Chapter III

The Early Novels
Chapter-III
The Early Novels

(1) Esmond in India (1958)

With Esmond in India Ruth Jhabvala selects another segment of her Indian experience. Returning to the working area of her first novel—cross-generation interactions in a community of westernized aristocrats—she broadens her canvas to include some social and political developments of the second decade of Indian Independence. The scene is set, once again, in Delhi—the locale offering a parallel to the real city and registering its developments as few fictional locales do.

The world of Esmond in India is confusing. In its complex fabric modern Western modes of life and thought are seen to be closely woven with traditional Indian living patterns. Talk of divorce is in the air at the same time that sentiments like "a woman's husband is her God" are being uttered. Inter-racial marriages are not only being contemplated but actually accepted in society. The people who inhabit this world closely represent upper class urban Indians of the late Fifties. The rich educated westernized class whose intimate experience of an alien culture has made it develop an ambivalent attitude to its own. Foreigners,
who form perhaps a higher percentage of the population than in the
days of the Raj, are aware of considerable change in the Indian ethos.
A impulse towards self-recovery is a motivating force in the characters
making a quest for assimilation in a changed world in *Esmond in
India*. Parents work in their children's behalf, though the younger
generation is not absolved from the struggle. Equally the products of
two cultures, the young of the novel, too, have to strive to belong and
identify. There are some characters, however, who are so confused by
what they see around them that they reject a world they have ceased
to understand.

The principal approaches to this quest in *Esmond in India* are
formed out, of the materialistic and the idealistic vies of life. The World
of *Esmond in India* is divided between the haves and the have-nots.
The haves or materialists are linked with the have-nots or idealists by
ties of blood, friendship or marriage. Emerging from this dualism is an
intricate pattern of cross-ideological relationships which the novelist
represents with particular reference to an Indo-European marriage.

The chief of the materialists is Madhuri, the middle-aged wife of
Hardayal, a wealthy gentleman of some cultural standing in Delhi. Wordly
values emanate from her presence as potent as the aura of sophistication
and refinement she breathes into the air. Her right hand in the pursuit of
wealth and position is her eldest son Amrit who, matched with an
equally ambitious wife, openly admits his philistinic values. Madhuri is happy too in her younger son but disappointed in her husband who, it seem to her, lacks the unswerving devotion to the material that she herself advocates.

Madhuri believes that she has striven hard for years to keep her “unstable” husband on her own path. In reality, Har Dayal has always shared her attachment to material possessions and her love of luxury. Though attracted in his youth to the ideals of his friend Ram Nath, he had allowed himself to be guided by his wife’s gentle but unrelenting influence and had refrained from joining the struggle for India’s freedom in which he would have had to set all his worldly assets at stake. Now, twelve years after Independence, Har Dayal is flourishing in his career of time-serving, he cannot, however, stifle an occasional regret, a desire to offer his friend everything the possesses, when he thinks of Ram Nath. Having been reduced to penury. Such twinges of conscience are rare for Har Dayal and are easily subdued for he has deluded himself into the belief that his has been a dedication too—not to a life of action such as Ram Nath’s, but to a life of the spirit. Unwavering in her point of view and with no need to delude herself, Madhuri had dedicated herself to indoctrinating in her husband and children the practical and materialistic values of life. Her success with her sons has been complete:

Amrit was safe. He had the sort of job and the sort of wife and the sort of attitude to life one could wish for. And now Raj too. She looked
again at the photograph, met that frank and sensible English gaze and thought that yes, Raj too was probably safe.¹

Madhuri rejects as dangerous anything that threatens the only way of living she has known from childhood. To secure the same for her children, she brings them up beyond all point of contact with what she sense as the danger area in the new India. In practical terms this Cause, involving a need for education, health care and social and moral uplift for the masses, is calling hundreds of talented young doctors, teachers and social workers out of cities to villages and backward areas. Personifying this area of danger is Ram Nath’s brilliant doctor son Narayan who, having turned down the possibility of a lucrative practice in the capital, has gone out to an obscure village to serve his country’s poor. Madhuri’s dislike of Narayan is partly an extension of her dislike for his father, for Ram Nath had always managed to discompose her well-ordered existence and make her husband doubt the worth of the life. Most of it, however, stems from ashrewd instinct of self-preservation. For Narayan has an unsettling effect on her husband and daughter. She prefers to place her faith in a foreign environment and culture:

...what can happen to a boy in Cambridge? It was such a safe place, where he could be exposed only to the best influences. She felt very comfortable about Cambridge. All
the men in her family for the last two generations has gone there, all had come back polished and polite and ready to take up responsible positions.²

Madhuri’s faith in Cambridge extends to other areas, indicating that her brand of materialism is not so different from the one that rules the West. Yet true safety for Madhuri lies in a reconciliation of basic Indian value systems with the Western way of life. Thus, while giving the highest priority in her scheme of values and tasteful living, she rejects the basic Western concept of individual liberty. A marked Indian trait in Madhuri is her refusal to grant her children the freedom of thought and action common in the West. Madhuri’s home is run in a sophisticated.

Madhuri’s entire life centres around the acquiring and preserving of objects. She does not mind adding to her collection an English daughter-in-law “many of the very best families had foreign daughters-in-law brought into them”. But her identification with the West stops short at the point where exploitation ends, and is extended to her own country. Totally untouched by the greatness and glory in India in the past and unconcerned with her growth and welfare in the present, her assessment of what is truly valuable in India is materialistic:

She was a great believer in going abroad. Though she did not believe in staying there for good. Europe, England, even
America were all right for education or sight seeing, but one always had to come back to one's dear India. It was here that one's roots were, here that one could get the best positions, here that one enjoyed one's money and property and one's proper social status. It was safe here, comfortable.3

Madhuri's view are shared by Amrit, who, is neither deceiving nor deceived about his expectations from life. Trained by Madhuri, he used his Western education to get the most out of India. An administrative officer in a large British firm of paint manufacturers in Delhi, he was "part of their policy of gradually replacing British executives by Indian ones; and indeed he has very suitable for this purpose, as he had attended an English university and was also very English in all other respects, except in his complexion". Amrit's arguments in favour of the materialistic view of life are couched.

'I have always been suspicious of this Simple-Living-High-Thinking sort of thing. What is wrong with having a motor car, good clothes, a good bank-balance? Who would not accept these things if they came to him? It is only those to whom they do not come who say they would not'.... 'To me it sounds very simple. We have only one life, so why not get what we can out of it?'4
Opposed to such a view of life is Madhuri’s problem child—the sentimental and unrestrained Shakuntala. From her friends in the college hostel Shakuntala has acquired a superficial knowledge of the condition of India. Unable to identify with her family conventions, she hankers for some undefined but wider scope of activity. Her aspirations, find a channel in an infatuation with one of the most materialistic persons in the novel—Esmond Stillwood the leader of the sophisticated Western community of Delhi. Shakuntala’s ideas of what she would like to do. They range from giving up her life “in the service of the sick and the poor and the ignorant” to a pursuit of “Art and Beauty and Poetry” and in the final analysis to an enjoyment of “gracious living” and “things beautiful”—none of which can be reconciled in practical terms to her desire of marriage with Esmond Madhuri, Amrit and his wife Indira have as few illusions. Madhuri sees through her daughter’s ideal and puts them down. Her assessment that the proper treatment for Shakuntala is marriage with the right man. Through the course of the novel, the mother-daughter relationship seems to be precarious.

Her father, however, is totally deceived. Reality faces them both in the shape of a marriage proposal between Shakuntala and Narayan. While the true idealists Ram Nath and Uma believe that here at last is Shakuntala’s chance to live the life of idealism. Har Dayal has to warn his daughter against the marriage and preserve her image of him as idealistic at the same time.
'It means that we must, each one of us, find that way of life which brings the greatest contentment to our shoulders.... For without contentment of soul we cannot live a good life. Let us say Narayan has found his sufficient beauty; but does it follow that this will also give contentment to Shakuntala and enable her to lead to good life?'

Shakuntala is more than prepared to meet him half-way:

'I think my ideals are different from his. Though of course I admire him very much... Daddyji, I love Art and Beauty and Poetry, how can I give these things up as I shall have to if I go and live with Narayan in a village to do good to the poor?'

The irony that Shakuntala is in the habit of directing against her mother and brother is turned against herself. Father and daughter are revealed as the hollow men that they actually are. Madhuri wins all her battles. Har Dayal, though secure on his own mercenary path, had felt lost and alienated:

He had felt then that somehow the main stream of life was passing him by and he was washed up on a ledge like some almost inanimate jellyfish. And though he had assured himself that he too was doing important work in upholding, as he put it to himself, standards of culture and refinement, yet he had never been able to stifle that feeling of missing something great, some thing vital.
But after Independence the tide had turned. History had been made. Gone was the world of Gandhian ideals. A crass materialistic world had taken its place in which Ram Nath, Uma and thousands of selfless freedom fighters had lost their moorings. Events had proved the materialists right, for it is now the Har Dayals who are caught up in the mainstream and in touch with the affairs of India. Uma and Ram Nath now being to the "disinherited class". They have lost not only their world of commitment and action but their compatriots as well. Barring a few who have adapted themselves to the changed circumstances and who hold high positions in consequence, that bright believing band had disintegrated and disappeared "......after'47, people just seemed to no longer be there, even those who had been there always through all those years. Some had died and some had got very old and some had gone to Pakistan.....And some had faded away.8

Uma’s husband has been saved by his death in prison; Uma’s religion and fierce mother love have helped to sustain her identity but Ram Nath, who had once infected everyone around him with his sense of urgency has faded away like so many of his companions. With no illusions to sustain him and nothing but the rational to fall back upon, Ram Nath disdains to seek a fresh channel of self-expression. Driven by his inner compulsions, he withdraws completely from public and private life. The only person with whom he is in touch is Uma,
"He walked as in daze, lost even he did not know in what thoughts of his own, and then he did not remember other lives and what he owed to them....

When he thought of.........., he thought of him with love and tenderness and perhaps also some pride; but, he had to admit it, he no longer felt very close to him.9

He who had once "darted about like a bright sharp little flame" has grown so dull and that he fails to see through Shakuntala’s pseudo-idealism and believes that Har Dayal will react favourably to a proposal of marriage. Along with the loss of his knowledge "of the values of the world.... all the different values belonging to different classes and different people", Ram Nath sustains a greater loss. He experiences a soul that cuts him off from surrounding life. He, who had always keep himself in the centre of events and who had always identified with larger causes, finds that with retirement and old age "he had narrowed and could see only himself and his own path". Ram Nath has lost his capacity for "expanding and taking in all the world" because he has lost his preoccupation. He is almost envious of his materialistic wife’s whole-hearted absorption in her domestic arrangement and asks himself if any "great preoccupation, whatever it might be with, be thought ridiculous? It meant, after all, participating whole-heartedly in the affairs of life". This then, in the author’s assessment, is the fate of the idealist
in Independent India— that along with the loss of all material things he comes so perilously close to losing his ideals.

Following his father’s example of selfless service, Narayan has surrendered present comfort, prospects of wealth and position, and even the satisfaction of pleasing his deprived and frustrated mother, to work among the rural masses of India. The future of this worthy young man is left open to speculation. Will Narayan have a life of fulfillment? Will the marriage he is looking forward to be compatible? Will he too suffer a loss of ideal like Ram Nath? These are some of the questions that haunt the reader at the conclusion of the novel.

The loss of identity that threatens the idealist is seen in yet another context in Esmond in India, in Uma’s daughter Gulab’s marriage with Esmond Stillwood, an Englishman who has set himself up as an authority on India. Gulab brings her personal ideal of Indian womanhood to her cross-cultural marriage. The first East-West encounter is represented, as Meena Belliappa observes:

You see things from Gulab’s point of view, participate in her languor; share her relish for hot, spicy, curries smuggled in from her mother’s house....sympathise with her dislike for furniture which seems to her to restrict freedom of movement; undersant her reluctance to go into smart society......and then you see it all as Esmond does, a smartly
furnished modern flat superimposed with the animal presence of stupid, slovenly Gulab, whose interests in life do not go beyond sleep and food.\textsuperscript{10}

But Ruth Jhabvala's analysis of the cross-cultural clash goes deeper. It reaches down to the gulf that separates Western materialism from oriental idealism. Gulab is the idealistic passive female of Indian tradition who refuses to leave a tyrannical husband because her thinking is conditioned by the ancient ideal of marriage being a sacred state and her husband a woman's God. The modern European materialist Esmond dismisses all ideals as a matter of course. Marriage for him holds no inescapable conditions and can only be based on a combination of sophisticated living and an elegant, intelligent companion. In marriage “Esmond seeks an equal-Gulab a God.” The two, naturally, cannot be reconciled.

To use Vasant A. Shahane's words, "the rationality of the West and the spirituality of the east are given a complete holiday," Esmond and Gulab could never have come together. In the first phase of his response to India, Esmond had been rapt in her sensuous delights and had sought assimilation with her through marriage with a traditional Indian girl. Gulab, just ripening into womanhood, had lavished her awakening responses on this fair English youth who must have seemed to her to have stepped out of some ancient myth or legend. They had
been happy in the birth of their dark-haired child. Esmond "had wanted an Indian son, a real piece of India, as he had wanted an Indian wife". But in a few years, the West had claimed its own. In the second phase—that of disenchantment and withdrawal—Esmond thinks wistfully of Betty—"so light, modern and airy. Being with her was almost as good as being in England—" and of "fair sturdy little boys with blue eyes and pink cheeks". Yet Esmond's yearning do not stem from a sense of being cut off from his own country and people. The superficiality of his alienation is revealed with startling clarity in the scene in which he is invited to tea by Madhuri and Indira. On the rebound from crude oriental Gulab who, to his overwrought senses, becomes an embodiment of India, Esmond recovers his identity in Madhuri's drawing-room:

A great calm came over Esmond as he watched.....dainty hands deft among the tea things, and the well trained servants bending over him with sandwiches and biscuits tastefully arranged on plates of finest China.....All his worries left him and he was at peace. This, he felt, was where he belonged....Esmond thought if only it could always be like this. Then how he would love.11

India, he would feel at home here and never want to go away......

Esmond's affinity with the materialists of the novel is complete in his speculations of the happiness that would have been his had he married
a girl like Indira " "With such a wife, he was sure, he could have lived happily. Moreover, she probably came from a rich and influential family who would have helped him, so that he would not have had to sit and teach Culture to silly girls".12

Gulab's identification with the idealists of the novel is based on the block link, and operates on the level of the physical alone. She needs her mother for the pampering of her senses—a powerful compulsion with her but not an all-consuming one, as there is another, distinct side to her personality. She yearns for her mother's way of living and the relaxed life style that were part of her childhood. However, she draws sustenance neither from her fiery, energetic mother, nor from her cynical, uncle, nor from her socialist cousin. Through the course of the novel, she is seen as engaged in a silent battle to preserve an ideal of womanhood. Turning a deaf ear to her mother's pleas to leave her cruel husband she clings to her suffering. She finds not the faintest echo in Gulab:

It was a husband's right....to do whatever he liked with his wife. He could treat her well or badly, pamper her or beat her—that was up to him, and it was not her place to complain. But in return there was one thing, only one, that he owed that he owed her, and that was his protection: it was his duty to see that she was safe in his house and that no
stranger could cast insulting eyes on her. Esmond had failed in that duty; so now he was no more her husband. Nor she his wife: since she considered herself defiled she could not remain in his house any longer but had to return, as was the custom, to her own people.\footnote{13}

She sinks under the pressure of her husband's intolerance and an alien life style and the whole burden of an alien culture to the level of a dumb animal that eats, sleeps and licks its wounds. Against this image of Gulab, reinforced by her uncle's vision of her as "a great amorphous mass of sensuous life", is juxtaposed the final one of a woman. The last is in terms of a fundamentalist ideal of female chastity.

Ruth Jhabvala seems to have had no direct experience of the brand of morality she assigns to Gulab. Indeed, one suspects that she had no model at all before her for the Gulab-Esmond relationship but had to fall back on literary sources.

Ruth Jhabvala conceives the Esmond-Gulab relationship within these parameters, but goes a step further than her predecessor by relating Gulab's passionate allegiance to her husband. The lack of a causal sequence leading to Gulab's walking out on her husband indicates that in this novel Ruth Jhabvala is less interested in depicting the nature of marital discord and more in establishing the impossibility of the merging of two moderns of thinking.
By denying conflict, growth and self-discovery to Gulab, the novelist is sacrificing in order to establish an abstraction. Gulab, in the end, is neither asserting her elementary rights. Her final stance is a forceful vindication of the Sita myth as actually operating in life.

Gulab goes back “to her own people”—not in the spirit of belonging that had been hers when she was wearing her sufferings, but in a spirit of defeat.

“She was going to her mother’s house and she would by staying there always—she knew it but did not feel about it. It was her fate, and she accepted it without emotional comment, in the way one should accept one’s fate”. With herself-imposed stigma of desecration weighing her down, she will continue to suffer the pangs of alienation even when surrounded by loving faces in a dear familiar world.

For the Westerners of Esmond in India with whom Shakuntala identifies, there can be no question of assimilation with India and therefore no problem of identity lost or recovered. Connection with India for this community extends only to the point of making a comfortable short term living out of her for all its members. Jhabvala’s introduction of this expatriate class for the first time in her novels may have come from a greater awareness of Europeans in India during this phase of her life.

The values of this expatriate class different from those of the ruling class of India’s colonial past. The updating is limited to gestures
in the direction of Indian literature, art and architecture and to a preference for Indian textiles and folk art as furnishings. An under-lying irritation and resentment that India is no longer subject creeps through their conversation and is highlighted in Betty's vulgar gibes at the glories of India on the road to Agra: "Ladies and Gentlemen, you are now approaching the historic spot where four pimps of three successive Moghul emperors met with an honourable burial. On the left you will see a pee-house for jackals". But if Betty's approach to India is a survival of that of her memsahib forebears, Esmond's is that of the pukka sahib for whom India is "the white man's burden". Esmond's treatment of his servant is an example in point:

'Bearer I Esmond called......so thunderously, at the same time crashing his fist down on the table, that the servant jumped with shock and came rushing out of the kitchen to see what had happened...... 'In my house,' Esmond explained to the servant in his very bad but very careful Hindustani, 'I expect absolute and immediate obedience....'14

The principal theme Jhabvala explores through these shifting, turning circles of activity is the dilemma of the Westerner for whom initial delight in India turns into a trap. To examine Esmond closely, she isolates him: he is the only Westerner among the Indian characters in
house-holds. They are inter-linked by blood, shared memories or old association. Although he associates with other Westerners in Delhi, Esmond is isolated even among them. He is also one of the very few characters in the novel who possess some sensitivity to India. His very professional and thorough knowledge of the subject is contrasted with the indifference and super facility by other Westerners in Delhi. Har Dayal that he employs the European Still-wood to tutor his daughter in Indian classical literature.

Esmond is in different ways with other characters in the novel. Esmond is much more intelligent and sensitive that the stupid, Amrit whose prospective wife he has married. Narayan, on the other hand, would regard with contempt the luxurious life led by Har Dayal’s family Gulab, becomes a symbol of India as far as he is concerned, adopts a way of life that is in appropriate conflict with Esmond’s own representation of Western civilization:

He was trapped, quite trapped. Here in this flat which he had tried to make so elegant and charming, but which she had man aged to fill completely with her animal presence. His senses revolted at the thought of her, of her greed and smell and languor, her passion for meat and for spices and strong perfumes. She was everywhere; everywhere he felt her— in the heat saturating the air which clung to him and
enveloped him as in a sheath of perspiration; in the sugarcane juice, which the people in the streets were drinking and which he could almost taste, filled with dust and germs and too much sweetness; in the faint but penetrating smell of over-ripe fruit; everywhere, she was every

Esmond has begun to realize that 'the had to get out.....quickly', that it is only the prospect of leaving India for good that can ever again make him feel 'young and free'. His admiration for Indian art, architecture and literature is genuine, and he believes that in giving the lessons and lectures on Indian classical culture that earn him his living he has found his 'true vocation'. But he as found that his intellectual and aesthetic approach to her culture is no protection against India. Despite his conscientiousness as a teacher, Esmond's personality begins to disintegrate along with his marriage as 'the strain of living with Gulab more and more intense'. His growing distaste for India merges with contempt for his lovely and slow-witted wife until she becomes the living embodiment of all he resents about India. Esmond is proud of his selfimage as a man of culture, and is shaken and distressed by the violence of his own revulsion. He finds relief from his problems in his relationship with the British Betty. His later attempt to console himself with Shakuntala, however, backfires on him. Fascinated by Esmond's tragic melancholy, the romantic Shakuntala offers him her love and devotion.
Where there were solid grey houses and solid grey people, and the sky was kept within decent proportions.\textsuperscript{16}

Esmond's main preoccupation in India is a sort of a mixed began he acts as a tutor to European women on subjects of diverse interests. He teaches these foreigners, especially the wives of ambassadors, Hindi or gives Sunday courses in Indian art and culture. He also acts as 'a kind of very superior guide' on their visits to historical places in Delhi and elsewhere. He prides himself on his knowledge of Hindi and treats his servants in an imperious manner. He takes his lunch of cheese salad, sitting alone at his smart little dining table which at once reveals his pseudo-romantic identity:

Everything on the table was colourful and modern—the bright table mats, the painted drinking glass, the earthenware plates of a rich dark green—so that it looked rather like a beautifully photographed fullpage advertisement in an American magazine. It was very different from gulab's spicy meal eaten on the floor out of brass bowls.\textsuperscript{17}

Esmond is not, however, a sophisticated Englishman. He still retains his outdated colonial attitude:

'In my house,' Esmond said in Hindustani, 'I expect absolute and immediate obedience....'\textsuperscript{18}
Esmond is overbearing and egotistic, Jhabvala as a European novelist can probe Esmond's weaknesses and also the failings of Gulab, his Indian wife. In fact the scene of the dining table and the lunch underscores not only the difference in their tastes of food, their attitudes of life, that divides them. Esmond is upset with the spicy smell, the uncleanliness, the untidiness—things which the Westerner usually dislikes. Gulab is very fond of spicy Indian food. He becomes crude in conversation, and even offensive. He tries to evoke some response, some protest in her, but she remains very passive—'the original dumb blonde'. He thinks that he is trapped in her stupidity; in her dull, heavy, alien mind.

References

1. Esmond in India, p. 169
2. Esmond in India, p. 96
3. Esmond in India, p. 22
4. Esmond in India, p. 73
5. Esmond in India, p. 82
6. Ibid., p. 83
7. Esmond in India, pp. 181-82.
8. Ibid., p. 176
10. A Stronger Climate, p. 183
11. Esmond in India, pp. 188-89
12. Ibid., p. 186
14. Esmond in India, p. 33
15. Esmond in India, p. 207
16. Esmond in India, p. 252
17. Ibid., p. 41
18. Esmond in India, p. 41.