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## REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN'S IDENTITY IN RUTH PRAWER JHABVALA AND ANITA DESAI SELECT NOVELS

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### ABSTRACT

Literature offers one of the most important ways in which these new perceptions are expressed. Jhabvala has a woman's perspective, natural and inevitable, given that she is a female writer. It is obvious in *Heat and Dust*, because it focuses on two (English) women and because, given the fact that these two are fifty years apart, women are important, perhaps more important than men, as signifiers of change. The narrative is double-layered. Anita Desai as well as Ruth Praver Jhabvala seems to have been on the quest for order and meaning in life in their Indian English fiction writing. Their protagonists undergo a struggle to find their real self; because of the cramping pressures of anxieties, they seem to have lost it. Anita Desai's *The Voices in the City* gives an objective observation of the crucial problem of the feeling of alienation. The characters like Adit, Sarah and Dev suffer from restlessness, attraction-detraction, and attachment-detachment. Here, we have made an attempt to focus on the writings of Anita Desai and Ruth Praver Jhabvala — who occupy a distinguished place among the novelists of Indo-Anglian literary scene, more specifically on her style and her treatment of women characters. The article named Similarities and dissimilarities of Female characters In the Major Novels of R.P. Jhabvala and Anita Desai's mainly studies. The women characters either from the east or from the west of Jhabvala and Anita Desai studied in the research paper share the common characteristics like courage, tolerance, forbearance, compassion and strong will power to face life's trials and complexities. This paper attempts to show how they achieve the results they seek to gain, in order to expose not only the extremity of the suffering endured by women, but also the deep psychological problems that beset many human beings.

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### Introduction

The emergence of women novelists in Indian English literature took place as early as the last quarter of the nineteenth century. But, it was only after independence that they could make solid contribution to Indian English fiction. The post-independence period has brought to the forefront a number of noted women novelists who have enriched Indian English fiction by a creative release of feminine sensibility. The 'woman' has been the focus of many literary works in this period. Writers like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande,

Kiran Desai etc. have achieved recognition in recent times.

Quest for identity and Female-Assertiveness in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English is a bifocal subject. It directs its gaze towards philosophy and psychology and looks towards social science and literature. The very expression 'Quest for Identity' has become a fashionable term in literary and other studies. Day-in and day-out, the newspapers' report on several sections of society resort to the expression 'search for identity'. Their stories tell us about 'national identity', 'regional identity', 'tribal identity', 'cultural identity',

'man's identity', 'women's identity', 'Indian identity', 'European identity', 'group identity' and hoards of other identities. One has no idea how many identities are at present floating in the air. It is very difficult to have a count of them, to catch them, and to comprehend them.

Anita Desai and Ruth Praver Jhabvala, the two prominent, post-Independence, contemporary Indian women novelists have many similarities and dissimilarities in their lives, their family background and their career as novelists. The present researcher has tried to find out the similarities and dissimilarities in their lives and works as well as has attempted to search out the differences in their careers as novelists and to compare and contrast multicultural aspects in their novels. Anita Desai and Ruth Praver Jhabvala have both contributed significantly to the literary world especially to Indian writing in English by investing their works with a multicultural perspective that widens and enlarges the frontiers of thought and which is therefore, considered a very important literary characteristic by most critics and thinkers is evident from the words of Noble Laureate Derek Walcott : "To have loved one horizon is insularity, it blindfolds vision, it narrows experience".

Ruth Praver Jhabvala nourished a deep-rooted literary ambition which burgeoned when she gained an entry into Indian life as the wife of a Parsi architect. In her early novels, especially in *To morn She Will* (1955) and *The Nature of Parsion* (1956), she was critical of India like an outsider, yet she seemed an insider, in that she was inward with Indian realities and appreciative. *Heat and Dust* (1995) marks her disillusionment both with India and with more than India, intimating the new directions and emphases of her later novels (which travel through time as well as space and in which the Western psyche occupies more of her attention) and employing an innovative, radical departure in narrative technique.

Jhabvala's novels from beginning to the end constitute an exploration of the feminine sensibilities and the feminine quest for the identity and self-actualisation as individual human beings free from any dependency syndrome. But in the phases of literary career it is observed that this quest for love, beauty, bliss and identity has been thwarted because woman is unable to come out of

the shadow of man inspite of equality in materialistic sense. The protagonists in all setting are portrayed as frail, wily, seductive and enigmatically submissive to masculine powers which lead them to self-hatred, inner fragmentation and even sometimes to death. Indian women are sufferers of confinement and cruel suppression; the expatriate European woman in India are the victims of romantic passions or spiritual idealism leading to their dooms; and most strikingly the modern women of West are possessed with mysterious urge to be controlled by some charismatic masculine power as they are suffering from emotional vacuum, abnormal sexuality, psychic disorder and loss of faith in life.

Anita Desai's treatment of the themes of alienation, maladjustment, isolation, the absurdity of human existence, the quest for ultimate meaning, and time as fourth dimension, have an existential learning. In one of her interviews, she admits to having been influenced consciously by Proust, Dostovesky, Lawrence, Checkov and Kawabata. Like some of the above writers, her works are also a quest for order and meaning in life. Her protagonists undergo a struggle to find their real self, which they had lost, because of the pressures of anxieties. They experience a disparity between the higher needs of the individual's inner nature and the unalterable cosmic condition of existence. Desai's self-alienated personages are often entangled in personal problems and cannot feel existential angst, because they are gripped by neurotic anxiety. Hence such characters lose their real self, forgo human values and create irredeemable conditions for themselves. My attempt in this paper is to study this change in the writings of Ruth Praver Jhabvala and Kiran Desai with special reference '*Heat and Dust*' (1975), Anita Desai "The Voices in the City" (1965) with reference to Women representation in their novels.

#### Discussion

Ruth Praver Jhabvala's women take up the position with men. Jhabvala's understanding of Indian women is greater than understanding men. In her novels relationship of mothers with their children is taken up again and again. Her women characters are very strong, it is the men who seem weak and vulnerable like Prem in *The Householder*. Jhabvala in an interview said, "it is like that in India. Women are much more dominant characters, they

know all the tricks, and they are not certainly slow to use them”

*Heat and Dust* anticipates post-modernism though without fantasy. Its structure is that of an artifact. John Updike objected: "the alternation between plots drains both of momentum, or of the substance that lends momentum" This alleged flaw, the cross-cutting, is really a postmodernist virtue: it prevents the reader from getting too absorbed in the worlds of the novel and thereby keeps him/ her alert and critical like the Brechtian alienation effect. The novel is written in an almost flat, bare style so as to focus the reader's attention on the content. There is no attempt to create character as in realist fiction. Comparisons to Jane Austen or Chekhov, usually made in regard to Jhabvala's novels, are inappropriate and inapplicable, given that *Heat and Dust* is very postmodern. The opening sentence states that "Olivia went away with the Nawab": Jhabvala is now capable of sacrificing the surprise and suspense this central fact could evoke.

The final impression created by the novel is ambiguous. Olivia is a shadowy presence at the end. This is necessary. It is part of the poignancy and the sense of her failure. Her spiritual yearnings may have been a fact or merely imagined by Miss Rivers, reflecting her own. In any case, Olivia's success is doubtful. Ralph J. Crane's view that the narrator's quest is successfully fulfilled, that she "appears to merge with India successfully, probably because she has a purpose for being in India and is prepared to accept India as it is, to surrender herself to India without needing to throw off her own identity," that she "learns to swim in the flowing tide of India," is over-simple. So is Laurie Sucher's complimentary view that when Miss Rivers "ascends to the Himalayas with a child within her: in the realm of the imagination and biology, her visit has borne hitmi Miss Rivers is a representative figure as a seeker and she does far better than numerous other seekers such as Chid and his two companions, who end up as derelicts. But pregnancy does not necessarily lead to a satisfactory issue; the ascent to the Himalayas is not necessarily going to result in spiritual fulfillment. The ultimate fate of Miss Rivers, too, is ambiguous.

Jhabvala's novel *Heat and Dust* won the famous Booker prize in 1975. She has taken the marital discontentment issue as one of the burning

problems of India. The novel *Heat and Dust* is on a different plane in the sense that both the hero, and the heroine, Douglas and Olivia, are from the same culture, same religion, same social and educational background; in spite of these facts, there is a lack of love between the wife and the husband. The strong reason for Olivia's emotional dissatisfaction is that they are married but they do not share emotional bond between them. So they feel that they are not made for each other. A woman's happiness does not depend upon getting everything in terms of comforts and luxuries. There is something beyond materialistic needs and that is psychological need for affection. Olivia lacks this affection from her husband, and so she is disappointed and that leads to their married life being loveless.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala's novel *Heat and Dust* focuses on the quest for identity of the narrator-protagonist, who is also the granddaughter of Olivia by her husband's second wife Tessie. Her quest for identity is examined from the perspective of psychology, with special reference to Jungian analytical psychology. It happens many a time that the quest for identity begins with curiosity regarding another person from whom one is seeking answers. In the novel *Heat and Dust* the narrator-protagonist is trying to find out the life history of her grandmother, Olivia. Olivia came to India with her husband Douglas, and at the later stage in her life, she developed extra-marital relationship with an Indian prince Nawab. Since Olivia has caught between two cultures, her own British culture and the Nawab's Muslim culture. Olivia decided to leave Douglas and ran away with the Nawab. Olivia found that life is totally different with the Nawab.

In the beginning of the novel *Heat and Dust*, the narrator-protagonist says: "India always changes people and I have been no exception" (HD 2). The person from whom one is seeking answer, about one is curious could be a guru, a teacher, or even someone from within one's own family, someone who represents ego ideals. Usually such a relationship begins from the unconscious side. This unconscious relationship in the novel *Heat and Dust* comes from the fact that narrator protagonist and Olivia have a granddaughter and grandmother relationship. It is the only reason that the narrator-protagonist sees the letter written by Olivia to her sister. This letter kindles her interest in the past life

of Olivia. So she decides to visit India and to reconstruct the past life of her grandmother. The quest for identity emphasizes the importance of communal belonging, but rejects the view that one ought to belong to the community one was born to. It suggests that the quest for identity may lead individuals to follow many avenues: while some individuals might affirm their "inherent" affiliations and traditions, others may remain within their community of origin and strive to change its ways, or choose to leave their social group and opt for membership in a new one. This analysis suggests that choice, characteristic of the liberal conception of the person, and rootedness, characteristic of the communitarian conception of the person, play an important role in the formation of personal identity.

#### **WOMEN AS CULTURAL AMBASSADORS IN RUTH PRAWER JHABVALA'S FICTION**

Anita Desai confesses that while she 'feels about India as an Indian', She thinks about it 'as an outsider'. Desai probably derived this point of view from her German mother, whom she aptly describes as carrying 'a European core in her which protested against certain Indian things, which always maintained its independence and its separateness'. Her oeuvre has explored the lives of outsiders within Indian society and, more recently, also within the West. Her fiction has covered themes, such as, women's oppression and quest for a fulfilling identity, family relationships and contrasts, the crumbling of traditions, and anti-Semitism. The Euro-centric and social biases that are sometimes detected in her fiction, therefore, may be more productively read as the result of the author's focus on uprooted and marginalized identities. Tellingly, the literary example which Desai set off to emulate was that of another migrant to India of German origins: Ruth Praver Jhabvala, though, some critics detect a Western disdain for Indian social customs in her fiction. Ultimately Desai's literary world is not sharply divided along Western and Eastern lines. On the contrary, ever since her novel Baumgartner's Bombay (1987), east and West have been treated as mirror of each other. Desai's novels and short-stories evoke characters, events and moods with recourse to a rich use of visual imagery and details, which has led to comparisons with the modernist sensibilities of T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. The origin of her stories is itself

rooted in images that remain in the mind but they often are also forgotten, and they pass through one's life and then they vanish. However, there are certain images, certain characters, certain words that you can't forget, you remember, they stay with you and eventually these come together, you being to see what the connection is between them.

A close study of Anita Desai's work reveals her struggle for female autonomy played out against the backdrop of the patriarchal cultural pattern. At the outset, it seems, she is asking a new and different question. Her writing can be viewed as a self-conscious reaction to overwhelming masculinity of privileged dominant gender. We can identify in her character a defiant tone of voice in asserting the personal and the subjective. Her emphasis is psychological rather than sociological; her profound intellectual maturity provides a frame-work based on gender (female) as the ideological scheme for the analysis of society in general.

In *The Voices in the City* the scene shifts from Delhi to Calcutta. Here the MayaGautam duo is re-enacted in the form of Monisha-Jiban marriage. Monisha has to undergo unbearable tyranny and injustice, insult and abuse in her husband's dwelling. In the long run, she commits suicide. Nirode, the brother of Monisha and Amla her sister, are also in Calcutta and all of them have to fight against the rigid conventions of the middle class life. Amla is shocked and heart-broken when her love is rejected. Her protagonists, chiefly Indian women, belong to the various age groups and are in constant conflict with the society. Most of these novels focus on women. The protagonists suffer in a meticulous world dominated by men, who in the guise of father, brother or husband present a constant threat to their integrity. She designs the exploration of the disturbed psyche of the Indian woman lying emphasis on the factor of loneliness and alienation. However, Desai's women do not give up the strife so easily. Desai focuses on the gender roles of women seen through the lenses of female activities experiences goals, values, institutions, relationships and modes of communication. Desai's contribution in the field of feminism does not merely involve revalidating the French theories or the western model. She presents in her writing, the pictures of women in flesh and blood, with a distinct mind of their own. Her characters are no more wooden

creatures, subject to suppression and male domination only. The transformative power of Anita Desai's novels lies in her taking up the task of revealing the process of self-awareness at work in feminine psyche.

Most of Desai's women characters registered protest against the circumstances which oppressed them. Yet where Maya, Monisha, Nanda, Anamika and Uma failed to tide over the crisis, Bim, Sita and Sophie succeeded in doing so. Desai's entire fiction traces the changing image of women in the face of existential dilemmas. These female protagonists assert their right to exist not as shadows of their male counterparts but as independent human beings with a will of their own. In fact this is the real aim of any feminist. Her characters realised that to live life one had to face new challenges, that hatred was of no avail, that all transcending love could overcome all obstacles, that life is indeed one single whole which is a delicate interconnected web. It shows although Desai is not a surrealist yet her understanding of the female psyche is highly distinctive and remarkable. She views the female in relation to different kinds of organization - familial, social national and international.

Her novel *Voices in the City* is existential in character, for it explores the inward subjectivity of its main characters. As H.M. Williams observes:

It is an 'existential' novel that explores the inner climate of youth despair, epitomized by the over-acutely self-conscious Nirode, that quoter of Camus, finding no meaning in his own life or in life at all. This existential 'angst' is duplicated in Monisha in whom it assumes a fatal rhythm from which Nirode was once narrowly saved but which in her reaches its inevitable end...."

The character named Monisha is characterized in such a way that, it clearly depicts the poetic abilities of the novelist. With the influence of the greatest 20th century novelist, this character Monisha, is not in a position to understand the importance of the traditions and she just falls a prey of them in minute issues. Monisha has a signified self-identity and taken obsessive pride in realizing herself as unique from other women in her in-law's family. She contemplates desire for alienated and separated behaviour to be the sign of superiority. She selects

separation as an approach for survival in the unpleasant atmosphere of Jiban's family: Keep it all to yourself, a secret, quiet, private, all your own to keep and gloat over."(VIC114)The customs of Jiban's family produces an emotional vacuum in her. The retreat into the previous identity again diminishes her already slighter bond with the outer fact.

Monisha has some psychological problem. She finds obscurity in her surroundings and does not try to develop optimistic attitude in herself. She enforces the primary truth of her awareness of experience and decisions. She fails to achieve an adequate self-identity, a meaningful existence of life. Her ineffectiveness, in bringing about a compromise between the demands of her physical and psychic needs, brings about fatal results. Such characters engage in "exaggerated self - accusations recrimination and feel severe guilt and self-devaluation, such reactions do protect the individual from expressing dangerous hostility towards other, but may lead to depression and even to an attempted or actual suicide."(Desai 129)

A woman, who resists femininity, feminine temperament, status, and role is thought to court neurosis, for femininity in her fate as anatomy is destiny. In so evading the only identity nature has granted her, she courts nothingness. This is precisely the state of mind of Olivia of *Heat and Dust*. 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).

Anita Desai has taken the problem of Indian female existence in all her novels. Therefore, a study of her treatment of the identity crisis of female character is central to the correct understanding and appraisal of her writings. She is often seen as a somewhat Western existential experimenter who deals with many existentialistic problems and predicaments. She portrays her characters as

individuals, "facing single handed, the ferocious assault of existence". The basic problem for her characters is now to exist in society, and yet maintain their individuality. It is to the credit of Anita Desai that in concentrating on the inner being of woman characters, she has given a new dimension to the Indian English novel. Her works have unconsciously contributed to the feminist use, an expression of inner pre occupations and of the modern ideal of tilding a male-dominance free society

#### Conclusion

The society imposed false identity of women which is a major patriarchal tool for depriving women from attaining their true identities as independent complete individuals is thoroughly illustrated in the selected pieces of literary works. Anita Desai probes into problems of woman, be it of a daughter, sister, mother, grandmother or a wife. Her female figure appears as a victim in a patriarchal, and father dominated Indian family. Anita Desai depicts the Indian woman as a fighter, a victim, a heroine and in later novels ultimately a winner because of her indomitable spirit and attitude of compromise. She has portrayed both kinds of women-those who are symbols of growth and change, those who are powerful means of withdrawal, regression, decay, death and destruction. To conclude, the novelists themselves are victims of cultural displacement due to their immigrant status and therefore, the protagonists are mostly projections of their creators and much of the writer's life is gone into their making. These novels grow on the soil of autobiography. The conflict in the condition of these writers is liberated through the dilemma of their protagonists. Both the novelists have dealt with the men and women relationship in their almost all the novels with a difference. This is very essential to find out the cultural differences and cultural relations between men and women and the novelists treatment towards them. Anita Desai deals with the hazards and complexities of men and women relationship, husband and wife alienation, disparities and male female sensibilities. In the novels the sufferings of women as an outcome of giving in to a false identity is demonstrated in detailed descriptions. Jhabvala's works abound with female characters who, on being displaced, struggle to survive in the unfamiliar surroundings they are

entangled in. Her works dealt with the common motif of exclusion, loneliness and the search for an identity and fulfillment. The characters in her Novels deal with their identity-crisis and how they handle the trauma and possible success, failure or resistance of subjects who in their confrontation with the culture of the other negotiate their new identities. Jhabvala's literary works are concerned with the diasporic postcolonial situation of the lives of Europeans, who are caught between the Indian traditions that they have left behind and a totally different western world that they have to live in, culminating in an ongoing struggle to adjust between the two worlds of the two cultures. Concerned mostly with the disappointment, failure and at-times success of Europeans immigrants in India, Jhabvala's works abound with female characters who, on being displaced, struggle to survive in the unfamiliar surroundings they are entangled in. Her work deals with the common motif of exclusion, loneliness and the search for an identity and fulfillment.

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