature, the mothers have deep and intense love for their daughters. One may find a faithful and realistic representation of Mother-Daughter relationship in her works. As Notar and McDaniel state, "One of the earliest and most profound bonds women form with each other is that of mother and daughter" (11).

Munro wants to stress upon the fact that whatever be their situation, they are primarily concerned with the well-being of their daughters and the other members of their family. In the story "Family Furnishings" Munro shows that the mother becomes very sick, and soon she changes herself into "a stricken presence around the house" (*HFCLM* 98). Amidst her sickness, she always gives counsels to the daughter and later it is emotionally felt by the daughter as: "My mother would say that she did not like to see a woman smoke. She did not say that it was indecent or unladylike--just that she did not like it" (88). The daughter also puts across that her mother has a horror for irregular sex and she feels that sex is only for married people. The mother figures feel that it is their duty to prepare them to face the future ordeals as boldly as possible or adjust themselves to the situations that may arise.

A similar situation is seen in the story "Soon" in *Runaway* when Juliet goes to see her sick mother, Sara, with her daughter, Penelope. To express her deep love for her daughter, the mother, though very sick, goes to receive Juliet and Penelope at the railway station. She reaches out her hands for Penelope "the arms that slid out of her sleeves were sticks too frail to hold any such burden" (90). Penelope, who has tensed herself at the first sound of her grandmother's voice, yelps and turns away, and hides her face in Juliet's neck. Munro artistically emphasizes the extremely sick mother's intense and unfathomable love for her daughter and granddaughter.

Munro's portrayal of the condition of sick mothers at home makes her readers awesome. Nevertheless, their love for their children never abates. The sickness and the neurosis of the mother who was suffering from Parkinson's disease are in a way reflected in her stories. In an interview with Geoffrey Hancock, Munro said, "Mother-daughter relationship interests me a great deal. It probably obsesses me. . . . Probably because I had a very intense relationship with my own mother. She became ill when I was quite young" (*Canadian Fiction Magazine* 103-04).

Incidentally, it is to be noted that like Munro's mothers, the mothers of Jhabvala too are affected by a streak of hysteria and craziness, mainly due to their familial connections. It is quite interesting to see that these mothers very often miss the love and affection of their husbands and they turn towards their

daughters, showering upon them all their love and kindness, feelings and emotions. Evidently, one will be impelled to find how mothers, whoever they may be, are actuated and conditioned by social, cultural and familial traditions. This common factor underlies and unites the artistic vision and the psychological understanding of the two artists who realistically bring out the behavioural patterns of the mothers in their respective cultural settings.

In “Gopis” Jhabvala tells the story of Lucia who prefers to go to India from her native place New York to learn Indian dance. Lucia finds it hard to reckon herself with her mother who is a Westerner scorns Lucia's commitment to Indian dance. So Lucia refuses to see or speak to her mother for months and she does not even say “goodbye” to her before leaving for India. However, since her arrival in India, both mother and daughter are constantly on the phone talking to each other. After she goes back to New York, Lucia gives up all her desires, ambitions and interests for the sake of her sick mother forever and stays back in Connecticut.

Indian mothers' inexplicable love for their daughters is also deftly depicted. This deep-seated love for children is ingrained in the very heart and soul of all mothers, whatever be their nature, culture and traditions, bring Jhabvala very close to Munro. It is a common psychological, physiological and biological trait in all women. Again in Jhabvala's story “Life,” Rosemary's mother, Nina, furnishes her room so beautifully well when Rosemary arrives from New York. The daughter who cannot accept her mother's love feels that it “had been overlaid by my own interests” (*MNL* 5). Also the mother Nina who has been a spectacular beauty begins a career as a film actress that may lead to stardom. The daughter knows the fact that it is very hard for her mother that she is not pretty. The daughter's as well as the mother's attitude and feelings towards each other is well brought out by the writer: “I knew how hard it was for Nina that I was not pretty, . . . She would buy me frocks that would have looked lovely on some other little girl and I put them on eagerly. But it was Nina herself who said, 'Take it off, darling,' and she would turn away in tears” (*MNL* 5).

Jhabvala also points out that it is only in the mother's house a woman can find the needed comfort and consolation and not anywhere else. In the story “Prostitutes” Tara lives in a house which is bought for her by her lover, Mukand Sahib. She has not felt lonely at all in the house. She eats and sleeps and plays with her daughter, Leila. She is very proud of her husband and of his attachment towards her. When Tara visits her mother's place, she relaxes that it is: “. . . the most comfortable place. . . . Tara stretched herself out on the mattress on the floor in an attitude of complete relaxation” (*HIBHM* 201). When Tara complains about her lover to her mother, “I don't want to see him ever again. I hate him. . . . I'm not going back there. I shall stay with you” (205), the mother advises her: “You can wait for seven births and plead and pray with folded hands, and still you will not meet again a person like Mukand Sahib” (204). She continues, “He has been sent to us from above” (207). The story illustrates that a mother's love for her daughter is unfathomable and real, whatever be the circumstances under which they live. As C.S. Lakshmi puts it “A woman's conflicts, battles and victories are viewed as springing from the family and as being resolved within the family system” (141).

It is to be noted that in both the writers, in certain situations, the relationship between the mother and the daughter gets strained but the mothers' love and affection towards their daughters never alters. Also, sometimes, the daughters are ignored and neglected by the mothers to a certain extent. However, at the end, forgetting all differences they come close together and enter into a new realm of heart-warming love relationship which is all the more tantalizing. This psychological change-over is portrayed by both the writers as faithfully and as realistically as possible.

Another interesting area in both Munro and Jhabvala is the portrayal of the relationship that exists between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law. Munro in her stories reveals the strong love that unites the two. In “Jakarta” Cottar leaves his mother and his wife to Hong Kong. He has real concern and affection for his mother, Delia, as it is revealed from the words of his wife Sonje: “He knew I'd never desert her. So

that was all right" (*LGW* 108). Sonje, the daughter-in-law, is very fond of her mother-in-law and her love for her goes even further than that of the son. Under no circumstance, both the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law break their hearts and lose their love for each other by openly discussing Cottar's separation with them.

In some of the stories, Jhabvala too, portrays the sincere relationship between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law though at times their relationship gets strained because Western daughter-in-law does not like the culture difference shown by the mother-in-law. She has her own grudges when she senses that her mother-in-law does not like her Western fashions and style of behaviour. In the story "The Young Couple" the English daughter-in-law, Cathy is proudly welcome by all in her Indian family. She knows very well that the family has great love for her than all the love that is being showered upon her by her English friends: "She could not complain that they did not care for her. The trouble was they cared too much, so that she felt herself lapped around and drowning in more love than she had ever before, among her cool English family and friends" (*SC* 54). The mother-in-law, however, does not like Cathy's excursions on the streets "alone and on foot" (56). On such situations, Cathy expects her husband, Naraian, to tell his family about the independence customarily enjoyed as a right by English girls. Cathy feels worried when he fails to give a reply: "But Cathy didn't say anything. Unlike the others, she had no liking for these family rows (57).

Jhabvala's thrust in this story falls on cultural difference. While in India, she has noted, how mothers-in-law in many of the families, adjust themselves with their daughters-in-law. This is also contradictory to the popular Indian proverbial saying that there cannot be any love and care between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law. As an English woman, who has lived in India with an Indian, Jhabvala, perhaps, does not want to paint a proverbial mother-in-law who eternally wrangles with her daughter-in-law even for petty reasons. In the story, both the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law, in spite of all cultural differences, adjust themselves with each other. What that intertwines them is the spirit of love and feeling which tell that only accommodation, adjustment and compromise can make their lives happy. There is perfect understanding between the two women at a deeper psychological level. The two do not want to have any disturbance in the family and as such despite all loneliness that engulf them, they love each other and live peacefully.

Another interesting area is, in all communities and cultures, one cannot expect any cordial relationship between the stepmother and the stepdaughter. Here too, both the writers do not want to paint the problems that arise between them. By showing love and affection the psychological problems can be solved is the basic intention of the two writers. The step-motherly attitude is a universal one. In the Tamil culture, even from time immemorial, there has always been a strained relationship between stepmother and stepdaughter as they fight for paternal love and property. There are ever so many literary works which show this inherited cultural setback.

One can easily realise the opposite of this 'inherited cultural setback' artistic ambition on the part of the two writers in their portrayal of stepmothers and stepdaughters. In Munro's "Royal Beatings" in *The Beggar Maid*, the relationship between the protagonist Rose and her stepmother Flo, is highlighted. When Rose's stepmother gets irritated about Rose's behaviour, she goes to her husband's woodshed and makes complaints about Rose. Rose's father does not hesitate to use the belt on her. Many years later, when Rose gets a letter from a friend which says that her stepmother is very sick, she is the one who at once goes to her rescue. Munro, here, wants to show that like the own mothers, the stepdaughters show much concern and love towards stepmothers.

Like Munro, Jhabvala too wants to build up a new society which is free from all harsh realities, enmity and hatred. Jhabvala inverts and reverses the cultural factor and tries to point out that there should be immense love and affection between the stepmother and the stepdaughter in families. Like Munro, she is also actuated by the desire to improve the social conditions that exist in one of the then backward

countries of the world, namely India. In Jhabvala's story "Life" Susie, the stepmother has intense love for her stepdaughter, the narrator of the short story. Whenever there is a problem in the family, she consults only her stepdaughter. After her father's death, the love between the two intensifies to a deeper level. The narrator says "She phoned me every day and often I had to go visit her, if she had a cold or the pain in her back was bad . . ." (MNL 20). The death of the father leaves a void in the family and the gap is filled by the inexplicable love that is being experienced by both the women. They make a lot of adjustments and live like sisters. Jhabvala's portrayal of this kind of family, though it is English, reflects her humanistic outlook and her respect for human values.

Yet another interesting common area is the portrayal of the relationship between sisters in a family. It is interesting to note that the "sickness syndrome" is obsessive with Munro and she finds it a very important channel for transmitting love to the members of a family. Incidentally, one must recall to one's mind the sufferings of Munro's mother who had Parkinson's disease and Munro's pity and compassion for her. In the story "Tricks" in *Runaway*, the two sisters, Joanne and Robin are very much attached to each other. Joanne has a childish body and is extremely sick and her sister Robin, a nurse, once goes to see a Shakespeare play in Stratford, where she meets Danilo, a man from Montenegro and falls in love with him. When they depart, they agree that they would meet again a year later.

Since her visit to Stratford, her romantic notions make the two sisters not much united for a year. "For a couple of weeks the two sisters hardly spoke. Then, seeing that there were no phone calls or letters, and that Robin went out in the evenings only to go to the library, Joanne relaxed. She knew that something had changed, but she didn't think it was serious" (RA 253). Of course, Munro has twisted the scene, undermining the romance and replacing it with something more realistic, frightful, and harder to live with. Evidently, Munro places more emphasis on the emotional love that binds together the two sisters than on the physical love that blooms between them.

Surprisingly enough, Jhabvala too, has similar plots. In the short story "Ménage," the elder sister, Leonora, has deep love for her younger sister, Kitty. As in Munro's short story "Tricks" here too, the younger sister does not pay any attention to the elder's love for her though they are deeply indebted to each other than to anybody else. Leonora is a wonderful manager of all practical details at home whereas Kitty is a pervert. Kitty's apartment is always in a mess. She lazily sits on the floor, wrapping her arms round her knees and her long reddish hair trail around her. On the other hand, "Leonora often came to check up on her sister--she would be . . . washing the dishes piled in the sink, while clicking her tongue in distress and disapproval" (MNL 34).

Whatever be the situation, both Munro and Jhabvala do not ignore the waywardness of young women. They wish that women should soon realise their folly and understand the need to have a lasting relationship with one another in their families. What comes to the surface in both the writers is the humanistic element of forgiveness and the readiness to give up all that hampers unity in families. Sisters who are in dire distress relate themselves to each other by sharing their experiences and problems. Alladi Uma who discusses at length the intense love between sisters refers to the story of Nalini in Kamala Markandaya's novel *A Handful of Rice*, as ". . . so sympathetic to her sisters' sufferings that she is willing to antagonize even her husband, Ravi" (79).

Some wives in the short stories of Munro and Jhabvala too are extremely devoted to their husbands and they never expect from them anything other than their love for which they are ready to suffer and even sacrifice their lives. Traditionally, wifehood has been seen as a desirable and valued position for women and it is considered obligatory for any normal woman to be a good and sacrificing wife. A wife is expected to be "the angel of the house" as termed by Virginia Woolf.

The wives of both Munro and Jhabvala fit well into this framework. A fair example of this is Johanna, the protagonist of Munro's title story "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage," who works as a housekeeper for the eminent hardhearted man Mr. McCauley and the caretaker of his

granddaughter, Sabitha. Sabitha and her friend, Edith, concoct a series of love letters, supposed to be written by Sabitha's widowed father Mr. Ken to Johanna. They are written in such a way that Johanna sincerely believes that the letters have come from Mr. Ken. Mistakenly believing that he is in love with her, she gives up her job and travels to a remote village where Mr. Ken lives. Unfortunately, when she arrives at his place, she finds Mr. Ken who is seriously ill and she plays the role of a wife. The story clearly illustrates how a woman, out of love and compassion, changes the life of a man and ultimately brings him back to life. In the story, the question of male-domination and female suppression does not arise at all. Both a wife and a husband are united by cords of love, indeed boundless, limitless and even incredible.

Jhabvala too presents in some of her short stories, wives who are totally devoted to their husbands, and yearn for their love and affection despite all familial problems and misunderstandings that creep in. In the story "Two More under the Indian Sun" Jhabvala presents the character of two English friends, Margaret and Elizabeth who are in love with India. Elizabeth is married to a fairly tyrannical Indian, named Raju. Margaret is of the view that there is no need for a woman to be afraid of her husband because marriage is based on "Trust and understanding" (OI 184). Once Raju gets very angry with his wife, raises his voice higher and pulls her hair. It is just at this moment, Margaret enters the room and stands in the doorway watching them. While the husband and the wife stand frozen, Margaret says, "we don't treat English girls that way" (188). Elizabeth is not prepared to lend her ears to the piece of advice that comes from Margaret. Her love for Raju, in spite of all his beatings and indifferences is boundless. Elizabeth hides the fact and tells Margaret that he "was helping her comb it" (188). Jhabvala comments: "*Yes, he was her India!* She felt like laughing when this thought came to her. But it was true" (OI 193). The assessment made by Sharada Iyer towards the wives who are figured by Jhabvala is quite convincing: "It is only the women who will go to absolute lengths for love..." (143).

From the above said instances taken from both the writers it may be understood that both have raised human love to the state of "divine love" which one calls "Agape." In Munro, human love comes spontaneously as she herself had experienced it personally while she was with her sick mother. In the case of Jhabvala, it comes from her absorption of Indian cultural and religious values. Kh. Kunjo Singh remarks "Despite her Western upbringing, Jhabvala has digested all the... religious literature just to understand the sweetness of the soul of India" (193). It might have also come from her intention to show to the reading public how social realities could be altered and the unities in families could be strengthened if women behave normally without any affectation and pretense.

The various roles played by women in their families such as the roles of mothers, daughters, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, stepmothers and stepdaughters, sisters and wives are highlighted in a very elaborate way. Munro carries over to her mother characters her own care and concern, love and affection which she had for her sick mother. Jhabvala is ever reminiscent of her separation from her Jewish families, neighbours and parents and she very realistically transfers her feelings and experiences to her characters.

Also in both, Munro and Jhabvala it is understood that some of the mothers are sick and crazy, yet their love for their daughters never gets abated. In both, the mothers warn their daughters as to how they should shape their lives so that they can have a happy married life with their husbands. Sometimes, the daughters feel that they are neglected but the moment they come home to see their mothers all differences vanish and there blooms perfect love and understanding between them. However, this cannot be generalised, because some mothers are waywardly and the daughters drift away from them and despise them till the end.

As a matter of fact, the author reflects in the paper what both the writers really find in their respective societies and cultures. If there is more thrust on Christian values in Munro, in Jhabvala the emphasis falls mainly on traditional and conventional values and ways of behaviour. Munro deals with the psychological aspects of the relationship, whereas Jhabvala looks at the problem from the cultural point of

view. Nowhere in the stories has she revealed that the Westerners despise India and its traditional and cultural values. All these show that the two writers want to build up a new society permeated by pure human love. The relationship between sisters in the families depicted by the two writers is also marked by indescribable love. Many of the wife figures in both are chaste, modest and loyal to their husbands in spite of all differences they find. Munro preaches that a wife should have constant devotion to her husband and must adjust herself with the existing situations as what she needs is only her husband's love and affection. In Jhabvala too, one comes across wives who totally devote themselves to the service of their husbands believing that marriage is based on "Trust and understanding" (OI 184).

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