CHAPTER IV

ESMOND IN INDIA

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*Esmond in India* is set in India which has had years of Independence. The British living in India are no longer the rulers but visitors, some of whom have overstayed and got mixed up with the natives. Esmond is an Englishman who just about forgets to return home and stays on to guide tourists around the ruins of the ancient country. He falls in love with an Indian beauty called Gulab and marries her. He is very fastidious and wants his house to be kept clean and beautiful. He wants Gulab to take to Western ways of life which she refuses to do. He wants her to be his companion and expects her to be an asset in his career as an expert on Indian culture. But Gulab dislikes moving out. She feels uncomfortable in the company of foreigners with whom she has little to exchange. Ravi, their son, becomes a matter of dispute between them. Esmond wants him to be fed on boiled English food and to sleep in a separate bed. Gulab, true to her tradition, wants to give him spicy and oily Indian dishes and pet him all the time. She puts a lot of oil in hair, uses strong scents and eats oily food and sleeps most of the time. These things irritate Esmond and he becomes
rough and inconsiderate. He starts treating Gulab with contempt but Gulab bears his contempt with meekness which gets on his nerves and in one of the many scenes between them he says: 'You'd be the original dumb blonde, if you were that, were blonde, I mean.' 'Yes,' she says. A little further, Esmond says: 'You have got what I only call a wonderful propensity to squalor. Tell me now, if pressed on the point, would you call yourself a slut?' 'Yes please?' she asks politely. In another scene: 'You animal,' he muttered through clenched teeth, 'why did you go away when I told you to stay home?' He inflicts physical pain on her and behaves like a 'frightful bully.'

Though Gulab bears the bullying of her husband meekly, her mother Uma does not. She worries herself to death and constantly keeps asking Gulab to leave her husband for good, but Gulab, true to type, considers Esmond her lord who could treat her as he liked. Esmond and Gulab are unable to understand each other and so their marriage becomes a cold affair. Bored and irritated, Esmond goes out for a picnic to Agra and gets involved in an affair with Shakuntala, a silly college girl. When
Esmond goes out to meet her again in a market place, his servant finds Gulab alone and advances towards her and puts his hand on her breast. This enrages the usually docile Gulab. She becomes furious and repulses the servant. She knows instinctively that it is time for her to leave her husband. He had failed in his duty to protect her. She could bear any kind of roughness from her husband, but she did expect him to protect her chastity and it is on this account that she leaves him. Esmond meets Shakuntala in a busy market-place and finds her in an ecstatic mood. But sadly enough, when he looks down into her eyes, - large and shining and brimful of joy - they remind him of Gulab's eyes as they had been when he was first married to her. This perhaps suggests that Shakuntala will be another Gulab in course of time.

Jhabvala, at one level, deals with the clash between two cultures in its simplest aspects. Putting oil in the hair, eating fried food or the smell coming from the kitchen is a trivial thing, but perhaps she means to suggest that life is made of trivialities and much depends on them in our day-to-day life. Besides, she
also shows the basic differences between the English and the Indian characters that keep them apart. According to her, the English are rational and the Indians emotional. Thus the clash between the two is also a clash between two conceptions of culture.

The other theme which Jhabvala takes up is the theme of social and political change in post-Independence India. In *To Whom She Will* Jhabvala suggested in passing how Nirad Chakravarty and men like him had worked for Independence and how, when it came, they were dismayed because it brought to the front a new breed of people who took advantage of its backwardness and, by sheer manipulation, became rich and powerful and indulged in a vulgar display of their wealth. The values Nirad and men like him had cherished were throttled, and a frivolous society forged ahead. In *Esmond in India* this theme is dealt with more sharply. Ramnath had been to Cambridge. He came of a rich family and could have settled down to a comfortable life. But he cared more for the freedom of the country and went to jail. His domestic life was disrupted by his long absences. He forced his wife to part with her jewellery and lead an austere life. He instilled the same spirit in his son
Narayan. Narayan is a doctor and chooses to work in remote villages without even basic comforts. Ramnath's friend Har Dayal too had been to Cambridge, but he had returned home to make money. His son Amrit, like his father, takes up a lucrative job with an English firm. Consequently, Ramnath remains poor and destitute, whereas Har Dayal becomes rich and respectable. He presides over meetings and attends parties. He makes speeches at grand functions while Ramnath moves about the streets as a distraught, nondescript and sick old man. Har Dayal and the members of his family look down upon Ramnath and Narayan.

Jhabvala's understanding of Indian women is greater than her understanding of Indian men. Of all the Indo-Anglian and Anglo-Indian novelists, she alone has been able to depict their excessive possessiveness, bickering and domineering nature, their greed and soft-headedness. Uma, after the death of her husband, lives only to feed her daughter. There is not a moment in her life when she is not thinking of Gulab. Uma is a reincarnation of Radha. She does not let Gulab live
peacefully with Esmond, she does not let her brother Ramnath live in peace because she thinks Gulab should leave her husband and come back to her. Laxmi is all the time fretting about her son Narayan, and scolds her husband for squandering away all the family property. Madhuri keeps asking her husband about her son Raj, who is at Cambridge. These women are like tigresses guarding their children, and they are all tremendously possessive.

Shakuntala is an extension of the Amrita and Nimmi image. Like Amrita and Nimmi, she is brought up in an upper-middle class family. Her father, like Nimmi's, sends her to college. Amrita, in her bid to be modern, wants to be married to Hari and does not bother to find out whether he was the right man for her. Shakuntala goes out a step further and offers herself to the middle-aged Esmond. In a most pathetic manner she says: 'Let me be your slave, please allow me. I want to humble myself before you.'

Obviously, there is a shift in emphasis in Esmond in India. Amrita's flirtation with Hari is an adolescent affair. Nimmi's affair with Phiroz is youthful folly,
but Shakuntala's infatuation with Esmond, who is married to her cousin, is something that leaves a bad taste in the mouth. In To Whom She Will Mird Chakravarty's disappointments are merely hinted at but Ramnath's disappointment is shown in a greater detail. In Hari's acceptance of the parental authority there is a touch of regret. But Gulab's acceptance of the role of a meek wife is shown without any redeeming qualities. Esmond, an Englishman, is a pathetic figure in Independent India. He earns his living by giving lectures on Indian culture which he hates. But he cannot show his hatred. He was attracted towards India the way he was attracted towards Gulab, but staying in India and with Gulab under the same roof soon makes him realize that underneath the beautiful facade there is something which causes real repulsion. As Gulab proves to be a slovenly woman, India, the land of Taj Mahal, turns out to be a scene of unredeemed poverty:

The ramshackle huts which served as shops, the wilting array of fruits and vegetables and sweetmeats, the old men who sat on broken stringbeds and puffed at their hookahs, the dirty dogs shuffling around for refuge, the
hordes of naked brown children with huge eyes and charms tied round their necks with black string - so persistent, so monotonous, drenched in eternal white light. And always, encompassing everything and holding it in its vast bowl, the Indian sky — an unchanging unending expanse of white-blue glare, the epitome of meaningless monotony which dwarfed all human life into insignificance. There was no romance about life in India, Esmond knew: only for the tourists, he bitterly thought, who clapped their hands in delight over what was, he knew, only shabbiness and poverty repeated to a point where the spirit yawned at the boredom and futility of it all.3

Esmond's unhappiness arises from the fact of his being trapped in India:

... He was trapped, quite trapped. Here in this flat which he had tried to make so elegant and charming, but which she had managed to fill completely with her animal presence. His senses revolted at the thought of her, of her greed and smell and languor, her passion for meat and for spices and strong perfumes. She was everywhere; everywhere
he felt her --- in the heat saturating
the air which clung to him and enveloped
him as in a sheath of perspiration; in
the sugarcane juice, which the people in
the streets were drinking and which he
could almost taste, filled up with dust
and germs and too much sweetness; in the
faint but penetrating smell of over-ripe
fruit; everywhere, she was everywhere, and
he felt himself stifling in her softness
and her warmth. 4

He turns to Betty because Betty can talk his own
language and share his attitudes. During their Agra trip
Shakuntala falls for him. He does not want to get
involved with her, but Shakuntala forces herself on him.
His stay in India, his precarious financial position, his
marriage to an Indian woman, the treatment he metes out
to her and his affair with Shakuntala render him an
insensitive, bullying, irritable and irritating character.
Of all the characters in Jhabvala's novels, Esmond is the
most intelligent. He can see through the glittering facade
of the land of the Taj. He can see the poverty and shabbiness
and muddle of India. He can articulate his own
predicament. He is sensitive but
India rubs him the wrong way. *Esmond in India* confirms Nirad Chaudhuri's contention in *The Continent of Circe* that there is something in Indian climate which dwarfs human spirit.

Obviously, in *Esmond in India* Jhabvala is in a less tolerant and forgiving mood than she was in her earlier novels. The change was noticed by reviewers too. This is perhaps because she is no longer totally detached from the scene she writes about. In the earlier novels she was an observer but in this novel she is confronted by her own experience of India. Hence the intensity and the passion.

*Esmond in India* gives a premonition of the present cultural and social situation in India. Jhabvala has a limited purview but she limits it to maintain her strength. *Esmond in India* is concerned, as many significant novels are concerned, with the problem of appearance and reality. Esmond becomes a victim of appearances -- The Taj and Gulab's eyes deep sad eyes which, he thought were full of all the wisdom of the East. When he wakes up to reality --- the poverty that surrounds the Taj and the mere blank eyes of Gulab --- it is too late.
The connections between Jhabvala's earlier novel, *The Nature of Passion* and *Esmond in India* are obvious. Just as Lalaji accepts the fact that he was born with the nature of a rich man and that it was his duty to keep becoming richer and richer, Gulab in *Esmond in India* almost instinctively accepts the code of conduct for Indian wives as it is stipulated in the holy books of the Hindus. In fact the code is a part of her personality:

Gulab was never, in anything, undecided -- probably because she did not form decisions about anything but followed whatever her instinct dictated. And just as before her instinct had told her that she must, whatever he might do to her, stay with Esmond, since he was her husband and therefore her God, so now it told her that she must leave him. She was quite sure about it; so sure that she did not have to sit and reflect but could at once start getting her things out, ready to pack them.

It was a husband's right, so her instinct told her, to do whatever he liked with his wife. He could treat her well or badly, pamper her or beat her -- that was up to him, and it was not her place to complain. But in return there was one thing, only one,
that he owed her, and that was his protection. It was his duty to see that she was safe in his house and that no stranger could cast insulting eyes on her. Esmond had failed in that duty: so now he was no more her husband. Nor she his wife, and since she considered herself defiled, she could not remain in his house any longer but had to return, as was the custom, to her own people.

A conversation between Uma and Ramnath throws further light on this phenomenon:

'Why not?' Ramnath repeated. 'Because our women are so. What can you do with them?' 'Are so what?' said Uma, though she knew perfectly well what he meant. 'So like animals, like cows,' he said with sudden revulsion. 'Beat them, starve them, maltreat them how you like, they will sit and look with animal eyes and never raise a hand to defend themselves, saying 'do with me what you will, you are my husband, my God, it is my duty to submit to my God.' 'It is true, a husband is a woman's God, it is written so in all our old books. And please also see how Sita submitted to Ram: she
followed him into the wilderness and afterwards, when he banished her, she turned and went without one word, though she was innocent.'

'Please try and think rationally. This is the trouble with all of you, always you must bring in those primitive myths whose original meaning has been lost or at least has no longer any bearing or significance for us, and you apply them or rather force them and squeeze them into every cranny of your lives.'

This is exactly what Lalaji did and this is exactly what Gulab does in *Esmond* in India.

In *The Nature of Passion*, Jhabvala depicted the unbridled reign of money and crude imitation of the West, marching hand in hand with moribund orthodoxy. She also depicted Lalaji's largeness of heart and familial affection. If Lalaji accepts his acquisitiveness, he does so as something preordained, and he is not happy about it. The balance between his two interests -- money and family -- defines his personality. *The Nature of Passion* and the earlier novel *To Whom She Will* were written in the first flush of Jhabvala's youthful stay
in India. But even in these novels she did not fail
to see that hypocrisy and humbug were characteristics
of the rising upper-middle class urban society. In
her third novel, we see the balance of her earlier
novels tilted slightly towards the negative aspects
and, therefore, her ironies become sharper and her
writing becomes more satirical. It is in this respect
that Esmond in India is a more serious novel than her
earlier ones.

The theme of East-West encounter has been one of
the most favourite themes of Indo-Anglian as well as
Anglo-Indian writers. It presupposes an awareness of
the interaction between two cultures and an attempt to
come to terms with them. The Indo-Anglian writers such
as B. Rajan, Mulk Raj Anand, Santha Rama Rau and Raja Rao
have dealt with it in a uniform manner. There is usually
a hero who has stayed in the West and, on his return, is
faced with the problem of adjustment. The protagonist
is initially enamoured of the West but soon realizes
that it is his own country where he belongs. In The
Twice Born Fiction Meenakshi Mukherjee studies how the
theme is handled by individual writers and comes to the conclusion that 'the Indo-Anglian novelist more often than not is trying to reconcile within himself two conflicting systems of value.'

The Anglo-Indian novelists treated this theme in a different manner. Meadows Taylor attempted it in *Seeta, Tara* and *Ralph Darnell*. Meadows Taylor wrote in the tradition of the 19th century historical novel and the theme in his hands gets a romantic treatment. Kipling tried to understand the mystery of the East in his novel *Kim*, but in his other writings there is a great deal of racial arrogance which precludes proper understanding of cultural differences, tensions or reconciliations. In *The Continent of Circe*, Nirad Chaudhuri says: 'I often say that *Wind in the Willows* is the fable of the Englishman at home, and *The Jungle Book* that of the Englishman in India.' Chaudhuri thinks that the 'Red Dog' is a story made of a fable out of the Mutiny. It was E.M. Forster who took up the theme of East-West encounter more seriously than any of his predecessors. In *A Passage to India* he makes an attempt to understand the spirit and the meaning of India. He
also tries to probe whether it is possible for the Englishman to be friends with Indians. 'Forster's judgement', says Benita Parry, 'seems to be that, if East and West cannot meet, this is evidence of the limitations of man. Yet it would seem that he does not regard them as immutable; his hope, the hope of the novel, is surely that the final 'No, not yet' can be transcended.' This is a fair judgement. In *Esmond in India* Jhabvala takes up the theme of East-West encounter where Forster left it off. But she adopts a totally different method of dealing with it. Forster raises it to religious and mystical levels; Jhabvala brings it down to the mundane. Forster used symbol and rhythm to convey his meaning. Jhabvala uses a plain matter-of-fact style to do so. Forster's characters are 'round' in the sense that they grow. Jhabvala's characters are 'flat' in the sense that they remain static.' The main effect in *A Passage to India*, 'says E.K. Brown, is I believe, of order in the universe, but order that can be merely glimpsed, never seized for sure'. The effect of *Esmond in India* is a heightened awareness of how cultural differences can get on one another's nerves and how they can cause unhappiness.