A NEW DOMINION: A STUDY
CHAPTER—VIII

A NEW DOMINION: A STUDY

In the seven years that followed the publication of *A Backward Place* Ruth Prawer Jhabvala did not publish any. Two volumes of short stories, *An Experience of India and Other Stories* and *A Stronger Climate* appeared in 1966 and 1968 respectively. Then, in 1972, she produced *A New Dominion*, a work which conveyed with astonishing intensity the psychic sum-total of her twenty years’ exile *A New Dominion* is wrought, even more powerfully than *A Backward Place*, out of the tensions generated in a displaced European sensibility by the increasing oppression of an alien ethos. In this novel, written during a dark phase of the novelist’s life in India, at a time when she was keenly aware of her condition as an alien, the Occidental vision predominates. As the title suggests, India is seen not from within but from without. In consequence, this novel belong more recognizably to the tradition of expatriate writing than *A Backward Place*. In fact, *A New Dominion* carries the tradition forward by operating within the socio-political context the *A Passage to India* anticipates—one in which Indians and Europeans can communicate freely. The races do communicate with one another; for the separations created by a political situation that thrived on exclusion
have no relevance twenty-five years after thrived on exclusion have no relevance twenty-five years after Indian Independence. The Westerners of *A New Dominion* pursue their quests with a freedom that Adela Quested would have envied. Lee and Raymond move in and out of every stratum of Indian society, rubbing shoulders with the royalty, the middle class, the proletariat and the ascetic with equal ease, unhampered and unprotected by officialdom. The food at a supper party hosted by a British High Commission official is, like the guests, “a judicious mixture of English and Indian” and the host boasts of a “special relationship” between the two races and speaks in terms of family bonds and mutual influences quite unlike his predecessors of the old dominion.

Yet many reminders of the separatist regime persist in the world of *A New Dominion*. The lifestyle of the mainstream Indian that it is comparable to that of the ruling class before Independence. To Raymond, who represents the authorial point of view more closely than any other character in the novel, the scrupulous cleanliness of the High Commission compound with its smart suburban architecture seems to mock the poverty and squalor that lie just beyond its walls: “‘you can’t help thinking that no place in India has the right to be that clean’” (*AND*, p. 71), he writes to his mother. It is Raymond again who shrewdly
recognizes that the loud commanding voices that the British acquire in India—obviously derived from memories of their rule have to be kept confined within the High Commission premises, for the new dominion, of which they have to be wary, lies just outside.

Racial distinctions are carefully maintained and the ideal of white superiority upheld, in the charity home for aged Europeans that Raymond visits with Miss Charlotte. A decaying old woman of eighty-six still thinks it worthwhile to dress as a proper mem-sahib should, and is outraged at a rumour that her ancestry is not all white. The home is, in fact, a hotbed of scandalous gossip and intrigue, each member accusing the other of mixed origins. The presence of the cemetery just beyond the home which has housed generations of English men and women and will, in the near future, reduce the inmates to a handful of Indian soil, is a valuable pointer to the novelist’s stance.

Traces of the old dominion linger too in the educated Indian’s hatred of the Raj which has remained unchanged from the first stirrings of nationalism in India. Deepak, a latter day Aziz, challenges his host’s assumption at the High Commission diner party that some kind of integration had been effected during the two centuries of British rule. When his host Gerald points out that the two races have shared a common language meaning common ideas and
values, Deepak retorts that Indians had "'willy nilly'" to learn the "'language'" of the British but not vice versa (Ibid., p. 52). His argument is borne out by the fact that his own aggressive nationalism foes seem to be inspired by his Western education and is as obviously derived as the language he uses for self-expression. This, however, is only one aspect of the impact of British rule on India. The other is a vicarious identification with the alien culture. Raymond's India neighbour at the Embassy dinner table brags about her friends the Haffners and prattles happily about English style cottages in Kasauli, "'so quite and peaceful like an English village'" (Ibid., p. 54). Both approaches are viewed by the novelist as out of context with the needs of contemporary India and compare unfavourably with a young Englishwoman's genuine distress at the condition of India and her guilt about her own life of luxury in it.

But by far the most powerful reminder of the Raj in the India of A New Dominion is the presence of an erstwhile royalty now stripped of its powers and privileges and forced into a position of choice between two alternatives—that an arrogant extinction or a humble putting out of new roots. For the first time in her fiction Ruth Jhabvala depicts the tattered remnants of princely India in a world ruled by politicians and plutocrats. Ex-
royals who are intelligent enough to recognize the inevitable are quick to seize their chance and can exchange one form of kingship for another while the foolishly arrogant defy the new order and are winnowed out. The author's moral assessment of both types is in the negative. She sees the first as desecrating a noble heritage in an attempt to worm itself into the favours of a corrupt bureaucracy. The other, by constantly harping on the past and refusing to recognize reality, is assailed by acute imbalances and neuroses. In her delineations of Rao Sahib and Asha, the novelist presents the two aspects of this struggle in the new India.

Divested of his principality, Rao Sahib has no other option left to him but to join the princely throng invading the electoral scene in order to find a footing in a changed world. Like many others of his kind, Rao Sahib is remarkably free from the royal complexes that may have stood in the way of his wheedling votes from erstwhile subjects and his shameless pandering to the whims of the ruling party. He is assisted in all his endeavours by his wife Sunita who, though a princess herself, has her ambitions fully geared to seeing her husband as a Cabinet Minister—one of the reak monarchs of the new dominion. Descended from a line of fiery Rajput kings who went charging into battle on the slightest injury, real or imagined, to their self-
esteem and whose women immolated themselves in preference to desecration by invading armies, Rao Sahib’s sycophantic allegiance to a political party that has robbed him of titles, lands and powers is as demeaning as his helpless submission before his sister’s indisciplined and licentious ways. For Rao Sahib is forced to adapt not only to a changed political situation but to a changed ambience as well. In the character of Asha, Ruth Jhabvala records the growth of a feminist ideology that received surprising acceleration in the Sixties and Seventies, setting off a corresponding reduction in the power and status of the male. Rao Sahib’s reduction both as male and monarch is placed in comic juxtaposition with the power and vitality of his ancestor of Bulbul’s story who had castrated his sister’s lover for bringing dishonour to a noble lineage. The present Rao walks into a darkened room at the precise moment when Bulbul is concluding her tale to find his sister and her lover lying together on the sofa listening to it. Hesitant and ineffectual, he find it safer to ignore a situation he is powerless to handle. Apologizing for having burst in on them, he tries to regain some of his dignity by advising Asha to do something constructive like joining some of Sunita’s committees.

Asha, however, is a totally different type. She cannot overcome her nostalgia for her childhood world as easily as
her brother for she lacks his capacity to adapt. The individualism and arrogance that her blue blood has fostered in her stands in the way of her seeking a new identity. In consequence, she is, for a good part of the novel, assailed by depressions and traumas that threaten to destroy her sanity. However, the new doctrine of the equality of the sexes with its revolutionary concepts of love, sex and power for the female, gives her a position of dominance that helps to partially resolve her frustrations as a deposed princess. Her emancipation is not discreetly transmuted into subservient collaboration with the male as it is in her sister-in-law Sunita. Asha, like Sarla Devi, creates her own norms and adopts traits of aggression and independence. She shakes off her inherited concepts of female meekness and chastity and explodes the myth of the sanctity of marriage and its careful guardianship by the wife. Adultery is no longer a man’s privilege in the world of *A New Dominion*. However, the new role demands exertions that drive Asha on to suffer as men suffer and possibly more for she has the weight of a tradition to struggle against. Continually drawn into sexual liaisons, she is consistently thwarted from fulfillment by some deeply embedded rule of conduct for an Indian widow. In consequence, she is seen as swaying between two extremes—of submission to the weakness of the flesh and
of bondage to a philosophy of life as maya or illusion. Asha’s loneliness and alienation stem from these conflicting desires. She knows that the glories of a love affair are short-lived and is ashamed of her excessive eroticism, yet nothing can hold ground before her overwhelming sensuality. Her awareness that her periodic bursts of renunciation will always be swamped by her physical cravings, and that with her diminishing youth and beauty physical fulfillment will be more and more elusive, make her sufferings real, and justifies her perception of the world she lives in as terrifying and meaningless.

Ruth Jhabvala’s modern woman falls short of the degree of independence which R. K. Narayan’s Rosie and Daisy, both of whom successfully shake off male dependence, achieve. For these two women, escape from their condition does not necessitate renunciation but is realised through putting to a strenuous test their own capacity for living. Turning her back on an incompatible marriage, Rosie of The Guide elopes with Raju who exploits her talent as a dancer to make a living. Within a few years, Rosie discovers her own potential—not only for success as a dancer but the ability to live without a man as a prop. Daisy of The Painter of Signs leaves her home as a twelve year old and learns to live like a man, but is never assailed from within like Asha. Shedding their male
supports, the two women proceed from strength to strength on the basis of their own sustaining vitality of which they were totally unaware in their stereotyped roles of subservient womanhood.² Ruth Jhabvala’s India is not ready to contain such women, but the existing cultural absolutes are seen in the process if change. The line that had demarcated the areas of operation for males and females in The Nature of Passion and The Householder is blurred in A New Dominion.³ Marriage is no longer the ultimate goal for a woman and the blessedness of motherhood is thoroughly defamiliarised. A female without male support need evoke neither pity nor surprise. Asha is just as much at ease in being by herself as she is with men and her relationship with men and women are equally uninhibited and free.

The invasion of the old by the new is evident in other areas of the Indian landscape, external as well as internal. The young industrialist Bob, Indian by birth but American by education and conviction, is clearly a prospective builder of modern India before whose ability rank and wealth have to take the second place. The ld British hospital in Maipur to which Raymond takes the dying Margaret is completely overshadowed by a vast modern block built with foreign aid but “quite empty from inside and smelling of bat droppings” (Ibid., p. 196). The exquisite tombs and
monument dating from the Muslim period that still dot the countryside can only be reached after driving through congested streets and over dusty bridges (Ibid., p. 108). Classical music, patronized by princely India, has to give precedence to acutely unmusical hymns with political affiliations at the Rao Sahib’s party. There is sustained irony in the novelist’s observation that the ancient arts, architecture and music of India are being destroyed by political interference and a social progress that is a travesty of the progress achieved by the West. The fact, that out of all the people at Rao Sahib’s party it is only Raymond who sits through the sitar player’s recital and that it is only foreign tourists like Lee and Raymond who seek out places of beauty and take the trouble to reach them, carries the author’s conviction that the only reason for the survival of the old in India is its tourist value. The picture of India that emerges is unflattering and often denounced by Indian critics as a ruse to attract a Western readership.4

But the most powerful indictment of India in A New Dominion is contained in Ruth Jhabvala’s delineation of the damage, physical and psychic, that is done to the Westerner in India. In this third phase of her Indian experience, the value systems of the two cultures appear irreconcilable to her. The demarcations of the encounter are drawn in terms of a conflict between Western affirmation
of individualism and fostering of the self and Eastern encouragement of self-negation in the interest of reaching a higher state of being. Ruth Jhabvala believes that while conformity and adaptation are part of the value system of the East, nonconformity and dissent are integral to the of the West. Thus, the Swami's doctrine to belong and not to be proves to be a source of degeneration for the Westerner who responds to it. Although the East wins in A New Dominion, its values are not idealized as they were in A Backward Place or as they are in the general run of Indo-Anglian novels depicting a similar struggle. Thus, the conflict in A New Dominion emerges as one sided—not a conflict at all but a frightening assault on Western values.
REFERENCES


3. The Presence of a lady Minister of State at Rao Sahib’s party indicates significant social progression from the time of Ruth Jhabvala’s first two novels.

4. This point has been discussed at length in Chapter II. See above pp. 49-50.