CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION
Jhabvala's *A Stronger Climate* contains nine stories. These are divided into two categories, "the seekers" and "the sufferers." The seekers are those who come to India in order to fill a void that is caused by too much sophistication that is ubiquitous in the western world. They are aware of the heat and dust in India, but are prepared to go to India for emotional or spiritual enrichment. The sufferers are those who stay in India after Independence and find themselves in an alien atmosphere, yet they try to put up with the unavoidable. A close study of Jhabvala's major novels confirms her conviction about fictional characters accessible to a novelist who likes to make the socio-cultural milieu of India the backdrop of his/her fictional world. In her major novels, *Esmond in India, The Householder, Get Ready for Battle, A Backward Place, A New Dominion* or (Travelers) *Heat and Dust* and *In Search of Love and Beauty*, the fictional categories of "the Seekers" and "the Sufferers" not only overlap but sometimes undergo a subtle conversion. Much of the interesting comedy we have in her novels has its source in the doubts,
difficulties, decisions, delusions, fulfilment and frustration, her characters, both as seekers and sufferers, face in a metropolitan society. As K.R. Srinivas Iyengar rightly observes, "Living in Delhi in the years after Independence Mrs. Jhabvala has had opportunities of exercising her powers of close observation on a milieu that changes chameleon-like from local to cosmopolitan, from traditional to conventional, from naive to sophisticated; only, sometimes one hardly knows which is which." More over, the measure of comic reference and the constructional strategies evolved to negotiate with the social situation differ from novel to novel. Sometimes westerners come to India simply as tourists and their efforts to mix with the local population and understand their sentiment and behaviour involve them in situations, some times exciting, humorous and in a few cases somewhat pathetic. On the whole, the comedy seems to arise from wrong notions of social intercourse and sometimes from events over which the characters have no control.

From a close acquaintance with her major novels one can infer that Jhabvala is not interested either in the geography or in the Socio-cultural conditions of India. The political climate of Delhi does not excite her curiosity. But she is interested in the Indian actuality in so far as it helps her create a fictional world which authenticates the values of the characters in that world. Most of these values are common sense oriented if not purely intellectual. For example, the following passage from A New Dominion illustrates the point:

'Oh You'll never change!' cried Asha, over come with admiration of her friends ever youthful spirits. 'And you too will never change,' said Banubai. At that Asha groaned for she felt it like a stone sitting on her—all the change that had come over her since she and Banubai had first met. But Banubai insisted 'You are still the same, always the same'. She sucked in her cheeks as if to supress a smile: 'I'm sure you have been having another love affair?' Asha admitted as much by flinging her hands before her face in shame. 'You see. Always the same ... And with a very handsome young man?' 'oh Banubai, Banubai,' Asha was in pain but she was also half
laughing. How good it was to be known and understood so deeply. 'She said 'Banubai, what shall I do?'

'What have you come here to do?'

'Just to be with you.'

'That's enough then.'

The above passage abounds in interesting contrasts. Asha is young, Banubai is old. Asha is a rich widow and Banubai is an old spinster. To Asha, Banubai is beyond all change. While Asha admires her youthful spirits, Banubai seems to be indulgent towards Asha and her love-affairs. Tears and laughter sway Asha. We know that she is very unhappy to lose Gopi, but she is also happy to be reminded of her love-affairs. If we go a bit further and think of Asha and Gopi love-affair, we feel that in Asha's scheme of values fulfilment consists in the warm embrace of a young lover. She comes to Banubai to find solace for her love-lorn body. In this context we are reminded of the way in which Banubai herself thinks that she is caressing Lord Krishna, when she caresses Gopi. The sort of self-deception that we notice in the case of Banubai, Asha and Gopi is paralleled by the self-deception that overtakes Lee

in her relationship with the Swamiji. Almost all the characters are driven to misinterpret their own experiences may be, because of bias, prejudice, passion and heat, or because of the cumulative effect of all these. From this it follows that in Jhabvala's novels the focal point of fictional construction seems to be the impact of a society in transition on characters who are vulnerable. Because of this we are not unjustified in discussing her novels under the broad genre "social comedy."

III

When a western artist writes about Indian characters in the west or an Indian artist writes about western characters in the East, it is labelled as the East-West encounter. But unfortunately we have, both in India and the west novels which more or less juxtapose the East and the West. Under these circumstances it is hardly possible to discuss the specificities of a novelist's work in terms of the East-West encounter. Let us take for example, Jhabvala's early novel *Esmond in India*. This novel meticulously presents the Delhi society of the late fifties. The design of the novel is based on the relationship between four families and the fortunes
of their members. These families belong to the upper strata of Delhi society into which Esmond Stillwood intrudes. The design and the detail in the novel cannot be meaningfully understood purely in terms of East-West encounter. Esmond is intelligent and sensitive. He comes to India as a 'seeker'. He has a good knowledge of India's cultural heritage and would like to encash it in order to make his life and living comfortable and decent. He marries Gulab, the daughter of Uma whose late husband took an active part in the freedom movement. They have a son called Ravi. Very soon Esmond begins to feel that Gulab has failed to rise up to his expectations. Gulab is a pampered child, beautiful but lazy and unintelligent. Esmond, having failed to induce any intelligent response to his values in his wife, feels frustrated and gradually develops a positive dislike towards her. He finds a suitable object for his intellectual adventure in Shakuntala, the daughter of Har Dayal whose son Amrit was first proposed to Gulab. Shakuntala's juvenile passion for freedom draws her towards Esmond. Unaware of the deep misunderstanding between Esmond and Gulab and the causes behind it, she talks in a light-hearted fashion and advises Esmond to obtain a divorce from Gulab. In the meanwhile her parents make preparations for her marriage with Professor Bhatnagar's
son who is in Harvard. The situation is further complicated by Ram Nath's anxiety to have Shakuntala as his daughter-in-law. Caught in a complicated situation, Esmond carries on his vocational activities moving like a shuttle cook between Gulab, whom he dislikes, Shakuntala whom he wants to seduce and Betty, a British girl who he loves. This complex character not only deceives himself at various stages in his sojourn in India but also deceives others. As Yasmeen Goonaratna observes, "Her (Jhabvala's) characterisation of Esmond resolves itself in a comedy as her study of Etta in A Backward Place (published some eight years later) does not. The reader of Esmond in India can savour the irony implicit in her Dayal's plan to prepare his daughter for her arranged marriage by engaging her seducer to tutor her in art history. Nor is Esmond exempt from his creator's depiction of the human race as incorrigibly inclined to self-deception: he believes he needs a wife who will be his equal but Betty, who knows him to be a bully, keeps her hold on him by never giving in to him. The novel ends on a final picture of Esmond as gay deceiver: his hand clasped in Shakuntala's, he gazes smilingly into her trusting, confident eyes and thinks with longing and increasing
pleasure of escape to England and to freedom."³

We began the discussion of social comedy in Jhabvala's novels from a classificatory point of view. Her characters fall into two broad groups of "the seekers" and "the sufferers" but ironically enough, Esmond happens to be both "a seeker and a sufferer." Most western characters in Jhabvala's fiction betray these traits. The tension that these traits generate in a character and the way in which a character tries to analyse his predicament in a fast changing society brings to a central focus Jhabvala's commitment to social comedy. In the following pages an attempt has been made to discuss her major novels within the framework of social comedy.