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The Cult of the Cousin

By Francine du Plessix Gray;

POET AND DANCER By Ruth Praver Jhabvala. 199 pp. New York: Doubleday.

WITH the exception of E. M. Forster, no 20th-century writer has more eloquently described Westerners' attempts to grasp the ambiguities of Indian culture than Ruth Praver Jhabvala. In novels like "Travelers" and "Heat and Dust," Ms. Jhabvala's portrayals of the subcontinent's Zeitgeist -- its puzzling composite of emotional prodigality and glaring inequalities, mysticism and materialistic greed -- were deft and firm. Critics began to note that her India had become as rich a metaphor for universal experience as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County or the czarist Russia of Chekhov's fiction.

Ms. Jhabvala's insights into India have been based on an acquaintanceship far more extensive than Forster's. A Central European Jew whose family fled to Britain just before the outbreak of World War II, she married a Parsi Indian in 1951 and moved to New Delhi. There she brought up three daughters, wrote her first 13 books of fiction and began her fruitful collaboration with the film makers Ismail Merchant and James Ivory. She continued to live on the subcontinent until 1975, when she felt she could no longer struggle, as she put it, with "the tide of poverty, disease and squalor rising all around . . . the alien, often inexplicable Indian character." She settled permanently in New York City, where she has lived ever since, returning to India every year for a few months in the winter.

Such a relocation is bound to have a deep effect on any writer's work. The first two novels Ms. Jhabvala published after leaving India -- "In Search of Love and Beauty" and "Three Continents" -- were predominantly set in the United States. Albeit far more minimally, Indian themes and locales continued to inform both these works, which featured Westerners who travel to the subcontinent to seek meaning and redemption with bogus swamis.

This is where "Poet and Dancer" makes a radical break with all of Ms. Jhabvala's earlier fictions: India as place is totally absent from it; and even India as spirit makes but a brief cameo appearance, in the form of a mother-and-son duo who are merely accessory to the narrative. Indeed, the only perceptible link between "Poet and Dancer" and her preceding works is that theme of transcendence-through-submission that incited Ms. Jhabvala's previous cult seekers, a motif that this novel's saintly heroine, Angel, exemplifies in her submissive love for her diabolical first cousin, Lara.

Angel is a homely, gauche, introverted girl who early abandoned the precocious, wondrous gift for poetry she possessed as a child. She is plagued by a need (read it as either pathological or angelic, as her name implies) to sacrifice herself to others, to experience that perfect love in which the lover "utterly and entirely [despoils] himself of himself for the sake of the thing he loves" (a quote from a medieval text Angel scribbles in her journals as an adolescent).

In her youth Angel found such blissful subservience in her passion for her mother, the prosperous divorced businesswoman Helena, and for her maternal grandparents, German Jewish emigres settled in Manhattan's Upper West Side. Patterns of bonding in "Poet and Dancer" are all matriarchal or Amazonian; the novel's principal male characters -- Angel's father, Peter, a feckless country-club suburbanite who divorced Helena shortly after Angel's birth, and her mother's brother, Hugo Manarr, a philandering psycho-spiritual guru who wishes to "fashion a new humanity" -- are strikingly shadowy and ineffectual.

After the death of her parents, Helena goes into a sorrowful decline and Angel dedicates herself to taking care of her mother, so elated by her selfless devotion that she goes through school and college "waiting for the moment when she could return home." Helena is also brought out of her doldrums by benevolent Indian emigres, Mrs. Arora and her son, Rohit, who not only revive her spirits but also rebuild her business and ultimately move into her house. In her early 20's Angel finds a new medium of self-negation in her infatuation for her beautiful cousin, Lara, an erstwhile dancer. The young women met just once, when they were 8 years old, and indulged then, at Lara's instigation, in some memorable genital foreplay.

From the moment the monstrously narcissistic, self-indulgent Lara enters the scene, we know that Angel has found the self-immolating love she has sought since childhood. Angel moves in with her cousin and, blinded by passion, becomes mere putty in Lara's invidious hands, abetting all her lies, condoning her most violent tantrums, admiring her lavish shopping sprees, overlooking her demonic egotism, even sanctioning Lara's tempestuous affair with Angel's own father.

As Lara gets increasingly stoned on her pill binges, wounds Angel by throwing a laser disk at her face and brings home

innumerable male strangers into their flat, Angel's infatuation with her cousin (a lesbian relationship is implied) only grows more masochistic and obsessive. Angel's mother, Helena, Helena's Indian companions (the only likable and benevolent figures in this grim narrative) and Lara's own hapless psychotherapist father vainly warn Angel of Lara's destructiveness. And when Lara's family decides to hospitalize her, Angel, true to her promise of never leaving Lara's side, must bring the novel to its unspecified but clearly implied and tragic end.

What are we to make of this fable, in which a symbol of absolute evil -- the satanically manipulative and egotistical Lara -- is pitted against an emblem of absolute good -- the self-immolating, saintly Angel? The clearest clue to the author's moral intent is given by one of Lara's victimized lovers, who says years later: "She wasn't mad. Just bad. People are, believe it or not. You can call it by all the fancy names you please."

But the lusterless predictability of this novel's allegorical figures, and their monotonously described Manhattan setting, make it all the harder to take that platitude to heart. Angel and Lara's wooden supporting cast -- devoid of any vivid characters like the buffooning guru and picturesque dowagers of "In Search of Love and Beauty" -- brings no respite or relief. The prose of "Poet and Dancer" is as pristinely sparse and finely honed as that of Ms. Jhabvala's earlier fictions, but one misses her wry humor and her rapier eye for detail.

It is significant that the only characters in "Poet and Dancer" who begin to come to life are Helena's Indian helpmates; deprived of the mythic undertow and talismanic force of the subcontinent, the damaged creatures who populate Ms. Jhabvala's bleakly two-dimensional Manhattan can be viewed only with horrified detachment. Given the splendor of her previous work, one can only hope that she will eventually re-endow her American terrain with a vigor analogous to that of her Indian novels. **WHATEVER LARA WANTS, LARA GETS**

Usually, when Angel and her father met, they arrived at the same time . . . but that day . . . he was late. . . . He could not begin to defend himself soon enough. . . . He told her that after their lunch together Lara had called him at home that same evening. . . . Peter said that they had spent an afternoon in a motel just outside the city; then a few more afternoons and finally a couple of nights. . . . Lara had known exactly what she wanted and had feared no complications. But for him there had been the fear of complication with his wife; and also of Lara, that she might turn elsewhere if he failed her. . . .

Her father . . . mumbled that he wouldn't want to lose her. When he realized that "her" might be . . . ambiguous, he said he meant Angel.

She said, "Why should you lose me?" . . . "Not you -- nor her." He gave her a swift glance, half embarrassed, half pleading.

She did not absolve him; her mild gaze did not beam on him with her usual affection. She blamed him, although no one knew better than she did how difficult it was to deny Lara anything she momentarily desired. -- From "Poet and Dancer."

Photo: Ruth Praver Jhabvala. (Jerry Bauer/Doubleday)(pg. 14) Drawing. (pg. 13)