CHAPTER VII

A BACKWARD PLACE

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In *A Backward Place*, Jhabvala finds a new theme for her fiction, namely, the problems of adjustment which Westerners living in India face. Some are in India for a short while, on a short assignment like the Hochstadts in *A Backward Place*, or on a holiday like Raymond in *A New Dominion*. Some, like Judy, who belong to the lower-middle class families, come out to India to escape from the rain and the cold of their countries. Westerners also come out to India seeking spiritual solace. Hans in *The Householder*, for example, came to India because in a dream he saw a temple and a palm tree and a holy sadhu sitting under it inviting him to come. Many of Jhabvala's characters in her later fiction are in India to 'find themselves.' It is the gurus, the temples, the chanting of hymns and talk about spiritual matters that attract a lot of Westerners. There are also quite a few who are in India because of a chance of marriage. In most cases such marriages break up sooner or later but by the time this happens it is too late for them to return to their own countries. Finally, there are Westerners who come out to India to understand the country. They are sensitive and receptive and get involved in the country to such an extent that they find it difficult
to return to their own countries.

In her introduction to An Experience of India, Jhabvala comments on the cycle through which Westerners pass in India, and says:

First stage, tremendous enthusiasm — everything Indian 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.

Westerners who are in India for a short while usually pass through the first stage and, before they reach the second stage, they return home. The problem of living in a country which is totally different from their own becomes really serious for those who, for one reason or the other, cannot get back to their own countries. Those who have strong personalities put up a fight to preserve their identities. Jhabvala's novels illustrate the entire cycle.

The Westerners in A Backward Place include the Hochstadts, who are in India on a brief academic assignment, Clarissa, a spiritual seeker, Judy, who is married
to an Indian to escape from her country and Etta,
who is in India because of a chance marriage to an Indian.

The Hochstadts are full of praise for India but
Etta hates it. Judy does not have any opinion of her
own. Jhabvala brings out their contrasting attitudes
towards India quite early in the novel. Etta and Judy
meet at the Hochstadts:

Etta sat in an arm-chair with her
legs crossed and smoking her usual
oval cigarettes. She had already
half filled an ashtray which was
balanced on the arm of her chair. She
was being amusing. She was telling
them something that had happened to
her in the post office in the morning:
'He kept me waiting fifteen minutes
and then he weighed -- he actually
actually weighed -- my letter and then
you know what he told me ?' Here she
tried with scant success, to reproduce
an Indian clerk's account: 'Excuse,
madam, this is wrong counter,' Can
you believe it ? After all that ?'
She gave a laugh; she was inclined
today to see the incident in a humour-
ous light, though in some other mood
it might have driven her into a frenzy
of irritation. ' Is there anywhere else
in the world where such priceless
fantasies happen daily?' And she gave a shrug, a throwaway gesture of the hand and another laugh.

Mrs. Hochstadt smiled with her. 'It is one of the many charms the country has for us.'

'Charms!' Etta exclaimed and cast appalled eyes to the ceiling. 'That's not exactly the word you'd use if you wanted to get something done.'

'Life plays itself to a different rhythm here,' said Dr. Hochstadt.

'It is fatal to come to India and expect to be able to live to a Western rhythm.'

'Well, Franz,' Etta said, 'then all I can say is the sooner they change their tune the better.'

'The West pushes forward in staccato rhythm,' said Dr. Hochstadt, 'the East repeats the same note over and over -- dom, dom, dom' -- he sang this in a deep voice, giving force to it with his fist-- 'over and over, and again and again, reaching not forward but down, down into depth.'

Judy did not have much of an idea what they were talking about, but she was used to having the conversation at the Hochstadts pass over her head. ...' Believe me, said Etta, 'If you had to live here for long, you would soon lose the taste for that dom, dom, dom.'
The Hochstadts are full of wisdom and, since they are secure in the knowledge that they would be returning to the West where they belong, can afford to ignore the harsh reality of India in which characters like Etta or Judy are caught. They are extremely tolerant and accommodating and take a highly detached view of India, an attitude which irritates characters, like Etta, who find themselves irretrievably caught up in India. The Hochstadts, Etta, Clarissa and Judy represent different strands of Western attitudes to India. The Hochstadts represent Westerners who take an academic interest in India. Consider, for example, the way Dr. Hochstadt talks about India: For the new-comer in India perhaps one of the most interesting aspects is the correlation—and here I have in mind not only physical facts but also intellectual and spiritual ones—the correlation of the old and the new, of what has been and what is.

Clarissa represents Westerners who take the attitude of condescension. Etta, an embittered woman but by no means unintelligent, says, "She (Clarissa) is always on about the wretched people in their wretched
villages or wherever they hide out'. Etta herself represents Westerners who adopt the sneering attitude. Talking of herself she says, "What I can't stand is all that hypocrisy about the simple life and the true values, that just makes me sick." Judy represents Westerners who seek to merge themselves in India. Etta, who sees things very clearly, says, "she is busy proving that it's possible for a nice healthy English girl to be an Indian wife in an Indian slum." 7

Judy married Bal while he was in London for a short visit. Her parents were working-class people and she suffered in the English cold, as she did not have enough clothes to keep herself warm. She found Bal handsome and married him in the hope that he would take her to a warmer place. Bal himself came of a lower-middle class family and did not have a regular job. He is inspired with the idea of becoming an actor in films. So he runs after a successful actor, called Kishanchand. Judy has, therefore, to work in an organization called Cultural Dais to earn their bread. Bal is hardly a suitable husband for Judy, but Judy does not wish to break up her relation-ship with him. She adopts an Indian personality to merge in India. In "Myself in India" Jhabvala says, "To live in India and be at peace one must to a very
considerable extent become Indian and adopt Indian attitudes, habits, beliefs, assume if possible an Indian personality." Fairly early in the novel Clarissa says, "She (Judy) is doing very nicely. She had the good sense to realize that the only way to live here was to turn herself into a real Indian wife." In a subtle manner Jhabvala shows Judy's transformation. In England, like her father, Judy did not trust men who mentioned God frequently. Like her father, she too thought that only hypocrites mentioned God again and again. But in India her attitude undergoes a change mainly through her contact with Bhuaji, a widow living with Bal, who, she observed, said her prayers and made her visits to the temple and took her purificatory dips in the river. Judy starts believing in Bhuaji and in all that she does. As an Englishwoman Judy feels restless and worried about future, but soon adopts the Indian attitude of leaving things to God. Like Bhuaji, she too starts saying "God provides." She is thrifty by nature. She does not like to live in a state of anticipation and uncertainty. But in the process of her merging in India she sacrifices her hard-earned savings to Bal and follows him to Bombay on his dubious adventure into the world of films.
The Hochstadtts and Judy represent the extreme situations in which Westerners find themselves, because the former are in India for a short time and the latter is better off here than in her own country. The real problem of adjustment with or acceptance of an alien culture or the clash of two cultures veers round Etta and Clarissa. Etta has lived in India a little too long and has married and divorced several times. Since she is a European, she attracts a lot of attention. Though she is ageing and losing much of the firmness of her flesh, she manages to hook rich admirers who meet her demands. In her own country she would have to work harder and be content to be one of the many but here in India she is considered distinguished and has hardly any work to do. This spoils her completely. She becomes ill-tempered and comes to hate the society she is sponging on. Jhabvala exposes the self-complacency and affected mannerisms of Etta in the very opening paragraph of the novel:

Etta was propped up on pillows in her bed. She was having an elegant breakfast from a tray. She held a cream cracker between thumb and forefinger and, before taking a bite, said to Judy, 'You ought to leave him, really you ought.'
Judy was thrilled. She had no intentions of leaving her husband, but it made her feel worldly to hear Etta talking about it.

' It is very bourgeois of you to keep going,' Etta said. She pronounced bourgeois with a very French accent, though she herself was Hungarian and her intonation, in spite of the English drawl she cultivated, was basically central European. 'Petit bourgeois,' she added, even more crisply French. 'Marriages, my dear, are made to be broken, that's one of the rules of modern civilization. Just because we happen to have landed ourselves in this primitive society, that's no reason why we should submit to their primitive morality.' She made a face and delicately dusted crumbs from her fingers, as if she were dusting off all that primitive-ness she spoke of. 'My dear Judy, you have made a mistake -- it could happen as they say to anyone -- but if you would only face up to it and get out before it's too late, too late, Judy.'

Obviously, Etta is an affected woman. She is also bickering, aggressive and sharp-tongued. She luxuriates in a set of clichés against Indian society. Clarissa is her opposite. She is meek but she too uses a set of
clichés which some Europeans use to show their love. for India. Between them, they characterise two attitudes, the one of intense hatred and the other of condescension. Jhabvala suggests that both the attitudes have become obsolete, because Europeans living in India are no longer conquerors but the conquered ones.

Etta and Clarissa hate each other but they have common friends and they have nowhere to go. They keep on meeting and quarrelling. Jhabvala skilfully creates situations which bring out the tension between the two characters. Etta has a rich friend called Guppy. Once, when they were having a nice time together, Clarissa joins them. She starts flattering Guppy. She flaunts an interest in painting and tells Guppy: "You have got a superb line from nose to brow, a real conqueror's face, that is what you have got, Guppy. The *veni vidi vici* type. I'd certainly like to have a stab at you." Etta dislikes the way Clarissa tries to flatter her friend Guppy and she gets into one of her dark moods. The scene that takes place fully brings out the ugliness of their lives:

... That made Clarissa very angry indeed. She shouted 'You make me sick! With your plucked eyebrows and your dyed
hair and all your phoney manners, you just make me sick!' Her cheeks were flushed, and her top-knot had come down and hung like an abandoned bird's nest against her neck.

Etta, still lying on her sofa, looked up and down with slow, green, insulting eyes; and drawled, 'I think you've drunk too much of my gin.' Her own speech, however, was not quite as clear as it had been an hour before.

'Listen to her,' Clarissa appealed to Guppy. 'First she invites me, then she insults me.' Her voice was trembling and her eyes looked damp.

'Who, pray, invited you?' said Etta, in the pleasantest manner possible. Clarissa pointed a shaking finger in her direction and shouted, 'You hear her? She stamped her foot in its broad sandal. 'I won't put up with it! I'll slap her insolent face for her!' 12

However, Clarissa does nothing of the kind. She makes for the bathroom and when she comes out she is ready for reconciliation. Etta takes pleasure in insulting people. At a party hosted by the Hochstadts, she insults Bal and spoils the party. Etta realizes that
she is not suited to the country and wants to go back; "Yes I am. Sick, sick, sick. Sick to the depths of my soul." She is aware that she is a prisoner in India, but she also realizes that back in her country she would count for nothing. She is irritated all the time and her nerves are on edge. She even takes an overdose of sleeping pills, but fortunately for her, the Hochstadts arrive in time and Clarissa, who was being asked to vacate her house, moves in to nurse her. Etta keeps telling that she would allow Clarissa to stay with her till she recovers and once she recovers she will go back to her country. But the readers know better.

Though Clarissa is meek and proclaims her love for the native customs, with her shabbiness and poverty she is an old and pathetic character. For all her love of India, she is easily upset by situations and even loses her civilized self-control. There is an incident in the novel which brings out the contrast between her and Mrs. Hochstadt. She once meets Mrs. Hochstadt at a market place and begins to tell her about her plans to start a theatre group in order to revive Indian theatre. Beggars start pursuing them and one of them actually touches Clarissa's leg. Clarissa jumps and slaps the boy across the face. Later, she realizes she has given
herself away and contritely says: 'Don't know what came over me -- I have never hit anyone before, believe me, Frieda, never -- I respect people. From the highest to the lowest, I respect them.'

The Western characters in the novel meet Indian characters, the types we have met before in her earlier novels. Bal is an incarnation of Viddi. Unlike his brother Mukund, who is content to lead an ordinary life, he wants to be an artist and thinks that he could become one by visiting cafes and restaurants. He dreams of becoming a film actor by hanging around Kishanchand, a famous film actor from Bombay. Bal also represents another basic trait so common to modern Indian youth i.e. the dillydallying. Once, Bal comes up with a bright idea to start a theatre group, but when Judy pushes the idea and it starts taking a shape, Bal loses interest in the project. He is quick to take insult but is totally negligent towards his duties as a husband and as a father. Prithvi, his son, falls sick and wants Bal to be with him. But Bal gets dressed in a finely starched muslin kurta and pyjama, which had come back from the laundry only that morning, and black slippers with little coloured flowers embroidered on them. Prithvi wants ice but Bal
has no time to attend to his needs. He dashes off to meet Kishan Kumar.

What is true of Bal is also true of Sudhir and Jayaker. Sudhir has an M.A. degree. He had a teaching job at an evening college in Calcutta but soon started disliking it and, through a politician, he gets a job at Cultural Dias. He starts disliking this job too. Jayaker adopts revolutionary poses and keeps talking about change but actually does nothing. Guppy is an extension of Gulzari Lal.

A Backward Place is, like Jhabvala's previous novels, a portrait of society which comprises of Westerners, new babbitts and lower-middle class people. All these characters have fixed traits, and when they meet there is no interaction. They do not change. This unchangeability of characters is a feature of the novel of character and it helps point the clear-cut diversity of characters and manners. The characters are, as if, arrested in time so that the picture can be seen without confusion. They are in Forster's term flat characters.
Jhabvala builds up the novel by piling incident upon incident. Her plots therefore are always loose and her novels end in an inconclusive manner. A Backward Place also ends on a deliberately inconclusive note. At the end of the novel, Sudhir boards the train for Calcutta and Bal boards the train for Bombay. From the way Sudhir and Bal are described in the novel, one knows that these journeys are endless and probably futile.

The value of A Backward Place as a novel lies in its objective and detached presentation of the varied reactions of Westerners caught up in India. The characters Jhabvala creates suit her purpose admirably and the situations in which she places them are realistic and convincing. A Backward Place represents an important phase of Jhabvala's progress towards more mature novels like A New Dominion and Heat and Dust.

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