AN EVALUATION OF A BACKWARD PLACE
CHAPTER—VII

AN EVALNATION OF:
A BACKWARD PLACE

I must admit that I am no longer interested in India.
What I am interested in now is myself in India—which...I tend to think of as my survival in India.¹

A years previous to making this remark in “My self in India”, Ruth Jhabvala published her sixth novel *A Backward Place* (1965).² The novel is significant in this that it anticipates the change in her sensibility admitted to in “Myself in India”. It also indicates the direction her writing was to take in the future. From this time onwards Ruth Jhabvala is seen to be relinquishing her hitherto near exclusive preoccupation with Intra-India interactions and accommodating the concern of her literary ancestors with the Indo-European. In this novel and the two that follow—*A New Dominion* (1972) and *Heat and Dust* (1975) there us a perceptible shift from the depiction of Indians adapting to or resisting a changing social climate to that of Europeans endeavouring to assimilate or shake off an alien culture.

In *A Backward Place* Ruth Jhabvala’s efforts are primarily directed at transmuting her own complex
response to India into the varied responses of her European characters. Her statement that her interest is now centred on herself in India does not indicate, as some readers may imagine, a simplistic identification with her European characters. *A Backward Place* articulates, very subtly and skillfully, the author's conflicting emotional and intellectual responses to India during this phase of her life. The responses are sometimes affirming, sometimes negative and at others ambivalent. But each response is truthfully recorded and assessed without bias. Presenting her European characters in various phases of the cycle of response that she believes all Westerners to go through in India, Ruth Jhabvala etches their destinies in relation to the quality of their response to an alien rhythm of life.

Four out of the five expatriates in *A Backward Place* bring to their Indian experience attitudes inherited from their colonial predecessors and are, like them, turning the alleged backwardness of India to personal advantage. With a changed environment, they can no longer claim their privileges as a racial prerogative but are reduced to striking certain postures. The Hochstadtts justify their presence in India by pretending to advance the cause of East-West synthesis. Clarissa professes a devotion to Indian spiritualism she does not even vaguely feel. Etta, who declares she is being submerged in a lower culture, flatters
and wheedles money out of men from India's least cultured section—the baniya or business class. All the postures are recognized as false and Ruth Jhabvala un_masks her Westerns as pitilessly as she unmasked their Indian counterparts in her earlier novels. Though her European characters share some of her attributes; convey from time to time her enthusiasms, desperations and intellectualizing tendencies—yet, pitted against an India of infinite complexity and mystery, they have their pretensions punctured, sometimes by each other but more often by the impartial authorial voice.

Like E. M. Forster’s India, the India of *A Backward Place* is an area in which the alien spirit is put to a strenuous test. India traps, rejects or embraces her aliens as they deserve—assimilating the worthy and expelling or destroying the unworthy. The ideal of worth as it is embodied in the novel and in *Heat and Dust* is also derived from Forsterian ideology. Forster detected in the gloom of modern civilization “an aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate and the plucky,” the members of which bring to their experience of life approaches and attitudes that ensure happiness. Nowhere, Ruth Jhabvala recognizes, are sensitivity, consideration and courage more in demand than in India. With her “tendency to constant self-analysis”, she realises that while she herself possesses the first quality she
is deficient in the other two. However she cannot but respect them in others. Thus, her final point of view is conveyed through the consciousness of a woman who is least like her in character and spirit. Judy’s voice—the voice that affirms all experience—is Jhabvala’s voice in *A Backward Place*. This spirit of affirmation is the basic element that goes into the making of the character of worth in the novel. Vasant Shahane’s comments on this aspect of *A Backward Place* are noteworthy:

*The most significant aspect of A Backward Place which strikes me as a major element of Jhabvala’s thought process is the dominant voice of affirmation which rings true and clear in the various chambers in the novel who says “aye” to all the challenges that her life and experience present to her. More than Etta, more than Clarissa, Judy represents the authentic voice, the dominant note of this international orchestration in A Backward Place.*

Affirmation however, is not enough in *A Backward Place* as the approaches of Clarissa and the Hochstadts indicate. Affirmation, in the novelist’s implication, should be guided by intelligence, discrimination and honesty. Ruth Jhabvala’s representation of worth, in the novel, is analogous to Forster’s characterization of humanism when he writes about Andre Gide in *Two Cheers for Democracy*.
though going beyond it. Forster describes the humanist as possessing four leading characteristics—“curiosity, a free mind, belief in good taste and belief in the human race.”

“Curiosity in *A Backward Place* obviously denotes a perceptive eye for the distinctive features of an alien ethos. “A free mind” indicates an ability to rise above convention and put new ideas and ideals to the test. “Belief in good taste” implies a faith in the value of discrimination, meaning that the true humanist not only recognizes the varying needs of diverse individuals and groups but helps them to find their moorings and sources of enrichment. “Belief in the human race” implies rejection of racism and a respect for human beings under all circumstances. With honesty and intelligence added to this list of qualities, Ruth Jhabvala’s criterion of worth is complete.

Few characters, Western or Indian, measure up to this criterion in *A Backward Place*. Selfishness, cruelty, pretentiousness and hypocrisy abound in the novel and are seen as manifestations of closed attitudes and base priorities. For the Westerner, in particular, Indian experience is seen as the testing factor in the novel. Those who are open to their experience of India, respond sensitively to the diversities and are yet clear-eyed and discriminating, are blessed and drawn into her mainstream.
The one who attack and exploit her are made to stagnate or, worse still, sent rolling in a downward spiral.

The most virulent attack on India’s backwardness and the most determined resistance to assimilation comes from the neurotic ageing beauty Etta, whose parasitical tendencies are established quite early in the novel. Like the *memsahibs* of colonial India, she loathes the country which has provided her with a luxurious living for two decades and like them makes India the scapegoat for the physical and psychic ravages wrought by an unworthy approach to life. For years she has traded her youth and beauty for materialistic returns and now that that they show signs of diminishing she convinces herself and is continually trying to convince others that the fault lies with the primitive society in which she is trapped. The backwardness of India is, in effect, her theme song. Her revulsion expresses itself in a hysterical rejection of the climate which plays havoc with her complexion and the poverty and squalor with which she is forced to rub shoulders. Etta, unlike her creator, is not horrified at the lot of the poor in India. She simply minds their existence. Etta, in her own estimation, is the supreme victim of India. In her unbalanced emotional state, she has contrived to make herself believe that her years in India have been lost to her, or sacrificed to a country unworthy of the favour. The fact that stares her in
the face—that she has stayed on in India and will continue to do so because it is materially more rewarding than life in the West—is deliberately overlooked.

Etta's neurotic fears mirror Ruth Jhabvala's own dread of a personality crisis in India—their predicaments presenting interesting connections and contrasts. Ruth Jhabvala describes herself directly in "Myself in India" and Etta by implication in *A Backward Place* as weak-nerved and "the wrong type of person" to live in India—the right type being those who "have a mission and a cause" and are "patient, cheerful, unselfish, [and] strong." But Ruth Jhabvala's sensitivity and self-confessed "tendency to constant self-analysis"—qualities which undermine her strength and tax her powers of receptivity—are conspicuous by their absence in Etta. What then is the worth of Etta's personality which is neither active enough to engage on behalf of others nor speculative enough to turn inwards upon itself? What are the constituents of her much vaunted Western sensibility that is so greatly under stress in India? What exactly is Etta nostalgic for and with what, in the West, is she actually identifying herself?

Etta's alienation from India, as it is portrayed in the novel, is not the consequence of a deeply felt cultural loss or a futile striving for a meaningful cultural synthesis. Her endeavour, at best, represents an attempt to connect cultural
incompatibles on a very personal self-centred level. Etta’s relationship with Guppy is a case in point. She attempts to make him respond to and value the delicate nuances of her Western sensibility but the idea that she might learn to value his sensibility does not even occur to her. From Etta’s point of view, like Neville Sinclair’s in Lilamani: A Study in Possibilities, her relationship with Guppy represents an “advance” on his part and “in a measure retrogression”\(^\text{10}\) on her own. Her efforts to improve Guppy have at their source only a yearning for greater indulgence and luxury than she is enjoying already. In the ultimate analysis, Etta’s alienation is nothing more than a hankering after the fashionable life of the West; for admiration from personable males and an assured supply of wealth and good living. The glories of Western civilization are contained, for Etta, in no more than the wearing of “‘wine with meals’” by which measure the civilizations of the East appear to her to be primitive and deficient (ABP, p. 173).

Etta’s compliant of the pressures of a backward society on a refined European sensibility would have evoked pathos had she not brought to the life around her an acute insensitivity, insularity and philistinism. A believer in the old colonial principle that though there is every reason to adapt to the particular ethos of the European country in
which one finds oneself, it is disgraceful to adapt to India. Etta has created for herself a miniature Europe in the heart of Delhi. Her chic flat with its white rugs, sophisticated black and white prints, raw silk lampshades and French fashion magazines and records, is her oasis in the desert of poverty and squalor that is India. Cutting herself off completely from her environment, Etta strolls down a street of Old Delhi as if it were the Champs Elysees and associates only with the whites and a few selected wealthy Indians of the city. She cultivates the latter for the simple reason that they and not the whites provide her with her creature comforts. She continually harangues Judy for surrendering to India and advises her to behave like a civilized European—to divorce her husband for being Indian in the first place and poor in the second.

A desire to belong being a fundamental human instinct, these attitudes to the country that houses her are gradually driving Etta to the brink of a mental breakdown. In such a state her feelings of insecurity at approaching old age, the loss of her charms and the defection of her lovers get ambiguously mixed up with a resentment against India. India responds to the attack by methodically tearing down Etta’s feeble cultural supports and exposing the hollowness of her vaunted Western culture that can neither hold its own in a confrontation with an alien one nor meaningfully
synthesize with it. Increasing isolation reduces Etta, the paragon of European sophistication, to a state of stagnation and decay. Her smart flat that could have come out of any European capital—“so elegant, so continental, in such good taste: just like Etta herself” (Ibid., p. 6) — is transformed, with cigarette smoke and “closed in like a cage” (Ibid., p. 171). Yet this very cage is Etta’s protection against her powerful antagonist—“necessary to her and out of which she would not break even if she could: for outside lay the dusty landscape, the hot sun, the vultures, the hovels and shacks and the people in rage” (Ibid., p. 171). With India just beyond her closely shuttered window, Etta lies in bed dreaming and yearning for Europe:

But she was afraid of it too. Here at least she had her personality: she was Etta, whom people knew and admired for being blonde and vivacious and smart. In Europe there were many blondes, and there they might more easily notice that she was not as young or as vivacious as she once had been; and they might not think her smart at all. She no longer knew the way they dressed there, or they way they talked, or the fashionable foods they are and drinks they drank, the books they had read, the conversations they had held with one another, while she was out here. (Ibid., p.171)
Etta has, in effect, become the “nowhere” person of Expatriate fiction who rejects the East to be rejected by the West—a fact that is a pointer to the dangers inherent in a refusal to assimilate with surrounding life. The futility of upholding norms and values that are out of context with immediate reality is mirrored in Etta’s fate. Yet Etta’s life in India is, with some differences, a conscious mirroring of the novelist’s vision of her own destiny. Though Ruth Jhabvala presents Etta as a character of little worth and one who comes out to India for all the wrong reasons, an element of genuine sympathy has gone into her making for she closely represents the novelist’s own impulse towards exclusion at this point of her life in India. In “Myself in India,” Ruth Jhabvala describes her life style in terms that bear an uncanny resemblance to that of Etta’s:

*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... all the time I know myself to be on the back of this great animal of poverty and back ward-ness. It is not possible to pretend otherwise... 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 in rooms and pretend there is nothing outside.*

\(^{12}\)
Isolating oneself, whether in India or Europe, leads to alienation and psychic disturbance in terms of the novel’s theme. Etta’s mental breakdown in India has a parallel in that of another woman’s in England. Judy’s mother’s suicide, like Etta’s abortive attempt, is the climactic point of a lifetime of exclusion of self from surrounding life. Etta believes that constricted urban settings where the sky does not bear down on one and where the landscape does not impinge on one’s consciousness (ABP, pp. 186,171) are necessary for the civilized European’s mental health. Yet Judy’s mother grows lonelier everyday in her spotlessly clean, tidy little house with the doors and windows locked securely against the weather and strangers, till one day she can bear it no more and is driven to suicide. The facts that she hangs herself and that Etta is careful not to take too many pills and to ring up the Hochstadts immediately on doing so, suggest that Etta’s life in India holds out more hope for her than that of Judy’s mother in England. Etta’s isolation is self-imposed while Judy’s mother’s is a way of life that is fast becoming a stereotype in the West.

In spite of Ruth Jhabvala’s sensitive portrayal of Etta’s suffering, the reader cannot help contrasting the latter’s approach to India with Judy’s and discovering that she falls disastrously short of the novelist’s criterion of human worth. In fact, if Etta’s dismissive view of India
represents a fact of Ruth Jhabvala’s complex response, Judy’s impulsive embracing of India and Sudhir’s sensitivity and faith embody other’s which if not more dominant, are certainly more valued by the author. Like Ruth Jhabvala and Etta, Judy had come out to India following a cross-cultural marriage but unlike them she chose to merge with the society in which she found herself in preference to being drowned in or expelled from it. Judy is seen throughout the novel as determined to adapt to her new country. She wears a sari and puts her hair up in a bun “in order to look like everybody else” (Ibid., p. 174), speaks fluent Hindi and interacts with her husband’s family with the utmost ease. She loves her ramshackle home and looks forward to going back to it after the day’s work. Her evenings, spent with Bal’s aunt and sister-in-law, sitting on a charpoy in the courtyard, correspond to Ruth Jhabvala’s account in “Myself in India” (p. 13) of her own evenings spent with Indian friends during the first phase of her Indian experience. However, ten years in India have not wrought disillusion and disenchantment for Judy as they did for the novelist. In fact, the process of adapting her inherited modes of feeling and thinking to the requirements of an alien culture is nearing completion, and Judy with her two children, irresponsible husband and family of in-laws
is as securely entrenched in her environment as any other Indian woman.

Judy’s view of India springs as much from a reaction to her old life in England as from an instinctive understanding that “it is fatal to come to India and expect to be able to love to a Western rhythm” (Ibid., p. 26). Judy’s Western world had consisted of little more than a small semi-detached house “with smoking fires and frozen pipes and carefully drawn curtains bought at two and eleven a yard at the sales” (Ibid., p. 173) in which she had lived, shut in from the outside world, with an inarticulate father and a mother employed in a ceaseless round of domestic activity. Judy had yearned for freedom, for a life full of possibilities, and with her marriage to Bal and her voyage out to India had felt she had found it. Never regretting her girlish impulse Judy opened herself, from the very beginning, to all of India’s influences. Full of the wise passiveness that Wordsworth rated highest among human qualities, Judy alone out of all the Westerners in A Backward Place, receives all that India can offer.

The memory of her mother’s suicide weighs heavily within Judy. It is this lurking presence that makes her so sensitive to Etta’s damaged psyche on the one hand and so determined, on the other, to make a different sort of life for herself. Judy’s flight from England and her determination
to make a permanent home in India indicate Jhabvala's concern at the way life is being lived in the West. The Indian view of life contained in Bhuaji's philosophy "god provides" is a comforting one to Judy not because she is attracted to Hindu spirituality but because the modern Western belief in the self as the complete integer has not wrought happiness for her parents:

Perhaps this was a reaction against her parents who, in their middle age, had spent much time and worry over the problem of how they would manage on the old age pension. And in the end the problem had not arisen. (Ibid., 63)

The process of assimilation is not easy for Judy nor is it concluded. From time to time she feels the pull of her Anglo-Saxon heritage, particularly when the realist in her finds it hard to relate to her fantasizing husband Bal who seems to have been modeled on the childlike Indian of early expatriate novels. Dreaming of success in a big way in films, Bal is often prepared to give up everything he has and go "wandering off in search of no one knew what" (Ibid., p. 176). At such moments, Judy feels very "English and sensible" and "determined to hold on tight to what she had, like her mother, like her Aunt Agnes, like all those other stubborn dwellers in little houses" (Ibid., p. 176). But another urge works simultaneously within her—the urge to
accept life as it is lived around her instead of seizing it and putting it to the test of Western norms. Though skeptical of Bal's success, Judy is charmed by his optimism and faith in the future. She knows that, if defeated, he will accept his defeat in the philosophical spirit that has been inculcated in the Indian sensibility throughout the novel, Judy's western pragmatism is seen in conflict with Bal's dreams which continue to carry him on their wings despite the sever pressures of reality.

Judy's warring responses are resolved in the end in novel way. When a serious clash is imminent between an inherited view of life and an adopted one—the crisis of her life and the climax of the novel—Judy receives an intimation from the vast India sky which resolves her tensions and fills her with a desire to let life take her on its wings, like the birds "floating on the sky—drifting without thought or effort or fear, aerial and at ease" (Ibid., p. 161).

She couldn't ever remember having looked up at the sky in England. She must have done, but she couldn't remember. There had been nothing memorable: nothing had spoken. So one locked oneself up at home, all warm and cosy, and looked at the television and grew lonelier and lonelier till it was unbearable and then one found a hook in the lavatory. Judy could
not imagine ever being that lonely here. In the end, there was always the sky. (Ibid., p. 179)

The same sky that goes unnoticed by Clarissa and the Hochstadts, and that threatens Etta with annihilation, blesses and strengthens Judy. Etta shuts out the intimations of destruction that emanate from a “too blue sky” with “the black wings of some birds of prey flashing against it” (Ibid., p. 186), but in doing so shuts out the “intimations of Heaven”\textsuperscript{13} that are received by Judy.

Like the Indian sky, the joint family to which Judy is brought by Bal fills her with a sense of harmony and an expansion of soul totally unknown to her in her old world of confinement and cleanliness. Here, Ruth Jhabvala implies, lies the old India, stormed by the new but resisting its pressure. A number of incompatible elements are seen together in this household—a serious, hard-working elder brother with a simple Indian wife; a do-nothing dreamer of a younger brother with a foreign wife; several children of which two are half-English and an old aunt whom the new unclear units cannot accommodate. Together, all these odd pieces make a strong and harmonious whole. When some members of the household are obliged to go out into the world, the others give them courage and support and the comfortable feeling that if things go wrong they can always come back. In contrast to the home Judy has left behind her
in England, this “Indian slum” (*Ibid.*, p. 27), as Etta calls it, offers her genuine refuge. ‘Live and let live’ seems to be the guiding spirit of the kindly unpretentious people who inhabit this household—the same kind of people among whom the narrator of *Heat and Dust* finds herself.

Between the two extreme approaches to India represented by Etta and Judy, there are two other Western approaches which, by providing contrasts, externalize aspects of Ruth Jhabvala’s relationship with India as well as help to clarify the image of worth that is central in the novel. The Hochstadt couple’s approach to India is, on the surface, the reverse of Etta’s. India, for them, is no backward place but aesthetic and charming. As short term visitors, they feel neither the need nor the desire to assimilate with India. They have, however, come with many ore-conceived views on the subject that seem to represent a trend in the West for appreciating everything Indian.

During their stay in India, the Hochstadts propound the view that the India spirit “has in many fields soared far above the European”” and that a “‘serious comparative study of Indian and Western spiritual achievements will widen the horizons off both”” (*Ibid.*, p. 84). Familiar with *A Passage to India* and quoting from it freely, the Hochstadts believe with Fielding that “that world is a globe of men
who are trying to reach one another and can best do so by the help of culture plus intelligence" (APL, p. 62). Convinced that by virtue of their own culture and intelligence they are best suited to participate in such an international exchange, they profess great admiration for India and great enthusiasm for synthesis. They are convinced that they are receiving a great deal from India and that they too are, in their own small way, contributing something to “this old, yet newly born, country” (ABP, p. 189). Armed with theories and quotations culled at random from European texts, the Hochstadts are continually intellectualizing about India.

Franz and Frieda Hochstadt have all the right theories about expatriate approaches to India. Dr. Hochstadt explains to Etta: “‘Life plays itself out to a different rhythm here…. It is fatal to come to India and expect to be able to live to a Western rhythm’” (Ibid., p. 26), which as a piece of advice to Etta is excellent but, as Ruth Jhabvala is careful to point out, is not one which he himself need follow. Though in India for a very short time the Hochstadts have managed to carve out a life style which is not very different from what they had in their flat in St John’s Wood:

*The place had a very comfortable European atmosphere...somehow the Hochstadts had managed*
to put their own touch on everything. There were lace
table-cloths, some abstruse objects d'art... many
heavily bound books on economics, philosophy, art
and religion; over all this hung the smell of Dr.
Hochstadt's cigars and of the coffee which Mrs.
Hochstadt brewed on a little electric ring specially
bought for the purpose (she had nothing but contempt
for the coffee sent up by the caterer from the kitchens
below). (Ibid., pp. 26-27)

Out of all the characters in the novel, it is Etta who
sees through the pseudo-idealism on the Hochstadt's and
exposes it to the reader. In fact Etta's voice often represents
the authorial voice. When Dr. Hochstadt regrets that as
mere visitors to India they "can never have that
understanding of India... which comes to those who are in
touch with the humbler people of this land" (Ibid., p. 27).
Etta is quick to point out that Clarissa holds similar views
but "takes good care to get in with people who don't live
in villages and who aren't in the least bit humble" (Ibid.,
pp. 27-28). That Etta's comment is actually meant for the
Hochstadt is amply supported by textual evidence. The
Hochstadts, for all their advice to the other expatriates,
restrict their socializing to Westerners and Westernised
Indians and live a life which excludes the average Indian as
much as Etta's does. Again, Frieda's characteristic
exclamation "India gives us so much... What joy to be asked to give a little in return" makes Etta think resentfully that "it was the way people who were here for only a short time, and all their comforts and conveniences laid on, so often talked" (Ibid., p. 85)—a sentiment that corresponds with the one expressed in Ruth Jhabvala's remarks on Westerners in the first phase of their Indian experience in "Myself in India." Judy, too, has her reservations about the Hochstadts. She resents their theorizing about Etta—"It was too easy for them....As far as they were concerned, everything here was only an awfully pleasant interlude/ it was different for Etta" (Ibid., p. 29).

A good part of Ruth Jhabvala's criticism is directed at Franz and Frieda Hochstadt's lack of discrimination, understanding and true sympathy. They are totally self-deluded as well. The reader is well aware that only the certainty of the transitory nature of their encounter with India has enabled them to put successfully to the test certain approaches to India that they had formulated prior to coming out. That such a test puts a severe stress on the permanent expatriate's sensibility is a fact that is ignored by the Hochstadts. Thus, they expect and continually demand form the other expatriates of A Backward Place their own patience and composure with regard to India.
When Etta, in a moment of total frustration, lashes out at the snail speed with which things move in India, Mrs. Hochstadt, prepared in advance to take the shocks of a cultural confrontation with equanimity, says indulgently: "It is one of the many charms the country has for us" (Ibid., p. 26). As far as the Hochstadt are concerned, the sub-continent is a course of continuous entertainment. Enjoying India’s hospitality and theorizing about her glories, the Hochstadts will never know her intimately for they will have lift the country long before reaching a point of genuine contact with her.

The cultural synthesis that the Hochstadts believe they have helped to initiate in India is revealed in its concrete form to be nothing more than a ludicrous yoking together of incompatible elements—a performance in Hindi of Ibsen’s Doll’s House sponsored by the Cultural Dais. though it had been more of a social occasion than an artistic success, even in the opinion of the Hochstadts, they take pride in it as a “true attempt....to weld this ancient heritage to what had since been achieved in countries of the Wes and so bring about a synthesis not only of old and new but also—and what could be culturally more fertile? Of Fast and West” (Ibid., p. 189). The sustained satiric tone of the concluding pages of A Backward Place puts into brilliant perspective the pseudo-enthusiasm and shallow
intellectualism of a pair of foreigners for whom India has as little use as she did for their spiritual counterparts—Hans and Kitty of *The Householder*—and whom she expels with as little ceremony.

It Etta is disdainfully resisting assimilation and the Hochstadts are only theorizing about it, Clarissa, self-proclaimed lover of India, is desperately trying to belong, but for all the wrong reasons and in the wrong spirit. A significant pointer to Clarissa’s true attitude to India, is contained in Sudhir’s involuntary reaction to Clarissa’s hand laid on his shoulder—as if it were “the pseudo-paternal hand of the British Raj” (Ibid., p. 92). Clarissa confesses that she comes from a family that has had connections with India for a long time—“‘one of my great-uncles was a Supreme Court Judge in Calcutta and another was a Chief Commissioner somewhere’” (Ibid., p. 93). However, Clarissa hastens to assure Sudhir that her illustrious lineage means noting to her and that her advent in India was triggered off by something quite different—her first reading of Romain Rolland’s *Life of Vivekananda* which made something in her snap and say “‘That’s where I belong. I’m going’” (Ibid., p. 93).

Yet Clarissa’s assurances impress neither Sudhir nor the reader. At the point of time that she appears in the novel, her spiritual quest, if there was truly one, is
concluded and she has turned to the more practical pursuit of making a living in India. Etta’s shrewd observation: “She likes her comforts, does our Clarissa. Not that I blame her, I’m very keen on them myself” (Ibid., p. 28), puts them both in the same category—of outsiders who are feeding on India. A conversation between Clarissa and Etta establishes the fact that Clarissa is staying on in India because her straitened circumstance (she lives on a tiny legacy left to her by a great-aunt) make any sort of independent living impossible in England. Her wealthy relations, she is convinced, will not accommodate her except as a “‘free baby sitter and nurse maid and general drudge about the place’” (Ibid., p. 155). Far easier to live in India where she can always “‘get in with people’” (Ibid., p. 26) who are wealthy enough to give her, her comforts and value an Englishwoman—a member of the erstwhile ruling aristocracy—in their circle.

Dressed in Rajasthani peasant skirt and a handspun blouse, Clarissa projects an image of herself as a “‘free-and-easy mixture of sadhy and artist’” (Ibid., p. 61)—a humane, simple soul slightly addled by the Indian sum but untouched by Western materialism and in love with the Indian way of life. That the image is false and that she, like Etta, shares the spirit of her memsahib forebears who demanded and received their living from India with no
contribution from their side, is established by the novelist in several ways. One is the use of Etta as a satiric persona, as we have already seen. Direct comment and Clarissa’s own self-revelations in her encounters with Indians are others. Characteristic authorial comments on Clarissa run thus:

Clarissa was not a good artist, but she got of places through what art she had. When she wanted to establish relations with some one rich or important or useful, she always commented enthusiastically on their fascinating faces and asked to be allowed to sketch them. She had got access in this way to some very prominent people. (Ibid., p. 38)

And:

Clarissa only kept her room to have somewhere to retreat to when none of her friends wanted her. For the rest of the time, she stayed in various comfortable houses, either in town or up in the hills...ate at other people’s tables, took an interest in other people’s affairs and made herself a part of other people’s families. (Ibid., p. 61)

In the face of such direct evidence of Clarissa’s parasitic tendencies in India, it is hard to accept Shantha Krishnaswamy’s view that Clarissa “longs desperately to belong and the author subtly indicts India for being
backward enough to reject such an appeal.”¹⁵ In fact, in almost all the scenes in which Clarissa appears, her veiled snobbery and opportunistic tendencies are subtly but surely exposed.

That, in spite of her Bohemian exterior, she is fully conversant with and conscious of the distinctions of class, rank and birth, is revealed in her malicious comments to Sudhir on Judy’s lack of education and class. Appalled at her slip, she is quick to cover up: “‘Good heavens...as if it mattered! I assure you I couldn’t care less about that sort of thing, even though I am English and I do, I confess, come from a family who are rather sticky about who is who.’” Her assertion: “‘I judge people by their worth not by their birth,’” needles Sudhir into leading her on to a confession that though she is “‘very very anti-untouchability and all that’” she sees something very beautiful and right about the caste system: “‘Every man in his own rank, doing his own work, there’s a divine harmony there’” (Ibid., p. 91)—sentiments that are considerably out of date in the India of 1965.

Another scene in which Clarissa’s mask is ruthlessly stripped away and her innate snobbery revealed is the one in which her problems with her landlord compel her to ask Judy for shelter. In the spirit of inclusion that characterizes the family to which Judy belongs, her sister-in-law Shanti
offers Clarissa the use of the whole house. Clarissa raves over Judy's "'lovely household'"; envies her opportunities of being "'part of India'" and living "'right where its heart beats.'" She even goes into raptures over Bhuaji's bare poky little room which she describes as "'a real little saint's room'" (Ibid., p. 129). She decides, however, against staying there and ensonsces herself, instead, in Etta's sophisticated flat where she knows she is acutely unwelcome.

The collapse of her carefully preserved veneer of love and respect for all humanity comes so suddenly that it throws even Clarissa off balance. When, on a shopping expedition with Mrs. Hochstadt, a little street beggar tries to attract her attention by touching her on the leg, her reaction is instinctive. Furiously turning around she knocks, not him, but another boy sharply on the head. She is immediately overcome with remorse—in part perhaps for the hapless urchin but mostly for herself—for the breakdown of the carefully put together personality she had been projecting for the benefit of other as well as herself. "'I've never hit anyone before, believe me Frieda,'" she sobs hysterically on the way home, "'I respect people! From the highest to the lowest I respect them'" (Ibid., p. 75).
This powerful and complex scene crystallizes many of Ruth Jhabvala’s ideas about the “dilemma of people caught between cultures, uncertain about what direction to take and how far to take it.” As the novelist sees it, Clarissa’s vulnerability which must proceed from involvement, however selfishly motivated, contrasts favourably with Mrs. Hochstadt’s capacity to insulate herself by same spirit of emotional detachment in which she had discussed the problem of Indian beggars with Franz and decided that it was pointless giving anyone anything, she simply withdraws from her experience which includes the weeping Clarissa. Staring stolidly over the head laid over her shoulder, Mrs. Hochstadt tries to preserve “some calm and dignity in this trying situation onto which she had been forced” (Ibid., p. 76).

This scene also emphasizes the peculiar nature of Clarissa’s dilemma in India, which is, in a sense, more complex than that of Etta’s Clarissa, like Etta, has to make a living in India without working for it but, unlike her true self and the image she projects—a complication that dies not present itself to Etta in whose behaviour there is no gap between appearance and reality. Jhabvala’s ironic thrust is cruelest when she makes constitutionally dishonest Clarissa accuse painfully honest Etta of posing (Ibid., p. 152). Clarissa’s collapse is complete when, fully exposed to
Frieda Hochstadt, all her familiar platitudes desert her and she has nothing to fall back upon but hysterical wailing: "'....[I] don't know what came over me...I'm not that sort of person...Etta is that sort of person, not mw!'" (*Ibid.*, pp. 75-76).

Barring Judy, India has no use for any of her expatriates who are either expelled or left to stagnate and even decay. The Hochstadts leave India and will soon be forgotten. Clarissa's mental confusion and self-delusion will increase as each day bring home to her, more powerfully, the meaninglessness of her life in India. Etta has come close to destruction and destruction is indeed around the corner, waiting till the Jumperwala episode and one or two more like it are over. That is the final impression registered in the pages of *A Backward Place*, not unmixed with an element of admiration and pity for these suffering women who, true to their type, do not admit defeat but go on fighting.

Ruth Jhabvala declared in 1966 that she was no longer interested in India except as it affected her and her kind. Yet the social, cultural and political climate of Delhi comes in for a good measure of criticism and scorn in her novel of 1965. That the condition of India adversely affects not only the foreigners but her own people as well is depicted through the personalities of Sudhir and Jaykar in
A Backward Place. The novelist's observation of the socio-political scene is conveyed through the character of Jaykar who, like Ramnath of Esmond in India, finds himself at odds with the India he has helped to create. Unlike Ramnath, who withdraws from a world he has ceased to understand, Jaykar is still very much with it. His attempts to reform it through his paper Second Thoughts are abortive, but his exhortations to a few chosen ones are taken seriously and prove valuable to them. Like Sarla Devi, Jaykar recognizes that the need of the hour is an urgent engage on the part of India's youth—to break out of traditional moulds and live vitally and purposefully in extending spheres of activity. His advice to Judy and Sudhir: "People are not born only to sit safe and quiet....like mice in holes" (Ibid., p. 15), echoes Sarla Dev's advice to Vishnu—to abandon his father's trodden path and prove himself to be something more than "a little merchant's son" (GRFB, p. 146). The fact that Judy and Sudhir, who represent Ruth Jhabvala's conscience with regard to India, take his advice and benefit by it, proves the worth of Jaykar's ideology.

Jayker's spiritual son Sudhir deplores India's backwardness—not out of hate, like Etta, but out of love. He believes that India's poverty and squalor accrue from the corruption and hypocrisy of people in high places, such
as the ones with whom he is continually in contact, as the General Secretary of the Cultural Dais. This association, run by a fashionable and wealthy lady called Mrs. Kaul, is supposed to dispense culture to a small minority of Delhi society; people who were "well dressed, spoke good English and had been abroad" (ABP, p. 14). In reality, the Dais functions only as Mrs. Kaul’s compensation for a husband who is too busy to give her any attention and a pattern of life in which her role has become indistinct. In the public eye the Cultural Dais stands, in Sudhir’s opinion, for social advancement—"a place where you can meet nice and interesting people and be in touch and be important, also an opportunity perhaps to wangle a trip abroad" (Ibid., p. 70). Jaykar fans Sudhir’s already smouldering self-hatred at allowing himself to be seduced, for a bit of financial security alone, into an organization whose activities are totally out of context with the country’s real needs. Finally, at a moment of supreme triumph for the culture Dais and of deplorable failure of Sudhir himself – each according to a set of individual value judgements—Sudhir decides to quit. Leaving behind him the “flowers, flashlights wonderful silk saris, new hair dos and the Prime Minister as a guest of honour.” (Ibid., p188) that represent the culmination of cultural dispensation the Dias is capable of, Sudhir sets out for a small village in
Madhya Pradesh where he will help educate the rural poor in the spirit of selfless service advocated by Sarla Devi in *Get Ready for Battle* and already initiated by the absent Narayan in *Esmond in India*.

Jaykar who functions as Sudhir's conscience in the novel is also the first to hint at the extraordinary complexity and unexpectedness of India. His malicious comment: "'As if the Indian character could be summed up...Let them [foreigners] say one thing about us and the next moment they will find we are exactly the opposite'" is seen as justified in the innumerable Indian responses to the expatriate that are recorded in the novel. Mrs. Kaul's arrogant double standards—her extreme civility to Etta and the Hochstadts as opposed to her contempt for Judy—are effectively contrasted with Shanti's affectionate inclusion of Judy and Clarissa. The manner in which public opinion is divided over the scene of Clarissa's striking the street urchin and above all in the way the unexpected is not an exception but the rule in India embody the author's faith that somewhere in all this rich plurality the expatriate can find a place. Judy leaves the house to obtain a brief respite from quarrelling with her husband and comes back a changed woman. Sudhir walks through an abandoned slum where "the pitiful shreds of pitiful human lives" are scattered all over and suddenly it is sunset and the sky
“blazing with the most splendid, the most royal of colours” irradiates everything till “the rages, the broken bricks, the split old bicycle tyres—everything burst into glory” (Ibid., p. 183).

Sudhir listens to the conversations of his fellow passengers—trite and sentimental for the most part—with indifference, even distaste, but suddenly at night he recalls them with pleasure recognizing in them: a manifestation of all the variety and unexpectedness of the fertile lives that sprang out of this soil, which was in itself so curious and unexpected and was now desert and now flourishing fields and now the flattest plains and now the highest and most holy of mountains” (Ibid., p. 184). In this mood he thinks of the discussions he and his friends were forever having about India and yet nobody ever said anything that was in the least conclusive or that which could not be instantly and authoritatively contradicted:

......it seemed to him now, shut in with an assortment of strangers and traveling through a landscape which was too dark to be seen and could therefore be only guessed at, that perhaps the paradox was not a paradox after all or, if it was, was one that pleasurably resolved itself for the sake of him who accepted it and rejoiced in it and gave himself over to it, the way a lover might. (Ibid., pp. 184-185)
These revelations are personally valuable to Sudhir for they help to complete his loving but partial understanding of India. They are even more valuable in terms of the novel itself, for they contain the author’s final affirmation of the possibility of assimilation for the right kind of alien. The paradox of India which the Hochstadts are too shallow to fathom: that which confuses poor Clarissa and tortures Etta, "pleasurably" resolves itself for the sake of Judy who gives herself up to it "the way a lover might."
REFERENCES


7. “‘Don’t you know that the Indian sun has been put specially in the sky to ruin out complexions,’” she tell Judy. See A Backward Place, p. 7.

8. The novelist writes “….not for one moment should we lose sight of the fact that a very great number to Indians never get enough to eat. Literally that: from birth to death they never for one day cease to suffer from hunger. Can one lose sight of that “See “Myself in India,” p. 10.


11. Etta expresses this in her conversation with Judy. *A Backward Place*, p. 7


13. Ruth Jhabvala uses this phrase in “Moonlight, Jasmine and Rickets” to denote a part of the Westerner’s Indian experience.

14. The Hochstadt couple seem to share a common identity in the novel. Ruth Jhabvala carries this idea to its furthest point when, towards the end of the novel, a sudden shock reduces them to two copies of a single image. *See A Backward Place*, p. 181.
