CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Biography, Background and Tradition

***

*
Ruth Prawer Jhabvala was born on May 7, 1927 in Cologne, Germany, to Marcus Prawer, a lawyer, and Eleonora (Cohn) Prawer. Hitler took power about the time that her elementary education began, and she and her elder brother, Siegbert Salomon Prawer, attended segregated Jewish schools before the family moved to England as refugees in April, 1939. She was enrolled briefly in Stock Park Secondary School in Coventry, and after the family settled in Hendon, a suburb of London, she went to Hendon County School and then to Queen Mary College, London University, where she majored in English literature. She wrote a thesis titled 'The Short Story in England' for her M.A. degree, which she earned in 1951. She had become a British citizen in 1948.

Among the students Ruth Prawer met at London University was Cyrus S.H. Jhabvala, an Indian architect. They were married on June 16, 1951 and left England to make their home in the old, quiet section of New Delhi. They have three daughters. Renana and Firoza are studying economics and music, respectively, in the United States and Ava is studying architecture in England.
Ruth Jhabvala's brother, Siegbert Prawer, is Professor of German literature at Oxford University. After having stayed in India for a quarter of a century, Ruth Jhabvala moved to New York City in 1976 and was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship, which gave her a year to write without the need to publish. During the period of the fellowship, Jhabvala did transitional writing. Since she moved to America, she has written the screenplay of an American movie called 'Rose Land.'

During the years Jhabvala was in India, she wrote eight novels and published four collections of short stories. She also wrote the screenplay of The Householder (Merchant - Ivory, 1963), which James Ivory directed. In collaboration with Ivory, she also wrote the script for Shakespeare Wallah (Merchant - Ivory, 1965), a film about a small troupe of English actors touring India in Shakespearean plays. Again working with James Ivory, she wrote the screenplay for The Guru (Merchant - Ivory, 1969). Another collaboration with Ivory resulted in the screenplay of Bombay Talkie (Merchant - Ivory, 1970). In yet another collaboration with him she wrote the script for Autobiography of a Princess (Merchant - Ivory, 1975).
Jhabvala is Polish-German by birth, English by education and Indian by marriage. She stayed in the land of her birth for nearly twelve years. She spent almost the same number of years in England. She has lived in India for over a quarter of a century. In my interview with her, I asked her whether she considered herself an Indian writer. She replied: 'No, how could I be? I'm not, am I? There is 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.' Undoubtedly, she belongs to the tradition of 'Anglo-Indian' writers. But since English is not her mother tongue, she has also something in common with writers as R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand, who write in English, though English is not their mother tongue. The problem of communicating a native sensibility in an alien language is very aptly summed up by Raja Rao in his foreword to *Kanthapura*. He says: 'One has to convey in a language that is not one's own, the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain
thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language.' Jhabvala's situation was even more complicated because she had to use a language not her own and write about people not her own.

Among the Anglo-Indian writers the most important are Meadows Taylor, Rudyard Kipling and E.M. Forster. Taylor's _Seeta, Tara_ and _Ralph Darnell_ are written in the style of 19th century historical romances. Taylor tried to assess the possibilities of a cultural synthesis between Hindus, Muslims and the British. _Tara_ deals with the events of 1657 in the history of India. 1657 was the year of bitter fighting between the Hindus and the Muslims. But Taylor shows in _Tara_ that in the thick of intrigue and treachery a Muslim youth saves the life of a Hindu widow, and marries her. Though Tara marries a Muslim, she is not forced to change her religion. She practises her Hindu rites in a Muslim house. The Muslim husband appreciates his Hindu wife's religion and the Hindu wife appreciates the customs of her Muslim husband, and social, religious and cultural prejudices are overcome. _Ralph Darnell_ deals with the events of 1757 in Indian history. 1757 was the year of the battle of Plassey and
'Black Hole'. It was a time when the English and the Muslims were locked in a struggle for power. Hard-core romantic that he is, Taylor depicts the marriage of an Englishman to a Muslim woman in this turbulent year to prove that such a marriage creates an inter-cultural bridge. The Seeta deals with the events of 1857, the year of the Indian Mutiny. Taylor takes up this year to show once again that Indians and the British could come together. In his fiction Taylor makes a strong plea for cultural synthesis. Jhabvala does not share Taylor's romantic fervour. In her art and vision Jhabvala is closer to Rudyard Kipling than to any other Anglo-Indian writer. Kipling's realism, his art of creating characters and his concerns are close to Jhabvala's own. Jhabvala's fiction echoes Kipling's famous lines: 'Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.' But Kipling was fascinated by the mystic, the occult, the supernatural and the spiritual. His art is more variegated than Jhabvala's. He uses beast-fables, allegory and fantasy with an equal ease. Jhabvala's interests do not lie that way. Like Kipling, E.M. Forster also was not unduly optimistic about the possibility of a cultural synthesis between the East and the West though he was definitely drawn to many things on the Indian scene. Forster reaches this
conclusion in spite of his Bloomsbury breeding and liberalism. The ending of *A Passage to India* suggests that the differences in the personalities of the English and the Indian were far too pronounced and that the possibility of the two coming together was remote. Forster, however, expressed his doubts about the two coming together in too refined and sophisticated a manner to offend anybody. Forster adopted the symbolic mode which suited the ambivalence of his vision.

Jhabvala's gifts are of another kind. She is mundane and matter-of-fact. She possesses a sharp, cool intelligence which can see through pretension and humbug. She is too down-to-earth and realistic a writer to be carried away by sentiment. She views things ironically and her handling of the material is more drastic, straightforward and prosaic than that of the big three Anglo-Indian masters.

In a broader perspective, Jhabvala belongs to the tradition of the nineteenth-century comic English novelists like Dickens, Thackeray and Trollope. The post-Independence India resembles, in some ways, the nineteenth-century England. When Jhabvala came out to India, the country was passing through a period of
unusual buoyancy. The longings of the people, which had been suppressed by centuries of subjection, had suddenly taken wing and started soaring high. The democratic faith that Indians had adopted had enkindled a sense of release and freedom among all sections of society. In the sudden momentum the country had gathered, the old and the new, the rich and the poor, the good and the bad made a common cause and marched hand in glove. The situation was ripe for Thackeray to be reborn to depict the tremendous push of the middle-class forces, their gross acquisitiveness, their fake religiosity, their snobbery, and for Dickens to describe the effects of high expectations that the spurt in Indian economy kindled among the more thrifty and cunning traders. As a student of English literature, Jhabvala had studied these writers. She resembles Thackeray in more senses than one. Her world is the world of Delhi as Thackeray's is the world of London. Like Thackeray, she writes in a detached satirical manner about self-interest, parasitism, and snobbery. Like him again, she has a cool observer's eye. She resembles Dickens in the sense that, like him, she too deals in inflated types.
II

Jhabvala has been compared both to Jane Austen and Chekhov. In my interview with her, I asked her whether she had consciously modelled her writing after these writers. She replied:

I have not 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—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? May be. 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 my 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 Turgenev and Chekhov were always writing about.†

Jhabvala shows an admirable awareness of the problems implicit in her practice of the art of the novel in the Indian situation. She considers herself as essentially a serious artist. In the interview with me she says:

Perhaps I do tend to see the ridiculous aspects first, both in situations and 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?

Jhabvala's writing becomes more and more serious as she becomes more and more aware of the Indian realities. As a novelist she communicates this awareness in her fiction. The problems of communication raise their heads but the urgency of her experience overcomes them. In an article called 'Moon Light, Jasmine and Rickets,' Jhabvala says:

When one writes about India as a European and in English (as I do), inevitably one writes not for Indian but for Western readers. Problems of
communication present themselves: how to translate the idiom of one language into another, how to present a scene to an audience unfamiliar with its most obvious ingredients (such as temples, bazars, and motorcycle rickshaws).

All these problems, however, very quickly disappear — not because they have been solved but because a much larger one swallows them up, and that is how, to explain within the limits of Western terms and concepts, what it is like to live in India.  

In her autobiographical essay called 'Myself in India', Jhabvala explains what, according to her, are the striking features of India and how she was preoccupied with them during her stay there. 'The most salient fact about India,' says Jhabvala, 'is that it is very poor and very backward.' Though Jhabvala thinks that India is very poor and very backward, she does not write about the poor in India, because she never lived with the poor and could not write about them with first-hand experience. As the wife of a prosperous architect in Delhi, she lived and mixed with people from the rising middle class. It is
this class she knows best and mainly writes about. But as a novelist she is sharp enough to see how poverty affects the behaviour of the rich in India, how it determines their life-style and conditions their attitudes. In the article called 'Moon Light, Jasmine and Rickets', referred to above, she says:

And yet, while wondering at their own attitude, my Western characters wonder still more at that of the Indian characters. One of these Western characters may be invited to a wedding — a festive scene where fairy lights twinkle, the tables are loaded with pilafs and kebabs and the guests with ornaments and brocades, the bandsmen play.

No one seems to notice that the bandsmen have no shoes, that gazing in at the front there is a rabble of children suffering from rickets and eye disease while at the back, where the waste food goes, a rabble of grownups is holding out old tins. Don't Indians see? My Western character asks. Several
weddings later it begins to dawn on him that perhaps they do see -- they have been doing so much longer than he has, for generations and centuries. It may be the reason why they eat so frenziedly, because when you have seen for that long, you may be tempted to grab all you can while you can and help yourself with both hands to whatever gifts are, for the moment, miraculously held out to you.

Indian poverty, material and spiritual, is Jhabvala's central preoccupation. In 'Myself in India' included in An Experience of India, Jhabvala 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 novel. 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.

Indian heat and time are Jhabvala's other preoccupations. Jhabvala is preoccupied with them in the same manner she is preoccupied with Indian poverty. She seems to believe that in a tropical country heat becomes the most dominant single element that determines the character of the place. Western writers writing about India have often described the debilitating effect of Indian heat but Jhabvala writes about it with the urgency of a personal calamity:

Sometimes, when I think of my life, it seems to have contracted to this one point and to be concentrated in this one room, and it is always a very hot, very long afternoon when the air-conditioner has failed. I cannot describe
the oppression of such afternoons. It is a physical oppression -- heat pressing down on me and pressing in the walls and ceiling and congealing together with time which has stood still and will never move again. And it is not only those two -- heat and time -- that are playing their weight on me but behind them, or held within them, there is something more which I can only describe as the whole of India.10

As a novelist Jhabvala shows how poverty affects the behaviour and attitudes of the rich on the one hand and how it affects Indian spirituality on the other.

If you live, or see others live in what sometimes seems like hell, you may begin to believe in heaven -- of which, by the way, India does not leave you without some slight intimations (for instance, in the nights laden with moonlight and jasmine, that follow the dusty days).
And once there is news of such a superior place, it is only natural no longer to care very much about what happens here. Or what happens now, for one's sense of time also seems to change.'

Jhabvala suggests in this passage that Indian spirituality is an escape from Indian poverty. Jhabvala has said time and again that India demoralises Europeans who come out to stay here. This is also a major theme in her novels and short stories.

III

All of Jhabvala's books have been published in Britain and America. Most of her stories have appeared in English and American magazines of high repute such as Encounter, London Magazine, Cornhill Magazine and The New Yorker and she enjoys a high reputation in the West. H.M. Williams, for example, says: 'Perhaps, at least in the technical sense, she is the best fiction writer now writing in and about India.' In yet another article published in Twentieth Century Literature called 'The Yogi and the Babbitt: Themes and characters of the
new India in the novels of R. Prawer Jhabvala,' he analyses how the notions of heroic virtue and religious non-attachment in the Hindu context are embodied in key characters in her novels in such a way as to suggest the futility and self-defeat of the Babbitt's pursuit of wealth and power as ends. Williams says that Jhabvala is essentially a novelist of manners rather than of ideas. He feels that she enlists our sympathy for the corrupt ageing bourgeois by loading the dice against him. Williams has also written a monograph on Jhabvala.

It is not so much in the number of articles or full-length studies of Jhabvala's work that one can judge the warm response given to her in the West, as seen in the high praise showered by reviewers of British and American dailies and magazines. The TLS reviewed each one of her books. So did The Times, Observer, Punch, The New Yorker and scores of other reputed journals. All these journals were unanimous in their high estimation of Jhabvala's art. As a sample quote here from a review of An Experience of India by John Reed 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.
The most striking evidence of the recognition of Jhabvala's achievement is the Booker Prize which *Heat and Dust* won for her.

The Indian critical response to Jhabvala's works has been a mixed one. Dr. K.R. S. Iyengar discusses her work in his pioneering *Indian Writing in English*. He praises Jhabvala for her 'engagingly entertaining art,' and for being 'a consummate portraitist of social life in Delhi.' But Jhabvala does not figure in full-length studies of Indo-English fiction by Paul C. Verghese and Meenakshi Mukherjee. Verghese has stated his reasons for not including Jhabvala in his book, *The Indian Creative Writer in English*. In his preface Verghese says: 'In this book I am concerned only with the fourth category of Indian writing in English and have discussed only those writers (a) who are of Indian stock and (b) who have used the English language for creative expression. I have thus excluded a discussion of R. P. Jhabvala who has in her novels competently dealt with urban life in India.' Meenakshi Mukherjee has also forwarded the same argument for bypassing her in her book called *The Twice Born Fiction*. In the 'Preamble', she says: 'I have, however, restricted my use of the term Indo-Anglian to include only the writings of those who
are Indian and who have written in English. Thus I have left out writers like R.P. Jhabvala and V.S. Naipaul.' Jhabvala does not figure in Critical Essays On Indian Writing in English published by Karnatak University.

A few articles on Jhabvala have appeared in Indian Journals. Meena Belliappa published an article in The Banasthali Patrika called 'A Study of Jhabvala's Fiction'. Belliappa points out Jhabvala's art of exploiting human incongruities. The article was written in 1969, and Belliappa could only see the promise that Jhabvala's fiction held out at that time. More recently, Shyam Asnani published an article in The Journal of Indian Writing in English. The article is a thematic study of Jhabvala's novels. C. Paul Verghese criticizes Jhabvala in a short note on Esmond in India published in The Journal of Indian Writing in English. He says: 'I am certain that Mrs. Jhabvala's understanding of India is not deep and that she just skims over the surface of urban life in India.' He further says, 'her preoccupations are only with the superficial concepts of Indian life.' Verghese says that Jhabvala suffers from 'a lack of empathy' and 'an inability to get inside the skin of her Indian characters owing to the linguistic
and cultural gap between them and her." Dr. V.A. Shahane's *Ruth Prawer Jhabvala* is the only full-length extended study of Jhabvala's novels and short stories to date. Dr. Shahane's thesis is that the structural pattern of Jhabvala's novels resembles the form of 'New Comedy'. Dr. Shahane concludes that Jhabvala's art is technically perfect but she is mostly preoccupied with the environment only, with India as its focal point. He says:

The vision of Lawrence finds an objectification in his technique projecting a passionate, private world of values. But in Ruth Prawer Jhabvala the bushes are neat and green, but they do not burn. There may be writers in whose work there is burning but no bush, whereas in Jhabvala there is a bush, but it does not burn.27

The most hostile attacks on Jhabvala are seen in the reviews of *A New Dominion*, *Heat and Dust*, and *How I Became a Holy Mother* published in *The Times of India*. In these reviews Jhabvala is attacked for her lack of real insights, surfacial observation, sneering attitude, dead-pan style and stunted characters. The attacks are
so spirited that they need to be illustrated. In a review of *A New Dominion* Eunice de Souza remarks:

The objection is not so much to the fact that virtually every Indian character in the novel is worthless as to the fact that all Ms. Jhabvala's insights about them are disastrously hackneyed and surfacial. What Ms. Jhabvala does is to create a set of Indian ducks she can attack with impunity. Does she really think that the fact that swamis are often fake is news for us, or that we don't know that many of our politicians are hypocrites?  

Nissim Ezekiel, the noted Indo-Anglian poet, criticizes Jhabvala not because she offers no insights into Indian life but because he thinks that her fiction is flawed by her inability to fully realize her characters. In a review of *Heat and Dust* Ezekiel says: 'Jhabvala's major weakness as a novelist is her inability to create any genuinely complex or even simple inner life for her characters.' Ezekiel also found fault with Jhabvala's
prose and another critic, Meenakshi Mukherjee agrees with him. In a review of *How I Became a Holy Mother*, Meenakshi Mukherjee says that Jhabvala repeats herself again and again and that 'her style, too, consistently reduces and distances. The reader never really gets involved because of the deliberately dead-pan tone, and her devices of detachment preclude all possibility of our ever knowing the characters from inside.'

My own approach to Jhabvala's work differs from the Indian approach. I think that Jhabvala offers real insights into Indian life and that she is a serious writer, not a mere scoffer. I think that her fiction is in the tradition of writers like Dickens and Thackeray and that it is not flawed as other Indian critics think.

As a novelist, Jhabvala did not feel happy in India. In an interview with Yolanta May she says:

Very few people have read what I have written and they certainly haven't liked it. Just before I came here there was an article headed 'Is Ms. Jhabvala anti-Indian?' If you don't say that India is simply paradise on earth, and the Hindu joint family the most perfect way of organising society, you're anti-Indian. I could count my supporters in India, or even people who have read me there on the fingers of one hand.
As she has pointed out, she has very few readers and she has hardly any real admirers. In the interview with Yolanta May she further says: 'Every writer is lonely but I don't think there's greater loneliness than being a writer in India.' Significantly enough, only three of her books have been published in Indian editions. Perhaps Jhabvala left India because of the loneliness of which she talks in the interview with May.

The present thesis aims to explain the nature of Jhabvala's art. It makes an attempt to point out how deep is her understanding of Indian mores and how she copes with her Indian experience. In the chapters that follow I discuss her novels in a chronological order. My emphasis is on Jhabvala's method of choosing her material and of presenting it in fictional terms. In the process, I also offer my interpretations of her work.