

**INTERCULTURAL THEME IN RUTH PRAWER JHABVALA'S
A NEW DOMINION AND ANITA DESAI'S JOURNEY TO ITHACA :
A NOTE ON SPIRITUAL INDIA**

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Abstract

The paper intends to make a comparative study of the intercultural theme as depicted in Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's *A New Dominion* and Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca*. Both Ruth Prawer Jhabvala and Anita Desai occupy significant positions in the Indian English literary scene. The former—a Polish-Jewish writer whose expatriate experiences spread across England, India and the USA, has dealt with the cross-cultural theme in most of her works. In fact, the theme overwhelms her literary creations. Anita Desai, who is ten years younger to the other novelist, too attempts to explore the intercultural issues in some of her novels. This may be explained by her mixed Indo-German roots and also her sojourn in the USA in the nineties. The comparative analysis of the novels will focus primarily on the subject of 'spiritual India' as seen through the lens of western men and women as depicted in the concerned texts.

Keywords: comparative study, intercultural, Indian spirituality, quest, Gurus, expatriate.

Religion forms one of the basic elements of culture in a society. It plays a crucial role in an encounter between two different cultures. In the comparative study, the novelists "touch upon religio- philosophical encounters because they are impediments to a fruitful linking of hands."(Jha 91) Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's *A New Dominion* (1972) revolves round the experiences of Westerners-- men and women in India of the seventies. They are Lee, Margaret, Evie, Raymond and Miss Charlotte They come to India for different reasons: Lee, Margaret and Evie come to India "to seek peace of mind and spiritual solace in order to give meaning to their empty lives."(Chadha 91) They are attracted towards India "not only because the East has a message to give but also because they are tired of their material west."(Saxena 227) Miss Charlotte—a Christian missionary comes to India to spread teachings of Christ. The Englishman Raymond comes to the alien land as a tourist. The novel also portrays other important Indian characters—Banubai, Swamiji(spiritual heads) and others.

In the novel, the intercultural theme at the spiritual level is examined through the westerners' interaction with Swamiji and Banubai. As Aruna Chakravarti comments,

The central theme of the novel is an encounter between the forces of Hinduism, as embodied in a spurious god man and an enigmatic holy woman, and the forces of Christianity and modern rationality represented by three western girls on a spiritual quest, a Englishman on a study tour of India and a female missionary who has spent thirty years in India. (Chakravarti 187)

A New Dominion presents Indian spirituality primarily through the character of the Swami and that of Banubai to a considerable extent. In the novel, the Swami is shown to be a charismatic figure and is a great fascination and attraction for the Westerners -- especially the three girls--Lee, Margaret and Evie who are spiritual seekers and the English tourist, Raymond to a lesser degree. O.P. Saxena remarks,

The Swami of course, is a magnetic personality. He can create illusions of hope and happiness through a skillful manipulation of words, gestures and facial expressions. (Saxena 235)

Lee, Margaret and Evie look upon the Swami as their spiritual saviour and guide. They hope that the Swami will help them find spiritual peace and solace in their empty meaningless existence. S. Ambika notes:

Lee, Margaret and Evie abandon western pragmatism and rationalism and come to India as travellers in search of Asian mysticism. These westerners who are disgusted with the material stodginess of the western world come with high expectation about oriental spiritualism.(Ambika 10)

However, their hopes and dreams about Indian spirituality are belied, and they get totally disillusioned in the end. This is evidenced from their association with the Indian spiritual leader--the Swami. In their bid to merge with spiritual India, the three girls become the credulous victims of the Swami. In fact, the Swami manipulates the westerners by playing on their beliefs and aspirations. Behind the superficial and pretentious preaching and sermons, the Swami has his own selfish motives.

In her complete surrender of self to the Swami, Evie becomes a non-entity; she has been drained of all her energy to express her individuality, intellect and emotion. She does everything as dictated by the Swami and even remains unaffected by Margaret's death. Laurie Sucher describes Evie's association with Swamiji:

Evie is his silent, obedient slave; already seasoned Evie, already turned her out, already broken her in. The language is that of the American street, but Swamiji has his own exact equivalent, which described a similar psychological process, culminating in the girl's fragmentation of self, complete dependency and severing of ties with the outside world.(Sucher 58)

Margaret's experience with the Swamiji proves to be fatal when she contracts Jaundice which kills her in the end. She refuses Lee and Raymond to help her cure her ailment and continues to serve the Swami in his ashram. When Margaret's condition becomes very serious, Lee immediately appeals to Raymond for help. Lee. Raymond along with Bob (an Indian character in the novel), takes Margaret to a hospital where she finally succumbs to her disease. Thus, she is physically destroyed in the process of merging spiritually with Swamiji: "Margaret meets with death due to the Swamiji's neglect to get her medical help when she becomes ill."(Ambika 11) On the other hand, the Swami is not at all concerned with the well-being of his disciples and treats Margaret's illness casually. He is too busy in his work of spreading his

teachings and religious principles to different places of the world. He befriends Raymond and tries to win his trust for he knows that Raymond is in the publishing business. But Raymond is displeased with the Swami who is too self-centred that he is not at all bothered about the sick Margaret. Nevertheless, Raymond seems to be impressed by the cheerfulness and vivacity of the Swami.

Among the three western disciples, Lee's encounter with the Swamiji is a bit different from those of Evie and Margaret. Unlike the two girls who submit to the Swamiji easily, Lee does not do so. Although she also shows her devotion and respect towards the Swami, she questions the Swami's ways: when Swamiji wants Margaret to work in the kitchen, Margaret agrees but Lee makes protests against the Swami because none of them (Evie, Lee and Margaret) can do kitchen chores. And when they are confined to the kitchen she (Lee) does not go out from the kitchen when Evie tells her that the Swami wants her. Her reluctance to accept the concept of total submission is mainly due to "her western upbringing with its emphasis on freedom and self-respect" which rebels against the philosophy of the Swami. (Chakravarti 192) Thus, she becomes a problem and challenge for the Swamiji.

In order to mould Lee according to his ways, the Swamiji tries to possess not only her soul and mind but also her body. So, he sexually assaults Lee in a terrifying and abominable manner. In fact, the assault is a clear indication of the Swami's attempt to tame and control her so that she may "live by his will and not by her own." (Chakravarti 192) Towards the end of the novel, Lee becomes totally disillusioned with the Swami. However, she has reached a stage where she has no capacity to separate herself from the Swami and his ashram. The novelist says:

No! she knew at once: it wouldn't be like before. True, the journey would be the same and the view out of the window: but now if some place they passed looked attractive— or she heard of some interesting monument or some fellow passenger invited her to and go wherever— she was taken. She would have to say I can't. Because now she would be travelling in one definite direction and get off at one definite station; and then wait for the bus; and travel in that bus down a long and dusty road; and jump off at what looked like the middle of nowhere and, lugging her bedroll behind her, walk across the fields till she came to a board and some barbed wire. There he would be, sitting under the only tree. Oh—ho! He would say, Just see who has come. (Jhabvala 253)

This makes her return to the ashram.

In *A New Dominion*, Banubai is a female saint. Many people come to her for advice and comfort. But she is fond of sweets as much as nice looking boys. So, she has an eye for Gopi (one of the Indian characters in the text) who is a handsome young man. She tells everyone that Gopi is like a son to her but in reality it is not so. Thus, Banubai's status as a spiritual leader remains debatable and open ended. In contrast to the Swami and Banubai is the Christian missionary Miss Charlotte who has dedicated her life to the service of mankind. Charlotte's charity in India may symbolise the Christian values of piety, universal brotherhood, compassion and benevolence; but they are not strong enough to withstand the forces of Hinduism represented by the Indian spiritual leaders— Swamiji and Banubai. The evil forces of the Swami lead to degeneration of the Western girl. Although Christianity renders momentary solace to the western questers— especially Lee and Margaret, it fails to save them from degeneration.

Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) also takes up the intercultural theme at the spiritual level. The novel revolves round the expatriate experiences of a European couple—Matteo, an Italian and his German wife, Sophie in India. Matteo has come to India in search of spiritual solace. In fact, Matteo's journey to the East has been inspired by Hermann Hesse's *The Journey to the East* and *Siddhartha* which he had read during his youthful days. He never returns to his home but stays on in India to serve the 'mother' (female guru in India). Matteo is accompanied by his wife in his journey to India. However, she has no spiritual aspirations unlike her husband. She comes back home totally repelled by India –its climate, people and customs. Her disbelief in the 'Mother' leads her to unravel the mysterious past of the 'mother'.

In the novel, the spiritual theme is exquisitely analysed through Matteo's quest for spiritual truth and solace in India. His search has been initiated by Hermann Hesse's book, *The Journey to the East* from an early period of his life. It was his tutor, Fabian who introduced Matteo to the world of the East through the books— *Journey to the East* and *Siddhartha* written by Hermann Hesse. In fact, the books aroused Matteo's interest: And they play a significant role in shaping his future. Moreover, the protagonist's sensitive temperament is also responsible for his attraction towards Hesse's book.

Matteo has been a non-conformist to convention and tradition since his childhood. During his school days, he did not show interest in studies and disliked the school activities:

Matteo could not stand the school from the first day to the last, Grandmother continues, almost proudly: He couldn't take orders from the teachers. They could not make him do his lessons or sing or play football, it didn't matter what they did to him. (Desai 11)

Besides, he would take only bread and water instead of meat and pastries served by his mother. Being a lonely child he had always played by himself. As a result, he found it difficult to mix with other people. His unsocial attitude became a problem when he had to play football with other boys in a team. Being an introvert child, he would rarely speak about himself to anybody.

When his parents felt that Matteo became a failure at school, they stopped him from going to school. So, they hired an Englishman, Fabian to tutor Matteo at home. In this regard, Mukund Padmanabhan says: "The sensitive Matteo, a failure at school and football, the despair of his father who wants him to be a man is placed under a tutor." (Padmanabhan 6)

Worldly and materialistic values of life do not appeal to him. Rather, he seems to shun these values and aims for something which is from the higher realm of life. As Mrinalini Solanki comments, "Like so many western youths in the sixties and seventies, a young Italian boy leaves his luxurious home and affluent family in search of something more and beyond his mundane existence." (Solanki 20)

In a way, Matteo's situation is similar to that of Meursault, the protagonist of Albert Camus' *The Outsider*. Like Matteo, Camus' protagonist too remains an outsider and a stranger to the worldly world due to his absolute defiance of the societal norms of life. After his marriage, Matteo and Sophie set off for India in 1975. In the alien land of India, Matteo and his wife meet a group of foreigners who are also on a spiritual journey. In his first encounter with the alien country, Matteo has been fascinated by the spiritual life of the Indian holy man and feels that the deep religious faith of the Indians is not present in any part of the world' (Myles 20) He gives up everything in pursuing his spiritual goal. At times, he may be accused of being crazy and irrational in his struggle for spiritual peace. But he is never shaken in his faith at any stage of his struggle. As a consequence, he accepts everything in India and remains unaffected by the harsh realities of the land. However, his wife responds to India and its spiritual life in a different way.

This may be explained by the fact that she has no spiritual cravings and believes in the practical and ordinary values of life.

Matteo's encounter with the 'Mother' is a significant example of the cross-cultural theme at the spiritual level. It may symbolise the success of the European mind in its attempt to understand the religio-philosophical aspects of Indian spirituality. The appearance of the god woman in Matteo's life has helped him to find meaning in his quest of attaining spiritual peace. As Rama Kundu comments,

After running from pillar to post in search of a Guru (Master), Matteo reaches an ashram on the mountains in the North and coming here at last Matteo finds peace, joy, deep contentment. Matteo seems to get closer and closer to his goal under the blessing and guidance of the Mother, the head of the ashram.(Kundu 93)

His association with the Mother seems to affect his relationship with his wife. He does not seem to show concern for his wife because he has dedicated his life to the work of the ashram and the 'Mother'. This makes Sophie frustrated and miserable. She accuses the 'Mother' of snatching away her husband from his family. Even the birth of babies to the couple, does not help Matteo to get closer to his wife and children

The death of the Mother shatters the spiritual world of Matteo. It seems to drain the life out of him: he forgets hunger and thirst in his sorrow at the loss of the 'Mother'. Then, he vanishes from the sight of humanity into the unknown. However, his appearance as a Christ-like figure at his home in Italy may indicate the completion of his spiritual journey through his attaining the stature of a saint.

Journey to Ithaca also presents another example of the religio-philosophical interaction in the character of the Mother. Before becoming the spiritual head of the ashram, the Mother too had gone through a long and tedious spiritual voyage. Like her disciple Matteo, she too had been a rebel against her community and its norms since her childhood:

She could not conform to the conventional religion of her society or the common ways/norms of life as upheld by her relative and acquaintances, She had become and alien even before she heard of India.(Kundu 96)

Besides, she had even alienated herself from the materialistic values of life and had been restless in her search for freedom of the spirit. As a critic examines, "An undefined urge for some sublime life and experience stirred within her." (Kundu 96) Her association with her Indian dance Guru, Krishna is brought about by her passion for the spiritual and divine form of Indian dance. In fact, she had followed Krishna to India in the hope of fulfilling her spiritual dream. But she felt betrayed by Krishna for he did not show any interest in her spiritual aspiration. On the other hand, Krishna was interested only in his material gain. Therefore, she left him and underwent an ordeal of physical and mental trauma in her quest for spiritual truth,. At last, she found her Guru in the mountains of North India and achieved a sense of harmony with her inner self. Then she came to be known as the Mother after the death of her Guru.

In contrast to Matteo and the Mother is Sophie who is unable to understand India in terms of its spirituality. This is because she lacks the inner urge to comprehend the basic elements of Indian Spirituality, Moreover, her rationalist and materialistic attitude towards life does not allow her to see things beyond the ordinary world. As a result, she does not believe in the Mother and

even suspects the Mother's association with her (Mother's) Guru. Reena Kothari further comments in this regard,

It was beyond Sophie's understanding to understand this union.

Presumably for her, whether two people have sex with one another or not is the paramount means of ascertaining their relationship with one another. However, from the spiritual point of view, sexual union is not the most but perhaps the least intimate of unions. (Kothari 70)

Her suspicion leads her to enquire into the Mother's past. She also wants to prove that the Mother is a fraud. However, she is proved wrong after her discovery of the Mother's past life. She comes to know that the Mother had also been a quester like Matteo. This makes her realise the significance of the spiritual voyages undertaken by spiritual seekers.

A close examination of the novels, *A New Dominion* and *Journey to Ithaca* seems to reveal the points of differences and similarities between the two novels in tackling the intercultural theme at the spiritual level. In both the novels, spiritual India seems to be a great fascination for the westerners and other foreigners. As a consequence, many of them engage themselves in a quest for spiritual truth in India. While some succeed in their attempt to understand India, others fail to do so and become disenchanted with the land. In Jhabvala's *A New Dominion*, the spiritual theme is perceived in terms of the westerners' interaction with the spiritual leaders of India. In this encounter, the western questers are being manipulated and bequiled by the Swamis, Sadhus and Mais. Consequently, their dreams and hopes of spiritual fulfillment are never realised. In the novel, Lee, Margaret and Evie become the victims of the Swami who is guided by selfish motives. Thus, they get "trapped in the ashram of a bogus Guru." (Chakravarti 187)

Normally, the Indian holy men— Gurus, Swamis and Sadhus are supposed to be selfless and abstain themselves from worldly pleasures and desires. However, in Jhabvala's *A New Dominion*, the spiritual heads have turned out to be cunning schemers who thrive at the expense of their followers:

The Swamis, the Sadhus and the Bais of Jhabvala's novels are not always paragons of virtues and intellect or the embodiment of the pure spirit. They are sometimes an odd combination of worldly wisdom and other— worldly charm; they are of the earth, earthy.

(Saxena 227)

The concept of faked or fraudulent holy man is present in many of the novels and short stories of Ruth Praver Jhabvala. In this respect, Jhabvala's *Three Continents* may be taken as a significant example. In *Three Continents*, a rich American heiress and her brother fall into the trap of an Indian holy man, Rawul and his adopted son, Crishi. The novel shows Rawul to be the founder of a movement for world unity. But in reality, the movement is involved in a number of illegal and criminal activities.

Among the short stories, "A Spiritual Call" from the author's collection, *A Stronger Climate* is noteworthy in its portrayal of the dubious holy man in India. The story centres on Daphne, an English woman who comes to India in search of a Guru. She stays at the ashram with a group of westerners. During the process of her spiritual regeneration, Daphne's Guru uses her for his purpose. Fritz Blackwell comments:

Unlike the householder, Daphne has no strong ties. There thus is no competition for Swamiji's demands upon her, and though she really does not want to be irrevocably tied to him, she allows herself to become so,

largely through lack of will to resist. (Blackwell 7)

Thus, the integrity of the Gurus in Jhabvala's novels remains doubtful and questionable. This seems to indicate the author's attitude towards the spiritual side of India. It may arise from the author's ambiguous position as an expatriate writer in India. In fact, in her essay, "Myself in India" she has confessed her inability to understand the alien land in its totality. On the whole, such a view of the author seems to be limited in its scope. Therefore, it needs to be reviewed from a wider perspective.

In Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca*, the spiritual theme is given a different treatment. Here, the white spiritual seekers' encounter with Indian Swamis and Sadhus brings about spiritual peace and satisfaction to them. Moreover, 'Spiritual India' seems to offer meaningful solution to their existential problems. Towards the end of the novel, even the protagonist's wife, a non-believer in Indian spirituality seems to be cleared of all her doubts regarding Indian spirituality. And she tries to understand the significance of spiritual journeys. This shows a positive and balanced view of the author in her depiction of the spiritual motif. Unlike Jhabvala, Anita Desai has taken an objective stance here. This may be related to the author's mixed background. Rama Kundu says:

While Chauhan emphasises Desai's parental background to explain her rejection of India, Bliss stresses her 'Eurocentric' view of India. Both observations, however, predate remarkably, and she exploits her mixed heritage to achieve something unique. She empathizes with the westerners' search for India; at the same time she also attains a harmonious, clear vision of India, a sense of delighted, joyous, serene fulfillment. (Kundu 99)

Like Anita Desai and Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya is also an Indian English novelist who has also discussed the spiritual element in her novel. In Markandaya's *A Silence of Desire* and *Possession*, the image of the Indian Swami is significant. Although many critics question the integrity of the Swami in Markandaya's novels, the Swami has been endowed with the healing power for spiritual regeneration. The absolute negative image of the Indian holy man which is seen in Jhabvala's novels is absent in Markandaya's works. Thus, Anita Desai is closer to Kamala Markandaya in her depiction of the positive aspects of Indian spirituality. But Ruth Praver Jhabvala differs from Desai and Markandaya as she emphasises primarily on the negative aspects of Indian spirituality. This may be explained by her partial rejection of the land and its culture which is a part of her alien European sensibility:

She does not think it at all possible that a European can adopt Indian beliefs and be at peace. There will be some frustration, a disillusionment at the end. (Jha 84)

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