CHAPTER IV

A BACKWARD PLACE
A Backward Place dramatises the narrator's preoccupation with marriage between an English woman and an Indian gentleman which somehow survives the stress and strain that are usual in such marriages. Keeping Judy and Bal at the Centre, the narrator skilfully creates the social milieu and fills it with characters, both foreign and Indian who provide the necessary comic foil to Judy and Bal.

One may feel that the novel is about three expatriates, Judy, Etta and Clarissa. They are destined to live in India. But their understanding and interpretation of the significance of India and its cultural heritage are not identical. Clarissa admires spiritual aspect of India, she is a seeker. Etta is fascinated by the opportunities for good-time India offers and Judy deeply involves herself in the socio-cultural reality of the country. Though they want to acclimatize themselves to the conditions of India and want to feel familiar and comfortable in India, all the women are bitter, frustrated and ultimately appear rootless.
A Backward Place tells us of Judy's struggles and sufferings and privations to achieve a successful marriage with Bal, an Indian and an unsuccessful actor.

Etta, the Hungarian blonde conversant with the ways of smart western world is irresistible to Indian gentlemen. She makes them feel as if they were not in dull, homely backward Delhi, but in places they dreamed of say, Paris, Vienna, Berlin, where the women are beautiful, accessible and knowledgeable.

Etta's views on marriage are somewhat flexible. The narrator tells us that "She had given upon husbands long ago, for, "after three attempts made rapidly in succession and all of them with handsome, educated young Indians, she had come to the conclusion that, while she had no objections to the institution of marriage as such, a more flexible arrangement was better suited to her particular temperament."¹

Etta does not want to merge like Judy, into the Indian milieu and ethos. She wants to be free and retain her European identity.

For her, a well-educated Indian youth and his family are "uncultured" Delhi is dull, homely and backward and

India is a prison.

She even tries to persuade Judy to take divorce from her husband. Talking about Judy's problems, she says that there is no point in clinging to her inefficient husband.

She tells Judy: "Marriages, My dear, are made to be broken, that's one of the rules of modern civilization. Just because we happen to have landed in this primitive society, that's no reason why we should submit to their primitive morality."²

Here it is crystal clear that Etta forgets her idea of coming to India and she does not seek any kind of transformation or change within herself. So there is no possibility for her to submit herself to the Indian ethos and elevate herself to the spiritual level. In her world of dreams there is no love and she always tries to find new admirers, but she could not find because she gradually losing her charm. Guppy wants to go to Europe not with Etta but with his niece. She is estranged culturally and emotionally. She places herself in a state of apathy, neither choses to go out of the country

nor stay within the country. She tells Judy:

It may be all right for you here, "God knows why, but you don't seem to care how you live or where or with what sort of people. But I care! Passionately! I have wasted quite enough of my life here. Now it's time for me to get back where I belong. To a civilized place."

Etta describes India as a backward place and from the western point of view. Uncivilized Judy submits everything to her Indian husband and seeks a new life in India with patience and hopes for the golden days in future.

Thus, the narrator portrays Etta as a secluded and frustrated type of European. In terms of Jhabvala's comic framework she is a sufferer. But her cynical robust wit makes her more a caricature than a robust individual.

Clarissa is a western artist who is unsuccessful in her art and in her understanding of India. What made her come to India was the life of Vivekananda. She tells Sudhir: Do you know that it was this book that really and truly finally decided me to come to India? I'd wanted to come ever since I was a tot, but it was this dear, darling book 'and she

kissed it - 'My Bible, 'My Guru.'

As Sudhir says Clarissa came to India first, "spurred by Romian Rolland and the Light of Asia and the everyman edition of the Bhagavad Gita and intent on a quest in which notions of soul and God played a prominent, if vague, part. But valiantly she had kept up this quest, or at least the pretence of it, though she was getting older year by year, and lonelier, and more ridiculous, and soul and God perhaps no nearer."

This sums up the noble abstractions which draw Clarissa away from her society, into the placid world of the peasants. She has neither talent nor a common factor to fit in its surroundings. Within the Comic framework of the novel she plays the role of a seeker who fails to realize the object of her quest. But what is significant is not her failure, but her attitude. She tells Etta "I came here out of convictions and idealism, not like you, who just came out on a chance marriage."

5Ibid., p. 126.
6Ibid., p. 139.
Clarissa's attitude on life is not very serious; she takes it all for granted. She tells Sudhir: "Well don't let's get too serious. Life is a jolly affair. So they tell me and we have to take it with laughter, laughter all the way."  

It is her capacity to laugh and joke, sometimes at her own expense, saves her from Etta's kind of cynicism. She is a well-meaning lady who develops the virtue of adjusting oneself to what is given. She is one of the robust comic characters in Jhabvala's fiction.

Judy, is different from the other expatriates in the novel. She is married to an Indian, who is an unsuccessful artist, named Bal. She behaves like an Indian house wife, patiently bearing all the problems that naturally arise in an Indian family. She is the mother of two children, Prithvi and Gita. Bal is full of plans that come to nothing. But Judy does her best to sustain him and their children and their marriage.

As a real Indian wife, she finds total identification with many people emotionally. We can compare Judy with the characters in Jhabvala's fiction.

other characters in the novel Sudhir, Jayakar, Shuji, Shanti, Mukun. We find towards the end of the novel that her integration into the Indian ethos is complete and absolutely perfect.

Towards the end of the novel, Etta asks Judy to look at herself in the mirror. Judy does not find anything strange and significant. But Etta suddenly comes up behind her and pulls the pins out of her hair, which fair and fine, falls down her shoulders. With another tug, the sari drops off. And there is

Judy in her sari-petticoat and the short blouse, looking young and vigorous and pleasing with her apple breasts, her bright blue eyes and her fair hair framing her face.

Judy stands blushing.

Her face too pale after ten years in India was suddenly the fresh pink it had been intended for.8

Sari and other accoutrements of Indian modesty have not changed her. She still retains her charm. Then Etta tempts her with an invitation to go with her to England.

France, Italy or wherever she likes and to have a good time. But Judy turns a deaf ear to her temptress. Although embarrassed, "She stopped to pick up her sari and tuck it back to her Petticoat string."

Thus Judy finds for herself a permanent place by identifying and submitting herself to the Indian ethos, which is strange and odd for Etta and Clarissa. They have crossed the cultural barriers but they are not always in it. But Judy seeks an identification with the Indian ethos and proves that she is a real Indian wife. Of course, there is a danger of retracing one's steps back to the world from which one came.

Jhabvala seems to be aware of this and says:

There is a cycle that Europeans - by Europeans mean westerners, including Americans - tend to pass through. It goes like this: first stage, tremendous enthusiasm - everything Indian is marvellous; everything Indian is not so marvellous, third stage, everything Indian is 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.  

While the above citation clearly suggests Jhabvala's personal encounter with India, it indirectly throws light on her fictional method. Her stay in India and her experience of the Indian conditions crystallise as a metaphor, and in the novel we are discussing, India is not like a backward place but is a backward place. From Etta's point of view India is not backward in terms of our economic conditions but in her institutions, climate, manners, beliefs and opportunities it provides for lovers of goodtime. To, Clarissa India may be backward, but is spiritually alive. To Judy it is not India that is significant as such but her husband's future and her children's welfare. By throwing these three characters together, Jhabvala creates a comic design in which the other Indian characters and the Hungarian couple the Hochstads constitute the details. For example, Dr. Hochstadt's expertise and fluency on the Indian political situation are contrasted with Sudhir's analytical approach to the Indian issues and

Jayakar's downright condemnation of national corruption in his *Second Thoughts*. In this way the novel is given a pleasant intellectual surface beneath which we notice a social comedy which a provoking comment on marriage and morals, family and the individual, stupidity and sophistication, innocence and experience.