Chapter III

Mothers and Widows

The dominance of the patriarchal family system in India desires women to play the roles of submissive daughters, traditional wives, patient mothers and renounced widows. They are expected to live for the continuance of family values. Mothers make more efforts to maintain its unity. But mothers in Indian society are often perceived as weak, emotional and often confined to the household works. The women portrayed in Jhabvala’s stories are authentic, credible and realistic. They try to reason out each and every action of theirs struggling hard to understand life in reality. These characters are primarily human in different circumstances, living in different conditions with different personalities. They have their own desires, ambitions and frustrations. Mothers and widows desire to express them in their own way of realizing their ambitions and they try to come to terms with their problems in their own way. A woman gains full acceptance only when she becomes the mother of a child. Unfortunate are the women who remain childless. Similarly widows are unfortunate. They are harassed and forced to observe rituals. They develop a sense of guilt which ends their happiness and leads to sufferings.

Motherhood is the anchor of womanhood in Indian Society. The equation of motherhood and femininity is a significant concept and it is often linked with
the metaphor of spring, a time of renewal. To Miller, motherhood is a concept which:

developed historically within discourses rarely entered by woman who are mothers. They could be said to mark out processes, values and relationships and in doing so, to assign roles and powers to women in specific relations with men.

(104)

Motherhood gives strength to the woman to face the society. Whether one is an Indian or a westerner, the basic urge of a woman for motherhood cannot be disputed. Jhabvala, like most of the writers depicts the mental and psychological bond of Indian mothers in her short stories. Her stories give a perspective on women in their complex and real relationships. They are about mothers, daughters and grandmothers negotiating a balance between tradition and modernity, analyzing and expressing their insecurities, fears and desires.

Some of Jhabvala’s stories depict poignantly the mother-daughter relationship mostly from the perspective of mothers trying to reach their daughters across a barrier. The patriarchal system always holds mothers to be more responsible to look after their children. Mothers are portrayed as the image of a self-sacrificing female bearing all complacencies.

Motherhood, sometimes considered a means to subordinate and oppress women in a male dominated society, becomes a powerful weapon too for
liberation of women when taken as a personal experience. Barriers crumble and disappear if only women find in motherhood an opportunity to assert her individuality and liberate her. Motherhood could be considered a journey, a pilgrimage, a quest. The quest in life for some remains purposeless, rather pointless, without having the edge of a focus. It is simply drifting; quest begun in an excited mood, stirred by the emotional speeches, sometimes by a god man, ends in dissipation.

Swami Vivekananda once mentioned to an audience of American women, “In the west, the woman is wife” (10). But when citing Indian woman, he says, “The ideal of marvelous, unselfish all suffering, ever-forgiving mother” (12). The mother-image shines like an unbroken ray in the whole of Indian culture in the fiction of Jhabvala. Mother is full of forgiveness, of compassion, of love and she is the crowning excellence of God’s creation. She is even taken to such a level that hails her as the shadow of Gods.

Jhabvala’s stories could be described as the psychopathology of power, the process of domination in personal relationships or clashing empires. Many of her stories deal with family relationships between siblings or mothers and sons that are predatory, obsessive and devouring. The mothers in most of her stories seem to be highly protective towards their daughters. This protective sense urges them to put restrictions on their young daughter’s movements, especially in their adolescence period. Sometimes this continues even after her marriage when the daughters are
not able to take correct decision at the right time. But these restrictions sometimes widen the gap between the mothers and their daughters. But for the restrictions, the mothers are always ready to sacrifice anything for the betterment of their daughters. But her love and care for their children are at times neglected and ignored. In the very first story “The Old Lady” in *Like Birds, Like Fishes and Other Stories*, Jhabvala portrays such a sympathetic mother. Through this story Jhabvala has explicitly expressed the true concern that the mothers in India have for their daughters. The old mother in this story is brought up in the patriarchal society. So she could not accept and tolerate the fact when her daughter Lelia talks about divorce. The old lady thinks that women in India must not talk about divorce.

The mother wants her daughter to be happy and leads a contented life with her husband, Krishna. So she takes all necessary steps with the only motive of making her daughter’s life happy. She invites Krishna to lunch in the hope that such a meeting might bring about reconciliation. Krishna too, like the old mother is not for divorce. But all end up in vain. The mother feels quite helpless against the obstinacy of her daughter and takes recourse to praying.

According to Lelia, her mother is often not dignified, she feels quite awkward when her mother is so soft with her husband Krishna. She could not tolerate her mother’s sympathy towards her incompatible husband. The mother
knows that her daughter is wrong and that she would come to grief. She wants to save her but finds herself unable to do so. Lelia is a snob:

“Mother!” Lelia called from the drawing room and was annoyed when her mother failed to hear her. “She must be gossiping with the servants again,” she told Bobo, who smiled indulgently and said, “why not, if it makes her happy?” (LBLF10)

The modern young daughter does not understand her mother’s real concern for her. The old mother expects the love and care from her children but what she gets from them is the sense of pity. “Poor mother”, Bobo said. They often said “Poor mother”, for they felt she ought to be in need of pity” (LBLF17).

Just because she is a widow, the old mother is expected to be under the control of her children. Her daughter and two of her sons, Bobo and Satish want to take upper hands and dominate others at home. The mother is criticized for being an old-fashioned lady who could not give up the ideas of her generation so easily. She firmly believes that the marriage bond is sacred whereas Lelia is totally dissociated of such attitude. Though the mother feels sad, even at this stage she wonders at her children as any true mother would do. “She admired her children for being so much more advanced and intelligent than she was; but that did not prevent her from feeling sorry for them” (LBLF19).

The daughters neither discern that their mothers too are victims, nor usually do they show sympathy with the older women’s dilemma. There is however an
implicit criticism of the warped values that promotes such exploitation. In the portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship in Jhabvala’s stories, she expresses that mothers contribute to the continuation of incapacitating psychological traits and oppressive life patterns in the generation of their daughters.

Nirupa Rani comments on this state:

The present generation of girls who are educated and who wish to be sophisticated in their outlook have gained a special place in Indian society. These types of people are saved from destruction only because of the constant vigilance by the older people. (118)

Mother’s love and care on her children are explicitly expressed in yet another story in the same collection, “A Birthday in London”. It is the only published story in which Jhabvala describes the life of expatriate German Jews in London she knew as a child. This story portrays the plight of a mother, Sonia Wolff of a ruined family and also about the miserable life of her friends settled in London after the Holocaust. The story begins with the celebration of Sonia Wolff’s birthday. Mr. Karl Lumbik, a fifty-six year old Austrian, Mrs. Gottlob, the landlady, and Tiny Else are the guests attending Sonia’s birthday party in Swiss cottage. Sonia’s husband Otto Wolff is dead. So the responsibility to look after her children entirely becomes her own.

Werner, Sonia Wolff’s son has become a globe-trotter spending his time with his girl friends and earning his living by doing some film-work or from a
little art-photography. He loves his mother very much. When he finds Karl Lumbik, Mrs. Gottlob and Tina Else in his house, he wonders if there is a coffee-party going on. He totally forgets his mother’s birthday and so cannot think it as a birthday party. All the guests find fault with him for it. He looks at his mother with large guilty eyes. As a mother, Sonia cannot tolerate his son feeling sorry in front of others. “What can I say?” Werner said to his mother. ‘No, no what does it matter?’ she said quickly. […] He took both her hands and kissed her cheek with a slightly condescending affection. He was the same height as she was, a handsome boy with thick brown hair and an elegant air” (LBLF125).

In spite of all her sufferings, Sonia feels proud of her son. The guests who have come to celebrate the birthday party are now refugees in London. They become reminiscent of the remote past, a blissful past for that matter. Sonia had had her girlhood days of romantic love-making. Mrs. Gottlob had lived happily with her husband who was running the biggest butcher’s shop in Gelsen Kirchin and Tiny Else had spent her pleasant childhood with her father, a teacher. Their present condition is juxtaposed with their past. The past and the present bring bitter memories to Sonia.

Sonia thinks of her husband, Otto and his inability to adapt himself to the new surroundings. Otto was so sensitive and he had always been used to refined people and it was difficult for him to adjust with the situation and the people there. He who had been a very wealthy factory owner in Berlin had to be a poor refugee
who could not speak English, had no work and so he felt too lonely and miserable to believe in a bright future. So in a mood of depression he had committed suicide and had helplessly ended his life. The death of the husband affected not only the wife in the family but also the children. The precise difficulties the family faces and the manners in which they cope with them are presented effectively by Jhabvala.

The present life of Sonia is not happy either. She always worries about her children. She wants her son Werner to become more responsible. But on the contrary, he is always away from home. He does not take up any one particular job. He has also cut himself off from tradition and has become a wanderer. Sonia has often dreamt that after the retirement of Otto Wolff, Werner would become the Director of the factory and manage its affairs. Her motherly concern is revealed when she weeps and tells the guests:

You see, I keep thinking how different it would have been [...] Otto would have retired by now and Werner would be running the factory. He would be Werner Wolff, Director of SIBGO, everybody would know and respect him. (LBLF129)

Sonia feels and is worried that her son has now lost all opportunities of heritage and like a disinherited being wanders aimlessly without being moored to his tradition. The children of the refugee families do not have a knowledge of their family descent along with its tradition.
Sonia’s daughter and her husband are not economically in good condition. They are poor farmers in Israel. Their sun-burnt look and the nakedness of the baby indicate that theirs is a poverty-stricken life. As they cannot afford to visit Sonia they send only letters to her occasionally. As a mother, Sonia is worried about her daughter’s life of hardship. But whenever she thinks of either of her children, she feels proud and her eyes seem shining.

Jhabvala has effectively portrayed the loneliness and loss as experienced by the mother trapped in an alien society. Yet, amidst the sense of depression and alienation, she continues to live for the welfare of her children. She survives because of the moral strength she has received from her family. The sense of heritage thus saves her from taking away her own life in a foreign country. When Sonia grumbles and cries over her unhappy past and present life Mrs. Gottlob consoles her with the encouraging words, “And I would like to know what cause for tears you have”, Mrs. Gottlob said. “You are alive, you are healthy, the children are alive and healthy, what else matters?” (LBLF130).

Going by tradition, women’s lives have been organized and manipulated by patriarchy in all ages, all cultures and all countries by establishing values, norms, roles, gender perceptions and idealism that prescribes unequal means, methods and routes to achieve the so-called “wholeness” for women. Motherhood and wifehood are the dual crowns of women-hood; nothing more, nothing less.
Adrienne Rich in his book *Of Woman Born* emphasizes the absurdity of the situation:

Though motherhood is the experience of women, the institution of motherhood is under male control and the physical situation of becoming a mother is disciplined by males. This glorious motherhood imposed on women conditioned her entire life. (45)

Jhabvala displays her deep awareness of the Indian mother’s psychic response to children and to the continuous chain of heredity in the story “Sixth Child”. The deep emotional involvement of Indian mothers in child birth is characteristic of Indian sensibility while the western attitude seems more rational.

The requirements of patriarchy surround a girl from the moment of her birth. This means that she has a particular psychology, which she transmits to her daughter. The intricacy of women’s psycho-social role is woven into the family in the relationship that will have the most profound bearing on her psychological development. Mothers and daughters share a gender identity, a social role and social expectations. They are both second class citizens within a patriarchal culture and family. Aspects of the mother’s psychology that are inextricably bound up with being socialized to the feminine role are absorbed and then shared by the daughter in her own psychology.

The young girl learns her social role and responsibility from her mother and her personality. Mother is the absolute source of self-respect and self image,
curiosity and energy. In Simone de Beauvoir’s view, motherhood emerges as an instance of the imperialism of the female – a mistaken desire to impose an identity on the world through another. The patriarchal society has privileged male characters like father, husband and son with their familial and societal responsibilities but has banished female characters to live in the shadow of their husbands, fathers and sons. Turning a spotlight into the shadows gives central importance to the dilemmas of mothers, their conflicts and sufferings within the family and to their questions about personal identities and the meaning of life.

Jhabvala is keenly aware of the Indian familial values and emotional responses. She portrays the Indian enthusiasm for a son admirably, especially if the earlier arrivals have been all daughters. The craze for a son is deeply rooted in the Indian psyche and the story “Sixth Child” projects this with great sensitivity. The birth of a female child which is strongly disliked by both men and women in the male-centred society is evident from this story. In the patriarchal society the woman is to suffer the pangs of the child birth many a times as to the desire of her husband. This story presents the agony of Babu Ram, the cloth merchant, over the birth of the sixth child. He is anxious that the new born baby should be a boy. He has already got five daughters. He hopes for a son very much.

It was the sixth time he was hoping for one and he was afraid of being disappointed for the sixth time. Not that he did not love his
five little daughters. His heart turned over every time he thought of them [...]. But he longed for a son. (LBLF 179)

The sociological and psychological reasons for Babu Ram’s longing to have a son are given by the narrator. He longs for a son to sit with him in the shop as in the other shops of the market. In each shop a boy sits at the edge of the shop with his legs dangling over. Babu Ram too yearns to experience the pride of being the father of a son who can sit with him in his shop while the girl child has to remain at home.

Becoming a mother makes a woman happy and further more giving birth to a son elevates the woman with pride. But having only girl children in the family is believed to be the result of the sins of the parents. Babu Ram, out of fear, ponders over the sins he might have committed. Only once he has accused an old uncle of theft. He ill-treated him in front of all other workers and finally sent him out. Feeling guilty and accepting the moral responsibility for having only female children, he goes in search of the old uncle to expiate the sin.

Babu Ram feels encouraged by the tolling of the temple bell. He hopes superstitiously that his sixth child will be a boy. Believing firmly, he takes his old uncle home. But on returning home, he understands all his hopes to have a son is shattered. But he half-heartedly accepts the female child. The sixth child also has joined the camp of innumerable female children who have been disowned since their birth.
Motherhood is a gift of God. But sometimes girl children are disinherited by both the mother and the father. Much of the female infanticides originate from disowning girl children who are thought of as liabilities, a burden draining the father’s exchequer. If the parents cannot afford the dowry, they marry off the daughter to any man like a drunkard or a rich old man, like the young protagonist, Durga of the short story “The Widow” who has to marry an old rich merchant for want of dowry. Even some go to the extreme of killing the female children as soon as they are born by giving the juice of a poisonous flower (Erukkam flower) and sometimes the children are even buried alive. This brutal act takes place in some of the villages of Tamilnadu.

Traditionally a wife gets status in her husband’s family only when she becomes a mother and she is applauded when she gives birth to a son. Sucher remarks of the state as, “Although strong ties of loyalty bind son to father and brother to brother, the strongest ties of sentiment are those binding son to mother” (130). Vasant A. Shahane ironically remarks of Bernard Shaw’s witty statement, “that he would prefer to leave an idea behind rather than a child is symptomatic of the attitude of the west” (165). Despite being an inheritor of this attitude, Jhabvala’s knowledge and awareness of the Indian society, Indian family, the Indian character and the Indian sensibilities assume great significance.

The mother’s nature differs from person to person, but undoubtedly the underlying nature of motherhood remains the same. In the gallery of female
characters there are diverse mothers of varied nature who are over-ambitious, timid, self-effacing, engulfing and dominating but at the core they are all empathetically tied to their children. In the story “The Interview”, Jhabvala focuses on the usual conflict that would be between an excessively loving mother and a son. She portrays excellently how the son struggles to find his identity from his devouring mother.

The nameless narrator in “The Interview” is an unsuccessful man in his life. This pathetic condition is entrusted on him because of his mother and her excessive love and care for him right from his childhood. Being the youngest child, the mother always treats him gently. Not only his mother but also his grandmother and his widowed aunt all are very fond of him. The possessive love of the mother makes him idle and insecure in his life. As he grows up his father takes him to his grocery stall to help him. When he is helping in the stall, the mother is shocked to see her lovable son working. His grandmother and aunt also could not tolerate this when they heard that the innocent and tender boy has been taken out to work in the grocery shop. Even though he is grown up, the excessive and possessive love of his mother prevents him to be a responsible son to his mother, true and lovable husband to his wife and sincere brother to his elder brother. Instead he grows up with lack of confidence and individuality. “The fact is, right from childhood I have been a person who needs a lot of peace and rest,
and my food too has to be rather more delicate than that of other people” (LBLF 103).

As a child, the narrator has been spoiled by the women in his family. He turns out to be something of a sad sack and he lacks some elements of adulthood that would lead to a dignified way of life. He has been petted by his mother and has been taught to like sweets and self-indulgence. He lacks the inner resources to face the conditions of the world he lives in.

This weak, dreamy, anxious, unmotivated young man wanders aimlessly. The young man does not really want a job. It frightens him. He feels he is unusually delicate and sensitive. He likes to just sit and think and to go to the cinema than to earn something for himself and his family. Through the protagonist of the story, Jhabvala seems to suggest the young Indian who is very much spoilt by his mother’s excessive love. He is incapable of facing problems in life and runs away into a dream land of happiness and pleasure only to be brought back rudely to the encircling gloom and unhappiness. Yasmine Gooneratne states that Jhabvala “had shown he awareness that popular Indian films provide escape fantasies for people trapped in hardship and poverty” (294).

Care, nurture, tolerance and empathy promote zest in life of a mother more than anything else. They expand the capacity to experience joy and happiness. Mothers also encourage their children to imbibe these virtues. They curb their own wishes and nurture the individualities of their children.
The mother-daughter relationship is dealt by Jhabvala with all its tensions and troubles, love and harmony, and establishes a frame of reference to understand the complexity of this relationship. A special maternal affection is reserved for daughters, contrary to expectations derived from social and cultural prescription. It is partly to be explained by the fact that a mother’s unconscious identification with her daughter is normally stronger than with her son. The mother-daughter relationship is a growth-fostering relationship. It is most affected by socialization pressures. In this dyadic relationship, the mother usually forges an ambivalent relation based on empathy. Fathoming the depth of this relation one discovers that the mutual responses do not depend solely on the mother-daughter factor as such but apart from the emotions involved, other socio-economic factors manipulate the relationship.

Jhabvala has explored the mother-daughter relationship from either anyone of the women’s point of view. The mother-daughter relationship is one of the world’s great mysteries which has confounded and confused men and women for centuries. For generations, mothers always care for the security of their daughters and they wish their daughters to lead a happy and a normal life as all other young girls do. Such sort of mother-daughter relationship is portrayed by Jhabvala in her story “In the Mountain” in her selection of stories, How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories. Highly frustrated by the mundane life in the society, the protagonist of the story, Pritam chooses to reside lonely up on the mountainside.
Living close by the nature, Pritam feels happy. As all the traditional mothers do, Pritam’s mother worries of her attitude and the behaviour of her daughter.

Pritam does not allow her mother to stay with her. Occasionally, her mother visits Pritam and is saddened to find that she has stopped caring about her appearance and forgets to think about her as a physical person. This sort of behaviour of Pritam upsets her mother. Her mother wishes her daughter to lead a normal and comfortable life as all the other young girls of her age do. Pritam’s mother disapproves of her daughter’s way of life. Yet she wants to stay with her daughter.

Pritam’s mother informs Pritam about the visit of her family members to her place on their way to their annual trip to Simla. Pritam is ready to welcome all her guests whom she really wants to avoid. The mother is really surprised and feels happy. In the bustle of their arrival and the excitement of many people the mother is relieved. Pritam attends to her guests warmly and serves them a vast, superbly cooked meal. “She went around piling their plates, urging them to take, take more, glad at seeing them enjoy her food” (HIBHM 161). On seeing Pritam’s behaviour, her mother is upset. Her sense of relief curtails. Though the mother wants her daughter to be normal, she does not want Pritam to stoop down to satisfy others:

She thought to herself, why should she be like that with them – what have they ever done for her that she should show them such
affection and be like a servant to them? She even looked like their
servant. (HIBHM 161)

Pritam wants to be away from all the relationships, yet she receives them and does
everything for them only to satisfy the desire of her mother. But the mother
cannot bear all the sights any more. She feels ill, her blood pressure has risen and
all her pulses throb faster.

Being a conventional mother, she is much more concerned about the
security of Pritam, who resides alone on the mountain. She does not want her
daughter to be in the company of Doctor Sahib whom Pritam considers to be her
spiritual companion. When the mother enquires her about the stay of Doctor
Sahib in Pritam’s house for the whole night discussing various matters with
Pritam, Pritam gets irritated. Pritam, the young revolutionary girl does not want
anyone to spy her, even her mother. She shouts at her mother to express her
anger, “you pretended to be asleep, and all the time you were spying on me”
(HIBHM 162). But Pritam wants her mother to get rid of her fear of Doctor Sahib.
He is nothing to Pritam rather than a spiritual companion. She explains her
mother, “And you want such a person to be my friend” (HIBHM 162).

The character and personality of Pritam worries her mother very much.
Jhabvala has analysed the inner most feelings of two women, the mother and the
daughter, their relationship, their own personalities and their right to privacy. This
story “In the Mountain” concerns the way of life and the worries of an Indian mother from a conventional middle class family.

The concept of female relationship, especially the mother daughter relationship, is the central concern of some of Jhabvala’s short stories. The girls, being of the same gender as the mother, do not completely separate themselves from their mothers. Moreover the mothers also tend to experience their daughters as more like themselves. Thus, the daughter’s formation of identity blends with attachment felt for their mothers. Psychologists point out that whether the relationship between daughters and parents is satisfactory and co-operative or not, the daughter observes the intensity of her parents’ relationship and in it the seeds for her own future relating to a man are fertilized. Moreover, mothers sometimes let their daughters know both overtly and covertly that behaviour of men is at times disappointing and disgusting. They convey both the necessity and limitation of emotional ties to a man.

In the story “A Summer by the Sea” in East into Upper East, the mother-daughter tension is very eloquent. The atmosphere and relationship in the story, with the mother can be described as love-hate relationships. But inside them run currents of love, of an unfulfilled urge to be nurtured, of strong desires to be accepted between Susie and her mother. Susie as a young girl observes the complexity of her mother’s relationship with other men and senses that she does not have the power to hold her in the same way others do. She may have felt
jealous and resentful of her mother’s availability to another man. She is unable to understand her mother’s attitude towards other men. Sometimes she perceives her mother as selfish and unworthy.

Jhabvala has presented Susie’s mother to be a victim as much as Susie herself is. In spite of all her dilemmas, Susie desperately wants to show sympathy. Her painful memories however at times prove a hindrance. To some extent, Susie, the frustrated young woman, is angry because life does not contain the easy harmonies of art and the reconciliations of male and female.

Susie and her mother are of unlike temperament. Mother continually embarrasses Susie and makes her uncomfortable. She verbally harasses and insults Susie for her withdrawn retreating character, lack of any desire to assert herself. The mother also blames Susie for her life choice of marrying a sensitive gay man, Boy. Like a child, lying there in her nightie, she let tears flow down her nose in a natural, unashamed way, and childishly she said, “He married you for your money. For Daddy’s money” (EUE 177). The mother does not have any good impression on Boy. She feels that her son-in-law is financially dependent on Susie’s inheritance which Susie’s father made. Mother tells her daughter that Boy does not love his wife Susie and has married Susie for her money to support his mother and sister. Sucher states,

Everyone, including Susie herself, knows that Boy would never have married her without her money. At least Susie’s
relations with her friends’ lack the painful self-delusion of her mother’s; at least Susie is not ridiculous. But her solutions to the problem of being a woman are highly imperfect at best.

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Susie knows very well that Boy has very refined tastes and needs mother. She is quite sure that her husband likes her very much and needs her as much as he needs the money.

Though the mother seems to be ridiculous, boring, overdressed and undignified, as a mother she is very loving and caring towards Susie. Boy plays a significant role because his importance built on the ego-clash that has occurred between mother and daughter. He becomes the person with whom Susie can identify in the process of separation – individuation and she tries to differentiate herself from her mother by emulating him and incorporating his characteristics that she admires.

The attitude of the mother keeps on changing now and then. She often finds fault with her son-in-law. But suddenly, the tenderness, one of the traits of the mother, is kindled in her. When Boy says to her about the pathetic condition of his mother and sister, she is moved: “Now mother really had something to cry about. So many things! […] she pressed both our hands and said, “Children, children.” All that crying completely washed away her make-up, and she suddenly looked her age” (EUE 178).
Susie never speaks against her mother’s words. She loves her mother in spite of all her weakness, like flirting with other men. “No one ever tells me that it’s wrong for me to love mother for the way she is and not for how she is supposed to be” (EUE 179). A woman who fails to get nurturing demands expects to nurture from her daughter. This is a secret urge, the failure of the daughter to understand this secret demand makes the mother feel lost, angry and frustrated.

This story “A Summer by the Sea” depicts the dilemmas of women, their conflicts and suffering within the family and their questions of personal identity. The story explicitly reveals the bond between mother and daughter. The stories that focus on the mother-daughter relationship are thus largely family stories.

Most of the mothers are recognised as devoted and caring but at times they are also devalued and subjugated. Their virtues become an instrument of domestic and social exploitation. They try to compromise and tolerate the injustice done to them silently. These women remain unhappy, conforming to the old traditions. Their submissiveness becomes a masochistic activity. Love and care primarily mean giving, but giving does not mean “being deprived of” or “sacrificing”.

Jhabvala’s close observation of human relationships throws light on nuances of feeling that are generally ignored – the latent eroticism of the mother-son relationship. The story “Husband and Son” tells the disgusted life of Vijay with her aged husband, Prakash and her son Anand. The story is of an aging married woman whose husband increasingly turns ascetic. Vijay often being
reminded of her own happy past and the lost relationship with her husband. She
does not really have a husband or a son in the sense she longs for. Her husband
has withdrawn into his ascetic existence on the roof. Her real son, Anand has no
time for her except to check through the account books and lectures her on her
spending. Her son is in his thirties, posted in Bengal as an important government
officer. He is too busy to get married. He is least bothered about his parents. But
Vijay loves her son dearly, but it has always been difficult for her to express her
feeling for him. From childhood he hates to be kissed and fondled. He also hates
to have his hair combed by her as she longs to do.

Deprived of love from her son, Vijay befriends one of the teachers, Ram in
the nearby dance-school. Ram is young and handsome and teaches the Kathak
style. They both begin taking walks together and gradually Ram starts eating at
Vijay’s house. Vijay and Ram become very close. She is able to lavish on him
the affections that her son always spurned. They decide that in their previous life,
they must have been mother and son or husband and wife, or brother and sister.
The woman through the young dancer, Ram, is transported back to the old days of
her own romance with her then young husband. Although the dancer ostensibly
treats the woman like his mother, there are sexual overtones throughout their
association. The state of mind of both Vijay and Ram is explicitly revealed in the
following lines in the story:
He smiled and looked up into her eyes and fondly murmured, “Ma”. From the beginning, he called her mother, but it was only lately that she had begun to call him not son but “My Sweet Son”. Because that was what he was to her, in a way that no one had ever been. When she was tired, he massaged her feet as he used to do to his mother, cracking the toes. The only other person who had done this to her was the old man, when they were both young and forever making love.

(EUE 121-122)

Vijay becomes lonely and restless when she hears a scandal that Ram has seduced a student in the dance school. When Anand tells his mother about Ram’s moral turpitude, Vijay rejects the information outright. Later the scandal is uncovered and it is confirmed that Ram is guilty. He finally confesses that the girl has seduced him. Vijay is enraged and hits him away from her home.

As her own son does not show any concern for his mother, she is tempted to shower her love on Ram. Anand is highly materialistic and comes to know about Ram’s behaviour towards his mother through the servants. The servants are waiting for a chance to tell everything to Anand, of the shopping expeditions, gold watch and diamond studs and also to tell about the special meals that has to be prepared thrice a day with cold drinks and snacks. Anand does not have any good opinion about Ram and he wants to avoid Ram coming to his home. So he
behaves rude to his mother and examines his mother’s accounts. But she is not able to explain the enormous increase in her expenditure. She becomes defiant and shouts at her son. She tries to create a mess out of this issue. “Let them hear, let everyone hear, what sort of a son I have brought into the world!” And on the matter of her health, “So who cares when my own son is making me die from grief and heartache” (EUE 128).

Though Anand cares for his mother, he does not spare his time for his mother. But his mother, Vijay expects only love and concern from his son. Gradually her affection moves towards Ram. Vijay trusts Ram than her own son but her hopes and expectations are all shattered at the end. This story is suffused with a deep feeling of loss, snatching at things and then helplessness.

The stories that are discussed in this chapter focus on the mother-daughter or mother-son relationship. They present important explorations of the lives of women, of their expectations that threaten them and of their struggles to determine their own identities and destinies. Although the specifics of each mother-daughter relationship are unique, they are rich, various and vital source of feminine self-hood. Mothers and daughters have a symbiotic, need-based relationship, when each can derive emotion from the other. But the life and identities of women have been shaped by the male family members of patriarchal society. “Mother” is at or somewhere very close to the heart of all women. Jhabvala in her stories depicts
mother as muse, mother as protagonist and antagonist, mother as a source of inspiration or exasperation.

The attitude of the mothers towards their sons is different from that of the daughters. The mothers seem to be highly possessive. This possessiveness of the mother spoils the harmony of the family. Generally, in Indian society a mother cannot tolerate her son catering to the favours of his wife. After marriage many serious problems arise as the mother could not allow another person to share her love of her son. The mother expects and desires her daughter-in-law to be ever ready for the service of others in the family. But the same mother could not accept if the newly wed bride tries to win the appreciation from her husband. A mother seems to be loving and possessive to her son but bossy to her daughter-in-law. Jhabvala tries to highlight such sort of mothers through her stories like “Aliens” and “The Young Couple”. Mother-in-law interferes in every way of her daughter-in-law. A young wife has no freedom for doing the desired things just as looking after her husband, going out for shopping and even cleaning the house.

The pleasure of having a child is as symbolic as the agony of not having a child. It is the women’s psyche which is haunted by her unfulfilled womanhood. Barrenness is a painful experience that can affect a woman’s mental balance and make her schizophrenic. Delight in motherhood indicates women’s quest for perfection and a woman without a child is considered a failure. The very
existence of a woman largely relies upon their creative achievement. A woman who is barren is tormented and tortured by her own anxieties.

The agony of childlessness and longing to have a child are presented in the story like “The Widow”. Jhabvala depicts the psychology of a widow who has no children and who is also not allowed to express her feelings of it. So she seeks solace in showering affection on her tenant’s son. But she is even blamed and deprived of showing love and affection to the boy. She feels often lonely. But nobody understands her loneliness. Inside her, there is an unfulfilled urge for motherhood. She weeps silently that her life would be a waste one. The childlessness is one of the potent causes of domestic violence against women. Thus women suffer in multiple ways like the stigma of being barren and the resultant loneliness.

The Indian woman today is rarely considered an individual. Instead she is viewed in her roles of daughter, wife or mother. To quote Heather T. Frazer:

Since she is thought to be lacking any internalized norms or self-discipline, it is imperative that her father, husband and sons protect her from herself and the outside world. This submissive position is reinforced by institution of caste, religion, joint family and village. A woman who abdicates her traditionally sanctioned roles is liable to experience severe censure. (109)
Jhabvala lovingly dwells upon woman as mother and child bearer. The inhibited and stereotyped images persist. It is because at personal level Jhabvala is a mother and wife and would not shatter her personal citadel for borrowed terms like literature. She pinpoints the defects of the society and wishes things to change towards betterment. But she does not advocate rupture in family and society.

It is an undeniable fact that marriage ensures a distinct status to women in many societies with established tradition like India. The conceptual difference between a married woman and a spinster or a widow is purported by differential social and ritual status. Women, particularly widows, in India are the victims of social stigmas and tenets of patriarchy. Social discrimination of widows is a common phenomenon, which is mainly rooted in traditional values and beliefs. Subordination of women has been caused by physical, economic, psychological and internal pressures. The situation becomes much more miserable when taking into consideration the plight of widows.

Sally Cline, in *Lifting the Taboo : Women, Death and Dying*, observes:

The old English ‘widewe’ originated in the Indo-European root ‘widh’ meaning to be empty or separated. The Sanskrit ‘vidh’ means destitute or lacking. Joseph T. Shipley in the Dictionary of Word origins points out that ‘since marriage has made two of one, a widow is a woman that has been emptied
of her.’ Other writers confirm this notion: ‘She was a widow, that strange feminine entity who had once been endowed with a dual personality and was now only half of what she had been.’ (147)

Often identities of women were so totally dependent upon that of their spouses that when death of their spouse did occur these females lost a significant portion of their very self-concept. On the other hand, age discrepancies between husbands and wives were greater in the past than in the present. Many old men in the past married young girls, as there were a lot of difference in age between the husbands and the wives. So the young women become widows at earlier age.

In the traditional Indian society widows are given a distinct social status inferior to married women and have to face a much harder time than widows in the west. Though a foreigner, being a sensitive woman Jhabvala tries to understand the state of widows in India. She explores the pathetic plight of widows in her stories. The societal norms require the widow to lead a life of renunciation. She had to observe very hard rules in respect of her food, dress and habits. The traditional rationale seems to have been the fear of the voracious, untrammelled independent female sexuality. The ideas that are embedded in the story “The widow” in Like Birds, Like Fishes and Other Stories indicate something of the official status of a widow in a culture bound Hindu life. Traditional Indian
concept of life places women in a position of real dependency on men and makes them inferior to men.

“The Widow” deals with the desires and conflicts of the protagonist Durga. Durga is a very well drawn portrait of a young Hindu widow. She is married to a decrepit old man, possessing a large estate. The story is all about Durga’s longing for physical comfort and a child. Her relatives begin to misunderstand that her sexual frustration finds vent in her affair with a boy, young enough to be her son. In course of time, she ultimately suffers from severe mental collapses. It is all because she cannot lead her life as she desires and also because she is forced to live the assigned role of a widow.

As Durga is forced to marry an old man, she begins to dislike the whole world. She hates her husband when he has been alive. Her frustration leads her to the extent of praying everyday to God for his death. “[…] she had felt at the beginning of her marriage when, God forgive her, she had prayed everyday for him to die. As she had pointed out in her prayers, he was old and she was young; it was not right” (LBF 56-57). Her memories of her husband are of kindness and generosity and not of love. She does not have any pleasant memories of her husband. She remembers only his “old man smell” and dried legs.

One could understand from Jhabvala’s stories that there exists an oppressive force of Indian social violence against women, particularly widows. However it may be circumvented or subverted. Being a widow, Durga’s relatives
expect that she should be stripped of her belongings because the widow in the post-independent period was considered as “the cursed one who had committed the sin of outliving her husband and was consequently to be numbered among the outcast” (LBLF 58). The author tries to expose the Indian traditional social conventions which often destroy the individual human personality. Members of Durga’s family want her to shave her head and compel her to lead an austere life and reduce her diet to stale bread and lentils. They even deprive her of “sweet things” of life and condemn her to perpetual mourning and expiation which has been considered to be the proper lot of a widow in India.

Jhabvala portrays the attitude of the members of the family, who represent here the general Hindu society which gives more importance to the traditional rites, rituals and customs, least bothering about the individual’s desire, sexual passion, obsession and the frantic search for happiness. This negligence and oppression precipitates the distortion and destruction of individual personality, here in the story the personality of Durga. Frustrated sexual emotions force a person to seek recourse to extra marital relationship. Durga strives hard to fulfill her innate desires by bringing in a silent mutation in her attitude towards the existing cultural order.

Durga is imperious by temperament and therefore prevails upon her voracious relatives to keep away from her home. She refuses to comply with the traditional customs. She starts managing her property shrewdly. She wants to be
independent both intellectually and financially. She decides to lead a luxurious life. “She kept two servants, got up when she wanted and went to sleep when she wanted, she ate everything she liked and as much as she liked” (LBLF57). She neither wants nor allows anyone to restrict her. She wishes to lead her life as she desires. She with her efforts, in spite of living up to her desires is surrounded with boredom and smouldering with suppressed desires. In order to divert her mind from her unfulfilled desires in life, she moves towards religion. When Durga suffers from depressive moods, Bhuaji, her old aunt, a shrewd and tough lady, uses the opportunity for her own benefit. The old lady finds herself a permanent place in Durga’s household by pretending to be a well-wisher of Durga.

Jhabvala portrays the other worldliness of a widow. In course of time, the young widow, Durga, gets attracted to Govind, the seventeen year old son of “puris”, Durga’s new tenant. Quite naturally the unfulfilled maternal instinct and sexual desire find a spontaneous outlet in her love for Govind. Bhuaji carefully notices Durga’s special affinity for her tenant in which they take advantage of avoiding the payment of rent. Durga’s relatives regard her friendship with the Puris as both ominous and unnatural. Bhuaji quickly and astutely prevents Durga mingling close with Puris, especially with Govind. She tries to mend the matters and in course of time she succeeds in separating Durga from the puris and persuades her to get rid of them as tenants. Durga becomes helpless and lonely. In such state:
She needed someone before whom she could unburden herself, and who more fit for that purpose than the ever available, ever sympathetic Bhuaji? So she lay on her bed and cried: ‘A son, that is all I want, a son!’ (LBLF 75)

Finally, Durga’s life seems to be totally shattered and is left in the state of bewilderment. She has been driven to the condition of mental breakdown by the circumstance of her life and also by the activities of her relatives. In the depressed mood she gives up all her belongings,

“Suddenly she got up and unlocked her steel almira. She took out everything – her silk saris, her jewellery, her cash-box. [...] Her treasure lay scattered in heaps and mounds all over the floor and Bhuaji squinted at it in avid surmise” (LBLF 77)

Durga shouts at her relatives to pick up all her belongings for which they are awaiting for a long time. As soon as their desire is fulfilled they twittered like birds. Bhuaji is busy squatting on the floor, trying to take everything, stroking it with her hands in love and wonder. Yasmine Gooneratne in her Silence, Exile and Cunning: The Fiction of Ruth Prawer Jhabva points out the condition of Durga.

Durga for whom life’s promise has ended, and whose personality is very near disintegration, spites the memory of her husband by giving away her silk saris, her jewellery and
The pathetic protagonist Durga, finally in despair chooses to accept her lot as a widow and lead a humble life as she has been instructed by her relatives. Jhabvala makes a hint of the cruel custom enforced on a widow:

There was no other way for widows but to lead humble, bare lives; it was for their own good. For if they were allowed to feed themselves on the pleasures of the world, then they fed their own passions too, and that which should have died in them with the deaths of their husbands would fester and boil and overflow into sinful channels.

These conditions sometimes lead the widows to come to the conclusion that it is better to die rather than to continue to live after their husbands have departed. Durga is left alone to endure her despair and disappointment without anyone to pity the state of her widowhood. The Indian women’s life is “viewed in three stages – girlhood, wifehood and widowhood” (262) says Yasmine Gooneratne. Jhabvala’s more oblique presentation creates in Durga a picture of a warm human personality first deprived, then destroyed by the unchangeable circumstances of Indian life.

“The widow” stands as an illustration of Laurie Sucher’s observation:
Taken as a whole, Ruth Jhabvala’s work [. . .] constitutes an exploration, told from a woman’s point of view, of the sexual politics of passion. It confirms and illustrates the premise of feminism, the societal derogation of women. It even confirms feminism’s imperative that women resist that social and psychological derogation. (9)

Durga rebels, though unsuccessfully, against the society and its laws of restraint on the widows.

Through the story “The Widow” Jhabvala exemplifies the condition of widows in the transitional period, when they are torn between age-old oppressive traditions and individual aspirations. In the beginning, as a young woman, Durga tries to revolt against the tradition in her search for freedom and love. The Indian women do seek a change, but within the cultural norms, to enable themselves to live with dignity and self-respect when Durga tries to go beyond the limit, she finds herself trapped and finally, as there is no other choice, she is forced to accept the role assigned to a widow by the patriarchal society. The widow’s longing for motherhood and sex is artistically and sympathetically presented by Jhabvala. In fact, the writer is more concerned with portraying either the fulfillment or the frustration of an individual like Durga.

The widows with or without children are the pathetic victims of patriarchal oppression. In “A Loss of Faith” from the same collection, Ramkumar’s
miserable mother, after the death of her husband, who was an inebriated wife-beater, has been forced to live in her brother-in-law’s house along with five of her children for their food and shelter. For the same cause she has been enduring the torture inflicted on her by her brother-in-law’s wife. She has been, therefore eagerly expecting her son to take her out of that house some day to live economically independent and happy. Their problem is sometimes financial but many a time it is psychological.

One of the stories “The Biography” from Jhabvala’s *A Stronger Climate* traces psychological problems faced by the protagonist, Anita. Joanathan Jones has come to India to collect material for a biography of a great dead leader. He meets Anita, the leader’s niece. She “had, in fact, been more than only niece the leader was unmarried, and she, his closest relative, had been companion, confidante, hostess to him” (ASC 32). Anita looks stately and distinguished.

When Jonathan Jones approaches Anita for the first time, he is very nervous but she receives him graciously. Whenever he goes to her for information about her uncle, she speaks about the past. Mostly she recalls, “the banquet in Moscow, the trip up the Rhine with Champagne and two ex-kings” (ASC 33). She often talks about herself than her uncle. Sometimes she elaborately refers to her uncle’s western education and his dream of the country’s receptivity to western ideals. Jonathan Jones very soon understands that his visit to Anita’s house is a
waste of time as literally he gets no useful biographical material from her. Yet he could not neglect her, he seems to sympathise with her.

Besides Jonathan Jones, Anita has a special friend, Miss Bridget Law, an English woman who has come to India in order to write a book on “The New Woman (from Purdah to Parliament)”. Miss Bridget Law enjoys Anita’s boundless generosity but speaks ill of her in her absence. But Jonathan Jones is not of such type. He is very polite, courteous towards Anita, though he desires to avoid her later on.

The story moves on to describe the nature of the new minister, who has risen from rags to riches by being a corrupt Government Minister, and hence Anita expresses her contempt for him. According to Anita, the present Minister is the exact opposite of her uncle who, she claims, “Stood for enlightenment, liberalism, and progress in the western sense” (ASC 42). Jonathan Jones’ attitude towards contemporary politicians is different from Anita’s attitude towards them.

The epiphanic moment comes when Bridget Law reads her notes on The New Woman: from Purdah to Parliament:

Indian womanhood, has really come into its own in these last decades. Now there are not only legions of women doctors, lawyers, and even engineers, but woman has penetrated into the hallowed halls of Parliamentary government. But while she may be called “modern” in the best possible sense of that word, she has remained
first and foremost “a woman”. She has not given up one whit of her femininity and the busiest doctor or legislator may be seen going about her demanding tasks enveloped in the graceful folds of the traditional sari. (ASC 45-46)

Anita listens with great interest. Bridget Law then invites Anita’s opinion on her writings. Anita, in the beginning remains silent over Bridget Law’s praise of the Indian woman and her “exalted status”. But after some time, she reveals her doubts about the image of the new woman to Jonathan Jones. She expresses her opinion as follows:

She said that Bridget meant well, and that it was good to have such books published abroad in order to give the world a favourable image of India’s progress – and then she sighed, and fell silent and studied her shapely hands. It was true, . . . the emancipation and complete equality of women had been one of her uncle’s most cherished ideals, and there were women doctors, lawyers and members of Parliament – And yet . . . The child brides and the widows. (ASC 46)

Anita does not stop there. She bursts out her feeling that she is emancipated and also she is educated. The statement is left incomplete. After a short pause, with her eyes filled with tears and with a rueful smile, she says to Jonathan Jones sympathetically, “why don’t you write my biography” (ASC 47).
Anita’s failure to give relevant factual details of the life of her uncle to Jonathan Jones, her hatred for the current minister, and her dissatisfaction with the changed situation in India are some slight manifestations – the tip of the iceberg of the suffering of a child-bride and a widow indeed. The anguish and frustration of the lonely widow remains concealed, in Anita’s case beneath her distinguished and domineering personality. Her public life serves as veil to hide it. The way Durga in “The widow” gives vent to the tortures of her widowhood is different from the polished behaviour of Anita in “The Biography”.

Jhabvala’s deep insight into the psyche of modern Indian widow is exposed in the story “The Suffering Women”. Anjana, a film actress does not enjoy a happy married life. After the death of her husband, she tries to seek a feeling of security and belongingness in Thakur Sahib, a married man. She has ideological differences with him too. Anjana as a mother in the modern world learns to accept the free attitude of her daughter Kiku. Kiku loves to roam around with her boyfriend Rahul. But Thakur Sahib does not approve of this freedom given to Kiku. He behaves very strict towards her. He tries to take hold of both Anjana and Kiku.

Though Anjana tries to explain the healthy relationship of Kiku and Rahul, Thakur Sahib does not agree with her. Anjana says that Kiku and Rahul are very innocent children, playing together like a little boy and girl. But Thakur Sahib in a calm voice says, “there was only one game little boys and girls played together”
In the beginning, Anjana’s relationship with Thakur Sahib is most enjoyable. But in due course of time, Anjana does not find Thakur Sahib as her true companion. She is totally in a confused state and feels insecure without him.

Thus through Anjana, Jhabvala brings out the confusion, instability, insecurity and bewilderment of the Indian widow in the modern society. She is able to move in the labyrinths of the head and heart of woman of modern times who is torn between old and new, tradition and modernity, restrictions and freedom, responsibility towards the family and responsibility towards her own identity, ideology and individuality.

In India, a widow is isolated from the mainstream of social life. She is not permitted to attend any public function and also never supposed to show interest on any other man rather than the members of her own family. If she crosses such established boundaries she has to face severe criticism and contempt not only from the society but also from the members of her family who loved her once. The poor creature, the widow has to put up with everything in her life after the death of her husband. If she allows to feed herself on the pleasures of the world, then she would try to feed her own passions too which should have died in her with the death of her husband.

The narrator in the story “The Man with the Dog” is an Indian woman, who in her earlier days was a beloved and respected wife and mother, faithfully fulfilling her household duties. Her married life was spent peacefully in the
countryside with her aged husband and young children. But once she was widowed and her children were grown up, she moved to the town to live alone. “I was left alone and the children were bigger, I kept the town house for myself, because I liked living in the town best. I spent a lot of time shopping and bought many costly saris that I did not need” (ASC 184). But she pays visit to see her children and grand children. She keeps herself fully engaged in shopping and being invited to parties and teas.

In course of time narrator’s visits to children and grand children degenerate into bitterness because of her current relation with a European, a Dutchman named Boekelman. Her passion for a man who is as advanced in years as her seems to be ridiculous but becomes unavoidable. She reminisces about their first meeting. Her Chauffer drives into the rear bumper of Boekelman’s car, Boekelman emerges from his car angrily, with a little barking dog in his arms. But once he catches the sight of the narrator he stops shouting and cast her an admiring glance and leaves the place. After a period of time, the narrator gets a chance to meet Boekelman in a party. His foreign traits fascinate her. The way he behaves with others seems to be quiet strange and it struck her with wonders. She admires the elegant way he dressed. He talks freely and familiarly with women. He is also extra polite to the ladies and just opened the doors for them in the party hall. When he greets the ladies, to show his love and reverence, he would kiss their hands. When he does the same for the narrator, she feels as if she had an electric shock going down from
her spine. “I wanted to snatch away my hand from him and wipe it clean on my sari. But afterwards I got used to it and I liked it” (ASC 185).

Boekelman originally came to India for the ivory trade, but he failed to acquire a big fortune and therefore his former wife returned to Holland. He is fastidious and short-tempered. He lives in a widow’s house. He insists on paying rent for his suite but by calculating the amount in his favour, he pays only a small rent. Though he has lived in India for years, he never leaves his circle of disaffected European friends. Though the elderly narrator is Boekelman’s land lady, he being a short tempered man abuses her and her servant. He always appears to be showed properly and well-dressed and he is annoyed to see the narrator indolent on the verandah in her nightclothes at noon. He complains about some minor irritation and grows incensed at her indifference. Now and then, there arises difference of opinion between the narrator and Boekelman. But all is forgiven and reconciled very soon. She is convinced that no one else knows him so completely as she does. She becomes his mistress and feels perfect happiness in his presence. Her affair with the old man leads her to neglect her duties and as a mother and grandmother.

The narrator’s grown up children strongly disapprove of the liaison. Her children are sad and disappointed with her. They wish and want her to devote herself to prayer and self-sacrifice which is the only state fitting to her last stage of life. But the all-devouring love that she should have for God, she has for the old
man. She herself creates the link between the erotic and the divine. She confesses “perhaps B. is a substitute for God whom I should be loving, the way the little brass image of Vishnu in my prayer-room is a substitute for that great God himself?” (ASC 203-204). Her attraction towards the old man forces her to become his mistress.

Though the narrator is economically independent, she is in the clutches of her children. Being a widow, the narrator’s eldest son, Shammi assumes to be the head of the family and directs and instructs his mother. The narrator’s relationship with Boekelman nearly comes to an end during Shammi’s visit to his mother’s place. When Boekelman and his refugee friends keep on complaining about India and the old man also rages peevishly against the “damn rotten” backward country into which fate has washed him. Shammi, the lieutenant-colonel who loves his army career passionately becomes very angry and indignantly leaves the room. He cannot accept the fact that his mother, at her ripened age flirts with another man and he is also not able to tolerate when Boekelman speaks low about his country and its army force.

The mother begs Shammi’s forgiveness as she knows very well how much his son loves his job and his country. The narrator recalls:

He is a very serious boy. He loves talking to me about his regiment and about tank warfare and 11.1 bore rifles and other such things and I love listening to him. I don’t really understand what he is saying
but I love his eager voice and the way he looks when he talks – just as he looked when he was a small boy and told me about his cricket.

(ASC 196)

She promises to send Boekelman away. When Shammi seems to be angry, she longs to comfort him as she used to do when he was a child by holding him close to her and put her hand under his child’s body, like a “a bird in a frail cage”. But now the narrator feels the gap between her and Shammi. Because “[…] he was grown-up, a big major with a wife and children, who had no need of his foolish mother and more” (ASC 198). Jhabvala probes into the mind of the narrator and reveals how the narrator, after the death of her husband longs for someone to love and take care of. But her children never understand her longings and do not care for her loneliness and expect her only to fulfill her household duties without any personal desires. Therefore when the narrator finds Boekelman is there to care her, she becomes a victim to him. Though she assures Shammi, that she would send Boekelman away from the house, she is unable to do it as she finds that Boekelman cannot find any other landlord who could financially help him. So she breaks down immediately and pleads him to stay with her. Despite going against society’s rules excepted of a widow and her children’s wishes, the narrator is full of peace and joy with the toothless old Boekelman.

Jhabvala through the story “The Man with the Dog” unveils an unsuitable relationship between an elderly, cross-cultural pair. Sucher states:
Ruth Jhabvala’s work explores Freud’s infamous question ‘what do women want?’ She shows, however, that it is not only women who stand implicitly accused of ‘masochism’, but any romantic idealist. Men and women alike, her idealistic protagonists fall for an assortment of unscrupulous, narcissistic, dominating men. Female or male, they find themselves wanting to be ‘bullied’ by their male lovers. (11)

Jhabvala’s female protagonists are almost completely alienated from others, particularly from other women.

If religion and tradition assign widows due role, circumstances permit, they take an altogether different role. Some of the widows luckily are able to make the most of their independence, triumph over the patriarchal marriage system in their husbandless days. Sucher remarks of such widows lives:

Their lives represent the welcome triumph of practice over theory: and practice, with its unexpected particularities, its arena for the force of personality, its quirks of circumstance – real life – is the stuff of which comedy is made. (128)

The story “A Summer by the Sea” appeared in the New Yorker in 1978 and later was included in the collection of short stories, East into Upper East. The story is set in Nantucket, an island and is narrated by an introspective, dispassionate young woman, Susie. Susie and her husband Boy are on Nantucket
for the summer with Susie’s widowed mother and Boy’s many friends including
Boy’s last year favourite friend, Terry and Boy’s latest flame, the hustler Hamid
and assorted other gay friends. The story revolves around Hamid and Susie’s
mother.

The widowed mother is ecstatic. In such an enthusiastic state she flirts with
Hamid who is Boy’s favourite for that year. To overcome her state of widowhood,
she behaves in an odd manner. Her activities prove that she teeters on high heels
on the beach and goes in for lavender bikinis, despite the prominent scar on her
abdomen. Sucher remarks of the state:

She sees herself as passionate and tempestuous and is
sublimely oblivious the ridicule of herself that enlivens the
group in her absence. She is animated now by her flirtation
with the charismatic, super erotic Hamid. (203)

Hamid calls the mother as “the golden oldie” but he laughs at her behind her back.
She becomes the butt of ridicule amidst the young men.

Susie and her mother represent polar opposites. The mother is an
exhibitionist and materialistic type who seems to enjoy life through fulfilling the
appetites and showing off whatever she has. She thinks the world is willing to
admire or tolerate her. But Susie is of a different temperament. The mother
verbally harasses Susie for her retreating character and Susie’s lack of any desire
to assert herself or have a worldly position or career. Susie’s choice to marry a
nervous sensitive gay man is also not appreciated by her mother. Susie, unlike her mother is content to sit on the sidelines and hear the voices of the men at the party who chit-chat contentedly as they idle away the sunny days together with the inherited fortune of Susie.

Both the women are hopelessly in love, Susie with Boy, mother with Hamid. The story generally shows women to be vulnerable economically and emotionally. Though Susie is not economically dependent on her husband Boy emotionally she surrenders herself to him. Susie allows her husband to have his flings while she tidies up the house.

Actually, Terry himself was one of the people who taught me that it’s not good to care too much. I was like him once -- for instance, when he and Boy were very much involved with each other … and I used to torment myself by spying, speculating, finding out. But now I don’t do that any more.

(EUE 172)

The mother, to overcome the problems of frustration and loneliness, forgets her state of widowhood and enjoys her life. The fact that the mother struts about in a bikini suggests that she wants to be younger than Susie and this is met with contempt. Susie has tried to warn her mother of her attitude but all is in vain. In turn the mother feels:
“you don’t understand, Susie,” she said. “you don’t know anything about these things”. […] it’s one of the regrets of her life that I haven’t turned out to be fun loving and sexy like her.” (EUE 165)

Hamid and the mother get on well together. They both seem to have the same sense of humour. Susie’s mother really forgets about her condition and also her age. She becomes and behaves like a girl in the presence of Hamid. Hamid too, to flirt with her often calls the mother by her first name, Bea. Bea is very happy and says proudly to her daughter that Hamid and she has got same Chemistry. The mother does not feel a tinge of shame to share such things with her daughter.

Bea, by nature, is a fun-loving woman and loves to sing and dance but to marry Susie’s father, and as he desired, she promised to give up her singing and dancing career. But still she cannot forget her lively activities and often the memories of her past linger back in her mind. Hamid reminds her of her husband. “He reminds me of Daddy. Hamid. Not that they look alike or anything, but there is something” (EUE 168). The innocent crazy mother is making a fool out of herself and she does not care of it. She just loves what physical pleasure Hamid offers. Her physical starvation even leads her to make love in front of her daughter. One of the most puzzling facts in the sensibilities and behaviour of Bea is that her obsession with her male friend exploiters reaches a point of return and she sacrifices all in her search of true love. She is doomed for miserable
predicament of internal fragmentation. The widows in the stories, “The Widow” and “A Summer by the Sea” are desperate for affection. They are ready to do anything and end up exploited monetarily until there’s nothing left to take from them, then gradually they are ignored.

The widow, an Indian or westerner suffers a lot in the society. They often feel lonely and isolated. The old women in Jhabvala’s Indian fiction to some extent escape the particular disparagement that is the lot of old age in the west. The Indian society traditionally values the last phase of life as a special period of freedom from the responsibilities of being householder and other things. Being a widow, spiritual practice becomes a full-time pursuit as shown in most of Jhabvala’s stories. The condition of a widow who has children are pathetic whereas the plight of a childless widow is often more pathetic.

The practice of “Suttee” which means immolation of the widow formerly practised in India was in part encouraged by the extreme hardships that widows forced in medieval Hindu society. Even in modern India, widows are isolated from the mainstream of social life. At times she is not only neglected by the society but also by her own family members on whom she is expected to depend at the time of her crisis. The plight of widows is sometimes so lamentable that they often resort to take the easy way out – “Suicide”. The attitude towards the widows is never questioned, and if at all someone ventures, she is confronted with obfuscating rigmarole regarding traditional values, beliefs and customs.