CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION
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In the foregoing chapters, we have discussed Jhabvala's major fiction in terms of a comic framework that has evolved out of her active engagement with and perceptive observation of the continental, the English and the Indian Societies. In order to analyse her novelistic skill and imaginative construction in terms of their generic aspects, we made use of the term "social comedy." Discussing the significance of Indian women novelists in English, William Walsh says, "R. Prawer Jhabvala, a most prolific writer, has been rather absurdly compared to Jane Austen, but, she is like a gentler Mary McCarthy. Her characters are a trifle routine, her prose is pedestrian but she is an expert analyst of domestic fiction."\(^1\) Walsh is not wrong in disapproving the comparison between Jhabvala and Jane Austen. But he is not very sympathetic in bracketing together Mary McCarthy and Jhabvala. No doubt, Jhabvala's prose is not metaphoric but it seems to serve her purpose well. The kind of fiction

she writes is neither Jamesian nor Joycean. It does not aspire to make the consciousness of a character transparent. Her aim seems to be to present characters who are vulnerable to the conflicting socio-cultural dynamics of the contemporary India. As Yasmine Gooneratne rightly says, "Ruth Jhabvala consistently bases the conflicts that arise between Indians and westerners in her novels upon the complexities of culture, history and psychology, avoiding the simpler, more obvious issues of colour. Her Indian characters, as seen by Western eyes, range from the comic to the beautiful; her Westerners, as seen by Indian eyes, range from the sexually titillating to the grotesque. By using descriptive terms that are non-associative in terms of colour, she keeps her subject clear of the superficial, the boring and—sal a trap into which many World Writers fall—the merely racist or sensational. Without being allegorical, her characters exemplify the conflicts, the tensions, and the response to a situation that emerges largely but of bias and the self-activities. There is some truth in her view that the climate

of a given region and its geographical specificities play an unobtrusive role in determining a character's response to a given socio-cultural event or situation.

A Stronger Climate is a dramatization of the interaction between climate and character. The stories collected in this volume deal with "the seekers" and "the sufferers." As we have shown earlier, the juxtaposition of the seekers and the sufferers generates the social comedy in her novels. These two fictional character types are interchangeable and are amenable to subtle variation. The novelist does not take the privilege of probing deeply into their thoughts and mental squints. On the other hand, the situation is dramatized in terms of opinions, attitudes, caste and communal differences and economic status of families, individuals, regions and nations. This sort of novelistic orientation, highlights the play and place of intelligence, wit and irony. For example A Backward Place brings to a central focus the conflict between family and society, love and marriage, boredom and goodtime, penury and riches, sophistication and stupidity.
Etta, the Hungarian blonde is sophisticated but cynical; Clarissa, the English seeker is stupid but honest. Judy, the English wife of Bal is honest, lovable and loving and is attached to her husband and children. Her love and affection, and her conviction and belief in the institution of marriage are juxtaposed with the views of Etta on marriage. Dr. Hotch Stedt and his wife are placed in a subtle contrast with Judy and her husband, Bal. Moreover, the Indian dress, especially sari suggesting the fusion of climate and garments is set off against the European fashions and dress. In this way the novel is a successful fusion of details and design, one enriching the other, and saturating the whole with an intellectual flavour.

III

The narrative reconstruction of Olivia's sad story in *Heat and Dust* proceeds in a comic mode and an ironic tone. The ironic perspective helps the reader to make his own evaluation of the Indian and the British opinions about what India virtually was and is. The intellectual and critical focus in the novel is on the Indian climate or the stronger climate and sex. Olivia often says that the heat in India
is unbearable, but she bears it because the strange bond that emerges between her and the Nawab. A similar point can be made about the relationship between the narrator and Inder Lal. The narrator accommodates herself to the Indian situation. She improves her knowledge of Hindi and develops intimacy with Inder Lal and his wife, Ritu just as Olivia develops a sort of passion towards the Nawab and his family, the narrator too, develops an interest in Inder Lal's family. As Yasmin Gooneratne rightly points out, "Olivia's honesty in her relationship with the Nawab is in direct contrast to the sub-terfuge that goes on all around her. She stands alone in this matter except for somewhat waverer support of Harry, who sees no difference in the way his countrymen handle their Indian subjects and servants, and their treatment of the weaker, defenceless members of their own society." But it would be absurd to suggest that climate alone was wholly responsible for Olivia's sad Indian experience. Of course, there is no stain in the love of Olivia for Douglas, but she indirectly suggests that Nawab has fascinated her and tickled her love and passion for goodtime.

It may not be wrong to conclude that in Olivia there exists an unqualified admiration and love for the manly and decent Douglas—and her sneaking but definite realisation that Douglas is too much the correct man to satisfy her passionate nature. Mrs. Jhabvala's attempt to recreate the India of twenties and thirties is more in tune with her intellectualising tendency than with a near dramatic presentation of the theme of sex and climate. The narrator's experiences reveal the incongruity between the apparent and the real aspect of Indian society of the pre-Independence India which is kept in close textural proximity with the post-Independent India. The roits at Khatm, the Sute, the decoits and the Nawab's involvement with them, his gay parties, the Hijras that populate his court are in pleasing contrast with Harry, Mr. & Mrs. Saunders and these are juxtaposed with Inder Lal's admiration for the British Sadhu, Chiki. These serve as a suitable scaffolding for the comedy we have in _Heat and Dust_.

IV

The lines of comedy we have been discussing appear with unprecedented imaginative felicity in her latest novel,
In Search of Love and Beauty. At the centre of the novel we have Leo Kellermann who successfully makes use of Louise and Regi for his personal and selfish ends. There are repeated references to Leo's strange appearance and dress in the novel. The career and fortunes of the German families who migrated to New York are dramatised with pleasing details and vigorous wit. Although it is not a novel about India, there are a few Indian characters and Marietta, the daughter of Louise pays a few visits to India. All the characters except Natasha live in an atmosphere of business and are instinctively prudent and calculating. Leo's aggressive pursuit of money and sex under the mask of monk and prophet are the comic details which are made suggested by numerous anthropological images. The petty quarrels between Louise and Regi, between these two women and Leo, the tension between Mark and his boys, the relationship between Mark and Leo which is purely business - like, the intimacy between Ahmed and Marietta which is purely promiscuous, and their interest in Natasha whose quest for love and beauty of the soul that constitute the details of the novel are placed in a design which is more significant than the details. The design is
so comic and suggestive that love and beauty which are rare commodities in the world of prudence and business become the goals of a quest and the characters are in a state of illusion thinking that their disillusionment is the source of love and beauty.

With an European cultural heritage, an English education and an Indian sojourn, Jhabvala is ideally qualified to express the results of her social observation in any manner she chooses. That she chose to dramatise her experience in terms of fiction seems to be a happy choice. A sensitive appreciation of one's own experience and observation may be articulated either in the comic, the tragic or the absurd mode. The comic mode we have in Jhabvala's fiction might have been a deliberate choice but as her readers, we are not concerned very much with the reasons for her aesthetic choice. We are concerned with the product of that choice. As we have indicated in the foregoing chapters Jhabvala's aesthetic product may be christened "social comedy." Some of the ways in which this "social comedy" emerges in her fiction we have analysed in the foregoing pages.