

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

These thirtyfive and odd stories could be neatly divided into two groups : i) Stories in which Jhabvala deals with Indian characters and Indian reality only.

ii) Stories in which she deals with her favourite theme of cultural encounter between the Indians and foreigners (mostly Britishers). The following table gives a sort of comparative glimpse at her treatment of the two themes :

No.	Title of the collection	Total Number of stories	Number of stories about Indians	Number of stories of cultural encounter
1.	Like Birds, Like Fishes (1963)	10	7	1
2.	An Experience of India (1966)	7	4	3
3.	A Stronger Climate (1968)	9	-	9
4.	How I Became a Holy Mother (1976)	9	7	2

Starting her scrutiny into the soul of modern, contemporary India and Indians, the first collection has only one story on the theme of cultural encounter. Jhabvala's initial understanding of India and Indians is the major theme here. With the second collection, the balance seems to be equal between the two themes as four stories deal with Indians exclusively and three with the encounter between Indians and

foreigners. By the time she comes to publish her third collection, she is seen to be interested in Europeans in India only, all the nine stories dealing with the European 'sufferers' and 'seekers' and their encounter with the Indian society. Significantly, not a single story deals with Indians exclusively. This loss of interest in India is borne out by her candid confession in "Introduction: Myself in India" included in the third Collection, An Experience of India.¹ It is interesting to see the same essay published under the title: "Why I Dislike India" in a journal. Thus she does not make a secret of her apathy towards India and as a natural result of it, she leaves India in 1975 and settles in America. The fourth collection, published after her expatriation, has again seven stories about the Indians and only two about foreigners in India.

This study clearly indicates that Jhabvala's last collection witnesses a waning of her interest in India and an equal falling off in the quality and perception in these stories.

Now I summarise my observations on her attempt to project her personal image of India in these stories. This discussion is carried round a consideration of her themes and motifs, her characters, the use of local colour or appropriate setting by her, her achievement or otherwise in respect of linguistic grasp of the situation she deals with and finally her cultural inwardness.

The two themes of Jhabvala's short stories as already mentioned, are India and Indians; and foreigners in India.

These themes, in fact divide her stories in two groups. As for her treatment of the theme of India and Indians, we don't see any advancement over what other Anglo-Indian writers have been maintaining. India's poverty and passivity, its lethargy and attitude of resignation or tolerant stoicism, our national obsession with religion- these have been traditionally the staple of Anglo-Indian fiction. Indian fatalism and negation, lack of unity and worst of all our climate of heat and dust- these have been traditionally criticised by writers like Kipling, Forster, Rumer Godden and many others.³

Jhabvala applies her vision to the modern, contemporary India, the urbanised cities of India, especially the city of Delhi where she herself lived for a score of years. Her India is the post-independence India of offices and clubs, parties and corrupt diplomats, of bored housewives in search of some twadry romance. It deals with the drawbacks of crime and immorality, suffering and sadism which seem to be inherent here. She also takes up Indian widows and joint families, Indian superstitions and penchant for begetting sons, the drab life of retired actors and music teachers. Her enquiry focuses attention on the male-dominated Indian society wherein of late a clash between tradition and modernity has been generating a lot of heat. The stories like, 'The Award', 'Lekha', 'The Housewife' and 'Sixth child' are notable for their success.

The second theme of encounter between the Europeans and Indians receives a powerful expression herein some stories. Her finest achievement seems to be in stories like :

'The Aliens', 'A Star and Two Girls', 'In Love with a Beautiful Girl', 'Passion'. Here again her conclusions point to an impasse in the Europeans' efforts to become India's own! Jhabvala's ironic stance exposes the hollowness of these foreigners' honest attempts to befriend India. The Indians are seen to be aspiring for the realization of those very goals from which the Europeans have sought shelter in India! Thus the Europeans are non-plussed to see the Indians religiously cultivating the ideals like 'free love' and 'pre-marital sex'.⁴ The encounter between the Indians and foreigners results in frustration and disenchantment for both the parties. E.M. Forster's 'only connect' seems to have been practised by Jhabvala's Europeans in the post-independence India. As the epigraph to "A stronger climate" puts it: "They (the Europeans) come no longer to conquer but to be conquered"⁵.

In her treatment of this theme Jhabvala seems to be laying all blame at Indian doors because her European characters receive a better treatment than their Indian counterparts. The image of India that emerges out of these encounters is negative and fearful.

As for her characters we see the Indians mostly caricatured and exaggerated for the sake of effect. Of the eighteen stories in the first group, none has a single admirable Indian Character ! Instead of real men and women we get ignorant shopkeepers, superstitious widows, aimless young men indulging in erotic day dreams, hypocritical writers, loafers, lower-middle class men with crime and

immorality. The politicians of India are either dull uninteresting human beings or if modernised and educated they are alienated in their own land. Indian officers and government servants are always corrupt and immoral ! Jhabvala reserves all her garish colours for Indian portraits ! Lack of sympathy and bitterness arising from a sense of alienation informs Jhabvala's treatment of the various aspects of Indian character. She is unable to transcend her cultural alienation. Her Europeans, on the other hand, receive all the benefit of doubt and are seen as 'sufferers', victims of India ! She seems to be writing for women's magazines and the various Swamis, Gurus and spiritual leaders in the short stories are invariably fake, lecherous and treacherous ! Many times her ironic mode reveals Indians in a very bad light. Her approach is not analytical and she seems to have no in-depth understanding of Indians. This oversimplification in characterization has made her Indians typical and hence not interesting. They are at the best intelligently observed but as people they do not add to our knowledge. She excels, on the other hand, in portraying the loneliness of European women because of her uncanny grasp of those characters. Her pen is marvellously subtle in delineating the feelings of the lonely men and women, trapped in India's stronger climate.

As for the local colour or creation of setting, it must be admitted that she can evoke the peculiar atmosphere of the place she is describing with a great deal of accuracy. She can suggest the depth and breadth of the land in all its nuances !, Description of the urban background of big Indian

cities like Delhi seems to be her forte. But here again, she can't forget the seamy side. What can we say about this opening of a good story, "Miss Sahib" ?

"The entrance to the house in which Miss Tuhy lived was up a flight of stairs between a vegetable shop and a cigarette and cold-drink one. The stairs were always dirty, and so was the space around the doorway, with rotted bits of vegetable and empty cigarette packets trampled into the mud. Long practice had taught Miss Tuhy to step around this refuse, smilingly and without rancour, and as she did so she always nodded friendly greetings to the vegetable seller and the cold-drink man, both of whom usually failed to notice her".⁶

The passage is admirable for the accuracy of its observed detail but she utilises it to gain sympathy for her British heroine !

In another story 'An Indian Citizen', she describes an Indian woman singing a song :

"It was one of those ambiguous devotional songs, where no one can be sure who is crying out to whom-- the soul to God or the lover to the beloved".⁷

Many times we are surprised to see her power of observation manifest in the details with which her stories are

strewn. Here are some samples :

"While his eyes never left her, she hardly, glanced at him but lounged there inert and passive, now yawning, now putting her hand inside her low-cut blouse there lazily to scratch".⁸

Again, another story, 'The Biography' from the same collection, gives the following description of a political leader :

"He was a grossly ugly man, squat, fat and bald headed, always dressed in flimsy white muslim which did nothing to hide his flabbiness --- His personal manners were atrocious -- he scratched himself when and where he felt like it, frequently burped and had altogether no inhibitions".⁹

It is clear from these specimens that Jhabvala's pen can create a character with a single stroke but hers is an art of a caricaturist and she must have come across an ample material to ridicule India and Indians.

As regards the language that she gives to her Indian characters, she seems to be aware of the difficulties before her which she states thus :

"When one writes about India --- and in English (as I do) inevitably one writes not for India but for Western readers. Problems of Communication present themselves, how to translate the idion of one language into

another, how to present a scene to an audience unfamiliar with its most obvious ingredients."¹⁰

The Indian characters in her stories speak English which is obviously influenced by vernacular expressions and these colour their vocabulary, syntax, tone and rhythm. Many times vernacular idioms are literally translated.

Sharmila, of the story "Miss Sahib", (A stronger climate) is an uneducated girl. As Miss Tuhy, the English teacher promises to give her 'sausages and bacon for breakfast' Sharmila

"Clapped her hands with pleasure and gave a squeeze to her child --- 'You will like that, Munni, na ? Shaushages, Hmmm !"¹¹

The indianisms here are obviously used to caricature her ignorance of the word and its sounds !

Indira, the sister of Ranjit in the story, "A Young Man of Good family", (A stronger Climate) joyfully remembers her visit to a Sari-shop :

"There was one in a sort of blue-- no, blue green-- Conjeevaram, lovely, Rs.185. it's a lot, but what to do ? I fell in love with it on the spot, that's all."¹²

Sometimes Jhabvala shows an admirable grasp of Indian manners and mores, Maji, an old woman, says to her daughter, Tara :

"You can wait for seven births and plead and pray with folded hands, and still you will not meet again a person like Mukand Sahib."¹³

In such observations her attempts to grasp and realize Indian culture are manifest. But such examples of cultural inwardness are few and far between. The image of India projected in her short stories is grossly unjust. Her themes are limited, characters mostly caricatures, the foreigners receiving a partial treatment and her skill in presenting felt or observed reality, though accurate, appears to have been utilised to further her not-so innocent intentions. To me she remains a scoffer of India who, catering to the demands of magazines for Western Women, has unwittingly created a false image of India in her stories. To compare her with Jane Austen and Chekhov, is to belittle the immense human sympathy of these great writers¹⁴! Stylish writing and attractive plots with a liberal sprinkling of comments on Sex and lust, can not make a writer reach Chekhov, whose humanity cuts him out to be a giant in the genre of the Short Story.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See Ruth P. Jhabvala, An Experience of India,
2. "Introduction : Myself in India" which prefaces her An Experience of India (1966), was reprinted in The Sundry Observer, May 10, 1987 but under a new title : "Why I Dislike India?"
3. See Rudyard Kipling : Kim; E.M. Forster : A Passage to India; Rumer Godden : Breakfast with the Nikolides.
4. The stories like "A Star and Two Girls", "My First Marriage", (Like Birds, Like Fishes); "The Suffering Woman", "Bombay" (An Experience of India), "Desecration" (How I Became a Holy Mother) should be seen as illustration of this point.
5. The Europeans in this volume are divided in two groups of 'The Seekers' and 'The Suffers'. Both these groups are not only conquered but also destroyed by India!
6. See Jhabvala's 'Miss Sahib' in A Stronger Climate, (1968), P. 162.
7. Jhabvala betrays her ignorance in this careless comment in 'An Indian Citizen' from A Stronger Climate, (1968), P. 153.
8. See the story, 'An Indian Citizen' in A Stronger Climate, (1968), P. 152.
9. See the story 'The Biography' in A Stronger Climate, (1968), PP. 39-40.
10. See Jhabvala's essay, "Moonlight, Jasmine and Rickets", in K.N. Sinha, Indian Writing in English,

New Delhi, 1979, P. 156.

11. See Jhabvala's A Stronger Climate, (1968), P. 177.
12. "A Young Man of Good Family", in A Stronger Climate, (1968), P. 129.
13. See the story, "Prostitutes", in How I Became a Holy Mother, (1976), P. 94.
14. See Gooneratne (1983), Shahane (1976), and Agarwal (1990).
