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Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's *Get Ready For Battle*: A Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala is one of the prominent women novelists in Indian English literature. She shows her affinity with the advocates of feminism. She presents the urban middle class life in and around Delhi. Her women characters raise the voice against the patriarchal forces that deny freedom to women as enjoyed by men. They also strive for their identity in the male dominated society.

The present research paper analyzes Jhabvala's novel *Get Ready for Battle* (1962) from the feminist point of view. Mrs. Sarala Devi is the wife of Gulzari Lal, a rich Punjabi businessman. She boldly raises her voice against male dominance and exploitation of women by men. In the course of this struggle she opposes openly the immoral habits of her husband and her own brother. She opposes her husband's attempt to buy the land of Bundi Busti and evict the inhabitants for his own economic gain. She lashes out at her brother Brij Mohan who leads immoral life and keeps relation with housemaids. Jhabvala advocates for freedom for women. It is also seen in the case of Sumi, a young marriageable girl of the novel.

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchy, Freedom, Determination, Sati-Savitri image, Male domination.

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala is an eminent woman novelist, story writer and script writer for films. She has a long and distinguished writing career. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar aptly comments on the creative genius of Jhabvala: "It is, however, only after the Second World War that women novelists of quality have begun enriching Indian fiction in English. Of these writers, Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala are unquestionably the most outstanding." (Iyengar 438) Booker Prize winning novelist and two times Academy Award winning screen writer, Jhabvala was born on 7th May 1927 in a comfortable middle class German-Jewish family in Germany. She came to England in 1939 when she was twelve and took an M.A. degree at the London

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University. She married Cyrus H. Jhabvala, an Indian Parsi architect in 1951 and settled in Delhi and lived there with her family till 1975. She settled in New York, USA in 1975. In 1986 she took American citizenship. Khushwant Singh rightly calls her "the adopted daughter of India" (Shahane 23). Her prominent novels are – *To Whom She Will* (1955), *The Nature of Passion* (1956), *The Householder* (1960), *Get Ready for Battle* (1962), *Esmond in India* (1958), *A Backward Place* (1965), *A New Dominion* (1973), *Heat and Dust* (1975), *In Search of Love and Beauty* (1983), *and Three Continents* (1987). *Heat and Dust* won Booker's Prize for fiction in 1975.

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala has a feminine contemporary urban sensibility. With her power of close observation, she presents her experiences with educated urban middle class of Delhi in the postindependence India. Like Jane Austen, she presents microscopic studies of a conventional India. She has close observation of very limited class of educated middle class Indians in and around Delhi and is often satirical while presenting the Indian family life and struggle of the urban middle class to adapt to new social mobility. She studies female problems and expresses her concern and sympathy for the female folk. She also depicts marital discord in Indian society, whose reasons lie in the rigidness of the male behaviour. M. A. Waheed aptly says: "Marital dissonance is definitely a reality, a painful disturbing fact of conjugal life, but its causes are rooted in the rigidity of male behaviour and consequently in seemingly abnormal relations of women" (Waheed 176). As a feminist, she advocates for women's freedom and equality. She has experienced that in this patriarchal society women are given secondary treatment. They have to follow the dictates of their fathers and husbands. Her women characters raise voice against male domination. Jhabvala's feminist concern is seen in her novel *Get Ready for Battle*, and it makes us apply the term feminism in broad sense to this work.

While portraying women in Indian society, Jhabvala not only presents the 'Sati-Savitri' image of Indian woman, she also presents woman who wants to change the age-old conventions. This is evident in her *Get Ready for Battle*. In this novel, Sarla Devi is the wife of Gulzari Lal, a rich Punjabi businessman. She comes into direct conflict with her husband who wants to buy land at Bundi Busti for his economic gains. Gulzari Lal also leads an immoral life and lives with his mistress, Kusum, a widow of an army officer, Major Mehra. Kusum has two daughters already married off and has grandchildren as well. Similarly, Gulzari Lal has a son Bishnu and a granddaughter Pritti.

Sarla Devi is a social worker, an idealist and Gandhian in temperament. She cannot abide by the immoral pursuits of her husband. She has been living a lone life for ten years in her brother, Brij Mohan's house, devoting her time and energy in serving the poor. She is not afraid of divorce if Gulzari Lal intends to do so. Even Gulzari Lal contemplates to divorce her so that he can live with his mistress, Kusum, freely and legitimatize his relation with her. When he proposes to start legal process for divorce, she calmly tells Gulzari Lal that she will sign all papers leading to divorce: 'If you like, she said meekly. 'I am ready to sign anything you want.' (39)

She declares her aim while talking to Mrs. Bhatnager and Mrs. Das: "People of Bundi Busti are my duty and responsibility and I have never yet shirked my duty and responsibility." (128) Mrs. Bhatnagar is a widow of a rich industrialist and President of the All India Society for Bringing Hygiene to the Depressed Classes. She also wishes that the slum dwellers of Bundi Busti to be shifted to a place miles away from the present site. Sarla Devi argues that after eviction the poor people will have to walk ten miles for work and come back every day. Fact is that the rich people will make fortune out of eviction of the slums. Even Kusum has sympathy for the slum dwellers. She reveals her feelings in these words: "There is nothing worse than to make your profit out of the suffering of the poor people. When I hear of such behaviour, I ask myself how is it possible for man's heart to be so full of greed that he has no feelings for others?" (128)

As a social worker, Sarla Devi has to bear a lot of hardships. She lives a very simple life in her brother's house. She does her all household works. Her only concern is the poor and the helpless. She walks miles on footpath all day long; passes her time among slum-dwellers trying to solve their problems and sharing their good and bad days. She does not care the sarcastic comments and criticism accorded to her by the rich. Even her own people such as Brij Mohan, her brother, Bishnu, her son and Mala, her daughter-in-law have no favour for her. Often her brother Brij Mohan becomes angry to see her devotion for the poor and the destitute. Certainly, her boldness, independent thinking and benevolent nature are well appreciated by all. Kusum reveals her appreciation for Sarla Devi: "I have heard how independent she is, what a fine free spirit! I admire her so much and often I think of her and love her also." (93) Brij Mohan calls Sarla Devi a saint:

> She is a saint! 'Brij Mohan cried.' For herself she wants nothing, only for others, always for others. If someone comes to her and says give me your jewels, give me your clothes, your food, the house you live in, she would give without one thought, she would strip herself of all (91).

Jhabvala expresses her displeasure at the exploitation of women in male dominated society. Brij Mohan, Sarla Devi's brother also leads an indecent, lustful and immoral life. He even abuses his maidservants to satiate his lust. This is the reason why Sarla Devi rebukes him. One morning Brij Mohan throws out Tara, his young maid-servant along with her old woman, alleging that she wants more and more presents and gifts. This act of her brother enrages Sarla Devi. She requests him to allow her to stay again. But her plea has no effect on him. She is very much angry with him at his immoral habits and vices. She does not hesitate to remind his brother of his immoral act. She boldly tells her brother the way he exploits the maidservants:

> But what do you want from her? She is ready for all your pleasures. She will sing for you. When you want her, she pours your drinks for you, she serves you. She lies on her back for you..... What more is there you want? (137)

Sarla Devi has deep sympathy with the poor girl/woman like Tara and her old woman. The old woman also accuses Brij Mohan of abusing Tara: "Such a beautiful girl, and see how he has taken her youth and innocence" (143).

Brij Mohan uses women like Tara to satiate his physical desires. He even confesses before Kusum: "I have had to make do with the company of low women…What pleasure could there be for me with such people?" (145) Here the novelist reveals her concern how women are exploited by men in patriarchal society.

In the concluding part of the novel, we find that Sarla Devi's efforts to stop the eviction of the Bundi Busti go waste as the rich people like her husband succeed in their scheme of eviction the same by bribing Ramchander, a leader of the Busti. Ramchander is a person whom she has trusted but he turns his side to the rich for money: All other dwellers of the Busti are persuaded to vacate that place. In spite of this failure, her determination to champion the cause of the poor is least affected. On the contrary, she renews her spirits after every failure and with vengeance plunges into a fresh mission to serve the people.

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala expresses her concern with regard to the treatment given to the girls in tradition bound Indian society. Sumi is a young unmarried girl and the sister of Mrs. Shankar. Sumi lives with her sister, though her parents live in Mathura. Mr. Shankar is a middle class man holding a government job in New Delhi. Sumi wishes to lead a life of freedom. She denounces Mala's objection to her free moving with Vishnu, Mala's husband and Gautam in strong words:

> Sumi began to pout. She decided that Mala had no right to talk to her in this way and it was time to stand on one's dignity. 'I am not a child.' She said. What is wrong? We are not in purdah, we are free like western women. I can go where I like with my friends. (77)

On the other hand, Mala upholds conservative values of Indian society and she scolds Sumi for her free thinking and openly moving with boys – Vishun and Gautam. Mala cherishes traditional view with regard to granting freedom to women, especially unmarried girls. She says: "Sumi, do you think it is right for young unmarried girl to go into the bazaar and sit in a shop with two men?" (77)

Again she declares:

> And if I were your sister, I would not allow you to run here and there wherever you please and whomever you please, oh no... How do you ever expect to be married if you behave like this? What family will take you? (78)

When Sumi is brought to Mrs. Shankar's home by Bishnu in his car she becomes angry with Sumi and Bishnu. She is also against granting freedom to girls. She cherishes the same conservative view that an unmarried girl is not supposed to walk with a boy. She tells Bishnu in furious voice: "She is a girl from a respectable family…. A girl like that can't sit in a young man's car and be taken where he pleases." Then she shouts: 'Please remember her marriage is still to be made! What decent family will take her if she is seen sitting in cars with young men like you" (89). Bishnu feels angry and humiliated. His feelings for Sumi are pure. He has no sister of his own and he treats her as his sister. Mrs. Shankar's reaction and anger makes Vishnu to ponder over the conservative society: "His feelings for Sumi were so pure, yet every

one – his wife, his father, and her sister – suspected them. Such, he reflected, is the society we live in; and it seemed to him sad and deplorable that he could not feel brotherly affection for a girl without interference from relatives" (90).

Jhabvala also points out how the dowry system, a social evil, is still prevalent in Indian society. It still decides the fortune of a girl not her quality. Sumi's parents who live in Mathura are not in position to arrange dowry for her marriage, and so her marriage could not be solemnized.

Here Jhabvala presents the concept of conservative patriarchal Indian society where a girl has to lead a restricted life. A girl's intimacy with a boy is always looked with suspicion. Sumi's friendship with Vishnu is pure, yet her sister does not like that their friendship should continue. Similar is the case with Amrita in Jhabvala's another novel *To Whom She Will*. Amrita also strives for freedom but it is not tolerated by the society. People think it bad when she takes breakfast with Hari and Vaidya in a restaurant. Her mother Radha is also against granting freedom to girls. Amrita upholds the opinion of Ram Nath expressed in her well known novel *Esmond in India*:" No person has a right to treat another person in any fashion he likes. Please remember you are an individual being first and a wife second." (133)

Amrita tries to defend her crave for freedom and justify her behaviour before Krishna Sen Gupta, who has got education in England and is presently working in University of Delhi, and living with Radha's family as a paying guest. She complains: "Everybody is always telling us to be emancipated, to be like European women, but when we try to be, they are shocked and say we are behaving badly." (*To Whom She Will* 49)

Jhabvala presents the situation of Indian society where educated young girls demand freedom and want to cross the limits of traditional society but they are not allowed. For example, falling love of a girl with a boy outside her own caste, community and social status is vehemently opposed. As D. C. Agrawal in his article entitled "*To Whom She Will*: Exploration in Modern English Fiction" writes about the situation:

> The traditionalists achieve much by hypothecating their individuality and freedom. They achieve a sense of security and belonging. The non-traditionalists, on the contrary have to pay the price to their identity and 'Lassaiz faire', even so it is questionable whether they will succeed in the bargains. (Agrawal 125)

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