The Clash of Cultures in Colonial and Post-colonial India as Reflected in Selected Works by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala

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Abbreviations:

EI	*Esmond in India*
BP	*A Backward Place*
Trav	*Travelers*
HD	*Heat and Dust*

Introduction

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala was born in Cologne, Germany, on 7 May 1927. The second child and only daughter of Marcus Prawer, a lawyer of Polish-Jewish origin who had fled his homeland of Poland for Germany during World War I to avoid military conscription. Her mother, Leonora Cohen, was born in Cologne to a German mother and a Russian father. In her personal essay "Disinheritance" (1979), a lecture given upon receipt of the Neil Gunn International Fellowship, Jhabvala describes her family whose history was already marked by migration as a "well-integrated, solid, assimilated, German-Jewish family"(qtd in Jones 3).

Jhabvala attended a Jewish segregated school before she came to England as a young refugee with her family in 1939. The family settled in Hendon, a London suburb with a sizable Jewish population, where Jhabvala attended school. In her new home country she switched from German to English at the age of twelve. In 1974 Jhabvala commented on her 'rootlessness' in an interview with Ramlal Agarwal saying,

> I was practically born a displaced person, and all any of us ever wanted was a travel document and a residential permit. One just didn't care as long as one was allowed to live somewhere. I'm still like that. I have absolutely no patriotism for, or attachment to, any country whatsoever. None. (qtd in Bhan 46)

All of Jhabvala's father's relatives in Poland died in concentration camps during the war, and Marcus Prawer, overcome by the tragedy, ended his own life in 1948. In

1979 Jhabvala referred movingly in "Disinheritance" to six early years of her life:

> I have slurred over the years 1933 to 1939, from when I was six to twelve. They should have been my most formative years; maybe they were, I don't know. Together with the early happy German-Jewish bourgeois family years--1927 to 1933--they should be that profound well of memory and experience (childhood and ancestral) from which as a writer I should have drawn. I never have. I've never written about those years. To tell you the truth, until today I've never even mentioned them. Never spoken about them to anyone. I don't know why not. I suppose they are the beginning of my disinheritance--the way they are for other writers of their inheritance. (qtd in Jones 3-4).

Jhabvala started to write stories at an early age and following her emigration to England she began to write in her adopted language adapting easily both to writing in English and to writing about her new surroundings but she never wrote of the Germany she left behind. In 1948 Jhabvala became a British citizen. She studied English literature at the University of London, receiving her MA in 1951. In "Disinheritance" Jhabvala views her extensive reading of English classics during her stay in England as "the great gift, the inheritance, that England gave me: my education which became my tradition--the only tradition I had: that of European literature"(qtd in Jones 4).

In 1949 she met an Indian architecture student named Cyrus Jhabvala at a party in London. Two years later, having completed her M.A. in English literature with a thesis entitled "The Short Story in England, 1700-1750",

they married. Leaving her mother and brother behind, Jhabvala accompanied her husband to Delhi, where he was lecturing in architecture.

Jhabvala spent the next twenty-four years in India, during which time she launched her career in fiction, culminating in the Booker Prize for *Heat and Dust* (1975), as well as her career in writing screenplays for the filmmakers Ismail Merchant and James Ivory. Jhabvala views her fiction set in India as a means to explain the bewildering experience of living in India. "My books may appear objective but really I think they are the opposite: for I describe the Indian scene not for its own sake but for mine"(qtd in Crane 489).

Cyrus Jhabvala's parents had both been involved in the struggle for India's independence from Britain gained in 1947. Radhika Jones comments:

> it is almost as if Ruth Jhabvala, by her marriage allied herself with that newly won independence and acted it out, distancing herself from her European ties and eventually becoming one of the forces that put the new India on the literary map. (Jones 5)

Her husband is of the Parsi community which is a product of migration from Persia several centuries ago and maintains a separate existence in India from Hindu and Muslim. Jhabvala learned about other religions from her husband's colleagues and students. Parsis however rarely appear in Jhabvala's work. She portrays the Hindu joint family in her early works stating: "[T]he Hindus are India"(Hamilton 12).

In 1975, after twenty-four years, she left India and settled in New York, dividing her time between New York

and New Delhi where her husband, with whom she maintains a close relationship, resides. Her three children live in the United States, England, and India, in the three continents of her novel *Three Continents* (1987). In her interview with Lyn Owen in 1978 Jhabvala confessed, "I am born an outsider, always looking through the windows. I would love to stay in one place. But I'll never settle down, never accept a place as home"(qtd in Bhan 62) admitting to Patricia Mooney in 1977 that "the step from India to [the U.S.] is nothing compared with the step I took from Europe to India. People here talk like me, think like me – and that is not so in India. In India, I'm an alien"(qtd in Bhan 51).

In 1975 Jhabvala won the Booker Prize for her novel *Heat and Dust* in which she handles "a double time-scheme with great success and treats with sensitive perception . . . love across the racial divide"(Massie 36). Her success "owed much to the calm ironic tone and measured elegance of her narrative voice"(Strobl 223). Her partnership with filmmakers James Ivory and Ismail Merchant was launched in 1963 by the adaptation of her novel *The Householder*. Since then she has written original screenplays and film adaptations of novels for which she won different awards. In 1984 Jhabvala won the MacArthur Foundation Award. Later in 1984 she won British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) for the best screenplay adaptation of *Heat and Dust* and the London Critics Circle Film Awards – Screenwriter of the year for the same novel. In 1986 she won the Academy Award for Writing Adapted Screenplay for *A Room with a View* and in 1987 the Writers Guild of America awarded her the Best Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium for the same film. In 1992 she won the Academy Award for Writing Adapted

Screenplay for *Howards End*. In 1994 she won the Writers Guild of America's Screen Laurel Award. In 2003 she was the O.Henry Prize Winner for "Refuge in London".

Critics have examined Jhabvala's work from different perspectives. Her work has been compared to that of Salman Rushdie in examining the ironic similarities of prejudice and intolerance in both Western and Indian societies. Jhabvala has been considered to focus on the intercultural encounter from a European perspective. Critics have examined her repeated portrayal of the theme of exile. Her work has also been compared to that of Christine Weston, John Masters and Paul Scott in depicting the British attitude towards de-colonisation. Jhabvala has been linked with the Indian women writers Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee for sharing similar philosophies while differing in perspective.

Ralph J. Crane reflects upon the effect of Jhabvala's life of exile and expatriation, saying that it "has placed her in an unusual position among novelists who write about India, and has enabled her to write about that country from the ambiguous position of an outsider who is also an intimate insider"(Crane 489). Radhika Jones states that "Jhabvala's richly varied background . . . defies categorization along national or cultural lines"(Jones 2). Salman Rushdie characterizes Jhabvala's voice as that of the "rootless intellectual" which Janbavala has admitted in a number of her personal essays (qtd. in Jones 3). Paul Gray remarks that Jhabvala is not "a do-gooder, a foreign service careerist or a spiritual pilgrim. But her European background and natural desire to sympathize with her adopted land made her an acute observer"(qtd in "Ruth Prawer Jhabvala." *Britannica* 5). Allan Massie states that Jhabvala works "at the meeting-point of different cultures. Her strengths as a novelist are

traditional; she tries to impose the order of art on the disorder from which her stories emerge"(Massie 37). Ramlal Agarwal considers Jhabvala an "Outsider with Unusual Insight".

Jhabvala's work has also received negative criticism; Vasant Shahane (one of Jhabvala's best known Indian critics) depicts her attitude as "constant sneering at the expense of India"(qtd in Sucher 5). In reply to Ramlal Agarwal's question about the reason behind her "cold reception in India" Jhabvala said, "I don't feel particularly neglected here. I think Indians don't read much anyway, so I don't really expect them to read my novels"(qtd in Gooneratne 301). Her reply reflects an Orientalist attitude to some extent but this is not represented in her novels.

In *Silence, Exile and Cunning: The Fiction of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala* (1983), Yasmine Gooneratne chronologically analyses in detail Jhabvala's first six novels, some of her short stories and examines how film writing added to her writing for fiction. Gooneratne examines the impact of the Indian experience upon Jhabvala's writing and its steady development into maturity. She disagrees with some critics' claims that Jhabvala's mature novels are "cynical attacks upon India"(26), viewing them as an "artistic expression of the process of understanding life and coming to terms with it"(26). Gooneratne regards Jhabvala's personal history of displacement and exile as representative of present times: "a period of history that will no doubt be typified in future ages . . . by the figure of the wanderer and the refugee"(vii).

In *Imagining India* (1989) Richard Cronin states that "Imperial India is a country that came to exist only in the act of being represented. Independent India is a country defied

by its resistance to Western attempts to represent it"(Cronin 158). Cronin considers Jhabvala's achievement as a writer of fiction to depend on her knowledge that "the most salient fact about India is that it is very poor"("Myself in India" 14), but concludes that "Jhabvala cannot get into her fiction the unutterable misery of India"(43). Cronin views the image that Jhabvala conveys in *Heat and Dust* (1975) as "a picture of a princely state in which love, power and race are inextricably entwined, in which personal relations can never triumph because no relations are simply personal"(176).

In Laurie Sucher's *The Fiction of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala: The Politics of Passion* (1989) Jhabvala's later work is examined from a feminist perspective. Sucher remarks that a study of *A New Dominion* (1972), *Heat and Dust* (1975), *In Search of Love and Beauty* (1983) and *Three Continents* (1987) together with a selection of her short stories from a feminist perspective "offers a fascinating study of women's isolation and alienation in a male-centered society"(Sucher 12). Sucher points the absence of maternal "relationships, or non-relationships, of mothers and daughters throughout the work"(12) as the main reason for the women characters' quests in these novels. Sucher depicts the dilemma faced by Jhbvala's independent Western women travelers when they discover the "inferior"(11) social conditions of women in India and their fall for men who "*know* them only in the sense of knowing how to use them"(11). Nevertheless Sucher argues that Ruth Jhabvala's vision "is fundamentally affirmative"(21), considering her disillusionment "a good thing because it brings us closer to truth"(21).

Gerwin Strobl in *The Challenge of Cross-Cultural Interpretation in the Anglo-Indian Novel: The Raj Revisited*

(1995) compares Jhabvala's portrayal of the Raj in *Heat and Dust* (1975) to that of Paul Scott in *The Raj Quartet* (1976) and that of J.G. Farrell in *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973). Strobl points out that Jhabvala's picture of the past is "essentially one-dimensional"(Strobl 259), concluding that she "examines literary evidence from the time of the Raj – rather than the Raj itself"(258).

In *Ruth Jhabvala's India: Image of India in the Fiction of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala* (2005) Pankaj Bhan depicts "the elusive quality" of Jhabvala's work showing that her ambiguous position in the literary canon "def[ying] easy categorization"(Bhan vii) arises from the fact that her fiction can be analysed from two different literary traditions: the 'Anglo-Indian' literature and 'Indo-English' writing. Bhan points out that lately

> the critical canon seems to be veering towards treating her as a post-colonial expatriate writer who cannot be pinned down to any particular nationality or literary tradition and who, in her deceptively simple literary style, tackles certain post-modernist themes and motifs. (43)

Pankaj Bhan traces Ruth Jhabvala's image of India as embodied in her entire body of fiction from her first novel *To Whom She Will* (1955) to the last novel to date *Shards of Memory* (1995). Bhan points out that Jhabvala's initial image of India is objective and sympathetic but gets more negative successively with each novel. Bhan concludes that "her track record of looking at India – first in a cool, detached manner, then in a frankly negative vision and finally as a negative metaphor – does not admit much possibility of a radical change of perception vis-à-vis India"(285). However one would disagree with his view of

the decline of Jhabvala's image of India from positive to negative because her representation of the Indian scene is quite objective. Referring to the "post-colonial concerns and themes" of her work, Bhan suggests that a postcolonial study of Jhabvala's work would result "in a fresh appraisal"(Bhan 286).

The objective of this study is to depict the cultural clash in colonial and post-colonial India as reflected in four novels by Ruth Jhabvala. In the colonial period the cultural clash is based on Western representation of the East as 'Other' as well as Indians' resistance to colonialism. In post-independent India the cultural clash is based on Westerners' inability to adapt to their new social position devoid of their presumed racial and moral superiority and Indians' resistance to cultural hegemony based on their awareness of the false assumptions in colonial discourse, a step towards 'decolonisation of the mind'. As such the East-West encounter is studied from both Western and Indian perspectives.

Postcolonial theory is the chosen approach involving theories of Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak in relation to the selected novels. The analysis of the East-West encounter in the four novels is applied in the Western representation of the East as 'Other' depicted by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978), the importance of forging national consciousness in anti-colonial resistance and the need to resist corruption in society after independence to avoid the 'bourgeois phase' illustrated by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry, ambivalence and hybridity depicted in *The Location of Culture* (1994)

and subaltern subordination illustrated by Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?"(1988).

Jhabvala's essay "Myself in India" is examined as a personal framework to her ambivalent attitude to that country which is reflected in her novels. Jhabvala depicts a wheel of three different responses that most Europeans pass through in their relationship to India in the first phase of which everything is "marvelous", in the second phase everything is "not so marvelous" and in the third phase everything is "abominable". The significance of this essay for her fiction lies "in its confession that the writer has effectively changed her subject"(Jones 12). The choice of the four novels is based on the second phase of her writing career during which her main focus of interest is the portrayal of Westerners in India.

In the novels included in this study Jhabvala portrays the India in which she found herself at the time of writing. According to Pankaj Bhan, her uniqueness as a writer lies in the fact that "she writes *in* and *about* post-independence India"(Bhan 198). Jhabvala's portrayal of India directly after it attained its political independence depicted the country as suffering from what Fanon called the 'bourgeois phase'. While her portrayal of modern India is based on her own experience, her portrayal of the Raj period in the 1920s plot of *Heat and Dust* is based on literary evidence.

The first of the novels to be examined is Jhabvala's *Esmond in India* (1958), which deals with the first of Jhabvala's expatriates to be transplanted in independent India. *A Backward Place* (1965) depicts five different European attitudes in independent India. Through one of the characters Jhabvala represents a Westerner's adaptation to another way of life. *A New Dominion* (1972) deals with