

Foreword

At a literary party in the 1950s I found myself standing next to a small, olive-skinned woman in an elegant sari. Earlier I had heard her speaking to our hostess in what had seemed to be a faintly Indian accent. Since on both sides of my family I have connections with India going back for generations, my conversational opening was: ‘What part of India do you come from?’ With a small smile, the woman replied ‘I don’t *come* from any part of India. I merely live there. In Delhi,’ she added. She smiled again, head uptilted, clearly enjoying my amazement. ‘What took you there?’ She replied that what had motivated her had not been a romantic impulse or a deliberate desire to learn about a different culture, but merely the chance that, as a student at Queen Mary College, London, she had met and fallen in love with an Indian student, Cyrus Jhabvala, later to become a distinguished architect, and so had married him. Gradually, in the ensuing conversation, I realised that this woman was Ruth Praver Jhabvala, a writer whom, even then when she was far less famous than now, I had already come to admire.

Mine has always been the perhaps now old-fashioned view that one of the essential gifts for a novelist is the ability to know precisely what it is like to be someone other than oneself. Ruth Praver Jhabvala possesses not merely that ability but also the rarer ability to *become* someone else. She was born into a well-to-do cultivated, happy German-Jewish family in Cologne in 1927. But in 1939 an inevitable decision had to be taken: to survive, father, mother, Ruth and a brother who eventually became an Oxford Professor of German Language and Literature, must seek refuge from the Nazis in England. With the adaptability of a child, Ruth was soon indistinguishable from any other Jewish girl in North London.

These two transformations from German into English and

English into Indian, were to be followed by a third. When, in the early Seventies I met her at another literary party, she spoke of her decision, soon to be implemented, to quit India for the States. Having just myself returned from India, I had been speaking to her of the conflicting emotions that the vast country had aroused in me: on the one hand an intense pleasure in its scenic beauty and on the other a horror at the suffering insistently visible all around me. I remember that I told her that, in order to stifle that horror, I made a deliberate decision to take only an aesthetic view of everything that I saw. At that she demanded almost angrily: 'But can you? *Can* you?' She went on to tell me how she found herself more and more unwilling to go out from her comfortable Delhi flat into streets teeming with human misery. We agreed that the most terrible aspect of this misery was the realisation that to attempt to alleviate it was like attempting to bail out a sinking boat with a teaspoon. Children and dogs besieged one. If one gave a scrap of bread to one of the former or a small coin to one of the latter, then all the rest pursued one in a pack. At least the dogs kept their distance. But the desperate hands of the children plucked at one's sleeve or clawed at one's shoulder.

After she had moved to the States, she produced more remarkable books and, having become friend and confidante of the highly successful film partnership of James Ivory and Ismail Merchant, also wonderfully professional scripts for such features as *Shakespeare Wallah*, *Autobiography of a Princess*, and *The Europeans*. But I think that, despite the high artistic quality of everything that she has written, she will, like Kipling, be above all remembered for her Indian tales. Some critics have seen her essentially as an outsider looking in on the exotic world to which her marriage transported her. But for me she seems miraculously to have become an insider from the first moment when she arrived in so dauntingly alien a civilisation.

Certain types constantly recur in her stories. Of these, among

her Indian men there is, first and foremost, the swami, powerful both in physique and personality, who dominates his followers and drains them of psychological and physical energy in order to charge his rampant egotism. Her attitude to such men is complex – is their authority truly supernatural or is it merely derived from their overweening personalities? In contrast her Indian women, whether wives treated as mere chattels by their husbands or mistresses treated with capricious generosity by their elderly patrons, are pathetically vulnerable. Her English males tend to be conventional, complacent, even feeble creatures, whose wives abandon them either for Indian lovers or for an itinerant life of seeking in vain for spiritual enlightenment.

Jhabvala has recorded that in writing about India she is ‘always attempting to present India to myself, in the hope of so giving myself some kind of foothold... I describe the Indian scene not for its own sake but for mine.’ As a result of this, she rarely refers explicitly to a multitude of political, social and moral problems. But just as a diagnosis of an illness can be reached by examination of a drop of blood or of a tiny area of tissue, so a page or even merely a paragraph of one of her stories can provide a diagnosis of what is amiss with the beautiful but often frightening world that is her subject.

Having reread these stories – so observant, so humane, so elegantly told and so beautifully crafted – I came to the conclusion that, if I had been on the jury that decided to give the Nobel Prize to an octogenarian woman novelist who in her youth settled in England from abroad, then my vote would unhesitatingly have gone not to Doris Lessing, fine novelist though she is, but to an even finer one, Ruth Praver Jhabvala.

Francis King
London, May 2008