

Apollo, Krishna, Superman: The Image of India in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's Ninth Novel

YASMINE GOONERATNE

Q. *Is there one thing you might just like to do which you have not done before?*

A. Something I would like to do is combine my three backgrounds: my European background because it was Continental; and then I had an English education. Then I had a 5-year immersion into India and now I am beginning an immersion into America. So if I can bring all these elements together, well, that's just fine by me.¹

WITH *In Search of Love and Beauty*, Ruth Praver Jhabvala's ninth novel, and the first to be published since she won the Booker Prize for *Heat and Dust* in 1975, she brings off with conspicuous success her stated intention to combine her "three backgrounds" if she can.² There have been other, earlier, attempts. In *Hullabaloo Over Georgie and Bonnie's Pictures* (1978), a film directed by James Ivory for which she wrote the screen-play, a young American art-collector and the representative of a British museum of fine art struggle for the possession of a Maharaja's famous collection of Indian miniature paintings. In "A Summer by the Sea," a short story, the young American narrator speculates about the origins of Hamid, an Indian visitor to the United States:

... I guess Hamid had a stronger personality than the rest of us, including Boy. Or maybe it was because he is a foreigner, an Oriental — someone different in an exotic way — and we kept looking at him in a fascinated way to see what he would do next.

At first we thought that he must be some kind of prince, on account of his looks, but he was too poor for that, really. He never had any money at all. Not that it bothered him, because there

were plenty of people eager to pay for anything he needed. Boy said that maybe he came from one of those very ancient royal lines that were extinct now, except maybe for a few last descendants working as coolies in Calcutta. Or maybe, Boy said — he has plenty of imagination and also quite a bit of Oriental background, thanks to his study of art history — Hamid was a descendant of a line of famous saints, dating back to the thirteenth century and handing down their sainthood from generation to generation.³

The satire directed here at a handsome Indian tramp who lives like a parasite on the goodwill and generosity of his gullible American friends blends, almost imperceptibly, with the tone of innocent wonder natural to Susie, the perplexed young American narrator. Susie, clear-sighted enough to note that it is not sainthood but eroticism that dwells in Hamid's beautiful eyes, is one of the latter's victims. Another is her husband Boy, whose elaborate theories spring not only from a lively imagination and a smattering of "Oriental background," but from willing self-deception: Boy, a homosexual, is infatuated with Hamid. A third victim is Susie's mother, whom Hamid calls "Golden Oldie" behind her back but flirts with outrageously in order to infuriate and distress Boy.

The emphasis in "A Summer by the Sea" is not, however, on Hamid and his mysterious Indian background, but on the Americans whose psychological weaknesses he exposes and pitilessly exploits. Boy's romantic speculations regarding Hamid's "sainthood" link Hamid with Swamiji, the religious rogue of Jhabvala's *A New Dominion*, while his spectacular good looks and callous heart link him with Gopi in the same novel. Boy, Susie, and Susie's mother find their lives laid waste by Hamid in much the same way that Raymond, Lee, and Asha are reduced to despair by Swamiji and Gopi in *A New Dominion*; and they too are willing victims, who joyfully open their hearts and homes to the predator. That the predators in question happen to be Indian is entirely by the way: it seems only too clear that exploitation would have come from one source or another, so obvious and inviting are the weaknesses displayed by the "victims" in both "A Summer by the Sea" and *A New Dominion*.

This impression is reinforced by a reading of *In Search of Love and Beauty*, a novel which has among its characters a large number of victims and predators, but in which the image of India seems at first sight to be unimportant and peripheral. Instead, it is the "Continental" background Ruth Jhabvala wished to explore in her American fiction that seems best represented in the private lives and secret longings of the Sonnenblick family and their friends, German-Jewish refugees who are building a new life for themselves in the United States. The novel focuses in particular on Bruno and Louise Sonnenblick, their daughter Marietta, their grandson Mark and adopted granddaughter Natasha, and Louise's childhood friend Regi; also on Leo Kellermann, a charismatic "genius" with whom both Louise and Regi are deeply and inescapably in love. As these European refugees recreate their pre-War lives amidst New York's "unending vista of towering buildings" with the help of their own imported furniture, cosy reunions in restaurants like the Old Vienna, and pastries from Blauberg's, Ruth Jhabvala makes contact for the first time in her published fiction with the obliterated world of her German childhood. Louise, she notes, "had grown up in a suburb of the town of D — in Germany" (p. 30). Whether or not D — stands for Dresden which (like Cologne, Ruth Jhabvala's birthplace) was bombed out of existence during the Second World War, we read for the first time in any of her novels and stories of a schoolgirl who lived in "a villa with a garden in which grew apple and plum trees," and travelled by tram every day to school.

India "officially" enters this European-American world only on page 22 when the restless Marietta, prototype of the Western self-seekers in Ruth Jhabvala's later Indian fiction,⁴ discovers at a dance recital in New York an Indian sarod player named Ahmed "and with him India and the particular brand of fulfilment to be discovered there." Unlike the European expatriates in their West Side and Central Park apartments, Ahmed has no intention of settling down in the United States. He "liked life in the West," and takes happily to Scotch, cigarettes, late-night TV and Marietta, but his life and his music cannot be uprooted from the Indian soil. When Marietta follows him to India, Ruth Jhabvala summarizes through Marietta's responses to India an aspect of

her own relationship with the land in which she lived for twenty-five years.

Marietta's initial enthusiasm for all things Indian places her at first in Stage One of the cycle of Indian experience that Ruth Jhabvala has described in her essay "Myself in India":⁵

How she exclaimed! And at what he considered such common, everyday things, one was almost ashamed of them. She adored, simply adored, the bazaars and the merchants . . . copper pans, or silver ornaments, textiles fluttering in the wind, gaudy sweetmeats — such colours, she had never seen, never dreamed such colours! She liked the smells, too, of incense and clarified butter, and even the denser ones of rotting vegetables and more sinister rotting things — even those didn't bother her, for she regarded them as part of everything: as the beggars were part of it all, and the corpses on the pyres, and the diseased people healing themselves in the sacred river, and the very fat priests . . . She wondered and wondered at everything and exclaimed and shone with joy so that there was absolutely no language barrier — feeling streamed out of her. (pp. 24-25)

Despite this early enthusiasm, however, Marietta does not surrender her Western sensibility: "She wanted to see everything but as herself" (p. 25). She is saved, therefore, from the disillusionment and revulsion Ruth Jhabvala associates with later stages of her cycle, and while heavy German furniture and upholstery darken her mother's West Side apartment, the Indian influence lights up Marietta's flat in Central Park West. Her oriental rugs "bloom" with "delicate floral motifs," while raw silk upholstery, "a shining gold Buddha," and exquisite Indian miniatures in golden frames illuminate her stylish, if unsettled, way of life (p. 27).

While Marietta represents in the novel what is essentially a sensitive Westerner's enthusiasm for India, a hint of deeper and more serious concerns is conveyed through Ahmed: he, unlike Marietta, is "restful," "impassive," "imperturbable" (p. 23). He is a disciplined musician who achieves his moments of most intense joy when he is either making or listening to music. He refrains from making personal or moral judgments about the astonishing people and experiences he encounters in the West, but his own personality and his outlook on life and art combine in an implicit

statement that is not lost on those about him who have eyes to see and wit to understand it:

When Leo asked Ahmed about his music: "Is it of the senses or of the spirit?" then Ahmed understood him less than ever. He had no conception of any division between the two, and if he had thought about it, he would have said, surely the one is there to express the other? That was what his music was for — he knew this so deeply that he had absolutely no thought or words for it. (p. 88)

In view of the chasm that exists between Ahmed's unspoken philosophy of life and art and the worldliness and sensuality of voluble, "pot-bellied and short-breathed" Leo Kellermann, it is ironic that "Ahmed's music opened up Leo's Tantric period" (p. 89), providing inspiration and starting-point for a new variation on the pseudo-philosophical theories Kellermann expounds to the impressionable members of his Academy of Potential Development. The "Tantric period" is one of a variety of stages through which Kellermann's philosophy passes before it reaches its culmination in what he terms "The Point," and it is on his journey toward "The Point" — at which, hopefully, man's highest spiritual and physical experiences intersect — that we have our last glimpse of Kellermann driving blindly into snow and a mist that is partly real, partly a confusion of the spirit (p. 226).

In her characterization of Leo Kellermann, Ruth Jhabvala achieves her aim of inclusiveness, combining her "three backgrounds" at a very ambitious level that takes in *In Search of Love and Beauty* far beyond the comparatively easy satiric strokes of *Hullabaloo* and "A Summer by the Sea." Until he encounters Ahmed in New York, there seems to be nothing "Indian" in either Kellermann's genesis or his personality. On the contrary, he is very "European" indeed, has arrived in New York from Europe in the 1930's as a penniless refugee, and makes his first appearance on page one of the novel among a group of German and Austrian women expatriates whom he manages from the very start to delight with his charm and fascinate with his ideas. But as things turn out, Kellermann's impact on American life as depicted in the novel is not human in any narrowly national sense but super-human. He enters the novel on a note of divinity: "An Apollo! —

A god," cries Regi to her friend Louise, describing this new and superb acquisition, and as his extraordinary influence spreads together with his fame, Kellermann becomes the "reigning deity of the Old Vienna" (p. 37) and the "beneficent deity" of the massive Gothic house in the Hudson Valley that houses his Academy of Potential Development (p. 12). Described at various times in the novel as a "pagan god" (p. 102) possessed of a "great Olympian laugh" (p. 3), and admirers who are at once his "followers" and "disciples" (p. 8), Kellermann has the "wonderful gift of making each (woman) feel that he was in intimate contact with her, on the deepest and most thrilling level; and moreover, that he had absolutely no difficulty in understanding as well as condoning whatever secret, or secret longing, she might be harbouring" (p. 2).

To Louise Sonnenblick, whose lover he becomes, he is nothing less than "a *tornado*" (p. 38), and even in the most unlikely circumstances retains his divine aspect: for example, while taking a bath and demanding that his back be scrubbed, he holds out a loofah as if it were a trident (p. 102). The lives of Regi and Louise are changed by his theories (p. 39). Religious symbolism thickens about Kellermann, whose very hair resembles a "burning bush" (p. 16) and "a prophet's halo" (p. 87), whose garments include a "robe like a monk's" (p. 11), and who cultivates in later life "an air of benign blessing" (p. 67). But such associations are counteracted, if not entirely given the lie, by symbolism of a very different, indeed sinister kind. Suggestions of the bestial and of a rank and mysterious underworld combine in the very name of this European adventurer who, like Hamid in "A Summer by the Sea," "never really had any difficulty in getting people to look after him" (p. 1); and cluster about the "den," the "lair," the "escape hatch" to which Kellermann flees in order to avoid his disciples and be himself. His classes in physical expression culminate in a "Day of Wrath" in the description of which animal references proliferate: "roaring as of lions, such bellowings of bulls, chatterings of monkeys, shrieks of hyenas" (p. 40). To Regi, forty years after he first enchanted her, he becomes — still larger than life — an "old monster" (p. 48). Mark sees him as a "stranded whale" (p. 8), and as "some superannuated circus ani-

mal" (p. 85). These divine and bestial images are brought together skilfully in the "Dionysian figure" of a tramp who resembles Kellermann, and whose appearance wins from little Natasha (the character who, above all others, seems to be her creator's persona in the novel) tears of "overwhelmed pity for all the hungers of humanity":

Natasha led (her grandmother) to the corner: the awful vision was still there. He sat enthroned on the dustbin, like a god wafted up from its depths. He was enormous and red in the face and wore a hat without a crown on his wild hair; a pair of stiff black trousers encased one massive leg but was ripped open on the other, exposing a surprisingly soft, lily-white expanse of thigh. His trident, or escutcheon, was an empty bottle held aloft in one hand, and he was alternately shouting and singing to passers-by. (p. 14)

It is Natasha, perceptive beyond her years, who draws her disgusted grandmother's attention to the fact that the derelict tramp resembles Leo Kellermann. The scene, which ends with Louise thrusting coins and reproaches simultaneously on the tramp, permits the reader an oblique insight into the mixture of sensual and spiritual elements in Kellermann's character, and foreshadows the novel's penultimate scene in which the founder of the Academy of Potential Development, crazed with the despair of an ordinary unrequited love, drives (evidently to his death) with Natasha beside him, "glad to be there with him: not that she could do anything as, blinded with tears, he drove them further into snow and mist, but at least so he wasn't alone" (p. 226).

It is inevitable that the blending of spiritual and bestial associations in Ruth Jhabvala's characterization of Leo Kellermann should remind readers of her novels of a somewhat similar technique used by her in building up the personality of another seeming charlatan, Swamiji in her earlier work, *A New Dominion*: particularly striking there were Lee's recollection of her sexual encounter with her *guru* in bestial terms,⁶ and the scene in which Swamiji runs "a broad, pale tongue swiftly round his lips" as he tells Raymond of his (overtly spiritual) desire that Lee should return to him.⁷ The similarities do not end there. Swamiji's ashram parallels Kellermann's Academy, and the conversation of both men ambiguously combine spiritual and sexual elements: for

example, Swamiji's statement that "the old Lee must be broken before the new Lee can be formed, and we are now only at the first stage of our task"⁸ has a parallel in Kellermann's pursuit of Marietta:

Leo . . . issued many invitations to her — which she ignored as she did her best to ignore everything to do with him. But Leo had never given up. He loved it when people resisted him, nothing pleased him more. "It's like fishing," he said — "It's no fun unless the fish resists; unless it struggles — flaps and fights and wriggles for its life until — yupp! you've got it: up in the air where you want it, dangling there, with all your hook, line and sinker inside it." He tended to use this image for both his sexual and his spiritual conquests. (p. 21)

But in Kellermann's ability to communicate intimately and secretly with each of the women who make up the adoring circle that surrounds him, we see not only a reflection of Swamiji's easy fascination of a roomful of admiring Western tourists;⁹ there is here a skilfully hidden allusion to the god Krishna's ability to manifest himself before Radha and her fellow milkmaids individually and collectively.¹⁰

Here, then, so cunningly woven into the stuff of her novel as to be unobtrusive and almost invisible, and yet undoubtedly at the very centre of it, is Ruth Praver Jhabvala's image of India, larger than life, containing within it intimations of divine joy and intense disgust, of god and beast, of Heaven and Hell.¹¹ The ironic presentation of the character of Swamiji had made it possible for two contradictory, yet perfectly consistent, interpretations of his personality to run throughout *A New Dominion*: spirituality on the one hand, opportunism on the other. Although there is no Natasha to weep for him, it is not possible for the careful reader to dismiss Swamiji as a mere sensualist and charlatan. And so it is with Leo Kellermann, in Ruth Jhabvala's latest and most complex work of fiction: with the added advantage in his case that Natasha's pity for him, which impels her to what is presumably her final, fatal, act of "self-immolation" (p. 30), helps us to see him with the compassionate eyes of his creator as more pitiable in his final, dreadful, banal despair than any of his helpless victims.

"Having assimilated all this Indian experience I don't want to

forget it or cast it off; what I want to do is to take it out again as a Westerner, enriched by what I have learnt there."¹² *In Search of Love and Beauty*, while confronting "life's disenchantments with alert and humorous resilience,"¹³ unobtrusively achieves this personal authorial aim through a plot that brings together characters convincingly representative of its author's "three backgrounds" to work out a universal theme; but most triumphantly through the chief of those characters, the novel's anti-hero Leo Kellermann — Apollo, Krishna, and Superman.¹⁴

NOTES

- 1 Ruth Praver Jhabvala, interviewed by Patricia W. Mooney: "Another Dimension of Living," *Newsweek*, 31 October 1977.
- 2 *In Search of Love and Beauty* (London: John Murray, 1983). All references throughout this essay are to this edition.
- 3 Published in *The New Yorker*, 7 August 1978, pp. 26-34.
- 4 See, for example, *The Householder* (1960), *A New Dominion* (1972), and *Heat and Dust* (1975); also the short stories "A Spiritual Call," "How I Became a Holy Mother."
- 5 Cf. R. P. Jhabvala, "Myself in India," in *An Experience of India* (London: John Murray, 1966) 1971 ed., p. 7: "There is a cycle that Europeans . . . tend to pass through. It goes like this: first stage, tremendous enthusiasm — everything Indian is marvellous; second stage, everything Indian not so marvellous; third stage, everything Indian abominable."
- 6 Ruth Praver Jhabvala, *A New Dominion* (London: John Murray, 1972) 1974 ed., p. 169.
- 7 *A New Dominion*, p. 179.
- 8 *A New Dominion*, p. 121.
- 9 *A New Dominion*, p. 123.
- 10 Cf. Y. Gooneratne, *Silence, Exile and Cunning: The Fiction of Ruth Praver Jhabvala* (London: Orient Longman, New Delhi and Sangam Books Ltd., 1983), pp. 201-03.
- 11 Cf. R. P. Jhabvala, "Moonlight, jasmine and rickets," *New York Times*, 22 April 1975.
- 12 R. P. Jhabvala, quoted A. Rutherford and K. H. Petersen, "Heat and Dust: Ruth Praver Jhabvala's experience of India," *World Literature Written in English*, 15:2 (November 1976), p. 377.
- 13 Peter Kemp, "The great pursuit," review of *In Search of Love and Beauty*, in *The Observer*, 10 April 1983, p. 33.
- 14 This essay will be reprinted as a contribution to a *festschrift* to be published in 1983/1984 in honour of Professor V. A. Shahane of Osmania University.