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**THE BRILLIANCE OF RUTH PRAWER  
JHABVALA'S CREATIVE PERSPECTIVE AND  
TECHNICAL ABILITY**

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# The Brilliance of Ruth Praver Jhabvala's Creative Perspective and Technical Ability

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**Abstract – Ruth Praver Jhabvala is the author of several novels, including *Heat and Dust* (1975), which won a Booker McConnell Prize and a National Book League award. In screenplay form, that work won an award from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts. Her screenplay adaptation of E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908) won a Writers Guild of America Award in 1986 and an Academy Award in 1987. Jhabvala's screenplay *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge* (1990) received a New York Film Critics Circle Award. In 1993, her screenplay adaptation of Forster's *Howards End* (1910) was nominated for an Academy Award.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Although she was well known when she lived in India and England, it was in the last quarter of the 20th century, since her move to New York City, that Ruth Praver Jhabvala became famous as a novelist, short story writer, and screenwriter. Her many awards include England's 1975 Booker Prize for Fiction for *Heat and Dust*. Her earlier novels, set in India, depict middle-class life among Indians (*To Whom She Will* [1955], *The Householder* [1960]) or feature British civil servants, expatriates, and travelers in India (*Esmond in India* [1957], *A Backward Place* [1965], *Heat and Dust*). Numerous critics have noted her gradual withdrawal from India in her fiction. Her first novel to be set in the United States was *In Search of Love and Beauty* (1983), followed by *Three Continents* (1987) and *Poet and Dancer* (1993), all of which contain characters from both East and West and explore such issues as immigration, ancestry, alienation, and identity. Always present, as well, are romantic and family relationships and good and evil.

Jhabvala gained fame for her screenplays, the best known of which include *Jefferson in Paris* (1995), *Howard's End* (1992), *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge* (1990), *A Room with a View* (1986), *The Bostonians* (1984), *The Europeans* (1979), *Heat and Dust* (1983), and *The Remains of the Day*. In addition to numerous Academy Awards for her adaptations of British novels, in 1990 she won the Best Screenplay Award from the New York Film Critics Circle for *Mr. & Mrs. Bridge* (1990), based on the novels by Evan S. Connell and starring Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala was born on May 7, 1927, in Cologne, Germany, to Marcus Praver, a Polish-Jewish lawyer, and Eleonara Cohn, a Russian-German

daughter of the cantor in Cologne's largest synagogue. The family fled Germany in 1939 and Jhabvala was reared in England, became a British citizen in 1948, and studied at St Mary's College, University of London, where she received a master's degree in 1951. That same year she married Cyrus S. H. Jhabvala, a Parsi architect, and moved with him to New Delhi, India, where she lived for the next 24 years. Four years later Jhabvala published *Whom She Will*, as it is known in England, and in the United States as *Amrita*, a novel portraying the inner workings of New Delhi's middle class, both Parsi and Punjabi. *The Nature of Passion* (1956) also elicited praise from reviewers, with many critics applauding her ability to write so realistically of Indian life. *Esmond in India* was praised for its womanizing civil servant whom upscale Indian women—one of whom is his mistress—find attractive. *The Householder* features the recently married Prem, temporarily infatuated with the life of a swami and with Hans, his idle German bachelor friend, until he realizes his love for and responsibilities to his wife, Indu.

Critics generally see a more critical treatment of India beginning with *A Backward Place*, in which Judy, an Englishwoman happily married to a Hindu, is contrasted with Etta, a Hungarian who attempts suicide after the dissolution of her marriage to an Indian and her betrayal by her Indian lover. *Heat and Dust* tells two stories, in two different eras, of Olivia, a young Englishwoman married to Douglas Rivers, an officer in India in the 1920s, and her granddaughter, who returns to trace Olivia in the 1960s. Both Olivia and her granddaughter fall in love with, and are seduced and disgraced by, Indian men and become pregnant; the difference is that while Olivia aborts her child, the granddaughter keeps hers. As the critic and scholar Judie Newman notes, Jhabvala's early,

"India-centered works" depicted such Jane Austen-like situations as marriage schemes, romance, the clash between young and old, modern and traditional, whereas her later novels move toward an ironic depiction of the colonial presence and a more immediate cultural confrontation.

While writing *Heat and Dust* in India, Jhabvala became ill with jaundice. On her recovery, she moved permanently to New York City. *In Search of Love and Beauty*, although set in New York and featuring a group of German-Jewish refugees, depicts the appearance of Leo Kellerman, a bogus Indian guru who ironically exposes American fads, silliness, and materialism and suggests that, beneath the surface, lies a darker truth. According to the scholar and critic Ralph J. Crane, *Three Continents*, "the most socially complex, sophisticated, and revealing of all Jhabvala's novels", focuses on Americans, Indians, and Europeans in an attempt to depict the nature of alienation and the immigrant experience. *Three Continents*, like *In Search of Love and Beauty*, features an unprincipled guru, here the Rawul; his "wife" Renee and his "son" Crishi (Crishi is revealed as Renee's lover, not her son); and a young American, Michael Wishwell, from a wealthy but corrupt and decaying family in the Hudson River valley. The novel follows the entry of the Rawul and his "family" into the household and the marriage of Crishi to Michael's twin sister, Harriet. The novel is, in Crane's words, a reversal of the colonializing depicted in *Esmond in India*. Jhabvala's next novel, *Poet and Dancer*, set in New York, has at its center the clash between good and evil, paralleled by the obsessive love of the poet Angel for her intriguing dancer cousin Lara. A more recent novel, *Shards of Memory* (1998), reintroduces a guru, this time called the Master, who affects the lives of a family over several generations. Her last work was a fictionalized autobiography entitled *My Nine Lives* (2004). Jhabvala died on April 3, 2013, at her home in Manhattan.

## RUTH PRAWER JHABVALA ACHIEVEMENTS

In addition to the many awards she has won for her fiction, Ruth Praver Jhabvala received a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship in 1976 and a Neil Gunn International Fellowship in 1979. She was a MacArthur Foundation fellow from 1986 to 1989.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala has achieved remarkable distinction, both as a novelist and as a short-story writer, among writers on modern India. She has been compared to E. M. Forster, though the historical phases and settings of the India they portray differ widely. The award of the Booker Prize for *Heat and Dust* in 1975 made her internationally famous. Placing Jhabvala in a literary-cultural tradition is difficult: Her European parentage, British education, marriage to an Indian, and—after many years in her adopted country—change of residence from India to the United States perhaps reveal a lack of belonging, a recurring "refugee" consciousness. Consequently, she is not an

Indian writing in English or a European writing on India but a writer of the world of letters, deeply conscious of being caught up in a bizarre world. Jhabvala's fiction is sensitive, intense, ironic—the work of a detached observer and recorder of the human world. Her almost clinical accuracy and her sense of the graphic, the comic, and the ironic make her one of the finest writers on the contemporary scene.

In 1984, Jhabvala won the British Award for Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) for Best Screenplay for the Ismail Merchant-James Ivory adaptation of *Heat and Dust*, and in 1986 she won an Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay for *A Room with a View*. In 1990, she received the New York Film Critics Circle Award for best screenplay for *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge*, which she adapted from two novels by Evan S. Connell. Jhabvala received an Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay in 1992 for her adaptation of Forster's *Howards End*, and in 1993 she was nominated for an Oscar for her adaptation of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. In 1984, Jhabvala was the recipient of a MacArthur Foundation Award, and in 1994 she was honored with the Writers Guild of America's Laurel Award. In 2003, she was awarded the NBC Screenwriters Tribute and received honors at the Nantucket Film Festival. In 2005, her short story "Refuge in London" won the O. Henry Award.

## RUTH PRAWER JHABVALA DISCUSSION TOPICS

Is the fact that Ruth Praver Jhabvala spent the first twelve years of her life in Germany during the rise of Nazi power reflected in her fiction?

Compare the Western women in Jhabvala's *A Backward Place* with those in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924).

Is Jhabvala's "The Housewife" primarily about the nature of the housewife in the story or about housewifery in India? Can both alternatives be presented successfully?

To what extent is Jhabvala's India representative of the East?

What is the symbolic significance of Jhabvala's title *Heat and Dust*?

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