

Social Realism in Ruth Prawar Jhabvala's *The Nature of Passion*: Exposure of Materialistic Passion

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Abstract

There is no doubt that India underwent so many changes in social, economic and cultural life immediately after the independence. One such change was the rise and growth of middle class people at the decline of the feudal system at the changed democratic social set up. This newly rich social class driven by utilitarian materialistic creed behaved as selfish, avaricious and scheming oriented by monetary and commercial interests. Money and status were the supreme force and stimulus in this ostentatious world. The attitude and ideology of the newly moneyed urban middle class people became mechanical, materialistic, and corrupt. Their way of life was replete with hypocrisy, pretention, deception and crookedness that were the predominating materialistic spirit of the post-independence Indian society. Ruth Prawar Jhabvala's *The Nature of Passion* (1956) successfully delineates the reality of Indian society and sensibility in the post-Independence era through Lalaji who represents the newly emerging rich selfish pretentious middle class businessman of contemporary India. His wealthy world is a part of the materialistic social condition which is predominated with money-mindedness, greed and hypocrisy rampant in the post-independence Indian society. The present paper aims at exploring Jhabvala's portrayal of contemporary materialistic social realism through shrewd Lalaji and other characters as depicted in *The Nature of Passion*.

Keywords: shrewd, selfish, materialistic passion, middle class people, post-independence India.

Introduction

It is a fact that India underwent so many challenges and changes in social, economic and cultural life immediately after the independence on account of various reasons. One such change was the rise and growth of middle class people at the decline of the feudal system at the changed

democratic social set up. The term ‘middle class’ in this context refers to an intermediate class or group of people in the social hierarchy between the noble class and the working class. From the Marxist and capitalistic point of view the term is associated with the rich bourgeois class distinct from nobility. It is fact that this prosperous middle class emerged in the post-independence era in India at the abolishing of the feudal system through parliamentary democratic reformations. This newly rich middle class became a dominating force in the socio-economic scene with its aspiring effort for ensuring social status and power. B.R. Agrawal and M.P. Sinha give an outline of this new social structure:

The result was that a new rich bourgeois class quickly emerged on the economic scene, which did not have to prove its nobility of blood and aristocratic birth for getting a status in the society. The encouragement from the government for the establishment of new small scale, medium and large scale industries and new community projects accelerated the growth of this class. Since independence, this new rich middle class has been dominating the socio-economic scene with its ambitious struggle for acquiring more wealth, status and respectability in society. (Agrawal & Sinha 112)

This newly rich social class driven by utilitarian materialistic creed behaved as selfish, avaricious and scheming oriented by monetary and commercial interests. Materialistic egocentric creed “values only things like money and consumer commodities” (Noonan, 3). M.L. Richins conceptualizes materialism as “a mindset or set of attitudes regarding the relative importance of acquisition or possession of objects in one’s life” (qtd. in Chan, 245). Money and status are the supreme force and stimulus in this world cherished by the newly affluent middle class people. The attitude and ideology of this urban social class people became mechanical, materialistic, and corrupt. Their way of life was replete with hypocrisy, pretention, deception and crudity that were the predominating materialistic spirit of post-independence Indian society.

Jhabvala and Her World

Ruth Praver Jhabvala (1927-2013) is a Germany born Indian English novelist who has achieved international recognition. She has written eight novels in English in her credit. Her novels highlight various themes including the clash between tradition and modernity, between

materialism and idealism and the east-west encounter in the context of Indian middle class society. Hemlata Singh remarks about her thematic concerns:

Her [Jhabvala] novels deal with the themes like, love and marriage in the bourgeois society, East–West encounter, pseudo-modernism in Indian society, the post-independence Indian ethos, affectation and hypocrisy in the Indian middle class society. She handles her themes with dazzling assurance and presents penetrating and compassionate picture of human relationship ironically and realistically (Singh 422).

Jhabvala as a conscious novelist presents an accurate picture of Indian life. The world depicted by Jhabvala is of the upper middle class North India. She deals with ‘a wide range of the Indian middle classes, from wealthy people to the government clerks clinging to status and respectability’ (Poornima 210). Her novels expose a candidly objective minute view of the family and social scenario of urban rich India in the post-independence era. V.A. Shahne is of the opinion about her artistic world: “Jhabvala’s merit as a creative writer lies in her being intensely aware of her limitations. She writes about possibly the only social segment of urban Indian that she knows at First hand” (Sahane 231).

Objective

The present paper aims at exploring Jhabvala’s portrayal of materialistic social realism as depicted in his novel *The Nature of Passion* through worldly passions nurtured by newly rich urban businessman Lalaji and other characters representing the self-seeking, shrewd and corrupt personalities typical of the post-independence Indian society.

Materialistic Passion in Jhabvala’s *The Nature of Passion*

Ruth Prawar Jhabvala as a conscious novelist successfully delineates the very ethos and shifting sensibilities of Indian society in the post-Independence era. Jhabvala’s *The Nature of Passion* published in 1956 is a novel about the urban prosperous middle class Indian society and its problems as she observed them. The novel is about a wealthy businessman man named Lalaji of New Delhi who represents the newly emerging rich selfish pretentious middle class of contemporary India. The novel shows through the morally deplorable egoistic nature of the

character of Lalaji on one side the rising value crisis in the changed social context of democratic India and on the other, the unprecedented growth of materialistic culture based on money-power and corruption-- a crude, vulgar and ostentatious world which lacks in the basic humanistic ideals and values such as honesty, truth, dedication and moral conscience.

Lalaji in *The Nature of Passion* is depicted as a millionaire, a member of the bourgeois community, and a very successful trader and an ambitious contractor. Lalaji has three daughters and three sons, namely Rani, Usha and Nimmi; and Om Prakash, Chandra Prakash and Ved Prakash (Viddi). The novel presents an account of the journey of Lalaji, a poor refugee from partition-ridden Punjab who emerges as an established businessman in New Delhi with his effort and his shrewd practices. Tasted success in business, he is determined to earn huge money and prosperity in order to secure his future and family fortune. Lalaji holds enormous capital through corruption and meanness. He has a passion to accumulate wealth and pursuit of wealth is his supreme goal of his life. This materialistic impulse dominating his life is echoed in the main thematic concern of the novel. The novel is concerned with to project the awareness of the 'worldly passions for money of the 'nouveau-riche' class of Punjabi refugees in Delhi' (Poornima, 210). This tendency is indicated at the title of the novel *The Nature of Passion* which has been derived from "Swami Paramanad's translation of Bhagvad Gita", XIV, 7 (quoted by the novelist): "Know thou Rajas to be the nature of passion, giving rise to thirst (for pleasure) and attachment. It binds the embodied by attachment to action" (qtd. in N.K. Singh 45). Jhabvala also quotes a passage from Radhakrishnan's comments on these aspects of *The Gita*:

The three modes are present in all human beings, though in different degrees. No one is free from them and in each soul one or the other predominates. Men are said to be 'Satvika', 'rajasa', or 'tamasa' according to the mode which prevails....while the activities of a 'Sattvika' temperament, are free calm and selfless, the 'rajasa' nature wishes to be always active and cannot sit still and its activities are tainted by selfish desires. (*The Nature of Passion* 7)

Lalaji, a part of the rising rich bourgeois class, is a selfish man with tainted worldly desires. A sheer materialist, he calculates everything in terms of money and profit. Lalaji's is a nature of 'rajasa'. The 'rajasa' nature of Lalaji "drives him to battle, using cunning and all sorts of

dishonesty, for the welfare of his large grasping family. He has amassed an enormous fortune by dubious means until a crisis arises when his employment of bribery has been uncovered” (Williams 72-73). The novel primarily emphasizes “in delineating the process of ‘Rajas’ the worldly Passion” (Poornima 210) which culminate in the material attachment. The ‘Rajas’ or worldly passion dominating the sensibilities of Lalaji is found in his excessive desire for money and luxurious life. Lalaji is rich enough to do anything he likes. His values pragmatic and egoistic have degenerated in inverse ratio to the excessive increase of his wealth. Driven by materialistic values so much that he “does not hesitate to blackmail his own son, Chandra Prakash, into filching from government files a very important document that could expose his shady deals in obtaining big contracts” (Singh 47). Like a crooked businessman, he also plans to absorb vast amounts of government taxes.

The novelist shows the strength of this sort of people increases ominously through the quick meteoric progress of Lalaji. The social class to which Lalaji belonged to in his earlier life is one similar to poor people: “A room for him and his like, and always been simply a room; it was all in all, one could eat there, sleep there, sit and talk and receive visitors” (10). The high posh life style of his later life brings out the change in his social condition, as reflected in his highly decorated sitting room: “The sitting room had shiny English furniture, silk curtains and lampshades, novelty cigar boxes and coloured photographs in silver frames” (10). The magic like material transformation of Lalaji’s lifestyle is realized due to the shrewd practices in the corrupt social system. Despite being a little educated or better to say unlettered man, Lalaji is respected person as he has piled up untold lakhs of rupees, which gives him ‘influence in the highest quarters’. The authorial description goes on about Lalaji’s wealth and influences:

... the sharp thin government officers... looked at him suspiciously over their regulation desks but had to be polite to him because he was a Lala, a rich man with influence in the highest quarters. (9)

Living in such a high profile society along with his stormy material advancement makes him more money-minded. This is clear in the words of his son Viddi who sketches his materialistic creed Lalaji cherishes most. He totally detests Lalaji because of his love of money. He tells to his artist friend about his father’s worldly passion:

You do not know what he is like. He is crude in his manners and his areas are also crude. He does not know anything except eating and sleeping and making money He is quite uneducated; even reading and writing he cannot do easily. (36)

Lalaji represents this group of money-minded people who, in spite of lacking in proper education, emerged as a very strong force in the post-Independence India and they reached to acme of power and position. This class of people believes in only one God, that is, money and all other faiths and commitments are only skin-dip in them. He leads a lavish life spending money in luxury and social occasions. Lalaji has become grandfather to his new-born granddaughter. The baby has been born in an expensive nursing home of Delhi. Excited, he spends huge money at this occasion. Holding two one hundred rupee notes saying, "All your life may you have two fistfuls like that" (25). Lalaji loves money; all his human feelings, for example, his sincere love for his grandchildren, are lustrous manifestation of his money. A millionaire, he believes in the power of money and the important role that money plays in Indian society including marriages. He has the conviction that all the drawbacks of his daughter Usha will be covered with the amount of dowry which will be given in her marriage. He tells his wife that: "They will be content enough when they think of the dowry they have got with her" (87).

The novel shows that the wealth and luxuries are generated by Lalaji's business activities in shrewd and scheming ways. Lalaji is very keen to secure the contract of huge amount for construction of new building of the *Happy Hindusthan Trading Company*. As a typical cunning businessman, he wins the business through sheer manipulation. He gets his favourite and pretty daughter Nimmi married to Kuku, the son of the Director of 'The Happy Hindusthan Trading Company', and thus overthrows his business competitor. The novelist writes about his excessive material calculation he is always concerned with: "Lalaji spent many pleasurable moments in calculating how much money would come into his family on Dev Raj's death..." (24). He is a hypocrite. He knows that "bribery and corruption were foreign words and the ideas behind them were also foreign—here in India.... one did not know such words. Giving presents and gratifications to government officers was an indispensable courtesy and a respectable civilized way of carrying on business" (43). But, like typical hypocrite, he unscrupulously hands over bribery for business favour. His son Chandra Prakash who apparently condemns his father

egoistic way of life but he is a passionate seeker of money. The eldest son, Om Prakash who is a replica of his father appears to be a coarse consumed by passion for high sophisticated life. Hence he has no problem with his father's money. This panegyric nature of both Lalaji and Chandra Prakash is described by Viddi, a frustrated younger son of Lalaji: "Money, Money, Money: that is all anyone thinks of in this house" (15). He also condemns the typical bourgeois monetary passion of his father and brother: "My father, my elder brother—it is all they know, all they can think of--- money. More and more and more money. It is the only thing they understand" (29). Lalaji's gold rush for material achievement reminds one of the excessive worldly inclinations of Margya in Narayan's *The Financial Experts* (1952) who thinks: "It's money which gives people all this (authority, dress, looks). Money alone is important in this world. Everything else will come to us naturally if we have money in purse" (17).

The selfish and crooked sentiments are not the isolated incident. Rather we can assume that their materialistic propensity marks the general debarring attitude of post-independence Indian society. Dev Raj, Lalaji's samadhi, i.e. father of his eldest son's wife Shanta is another crude personality who ranks only next to him in respect of thieving of huge public wealth. Coarse-grained fellows, both were counted "as richest men in Delhi" (27). The novelist describes the relationship of Lalaji and Dev Raj in the following words:

Dev Raj's presence always had a doubly stimulating effect on Lalaji. First because it did good just to see the man—almost as rich, as expensive, as shrewd, as *sauve* as himself, and there were few who could esteem themselves that. Then too, the sight of Dev Raj always brought to his mind some business problem which had been worrying him. (24)

Regarding the corrupt and mean practices made by people like Dev Raj and Lalaji and their morally ugly nature in the high society of Metropolitan city of Delhi Yasmine Gooneratne remarks:

The Nature of Passion presents a fictional world that is, though rich in humour, colour and interest, a symbol of rapacity on a universal scale. The author's ironic observation follows the corruption generated by Lalaji as it spreads to stain every other sphere of Indian life, from officialdom (as represented by his second son Chandra Prakash) to the sphere of art and culture (as represented by the friends of his youngest son, Ved). Although there are

moments in the novel when finer feelings manage to break through the carapace of selfishness that their life has formed around the soul of every character, the Indian world Jhabvala pictures is morally, intellectually and aesthetically bleak. (72-73)

In this world of moral bleakness the avaricious well-to-do people like Lalaji and Dev Raj rapaciously plunder the national wealth and exploit the millions of poor people of India, and thus deprive the Indian mass of their two square meals a day. People like Lalaji in the post-independence India have consequently created ‘so much black money that not only parallels but dominates the economic order of the country’ (N.K Singh 54). The magnanimity of his power and social status can be easily speculated from his plan of gorgeous marriage ceremony of his dearest daughter, Nimmi as he imagines—a celebration people will always remember. The following lines from the text will describe the outline of Lalaji’s reverie:

After Usha, Nimmi. Here he could hardly contain himself, when he thought of the marriage he would make for his Nimmi. If people were to talk of Usha’s wedding for years to come, the memory of Nimmi’s they should carry them into their next birth. A hundred cooks and confectioners would be sitting in his house day and night to prepare for the feasting ; six bands in red and gold uniforms to serenade the guests; whole street will lit up by the illumination from the house; Delhi drained of chickens and rice and spices and sugar and ghee; all traffic blocked by the cars bringing the guests; the women of the family in sarees stiff with gold, bent under the weight of their jewelry; all the richest men in Delhi, the contractors, the mill owners, the Directors of companies, the wedding marquee; Ministers, Deputy Ministers, Secretaries—the whole Government—should come to honor his daughter. (261)

One can here assume how influential he is and how much easy for him is to access into the passage of power. The aristocratic marriage ceremony is a sharper contrast to the general impoverished and deplorable socio-economic condition of India. This proves the very existence of two Indias— the poverty-stricken shabby India and the glittering posh India. The posh society based on dishonesty Lalaji belongs to and the capitalist system he possesses provide him enormity of scope and opportunities to increase his money power and social associations in more

corrupt world of Ministers and officers. Regarding this corrupt materialistic way of life Nagendra Kumar Singh says:

The rot in system has corrupted the very psyche of the Indian people so that they cannot see for themselves the bleakness, the ugliness, the corruption and degeneration of the Indian humandscape of which they are all parts. As a result, these deadly things go on increasing on larger and larger scales. (54)

In the novel we find that all the people who could have been the carrier of real values confirmed to the materialistic values people like Lalaji cherish. They are parasitical in nature who manipulate the opportunity and want favour the people like Lalaji confers on them. Viddi, in spite of his near rebellion against his father, is parasite on his bounty. Even Viddi's artist friends, namely Tivari, Zahir-ud-din and Bahwa desperately want Lalaji to be their patron with a hope to receive financial assistance for their artistic schemes. Viddi's friends 'worship money avidly than Lalaji so they extract as much money from him as they can' (Saranya and Ramya 2165). They have respect only for Lalaji's money. Like the selfish opportunists, they are pretensions having no sense of moral values, and like Lalaji, they worship materialistic creed. Even though Viddi neglects his father's wealth, he inwardly carves for money.

In the novel almost all the characters are consumed by worldly passion for high sophisticated life. Nimmi represents again the selfish world of the day. A replica of her father's money-mindedness, she is a voluptuary and egoistic. Lalaji loves her most. A daughter of rich businessman, she has grown on the rich soil of wealth. She is fond of leading a high life mixing in the circle of aristocratic society people. She measures the excitement of life in terms of expansive dinners in the expensive hotels. She prefers the life of night clubs and wants memberships of a refined clubs. In short, she seeks a rich sensational sort of life. She is greatly impressed with money. A product of money-minded Lalaji-like culture, she calculates life in terms of money power that she acquired from his father's influence. This is clear in her vision of bright future to be realized soon after her marriage with Kuku, a son of Amarnath, another business tycoon in Delhi:

She (Nimmi) tried to look indifferent; but she was jubilant. She would be, at last a member of the club in her own right. She and her husband would drive up in their car, he sober in evening cloths, she gorgeous in sari and jewelry. They would dance in the ballroom and eat dinner on the lawn. Afterwards they would go on to a night-club and dance some more. (258)

Lalaji has promised Nimmi that on her honeymoon trip after her marriage with Kuku, they would go on a tour of Europe at his expense. (Singh 58) Accordingly, Nimmi pleasingly makes the plan of visiting Cambridge University and her former friends now in England. Nimmi was earlier attracted towards Pheroze for his life-style and his regular visits to clubs. But when her family relatives settle her marriage with Kuku, she happily accepts him for his well-to-do financial background. She argues: “Pheroze is so boring, he does not know how to make conversation at all” (258). This brings out her selfish opportunistic attitude similar to her materialist father. Like Nimmi, Kanta, Lalaji’s daughter-in-law is an opportunist and pretender. Kanta displays an ambivalent attitude to Lalaji’s wealth. She enjoys Lalaji’s money but hates his taste and way of life. She dislikes Lalaji’s lack of elegance and sophistication. Regarding her intriguing nature of Kanta who lives with Chandra in sprawling big house in New Delhi, Saranya Dei and Ramya D remark:

She [Kanta] pretends to be scandalized at Lalaji’s request that Chandra Prakash should remove Om’s letter from a file because it might involve him in the T-bribery and corruption case and talks of the sacredness of the gazette officer’s position, but later consoles Chandra Prakash after he has removed the letter by implying that his father’s money and influence could silence any reprisal even in his act was discovered. (2162).

In fact, all the men and women depicted in this novel are more or less guided by the selfish materialistic impulses that shape their individual ideology to life in the post–independence era. Jhabvala realistically presents the actual feeling and sentiment of urban the middle class people she witnessed in Delhi. She depicts the social tendencies with the satirical vein as well as with the sympathetic tone. What Prof. Iyenger opines regarding the general feature of Jhabval’s writing is also applicable in the context of the present novel:

Mrs. Jhabvala is no sentimentalist, and hence doesn't falsify or merely idealize life. But she is human enough to feel the heart-ache at the heart of humanity, and it is this that finally defines the quality of her engagingly entertaining art as the consummate portraitist of social life in Delhi. (461)

Conclusion

In the novel *The Nature of Passion* Jhabvala portrays the accurate contours of the post-independence Indian social realism in which the newly rich greedy pretentious middle class people guided by capitalistic pragmatic principles enjoy a rich luxurious life, cheat the government money and always busy in material calculations and gains without least moral considerations left in them. The novel presents a popular trend of contemporary India through the worldly sensibilities and practices of the newly rising middle class. The characters like Lalaji and Deb Raj represent this society. Their lavish society is controlled by the force of money, wealth and power achieved through hypocrisy and manipulation. The novelist unsentimentally makes a genuine attempt to expose this materialistic reality of post-independence Indian society faithfully reproducing its crookedness, pretention and money-oriented passion.

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