CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Writing about Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Haydn Moore Williams says:

Perhaps, at least in a technical sense, she is the best fiction writer ... writing on India. But she has not received much critical attention because critics tend to judge her more harshly than they do native Indian writers who use English.

So far Jhabvala has published ten novels and four collections of short stories. But most of her books are not available at the bookshops; of her fourteen books, only three have so far been published in Indian editions.

The existing critical approaches to Jhabvala deal mainly with the following questions:

1. Why is Jhabvala, though a versatile writer, neglected by Indian critics?
2. Is she an outsider or an insider?
3. Are her interests centred on the middle- and upper-middle-class milieu?
4. Can her themes be studied as a conflict between tradition and modernity?
5. Is the main concern in her novels a mere representation of the East-West encounter?
6. Is she an Indian writer for Western readers, or is she a European writer writing for both Indians and the Westerners?

In his well-written article "Two Approaches to Jhabvala" in the January 1977 issue of The Journal of Indian Writing in English, Ramlal Agarwal enumerates several reasons for the neglect of the gifted
writer: some scholar critics think that she cannot be considered an Indian writer, as she is not one by birth; others think that she does her bit of finger-wagging. Still others think that her novels are 'social novels' written in the most matter-of-fact manner.

Vasant A. Shahane remarks: Ruth Prawer Jhabvala has sometimes been described as an 'inside-outsider', and other times as an 'outside-insider'. This means that one who does not belong to India by birth but who has lived long enough here to comprehend and depict Indian culture realistically.

Jhabvala writes about the furious social scuffling in present-day India. Her world is middle-and upper-middle-class North India. It is a world crowded with people who are indolent, sensuous, and violently emotional; people who have no intellectual curiosity and in the absence of this lead a sort of life bereft of any quality in it.

Jhabvala does not write about one or two persons; she writes about the corporate life of two or three families. Her novels are singularly devoid of accidents, coincidences, and sudden shifts of fortune. On the contrary, they are full of the drab routine of daily life, so much so, they tend to be tritely repetitive. But she is not afraid of being repetitive. It is for this reason that she has been able to describe the domestic and social life of Indians as no other writer in English has ever done.

All Jhabvala's novels are full of local colour and clamour, dealing with the young who are inert, romantic, and none too wise and the old who are cool, calculating and rigid. She describes the head-on collision between the traditional and the modern, East and West and the confusion that follows in the wake of these collisions.
A very relevant question is whether Jhabvala writes as an Indian writer for Western readers or as a European writer both for Indians and Europeans. Does she have in mind the Western audience only, or the whole of the world? The answer to this question is not difficult to find. She herself admits,

When one writes about India as a European and in English (as I do), inevitably one writes not for Indian but for Western readers. Problems of communication present themselves; how to translate the idiom of one language into another, how to present a scene to an audience unfamiliar with its most obvious ingredients (such as temples, bazaars, and motorcycle rickshaws).

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala is a European who lived with her husband in India for more than two decades. She defiantly declares, that

"I have lived in India for most of my adult life. My husband is Indian and so are my children. I am not, and less so every year."

It is to her credit that she, with her complex alien background, trains a keen, observant eye on the conflicting human relationships in Indian society, an 'in-group' society, obscure and deep enough to elude casual investigation.

This gifted non-Indian, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, should not be linked with other creative Indian writers in English such as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan — nor with women novelists such as Kamala Markandaya and Nayantara Sahgal. She is, in a way, unique; and the advantages (as well as the disadvantages) of her literary situation are peculiar to her and they stem from her being a European woman of
Polish-German-Jewish origin brought up and educated in England, who lived in India with her Parsi husband and wrote about India. She has given new, literary currency to the old doctrine that India makes extraordinary and irreconcilable demands on a European, especially on a white woman.

Vasant A. Shahane observes:

India is Ruth Jhabvala's constant preoccupation almost her obsession. If there is a single distinctive European writer who continually responds to what India means to him/her, it is most obviously Ruth Jhabvala. No other European writer in recent years ... has reacted so sensitively and sharply to what life in India implies for her — as Ruth has done.

In the United States, as in New Delhi, Jhabvala writes in complete isolation now. Her habit of living like a recluse while residing in New Delhi raised doubts in some critical minds (chiefly Indian) as to the authenticity of her picture of India, — doubts that she seems to be well aware of.

People say, 'She lives like this, how can she know about India?' Well, a novelist doesn't have to go out like a journalist. You meet one person and he can split into twenty people. There's no shortage of people for me.

As many authors of both East and West have done before her, Jhabvala splits up certain modern phenomena that interest her deeply into many aspects that she embodies in the settings and characters of her fiction, contriving by this means not only to study the whole, but
to explore with remarkable objectivity her own identity in its relation to India. Yasmine Gooneratne says:

Her approach to writing in and about India could well be explained in terms of the Indian concept of avatar, the manifestation of the divine personality, according to which Shiva and other deities manifest themselves in various forms across time and space while mankind, worshipping them in one form or another, finds paths opening to the divine nature as a whole.

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala was born on 7 May, 1927 in Cologne, Germany. She was the only daughter of a Polish-Jewish lawyer named Marcus Prawer and his wife, Leonora Cohn Prawer. She went to England as a refugee in 1939. There she got her high school education at Hendon County School. She graduated from Queen Mary College and then took her M.A. in English literature at London University.

In 1951 Ruth Prawer left England for India as the twenty-four-year-old wife of Cyrus H.S. Jhabvala, a young Parsi architect. She remained in India for the next twenty-four years, and in 1975 she left India and took up residence in the United States.

A close study of the biography of Jhabvala and her literary career reveals distinctly three stages in the process of her development as a woman and as an artist. The first stage lasted from 1951 to 1956, the second from 1957 to 1962, and the third from 1963 to the present.

The first stage of Jhabvala's experience of India included the birth of her three daughters and the publication of her two novels To Whom She Will (1955) and The Nature of Passion (1956). This lasted for
six years, during which time she never left India but entered with increasing delight into the experience it held out to her.

In an interview with Ramlal Agarwal for *Quest*, Jhabvala said, looking back, that "as a writer I consider myself exceedingly fortunate to have come here (India) when I did and the way I did."

Jhabvala's descriptions of the first encounter with India suggest that living and writing blended into an intense joy of discovery. She said:

"As soon as I got here, I began writing about India ....

It came about instinctively. I was enraptured. I felt I understood India so well. I loved everything."

Although Jhabvala entered a family of Indian Parsis who themselves had possessed a history of expatriation from Persia that is many centuries old, the large extended family of her husband's Punjabi business partner provided her with an opportunity to observe Indian — and particularly Hindu-life at close quarters, on a footing of intimacy. This is seen in her first two novels, *To Whom She Will* and *The Nature of Passion*.

In 1957 Jhabvala paid a brief visit to England and found, on her return to India, that her attitude to India had changed. This is clearly seen in her third and fourth novels, *Esmond in India* (1957) and *The Householder* (1960). Some of the sources of dissatisfaction are found in her fifth novel, *Get Ready for Battle* (1962); the only novel she wrote, centred exclusively upon India's poverty and upon the exploitation of the poor and the helpless by the rich and the corrupt.

Jhabvala's disillusionment with India found additional expression

The second of these is prefaced by an extraordinarily revealing autobiographical essay entitled 'Myself in India' in which the author says:

> There is a cycle that Europeans — by Europeans I mean all Westerners, including Americans — tend to pass through. It goes like this: first stage, tremendous enthusiasm — everything Indian is marvellous; second stage, everything Indian not so marvellous; third stage, everything Indian abominable. For some people it ends there, for others the cycle renews itself and goes on. I have been through it so many times that now I think of myself as strapped to a wheel that goes round and round and sometimes I'm up and sometimes I'm down. When I meet other Europeans, I can usually tell after a few moments' conversation at what stage of the cycle they happen to be.

These feelings are reflected in the yearning for Europe that overtakes Jhabvala's Western characters in the three novels written during this period: *A Backward Place* (1965), *A New Dominion* (1972), and *Heat and Dust* (1975). Yasmine Gooneratne writes about the Western characters in *A Backward Place*:

> Etta, Judy, Clarissa and the Hochstadts are poised at different points on a turning wheel of emotional experience, and their respective fates result as much
from their being Westerners in India as from individual temperament or social and cultural background.

For her novel *A New Dominion*, Jhabvala selects a time-span identical with the period it takes her two Westerners, Lee and Raymond, to experience the intense effects of a full turn of the wheel of fascination and disillusionment. Raymond plans to leave India; but for Lee, the fascination of India 'renews itself'.

In *Heat and Dust* the experience of Olivia in India of 1923 are recreated and analysed, after a gap of fifty years, by another English woman for whom the cycle 'renews itself'.

These observations are penetrating analyses of states of mind, some of which are personally familiar to Jhabvala, whose essay 'Myself in India' refers to the indescribable sense of 'oppression' she felt on occasions during her stay in India and she has noted of her Western characters that they 'of course include myself'.

Jhabvala writes about the impact of the Indian summer day and heat on herself and other Westerners:

Only those who have lived through days of endless Indian heat know their effect on one's behaviour.

The Western characters in my novels are amazed at themselves. They yell at servants ... 'My God,' they ask, 'what's happening to me?'

What's happening to me? My Western characters ... have reason to be appalled at the transformation to which they are being subjected. Along with their behaviour their most cherished principles and feelings seem to be changing.

The recurrence of similar characters and subjects in the film scripts and fiction Jhabvala worked on alternatively during this period reflects the nature and intensity of her preoccupations as a woman and an artist in these crucial years. It is found, for example, that the figure of a Western woman seeking self-fulfilment in India is explored successively in the characters of the American novelist Lucia Lane in *Bombay Talkie*, Jenny in *The Guru*, the narrator of the short story 'An Experience of India', and the triple studies of Lee, Margaret, and Evie in *A New Dominion*. It is taken up again, with greater ironic complexity than before, in the characterisation of the narrator of *Heat and Dust*. Similarly, the swami figure who appeared in a favourable light in *The Householder* and *Get Ready for Battle* is taken up again with less respect in *Bombay Talkie*, *The Guru*, short stories like 'An Experience of India' and 'A Spiritual Call', and *A New Dominion*. These observations of spiritual seekers and swamis are
never merely repetitive; they seem to distil the essence of Jhabvala's own 'earlier enthusiasm' for, and 'subsequent disillusionment' with, India. Other themes that dominate the writing of this period include the exploitation of one individual by another; the analysis of a sensitive personality trapped in a hostile environment; the integrity of the creative artist; and — a theme stemming, perhaps, from Jhabvala's personal history of displacement and expatriation — the helplessness of the socially disadvantaged.

After spending twenty-four years in India, Jhabvala in 1975 took up residence in the United States — which has become the subject of her novel In Search of Love and Beauty (1983) and of her screenplay Roseland. Interviewed in London soon after receiving Britain's prestigious literary award the Booker Memorial Prize of £ 5000 for Heat and Dust that year, she said:

I'd like to live much more in the West, going back to India sometimes but not as much as before. Having assimilated all this Indian experience I don't want to forget it or cast it off; what I want to do is to take it out again as a Westerner, enriched by what I have learnt there ... I can't throw away the past twenty-four years, nor do I want to. What I'd really like to do is record the journey back. I don't know if it's possible. It's also a matter of age. I was twenty-four when I went to India. I'm now forty-eight and one is not so flexible. But it's not as if I'm going to a new place; I am going back West, so it might work out. I don't know, we'll just have to see.
Jhabvala's published work after 1975 has included many short stories, some of which are included in the collection *How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories* and they focus on the experiences of lonely, exploited, and unhappy women at every level on the Indian social scale. They have been written with an insight and cleverness that reveal how much Jhabvala's world has opened out since 1960.

There seems to echo a new freedom and lightness of spirit carried over from the last words of 'An Experience of India', a suggestion that nothing is resolved except the decision to keep moving, 'travelling'.

In two days' time I too will have to go with my bundle and my bedding. I've done this so often before - travelled here and there without any real destination - and been so happy doing it; but now it's different. That time I had a great sense of freedom and adventure. Now I feel compelled, that I have to do this whether I want to or not. And partly I don't want to, I feel afraid. Yet it's still like an adventure, and that's why besides being afraid I'm also excited and most of the time I don't know why my heart is beating fast, is it in fear or in excitement, wondering what will happen to me how that I'm going travelling again.

As the title *In Search of Love and Beauty* suggests a very abstract concept like the pursuit of 'love and beauty' is the main theme of this novel. The possibilities of realising it completely are rare, but the search itself becomes important. Through a rich mosaic of episodes, shifting intricately back and forth from the 1930s to the
present day, the lives of three successive generations are traced. Linked by the incessant longing for inner fulfilment, grandmother, mother, son and daughter pursue their selfish quest by very different routes. Yet each is drawn, either by love or hate, to the magnetic Leo Kellermann.

But on the evidence of her writing in the last few years, it certainly seems that Jhabvala has found the way to make her "true triumphs happen, as they have in the case of V.S.Naipaul, by reaching 16 and remaining in a free state."

In 'Myself in India', Jhabvala predicted that her struggle to retain her individuality and live in India was quite likely to end only with her death:

Of course, this can't go on indefinitely, and in the end I'm bound to lose — if only at the point where my ashes are immersed in the Ganges to the accompaniment of Vedic hymns, and then who will say that I have not 17 truly merged with India?

When Ramlal Agarwal asked her in his interview whether she would like to be considered an Indian writer, she replied:

No, how could I be? I'm not, am I? There's no getting away from that fact. I write differently from Indian writers because my birth, background, ancestry and traditions are different. If I must be considered anything, then let it be as one of those European 18 writers who have written about India.

and when Agarwal asked her what, according to her, might be the reasons for her cold reception in India, she replied:
I don't feel particularly neglected here. I think Indians don't read much anyway, so I don't really expect them to read my novels. Besides my books are not easily available here. They're terribly expensive and who can afford to pay that much?

Anyhow, one can feel in her writing an ever-growing sense of disillusionment and alienation and an increasing urgency to leave India. She has now done so. This does not mean that she has discarded her Indian experience. Perhaps her 'Indian' fiction will represent a milestone along her literary journey to the greatness for which she has the potential.

But no one has studied her fiction as the expression of a sensitive writer enabling her to discover herself in the process of writing. And the present study is concentrated on her fiction as an aesthetic exploration to find out her own identity in its relation to India. There is an evolution in the mode and style of the artist from comic objectivity to ironic self-discovery.

Her initial responses to the phenomenon that is India are reflected in her early novels, *To Whom She Will* and *The Nature of Passion*. They are gentle comedies embodying the light, unfettered consciousness, seldom delving deeper than the ordinary. They contain almost wholly an Indian cast of characters and only Indian culture contrasts. The author displays her enthusiasm and awareness of new modes of living, different from what she has been used to.

This period of gentle comedy is not enduring. There is a gradual growth in the process of the alienation and disillusionment with the
passage of time, and with it a deeper awareness of her predicament as a European in India. She is now more aware of the erosion wrought on the Western sensibility by Indian climate and Indian modes of living. She brings a sense of her personal anguish and mental turmoil in her novels belonging to this period (Esmond in India, Get Ready for Battle, and A Backward Place). With the two novels, A New Dominion and Heat and Dust the process of withdrawal is completed. Everything falls apart.

The issue of surrender of personality is now replaced by the struggle to keep her own personality and not become drowned in India, to remain European. India has become a sort of white woman's burden for her. She feels that she can never become Indian, that her stay in India threatens her Europeaness, her own personality. This personal dilemma is transposed as the principal problem of the European characters in her fiction.

R.F.Isar makes a valid attack on Jhabvala's contentions:

These formulations may have been all right for her personality but seem to me all wrong as generalisations. India does not force a white woman to become either memsahib or crank; it may well bring out either if the potential was there on arrival. Nor is it the only tropical country to make an assault on European senses. Some people get old-maidish reactions but run indoors to hide but most seem to get along quite well. Nobody in a country whose essence is a rich plurality really asks you to be other than your own genuine self. It is only some foreigners who think they have to undergo a kind of bilious sea-change mostly by awkward compliance with externals.
The subsequent chapters of this thesis deal with the growth of the mind and art of Jhabvala. In Chapter Two, the novels, *To Whom She Will* and *The Nature of Passion* are taken up for discussion. The two novels are discussed in detail to show how they are just social comedies whose main intention is that of comic portrayal of Indian life and culture. In Chapter Three, *Esmond in India, The Householder* and *Get Ready for Battle* are taken up for discussion and it is argued that it is no longer possible for Jhabvala to be a mere spectator. India tries to engulf her and the deepening of shadows are clearly discernible in this period. It is no longer a light-hearted comic vision of amusement and gaiety but a tragi-comic vision in which comedy thickens into irony and seriousness destroys the amusement and gaiety of the earlier period. In Chapter Four, *Like Birds, Like Fishes, A Backward Place, A Stronger Climate, A New Dominion, Heat and Dust, How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories, In Search of Love and Beauty, Out of India* (1987) and *Three Continents* (1987) are taken up for discussion. Jhabvala's disillusionment with India and Indian ways of life depicted in these books can be considered as an outcome of her awareness that she is an outsider and it is futile to allow her identity as an outsider to be engulfed by her Indian experience. Her sense of being a sojourner, never belonging to any place, any time is discussed in detail. Chapter Five is devoted to a discussion of Jhabvala's techniques of narration and it is shown that there is a definite progression in her narrative technique. The last chapter is an attempt to assess the achievement of Jhabvala as a novelist and it is argued that she is an outsider and that her fiction can reflect authentically only her experience. It is shown that her range of fiction becomes an outsider's experience of India, her vision of India and her vision of life.
NOTES


7. Silence, Exile and Cunning , p.11.


10. 'Myself in India', *How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories*, p.9.


15. 'An Experience of India', *How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories*, p.137.


17. 'Myself in India', *How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories*, p.10.

18. *Quest* 91 (September-October 1974), p.36.
