

five different words to signify snow, the ancient Indian Vedic Sanskrit operated as an essential spiritual register. Vedic Philosophy and psychology minutely and meticulously explored and chartered regions of the soul and spirit so much as to provide them with a local habitation and a name. The Vedas and the Upanishads were created by those in whom the veil of division between the spiritual and the secular had fallen away.

C. Day Lewis warns us in a poem :

Those Himalayas of the mind
Are not so easily possessed ;
There is more than prescience and storm
Between you and your Everest.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala's : "The Widow", Reading the Subtext

V. T. Usha
Govt. Victoria College, Palghat

BORN in Germany, of Jewish-Polish parentage and educated in England, R. P. Jhabvala, came to India in 1951 as the wife of a Parsi architect. The 24 years she spent in India—"most of my adult life"—gave her abundant time and opportunity to study India and write about it. But her approach is that of an "initiated outsider" (in the words of John Updike in his review of *Heat and Dust*). Her relationship with India vacillates between extremes, ranging from intense love to active loathing. To describe it in her own words :

There is a cycle that Europeans—by Europeans I mean all Westerners, including Americans—tend to pass through. It goes like this : first stage, tremendous enthusiasm—everything Indian is marvellous, second stage, everything Indian not so marvellous ; third stage, everything Indian abominable. For some people it ends there, for others the cycle renews itself and goes on. I have been through it so many times that now I think of myself as strapped to a wheel that goes round and round and sometimes I'm up and sometimes I'm down.

As Jhabvala herself confesses, she can "concentrate only on modern Westernised India, and on modern, well-off, cultured, Westernised Indians", for her exposure to India is limited to these individuals. And she is full of contempt for these persons, for... "though they themselves are modern India, they don't look at themselves, they are not conditioned to look at themselves except with the eyes of foreign experts whom they have been taught to respect" (p. 17). In her view these women are shallow intellectuals with a "synthetic social life", and in

herm as well as in other Indians "There is no attempt at exercising the mind or testing one's wits against those of others" (p. 18). She finds their passive contentment and lassitude revolting and fights to get out of that mood of stagnant inertia. Therefore it is not unnatural for the female personae in her stories and novels to be coloured by these prejudices.

In the short story "The Widow" (which appears in the collection *Out of India* (John Murray, 1987, Penguin 1989) the central character is Durga the Widow. Apparently she was independent both intellectually and financially, for no one, not even her relatives could "talk her into anything" (p. 39). She did not allow herself to be treated as a conventional widow would have been, which meant being deprived of her luxurious living conditions. She lived like a queen with servants to pamper her and her fawning relatives were forced to take a secondary role pandering to her whims and fancies despite their reluctance to do so.

The theme of the story seems to deal with the efforts of Durga to break away from the conventional mould and lead an independent life. She was able to put up a brave front and counter all traditional opposition effectively to establish her rights as an individual. Yet the story culminates with the widow having to surrender herself to continuously unfavourable conditions. She is portrayed as a powerful individual ultimately breaking up under rigid social restraints, so much so that her (Jhabvala's) critics have chosen to highlight this as notable and praiseworthy.

The foregrounding of her prejudices towards India which she sees from the viewpoint of a foreigner is quite evident. In this context multi-angled possibilities of reading the work surface, of which, the most probable alternative, I believe, could be this. In place of the widow, Bhujaji—another woman who appears in the story—could be focused upon. Then the entire story re-arranges itself to read differently.

Bhujaji was an old aunt, who constantly made her presence felt. Though small and frail in appearance, she was in actuality, a tough, shrewd, old woman, incessantly in pursuit of her personal advantage. Endearing herself to Durga by constantly attending on her, pampering her, adjusting to her varying moods, Bhujaji quickly makes herself a permanent fixture in

Durga's household. Wheedling herself gradually into the role of confidante, she studies Durga's problems carefully and uses subtle psychological techniques to soothe her and thereby win her favour.

Bhujaji encourages her to unburden herself and begins to talk to her of God. But her ideas of divinity are quite different from the traditional one. Her God seems more real than the stone one that Durga was familiar with: "She talked about Him as if He were a person whom one could get to know, like someone who would come and visit in the house and sit and talk and drink tea" (p. 42). She describes Krishna not merely as a child but more vividly as a lover, giving her detailed accounts of His physical beauty and His erotic relationships with His devotees. Thus she subverts conventional religion cleverly in order to gain her personal ends. She is able to defamiliarise the conventional Krishna legend and make her victim identify herself with the conceptual heroine, sometimes as beloved and sometimes as mother. She studies Durga's changes of mood and insidiously maneuvers her notions regarding the neighbours for whom she had a special affinity. When the evolving situation begins to threaten Bhujaji's selfish interests, she acts quickly and astutely to prevent it. She is quite unscrupulous and proceeds to falsify the actual situation cunningly so that the developing relationship is nipped in the bud. Bhujaji engineers the events cleverly so that the love and affection Durga showed the tenant's son Govind is diverted and she now thinks only of Krishna "as a son and as a lover".

Even without Durga's conscious knowledge the transfer of affections from Govind to Krishna, however heartrending, has taken place within her intimate self and she begins to see Krishna in concrete terms.

The story terminates with Durga giving away her precious finery to Bhujaji for distribution and opting to deny herself of all pleasures and enjoyments while Bhujaji murmurs approvingly in the background; "That is the way—to give up everything. Only if we give up everything will He come to us....as a son and as a lover".

Durga finally chooses to accept her lot as a widow and lead a humble life, as she was informed "that it was all for her own good". Her avaricious relatives deemed it necessary for her to

lead an ascetic life and suggested that any other way of life would only lead a widow like her astray :

They were glad for her sake. There was no other way for widows but to lead, humble, bare lives : it was for their own good. For if they were allowed to feed themselves on the pleasures of the world, then they fed their own passions too, and that which should have died in them with the deaths of their husbands would fester and boil and overflow into sinful channels (p. 56).

Although Bhujji and the other relatives adhere to this conventional view of orthodox widowhood, their interests are obviously centered around the widow's material possessions rather than the woman's spiritual well-being. They make it clear that they only want to dispossess her of her valuables and not her hair as custom would require.

In my reading of the story, Durga has never been an independent person all along. She had been consistently acted upon by more powerful forces throughout the story. Dragged into a marriage with an old man against her will, she had initially hated both the old man and her family for creating such an intolerable situation, and cursed them for her misery. Gradually she had learned to like the strange old man who had been extremely *kind* to her. It was he who taught her to be independent, "to have a mind, be strong" (p. 32). In fact, "his last energies has been poured into training her, making her strong" (p. 39). Her final decision to deny herself and distribute her material possessions is in actuality one of rebellion against her former husband's will and wishes :

She was thinking of her husband and of his anger, his impotent anger, at thus seeing everything given away at last. The more she thought of him, the more vigorously she emptied her almira (p. 55).

She is, in a sense, passive and acted upon, rather than conceitedly acting. The old aunt is the one who acts, thinking cleverly and deviously, making subtle suggestions, and planning meticulously in order to further her mean purpose.

She not only exercises her mind pitting her wits against those of Durga and the other fawning relatives, but also cleverly

devises a unique way of parting Durga from her money. Though the character of Bhujji was created by Jhabvala, she fails to adhere to her own theory that an Indian makes no attempt to exercise her mind or test her wits against these of others.

From her own writing, we can see how her highlighting of the Indian situation is tangential and inexact. "Writing", in Levi-Strauss's sense is a merely derivative activity which always supervenes upon a culture already "written" through the forms of social existence. It is a means of colonising the *Primitive mind* through its oppressive powers. When applied to the post-colonial situation, writing thus attempts either to highlight a cultural problem or underplay its implications. By oversimplifying a complex situation and trying to generalise, Jhabvala seems to have missed its socio-cultural implications completely. Here the text writes itself and thus prevents the writer's prejudices from upholding themselves.