

## **Cultural divergence – the Crisis and the Consequences in the Context of Ruth Praver Jhabvala’s *A Backward Place***

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### ***Abstract***

*The objective of this research article is portraying the cultural divergence experienced by the protagonist in the novel **A Backward Place** written by Ruth Praver Jhabvala. It also intends to deal with the crisis caused by the divergence of culture in the life of the protagonist and it tries to defend how well the protagonist has handled the conflicts with a positive approach and finally how she became successful in her life. Ruth Praver Jhabvala, a German born Jewish woman, married a Parsi and lived in India from 1952 – 1976 and then moved to New York. Being a diaspora, Ruth Praver Jhabvala was able to wonderfully present the inner aspects of both Indian and Western Women through her characters.*

**Key words: Culture, Divergence, Conflicts, Crisis, Life**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Jhabvala presents a successful marriage story of interracial nature in her novel, *A Backward Place*. The characters Judy and Bal decide to marry; They are able to succeed in their married life. Judy as an English woman is well aware of the differences between her cultural identity and that of her husband. They both understand and accept their differences. As a result, Judy is able to transcend her cultural identity, and seek happiness with her husband, and even with her husband's family. Judy is able to find fulfilment in her life in spite of the differences. She uses her native sensibilities positively in order to make a life in a new land. In fact, Judy finds happiness in her married life which is quite contrastive to her childhood back in England. As a child, Judy had often found herself lonely and neglected. "...just the three of them, in that tight little house with doors and curtains firmly shut to keep the cold and strangers out." (*Backward Place* 42).

### **CRISIS AND CONSEQUENCES**

Judy transforms herself into an Indian by adopting all the cultural practices of the land. She learns to eat Indian food, she learns to wear a sari, and tries to become an Indian in her identity.

Clarissa, an English expatriate in India, remarks that Judy has mastered the only way to live in India, that is, by turning herself into "a real Indian wife" (*Backward Place* 26).

Irrespective of her ability to adapt, her relationship with her husband is not smooth. She too faces differences of opinion and disappointments because of her husband's attitude and behaviour. Judy finds her husband responsible. He is a dreamer and an optimist, and Judy wishes him to be realistic and practical. Jhabvala delineates the character of Bal as an idealist who continues to show immaturity and irresponsibility. In spite of becoming a father of two children, and after having tried for 10 years, Bal continues to imagine himself as a film actor, and waste his time in idleness while others work.

Jhabvala has created Judy as a resourceful woman. She is disappointed with her husband, but single-handedly takes the responsibility of the household. As Bal is unable to provide for the family, Judy takes up a job and becomes the breadwinner of the family. Much like other women characters in the other novels, Jhabvala has created a strong woman character in Judy. R. S. Singh thinks that Judy is a far-sighted, soft natured and understanding woman always ready to compromise. Yet he adds that "her patience with a jobless husband for ten years cannot be credited" (152).

This also brings friction into the interpersonal relationship between the husband and wife. Bal is not keen on sending Judy to work because he thinks that it will reflect badly upon his personality. "You like it. But my position, this has never occurred to you how it looks to others that I your husband allow you to go out to work; what a disgrace that is to me" (*Backward Place* 195). Similarly, Shanthi is also traditional in her opinion as she defines the qualities of being a good wife. "With us it's like that, only to sit at home day and night, cooking and cleaning and looking after children" (*Backward Place* 14-15). There is opposition in the family, but Judy continues to work in order to provide for her family.

Jhabvala once asserts the inner strength that Judy possesses. When her Hungarian friend advises her to abandon her husband Bal, Judy refuses to do so. Even though the western concept of marriage does not entail a strong binding much like that of the Indian marriage institution, Judy appears to be a level-headed character who does not take any decision on impulse. Judy likes everything in Bal and his family except for his responsibility and his dream of becoming a film actor. Therefore, Judy finds no reason to abandon her family. She continues to work and be the breadwinner of the family, and thereby proves that she is a responsible person. Judy, therefore, takes up a small job at the Cultural Dais and becomes the bread winner of her family. R.G.G. Price aptly comments that while Bal "dreams of astounding his cafe's friends by success in films" his English wife works to support her husband (Price 942).

Judy feels proud for being an English woman, and she thinks that any English woman will not act on her impulse. "English people didn't behave like that, they didn't on the whim of a moment give up everything they had and go wandering off in search of no one knew what" (*Backward Place* 237). Judy has a self-assured identity as an English woman, and she is able to hold her family together. As Ronald Shepherd remarks, "She is the hypothetical heroine, hypothetical in that she exemplifies what Ruth Praver Jhabvala in 'Myself in India', declares herself unable to do — namely, to become an Indian without having to surrender her own sense of self" (99).

Judy continues to reinvent herself as an Indian woman. Gradually, she transforms herself into an Indian by accepting and adapting all the values that define the Indian family system. She also takes up the role of an Indian wife in an increasingly Indian manner. At the end of the novel, Judy embraces the philosophical truth that forms the foundation of the Indian lifestyle, that God as an omnipotent being would be responsible for providing anyone and everyone. As a consequence, Judy gives up her job, her sense of security, and follows her husband to Bombay towards uncertainty. This decision by Judy brings happiness to the familial relationship with Bal. Bal is overjoyed by the decision, and he feels proud of his wife. "From now on you will see I shall be a different person. And no one will ever dare to say to me again that I cannot support my own family. No one shall ever insult me like that again" (*Backward Place* 217).

Jhabvala has attributed some of the fundamental qualities into Judy that she is able to successfully adapt herself to the new land and its different cultural practices. Judy possesses some of the qualities which Jhabvala herself believes that are essential to leading a successful life in India. In Ronald Shepherd's words, the author holds up a refracting mirror splitting the image of herself into a series of contradictory selves, demonstrating in unambiguous terms what might otherwise appear as an integrated authorial personality. (Shepherd 102)

Through the character of Judy and her successful adaptation into a family system in India, Jhabvala shows that people from different cultures within the institution of family is full of compromises. Judy has shown that by choosing the middle path between the extreme western reactions to Indian realities that a westerner can successfully migrate and acculturate into the Indian establishment. Renee Winegarten sums up:

*The dialectic of love and loathing for India or submission versus resistance to its power, assumes a far more subtle form. It is no longer shaped by the author's struggle against one of the characters, but is embodied in the two women, Judy and Etta, who may be taken to represent in some degree the conflicting inner response of the novelist. (74)*

Having brought up in a family which is reserved and quiet, Judy enjoys the noisy atmosphere which is typical of an Indian joint family system. Judy is able to adapt herself to the new situation. She not only marries an Indian, Bal, but she also learns to live with the members of his family. She is comfortable with her sister-in-law, Shanthi. Judy finds heaven in the middle-class Indian family with her husband, mother-in-law, and sister-in-law. Much like the advice of Jhabvala, Judy adapts the strategy of creating an Indian personality for herself in order to negotiate the realities of the Indian cultural establishment. In 'Myself in India', Jhabvala says:

*"To live in India and be at peace, one must to a very considerable extent become Indian and adopt an Indian attitude, habits, beliefs, and assume if possible an Indian personality" (19).*

Jhabvala realises the importance of family and the values associated with it for an individual to survive as a human being and in turn succeed. As the sociologist Ray E. Baber remarks, "the family is the matrix of human personality and to this small group, the state entrusts the initial care and training of its future citizens in the most formative years of their lives" (1). The relationship depicted in the chosen novel shows that Jhabvala has taken a positive approach

towards presenting the strong familial ties that continue to hold the social setup together. Family strengthens an individual and supports the individual in making a successful living. Due to constant changes, adjustments are required, resulting in manifold forms of social pressure on the family.

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