Chapter III

Economic Milieu
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Jhabvala focuses on money-civilization of a rising commercial middle class. She shows scales of values caught between conflict of tradition and modernity. Lalaji in The Nature of Passion often spends money for clandestine deals such as engaging the lawyer for securing Om’s letter to T-.

“He left the lawyer and went to his bedroom fumbling under his kurta for the little key which he wore tied to his pyjama-cord. The bedroom had built in walnut wardrobes with sliding doors which had cost a lot money. But they were almost empty, for both Lalaji and his wife preferred to keep their belongings their clothes, their valuables in the huge old family trunks which stood pushed against the wall. These peasant coffers heavily padlocked and iron-bound spelt more security to them than any safe or any bank.”

1The Nature of Passion, p. 84.
Lalaji is seriously aware of significance of money to man's station in life. He adjusts himself quickly to his newly gained wealth and is aware of the bond between man and his acquired objects.

"However, he had very soon managed to adjust himself to his new and foreign opulence. His costly, shiny possessions did not disconcert him. These things were proof of his wealth, of his achievements. He felt at ease among them because he owned them; he mastered them. Tomorrow, if he wanted to, he could throw them out and buy new ones, more expensive ones, if more expensive ones could be got."

This capacity and power of Lalaji to enlarge the area of possessions characterizes his personality. He recognizes power and value of money but his inward self transcends narrow confines of his materialistic bent of mind. His quest for money is a kind of self-fulfilment.

The women question Lalaji's implicit faith in what money can achieve in life. Nimmi as a bride will be pleased with huge dowry. Lalaji's wife protests: 'Dowry-showry' and contemptuously says:

\[1 \text{ The Nature of Passion, p.10.}\]
“they will wish they have half the dowry and twice the better girl”.

Lalaji, then, provokes his wife and sister,

“You would have my daughter brought like a poor man’s, asked Lalaji, smiling, ‘poor man, rich man’, his wife replied, ‘a daughter is a daughter and there is only one way’.

These elderly orthodox women who oppose modernity, women education, female independence and equality to men are no less materialistic and acquisitive.

Jhabvala attempts to demonstrate that morality, goodness and virtue have necessarily no connection with riches and positions.

Lalaji envisions the wedding of Nimmi in style:

“If people were to talk of Usha’s wedding for years to come, the memory of Nimmi’s they should carry with them into their next birth......And after the wedding.... for he could not stop thereafter she was married, he would make her life a paradise...... At every step someone should attend her, every wish to be fulfilled before she had wished it.... and when she went out, all the world should turn its head and ask ‘who is this

\[1\text{The Nature of Passion, p.87.}\]
Queen?’ to be answered, ‘she is the daughter of Lala Narayan Das Verma’."1

This excessive doting and ambitious planning of Lalaji makes Nimmi represent the quest for culture of the new rich class in Delhi. India has to experience this transformation.

Lalaji’s clerk informs Lalaji that ‘every man is born with a certain nature’ and a person acts according to that nature. ‘Man attains perfection,’ he quotes, ‘being engaged in his duty.’2 The nature of Lalaji’s passion is to become a rich man and his pursuit of wealth is his duty and in a way realization of his real self. Lalaji’s earthiness and worldliness concretize his abstract passion, his love of children and the family and a desire to realize his true self. He loves men, things and the family gathering. He snaps his ties with his roots birth place, his native village in the pre-partition Punjab. He, in the soil of Delhi, begins to search and evolve new roots. He looks for a new Jerusalem of money and familial get-togetherness.

The forces of stodgy commercialism in some respects challenge moral order of man and society. The quest for money is

2 Ibid, p.240.
viewed as a fulfillment of self. Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair* ruminates,

“I think I would be a good woman if I had five thousand a year,” and adds with a sigh, “heigho! I wish I could exchange my position in society, and all my relations, for a snug sum in the three percent consols.”¹

The worldliness and love for money of Becky is distinctly different from that of Lalaji. The old man shows profound concerns for his family and happiness of his relations. Lalaji’s engagement with money is modified by his affection for his daughter. The materialistic self in him is mellowed by the filial affection.

“Had he been born without the nature of a rich man, Lalaji himself could have said so without pain. As perhaps he could also have said that a daughter is but a loan, if he had not had a daughter like Nimmi. All men wish in their hearts for wealth and for beautiful daughters; and yet, thought Lalaji, there is great sorrow both in wealth and in beautiful daughters. Since the one has to be kept up, and the other given away.”²

¹ *Vanity Fair* p. 48.
Nimmi represents quest for culture of newly growing rich class in Delhi. She is placed wherein the culture of ‘business people’ faces onslaught from the sophisticated citadels of culture. Pheroze tells Nimmi:

‘Once the Intimate was quite a nice place,’ Pheroze said, ‘the people who went there were gentlemen and ladies. But now you cannot imagine what kind of people go there— they are all businessmen and are very bad and crude and have no manners.’

Pheroze disapproves the new rich class.

‘The businessmen come into all the best places and spoil them for other people, and sometimes they even bring their uneducated wives. It is a great pity. I do not know why such people cannot stay at home or why rules cannot be made to keep them out.’

The attack of Pheroze on Delhi business class appears to be voice of the pseudo-cultured class against the invasion of their culture by the newly rich.

1 The Nature of Passion, p.132.
2 Ibid, p.132.
There is a genuine effort to expose material reality, pretentiousness, hollowness of money-civilization, and emotional poverty of an affluent society in Jhabvala’s fiction.

The materialistic approach to the feelings and emotions of womenfolk along with their vanity, corruption in business and in the Indian bureaucracy are articulated from a woman’s point of view in *The Nature of Passion*. The novel is a sarcastic exposure of worldliness and the attitude of rapacious men towards women on the other.1

"Ruth Jhabvala portrays the characters of this novel with a verve-recording quirks and oddities, the weaknesses and strengths of each individual in the extended (and continually extending) family of Lala Narayan Das Verma and in her anti-hero’s character with its blending of endearing and repulsive qualities, we may see both a symbol of his creator’s conflicting feelings for India, and evidence of her ability to externalize them in her art."2


Jhabvala exposes crudity, coarseness and lack of sensitivity of an inherited tradition of the Punjabis (certain groups only) who, for partition, moved to Delhi. Jhabvala does not ignore the 'odours' of the rich emanating from brave people of great vigour and vitality (Punjabis again). These new rich classes have grown out of a sense of enterprise, initiative and courage, qualities which cannot be dismissed. Jhabvala's awareness of culture, specifically of European or westernized Indian culture in urban India, is not devoid of positive elements of that culture. She satirizes such people, ridicules them exposes their hollowness yet she is aware that they primarily people her world and give it solidity and sustenance.

The 'quest for Indianness' and the company of simple, true and unostentatious people leads Amrita to Hari's elder sister, 'in whom she will only discover the familiar combination of wealth and ostentation, together with a new kind of emptiness'. The newly acquired wealth gives Prema and her husband Suri a superior status in their own community. She amusingly tempers her cordiality to
Anand's relations with 'a touch of condescension' (p.230) and challenges the arrogance of Saxenas:

"Do they think they are better than we are because they live in a big house and have been to England? I also live in a big house and if I wanted to I also could go to England. And we have a big car brought specially from America, and I have clothes fine enough for the finest lady in Delhi, one salwar-kamiz I have cost Rs. 250, I don't know if the ladies in that family have such clothes. Why didn't you tell him that?"¹

Prema's articulation characterizes her essential feminine traits. She is enraged by her brother's rejection as a suitable groom for the Saxena girl (Amrita), she defies all limits of modesty and enumerates items of material affluence only to establish her status.

The problem of Prem is his low salary of Rs. 175 a month:

'How to manage on that? His rent alone came to 45 rupees.'²

It haunts him. He tries to represent it before the house owner, Mr. Seigal and make him aware of his growing expenses. Prem,

¹To Whom She Will, p.230.
²The Householder, p. 9.
nervous to speak directly asks his wife Indu and even requests his old mother to accomplish this mission. His bold effort to ask Mr. Seigal gets cold response. In fact, his subconscious self constantly harps on reduction in rent. The novel ironically, ends on pessimistic and strained note of dull exchange of views between Raj and Prem. Raj when arrives for a meal at Prem’s apartment with his family, surveys the room and asks:

‘how much rent do you pay?’ When Prem tells him, he shakes his head: ‘It is too much!’ Again, he continues, ‘Landlords must be checked from profiteering.’

It is not merely an obsession of Prem or Raj but a tangible economic reality. It occupies the conscious self of lower middle-class individuals in India.

Mr. Khanna uses staff room of the college as a guest room. He brings in a bed and a towel with “work is worship” embroidered in it. Mr. Khanna’s behaviour with Prem satirizes Indians cultivating the habit of being ponderous, pontifical, knowledge-parading. Prem

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1 The Householder, p. 191.
attempts to impress upon Mr. Khanna the need to help Sohan Lal (indirectly Prem himself) by painting a pitiable picture of the teacher's poverty. Mr. Khanna instead waxes eloquent on advantages of a sumptuous breakfast.

‘You see,’ explained Mr. Khanna, ‘the gastric juices must be allowed to flow from early morning otherwise they will become clogged and nasty indigestions follow.’

‘A spoonful of salt taken in a glass of warm water is also very good for replacing liquid strength lost through too much perspiration.’

The irony appears on two contrary conditions: compulsion of Sohan Lal to leave home at six without food and the pompous comment of Mr. Khanna on the need to take plenty of salt with food.

Mrs. Khanna, a short plump woman, very conscious of her husband's status, and contemptuous of his subordinate colleagues, wears ample gold ornaments and bright flowered saris.

“She looked as opulent and upholstered as her sitting-room, and consequently

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inspired Prem with the same feeling of shyness.'"\(^1\)

The novelist describes opulence of the interior of Mr. Khanna's apartment and the gloomy poverty of the dirty Mehrauli street crumbling houses of Sohan Lai.

"It was a narrow winding street with open booths on both sides-booths selling embroidered slippers, booths selling cheap cotton cloth, booths selling vegetables or fruits or sweetmeats or chunks of meat hung up on hooks. Over the shops were wooden verandas and arched windows set in thin crumbling walls."\(^2\)

Sohan Lai lives in one such house with crumbling walls. The author narrates:

"Prem and Indu walked into a dark doorway by the side of a booth selling coloured drinks in bottles. The stairs too were very dark. Upstairs Sohan Lai met them...."\(^3\)

\(^1\) The Householder, p.16.
\(^2\) Ibid, p.131
\(^3\) Ibid, p.131
Mr. Khanna exploits people like Sohan Lal and with his wife eats ‘English’ breakfast and meals in their opulent and comfortable rooms. It is a pattern in all spheres throughout India— in trade, and commerce, in politics, education and culture, in art and literature, and so on. The entire system is vitiated. In truth, the very human psyche in India is perverted. Jhabvala places her protagonist in such a system. The young Prem a householder, has to fulfill certain obligations. The novel is a quest on the part of a weak, imperfectly equipped character in respect of knowledge and courage. Prem in his personal and social relationships with Raj, Sohan Lal, Mr. Chaddha, Mr. and Mrs. Khanna, Hans, the Swami, the Seigals, and his wife Indu is drawn. Each relationship leaves its own impression on his soul. Prem is pitted against formidable forces.

“But he was weak and alone. He is on one side with Indu behind him and the coming baby, and on the other side were the Khanna’s and the Seigals and Mr. Chaddha and his students and doctor’s bills and income tax forms and all the other horrors the world had in store for him. He felt that he was required to pit his strength against all these, and yet he knew from the beginning that it was...
hopeless because he did not have much strength. He knew that the only way he could survive was by submitting to and propitiating the other side.1

Prem, pays house rent of Rs. 45/- out of his salary of Rs 175/-. His landlord Mr. Seigal with his family members lives a happy life. Prem becomes an object of pity. Jhabvala sympathies with Prem because of his social class which is neither rapacious nor vulgar, nor hypocritical, nor selfish, nor mean, nor the exploiting class, nor brutish like the rich people represented by Suri, Lalaji and Har Dayal and their associates in her earlier novels. Prem and Raj are employed in private and public sectors respectively. They come from lower middle-class families who become victims of materialistic society. The perpetrators of such society in affluent countries are not as odious as they are in India- a country where the gulf between the rich and the poor is vast. There are thousands of poor children who become blind, and die of malnutrition. There are millions of beggars, unemployed or semi-employed. The life style of the rich people in India matches the rich of imperialist countries. These rich Indian

1 The Householder, p.125.
people do not deserve such lifestyle as they have not achieved it through their constructive and creative contribution to the growth of Indian society, and with hard labour but have grabbed it by looting public wealth under official auspices.

In such milieu, Prem has rock-bottom existential experiences. He feels the harshness of his living in the world. He senses bitterness.

“He realized that no one was interested in his difficulties that the problem of supporting himself and Indu and any family they might have was his alone. The harshness of the world filled him with bitterness and despondency. It seemed to him that adult, settled, worldly people-people like Mr. Khanna and Mr. Seigal—should be glad and even eager to help a young man, just starting out in life and with a family to support. But nobody cared. ‘Wherever you look in the world’, he told Sohan Lal, ‘people think only of themselves and they don’t love their neighbours at all’.”

Mr. Khanna, his employer and Mr. Seigal, his landlord touch his life on the raw. Prem from the beginning, hopes of help from

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1 The Householder, p.126
them: a rise in salary from Mr. Khanna and a reduction in house-rent from Mr. Seigal, so that, he may accomplish his obligations as a householder. Mr. Khanna instead gives him a severe dressing, even a warning that he may be dismissed from service.

"The fear of losing his job was a new one for Prem......His mind leapt to the consequences of dismissal: the difficulty- or even impossibility- of finding another job, the destitution of himself, Indu and their baby."1

Prem recognizes the significance of holding on to his job but feels “the weight of this burden”. He tries to impress upon Mr. Seigal his desperate financial condition but he is grieved to notice Mr. Seigal’s insensitivity to his suffering.

Prem recalls his past, his status and joy as the only son of his father the principal of Ankhpur College, but now he feels financially insecure and becomes aware of his stark existential situation:

“But Prem-what was he? He was no longer a student living in his father’s house: he has lost interest in his mother and in her cooking and in talk of Ankhpur. But what was he instead?

1 The Householder. p.126.
Where did he belong? It seemed to him now that he belonged nowhere, was nothing, was nobody.”1

Prem cannot provide sweetmeats and small presents to his pregnant wife Indu. He cannot buy as he has no spare money. Prem, while returning to his college after lunch, yearns for a cold drink, but soon he chides himself for harbouring such an unbecoming longing. He buys a satin blouse piece at a moment of his separation from Indu when he feels a sudden surge of emotion for her. The feelings of Prem are so gnawed at by his obsession with his low, meager wages that he cannot enjoy love-relationship.

Jhabvala, in The Householder and Heat and Dust depicts a rapacious social system in which the rich and the privileged exploit and thrive at the cost of the poor and the under privileged. Prem is hedged in his existence as householder by two exploiters, Mr. Khanna and Mr. Seigal, who provide him food and shelter respectively. The Khannas and the Seigals do not allow him to live a dignified life of a householder. He lives a harassed existence.

1 The Householder, p.92.
The forces of a society crush Prem. The Khannas and the Seigals rule the economic roost of the Post Independent India. They are insensitive brutes and their lifestyle fills human consciousness with abhorrence. Mr. Khanna eats sumptuous breakfasts in contrast to Sohan Lal’s poor lunches. The Seigal’s easy and lavish life presents a sharp contrast to unfurnished poor man’s life.

Lalaji, a rich and old-fashioned man, tries to pace with changing world. His ruling passion emerges as eagerly extends his influence and power through a growing network of family and business connections. Lalaji shows unfailing interest in the worldly advancement of his children whom he considers an extension of himself. Lalaji treats his wife as another possession. He believes that the life of women in a household whether rich or poor, is always the same.

The poor people helplessly wait their ejection from their tiny hutments in ‘Bundi Busti’ under pretentious plan of ‘slum clearance’ with option of better environment to them far away from their work place. The industrialists, real-estate dealers and profiteers are to
acquire their land. These people are coaxed and threatened to vacate
the area. Gulzari Lal himself is a prospective buyer of this piece of
land.

His wife Sarla Devi, who has conquered and transcended
herself, appeals to her son Vishnu to lend his hand in alleviating
miseries of the residents of Bundi Busti. Vishnu does not respond to
her appeal:

‘There is the double disgrace that people
should have to fight for their homes and
then that they should have to call such
places homes. If you saw them, if you
saw the conditions there- Is it all nothing
to you.........that people are poor and
helpless!.......’

Vishnu is in truth the little merchant’s son. He is driven by
values of money-ridden society. He is a true inheritor of Gulzari
Lal’s commercial outlook. He represents values of the rising
bourgeois in post-independent India. Sarla Devi beckons to him;

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1 Get Ready For Battle, p.146.
‘You must stand up, son, fight, you must fling yourself into the world.’¹

Jhabvala is worried about phantom-like extreme poverty in India and the gulf that divides the poor and the rich. Raymond attends a sumptuous supper at the British High Commission. The dignified Indian guests talk about the Indo-British relationship but Raymond thinks of Gopi and his poor surroundings. The English lady raises this pertinent question,

"I feel so odd," she says, ‘I mean, living the way we do, how can we, how do we have the conscience."²

Jhabvala expresses her disgust and disdain against the new rich in India as well as the luxury-loving foreigners in A New Dominion.

Rao Sahib’s assertion of progress seems again pompous. The assertion of Deepak that India shall be self-reliant in producing screw-valves within four years is ridiculous. The milk meant for children sold in the black market highlights corruption in public services, the darker side of ‘progress’. Bob, the go-ahead youngman,

¹ Get Ready For Battle, p.146.
² A New Dominion, p.53.
is a weak spokesman of the concept of progress in contemporary India. This surrender saves him from being a mere commercial success-hero.

Har Dayal, the committee man, the careerist, the materialist, and Ram Nath, the recluse, the book-worm, the idealist seem to sum up the two dominant aspects of society in contemporary India.

India’s misery and poverty draws Jhabvala’s attention. Her characters do not necessarily belong to the poor and disinherited classes of India. The dilapidated houses, hungry beggars, maimed children, dirty and filthy lanes and other tokens of poverty are present in her novels. Her characters with a brush with them do not directly suffer poverty.

Jhabvala’s prime interest lies in the life of the middle-class. She places role of money in the centre of her fictional world. The essential feature of her fiction is wealth and leisure on one side and poverty and resultant misery on the other. In the middle spectrum, the question assumes significance in terms of aspirations and trepidations of the middle-class.
Poverty and scarcity are terrible concerns. It explains fearful consequences of Prem as a husband, as a father, as a teacher and as a citizen, but it is also central to social milieu so realistically and skillfully portrayed in the novel. It is a kind of personal exile which occurs in Indian-society when a young married man leaves home to set up his family life independently. Prem discovers himself to be a loner in his new house. He is unable to communicate with his wife whom he hardly knows. He is burdened with teaching job he can scarcely cope with. Having embarked upon this new stage of life, strange and unusual, he finds himself dwarfed by onerous duties that await him. Prem resorts to his own father’s brand of stern authoritarianism in order to disguise his weakness and vulnerability.

The disparity between the rich and the poor in India is overriding theme of Jhabvala’s fifth novel Get Ready for Battle. The luxurious world of wealthy businessman Gulzari Lal is contracted with the world of sickness and destitution. It separates him from his wife Sarla Devi, a woman of conscience. She struggles to alleviate suffering of the poor and expresses her views in the newspaper article:
"While wandering at their own attitude, my western character wonders still more at that of the Indian characters. One of these western characters may be invited to a wedding a festive scene where fairy lights twinkle, the tables are loaded with pullows and kebabs, and the guests with ornaments and brocades; the band men play."\(^1\)

No one seems to notice that band men have no shoes, that gazing in at the front there is a rabble of children suffering from rickets and eye disease while at the back, where the waste food goes a rabble of grownups is holding out old tins. Don't Indians see? My western character asks.\(^2\)

The novel 'Get Ready for Battle' demonstrates the novelist's artistic and social preoccupation with money-civilization. It protests values of that civilization. The sequence of events, plots and structural devices revolve round the basic motif of the

\(^1\) Get Ready for Battle, p.129.
\(^2\) Ibid p.161.
preoccupations of individuals and families with money society, and value-patterns that arise from such goings on in a society.