CHAPTER XI

CONCLUSION:

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF JHABVALA

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Jhabvala's novels and stories were written during her stay in India. As such, her work belongs to the literary scene in the country. Her achievements too have to be studied in relation to the achievements of the best of contemporary writers in India. Raja Rao and Jhabvala write with diametrically opposed visions and styles. In _The Serpent and the Rope_ Raja Rao deals with India as an idea of the Absolute, an idea of eternity. As Meenakshi Mukherjee says in her book _The Twice Born Fiction_:

> It is India, Brahminical India, which represents the quintessence of _advait_ philosophy. India at all other levels is excluded.¹

Jhabvala, in contrast, deals with India at the social, cultural and intellectual levels. She is more concerned with the social realities than with abstract philosophies. In this respect Jhabvala is in tune with the Western concept of the novel.

Jhabvala's work is closer to R.K. Narayan's. Both writers view their worlds ironically and with detachment. Both of them do not make radical experiments in the use
of English but stick to the standard prose. But they differ from each other in their approach and vision. R.K. Narayan observes petty villainies and follies with amusement. 'India will go on,' said Narayan to Naipaul. In an article in the *New York Review of Books* dated April 29, 1976, Naipaul says that the conviction that India is eternal leads to indifference. He points out how the hero of *Mr. Sampath* has withdrawn into a world of non-doing -- 'Life and the world and all this is passing -- why bother about anything? The perfect and the imperfect are all the same. Why really bother?' The theme of *The Man-eater of Malgudi* is that evil destroys itself. It is this kind of religious conviction in Narayan which provokes Naipaul to comment:

> For all their delight in human oddity, Narayan's novels are less the purely social comedies I had once taken them to be than religious books, at times, religious fables and intensely Hindu.²

Jhabvala is totally unaffected by religion. She is not concerned with ideological interpretations. Her only
concern is with the presentation of a graphic picture of the society around her. She writes about the furious social scuffling in present-day India, and describes the head-on collision between the traditional and the modern, the East and the West and the confusion that follows in the wake of these collisions. She is not a practitioner of the psychological novel. In each of her novels, she writes about the corporate life of two or three families. Her novels are singularly devoid of accidents, coincidences and sudden shifts of fortunes. On the contrary, they are full of the drab routine of daily life, so much that they tend to be tritely repetitive. It is for this reason that she has been able to describe the domestic and social life of Indians as no other writer writing in English has ever done. In her work to date, Jhabvala has handled a variety of themes. In her earlier work she deals with the strong-hold of tradition and traditional wisdom and how in present-day India tradition and modernity go hand in hand. She also takes up the theme of East-West encounter and its disastrous effects. In her later work she is engaged in writing about gurus and the fate of Europeans who come to India, the country of vast stretches of dry, parched land and white, monotonous landscape smouldering with heat and boredom, and its debilitating effect upon
people. Jhabvala's art is the art of portraiture and each one of her novels is a portrait of some aspects of India, larger than life by design.

II

Jhabvala's novels and stories are about Indians and Westerners in India. In her first five novels about Indians Jhabvala has mainly dealt with marriage, money, the Indian wife, the Indian householder and the Indian social reformer. The titles of these novels, except Esmond in India, indicate Jhabvala's approach. She presents Indians in terms of Indian codes of conduct for businessmen, wives, householders and social reformers. Indian society, for all its progress in science and technology, is traditional to the core. It still works according to the ethical and moral stipulations as expressed in sacred books. Therefore, the Indian girls are to be married in a class and caste to which they belong, the Indian businessman need have no pangs of uneasy conscience as it is his nature to make more and more money, the Indian wife has to put up with the tyrannies of her husband, the Indian householder must
live up to the duties expected of him and a social reformer must continue to work, treating alike gain and loss. Indians accept these codes almost instinctively Hari in To Whom She Will accepts the dominion of tradition; Lalaji in The Nature of Passion accepts his selfish nature because he thinks it is his fate; Gulab in Esmond in India accepts the duties and obligations of a wife as they are defined by tradition; Prem in The Householder tries to live up to the traditional role of a householder; and Sarla Devi in Get Ready for Battle accepts the philosophy of 'treat ing alike pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat, then get ready for battle.'

Jhabvala's depiction of the working of these codes in modern times is in terms of the major concerns of the novel like appearance and reality, snobbery, uneasiness, illusions, fantasy and other effects of money and the dangers of passions which tend to be wilful, imperious and impatient.

All through her work Jhabvala shows a concern for reality. Her characters, on the other hand, are seduced by mere appearance. Amrita feels drawn towards Hari
because he seems to be unsullied by the vulgarity of opulence. Nimmi is attracted towards Phiroz because he seems to her to be the quintessence of modern man. Esmond married Gulab because he thought that her eyes were deep, sad and full of the wisdom of the East. Jhabvala describes her characters' fascination for mere appearance, and their slow disillusionment.

Her novels about Westerners in India show the Western involvement in post-Independence India. In these novels Jhabvala deals with the various reasons for which Westerners come out to India and how their attitudes towards India are conditioned by the nature of their stay in the country and by their native sensibilities. In her novels about Westerners in India Jhabvala emphasizes the fact that Westerners are no longer here as conquerors but as the conquered ones.

In her novels about Indians as well as in her novels about Westerners in India, Jhabvala presents vivid portraits of certain aspects of Indian society. Her area of exploration is the social world and the material of her analysis, manners. To Jhabvala, reality
is whatever is external and hard, though it could be gross and unpleasant. She writes the novels of character which are concerned with expressing the modes of existence rather than the images of experience. Her work is devoid of thrills, violence and esoteric elements. Jhabvala is never a mere casual observer of the Indian scene. She writes mainly about the middle class because this is the class she knows best. She shows a characteristically Western awareness of social problems.

III

Indian critics have said that Jhabvala deals with surfacial life, that her characters are static and that her fiction is a monstrous distortion. In fact the very titles of her novels about Indians show that she is concerned with Indian wisdom and philosophy. Though she writes about the middle class society and about Westerners in India, she shows an admirable awareness of Indian problems by and large. She is aware of Indian poverty and of the indifference, callousness and moral squalor that afflict the middle class. She succeeds in presenting the willless, wavering and drifting lives of
Indian youth, the bickering and possessive Indian mothers and the rising callous, unscrupulous middle class in post-Independence India. The charge about 'static' characters is not wholly untrue. Her characters are definitely static and there is certainly some exaggeration in her depiction of characters and situations. All her characters have exaggerated traits which creates an impression that they are meant to be caricatures. But static characters and exaggerations are necessary for the kind of novel Jhabvala writes. She writes about anti-heroes who are terribly conditioned by their religious, social and economic traditions and oppressed by sweltering heat. Small wonder if they lead false and empty lives. It is not Indians alone who are depicted in this manner but also the English and the Americans who abandon themselves to the weird charm of the East. She takes a group of men and women and describes them as they move from day to day. The boredom of routine life and desperate attempts to run away from it by taking refuge in ashrams, which promise peace but make life more complicated, form the bulk of her fiction. Jhabvala adjusts her prose to suit her purpose. Not for
nothing is her prose so slow and devoid of poetic embellishments. It is the slow, dull, false lives of her characters described in slow, simple, economical prose which creates a cumulative effect of total futility and aimlessness. Jhabvala has an eye for the ridiculous but she is also aware that what is ludicrous on the surface is tragic underneath. Jhabvala's characters are given just enough definite traits to carry on. Their deeds and adventures, their tragic predicaments, or the rowdy pranks in which they deport themselves are not mere episodes in a literary farrago: these are, unmistakably, pages torn from the daily register of life as it goes on.

A kind of puerility marks the entire behaviour of Amrita and Nimmi, two of Jhabvala's heroines. A kind of looseness or willlessness is the hallmark of Hari and Viddi. Greed is the driving passion of Lalaji. Sloth and sloppiness rule the world of Gulab. Sarla Devi is a little too unworldly and Kusum is a little too coquettish. In an article on Dickens, George Orwell says: 'His (Tolstoy's) characters are struggling to make their souls, whereas Dicken's people are present far more often
and far more vividly than Tolstoy's, but always in a single unchangeable attitude, like pictures or places of furniture. Perhaps unchangeability is the cause of the popularity of Dicken's characters. And so it is with Jhabvala's. Hari, Viddi, Inder Lal are characters who in spite of their ' flatness ' leave a lasting impression. ' India always changes ', Jhabvala has said time and again. It certainly changes Westerners, though they do not grow. On the contrary, there is a marked diminution in them. Etta, Clarissa and Judy from A Backward Place and Margaret, Evie and Lee from A New Dominion might have lived a full life in their countries but here in India they sink to the bottom of degradation and sloth. Moreover, India changes them much in the same way. So there is always a static pattern of action in Jhabvala's novels.

Jhabvala's fictional strategy in creating her fictional world is to take a central character and build around him or her a set of incidents which are so arranged as to reinforce the validity of the kind of world she creates. Jhabvala's art consists in recreating a typical social context by slow, patient, careful accumulation of
details. The details include small actions, dress, decorations, gestures, the words that are used with a special frequency, the choice of food etc. The massive accumulation of detail leads to the establishment of a cultural identity of the people she writes about. As an outsider, Jhabvala's first business is to know and then to impart all she knows in terms that would make her readers see and hear and feel a lively sense of actuality. Jhabvala fastens herself instinctively on to the truly revealing aspects of life in India. In her first five novels Jhabvala is mainly concerned with the presentation of Indian codes of conduct. In order to do so she plays up certain character-traits and introduces extreme situations. The situations are so arranged as to highlight the character-traits. They are continuously reshuffled and redistributed to suggest a mode of existence. This strategy suits Jhabvala's purpose because she is not interested in individuals or their psychology. She is interested in social life. A part of her fictional strategy is her art of juxtaposition of highly incongruous characters. In her novels about Westerners in India, Jhabvala is concerned with various attitudes the Westerners in India adopt towards this country. So she takes up
characters that represent these attitudes and brings them together in situations that would highlight their attitudes. But while her characters are busy reaffirming and reinforcing their various points of views Jhabvala is busy showing how the overall reality of India affects them. In *A New Dominion* and *Heat and Dust* Jhabvala employs more sophisticated techniques. *A New Dominion* uses the combined technique of direct narration, epistolary form and autobiography to present its characters. In *Heat and Dust* Jhabvala employs the strategy of two parallel stories to distinguish between the temporal and the timeless aspects of life in India.

IV

Jhabvala's distinctive achievement as a novelist lies in the fact that, while Indian writers writing about Indian mores tend to deviate from the British tradition of the novel and evolve a more indigenous form especially suited to Indian life, but not universally acceptable to the Western readers, she works within the British tradition and presents Indian life in terms that would be acceptable to the Western readers. Though an outsider, Jhabvala shows an unusual insight into Indian mores. She sees India,
a Western perspective. Radha and Uma, the two anxious mothers in *To Whom She Will* and *Esmond in India*, for example, are presented ironically rather than sentimentally as they would be by Indian writers. What is sentimental for Indian writers is comic to her. The material that would get melodramatic treatment from Indian writers gets ironical treatment from her. She never allows her Western sensibility to be overwhelmed by the Indian scene. Writers like Kipling and Forster were highly fascinated by Indian mysticism but not so Jhabvala. So her fictional presentation of Indian life with a strictly Western perspective is unique. A theme running through her novels about Indians in post-Independence India is the frustration of people who fought for Independence. It is fully treated in her first three novels. Few novelists writing about India have dealt with it more poignantly. Running parallel to this theme is the theme of moral squalor among the newly rich. The intensity and technical excellence with which it is dealt is rarely met in writings about India. In her novels about Westerners in India, Jhabvala is perhaps the only writer who has dealt with the nature of Western involvement in post-Independence India, on a large scale.
For over a quarter of a century Jhabvala's novels and stories have been the Westerners' window on India. Her technical skill, her unusual insights, her cool and controlled brilliance and her sustained work have carved for her a place in the front rank of the writers of the world. Fortunately, she has started attracting serious critical attention in the English speaking world. Dr. V.A. Shahane has already published his pioneering work on Jhabvala. Professor Blackwell of Washington State University and Professor Yasmin Gooneratne of Macquarie University are engaged in writing full-length studies of her work.

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