

**Illusion Versus Reality in Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's
*To Whom She Will***

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Ruth Prawer Jhabvala (1927-2013)

Courtesy: <http://www.mid-day.com/articles/ruth-prawer-jhabvalas-passage-to-india/208779>

Abstract

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala confines her attention to the Indian middle classes and the expatriates and her novels deftly ring the chimes on the same themes, tracing numerous permutations on family conflicts. The first novel *To Whom She Will* treats the theme of disillusionment in its gentlest and most benign form. There is comic mismatching of pairs of lovers. The mismatched lovers, as the novel progresses, discover the difference between illusions and hard realities. The women protagonists are thwarted by their own romantic idealism, by the economic realities and by a social system that devalues them. In this novel Jhabvala has depicted

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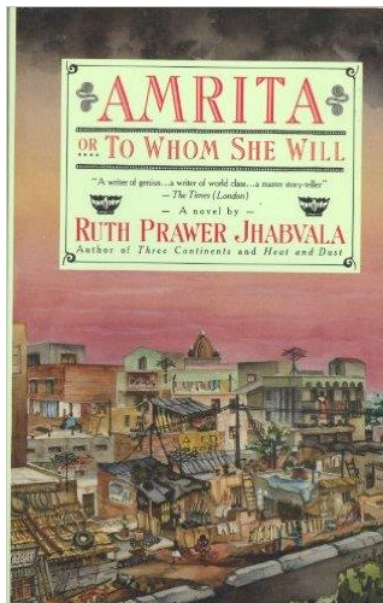
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a clash between tradition and modernism at a personal and familial level. In fact, modernism of Amrita and Hari in *To Whom She Will* is pseudo-modernism, which loses ground as soon as it faces real problems of life. In this novel when the parents come to know about the love affairs of their daughters, they don't lose any time to arrange marriages for them. The irony of the situation is that the girls too accept the proposals made by their parents. This novel poses the question whether 'arranged' marriage or 'love' marriage is conducive to happiness. Jhabvala excels in exploring the comic element in sentimentalized love scenes and also in exposing the hollowness of pseudo-romantic epithets. In the beginning, both the female protagonists are non-conformists who are trying to come out of a convention ridden and tradition bound society to an open, uninhibited society free from the shackles of social customs, but in the end, both become conformists and agree to marry according to their parents' choice.

Key Words: Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, *To Whom She Will*, tradition and modernism , Indian middle class, expatriates, familial conflicts.

To Whom She Will



Marital Disharmony in Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's *To Whom She Will*

Marriage can be defined as a legal union between spouses which is legalized by customs and beliefs that recommend the rights to the partners. It refers to the rules and regulations which define the rights and duties after marriage. Marriage signifies the equal partnership and intimate

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union between a male and a female. It is a strong association which connects not only two individuals but also builds up a relationship between two families. It brings stability and essence to human relations, which is incomplete without marriage. Its strongest function concerns with the care of children, their upbringing and education. The concept of marriage varies from culture to culture, but its role is same i.e. union of two people of opposite sexes, male and female. This bond is lifelong and special.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala is indeed a very talented artist. She has achieved an international reputation as a novelist. She projects in her novels her experience, her awareness of man, society, and human and moral dilemmas. She has felt the problems related to rootlessness, alienation and isolation. She deals with the situation of the breakdown of a traditional social order, thereby highlighting another in marital relations, in family life and at large in the society. The purpose of this paper is to study the matrimonial crisis in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's novel.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala presented in this novel a dynamic picture of Delhi in a state of transition. She projects a drama of cross generation conflict and resolution in two extended families of Post Independence India. Of the two, one belongs to the weak aristocracy living for generations in Delhi and the other to the new expatriate community from North Punjab now ceded to Pakistan. She shows the coming together of two communities who share a common religious and ethnic heritage, who are separated from each other by distinctions of wealth, education and breeding. She reveals a world order in which a stubborn identification with one's inherited culture is both realistic and desirable.

Jhabvala's first novel *To Whom She Will* has dealt with the very striking theme of marital discord. Amrita and Hari the two major characters in this novel profess contrasting opinions about the institution of the arranged marriage. The novel opens with the following lines:

“For if she bids a maiden still, she gives herself to whom she will,
then marry her in tender age so warns the Heaven-begotten
sage”. (TWSW 3)

Exploration of the Concept of Arranged Marriage

To Whom She Will bears as its epigraph, these four lines from Arthur W. Ryder's translation of the *Panchatantra* indicating that the central concern of the novel is an exploration of the concept of arranged marriage. Convinced that early arranged marriages constitute the sole safeguard against a mixing of class and community, the elders of Ruth Praver Jhabvala's novel fall back on the old adage. The concept of what constitutes "tender age" for a woman, however, has changed from nine in Vedic India to nineteen in the India of *To Whom She Will*.

Falling in Love

In *To Whom She Will*, Jhabvala makes fun of the young Indian generation, who while thinking themselves to be modern and westernized, tries to do things which the traditional Hindu society would not accept, that is, falling in love with a boy outside one's own caste, community and social status. They face a vehement opposition and the irony is that tradition wins over modernization. And D.C. Agarwal in one of his articles analyzing the situation writes:

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 for their identity and 'Lassaizfaire', even so it is questionable whether they will succeed in the bargain. (215)

In this novel Mrs. Jhabvala has very successfully described these two types in the modern Indian society.

Hari and Amrita

Hari and Amrita are the two major characters of the novel and each represents one section of contemporary Indian society. Hari and his family are lower middle- class people who are not educated and who firmly believe in old traditions and customs. Amrita, on the other hand, is the representative of the other section. She and her family belong to the upper middle- class society. They are well educated and are westernized to a certain extent. Her grandfather, Pandit Ram Bahadur Saxena, was an advocate in the British Raj, he was in close contact with the Britishers and hence knew much about the western world and their ways. It is he and his family who represent the modern Indian society. He has three daughters, Radha, Tarla and Mira. He, in his days, allowed Radha a free marriage. She married a Bengali revolutionary, who was below

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his own status. Amrita is the daughter of Radha. Tarla is highly educated and has fine manners and is married to a rich man, Vazir Dayal. She is fortunate enough to be able to spare both time and money and hence she belongs to many committees and women's organizations. Mira is altogether different from her two sisters. Though coming from the same background she is by no means modern: she is not interested in anything; all she cares about is good food and dresses.

Amrita works at a radio station where she meets Hari, a Punjabi youth coming from an entirely different background. Their work brings them close to the extent that they feel they are in love with each other. It is through this relationship that Jhabvala has been able to develop the main theme of the novel, arranged marriage vs. free marriage.

Getting Married

Amrita and Hari want to get married and apparently seem to be deeply in love. Describing their passion for each other V.A. Shahne writes:

The adolescent love- making is in the
style of most pseudo-romantic lovers
who only care for one ruling passion,
however momentary it may be. (11)

Humorous Treatment

The entire episode of Hari and Amrita's love has been written in a humorous manner by Jhabvala. In fact, many times she appears to be ridiculing the whole thing. Amrita confesses her love in a dramatic manner to Hari in the studio. Her grand-father, who is against their marriage, wishes to send Amrita to England, but she prefers to stay with Hari rather than go to England. Hari, who is unable to understand Amrita, tells her:

‘You give up England for me’, he said,

‘Your love for me is great. I am unworthy’.

‘Please do not speak like that!’

‘I am’, he repeated sadly.

‘Who am I? Hari Sahni, an announcer in Hindi section. I draw only Rupees 300/- a month. I live in a rented house paying Rupees 50/- rent. I am nobody. I am nothing’. ‘You are my life,’ she said, and then had to announce the end of the programme. Later to the accompaniment of music Amrita says to Hari: ‘It is that I love you. And you love me. What else matters’. (TWSW 92-93)

Hari’s Feeble Protest, Not Strong in Asserting His Love Choice

And this feeling of being nobody reveals Hari’s character. Hari has been described as a weak character as compared to Amrita. He lacks manner and sophistication. The feeling of being nothing haunts him constantly. He thinks he is in love with Amrita and when Krishna Sen Gupta, a Bengali youth who lives with Radha as a paying guest talks to Hari about Amrita, he speaks of his passion in a manner which takes away all the seriousness and appears to be very humorous. He says: “...every moment of the day I think of her. She is the nightingale of my heart, the stars of my eyes, and the juice of my liver, tell her that”. (TWSW 145)

Though Hari, who has been portrayed as a weak character, declares his love for Amrita, he is not able to face the opposition of his family. His family does not approve their marriage, for a Bengali girl cannot fit into their family. It is here that Jhabvala brings in the issue of caste and community. Punjabis and Bengalis are considered to be poles apart. Their dress, food, language, and social customs, everything is different, and hence they find a nice girl, Sushila Anand, a girl from their own community. Prema, Hari’s sister tells him, “You and Sushila. We think it is the best for you: she will give you happiness.” (TWSW115)

Sushila was a prettier girl than Amrita, she had a melodious voice, she was very intelligent, very soulful, and more-over she was a girl from his own community. He slightly protested that he was in love with Amrita, and that it was not right for him to marry Sushila. And then Suri, Prema’s husband, told him:

It is only a game and we all play it.

After marriage you will forget and you

will laugh at yourself for taking it
seriously. (TWSW 117)

And Hari's last protest comes out very feebly and comically. He says:

Love is not a game". Hari protested
feebly. At the moment he could not
help wishing that it were. (TWSW 117)

The matter is settled here, but in these lines Jhabvala has been able to kill two birds with one stone. On the one hand, she brings out, ironically, the conception of love in India, and on the other, she very aptly proves the victory of tradition over modernity. She proves that India is still very traditional, no matter how much its younger generation strives to break the shackles of old traditions and customs.

Obedience to the Decision of the Family in Matrimonial Matters

The traditionally blind obedience to the decision of the family in matrimonial matters is depicted through the characters, Hari and Sushila. Hari, the unheroic hero is emotionally squashed under the protective love of his family. It is through the character of Hari that the novelist has shown the ideological control of family over the individual who is bound to follow its standards and norms. He hails from a typical middle class family which has settled in Delhi after the partition. He is a weak man who finds it difficult to protest either against the wishes and whims of his family or of his beloved Amrita. He lacks courage and confidence, self-determination and will power and is overpowered by his emotional feelings for his family. He falls in love with Amrita, his co-worker and colleague in Delhi Radio Station and has a desire to marry her, but as a laggard in love he finds it impossible to go against the wishes of his parents. He practically does nothing for the fulfillment of his romantic love. Not to talk of any efforts on his part, he cannot even make up his mind to go to England even when his beloved's uncle is ready to bear all the expenses.

Individual is Bound to the Traditional Family

In Indian society an individual is blindly bound to the traditional family against which he cannot raise his voice or protest in any way. The stronghold of family ties on an individual is well noticed in the scene in which Krishna Sen Gupta, informs Hari of Amrita's plans of going to England and marrying him there. The dialogue and discussion of Hari with Sen Gupta shows Hari's infirmity born of the strong ties that bind a traditional Indian family:

If I had so much money...." Hari began. "You would go to England with Amrita", Krishna took him up. "Yes", Hari had to agree. "Well then", Krishna said, "You have the money now and you can do as you wish. Both of you can do as you wish". Hari's reply here is very significant: If only it were so easy, he said licking the empty spoon. "But how can I leave Delhi? My whole family is here... them". On further provocation he comes to the point and lets out the exact reason:

"It is that: my family is arranging a marriage for me, that is why I cannot go". (TWSW 143)

No Self-Determination and Self-Opinion in Matrimonial Matters

Hari's reply here clearly indicates as to how difficult it is for the Indians to have self-determination and self-opinion in matrimonial matters. When Krishna Sen Gupta asks him if he cared more for his family than for his beloved, Hari very cleverly and quite intentionally avoids talking about the sacrifice of his love for the family at the altar of tradition and shows the utter helplessness of the individual against the deeply rooted force of orthodoxy and tradition. Hari's mother is very happy and is proud of her son. She concludes the entire matter by saying: "He is a good son, he will marry a nice girl, you will see, one of our girls whom his family chooses for him", which turns out to be quite true. The hold of his family proves to be so strong upon him that he ultimately deserts his beloved and marries Sushila, the girl chosen for him by his family. Perhaps Jhabvala intended to present through Hari, an indecisive character like Hamlet confronted with the problem of "to be or not to be" torn between the demands of the family and the personal fulfillment. His dilemma is stated as this "Decide, always nowadays from all sides it was decided" (TWSW 175).

Too Weak to Attain the Grandeur of a Hero's Character

Though it is true that the matter of decisions in the case of Hari is not petty, yet his character is drawn to be too weak to attain the grandeur of a hero's character. Moreover, he fails to bring out the real conflict between tradition and individuality from the sincerity of love towards Amrita. The song of a Garman singer interests him more than any love talk with his so-called beloved. He likes to go for a dinner instead of meeting his beloved. He is like a romantic lover who brags of having sacrificed everything for the sake of his lady love. He presents himself as a Romeo ready to cross the ties and pass the prying eyes of society, pluck the stars from the heaven or climb the cliffs, but truly speaking he is afraid of going out in the rain, lest he should catch a cold. Hari feels that being in love is fine and fantastic, only if it were not complicated. The fact is that Hari has never felt love, in the real sense of the word and had only been deceiving himself by imagining himself to be in love. The self-delusion alone is responsible for his demands of marriage with Amrita. Hence, his dilemma as to whether he should obey his family, or go with his beloved is only self-deceiving.

Jhabvala and Jane Austen: Amrita's Determination

Jhabvala has shown characters who conform to Indian traditions and institutions; on the other hand, like Jane Austen, she goes to the extent of delineating characters who are individualistic and expressive in their attitudes to social problems and especially those concerning matrimony and the choice of a husband or a wife. Amrita, the heroine of the novel, is one such character. She typifies self-determination in marriage. She is a practical and sensible girl who is in revolt against her dominating mother Radha. An arranged marriage would simply mean disaster for her. Having an individualistic personality, she is not ready to pay any attention to the opinion of her family. She continues meeting Hari even after she has been forbidden to do so by her grandfather Pandit Ram Bahadur, who is consulted in all family matters and whose word of judgment is accepted as final. He had frankly told Amrita that the gulf between her family and the family of Hari was too wide to be bridged. But Amrita is so very self-willed, that she acts just as she desires. She tells Hari:

...But I do not care about what grandfather
says: believe me, Hari, I do not care what

any of them say. "Please believe me, please.
What does my family matter? You know
I would give up everyone and everything
for you. (TWSW 29)

Her own family as well as that of Hari is equally insignificant for her. After meeting Prema, Hari's sister, she shows the same spirit of caring a fig for any one and persuades even Hari to have such an attitude:

But O Hari, even if your sister does not like me,
Even if your whole family do not like, what will it matter?
They cannot come between us. They are no more important than my
family. They will never be able to separate us. (TWSW 32)

Individualism of Amrita: Sudden Change in View

In Amrita, Jhabvala has portrayed an individualistic character totally against the Indian tradition according to which "at no stage can a woman act independently - as a child she is guided by her father, as a wife by her husband, in old age by her son". Amrita is self-willed, bold and active; Amrita defies her mother and does not stop going to the Radio Station in spite of her mother's requests and threats. She will not accompany her mother at any cost, if she does not desire. On the other hand, if she wishes she can go alone to see her grandfather. Since she is shown as a strong individual from the beginning, her decision and efforts to go to England with Hari do not seem inconsistent with her behaviour. From her side, no stone is left unturned for the fulfillment of her romantic dream-marriage with Hari. The failure of her plan is merely because of luck or the change of heart on Hari's part. If the question of money had not choked her, she would have definitely gone to London and so would have married the man of her own choice.

Moreover, Amrita does not truly care about not marrying Hari, because a new realization has dawned up on her that in the innermost part of heart she had been in love with Krishna Sen Gupta, rather than Hari. And this realization of love for Krishna seems to be a significant factor in her character portrayal. Throughout the story, she had been trying her level best to be united

with Hari. The reader fails to understand how all of a sudden, Krishna's letter makes her realize that she loved Krishna and not Hari.

Strong Character Feeding on Yielding Character

Essentially the novel is about the self-deception of two young Indians who think what they feel for each other is love. The idea of arranged marriage is presented ambiguously and intentionally so. For Amrita on the other hand an arranged marriage would be normally a disaster. She is so intensely self-willed and independent. She too deceives herself at first that she loves Hari; and this may appear to some a fault in the novel. Jhabvala however suggests that Amrita's strong character feeds on Hari's yielding character. She hectors him lovingly, emotionally. All along she uneasily suspects he is less selfless about her. Ironically she asks Krishna Sen Gupta to be her go-between to elude her mother's vigilant hostility to Hari. Only at the end of the book does she come to understand that it is Krishna she really loves and that he loves her. Common sense, sincerity and sheer chance win over false romanticism and self-deception.

Hari finally falls into the arms of Sushila and Amrita into the sedate, yet seductive, embraces of Krishna Sen Gupta. Krishna is her paying-guest, and quite comically, the messenger of her love for Hari. He genuinely tries to bridge the gap between Hari and Amrita, but finally fills in the gap himself. Amrita after her experience of puppy-love, reverts to a posture which ostensibly is more sober, at least more pragmatic. Her life in the studios begins as a song of innocence and culminates in a song of experience.

Comic Effect

Jhabvala portrays these situations with a genuine sense of the comic and a spirit of gaiety. The scene of 'booking the boy'- a kind of betrothal- is not without its lighthearted flourishes and ceremonial playfulness underscoring the comic mode which dominates its spirit. Mr. Anand proclaims with an air of assumed importance, 'well, Suri sahib, you boy is ours, we book him, here is our money.' Suri holds the 21 rupees and responds heartily:

He is booked.' This 'booking' event leads to the usual sentimentalism of elderly women, their sobs of self-pity, a curious combination of joy and grief. Hari's

mother let out a loud sob while Hari desperately pretended not to notice what was going on. (TWSW 150)

Hari is thus involuntarily marching on the road to matrimony, but quite curiously just three days before the date of the wedding, he talks to Amrita about their proposed action. Earlier he had gone with her to travel agents and agreed to try to get the passports, and the painful health inoculations. The bizarre world is in tune with the basic comicality of Hari's pretensions and Amrita's predilections. While Amrita is seriously contemplating revolt and action including a journey to England with a view to getting married to Hari and settling down in that country, he is quietly but surely giving in to the pressures of his family.

Indians Falling in Love and Matrimonial Crisis

The Matrimonial crisis is dramatized through the predicaments of Hari and Amrita, Sushila and Krishna and the complex tangle of their human relationships. Amrita, the attractive, self-willed maiden makes a bold, though fruitless, attempt to marry for love. She tries "to give herself to whom she will" but doesn't succeed. Sushila and Hari both are married at a tender age to preclude the possibilities of their marrying for love and fighting for it. Even Amrita will marry Krishna, so that they will not float any more on the chessboard of adolescent love.

Hari marries Sushila not for love, but for social and individual graces and for preserving the group values of the community and family. Marriage, then, at best seems a compromise in the social sense, an adjustment that two individuals have to make to conform to a social norm. The two marital alliances in *To Whom She Will* only reinforce this comic mood of a social compromise.

Marriage is, thus, one of the necessary bonds of human life which basically rests on the proper understanding between husband and wife. It is this very relationship which helps marriage to exist in this world. The error known as 'misunderstanding' is largely responsible for the matrimonial crisis. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala talks a lot about this crisis among married couples in the novels taken up for examination.

Jhabvala presents in her problem with minute details about the people and their problems. The problem of marital discord is portrayed in almost all her novels and her characters,

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especially women characters pass through crisis after crisis. Most of them are in quest of better partners, searching with all their hearts. It is attempted to expose to the readers the crisis felt by women protagonists, arising out of the marital discord in their lives, in the fiction of Jhabvala.

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