

Judy: A Cultural Trapper in Ruth Praver Jhabvala' A Backward Place

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Abstract

A Backward Place is about human vulnerability, the need for structure, form and identity. Without these shapes and support, life is rendered meaningless and empty. The novel portrays a number of Europeans trapped in India, unable to adapt to its ways and consequently, lead lives of misery and frustration. The principle character is Judy, the young English lady. She was born in a British society but did not really belong to it. Judy tries her level best and almost succeeds in adapting herself to Indian ways of life. Her positive attitude to life helps her accept the challenges of life. Her readiness to identify herself with the lower middle class Indian family which gives her a sense of belonging saves her from cultural alienation. In Judy's character, Jhabvala has portrayed those foreigners, who come to India, and accept the country totally, both physically and mentally, and have no complaints whatsoever. The novel dramatizes the fate of dislocated, rootless, and discontented foreigners who refuse to merge in the "backward place". Judy effectively realized the personality in her own right, and though the subject of her thoughts and discussions is constantly, inescapably the endlessly fascinating, puzzling and infuriating phenomenon, that is, 'India', the novel as a whole heralds a change of interest.

KEYWORDS: Human Vulnerability, Frustration, Discontented Foreigners, Backward, Trap.

India creates the hot-house atmosphere within which people bloom or, more often, wither. A Backward Place is about human vulnerability, the need for structure, form and identity. Without these shapes and support, life is rendered meaningless and empty. In this novel Jhabvala finds a new theme for her fiction, the problems of adjustment which Westerners living in India face. She concentrates on their reactions and different attitudes towards this country, and as a result, there are more foreign characters who dominate the entire story. The Indian characters are few and they remain in the background.

The novel portrays a number of Europeans trapped in India, unable to adapt to its ways and consequently, lead lives of misery and frustration. There are four European characters; Judy, the central female figure is married to an Indian actor Bal, Etta, who was once married to an Indian and now divorced, is the mistress of a wealthy Indian businessman; Clarissa, an English woman is in love with the imaginary and romanticized India, and the Hochstads, Anglicized Germans are on an educational exchange program. Only the Hochstad couple survives well, because India never really touches them. They are secure in the complete acceptance of their own culture as they are in India for a specific and limited period of time. The others live in India in varying degrees of discomfort.

The principle character is Judy, the young English lady. She was born in a British society but did not really belong to it. She had a cheerless home life in London and at the age of seventeen she was employed as a petty employee in some office. It was there that she had met Bal, who had gone to London as an Indian delegate to

attend a Conference of International Youth. She married Bal and settled with him in a low middle class joint family house in Delhi. She is already a mother of two children when the novel opens and she is very deeply involved with them. Bal calls himself an artist and is intermittently mixed up with radio, stage and movies. He is the embodiment of undue and flimsy optimism. He is so involved in the world of stage and screen that he does not realize the daily needs of his family. Judy is fully aware of his failings, but she is passionately in love with him. It is Judy's love that sustains their marital happiness. It is only due to her love that she is able to transcend the barriers of English culture as she learns to live in a Hindu joint family.

Judy is married in a family where even the basic amenities of life are absent and as such she has to work at home as well as at office to keep her household going. She has learnt to put up with a lot of noise and lack of privacy—typical of Indian life. It seems that Judy continues to live in the first stage of living in India, when everything is fascinating and marvelous. She learns how to adjust with the waywardness and impulsiveness of Bal and the fatalism of Bhuaji. Jhabvala is of the opinion that the joint family system is well suited to the Indian climate.

Judy tries her level best and almost succeeds in adapting herself to Indian ways of life. Her positive attitude to life helps her accept the challenges of life. Her readiness to identify herself with the lower middle class Indian family which gives her a sense of belonging saves her from cultural alienation. She retains her English pragmatism and Anglo-Saxon coolness, but these very qualities, instead of working as barriers in her coming closer to her people, help her put up with Bal's childish irresponsibility and impractical optimism.

Although English by birth, and alien by upbringing, she adapts herself admirably into Bal's joint family and the heterogeneous household. She has inherited the Englishman's gift for adaptability, and she adapts her Western modes to the requirements and claims of Indian culture. Judy endures life in India in spite of the fact that she is not used to her husband's environment and abode. She endures it with an angelic fortitude and charm and adapts herself magnificently to the Indian cultural and social milieu. She does not acquire the fatalistic attitude of her family and clings to worldly possessions with a fanatic fervor. And yet this too changes as the book progresses. Though she cannot, till the end, achieve the simple faith of Bhuaji, she does enjoy her daily morning hymns and folksongs. In this respect, she can be compared to any Indian girl. But at the same time, she has a strong Western conviction ". . . that the world didn't owe her a living . . ." (ABP 13). That is why she decides to work in the office against Bal's wishes as he is mostly out of job. She is working for Mrs. Kaul in her 'Cultural Dias', and is somehow able to manage on her low salary. Judy is downright practical and wise, whereas Bal is an irresponsible young man of romantic temperament. The real cause of their dissonance is not racial but temperamental. Judy always tries to shoulder her responsibilities, whereas Bal evades them as far as possible. Judy is also a homely type of woman who has gone out to work not so much out of choice as necessity.

The Indian male superiority over a western woman continues in the Sudhir-Judy relationship. Judy depends on him a lot for her job security. She knows that Mrs. Kaul, her boss, who is charmed by the younger Sudhir, would retain her till such time that he chooses to work for her at the Cultural Dias.

Judy has genuine attachments and affection for her children. Prithvi's ailment disturbs her emotionally. Bal merely seems to be acting his part without genuine involvement. Once when her little son, Prithvi is sick, Judy having nursed him all that hot day, lies exhausted on her string cot. Bal comes in, speaks very sweetly to the

child, then announces he has to go out. Prithvi wants his father to stay with him, while Bal wishes to attend on Kishan Kumar, a Bombay film star on a visit to Delhi. While Judy is seriously concerned with Prithvi's rising temperature, Bal constantly talks of films, sings 'Mere Dil men Rehta Pyer' while Prithvi asks for ice. Bal wishes to see the film star, Kishan Kumar, in the hope that he will put something big in Bal's way. Judy loves her husband deeply and cares for his feelings, yet her maternal instincts compel Bal to bring the ice. This contrast between the two ways of thinking and living causes awkward and unseemly situations in their married life. The incident shows that she is aware of the real situation but even then she does not discourage Bal.

Bal's immaturity, lack of planning and foolish dreams perplexes her. She chafes, sulks and fumes for the irresponsible behaviour of Bal and Bhuaji, but ultimately reconciles herself with the fatalism of Bhuaji and impulsiveness of Bal. Due to her self-sacrificing and absorbing nature, she accepts the new modes and forgets the past. She gets integrated with the Indian culture. This change, far from being superficial, has gone deep down into her psyche. She even wants to look like an Indian. So she starts wearing a sari and has grown her hair which she wears in a plain bun. When Bal presses her to go to Bombay, she refuses, not because of her arrogance, but because she does not want to lose the security of her home and job.

Judy has no romantic illusions like Bal and can realize their increasing responsibilities as the children grow up. When she has a small quarrel with Bal, she goes to the park where a new light dawns on her and she imagines that someone has spoken to her from the sky. Bal and Judy look incongruous as man and wife. It is Judy who responds positively to Bal's childlike enthusiasm. She seems to love his fantasies. These fantasies seem particularly cheerful and bubbly to Judy who was brought up in a cheerless, damp and mirthless environment that her staid parents built around her in London.

Judy's view of India springs as much from a reaction to her old life in England as from an instinctive understanding that "It is fatal to come to India and expect to be able to live to a Western rhythm" (ABP 26). Judy's western world had consisted of little more than a small semi-detached house in which she had lived. Shut in from the outside world, with an inarticulate father and a mother employed in a ceaseless round of domestic activity, Judy had yearned for freedom, for life full of possibilities, and with her marriage to Bal and her voyage out to India had felt she had found it. Never regretting her girlish impulse, Judy opened herself, from the very beginning, to all of India's influences.

Judy has no yearnings about England. Rather "Judy never cared to think much of home nowadays (whenever memories of it came up, she did her best to think of something else) . . ." (ABP 10). Her recollections of England are far from romantic. It was not that her childhood had been unhappy. But neither had she been very happy. Her father had worked in a factory making precision instruments while:

. . . her mother cooked and cleaned and kept Judy away from strangers. Her mother didn't trust strangers; these included the neighbours. You were safest if you kept yourself to yourself. So they did, just the three of them, in that tight little house, with the doors and curtains firmly shut to keep the cold and the strangers out (ABP 31).

Judy finds it painful to speak of her parents. Her father died of lung cancer after Judy came to India, and her mother committed suicide. Such memories were hardly pleasant. The memory of her mother's suicide weighs heavily within Judy. Judy's flight from England and her determination to make a permanent home in India indicate Jhabvala's concern at the way life is being lived in the West. The Indian view

of life contained in Bhuaji's philosophy "God provides" is a comforting one to Judy not because she is attracted to Hindu spirituality but because the modern western belief in the self as the complete integer has not wrought happiness for her parents.

Judy is sceptical of Bal's success, but is charmed by his optimism and faith for the future. She knows that, if defeated, he will accept his defeat in the philosophical spirit that has been inculcated in the Indian sensibility through centuries of faith in reincarnation and the immanent will. Throughout the novel, Judy's western pragmatism is seen in conflict with Bal's dreams which continue to carry him on their wings despite the severe pressures of reality. The most striking feature of *A Backward Place* is Judy's decision to stay on with Bal in spite of the fact that she knows all about India and its backwardness. She understands the country of her choice better than others who come there for short periods or those belonging to the country who come under the superficial impact of the west and condemn their own heritage in their false enchantment with modernity. The stability-seeking modest Judy finds a lot in the so-called "backward place" to live by.

In a significant episode, Judy gets cross with Bal. She and a few others have been working hard on plans for the theatre of Bal's dreams, only to find he has almost forgotten it, and is now busy with other rosy dreams about Kishan Kumar. Bursting into tears, leaving behind an anxious Bal, Judy goes out to join Bhuaji who is just leaving the temple, and walks with her to the river. It is full of people sitting in a relaxed way in the cool of the evening. Bhuaji soon gets engrossed in the talk of a holy man, but Judy understands only snatches of it. Judy's warring responses are resolved in the end in a novel way. When a serious clash is imminent between an inherited view of life and an adopted one—the crisis of her life and the climax of the novel Judy receives an intimation from the vast Indian sky which resolves her tensions and fills her with a desire to let life take her on its wings, like the ". . . birds floating on the sky—drifting without thought to effort or fear, aerial and at ease" (ABP 161). The peace of the atmosphere touches her. She forgets why she ran away and her anger. "She only remembered Bal sitting so sweetly on the string cot and looking after her surprised and sad, and she felt full of love for him and wanted to go home" (ABP 112).

In Judy's character, Jhabvala has portrayed those foreigners, who come to India, and accept the country totally, both physically and mentally, and have no complaints whatsoever. Judy finally agrees to go to Bombay with Bal, leaving behind the security of her job and income. Her first reaction to Bal's suggestion that they should all go to Bombay, however, was rebellion. Her English self sprang to the surface. Bhuaji's religious faith and spiritual peace provided her with an answer to her fears and doubts regarding their future. So she accepts to face the challenge by consoling herself that she can find a job in Bombay. Judy has the courage to accept, which should not be taken to be passivity. It is Judy's love for Bal and her readiness to adapt and accept, that help her to be happy and contented in the face of adversity and want too. Judy effectively realized as the personality in her own right, and though the subject of her thoughts and discussions is constantly, inescapably the endlessly fascinating, puzzling and infuriating phenomenon, that is, 'India', the novel as a whole heralds a change of interest. The novel dramatizes the fate of dislocated, rootless, and discontented foreigners who refuse to merge in the "backward place".

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