CHAPTER FIVE

NOVELS OF R P JHABVALA

(1983-1987)
An Experience of India is Jhabvala's third collection of stories. The stories about Indians in this collection are studies of characters leading driftless, purposeless lives. The first story "A Bad Woman," is the story of Chameli, who is more or less a whore. She stays in Bombay because Sethji, who has his family in Delhi, cannot keep her there for fear of a scandal. He visits Bombay from time to time. During his visits Chameli has to offer herself to the old man. She does not like it but she cannot help it. Sethji has given her a good house and provides for her. But for him, she would be in the streets. She feels secure in his presence. In his absence, Chameli meets a young, feckless college boy who is not interested in studies. Chameli likes him tremendously and they are in love with each other. The young fellow does not like Chameli's association with Sethji. Chameli cannot decide what to do. She wants to eat her cake and have it too. One day the young fellow breaks into her house and strangles the old man.

The story ends with a murder. Ravi, Chameli's lover, shuttles between moods of extreme apathy and extreme violence. But the apathy and violence, the strange predicament of Chameli and the moral depravity of Sethji are stylized in order to suggest a pattern of life of the lower-middle class and upper-middle class people. Violence is a part of the lives of lower-middle class people and so is moral depravity of the upper-middle class of people. In this story Jhabvala recreates a world in which people live on the margin of crime and minimal respectability.

"A Course in English Studies" is the story of Nalini, a girl studying in
an English University. Her work is found wanting and she is told to improve. She loses interest in her studies and, instead, falls in love with a middle aged teacher who is married. The teacher tells her, “Don’t expect anything from me. Leave me alone. Let me be.” But Nalini thinks that he is unhappy and that he needs her. She extracts from him a promise to meet her the next day. The affair deepens and the two lovers go to picnics and have a good time. The teacher gets more and more restless and worried. Once Nalini inquires about his health in the class and the teacher gets frightened and wants her not to ask him anything of the sort in the class. Soon the romance starts wearing away. Nalini becomes possessive. Norman, the teacher, realizes his duty to his wife. Nalini does not look charming any more: the romance is shattered, and Nalini starts looking forward to returning to India and to Miss Subrahmanyan, her English teacher. The story highlights the working of a simple mind which naturally tends to shirk any intellectual pursuits and finds itself at home in matters sensual.

In her essay “Myself in India” published in 1966, she describes the Western reaction to India as a sort of cycle with three stages: “....first stage; tremendous enthusiasm—everything in India 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...” On what she bases this generalisation is not clear, particularly in the light of her confession that in the first ten years of her life in India she had cut herself off from everything European. Whether she had met as many Westerners in the next few years on the level of interaction that warrants
such a universalisation is very doubtful indeed. Yet she assures her readers that the cycle of response she describes is particularly apposite to the experience of those Westerners who tend to be liberal in outlook and have been educated to be sensitive and receptive to India. Unfortunately, she goes on to say, it is not easy to retain this mood of openness for any length of time to a country that proves to be too strong for Western nerves. A time comes when one's inheritance reasserts itself and one finds oneself painfully estranged from a culture that had once seemed so easy to assimilate. Describing this experience in her own case, she writes: "I won't call it disillusionment, I don't think it was that; it was more the process of becoming myself again. Becoming European again."

What phase of her life is she recalling here? What exactly does "becoming European again" mean in her case? Is she recalling the terrors and afflictions of her infancy in a Hitler-ruled Germany or the bleakness of her adolescence as a German refugee in Hendon? What then did she mean when she spoke of her "disinheritance" and "not having a world of my own."

To quote her own words when describing the glory of the initial impact made by India:

Was it in reaction to the bleakness and deprivations of my own childhood—Nazi Germany and then war-time blitzed London?

Or did it go further, and was it that whatever was Oriental within me—I mean through my being Jewish—was opening up to buried ancestral memory?¹

Whatever was oriental in her was apparently not strong enough to sustain a lasting relationship of love with India. By her own admission, then, a state of alienation accompanied by a drastic change of vision followed the first phase of exuberant identification:

I still wrote about India but now seen from a European point of view. I became a European sensibility again, and now I saw everything as perhaps I should have seen it from the beginning. I was no longer immersed in sensuous delights but had to struggle against all the things people have to struggle against in India: the heat—the frayed nerves; the strange alien often inexplicable, often maddening Indian character.¹

Now here, it seems to me, we perceive a contradiction. Was this inability to remain “immersed in sensuous delights” the accompanying condition to a state of alienation or its reverse? Surely the sentence “but had to struggle against all the things people have to struggle against in India” is indicative of an involvement with India at a more fundamental level than the mere revelling in her sights and sounds. This contradiction lies at the heart of Ruth Jhabvala’s love-hate relationship with India—a relationship that has remained unbroken even after her departure from India and her reversion to her once abandoned Western heritage. Her European reclamation has been faithfully and accurately recorded in all her autobiographical writing and interviews and has set the tone for all her fictional writing after 1960.

Beginning as “a buoyant feat of loving empathy,” Ruth Jhabvala’s fiction, 
then, deepened in time into a “literature of exile.”¹

In the essay “Moonlight, Jasmine and Rickets”, Ruth Jhabvala attempts 
to describe, within the limits of Western terms and concepts, the complex of 
emotions that shapes the Westerner’s response to India on the second point 
of the cycle—emotions that have been her own and have been externalised in 
those of her characters. The most tangible of them is the Westerner’s 
reaction to the heat and dust of India:

How to explain—to begin with—an Indian summer day: when inside the city walls the lanes and alleys are packed with people and the sun draws every kind of smell out of the gutters, while outside plains of dust stretch away, into the shimmering distance that may turn out to be the horizon or just a further extension of dust.²

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

The Western characters of my novels are amazed at themselves. They yell at servants, abuse shopkeepers, nearly strike the clerk in the post office. “My God!” they ask, “What’s happening to me?”³

The press of Indian poverty and the yawning gulf between the rich and the poor is another source of disenchantment—a factor that promotes the fearful metamorphosis that the European in India is susceptible to. Appalled as he

---

1. A Jewish Passage to India, p. 74
3. Ibid,
is by his own behaviour, he is still more so by that of the affluent Indian's:

One of these Western characters may be invited to a wedding—a festive scene where fairy lights twinkle, the tables are loaded with pilaos and kebabs, and the guests with ornaments and brocades; the bandsmen play.

No one seems to notice that the bandsmen have no shoes, that gazing in at the front there is a rabble of children suffering from rickets and eye disease, while at the back, where the waste food goes, a rabble of grown ups is holding out old tins. Don't Indians see? ¹

After some time he senses that they do see—have done so for generations and centuries—and that the gap between affluence and poverty in India produces two kinds of response. One is a frenzied grasping of whatever is within reach, indifferent to the claims of others; and the other—a resigned surrender of life's fruits in the knowledge that the enjoyment of them can at best be temporary. Both states are equally explicable within the context of Indian experience but are startlingly alien to a twentieth-century Western sensibility. In consequence, Ruth Jhabvala's Westerners are often seen as grappling with something intangible in India. "It is as if by being here," the novelist continues in "Moonlight, Jasmine and Rickets," "they have been exposed to another dimension and begun to open up in response to it. But this is often a painful process and not everyone can stand it."

¹.  *Moon Light, Jasmine and Rickets*, (1975) Times, April 1975, p. 1
Several of Jhabvala's characters tend to become psychological studies. Her technique, however, is primarily that of a social satirist or social
median, and she hardly makes any attempt at all to probe into the psychological depth of her characters. In fact, some of her characters are neurotics, sexually and otherwise, for instance, the English girl, Henry's wife in the story 'An Experience of India'. In her quest for the spiritual, physical and other realities of India she gives up her very comfortable home, a sensible and sympathetic husband, and the values of an Anglo-Saxon middle-class heritage. She wanders aimless, sleeps with fellow-passengers, finds kindred souls in middle-aged, suffering Indian men; finds kindred souls in middle-aged, suffering Indian men; falls in love, goes to bed with Ahmed and many others, leading a life hungry for all kinds of experience of the soil, the flesh, the carnality and also the spirit of India and Indians. It seems to be a life of abandon in which enjoyment of the flesh seems analogous to self-sacrifice, even self transcendence. The bonds that bind her to this quest for experience are so strong that she refuses to fly with her husband, Henry, to a cosy life in Europe, sells her air ticket, and decides to travel again in India, almost penniless and poor. She seems to throw herself on India quite recklessly, actuated by complex feelings of a search for a new life.

And the India that she experiences is neither intensely spiritual nor is it very morally elevated. The 'Guru' in Delhi wants Henry, her husband, to visit the Ashram and give it due publicity since he is a foreign journalist. He employs Jean to subdue the ego of this girl, and finally when nothing
succeeds, he visits her in her room and promptly gets on top of her calling her ‘a bitch’. She only laughs scornfully because she finds that there is no difference at all between a sex-hungry wayfarer and the spiritual Guru. This completes one circle of her self-delusion. Does she seem a ‘near’ hippy? One does not know the exact answer.

To sum up, then, Jhabvala is a very accomplished short story writer. Her art excels in various realms of the short story: description, narration, character delineation, thematic exploration and creating the total effect of a singular significance. Almost all her short stories have one or more themes which sum up the total meaning of the story. Jhabvala tends to draw, it appears, her characters from life and fictionalize living people. She seems to have made a very conscious and deliberate attempt to understand various sorts of people in real life with a view to fictionalizing them in the stories. Quite often her characters ring true in word and deed, as if they are thinly disguised real life people, or a composite of several living persons. However, the tendency toward surface satire, irony or fun makes these characters seem just caricatures, and when this happens, they look like stuffed figures in a skilfully designed dolls’ museum. Jhabvala’s art is preponderantly narrative and insufficiently dramatic. Therefore, immediacy is a quality which her stories lack a great deal. The reader does not feel intensely involved in her stories, but seems merely conscious of observing the characters and situations in them. Her dialogues are very weak and scanty, which causes immediacy to evaporate from her creative process. She, quite often, seems to project a point of view which is structured in three modes: Author
omniscient in the third person; Author-participant in the first person; or Author-observer in the third person again. Her stories demonstrate all these three modes, but she sometimes writes stories which have no point of view at all, and her art then achieves excellence and glory.

However, some of her stories are too long and even tiresome. Then the limited focus, the ideal objective of a short story, is utterly sacrificed, and the unity of form ruined in the process.

A few of Jhabvala’s stories can challenge comparison with the best in this genre written by Indian or European writers on India. She should not be compared with either Kipling or Forster in this context because neither the fantasy of Kipling nor the symbolism of Forster is within the range of her imagination. She is essentially a realist writing domestic fiction with great understanding, sensitivity and value-judgement. As a short story writer she will rank higher than some of the modern famous writers of Indo-Anglian short stories and this is no mean achievement for a person who is neither a born Indian, nor whose mother tongue is English.
(2) Three Continents (1987)

'Nearness, closeness, proximity,' in space, time, blood or relationship, and also 'similarity or affinity of belief,' could almost be taken as an ironic epigraph for Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's two most recent novels, *In Search of Love and Beauty* and *Three Continents*. Jhabvala gives the name 'Propinquity' to the mansion house and estate in *Three Continents* which will be inherited on their twenty-first birthday by the twins, Harriet and Michael, the central characters in the novel. When Michael becomes obsessed with the Rawul, Swami-leader of the dubious 'Sixth World Movement,' he invites the Rawul and his Indian 'family' into 'Propinquity' with three generations of his own American family. This sets in motion a kaleidoscope of changing ironic patterns of closeness and separation which affect personal relationships, philosophies, and cultures.

Jhabvala is able to spread the ironies so widely because she makes this house in one of the heartlands of America, the Hudson River Valley, not only a private inheritance but a symbol of the whole patrician American cultural heritage:

As has explained to me one morning....what he especially valued in using our house as his headquarters was that it placed him right at the heart of American society, at the very center of those traditions he wished to merge with his own.  

But unknown to the Rawul, the centre is also in motion, and his own

1. *Three Continents*, P. 45
presence is part of that shift. The American traditions he admires come under examination during the ensuing events at Propinquity and the word itself echoes through the text as motto for the needs and failures Jhabvala perceives in the American culture as a whole.

This culture has given Michael and Harriet a lavish material inheritance, but failed to make provision for their spiritual needs:

While our parents were having marital squabbles and adulterous love affairs and our grandparents were giving diplomatic cocktail parties, and I were struggling with the concepts of Maya and Nirvana, and how to transcend our own egos. Anything smaller than that, on a lower plane, disgusted us.

For many readers with a particular interest in Jhabvala, approaching In Search of Love and Beauty and Three Continents through the focus of her earlier work, this new emphasis is likely to be concealed by a more immediate sense of recognition, since a number of Jhabvala's consistent preoccupations in theme and character certainly do recur.

Michael's obsession seems at first sight very like that of many other young Westerners in Jhabvala's earlier novels. Characters like Lee in A New Dominion, the unnamed narrator in Heat and Dust, and Katie in the short story 'How I Became a Holy Mother' are, amongst others, fully created individuals, but the reader also recognises them to be typical of a particular moment in the history of the disillusionment of the West with its own values. While this is continually hinted at in her novels of the sixties and

1. Three Continents, p. 17
seventies, it is never explored. The backgrounds of these Western characters remain obscure. The focus is always on India herself, on the teeming paradoxes of this bewildering subcontinent which seems to thrust on certain personalities an unavoidable search for meaning. By contrast, in *In Search of Love and Beauty* and *Three Continents* Jhabvala probes the developments in America over three generations which have produced the dissatisfied seekers of her earlier novels.

The figure of the swami, or guru, is also a recurrent and often ambiguous character in Jhabvala’s writing, and one which has provoked interesting and sometimes contradictory critical assessments. This, too, appears at first sight to link *In Search of Love and Beauty* and *Three Continents* with the earlier novels, but there are many important changes. In *In Search of Love and Beauty* Jhabvala writes for the first time about a guru who is not an Indian but a Westerner; Leo Kellerman is a Jew, an artist, an actor, a charismatic leader. In India, the swami simply exists as part of the religious and social structure, but in the America of Jhabvala and Bellow the role of spiritual leader is almost forced upon some people by the needs of would-be disciples. *In Search of Love and Beauty*, who become lovers and followers of Leo Kellerman, these heroes ‘felt the need to hadn themselves over to someone else, someone stronger’ who will help them live in what Leo calls ‘a civilisation which was hopelessly crippled in all its responses’.

Jhabvala hints in a very Jamesian play on surnames, Michael is a ‘Wishwell,’ full of hope, but about to discover at the cost of his life the difficulties of putting ‘all the ideals’ into practise. Jhabvala’s attitude to this
proposed synthesis seems deliberately ambiguous. She makes Harriet report that the Rawul sees her own union with Crishi as ‘a symbol of the synthesis that was the heart of his movement’, and yet that marriage, based upon false premises, seems ill-fated from the start. Jhabvala’s position is also hinted at by the path of Michael, the most honest character in *Three Continents*.

Harriet, when she becomes infatuated with Crishi, seeks to be ‘as far as possible from everything that lay behind, not in space as much as in orientation’. She suddenly sympathises with what she has previously deplored, Michael’s desire to put continents between himself and his ‘nearest’ relatives:

Hadn’t Michael felt the same during the years he was traveling in all those different places — not for the sake of the places but for himself, his own fulfillment, his own happiness, rejecting everything that was a hindrance to that. ¹

And they recognise their own case in Paul, a longer-serving disciple of the Rawul:

—it was why had come here in the first place : to get away, from home, from his family, from himself, his own personality as it had been formed by these outward circumstances.....

There are many suggestions in both the Jhabvala novels as well that the old families, who represent both ‘family’ and the civic tradition of America, are in decline. Most importantly there is Michael’s grandfather who urges

¹. *Three Continents*, pp. 316-17
him to think of duty and responsibility, but has for years kept a mistress behind the facade of happy family life. In *Three Continents* the other estates around Propinquitey have been sold up, there are hints of scandal, disgrace, and even murder at the Linton house, and insurance fraud at the van Kuypen house is mentioned in both novels. Traditional local people, once prosperous tenant farmers, are now cleaners or counter hands at 'Dunkin Donuts.' In *In Search of Love and Beauty* the patriarchal centre of America is represented by Marietta's husband Tim, a weak, drunk, dilettante, whose mother and sisters are all eccentric to the point of madness. Living fossils of a culture, they are a museum of dead tradition. Significantly, the houses have been bought by antique dealers, artists, estate agents, who carefully preserve this 'museum' outward appearance of tradition while abandoning old moralities. The names of some of these new families hint in both novels that the owners are homosexual couples. The British aristocracy fares no better. In *Three Continents* the marriage between Renee, of very mixed Oriental parentage, and the terribly nice but ineffectually British Rupert, produces a son whom Rupert cannot protect, and who is probably not his child anyway, but the child of the old/new usurper, Crishi. Renee sells the ancestral home in Yorkshire which Rupert has struggled to maintain because it is 'far from everywhere she had to be,' and the distance is implicitly a matter of the irksome duties of tradition as well as physical distance.

Jhabvala uses the twins relationship in *Three Continents* in a similar way to that in which she uses marriage. It is a close tie which proves to be as vulnerable as any other link. Harriet and Michael, who have always thought
alike, have developed an idealistic theory of 'nonattachment' to things, and to people, which becomes sadly ironic. It is precisely her attachment to Michael which initially prevents her from voicing her misgivings about his allegiance to the Indian family. Harriet's mental attachment to Michael is usurped by her sexual bond with Crishi. As she gets closer to him, she moves further in every way from all her family, and is forced into a 'nonattachment' very different from the twins' earlier intentions. Her bondage to Crishi is foreshadowed by Jhabvala in a scene early in the novel at the Rawul's party. When three-legged races are suddenly suggested, Crishi finds some old ties up in a cupboard, and binds himself tightly to Harriet in an image which combines that of the oldest tie of all, sex and marriage, with hints of the 'old tie' wealth and influence which precisely make her of interest to this predator. Crishi forces her to run races with him long after she wishes to stop and her ankle is hurting, suggesting similar compulsions and pain in the marriage which is to follow.

It is one of the dark ironies of Three Continents that the party which prefigures Harriet's attachment of Crishi should be held on the Fourth of July weekend, since it does not celebrate American Independence, but underlines the growing domination of the Rawul and his 'family.'

At the end of the novel, on the night before her twenty-first birthday, Harriet has exchanged the house in America for the Rawul's ruined palace in the wilderness. She seems to be as distant as possible from her old world and its values, and yet, for the reader, this only points to how much closer she still is to these than to Crishi. She thinks with tragic naivety that she is
lucky to have married Crishi because 'left to ourselves Michael and I would probably have messed up everythin'. But this is precisely Jhabvala's point; they have been left to themselves by the wrong people at the wrong times. There has been too little of the saving kinds of propinquity.

In *Search of Love and Beauty* also contains scenes set ironically on another day of American celebration, Thanksgiving. Jhabvala seems attached to these public festivities; she inserts one into her film version of James's *The Bostonians*. No such scene actually occurs in the novel, and yet it is profoundly Jamesian in spirit, implying the interdependence of family and national harmony. Bellow and Jhabvala take up James's interest, but unlike James they refrain from direct moral judgement. They struggle instead with the difficulties of how to inherit a culture, particularly in the paradoxical situation of America, where it is difficult to reconcile the demand to be personally 'free' with the obligation to accept the position prepared by the former generation.

Although they examine the family as a traditional centre, both subvert all settled notions of what age groups or sexes should take on the traditional roles of parent and child, or what combination of relationships might constitute a 'family.' In *Search of Love and Beauty* during a long and interesting scene at the beach, the adolescent Natasha becomes the 'mother' of her adoptive grandmother, Louise.

Natasha is the sensible one, calling Louise out of the rain, listening in motherly sympathy to the adolescent suffering of Louise in love. Such reversals can involve not only age, but sex; Eric becomes a 'good mother' to
Regi. Much of this is suggested in *Three Continents* by a scene which takes places between Harriet and her father's young, pregnant mistress, Barbara in a London museum. They sit and talk in front of a Veronese painting of a family:

The picture was a huge high one, with a huge bearded father and huge white-bosomed mother, both in pearls and velvet and making energetic lunging motions toward a very large naked baby.

The presence of this trio in a museum indicates that Harriet's only model for a family is old-fashioned and 'mythological.' She claims that the Rawul, his consort, and his 'adopted' son Crishi are the only 'real' family she has ever had and is unable to differentiate between the unconventional but loving ties of her own extended family and the grasping perversities of the Rawul's 'family', perversities which become very important in view of the Rawul's stated intention 'to make a family of the whole world'. Harriet refuses to consider as 'real' family her mother Lindsay, and Lindsay's well-meaning lesbian lover Jean, or her father, Manton, and Barbara, his lover. She discounts as well her grandfather and his long-time mistress Sonya, now a good friend, presumably because none of these relationships accord with her idea of the 'ordinary, bourgeois sort of family' she alternately despises and desires. Harriet will not accept the hint offered to her by Rupert's brother Tom, the Roman Catholic priest, that although the Wishwell family may be 'ex-centric', she still loves them, they still form a centre for her.

1. *Three Continents*, P. 228
During this museum scene, however, Harriet does begin to admit that the ex-centricity of her own marriage is of a different and far more sinister kind. As she sits with Barbara, she thinks:

Our hands were still intertwined but not our fellings. I knew she wanted to contradict me, and she was right....There was no resemblance in these marriages...she could have no conception of the way I felt for Crishi: the sick hunger that gnawed at me.  

Although Harriet continues to cling to her version of marriage and family as equally valid, Jhabvala makes strong counter-suggestions. The wine at her wedding turns out to be underinkable, although Harriet is forced to swallow it; the sexual contact which initiates their relationship takes place in the deserted swimming-pool on the spot where the former owner of the house is said to have murdered his wife. Crishi, in the course of the novel, breaks two of the most ancient taboos of family life; as the lover of Renee, he 'marries' his 'mother', and later murders his brother-in-law, Michael. Crishi's pseudo-incestuous relationship with Renee, and also perhaps with Michael, continues after his marriage to Harriet.

More significant still are Crishi's relationships with children who are images of future hope for Jhabvala and Bellow. Crishi has already abandoned a pregnant wife and children, he is brutal to the child Robi, who may be his son, and Harriet, after briefly desiring a child by Crishi, admits to herself that it would not be suitable, that a child would be irrelevant. This marriage exists for itself alone, it is not part of that contact with the past and

1. *Three Continents*, P. 229
extension into the future which both Jhabvala and Bellow suggest brings the family and hence the individual close to history and tradition.

Affinities which transcend the distance of time are suggested by Harriet who knows she looks 'like generations of own grandmothers,' and, she says, 'I also felt like them'. Portraits of ancestors which figure prominently in Henderson the Rain King, in \textit{Three Continents}, and in \textit{In Search of Love and Beauty}, also establish a sense of continuity, but make it clear that each individual must either accept or reject a place in this line. One of Henderson's early sins is to reject this continuity by refusing to recognise his daughter's baby because it is coloured, and born out of wedlock. He hopes to redeem this mistake by bringing back with him the Polish orphan, and the lion cub which may incarnate the soul of Dhafu. Similarly, in \textit{Three Continents} Manton's baby, Samuel Wishwell, is, Sonya believes, the reincarnation of the grandfather after whom he is named.

\textit{Three Continents} marks a further departure from Ruth Jhabvala's studies of the standard Indian gurus. The new sage, a minor Indian prince with the title of Rawul, leads the Sixth World movement, which offers 'a religion for a world which has outgrown religion', a doctrine of universal brotherhood which will dissolve the boundaries between nations and continents and lead, in time, to world unity. He appears in the United States as a dignified speechmaker accompanied by the Rani, his glamorous consort, and Crishi, their adopted son, who has a notable gift for organisation. The trio win the allegiance of the nineteen-year-old American twins Harriet and Michael Wishwell, of their divorced mother, Lindsay, and to some extent of
their father, Manton, and they try to lay their hands on the property of both Lindsay’s and Manton’s families. The twins accompany the three foreigners first to London and then to India, where the Rawul hobnobs with the President and several chief ministers as he seeks a seat in the Upper House of Parliament. This is to be a first step towards forming a new opposition party, defeating the Government, ruling India, and leading the world. The reader sees these events through the eyes of the gullible narrator, Harriet, who is so besotted by her sexual bond to Crishi that she does not comprehend the many facts to the discredit of this man, of the Rani, and to a lesser extent of the Rawul, that gradually come to her knowledge. Sexual obsession and the consequences of casual divorce, as well as the credulity of disciples on the run from a materialistic society, are targets of authorial criticism in this book.

In important ways her two most recent novels mark new departures for this author, who now discards a sometimes facile antithesis between East and West and moves from a general championship of rationality and humaneness to a more narrowly focused defence of family and tradition. In *A New Dominion* and *Heat and Dust*, she follows in the path of Yeats, who, in his poem ‘The Statues,’ maintains that the ancient Greek sculptors, with their ‘Calculations that look but casual flesh,’ ‘put down / All Asiatic vague immensities.’ Aside from the obvious objections to pitting a rational West against an emotional East – is the nineteenth-century Romantic movement not emotional? are Hindu philosophies not rational? - the contrast reflects an oversimplified view of the human mind, which does not operate on a
foundation of only two faculties: in particular, human life is impossible without the exercise of imagination. However, as I have argued elsewhere, Jhabvala does make one concession to the mysticism of India. This takes the form of including among her characters holy women like Banubai in *A New Dominion* and Maji in *Heat and Dust* who operate on the border of what is rationally explicable to bring solace and healing to the afflicted. In *Search of Love and Beauty* lacks a successor to these women: instead Natasha, the one admirable character in the novel, yearns in vain for the settled and predictable way of life that her restless acquaintances avoid.

In *Three Continents* revulsion from a society of easy divorce, frequent changes of partner, and rootless children becomes as important a theme as falling into the hands of false teachers. As Peter Ackroyd comments, the experiences of the characters suggest ‘that to be without a “home” is to be without a moralsense also. Manton Wishwell, the fetherheaded father of the twins, and Barbara, his glamorous girlfriend with a Hollywood background, eventually turn with relief to the joys of marriage and parenthood. Even Manton’s divorced wife, who finds solace with a lesbian lover, attends her ex-husband’s wedding when he marries Barbara and takes plesure in the couple’s baby. The twins stand to inherit a fine estate on their mother’s side and a delectable island summer-house on their father’s. These properties, especially on the paternal side, have been in the family for a long time, but the adventurers running the Sixth World movement hope to inveigle Lindsay and the twins into donating them to the organisation. Manton’s
father tries in vain to awaken in his grandchildren a sense of pride in his family and its tradition of public service going back to the eighteenth century. He hopes that this will suffice to prevent them from giving away what he regards as the property of no single generation. It is the grandfather, a wise and distinguished American diplomat, who serves as a link between the world of family and the world of politics, though the fact that he discreetly ran a menage a trois when his wife was alive may have contributed to the breakdown of values that saddens him.

The Rawul's obsessively devoted followers are the equivalents of the blind disciples of the gurus in Ruth Jhabvala's Indian novels and stories, but they are for the most part shadowy figures, and, ad Robert Towers has observed, their fanatical allegiance remains unexplained. The author concentrates instead on the psychology of the twins and their family. Their mother's temporary infatuation is no more than the delight of a shallow mind in a new toy, but with Harriet and Michael the case is different. In the earlier novels and stories, especially *A New Dominion*, the disciples are people ignorant of mystical tradition both western and eastern and dazzled in the first place by an unfamiliar philosophy. But another element soon enters. The Anglican missionary C.F. Andrews, who worked in India and became Mahatama Gandhi's closest English friend, believed that while conversions were sometimes justified, those involved had to be completely certain that the convert was responding to his or her own religious experience and to the doctrine of the new faith, not to the personality of a proselytizer. The reverse is the case in Jhabvala's fiction. A character in *A New Dominion* believes that
the American disciple Lee is in love with her swami, and the jealousies among her fellow disciples suggest that the same is true of them. Similarly, in *Three Continents*, Harriet and her homosexual brother, who have begun as seekers of Eastern spiritual truth, are both infatuated by the glamorous figure of Crishi. Michael, who was wandered around India and Nepal and stayed with a shaven head in a Buddhist monastery, is, unlike the author’s earlier disciples, well read in mystical literature and, unlike his sister, as she readily admits, he has ‘a mind for abstract ideas’. As soon as his infatuation with Crishi lifts, he realises the essential falseness of the whole movement, which has corrupted him to the point where he can enjoy the thrill of smuggling and, having felled a man who has displeased him, can brutally kick him as he lies on the floor. At this point he tells Harriet,

‘You can’t let another person take you over that way. Even if it’s a good person....Self-surrender is okay, but it has to be to something— ....something higher— ... of a different quality altogether from what we are.’

He now reverts to family values and wishes to return to America for his half-brother’s christening.

Harriet, who has shunned the sexual adventures of other young girls, is deflowered by Crishi and becomes sexually enslaved to him, consenting to share him with others even after she has married him, and ignoring the warning of Jean, her mother’s clear-sighted lover, that he is a fortune-hunter. She allows him to seize her inheritance, and even, after Michael’s death,

1. *Three Continents*, P. 128
forges at his urging a suicide note so that she can ensure that her brother’s share of the family property passes to Crishi. The utter folly of Harriet’s conduct is emphasised by the efforts of the missionary Tom to rescue her from the brilliant criminal who has dazzled her. Tom is the nearest equivalent in *Three Continents* to Miss Charlotte, the model character of *A New Dominion*. Both these Christian missionaries are concerned not to proselytize but to minister to the material and emotional needs of the afflicted. In the case of Harriet and Michael, this means trying to persuade them to return to their relatives in America; in the case of the Rani’s small son, supposedly by her estranged husband, though there are strong suggestions that Crishi is the real father, it means removing him from the atmosphere of the Rawul’s entourage and sending him to school.

In *A New Dominion* the manipulative character of the religious guru is disclosed quite early to the reader, who is invited to watch with appalled fascination as the depth of his wickedness is disclosed. Less sinister but an almost equally successful exploiter is the psychological guru of *In Search of Love and Beauty*, whose genuineness is suspect from the beginning and soon becomes more so. In *Three Continents*, the natures of the political guru and his aides are slowly revealed, and not till the end of the book is it shown how deeply the Rawul is implicated in the corruption of his movement for world unity. The newcomers enter the lives of the Wishwells as husband, wife, and adopted son, but there seems to be an insufficient gap between the ages of the Rani and Crishi, and it becomes clearer and clearer that they are lovers. It also transpires that these lovers smuggle antique — sometimes
stolen - paintings from India to the West to raise money for the Rawul's movement; Crishi uses physical threats and bodily violence to bludgeon followers into participating and sexual attractiveness to draw Michael into the ring. Crishi, it turns out, has served a prison sentence in Iran for a drug offence and another in India for fraud; he has unexplained scars on his back, perhaps from a judicial whipping; he has deserted his first wife, who committed suicide when he left her with their two young children; and he has a voracious appetite for cars, night life, and rock concerts, in addition to sex. Eventually he admits that he seeks money for himself, too—because it is 'so unbearable not to have it'—as well as for the movement.

The most mysterious character in the book is the Rawul, who really is a minor Indian prince, though the Rani—her true name is Renee—is not married to him. He has a wife, the Bari Rani, who lives in London with their three teenage daughters, and he has obtained possession of her property to fund his organisation. When the police are on Crishi's track and the whole party moves on to Delhi, where the Rawul is known, she again becomes his official consort and, despite her hostility to him in England, again serves the movement. The Rawul is an object of adoration much like the Swami of A new Dominion. The Swami is a religious figure, the Rawul is the head of an organisation which is religious in spirit, political in its aims, but the evening
meetings at which they bring their followers to a state of dreamy ecstasy are distinctly similar. However, while the Swami is a monstrous egotist teaching a controversial doctrine of ego-transcendence, the Rawul works to bring about world unity and an end to war, and, as Harriet asks, ‘what could be better?’.

He has a dignity that enables him to meet an experienced diplomat—the twins’ paternal grandfather—on equal terms, and he takes a gentle pleasure in making noble speeches, for which he has great talent. The questions remain, is there an element of sincerity in him? has he been corrupted by Renee and Crishi?

In *Three Continents*, though, Jhabvala firmly locates herself as the outsider looking inside with possibly bitter and hostile memories of India. We see her firmly as the ‘in-law’ bound to India not by propinquity but only by ties of marriage signified and personified by the fact that we think of her as Mrs. Jhabvala, the daughter-in-law who never became part of the family. This symbol becomes an image as it falls outside the purview of simply being a textual signifier and becomes an overarching image of the representations of Indians created in her work, *Three Continents*.

I believe that Jhabvala wants us to interpret *Three Continents* and to discover what she depicts as the reality, the image that all of India and all that India stands for—religiosity, spiritualism etc.—is a fraud, a deception, and that through India one cannot know the Absolute—not yet at least. ‘Neti’ is an important world in the book. She has appointed herself the ‘holy mother’ who is to make this Maya or illusion fall from our eyes so that we can see all Indians acting out of fraud and greed and thus be warned of the
deception that awaits us. The upanishadacic concept is that when the illusions caused by bad karma fall from our eyes, then we can see the Absolute. Until then, we labour under 'neti' or not yet, translated more definitively as not this. The Americans in her book cannot get to the Absolute or to the truth, not because of their bad karma, but because of their innocence and the illusions created by the deceitful Indians.

In Three Continents, Propinquity, an estate belonging to a wealthy American family, located in America, is juxtaposed to Dhoka, a small kingdom supposedly in dusty, northern India. The Americans are all tied by propinquity – blood relationships – whereas the Indians that come to invade Propinquity and conquer it are all ties as loosely as a band of brigands come together to plunder. While the authorial voice, Harriet, is the twin sister of the novel's protagonist, an innocent American Adam, Michael, and while their ancestry can be traced to generations of good, white American stock, the anti-hero of the novel, the duplicitous, fraudulent Crishi who is the chief dhoka laganaar, the person most responsible for duping Harriet, does not know who his father was. Possibly of Assamese extraction, born of a mother who it is hinted was a Hong Kong prostitute, Crishi has allied himself with fake Ranis and Bari Ranis. A character in the novel referred to as Rani, it turns out, was only meant to be Renee. Crishi and Rani make their living by smuggling drugs and stolen art. But they all pretend to be related; Renee or Rani pretends to be Crishi's mother and the Rawul's wife when they arrive at Propinquity.

Michael, Harriet's twin brother, has been travelling through India
studying Eastern religions, pursuing high ideals in general. We see him only through what Harriet chooses to tell us about him, all of which is almost idolatrous — that he was extraordinarily principled and that he believed in the greater good of all mankind.

It is in this pursuit that he has met Crishi, Rāni, the Rawul, and their entire entourage working for what they believe is a Sixth World — a world of greater good, peace, harmony, etc, devoid of 'neti' and bad karma. The question one wants to ask Harriet is, that if Michael was quite so wonderful, how and when did he come upon these smugglers and drug dealers? Or are we to believe that all Indians are smugglers and drug dealers and that whomever you meet in India is likely to dhoka-maro or dupe you?

Michael arrives from India bringing these duplicitious guests with him to his mother's home, Propinquity. He wants his mother and sister to believe that these are very important people with a very important purpose in life. His mother, Lindsay, is soon taken in by this scam, while Harriet together with her mother's lesbian lover, Jean, remain sceptical. But Lindsay is so moved by hearing the Rawul speak for his Sixth World, that she wants to bequeath Propinquity to the movement. Of course, here lies a wonderful symbol: one cannot bequeath propinquity. Blood is thicker than water and only those related by blood can truly feel for each other.

But this is soon to turn around ironically because the loosely knit group of pretend relatives seems to hand together more coherently in its pursuit of money than does the group related by blood. Lindsay is fortunately held back from bequeathing Propinquity by Jean and others,
while the property Harriet and Michael come into from their paternal grand-
father is being held in trust for them until they turn twenty-one.

In an attempt to win over the sceptical Harriet, the Rani proceeds to
arrange a marriage between Harriet and Crishi. The goal is plain and clear to
obtain all the money. Crishi seals this endeavour by making love to Harriet
in such a manner that she is won over forever. Her physical and bodily need
for Crishi is so great that she gives up all her principles and scepticism. A
wedding together with a flag raising ceremony cements the goals of the
Sixth World movement. Here too, one must ask, however much a crook and
deceiver Crishi is, should we not wonder about Harriet? Sex seems to be all
she wants from Crishi, but we are never permitted to see her as a sex-carved
nymphomaniac who goes to great distances for her sex. No. She is ever the
innocent American deceived by the experienced and corrupt Indian!