Chapter II

Dissonance in Marital Life

Jhabvala’s writings show her awareness of the variety and complexity of the post-independent Indian society. Her basic literary endeavour is to portray the human portent of the society which is caught in the conflict of a change from tradition to modernity. She has written mainly about the middle class Indian life which she had an opportunity to observe from close quarters. This provided her with the raw materials for most of her fictions.

The incongruities of human characters and situation are depicted excellently by the writer. These incongruities have social, familial and cultural implications. Most of Jhabvala’s stories usually centre on the lives of women. The women characters in her stories are not presented as classical heroines, absolute in their strength or devoid of human limitation. They are all ordinary beings with normal human limitations. The economic hardships and social constraints they encounter are quite varied. The problems faced by the women in her stories are mostly emotional, cultural, sexual, artistic and those arising from their pursuits of higher achievement.

Jhabvala tries to lend complexities to her characters and presents them in the context of human struggle. She explores several aspects of womanhood and discusses about the institution of marriage in India in which women usually seek
anchorage. This chapter “Dissonance in Marital Life” tries to elicit the problems of young women who are caught trapped between the traditional and moral values that exist in the culture-bound society. The writer explores that these young women with the false pretensions to independence and modernism are not able to grow out of their mental servitude. Their attitudes, sentiments and mental processes are controlled by the societal norms in which family bonds are dominating and parental affection obviously possessive.

The fundamental relationship between man and woman is disintegrated mainly because of misunderstanding and betrayal. Because of dissonance of this relationship, family is wrecked. This becomes one of the major themes in the stories of Jhabvala. Vasant A. Shahane in *Ruth Prawer Jhabvala* states:

The major themes in Jhabvala’s fiction are ‘East-West Encounter’ and ‘marital dissonance’ which are mutually linked and interlinked in their negative context. In the positive context these may be described as fruitful and happy relationships between East and West culminating in marital harmony and joy. Jhabvala portrays both these aspects, but the elements of encounter and dissonance dominate her world. (27)

Disharmony in modern life has struck at the very root of the family relationship. Marriage is a sacred bond that brings people together into a harmonious joyful
union. But sometimes it proves to be an impediment to happiness of the individual concerned and because of it people move apart. All the disintegration and conflict arise out of caste, communal, class and racial differences. This sort of discrimination could be overcome in the family if both partners have involved love for each other but it rarely happens.

Jhabvala clearly pinpoints through her stories that family suffers the onslaught both from within and from without. The main forces that cause disintegration from within the family are the search for the gratification of individual desires, incompatibility between husband and wife, unequal marriages, economic inequality and above all domination of one over the other, usually the male domination and sometimes female domination too. Yasmine Gooneratne in her work, *Silence, Exile and Cunning: The Fiction of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala* comments as, “Her characters exist in the shadow or the aftermath of great events, and her attention is held by their lives and not by the events themselves.” (89)

The young women portrayed by Jhabvala, because of education and the influence of modern views become self-willed and assertive. They are also caught in the conflict between responsibility to themselves and conformity to the traditional role of wife. It is their adaptation of their own requirements to the demands of the prevailing patriarchal society that determines the focus. Of this Haydn Moore Williams states:
Jhabvala’s novelistic concern is with the difficulties of young married couples either within, or recently escaped from the cocoon of the joint family, with the problem of the so-called ‘backwardness’ in India, and with a set of conflicts generating considerable emotional heat; the conflict between traditional Hinduism and modern western ideas, the conflict within Indian society of spiritual and material aspirations, the more universal conflict of children and parents, husband and wife.

(11)

Jhabvala usually focuses on one family. She explores the problems that inevitably precipitate the conflict between the liberated younger people and the older orthodox members of the family. Some of the Indian women in her stories have undergone the impact of the Western culture. Through their education they are made aware of their individuality. They are attracted towards new ideas, tastes and manners which they try to ape just because they find them novel and attractive. But they are held back by the dictates of their parents or husbands. Though they do not like such dictates, they have been taught in their bringing up to seek fulfillment in their duty to their husbands and to accept no man’s love apart from their husband’s. In case they cannot for some particular reason abide by their commitment to their husbands, they must seek fulfillment in spiritualizing or sublimating their feelings.
The first story, “The Old Lady” in the collection Like Birds, Like Fishes and Other Stories deals with the young daughter, Lelia who insistence on a divorce from her husband, Krishna, for no particular reason. She thinks that divorce is a natural thing in an enlightened society. She wants to seek liberation from the ties of marriage. She involves herself in the activities of clubs and parties. Being, a modern woman she comes into conflict with her mother who has been trained to be a man’s woman. The old lady, as all mothers in the world, wants her daughter to lead a happy and contented life with her husband and her child. She knows very well that her daughter’s choice is wrong but she is helpless and unable to do anything for the betterment of her daughter.

Jhabvala in “The Old Lady” has brought to light the contrast between two attitudes of the marriage. The traditional customs are represented by the old woman and the pseudo culture is symbolized by the daughter, Lelia. The character of the mother as a wife is also brought to light in this story. When the old lady’s whole family, her two sons, Satish and Bobo, the daughter Lelia and her son-in-law, Krishna and her little cute granddaughter, Munni are present around the dining table, she thinks of her past unhappy days with her husband:

She remembered so many meals in the room round this table; her husband stern and domineering like Satish, her children tense with conflict. And she herself full of unhappiness,
because she did not know what to do or what to say.

(LBLF 14)

After her marriage, the old lady was suppressed and dominated all along her life by her husband and later by her elder son, Satish. He is also stern and stiff like his father. “Allow me, son, she said, her hands shaking a little as she piled food on to his plate, it is my pleasure.” (LBLF13) Satish was so much like his father that she even felt towards him as she used to feel towards her husband. She sometimes feels that she had neglected some part of her duty.

When problem arises, the mother turns out to be an escapist seeking refuge in a swamiji to whom she was introduced by her husband when he was alive. When Lelia’s problem is discussed by all her family members including Lelia’s husband, she becomes helpless as she could not change the opinion of her daughter in getting divorce from her husband. She swiftly goes up to her room and sits in front of the little table with the image of Vishnu and the photograph of her guru. She tries to escape from reality as she could not express her opinion which would not be accepted even by her own children. Though she knows very well that her marriage life did not bring her any sort of happiness and fulfillment she insists her daughter to accept her life as it is.

Jhabvala has brought in the two contrasting attitudes of marriage. The traditional customs are represented by the old woman and the pseudo modern culture is symbolized by Lelia. Lelia is on wrecking her marriage just because
divorce has become fashionable in Europe. When her mother advises her, she
considers that her mother is old-fashioned. She feels of her mother as:

‘Mother doesn’t understand’, Lelia at last said, ‘she still
thinks that marriage bond is sacred’; and she made a school
girl face of distaste to show how completely she dissociated
herself from such an attitude. (LBLF19)

The mother is caught trapped in the social institution of marriage. She is not able
to overcome the societal imperatives that constrain her. She is of the strong belief
that women in India are not supposed to talk about divorce but for Lelia’s divorce
is natural thing in an enlightened society. Ramlal Agarwal in his Ruth Prawer
Jhabvala: A Study of Her Fiction states:

The story becomes poignant because it brings into focus the
old woman’s predicament. She knows that her daughter is
wrong and she would come to grief. She wants to save her
but finds herself unable to do so. (82)

Even though the mother herself, did not have a happy married life, the mother
leads a conventional life, accepting calmly the existing social norms, she expects
her daughter also to fall in line with the tradition.

Jhabvala is predominantly and explicitly concerned with the suppressed life
of Indian women. She focuses the clash between their old-fashioned lives and
their deprived inner longings. Indian women, in Jhabvala’s stories are described
as good-looking people but far more she portrays them as beautiful, mysterious, passionate and a jewel of their families. Belonging mainly to the post-colonial urban Indian middle class, the protagonists in her stories search for their identities. Women with artistic aspiration also suffer. They have to strive hard to realize, develop and bring to fruition their artistic talent.

The short story “The House Wife” in How I Became a Holy Mother, deals with the most moving exploration of the theme of artistic aspirations of the protagonist. It is discreetly embedded in a domestic drama of the middle class marital infidelity. Shakuntala, the heroine of “The House Wife”, is one such victim. She is a devoted wife, good mother and loving grandmother. She is apparently a housewife married to a prosaic man looking after a middle class household. She has a daughter, Manju, who is already married and has a small baby, Baba. Her affections have been equally shared among her husband, her daughter, Manju and her young grandchild.

Shakuntala embodies the motif of musical passion. Her passion for music conflicts with her household duties as a wife, mother and grandmother. In the beginning stage, she manages to avoid or at times to overcome the conflict between her love for music and her assigned duties. She tries to do justice to both of her roles as a housewife and also as a learner of music.

She had her music lesson very early in the morning before anyone else was awake. She had it up on the roof of the
house so no one was disturbed. By the time the others were up, she had already cooked the morning meal and was supervising the cleaning of the house. She spent the rest of the day in seeing to the family and doing whatever had to be done, so no one could say that her music in any way interfered with her household duties. (HIBHM 88)

At times Shakuntala feels guilty because all at home including her husband, daughter and even her little grandson are not interested in her music lessons but allow her to learn music and sing as it gives her pleasure. Her state of mind is explicitly presented:

[…] She loved all of them, but she could not deny to herself that her singing meant even more to her than her feelings as wife and mother and grandmother. She was unable to explain this; she tries not to think of it. (HIBHM 88)

Thus Shakuntala struggles to live two lives. The one is an outer one a comfortable but dull one. The next is a realistic inner life in which she is an ardent devotee of art.

Phuphiji, an old aunt of Shakuntala’s husband acts as a surrogate mother-in-law. She represents the society. She voices forth her view that singing in public is disreputable. She vehemently hints that “it wasn’t seemly for a housewife, a matron like Shakuntala, to take singing lessons” (88). In the
conventional Indian society, as a married woman, she is not able to integrate her artistic desire of learning and practising music in the domestic affairs. Her loyalty is tested. Sucher in his The Fiction of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala: The Politics of Passion states that, “Shakuntala’s music is not purely abstract but identified with her singing teacher. So the fascinations of art are complicated by the fascinations of love” (70).

With music, Shakuntala lives in a place where she feels herself most truly and most deeply. But she has to suppress her desire in order to satisfy the demands of the members of her family. The people at home, whom she loves most and for whom, she sacrifices all her time to do the needful for them do not encourage or even share her interest in music.

 […] But it was true that with her music she lived in a region where she felt most truly, most deeply herself. No, not herself, something more and higher than that. By contrast with her singing, the rest of her day, in deed of her life, seemed insignificant. (HIBHM 88)

Shakuntala’s meeting the music teacher brings a tremendous twist in her domestic life. This different experience initiates new vistas for her soul. Shakuntala’s restless attitude after visiting the music teacher in his house is immediately noticed by Phuphiji. The old woman follows Shakuntala everywhere. She goes nagging at her, complaining that Shakuntala has failed to attend her household duties.
“She continued to follow her to circle her, to fix her with her bright old eyes” (HIBHM 90). Manju also notices a difference and distraction in her mother. At one point, Shakuntala’s passion for music dominates the interfering aunt, mercenary daughter and also the destined duties of a housewife. She is greatly pleased when her music teacher suggests that she may give a public performance. This kindles a sensitive chord in her being. She longs to give another dimension to her singing by performing and exhibiting her talents before strangers. She is triumphant with joy. But she cannot accept it immediately and enjoy it.

But she also knew it was not to be thought of. She was a housewife from a fine respectable middle class family people life her didn’t sing in public. It would be an outrage to her husband, to Phuphiji, to (her daughter) Manju’s husband and Manju’s in-laws. Even little Baba would be shocked, he wouldn’t know what to think if he saw his granny singing before a lot of strangers. (HIBHM 94)

The two lives of Shakuntala, a housewife and a singer come into conflict with each other. Her admiration for music and admiration for her music teacher become confusingly intermixed. But the music teacher becomes impatient with her as she refuses to sing in public. So gradually he seems to lose interest in her singing. Sometimes he even walks out before she has finished singing. She cannot accept the negligent attitude of her master. Shahane in his book Ruth
Prawer Jhabvala states the mentality of Shakuntala as, “Shakuntala involuntarily follows the dictates of her spirit, her longings for music and her involvement with the teacher’s soul” (142). Finally she surrenders herself totally to him, to music and the musician.

Shakuntala in “The Housewife” transforms her tradition-bound self. She is united in body and spirit with art, life and the person who embodies this harmony. Nobody at her home accepts and appreciates her artistic talents. Added to it, Phuphiji always complains about her. Manju never shares her mother’s interest in music. Whenever she goes along with Shakuntala for concerts, she feels much bored. Shakuntala’s husband, who is a contractor, provides her with all the material needs. He buys her a pair of ear rings, “24 carat gold set with rubies and pearls” (94). Though her husband satisfies all her material comforts, he fails to understand and to recognise her desire for singing which would give her real comfort. Because of lack of participation by the members of her family in her interest, she feels alienated. So she easily falls as a prey to the music teacher whom she believes to have real concern for her and her talents in music. But the music teacher takes advantage over her and exploits her love of music to satisfy his own brutal sexual desire.

Thus in this story Jhabvala deals with the artist’s alternating joy and agony as inspiration greets and deserts her. When Shakuntala evades the conventional role of a housewife in the patriarchal society and gives importance to her
individual commitment to art, she has defaced herself. Consequently the harmony of her married life is lost. Woman in the patriarchal society is expected to be a good wife and responsible mother who should carefully uphold the status of the family. The woman who internalizes the patriarchal code and lives as a submissive male-identified being is described as good by the society. On the contrary, any woman who rebels or goes against the societal and patriarchal norms is dubbed bad, unchaste and impure. Jhabvala makes an attempt to save the traditional woman, who has turned out to be variable dual characters forced by the circumstances. Her personal choices and preferences are kept, as exclusive secrets of herself as in Shakuntala in “The Housewife”. Shakuntala is contented in the first half of the story. She allows her personal aspiration to be complementary to her role as a housewife. No problem arises when they remain on parallel lines. But once when they conflict with each other or dominate one another, the problem begins.

In “Lekha” Jhabvala focuses her attention on extra-marital love against the background of contemporary Indian society. Some of her stories record the problems arising out of settled marriages and unhappy married life, which often result in frustration or extra-marital love or sex. The story “Lekha” is a sensitive exploration of adolescent life of a nervous and nervy girl of twenty. She is married to an official in the Ministry of Valuation in Delhi. Her surplus age of
sentimentality is reflected in her life style. She is not modern. She does not enjoy the dinner parties and does not keep the house in style.

The narrator of the story, an Indian seems to be different from Lekha. She is the wife of an official where Lekha’s husband is the head of the department. The narrator prides herself on her nice home, modern ways and ability to get on with the wives of other officials. In course of time, Lekha develops friendship with the narrator and visits only her home and no one else’s home. It is only there that Lekha meets Govind, the narrator’s “never-do-well” brother-in-law. As Lekha could not get her expected love from her husband, she shamelessly engages in a love affair with Govind. On the contrary, the narrator is perfectly satisfied with her way of life and her own personality. The emptiness of both is only unconsciously revealed when Lekha’s passionate love affair with Govind, the narrator’s bohemian brother-in-law, puts these complacent at risk:

I have been married now for ten years and I am fond of my husband and I have had three children by him, but we have always used restraint in our behavior together. I pressed my face into my pillow and suddenly I began to cry […] very bitterly. (LBLF 166)

When Lekha confides her illicit affair to the narrator, the latter is stunned. The narrator tries to bring the girl to her senses. When the narrator tells of her irresponsible idle brother-in-law, Lekha does not care to listen to her. But in the
romantic tone, Lekha whispers, “you don’t know what happiness he gives me, what paradise he has made for me” (167). The narrator does not lose her hopes. She tries to make Lekha understand the duty of a wife and convinces Lekha saying of Lekha’s husband as a good, kind and an excellent man. But Lekha pours out her emotions:

    But being good and kind is so little – ‘it is nothing by being only good and kind you can’t touch another person’s soul. I was not alive before,’ she said and turned to look at me with her big burning eyes. (LBLF 168)

Lekha begins to avoid the narrator. She does not like her referring Govind as a worthless loafer. When Govind has gone to Bombay on some film work, he does not have any contact with Lekha. So there occurs a drift between Lekha and Govind. Gradually Lekha has nothing to do with the narrator anymore and so she takes up friendship with the wife of another official, Mrs. Nayyar, whom she has formerly scorned. However, Govind has kindled the spark in her and makes her realize the transforming power of love, Lekha returns to the fold of her husband for security and respectability. Though Lekha does not get her expected love, she decides to lead the assigned role of a wife in the culture-bound story.

    Jhabvala’s delineation of Lekha and Shakuntala in “The Housewife” is quite different. These two stories imply a change in perspective and valuation of life. Shahane remarks, “While Shakuntala courageously runs away from her home
to quench her soul, Lekha withdraws to her home-bred fancies despite realizing the soul-satisfying qualities of her lover” (144).

Jhabvala’s another story “The Suffering Women” brings out the predicament of modern urbanized Indian wife. The story focuses on two film actresses, Anjana and Sultana. As years passed away Anjana has taken retirement from film line and is living with her daughter Kiku in a comfortable flat. Sultana is still working to meet her expenditure as she is extravagant by nature and so needs more money to spend.

Anjana and Sultana were friends as well as professional rivals in their young days. They both loved one person. But finally Anjana got married to him which ultimately made Sultana very furious. But later on, Sultana reconciled to the fact because the marriage of Anjana did not prove to be a happy one as her husband could never accept her, as he belonged to, “an old Lucknow family claiming descent from courtiers, while Anjana’s mother and grandmother (like Sultana’s) had been dancing girls” (HIBHM 109).

The pathetic situation in the life of Anjana is that she is sexually exploited and made pregnant. But she is never accepted emotionally by her husband. Though they are bond together in marriage, the husband never accepts her in spite of all her love and devotion:

He could not forget his fall, and she too had become deeply imbued with feelings of guilt. She did all she could to make
it up to him, keeping him in the luxury that he loved and
pampering him in all his desires and manifold tastes. Nothing
did any good […] (HIBHM 109)

Housewives either go mad or have nightmares for various reasons. Anjana
happens to see a woman in the nursing-home opposite to her house. Anjana sees
her for the woman had been there since the hospital was opened some five years
ago. It is a private nursing-home. Some of the patients are permanent inmates.
Anjana thinks that these permanent inmates have been kept there by rich relatives
unwilling to have them at home. One among them is a woman:

At first Anjana had tried to make friendly overtures to her but
when she got no response at all, when the woman had simply
gone on staring in the same blank way, Anjana had realized
that she was not right in her mind. (HIBHM 110)

Later on, once more, from her bedroom window, Anjana gets a glimpse of the
miseries of human life. Then she begins to speculate about what that woman
might have been:

She looked like a good housewife, enjoying a little respite
from her duties after the day’s chores. Probably she had been
a good housewife – before she couldn’t carry on any longer
and her relatives had to bring her here. Anjana understood
how this could happen. (HIBHM 118)
Housewives thus have a difficult time in life. Suppression of their individuality sometimes leads to mental depression.

The problems of marital discord are portrayed effectively in Jhabvala’s writings. Her writings are concerned with the theme of loneliness and neurosis. Most of her women characters are in quest for better partners, searching their heart’s desires and waiting for their desires to be fulfilled. The story "Desecration" in the same collection, How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories depicts the personal predicaments of Sofia, the wife of the Raja Sahib of Mohabhatpur. Sofia, the protagonist of the story, is thirty years younger than the Raja Sahib, her husband. Both of them live in isolation in a lonely palatial house. Sofia is an educated Muslim and Raja Sahib is an aristocratic Hindu land owner and amateur playwright. Sofia is a very sensitive woman. She is partly a Muslim and perhaps an Afghan. She occasionally suffers from nervous breakdown and also has heart problem. Because of these ailments Raja Sahib takes care of her and he is also deeply devoted to her. Sometimes she suffers from nervous prostrations, “At such times the Raja Sahib sat by her bedside in a darkened room. If necessary, he stayed awake all night and held her hand” (HIBHM 252). Though her husband attends to her affectionately it does not matter to her.

Sometimes both the husband and wife enjoy themselves reading the verse dramas written in English during their midnight dinners on the terrace. Even though they have such happy occasions, there is a great gulf between the couple.
Neither his affection nor her sensitivity could make up this cleavage. Sucher Laurie states the gap as, “[...] the gap between innocence and experience, between the ideal and the profane between ‘Feminine wisdom’ and ‘Masculine knowledge’” (80). Boredom and loneliness make Sofia desperate. Her husband provides her with everything she requires in life but not the sexual pleasures she desires. This leads to a violent explosion and finally to the calamity of her peaceful life. Though aware of the role of a married woman in the patriarchal society soon Sofia finds herself trapped gradually in the power of a sex-maniac.

Sofia is a pleasure seeking girl. She usually gets excited to attend parties with the grand dinner accompanied by the musical entertainment. At one such party hosted by Sofia and her husband, she happens to meet Bakhtawar Singh, the Superintendent of Police. His handsome look, his great courage and love of music attract her. Gradually she develops an affair with him. As Shakuntala in “The Housewife” is attracted by her music teacher, Sofia is also fascinated by Bakhtawar Singh because of the love for music. In reality Bakhtawar Singh is very much fond of woman and he easily finds a mistress for him quickly wherever he goes on duty.

Like the story “The Housewife”, “Desecration” also probes both the marriage and the adulterous affairs that disturb and destroy the life of the protagonist. Sofia falls as a prey to Bakhtawar Singh. Though she meets him first at a party, she then starts meeting him in lonely places. She usually meets him in
an unfrequented hotel room. Sofía’s pursuit of sexual gratification leads her to madness. The feeling of loneliness and boredom lead her to violate the social code. Being the wife of the highborn aristocrat in the village, every movement of her is observed and scrutinized. The relationship between Sofía and her husband is not that good. The distance of understanding between her and her adoring husband is too long. She is always considered the innocent child-bride by her husband. He never tries to understand or consider Sofía’s feelings. The Raja Sahib only half-heartedly wishes to know what Sofía is thinking. His real intention is to conceal her faults and foibles. Such emotional distance of her husband is variously presented both as a defect and as a good quality by Sofía herself.

Sofía’s passion marks the progress of her tragedy. She is rather very curious about the Superintendent of Police for all his abilities. But the affair the Superintendent has with Sofía is quite something different and unusual:

Although he had had many women, they had mostly been prostitutes and singers. Sometimes he had had affairs with the wives of other Police Officers, but these too had been rather coarse, uneducated women. Sofía was his first girl of good family. Her refinement intrigued him. He loved watching her dress, brush her hair, treat her skin with lotions. He liked to watch her eat. (HIBHM 259)
Such affair between a rather coarse man and a very refined woman smacks of the strange ways of love. Sofia’s visits to the town, in order to meet Bakhtawar Singh become frequent. In turn he is surprised and also puzzled by her adoration for him. In course of time, Sofia becomes a marginal and sacrificeable individual – a whore. The Superintendent of Police also treats her as a prostitute and gradually she is also seen as one by the villagers.

When Sofia comes to know about the crude and arrogant nature of Bakhtawar Singh, she could not tolerate the reality and so finally commits suicide in the desolate hotel room. Sucher comments on Sofia’s pathetic plight:

Her tragedy unfolds on two fronts: On a personal level, she is degraded – ‘desecrated’ by her lover. In relation to the village, she is ‘ruined’ and cast out. Having crossed over into ground that is taboo to women – the active pursuit of sexual experience – she is no longer entitled to full humanity. She becomes virtually a whore. Her suicide is a conventional response to the ‘shame’ of her fall. (84)

Sofia being a sensitive woman is afraid of her husband of whom it is said that he never forgives people who commit mistakes. So she feels guilty of her affair with the Superintendent. At the same time, she cannot resist Bakhtwar Singh, though he insults her quite often. Thus under the power of the forces that she cannot control her passion finally leads to her destruction. She is further more agitated
when she comes to realise that her husband, whom she has been deceiving is leading his life in his private hell of undisclosed sickness. The sexual rekindling of young and cloistered Sofia ultimately leads her to commit suicide.

Jhabvala in “Desecration” mainly concentrates on Sofia’s growing awareness of her inner contradictions which eventually become too unbearable to live with. She is noted for her sense of nuance, emotional delicacy and sympathetic sensitivity. She always tries to explore particular individual’s relationship with the husband and other people with whom she is involved. This story “Desecration” is about alienation, the failure of communication, impossibility of fulfillment.

The injustices to the down-trodden females are depicted obviously in Jhabvala’s writings. She portrays the conflict of the traditional married woman as torn between the assigned domestic roles of her life and her inner longings. Her stories clearly disclose the piteous state of women in society in which they have no control over their destiny. They are represented merely as objects of men. They are not treated as human beings with personal likes and dislikes, but as a part of men’s possessions. Jhabvala’s story, “In a Great Man’s House” from How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories is the finest example of women’s condition as men’s, particularly their husbands’ possession. Like the story “Desecration”, this story, “In a Great Man’s House” also analyses the desire in
women who have been isolated from the world by marriage. Jhabvala describes in an effective manner, the complex web of human relationship.

Anne Z. Mickelson in *Researching out: Sensitivity and Order in Recent American Fiction by Women* presents a vivid picture of the tangles of attitudes that has encircled the social thinking about woman. Mickelson refers:

She (woman) has been regarded as inferior, yet somehow meant to be man’s spiritual guide; she is passive, but inclined to mysterious activity during certain phases of the moon; intuitive, but lacking the practical sense to select the correct detergent for her washing machine; biologically weak; yet able to lift heavy bags of groceries and husky children; incapable of logic; but full of cunning arguments; sexually pure if watched, uncontrollably sensual if not curbed; too feather-brained to create a work of art; psychologically subject to breakdown if faced with business or professional competition; yet designed to bear, nurture children, act as her husband’s helpmate, help him fulfill his potential and resign herself to her ‘limitations’. The result is a polarization of roles, with woman’s role as wife / mother defined as inferior and man’s role as economic provider / domestic protector defined as superior. (4-5)
Mickelson’s observation is applicable to Hamida, the protagonist of the story “In a Great Man’s House” who is a traditional Indian woman. Hamida is all powerful among her family members but becomes powerless and voiceless at her husband’s home. As she is Khan Sahib’s wife, she becomes powerful and is welcomed by her relatives. This honourable reception is accorded to her because she is the wealthiest member of her family and also the one with the highest social status.

Khan Sahib is a well-known musician. He has achieved a great name and fame. Even the people from abroad come to seek his advice and guidance. He is proud of his popularity and status. Being such a great man, his treatment of his wife, Hamida is somewhat different. He always wants his wife to abide by his orders. She has to rub his tired limbs with oil and scents whenever he wants her to do so. “When she had desperately wanted something, he had lain like that, mountainously on his bed. He said, “Massage my legs” (HIBHM 239). Though Hamida leads a luxuries life, she has to depend on Khan Sahib for the fulfillment of her desires.

Jhabvala depicts Khan Sahib as the provider and the head of the family. He thinks that decision making is his birth right alone. He completely ignores his wife taking decision even in her life. He also never allows her to enter his world. Even though Hamida has got some freedom to use his riches, she has to get his permission to make use of it that makes her dependent on him. Hamida receives
an invitation to attend her niece’s wedding. Roxana, Hamida’s sister is economically backward who is also married to a musician working in All India Radio. But he is not as successful as Khan Sahib in making his fortune. Roxana with her children arrives at Hamida’s house to discuss their date of departure to attend the marriage. But as the wedding date clashes with the date of an All-India Music-Conference, Khan Sahib does not permit Hamida to attend the wedding which she very much wants to.

Hamida is from a poor family while Khan Sahib is among the elite of the community. He deliberately chooses a woman of a lower status than him as his wife just to have control over her. Belonging to a higher status than her, her family’s admiration, dependence and adoration make him feel superior. It is with this attitude to prove his superiority, he helps Roxana’s husband by arranging him to accompany other musicians at concerts and also helps to get some students for him. But his brother-in-law in return adores him:

[…] he was fond of his brother-in-law who in return adored, worshipped him. When Khan Sahib sang, his brother-in-law listened in ecstasy, and tears of joy coursed down his face that God should allow human beings to reach so high. (HIBHM 245)

In a tradition bound society like India, the woman’s sense of identity derives from her identification with her husband. Likewise Hamida is all powerful
among the members of her family because she is married to the rich musician, Khan Sahib.

Her family needed her; she was always the most important person at these family occasions. They all ran around in a dither or sat and wrung their hands till she arrived and began to give orders. She was not the eldest in the family, but she was the one who had the most authority. Although quite tiny, she held herself very erect and her fine-cut features were usually severe. As Khan Sahib’s wife, she was also the only one among them to hold an eminent position. (HIBHM 242)

But Hamida yearns for the true lover and power at home of which she is deprived. So she tries to establish her power in her kitchen on her servants. Like Shakuntala in “The Housewife”, Hamida also finds comfort in Kitchen. “She enjoyed doing it. She always enjoyed being in her kitchen which was very well equipped with modern gad gets” (HIBHM 243). Jhabvala’s writings show that the domain of the traditional Indian woman is her kitchen. She never degrades the position of woman but in the male dominated society it happens so that cooking is the foremost work assigned to her as a housewife. It has become a part and parcel of her life. When Hamida’s self-esteem gets disturbed, she feels frustrated, isolated and worthless. In order to preserve her self-esteem she constantly criticizes the works of her servants. She wants to prove her power over her
servants which she cannot do with her husband. She keeps on complaining about the incompetence and laziness of the servants. They are good to eat up rice and lick up the butter.

When Khan Sahib does not allow Hamida to attend her niece’s wedding, in a suppressed state she bursts out her feeling to him. She feels that she is treated as a servant to keep the house clean and cook for the guests. Her intention to attend the marriage is not only to exert power but also to feel that she has some body for her to feel and care. In her house, she gets all the riches and luxuries but not love. There is nobody at home to share her emotions. Khan Sahib though seems to love her, his priority is only for fame and popularity. She feels as a stranger in her own house. “I have sat a stranger in your house with no one to care whether I am alive or what has happened” (HIBHM 242). She often quarrels with him as emptiness engulfs her mind. She feels more upset when Khan Sahib has sent her son for education to an English type boarding school in the hills. She feels very lonely in her life. When her son, Sajid has been taken away from her for schooling, her heart aches for his love. Hamida in a distressed mood says, “you want only one thing: to take everything you can away from me. To leave me with nothing. That is your only happiness and joy in life” (HIBHM 240). In a depressed state, Hamida consoles herself looking at Roxana’s daughter. She finds the image of her own son in her. At first she did not like Roxana’s daughter later she becomes very affectionate towards the girl. She dresses her beautifully and admires her. But
Hamida’s happiness was only short lived because Roxana comes to take the girl away to attend the marriage function.

In a state of mental disturbance and depression, she hears Khan Sahib singing a romantic song in his room. The song is about a love-sick woman and full of delicate womanly feelings. Hamida is surprised and with ache in heart she smiles at her husband intentionally, thinking of how he could sing about a love-sick woman, when he really could not understand the natural feelings and emotions of his love-sick wife. Jhabvala thus portrays the attitude of a selfish husband who considers the wife as an object of his desire and pleasure. But he fails to realise that woman too has desires of her own which often remains unfulfilled. The desires of Hamida, like attending her niece’s wedding and having her son by her side always are denied by her husband. Shahane articulates Hamida’s feelings as, “the complex love-hate relationship of a worldly woman, Hamida, towards her rather complex husband, the Khan Sahib” (179).

Jhabvala tries to bring out the dilemma in the mind of the higher class Indian woman. In her story “Rose Petals” she portrays the predicament of woman in the higher class of the society. The narrator of the story is the wife of a Cabinet Minister. There is a striking contrast between the husband and the wife. The Minister is a great activist and his spirit and dynamism is also inherited by Mina, his daughter. But whereas, the Minister’s wife wishes to lead a quiet, secluded, slow life. Though she does not like, being a wife of a Minister she is forced to get
involved in public life. Like any Indian married woman she finds it to be her
moral duty to maintain the dignity and honour of her husband and behave
accordingly, though in the depth of her heart she does not relish it at all. She is
rather forced to attend the public meetings, preside over the function and
sometimes even compelled to deliver speeches. Her anguish is revealed:

It is not easy to be a Minister’s wife. People ask me to do all
sorts of things that I don’t like to do. They ask me to sit on
welfare committees and give away prizes at cultural shows. I
want to say no but the Minister says it’s my duty. So I go.

(HIBHM 57)

Though morally and emotionally she is attached with her husband, she
cannot participate in all his public activities enthusiastically like her daughter. She
finds no temperamental affinity with her husband. She finds her life to be gloomy,
meaningless and hollow in the midst of the entire busy schedule. Her husband too
loves and cares for her very much. He never fails to give and get her due respect
wherever he goes. But he does not care to understand her inner self longings. He
never bothers of her likings and dislikings. As she is his wife, he expects her also
to actively participate in his entire busy schedule. Even before he became the
Minister he was crazeful of leading a busy, hectic life. “[…] he drew up a heavy
programme for us which I found very tiring, but since he himself never needed
any rest, he couldn’t understand why I should” (HIBHM 57).
In such state of loneliness, she finds comfort in the company of her husband’s brother, Biju who has just come back from abroad. Like her, Biju also wants to lead a dull, slow and inactive life. Before his arrival, she lies in bed for several hours doing nothing. But now she loves to sit with him for hours together idly, discussing nothing significant or cracking childish jokes. In his company, she even becomes forgetful of her regular household duties. She cares for the Minister and the house only when he is away from her. She could not tolerate his absence for a long time but she is least bothered about the presence of the Minister. Because she feels that it is her husband’s brother who understands her feelings and desires far better than her husband. “[…] if there is no sign of him by afternoon, I get restless” (HIBHM 65).

When the narrator suffers from physical ailment, it is only Biju who spends time to sit with her for long time. Though the Minister and her daughter care and have concern for her, they do not have enough time to spend with her. Her life seems to be meaningless. She finds nothing important and graceful in her life to give her a healthy feeling to lead a happy life and to create a zest for life in her. “Is life only a game for Biju and me?” (HIBHM59).

The narrator thinks of a Persian poem suggesting that human life is like the petals, which fall from the rose and lie withering below or near the vase. With the sense of boredom at the heart, the narrator feels that she and Biju are leading a
withering life like the rose petals that are fallen. “[…] like the petals that fall from
the rose and lie soft and withering by the side of the vase” (HIBHM 68).

Jhabvala thus represents the dilemma of the upper class Indian woman
whose inner-self and external-self are two separate identities having no harmony
between them. Jhabvala suggests that the Minister’s wife and Biju are such rose
petals. But Shahane contracts the opinion of Jhabvala:

[…] as in several poems of Robert Browning and there is
nothing rosy whatever either about Biju or the Minister’s
wife. Both of them seem so dull, bloodless, pale, almost
shadowy nothings. They are terribly prosaic and to associate
them with a rich poetic metaphor of the rose petals is like
calling a metalled street a ribbon of moonlight. (164)

Jhabvala portrays a Parsi household in the cosmopolitan city in the story
“Bombay”. The story revolves around Nargis and her uncle. Nargis’ father and
his brother live together. They were once married but the wives were no more.
Their main aim is to educate and entertain Nargis whom they love. Nargis
becomes the sole motif of their life and her every requirement is fulfilled. All her
desires are satisfied. Normal happy life of Nargis gets disturbed when she reaches
the marriageable age.

Nargis is married to a man of business, of pale yellow complexion, who ran
the firm of Panivala and Sons. He is very rich and kind man. So he finds jobs for
her father and as well as for the uncle in his firm. Soon Nargis’ father dies and the uncle is left helpless and he could not tolerate the hard realities of life. Nargis who is the most important person in the life of her father and her uncle becomes secondary in the house of her husband.

Though she has no apparent problems, her life becomes prosaic and dull. She leads a mechanical life, where there is no enthusiasm, no specific great aims. She admits herself as a typical Indian housewife lost in her household duties, forgetting her own individuality completely. Nargis’ self-deception is focussed in this story.

Jhabvala has keenly observed and realistically portrays the traditional Indian women in her stories that are supposed or forced to remain mute and voiceless. They have been relegated to the status of child-bearing and child rearing machines. Indian women are expected to play second fiddle in the lives of men. The male expects his wife to be a true woman confined to sexual and family functions. The Indian women in the patriarchal society are excluded from defining and shaping the terms of their individual lives, women help in creating ethnic and racial boundaries by giving those names and identities but they do not have their own identities. It remains suspect, anonymous and insignificant to men. They are merely identified as a mere property of some men whose name they bear with them. Such a condition is effectively picturised by Jhabvala in her short story “Sixth Child” from Like Birds, Like Fishes and Other Stories.
The story “Sixth Child” presents the agony of Babu Ram and the pathetic condition of his wife. The story opens with Babu Ram’s wife undergoing the pangs of childbirth. She has already given birth to five daughters and one of his neighbours comments, “God will be good to young, his neighbour – himself the father of four sons – comforted him. ‘He knows five daughters are enough for anyone’” (177). Babu Ram does not have any concern for his wife. He never cares for her physical and emotional discomfort. When his wife undergoes the pangs of childbirth, Babu Ram is reluctant to go to his shop, not because he cares for his wife but for the eagerness and desire to know what baby his wife is going to give birth. He expects a son as he has been longing to have a son. Babu Ram has his own reasons to have a son, “Who otherwise would preside over his funeral obsequies and pour the ghee to feed the cremating fire? Who would carry on the shop, the properties?” (LBLF179).

Though an Indian woman begins to understand gradually that marriage obstructs her growth as an individual, she remains to be mute. Simon de Beauvoir makes a vivid observation: “Marriage subjugates and enslaves woman and it leads her to aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently towards death without questioning its purpose” (500). Babu Ram’s wife is treated mainly as a child bearing and child-rearing gadget without any individual desires. But Babu Ram yearns to experience the pride of being the father of a son who can sit with him in his shop. As he does not consider the psychological feeling of his wife, he
contemplates on the role of women, particularly the girl children in the family. They are supposed to remain at home with the other women in the family and learn to do household chores:

They had to stay at home with the women of the family, where they became as familiar with the life of kitchen and courtyard as the boys did with that of the shop. They learned to imitate the ways of grandmother, mother, aunts, pretended to wear saris and to pound spices and sift rice and scold servants. (LBLF180)

Right from the childhood, the girls learn to be domestic and the patriarchal system gets deeply ingrained in them. Thus the role of a wife restricts and circumscribes women’s self development. Marriage, for a woman in a traditional society like India is a continual self-sacrifice. Whatever she does, she actually does for her husband, mainly to please him as her master, losing her individuality and concealing her desire, as the wife of Babu Ram does. Marriage, says Beauvoir, “is the destiny traditionally offered by society” (445). The fact, however, remains that marriage is no more than an event in a man’s life, but the only important event in a woman’s life. She is suppressed and supposed to be dominated by man in every stage of her life. She is expected to be a good daughter, wife, mother and grandmother. She is reared by the parents carefully as one to be given away in marriage.
Woman has to learn the art of housekeeping during the period of her stay in the house of her parents. There she is under her father’s custody. On the occasion of the marriage she is given into the hands of her husband. In the husband’s house, she is expected to be the housekeeper and an object of sex. Her sole duty is to bear and rear his children. Thus the patriarchal society stamps the role of a woman. The woman, Babu Ram’s wife in the story “Sixth Child” plays only such roles as looking after the household duties and giving birth and looking after the children without her individualistic traits.

During the post-colonial period in India, on which Jhabvala mainly concentrates, marriage in the tradition bound society makes a woman a helpless creature, a deprived soul, unaware of her own existence and her own desires. It brings great disturbance to the emotional life of married woman who as a victim of wrong marriage continues to be subjected to persistent male tyranny and ego. Such a type of woman is beautifully focused by Jhabvala in her story “The Interview” in the same collection Like Birds, Like Fishes and Other Stories. She portrays the helplessness and dispensability of married woman in a joint-family of Indian middle class. The story is in first person narrative. The protagonist of the story is a young man who wishes to appear for an interview, but in fact does not. Joint-family system has been the crown and glory of ancient India. Indeed this traditional Indian joint family affords a measure of social security and comfort to its members. But now it has begun to crumble in the money-centred world. The
man who earns is considered the head and the patriarch’s command has to be implicitly obeyed. The patriarch always wants to retain the traditional vestiges of his power. In a family the young, educated, but irresponsible and good-for-nothing sons have to be accommodated. Sometimes, wife-beating husbands are to be tackled and endured. Such are the problems that cause the disintegration of family which affects the married women directly and leaves them at cross roads.

The protagonist of the story “The Interview” is portrayed as such an irresponsible young man who is under the control of his mother, elder brother and brother’s wife. He does not have the job of his own, so he is dominated by his brother and teased by his sister-in-law.

I thought she might be smiling. It made me uncomfortable. I thought she might be smiling because she knew I wouldn’t get the job for which I had to go and be interviewed. I also knew I wouldn’t get it, but I didn’t like her to smile like that.

It was as if she were saying, ‘you see, you will always have to be dependent on us.’ (LBLF102)

Jhabvala has not named the protagonist; it may be purposely done to state the fact that he does not have any individual identity. He and his wife and children are totally dependent on his brother’s earnings. Therefore his wife is sad and she wishes that they could move out and live on their own. But he does not understand her feelings and is not ready to get a job which would bring happiness
to his wife. “Get this job and take me away to live somewhere alone, only you and I and our children” (LBLF101).

The wife desires her husband to get a job as she does not like him to be financially dependent and also she does not want to live under the domination of his sister-in-law. But he never cares for her emotions. He is always very much concerned with his appearance and wants to look very neat like Raj Kapoor, the film star.

The irresponsible young man’s wife is even denied of the basic rights. Serving the husband is considered to be a great privilege of a wife in tradition bound family. Jhabvala focuses the condition of the poor oppressed Indian women who are supposed to be mute of what so ever happens around her. The feeling of his wife is expressed in the story by the young man himself:

I sat on the floor and my sister-in-law brought me my food on a tray. It may sound strange that my sister-in-law should serve me, and not my wife, but it is so in our house. It used to be my mother who brought me my food, even after I was married; she would never allow my wife to do this for me, though my wife wanted to do very much. Then my mother got so old, my sister-in-law began to serve me. I know that my wife feels deeply hurt by this, but she doesn’t dare to say anything. (LBLF101)
Jhabvala has portrayed women in India as suffering wives and as controlling mothers but silenced by patriarchal institutions. Silence is always considered a symbol of oppression which is a specific characteristic feature of the subalterns. She efficiently introduces the character of an entirely passive female, who never has any rights to raise her voice. Sometimes it may not because of her personal choice but due to the social and other constraints in a male dominated culture. A young wife in such society is dominated by others in the family in every Indian household. Jhabvala’s women characters never support one another. They are represented as the women who always quarrel and fight among themselves. Sometimes they want to establish their power over the other women as they are often suppressed by the men. Therefore a young wife is not only abused and dominated by her husband and other men of her family but also always watched, criticised and abused by the other women in the family, particularly the mother-in-law. Sometimes, it is the sister-in-law, who becomes the power to tease and punish the young wife.

In the story “The Interview” the sister-in-law also does the same thing to the young man’s wife. As said by the young man, “My sister-in-law always calls her that beauty but she does not mean it and she makes her do all the most difficult household tasks and often she shouts at her and even beats her” (LBLF104). The young man knows that his wife has never done anything to his sister-in-law. But he is helpless and cannot interfere in their quarrels and support his wife because he
is financially dependent on his sister-in-law. Also to please his mother and make her happy he hits his wife during a quarrel. The young husband confesses that:

> Once there was a great quarrel, because my wife had taken one of them to make a dress for our child. My mother shouted at her – it was terrible to hear her; but then, she has never liked my wife and my wife was very much afraid and cried and tried to excuse herself. I hit her across the face not very hard and not because I wanted to, but only to satisfy my mother. (LBLF102)

The wife in “The Interview” is much more pathetic because she has to lead her life with the irresponsible husband. She finds tough time to live with him. She is economically dependent on his brother and his wife. But she is helpless and tolerates her life with him. She also does whatever he wants and always tries to please him as Indian wives are expected to do. His brother arranges for an interview for a government job. But before his name is called, he becomes nervous and leaves the place. He is a sort of young man who does not really want a job. He likes to just sit, eat, think and enjoy. He feels happy when he is at the cinema watching the pretty women and hearing the beautiful songs. Shahane states the condition of the young man as:

> The hero of this story is so thoroughly unheroic that he even runs away from the committee room just at the moment when
he should have boldly faced the interview. [...] This is a genuine picture of a half-baked Indian youth, rendered with remarkable sarcasm and sheer good fun. (165)

In the middle class Indian family as presented in Jhabvala’s stories, the status of a wife in a family is based on the economic condition of her husband. That is the misfortune of the wife of the hero in the story. Both are not given any particular names as they do not have any individualistic nature in them.

Domination of mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law does not end with oppression of Indian wives but it extends to the level of suppression of the Western women who marry Indian men and get trapped in the Hindu joint family system. Characters like Peggy in “The Aliens” and Cathy in “The Young Couple” tolerate the domination of the mother-in-law and also sometimes the sister-in-law. They admit to lead their life silently in India though they have led a different sort of life in their mother lands.

The theme of the girls’ problems of adjustment is the new setup of the husband’s families, often a joint family, after marriage. These problems have been studied by sociologists as well:

The new bride does not enjoy the emotional side of her marriage and her urges, emotions, aspirations and dreams of a happy married life find an early burial. She is expected to go
through a long process of unlearning what she had learnt in
order to adopt herself to her new environment. (43)

Many times the mother-in-law would dominate the scene to such an extent that
there would be friction always. The girl would have to unlearn what she had
learnt in her parental home as a daughter and as wife learn all over again in her
husband’s home.

Jhabvala’s stories are mainly concerned with portraying either the
fulfillment or the frustration of individuals in the undivided Hindu joint family
system. She also tries to present the other dimension of the Indian familial setting
with the deeper inward understanding. The experience and feeling of European
woman married to Indians are confronted with the inevitable situation of the
Hindu joint families. European woman such as Peggy in “The Aliens” and Cathy
in “The Young Couple” are in cultural shocks.

“Traditional Indian life”, as Sucher comments, “places women in a position
of real dependence and inferiority to men: purdah continues” (11). Women in
India are always protected by the parents. Thus, the Indian women are dependent
on men as mother on the son, as wife on the husband, as sister on the brother and
as daughter on the parents. Women who are always under someone’s control, of
which they consider to safe and secure, expect the other women also to be under
control and dependent. When some women attempt to break the cultural bound
societal norms they are deflated by the family.
But their Western counterparts try to take freedom into their hands and wish to come out of the confines of the binding tradition to live like birds, like fishes seeking for real love, beauty and truth in life. They come with the great expectations to manage their life in a strange environment without being aware of the oppressive tradition on women. They are courageous enough to marry the Indians with the hope that they could break the impregnable indigenous Indian tradition and cross the boundaries of nationality, racial and cultural difference. But at the end they adjust to lead their life in an alien land. Some of the foreign wives come with the notion of high ideals. Sucher comments on their quest as:

Ruth Jhabvala returns often to the idea of quest; her characters search tirelessly for something. Her women characters particularly, desire something transcendent, a level of being, perhaps, that might be deeper, more connected and less alienated, more joyful, better. (10)

But when the Western women come in contact with and face the reality of the traditional, male-dominated society to India, they feel uneasy and psychologically shattered. Sucher remarks on their freedom:

Ruth Jhabvala’s British or American women travelers are blithely and unconventionally independent, even in their own countries; they reject the norms of patriarchal society simply
by the act of setting out alone. […] They do not and cannot
ignore its romantic and erotic reverberation. (11)

Cathy in the story “A Young Couple” in Jhabvala’s short story collection,
A Stronger Climate and Peggy in the short story “The Aliens” in her collection
Like Birds, Like Fishes and Other Stories come to India because of their marriage
as Jhabvala herself to India. Cultural differences pose a big problem for them.
They are culturally alienated.

“The Aliens” is a story about an English woman who comes to India to live
in a joint Hindu family after her marriage with Dev. Jhabvala neatly sums up the
Westerner’s experience in India in “Myself in India”.

There is a cycle that Europeans – by Europeans I mean all
westerners including Americans – tend to pass through –
everything Indian is marvelous, second stage, everything
Indian not so marvelous; third stage everything Indian
abominable. For some people it ends there, for others the
cycle renews itself and goes on. I have been through it so
many times that now I think myself as strapped to a wheel
that goes round and round and sometimes I am up and
sometimes I am down. (7)

Jhabvala finely describes Peggy’s bewilderment at the family scenes that
has become quite natural to the Indians but very strange to her, an outsider. Peggy
is not able to share the strong spiced food that the other family members eat with relish. Dev, Peggy’s husband devours a heavy breakfast of lentils, puris, pickles and fried vegetables. Being conscious of her health, she takes a simple diet, a scrambled egg. She gets angry with her husband because she knows very well that such sort of diet would make him fat, but he does not mind it. Peggy also hates the noisy quarrels between the mother-in-law and Sarla, the eldest daughter-in-law. Both complain each other quite often. Sarla, Suraj’s wife desires to go to the hill station for summer but her husband does not take her there. As her husband does not heed to her desire, she thinks that he has an affair with a girl in his office. The mother-in-law asserts that her sons would give priority to business first which cannot be accepted by Sarla. Therefore Sarla and her mother-in-law always make wild accusations against each other. Peggy feels miserable, upset and longs for peaceful environment. She thinks of her home:

No one at home ever fought like that; sometimes, of course, they had their little differences of opinion – especially on washing days, mum did tend to get a bit out of temper then – but they never forgot themselves. Only lower-class people forgot themselves and shouted the way they shouted in this house. She was thankful that Mum and Daddy couldn’t hear them, they wouldn’t know what to think. (LBF 81-82)
Peggy could not tolerate when her privacy is interfered by her in-law’s family members. Sarla without Peggy’s permission meddles with her things in her room. Sarla’s children come bursting into her room without seeking permission, when she is at ease, lying down in her bed. By marrying Dev and coming with him to India, Peggy expected that her future life in India would be romantic and exciting. Peggy is also not supposed to do the household work which is allotted to the servant. She is scolded by her mother-in-law for doing the works of the servants and helping them. So she feels totally isolated from the family. Because of such cultural alienation in day to day activities she feels terribly disappointed.

In the frustrated state, she begins to write all the complaints in the letter to her parents. “Oh I can’t tell you how fed up I am with it all and how awful it is and the heat and everyone shouting all the time and they are all so [...]” (LBLF 93). But suddenly she thinks of her mother and remembers that her mother never complains about anyone or anything. Her mother used to tell her that English people never grumbled and moaned. Peggy remembers an incident.

[...] good old mum, who never complained even when the water-pipes froze and she had to climb up in the loft and unfreeze them with hot-water bottles and her fingers all swollen with child blains. It was only here that they grumbled all the time about heat, headaches, husbands.

(LBLF 94)
Finally she decides and begins to write a happy letter to her parents. Though she faces a lot of problems in her life, she tries to adjust with all the peculiar situations that happen around her.

Peggy too like all other Indian wives in India faces the traditional male-dominated society. She draws strength and retains the spirit from her memory of past experience with her mother. She solves the puzzling problems of her life by applying her knowledge of the past to the present.

The same ability to surmount obstacles and difficulties of any kind is exhibited by Cathy of “The Young Couple”. Cathy marries an Indian, Narain and comes to India with lots of hopes. Narain is an idealist, who goes to England for his higher studies. His aim is to do social work in India. When both Narain and Cathy return to India, they rent a small house in spite of the objection of Narain’s parents. Cathy in the bond of marriage lives in India and undergoes different stages of experiences during which her feelings fluctuate.

The young couple love and enjoy each other’s company. In the beginning of the story Jhabvala pictures Narain as a determined husband but as the story develops he becomes weak, dependent and selfish. Cathy’s life in India too begins enthusiastically but unfortunately soon she finds her enthusiasm waning for one reason or another. She wants to establish herself as an independent and determined woman. But her life in India undergoes different changes and her spirit falters.
Cathy ultimately begins to lose interest in her endeavours. Feeling loved while her husband is out to work, she goes to city bazaar which is resented by her mother-in-law. She also does not enjoy the Sunday lunches at her in-law’s house. She feels that the members of Narain’s family interfere in her private life. When she is questioned about her lonely visit to many places in the town she expects her husband to support her by explaining to them the independence customarily enjoyed as a right by English girls. But he does not defend her from his mother’s criticism instead he is busy eating the flesh of the mango.

Indians educated in the Western countries have grown up enlightened on Western pragmatism and rationalism. Nevertheless the roots of their native culture and strongly entrenched in them. In England, Narain was very demonstrative and highly romantic. He liked to hold Cathy’s hand in the public places. But in India, he becomes reserved and shuns any contact with her in the outer places. Cathy is shocked to notice the difference in Narain which she could not accept and tolerate. He is much concerned about the cultural behaviour after they returned to India. Cathy gives importance and cares for the individual whereas Narain is much concerned about accredited Indian public behaviours.

Jhabvala effectively brings out the tension between the young wives and the middle aged parents. She has seen India at close quarters and has acquired an intimate knowledge of its ideas, ideals and various modes of life. Narain’s mother seems to be interfering, possessive and bossy on Narain and Cathy. But she
considers herself to be devoted, generous and unselfish. She wants to gain a hold on the feelings of her son. She often quarrels with Cathy over petty things. When she is cross with Cathy, Narain keeps quiet. Cathy who finds it difficult to adjust with such familial settings is not able to voice forth her feelings. Jhabvala’s stories mostly portray the Indian wife as a silent suffering woman who becomes a venerable figure only on becoming the mother of a son. As a mother-in-law she is never willing to allow the wife to gain a hold on the feelings of her son. As the same, the Western woman Cathy also suffers her bitter and unhappy frustration silently. She begins to feel so oppressed which she has never experienced in her motherland, England. Her relationship begins to deteriorate with Narain’s family members.

The result of the strong sense of alienation is often an accentuated, self-consciousness leading the minds of the most sensitive characters to an all-enveloping feeling of frustration and failure. When Cathy becomes pregnant, the whole family feels happy. Her pregnancy makes a twist in the plot of the story. It is at this juncture the family starts to take control over the activities of Cathy and Narain. Though Cathy does not like such attitude, she allows them to do everything for their own interest. This state of Cathy is clearly expressed through the words of Yasmine Gooneratne in her Silence, Exile and Cunning: The Fiction of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala as:
the extended family is seen as Octopus like, pulling people in from the periphery to the centre, there to swallow all that is divergent or individual in them, making them part of the one organism. (269)

After the great mess of problems, she tries to set up her mind to adjust to live anywhere as long as she lives together with her husband, Narain. Though she pretends to be normal, it is obvious to her that she is trapped. She is deeply hurt when she finds that Narain has fallen into the traditional line obeying the orders of his family members. She decides and tries to overcome all her feelings and sufferings and adjusts with Narain’s family members for the sake of her true love for Narain. Agarwal in *Ruth Prawer Jhabvala: A Study of Her Fiction* quotes:

“The Young Couple” shows that though difference in food, furniture and fashion are trivial, it is on these trivial things that one’s happiness largely depends. The meetings between Europeans and Indians initially produce an irritating effect on Europeans but in the end they succumb to Indian influences and become nonentities. (89)

Cathy’s miserable condition is conveyed effectively by the writer. Even when Cathy closes her eyes, she could still see the family in her mind, which haunts her quite often. “She was very miserable; she shut her eyes but she couldn’t shut out
the sense of this large well-fed family with Narain and herself trapped in the middle of them” (ASC 61).

Jhabvala presents the most part of the story from Cathy’s point of view. It helps the readers to understand her feelings and sympathise with her. As she is married she has to lose her individualistic nature. Both Cathy and Peggy with all romantic hopes settle in India but unknowingly they are caught trapped in the traditionally dominating Indian joint family system. Both the stories highlight the difference between the individualistic European families and the socially close-knit Indian families.

The reason for the alleged feeling of inferiority of both Indian and foreign women is peculiar. Though the women are well-educated or not, after being married off as they are expected by their parents or of their own choice, they required to go and live with their in-laws in a big joint family. The other members of the family have more rights on the husband than the young wife. Both the Western women meet with the problems of cultural differences. They try to endure the buffets of life because they both are thinking individuals. They draw strength to meet the novel situation from their memory of the past experiences and apply this pragmatic knowledge of the past to their present puzzling problems of their life. Their ability to surmount obstacles of any sort is best revealed in characters like Peggy and Cathy. When young educated Western women get
disillusioned these characters find a meaning in life and away to adjust and put up with problems in their married life.

It is obvious that Jhabvala’s own status of a stranger, wherever she has lived, forced her to increase her efforts in trying to understand life as it is at present in different cultures. The true art must express what one feels and experiences views of such high caliber is more vividly presented in Jhabvala’s writings. In her artistic endeavours she struggles to find out her own cultural identity and tries to solve the emotional and cross-cultural dilemmas that confused her sense of the inner self. While talking about her alleged “rootlessness”, Jhabvala confesses in an interview with Agarwal:

It may have something to do with my background. I was practically born a displaced person, and all any of us ever wanted was a travel document and a residential permit. One just didn’t care as long as one was allowed to live somewhere. I’m still like that. I have absolutely no patriotism for an attachment to any country whatsoever.

None. (36)

―On Bail‖ twice collected in How I Became a Holy Mother and Out of India is about an introspective Indian young woman narrator. She has been her intellectual father’s hope for the future. But all his hopes are shattered when his daughter, the narrator marries Rajee. She marries Rajee in very unusual
circumstances. Her friend and college-mate Sudha has fallen in love with Rajee. The affair was abruptly broken off when Sudha is forced to marry another person. She is married to a rich man who snores at night. Rajee’s cries to the narrator over the misfortune and then they get married. Sudha continues to cherish Rajee’s clandestine visit to her house when her husband is out.

Marriage, built on false images, tends to enclose in hypocrisy. A well-educated woman, the narrator makes a foolish choice. Her inappropriate man of choice 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 hypnotized because she wishes to be. The narrator of the story deliberately discarded the privileges and advantages that her university degree might have conferred. Sucher remarks:

[...] the young Indian narrator – protagonist of ‘On Bail’, (How I Became a Holy Mother), who was supposed to have been a ‘new’ woman. Ironically, she is undone by foolish love, marrying a charismatic hustler and becoming the cheerful and willing dupe of him and his wealthy mistress.

(27)

The narrator and her husband Rajee live in a small run-down apartment. She works as a cashier in a shop all day. But Rajee goes to coffee houses and gets involved in shady deals. In consequence he has been arrested on a charge of
cheating. The narrator being a dutiful wife wants to save her husband and needs five thousand rupees to take Rajee and asks for money for Rajee’s release. Sudha gives her jewellery and Rajee is released. But Sudha wishes to get full returns for her money and visits the narrator’s house. Sudha takes Rajee to the bedroom and sleeps with him.

The narrator has to put up with this ignominious situation as it cannot be helped because Sudha and Rajee regularly meet every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. But Rajee has not met Sudha recently, so in anger, she shouts at him. Rajee looks at the narrator’s guilty. “I waited and waited – why are you looking at her!’ she cried for Rajee had glanced nervously in my direction. ‘Who is she to grudge me those few hours with you, when she has taken everything else’” (HIBHM 187). The narrator tolerates all the painful sight as she has married Rajee voluntarily out of love, affection, sympathy and fellow-feeling. She tries to hide the illicit relationship between Sudha and Rajee from her father. Because she does not want the old man feel sad and also does not want her father to find fault on her husband.

The narrator befools herself believing that Rajee no longer loves Sudha but he has the softest feeling for her as his wife. Though Rajee is an irresponsible man and disloyal to her, the narrator accepts him. “Sometimes it is not good to think too much. Why dwell on things that can’t be helped? Or on those that are over and done with? That is why I also don’t look back on the past very much”
(HIBHM 187). The narrator accepts life as it is. Jhabvala expresses the conflict of two women, the narrator and Sudha desiring the same man. Shahane comments that, “Jhabvala shows herself as a realist in portraying Sudha and the narrator as friends and rivals, involved in a mutual love and hate relationship” (173).

The shifting of Jhabvala’s interest from the Indian people and culture to the people and culture of New York shall be clearly understood from her collection of stories, East into Upper East. In both cultures, Indian and American, most of the married women in her stories tend to suffer. There prevails gloominess and loneliness in the atmosphere of women who have unsuccessful married life. In the story “Fidelity” Jhabvala exposes how Sophie longs for the love and care of her husband from the beginning of her married life till the end of her life. Dave, Sophie’s husband, continues to indulge in adultery and cheating. The relationship between Dave and Sophie is purely materialistic and is deprived of any emotional bonds within a year after her marriage. Sophie discovers Dave’s unfaithfulness to her. But he pretends to be innocent. He wants to live a sophisticated life. People around him say that Dave married Sophie only for money and not for love. “She was not pretty at all and was prepared for people to say that Dave had married her for her family’s money” (EUE 229).

Jhabvala presents Sophie as a great sufferer in silence. She loves her husband and highly respects him in spite of his indifference towards her. Though a Westerner, Sophie, like an Indian wife is submissive to her husband and longs
for his true love. But Dave obsessed with other young girls, often leaves Sophie alone. He moves away to live with his girl friend. But when Dave is convicted of fraud, his girl friend disappears. His apartment is sold to pay his fine and legal fees. So, having no other alternative he decides to go and live with Sophie.

[...] the apartment Dave had brought to keep his girl friend had to be sold to pay his fine and legal fees. The girl friend herself disappeared, so when he came out, it was natural that he should return to live with his wife. (EUE 233)

It is not any love for Sophie that prompted Dave to live with her; it is sheer force of circumstance as he has no other choice. But the renewed union does not last long. Soon he is obsessed with another girl and moves out of Sophie’s apartment to live with his new lady love. But when he finds that his new lady-love is not up to his expectation, he leaves her and returns to Sophie with pretension to be sincere and deep love and care for Sophie.

Jhabvala portrays Sophie as a very innocent girl who befools herself. She suffers from some incurable disease. As any woman, she wants to share her plight with her husband, perhaps with the expectation of some consoling words of sympathy. But she desists from talking to him about her ailment just because she does not want to add another trouble to him. Already Dave has to face troubles from his creditors, problems in his business and also troubles from his young girl friends. One day, he happens to see some strong drugs and painkillers in her
bedroom. Immediately he expresses his dislike to see people swallowing pills. As Dave does not like to tolerate people taking pills, Sophie lies about the pills and her physical condition. Sophie says that the pills are just vitamins. Dave, though does not have real concern for Sophie, he pretends to be “Well. Okay, vitamins – that’s good, you have to keep up your strength, I need you, dear. Nobody will believe this, but I need you more than ever” (EUE 236). When Dave is away from her she longs to see him. She expresses her desire to Michael, the son of her sister-in-law, “I don’t know why he doesn’t come to see me. He hasn’t been since Tuesday. Tell him to come tomorrow […] just tell him I need to see him […] that I want to see my own husband sometimes” (EUE 241). But Dave’s love for Sophie is utmost selfish. “Dave’s relation to his wife was an affair of the utmost delicacy to him. He considers his love for her as the only pure and selfless part of him, which he was reluctant to tarnish with a request for money to keep him out of jail” (EUE 238).

Though Dave goes after other girls leaving Sophie alone to emotional suffering, it does not precipitate any rift in her feeling for Dave. Unlike in the stories in her earlier collection, Jhabvala ends her story “Fidelity” with reconciliation between the husband, Dave and the wife Sophie. In her deathbed Sophie longs for Dave’s love. She asks him to hold her for one more minute. Dave immediately responds to her request saying that he will do it as long as she
wants and forever if she wants. “Tears had already gathered in his eyes, ready to flow and ease him” (EUE 245).

The theme of suffering wife keeps on recurring in Jhabvala’s stories. Woman suffers as wife owing to her emotional home-loving temperament. She may try to rebel as an individual but it gives her infinite pain to be away from home as wife and mother. She prefers to suffer in silence and remains at home even though a part of her being dies in the process. Moreover, it is difficult for the wife to rebel because the code of submission, sacrifice and chastity is dinned into her ears and imprinted on her mind from childhood. There are occasionally images of rebellious wives, but often ends in a failure.

In Jhabvala’s stories one could get the portraits of women whose desires for their identity is wiped out. In the traditional Indian society and sometimes in the Western societies too wives struggle for their identity. They do not get the expected support and love from their spouses. So, they are made to suffer from emotional suffocation, isolation and dilemma of self-pity. In the above stories dealt within this chapter, women are obviously placed in a position of dependence and servitude to men. The dissatisfaction of wives in the institution of marriage and their unsettled sense of individuality are explored. They suffer, submit and adjust themselves to circumstances. This aspect of woman’s life has been portrayed by Jhabvala with sensitivity and instinctive understanding.
Jhabvala here presents women as tireless searchers in the pursuits of something in materialistic world dominated by cunning and self-seeking men. Sucher comments on women who, “desire something transcendent: a level of being, perhaps, that might be deeper, more connected and less alienated, more joyful, better” (10). Marriage proves to be social institution that perpetuates male domination and thwarts women’s identity and higher pursuits. In the tradition bound society oppression and betrayal of their life-partners make women suffer silently.