Chapter IV

Quest for Spirituality

Jhabvala has attained great success as an artist as she has efficiently succeeded in presenting artistic expression to the sense of alienation in her knowledge of man and society in India. In India, people are not merely involved in a change from tradition to modernity but in a process of cultural fragmentation and material reality. Jhabvala endeavours to counter-balance these with the portrayal of aspects of India’s spiritual reality. This spiritual reality would help to get over the sense of alienation and frustration. People, particularly women move towards religion to find solace and comfort for their disturbed mind.

In the opinion of Dr. Radhakrishnan, religion is not a way out of life but a way unto life. The writings of Jhabvala instill the spirit of awareness and love, and the need to show compassion to the suffering fellow human beings. She creates men and women in her stories and allows them to go in search of spiritual reality. According to Jhabvala, she feels that “Religion” is not only the way to God but the way to man. Her characters in her stories reveal Jhabvala’s idea of religion. She feels that it is a bounden duty of an individual to render a helping hand to the poor and oppressed at the needy times. It is a human concern to serve the man in need. Therefore leading life in this world with such attitude would
make one understand the meaning of spiritual reality. This is the chief-concern of Jhabvala and is the notion of her religion.

Jhabvala’s long stay in India and her keen observation of it leads her to realize that religion and religious devotion are potent forces in India. R.K. Dhawan states, “Religion plays a prominent role in the daily life of the Indian – he is tenacious in clinging on to his religious beliefs since it sets him apart from his fellow citizens, giving him a distinct identity” (103). She understands that people in India are very pious. God is embodied in many forms more in India than anywhere else in the world. Even though she is a foreigner by birth, she has read all the Upanishads, Gita and also other religious scripts. She has tried her best in understanding the sweetness of the soul of India. Her inspiration from these holy scripts has aided her in developing the theme of her novels and short stories.

Sucher in his work, The Fiction of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala: The Politics of Passion explains Jhabvala’s view on religion as, “If Ruth Prawer Jhabvala’s fiction endorses a religion, it is a quietistic religion of private and contemplative withdrawal, passive waiting for grace through meditation” (25). Jhabvala portrays some of the wisest Indian characters who practise a deeply revivifying meditation. An old lady in the story “The Old Lady” adapts the means of meditation. Jhabvala’s sympathetic characters absolutely try to find peace for their disturbed mind on their own through religion. As discussed in the earlier chapter “Dissonance of Marital Life” the old lady is suppressed by her husband in her
earlier married stage and later by her elder son, Satish. She also meets with a problem regarding her married daughter, Lelia. When Lelia does not want to continue to live with her husband, the old lady is very much disturbed. The old lady’s voice becomes voiceless. No one even at her home is ready to heed attention to her words. Therefore in a depressed mood, she tries to seek refuge in meditation which makes her to forget all her problems.

The old lady got up and hurried to her room. Only for one minute, she promised herself. She sat in front of the little table with the image of Vishnu and the photograph of her Guru and God forgive her – at once forgot all about her children sitting puzzled in the drawing room. Everything now was clear and serene. (LBLF 16)

Some of the women characters in Jhabvala’s stories desperately get guidance of some persons whom they think could give them spiritual comfort. They deliberately run to persons whom they think will offer them the right suggestions to solve their complex problems. Sometimes they succeed but quite often are deceived by them. The old lady along with her friend goes to see the Guru. At the very first sight itself, she gets confidence that he is the man who would guide her. When the old lady is sitting with her friend, looking at the Guru, he suddenly turns to her and his eyes looks as if burning and he says to her, “If you look for it, peace is not hard to find. So now she sits cross-legged before her
little table, surrounded by vast fields of peace in which her spirit frisked like a lamb” (LBLF 17).

Jhabvala explicitly shows in the story that unhappy and unexpressed love in a family is a sign of readiness for spiritual awakening. The old lady, after the death of her husband lives with her children, Lelia, Satish, Bobo and also her little cute granddaughter, daughter of Lelia. But they are blind to her love, strength and also to her religious source. In a frustrated mood, the unnamed old lady is found sitting still and meditating in her room. When Munni, her granddaughter comes in search of her and cries, she wakes up to reality. She experiences transcendent bliss through her meditation.

When the little girl asks her grandmother, if all human beings die when they become very old, immediately the old lady cheerfully agrees to it. After being silent for sometimes, she states, without being asked by her little granddaughter, that humans become happy when they die. Munni could not accept this fact and she sharply retorts how they could be happy, when they are burnt. The grandmother replies that “Their spirit is happy, […] and she smiled, her eyes looking far into the distance as if she saw there vast flowering plains for spirits to be happy in” (LBLF 18).

Jhabvala makes a hint that sometimes religion is used as a sort of escapism. The old lady in this story actually tries to run away from her grown up children. The members in the family have a heated argument regarding the divorce matter
of the daughter, Lelia. But they are not able to arrive at a final decision. As the old lady, the poor mother is not able to solve the problem; she escapes from the place and moves towards the prayer room to take refuge there. She speaks philosophically about the spirits being happy after death. Her comment is tinged with satire. The old lady thinks of being happy after death. But she forgets the pathetic sufferings in her present life. Sometimes this sort of meditation and constant thinking to understand the way of God and man are considered inevitable means to attain knowledge.

Until the early twentieth century women in India was expected to suppress or spiritualize her natural desires. This is reflected in Jhabvala’s writings. Especially the condition of widows in traditional ancient India is highly pathetic. Life becomes the most difficult for them. Fate led many young women to suffer the dreary life of a widow. This happened so, because of young women married to old men in the past. The young widows, even in the family fold, become unprotected creatures. Hard work and harsh words would be their lot. Sometimes, they are considered or suspected to be inauspicious or a disturbing influence. Treating them as a disturbing influence they are made to undergo tonsure and fasting. Even then, they are looked upon with suspicion, scorn and kept as a drudge on the pretence of giving protection. Especially the young widows have to struggle a lot either to suppress or spiritualise their feelings. Such is the condition of the central character Durga in Jhabvala’s story “The Widow”.
Jhabvala portrays the other worldliness of a widow. Durga, a young girl is married to a decrepit old man, who possesses large estate. But the marriage is of no use and seems to be meaningless as the husband dies soon leaving his young wife and surplus wealth alone in this selfish world. Durga is presented as a powerful individual who tries to break up the rigid social restrictions. In spite of living up to her desires, after the death of her husband, she is surrounded with boredom and smouldering suppressed desires. When Durga suffers from depressive moods, Bhuaji, her old aunt, a shrewd and tough lady, uses the opportunity for her own benefit. Bhuaji finds herself a permanent place in Durga’s household by pretending to be a well-wisher of Durga. Usha in her article “Ruth Prawer Jhabvala’s “The Widow”: Reading the Subtext” writes “Wheedling herself gradually into the role of confidante, she studies Durga’s problems carefully and soothes here and thereby wins her favours” (135).

In order to divert Durga’s mind from the unfulfilled desires, Bhuaji directs Durga to move towards religion. She understands her problems and draws her attention to the cult of Lord Krishna. Until Bhuaji began to talk of God to Durga, she had a different view about God and other religious aspects. As almost all women in Hindu society believe, Durga too is of the opinion that the people have to go to the temple to worship God. They are also supposed to follow some rites like fasting, bathing in the river after an eclipse and giving some food to holy men.
Durga believes in it, “One did all these things so that no harm would befall, and everybody did them and had always done them: that was God” (LBLF 60).

Bhuaji’s conversation with Durga changes her perception of God. She talks differently about God and tells Durga mostly of Lord Krishna. Sometimes she describes Him as the baby Krishna and sometimes as the lover Krishna. Bhuaji narrates the stories of women who accepted Lord Krishna as their son and some as their lover. The old aunt describes of the baby Krishna as very lovely and naughty as he stole butter and teased the young girls by pulling their hair. Durga with great interest listens to her and admiringly replies, “How naughty!” she cried, what a bad bad boy, bless his heart!” (LBLF 61). Then Bhuaji describes the Lord Krishna as a lover, who is very handsome with, “lotus eyes and brows like strung lows and a throat like a conch. Later she purposely narrates Durga about the life of Mayadevi, who accepted the baby Krishna as her child. Mayadevi played with Him, cooked for Him, bathed His image and dressed it and also took care to put it to sleep at night.

The old aunt says of the illustrious manifestation of the personal God to divert her from other worldly pleasures. Thus Jhabvala effectively portrays the conflict in the mind of Durga, whose life is divided between an oblique devotion to Krishna and worldly affairs. After an unsuccessful attempt to establish her affinity with the son of her tenants, she is persuaded by Bhuaji to evict them. Bhuaji deliberately whispers into Durga’s ear “with prayer He will surely come to
Durga’s relatives finally get all her wealth because her unhappiness leaves her without the strength to resist them. Bhuaji murmurs approvingly to Durga:

‘That is the way to give up everything. Only if we give up everything will He come to us’. And she went on murmuring, while stroking the fine silks and running hard gold necklaces through her fingers: ‘As a son and as a lover’, she murmured, over and over again, but absently. (LBLF 78)

Jhabvala through the story, “The Widow” expresses her idea and knowledge of the condition of widows in a Hindu, undivided family. She also describes the social and religious pressures to which they are subjected throughout their life. Vasant A Shahane remarks:

The rationalist in Jhabvala skillfully grasps the worldliness of Durga; the artist in Jhabvala brilliantly captures the other –
worldliness of Durga. The coexistence of the material and the spiritual, which is a dominant aspect of Hindu society, is portrayed with remarkable empathy. (158)

Primarily, people take to religion only for the peace of mind. Some elderly women by their constant religious practice and through their native wisdom have solved their problems. They try to seek peace of mind in this troubled world. But
this peace of mind and tranquility cherished by the elders is not communicated to
and practised by the younger generation. Spiritual realization is something
personal and innate. The acts of hypocrisy, betrayal and cheating deter young men
and women from their spiritual pursuit. The youth with ideal aspiration to seek
spiritual reality, are at a loss in this tragic situation. When the youth feel that
everything in the world works against their faith, they are shattered. They become
to lose faith in everything in their life and it is portrayed well in the short story “A
Loss of Faith”.

Jhabvala in her story, “A Loss of Faith” presents a pathetic picture of the
sense of frustration of Ramkumar. Ramkumar, the protagonist, in his everyday
life witnesses the disorderly and quarrelsome life in the house of his uncle. After
the death of his father, he goes to his uncle and becomes dependent on the uncle,
along with his mother, two sisters and a brother. He grows as a weak, timid and
friendless boy. He longs for love and peace. Fortunately, when he gets a job in a
draper and outfitter’s shop, he experiences the cherished lover of order in his
work. He loves his work. He loves his work, the skill with which he handles his
customers and his sincerity is rewarded. He gets promotion after promotion until
he becomes the head salesman and staff manager.

The tenor of Ramkumar’s life in the shop is disturbed by domestic friction.
Though he becomes a successful head salesman, he suffers from the pangs of
poverty, the vexation of his quarrelsome brother and demanding relatives. His
domestic situation does not change and he is not able to meet with the demands of his family. His mother pesters him to rent a separate house for her to live in. Everything in his life goes on well for some time. But the tranquility is spoilt when his elder brother, Vijay, returns home. Vijay has shirked his responsibility as the eldest son of the family. He had chosen to live a wayward life. Ramkumar is diligent, cautious and sincere worker. But his income is comparatively lesser than his brother Vijay’s. Though Ramkumar provides for the family and settles his two sisters with better partners, no one in the family, especially his mother and his wife loves him sincerely.

Vijay, the run-away son usurps the place of his brother. Ramkumar yearns for a happy atmosphere at home. But his dreams of restructuring and rebuilding a peaceful home are shattered. He also expects the women at home to lead a quite modest life, but to his shock, they do not. Therefore in a dejected mood he arrives at a conclusion how a life should not be:

[…] he knew how life should not be and deduced from that how it should. He was sure it should not be as he had known it in his uncle’s house – disorderly, dirty and violent; and in opposition he set up an ideal of quiet and orderliness, of meekness and domestic piety. (LBLF 28)

Ramkumar’s faith in humanity and faith in God gradually gets shaken. He begins to lose his faith in the people at home. Ramkumar feels betrayed because
of the arrival of his brother. The mother and Ramkumar’s wife are drawn more
towards Vijay than towards him. Of all matters, his wife too betrays him. He
feels helpless and his trust upon his fellow beings gets shattered. His one and only
ideal of keeping up the domestic piety is submerged in the disorder and the squalor
of life around him.

Frustration and loss of faith in humanity leads Ramkumar to lose faith in
God. At the time of his brother’s death Ramkumar gives vent to his doubt.
During the funeral procession everyone chants: “God, God, you are Truth!’
Ramkumar chanted too, but he did not believe it; he did not believe there was any
God or any Truth or anything at all” (LBLF 39). The situation becomes worse
when the proprietor of the shop, whom Ramkumar considers his “Guru”, refuses
to give him a raise in salary. Thus in frustration, Ramkumar loses hope in life that
ultimately leads him to drop a doll while changing the attire. Ramkumar’s act of
rebellion is vividly portrayed at the end of the story:

    He never quite knew whether he had done it on purpose. He
    remembered thinking, just before the fatal accident, that the
doll’s mouse-tooth grin was rather stupid; he also
    remembered the surge of pleasure when it went hurtling, with
    some violence, down from the counter. (LBLF 40-41)

He begins to act differently. That is what the world – his home, neighbourhood
and workplace does to an aspiring ideal young man.
When human beings realize that they are really instruments for the expression of spirit, they outgrow individualism and espouse the cause of fellowmen because they are expressions of the same spirit. Universality of individuality entails universal love for each and every creature. From time immemorial, India has ever been hailed as a land of spiritual heritage and it is an abode of spiritual guides. The westerners do not find these spiritual values in their own land of materialistic abundance. These values have been a great magnetic attraction to the westerners. Jhabvala endeavours to counter-balance her portrayal of material reality with the portrayal of aspects of India’s spirituality.

Saint is important to all religions. It is believed that the soul can receive impulses from another soul. The holy man is deemed to have fulfilled the duties and obligations of that stage of life to which he is born and ready to abandon all worldly pursuits which he turns down to seek Eternal love. He makes complete renunciation seeking persistently spiritual knowledge and striving to excel in love and compassion. Meditation, discipline and inquiry make him a Guru. He renders service to humanity.

But in modern times, modern Indian God man’s dominion has gone profane as represented by the charismatic but sinister Swamiji. In Post-independence era, the new Guru cult of Indian religious and spiritual guides is exposed with all its dubious and spell-binding hypocrisy. In some cases, one could observe the Swamiji duping innocent women and girls who have drifted away mainly from the
western materialistic world. The young western girls, tired of their life in hectic civilization, come to India on a quest for spiritual salvation and peace but become easy victims to the dubious guru-swamiji.

Jhabvala takes the position of an outsider and articulates the experiences of the western women from the point of view of a woman on a quest. The women, who come seeking such guidance, are exploited by charismatic men who pose as heroes. Being anti-heroes, they usurp the place of genuine Sadhus, masters and teacher. Though all that glitters is not gold what glitters is still attractive. The snobs and imposters glitter in the world and they are more admired than the humble and honest gurus.

Jhabvala at some instances tries to explore the personal perplexities of Indians in a purely native context. In her story “My First Marriage” she depicts the picture of a fraud, an imposter who is able to entice an educated young lady. A girl from a well placed family is fascinated by a poor and unpredictable young man who pretends to be keen on moral training. Through first person narrative, Jhabvala makes the protagonist reveal her foolishness. The narrator of the story is the only daughter of the Director of Education whose name is not mentioned. She is engaged to be married to Rahul. He is her childhood friend who later becomes her lover. He is an only son of the narrator’s father’s friend. Everything goes on well with the narrator’s life until she happens to meet M. The entry of M into her life disturbs everything. To discuss the matter of beginning a new department for
moral training in the university, Rahul wants to meet the Director of Education to get his help. He finds an easy way for it. He approaches the narrator on her way to Rahul’s house.

The narrator is very much impressed by the ideals of M. She becomes fascinated towards him. He gradually attracts her attention towards him. He telephones and asks her to meet him in a particular hotel. She cannot resist meeting him in that cheap hotel. Thereafter she meets him every day, which finally leads her to marry him, leaving her father’s house with a bundle of clothes and jewels. She marries him with all dreams and hopes. But soon she comes to know that he has been already married to another woman Savitri, and also has children. After a short stay in the workshop of M’s friend, the narrator and her husband, M, go to the latter’s birth place, Niripet. There the narrator happens to overhear some shocking comments of the women in the house about M. The women remark that M is just a loafer and he is a man of words and not of action. Their comment, “Not it is very fine, but just wait, in the end her state will be same as Savitri’s” (LBLF 195), makes her unhappy for some time until M explains to her about his marriage, his first wife, Savitri and the children. She remembers and recollects the kind of explanation he gave her:

He had been married very young and to a simple girl from village. After some years he left her. She understood it was necessary for him to leave her because he had a task to fulfil
in the world in which she could not help him. She went back to her parents with the children. She was happy now, because it was her duty to stay at home and look after the children and lead the good, simple, self-sacrificing life of a mother.

(LBLF 195-196)

M efficiently makes the narrator believe that Savitri is not a suitable wife for the man like him, who thinks that he is one with lofty ideals and responsibility to the society. In the beginning the narrator feels happy and does not ever regret for having married M. She is rather fascinated by his plan to start a school that will teach the children to follow, “only their instincts which will lead them to the highest good” (LBLF 200). She feels happy when she thinks that she has acted according to her instinct, marrying M. She is also of the opinion that every individual being must choose her own life and she indeed feels proud as she has chosen hers.

Jhabvala tries to point out the innocence of the narrator and her weakness in analysing matters of life. As M’s idea to start a school seems to be very attractive and as it emphasizes on “instincts” she begins to adore and believe him to be “a prophet, a saint”. Therefore she unhesitatingly approaches her father for a grant from the Ministry of Education to help M. Her request for help only results in M’s taking the narrator away from her parent’s house. M continues to impress her by
going around meeting people in various ministries and returning home thoroughly exhausted. She recollects:

Then he looked tired and the lines on his face became very deep and I felt such love and pity for him. But he had great inner strength, and next day he always started on his rounds again, as fresh and hopeful as before. (LBLF 201-202)

Gradually when M begins to lose his strength, he continues to stay at home and spend his time in meditation. This leads people from various walks of life, who think that they are disturbed in some way come to him for consultation and guidance for their peaceful state of mind. Most of his visitors are women. They crowd around him to listen to his stories, which the people interpret to have some deep meaning. The women visitors, when they seem to understand the meaning of those stories feel and believe that, “God was speaking through his mouth” (LBLF 204). When M married her daughter, the narrator’s mother considered him her sworn enemy. But when the message of the holy image of M soon reaches the narrator’s mother, she changes her opinion and considers him a very religious person and begins to listen to his speech and stories attentively.

Jhabvala ridicules the impermanent attitude of human mind in this story. M does not stay for a long time in the role of God’s messenger. He grows tired and feels exhausted even in that role. He feels angry with everybody. At the state of dissatisfaction and bitterness he informs the narrator one night, “Soon I shall have
to go away” (LBLF 206). This sudden change in him is not only because of the frustrated but also because of his association with a pretty young widow. She may have been the source of temptation because she comes to meet M everyday and tells him that she is going mad with love of God. She visits M frequently for his words of solace and comfort. “She touched his feet and implored him to relieve her and when he took no notice of her, she shook him and tugged at his clothes, so that he became quite angry” (LBLF 204). At one stage, losing his temper M beats her with his slipper and pushes her into the street. This happened just the day before he deserts the narrator. Back at home he starts cursing and beating all others who are present there. He behaves like a rogue. When everybody is gone, he shuts himself up in his room. The next day he is gone, leaving the narrator to believe that she has also been left alone as Savitri like a candle burning for him in a window of the world.

M keeps on changing his role and attitude as a chameleon. He is a man who never sweats for his living. He leads a life of a parasite. He tactfully sponges on others for his own benefits. Especially he sells the narrator’s jewels whenever he needs money to send to his first wife, Savitri and her children. The narrator’s father as a dutiful and lovable man also sends them the cheque every month without fail. Despite all this advantages, he does not like to remain fixed to a purpose. He talks abstract ideals, pretends to be highly philosophical whose motive is to deceive and to entice blind worshippers like the narrator.
The narrator’s attitude towards him is quite different. Moore in his article, “The Yogi and the Babbitt” comments:

M is a useless man, a loafer, an idle dreamer, a superfluous character. In another sense, as she realises in the depth of her being, he is a holy sage, consulted and even worshipped as guru. Though she has left him, fleeting from the spiritual disturbance and social disorder he appears to generate into the life of conformity and comfort, she feels fundamentally dissatisfied. M, the holy fool, has shown her a glimpse of a higher life. (90)

When M deserts her, she never thinks of this in terms of desertion. But she accepts it and says, “I am patient and inwardly calm and lead the life that has been appointed for me” (LBLF 207). The appearance of wisdom and experience is deceptive in his case. Even when M suddenly disappears into a land of know-not-where, the narrator remains steadfast in her love for him. The narrator returns to her parents’ house. After two years, Rahul, the narrator’s lover proposes to marry her. He also succeeds in making his parents and his married sister, Kamala agree to their marriage. The marriage is soon to take place but the narrator still finds pleasure in her efforts to recollect M’s face:

I still try and see his face in my mind, and I never succeed.

But I know and that is how I can go on living the way I do,
and even enjoy my life and be glad – that one day I shall succeed and I shall see that face as it really is. But whose face it is I shall in that hour of happiness – and indeed, whose face it is I look for with such longings – is not quite clear to me. (LBLF 207)

Jhabvala pinpoints the plight of a young woman though she has had her education in the university. The narrator’s character stands as an illustration of some of Jhabvala’s female protagonists who love what is mysterious, alien and dangerous and ultimately end in despair. Sucher remarks of this state:

A well-educated woman makes a foolish choice, loving not wisely but too well. Her inappropriate lover is from a social class lower than her own. The foolish choice is made with a peculiar combination of will and involuntariness. She is enchanted, enthralled and hypnotised because she wishes to be. Her inappropriate choice is to some degree a political act, a rejection of the hierarchies of class. (33)

The young narrator tries to learn by shedding naïve illusions about men, romance and spirituality. Jhabvala ironically hints the mistake of the young people choosing wrong person for guidance of any kind, material or spiritual.

In the story “Lekha” from Like Birds, Like Fishes and Other Stories, young Lekha, the wife of the Head of a department in the Ministry of valuation is
attracted towards Govind, the narrator’s idle brother-in-law. In the dinner party arranged by the narrator, Lekha dances while Govind plays on the dholak and sings a song expressing the lady’s pining for her lord and lover:

Bring, O bring, my beloved unto me!

O what ecstasy shall I know with him

.......

Ask my lord to come to me, so that flower –

adorned I may dance,

sing and play with him

Why this delay? (LBLF 171)

The song sung by Govind has direct reference to the relationship that exists between him and Lekha. It does not have any religious connotation. But Lekha, associates Govind, a skilled musician of the dark good looks with the God Krishna in his aspect of the lover. Gooneratne comments, “Lekha is transformed, for the duration of their love-affair, into an avatar of Radha, the milk-maid who symbolises in Indian mythology the concept of the human soul” (238).

The likeness of Lekha and Govind to the mythological couple strikes the narrator when she first sees them together. “They looked like a couple out of Hindu mythology – the sort of Krishna and Radha couple you see on calendars or in historical films” (LBLF 164). Once to the narrator, Lekha has already described Govind as “God”. Now, while witnessing the dance the narrator, the
wife of Govind’s brother is reminded of that. “Like a god’, she had said, ‘he is handsome like a god’; and now she was worshipping him with her dance – how soft she looked, how pleading – and he knew it and she knew it and I knew it” (LBLF 171).

Lekha’s comment draws the reader’s attention to the danger of taking the sensuous for the spiritual, because with pretentious lore of songs and music, the irresponsible anti-heroes almost hypnotise the followers.

Later in some of her stories, the writer portrays the young western women who are in a confused, depressed and even sometimes demoralised state seem to be fighting a battle within themselves. They go on a journey in search for something or someone who could really bring them happiness and peace. In such state of mind, the young western girls fall victims to religious charlatans masquerading as swamis or gurus in India. Jhabvala has treated with such themes in some of her stories like “A Spiritual Call”, “An Experience of India”, and in “How I Became a Holy Mother” with little variation.

Jhabvala in one of her autobiographical sketches has admitted her initial fascination for spiritual gurus. She has also stated the inevitable recoil and revulsion that she has felt for them later on:

Whenever opportunity came to visit a Swami, I did so. I loved to think I was near someone holy, within the range of such wonderful vibrations. […] Of course, here was the
richest soil for disillusionment, and I reaped that harvest in plenty. I couldn’t stand those swamis anymore; far from embodying human perfectibility, they embodied its corruption, degradation, lies. I loathed them […] But those terrible swamis and their terrible followers […] I hated them for being what they were and not what they pretended to be, and what I wanted them to be. (1)

Being well-aware of the young western girls, Jhabvala delineates their fascination for the India spirituality and other fads in her stories. She also portrays how they fall a prey to the machinations of such roguish Swamis.

According to Jhabvala, the Sadhus are not always paragons of virtues or embodiments of the pure spirit, but they are presented as an odd combination of worldly wisdom and other worldly charm. In some of her short stories she is engaged in writing about gurus and the fate of Europeans who come to India in search of something, emotional or spiritual in life. The story “A Spiritual Call” in the collection A Stronger Climate portrays the hankering after a spiritual experience of Daphne, a young English girl and Helga, her German companion, evoked by their association with Swamiji and India. Daphne comes to India to see a guru whom she has met in Britain, “[…] to undergo an intensive course of spiritual regeneration” (ASC 89).
Daphne, is a member of an ashram in the Himalayas. She is part of an oddly assorted lot of westerners those who are all viewing for the attention of Swamiji. She shares a dark poky little room with “[…] a large blonde beauty in her thirties called Helga” (ASC 92). The competition between the two friends for Swamiji’s attention is implicitly sexual rather than spiritual.

Jhabvala describes the pretentious nature of the Swamiji ironically as:

Swamiji had a very simple and beautiful message to the world. It was only this: mediate; look into yourself and so, by looking, cleanse yourself; harmony and happiness will inevitably follow. This philosophy, simple as its end-produce appeared to be, he had forged after many, many solitary years of thought and penance in some icy Himalayan retreat. […]

Certainly, it was evident that the world urgently needed his message, especially the western world where both inner and outer harmony were in a state of complete disruption.

(ASC 93)

Swamiji’s visit to England, America, California and some other countries is also ridiculed. He travels around the world with the intention of forming a group of new disciples for an intensive training course. He draws the attention of others, particularly women through his lectures and informal talks. His permanent disciples accompany him silently wherever he goes and also looks after his simple
needs. Initially Daphne and Helga are expected to stay only for a limited time. Swamiji trains them in methods of meditation and also makes an attempt to untangle their tangled souls. This is done with the intention of spreading his fame and popularity to every nook and corner of the earth.

Though Daphne has been educated at Oxford, she desires to surrender her will to the Swamiji willingly. She becomes his secretary and is likely to become as much as his slave. Gooneratne describes Daphne’s condition as, “Daphne’s adoration of her guru conquers all the scruples, her doubts regarding his previous career and amusingly, even her Oxford-trained revulsion at his poor written expression” (ASC 265). Daphne rewrites and restructures Swamiji’s dictations caring more for the spirit than just grammatical accuracies. “At night she would sit by the dim bulb in the little room. She shared with Helga to write up these notes and put them into shape (ASC 95).

Swamiji is the pivotal character in this story. He exemplifies the strong fascination that the East exerts on westerners, who are fed up with their own society. His strong personality and saffron clothes contribute to his charm. His coherent talk and frequent references to words such as God, meditation and submission impress westerners who believe that his talks are full of mysticism which they cannot understand so easily. Daphne, who comes to India to escape from the materialism of her country, also feels the same. Both Daphne and Helga become victims to the swami in their eagerness to attain spiritual power. They
never think of returning to their homeland. The ashram and Swamiji fascinate
them to such a greater extent. The current meditation course, for which Daphne,
Helga and all other disciples have enrolled, comes to an end. But it becomes
impossible for them to leave the ashram, particularly Swamiji and his meditation
classes.

Daphne becomes more attracted towards the Swamiji and she feels that it
would be impossible for her to go away from the Swamiji. “She didn’t even think
of going home, it was inconceivable to her that she could go or be anywhere where
he was not” (ASC 105). This leads to a conflict between Daphne and Helga.
Helga accuses Daphne of flirting with their guru. But they get reconciled at the
end.

Daphne herself eventually recognises the erotic nature of her joy in
Swamiji’s presence. He gently reprimands her for not attending the meditation
session in the morning. In response to his question, she replies in a childish
manner that she is lazy but the truth is that she has after all been rewriting his
dictations until dawn. That is why she feels tired and happens to sleep without
attending the morning meditation class. When Swamiji asks her to look at him,
she immediately responds to him.

She was too surprised to do so at first, so he repeated it in a
soft voice of command, and she turned her head blushing
scarlet, and lift her eyes – and found herself looking into his.
Her heart beat up high and she was full of sensations. She would have liked to look away again, but he compelled her not to. (ASC 96-97)

Swamiji, to satisfy his physical desire, tries to draw Daphne and make her surrender herself to the call of life and love. He calls her tenderly, “Daphne” and also adds that it is a pretty name. Fascinated by Swamiji’s admiration, she innocently begins to tell him of the Greek legend of the nymph called Daphne. Daphne was the daughter of river Peneus, who was loved by Apollo and the mortal Leucippus. Leucippus was slain, but Apollo still pursued the nymph and she, at his entreaty, was changed into a bay tree, which became sacred to him. Swamiji ironically comments that the legendary Daphne was afraid of love and so is modern Daphne too. Shahane explains Daphne’s nature as, “The Swamiji associates Daphne with a rationalistic civilization, cool, practical, intelligent. She, however, on her part is willing to surrender her will to the Swamiji’s and do things at his bidding” (ASC 149).

Finally Daphne surrenders herself to her guru. He pretends to transform her and she responds positively to him. She wears a plain white cotton sari given by the Swamiji to her as a gift. Her stay in the ashram does not bring any achievement in spiritual heights. It is obvious that the basis of the swami’s attraction for her is sexual. Daphne comes to India for spiritual comfort but instead she loses her individual personality. Her submission to the guru is
complete when he makes the decision for her. In doing so it not only cements her attachment to him but also causes her to abandon her own ego to his will. The pivotal moment comes when she is picked up to go with Swamiji to Southern California. “She was completely happy to be going to California, and anywhere else he might want her to accompany him” (ASC 110). Jhabvala ironically hints that Daphne’s spiritual call has attained its tragic-comic fulfilment.

In some of Jhabvala’s stories, the female protagonists come from the disintegrated, materialistic socio-cultural backgrounds of Europe or America. They travel from continent to continent with a confessional urge to submit or surrender themselves to some spiritual mentors whom they believed to bring them spiritual succour and transcendental essence of their existence. Rishi Pal Singh in his article “Motifs of Piety and Profanity: A Critique of Guru-cult in the Novels of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala” in the book Generic Manifolds Indian English Literature Since 1950 states:

It is ironically awful and ethically unbelievable that the godfathers of these women are mostly vicious and vindictive to exploit these disciples and have their direct or indirect origin from India – a country of renowned religiosity and spiritual heritage. (81)

One such tourist heroine is portrayed by Jhabvala in her story “An Experience of India” in the collection How I Became a Holy Mother and Other
Stories. The English woman, the unnamed narrator tries to explore the connections between sexuality, spiritual quest and discipleship. The narrator is the wife of a western Journalist, Henry. Both the husband and wife come to India with some expectations of change. Their visit to India is a sort of escapism from the materialistic western world. “Here was our escape from that western materialism with which we were both so terribly fed up” (HIBHM 119). Though both the husband and wife come to India, their intentions are different. “I had come to India. I wanted to be changed. Henry didn’t – he wanted a change, that’s all, but not to be changed” (HIBHM 120). In her thirst and quest for the spiritual, physical and other realities of India the narrator gives up her very comfortable home and her sympathetic husband. They drift apart. She moves on wandering the country, getting herself involved in one sexual adventure after another.

Shahane describes the narrator’s condition and her attitude:

She wanders aimless, sleeps with fellow-passengers, finds kindred souls in middle aged, suffering Indian men; falls in love, goes to bed with Ahmed and many others, leading a life hungry for all kinds of experience of soil, the flesh, the carnality and also the spirit of India and Indians. (151)

The narrator’s search for something different and quest for experience are so strong that she refuses to fly back home with her husband, Henry, once again to the cosy life of Europe. Instead he sells her air ticket and decides to stay in India.
Later she becomes penniless and poor. India fascinates her very much. She meets people who sleep with her, abuse her and leave her with her health impaired forever.

In a desperate mood, the narrator drifts into an ashram with the intention to get a different experience. But there too, things are not very different. When the guru in the ashram finds that the narrator’s husband is a journalist, he shows some special interest in her. The guru wants her husband to visit the ashram and give it due publicity as he is a foreign journalist. He states “the importance of introducing the heaven of Indian spirituality into the lump of western materialism” (HIBHM 129). He is very keen to use all the modern resources to spread his message in the west. He wants her to give free publicity to his projected western tour.

The narrator in “All Experience of India” does not like the idea of the guru. To her, he does not seem a very spiritual type of person.

He was a hefty man with big shoulders and a big head. He wore his hair long but his jaw was clean. Shaven and stuck out very large and prominent and gave him a powerful look like a bull. All he ever wore was a saffron robe and this left a good part of his body bare so that it could be seen at once how strong his legs and shoulders were. (HIBHM 129)
The narrator in this story is not as the same as Daphne, in the “A Spiritual Call”. Daphne surrenders herself voluntarily to a swamiji whereas the condition of the narrator in “An Experience of India” is quite different. She is seduced by her guru.

The guru in “An Experience of India” seems to be a powerful and charismatic figure that uses his huge eyes to create tremendous effect in the minds of his disciples. One such disciple is Jean, a roommate of the narrator. Jean is absolutely humble and submissive. She always touches the guru’s feet whenever she comes into or goes out of guru’s presence. Jean seems to be an obedient slave to guru. She always praises the joys of submission. She does not have a will or a thought of her own. But the attitude of the narrator towards the guru is completely different. Her ego does not allow her to become submissive. Like other disciples, she does not touch the feet of the guru. She also talks to him as if he is just an ordinary person. Jhabvala expresses the narrator’s opinion clearly when she refers to Jean:

When she said that, there was a sort of sparkle in her pale eyes, and at such moments I envied her because she seemed to have found what I was looking for. But at the same time I wondered whether she really had found what she thought she had, or whether it wasn’t something else and she was
cheating herself, and one day she’d wake up to the fact and

she’d feel terrible. (HIBHM 130)

Even though the narrator likes the tranquil atmosphere in the ashram, she
decides to leave the ashram. But the guru who wants her help for his publicity
does not want her to go away and so he forbids her from leaving the ashram. But
she insists her desire to leave the place. To prevent that, he follows her to her
room and orders Jean to go out of the room. Jean responds to him immediately.
She touches his feet in reverence and disappears from there. The guru seduces the
narrator brutally. He justifies his immoral deed. He does it with the intention to
smash the narrator’s ego and let it go scattered into pieces into the dust. He also
states that this experience, though painful, would lead her to a joyful life of
freedom from the prison of her own self that is remade and reborn. The narrator is
terribly shocked. She is afraid not only of his physical power and domination over
her but also that he would make her too submissive as an obedient slave like Jean,
washing his feet in tears of gratitude.

The so-called spiritual guru calls the narrator “licentious” and “obstinate”.
He asks her, “How many men have you slept with? […] he cried, riding on top of
me, and then he cried ‘Bitch’!” (HIBHM 133). She finds no difference between a
sex-hungry wayfarer and the spiritual guru. She laughs in relief. She no longer
fears him. Laurie states the rape of the narrator by the guru.
[...] represents both a relief and a disappointment: his magic and fascinating power is revealed as self-gratifying, loveless sexuality, the mere satisfaction of his physical needs and thus neither as profoundly menacing, nor as exciting, as she had hoped and feared. (42)

Her adventure with the guru is over and she goes back to live with her husband in Delhi. But the reunion is temporary. When Henry asks her to return to England along with him, she refuses to return. By her own choice, she continues to remain in India lonely and penniless. She is thrust back into a state of isolation and boredom. She sets out to live the life of a wandering aimless and lonely religious person without any destination and also without money. She leads a reckless life and is actuated by complex feelings of a search for a new life.

Most of Jhabvala’s characters in the short stories are involved in a process of feeling that can be least described as self-delusion. The narrator in “An Experience of India” completes one circle of her self-delusion. Her emotions are false and she is hardly aware of that. The seekers of the spiritual reality of India seem to be significant object of study in self-delusion. Shahane describes the condition of such seekers of spiritual reality.

While attempting to transcend their self with a view to becoming one with the Swamiji or the spirit of India, they seem to get bogged down into the network of cords, or mesh
of the ego, which is both narrow and hard. They are genuinely playing with false emotions thereby creating some times the comedy or at other times the tragedy of self-delusion. (152)

The India that the narrator experiences is neither intensely spiritual nor is it morally elevated. Because of the boredom of her routine life and her desire to have some different experiences the narrator seeks desperate refuge in the ashram, which promises peace but makes her life more complicated. Some of the stories of Jhabvala are extensive saga of the disintegrated women protagonists, who in spite of their unbridled freedom and economic affluence. They suffer from a malaise of death-in-life. Their rootlessness, self-hatred and inner-fragmentation have created a vacuum and they are in an urgent need of being possessed by some potent, charismatic and romantically enchanting male.

Yet another story titled “How I Became a Holy Mother” deals with a western narrator, Katie. She is twenty-three years old. She gives up all her materialistic comforts in the west and comes to India in search of spiritual comfort which she thinks would bring happiness to her. The story “How I Became a Holy Mother” was first published in The Encounter, a London Magazine and later included in the collection, How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories in 1976.
Katie is fed up with her life in London. She is disappointed with her boyfriends, her two unsuccessful marriages and also she does not show any special interest in her modeling job. At this juncture, she receives a letter from her girlfriend, Sophie who has gone to South India to find peace in an ashram there. The letter inspires Katie and draws in her the idea of joining an ashram in South India. Her intention to join the ashram is that she could meditate and find the solely needed solace which she could not get in the western life. Her life in India and her experience in the ashram is quite different from that of the narrator in the story “An Experience of India” though both come to India in search of comfort, especially spiritual.

Katie’s initial experiences in the ashram with the swamiji are dismal. When she goes to see Sophie in the ashram, she finds that Sophie had left the place. She does not like to stay long in such a place. “I didn’t like the bitchy atmosphere, and the swamiji was a big fraud, anyone could see that” (HIBHM 138). She, dissatisfied with the environment of the ashram decides to travel around India to find a better ashram and meet a few genuinely dedicated people. Soon she happens to arrive at such an ideal ashram. It is beautifully situated in the slopes of mountains in the lower ranges of the Himalayas. One of the reasons for which she likes the ashram more than the other is that the natural scenery around is very picturesque. Behind the ashram, there are other mountains stretching right up to the snow-covered peaks of the Himalayas and a river flows down on the
other side. Such beautiful scenes make her happy and urge her to stay there in the ashram. Not only is the environment surrounding the ashram but also the atmosphere inside the ashram is also pretty good. The head of the ashram is just called plainly “Master” and not referred to as others like Swamiji or Maharaj or Babaji or Maharishiji or Guruji. The master of the ashram seems to be one among the other inmates of the ashram.

The master seems to be a dynamic person with full of pep and go. Though he devotes himself to the way of renunciation, he is always lively and does not want anyone to have a dull moment and fall into depression. The master has Indian as well as foreign disciples. There are many junior swamis who are all young men, some of them are only young boys and they aspire to become Swamis. One such young disciple is Vishwa. Vishwa is with full of inspiration and he is the most advanced disciple and is next in line for full initiation. Katie and Vishwa become intimate and they discuss their past personal life. For Katie, everything in the ashram is well and good until the arrival of the highly sophisticated countess.

The countess is familiar to some of the disciples in the ashram. She had accompanied the Master on his foreign tour earlier. When Katie asks Vishwa about the countess, he refers to her as “a great spiritual lady”. She is also rich, aristocratic and a sensitive disciple of the Master. The countess shows special interest in Vishwa. She wants him to become a spiritual leader and spread the spiritual message among the people in the west. So the countess prepares him for
that purpose very sincerely. The countess becomes possessive of Vishwa which cannot be tolerated by Katie. As Katie has some experience in modeling, she is asked to teach Vishwa the western manners and the model of behaviour. It becomes a chance to develop the intimation between Katie and Vishwa. This intimacy grows very strong and deep and they become physically united too.

The most important day in the life of Vishwa, the final Renunciation and Initiation Ceremony occurs as a symbolic one. “It means he is dead to the world but resurrected to the spiritual life” (HIBHM 147). The countess dresses Vishwa not in the usual piece of orange but in a robe of white silk richly designed by her with an embroidered shawl and also with other accessories like beads, sandals and the deer skin, on which he has to sit on.

Katie is acute and dispassionate enough to observe the European enthusiasm for spiritual quest and the erotic impulse behind the European disciples’ submission to the guru.

They’re always keen on things like that - I mean, bowing down and touching feel. I don’t know what kick they get out of it, but they do […] when they stumble up again, there’s a sort of holy glow on their faces. (HIBHM 148).

After Vishwa has performed the great Yagna, the Master says that Vishwa and Katie have to be a couple and informs that Vishwa has to be the guru and Katie the Holy Mother. Katie has to embody the mother principle. The Master is genuinely
practical. The countess comes and complains of two foreign disciples, a boy and a
girl to the master. The master understands the feelings of the disciples and let
them go and take rest. Later he explains his early life in the world when he was a
married man. After the death of his wife of a miscarriage, he wandered aimlessly
for many years and finally decided to give up the world. But later he decided to
look for happiness elsewhere and help other people. All the three, the Master, the
Countess and Katie had a disappointing and unsuccessful married life. They all
long for true love and so want to have transformation of the soul.

Having accepted the Mother principle, Katie begins to feel transformed by
the experience. Even when one is in the Times Square in New York one could
visualize the mountains, the Himalayan peaks which embody the vision of a
higher world. Shahane comments on the story:

‘How I Became a Holy Mother’ is essentially a story of the
journey of the spirit – of Katie’s, the Master’s and Vishwa’s
deepest longings. It is intense yet relaxed in its portrayal of
this inward passion. Its development is from the negative to
the affirmative, from Katie’s mood of doubt and self-criticism
to her total acceptance of the role of the Holy Mother. (168)

At last Katie joins the tour and all the four – Vishwa, the Guru, Katie, the
mother-principle; Countess and the Master are off to Europe. The Countess really
likes it. It’s her life’s fulfillment. But for Vishwa and Katie it is just a job they
do. After attaining such transformation Katie is able to see the mountains, rivers and temples even when she is far away from it. Katie has attained the solace and happiness. The path chosen by the narrators in the stories like “An Experience of India”, “A Spiritual Call” and “How I Became a Holy Mother” lead them “towards the complete surrender of the individual personality, and the abandonment of all objectivity in self-subjugation to the guru” (Gooneratne 242).

Some of Jhabvala’s short stories focus on disillusionment of the western youth and their subsequent alienation towards oriental spirituality, specifically the Indian mysticism in their efforts to acquiesce meaningful existence. Isolation and nature are considered essential for good thoughts and meditation. All ashrams lay stress on meditation. Nature and meditation provide a distant and distinct vision of life. To look at anything thoroughly one must keep some distance from the mundane life of affinities. Living amidst nature provides better opportunity to view the life and its aspects. That is why the master, the senior swamiji in “How I Became a Holy Mother” prefers to stay in the mountainous regions. Katie is also attracted by the mystical experience that is provided by the mountains. This is the reason why Pritam in the story “In the Mountains” chooses to stay alone in the Himalayas. Such oneness with nature is expressed beautifully by William Wordsworth in his poem “Tables Turned”.

One impulse from a verbal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral will and of good,

Than all the sages can. (21-24)

Mountain peaks, particularly, Himalayas connote spiritual awakening and heightened knowledge. In some of Jhabvala’s stories, religious experience is associated with beauty, nature and withdrawal. Gurus may be bogus, but contemplative connection with nature is not. Jhabvala in her successful novel Heat and Dust too refers to the significance of mountains. Mountains give relief both from boredom and from the obsessional sexual yearning. Sucher states:

The world of patriarchal society, which confines and derogates women, the mountains represent particularly for the modern narrator, an escape route to a mythic, sibylline nurturance, which is associated with archetypal femaleness.

(123)

Jhabvala’s stories deal with the attempt of adjustment and the quest of solace and happiness. One such story in the collection How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories is “In the Mountains”. It is the study of the sensibility of a female protagonist who deserts her comfortable middle-class life for solitude and freedom and moves close to nature. Pritam is a middle-aged woman who is in her thirties. Bored with the mundane life, she tries to absorb the spirit of the hills and valleys and through which she strives to seek the fulfilment in her life.
Pritam is highly individualistic and desires to be lonely. She is very much different from the normal and ordinary Indian woman from a conventional middle-class family. According to her, the sole purpose of the ordinary people’s life is eating and making money. Pritam expresses the attitude of the people:

There are people in the world whose feelings are much stronger than other people’s. Of course they must suffer. If you are not satisfied only with eating and drinking but want something else […] you should see my family. They care for nothing - only physical things, only enjoyment.

(HIBHM 159)

Being a determined woman who insists on falsifying the old belief, Pritam without any hesitation chooses to isolate herself in a small lonely house in the mountain. She does not want to be caught in the clutches of anyone. She refuses to be a toy and does not like to behave as a puppet in the hands of others. But her conventional sympathetic mother is very much upset by her daughter’s individualism. She never likes her daughter leading an isolated life, away from the society. But she could not succeed in persuading Pritam to abandon her mountain aerie. The temperament of her mother is just in contrast to her. The mother is plump and pampered and loves pastries and fond of silk saris. But Pritam does not care for her physical and she never gives importance to her physical appearance “found herself sniffing in an attempt to identify the odour emanating from her.
Perhaps it was from Pritam’s clothes, which she probably did not change as frequently as was desirable” (HIBHM 154).

Pritam loves the hills and mountains. She thinks that it could give her peace and happiness rather than the members of her family. She even does not want her mother to stay back with her as she fears that her mother would disturb her self-chosen isolation. Even though Pritam wants to be away from the holds and domination of others, she considers Doctor Sahib, a companion in her mountain life. He is a tiny man, shabby and looks dirty. He is very fond of reading. He generally reads historical romances and believes very strongly in past births. This infirm old man also lives in the mountain far away from the crowded cities to experience the beauty and spirit of nature, through which he thinks he could attain spiritual elevation.

The arrival of Pritam’s mother brings some of their relatives to stay at her home for lunch on their way to Simla. To her mother’s surprise, Pritam prepares delicious food for the guests and attends to them cordially. Sarla and Bobby also accompany the guests. Sarla is Pritam’s cousin and Bobby is married to Sarla who is the former lover of Pritam. Pritam and Bobby have not met for eight years since Bobby has been married to Sarla. But they happen to meet again in a lonely path in the hill during their short stay on their way to Simla. She begins to experience new sensations in his presence. His desperate mood is little bit soothing because
of the pleasant and marvelous nature and soothing air. He says of his feeling and also feels jealous of Pritam as she is blessed to stay close with nature:

Priti, I think you’re really lucky to be living here; he said.

‘No one to bother you, no worries, and all this fantastic scenery.’ He turned his head again to admire it and made his eyes sparkle with appreciation. He also took a deep breath.

‘And such marvelous air’, he said. No wonder you keep fit and healthy. (HIBHM 165)

At the departure of Bobby and other relatives, Pritam throws three stones at the three cars to express her opposition to the instruments of modern civilization. She always wants to be close with nature. Shahane comments on the story as the “very sensitive story of two simple souls who were the children of nature, the creatures of the mountains, the offspring of the lonely valleys. They looked inwardly to their souls and outwardly to the clouds” (HIBHM 169). Thus isolation and nature provide solace and comfort to Pritam. She feels that she has attained spiritual enlightenment by her intimacy with nature along with her spiritual companion, Doctor Sahib. Mountain climbing is used as a symbol for spiritual freedom.

Indian philosophy and spirituality are explored to its fullest in the story “Two More under the India Sun” in the collection of stories How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories. In addition to the Indian philosophy and spirituality,
there is an attempt to understand and adopt the Indian way of life and thought in
the story. It portrays two English ladies, Margaret and Elizabeth. They both have
a great fascination towards India, Swamis, ashrams and specially the
contemplative India men. Margaret is much older than Elizabeth and the two are
also very different in character. Their temperament and attitudes are never the
same.

Margaret is a middle-aged widow who has been living in India for many
years. Elizabeth, her friend had been a school teacher in England for more than
thirty years. As she had married Raju, an Indian who had gone to England for
studying, she comes to India. Margaret’s life as a social worker becomes very
busy. Her house is always peopled with some guests like holy men from the
Himalayas, village welfare workers and organizers of conferences on spiritual
welfare who happen to stay at her house. There is a constant flow of visitors to
her house during winter. There is an elderly government officer who after his
retirement from his service has surrendered himself to a spiritual life and has gone
to live in the mountains at Almora. Everyone affectionately calls him Babaji.
During the cold winter he comes down to Delhi and lives with Margaret.
Margaret feels great comfort in the presence of her spiritual companion just as
Pritam feels it. “He had a soothing effect on her – indeed, on anyone with whom
he comes into contact, for he has cast away anger and all other bitter passions out
of his heart and consequently is always smiling and serene” (HIBHM 210).
When Margaret informs Elizabeth of a trip to Agra with the Tibetan children to see the Tajmahal, Elizabeth immediately refuses to accompany those orphans. This makes Margaret irritated and even angry. Margaret guesses that Elizabeth’s denial to visit Agra is that she would miss her husband, Raj if she joins the trip. Margaret also accuses Elizabeth that there is no understanding and trust between the couple. According to Margaret, “married life is nothing if it is not based on the twin rocks of trust and understanding” (HIBHM 211). Margaret is not only an energetic and active person who is involved in many activities but also is a generous soul. She is ever ready to keep her house open to any friend or acquaintance who comes there for shelter. Three years ago Margaret provided Elizabeth and Raju a whole suite as they were asked to vacate their rooms immediately over-night in order to accommodate the landlord’s relative.

Margaret often discusses Indian spirituality with her guests, holy men and Babaji, her spiritual companion. She discusses with Babaji the significance of the three modes of Hindu Salvation. She also speaks “on the relative merits of the three ways towards realization. They spoke the way of knowledge, the way of action, and that of love” (HIBHM 215). She also describes her experiences at Swami Vishwananda’s ashram to Babaji. She experiences peace and comfort in the company of Babaji. Finally, Margaret and Babaji both plan to accompany the Tibetan children during the Agra visit. Shahane comments on the story as: “‘Two more under the Indian Sun’ sensitively portrays the personal predicament of two
European women in India and their rather impulsive responses to their friends and associates and to their physical and spiritual environment” (175).

Thus Margaret, like Katie in “How I Became a Holy Mother” and Pritam in “In the Mountains” tries to seek peace in the company of a person who could provide them spiritual comfort amidst serene and lovely nature. Jhabvala is of the opinion that to stay and endure in India, one should have a mission in life and a determined cause and also should be patient, cheerful, unselfish and strong. As Margaret possesses all such qualities in her at times she feels proud and thinks that she is a committed person to Indian values and Indian civilization.

Jhabvala has tried to portray the hollowness and fakery of lives in the story, “The Temptress” from the collection of stories East into Upper East. The story deals about an old lady, Ma who is an ordinary Indian housewife but pretends to have some extra ordinary powers. With these powers she is able to draw the attention of others towards her. She is a fat, chatty sorceress in her 60’s. This story seems to be a sort of allegory about the seductive appeal of religious cults. Ma, in the beginning seems to be someone special and holy for Tammy and Minnie. They have picked out Ma to be their guru because they do not want the responsibility of thinking and deciding for themselves. Jhabvala must have purposefully named the central character as Ma, because Ma is a mother figure taken to extremes, someone who will listen and support one endlessly and smooth all the worrying thoughts out of the mind.
Ma is imported to New York by Minnie on her return to New York. Minnie informs everyone about Ma and she speaks of Ma, her friends long to see such a lady. Minnie is spell bound. “Minnie described how, when Ma had laid her hands on Minnie’s head, the effect had lingered for days, for weeks, and it was still there, she said” (EUE 138). All her friends want Ma to be brought to New York. Jhabvala has presented that many young people in this story seems to be starving for the spiritual grounding which their parents have discarded. Jhabvala tries to focus on the concept of spirituality versus lack of faith, worldly versus unworldly. When Minnie shares her exciting experience with Ma to her friend Tammy, “At that Tammy could not repress a cry: for it was exactly what she herself was always wishing for, to get out of this world into a completely other one” (EUE 138). Ma represents or pretends to represent the worldly and unworldly state. She makes use of the opportunity of those who seek something beyond themselves to her advantage.

Tammy and Minnie were room-mates in college. When Minnie happened to travel around India, she found Ma. But later it was Tammy who inherited Ma as she had inherited Ross. Tammy met Ross when she was 13 and that was ten years ago. Tammy, the passive female allows Ma to stay in her apartment as Ross. Very soon Ma becomes Bore to Minnie and wants to send back her to India. But Ma is not ready to come back to her home. Ma feels that she has to still enjoy a lot in her life like doing shopping, going to theater and enjoy flavours of ice-
creams and so she moves to Tammy’s apartment where she leads her life as she desires. Ma splashes herself with oils proceeds to take over the house, the kitchen and Ross. Most of the smells associated with Ma are to do with seductive qualities – oils, perfume and rich food. “[…] she looked like a hundred-year-old witch but like a temptress too, gleaming and glittering with oil and silk and gold” (EUE159).

Jhabvala’s Ma is rather the mother-woman who has no income, no permanent place and no significant meaning but her much vaunted power to soothe others. Ma is busy coaxing out of hiding the city’s vast, suppressed spiritual yearnings. Her neighbours unlatch their doors and pour out their hearts to her. Sales girls from the local discount story consult her between customers. Even doormen who are considered to be the most hardened of urban breeds give up their jobs to join the chanting. Ma tries to soothe them by dealing, “[…] with everyone in the manner of one used to hearing strange and even terrible things without letting herself be overwhelmed by them” (EUE 152).

Tammy in the story is presented as someone who cannot live in the present and face the reality and looking for someone else to take on the responsibility of her own life. “She seemed always to be straining upward, in the direction of something beyond the reach” (EUE 143). She wishes to get out of the world into a completely other one. In the beginning Tammy believes that Ma is a source of spiritual enlightenment. But gradually like Minnie she too understands that Ma is pretentious and is a failure with no special features as adorned by others. “[…] for
the most drastic cases she performed some circling motions with her arms and then cracked the knuckles of both hands against her temples” (EUE 153).

Therefore Tammy abruptly begins to abandon her. Thereafter she does not show any interest on Ma. She allows Ma to reside in her home but never meddles with her work. Tammy goes to school to take the classes and leaves the apartment to its own device. She ignores all sorts of people who come in with a belief to get spiritual comfort.

The people of New York have grasped at the easy security offered to them by the matriarchal figure, Ma. Ma makes use of the chance to build up a business for her own and starts to earn money from the people who come to meet her disasters. The faith of the westerners is turned as a business and Ross, who initially does not care for Ma gradually becomes her Business Manager. So when Tammy wants her to leave her apartment, Ma is least bothered and immediately make-up her mind to move to other place.

On her return from Copenhagen, Minnie brings in the Doktor who makes Tammy more enthusiastic. Tammy begins to accept Doktor as her spiritual guide. She wants to bring the Doktor to her apartment and so she wants Ma to clear out of the apartment. This states the impermanent temperament of Tammy. Tammy trusts him totally for her spiritual improvement. Doktor is a sort of a quasi guru who marries whoever follows him. He is another Charlatan. He makes use of Tammy for his own benefit. No one except Ross questions the Doktor. He is
Presented as the rival guru who piles on guilt and blames Tammy for everything, while still wanting to take possession of her apartment.

Both gurus of Tammy, Ma and Doktor are self-deluded fakes. The way the others are attracted to her and find comfort in her for awhile is a measure of the meaninglessness of their lives. The motive of the Doktor is to get settled in Jammy’s apartment. “Tammy too was under pressure, for it was past the date when the Doktor was due to have moved in” (EUE 156). But Tammy does not understand the real nature of the Doktor but her innocence makes her feel that he has some supreme power.

Guiding someone psychologically means taking care of them – caring for them. [...] He has this wonderful gift of being with you even when he’s not – like you think he’s busy with someone else? Like he might be with Minnie or someone for hours and you think you’ve been completely forgotten and then next thing you realize he’s never for a moment stopped thinking about you and knows exactly what’s going on inside you. (EUE 157)

Ma and the Doktor try to attract people and make them believe of nothing significant. Ma leaves the apartment of Tammy and moves to a new place has a group of people who come to her with a hope to get peace of mind and something more. Ross who does not like the arrival of the Doktor to Tammy’s apartment
moves to Ma’s new place. He prefers to tolerate Ma than the Doktor. Jhabvala pinpoints the wavering mentality of the western youth who in their materialistic world try to seek solace and comfort. As there is no strong emotional bond between one another in the western countries, they are ready to cling on towards someone whom they believe would be the source of comfort and inspiration.

In the lonely and frustrated state, one moves towards something or some person to hold them firmly to attain peace. But sometimes in the state of despair, some people keep themselves aloof and try to lead a life like a yogi. Such yogi-type characters are also presented effectively by Jhabvala in some of her stories. The yogi is traditional to Indian scene. But it is an example of the disinterested spiritual man. Haydne Moore Williams in his article “The Yogi and the Babbitt: Themes and Characters of the New India in the Novels of R. Prawer Jhabvala” states:

Hinduism traditionally recognizes four stages of human life: student, householder, hermit, ascetic. Ideally one moves from stage one to stage four. The good Hindu hopes to spend his last years when his family has grown up in some form of meditation and disinterested existence. (84-85)

Jhabvala characterizes one such old man who has become an ascetic in the story “Husband and Son” in the collection of stories East into Upper East. The story
deals with an isolated old man, Prakash, the husband of Vijay. Prakash being disillusioned with politics lives like a hermit on the roof of his own house.

The marriage of Vijay and Prakash was an arranged one and they live happily. While Prakash was studying at Cambridge he was a man of ideas and sometimes behaved cynical. Gradually he became deeply involved in the independence movement and spent several years in jail. After independence, he was elected to Parliament and given a post in the Cabinet. So the couple moved to one of the Former British residences in New Delhi. But the luxurious life led by the couple was short lived. Disgusted with the politics of power, Prakash resigned his post and all his honours. The couple moved from the British residence to the family house on the Jumna. In a depressed mood he gradually begins to give up all worldly pleasures. He even abstains himself from a physical union with his wife. He becomes an ascetic. He lives like a pauper, eating little and sleeping aloof in a servant’s cot on the upper floor.

Prakash becomes more and more eccentric. He cuts down his meals to once a day, consisting of a few chapattis and vegetables or a lentil dish. But Vijay could not follow it. She needs her regular meals with meat or fish. Vijay is frustrated on seeing the state of her husband. She could not avoid and isolate herself from all the worldly pleasures in the earlier days. Prakash often ridicules Vijay as she is always obsessed by three terrible problems like what to wear, where to go, and what to do. Only for certain period of time, under his influence,
she sacrifices her fine saris for the patriotic homespun cotton clothes. But soon she feels that such cotton clothes are very scratchy and coarse and so she starts to wear her imported silks with embroidered borders. But he remains the same in his dressing habit.

To her regret, he never again wore the suits he had brought from England, but she kept them hanging in her wardrobe – they were still hanging there, and she touched them sometimes stroking the sleeves of tweed and wool and sniffing at them for the last aroma of the English cigarettes he had chain-smoked. (EUE 118)

As Prakash is leading his life as a Sannyasi, there is an undertone of melancholy and feeling of loss and loneliness in Vijay. This leads her to befriend a young dance teacher, Ram whom she thinks to be her son and becomes possessive of him. Usually Vijay visits the old man at least twice daily to check upon him but when her bond with Ram becomes strong, she sometimes forgets to visit him. The old man looks calm and serene. “The old man sat silent and alone on the roof; he no longer came down, not even when Vijay, kept out late shopping with Ram, forgot to bring up his meal” (EUE 128).

Vijay is totally shattered when she hears a scandal that Ram has seduced a girl in the dance school. She is enraged and insults him. After Ram’s departure she becomes lonely and restless. She goes up to the roof to see her husband and
she turns to look after him. Prakash though does not express his desire, he has been longing for his wife’s love and care. When that has happened, he begins to sing once again blissfully.

India has been a land of attraction to many, both insiders and also outsiders because of its philosophical outlook and spiritual message to the world. Many westerners who have come to India before and after independence have engrossed themselves with various problems, which are universal. The only difference is the way in which they have assessed the problem and this differs from writer to writer depending upon their psychology and temperament.

Jhabvala opines that God seems to be more present in India but the fact is that the spirit is turned elsewhere. Nirupa Rani in her article “India in the Fiction of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala” asserts:

Her knowledge of God and miracles of God are mostly from newspaper and magazines. The messengers of God who convey the message of God are described as young, energetic and gay types of character with a charming smile and captivating looks and are eloquent speakers. We find people getting consolation in their presence rather than any spiritual benefit. (125)

Jhabvala in her stories like “The Old Lady” and “The Widow” portrays how Indians follow the Gurus and Swamijis to get consolation. They also accept
the spiritual aspect of the life. But in some stories like “A Spiritual Call” and “An Experience of India” she delineates Swamijis as cheats and fraud and they are not truly spiritual Gurus but isolated men of the society. Some hopeless and helpless western women come from a socio-cultural background where the life sustaining institutions like marriage, home and family have already died a natural death. They are in sole need to become some new entity and so willingly they merge their whole self in the renowned spiritual heritage of India. Such bond or their unification with their gurus, though it is spiritual or even physical, reaches so deep that even their filial ties go ineffective to draw them back to their self. Whether it is mystic religiosity or physical confession, it is explicit that the western disciples of these spiritual mentors relish their weird therapies at the cost of their self-laceration to regain and retain a sense of belongingness. Rishi Pal Singh in the article “Motifs of Piety and Profanity: A Critique of Guru Cult in the Novels of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala” comments on such solace seeking westerners:

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala has articulated these women protagonists going a whole cycle of self-realisation beginning from passionate sexual organs and culminating in highly mystic self-immersion, which obsesses them, to merge with their mentors. This, in reality is a saga of self-laceration of the devotees in their quest for transcendental essence of life. To reach the state of spiritual rejuvenation and self-realisation
piety or profanity are inadequate denomination to the physical
submission because guru leads towards a mystic realisation
beyond their corporeal existence. (90-91)

But this does not mean that what allured the westerners, the promise of spiritual
peace, does not exist in India. Jhabvala, thus reveals her consciousness about the
significance and consequence of the quest for the absolute. In her view, the
westerners seek Indian spirituality with the hope of finding a simpler and more
natural way of life. She believes that this quest must be undertaken under proper
guidance from sincere Sadhus and ideal Swamijis along with a complete
appreciation of the meaning and substance of Indian spirituality.