

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala The Interview

The Interview – by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala

I am always very careful of my appearance, so you could not say that I spent much more time than usual over myself that morning. It is true, I trimmed and styled my moustache, but then I often do that, I always like it to look very neat, like Raj Kapoor's, the film stars. But I knew my sister-in-law and my wife were watching me. My sister-in-law was smiling, and she had one hand on her hip, my wife only looked anxious. I know she was anxious. All night she had been whispering to me. She had whispered, "Get this job and take me away to live somewhere alone only you and I and our children." I had answered, "Yes," because I wanted to go to sleep. I don't know where and why she has taken this notion that we should go and live alone.

When I had finished combing my hair, I sat on the floor and my sister-in-law brought me my food on a tray. It may sound strange that my sister-in-law should serve me, and not my wife, but it is so in our house. It used to be my mother who brought me my food, even after I was married, she would never allow my wife to do this for me, though my wife wanted to very much. Then, when my mother got so old, my sister-in-law began to serve me. I know that my wife feels deeply hurt by this, but she doesn't dare to say anything. My mother doesn't notice many things anymore, otherwise she certainly would not allow my sister-in-law to bring me my food, she has always been very jealous of this privilege herself, though she never said who served my brother. Now she has become so old that she can hardly see anything, and most of the time she sits in the corner by the family trunk and folds and strokes her pieces of cloth. For years now she has been collecting pieces of cloth. Some of them are very old and dirty, but she doesn't care, she loves them all equally. Nobody is allowed to touch them. Once there was a great quarrel, because my wife had taken one of them to make a dress for our child. My mother shouted at her – it was terrible to hear her, but then, she has never liked my wife – and my wife was very much afraid and cried and tried to excuse herself. I hit her across the face, not very hard and not because I wanted to, but only to satisfy my mother. The old woman kept quiet then and went back to folding and stroking her pieces of cloth.

All the time I was eating, I could feel my sister-in-law looking at me and smiling. It made me uncomfortable. I thought she might be smiling because she knew I wouldn't get the job for which I had to go and be interviewed. I also knew I wouldn't get it, but I don't like her to smile like that. It was as if she were saying, "You see, you will always have to be dependent on us." It is clearly my brother's duty to keep me and my family until I can get work and contribute my own earnings to the family household. There is no need for her to smile about it, but it is true that I am more dependent on her now than on anyone else. Since my mother has got so old, my sister-in-law has become more and more the most important person on the house, so that she even keeps the keys and the household stores. At first I didn't like this. As long as my mother managed the household, I was sure of getting many extra lobbis. But now I find that my sister-in-law is also very kind to me – much more kind than she is to her husband. It is not for him that she saves the lobbis, nor for her children, but for me, and when she gives them to me, she never says anything, and I never say anything, but she smiles and then I feel confused and rather embarrassed. My wife has noticed what she does for me.

I have found that women are usually kind to me. I think that they realize that I am a rather sensitive person and that therefore I must be treated very gently. My mother has always treated me very gently. I am her youngest child, and I am three years younger than my brother who is dead to me. She did have several children in between us, but they all died. Right from the time when I was a tiny baby, she understood that I needed greater care and tenderness than other children. She always made me sleep close beside her in the night, and in the day I usually sat with her and my grandmother and my widowed aunt, who were also very fond of me, when I got bigger, my father sometimes wanted to take me to keep in his stall the hall a little closer's stall, where he sold lentils and rice and cheap cigarettes and colour drinks in bottles) but my mother and grandmother and aunt never liked to let me go. Once he did take me with him, and he made me pour some lentils out of paper bags into a tin. I rather liked pouring the lentils – they made such a nice noise as they landed in the tin – but suddenly my mother came and was very angry with my father for making me do this work. She took me home at once, and when she told my grandmother and aunt what had happened, they stroked me and kissed me and then they gave me a hot tiffin to eat. The fact is, right from childhood I have been a person who needs a lot of peace and rest, and my food too has to be rather more delicate than that of other people. I have often tried to explain this to my wife, but as she is not very intelligent, she doesn't seem to understand.

Now my wife was washing me when I ate. She was standing on the floor, washing our youngest baby, the baby's head was in her lap, and all one could see if I was the back of its legs and its raised bottom. My wife did not watch me as gently as my sister-in-law did, only from time to time she raised her eyes to me. I could feel it.

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala: The Interview is a fascinating exploration into the life and works of one of the most celebrated writers of the 20th century. Born in 1927 in Germany and later moving to India, Jhabvala's unique experiences shaped her literary voice, which resonated with readers around the world. Through her interviews, we gain insight into her thoughts on writing, culture, and her experiences living in India and the West. This article delves into various aspects of Jhabvala's life, her literary contributions, and the significance of her interviews in understanding her work.

Early Life and Background

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala was born into a Jewish family in Germany and fled to England in 1939 due to the rise of Nazism.

Education and Early Influences

1. Academic Pursuits: Jhabvala studied at Queen Mary College, London, and later at the University of London, where she developed a passion for literature and writing.
2. Cultural Influences: Her early exposure to the arts, theater, and literature significantly influenced her narrative style. The rich tapestry of Jewish culture and her experiences as an immigrant shaped her worldview.

Life in India

In 1951, Jhabvala married Indian architect Cyrus Jhabvala and moved to India, where she would live for many years.

Adapting to a New Culture

1. Cultural Integration: Jhabvala's adaptation to Indian culture was profound. She became fluent in Hindi and deeply engaged with the local customs, which enriched her narratives.
2. Themes of Displacement: Her experiences as an expatriate allowed her to explore themes of displacement, cultural clash, and identity in her work.

Literary Contributions

Jhabvala's literary career spans novels, short stories, and screenplays.

1. Novels: Her notable works include "Heat and Dust," "A Backward Place," and "The Householder." These novels often explore the complexities of Indian society and the lives of its characters.
2. Short Stories: Jhabvala's short stories, such as those in "East into Upper East," reflect her keen observations of life in India and the nuances of human relationships.
3. Screenwriting: Collaborating with renowned filmmakers like James Ivory and Ismail Merchant, Jhabvala brought her literary works to life on screen, gaining acclaim for her screenwriting.

The Interview: Insights and Reflections

Ruth Praver Jhabvala's interviews provide a unique lens through which to view her perspectives on life, culture, and art.

Writing Process

1. Daily Routine: Jhabvala often discussed her disciplined writing routine, emphasizing the importance of a dedicated space and time for writing.
2. Inspiration: She drew inspiration from her surroundings, stating that her observations of life in India and her interactions with people informed her narratives.

Views on Culture and Identity

1. Cultural Duality: In her interviews, Jhabvala frequently addressed the duality of her identity as a Western woman living in India. She expressed a deep appreciation for both cultures, while also acknowledging the challenges of navigating them.
2. Representation of Women: Jhabvala believed in the importance of

representing women's experiences authentically. Her characters often grapple with societal expectations and personal desires, reflecting the complexities of female identity.

Legacy and Recognition

Ruth Praver Jhabvala's literary contributions have left an indelible mark on both Indian and Western literature.

Awards and Honors

1. Booker Prize: In 1975, she won the Booker Prize for her novel "Heat and Dust," a testament to her literary prowess.
2. Academy Awards: Jhabvala received two Academy Awards for Best Adapted Screenplay for her collaborations with Merchant Ivory Productions, showcasing her versatility as a writer.

Influence on Literature and Cinema

1. Cross-Cultural Dialogue: Jhabvala's work opened up dialogues between Eastern and Western cultures, facilitating a greater understanding of the complexities of each.
2. Inspiring Future Generations: Her writings continue to inspire new writers, particularly those exploring themes of identity, culture, and the immigrant experience.

Conclusion

Ruth Praver Jhabvala: The Interview serves as a critical resource for understanding the nuances of her life and works. Through her interviews, Jhabvala's insights into writing, culture, and identity emerge, revealing the layers of her storytelling. Her ability to bridge cultures through her narratives and her reflections on the human condition solidify her place as a significant literary figure. As readers and scholars engage with her works, they not only appreciate the beauty of her prose but also the depth of her understanding of the world, making Jhabvala's legacy enduring and relevant in contemporary literature.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who is Ruth Praver Jhabvala and what is her significance in literature?

Ruth Praver Jhabvala was a celebrated writer and screenwriter known for her works that explore the cultural interactions between India and the West. She won the Booker Prize in 1975 and was an Academy Award-winning screenwriter.

What themes are prevalent in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's works?

Her works often explore themes of cultural dislocation, identity, and the complexities of relationships, particularly in the context of Indian society and the experiences of expatriates.

What is the central premise of Jhabvala's short story collection 'The Interview'?

In 'The Interview,' Jhabvala explores the nuances of personal and professional relationships, particularly the power dynamics and expectations that arise during job interviews, reflecting broader societal issues.

How does Jhabvala depict the concept of identity in 'The Interview'?

Jhabvala illustrates how identity can be shaped and manipulated in professional settings, with characters often grappling with their self-perception and the perceptions of others during the interview process.

What literary techniques does Jhabvala use in her storytelling?

Jhabvala employs rich character development, vivid imagery, and sharp dialogue, often blending humor with poignant observations to highlight the absurdities of life and cultural differences.

What impact did Ruth Praver Jhabvala have on Indian literature?

Jhabvala significantly contributed to Indian literature by bridging cultural gaps and providing insight into the complexities of Indian life, particularly through the lens of Western readers, making her work accessible and relatable.

How has 'The Interview' been received by literary critics?

Critics have praised 'The Interview' for its insightful commentary on the human condition and its skillful exploration of the anxieties surrounding ambition and success in a postcolonial context.

In what ways does Jhabvala's background influence her writing?

Jhabvala's experiences as an expatriate living in India and her Jewish heritage inform her unique perspective on cross-cultural interactions, enriching her narratives with authenticity and depth.

What adaptations or influences has 'The Interview' had in other media?

While 'The Interview' itself may not have been directly adapted, Jhabvala's works have inspired films and plays, particularly through her collaborations

with filmmakers like Merchant Ivory, bringing her stories to a wider audience.

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