Chapter V

Summation

Being born a “displaced person”, and having survived the terrific holocaust, Jhabvala has undergone in consequence, triple displacement in life. Her sympathies lie with those who suffer the yoke of disinheritance. In this context Iyengar says that she is able “to feel the heartache at the heart of humanity” (461). The family and the refugees in it are the chief preoccupations of Jhabvala from the first to the last of her writings. Within the area she has chosen, she is able to present a world – view which is essentially tragic. Memories of her experience and those of others have gone into the making of her short stories.

The previous chapters have examined the short stories of Jhabvala as a criticism of modern times, focusing on the vision that evolves out of it. Pankaj Bhan in Ruth Jhabvala’s India remarks:

    Literary – historical backdrop helps us in assessing whether Ruth Jhabvala is essentially an ‘outsider’ trying to understand India and portraying the myriad aspects of its life in her works or an ‘insider’ who is part of the Indian reality and trying to come to terms with it through the literary medium at her disposal. (279)
This study does not focus on the controversies concerning her status as a writer that is whether she is an “inside-outsider” or “outside-insider”, whether she is an Indian or European writing about India. The study highlights Jhabvala’s rank as “a writer of genius” whose fiction presents deep insights into life.

The stories in the collections, Like Birds, Like Fishes and Other Stories, A Stronger Climate, How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories, East into Upper East: Plain Tales from New York and New Delhi are embodied with the experience of the prominent female characters. In the context of contemporary Indian society, woman struggles to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and the most important of all, as human being. This becomes Jhabvala’s major concern as a creative writer and this appears almost in all her important short stories.

The short stories are harmonious creations because of their coherence and logicality. In the collection of stories, Jhabvala is preoccupied with the problems of women either as wives or mothers or widows. Her sympathy for womenfolk and her high esteem towards womanhood find one of the best expressions in all the stories. Her stories deal purely with middle class women’s turmoil, convulsions, frustrations and also their silence and acceptance. The main themes that have found expression in the stories are inner conflict, complex relationship between man and woman, concept of marriage and sex, mother – daughter relationship and the role of spirituality in an individual’s life. The writer has
vividly portrayed what she has observed so that the readers, both occidental and oriental are able to visualize what she has painted by words. She portrays the female protagonist as torn between her old-fashioned life and her inner longings. The problem of identity, the conflict of being oneself and fitting a traditional role as a good wife or good mother occurs frequently in her writings.

In the chapter “Dissonance in Marital Life”, women’s positions in the life of the males and their efforts to break or assimilate the patriarchal norms have been analysed. The concept of marriage that is related to a delicate union of two different minds has been properly realized in traditional bound male dominated Indian families. A woman’s individual identity has not been positively and open-mindedly realized in her marriage. A woman has never been accepted as a full human being or an equal partner to man in marriage. She is taken for granted on number of fronts. This casual attitude causes her consistent suffering and miserable life.

Being a writer of domestic life preeminently, Jhabvala has presented the joys and sorrows, harmony and friction, fulfillment and frustration of domestic life. Marital dissonance with its clash of wills, personalities, temperaments and values is widely presented in her fictional world. The conflict between a growing sense of individualism and the orthodox tradition of a man-ridden Indian society is genuinely representative of the post-war phase of Indian society. In fact she has presented the conflict-torn Indian society and the position, the role and the status
of Indian wife who is struggling hard to realise her own identity. Jhabvala’s keen insight into woman’s heart enables her to explore the miserably confused psyche of this woman, who is trying to establish a harmony between the traditional values and modern revolutionary ideas. Shakuntala in “The Housewife”, the narrator in “Rose Petals” and Sofía in “Desecration” try to expose their desires. They try to fulfill their desires and also want to maintain the traditional values but all end up in vain.

The stories of Jhabvala deal with the wasteland condition of modern life. Oppression and betrayal rock violently the relationship between man and woman. Women feel caged in the male-dominated society, as Sophie in “Fidelity”. Too much of importance of a man’s existence in woman’s life makes all vulnerable to their whims and the woman’s compliance to man is misconstrued by them as total dependence on them. Jhabvala advocates that men are not the masters of the women but companions in life who cannot exist without each other and are equally dependent on each other for a complete and accomplished life.

In a “husband centered” society, the women have no standing. They are portrayed as passive creatures in the stories of Jhabvala. Her women are typical example of qualities which one would look for in a traditional Indian woman. The qualities are such as patience, forbearance and adherence to family. A married woman who is an object of silent suffering at times strives to seek personal gratification and self-fulfillment. They are certainly more aware of the injustice
done to them by men. But habit makes them a willing prisoner in this world of exploitation and injustice.

There are traditional Indian women, modern educated young Indian women and western women in the stories of Jhabvala. Of these different kinds of women some western women take cudgels against institutionalised marriage, harsh materialism and male-domination. India is their destination and once they are here after marriage, they too, like the Indian women, confront the male-supremacist society. Their ability to surmount the hurdles decides the course of their life and, what they find provides the answer to the puzzling problems of life.

A handful of the western women like Cathy in “A Young Couple” and Peggy in “The Aliens” are presented effectively by Jhabvala. By discriminately applying their knowledge of the past to the present situation, clear the air for them and affirm the possibilities of life for the readers. They are responsive to the virtues of humble Indian women, and the vast Indian sky, the sea and the mountain. The epiphanic moments in their lives creates an awareness of the possibilities of life. This affirmation of life, hence is quite relevant for “consciousness raising” among the marginalised women. The diseased relationship between a husband and a wife results in scenes of broken homes.

Through these stories Jhabvala depicts the psychological suffering of the frustrated housewives. The repressed and oppressed lives of the Indian married women in the society are brought to focus. They do not expect to live out their
lives in a state of romantic passion, they do hope and expect for affection and companionship. Their discontent with married life does not seem to be experienced as disillusioned with the institution, but rather only with a particular relationship. The aged mother in “The Old Lady” though does not have a happy married life, she insists her daughter to live with her husband and lead a happy life. This proves that the old lady has faith in marriage.

A wife may try to rebel as an individual but it gives her infinite pain to be away from home. So she prefers to suffer in silence even though she does not desire it. It is sufficed to state that courage and not escapism is that women of today requires. She should have the courage to uphold what is right for her and adhere to it with firm determination and tenacity. A headlong plunge into the social milieu with pertinacity can alone bring harmony and fulfillment in her life. Jhabvala has not tried to make her women characters stronger than they are in real life. Rather she has exposed their passivity, anxiety and confusion. Through these stories Jhabvala has moralised that marriage cannot bring happiness to both the spouses unless they surrender their ego and merge into each other.

The next chapter “Mothers and Widows” has analysed some of the stories of Jhabvala and makes an accurate study of the feelings and frustrations of female protagonists playing the role of mothers and widows. The desire and the expectation of an elderly mother are portrayed in “The Old Lady”. The mother is able to play the role of a grandmother rather successfully but she fails as a mother.
She is not able to convince her daughter who is deliberately in need of divorce for no reason. The dreams of an aged mother are projected in the stories “A Birthday in London” and “Husband and Son”. Both the stories revolve around a mother and son. The expectation, longing for true love and care and alienation are explicitly pictured by Jhabvala. There are many prominent mother characters starring her short stories. The mothers’ conscience is delved deep to lay thread bare their inner feelings and emotions.

The anguished mother in “A Summer by the Sea” rebels against her fixed role as a mother. The widowed mother flirts with other men in the presence of her daughter. Here concealed emotions are brought out to light. This enables the daughter to perceive her mother in a new light and thereby she is able to comprehend her mother’s feelings in its fullest sense. Like all mothers in a tradition-bound society, the mother of Pritam in “In the Mountains” worries about her young daughter who lives in the mountain isolated from the maddening crowd. She aspires to settle her daughter well under the guidance of the elders. She wants her to get married and lead a domestic life. The dreams and desires of an aged mother are projected in this story. Quite often the mother’s self as perceived by her child seems to be that of a happy and fortunate one. But the ideal self of the mother is one, which is a tortured soul and longs for unfulfilled love. The discrepancy between the real and ideal self of the mother results in becoming discontented and maladjusted. The mothers in Jhabvala’s stories experience
greater tension and anxiety as they could not lead a life as they aspire to live or lead a life as others expect them to live.

The mother in “Sixth Child” fits into the category of stereotyped mothers. The qualities like tenderness, fragility, love, charity, loyalty, submission, sacrifice, rearing and caring children are expected from a mother. She busies herself with feeding them, watching over them and making them happy. A woman is always perceived as a daughter or a wife or a mother but not as an individual with the desire of her own. The mothers in Jhabvala’s stories create sympathy in the minds of the readers. But the condition of widow with a child or childless in a post-independence India is highly pathetic. Jhabvala has portrayed skillfully that when one reads her stories will feel for such women and sympathize with their unacceptable destinies which are thrust on them. The ritual of Suttee or widow-burning which Edward Said included under “unfair male practices” was quite common in the pre and post independence India. The living widow was burned along with the corpse of her husband. The Indian widows were forced to consider this to be their bounden duty to their dead husband and to the society. Gradually the condition of the widows has improved from worse to bad. Though Suttee had been abolished, the widows are expected to adapt the assigned role. But when they do against it they are looked down. Durga, a young widow in “The Widow” desires to lead an independent life after the death of her aged husband but the relatives do not accept to respect her feelings.
The mothers, who are widows, are dependent emotionally and economically upon their sons or daughters. The widowed mothers in “A Loss of Faith” and “The Old Lady” surrender themselves totally and trust their children completely. As the society expects a widow to lead a humble and bare life it could not accept when a widow go beyond the societal norms as portrayed in the stories, “The Man with the Dog”, “A Summer by the Sea” and “Suffering Women”. The widows in these stories develop a relationship with other men which are not accepted by their own family members and the society too. It is not to fulfill their sexual desire they seek a partner but to have a companion at their ripen age. They expect and long to have true and secure love.

Thus the disharmony in the family life and the society leads the submissive wives, tolerant mothers and pathetic widows to go in search of peace in their lives. There arises then the logical need to examine the role of religion in the life of the Indian women. The chapter “Quest for Spirituality” has given a detailed account of this aspect. The goal of religion is redefined in the short stories of Jhabvala. Reaching out to the poor, the depraved, the disowned and the disinherited section of humanity stands highlighted as the goal.

The role of religion in the life of man cannot be disputed. Nations have distinguished themselves by being either secular or theoretic. The same is the case of individual and one finds various beliefs among them. Jhabvala through her stories advocates that only by giving, sympathising and sacrificing can mankind be
redeemed. Nature particularly plays a prominent role in spiritualising the inner feelings of a person such as Pritam in the story “In the Mountains”, gets solace only when she is close to nature. Many westerners are drawn towards India mainly because of the rich natural resources in India.

The expatriate women come to India with high romantic aspiration of attaining spiritual rejuvenation and divinity. These women, in spite of their unbridled freedom and economic affluence are suffering from a malaise of death-in-life. Their rootlessness, inner fragmentation and self hatred have created a vacum and they are in an urgent need of being possessed by some potent, charismatic and romantically enchanting male. The boredom of routine life and desperate refuge in ashram, which promise peace, make their life more complicated. The spiritual hunger and thirst of the youth and their perplexed condition are taken advantage of by some men who are more domineering and seem to be more charming than the ordinary men. These men exploit the situation to achieve fame and fulfillment of their personal desires as in Jhabvala’s stories “My First Marriage”, “A Spiritual Call”, “An Experience of India” and “Two more under the India Sun”. The holymen in their stories are not real sadhus but fake ones who move about disguised as spiritual gurus. In fact, they are the demon lovers who seduce young women.

Jhabvala is generally misunderstood for her attitude towards holymen. Paul Verghese, for instance, asserts that she brings in “the formula of yoga-spirituality-
“swami at work” and that her motive is “to attempt a satirical portrait of India […]” (33-34). But Jhabvala’s concern with the character of the holy men and sages has different purposes. In modern times, men are after lust and power. Passion for these has been substituted for the time-honoured values of love, sympathy and sacrifice. Naturally, with such changes of values, the place of the genuine master or guru has been usurped by the charlatan or the anti-hero. Jhabvala through her stories seems to emphasise the fact that the rich tradition of the guru has been abused.

Many facets of Indian life have been explored effectively by Jhabvala in her stories. India is a land of beliefs and faiths. Everything is not explained in terms of logic. Some things are beyond questioning as in the story, “My First Marriage”, M lives a life on his own terms. He is questioned neither by his first wife nor by his educated second wife. This emphasises on the faiths and the beliefs of the Indians. The ashrams of various ascetics and hermits and also the activities going on there are depicted. In spite of the foreign tours of the swamijis and also sometimes sex scandals about them, spirituality is not questioned. Spirituality is not only seeking peace through religion but also by following values and tradition one could attain spirituality.

India remains the hope of the westerners, who are caught in the hard grinding wheel of materialism. Sick with gross materialism, meaningless practice and dead conventions of the society, the westerners come to India with lots of
expectations. The rich cultural heritage of India, they expect, may provide an anchor to their restless spirit. So, with much hope young women like Daphne, Helga of “A Spiritual Call” and Katie of “How I Became a Holy Mother” is in India as they are fed up with their homeland and all the rest of it.

People from India go to America in search of freedom and money as the westerners come to India in search of the much needed solace and comfort for their tired spirit. Jhabvala reveals the truth that peace of mind cannot be acquired merely by drifting, without any purpose or inner discipline in the world. One cannot reap spiritual benefits by running hither and thither; one has to really travel when it is necessary, not drift. It is important for a person to sit and meditate and learn to combine reason and imagination, intellect and wisdom, tradition and modernity, responsibility and freedom, marriage and love, and reason and passion. The thoughtful, intelligent, sincere seekers in the stories of Jhabvala have glimpses of what they seek.

Jhabvala seems, by comparison, limited in scope and vision. She keeps as R.K. Narayan does to one locality; the locality is explicitly the real Delhi. By inventing his town of Malgudi, Narayan deliberately gave himself license to weave fantasies. By declaring the setting of her stories to be Delhi, Jhabvala manifests her desire to remain within the confines of naturalistic fiction. Narayan has experimented with his subject matter, shifting from tragic adultery and sexual passion generally to the fantastic comedy. Jhabvala returns repeatedly
to the same subjects, the joint-family, arranged marriages, romantic love affairs, children, parents, divorce and widows.

Jhabvala could also be compared with Jane Austen in the sense that both of their works are framed within the family circumstances. Jhabvala’s language has often been called simple, realistic, transparent and close to the speaking voice. She uses English the way an average middle class individual would use it. She adapts the technique of first person narrative and almost in all the stories the task of narration is assigned to a female character. Some of the short stories like “The Interview”, “My First Marriage”, “The Man with a Dog”, “An Experience of India” and “How I Became a Holy Mother” read like dramatic monologues.

The stories of Jhabvala abound with rich imagery. The images used enrich the narrative and add to the artistic beauty of the stories. Mirror image has been seen recurring in the stories of Jhabvala. This reveals the artist’s vision of life. Though it is used unassumingly, the mirror image emphasises the characters’ narcissistic concern, which is the worst kind of incarceration. Durga, the widow in “The Widow” as has already been dealt with in earlier chapters, is dissatisfied with her life. Having been married to an elderly merchant she has not had the opportunity or the privilege to have a child of her own. The appearance of Govind, the new tenant’s son, deepens her sorrow. She stares at herself in the mirror for a long time. She is terribly angry with her husband. She curses him for leaving her childless. The more she thinks of him the more she is filled with the
feeling of dislike against him. Gazing into the mirror, she thinks, “It was eighteen or nineteen years now since they had married her to him and if he had been capable, wouldn’t she have had a son like Govind […]” (LBLF 67). Her prolonged gaze at herself in the mirror indicates her deep sorrow and frustration.

The narrator of the story “Rose Petals” refers to her childhood habit of looking at herself first in the mirror as soon as she got up from her bed. She derived immense joy out of this habit then. The habit remains with her even as she grows up but her delight has vanished. She, as the narrator, describes her past interest and boredom at present. Her minister husband and her daughter Mira have plunged into politics and are always active preparing and delivering speeches. But the narrator is not able to share their interest. So she keeps herself out of their zone of activities. Consequently, she is left alone and therefore feels bored. Moreover, she is haunted by the fear of death due to prolonged loneliness and boredom. Boredom is a manifestation of mental and spiritual stagnation. She experiences a profound sense of ennui, which is her cage. The narrator of “Rose Petals”, the narrator of “On Bail” and Shakuntala in “The House wife” often gaze at their own image in the mirror and heaves sighs of dissatisfaction, boredom and loneliness.

The image of mirror embodies the theme of entrapment or “incarceration” which as Shepherd says is a consistent theme in Jhabvala’s fiction. He remarks:
Jhabvala’s fiction is a fiction of trapped people where even the most intelligent lack the power to do anything about it. Indeed the most intelligent people also fall prey to themselves – make mistakes or allow themselves to be driven by deep and powerful impulses they can neither control nor understand. (83)

The vision of Jhabvala encompasses good and evil in the world. Her stories suggest that only by loving the prodigals, the vagabonds and the criminals can the world be redeemed. The world contains in itself all opposites; heaven and hell are here; it only depends on the nature of the individual to find heaven in it. By providing the background for most of her writings, India symbolises all the contradictions and multiplicity that are there in the world.

It is usually thought that Jhabvala presents a distorted image of India to the western readers so as to instruct them to keep away from it. The surface meaning of some of the titles of her works like A Stronger Climate, Heat and Dust, A Backward Place seems to imply that she is India-baiter. But, contrary to this, India, in the fiction of Jhabvla, symbolises the paradox of life. It is as puzzling as life itself. The hot summer has its compensation in juicy fruits. The skyscape, landscape and seascape are forever ready to convey messages to those who can stop to listen. India, moreover, is a spring board for the artist to articulate the problems of life. When the background of the stories shifts to the west, from India
to New York, she still seeks only for the possibilities of life. Amidst moral decay of life, young women like Sophie of “Fidelity” possess the ability to love without expecting anything in return except love. When the image of the east and that of the west as projected in the stories of Jhabvala are analysed, it becomes obvious that India stands as a symbol of universal experience.

The characterisation is crafted with subtlety and complexity that it leads to a psycho analytical study. The stories can also be analysed in the post-colonial context. Jhabvala has made an indelible mark of her presence in most of her short stories. A separate research work may be carried on the autobiographical elements present in the stories. Jhabvala has depicted the pull between the East and the West so vividly that a research on this line will also prove fruitful.

Though Jhabvala writes for women, presents their problems, she cannot be categorised among feminist writers. Her works are not the strident and militant kind of feminism which sees the male as the only cause of all troubles. Rather her writings deal with the inner conflict of women in domestic sphere. Nowhere does Jhabvala encourage her female protagonists to rise in rebellion against the males in family matters, instead she wants to build a harmonious relationship between man and woman in a spirit of give-and-take, in a mood of compromise and reconciliation.

Being a postcolonial writer, Jhabvala could not accept the condition of the down-trodden female in India. Even though she does not offer any remedy apart
from fighting against the ignorance and submissiveness of the women, she has
done far more than other writers of her period to enlighten the occidental reader
about the silent suffering of the women in India. She advocates these problems in
her artistically written, profound and strongly humane stories. Jhabvala’s vision
of India, especially as portrayed in the stories of nineteen sixties has been coloured
to a certain extent by her western background and to the class of society to which
she has belonged through her marriage. Comprehensive and provocative
collections of short stories prove Jhabvala’s great skill as a writer of unparalleled
grace, insight and emotional power.