CHAPTER VI
The works of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala have been approached from various angles. Of course, the ways of approaching an author are many and no single approach can be considered as totally valid. Among the various approaches to Jhabvala's fiction, the following seem to be the most prominent.

Attempts have been made to speculate on the extent to which Jhabvala's fiction reflects her personal life. Although in her first novel, To Whom She Will, she writes that 'all characters are entirely fictitious', there is no need to insist on the point in her later fiction. Since she admits that she includes herself among her Western characters, the hatred shown by such characters as Esmond and Etta towards India are sometimes seen as reflecting her own point of view.

Far more rewarding than such speculation is the evaluation of the degree to which her personal life has extended and enriched the techniques of her art. In a sense, everything she has written emerges from the fact that her marriage to an Indian architect brought her to India in 1951 and kept her here for twenty-four years. The description of buildings and streets in New Delhi in her earliest fiction surely comes out of being Mrs. Jhabvala: the consciousness not only of how buildings appear, but of the materials used in their construction, the care to which they have been subjected, and the ways in which they reveal the personalities of their inhabitants. New Delhi's lanes, colonies, quarters, and streets are so exactly located that the favourite haunts of her characters, and the settings of some memorable scenes in her fiction could be marked upon a map of the city: Chandni Chowk, down which Etta walks; the coffee houses in which
Hari, Viddi, and Bal talk about life and discuss their prospects; the hotel owned by Guppy; the tennis club of which Nimmi, Rajen Mathur, and Pheroze are all regular playing members; the shopping centre that Radha loves to visit and to which Madhuri takes Indira shopping for a wedding-gift; and Janpath, where Shakuntala shops for shoes and Esmond dreams of England. To these could be added the government offices where Jaykar's son and Prem's friend Raj work at their files, and the rows of uniform houses to which they return at the end of the day; the obscure colleges, in one of which Prem struggles manfully with his fate; the business offices in Delhi and the old part of the city where Lalaji sits uneasily at the centre of a web of corruption. That world being subject to change, Jhabvala's Delhi necessarily mirrors social and cultural developments over a period of twenty-four years.

C.V. Venugopal writes:

Jhabvala is an Indian writer as much as Conrad is English. Her pictures of the Indian streets or the crowded and dingy housing localities are true to life as her impressions of a tea-shop or a third class railway compartment. Her observation of Indian men and women, again, is surprisingly thorough, although she does not confine herself to those who make up the higher social circles with whom she is naturally familiar.

In 1974 Ramlal Agarwal discussed with Jhabvala the question of literary influences on her fiction. Agarwal told her that she had been frequently compared to Jane Austen and asked whether she had consciously modelled her writing after Jane Austen's. She replied:
I haven't consciously modelled myself on anyone. Unconsciously (or does one say subconsciously?) more or less on every writer I have loved and admired. Any writer who had deeply thrilled me— and there have been many, many— has as it were entered into me; and so has influenced me... The reason I used to be compared to (Jane Austen) is because my earlier books dealt with the same sort of society as hers did— i.e., the leisured middle classes, mostly concerned with eating and marrying. Also perhaps my way of looking at things may have been somewhat similar to hers— a sort of ironic detachment? May be. Any way, that was in my earlier books. In my later ones I've been mostly compared to Russian writers. Chekhov, for example. Again I feel not because of any similarity between us— how could there be! I wish it were so, even by a thousandth of a fraction— but because one deals with similar societies. Present-day India does seem to have a lot in common, socially and economically, with nineteenth century Russia. (emphasis mine)

Most comparisons of Jhabvala's fiction with that of other writers have indeed concerned themselves mainly with the similarities between the societies described. Her own thoughts on similarities that might go very much deeper are tentatively offered in connection with Jane Austen— 'a sort of ironic detachment? May be'— and modestly withdrawn even as the possibility is mentioned in the case of Chekhov. And yet, as she has admitted, she has never ceased to study the art of fiction, with a special interest in the European writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.
V.S. Pritchett finds her
"an ironical observer of what Chekhov called the false
emotions, the comedy (in the sternest sense) of self-
delusion without drastic condemnation of the deluded."

Instead of concentrating on the inward life and disregarding
social realism, Jhabvala (who by temperament or circumstance is an
outsider) can move to the other extreme of completely excluding the
private consciousness to look at experience only from the outside,
describing it in a style that is deliberately devoid of all
suggestions. This is Jhabvala's method. For twenty-four years and
through her fiction, she has kept up detached clinical attitude.
Unlike the writers who probe into the interior landscapes of the mind,
Jhabvala's landscape is very much externalised, the heat and the dust
a necessary and tangible part of her theme. She brings what she calls
a Western sensibility to work upon material that is non-European, and
all her work is born out of this tension.

Meenakshi Mukherjee says in 'Inside the Outsider':

Prawer Jhabvala is an extreme case of the outsider in
the commonwealth context. Her situation is far too
unique to offer a model, but it certainly warns the
writers who are outside a literary tradition that in
order to exploit their situation they must peregrinate
and remain 'unhoused' and not get caught in their own
self-created grooves. Their true triumphs happen, as
they have in the case of Naipaul, by reaching and
remaining in a free state.
When the Booker Memorial Prize for 1975 was given to her for *Heat and Dust*, the literati in India refused to be impressed. They thought that Jhabvala was awarded the prize for her ruthless damning of India. Naturally they hit back by damning the book. In an article called 'Cross-Cultural Encounter in Literature', published in *The Indian P.E.N.*, Nissim Ezekiel observed:

I found *Heat and Dust* worthless as literature, contrived in its narrative structure, obtrusive in its authorial point of view, weak in style, stereotyped in its characters and viciously prejudiced in its vision of the Indian scene. To the distinguished English novelist who was the Chairman of the Jury for the Booker Prize, and to his colleagues, this judgement would no doubt be quite inexplicable, though it was widely shared in India.... *Heat and Dust* did not generate any heat or raise any dust in England. It did both in India, partly because of the Booker Prize which put on the novel stamp of English approval, naturally without any concern for Indian sensibilities. The gulf between the two viewpoints seems unbridgeable.... In *Heat and Dust*... the title itself would be subjected to an analysis more thorough than anything it has so far received. Is there not a demeaning motive in this characterising of a country and its culture in terms of its climate and the least valuable, so to speak, element lying on the physical territory designated? How would an English reader respond to a novel set in England, entitled in the same spirit by an Indian writer as *Cold and Fog*? When, further, there is more
than a hint that heat and dust in one place or cold and fog in the other represent the sum of the culture fictionally recreated and criticised, would a misgiving not be justified regarding the author's cultural intentions? I think it would be. Whatever the author's gifts of observation, style, narrative structure and character creation, a suspicion would remain in the reader that these gifts were being manipulated to darken rather than to illuminate one's understanding of the reality inherent in all fiction. Such writing, in my opinion, insults and degrades reality, deliberately or inadvertently.

According to S.N. Kumar,

Those who have had occasion to read Prawer Jhabvala in the past will notice the sneering at India in all her writings, but then she is entitled to her opinions. To someone like Mrs. Jhabvala who has been in India long enough the reasons for the poverty, alienation, and human frailties should not be difficult to find but to ignore the historical reasons and skim on the surface, naturally results in what Nissim Ezekiel calls 'a distorting mirror of India'.

Jhabvala, with a sharp eye for hypocrisy and inconsistency, makes in her novels a consistent use of a character whose astringent habit of mind, and carefully controlled behaviour denote a person of sensitivity. She said in 1974:

Of course it has everything to do with the way I look at things and people. Perhaps I do tend to see the
ridiculous aspects first, both in situations and in characters. But I don't think I just sit and laugh at them. Especially not in my later books. On the contrary, I'm beginning to feel that what is ludicrous on the surface may be tragic underneath. That's especially true in India. All those Indian paradoxes and comical situations that Western writers especially like to exploit and make fun of eg. the B.A. failed, the banya praying with one hand and giving false weight with the other. Well, perhaps one laughs at first (I'm afraid I used to laugh more than I should in my early books)—but afterwards you see that it is not comic at all but quite the opposite. Then one stops laughing: at which point perhaps one's writing opens up?

The cool detachment of her tone in A Backward Place as she takes the Hochstadts apart from her reader's pleasure, and the flexibility of a narrative style that can appear to take on the colours of a character's voice, and habits of thought are features of her writing that develop increasing subtlety with each published novel. It is not long before the confident satire with which the Hochstadts are exposed gives way— as her writing 'opens up'—to a kinder, because ironic, view.

Jhabvala's movement from the comparative simplicities of satire towards the complexities of an ironic mode can be seen from a literary point of view as a maturing process, and from a personal one as a means of survival. The satiric mind, moved by a deep feeling to an aversion only thinly covered by a casual tone, and a polite manner, is
only too apt to turn destructively upon itself. The irony to which she subjects the satiric personae of her novels, and short stories tells that they are not only externalisations of her moral viewpoint, but projections of her own personal dilemma. The use of irony becomes for her a means of self-discipline and self-chastisement. The Nawab in Heat and Dust, who would be glad to visit a fearful punishment on those who insult and persecute him, develops a studied courtesy with which he hides his contempt for the British political agents upon whose goodwill his position depends. He does not, however, try to develop an understanding of their difficulties, or pity for their point of view. Inevitably, the time comes when his nature can support the tension of this situation no longer, and a personality that once had the potential for true leadership dwindles into comic ineffectualness. Jhabvala prefers the cooler regions of irony to the heat and dust of satiric indignation. It is from frustration, and tension comparable to that of the Nawab, possibly, that she has developed her richly varied ironic style. She says:

I know I am the wrong type of person to live here. To stay and endure, one should have a mission and a cause, to be patient, cheerful, unselfish, strong. I am a central European with an English education and a deplorable tendency to constant self-analysis. I am irritable and have weak nerves.

It is all here, though it is presented as weaknesses: the English academic training, the cosmopolitan experience, the impulse to project facets of her own personality, and experience in her characters, and by this means to try to understand, and control them, the extreme sensitivity, all of which contribute so much to her
strength as a novelist. One can see that in *Heat and Dust* she uses irony as a weapon of self-analysis. By the time she wrote this novel, it had become her characteristic authorial tool, moulded by her individual, indeed unique, experience as an 'outsider' in India.

Haydn Moore Williams remarks:

Nothing separates Jhabvala more decisively from other "Anglo-Indian" or "Indo-Anglian" writers than her remarkable sensitivity to the plight of the expatriate ... and her exploration of Hindu gurus, though Jhabvala's sadhus and gurus are only superficially "bogus;" their deep mystery is either "saintly;" or "demonic;" in some cases it is both. Yet until *A New Dominion*, painful expatriation and ecstatic delirious devotion have been kept strictly under Jhabvala's taut direction within the pale of a social comedy that ends in resignation, compromise, or a subdued cynical suspension of resolution.

Jhabvala's mature novels, far from being the cynical attacks upon India that some critics have taken them to be, appear to be most properly viewed as artistic expressions of the process of understanding life, and of coming to terms with it. As in real life, there are no 'answers' provided in either *A New Dominion* or *Heat and Dust*, only ironic ambiguities that appear to point in one direction at certain times, in another at others: a feature that suggests Jhabvala is becoming increasingly interested by the challenge of reflecting the hidden workings and perplexities of real life in her fiction.
Jhabvala's description of her own life in India in the essay 'Myself in India' is frank, and deeply moving:

So I am back again alone in my room with the blinds drawn and the air-conditioner on. Sometimes, when I think of my life, it seems to have contracted to this one point and to be concentrated in this one room, and it is always a very hot, very long afternoon when the air-conditioner has failed. I cannot describe the oppression of such afternoons. It is a physical oppression — heat pressing down on me and pressing in the walls and the ceiling and congealing together with time which has stood still and will never move again. And it is not only those two — heat and time — that are laying their weight on me but behind them, or held within them, there is something more which I can only describe as the whole of India. This is hyperbole, but I need hyperbole to express my feelings about those countless afternoons spent over what now seem to me countless years in a country for which I was not born.

The vividness of the images that she presses into her service shows the intensity of her suffering in India, and the strength of her compulsion to work and re-work it in her fiction. Etta in A Backward Place, Raymond in A New Dominion, and Harry in Heat and Dust are all, in part, expressions of this personal need. But, as her own account, and the record of her novels and short stories make clear, 'rapture', 'love' and 'excitement' are also part of her experience of India. She externalises through fiction every aspect, puzzling, gladdening and
painful, of a complex relationship with India. In *Heat and Dust* Major Minnie regards India as: "an opponent, even sometimes an enemy, to be guarded and if necessary fought against from without and, especially, from within: from within one's own being." Olivia, on the other hand, becomes one of those who accept India as a lover: "She followed him wherever he called her and did whatever he wanted."

Between these extremes there exist innumerable attitudes, and Jhabvala explores a good many in her fiction, having experienced them all at first, or at second hand, during her years in India. Many of her Western characters (who include, 'myself') leave India, fleeing back to a setting they can comprehend, which will not make too many demands on them.

R.S. Pathak observes:

Many Indian novelists in English ... lack the necessary belongingness to Indian values, and their works reveal the plight of an alienated self. The case of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala perhaps perfectly illustrates this point. She is a gifted novelist noted for her remarkable intuitive and perceptive powers. This sensitive observer is well-equipped to deal with the mysteries of the Indian psyche. Despite her constant endeavour to identify herself with India, she could not obliterate the memory of foreignness.

The curious thing about Jhabvala is that, her exile is not from, but to India. Her position as a kind of permanent refugee has the greatest significance for an understanding of her work.
The central fact of all my work, as I see it, is ... I have lived here for most of my adult life and have an Indian family. This makes me not quite an insider but it does not leave me entirely an outsider either. I feel my position to be at a point in space where I have quite a good view of both sides but am myself left stranded in the middle. My work is an attempt to charter this unchartered territory for myself. Sometimes I write about Europeans in India, sometimes about Indians in India, sometimes about both, but always attempting to present India to myself in the hope of giving myself some kind of foothold. My books may appear objective but really I think they are the opposite: for I describe the Indian scene not for its own sake but for mine. This excludes me from all interest in all those Indian problems one is supposed to be interested in ... My work can never claim to be a balanced or authoritative view of India but is only one individual European's attempt to compound the puzzling process of living in it. (emphasis mine)

This straightforward statement, made by her in 1972, offers useful clues for the interpretation of her fiction.

From Jhabvala's point of view there is a considerable advantage in being considered as Indian. It permits her to be ruthlessly critical of both traditional, and modern India. She also need not expect banning on the grounds of offensiveness to a particular tradition. In writing of the India that she knows from her own experience she has the advantage, as she says, of being as it were
both of it, and out of it. To her observation of Indian urban life she brings forth a Western irony, that can come only with a certain detachment, and an insider's knowledge of detail, and nuance that few other non-Indians could hope to command.

Jhabvala may perhaps be considered a European writer on India, yet her creative work provides ample evidence of her Indianness, the aesthetic design of her art, moulded by her experience of life in India. It is a Jewish 'Passage to India', but very different from that of Forster. Jhabvala in the early years of her experience of this country seems to try to transplant a little Europe of her own in India, but with the passage of time the plant has grown into a tree, with a native growth, which is watered and nourished by the Indian earth. She concludes the essay 'Myself in India' by saying:

I do sometimes go back to Europe. But after a time I get bored there and want to come back here. I also find it hard now to stand the European climate. I have got used to intense heat and seem to need it.

But, in 1981, she writes:

In 1975 I left India and am now living in and writing about America—but not for long enough to be able to make any kind of comment about either of these activities.

According to Fritz Blackwell,

The essay [Myself in India] stresses the ambivalent attitude of the author, typical of most Westerners' experience of India. She warns particularly of the overpowering climate, cultural as well as physical,
especially in regard to its effect upon the naive who come armed with "tremendous enthusiasm" but remain unprotected from what she refers to as the "intense heat".

Jhabvala's present stay in the United States, with occasional visits to India, cannot show that America has accepted her, or she has accepted America. She is quite aware of her own isolation, and it becomes clear that her ironic objectivity in her mature novels has arisen out of self-discovery. She should have felt that living in India meant a constant struggle. She feels that her 'Europeanness' is threatened, that she can never become 'Indian', that if she stays on, India would attack her morally, it will destroy her personality. Given the choice between staying on the suffering or escaping abroad; she chooses, like Esmond, the latter route. These formulations seem to do a disservice to an old culture, and an ancient country, when taken as generalisations. Perhaps she was worn out by twenty-four years of living in an environment alien to her particular physical, and emotional temperament. India, to such a woman, tired as she is, may have proved to be too much of a burden to bear, and she seems to have chosen, wisely enough, for her to stay out. She is so much obsessed with India that she says in 'Myself in India':

Sometimes one wants just to run away and go to a place where everyone has enough to eat and clothes to wear and a home fit to live in. But even when you get there, can you ever forget?

Unfortunately, Jhabvala's work in fiction gives the impression that India is not only her particular burden, but that of every White woman's, that India is out to destroy the White man/woman's
integrity, and that it is impossible for a Westerner to cultivate a natural, and realistic attachment to the country. When Jhabvala chooses to withdraw, it means a refusal to see India in human and historic terms. Her works remain a documentation of a largely superficial and restricted society.

But Jhabvala takes full interest in Indian life and tries to absorb it in her being. She says:

The place [India] is very strong and often proves too strong for European nerves .... However, I must admit that I am no longer interested in India. What I am interested in now is myself in India – which sometimes, in moments of despondency, I tend to think of as my survival in India. I had better say straightaway that the reason why I live in India is because my strongest human ties are here. If I hadn't married an Indian, I don't think I would ever have come here for I am not attracted – or used not to be attracted – to the things that usually bring people to India.

Her ironic vision, within her range, is definitely revealing. Her own life characterizes this irony:

Should one want to try and become something other than what one is? I don't always say no to this question. Sometimes it seems to me how pleasant it would be to say yes and give in and wear a sari and be meek and accepting and see God in a cow. Other times it seems worth while to be defiant and European and — all right, be crushed by one's environment, but all the same have made some attempt to remain standing.
These sentences reveal the inner tension of the writer the European who chose to be Mrs. Jhabvala but is unable to 'merge' with India. This tension is transferred on to the characters of her fiction. What she tells is the truth about herself, and not about India.

It is sometimes argued in defence of writers such as Jhabvala that the writer's world is 'within', and that he/she is entitled to it. The writer is certainly entitled to his/her world. But the critic is equally entitled to a value judgement of that world.

If the expatriate writer leaves a developing country, for whatever reason, to live in a Western one, or leaves a European country and comes to live in a developing country, he/she has a special responsibility. His/her work is meaningful to the extent that he/she can interpret one group to the other, make these groups see how others see them. The uncomprehending sneer of an 'outsider' is not merely the easy, and irresponsible way out. It is ultimately destructive, both of individuals and their writing.

Any reader of the fiction of Jhabvala can easily find three distinct stages in her literary career. In the first phase she remains an amused spectator of the comic oddities of Indian life. In the second phase one sees her entangled soul in the backwardness of India — backwardness from her point of view of poverty, prostitution, swamis, and gullibility — and the gradual dawning awareness that India hides her heart from the cool scrutiny of the Westerner. Her comic tone thickens to irony and the comic-tragic view of life emerges. She learns the lesson, and accepts that she is an outsider, and that her fiction can reflect authentically only her experience. Her range of
fiction becomes an outsider's experience of India. The characters in her fiction belonging to the middle and later periods cease to be Indians, and they become expatriates like herself. But the resistance that India offers to the outsider puzzles her, and at the same time fascinates her. Her irony thickens because of her fear of being engulfed by the mysterious East. In the third phase, she flees the country, and becomes aware that after all she writes in isolation. How could any man be committed to anything outside him? He commits only to his inner voice, and it says that he is severely alone. The third phase insists upon her self-discovery, and her inability to speak of India as an Indian, and the futility of trying to do so. But yet she must write, and her writings are her vision of India, her vision of life.
NOTES

2. *Quest* 91 (September - October 1974), pp.33-34.
7. *Quest* 91 (September - October 1974), p.34.
8. 'Myself in India', *How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories*, p.9.
9. *Galaxy of Indian Writings in English*, p.77.
12. Ibid., p.152.
15. 'Myself in India', *How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories*, p.16.
18. 'Myself in India', *How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories*, pp. 10-11.

19. Ibid., p.9.

20. Ibid., p.16.