

July 18, 2004

'My Nine Lives': Passages to India

By PANKAJ MISHRA

IN 1951, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, who was born in Germany to Jewish parents, moved to Delhi with her Indian husband. Thirty years later, she described, in an essay called "Myself in India," "how intolerable India -- the idea, the sensation of it -- can become" to someone like her, a "Central European with an English education and a deplorable tendency to constant self-analysis."

Jhabvala spoke of the intense heat, the lack of a social life and the "great animal of poverty and backwardness" that she couldn't avoid seeing during her 24 years in India. And she explained why she disliked Westernized Indians: "They know Modern India to be an important subject and they have a lot to say about it: but though they themselves are Modern India, they don't look at themselves, they are not conditioned to look at themselves."

This sounds a bit harsh, and at least some Westernized Indians may ask: whom did Jhabvala meet in Delhi? Did she ever expose herself to the wide range of experience that V. S. Naipaul and E. M. Forster attested to? But then Jhabvala, unlike Naipaul, wasn't drawn to India by ancestry or, as in Forster's case, by a desire to move beyond a complacent Western liberalism. She was in Delhi, as she wrote, only because her husband was there, and she was interested not in India but in herself in India.

In any case, what matters is that she managed to transmute her personal experience, however narrow, into art. Her first few novels and stories feature the kind of semi-Westernized Indian businessmen, bureaucrats and politicians she probably saw or heard about in Delhi. These early works deal mainly with arranged marriages and the difficulties of romantic love. But they also vividly evoke the first decade of Nehru's India -- its political idealism, its vulgar vitality and confusion.

In 1913, while attending a wedding in a self-consciously modern Indian family in Simla, Forster remarked on the predicament of an older world hectically adjusting itself to the ways of the new, noting "the unlovely chaos that lies between obedience and freedom -- and that seems, alas! the immediate future of India." Living in Delhi in the years immediately following independence, Jhabvala, with her European sense of irony, was well placed to put this unlovely chaos into fiction. She was probably the first writer in English to see that India's Westernizing middle class, so preoccupied with marriage, lent itself well to Jane Austenish comedies of manners.

Jhabvala, who spent much of the 1960's in India, was also well placed to observe European and American seekers who sought to escape the bourgeois materialism of the West and often encountered in India the tackier materialism of the East. Feckless middle-class Westerners, unctuous Indian middlemen and charismatic but fraudulent gurus proliferate in novels and short stories like "Travelers," the Booker Prize-winning "Heat and Dust" and "How I Became a Holy Mother: And Other Stories." These were suave comedies, albeit with an undertone of melancholy, and they showed Jhabvala's cosmopolitan ability to evoke entire cultures with a few well-chosen details.

But it was also in these books of the 60's and 70's that Jhabvala's satire began to harden into cynicism. Her Western seekers usually ended up badly, defrauded and exploited. The Indians they met were either indolent fools or sexually rapacious knaves. East is East and West is West, Jhabvala seemed to say, and they meet only in silliness and depravity.

This is the vision of the confident exile -- of the much displaced person who, finally secure in her inner world and reconciled to her isolation, looks askance at people longing for fulfillment in other cultures and landscapes. It did not change much when, in the mid-70's, Jhabvala moved to New York and became famous for her sensitive screen adaptations of novels by E. M. Forster and Henry James. In books like "In Search of Love and Beauty," "Three Continents," "Shards of Memory" and "East Into Upper East: Plain Tales From New York and New Delhi," Jhabvala writes about the post-Nazi generations of European refugees and immigrants in America: a gloomy subject she often enlivens by sending some of her characters to India on farcically doomed quests for spiritual wisdom.

Her new novel, really a collection of stories, once again describes a world of displaced people, where, as the half-British, half-Indian narrator of "A Choice of Heritage" puts it, everyone is "moving more freely" as "refugees or emigrants or just out of restless curiosity" and where there are "at least two generations of people in whom several kinds of heritage are combined." As in a retrospective, the book has her usual cast of dropouts and eccentrics: the charismatic Indian guru, the Central Park West heiress, the dubious Indian businessman and politician, the eccentric Central European professor and musician, the trust-funded East Coast bohemian, the failed artist and the plain old charlatan. India reappears as the promise

of redemption to rich Americans and also as a setting of physical squalor: of "interstate buses, piled on top with baggage and bundles and maybe a crate of chickens, some of them dying on the way" and "crowded with farmers, clerks, pregnant women carrying infants, and children vomiting out of the barred open windows through which dust and pollution flowed in."

Describing an aristocratic Muslim woman in the England of the 1950's, Jhabvala writes, "Although in India, she had, like her mother, hardly been inside a kitchen, she learned to roast, to baste, to bake, with a rattle of the gold bangles that she never took off." These cherished symbols of Indian matrimony, rattling in an English kitchen, are the sort of details that make her short, compressed narratives seem oddly spacious, giving the reader the feeling of drifting along with her characters, from one continent to another, across several decades.

In "My Nine Lives," Jhabvala's Western seekers have grown up, and most have embraced their bourgeois destinies. The Indians have finally lost their post-independence idealism and are now seedily corrupt. The European exiles in New York are less unhappily reconciled to their American home. But none of these characters are closer to fulfillment, even when, like the indigent American woman in Delhi in "Life," they are "at the end of . . . lives of unrequited longing." Their sense of futility can infect the reader, who already feels slightly thwarted by Jhabvala's often very frank disdain for her characters.

In one story, she describes a refugee philosopher from Nazi Germany whose "central idea" is "the reversal from the Western tradition of technology, or the exarnation of spirit into matter, to the Hindu concept of Maya." One of her narrators is the daughter of Jewish refugees from Berlin who once wanted to be a Buddhist nun -- "it seemed a practical way out of the impasse of human life. But then I dropped the idea and got married instead."

The Jewish Buddhist sounds as absurd as the German philosopher, whom Jhabvala shows seducing his graduate student only a sentence after defining his "central idea." It is as though Jhabvala wants to tell the reader how hard it is to take such characters seriously, to believe in anything they say or do. The reader may agree, but probably also wonder why Jhabvala seems unwilling to assume the novelist's responsibility and show how people form their character and beliefs while trying to find a place in a usually inhospitable world: how, for instance, someone who has barely escaped the brisk, technology-assisted murder of six million Jews might wish to reassess the moral consequences of the Western faith in technology.

Jhabvala's own overdeveloped satirical impulse appears to originate in her state of spiritual exile. When fully absorbed by self-analysis, the perennial outsider usually ends up regarding all emotional and intellectual commitment as folly. Such cold-eyed clarity, useful to a philosopher or mystic, can only be a disadvantage for the novelist, who needs to enter, at least temporarily, her characters' illusions in order to recreate them convincingly on the page. It explains Jhabvala's rather bleak late fiction, in which she tackles Forsterian themes without Forster's sympathy and echoes Naipaul's impatience without his social concerns. "My Nine Lives" expresses, above all, her increasingly formidable detachment and, despite its many pleasures of observation, appears to round off rather than add to a distinguished corpus.

Pankaj Mishra is the author of a novel, "The Romantics." His book about the Buddha will be published this fall.