Review Article

The Spell Breaks: Disgust and Disenchantment; Jhabvala's Second Phase Novels

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A BACKWARD PLACE

*A Backward Place***,** Jhabvala's sixth novel, was published in 1965, and within a year of its publication, she wrote that "India no longer interests me as a subject. What I am interested in now is myself in India" – (*Myself in India", p. 19).* It is not that there had been sudden geographical political or social changes in India that brought about such a change in Jhabvala's fiction. Actually, *A Backward Place* points out how Jhabvala's tone, attitude, perception and outlook towards India get changed in the second phase of her career as a novelist. Ram Lal Aggarwal, Gooneratne and others have as well noted this change. The novel analyses Jhabvala's attempt to probe the impact of India on the European's body, mind and soul.

A Backward Place tells the story of three European women, Etta, Clarissa and Judy. In some respects, they represent a European's general response to India – enthusiasm, lack of enthusiasm, and hatred – which sums up Jhabvala's deep-rooted conviction, and which is authenticated by this remark of Clarissa in the early part of the novel,

One either merges with Hindu civilization or is drowned in it. (BP-20)

Something similar is echoed in Etta's outburst to Franz –

Oh do stop it, Franz! Etta interrupted, India , India, India, all the time as if there wasn't anything interesting to be said. One has the misfortune to be here… why do we have to keep on torturing ourselves by talking about it. (*A Backward Place*, pp. 36-37)

Perhaps the most consistent and strident resistance to India's supposed influence comes from Etta, a Hungarian expatriate, who has been in India for long, leading a pretty luxurious existence thanks to the munificence of her succession of lovers. She has created a little Europe for herself in Delhi in the backdrop of an unfriendly Indian expanse. On her first visit to Etta's apartment, her friend Judy cannot help exclaiming that it was "so elegant, so continental. In such good taste: just like Etta herself."(*BP.* p.*6)* But with time passing and age leaving its mark on Etta's person resulting in increasing inconstancy of her lovers, she is having a hard time maintaining the kind of life she is used to. Hence, her increasing desperation leading to almost neurotic behaviour and her fulminations against India and all that it represents. At one point, she bursts out : "Just because we happen to have landed ourselves in this primitive society, that's no reason why we should submit to their primitive morality"(B*P p. 5).* In one of her typical hysterical moods, she says that even Nature in collusion with India is bent upon harming the expatriates: "Don't you know that the Indian sun has been put specially into the sky to ruin our complexions.?" (B*P p. 7)*

Etta's repeated snubs to Judy for marrying an average Indian and staying put in India in rather difficult circumstances is of a piece with her character. In the beginning of the novel itself she is seen haranguing Judy: "My dear Judy, you've made a mistake – it could happen as they say to anyone – but if you would only face up to it and get out before it's too late, too late. Judy'." (*BP, p.5)*

By the end of the novel, Etta has come to a stage where she loathes India and everything associated with it and yet at this dusk of her life she has nowhere to go but to stay put in India. "For the first time", so runs the text, "she disliked her flat, though she had taken so much trouble with it and had made it as chic and modern as she still knew how. Now it was stale with cigarette smoke, untidy and dusty, closed in like a cage.." (*BP, p.171)* Also, even though untidy and disorganized her small flat "was a cage that was necessary to her and out of which she would not break even if she could: for outside lay the dusty landscape, the hot sun, the vultures, the hovels and

shacks and the people in rags that lived there till some dirty disease carried them off" (*BP, p.171)*

Etta is also aware that at this stage of her life, even Europe would be alien and inhospitable to her and even if she manages to escape to that haven, she would be out of place there. In one of her rare (and honest) bids at self-introspection, she ruminates:

But she was afraid of it too. Here at least she had her personality: she was Etta, whom people knew and admired for being blonde and vivacious and smart. In Europe, there were many blondes, and there they might more easily notice that she was not as young or as vivacious as she once had been; and they might not think her smart at all. She no longer knew the way they dressed there, or the way they talked or the fashionable foods they ate and drinks they drank, the books they had read, the conversations they had held with one another, while she was out here. (*BP, p.171)*

In this orchestration of Western response to India, Etta represents a type of expatriates who has stayed too long in India and who has not had 'a mission and a cause' and who has not been "patient, cheerful, unselfish, strong."[1] The moral of her rather tragic story is that if you do not have these preoccupations, then you must not stay so long in India. For India affects her visitors too strongly and in too many inscrutable ways for persons like Etta to resist it.

At the other end of the spectrum is Judy who represents a different kind of response to INDIA. At the surfacial level, she represents the response of total assimilation in India and is deemed to have attained ineluctable peace in such unquestioned surrender to India. Though married in a cross-cultural context, Judy has made conscious attempts to identify with the land of her adoption and be part of its social and cultural ethos. She wears sari, puts her hair up in a bun, speaks Hindi and interacts with everyone in her husband's home and around in a most spontaneous manner. She lives in an old house in a non-descript colony 'in a side-street leading off from a road of shops.' In this typically low-brow Indian house, Judy lives with her drifter husband, two children, brother-in-law, sister-in-law, their children and an old destitute aunt called Bhuaji who in the time-tested Indian way gets economic and emotional support in this large extended family. Even in its most austere essentials, Judy loves this home and eagerly returns to it in the evening after a day's work to be with her family. She spends the evenings sitting on a cot in the courtyard and doing her diurnal round of duties like a typical 'Indian' woman.

However, Ruth Jhabvala's view of Judy is not as idyllic as it is made out to be. For one, the writer has made use of subtle ironic devices to puncture the idealization of Judy. Judy has had a disturbed family background back in England. We are told that she was the only child of her parents. Her grandparents had died before Judy was born and they had no relatives except one, Aunt Agnes. They had kept aloof- "just the three of them, in that tight little house, with the doors and curtains firmly shut to keep the cold and the strangers out". (*BP, p.31)* While Judy was in India, her father died of lung cancer and after some time her mother hanged herself in the lavatory. After her marriage, Judy had never been able to go to England to meet her parents-only the tragic news of her parents' death one after the other reached her. With this disturbed family background with nothing to look back to, Judy's view of the Western world consisted of "only little semi-detached with smoking fires and frozen pipes and carefully drawn curtains brought at two and eleven a yard at the sales". (*BP, p.173)* The marriage with Bal must have opened immense possibilities of material and spiritual growth – something that the East has always promised to the seekers. But with the Indian dream not working the way Judy had probably anticipated, there is no alternative for her but to adjust with the reality that has unfolded itself before her.

The other point worth noting is that this assimilation is not easy for Judy and throughout the novel her rational Western self is at war with the demands of Bal and her family. Since Bal has no regular income, he keeps sponging on her. Often he keeps fantasizing about starting a new theatre movement, of joining Hindi films as a hero and so on. Bal's harebrained ideas need financial backing and he pesters her for providing it to him from her hard-earned meager resources. At such moments, Judy identifies with her English background:

English people didn't behave like that, they didn't on the whim of the moment give up everything they had and go wandering off in search of no one knew what. That might be all right for people like Bhuaji and Bal and all those holy men in changed robes one saw roaming about. But it was not all right for anyone English and sensible: not all right for Judy. She was determined to hold on tight to what she had, like her mother, like her Aunt Agnes, like all those other stubborn dwellers in little houses among whom she had grown up and who, she now decided, were her kind. (*BP, p. 176)*

Judy's struggle with herself is at its most intense at the end of the novel when Bal decides to migrate to Bombay with his family to try his luck in Hindi filmdom and all that they have to fall back on in that new city are superstar Kishan Kumar's vague promises. She has intense bouts of struggle with herself – between her rational Western self and her love and loyalty for her family even if it makes

unreasonable demands on her. She has bouts of quarrels with her husband Bal too on this issue and after each such bout, she regrets why it should take place at all.

It is at this stage when her life is beset with uncertainty and acrimony that a ray of hope – something akin to spiritual illumination not uncommon in Indian mystical tradition – fills her being. The agent of illumination in this case is the vast Indian sky that is distinctly different from the sky she was used to in England:

She couldn't even remember having looked up at the sky in England. She must have done, but she couldn't remember. There had been nothing memorable : nothing had spoken. So one locked oneself at home, all warm and cosy, and looked at the television and grew lonelier and lonelier till it was unbearable and then one found a hook in the lavatory. Judy could not imagine ever being that lonely here. In the end, there was always the sky. Who spoke from the sky here? Why did it seem to her that someone spoke? She must be going batty. (*BP,* p. 179)

Acting on the spur of this illumination, she decides to throw in her lot with her family led by her husband and to chart uncharted territories in the Bollywood maze. In her heart of hearts, she knows that uprooting the family from Delhi and moving to Bombay on the strength of vague promises of a matinee idol with no firm resources of support is an irrational move. The struggle between the structures of Western rationality and the Indian pressure to conform and to assimilate is resolved by Judy in the way Ruth Jhabvala's Persona in '*Myself in India'* does: "Of course, this can't go on indefinitely and in the end I'm bound to lose – if only at the point where my ashes are immersed in the Ganges to the accompaniment of Vedic hymns, and then who will say that I have not truly merged with India? [2]

Thus an expatriate like Judy, having a disturbed family background and after undergoing intense struggle between her Western rationality and an emotional and impulsive Indian response decides "to say yes and give in and wear a sari and be meek and accepting and see God in a cow."[3] But this assimilation is done at great cost. As has been pointed out earlier, Etta and Judy represent two extremes of Western response to India. While Etta prefers "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," Judy has decided to go to the point "where my ashes are immersed in the Ganges to the accompaniment of Vedic hymns, and then who will say I have not truly merged with India"?[4] In sum, while Judy's response is representative of a type of response that some expatriates may like to live up to, it cannot be called 'the dominant voice of affirmation' or a response that carries the writer's unreserved approval.

Wedged between Etta and Judy is Clarissa, an expatriate woman with a bohemian spirit who is a seeker in India and has been tramping the length and breadth of the country in search of her rather elusive objective. By her own admission, it was Romain Rolland's *Life of Vivekananda* that attracted her to India: "Do you know that it was this book that really and truly finally decided me to come to India? I'd wanted to come ever since I was a tot, but it was this – this dear, darling book' – and she kissed it –'My Bible! My Guru!" (*BP*, p. 92-93)

Once in India, she has been dressing herself in Rajasthani peasant skirts and handspun blouses which give her the look of a tramp and chasing whatever dreams or ideals she has had. She describes herself as "a sort of free-and-easy mixture of sadhu and artist" and expresses her preference for "the wild life, the free life." (*BP*, p. 61)

Ruth Jhabvala deflates the bohemian facade that Clarissa constantly wears through a number of deft ironic moves. First she refers to her financial resources which could not have supported her in England: "All I have got is that wretched legacy my Great-Aunt Marie, God rest her soul, left me. And that's just nothing, not by present-day standards it isn't". (*BP*, p. 154) She also has an unhappy family background. In a conversation with Etta, she gives vent to her charged feelings on this account:

'Of course, my family don't care a damn. I've got all those beastly rich brothers, and sisters married to beastly rich stock-brokers or something, but of course it wouldn't ever enter their heads, oh no, that I might want bit of assistance. Whenever I write and tell them for goodness' sake, how you expect me to live on 150 a year, even out here, all they can say is come back and we'll see what we can do . Come back, indeed! Not on their sweet lives. I suppose they want a free baby-sitter and nursemaid and general drudge about the place, that's what they want me back for, no thank you. (*BP*, p. 154-55)

The scarce resources and the cold attitude of her relatives make it impossible to live the kind of life Clarissa wants to lead in England. In this sense, India is a better place to live in and also to provide the appropriate locale for the spiritual quest that a section of the expatriates are wont to indulge in.

Secondly, the writer has made direct satirical comments on the way Clarissa takes care of her day-to-day needs in India with her extremely limited resources. This she does by sponging on the Indian rich, not even minding to make a pass at Etta's lover Guppy much to Etta's consternation and jealousy. Thus she tries this tactic on Guppy too and convinces him that he has "got a very interesting face. Striking…striking." (*BP*, p. 38) She adds: "You've got a

superb line from nose to brow, a real conqueror's face, that's what you've got. Guppy, The Veni Vidi Vict type. I'd certainly like to have a stab at you.' But the writer rips through this façade by making the following satiric comments:

Clarissa was not a good artist, but she got a lot of places through what art she had. When she wanted to establish relations with someone rich or important or useful, she always commented enthusiastically on their fascinating faces and asked to be allowed to sketch them. She had got access in this way to some very prominent people. (*BP*, p. 38)

Similarly, the room she keeps in the office apartment block virtually rent-free is maintained in a way that moves even Bal. It is full of "soiled clothes, old paint pots, a copper jug and earthen water container: the only pieces of furniture were a string cot, a sofa with the springs leaking out from underneath, a wooden kitchen table and two cane stools". But then, as Clarissa herself admits, she does not stay in the room most of the time. The writer comments caustically:

This was true, Clarissa only kept her room to have somewhere to retreat to when none of her friends wanted her. For the rest of the time, she stayed in various comfortable houses, either in town or up in the hills or indeed anywhere she was invited, ate at other people's tables, took an interest in other people's affairs and made herself a part of other people's families. (*BP*, p. 61)

Finally, beneath her bohemian exterior, Clarissa still retains some of her prejudices when it comes to inter-cultural relations and conservative values. In one of her conversations with Sudhir, she says: "Of course the family'd had connections with India for ages and ages – one of my great-uncles was a Supreme Court judge in Calcutta and another was a Chief Commissioner somewhere – all that boring stuffy sort of thing." (*BP*, p. 93)

Clarissa is also very conscious of the distinctions of class, rank and birth in society. She makes a contemptuous comment on Judy's background to Sudhir: "She can't have had much education – she probably went to some elementary school and left school at fifteen… Judy doesn't come from a very good class. Even though I am English and I do, I must confess, come from a family who are rather sticky about who is who. What nonsense it all is! It's something I'v never had any time for, I judge people by their worth not by their birth.[4] (*BP*, p. 91)

At the end of the novel, we see Clarissa losing that one room and she is left with no alternative but to find a roof over her head. Earlier, she has visited Judy's moderate house and has gone into hypocritical raptures over its positive features. She has declared that "it's got character. I do think character in a place is so much more important than anything else, don't you?" (*BP*, p.129) She also compares this house with Etta's flat and has no compunction in declaring that Etta's place has got "no character at all". Judy's sister-in-law Shanti offers that she could stay with them. But when ultimately Clarissa has to make a choice, she prefers Etta's flat where she is unwelcome to Shanti's Indian home. Also she prefers Etta's selfishness and snobbery to a more open and affectionate ambience of Judy's Indian household. Clarissa's final act proves that two expatriates – even if mutually as antagonistic in terms of values and temperament as Etta and Clarissa – find more in common with each other in times of crisis than with the 'real' India they have been seeking or the Indians they have been befriending.

Next, Ruth Jhabvala exposes the Hochstadt couple. Dr. Franz Hochstadt is an economist and has come to India on a two-year appointment as an exchange professor. The couple-Franz and Frieda – are ostensibly in love with India and its culture which they extol in hyperbolic terms. They have even developed certain theories on India, on East-West synthesis and related areas. For instance, they believe that in cultural matters, India has something to teach the West as "the Indian spirit has in many fields soared far above the Europeans" and "that a serious comparative study of Indian and western spiritual achievements will widen the horizons of both the one and the other." Jhabvala, however feels that the views held by the Hochstadt couple are not genuine. Thus inspite of their lofty ideas and ideals, the couple are painted in caricaturist hues.

First, there seems to be a lot of disparity between what the Hochstadts preach and what they actually practice. Thus while all along they have been talking in comically exaggerated vein of the greatness of India and the Indian people, especially of the humbler variety, they themselves live a life-style which is an exact replica of the way they live in their flat in St. John's Wood back home. The author comments:

The place had a very comfortable European atmosphere …somehow the Hochstadts had managed to put their own touch on everything. There were lace tablecloths, some abstruse object d'art …. many heavily bound books on economics, philosophy, art and religion: over all this hung the smell of Dr. Hochstadt's cigars and of the coffee which Mrs. Hochstadt brewed on a little electric ring specially bought for the purpose (she had nothing but contempt for

the coffee sent up by the caterer from the kitchen below). (*BP*, p. 26-27)

Also, contrary to their homilies on the subject, the Hochstadts restrict their socializing to expatriates and upper-class Indians alone. Secondly, Dr. Franz Hochstadt is in India for a short teaching assignment. Thus when Mrs. Hochstadt says: "India gives us so much …what joy to be asked to give a little in return", (*BP*, p.85)At this the writer brings out Etta's response to such vacuous sentiments : "Etta hated to hear Mrs. Hochstadt talk like that. It was the way people who were here for only a short time, and had all their comforts and conveniences laid on, so often talked." (*BP*, p. 29)

REFERENCES

1. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, "Myself in India", Out of India, p. 21.

2. ibid., p. 21.

3. Ibid, p. 21

4. Ibid, p. 21