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## Books of The Times; Immigrant Families, at Home and Yet Alienated

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI

Poet and Dancer By Ruth Praver Jhabvala 199 pages. Doubleday. \$19.95.

Both the themes and the characters of "Poet and Dancer," Ruth Praver Jhabvala's 11th novel, uncannily echo those of "In Search of Love and Beauty," a novel she published exactly 10 years ago. Both novels concern the fragmentation of family life experienced by immigrants in New York. Both novels feature a similar cast of people, including gurulike charlatans who seduce wealthy women with their promises of salvation; older matrons who end up leading lonely, desperate lives, and the offspring of these people, who drift aimlessly through life in search of love and connection.

This time the reader is introduced to Anna and Siegfried Manarr, wealthy German immigrants who have made a home for themselves in Manhattan. Assiduously devoted to each other, Anna and Siegfried spend their free time going to concerts and art exhibits. Having come from families who have prospered in business for generations, they dream of having children with artistic talent.

Instead, their son, Hugo, becomes a sort of new-age guru who dreams of "fashioning a new humanity." He marries a flighty woman named Alice, one of those familiar Jhabvala characters who travel the third world looking for meaning, and they have a pretty, high-strung daughter named Lara. Hugo's sister, Helena, meanwhile marries a wealthy businessman named Peter, and raises a shy, introspective daughter called Angel.

Angel and her cousin Lara meet briefly as young girls, and both vow to pursue artistic careers: Lara will become a dancer; Angel, a poet.

Years pass in which the girls do not see each other. Angel grows up to be a shy, serious girl, unhealthily dependent on her mother. Lara grows up to be a world-class neurotic and flirt.

Beautiful, vivacious and emotionally needy, Lara collects admirers and hangers-on the way a lepidopterist collects butterflies. One of her chief admirers is Angel, who quickly transfers on to her all her needs to be needed. Her other big admirer is Angel's father, Peter, who soon sets her up in a hotel room as his mistress.

Intercut with the incestuous tale of Lara, Angel and Peter are other stories of love and loneliness in Manhattan. Mrs. Jhabvala shows Helena compensating for her daughter's absence by befriending a superstitious widow from India named Mrs. Arora, who has lost her eldest son in a bloody fight in prison. Peter's mother, Mrs. Koenig, meanwhile, tries to compensate for her son's absence by befriending Rose, her new maid. Each of these friendships is supposed to make up for more conventional family ties, but as in so much of Mrs. Jhabvala's fiction, love breeds disappointment and regret, not solace and safety.

When Peter grows sick of paying hotel bills for Lara, he comes up with another plan: he decides to install her in an apartment with his daughter, Angel. Despite the protestations of her mother, Angel jumps at the idea, and she and Lara soon become inseparable pals. It's hardly a friendship of equals. In fact, the two women quickly come to resemble one of those infernal pairings found in so many of Anita Brookner's novels: Lara is the imperious, bossy, selfish one, constantly making importunate demands on Angel's time and attention; Angel is the meek, passive one, always eager to please.

Their hermetic relationship seems meant to protect the two women from the realities of the outside world, and it leads, predictably enough, to a dangerous mutual dependency. Angel abandons her poetry-writing; Lara abandons her dance. Lara actively tries to turn Angel against her old friends, and she begins demanding that Angel spend all her time at home. As Lara's behavior grows more and more erratic -- she starts stealing things from stores, and baiting Peter's wife -- Angel begins giving her large doses of tranquilizers. Confusion and hostility soon take over their daily routines and gradually infect the rest of the Manarr clan as well.

Mrs. Jhabvala writes with such fluency and poise that "Poet and Dancer" flies by with almost no effort from the reader. Her subsidiary characters, as usual, are delineated with deft, ironic strokes, and together they leave the reader with the pleasant sense of being immersed in a convincing fictional world. We are made to see the ways in which emotional needs

and scars are handed down from father to son, mother to daughter, and we are made to appreciate the difficulty of erasing these patterns.

Still, the reader finishes "Poet and Dancer" vaguely dissatisfied and filled with a lingering sense of *deja vu*. The story of Angel and Lara feels mechanistic and predictable in the end: as young girls and later as women, they are almost completely defined by a single personality trait or two, traits that practically condemn them to their unhappy fates. Halfway through the book, we know where these characters are headed, and sure enough, we are given no surprises -- or further emotional revelations -- by the novel's end.

Mrs. Jhabvala has written similar stories before, and done so with considerably more complexity and insight.

Photo of Ruth Praver Jhabvala. (Doubleday)