

## A Comparative Study of R.K. Narayan and R.P. Jhabvala



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Khushwant Singh writes of Narayan and Jhabvala having “much in common with each other.” Both novelists write about one part of India which they know by first-hand experience (Narayan’s South Indian town, Jhabvala’s Delhi) ; both tend to write about day-to-day problems of living, avoiding more obvious sensational, melodramatic or heroic subjects (though Narayan’s novel have more and more dealt with “heroic” subjects in a comic spirit) ; both avoid political controversy and a party political spirit (Narayan’s portrayal of the Mahatma in *Waiting for the Mahatma* is heroic rather than merely political) ; both write in a deceptively simple style and use a conventional novel structure ; and of course, both tend to write the same book over and over-while showing development in complexity and maturity of vision.

Such distinctions account partly at least for the differences between their novels. R.K. Narayan, his first novel, *Swami and Friends*, appeared as long ago as 1935 and his ten novels have appeared at regular intervals ever since. Ruth Jhabvala seems by comparison limited in scope and vision. She keeps as Narayan does to one locality, although in her novels the locality is explicitly the real Delhi. She writes about professional people and expatriates like herself or about the rich business elite who would regard themselves as above the families of Narayan’s Malgudi is social status. Jhabvala returns repeatedly to the same subjects the joint-family house, arranged marriages, romantic love affairs, children and parents, divorce and the keeping of mistresses among the idle rich. Narayan too duplicates characters from book to book but Jhabvala writes on the same subjects from different angles. Her first novel *To whom She Will* (1955) shows a girl in love with a boy whose parents arrange a marriage with someone else more suitable to their class and way of life But Jhabvala’s main difference from Narayan is her exclusion of fantasy, poetry and exaggerated comedy. Narayan somehow seems to be unable to disengage himself emotionally from Malgudi. Hence the lyrical and emotional quality of his treat-

ment. Jhabvala seems in contrast cool, detached and often sardonic. Jhabvala treats young passionate love with some irony, as opposed to Narayan’s serious romantic treatment in the heroes of *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The Guide*. In her first novel *To whom She Will* her foolish young people (Amrita and Hari) fall in and then out of love with equal ease and the system of arranged marriage appears to be no so tyrannous after all, especially when Amrita falls in love in the end with someone approved of by her own mother. Jhabvala chooses classes of the Indian community where adultery and divorce are not unknown the rich upper middle class of Delhi and the circles of artists bohemians and expatriates. Etta one of the central characters of *A Backward Place* has had a failed marriage and has been the mistress of several men since the break up. Kusum is the mistress of Sarla Devi’s estranged husband. Jhabvala sketches in *Get ready for Battle* the life of a fast-living set of young people who drink, dance and have affairs in Delhi. Even innocent girls like Shakuntala in *Esmond of India*, fall easy victims to phony sexual charms. Break up of united families is also a familiar phenomenon in Narayan’s books, although it is hardly ever as central or as significant for subsequent action as in Jhabvala, and frequently for Narayan it is a source of wry comedy. Family squabbling accounts for the break-up of Nataraj’s home in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*.

My father ..... resolved ..... to break up the joint family in the interests of peace, The next few days saw our family lawyers, assisted by the adjournment expert, walking in and out with papers to be signed, and within a few weeks the house had become empty. The reverberations of this domestic calamity continue long after Nataraj has grown up and his married. My cousin from the fourth street gave me a cold look and passed. She hated me for staying in our ancestral home, my father having received it as his share after the division of property among his brothers. The *house-holder* is Jhabvala’s most sympathetic study of a young married couple in India, an ironical

and yet tender idyll. In the *Financial Expert* Narayan's targets are mysterious world of finance, pornography (briefly) and the "dolce vita." Narayan's wry treatment of the whole episode (and incidentally is a link with Jhabvala's satirical treatment of the film actor. Much more thoroughly satirical is Ruth Jhabvala's treatment of modern Delhi Society, Three groups are the targets of her most pungent revelations. There are the nouveaux riches men like Lalaji (The nature of passion) and Gulzari Lal (*Get Ready for Battle*) who have risen high in society through shady business deals. A second group is the westernized young sophisticates who dance, drink and flirt in the clubs and restaurants of Delhi. The third group excites Jhabvala's most acid treatment : the rich Indian women who set up as "dogooders." Expatriation is a theme which Jhabvala finds irresistible ; it is not prominent in Narayan's work. Ruth Jhabvala's experience of India is entirely of the post-independence period when Indians for the first time

faced serious economic and political problems which they had to solve themselves. Moreover, she restricts her field of interest to the Indian middle classes of Delhi and the European expatriate. Narayan's development has been in the direction of fantasy. His comedy has become both broader and more poetic, and he has moved away firmly from the realism of an early novel like *The dark Room*. Like Jhabvala he has confined his art to one part of India-South India, and to one class-the lower middle class, artisans traders and teachers. Perhaps the difference can be summed up like this : Narayan's India is both ancient and modern ; basically it hasn't changed much since epic times, for human character is constant and customs go back to the remotest past, but Jhabvala's India is modern India, the India of industrial expansion and westernization seen with the sharp and often surprised freshness of a novelist who is also a permanent expatriate.

## **REFERENCE**

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