

RUTH JHABVALA'S *AN EXPERIENCE OF INDIA*: POST-INDEPENDENCE REINVESTMENT IN COLONIALIST STEREOTYPES

"Sometimes it seems to me how pleasant it would be to say yes and give in and wear a sari and be meek and accepting and see God in a cow. Other times it seems worthwhile to be defiant and European and -- all right, be crushed by one's environment, but all the same have made some attempt to remain standing".¹

"If I were God, I would regard as the very worst our acceptance - for whatever reasons - of racial inferiority."²

I

In the former British colonies independence from imperial government has been accompanied, as Salman Rushdie has expressed it, by the empire writing back to the center in a sustained effort at mental decolonization as well as political. Some of the concerns in writings that are considered "post-colonial" are to do with exposing the assumptions and the axioms that went into colonialist discourse and the construction of colonial subjects; subverting the priorities and the agendas of the colonial texts; reinscribing the historical narrative differently and from the perspective of the colonized; recognizing and even celebrating the hybridity that is a legacy of the colonial encounter; and revealing the fractures, the contradictions, the political divisiveness and atrocities that are both causes and effects of that encounter. But, as Helen Tiffin points out, "decolonization is a process, not an arrival."³ In that overall process of decolonization, there are interesting regressions, traducings and retracings that manifest even in the literature produced in our time. The short story selected for discussion here, Ruth Praver Jhabvala's "An Experience of India,"⁴ shows that the ideology of the colonizer is also replicated by "native" authors in the post-colonial era. Therefore, certain texts,

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1. Ruth Praver Jhabvala, "An Experience of India," *Out of India*, (New York, William Morrow, 1957-1986), p. 21.
 2. Chinua Achebe, "The Novelist as Teacher," *Morning Yet on Creation day* (New York: Anchor Press, 1975) p. 70.
 3. "Post Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse," *Kunapipi* (9.2, 1987) p. 17.
 4. In *Out of India* (New York: William Morrow, 1957-1986), pp. 125-46. Subsequent page references are made parenthetically within my text.

even when produced by post-colonials themselves, cannot be categorized as post-colonial writing, since their authors play the role of "native informants"⁵ in reinvigorating, defending, and returning certain colonialist priorities. In order to reveal the complicity even in our time of liberal discourses and imperialism, and the critical limits of that discourse, I want to demonstrate some ways in which the priorities of the colonial past are now recirculated despite the dismantling of the colonial regime.

The short story selected for discussion is set in India; its author Ruth Praver Jhabvala is considered an "Indian" writer well received and acclaimed in the West. Jhabvala, however, is not an Indian, but was born in Germany of Polish/Jewish parentage and emigrated to England when she was twelve years old. Jhabvala lived in England for the next twelve years and then became the wife of an Indian architect and lived in India for twenty-four years, before moving to New York in 1975.⁶ Jhabvala has published several collections of short stories and eight novels, of which *Heat and Dust* is the winner of the 1975 Booker Prize. She has co-authored several film scripts and written plays for TV and the script for the filming of *Heat and Dust*. Jhabvala's status as an Indian author is somewhat uncertain, but many of her stories are of her "experience of India" or, more cryptically, are "out of India." The bibliography of Indian writing in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* regularly includes her work in its citations. Her major work, however, is published in London and New York. Jhabvala's own desire is to be considered a "European writer" and to be included among those European writers about India.⁷ Britain seems to have officially claimed her now (as it has V. S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie) and she appears in Allan Massie's *The Novel Today: A Critical Guide to the British Novel 1970-1989*. Whatever the national affiliation of Jhabvala, the point to be made here is that many of her tales are set in and depict a post-independence, post-colonial social context, but cater to audiences mainly in the western world.

It must be emphasized at the outset that there is no attempt to speak of the body of work or even of the novels of Jhabvala; the short story is selected because it encapsulates in the post-colonial era interesting problems symptomatic of the prior colonial literary history. In other words, the story is emblematic of a persistent discursive trend within liberal discourse upon the former colonized world.

⁵. A succinct definition for this term introduced by Gayatri Spivak is inaccessible, since *Native Informant; Master Discourse* is unpublished as yet. I interpret and use the terms to indicate those instances when the native is given a script ("worded") that reconfirms the colonialist stereotypes.

⁶. Yasmine Gooneratne, *Silence, Exile, and Cunning: The Fiction of Ruth Praver Jhabvala* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1983) pp. 1-10.

⁷. *ibid.*, p. 301.

II

In the Anglo-Indian fiction produced in the ethos of empire, there is a certain monotony in encountering Indian subjects cast as victims or villains, and westerners as destroyed by devious native elements as well as the climate, or what is regarded as general and palpably evil environs. Overall, the tendency is to cast native difference negatively. Native difference is rarely celebrated, legitimized or validated. Helen Tiffin points out the legitimacy and the validity, therefore, of the post-colonial "impulse to create or recreate independent local identity."⁸ In the fraught context of the post-colonial, therefore, it becomes an imperative to contest the native identity that Ruth Praver Jhabvala reconstructs and rewrites along the lines of colonialist narratives.

The collection of short stories from which "An Experience of India" is selected for this reading bears the nuanced title *Out of India*. It is certainly a perspective from without that represents the Indians in this story; however, it is the quality and the working of the perceiving mind that is revealed in it, rather more than the Indian situation itself. But, it is difficult to attribute any of the peccadilloes of the perceiving mind to the author, who is elusive and inscrutable in the story. The frontispiece for the collection, "Introduction: Myself in India,"⁹ which is apparently autobiographical, provides important signification of the perceiving intellect of the stories that follow. In it Jhabvala stresses her increasing alienation from India: "However, I must admit that I am no longer interested in India. What I am interested in now is myself in India--which sometimes, in moments of despondency, I tend to think of as my survival in India" (13). Jhabvala writes of her efforts to shut out the poverty and destitution of the country, which she likens to "a great animal" on whose back live all those who are materially secure in India. The analogy is powerful and moving. On the other hand, the entire piece is devoted to describing her own acutest sufferings and sense of crisis, which is the lot also of those who, like her, are "liberal in outlook and have been educated to be sensitive and receptive to India: there comes a point when you have to close up in order to protect yourself" (13). Jhabvala quite candidly denies any identification with India: "I am a central European with an English education and a deplorable tendency to constant self-analysis. I am irritable and have weak nerves" (14). The self-deprecation suggested by this comment is discussed below, but the comment gives a very definite sense, though, that Jhabvala is playing mind games with or posturing for the reader. At times her pronouncements are earnest, as is evident in some of the lines quoted above; at other times, as for example, when she speaks of her abhorrence of the westernized Indian woman, she is openly biased, deliberately contemptuous, and even somewhat frenzied, but above all, the tone of patronage is significant evidence of her own and European superiority:

⁸. *op. cit.*, p. 17

⁹. See *Out of India*, pp. 13-21. Subsequent page references are cited parenthetically in my essay.

In fact, my teeth are set on edge if I have to listen to her for more than five minutes--yes, even though everything she says is so true and in line with the most advanced opinions of today. But when she says it, somehow, even though I know the words to be true, they ring completely false...nothing of what she says (though she says it with such conviction, skill, and charm) is of the least importance to her. She is only making conversation in the way she knows educated women have to make conversation. And so it is with all of them....This applies not only to subjects that are naturally alien to them--for instance, when they talk oh so solemnly! and with such profound intelligence! of Godard and Becket and ecology--but when they talk about themselves too...(17).

And at other times her tone becomes quite desperate. She admits that she gives "exaggerated images in order to give some idea of how intolerable India--the idea, the sensation of it--can become" (20). On occasion, the exaggerations become quite absurd: she says that she cannot stand the "lassitude" that Indians display at their gatherings when they sit around and relax, although she enjoys the feeling for a short time and then:

I can't just *be!* Suddenly I jump up and rush away out of that contented circle. I want to do something terribly difficult like climbing a mountain or reading the *Critique of Pure Reason*... Anything to prevent myself from being sucked down into that bog of passive, intuitive being (98).

In a sense Jhabvala becomes the subject of her own narration in this piece, where she gives free reign to her intense frustrations; her analysis thereof is the text.

Despite the deprecations and self-irony, this opening "autobiographical" text posits certain images of India, which, by her own admission are hyperbolic, but nonetheless, they replay and energize discursive features of the colonialist discourses on India. In short, these are the oppressivity of climate; the men and women easily "read" by the European; the falsity and superficiality of the "westernized" Indian and the passivity of the rest; the alienation of the sensitive westerner or how *their* ways are so different from *ours*; the fatalistic attitude of Indians "to do with their belief in reincarnation" (15); and always and yet again the heat--"white-hot city streets under a white-hot sky" (19). She also introduces "lepers" and scenes of human sacrifice. This first piece is an account of the nastiness of India and the thesis of it is that to live with such horror one must "become Indian and adopt Indian attitudes, habits, beliefs, assume if possible an Indian personality" (21) or else be destroyed.

The self-deprecation and the recurrent self-irony serve as a technique for validating the representation, simultaneously disavowing the responsibility for presenting the "truth," while not quite disclaiming it. Jhabvala bears a native name, which also

lends her portrayals of India a certain validity. But, as Paul de Man alerts, "The name on the title page is not the proper name of a subject capable of self-knowledge and understanding, but the signature that gives the contract legal, though by no means epistemological, authority."¹⁰

Jhabvala's own emphasis that she writes as a European is important, because it gives a sense of her filiation and she is fearful of becoming an insider. In my view, it is her sense of hostility that is the source of her creative energy. For the native, however, to read Jhabvala is to feel colonized again. But above all, to accept her evaluations and judgements and perceptions is to accept unconditionally the artists' superior competence of artists, to read the world, to deny their complicity in ideological power struggles over fixing meaning, and in fact, to arrogate to them an unmediated vision.

In the colonialist era, representations similar to Jhabvala's were practically useful as a means of ideological control for domination; in the post-colonial context, they are a means of sustaining cultural hegemony and western ascendancy.

The protagonist of Jhabvala's short story, "An Experience of India," is a western woman, who comes to India to discover its famous spirituality, to know Indians, and "to escape from western materialism." Jhabvala is heavily satirical about the protagonist's naive optimism and romanticizing; she eventually leaves her comfortable home, nice complacent husband, and takes to the life of the hippies, who frequent the streets of India. The protagonist is outrageously unconventional and moves with the homeless, the street people, and has seamy sexual encounters with strange Indians. Through it all she is quite earnestly analytical about her experiences, which are part and parcel of her desire to be Indian. Eventually she is raped by a "guru" who is the incarnate of all evil. This experience of India changes the woman's romanticism to hatred of all things Indian, but at the end she is left obsessed with going on the streets again, addicted to and fascinated by the terror, the violence, the sordidity, which she has experienced first hand. This protagonist is a strange creation, a one dimensional, playing card figure, a caricature compelled by terror and obsession, pursuing the violent and terrible path of her own destruction.

The anonymous protagonist in Jhabvala's story is an extreme and contemporary version of Forster's creation, Adela Quested, and as her predecessor, is motivated by a spurious curiosity and romanticism, a quest which eventually proves destructive. In Jhabvala's story too, the rape of an English woman by an Indian is the central metaphor for the "experience of India." Cumulatively, the Indian experience reduces the woman to a mass of uncontrollable impulses completely devoid of anything like human volition. In the irony that surfaces for the reader from the bizarre observations of the protagonist--

¹⁰. Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984) p. 71.

"I didn't like sleeping with all these people, but I felt I had to. I felt I was doing good, though I don't know why" (128)--the author seems to be saying that poverty, destitution and third world impoverishment should not be romanticized and preyed upon by bored westerners, that such actions too are exploitative.

But the overwhelming attention is upon the woman's folly and its wages. It is as if Jhabvala, for the elucidation of the westerner, situates and parades in the Indian space all of the forces inimical to the human being and lets her obsessive protagonist relentlessly draw them out one by one, thus setting in motion a process of destruction.

Jhabvala's introductory and autobiographical account has already warned the reader that such forces may be the undoing of liberals who are potentially sensitive to India. Jhabvala is, perhaps, cautioning that only the tough imperialists, the "sahib" types can survive India, that it requires brute domination, or else a sorry fate is inevitable.

In the course of this story, as in the prior introductory "Myself in India," more stereotypes of India are offered and *not denied*. The western woman is raped by the Indian male, because he is supposed to have an eternal curiosity about and attraction to her. When the "swami" rapes her, he "proves" that he was the same as all the other Indian men she had known, characterized by the same obsession regarding her and, therefore, she says: "I was no longer afraid: now he was not an unknown quantity nor was the situation any longer new or strange" (141). The "knowing" is important for domination, and although he has overpowered her physically, she is his superior by her "knowledge" of him. According to Chinua Achebe "To the colonialist mind it [is] always of the utmost importance to be able to say: *I know my natives*," and this "knowledge" testifies to the simplicity of the native, the vision of the colonizer and it is a form of control.¹¹

Jhabvala reconstructs and perpetuates the stereotypical and dystopic mystique of India. That image is menacing: it suggests that in India, violence and sordidity are a general proclivity. The bizarre subjectivity of the narrator of the story, and Jhabvala's own admitted neuroses notwithstanding, these images appear to acquire almost factual status because the initial narrative supports and authorizes the negative. Since there is not a single positive character in the whole parade of Indians made to perform their sordid roles either in the introductory piece or in "An Experience of India," Jhabvala's discourse replicates with alarming fidelity the colonialist rhetoric that loudly proclaimed the inherent viciousness, simplicity, passivity, and moral decrepitude of the native.

In earlier fictions, since authorial intentions almost always had some universal human condition as ground for pronouncements about natives, the witting or unwitting racist implications would be dissimulated. On the contrary, Jhabvala, her stock-in-trade of self-irony notwithstanding, speaks specifically of "them," and holds herself and

¹¹. See *Morning Yet On Creation Day* p. 6.

Europe apart from the proclivities of the Indians. Her western agent is an unwitting and unconscious provocateur that unleashes what is already there. Chinua Achebe, on the subject of European representation, remarks:

I would not dream of constructing theories to explain "the European mind" with the same "bold face" that some Europeans assume in explaining ours. But perhaps I am too diffident and ought to have a go at it. After all a novel is only a story and could be as tall as an iroko tree.¹²

III

Ruth Praver Jhabvala's "An Experience of India," despite its irony, shows such strong colonialist habits of representation that it might have been written in another era. I have remarked above that her inscriptions of fictional event and native characters are reminiscent of Forster and Woolf, but it must be stressed that although their characters may be similarly constructed in terms of the defining ideology, there is a crucial difference. Forster's and Woolf's characters are ordinary, and despite the stereotypical elements invested in them, may function in a "human" community even after the author has done with them. Jhabvala's character is not so lucky and may never belong with the "normal" human being, so inimical has the author made India's influence upon her.

Overall, Jhabvala's characters are interesting surreal figures in whom Orientalist or colonialist "verities" are concentrated and accentuated. Jhabvala, by virtue of her native name and connections to India, plays the role of "native informant" in rearticulating--albeit more bitterly than either Woolf or Forster--the colonialist discourse on India. It is a good thing, perhaps, that Jhabvala wishes to be classed as other than an Indian writer. It seems a vast insult, added to the injury of the colonial experience itself, that the most memorable stories about the colonies are also a catalogue of pitiable victims, evil men, and oppressive environs; in the particular case of India, the characterizing trope in some of the best known stories on India is the metaphor of rape.

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¹². *op. cit.*, 79