

RUTH PRAWER JHABVALA: A LITERARY AND CINEMATIC ODYSSEY

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Abstract:

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, a prolific writer and screenwriter, is a unique figure in the literary and cinematic worlds. Born in Germany, she later became a British citizen and spent a significant portion of her life in India, which deeply influenced her work. Jhabvala's oeuvre includes novels, short stories, and screenplays, many of which explore themes of cultural dislocation, identity, and the clash between tradition and modernity. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of Jhabvala's life, her literary and cinematic contributions, and her enduring legacy. By examining her major works, including her novels, short stories, and screenplays, this paper will highlight the thematic and stylistic elements that make Jhabvala's work distinctive. Additionally, the paper will explore her collaborations with the Merchant Ivory Productions and her impact on both literature and cinema.

Keywords: Dislocation, Films, Conflict, Legacy, Adaptation, Pioneer, Achievement, Inspiration

Introduction:

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala (1927-2013) was a writer of remarkable versatility and depth, whose work spans multiple genres and mediums. Born in Germany to Jewish parents, she fled the Nazi regime with her family and settled in England, where she later became a British citizen. Her marriage to an Indian architect, Cyrus Jhabvala, brought her to India, where she lived for over two decades. This experience profoundly shaped her literary output, as she became one of the most astute observers of Indian society and culture. Jhabvala's work is characterized by its keen insight into human nature, its exploration of cultural and social dynamics, and its elegant prose.

In addition to her literary achievements, Jhabvala is renowned for her screenwriting, particularly her collaborations with the Merchant Ivory Productions. Alongside director James Ivory and producer Ismail Merchant, she crafted some of the most acclaimed films of the 20th century, including 'A Room with a View', 'Howards End', and 'The Remains of the Day'. Her screenplays, like her novels and short stories, are marked by their nuanced characters, intricate plots, and exploration of themes such as class, identity, and cultural conflict.

This paper will delve into Jhabvala's life and career, examining her major works and their significance. It will also explore her contributions to cinema and her collaborations with Merchant Ivory Productions. Finally, the paper will assess Jhabvala's legacy and her impact on both literature and film.

Early Life and Background:

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala was born on May 7, 1927, in Cologne, Germany, to Marcus and

Eleanora Prawer. Her father was a lawyer, and her mother was a singer. The Prawer family was of Polish-Jewish descent, and they faced increasing persecution under the Nazi regime. In 1939, the family fled Germany and settled in England, where Ruth later became a British citizen. This experience of displacement and exile would later become a recurring theme in her work.

Jhabvala attended Queen Mary College, University of London, where she studied English literature. It was during her time at university that she began to develop her interest in writing. After completing her degree, she married Cyrus Jhabvala, an Indian architect, and moved to India in 1951. This marked the beginning of a new chapter in her life, as she immersed herself in Indian culture and society. The experience of living in India would have a profound impact on her writing, as she became one of the most perceptive chroniclers of Indian life.

Literary Career:

Novels:-

Jhabvala's literary career began with the publication of her first novel, 'To Whom She Will' (1955), which was later published in the United States as 'Amrita'. The novel is a light-hearted comedy of manners that explores the complexities of love and marriage in Indian society. It was well-received and established Jhabvala as a promising new voice in literature.

Over the next two decades, Jhabvala published several novels that further cemented her reputation as a skilled and insightful writer. These include 'The Nature of Passion' (1956), 'Esmond in India' (1958), 'The Householder' (1960), 'Get Ready for Battle' (1962), 'A Backward Place' (1965), and 'A New Dominion' (1972). These novels are characterized by their sharp social commentary, their exploration of cultural and generational conflicts, and their richly drawn characters.

One of Jhabvala's most acclaimed novels is 'Heat and Dust' (1975), which won the Booker Prize. The novel is a dual narrative that intertwines the stories of two Englishwomen living in India at different time periods. The protagonist, a young woman in the 1920s, becomes involved in a scandalous affair with an Indian prince, while her step-granddaughter, in the 1970s, seeks to uncover the truth about her ancestor's life. 'Heat and Dust' is a masterful exploration of cultural clash, colonialism, and the complexities of human relationships.

Short Stories :

In addition to her novels, Jhabvala was a prolific writer of short stories. Her short story collections include 'Like Birds, Like Fishes' (1963), 'A Stronger Climate' (1968), 'An Experience of India' (1971), and 'How I Became a Holy Mother' (1976). These stories are marked by their keen observation of human behavior, their exploration of cultural and social dynamics, and their elegant prose.

Jhabvala's short stories often focus on the experiences of expatriates and outsiders in India, as well as the complexities of Indian society. Many of her stories explore themes of cultural dislocation, identity, and the clash between tradition and modernity. Her characters are often caught between two worlds, struggling to navigate the complexities of their lives and relationships.

Themes and Style:

Jhabvala's work is characterized by its exploration of several key themes, including cultural dislocation, identity, and the clash between tradition and modernity. Her novels and short stories often focus on the experiences of expatriates and outsiders in India, as well as the complexities of Indian society. Her characters are frequently caught between two worlds, struggling to navigate the complexities of their lives and relationships.

Jhabvala's prose is elegant and precise, marked by its keen observation of human behavior and its exploration of cultural and social dynamics. Her writing is often described as 'cool' and 'detached', as she maintains a certain distance from her characters and their struggles. This detachment allows her to explore her themes with a clear-eyed objectivity, while still conveying a deep understanding of her characters' inner lives.

Cinematic Career :

Collaboration with Merchant Ivory Productions :

In addition to her literary achievements, Jhabvala is renowned for her work as a screenwriter, particularly her collaborations with the Merchant Ivory Productions. Alongside director James Ivory and producer Ismail Merchant, she crafted some of the most acclaimed films of the 20th century. The trio's collaboration began with the adaptation of Jhabvala's novel 'The Householder' (1963), and they went on to make numerous films together, including 'Shakespeare Wallah' (1965), 'The Guru' (1969), 'Bombay Talkie' (1970), and 'Autobiography of a Princess' (1975).

One of the most successful films of the Merchant Ivory-Jhabvala collaboration is 'A Room with a View' (1985), based on the novel by E.M. Forster. The film was a critical and commercial success, earning numerous awards, including three Academy Awards. Jhabvala's screenplay was praised for its faithfulness to the source material and its ability to capture the nuances of Forster's characters and themes.

Another notable film in the Merchant Ivory-Jhabvala collaboration is 'Howards End' (1992), also based on a novel by E.M. Forster. The film was a critical and commercial success, earning numerous awards, including three Academy Awards. Jhabvala's screenplay was again praised for its faithfulness to the source material and its ability to capture the complexities of Forster's characters and themes.

The Merchant Ivory-Jhabvala collaboration reached its zenith with 'The Remains of the Day' (1993), based on the novel by Kazuo Ishiguro. The film was a critical and commercial success, earning numerous awards, including eight Academy Award nominations. Jhabvala's screenplay was praised for its ability to capture the subtleties of Ishiguro's novel and its exploration of themes such as duty, loyalty, and regret.

Themes and Style in Screenwriting :

Jhabvala's screenplays, like her novels and short stories, are marked by their exploration of themes such as class, identity, and cultural conflict. Her screenplays often focus on the experiences of individuals caught between different worlds, struggling to navigate the complexities of their lives and relationships. Her characters are frequently outsiders or

expatriates, and her screenplays explore the tensions and conflicts that arise from their interactions with different cultures and societies.

Jhabvala's screenwriting style is characterized by its elegance and precision, as well as its ability to capture the nuances of human behavior and relationships. Her screenplays are often described as 'literary', as they maintain a strong connection to the source material and its themes. At the same time, Jhabvala's screenplays are highly cinematic, with a strong sense of visual storytelling and a keen eye for detail.

Legacy and Impact:

Ruth Praver Jhabvala's work has had a profound impact on both literature and cinema. Her novels and short stories are celebrated for their keen insight into human nature, their exploration of cultural and social dynamics, and their elegant prose. Her screenplays, particularly those written in collaboration with Merchant Ivory Productions, are regarded as some of the finest examples of literary adaptation in cinema.

Jhabvala's work has been widely recognized and honored. In addition to winning the Booker Prize for 'Heat and Dust', she received numerous awards for her screenwriting, including two Academy Awards for Best Adapted Screenplay for 'A Room with a View' and 'Howards End'. She was also awarded the *Padma Bhushan*, one of India's highest civilian honors, in recognition of her contributions to literature and cinema.

Jhabvala's legacy extends beyond her individual achievements. Her work has inspired countless writers and filmmakers, and her exploration of themes such as cultural dislocation, identity, and the clash between tradition and modernity continues to resonate with audiences around the world. Her ability to navigate between different cultures and mediums, and to capture the complexities of human experience, has made her a unique and enduring figure in the literary and cinematic worlds.

Conclusion:

Ruth Praver Jhabvala was a writer of remarkable versatility and depth, whose work spans multiple genres and mediums. Her novels and short stories are celebrated for their keen insight into human nature, their exploration of cultural and social dynamics, and their elegant prose. Her screenplays, particularly those written in collaboration with Merchant Ivory Productions, are regarded as some of the finest examples of literary adaptation in cinema.

Jhabvala's work is characterized by its exploration of themes such as cultural dislocation, identity, and the clash between tradition and modernity. Her characters are frequently caught between different worlds, struggling to navigate the complexities of their lives and relationships. Her ability to capture the nuances of human behavior and relationships, and to explore these themes with a clear-eyed objectivity, has made her a unique and enduring figure in the literary and cinematic worlds.

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the literary and cinematic worlds.

In conclusion, Ruth Praver Jhabvala's contributions to literature and cinema are immense. Her work continues to be celebrated for its insight, elegance, and depth, and her legacy as a writer and screenwriter remains secure. She was a true pioneer, whose work has left an indelible mark on the literary and cinematic landscapes.

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