CHAPTER III
ACTIVE REPULSION, SELF-AWARENESS AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE

If *To Whom She Will* and *The Nature of Passion* depict the overwhelming fascination that India holds for a European for amused observation and comment, Jhabvala's next three novels *Esmond in India*, *The Householder* and *Get Ready for Battle* negate the possibility of such a detached stance for the Western observer of Indian life. He is drawn in sooner or later by this huge and incomprehensible phenomenon India is — so ancient, so passive, and so very different from his own culture and systems of values. He is not able to be a passive onlooker of this passivity for that would be to go against his very nature; therefore, the initial fascination for India turns into active repulsion; amusement thickens into irony and objectivity leads to self-awareness and self-knowledge. *Esmond in India*, *The Householder*, and *Get Ready for Battle* represent this second stage.

The existing critical opinions on these three novels repeatedly draw our attention to the deepening irony — the mingling of satire and irony and of melancholy and irony. To quote K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, "In *Esmond in India*, the strands of comedy, irony and satire mingle and fuse to make a fabric of fiction that teases and fascinates at once!" In fact, one of the early reviews of *Esmond in India* makes the very same observation:

This is Mrs. Jhabvala's third novel of life in India and every page of it is alive with the gaiety and high spirits which are such charming features of the Indian character, all the more charming because they are not incompatible with melancholy and irony.
According to Vasant A. Shahane,

Esmond in India ... artistically illustrates one of the basic modes of Jhabvala's art of fiction: the ironic. This ironic mode, placed midway between satire and comic spirit, is central to Jhabvala's world.

C. Paul Verghese writes that

"in almost all her novels you have the same formula of yoga-spirituality-swami at work. The novel, Esmond in India, which purports to deal with the worn-out theme of East-West confrontation, too is no exception. Perhaps the only justification for her steady use of the formula in all her novels is that it enables her to attempt a satirical portrait of India and to ridicule the pseudo-idealism and pseudo-romanticism of Indians and of the Westerners who are in love with India and come to India seeking spiritual solace."

As P. P. Mehta observes,

Esmond in India ... is a more serious book than either of its highly acclaimed predecessors, but readers of Mrs. Jhabvala's novels of Indian life cannot fail to be impressed by this new development, which only reinforces her mastery of the art of social comedy.

When Jhabvala was interviewed by Ramlal Agarwal, he asked her:

In your first two novels you write in a tolerant and amused manner about the absurdities and affections of the people around you. But the third novel
Esmond in India shows a sudden change in your attitude and there has been an unmistakable note of bitterness in your work since then. What has brought the change in your attitude?

Jhabvala's explanation for this apparent change in her attitude is:

I suppose it could be put down to my change of attitude towards India. I loved everything during my first years here—I really loved it and was wildly excited by it and never wanted to go away from here. But later that changed. I saw a lot I don't like. I'll go further a lot that horrified me.

After staying in India for six years, Jhabvala has reached the second stage of life; i.e., everything Indian is not so marvellous, and she confesses to Agarwal:

In my earliest books I wrote about the newly rich; then about Europeans in India, then about Gurus—though the last two have tended to overlap, which is inevitable since the one brings the other.

Esmond in India can be viewed as the expression of Jhabvala's inner dilemma: whether to belong to India or not and if one wishes to belong, how to go about it. In 'Myself in India,' she states this central problem that bothers the Westerner, especially the sensitive Western writer who lives in India and who aims at concretising her life in India in her literary works:

To live in India and be at peace one must to a very considerable extent become Indian and adopt Indian attitudes, habits, beliefs, assume if possible an
Indian personality. But how is this possible? And even if it were possible — without cheating oneself — would it be desirable? Should one want to try and become something other than what one is?

The main characters in *Esmond in India* try to cope with the experience, the world, that is India. Jhabvala has externalized in this novel her personal predicament, the predicament of transforming her inner life according to the dictates of the outer life.

*Esmond* considers that the white world alone is equipped with a unique capacity to enjoy the fruits of culture and sophistication. In his initial reaction to India, the East he avidly studies Indian folklore, traditional poetry and history. Perhaps this explains his fascination with and marriage to Gulab, who is the very antithesis of all that culture stands for in European eyes.

Gulab is one character to whom the problem of identity does not arise at all. The only daughter of a doting mother, petted and pampered and brought up in a sheltered way, she is definitely a puzzle; how did she feel attracted to and get herself married to *Esmond*, who differs so drastically from her? She is so unresponsive that he wants to break out from his trap of a dull and alien marriage.

He thought of himself as trapped — trapped in her stupidity, in her dull, heavy, alien mind, which could understand nothing: not him, not his way of life nor his way of thought (37).

The birth of their son, Ravi, hastens the process of alienation. Ravi was as dark as his mother, he looked completely Indian. At first, when Ravi was born, *Esmond* had been
very happy about this: he had wanted an Indian son, a real piece of India, as he had wanted an Indian wife. Now, however, he thought wistfully of fair sturdy little boys with blue eyes and pink cheeks. Angels not Angles, he often found himself murmuring, quite out of context; Angels not Angles. He could see them. But Ravi was definitely dark (34).

By presenting the impossibility of a meaningful relationship between Esmond and Gulab, the novel precludes the possibility of any meaningful relationship between Europe and India. In Gulab's case the futility of cross-country marriages trying to bridge the impenetrable cultural barriers, imposed both ways, is exposed.

It is strange that Esmond, who is skilful at playing on others' senses, who tries to be wholly English, could fall for Gulab (who is so unlike him in every respect). It is equally surprising that she, ever docile and placid like a cow, could rebel against a loving mother and break her engagement with Amrit, a boy selected for her by the elders, in the traditional manner, as being suitable to her. Where is her individuality and strength of will once she is married to Esmond? She reverts to the pattern of traditional womanhood. She practises what her mother, Uma, declares to be the ideal: "It is true, a husband is a woman's God, it is written so in all our old books" (78).

She condones Esmond's infidelities, drawing "comfort from the fact that they were only with white women. This made it somehow less humiliating" (60).

Gulab marries Esmond for the wrong reasons and she leaves him for the wrong reasons. In a melodramatic scene one sees her driving out
the servant who tried to molest her. In her primeval mind she looks upon herself as a possession of her husband; her husband is a god to her and she has to remain 'pure' for him. She considers herself now defiled and made unclean by a servant. Her understanding of her situation as a wife is summed up in the following words:

It was a husband's right, so her instinct told her, to do whatever he liked with his wife. He could treat her well or badly, pamper her or beat her — that was up to him, and it was not her place to complain. But in return there was one thing, only one, that he owed her, and that was his protection: it was his house and that no stranger could cast insulting eyes on her. Esmond had failed in that duty; so now he was no more her husband. Nor she his wife; since she considered herself defiled, she could not remain in his house any longer but had to return, as was the custom, to her own people (199-200).

The main theme that Jhabvala explores through these shifting, turning circles of activity is the dilemma of the Westerner for whom initial delight in India turns into a trap: Esmond in India is her first detailed study of a subject, preliminary hints of which may be seen in both her previous novels To Whom She Will and The Nature of Passion and which she has taken up in subsequent novels and short stories, thus making it a major literary preoccupation for a considerable period of her writing life.

By tracing Esmond's rapidly accelerating journey from comparative calmness to mounting hysteria during the five months covered by the action of the novel (during which Esmond has grown
steadily disillusioned with both Gulab and his life in India), Jhabvala is able to plot the stages by which the 'experience of India' affects the Western sensibility.

Esmond has begun to realize that "he had to get out ... quickly" (167). He realizes also that it is only the prospect of leaving India for good that can ever again make him feel 'young and free.' His admiration for Indian art, architecture and literature is genuine, and he believes that in giving lectures on Indian culture that earn him his living he has found his 'true vocation.' But he has found that his intellectual and aesthetic approach to her culture is no protection against India. Despite his conscientiousness as a teacher, Esmond's personality disintegrates along with his marriage as "the strain of living with Gulab was becoming more and more intense" (185). His growing distaste for India merges with contempt for his lovely and slow-witted wife until she becomes, in his overwrought imagination, the living embodiment of all that he resents and despises about India: her 'animal sleep' seems to oppose his alert rationality; her lethargy, his energetic activity; and her quiet complaisance his need for lively companionship. He is proud of his self-image as a man of culture and is shaken and distressed by the violence of his own revulsion and the behaviour it brings out in him. He finds occasional relief from his problems in his relationship with Betty and in the activities of the cultural group that provides him with publicity, payment and a regular audience. His later attempt to console himself with Shakuntala, however, amusingly backfires on him: temporarily fascinated by Esmond's Shelleyan aspect of tragic melancholy, the romantic Shakuntala offers him her love and devotion. Her enthusiastic resolve to "adore you and to serve you and to be your
"slave" (148) is yet another trap, from which Esmond finally flees to England, "where there were solid grey houses and solid grey people, and the sky was kept within decent proportions" (202).

One can see that the weather conditions of North India contribute to Esmond's growing unease. Little signs chart the passing of the seasons: Esmond's lecture on the Indian love lyric is delivered on an open terrace at sunset, when the weather is becoming warm; the Western Women's Organization visits the Taj at Agra in high summer, and Esmond is annoyed by Betty's delay, which makes the morning heat unbearable. Back in Delhi, the heat becomes oppressive in his little flat. Jhabvala writes:

It was very hot; all the noonday heat had accumulated into a solid mass which lay heavy in the air and passed on the walls and ceiling, so that they seemed almost to bend and close in under the weight .... It was so hot and so still; all the world seemed to have swooned into a stupor (197).

To quote Shantha Krishnaswamy,

The heat of the Indian summer aggravates the European sensibility already frayed by India's poverty and the rich Indians' insensitivity to his poor brethren.

Despite the obvious links between this climatic passage and the author's description in 'Myself in India' of her own response to Delhi's hot season, her characterization of Esmond resolves itself in comedy as her study of Etta in A Backward Place (published some eight years later) does not. The reader of Esmond in India can savour the irony implicit in Har Dayal's plan to prepare his daughter for an
arranged marriage by engaging her seducer to tutor her in art history. Nor is Esmond exempt from his creator's depiction of the human race as incorrigibly inclined to self-deception: he believes he needs a wife who will be his equal, but Betty, who knows him to be a bully, keeps her hold on him by never giving in to him. The novel ends on a final picture of Esmond as gay deceiver: his hand clasped in Shakuntala's, he gazes smilingly into her trusting, confident eyes and thinks with longing and increasing pleasure of escape to England — and to freedom.

The distinctive vision of the Indian landscape that becomes a recurring motif in Jhabvala's later fiction (notably in *A Backward Place*, *A New Dominion*, *Heat and Dust* and the short story 'An Experience of India') appears in *Esmond in India* for the first time:

*Imperceptibly — dust unto dust — village and shops faded again into desert landscape, and sometimes there was a ruined mosque among the withered shrubs and stumps of trees. The sun became hotter every minute, making of sky and earth one vast white bowl of dust* (116).

*Looking about him with discontented, disenchanted eyes, Esmond sees  

"always, encompassing everything and holding it in its vast bowl, the Indian sky — an unchanging, unending expanse of white-blue glare, the epitome of meaningless monotony which dwarfed all human life into insignificance" (202).
Within the comic pattern of the novel, Esmond's 'vision' of India is seen as idiosyncratic and eccentric. It is Uma's house, in its flaking beauty and decayed grandeur, its memories of past heroism, and its atmosphere of a spacious but neglected and unregulated Paradise, that furnishes the novel's metaphor for India. The garden has run wild, the pond is covered with slime, and the fountain plays no longer. The servants' quarter has been let and sublet, for "there were always poor people desperately in need of a corner to live in" (76).

India is a more subject for humour among the members of the Western Women's Organisation than for respect or interest. Betty's quip, made on their expedition to Agra to see the Taj Mahal, "On the left you will see a pee-house for jackals" (119), causes much amusement, some of it subtly directed at Esmond, who is their guide to the architectural treasures of India. An occasional glimpse of an amused author behind the scenes is possible for the reader who is alert to the ironic self-satire in the comment:

"In those days it had been thought expedient to marry young men before they left for their studies abroad. Nowadays it was different, one took the risk even of a foreign daughter-in-law" (23).

The words are the narrator's; they describe a situation central to the author's personal experience. Jhabvala says in 'Myself in India':

The reason why I live in India is because my strongest human ties are here. If I hadn't married an Indian, I don't think I would ever have come here for I am not
attracted — or used not to be attracted — to the things that usually bring people to India.

Jhabvala's next novel, *The Householder*, is a return to social comedy. For example, Haydn Moore Williams observes:

*The Householder* ... is in many ways a contrast to *Esmond in India*, not least in returning to the purer air of social comedy and in the absence of villainous characters as black as Esmond. Having told a story of a bizarre unhappy marriage that ends in separation, Jhabvala now turns to a marriage that starts off badly but ends up as a success. It is a simple tale completely centred on the married life of Prem and his new young wife Indu, a tale told with gentle mocking irony.

Vasant A. Shahane writes on the subject:

*The Householder* is a sensitively portrayed social comedy of a lower middle-class Hindi teacher reflecting not merely his monetary and familial problems, but also his complexes, his sense of failure and frustration and his minor fulfilments.

But at the same time these critics are also aware of the deepening ironic mode in this novel. For example, Shahane points out that

*The Householder* has more fun than philosophy, more satirical and comic spirit than social documentation of the problems of lower middle-class individuals.
In the opinion of K.N. Joshi and B. Shyamala Rao,

_The Householder_ expounds the comic possibilities of the human situation in which the individual always falls short of his expected stature in life.

In the final analysis of the novel Haydn Moore Williams seems to be right when he says:

The title _The Householder_ points to the theme of the Indian husband’s quest for his own status and identity as suggested in the irony of the word and the irony of the status ...

But it is S.C. Harrex who comes very near to a proper understanding of the main theme of the novel. He observes:

_The Householder_ offers the most intimate and sustained portrayal of the marriage relationship in its shy early stage. A feature of this novel is that the story of the struggling newly-weds, learning to adjust to each other and cope with economic and in-law problems, is projected mainly from the male angle. _The Householder_ ... reveals with sympathetic irony the temptation of escape from adult responsibilities by premature progression from the second _ashrama_ of the householder ... to the _sanyasi_ stage of life.

The problems presented in _The Householder_ are the problems of Prem and Indu, travelling from an unsatisfactory married life to a premature acceptance of their failures by espousing the passive detachment of the sanyasis. If _Esmond in India_ is the Western answer of separating oneself from an unsatisfactory married status,
The Householder is the Indian answer to the same problem — namely, a passive acceptance of things as they are. Viewed in this angle, the novel is replete with irony stemming from the novelist's own experience in India as a householder.

To quote Rupinderjit Saini,

Jhabvala would write, after all, light social comedies with astute irony and brilliant humour. It would also ensure an almost complete absence of the tragic and the heroic.

Prem is an underpaid teacher in a third-rate private college in Delhi, struggling to make both ends meet, and trying hard to meet his obligations as a family man. A reduction in house rent and a raise in his salary are the two projects he works at; he succeeds in neither and his struggles, failure and frustration are viewed more with fun than with any philosophical intensity. He is aware that, as the head of the family, he has his responsibility to be fulfilled. His troubles are increased not only by his low salary and tight budgeting but also by his wife and mother. His mother tries to reinforce the feeling in him that Indu is not pretty enough for him. Before much damage can be done, Prem tactfully sends her away to his sister's house.

Indu is phlegmatic — though not appallingly like Gulab; she is able to run a household, invite guests, cook and serve them delicious meals, and feel honoured as a householder. Her sensuousness appeals to Prem, young and newly-wed as he is; he values his sexual experience but at the same time a frustrating atmosphere of guilt and shame is cast about it. He acknowledges his feelings truthfully on
knowing that she is pregnant: "Her pregnancy was a terrible embarrassment for him. Now everybody would know what he did with her at night in the dark, as quickly and guiltily as he had eaten the nuts and raisins"(8).

The plot of the novel humorously traces the process by which Prem, who was until very recently a carefree student, shedding his adolescent dependence on parental props and developing, through an improving relationship with his wife, self-respect and an increased confidence, at least, in some of his abilities.

The humour with which Jhabvala traces Prem's 'progress' is given a delicate ironic edge by the disillusioning evidence yielded by every stage of his experience, that worldly 'success' does not depend on moral work or integrity. Indeed, he already possesses qualities of character that raise him above the ostentation and vulgar self-consequence of the 'mature' and 'successful' persons he seeks to emulate. Since experience seems sadly to teach him that in the world of men the areas of 'sense' and 'sensibility' are mutually exclusive, he has learned by the end of the novel to keep these aspects of his life apart. Sharing the spiritual side of his life with Sohan Lal, he looks to Raj for advice in such worldly matters as bettering his financial position. In responsibly coming to terms with what is 'tragic underneath' the circumstances of his life, he advances to maturity: "He knew that, whatever it might cost him, he had to hold on to his job. He had to do everything, accept everything, for the sake of holding on to his job" (124). His decision to protect Indu from the knowledge that "insecurity ... would for ever threaten them" (124) gives him greater dignity than all his anxious self-assertion in the early days of their marriage. Significantly, it is
not with the spiritual-minded Sohan Lal, but with an evening on which Prem and Indu entertain Raj and his family at dinner that the novel ends. A government official in the ministry of food, married and the head of a family, Raj will be Prem's model for worldly advancement. Although Raj's behaviour suggests that success as a householder can turn a pleasant youth into a pompous and selfish person, it is unlikely that Prem and Indu will ever again experience such a moment of joy and mutual satisfaction:

'Very nice', Raj's wife pronounced after her first few mouthfuls, swaying her head from side to side in appreciation.

Indu glowed, but she murmured, 'It is only our plain home food.'

Raj had his mouth full of rice. He said, 'It seems your wife is a very good cook.' Then Prem felt really proud (139).

It is a scene that finely concentrates the varied aspects of Jhabvala's approach to her subject: her sympathy for Prem, her amused admiration for Indu, her ironic scorn of the complacent Raj, her sense of comedy and her awareness of the transience and fragility of the satisfaction being experienced by hosts and guests alike.

While Prem tries to establish himself in the linked roles of husband, breadwinner, and householder, Indu finds some difficulty in accommodating her individual, fine outlook to the requirements of her role as married woman and housewife. She comes from a fun-loving family, and though she wishes to be a credit to her parents and to Prem, she cannot help being amused by the very idea of herself as the dignified 'lady of the household.' Indian tradition lays down time-
honoured rules for a wife's conduct and Indu finds that there exist certain ideals according to which her husband and her mother-in-law expect her to behave.

Prem and Indu try their best to conduct themselves according to traditional 'rules' governing the adult world to which marriage has brought them. Unfortunately, their good intentions often place them in comical opposition to each other; as when Prem's plan to assert himself in the role of authoritative husband collides with Indu's intention to prove herself a model housewife:

He would have been quite pleased if his food had been slightly delayed, but Indu was very prompt with it ... She kept bringing him more hot chapattis ... May be he was a successful husband already (49-50).

When she is annoyed with Prem, Indu might serve his food to him with 'a defiant little slam', but she will still prepare it with care and serve it to him herself. Prem, a teacher well versed in the classics, whose ideas about marriage have been shaped primarily by his mother's exemplary deference to her late husband, applies ancient rules and childhood memory to present experience with amusing results. Returning home rather late to find the house dark and silent and Indu asleep, he reflects that

"it was not right for a wife to go to sleep before she had served her husband however late he might come. He considered for a moment whether to wake her up and tell her so" (46).

These incidents are typical of the misunderstandings that punctuate the early months of their married life. Neither likes nor
understands the other very much to begin with; both have stubborn personalities that resist the merging that marriage requires of them, and a good deal of comedy arises out of the efforts of Prem and Indu to fit themselves (and each other) into the traditional roles of husband and housewife. By the novel's end, discord has been resolved into harmony. Having learned first to love and be loved by each other, Prem and Indu take their places as members of adult society.

The Householder is a study of human life and aspirations that is delicately poised on the fine line between comedy and tragedy. Jhabvala's satiric exposition of Raj's unprepossessing personality is part of the analysis undertaken in the novel as a whole of the cramping effects of Indian social convention upon the young and hopeful. Once a carefree young student, Raj now dismisses young men who have not yet found an occupation as mere 'loafers.' He is much better off than Prem but chafes at the price of a bus ride, ignores the appeals of beggars, and lets Prem pay for his tea. A brief exchange between Raj and Prem's German friend Hans demonstrates his creator's amused, yet compassionate view of Raj:

Hans beamed at him: 'So you are a cog in the vast machinery of the Government?'

'No, I am a sub-officer, Grade Two.'

'By cog I mean one little screw in a big wheel. It is a joke.' Raj continued to stare ahead of him but now he wore a look of tight-lipped disapproval. Quite obviously he did not regard his job as fit subject for a joke (113).

Hans's remarks reflect his own preoccupations, but they also expose Raj's increasing materialism and a pompous self-consequence
that is not unlike Prem’s. Raj’s pompousness is amusingly pricked by Hans, but at the level at which Raj remains, a job is indeed no ‘fit subject for a joke.’ Pursued by fears that he will lose his job at the college, Prem himself hopes to become a government officer. He knows that the choice before him is limited, and aspires to the security of a government job and the possession of one of the “rows and rows of hutments, each one with an oval door, a little veranda and a tiny rectangle of grass in front” (66). Parenthood will surely increase the “doctor’s bills and income tax forms and all the other horrors the world had in store for him” (125).

The novel ends while insecurity has not yet clouded Prem’s ability to feel joy in simple things. The ‘tempting and rapturous’ vision yielded to Prem by his visit to a swami is one of the high moments life grants him, his satisfaction at seeing reflected in the mirror ‘a man’s face, no longer a boy’s’ is another. His uninhibited and passionate love-making with Indu, his dignity as a wedding-guest, his secret enjoyment of the respect shown by others to his pregnant wife, his new confidence in facing the future with Indu beside him to support and be protected by him, and his pride in playing the host to Raj and his family are all similarly touched, even in their amusing aspects, by his creator’s sympathetic seriousness.

Hans is a member of a group of Westerners who provide The Householder with more sources of amusement. In this novel more than in any other work of fiction, Jhabvala treats Westerners in India as subjects for unalloyed humour. There is even an element of caricature in her presentation: a European woman Prem meets at a party "had big teeth like a horse and a long neck thrust slightly forward round which she wore a bead necklace” (64). While emphasizing her
opinions, she "drew back her lips and bared her long yellow teeth" (65-66). Another Western woman is described as "a wizened white lady in a cotton sari, who was recounting her experiences with a very advanced yogi in Lucknow" (66).

Hans has 'pale eyes' and 'moist colourless gums,' his legs and feet being 'large and naked and white like chicken-flesh' (44). At the party Prem attends, Hans is seen to be "wiping the saliva from his lips which had gathered there in the excitement" (64). Kitty, a British resident in Delhi of many years' standing, has a 'square and red' face. She bends over a tea-tray

"with her big bottom in its black and white cotton dress stuck out at one end and her head at the other; her lips were moving slightly and she looked preoccupied and even a little sinister" (45).

The general effect of such descriptions as these is to convey an impression of grotesque ungainliness. Their ungainliness is due partly to the fact that these characters are seen through Prem's eyes and assessed by his limited experience of the world. Their conversation, which generally concerns their quest for a spiritual fulfilment in India, perplexes Prem, who "had always thought that Europeans were very materialistic in their outlook" (46). Prem's own mind cannot rise easily above the practical matters that make his life miserable: his low salary and the high rent he is paying to the Seigals.

In The Householder certain oblique criticisms of Indian society are expressed through ironic reflection. The students at the college, who have no taste for poetry, cunningly turn the task of describing an
actual event into the far simpler exercise of repeating parrot-wise
the moral sentiments of a high order that will get them through
examinations. Of India's Republic Day Parade,

'How beautiful to see our Country, our Bharat so
feasted and loved,' they wrote; or 'Thus was offering
of thanks given to God and our good and great Prime
Minister for our Freedom and Independence'... [Prem]
was often surprised... at the deep thoughts and
feelings his students expressed. In the classroom they
seemed such callow young men, one would never have
credited them with any of these finer sentiments (8).

But Prem, despite his shyness and his youthful inhibitions, uses
words that come from the heart: there is a difference, even in his
'petition' to Mr. Khanna and especially in his letter to Indu, between
his style and that of the others. Yet the petition is ignored by
Mr. Khanna, and his passionate love letter is burnt by Prem himself in
shame. His remarks on the four stages in a man's life are hardly
heard by Mr. Seigal, who is interested only in film-music and thoughts
of food. Although Prem's problems are a source of humour in the
novel, it is significant that the substance of what this sensitive
young man has to say, whether in speech or in writing, is ignored by
others.

In his quarrels with Indu, Prem tries to adopt an adult,
responsible manner but is often amusingly thrown off balance by her
potent physical attraction for him. Ashamed of his 'unworthy'
thoughts about her body, the conflict between Prem's idealism and his
healthy maleness is presented humorously, yet with sympathetic
understanding. Their disputes, which often end in deadlock, and in
which Prem and Indu overtly assert their claims to respect as householder and housewife respectively, express in reality their need of each other as friend and as lover. Once Prem left "sad because Indu was there; now he felt sad because she was not there" (105). After their mutual avowal of love for each other, Indu becomes Prem's main source of consolation; a failure apparently, on every other front, he feels he has achieved something as a lover and a husband. Her extreme youth and her dependence upon him for support call forth all the tender protectiveness in Prem's sensitive nature. His status in the college ceases to matter so very much: he has tried to raise it, but fate is clearly against him. He is adult enough to find happiness in what he does have, his wife and his confidence in his role of householder.

Get Ready for Battle, Jhabvala's fifth novel, is again a domestic social comedy marked by satirical flourishes. According to P.P. Mehta, in Get Ready for Battle, "irony, scepticism and humour keep the atmosphere lively."

The novel shows the conflicts in a family setting. There is no battle to speak of, worthy of the title. Vasant A. Shahane remarks: Get Ready for Battle is not all about battles, fights, quarrels and conflicts. It is a very adroitly designed novel of domestic life and familial relations which are sometimes marked by an intensity of emotion and other times by jealousies and prejudices.

The novel displays Jhabvala's delightful handling of the interplay of family relationships, the hidden dramas, the absurdity of individual foibles in the brilliant scenes caught and held with wit and sharp irony. Haydn Moore Williams is right when he says:
In Get Ready for Battle ... a much more complex novel, Jhabvala attempts a more ambitious project which is to weave together a number of intrigues, sexual, family and social, all connected with the broken marriage of a Punjabi business-man Gulzari Lal ...

In Get Ready for Battle, everyone wants something and struggles to get it. Vishnu, the son of a wealthy entrepreneur, Gulzari Lal, wants a life of his own, independent of his father. Gulzari Lal, who has a very satisfactory business life, wants a satisfactory private life as well, but this is difficult for him to achieve because he is estranged from his wife, Sarla Devi, and has a mistress of long standing, Kusum, who in her turn wants to be married to Gulzari Lal and schemes to bring him to the point of getting a divorce from his wife. What Sarla Devi wants is to be left alone to her religious contemplation, but her conscience will not let her, and she forces herself to meddle in the affairs of the poor and underprivileged. Her brother, Brij Mohan, who has lost all his money, wants to come up again so that he can enjoy the good things of life, which for him comprise plenty of whisky and plump young prostitutes.

In a series of wittily observed scenes Jhabvala gives a remarkably subtle and engaging picture of contemporary life in Delhi. Through the conflicting ambitions, business intrigues and the personal and emotional entanglements, she gently mocks the self-seeking nature of this group of people who are all engaged in battle with themselves and with each other. But beneath this humorous and ironic study of personal problems and conflicts, one catches a glimpse of India's terrifying social problems and also of the deep moral consciousness which may prove her salvation. Vishnu and his wife, Mala, are the
husband-and-wife team who quarrel often and love deeply at times. They are similar to other pairs, like Prem and Indu, and Suraj and Sarla in the short story 'The Aliens'. These moments of physical pleasure that are portrayed very vividly in man-woman relationships become increasingly less frequent in subsequent novels; moments of contact serve only as reinforcements of the awareness of the sterility of the human condition. The novelist says:

While wondering at their own attitude my Western characters wonder still more at that of the Indian characters. One of these Western characters may be invited to a wedding — a festive scene where fairy lights twinkle, the tables are loaded with pilaos and kebabs, and the guests with ornaments and brocades; the bandmen play.

No one seems to notice that the bandmen have no shoes, that gazing in at the front there is a rabble of children suffering from rickets and eye disease while at the back, where the waste food goes, a rabble of grownups is holding out old tins. Don't Indians see?

24 My Western character asks.

The immense disparity between the rich and the poor of India is the overriding subject and theme of Get Ready for Battle. In its contrast of the luxurious world inhabited by a wealthy entrepreneur with that other world of sickness and destitution which his wife Sarla Devi struggles to alleviate, Jhabvala projects a fictional equivalent of 'what one has to see here everyday'. She says in 'Myself in India':

We may praise Indian democracy, go into raptures over Indian music, admire Indian intellectuals — but
whatever we say, not for one moment should we lose sight of the fact that a very great number of Indians never get enough to eat. Literally that: from birth to death they never for one day cease to suffer from hunger. Can one lose sight of the fact? God knows, I've tried. But after seeing what one has to see here everyday, it is not really possible to go on living one's life the way one is used to.

The novel takes its title from the advice given by Lord Krishna to the heroic prince Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra: "Treating alike pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat, then get ready for battle" urges Krishna as recorded in the Bhagavad Gita (II, 38) as Arjuna prepares to withdraw from the battlefield, daunted by the sight of kinsmen before him whom he must kill in order to achieve victory. In the novel it is Sarla Devi's duty to fight against every form of social injustice and oppression of the poor. She is somewhat 'larger than life.' Ramlal Agarwal asked Jhabvala in his interview:

Don't you think that Gulab in Esmond in India is a little too sluggish or Sarla Devi in Get Ready for Battle is a little too unworldly? Don't you think there is a shade of exaggeration in the depiction of characters and situations in your novels?

She upheld:

I think novelists can be classified into two schools, or sects: (1) those whose characters are as large as life — here the high priests are writers like Tolstoy and George Eliot; (2) those whose characters are
larger than life — the high priests being Dickens and Proust. I am a follower of the second school. That just happens to be the kind of novelist I am.

At the end of the novel, Sarla Devi takes upon herself the blame for the expulsion of Bundi Busti's slum dwellers and walks away towards Delhi's red-light area to compensate Tara, the prostitute, for the treatment she has received from Brij Mohan.

Gulzari Lal is no nouveau riche. His family background is, or has been aristocratic. His forefathers "lived stately lives in large country houses and dispensed charity and justice to their villages" (25). He possesses an 'inbred courtesy, a dignity' that lend grace to all his relationships, including those pertaining his business and his wayward family. To these qualities he adds, in his own opinion, other "virtues — that is, his realism, his capacity for hard work, his shrewd business sense, his balanced view of life" (37).

And yet, despite all this, Gautam tells Vishnu that Gulzari Lal seems to him to be the worst type of man, attached to money and money-making and existing not as a man but only through the things he possesses, like his car, his house, his mistress. Women and gold, as Sri Ramakrishna has said, these are the worst temptations in the life of man, and your father has not only tasted of them but has swallowed them whole (17).

Such a judgement of Gulzari Lal might seem extreme. But Get Ready for Battle, although more firmly rooted in the realities of Indian life than any other of Jhabvala's novels, is paradoxically not
a study in realism but a book that concerns itself with the difference between reality and illusion on a moral level. In practical terms, Jhabvala's exploration of this theme emerges frequently as a satiric comparison of her characters' illusions about themselves with what they really are. In no other among her novels are the lines of demarcation between what is 'natural' and 'unnatural' (and noble and worthless) so clearly drawn. Her spokesman on moral matters is Gautam. Genuinely free in spirit, his view on most matters is likely to be the most morally penetrating, and his insight reliable. His views on the subject of religious swamis are of interest, since they illuminate Jhabvala's own ironic approach to it in *A New Dominion* and *Heat and Dust*.

'There is always a danger,' said Gautam. 'Especially for our women ... often they mistake what is lower in themselves for a high manifestation. How many of our women do we see hanging around healthy young swamis, they swoon with love and speak words of ecstasy — to whom? To God? Or to the swami? ... All these expressions of love and longing ... are meant to fly up straight to God or ... for someone nearer to earth?' (109).

*Get Ready for Battle* reflects a view of India that has altered profoundly from the comic vision that inspired Jhabvala's earlier novels; what had previously seemed 'always a little bit ludicrous' even in its excesses, has ceased to amuse.
NOTES

1. *Indian Writing in English*, p. 454.
3. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, p. 84.
7. Ibid., p.34.
9. 'Myself in India', *How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories*, p.16.
11. 'Myself in India', *How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories*, p.9.
15. Ibid., p.63.


25. 'Myself in India', *How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories*, p.10.
