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Books: Dutiful in Delhi but moonstruck in Manhattan

By Carole Angier

Carole Angier follows Merchant Ivory's screenwriter from India to New York and discovers a strange journey into the mysteries of love; East into Upper East by Ruth Praver Jhabvala John Murray, pounds 15.99, 314pp

MORE PEOPLE know Ruth Praver Jhabvala for her Merchant Ivory screenplays than for her books, which are many. That is not a comment about her, but about us and our 90-minute (at most) culture. And yet I wonder if it does not reflect something about her after all. Many of these stories of New York and New Delhi are quite brilliant: acute, profound, moving. But they are also quite strange.

They are called "plain tales", to echo Kipling, and at first I thought: they are plain. They are very plainly divided into Indian and American sections, as the very plain title shows; and the Indian ones, which come first, despite Ruth Praver Jhabvala's reputation, also seemed to me very plain.

Was that the right word? The two which are (mainly) about the coming of modern India are subtle in their regret for the past; the other four, (mainly) about love, are deeply acquainted with its mystery, its imperiousness, its strange sacrifices. I particularly liked "A New Delhi Romance", in which the son of an ambitious mother and a reckless father falls recklessly in love, but in the end is more his mother's than his father's son. Not "plain", then, but what? They reminded me of a wonderful writer I was once meant to show around London. She hardly looked up; all she wanted to talk about was people, which she did with great brilliance.

These tales are hugely rich in emotional insight, but contain almost nothing else at all. We know if people are fat or thin, dark or fair; we see the insides of their houses and apartments. But they seem marooned in their tiny bits of New York (or New Delhi), in their families, in their obsessive loves. And the language in which they are described is equally single-minded. There are few images, almost no similes or metaphors, and no playfulness or irony at all.

A remark in one Indian story - that a daughter "was learning far more about herself and her relationship with her mother than was good for her" - is the only remotely tongue-in-cheek observation I could find. Maybe hot, analytical Ruth Praver Jhabvala does need cool, visual James Ivory after all.

Given this quirk, these are marvellous stories. Especially the American ones, which seem to me richer than the Indian (although this difference may be more in my reading than her writing). Here, too, are two great themes. One is, again, love, and the sacrifices we make willingly for it - even when it is unreturned ("A Summer by the Sea"), or dangerous ("Bobby"), or costs us everything ("Great Expectations"); even unto death ("Fidelity").

The other is a strange and interesting theme about the privileged Western rich, who have forgotten how to live, and who depend on the (often Eastern) poor for their spiritual and emotional renewal. Some of these exploit them, for money ("Great Expectations", "Parasites") and/or for sex (there are some pretty dark remarks about gurus). Some both love and exploit them, like Netta in "Two Muses"; and some simply love them, as truly as Jhabvala's other lovers.

The parasites, as the story of that title neatly shows, are the rich. In these New York stories, Ruth Praver Jhabvala struck me as a kinder, kinkier (many of these lovers are lesbian) version of Anita Brookner.

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