AN INTERVIEW WITH RUTH PRAWER JHABVALA

By courtesy of Quest

(QUEST 91)

R.A. Would you care to say how you started in writing?

R.J. I started as a child and never stopped. It came as naturally as breathing. I've always had cupboards stuffed full with unfinished novels, plays, stories. I wrote through my school years and college years and then when I came to India I went on writing. I hadn't published much before I came here—just some isolated articles. I had just finished a thesis for my M.A. (on the short story in the 18th century). I was 24 when I came here. India excited me tremendously, and I at once began to write about it. And have not stopped since. I wrote my first novel—To Whom She Will—about a year after I got here. I mean, the first novel to be published. I didn't know anyone in publishing, neither in England nor America nor here. When I finished, I made a list of English publishers and began to send my novel around to them. The first three on my list turned it down; the fourth took it.
R.A.  Do you enjoy writing?

R.J.  Yes, I do. Very much. It's hard, but I enjoy it very much.

R.A.  How often do you revise your work?

R.J.  Over and over again. I rewrite large chunks and make lots of corrections and this goes on for many months. But I never rewrite the whole. Just those portions that I feel have gone wrong. But if I feel that the whole thing has gone wrong, then it's just no good. Then it's best to throw it all away and start on something else. Something completely new and different.

R.A.  How long does it take you to complete a novel?

R.J.  The Householder took six months. The others from 1 - 2 years.

R.A.  And a short story?

R.J.  About a month.

R.A.  Which one do you find easier to do - a novel or a short story?

R.J.  Oh! a novel. It's a much looser form. You can put in so much more - put in anything really --
description, dialogue, monologue, dramatic scene, general reflections, all sorts of different things. Anything goes, as it were. You can also cheat quite a bit - I mean, go back and try to strengthen or prop up situations or even characters that you feel have come out not as you hoped. But not in a story. There it is one attempt - one throw - and if you don't get it right that time, then it's best to give up. Of course I rewrite in detail - very laboriously - but only in detail. No major changes. A story is more like a poem really. You can't cheat on a poem. It's one cry from the heart - just one - only that has to come out true and right.

R.A. You have been frequently compared to Jane Austen. Have you consciously modelled your writing after her?

R.J. I haven't consciously modelled myself on anyone. Unconsciously (or does one say subconsciously?) more or less on every writer I have loved and admired. Any writer who has deeply thrilled me — and there have been many, many— has as it were entered into me; and so has influenced me. But to get back to Jane Austen. The reason I used to be compared to her is because my earlier books dealt with the
same sort of society as hers did—i.e., the leisured middle classes, mostly concerned with eating and marrying. Also perhaps my way of looking at things may have been somewhat similar to hers—a sort of ironic detachment? Maybe. Anyway, that was my earlier books. In my later ones I've been mostly compared to Russian writers. Chekhov, for example. Again I feel not because of any similarity between us—how could there be? I wish it were so, even by thousandth of a fraction—but because one deals with similar societies. Present-day India does seem to have a lot in common, socially and economically, with 19th century Russia. Especially the well-to-do middle classes, anguished with boredom, that Turgeniev and Chekhov were always writing about.

R.A. In your first two novels you write in a tolerant and amused manner about the absurdities and affectations of the people around you. But the third novel, *Esmond in India* shows a sudden change in your attitude and there has been an unmistakable note of bitterness in your work since then. What has brought this change in your attitude?

R.J. I suppose it could be put down to my change of attitude towards India. I loved everything during my
first years here— I really loved it and was wildly excited by it and never wanted to go away from here. But later that changed. I saw a lot I didn't like. I'll go further: a lot that horrified me.

R.A. You seem to be preoccupied with the bombast of the newly rich, bizarre spiritualism of the gurus and the helplessness of Europeans living in India. Your fictional world is full of frivolous, futile and fractious characters. Don't you think that writing about such people restricts the scope of your art? If so, why do you choose to write about them only?

R.J. That's quite a variety of subjects, isn't it? Just look at them: you've mentioned three widely differing ones. In fact, though, I haven't always dealt with all of them together. In my earliest books I wrote about the newly rich; then about Europeans in India; then about gurus — though the last two have tended to overlap, which is inevitable since the one brings the other.

As for my characters being frivolous, futile and fractious — I don't quite see them like that. In part yes — as who isn't? which one of us is free of
such characteristics - but I do feel they have redeeming qualities. At least they do for me; otherwise I wouldn't be able to live with them for the length of a book. Of course it has everything to do with the way I look at things and people, perhaps I do tend to see the ridiculous aspects first, both in situations and in characters. But I don't think I just sit and laugh at them. Especially not in my later books. On the contrary, I'm beginning to feel that what is ludicrous on the surface may be tragic underneath. That's especially true in India. All those Indian paradoxes and comical situations that Western writers especially like to exploit and make fun of—e.g., the B.A. failed, the banya praying with one hand and giving false weight with the other—well perhaps one laughs at first (I'm afraid I used to laugh more than I should in my early books)—but afterwards you see that it is not comic at all but quite the opposite. Then one stops laughing: at which point perhaps one's writing opens up?

R.A. The usual criticism levelled against you is that you have moved among only one set of people and seen India from a distance and that some of the themes and incidents in your novels and stories
recur. What do you have to say about this?

R.J. It is true that I know only the upper and middle classes but isn't that quite a wide spectrum? Ranging from minor princes like Rao Sahib in *A New Dominion*, to underpaid school teachers like Prem in *The Householder*, or the clerk in my story "The Interview". I've always moved up and down the social scale quite freely, I think—though only, as I say, among the urban upper, middle, and lower-middle classes. I haven't lived among villagers and I haven't lived among the very poor, so obviously I can't write about them directly. Although I like to think that they are there indirectly—the great mass of India beneath these middle class lives—as they are there indirectly for all of us who live here.

As for my themes and incidents recurring—that goes back to your earlier question when you mentioned those themes and I said well, aren't they varied enough? I get fascinated by certain subjects and then write and write about them till I'm bored or exhausted. But perhaps my readers reach that point before I do?
R.A. It is also said that you present only one aspect of Indian society. It is true that there is a great deal of pointlessness and emptiness in rich urban society. But there are Indians who are working quietly and unpretentiously. You have stayed in India for over two decades. Haven't you met such people? If yes, why don't they figure in your work?

R.J. Yes I know Indians who are working quietly and unpretentiously—quite a few of them—but would you say they are the most representative of India and Indian life today? And doesn't a writer always take the most representative aspect of his subject—that which will bring out its principal, its most striking features? And would you say that the most striking feature of Indian life today is Indians working quietly and unpretentiously? Would you really?

R.A. Don't you think that Gulab in *Esmond in India* is a little too sluggish or Sarla Devi in *Get Ready for Battle* is a little too unworldly? Don't you think there is a shade of exaggeration in the depiction of characters and situations in your novels?

R.J. I think novelists can be classified into two schools, or sects: 1) those whose characters are
as large as life — here the high priests are
writers like Tolstoy and George Eliot. 2) those
whose characters are larger than life — the high
priests being Dickens and Proust. I am a follower of
the second school. That just happens to be the kind
of novelist I am.

R.A. You describe in detail the sexual habits of the
Indians. What is your source of information in this
regard?

R.J. What a loaded question...
Mostly, the many foreign girls I meet who travel
around India. They certainly have some very memorable
experiences in that field here. I haven't yet met
one who hasn't, in the course of her travels,
learned quite a bit about the sexual habits of
Indians. Often more than she wanted.

R.A. You have been very enthusiastically received in the
West, but not so in India. How do you feel about
this? What, according to you, may be the reasons
for your cold reception in India?

R.J. I don't feel particularly neglected here. I think
Indians don't read much anyway, so I don't really
expect them to read my novels. Besides, my books
are not easily available here. They're terribly
expensive, and who can afford to pay that much? From time to time I get letters from strangers usually from some very remote part of India saying how they had read and liked some book or story of mine. Then I feel very touched.

R.A. You wrote to me that you would not write anything for sometime after the publication of *A New Dominion*. Does this mean that you don't plan to write any more novels set in Delhi?

R.J. I don't think I can write another novel for a long time. Of course, one never knows - I've said this before and next thing I knew I was in the middle of a new one. These things just happen. But for the time being I'm not planning another novel.

R.A. Which, according to you, is your best novel?

R.J. *A New Dominion*.

R.A. What is your opinion about the contemporary literary scene in the country?

R.J. I don't have any opinion about that. It seems a ludicrous presumption to talk about any kind of "cultural scene" in a country living at so low a level of development. Of course there are individual
writers here and there who are writing wonderfully well, and even by a miracle one great film director, but these are isolated (very isolated) individuals who do not constitute any kind of "cultural scene". India does have two highly developed art forms of its own — music and cooking — but those are gifts handed down by an older, richer civilisation. One really can't — mustn't — expect any developments of that sort from contemporary India. How is it possible? I mean — look around you.

R.M. May I ask you a question having to do with your personal life? You have been living in India for over two decades and yet you are not a naturalised citizen of this country. Why is it so?

R.J. That's purely a matter of convenience. For personal and professional reasons I have to travel out of India, and that's not all that easy on an Indian passport. If it were to be easier than on my present passport, I'd change tomorrow. I have no sentimentality about things like that. It may have something to do with my background: I was practically born a displaced person, and all any of us ever wanted was a travel document and a residential permit. One just didn't care as long as
one was allowed to live somewhere. I'm still like that. I have absolutely no patriotism for, or attachment to, any country whatsoever. None.

R.A. Would you like to be considered an Indian writer?

R.J. No, how could I be? I'm not, am I, there's no getting away from that fact. I write differently from Indian writers because my birth, background, ancestry, and traditions are different. If I must be considered anything, then let it be as one of those European writers who have written about India.

R.A. Don't you think that coming over to India has been a blessing in that it has provided you with a rich subject to write about?

R.J. That's absolutely correct. As a writer I consider myself exceedingly fortunate to have come here when I did and the way I did. Yes very lucky indeed.

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OUTSIDER WITH UNUSUAL INSIGHT

( By courtesy of The Times of India )
( The Times of India, March 25, 1973 )

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Writing about Ruth Prawer Jhabvala in the June 1971 number of The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, Haydon Williams Moore says, 'Perhaps at least in a technical sense, she is the best fiction writer now writing in and about India.' He adds, 'She has not received much critical attention because critics tend to judge her more harshly than they do native Indian writers who use English.'

In fact, critics and readers treat Mrs. Jhabvala more indifferently than harshly. She has been the most neglected writer, writing in and about India. So far, Mrs. Jhabvala has published six novels and three collections of short stories. But most of her books are not available at book shops. Her most successful novel, The Householder, is simply not to be found anywhere. Of her nine books, only two have been published in Indian editions. She does not appear in the Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English published by Karnatak University. Nor does she figure in the numerous seminars on Indo-Anglian literature
organized from time to time by various Universities. There have been several special numbers of Indo-Anglian literature but except for one or two they do not have anything to say about her.

There are several reasons for the neglect of this gifted writer. Scholar-critics think that she can not be considered an Indian as she is not one by birth. It was for this reason that Mr. Verghese dropped her from his study of the Problems of the Indian Creative Writers in English and Mrs. Meenakshi Mukherjee had nothing to say about her in her Twice Born Fiction. Some scholar-critics think that Mrs. Jhabvala is doing her bit of finger-wagging as Mrs. E.V. Savi and Flora Annie Steel did in the past and that she will be lost in the limbo of time as they are today.

Ironically enough, Mrs. Jhabvala is also neglected because her novels are 'social novels' written in the most matter-of-fact manner and because she does not deal with such popular subjects as 'Spiritual Quest,' 'Rituals To Get Rich,' 'Nature Of Reality,' etc. Another reason for her neglect is that her social criticism is regarded with distrust and she is presumed to be an anti-Indian novelist.
Mrs. Jhabvala is not even a naturalised citizen of India. But she is married to an Indian, has been living in India for over two decades and all her work is on or about India. So, she belongs to the tradition of writers like P.M. Taylor, Kipling and E.M. Forster on one side and Narayan, Rao and Anand on the other.

Writers belonging to the former tradition have been prone to excesses of various sorts. Taylor was boyishly over-enthusiastic about Indian culture. Kipling was full of racial arrogance. Even Forster was not free from this tendency, his Indian characters being caricatures. Moreover, all the writers in this tradition have been concerned with themselves and been more interested in pronouncing judgment rather than in understanding people.

Indian writers in English tend to make a virtue of mysticism and sentimentalism. Raja Rao's meandering into Vedantic philosophy and Narayan's descriptions of the rituals to get rich are not everybody's cup of tea.

Mrs. Jhabvala's novels do not show a trace of these peculiarities. She writes about the furious social scuffling in present-day India. All her novels are full of local colour and clamour, dealing with the young who are willless, romantic and none-too-wise, and the old who are cool,
calculating and rigid. She describes the head-on collision between the traditional and modern, the East and the West, and the confusion that follows in the wake of these collisions.

She does not write about one or two persons. She writes about the corporate life of two or three families. Her novels are singularly devoid of accidents, coincidences and sudden shifts of fortune. On the contrary, they are full of the drab routine of daily life, so much so that they tend to be tritely repetitive. But Mrs. Jhabvala is not afraid of being 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.

Her first novel *To Whom She Will* is about Amrita, a modern girl, who in the first flush of youth falls in love with Hari, her colleague at a radio station, and how this affair goads the members of the young lovers' families into frantic efforts to keep them apart. *The Nature of Passion* is the story of Lalaji, a self-made man, and his children who do not approve of his ways but rally round him because he has the money they need.
Mrs. Jhabvala took up the theme of East-West encounter in *Esmond in India*. Esmond, an Englishman, marries Gulab, an Indian beauty. The marriage fails because Esmond is selfish and mean and Gulab is sluttish and unsophisticated. Her most successful novel *The Householder* is the study of how Prem, a sensitive young teacher is bewildered by an early marriage, an unsteady job and a strange city; and how he stumbles along his way to love and maturity. *A Backward Place* deals with three European women who are ageing and decaying in the Indian heat.

Mrs. Jhabvala is hard on Indians as well as Europeans. If she is critical of the Indian tendency to sloppiness and self-indulgence, she is equally unsparing in her criticism of the pretentiousness and meanness of Europeans living in India.

Mrs. Jhabvala's stories read even better than her novels. Her stories are long short stories. They are long because they are about the slow, dull life her characters live out from day to day. In her stories, Mrs. Jhabvala expresses the weariness of the young, their vain attempts at rebellion against the society they find oppressive
and their abject surrender to its norms. Her stories are, as our social life is, full of petty things: the parties of the wives of government officials, the self-congratulatory and self-indulgent ways of the well-to-do, the usual talk about culture, committees and so on. One is amused when she depicts a government clerk Shankar in Like Birds Like Fishes shouting at his son and brother: 'People have been talking about my family. What is my position as a government officer? Answer me!' Or when the narrator in Lekha decides 'to drop in at Mrs. Nayyar's for a chat and perhaps a cup of coffee (though the coffee she serves is never very good),' One also feels amused and unhappy to read 'The Old Lady,' which is about Leila a committee woman taken in by the West, and who is bent upon wrecking her marriage just because she can repeat a a few phrases like 'Our attitude of mind is wrong. We don't understand that divorce is a natural thing in any enlightened society' or 'Mother doesn't understand. She still thinks the marriage bond is sacred.'

Obviously, Mrs. Jhabvala has observed her Indians from close quarters. She depicts the uneasy and comic manner in which East and West meet, but only superficially.
Mrs. Jhabvala describes as no other writer writing in English has been able to describe, how funny and tragic such a meeting could be. She is too intelligent and sharp to be concerned with the exotic side of Indian life, which is favoured by the casual observer of the Indian scene. Her first collection of short stories *Like Birds Like Fishes* and her latest collection *An Experience of India* contain some of her best stories which are also among the best in the world.

All of Mrs. Jhabvala's books got rave reviews in the West. Admittedly, rave reviews don't necessarily mean much and one can't go by them. Almost any Indian writer who writes in English manages to get a few rave reviews. David McCutchion explains this phenomenon in his essay - 'The Indianness of Indian Criticism' thus: 'Bloomsbury good breeding and had colonial conscience do not make for 'clearest judgement.' Moreover, there is something odd and insulting in the manner these reviews are quoted to recommend an Indo-Anglian writer.

Fortunately, Mrs. Jhabvala needs no such recommendation. But the rave reviews her books got do, in fact, highlight some of her qualities as a writer. These reviews show that for once -- Perhaps for a change -- the reviewers
have been right and their comments about the novelist have a bearing upon her work. Reviewing her very first book To Whom She Will the TLS reviewer said: 'Mrs. Jhabvala's balance is perfect, attained as a novelist's should be at the very moment of writing. The balance is achieved in the novel as a tight-rope-walker's is in the performance of his art.' Her second novel, The Nature of Passion, roused a similar response. Reviewing it for The New Yorker, Whitney Balliet wrote, 'The Nature of Passion is an unpretentious delight done in the tradition of the 19th century comic English novel, which got its material from the muscular setting-up exercises of the rising middle-classes.'

Goronwy Rees wrote of Esmond in India in The Listener: This is Mrs. Jhabvala's third novel of life in India and every page of it is alive with the gaiety and high spirits which are such charming features of the Indian character, all the more charming because they are not incompatible with melancholy and irony.'

Reviewing A Backward Place for the Financial Times a reviewer urged 'If you have never read a novel by her start now. She is an astringent as Jane Austen.' In a
review of An Experience of India, John Reed wrote in the Christian Science Monitor: 'No Western writer I have read, not even E.M. Forster, is better equipped to deal with the mysteries of the Indian psyche than this sensitive observer.'

There is a deplorable tendency to compare Indian writers to celebrities from the West. Raja Rao, it is said is an Indian Melville and Narayan is an Indian Hawthorne. Mrs. Jhabvala has been compared to Jane Austen and Chekhov. But these comparisons do suggest themselves as one reads her works. In her earlier novels she shows all the Austenish qualities of exposing the smug self-consequence and pompous triviality, the sentimentalism and cheap romance characteristic of the middle class. 'Austen' said Sir Walter Scott, 'renders ordinary common place things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and sentiment.' These words could almost apply to Mrs. Jhabvala. In her later works, she writes in the Chekhovian manner about people who are skimming the surface of society leading futile lives and longing for happiness which eludes them.

It is most painful and unfortunate that such an accomplished writer should go unnoticed especially when
complete mediocrities and nonentities continue to be in limelight. ' She is a writer' says C.P. Snow, ' who ought to be attracting the most serious attention. There must be many readers who, like me, before this week, have known her only by name.' It does little credit to critics and readers to neglect this talented writer.

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JHABVALA DOESN'T MERELY SCOFF

(By courtesy of The Times of India)

(The Times of India, October 19, 1975)

Few writers in India today are as gifted as Jhabvala. But characteristically enough, few writers are as neglected as she is. Jhabvala has suffered greatly because stiff-necked academics harbour a host of prejudices against her. Some disturb her because they feel that she makes fun of Indians. Certain others find her novels too slow and dull and full of drab details of every day life. Still others find her language too simple to warrant any attention. Her last two books An Experience of India and A New Dominion provoked some to think that she had become hysterical. All believe that she is anti-Indian.

This is not surprising because academics in our country can appreciate satire, irony, social criticism etc. in Western literature but they cannot appreciate those very qualities in writings about India. Here fake spiritualism, tear-soaked sentimentality and bravado of types are the order of the day. Those can only draw a wry smile from Jhabvala, who is born of Jewish-Polish parents.
in Germany and educated in England. Her characters, which are drawn from real life and being what they are, antagonise her and make her satirical and ironical more and more with each new story and each new novel. Unfortunately this has created the impression that she is a mere scoffer. In an interview with the present writer Jhabvala explains what kind of a writer she is in these words: 'Perhaps I do tend to see the ridiculous aspects first, both in situations and in characters. But I don't think I just sit and laugh at them. Especially not in my later books. On the contrary, I am beginning to feel that what is ludicrous on the surface may be tragic underneath. This is especially true in India. All those Indian paradoxes and comical situations that Western writers especially like to exploit and make fun of - e.g., the B.A. failed, the banya praying with one hand and giving false weight with the other - well perhaps one laughs at first (I am afraid I used to laugh more than I should in my early books) - but afterwards you see that it is not comic at all but quite the opposite. Then one stops laughing: at which point perhaps one's writing opens up?'

( Quest 91 )
Undoubtedly there is a lot of hatred about India in Jhabvala's work. But this hatred is compounded with compassion and is itself an indication of the writer's involvement in and attachment to this country. Jhabvala is not a mere casual observer of the Indian scene. In a candid introduction to An Experience of India she says: 'I have a nice house, I do my best to live in an agreeable way. I shut all my windows, I let down the blinds, I turn on the air-conditioner: I read a lot of books, with a special preference for the great masters of the novels. All the time I know myself to be on the back of this great animal of poverty and backwardness. It is not possible to pretend otherwise. Or rather, one does pretend, but retribution follows. Even if one never rolls up the blinds and never turns off the air-conditioner, something is bound to go wrong. People are not meant to shut themselves up in rooms and pretend there is nothing outside.' (Page 10)

Obviously, she is aware of the problems of this country and these problems make her squirm in her easy chair. Fortunately she does not romanticise Indian poverty or write propaganda novels about the travails of the poor. She writes about the restlessness of the tiny minority of the rich, its infuriating stupidity and its paranoiac sensuality.
The rot and decay of this section has been the theme of most of her novels but it finds fullest expression in her latest novel *A New Dominion*. The characters in this novel make a strange assemblage of European flotsam and Indian jetsam. They have no specific occupation whatsoever and seethe with unrestrained carnality. Raymond is fond of Gopi in a homosexual way. Gopi and Asha wade through an orgy of sex. The Swami is no less lewd and lecherous. He manages to tame the rebellious Lee like he had managed to tame Evie and Margaret. All the characters in this novel wallow in sloth and depravity and they enjoy doing it. Nothing else matters for them. Of course, there is that America-returned engineer with his American nickname Bob who attempts to set up industries in the desert but his attempts, his zeal, all look pathetic because he does not understand the spirit of the country, and is too brash to know his own fate.

In her short stories Jhabvala deals with weariness and emptiness that envelope some sad souls. In all her stories there is a note of lingering sadness which never fails to affect the reader. A beautiful short story *The Widow* is the story of Durga, a young widow who has to suppress her desires, deny herself all comforts and bow
before the machinations of useless and greedy relatives.
In a moment of anguish she tells her boy-lover - ' If you
know how empty my life has been, how lonely ! ' One wonders
whether the tragedy of being a widow in a Hindu society
has been described better. The Aliens is about the
estrangement and sufferings of an English girl Peggy, who
marries an Indian. Everyday her sensibility is offended by
what seems to her the coarseness of her husband's relatives.
She wants to fight against this by asking her husband to
stay independently but then staying independently without
the interference of one's relatives is an alien concept and
she realizes it rather too late. Her other stories deal
with Europeans stuck in India and Indians who are victims
of the violence of their uncontrollable desires.

Of course, after reading her novels and short stories
one gets the impression that a deity with infinitely greater
power to corrupt and deprave than Circe rules over this
country. And then naturally one wonders whether she is not
anti-India. There are two ways to tackle this issue.
Either one may call the writer anti-Indian and dismiss all
disturbing thoughts from one's mind or one may turn inward
and see reality. If one takes the second course one sees in Jhabvala a writer gifted with the art and finesse of Chekhov and one who is humane and sympathetic notwithstanding a grim dark vision of India.

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