

**Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Get Ready for Battle: A Reflection on Moral Decline***

**Dr. Twinkle B. Manavar**  
Assistant Professor in English

**INTRODUCTION:**

Generally, Indian society is accustomed to honour some social conventions and traditions that have been passed down through generations. These customs and traditions often hold deep cultural, religious, and historical significance, shaping the way individuals interact with one another and contribute to the social fabric. It is widely believed that adhering to these traditions is not merely a personal choice but a moral duty, as they provide a sense of belonging, continuity, and stability within the community.

However, while traditions serve as a guiding force, it is also essential to evaluate them critically. Not all traditions remain relevant in modern times, and some may even hinder progress or contradict principles of equality, justice, and rationality. There are always individuals who dare to question and challenge outdated customs, striving for reform and advocating for change where necessary. Society must recognize that blindly following every tradition without questioning its relevance or impact can sometimes lead to stagnation rather than growth.

Traditions and social conventions do play a vital role in fostering unity and harmony. For a society to prosper, individuals must actively contribute to its welfare at every step. A strong and healthy society is built on shared values, mutual respect, and collective efforts toward

progress. When traditions encourage ethical behavior, compassion, and cooperation, they contribute to the development of a well-balanced and morally rich community.

Therefore, the true essence of a good society lies in striking a balance—preserving valuable traditions while being open to change and progress. When people follow conventions that promote kindness, inclusivity, and social welfare, they collectively create a society that is not only culturally enriched but also forward-thinking and just.

**DISCUSSION:**

In *Get Ready for Battle*, Ruth Praver Jhabvala seeks to highlight the deep-rooted moral degeneration that prevails in society. She skillfully presents a range of characters whose behaviors, choices, and attitudes reflect the erosion of ethical values. Through her nuanced portrayal of characters like Gulzari Lal, Kusum, Vishnu, Sumi, and Brij Mohan, she reveals how moral decline manifests in varying degrees within individuals, shaping their personal and social interactions.

Among these characters, Gulzari Lal stands out as a morally corrupt individual whose actions exemplify the decay of ethical principles. His relationship with Kusum is not only irrational but also devoid of any genuine emotional connection or moral integrity. Kusum, a widow of an Army officer, has assumed the role of Gulzari Lal's mistress, a position she maintains through cunning manipulation and selfish motives. Rather than adhering to societal expectations of dignity and self-respect, she prioritizes her personal gain, aspiring to secure financial and social stability through a second marriage

with Gulzari Lal. She strategically spends most of her time at his house, hoping to drive a wedge between him and his wife, Sarla Devi. Her ultimate goal is to ensure that Gulzari Lal divorces Sarla, thereby enabling herself to become his lawful wife and rightful heir to his wealth and property.

Gulzari Lal, on the other hand, is indifferent to any moral considerations regarding his extramarital affair. He sees nothing wrong in keeping a mistress, treating Kusum merely as a source of comfort and convenience rather than as a valued partner. His justification for this relationship is purely self-serving—he believes that after a long day at the office, he deserves someone like Kusum to cater to his needs, entertain him, and provide him with both physical and emotional gratification. Over the years, he has grown accustomed to her presence, relying on her for his personal comforts, such as preparing his bath, serving him drinks, and massaging his legs. Jhabvala captures this dynamic vividly in the novel:

Gulzari Lal had been used to finding Kusum when he came home in the evenings, and it was hard for him to do without her. For eight years now she had been always there: she would have his bath ready for him, serve him with drinks, massage his legs; and at the same time she entertained him with accounts of all she had been during the day.<sup>1</sup>

This passage illustrates the extent to which Gulzari Lal has normalized his dependence on Kusum while completely disregarding the moral implications of their relationship. His sense of entitlement and lack of ethical introspection further highlight

the broader theme of moral decay that Jhabvala critiques throughout the novel.

Through such characters, Jhabvala effectively exposes the deep-seated flaws within individuals who prioritize self-interest over moral values. The novel serves as a reflection of a society where ethical principles are often compromised for personal gains, relationships are built on opportunism rather than genuine affection, and moral degeneration becomes an accepted norm. The characters, in their varying degrees of corruption, collectively paint a picture of a world where morality is secondary to ambition, power, and self-indulgence.

Kusum's role in Gulzari Lal's life goes beyond mere companionship; she also shares his bed, fulfilling his physical needs after he has lived without a wife for the past ten years. Over time, she has seamlessly taken on the role of his wife in his private life, blurring the lines between being a mistress and a life partner. However, despite appearing to uphold traditional and societal values on the surface, her actions reveal a stark contrast. The respect she seemingly holds for conventional and traditional ways of life is only superficial, as her motives are primarily driven by self-interest and opportunism rather than genuine emotional connection or moral integrity.

This hypocrisy is further evident in her interactions with Mala and Priti. Her demeanor toward them lacks genuine warmth, compassion, or concern. Instead of fostering a sense of family or emotional support, her approach is calculated and distant. This detachment becomes apparent in a significant moment when Mala expresses her desire to accompany Vishnu to

Chandnipat. Rather than showing any maternal or elder-like wisdom, Kusum seizes the opportunity to manipulate the situation to her advantage. She turns to Gulzari Lal and encourages him to let them go, seeing it as a chance to deepen her hold over him. Her words, filled with both persuasion and anticipation, lay bare her true intentions:

Let them go. Then it will be only you and I, and what times we shall have together! Soon there will be your divorce . . . It must be so . . . It is true we are both of us grandparents – yes, perhaps we are not so young any more as we would like to be, but there is still something left in the old bones.<sup>2</sup>

In this statement, Kusum's manipulative nature is unmistakable. She frames the situation in a way that benefits her, subtly reinforcing the idea of Gulzari Lal's impending divorce from Sarla Devi while romanticizing their future together. Her mention of their age suggests an attempt to rationalize their actions, implying that despite being older, they still deserve a fulfilling and passionate life. However, her real motivation is clear—she seeks security, stability, and social legitimacy through marriage to Gulzari Lal.

Through Kusum's character, Jhabvala effectively exposes the moral contradictions within individuals who outwardly conform to traditional values while privately engaging in behavior that contradicts them. Kusum's superficial respect for tradition, coupled with her calculated actions, highlights the larger theme of moral decay and self-serving hypocrisy prevalent in society. Her relationship with Gulzari Lal is not founded on love but on ambition and convenience, making her a key

representation of the ethical degeneration that Jhabvala critiques throughout *Get Ready for Battle*.

Gulzari Lal is a man whose sole belief revolves around wealth and material success. For him, money-making is not just a means of survival but the ultimate purpose of life. He is entirely detached from any sense of spirituality, morality, or ethical considerations, as otherworldly matters hold no significance for him. His character serves as a prime example of the moral degeneration that has taken root in society, where values such as honesty, loyalty, and righteousness have been overshadowed by greed, selfishness, and opportunism.

This moral decay is further exemplified in his personal life. Despite being over forty years old and already married, both Gulzari Lal and Kusum harbor aspirations of marrying each other. Their desire for a union is not driven by love or mutual respect but by self-serving motives. Kusum, who is equally morally compromised, sees this marriage as a means to attain financial security and social legitimacy. Meanwhile, Gulzari Lal, who has grown accustomed to her presence and services, finds comfort in the idea of making their illicit relationship official. Their willingness to disregard their existing marriages and familial responsibilities further illustrates the extent to which ethical principles have eroded in their world.

Through this scenario, the novelist vividly portrays the larger theme of moral decline that pervades society. Jhabvala critiques how individuals, blinded by their own desires and materialistic pursuits, abandon traditional values and ethical responsibilities without remorse. The story reflects the reality of a society where personal

gain takes precedence over integrity, and the sanctity of marriage and relationships is easily disregarded in the pursuit of convenience and self-interest. Gulzari Lal and Kusum's actions symbolize the shifting moral landscape, where loyalty, commitment, and ethical considerations are increasingly being replaced by ambition, greed, and hypocrisy.

Vishnu, the son of Gulzari Lal, seems to be following in his father's footsteps, both in his approach to life and his moral shortcomings. Despite being married to Mala, a young, beautiful, and charming woman who wholeheartedly embraces her role as a loving wife and devoted mother, Vishnu remains unsatisfied. Mala, through her care and affection, fulfills the traditional expectations of a dutiful wife, yet these qualities fail to impress Vishnu. Instead of appreciating and valuing her, he secretly indulges in flirtations with Sumi, a close friend who harbors strong feelings for him. His disloyalty toward his wife is a clear indication of the same moral decline that defines his father's character.

Sumi, too, reciprocates Vishnu's affections, seeking his companionship and attention. Her fondness for him is evident in the way she constantly tries to be around him. She eagerly invites him to her house when her sister is out of town, ensuring privacy for their interactions. She also enjoys going to the bazaar with him, finding pleasure in his company even in mundane activities. Her emotional attachment to Vishnu is clearly expressed in her words:

I feel so strange, all day I think and  
at night also I lie awake and think.  
You don't know how I have waited

and waited... I don't want anything,  
only friendship.<sup>3</sup>

However, her insistence on calling it "only friendship" seems to be a way to justify their closeness, as their actions suggest a deeper emotional and romantic connection. The intensity of her admiration for Vishnu is further revealed when she expresses her hope that her parents find a suitor just like him, as she tells him: "I hope my parents have chosen someone exactly like you."<sup>4</sup>

Their frequent meetings, their moments of joy together, and even her occasional rides in Vishnu's car illustrate an underlying relationship that, while not as explicitly scandalous as that of Gulzari Lal and Kusum, still reflects a degree of moral ambiguity. Vishnu's flirtation with Sumi inevitably creates a gap between him and Mala. He fails to acknowledge Mala's needs, desires, or emotions, offering her little consideration or affection. His disregard for her feelings and his involvement with Sumi leave Mala feeling neglected and unfulfilled as a wife.

Beyond his personal relationships, Vishnu's social circle further deepens the divide between him and Mala. His group of westernized friends, whose values and lifestyle differ significantly from traditional Indian ideals, irritates Mala, making her feel even more isolated in her own marriage. These friends influence Vishnu's mindset, reinforcing his detachment from his cultural and marital responsibilities.

While Vishnu and Sumi's moral decline is not as extreme or blatant as that of Gulzari Lal and Kusum, it still represents a subtle yet significant erosion of values. The novel suggests that moral degeneration

manifests in different forms and intensities, sometimes in outright betrayal, as seen with Gulzari Lal, and other times in the quieter neglect of duty and emotional fidelity, as in Vishnu's case. Through Vishnu's character, Jhabvala critiques the generational transmission of flawed moral values, showing how ethical decay continues to persist in different degrees within society.

The novelist highlights yet another instance of moral degeneration through the character of Brij Mohan, the brother of Sarla Devi. His relationship with Tara, a young prostitute, serves as a stark example of the ethical and social decay prevalent in society. Brij Mohan, a degenerate aristocrat, indulges in a life of debauchery, squandering both his time and wealth on prostitutes rather than engaging in any meaningful or productive pursuits. His actions reflect the moral bankruptcy of individuals who belong to the so-called elite class yet lack any sense of responsibility or integrity.

Brij Mohan's affair with Tara is not a hidden secret—it is well known to everyone around him. Tara, a helpless and unfortunate woman trapped in the harsh realities of prostitution, frequently visits him, fulfilling his every need in the hope of securing financial stability. She ensures that his drinks are ready for him when he arrives, catering to his whims and desires with the expectation that he will provide for her in return. However, despite her unwavering service and submissive attitude, Brij Mohan treats her with utter disregard and cruelty. He frequently loses his temper with her, and in moments of rage, he does not hesitate to physically assault her. His violent and disrespectful behavior exemplifies the exploitation and suffering that women like

Tara endure in a society where they have little agency or protection.

The harsh reality of Tara's situation is acknowledged even by Sarla Devi, who, despite her own moral standing, cannot ignore the unfair treatment Tara receives. In a moment of sharp observation, she confronts her brother and says: "I hope you pay her properly, the poor girl doesn't come here for her pleasure."<sup>5</sup> Sarla Devi's words highlight a painful truth—Tara's presence in Brij Mohan's life is not one of personal choice or desire, but a necessity for survival. She is not there for her own pleasure but is merely trying to make a living in a society that offers her no dignity or security.

Despite all that Tara does for him, Brij Mohan ultimately discards her without remorse, driving her out of his house as if she were nothing more than a disposable object. This final act of rejection further underscores the deep-rooted moral decay in society, where individuals like Brij Mohan exploit the vulnerable for their own gratification and then abandon them without any sense of guilt or responsibility.

Through this portrayal, Jhabvala not only exposes the moral corruption of men like Brij Mohan but also sheds light on the plight of women like Tara, who are forced into miserable and degrading circumstances due to societal neglect and exploitation. Tara's suffering is not just an individual tragedy but a reflection of a larger issue—the widespread dehumanization of marginalized women in a society that claims to uphold values and traditions. By presenting this relationship, Jhabvala offers a powerful critique of the ethical decline in society, where wealth and privilege do not equate to

moral responsibility, and the weak are left to suffer at the hands of the powerful.

Jhabvala, through these characters, effectively highlights the moral degeneration that has deeply entrenched itself within society. While the most striking example of this decline is evident in the illicit and morally questionable relationship between Gulzari Lal and Kusum, it is by no means an isolated case. The novelist also provides multiple references to similar moral lapses exhibited by other characters, such as Vishnu, Sumi, Brij Mohan, and Tara. Each of these individuals, in their own way, contributes to the gradual erosion of ethical values, reflecting a larger societal decay where personal desires take precedence over social responsibilities and moral obligations.

The moral corruption displayed by these characters extends beyond their personal relationships—it actively taints the larger fabric of society. People like Gulzari Lal, who prioritize their selfish needs over ethical conduct, serve as catalysts for the spread of moral decay. His extra-marital affair with Kusum, his disregard for societal norms, and his failure to uphold basic moral principles set a damaging precedent, influencing even the younger generation, as seen in the case of his son Vishnu. Similarly, Vishnu's disloyalty toward his wife Mala and his secretive association with Sumi mirror his father's failings, suggesting that this moral degeneration is being passed down through generations.

Brij Mohan, with his indulgence in a reckless lifestyle and his exploitative relationship with Tara, further exemplifies this decline. His character sheds light on the callousness of men who abuse their status and wealth to manipulate vulnerable women, discarding them when they are no longer of

use. Tara, as a victim of societal neglect, represents the unfortunate reality of individuals who suffer at the hands of morally corrupt elites. Jhabvala not only portrays the exploiters but also emphasizes the plight of the exploited, thereby providing a holistic view of the consequences of moral deterioration.

Such morally degraded individuals not only harm their own lives but also weaken the structure of society itself. They undermine social values, break established norms, and set examples that promote selfishness, dishonesty, and betrayal over integrity, loyalty, and responsibility. When people prioritize personal pleasure over moral duty, society inevitably suffers, leading to a loss of ethical grounding and cultural identity. Through her novel, Jhabvala makes a strong critique of this ongoing degeneration, subtly urging her readers to reflect upon the impact of such behavior.

### CONCLUSION:

In this way, Jhabvala does not merely present a set of flawed characters but rather uses them as symbolic representations of a larger issue—the moral decline of urban Indian society. These characters metaphorically stand for a world where materialism, selfishness, and the pursuit of personal gratification have overshadowed ethics, tradition, and collective well-being. Through their stories, Jhabvala exposes the cracks in the seemingly sophisticated and modern urban life, revealing that beneath the surface of progress and affluence lies a deep-seated moral crisis that continues to plague society.

### REFERENCES

1. Jhabvala, Ruth Praver. *Get Ready for Battle*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 22.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
6. Manavar, Twinkle B. *A Thematic Study of Ruth Praver Jhabvala's Esmond in India, Get Ready for Battle and Heat and Dust* M. Phil. Diss. (Rajkot: Saurashtra University, 2001).