



**DIASPORIC SENSIBILITY IN
LITERATURES IN ENGLISH**

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- 52 Helms's Womanist Identity Model in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*
S. Rekha
- 53 Expatriate Feeling in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*
Ms. Shanmuga Jothi
- 54 The Concept of Nostalgia in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Novels: *The Mistress Of Spices* and *Sister Of My Heart*
S.I. Shanthi Coleen
- 55 East and West: Cultural Estrangement in Anita Desai's *Fasting Feasting*
Ms. N. Subashini
- 56 Transformation of Shiva From an Immigrant to Lord Neelkanth: A Study of Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals Of Meluha*
Ms. V. Suguna
- 57 Expatriation of Self-hood in Kamala Das's Poetry
A. Swathi
- 58 Man as 'Self' and Woman as The 'Other' –A Psychoanalytical Study of Shashi Deshpande's *In The Country Of Deceit*.
M. Vaijo Latha
- 59 Racial Issues and Gender Bias as Reflected in Toni Morrison's First Novel *The Bluest Eye*
Mrs. Vanitha. S.R
- 60 Racial Inequality And Social Injustice In Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*
Vevek. D
- 61 Marital Disharmony in Jhabvala's *Esmond in India*
Mrs. G. Vijayalekshmi
- 62 A study on Diasporic Women in Salman Rushdie's Select Novels
Mr. N. Moorthy

MARITAL DISHARMONY IN JHABVALA'S *ESMOND IN INDIA*

G. VIJAYALEKSHMI

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, the most outstanding woman novelist of quality, presents the story of two contrasting families in her first novel of expatriation, "*Esmond in India*" (1957). The story of "*Esmond in India*" is set in post-Independence India, where an Englishman called, Esmond earns his living in India, teaching Hindi to the wives of foreign embassy officials and delivering lectures on Indian Art and Culture. Here the west represents the European Tradition and the East is synonymous with India.

As we all know, a marriage is thought to be bringing together of two people who are supposed to be compatible, and the sense of unity, intimacy and love between husband and wife physically, mentally and spiritually serve as the basis of happy married life of fulfilled desires. Thus marriage is not self-indulgence, but it should rather be considered as a life long social and spiritual responsibility.

But Jhabvala's "*Esmond in India*" gives a premonition of the present cultural and social situation in India. The main focus of this paper is on the conflicts and disharmony arising in the conjugal life of couples on account of confrontation of East and West Cultures in cross cultural marriages.

In Jhabvala's "*Esmond in India*", the east-west relationship is projected in relation to the friction which results when a westerner comes to India, and tries to get adjusted to the Indian Society. During such adjustments he gets married to an Indian Girl. In such marriage, the European finds excitement in the initial period of his conjugal life. But the moment he begins to notice changes, his attitude undergoes a transformation. The weather of India which was bright and sunny to him once, now becomes disgustingly hot and dusty. The people who were affectionate to him once have become sentimental now. The food that was once exotic is now regarded as spicy. The result is that the westerner feels unhappy and bored.

The most intriguing aspect of marital disharmony in the novel "*Esmond in India*" is exemplified in the mixed marriage between persons belonging to the two hemispheres of the world - East and West. The westernized modern upper middle class Indian family is the target of such problems due to conflicting attitudes and interests. For instance, the married life of Esmond and Gulab in the novel is full of conflicts between Eastern and Western patterns of living and the eventual failure of the marriage. There is also another problem in the marriage mixed with the cultures of east and west that the English are rational and the

Indians are emotional. Thus the clash between the two is also a clash between two concepts of culture.

Esmond's wife, Gulab is an Indian Woman. He is tall, handsome and quite impressive. Gulab who was thought an Indian beauty in her college days fell in love with him and married him much against the wishes of her family. Now, she is leading a comfortable life in a well-furnished flat. She is visited by her mother every day who also gets Indian food for Gulab. Her subconscious thought about an ideal marriage is precipitated only when they come into clash with the western attitudes of Esmond. Gulab's tastes and attitudes are typically Indian. From food to making their son Ravi sleep with her, she has strong Indian attitudes in her. Apart from this, there are clashes in the personalities of Gulab and Esmond. Esmond is a selfish, sophisticated egoist and Gulab is sluttish and unsophisticated.

The sharp contrast between the two ways of living and thinking causes awkward and ugly situations in their conjugal life. The east-going Gulab, with her oriental taste for Carrot Halwa, spices and other things preserved for them in other pots, gram, tomatoes and potatoes swimming in red curry and cheeks of meat soaked in curds, which is in sharp contrast to the western sophistication of Esmond. Her typically Indian bashfulness of high society and indifference towards modern furniture is a glaring contrast to her husband, Esmond, with his innate craze for orderliness, smart and sophisticated society and up to - date furnishings. Ultimately, he realizes the unsuitability of their marriage. His unhappiness creates hatred in him towards everything Indian. He dislikes the Indian climate, the landscape, the people and their way of living. He develops an abnormal and a very negative attitude about India. It's the irony that he hates India but makes a living by teaching Hindi and Indian Culture to rich Indian women and English and American tourists.

Esmond and Gulab are two individuals who are as incompatible with each other as their cultures. There is hardly a pleasant meeting between the two. The marriage becomes a battlefield when Esmond insists that Gulab should bring up their son, Ravi in the European way, keeping him away from the sweet food and without petting or pampering him with sentimental love. But in the absence of Esmond, Gulab simply reverts to Indian ways by providing lavishing sweets and by showering sentimental love on the child. But Gulab never throws herself into confrontation or argument with her husband before others. On the other hand, she supports her husband by telling her mother that they are educating their son according to modern scientific ideas. Gulab's mother frequently interferes with the domestic and administrative affairs of Esmond's family and with most other things.

like a typical Indian mother-in-law, she ignores the western ideas of her son-in-law, about food habits to be developed in the child. She suggests:

He (Ravi) needs such food (good strengthening food cooked in plenty of ghee), and she also needs to have his legs rubbed with oil to make them strong and his hair must be shaved so that it may grow luxuriant, and black shadow must be applied under the eyes to shield them from the strong sun, and in the night he must sleep with his mother so that she may comfort him if he wakes with bad dreams! (148).

Jhabvals's understanding of Indian women is greater than her understanding of Indian men. She has also been able to depict their excessive passiveness, bickering and domineering nature, their greed and soft-headedness. This is incorporated in the nature of Gulab's mother who wants her grandson under her possession. This behavior is in total contrast to Esmond's western approach; and consequently he is irritated not only with Gulab's mother but also with Gulab who encourages her.

The disparity in the cultures, backgrounds and habits of Esmond and Gulab strikes a discordant influence on their marital relationships. Esmond expects, more than anything else, companionship in marriage. He desires a sympathetic, clean, neat, upto date, decorative and intimate partner and not a slave. Gulab's unquestioning stoic obedience fails to move him even to compassion. Esmond feels uneasy the moment he looks at his wife with crumpled and torn dress. He observes:

Having been conscious of her presence everywhere in the house, he feels himself trapped and caged.

As a westerner, Esmond is not in a position either to understand or to appreciate her passive, obedient, and submissive nature. As a result, the beast in him surfaces and he pinches and slaps her, forgetting his sophistication. He wonders at his own behavior:

To his horror he found himself wanting to seize her again and tear at her flesh and even to bite into her, to let his teeth sink deep into her soft body; to hurt her till he got some human response from her, even if it was nothing more than a cry of pain. (216)

The only comfort and solace for Esmond is the company of Betty and her Englishness. He always, whenever he felt particularly oppressed by Gulab, went to see Betty. Her flat was so light, modern and airy; she herself so light, modern and airy. Being with her was almost as good as being in England - which was the one place where he wanted most passionately to be. Esmond feels alienated in India - his feelings of homelessness and the absence of a sympathetic friend fill him with a sense of insecurity. He feels like returning to England for a sense of relief.

The easy going Gulab with her faith in Indian tradition is a glaring contrast to her husband, Esmond with his innate craze for orderliness. Esmond feels unsatisfied with his wife and falls in love with Shakuntala, Har Dayal's daughter, but when he meets her in the busy bazaar in the last scene and looks at her eyes, they remind him of Gulab's eyes as they had been when he was first married to her. This perhaps suggests that Shakuntala will be another Gulab in course of time. Hence Esmond behaves like a westerner throughout the novel. Esmond wants Gulab to take to western ways of life which she refuses to do.

Such a mother - daughter relationship may be considered charming, if the daughter is a widow or separated from her husband. But her mother, Uma's interference is a major contributory factor for the disharmony of married life between Esmond and Gulab.

From the Indian point of view, one can understand Gulab's languorous way of life, her liking of spicy food and her feeling of discomfort in a smartly furnished flat which seems to restrict her freedom of movement. She feels a sense of restlessness and alienation in such modern flats:

"Gulab, lying on the floor, felt as comfortable as she ever felt in that flat. It was not really convenient to her way of living. In her mother's house she has been used to vast rooms and little furniture, so that she had been able to lie on an old string bed in the middle of an otherwise empty room, floating as on a great sea of cracked marble flooring under a high ceiling fretted - sky with clouds : with flacking frescoes. But here, in her husband's flat, she was hemped in by furniture, there was no room to lie down, no room to move at her ease.

Oh yes, everybody said what nice furniture it was and how clever Esmond was to make so much in that small flat. He had utilized every corner, fitted in divans and shelves and coffee - tables, all very low and modern and so they said, attractive. But Gulab could not see any purpose for so much furniture; it only prevented one from being comfortable" (20).

Gulab's concept of marriage is orthodox she feels that marriage should provide her security. Though it is the husband's right to treat his wife as he likes, it is also his duty to see that she is safe in his house. But her servant, taking advantage of their marital dissonance, tries to molest her. He enters her room and fumbling with the words, "My Clearie, My dearie". For a moment his hand lay on her flesh and looked down at it because she could not believe it, though she felt it there" (259).

Thus, her personal honour is assaulted by the servant. She feels that she has no use of a husband who can not protect her honour.

Esmond fails in his duty. Gulab's sense of security is shattered and she feels that in no way she should be bound to marriage. So she is no more her husband, nor is she his wife. Though her mother and her maternal uncle have been suggesting to her to quit her husband's house, because of the incompatibility between husband and wife, Gulab had been hesitating it. But now the time has come to leave her husband's house. Thus she takes the final decision and walks out leaving the doors unlocked.

Despite the amused detachment employed by the novelist in the delineation of the characters and situations in the novel, a kind of poetic justice is also done to them. It is the ambitious and the materialistic who suffer and are unhappy towards the end of the novel, whereas the simple, the innocent, and the idealists like Gulab, her mother, Uma and her Uncle, Ramnath in spite of their trials and tribulations, insults and injuries, triumph ultimately in finding some kind of peace in their life. The novel, chiefly concerned with matrimonial adjustment between the east and the west, depicts not only the pathetic rootlessness of the foreigner in India, but the glorious failure of social and cultural adjustments also. Moreover, Jhabvala degrades Indian Women through her European character, Esmond and the main Indian woman character, Gulab. So the relationship between Gulab and Esmond seems to be a tragedy or atleast a tragicomedy as there are problems that can not be solved.

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