INTRODUCTION
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala was born on 7 May 1927 to Marcus Prawer, a Polish Jew, and his wife Leonora (nee Cohen) in the city of Cologne in West Germany. A lawyer by profession, Marcus Prawer had come over to Germany during the First World War to escape military conscription in Poland and it was here that he met and married Leonora Cohen who, though born in Cologne, was not a naturalized German-her father having emigrated from Russia. Musing on the rootlessness of her ancestry, the novelist wrote many years later: "Whatever place we were in, we didn't go back into it very far. Not much rootedness-everyone having come from somewhere else; usually having run away from somewhere else." Yet, as Ruth Jhabvala also points out, the Prawers seem to have, during that phase at least, displayed a remarkable propensity for adaptation and were quickly assimilated into the life around them:

......once there, once settled in a place and feeling some measure of security in it I must say my family seems to have shown the same chameleon or cuckoo quality that I have already had to confess in myself. And I was born into what seemed a very solidly
based family who had identified with the Germany around them—had been through the 1914-1918 war with them—had sung for Kaiser and fatherland.... My first memories then—that is between 1927 and 1933 were of a well-integrated, solid, assimilated German Jewish family.²

Even then, the fact of their Jewish ancestry must have ruled the lives of young Ruth and her elder brother Siegbert Saloman and segregated them, at least partiality, from the mainstream of German life. Their grandfather being the cantor of the biggest Jewish synagogue in Cologne, the children must have been initiated early into the mysteries of the Tohra and Talmud and the duties attendant upon the Jew as the suffering servant of God. The impulse that led Ruth Jhabvala in her subsequent life to explore the different aspects of assimilation in her novels and stories may be attributed in part to her Judaic ancestry and her early exposure to the history of a separate people who had created their present out of a memory, and in doing so had cut themselves off from the rest of mankind. The sense of her separateness as a Jewish child must have deepened after 1933 when, immediately on taking over power in Germany, Hitler set in motion a systematic, politically motivated persecution of the Jews. Elementary education in a segregated Jewish school was followed, for the child
Ruth, by the trauma of exodus. Between 1933 and 1939, Germany was one of her Jew-whole families emigrating to Holland, France, what was then Palestine, and the United States. The Prawer family was one of the last to emigrate. The novelist’s grandparents had died in the meantime and the uncles and aunts who survived had already gone. In April 1939, Marcus Prawer, his wife and two children left Germany for England and settled in Hendon, a suburb of North West London with a sizeable Jewish population. “I was practically born a displaced person,” Ruth Jhabvala told Ram Lal Aggarwal thirty-five years later, “and all any of us ever wanted was a travel document and a residential permit. One just didn’t care as long as one was allowed to live somewhere.”

In England twelve year old Ruth was enrolled initially in Stoke Park Secondary School and then in Hendon County School. She seems to have had a natural flair for languages and made the transition from German to English very smoothly. She had experienced the thrill of creative writing at the age of six with her first school composition Der Hase (The Hare). Essays and stories written in German chiefly on religious and Jewish subjects had followed. Within a week of her arrival in England, she started writing in English:
England, 1939, My first entirely instinctive demonstration of my cuckoo or chameleon qualities. I took to England and English immediately I didn’t have that much English-only what I’d learned at school in Germany—but once in England I did learn fast. And not only did I then write in the English language but also—and this is where the chameleon or cuckoo quality really came in—about English subjects.

She wrote large number of unfinished novels and stories, but long before she had acquired enough skill, in her own judgement, to round off the formless structures and complete the fragments, she stopped writing about England. If one had had access to her juvenilia, one could perhaps have caught a glimpse of the sensibility at work, and have thereby discovered the cause of her reticence about this phase of her life. It is indeed a significant fact that this major upheaval in her life is so feebly represented in her fiction and autobiographical writing. Barring one personal communication in 1978 in which she described the experience of losing in the Nazi holocaust “my father’s entire family, part of my mother’s family, most of the children I first went to school with, and most of my parents’ family friends—in fact our entire social and family circle,” her silence on the subject has been amazingly consistent. Her childhood, spent in the dreaded Nazi of
regime and then as expatriate in war torn England, was surely an area of experience from which she should have drawn literary inspiration slight. One story, “A Birthday in London,” centering on the lives of German expatriates in post-War London is her only published attempt to recreate the world of her adolescence and youth, Renee Winegarten comments on this strange phenomenon:

….. as we reflect on the large part childhood memories or condition play in the development of most outstanding post-Romantic writers, her reticence seems even more astonishing.

We may venture to attribute it to various causes, among these might be a sense of unassuaged pain or alienation...

One is certainly aware of some strong emotion, kept painfully in check, in the picture she paints of the ageing German Jews in. “A Birthday in London.” They are no longer penniless refugees but British citizens made wealthy by reparation. Yet they are continually haunted by the hardship and humiliation suffered in their first years in England. A sense of lost caste in consistently with them. Sonia’s bitterest regret is that her children have adapted to the new life and have no inkling of their past: “‘We know who we are’” she cries, “‘but what does my Werner know, and my Lilo….. my poor Lilo—I have had such a lovely
girlhood, such lovely dresses and always parties and
dancing classes.... And she has had only hard work in the
Kibbutz, hard work with her hands.""\(^8\)

Like her own creations Werner and Lilo, Ruth Jhabvala,
too, quickly forgot the old life. Yet there was an awareness
of the pain of rootlessness and around her and a sense of
her disinheritance. This is borne out in her statement that
she was indebted to England for giving her a world which
she could embrace.\(^9\)

Although Ruth Jhabvala became a British citizen in
1948, she was not destined to make England her permanent
home. While studying for her Master's Degree in London
University, she met Cyrus S. H. Jhabvala, an Indian
architect. They were married on 16 June 1951 and left
immediately afterwards for Delhi where she lived for the
next twenty-four years. Ruth Jhabvala had no prior
connections with India nor any preconceptions. Although
familiar with the country through the novels of the
expatriate writers, she was not sufficiently enthused by
them to wish to visit India.\(^10\)

As from Germany to England, the transition from
England to India was smooth and easy-more, it was a
wonderful experiences. "I was enchanted. It was paradise
on earth," she described her first impressions of India to
Caroline Morehead, "Just to look at the place, the huge sky,
the light, the colours. I loved the heat, going round with few clothes, the stone floors."\textsuperscript{11} There is no reticence here, no withdrawal. The intense joy of discovery finds expression in a delighted stream of adjectives and evocative phrases in her autobiographical writing.\textsuperscript{12}

This phase, which according to her lasted a decade, had come about instinctively. She thought she understood India, loved her and felt completely assimilated.\textsuperscript{13}

Perhaps her Jewish ancestry with its Eastern basis was at the heart of this recognition. It was as if this impact made by India percolated through layers of consciousness to open up some deeply buried ancestral memory. Whatever it was, it is certain that her creative instincts found in the Indian scene an outlet the like of which she had never experience. During those first few years, she never visited made no European friends. Living with her family in her beautiful house by the river, she keenly observed the life around her and, as she herself describes it, "really lived."\textsuperscript{13}

And all that time she was recording her experience of India in novel after novel, adapting for her purpose the old English novel of manners that had found its most chiseled expression in a early nineteenth centuries. Her choice of such a form to depict life as it was lived in the rapidly changing ethos of Independent India is significant. It indicates an awareness of a deep assimilative instinct in the
Indian character that ultimately triumphs over the divisions and conflicts that political and sociological changes bring in their wake. Thus, the harmonious resolution that is fundamental to the comedy of manners became, in Ruth Jhabvala's early novels, the natural corollary to the clashes and tensions of Indian family life.

Ruth Jhabvala's acceptance of India amounted to conscious identification. Describing her personal stance as an author, she writes.15

The community she chose to identify with and delineate in her novels was, curiously enough, not the Parsee community to which she belonged by right. In the same way as the predicament of the Jew in exile did not prove to be a sufficiently potent source of inspiration for the novelist, the state of stagnation and decay that the Parsee had fallen into though centuries of insulated living and inbreeding in India failed to kindle the creative spark. She turned instead, with interest, to the Punjabi refugee-also an alien community trying to adapt itself to an unknown ethos. She noted the resilience with which the Punjabi overcame the trauma of Partition; the quickness with which he put down new roots and the eagerness with which he embraced a new sun and wind to become in time so vigorous and strong as to tower over the original inhabitants. Though she laughs at their bourgeois and simplistic values in her
fiction, there is a measure of genuine respect for these people who have neither been scattered like the Jews nor enclosed themselves like the Parsees in a social structure that seemingly protects but actually imprisons.

Yasmine Gooneratne tells us that the field for the novelist’s observation of the Punjabi refugee community was provided by the large extended family of her husband’s partner with which she was on friendly terms. Perhaps some aspects of the domestic life of this household, filled with relatives and in-laws, reminded her of her own Jewish background. The strong sense of racial allegiance and clan loyalty that she saw in this family, the self-deprecating humour of its members and their emotional exuberance tinged with self-pity, seem to have awakened memories of her own pre-War childhood. The relaxed atmosphere of the clan assemblies is described by her in the following words.

At what point during this phase of acceptance of India did the crack that later deepened into a chasm and had its inevitable aftermath in withdrawal and flight appear? Though the novelist herself places it around 1959, during her first visit to England after her marriage, one suspects that the process of disenchantment had been set in motion some time earlier. A swamping of the pervasive pleasures of India by exasperation and a sense of defeat must have
been gathering momentum, however insidiously, for her mind to have registered the contrast when it did come. The impact was profound. In an interview with Paul Grimes, many years later, Ruth Jhabvala said.

So after that first visit I felt more and more alien to India.\(^{19}\)

In her essay “Myself in India” published in 1966, she describes the Western reaction (European and American alike) to India as a sort of cycle with three stages: “... First stage; tremendous enthusiasm-everything in India is marvelous; second stage, everything Indian not so marvelous; third stage, everything Indian abominable. For some people it ends there, for others the cycle renews itself and goes on.....”\(^{20}\) On what she bases this generalization is not clear, particularly in the light of her confession that in the first ten years of her life in India she had cut herself off from everything European. Whether she had met as many westerners in the next few years on the level of interaction that warrants such a universalisation is very doubtful indeed. Yet she assures her readers that the cycle of response she describes is particularly apposite to the experience of those Westerners who tend to be liberal in outlook and have been educated to be sensitive and receptive to India. Unfortunately, she goes on to say, it is not easy to retain this mood of openness for any length of
time to a country that proves to be too strong for Western nerves. A time comes when one’s inheritance reasserts itself and one finds oneself painfully estranged from a culture that had once seemed so easy to assimilate. Describing this experience in her own case, she writes: “I won’t call it disillusionment; I don’t think it was that; it was more the process of becoming myself again. Becoming European again.”

What phase of her life is she recalling here? What exactly does “becoming European again” mean in her case? Is she recalling the terrors and afflictions of her infancy in a Hitler-ruled Germany or the bleakness of her adolescence as a German refugee in Hendon? What then did she mean when she spoke of her “disinheritance” and “not having a world of my own.” To quote her own words when describing the glory of the initial impact made by India.

Whatever was oriental in her was apparently not strong enough to sustain a lasting relationship of love with India. By her own admission, then, a state of alienation accompanied by a drastic change of vision followed the first phase of exuberant identification.

Now here, it seems to me, we perceive a contradiction. Was this inability to remain “immersed in sensuous delights” the accompanying condition to a stage of alienation or its reverse? Surely the sentence “but had to
struggle against all the things people have to struggle against in India” is indicative of an involvement with India at a more fundamental level than the mere reveling in her sights and sounds. This contradiction lies at the heart of Ruth Jhabvala’s love-hate relationship with India—a relationship that has remained unbroken even after her departure from India and her reversion to her once abandoned Western heritage. Her European reclamation has been faithfully and accurately recorded in all her autobiographical writing and interviews and has set the tone for all her fictional writing after 1960. Beginning as “a buoyant feat of loving empathy,” Ruth Jhabvala’s fiction, then, deepened in time into a “literature of exile.”

In the essay “Moonlight, Jasmine and Rickets” (1975), Ruth Jhabvala attempts to describe, within the limits of Western terms and concepts, the complex of emotions that shapes the Westerner’s response to India on the second point of the cycle—emotions that have been her own and have been externalized in those of her characters. The most tangible of them is the Westerner’s reaction to the heat and dust of India.

Only those who have lived through days of endless Indian heat know their effect upon one’s behaviour:

*The Western characters of my novels are amazed at themselves. They yell at servants, abuse*
shopkeepers, nearly (or not even nearly) strike the clerk in the post office. "My God!" they ask, "What's happening to me?"26

The press of Indian poverty and the yawning gulf between the rich and the poor is another source of disenchantment—a factor that promotes the fearful metamorphosis that the European in India is susceptible to. Appalled as he is by his own behaviour, he is still more so by that of the affluent Indian’s:

One of these western characters may be invited to a wedding—a festive scene fairy lights twinkle, the tables are loaded with pilaos and kebabs, and the guests with ornaments and brocades; the bandsmen ply.

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 grown ups is holding out old tins. Don’t Indians see?27

After some time he (her Western character) senses that they do see—have done so for generations and centuries—and that the gap between affluence and poverty in India produces two kinds of response. One is a frenzied grasping of whatever is within reach, indifferent to the claims of
others; and the other—a resigned surrender of life’s fruits in the knowledge that the enjoyment of them can at best be temporary. Both states are equally explicable within the context of Indian experience but are startlingly alien to a twentieth century Western sensibility. In consequence, Ruth Jhabvala’s Westerners are often seen as grappling with something intangible in India. “It is as if by being here,” the novelist continues in “Moonlight, Jasmine and Rickets,” “they have been exposed to another dimension and begun to open up in response to it. But this is often a painful process and not everyone can stand it.”

Statements like this have sparked off a good deal of adverse comment from Ruth Jhabvala’s Indian critics. R. F. Isar challenges her assertion that all Westerners suffer disenchantment as a rule in India and censures her for presenting the personal anguish that India inflicted on her as an inescapable condition for all Europeans alike. Such a criticism is acceptable from Isar whose European wife Renee lived on in India, in apparent contentment, till her death. Isar’s criticism is endorsed by Jacquelin Singh’s denial that she ever passed through the cycle of response described by the novelist in “Myself in India” or experienced the swing from delighted acceptance to vehement rejection of India. But when Isar announces that Ruth Jhabvala’s “initial uncontrolled delight at the
sights and sounds of India" was as unbalanced as the "sudden harsh recoil," he is obviously making no allowance for the artistic temperament. Nor is he giving her credit for the honesty with which she recorded her impressions—good and bad—about India. Eunice De Souza compliments Ruth Jhabvala on her honesty but asserts that honesty by itself is not enough:

... The mere knowledge that she is going through these stages does not produce creative work. As a writer, recognizing what is happening to her, she should be careful to see that her writing is not unduly influenced by the phase she happens to be in.32

One agrees with Eunice De Souza that a certain degree of distancing from immediate experience is imperative for the production of good quality creative work, and that Ruth Jhabvala’s fiction is, sometimes, excessively influenced by her personal response. De Souza’s comment, however, is too generalized. She overlooks the fact that in novels like *A Backward Place* and *Heat and Dust* Ruth Jhabvala does succeed in presenting an objective image of Indian reality. Detachment is particularly perceptible in her character conceptions of Judy, Olivia and the narrator of Heat and Dust. Their interactions with India have nothing in common with their creator’s. Nor do their destinies. Shantha Krishnaswamy goes a step further than Isar and De
Souza when she censures Ruth Jhabvala for being “bitter and corrosive” and pronounces her guilty of denying “humanity to a whole nation.”

This is a scathing attack backed by sweeping generalizations. Where for example, is any sign of anger and revulsion in Ruth Jhabvala’s images of India in *To Whom She Will, The Nature of passion* and *The Householder*? What does the term “denying humanity to a whole nation” mean in the context of Ruth Jhabvala’s fiction? There is, no doubt, a lot of hatred for India in some of her novels, but the hatred is never unrelieved. Ram Lal Aggarwal describes her hatred as “compounded with compassion” and “itself an indication of the writer’s involvement with and attachment to this country.” One agrees with Ram Lal Aggarwal, for hatred is certainly as much a symptom of involvement as love. Were that not so, Ruth Jhabvala’s hatred of India would have gradually destroyed her creative impulse. Instead, her hate evolved into such a powerful compound of passion and idea that it became, with the passage of time, a far more potent source of creative inspiration than her early delighted embracing of India.

Perhaps Renee Weingarten comes closest to the truth when she describes Ruth Jhabvala’s confrontation with India as the confrontation between two of the strongest
spiritual impulses in the world. For what is involved here, in her opinion, is an encounter—not between East and West but between Judaism and Hinduism.\textsuperscript{35}

*Ruth Jhabvala's confrontation with India, then, is not confined to the poverty, backwardness and disagreeable climate of the country. It involves a struggle, ending in failure, to come to terms with the Hindu spirit. In a powerfully emotive passage in "Myself in India," she gives expression to the oppression that she has experienced during the course of this struggle.\textsuperscript{36}*

These are exaggerated images\textsuperscript{37} induced by a state of mind in which filtering of response into idea has become impossibility. Ruth Jhabvala admits that they are so, but is compelled to resort to them in her effort to describe the inexplicable nature of Indian spiritualism which is also the crux of her complaint about India:

*Here perhaps less than anywhere else is it possible to believed that this world, this life, is all there is for us, and the temptation to write it off and substitute something more satisfying becomes overwhelming. This brings up the question whether religion is such a potent source in India because life is so terrible, or is it the other way round—is life so terrible because, with the eyes of the spirit turned elsewhere, there is no incentive to improve its quality.\textsuperscript{38}*
If passivity in the face of affliction has been bred in the Hindu through centuries, so, it may be argued, has been the case with the Jew. There is, however, a difference. Whereas in the former, acquiescence has been unequivocal and unquestioning, it has been tempered, in the latter, by argument and debate. The Jew has embraced suffering and persecution on the mandate of God but not without question and only on the assurance of Redemption and the coming of a Messianic age. Conversation between Man and his Maker has been recorded in the Bible from Genesis onwards—in Adam’s answers to God’s reprimands and Cain’s passionate protest against his exile.

It is here that we find the basis of Ruth Jhabvala’s dilemma in this phase of her life in India—a dilemma that is at the heart of almost all her fictional writing after 1960.39 Transmuting personal experience into concept, she poses the pivotal question: Is it possible for an alien, whose spiritual roots have been nurtured in Judaism and its sequel Christianity, to achieve a meaningful assimilation with India? Her personal response, at this stage, is negative. One could if one tried, she says, wipe out prior conditioning, adopt an attitude of unconditional surrender, allow oneself to be “sucked down into that bog of passive, intuitive being”; 40 that is the norm in India—but that state could at best be temporary. The rational would, one day or
other, reclaim its own. The temptation to merge in totality with India is sometimes irresistible—at others something to be conquered, but always behind one is the lurking terror that one day India will win—will, with her dark inscrutable grip, force the rebel to merge—even if it is at the point of death:

Sometimes it seems to me how pleasant it would be to say yes and give in and wear a sari and be meek and accepting and see God in a cow. Other times it seems worth while to be defiant and European and—all right be crushed by one’s environment, but all the same have made some attempt to remain standing. Of course this can’t go on indefinitely and in the end I’m bound to lose—if only at the point where my ashes are immersed in the Ganges to the accompaniment of Vedic hymns, and then who will say that I have not truly merged with India?41

In 1961, just when the phase of alienation from India was setting in, a new challenge came to the novelist in the form of a request from James Ivory and Ismail Merchant to allow them to film her novel, The Householder, and to write the script for it. Within two months they had a screenplay; a year later, a film and a destiny for that initial meeting saw forging of a trinity that has lasted to the present day.
Ruth Jhabvala's life changed in pace and quality from that time onwards. She who had rarely left Delhi started traveling extensively, looking for locations for her screenplays. In consequence, the settings of her novels which until them were confined to Delhi were extended to include a number of cities and towns of Northern India. Filming also brought her new relationships and occasional spurts of hectic activity that forced her out of her self-inflicted seclusion.

In 1975, at the peak of her career as a novelist and screenplay writer, Ruth Jhabvala decided to leave India. Her choice of the United States for refuge from India was in contradiction to her claim of a European reclamation. She had consistently identified herself with Europeans; had declared herself "homesick for Europe"—yet when the time came to make the change it was in favour of a country which was not only new to her but also one in which she was relatively unknown. Some of her short stories had appeared in *New Yorker*. She had a number a admirers, which included literary critics, in America, but it was microscopic compared with that of England. Extensively interviewed in the after-glow of her two greatest triumphs—the Booker Award for *Heat and Dust* and the John Smith Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship—one of the questions repeatedly put to her was the reason for her
choice of the United States for emigration from India. To Patricia Mooney who interviewed her for Newsweek, she gave an interesting reply:

For one thing I've gotten used to a big country in India and all of Europe seems a little small. America on the other hand is another vast country, and again it's one of contrasts. It's stimulating in a completely different way from India. Everybody in New York seems to have the same background as I have. After all I'm a European Jew and so are a great number of New Yorkers. So the step from India to here is nothing compared with the step I took from Europe to India. People here talk like me, think like me—and that is not so in India. In India, I'm an alien.43

Her reasons for preferring America to Europe were presented more explicitly in her interview with Paul Grimes a year and a half earlier.44

America, with New York as its microcosm, is then, in Ruth Jhabvala's opinion, the ideal refuge for the displaced European since it is of such that her nation is compounded. A vast, new and vital country, it should have presented itself as a permanent resting place for the already twice expatriated novelist. Yet, the images of America and her people that are portrayed in her writing of the last twenty
two years (1975-97) is not one of potential assimilation but that of acute alienation. Curiously once again, India becomes the scapegoat. Transposing to Manhattan, she has a vision of a kind of India now growing in New York, a vision, which she believes is her inheritance from India.⁴⁵

By her own confession, she has lost her subject.⁴⁶ Following her departure from India, her creative impulse has registered a steady decline and her fictional output has suffered both qualitatively and quantitatively. In these twenty two years she has written only four novels—In Search of Love and Beauty (1983); Three Continents (1987); Poet and Dancer (1993) and Shards of Memory (1995) and a few short stories. This flagging if inspiration may be the consequence of her vision of her new country. Her comments on the American way of life and her observation of the changes wrought in her own personality within a few years of her arrival in the States are significant. In her interview with Patricia Mooney, she remarks.⁴⁷

The bulk of her writing in this final phase, her four novels in particular, are concerned with the Central American problems of loneliness and neurosis:

*It is in the air there as diseases are in India, you feel like screaming with nerve pain.... I think it is in the noise, the crowds, the shrieking ambulances and*
police care—*all the pain in the world you hear all the time*.⁴⁸

Ruth Jhabvala probably tries to shut it out in the same way that she tried to shut out the heat, the dust, the poverty and filth of India—and with as little success. “I’m a born outsider,” she admits in the final analysis, “always looking in through the window. I would love to stay in one place. But I’ll never settle down, never accept a place as home.”⁴⁹

In the concluding remarks of her commemorative lecture on Neil Gunn in 1980, she tries to offer the sum total of her experience as an expatriate. Likening herself to a fickle woman who frequently changes her lovers, she says:

Perhaps after my first disinherittance—and my calm acceptance of it, of so cheerfully pretending to be English, and then Indian and then Anglo-Indian,⁵⁰ changing colour as I changed countries—may be I will just have to go on doing it, changing countries like lovers...

There’s saying and I can’t (characteristically enough) remember whether it is a Jewish, or a Muslim, or a Hindu or a Buddhist one; ‘It is forbidden to grow old’. I take that to mean that one just has to go on—learning, being—throughout however many twenty year stretches in however many different countries or places—actual physical ones or countries of the mind—to which one may be called.⁵¹
REFERENCES


2. Ibid.


4. Ruth Jhabvala described this experience forty seven years later in these words: “At once I was flooded by my destiny; only I didn’t know that’s what it was. I only remember my entire absorption, delight in writing about—giving my impression of *der Hase*.” See “Ruth Prawer Jhabvala’s Testament,” op. cit.

5. Ibid.


Pocket Books, N. d.), p. 137. all references cited are from this edition.


12. “Ruth Prawer Jhabvala’s Testament,” *op. cit*


17. See Current Biography, 38, No. 3 (March 1977), 222.