



Narration of the Nation through the Motif of Journey in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Get Ready for Battle*

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ABSTRACT

It was the novel that historically accompanied the rise of the nations by objectifying the “one, yet many” of the national life; and by “mimicking the structure of the nation.” Jhabvala’s novel, *Get Ready for Battle* takes up the task of narrating the Nation through the exemplification of the motif of journey, from periphery to the power center. The narration of the nation finds an impetus in the national paradigm through the construction and reconstruction of the national history. The Partition is a painful wound in the history of India. The journey was fraught with loss, suffering, and anxiety; yet it proved to be a fulfilling one for some as it paved the way for entrepreneurship. The novel portrays the inevitable journey from the periphery to the center. Joginder’s journey, from being a homeless refugee to an entrepreneur inspire Vishnu. He realizes that when the nation is modernizing and entrepreneurship is being welcomed by the government, men like Joginder Singh are sure to get ahead. It is the sign of his initiation into the world of maturity, of enterprise and of initiative that is required from an individual to move from the periphery to the power center in the highly competitive space of the city.



Introduction

Homi Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* explores the cultural representation of the ambivalence of modern society. According to him, this ambivalence results from transitional history, conceptual indeterminacy and shifting vocabulary, and has a considerable effect on the narratives and discourses which signify a sense of 'nationness'. It was the novel that historically accompanied the rise of the nations by objectifying the "one, yet many" of the national life; and by "mimicking the structure of the nation." (Bhabha 49) Jhabvala's novel, *Get Ready for Battle* exemplifies the motif of journey from the village to the city, from periphery to the power center. The narration of the nation finds an impetus in this national paradigm through the construction and reconstruction of the national history. Here the movement is one from the ancestral village of peace and security to the tremendously competitive, uncertain world of the city. In this novel, we come across two kinds of movement—voluntary as well as forced, brought to effect by the partition of India into two independent nation states. The Partition is a painful wound in the history of India and led to one of the greatest migrations in human history. On a rough estimate, 16 million people lost their homes by the beginning of 1948. "It was a kind of journey that South Asians had not previously seen. It uprooted people from habitats they had known for centuries..." (Nandy 102) Millions of people, living in harmony with people of different faiths, were compelled to give up their livelihood, property and friends and migrate to unknown places across a man-made border. The journey was obviously fraught with loss, suffering, and anxiety; yet it proved to be a fulfilling one for some as it paved the way for entrepreneurship and tapped the potential of individuals. It has been seen that any great national event or experience always provides the literary writers with a "grand reservoir of literary material" (*The Twice Born Fiction* 34). Thus, writers incorporating social, cultural, political events into the fictional frame of their novels can help build up the idea of the nation, founded on shared values and assumptions, since all literary creations are inherently ideological.

Partition is central to modern identity in the Indian subcontinent. According to the 1951 Census of India, 2% of India's population were refugees, and Delhi received the largest number of refugees. To ease the condition of the refugees being subjected to economic hardships, social discrimination and humiliation, the Government had started several schemes which included the provision for education, employment opportunities and easy loans to start businesses for the refugees all over India.

Get Ready for Battle presents an array of characters, major and minor, to portray the inevitable journey of the self- Gulzarilal, Vishnu, Joginder Singh, Sarla Devi, Kusum *et al.* Gulzarilal is a wealthy businessman. He has succeeded in establishing himself in Delhi independently after migrating from the



ancestral village to the city in his youth. Likewise, he had been bold and original even in the choice of his bride, the spirited and idealistic Sarla Devi. One idea that has persisted throughout the continuous process of movement or flux, is the idea of the country as a place of pastoral innocence and the city as a civilising agency. As the owner of a prosperous concern dealing in land properties, he does not hesitate to bribe government employees or negotiate with brokers for making forced mass evictions in slum areas to gain his own ends. In the novel, we find him interested in buying a piece of land on the condition that the slum, named Bundi Busti, in the adjoining area be permanently removed. He is aware of the broker's evacuation tactics- the inhabitants of Bundi Busti would be threatened, warned, coaxed, even bribed to leave and resettle elsewhere. However, he is oblivious of the plight of the poor and the miserable. Rather, he nonchalantly arranges grand parties for persons who may bring him business gains, especially government employees who would pass some "tricky" plans for him in the future. This shows his ruthless desire to gain the power center of the community.

Gulzarilal's business strategy is devoid of the concept of morality. The dinner party with which the novel begins, exposes him as an unscrupulous industrialist. His moral and aesthetic bleakness is further revealed by his indulgence in a love affair with his mistress, Kusum, for eight long years while showing strong reservations against divorcing his legally wedded wife, Sarla Devi. His reasons appear quite flimsy as he considers legal divorce to be "too newfangled an idea to be introduced into a family such as his." (Jhabvala, *Get Ready for Battle* 34) Thus, Gulzarilal seems to have come a long way from the pure and simplistic habits of his life in the country from where he had originated and competently adapted himself to the cunning and materialistic ways of the city.

However, the lack of ambition and drive in his only son Vishnu disappoints him. He exhorts him to move to Bombay to expand the family business but Vishnu does not show any interest in the proposal. Gulzarilal misunderstands Vishnu's yearning for independence. Continuing his father's legacy would never allow him to take autonomous and radical decisions. Even in Bombay he would be inundated by his father's phone calls, correspondences and visits. He felt an aversion to follow the conventional routine of being settled in his father's business. In fact, he felt no great desire to be around prosperous people. His equations of achieving the center, the citadel of power, is quite contrary to that of his father. This is exemplified in his preference for the company of the poor and idealistic Gautam and the plain Sumi. He also displays great respect for his uncompromising and principled mother who had chosen to live in great austerity in her brother's house rather than amid the opulence of her husband's house as she considered him an unscrupulous and unjust profiteer.



Sarla Devi's concern for the poor, powerless working-class people lead her to join the protest that the inhabitants of Bundi Busti stage against the evacuation of the slum, as this would compel them to travel long distances daily to their places of work in the city. She gives them psychological support by being present in their protest meetings and demonstrations. Sarla Devi seems to echo Ashis Nandy's words as he remarks that "the slum captures, within the heartlessness of the city, the reinvented 'compassionate' village." (Nandy 20) She requests her husband and son to look into the matter and help the victims. She also meets the voluntary organization of society ladies for assistance. Yet, she finds all her efforts fail when she discovers the victims themselves accepting bribes to leave Bundi Busti. She accepts this practical truth of city life that the poor cannot afford to refuse offers of money for the sake of principles. Thus, her journey from naivete to experience is initiated.

Sarla Devi urges Vishnu to give up the life of luxury and profit-making like his father and involve himself in causes that would make a difference in the lives of the backward and disadvantaged groups in society. Under Sarla Devi's persuasions, Vishnu finds the courage to quit his father's profitable business and team up with Joginder Singh, a refugee, in order to set up a factory for fountain pens. He is conscious of the fact that the beginning would be quite difficult as the site for the factory was way out of the city. Yet his great admiration for the enterprising Joginder Singh, who had been able to overcome the trauma of partition and was now the owner of a furniture shop as well as a plot of land in Chandnipat, fuels his ambition of being his own master. Joginder frankly confesses that he knew nothing of making furniture when he started the business but learnt along the way. Now he was keen on building a factory for fountain pens at Chandnipat for it was "something that people need." (Jhabvala, *Get Ready for Battle* 56) His market-study for fountain pens in the recently independent and developing nation shows his keen business sense and exertion at gradual movement from the borders to the center.

Vishnu is quite taken up by Joginder's idea as it shall give him the much-needed opportunity to stand on his own feet and to take independent decisions. When he visits Joginder's house, he is impressed by his position and importance in the family, highlighting the success of his journey and his achievements. Joginder admits to Vishnu how he can never forget the painful episode of migration. Jhabvala here "marks the plight of the outsider-refugee, his/her strategies for survival, and the heightened consciousness that outsiderhood confers," (Sucher 6) Joginder's journey from the periphery to the center, from being a homeless refugee to an entrepreneur inspire Vishnu. He realizes that at this juncture, when the nation is modernizing and entrepreneurship is being welcomed by the government, enterprising men like Joginder Singh are sure to get ahead. It is obvious that Joginder's sense of insecurity is born out of



his memory of the flight from Pakistan to India with his parents. Clearly, the memories of his homeless and hungry state in the past haunt him and “made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past...” (Rushdie 12) With great satisfaction and pride, Joginder confides in Vishnu about his finances: “It is all paid for and finished now...the wood, the floors, the sanitation, I have paid everybody.” (Jhabvala, *Get Ready for Battle* 123) This episode appears to validate Bharati Mukherjee’s claim that “immigration, despite losses and confusions, its sheer absurdities, is a net *gain*” (qtd. in Alam 140 emphasis original) Joginder Singh gains maturity, enterprise and determination from the misfortune of his status as a refugee as he attempts to revamp his life.

As an enterprising industrialist, Joginder is organized and persevering. His vision is clear; he looks forward to a self-sufficient nation based on education and entrepreneurship. He is conditioned by modern ideas. It is Vishnu who seeks a partnership with Joginder Singh as he attaches himself to the uncouth but capable Joginder Singh. He is prepared to take the plunge in spite of the hardships he would have to undertake at Chandnipat, as “he felt excited at the thought of doing something for himself, something vigorous and modern and industrial.” (Jhabvala, *Get Ready for Battle* 47) It is the sign of his initiation from inactiveness into the world of maturity, of enterprise and of initiative that is required from an individual in the highly competitive space of the city.

Thus, in this novel of Ruth Praver Jhabvala, we detect a dialogic tension between “religious dogma and independent questioning, between rigid social hierarchy and fluid identity, between colonial education and traditional wisdom, and between individual agency and the power of the community which can be alternately nurturing or claustrophobic.” (Mukherjee 73) This tendency makes Jhabvala’s novels an impartial depiction of the Indian way of life because Jhabvala herself has a fluid identity- she has been a German, an English and an Indian in various phases of her life. Being an outsider, she is able to observe the Indian society with nonchalance and detached interest. The India she sees is one which shatters all generalizations. One who shows genuine fondness is accepted while others are rejected and dismissed. This invests India, a recently independent nation, with the qualities of self-reliance, confidence and spiritual influence. However, Jhabvala shows only a slice of India, that is urban, wealthy and located in Delhi. The two aspects of India- the country and the city, viewed by Jhabvala, puts forth an idea of India as a nation that is composite in nature and fundamentally a cultural construct.



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