The New York Times
nytimes.com

July 19, 1983

Books Of The Times

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IN SEARCH OF LOVE AND BEAUTY. By Ruth Prawer Jhabvala. 251 pages. Wil- liam Morrow & Company. $12.95.

ALL her life, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala writes of a character in her latest book, "she had been in search of love and beauty and, in the course of this quest, had recklessly entangled herself in one harmful relationship after another." The same might well be said of everyone in this melancholy, tautly written family saga. Caught up in a vicious circle of emotions, all the characters - except the granddaughter, Natasha, who has few passions and even fewer attachments - long to be loved, but instead end up casualties of their own needs and self-delusions.

In a sense, of course, the perils of love and the complicated emotional geometry of the family have been the subject of all Mrs. Jhabvala's novels, from "Amarita" through "Heat and Dust," and while her delicate satire takes on more insistent Chekhovian tones of regret in this book, a sense of continuity with the earlier novels remains.

Born in Germany to Polish-Jewish parents, Mrs. Jhabvala has spent much of her life as an expatriate -first in India, later in England and America - and she possesses an outsider's gift of observation. Though "In Search of Love and Beauty" is her first novel to employ an American setting, she brings to this new milieu the same eye for social detail and the nuances of domestic life that she once trained so scrupulously on India.

In terms of both spirit and geography, Mrs. Jhabvala's characters, too, tend to be exiles - in this book, they are mainly Austrian and German refugees who have emigrated to New York - and in trying to come to terms with an alien culture, they discover that their psyches are scarred by a fault line that runs between their expectations and the reality of their daily lives. Unable to make connections, they pass on their emotional deprivations to their children and their lovers, and they seek solace themselves in little souvenirs of the past - they restore old houses, reminisce over old family photographs and spend hours talking about the days when everything still seemed so promising and romantic.

Louise, for one, grew up in a German suburb where her parents had a lovely villa with a grove of apple trees. She was bright and pretty, and when a successful man named Bruno declared his love for her, she married him, thinking it would last forever. In America, however, Bruno feels lost and at loose ends, and Louise soon falls under the spell of a chubby Adonis named Leo, who rudely insinuates himself in her heart. For years and years to come, he will keep her on a string - waiting desperately for the occasional phone call (collect, from a booth) and the unexpected visit.

The lives of Louise's family and friends are similarly lacking in fulfillment. Her best friend, Regi, also bright and pretty, ends up an old lady, dependent on the escort services of interchangeable young men. Her daughter, Marietta, separated from her husband and disaffected with life, is a familiar Jhabvalan character - one of those Westerners, who make a pilgrimmage to India in search of a guru or a swami or someone who will give them a reason to believe. And her grandson, Mark, a homosexual, craves love and affection but finds himself unable to sustain any real ties.

This sense of flux and impermanence in contemporary American life is perhaps best represented by Leo, the central character of "In Search of Love and Beauty." A charlatan who specializes in ministering to the souls and bodies of lonely, damaged women - women who are so desperate for attention that they actually believe all his silly self-help babble - he is a self-invented guru who trades in ideas and romantic partners as easily as he changes costumes, from a pin-striped English suit to overalls to a monk's flowing robes. After years of using and discarding women, however, even Leo finds that he is susceptible to love - love that will leave him, too, vulnerable and lonely.

Clearly the structure of "In Search of Love and Beauty" mirrors the sense of fragmentation that Mrs. Jhabvala's characters feel. Instead of relying upon a conventional narrative, she has composed the book in a series of brief, cinematic "takes," arranged in nonchronological order - an approach that, as in "Heat and Dust," manipulates the reader's sense of time.

The overall effect, in fact, is that of family snapshots that have come unglued from their album and fallen randomly to the floor: we catch glimpses of individuals at various points in their life - in old age, childhood, middle age and adolescence - and we learn, bit by bit, how they have improvised their lives. Though this structure tends to heighten the distance Mrs. Jhabvala maintains from her characters - thereby resulting in a certain coolness at times - it seems a fitting narrative strategy for this story of emotional waifs and strays.