

essay

What I Believe

by Nirad C Chaudhuri

OVER the last 40 years I have offered three accounts of what I believe: first, very briefly at the end of my book, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*; second, in a longish article in the most widely read weekly journal in India as part of a series of confessions of faith beginning with one from the first non-European cardinal of the Roman Church; and lastly in the epilogue to the second part of my autobiography, *They Hand, Great Anarch!* None was regarded as any kind of confession of faith, although to the last I gave the title *Credo ut intelligam* — I believe in order to understand — a famous Christian formula.

That was because, in conformity with an established tradition, all confessions of faith are affiliated to religion, usually an established one, and I was offering as faith something without connection with religion. Most religions, despite their bewildering variety, are based on three simple but continue in an incorporeal form; that they pass into an eternal and perfect world imperceptible to the senses; and that, presiding over that world, there is an all-powerful and all-knowing personality who not only gathers those who die in this world, but also cares for the living in the material world. I, on the contrary, was accepting death as the final end of the living individual, denying the existence of the transcendental world, and not recognising a personal God. Therefore my view of life could not be faith in any acceptable meaning of the word.

Certainly, that is a valid religious objection. But what I offer is an non-religious faith, a contradiction in terms to those who take their stand on religion. But I am not being paradoxical, because men stand in need of faith to go through their worldly life, in which inevitably they have to face evil, suffering, and disappointment.

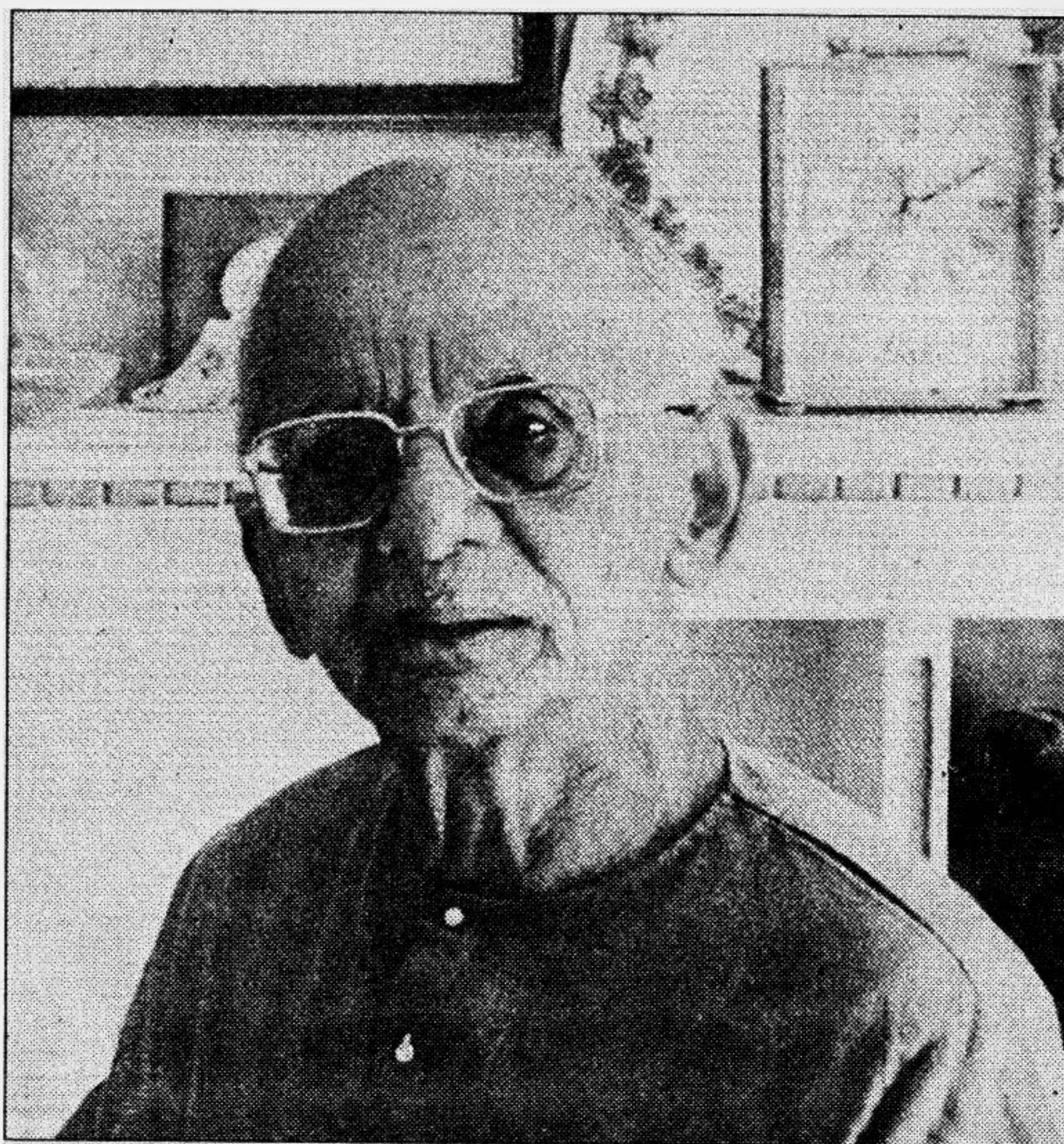
Of course, the great majority of men live without thought, taking life for granted, and also because they are born with love of life. That is to say, they live just as animals do, being three-quarters animals themselves. But the quarter of pure humanity in them suffers, and in order to bear that suffering, man has created a double of his own world in another world.

But supposing the same sort of strength in living could be ensured by conceiving of this world as inherently good, even perfect, and evil as accidental to a general tonality, created by man's hubris, there would be no need for a transcendental world of the imagination. But is this possible?

I think it is, and that is the first article of my faith. I would emphasise that this is not the meliorist's faith, which is only liberal humanism. My faith, in spite of being independent of religion, is in something outside of man, something above man, to whose domination he is not only subject, but should be ready in his own interest to surrender his egoism. That something is the universe thought of as animate.

But this faith did not come to me quickly or easily, it came after decades of suffering, which followed my loss of faith in all established religions before I was even 25. The suffering also came because at first I thought that the intellect would be able to fill up the void created by the loss of religious faith. I became fanatical in my belief that only the intellect could explain life and assign any value to it. For this I depended above all on two sciences, modern physics and modern biology. But in the end both failed me.

The most relevant conclusion of physics for life was that the universe was running down and would one day become extinct. The evolutionary biologists were almost unanimous that the evolution of species was not purposive,



Nirad C Chaudhuri (1897-1999)

but the result of an accidental combination of variations. My mind was repelled by both ideas, but as long as I believed in science, I could not reject them.

So, the suffering which was created by the void left by religion now became positive, because life did not possess

any meaning to me. Furthermore, those scientists who offered views on human life in the light of science did not bring comfort to me. As moralists they did not approach even the oldest religious teachers, for example, the authors of the Bible's Book of Proverbs and Book of Ecclesiastes. I give only two examples.

Bertrand Russell, whatever his eminence as a mathematician and philosopher showed himself a self-indulgent egotist in his writings on human life. I felt nothing but contempt for his weak self-pity. Even Einstein, a far greater scientist and, equally, a far greater man, uttered only banalities on human affairs. Thus scientists could help me neither in their special role nor in their general role as teachers.

Yet I could not fall back on religion, as many eminent European rationalists had done. That would have been apostasy from reason, my allegiance to which remained unshaken. I had to find a faith consistent with reason. As it happened, I found a way to it from the positive conclusions of physics, only rejecting its nihilistic eschatology. What the physicists have finally established is that what we regard as the material universe is only a subjective illusion of man. I read Sir Arthur Eddington's *Nature of the Physical World* in 1928, and from it learned for the first time that the material universe is only the image which man's sense organs create out of an immaterial energy which is organised in patterns of motion.

Now the invention of television has finally given a practical demonstration of the truth of that scientific hypothesis, and put an end to the credibility of a material universe. On the one hand, there can be no doubt that what we see on the television screen is a pictorial representation of the things we see in real life. On the other, there is equally no doubt that these images are produced by electricity in motion. On this analogy it is permissible to hold that the universe is really a cosmic TV show run by some power who designed it for some end known only to itself.

If this view of the nature of the universe is correct, there can be no room for materialism, for then we have to regard it as process, as a flow of energy

towards a goal. Then the only thing which man, who has been created by the process, can or ought to do is to follow the current of the process. This would render any aberrant desire of an individual a frivolity. So, I would define my faith as a conviction that I am in the hands of a power which determines my life. Dante said of the God of religion: *En la Sua volonate — e nostra pace*: in His will is our peace. I have discovered the same God in the universe, and found my peace.

Certainly, it is difficult to accept the universe in this manner if we consider the present state of humanity. To me, it seems that man in his arrogance has set himself against the universe and is determined to play the role of the rebellious angel. In this conflict I shall be, and indeed am, on the side of the universe, one of the loyal angels.

As it happens, only a few days ago I came upon a passage in Ernest Renan's *Recollections of Childhood*, published in 1883, which sums up my attitude to the universe. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, some of the greatest minds of Europe had been brought to a mood of deep pessimism about the future of man by the radical transformations in human life due to science and democracy. Renan was one of them, but he tried to reassure himself in these words:

"Let us, without worrying about it, allow the destiny of the planet accomplish itself. Our lamentations will not affect it, and our ill-humour will be misplaced. The universe does not know discouragement, it renews every task that has miscarried, every check leaves it young, alert and full of illusions. Courage courage!"

I also would leave it at that, only adding that, in religious terms, my faith might be called impersonal pantheism.

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in memoriam

A Tribute to Nirad C Chaudhuri

by Khushwant Singh

IT was sometime in 1950 that I first met Nirad C Chaudhuri. He was then working as a scriptwriter for All India Radio's external affairs cell. I also joined them for a brief period for two years.

His first book in English, *The Autobiography Of An Unknown Indian*, had just been published. I had read the book and was very impressed with the style of writing and the beauty of the language. So I made it a point to go and see him.

He had a very offensive dedication. He had dedicated the book to the British Empire. So he got into trouble. He was dismissed from service.

B K Keskar was then the minister for information and broadcasting. He sent orders to all the newspapers that published Niradbabu's articles, telling them not to entertain him. Since the papers depended a great deal on government patronage, no paper would have anything to do with him.

Nirad was reduced to very difficult straits. Only a few Indians had the guts to stand by him. Minoo Masani, Jhabvala, myself and handful of other admirers, including the then British high commissioner to India, John Freeman, and his wife would see him on a regular basis. We would celebrate his birthday and take turns to host the party at our places.

He once wrote an article in *The New Statesman* about how hard it was to live in England without a proper income. I published this piece in one of my columns. K K Birla asked me to get in touch with Nirad and tell him that the Birlas would pay him in any currency and any amount to ensure that he lived a comfortable life. I told him about the offer and, as expected, he had the same thing to say as he did for the offer by the Government of India. "Give my personal thanks to Birlaji, but I am not able to accept his offer," he wrote back to me from England. He had that kind of uprightness and was extremely touchy about anything which hurt his pride.

Although he was passing through a difficult time, he had enormous self-esteem. He would not take things lying down. There was no question of an apology. In 1970, when things were hotting up on India-Bangladesh border, he got a chance to rebuild his bridges with the Government of India.

Millions of refugees from Bangladesh were pouring into our country. The then finance minister C Subramaniam got in touch with me and asked me to suggest the name of someone who could do a book on East Pakistan. The government wanted to publish a book so that it could be sent abroad for propaganda. I suggested Nirad's name because he was born in East Pakistan and could speak the language of the place fluently. Also, he could write beautifully.

I told Subramaniam that the minister for information and broadcasting had put a ban on Nirad. He told me I was free to tell Nirad that the government had lifted the ban. I was also told that the government was willing to pay him any price and host him at any place and fly him there.

I thought everything had changed for him. Since there were no phones at that time, I sent Nirad a note. So he came to see me the next day at my house in Sujjan Singh Park. I told him that the government had lifted its ban on him and they were willing to pay him any price that he would name to write a book on East Pakistan. He told me, "The Government of India may have lifted its ban on me, but I have not lifted my ban on the Government of India." That was Nirad C Chaudhuri.

He did not stop writing in praise of the English. He wrote a book on Robert Clive, whose name we detest. He used this book as a stick to beat the Indians who were critical of his work. He often said that the most disliked person was a Bengali Hindu, and he was one such person.

Then he wrote another book, *The Continent Of Circe*. The theme of the book was that anyone who had come and lived long enough in India was turned into a pig. All the invaders and Mughals also came under this category. The book was deliberately written in a provocative style.

Then came a stage when he decided that he had lived long enough in India and it was time to migrate to England. He did not get very much there and he lived on the royalty he got from the sale

of his books. He wrote a book on the life of Max Mueller. Mueller became his role model because he was a man who had never come to India, who had lived in Oxford, but had translated the Vedas there and eventually died in Oxford and was buried there.

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The last time I saw him was a couple of days before he left for England. Though we kept in touch with each other either through letters or on the phone, we never got the occasion to meet each other thereafter.

I have read books written by Indian writers who write in English. To my mind, he was the best Indian writer in English. His command over the language was simply superb. Others made their millions and came back home. But he continued to live there, despite the difficulties he had to face.

Despite his hardships, he would offer the best wine to his guest in French cut glasses. I don't know from where he got them, but he would always do things in style.

His English appearance had become a bit of a joke. Particularly his large British hat. As soon as he stepped out of my father's house to go back, children in the streets would tease and torment him, but he would not give up his style of dressing for anything. His son told me last year that his father was losing his head.

Nirad C Chaudhuri without his head meant nothing to the world.

profile

Ruth Praver Jhabvala — A Writer of World Class

by ASM Nurunnabi

RUTH Praver Jhabvala was born in Germany of Polish parent and came to England at an early age. She graduated from Queen Mary College, London University, and married an Indian architect. They lived in Delhi from 1951 to 1975. Since then they have divided their time between Delhi, New York and London. Her published work covers a wide range, and it has won wide-spread acclaim. CP Snow, a famous critic wrote, "Someone once said that the definition of the highest art is that one should feel that life is this and not otherwise. I do not know of a writer living who gave that feeling with more unqualified certainty than Mrs. Jhabvala."

In a writing career which spans almost 40 years, Ruth Praver Jhabvala has successfully combined the writing of novels, short stories and screenplays.

She is perhaps best known as a novelist of India, even as novelist who interprets India for the western reader, but her most recent novels introduce a shift in setting — to America and England — and reveal a desire to combine her triple European, Indian and American heritage in her fiction.

Jhabvala's life of exile and expatriation has placed her in an unusual position among novelists who wrote about India, and has enabled her to write about that country from the ambiguous position of an outsider who is also an intimate insider. In her early work Jhabvala focused on the domestic and social problems of predominantly middle-class urban Indians living in Delhi in the years following independence. Her first two novels *To Whom She Will* and *The Nature of Passion*,

both deft comedies of manners in an Austenish vein, treat the subjects of arranged marriage and romantic love and explore the conflicts which arise as the modern, western views of characters like Amrita, or Viddi and Nimmi clash with the traditional values of their families. She was, however, not blind to the overwhelming social problems facing India. In *'Get Ready for Battle'* those problems were confronted as far as the limits of her domestic drama would allow; this was Jhabvala's darkest portrait of modern India, and the last of her novels to deal primarily with Indian characters.

In her next three novels, *'A Backward Place'*, *'A New Dominion'* and *'Heat and Dust'* Jhabvala moved away from the presentation of India, to a portrayal of the westerner in India, and an interest in the effect of India on her western char-

acters. She explored the problems faced by expatriate westerners (mostly women) and the world of often fraudulent gurus encountered by the young western seekers who flocked to India in the 1960s and 1970s. This shift in emphasis is also reflected in her short stories.

In *'A Backward Place'* Jhabvala considered whether or not it is possible for some Europeans to live in India and survive, and through the character of Judy she showed that it is possible if one is willing to adopt Indian values: In *'A New Dominion'* and *'Heat and Dust'* Jhabvala again showed that westerners can remain in India and survive. For the first time these two novels move out of Delhi and beyond the confine of the largely domestic, interior settings of her earlier novels. The landscape, the heat and the dust, became increasingly

important metaphors which showed how unsuitable India was for most of the westerners who populate Jhabvala's fiction.

Since moving to America Jhabvala's interest moved away from Indian subjects and settings. In *'In Search of Love and Beauty'*, which focused on group of German and Austrian refugees in New York, Jhabvala wrote for the first time on a sustained level, on the German-Jewish background she knew as a child. At the centre of this novel is a concern with the search for identity and heritage — an attempt to explain and understand the sense of alienation and expatriation which had been her own experience as well as that of many of her western characters.

Jhabvala's reputation as a writer of fiction has been built around her Indian

novels, particularly the Booker Prize-winning *'Heat and Dust'*. Her two most recent novels show that she writes equally well about America and Europe, and suggests that she is an international writer who deserves to be numbered among the best novelists writing in English today. She has been compared with Jane Austen, EM Forster and Chekov.

In Jhabvala's own words, "the central fact of all my work, as I see it; is that I am a European living permanently in India. I have lived here most of my adult life and have an Indian family. This makes me quite an insider but it does not leave me entirely an outsider either. I feel my position to be at a point in space where I have quite a good view of both sides but am myself left stranded in the middle".