Chapter IV

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Jhabvala in her novels treats marriage, position of daughters, dowry, class-distinction and behavioural patterns based on enduring aspects of human nature. The leisured middle class, concerned with merriment, deals with the impediments of everyday living and professional activity, food, clothes, furniture, money and servants. She portrays a realistic society springing from their acute observation of contemporary life.

The novel To Whom She Will reflects reconciliation between individual ambitions and social constraints. The individual theme stated through the personal conflicts of Amrita and Hari, and the social theme explored through responsible agents of social institutions induct into marriage. The reconciliation is ironically foregrounded when Amrita, in the beginning in love with Hari, reconciles to the notion of marrying Krishna Sen Gupta.

The plot of Amrita endorses wisdom of institution of oriental conservatism; marriage ‘arranged’ by family elders. Their families,
obsessed with their inherited values of class and conviction desire to prevent marriage: Amrita’s grandfather forbids it, her mother and her aunts are on look-out for a suitable groom with matching affluence and respectability, and a family of their own community. The gender differences appear to sink completely when attachment to inherited values is staked as demonstrated in the attitude of the elders of the Chakravarty family. Worn down by family pressure, Amrita and Hari settle for marriage with partners from socially suitable backgrounds in deference to wishes of their elders.

Amrita discloses to Hari her grandfather’s opposition to their intention of marriage.

“But I do not care about what Grandfather says; believe me. Hari, I do not care what any of them say.’ And when he still looked sad, she went on. ‘Please, believe me. Please. What does my family matter? You know I would give up everyone and everything for you. Nothing matters. Only you.”

1 To Whom She Will, p.29.
The mode and the tone of adolescent love emerges when Hari informs Amrita:

"All day my soul sings and dances for you,' he was saying and then someone slapped him on the back and he turned round and said, 'Hallo-hallo.'"¹

The exposure of this sentimentality is remarkably effective. Hari tells her:

"I am unworthy—you are a goddess and I am unworthy of you'. Amrita pleads that she, like Pope's Belinda, is no goddess but Hari is assertive. 'A goddess,' he insisted. 'You are a goddess; I worship you.'"²

Jhabvala exposes hollowness of pseudo-romantic epithets. Vaidya observes:

"She is What is known as a lady in our society..... That is to say, she has been brought up to a sheltered and idle

¹ To Whom She Will, p.30.
existence and taught never to think for herself.\textsuperscript{1}

It is a commentary on their personality. Both Hari and Vaidya adapt usual stances of the happy-go-lucky young men in India.

Hari, uncertain of himself is conscious of Amrita’s feelings for him. His responses are utterly sensuous, sometimes even sensual. Hari speaks to Krishna about his passion for Amrita:

“\ldots every moment of the day I think of her, she is the nightingale of my heart, the stars of my eyes, the juice of my liver, tell her that.”\textsuperscript{2}

The uncertainty, the instability, the waywardness of Hari’s emotional responses form crux of Amrita’s problem. Krishna places the matter straight to him:

“Unless of course, you care more for your family than you care for Amrita’. The proposal of his parents for an arranged marriage with Sushila Anand, a pretty singer. His sister, Prema, had said

\textsuperscript{1}To Whom She Will, p.56.
\textsuperscript{2}Ibid, p.145.
to him that Amrita was not the girl for
him. "You and Sushila we think it is best
for you: she will give you happiness."¹

Sushila is intelligent, soulful and from their community. He
pleads of his love for Amrita and protests that it was not right for him
to marry, Sushila. Suri, Prema's husband tells him:

"It is only a game and we all play it.
After marriage you will forget and you
will laugh at yourself for taking it
seriously."²

This view of love in human world, society, family is shown as
game. Ram Bahadur, Amrita's grandfather though not against inter
caste marriage opposes match on social and cultural grounds. In his
opinion Hari is a misfit in mind and soul. He lacks in culture and
refinement. Hari appears to him as untutored mind.

Hari marries Sushila for social and individual graces and
preserves values of community and family life. Marriage seems a
compromise in social sense: an adjustment of two individuals to

¹To Whom She Will, p.115.
²Ibid, p.117.
conform to social norm. Haydn Moore Williams points out that Ruth Jhabvala,

"like her literary ancestor, Jane Austen...... likes to develop plots in which romantic love is less than adequate".

The elderly orthodox women in The Nature of Passion oppose modernity, women education and their independence and equality of men.

Nimmi rebels against confines of tradition bound society. Her hair cut causes uproar in the family. Her mother and Phuphiji, the most conservative women of the house, are offended. They blame Lalaji for being too lenient with her. Nimmi goes to club with her friends, plays tennis dressed in shorts, drinks sherry even though it tastes like petrol, has a Parsi boyfriend and even allows him to kiss her in the moonlight.

Nimmi’s defiant attitude and unconventional behaviour is considered immodest. The family of Lalaji feels a sense of disgrace.

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1 H.M. Williams, *English Writings in Free India*, op.cit.3
that eighteen year old Nimmi is still unmarried. Phuphiji cries vengefully, ‘A girl of that age has no right to enjoy herself! She should be managing a household and bringing children and looking after a husband’ Lalaji responds with mild pity, ‘It will come to her soon enough’.

Nimmi after a few initial fanciful bursts of ideas agrees to her marriage. It is difficult to believe this change in Nimmi who defiantly opposed and spurned her arranged marriage like Usha.

“I will never say ‘yes’ if they come to me with a husband they have kindly found for me. On the contrary I will tell them: Thank you, I am grateful to you for your trouble, but if you do not mind I will find my own husband. This is a work I will do for myself.”

The gulf, in the attitudes to life between Esmond and Gulab divides them. Esmond is upset with spicy smells, uncleanliness and the untidiness but Gulab is fond of spicy Indian food and indifferent to environmental cleanliness. His sarcasm, his sneer, his contempt is

\[\text{\citearticle{The Nature of Passion, p.164.}}\]
\[\text{\citearticle{ibid, p.154.}}\]
all lost on Gulab since she is very languorous and placid. He tries to evoke some response or protest in her but she remains passive-'the original dumb blonde'. He finds himself trapped in her stupidity, in her dull, heavy, alien mind. He is very offensive toward her:

“You've got what I can only call a wonderful propensity to squalor. Tell me now, if pressed on the point, would you call yourself a slut?”

The Gulab-Esmond relationship forms the core of personal and familial tangles in the narrative. Esmond feels oppressed by Gulab and goes to mistress Betty ‘so light, modern and airy’. Her company in her small flat gives Esmond the feeling of homely England.

Gulab leaves Esmond at unsuccessfully attempt of her servant to molest her and failure of her husband to protect her.

Har Dayal’s daughter Shakuntala, is fascinated by the looks of her tutor Esmond Stillwood. She like Nimmi is immature teenager and falls a prey to temptations of the flesh and promptings of the senses.

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1 Esmond in India, p. 47

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"Esmond, I know you are married and also you have a child, but I tell you this means nothing to me. Only I know you have come into my life and now it is my duty to give everything I have to you, to adore you and to serve you and to be your slave...."¹

Esmond an Englishman inheriting a rationalist tradition cannot come to terms with the longings of an intense life. He tells Shakuntala:

"Hearts don’t burst that easily……no, no, I am not laughing at you, but do try and be sensible."²

Shakuntala’s sensuous fascination for Esmond ensues from her avowed rejection of Narayan, the idealist doctor, and the betrayal of her classmate and companion, Gulab. Jhabvala in a detached manner presents an adolescent, inexperienced girl, fed on romantic notions of love and feelings of sensuousness, falling to temptations of flesh.

¹ Esmond in India, pp.183-184
² Ibid, p.184
Jhabvala fails to portray true, genuine, heartfelt love. Esmond, Betty and Shakuntala do not evoke feelings of a bond that may unite man and woman in a sentiment and sensibility.

The Esmond and Gulab relationship comes to disaster, discord and separation. It is shown that possibilities of a relationship between culturally different persons becomes futile and frustrating experience.

Gulab marries for love but does not find it Shakuntala succumbs to her passion without evoking any positive fulfillment. The frustrated Esmond with Gulab allows his sexuality in his escapades with Shakuntala and his flirtations with Betty without discovering the internal centre of fulfillment of self.

Prem lives in oppressed conditions. He suffers intense loneliness, though cheerful and sociable by nature. He feels it after his quarrel with Indu:

"He began to feel like crying himself; already a tear was trembling on his cheek. He brushed it aside with his hand and the feel of it made him want to cry more. He felt so alone and lonely, shut up
in this small ugly flat with Indu who
cried by herself in the sitting room while
he had to lie and cry by himself in the
bed room." 1

The sense of failure oppresses Prem throughout the novel. The
various conditions of a man's mind such as utter loneliness, a sense
of oppressive failure, a terrible feeling of inadequacy become
existential modes of human existence. It results in a loss of self-
awareness and at times revels in 'sensual music' which husband and
wife feel and develop into each other's spiritual self-identity. Prem
has a feeling of self-alienation.

"It is not that alone", said Prem. He
thought of words in which he could
explain how difficult it would be for him
to bring Indu. I hardly know her, he
wanted to say; how can I bring someone I
hardly know to such an important tea-
party? Yet it seemed a strange thing to
say about one's own wife especially after

1 The Householder, 5.24
he had already confessed to Sohan Lal that Indu was pregnant.\textsuperscript{1}

Sohan Lal, Hans Loewe and the Swami show sympathy for him. They nodded and sighed when Prem says:

“Everywhere there is selfishness and cruelty, so that it is very difficult for a young man to make his way”\textsuperscript{2}.

Hans Loewe, a young German who comes to India for his spiritual regeneration and thinks that India is the chosen country. He regards Prem spiritual. Hans cannot understand the gnawing pain of Prem as at the core of his being exists a society where in pervades cruelty, selfishness, insensitivity, injustice. Prem feels that ‘he belonged nowhere, was nothing, was nobody’\textsuperscript{3}.

Prem’s each visit and stay at the Swami’s residence, purged his soul of all anxieties, and gnawing pain, his precarious financial situation and insecure social positions, his despondency and tensions and his relationship with his wife Indu. The soul breathes fresh air of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} The Householder, p.26
\item \textsuperscript{2} ibid, p.126
\item \textsuperscript{3} ibid, p.92
\end{itemize}
freedom. Jhabvala describes this spiritual state of Prem after his first meeting with the Swami:

“Later he could not remember how he got home. He felt light-headed, and kept laughing to himself. Probably people who met him thought he was drunk. In a way that was how he felt. But it was not so much as if he had drunk spirits than as if he had drunk pure well-water, and it was the unaccustomed purity of it that he had gone to his head.”¹

Jhabvala informs that the harshness of the world filled Prem with bitterness and despondency. In his successive visits to the Swami, Prem sees disciples ecstatically singing devotional songs and dancing. He feels “that his own life too had, like a river, found its own bed and was running with their in one current towards God”.²

The paths of Swami and of the householder are different. The householder must perform his social and familial duties and fulfill his obligations.

¹ The Householder, p.57.
² Ibid, p.128
The novel *The Householder* presents personal predicaments, familial and social problems of a sensitive young teacher.

Mr. Chaddha clings to old values and considers woman inferior. He treats women as objects of mere entertainment:

"It is not for nothing suggested Mr. Khanna, that they are known as the gentle sex......It is good sometimes to break off in the midst toil..... and enjoy an hour’s leisure and ease in their charming company.”

Sohan Lal’s remarks convey criticism of Indian system of early arranged marriage which deprived him of his freedom to live his life as per demands of his temperament.

"Here in our India......it is so that while we are still children and know nothing of what we want, they take us and tie us up with a wife and children....so....when we are old enough to know what the world is and God is, then it is too late, for we have

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1 *The Householder*, p 38.
a burden on our back which we cannot
shake off for the rest of our days.”

The novelist in Get Ready for Battle speaks of readiness of women characters for a battle of their final emancipation from the patriarchal dominance. Sarla Devi, Kusum Mehra and Mala are not subservient to their male counterparts. In fact, issues of divorce, separation and woman’s self-reliance are in the air. If husband’s ways and behaviour of life do not suit his wife, it is no longer necessary for wife to stay with husband. If a widow, though of grandmother’s age, happens to like a man, she cannot be stopped her from marrying him. If a husband neglects his wife and expects her to sit passively at home, revolt is not far behind. It is a scenario of feminine sensibilities with bold self-decisions that Jhabvala unfolds and one observes exercises of female personalities as individuals.

Kusum, the middle-aged mistress of Gulzarilal consciously strives him to seek divorce from his estranged wife Sarla Devi and marry her. Sarla Devi, a woman of conscience and self-identity, is an excellent foil to other women who pursue advancement of their own

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1 The Householder, pp.133-134
prosperity, or happiness of their family life. Kusum’s usurpation of the place of his lawful wife in business parties at Gulzari Lal’s residence gives an idea of process of transition ushering in Indian society. The novelist draws such women prepared to fight their battle for achieving self-realization and self-identity in India of modern times.

The writer shows her concern of western women and their interaction with India and Indians, the malaise of East-West encounter. Jhabvala is interested in delineating the predicament of particularly expatriate women characters in the process of their living in illusionary country India. Jhabvala declares:

“My work is only one individual European’s attempt to compound the puzzling process of living in India.”

The novel A Backward Place breaks fresh ground of visualizing India and Indians in European feminine perspective. The three expatriate women-Judy, Etta and Clarissa. They fall in a puzzling cycle of attraction, and illusion towards things Indian.

1 Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, quoted in Contemporary Novelist, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976, p.270
leading to disillusion and ending in frustration, self-destruction and disintegration of individual personality on one hand and withdrawal and fight for survival on the other. David Rubin observes:

“In this case the central figures are three European women who represent in varying degrees the East-West malaise and love affairs between-----and Europeans; the romantic vaguely questing Westerners; the adventure and fight for survival of bored, superficial and Idophobic drifters, mirrored by their egomaniacal, mindless and predatory Indian counterparts.”

These three women represent three versions of European sensibility at different degrees of realization. Etta hides her Hungarian origin and finds herself in India in consequence of her marriage to an Indian which has failed. She discards Indian socio-cultural ethics which regard marriage an everlasting fusion of two souls in which woman’s soul is submissive to the dominating soul of

man. She leads a life of permissive and sexually indulgent young woman having a long train of her lovers. Love for her is a matter of will and wish, therefore, she has a pathetic series of transient affairs. Etta scolds Judy for her commitment to Indian traditions. She argues that Judy in marrying a dreamy Indian has committed a disastrous mistake. It shall spoil and reduce her to a savage. She exhorts Judy:

“You are just nothing here. Look at you in that thing—Judy looked down at herself, at the sari which she mostly wore nowadays......and your hair too and —ough you’re awful. You have let yourself go.”

Judy represents Englishness with liberal, practical and phlegmatic sensibility. Her friend Clarissa is an antagonist of Etta. She expresses her craze to Etta to experience it:

“I’ve rejected all western values; I belong here now.....They’re the most conventional, dull, bourgeois, English, English people you’ve ever met in your born days. God knows how I escaped being like that. We’re like creatures from

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1 A Backward Place, p.6.
a different planet, absolutely. I really think I must have been Indian in my previous birth-in all my previous births…”

Etta and Clarissa represent two antithetical approaches of English women to India. Etta needs her show of Englishness for self-protection, Clarissa feels trapped as an English woman. Etta clings to cover herself with an English mask but Clarissa tries to free herself from this mask. Etta expresses her loathing of India, Clarissa her love of it, Etta her skepticism, Clarissa her idealism.

These three women mirror inner enigma of Jhabvala in a pathetic manifestations. They discover that India has no solution for them. India embraces all and treats lovers like Etta, ideal wives like Judy and aesthetic seekers like Clarissa alike as life-long prisoners here. 2

Mrs. Hochstadt speaks of her opinion of honeymoon of the East and the West:

1 A Backward Place, p.192
2 cf. Ronald Shepherd also perceives Jhabvala’s own face in these three women from Europe. “More specifically, these three women at the centre of A Backward Place dramatise Jhabvala’s own difficulty not just with India but with herself. At the centre of this novel there is an existential dilemma, arising from an uncertain authorial identity.” Jhabvala in India: The Jewish Connection, Delhi: Chanakya Publication, 1994, p.100.
"How often have I thought that a serious cooperative study of Indian and Western spiritual achievements will widen the horizons of both the one and the other".1

Hochstadts and Etta reflect division between the ideal, romantic, positive perspective and sheer negative, cynical attitude. Europe and India, in the opinion of Hochstadts, could be mutually contributory. In cultural content, the ‘Indian spirit has soared far above the European’ where Mrs. Hochstadt remarks: ‘India gives us so much......What joy to be asked to give a little in return.’2

Judy and Bal become integral to a cluster of human relationships. She is drawn to Bal’s spirits in her cheerless home in England. She marries him and settles with him in a low middle-class joint-family house in Delhi. Prithvi, their son wants his father to stay with him, while Bal wishes to attend a Bombay film star Kishan Kumar on his visit to Delhi. Judy is worried of Prithvi’s illness but Bal constantly talks of films. Judy holding him by the sleeve, asks

1 A Backward Place, p.106
him to attend to his duty as father. He yields but she does not happy feel.

“She imagined him before the bored gaze of the successful film star, dancing, singing, jumping, looking as eager as Prithvi, his ears pink with effort, and hope glowing in him that it would somehow lead to his big chance.”

The construct of ‘a backward place’ rests on relationships that develop between Indians and Europeans, the highbrow and the middlebrow that bind characters together and give meaning and significance to their experience. The controlling metaphor concretizes frustrations of the Europeans experience of India. It underscores impact of European coarseness, sensuality and sterility on the Indian soil, thus, makes it appear a ‘backward place’.

A young Englishman on his visit to India begins to live among the sadhus and finally finds a Guru who gives him initiation, new existence and new name. The Englishman becomes Hindu in spirit and is given a name Chidananda (Chid) in Heat and Dust. The

1 A Backward Place, p.31
narrator while walking with Inder Lal in the Royal Tombs, hears a
groan and enters the desolate buildings where he finds this forsaken
man and recognizes as seen him at the travellers’ rest-house. He
seeks shelter in the narrator’s small room for his illness but after his
recovery doesn’t want to leave. He expects the young woman to
provide him food and sex. The sex appetite is most intricately
compounded with religious or spiritual pursuit in *Heat and Dust*. The
narrator describes Chid’s attitude:

“He is always hungry, and not only for
food. He also needs sex very badly and
seems to take it for granted that I shall
give it to him the same way I give him
my food.”¹

The narrator Olivia Junior who is being used by Chid ‘to reach
a higher plane of consciousness through the powers of sex’; she
herself doesn’t know this, yet she allows him to go ahead. Olivia,
physically stronger, can easily resist but she feels it is due to some
emanation which comes not from him, but from some powers outside
himself.

¹ *Heat and Dust*, p.65.
The novel primarily shows the manner of conjunction between sex and spirituality in characters and situations. Olivia Junior has only vague intimations of immorality flowing from sexual experience with Chid. Her sexual relationship with Inder Lal, the lower middle-class clerk seems purely sensual and normal. In the shrine of Baba Firdaus she unpacks sandwiches when Inder Lal gives two pieces of red string to be tied to the lattice in the shrine to get their wishes fulfilled. She lays her hand on his and then he looks at her in an entirely different way.

".......he was a healthy young man- his wife was away- we were alone in a romantic spot (getting more romantic every moment as the sun began to set)."¹

Sex and pregnancy seem to be recurring sequence of events in Heat and Dust. Olivia Junior gets pregnant and does not want Inder Lal to know about it and worry over it. Unlike, Olivia, the Junior decides to have her baby and hopes to go to mountains and join an ashram. She cherishes, as Olivia did two generations earlier, the view

¹ *Heat and Dust*, p. 127.
of the high, snow-covered mountains and clear, deep blue sky. *Heat and Dust* ends on this note:

"That is what I expect to see. Perhaps it is also what Olivia saw: the view- or vision- that filled her eyes all those years and suffused her soul."^1

In *Search of Love and Beauty* (1983), the novelist displays continuation and intensification of same processes of splitting of personality observed in several previous novels. Jhabvala finds an opportunity to devote herself to self-examination. The subtext of her ‘Indian’ fiction becomes the principal text, and her subject becomes divided personality. Jhabvala focuses on groups of German and Austrian refugees in New York, and writes on a sustained level about the German-Jewish background known to her as a child. *Three Continents* (1987), similarly focus on search for identity and heritage and attempt to explain and understand sense of alienation and expatriation which has been her own experience and of many of her western characters.

^1*Heat and Dust*, p. 180

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Her references to sexual contacts are in terms of animal imagery. The love making of Louise and Leo to Marietta as a child nothing but 'coiled......into......one unknown primeval animal'.1 Shirley, one of Leo’s confused disciple says I ‘got married like an animal’.2 The copulating of Stephanie and Jeff is described as ‘just one more activity that went on in the summer grass at the edge of the brook, among the birds and insects’.3 Mark’s ‘possession’ of Jeff, is also described in almost identical terms.

The contradiction between God and animal imagery seems to represent western man, lurching between soaring aspirations of the spiritual, followed by the despairing descent into the animal. Love and lust demonstrate same act and are tied to physical body. Humanity oscillates between these two extremes, and fails to find equilibrium of being human.

Harriet Wishwell and her brother Michael form a duo more like one single person than separate individuals. The narrator Harriet reveals that she suspects the sinister trap in which Michael falls and

1 In Search of Love and Beauty, p.92.
2 Ibíd, p.115
3 Ibíd, p.57.
her own entry into it for the sake of her brother. In a promise of inner strengthening through spiritual enlightenment, the twins surrender their self for sexual and economic rapacity of this oriental scam. Harriet’s involvement with Crishi and her obsessive sexual hunger for Crishi becomes uncontrollable.¹

In *Three Continents*, Jhabvala tends to interpret image of India that stands for religiosity and spirituality but it becomes a deception in modern context. The hypocrisy spreads a vicious network through alluring and charismatic manipulators in the form of trio’s cruel absolutism.

The relationship of twins is characterized by animal lure and contest for being seduced by a fascist masculinity in Crishi. It is pathetic to note that later in the novel Crishi fails to appear in the evenings and Harriet feels herself reduced to something less than human:

“He had aroused me so completely that the sex he gave me-rationed out to me was absolutely essential to me. Deprived

¹ cf. Ronald shepherd, “In Crishi and the movement there exists for Harriet and Michael Wishwell the promise of some magnificent renewal. The associated dangers of their liaison only stimulate in the twins a reckless desire to go the whole hog”, op cit, p.152
of it, I was if without breath and air. Really sometimes I lay there in such an agony of unfulfilled longing, I was fighting to breathe. I was hardly a person anymore but just this fearful need.”

She confesses that her inner urge for Crishi is irresistible though Crishi shares the same bed with Renee. She proclaims:

“I realized that my ravenous need was not that of any physical animal for another but for one particular human being-for Crishi, for my husband, whom I loved”

It is a mysterious and charismatic impact of Crishi on her. Harriet pays no heed to calls of her own reason and sane warnings from her blood relations. In fact, her mother, her father and also her step-grandmother Sonya all come over to London to warn and rescue Harriet and Michael from their commitment to self-destruction and self-immolation. They try their best to make them understand the togetherness of blood and return of family to America but it becomes

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1 Three Continents, p.152
2 Ibid, p.158
too late to revive family that has lost its original base of belongingness and meaning at all. Harriet finds herself unable to resist the obsessive infatuation towards Crishi in spite of knowing of hypocrisy as Lee could not separate herself from Swamiji even after her brutal rape in *A New Dominion*. The author depicts predicament of feminine sensibility in hopelessly ideallistic behavior of the twin and their desire to put themselves at risk, to cast aside past connections and dare annihilation for the promise of subsequent transcendence.

Michael’s eyes open to realities of criminal racket. Harriet discloses her reason for choosing this path while talking to ‘Father Tom’ and says:

“It’s the first real family I’ve ever had, my own family having split up ages ago”

Harriet, in her confession of homelessness and emotional vacuum, appears like other protagonists dealing with the America.

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1 *Three Continents*, p.311
Harriet's surrender after realization of her being entrapped in fraudulent scam is puzzling. She signs everything to Crishi in spite of murder of her twin brother by him. Crishi has turned Harriet into a woman obsessed with unusual sex-hunger which only he could cater. Harriet's wandering through the decayed palace at Dhoka in the final pages of the novel, is a pathetic wandering of a tragic heroine through a succession of broken mirrors with her fragmented personality caused by her wily embrace of self-destruction.

"It was as though I were entering him, becoming him; and that was what I tried to do with my thoughts—to make them Michael's thought: What he would have written. I said that I— that is, I, Michael—was going aware because there was nothing in this world that was good enough for me; that I had tried everything and had looked in every direction and there was just absolutely nothing that came up to my expectations. I said that if once you have these expectations—that is of Beauty, Truth and Justice—then you feel cheated by
everything that falls short of them; and everything here—that is, here in this world—does fall short of them. It is all neti, neti.”

Three continents thus becomes a debate of woman with the self on the nature of passion and experiences of romance. In spite of all traumatic experiences, Harriet reiterates her willing victimization by her demon-lover Crishi. Jhabvala seems to indicate that her protagonist, after their all skepticism and excruciation, is afflicted with some undefinable malaise and enemy of the woman is always internal.

A New Dominion focuses on love the modernization of India the conflicting demands of the worldly and the detached life; and the European expatriate’s ‘experience of India.’

The Christian missionary Miss Charlotte is placed opposite Swamiji. She is totally devoted to India and dedicated to her charitable and educational work. She remains deeply English and obstinately Christian. She is like Sarla Devi of Get Ready for Battle.

1 Three Continents, p.383
The novelist portrays virginal old Christian missionary as a true and faithful lover and servant of India. Raymond watches her pray:

"Miss Charlotte slipped from her chair down to the floor in a practiced, agile movement. The other two remained where they were but lowered their heads respectfully. Raymond thought how hard the floor must be under Miss Charlotte's knees, but he knew she didn't feel it. Surreptitiously he looked over at the old lady. Her head was still lowered but she was looking at him out of the corner of one of her blotted eyes. She closed it at him in a wink that made him look away again quickly. Miss Charlotte prayed out loudly and in a voice of faith and joy."

The novel is full of seekers for spiritual peace (Asha, Lee, Margaret, Evie, perhaps even Raymond in his own way) and of professed spiritual Gurus (Swamiji, Banubhai). Miss Charlotte alone seems at peace with herself, God, and India. She may have obtained her goal the other seekers look for in vain. She does not set herself

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1 A New Dominion, p.171
up as a 'teacher', unlike the Indian spiritual guides whose influences are baneful and useless. She becomes her own when she washes Margaret’s corpse and prepares it for Christian burial. She quietly defeats Evie’s frantic attempt to claim Margaret Hindu to the bitter end. The intentions of the novelist, here, are not to display conflict between 'east' and 'west', Christianity and Hinduism, but to frame a character dedicated religiously to love (agape) against a fanatical and possessive 'demonic' spirituality.

Jhabvala brings boldness to dramatic confrontation of 'spiritualties' which is matched in her treatment of physical love and love-making. Lesbianism is treated frankly in A Backward Place. There is a foretaste of Swamiji’s brutal sexuality in the expatriate Esmond’s behavior. Jhabvala analyses the homosexual relationship of Raymond and Gopi, its ultimate collapse and the interpolation of nymphomaniac Asha.

Jhabvala presents the experience of European women married to Europeans who are confronted with situation of Hindu joint families. Peggy in ‘The Aliens’ get cultural shock when her sister-in-law enters her room and opens drawers without asking her. It is not a
question of social manners or surface formalities, but it highlights the difference between attitudes of the individualistic European families and the socially close-knit Indian families. Jhabvala in her characters and situations shows awareness of such differences. The novelist, both European and Indian reveals pains and predicaments of Peggy in a joint family of Punjabi Hindu businessmen. She feels isolated because she is up against the coarseness of her mother-in-law.

Peggy is opposed to insensitivity and coarseness of people of a money-civilization. She feels 'alien', and yet manages to 'live and let live' in her Indian husband's family. Peggy disapproves Indianness in manners and ways of behavior. Jhabvala exposes this negative aspect of Indian modes of behavior quite sharply.

Jhabvala deals with interaction between European and Indian cultures. Her forte is that her personal experience in India is transformed into art.

The growth of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala as an artist shows workings of a process of isolation-alienation in a mild form, and its transformation into art. Her writings depict breakdown of a traditional social order thereby highlighting isolation between
individuals and marital relations in family life and in society at large. The Marxist critic may describe it as a satirical portrayal of a decadent, capitalistic, commercial society. The breakdown of a world-view, divinely ordained and supported by tradition, is the primary source of this alienation. Man, pitted against the power of money, is reduced to the status of a thing, thereby alienated from the world and his fellowmen. He becomes a victim of power and lure of money, values of an acquisitive, commercial society and a philosophy, denounced by Carlyle, of making soul synonymous with the stomach.

Jhabvala's fiction marks a sense of alienation in a diffused, undefinable form. Jhabvala as a European writer in India, subjected to pressures of alienation and as a representative of western culture and tradition, inherits a non-native life-view. She brings to bear upon Indian ethos the Western rational and scientific attitudes which become criteria for judging Indians, their moral behavior and their emotional or sensuous responses to environment. This situation becomes a source of her strength as well as her weakness as an artist. She is at her best portraying conflicts of individuals and domestic
friction, which are familial manifestations of alienation. Alienation is enlarged to 'foreign' wives in their relationship with 'native' husbands or vice-versa. It is a dominant trait of her cosmos wherein Indian wives and husbands are against barriers created by them. The implication of alienation in her fiction goes beyond boundaries of domestic life. It extends to a world wherein man is reduced to a level of an object and is subjected to manipulation by his fellowmen in pursuit of wealth and material gains. Man joins the bandwagon of mammon-worshippers who form the vanguard of our present day money-civilization.