Chapter VI

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Jhabvala is different from other creative Indian writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao or R.K. Narayan, Kamala Markandaya or Nayantara Sahgal. Her advantage lies in her position of being a European living in India and her disadvantage lies in her not being a genuine, grass rooted Indian. She is detached, ironical and satirical. She views affairs of Indian family from an objective and unsentimental point of view. She is better equipped than E.M. Forster 'to deal with the mysteries of Indian psyche.'1 Jhabvala excels in displaying incongruities of human character and situations which have social, familial and cultural implications.

Indian creative writing, especially fiction, is judged as an art and as an expression of social values. The polish parentage, German upbringing, British schooling and finally, life in India after her marriage and her living in New York heighten complexity of judging

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her creativity. Indian society in urban areas maintains 'in-group' feeling and get-togetherness of family ties. The atomization of the West has not yet affected the spirit of Indian society. Jhabvala shows her deep awareness of this aspect of Indian society. Her novels and short stories primarily portray either fulfillment or frustration of individuals in the undivided Hindu joint family system. The Nature of Passion, dramatizes clashes of two families or two individuals of a family in the light of present day changes in urbanized India. The tensions of Indian society between the young and the old, the upholders of orthodox tradition and the rebels characterize social world of Jhabvala's fiction. This experience of individuals caught in the vortex of social change though Indian is as much universal.

Like Jane Austen, Jhabvala concentrates her attention on families from North India, the joint family system and various Indian customs and traditions. Her fiction portrays Punjabi families, and their moral values with great understanding and knowledge.
These novels revolve round families consisting of two or three generations and their inter-personal relationships constitute plot of her works.

Amrita and Nimmi outshine in their urge to defy conventional values though they end as puppets in the hands of society. Their feminist prejudices are mild and they ultimately compromise with conventional values. Gulab a rebel and non-conformist, ends up as a helpless destitute.

Jhabvala in her commitment resembles native writers envisioning future dreams and aspirations of the newly independent country. Her short visit to England in 1960 opened her eyes to technological advancement. On her return, she discovered appalling problems in India defying all solutions. India was no longer a land of romance, a house of heartening hugging, a panorama of pompous profundities and a country of constant comforts and consolations but hostile, harassing, hampering and degenerating throughout. The cultural snobbery of the European continent can be discovered in her
changed attitude towards people and places, once so dear to her heart.

Her profound interaction with country and its people makes her aware of great complexity of Indian context. Her themes and concerns include serious issues like widowhood and remarriage, dowry and its evil influence, and hopelessness inevitable in the midst of poverty and disease. She admitted:

"I am to feel that what is ludicrous on the surface may be tragic underneath. India.....well perhaps one laughs at first (I'm afraid I used to laugh more than I should in my early books) but afterwards you see that is not comic at all but quite the opposite. Then one stops laughing....."

Her fiction reflects Indian life in all manifestations. She deplores attitudes of the rich class towards the poor and exposes them. She is critical of general lack of progress in the country.

1 Quest, vol. 91, 1974, p. 33-4
Sarla Devi has ideals of the typical Indian womanhood in her veins to protest but within limitations. India in the context of feminist pretensions remains a backward place.

Jhabvala expresses a particular ideology, perhaps the colonialist British/European ideology of hatred and disdain for Indians. She affiliates herself with the Western hegemonic view of India and Indians as depraved and decrepit. Jhabvala wants us to interpret *Three Continents* and to discover what she depicts as reality that the image of India that stands for—religiosity, spiritualism is a fraud, a deception.

The Swami or a Guru, a recurrent figure, is ambiguous character in Jhabvala’s writing. He provokes interesting and sometimes contradictory critical assessment. In *In Search of Love and Beauty* and *Three Continents* link themselves with her earlier novels in this context but with changes. In *In Search of Love and Beauty*, the Guru is a Westerner Leo Kellerman who is a Jew, an artist, an actor, a charismatic leader. In India, the Swami exists as part of a religious

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and social structure, but in the America, the role of a spiritual leader is loaded upon some people by the needs of their disciples.

In *Three Continents*, Michael flees America in search of wisdom, to thwart the apparently and enslaving propinquities of family society in favour of a freedom which can become as in the case of Michael pathological loneliness and isolation. Jhabvala later treats desire to turn away from the Rawul and back to America as a positive step, though one does not see how it works out in practice.

The marriage for itself exists alone. It is seen not as part of contact with the past and extension of it into the future which brings the family and the individual close to history and tradition.

Jhabvala’s migrant experience gets vocal manifestations in these novels. The obsessive sense of rootlessness, the literal and the psychological, show overt reflection in the behaviour of characters who find it hard to adjust in a society around their own family members. The female characters of Jhabvala’s American phase have a fixed identity and their feminist concerns get suppressed by their personal frustrations. They are broken to the core and find it hard to
survive. They do not wage a war against their male-exploiters. Marietta and Harriet are tossed on the currents of circumstances beyond their control. Their zeal for life helps them escape and they demonstrate human dignity in which man can be destroyed but not defeated.

Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and G.V. Desani adopt different stances in regard to East-West cultures. These novelists return to their Indian grassroots frequently whereas Jhabvala remains consistently European, uninvolved and unconcerned. She writes from the point of view of her own dilemma as a white European woman caught in the mixed marriage in a tropical country.

The concern to harmonize the East-West encounter might have been a difficult proposition for Jhabvala because of her cultural and religious diversities. Her stay in India for two decade had little influence on her European convictions.

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, a true cosmopolitan, views cultural clash of the East and the West with unprejudiced eyes. Raji Narsimhan holds the view:
"She writes about India, of course. But that it is a foreigner’s perspective and the voice has unmistakable foreign inflexions have come to be overlooked in misplaced magnanimity towards Indo-English."¹

Her vision is ironic and her major artistic intent is depiction of gap between human hopes and their means. Therefore, frustration, foibles and absurdities of middle class life constitute integrity and centrality of her fiction. Their ironies emanate from constant clash between the real and the romantic, the mundane and the mystical, and the existential and spiritual pre-occupations.

The Western women come to India, drawn to culture, tradition and customs, the warmth and wilderness of this subcontinent. They find it difficult to return to their motherland though discover themselves chance-trapped in circumstances.

Women of the West and the East share characteristics like courage, tolerance, forbearance, compassion and strong will power to

face life's trials and complexities. They spread message of love, forbearance and understanding.

Jhabvala treats marriage as a social institution where the two sexes are exposed to clash and conflict. In *The Householder* and in *A Backward Place*, the trapped married couples wriggle the cage for better understanding while in *Get Ready for Battle*, they break loose to live their separate lives in search of alternatives. The married life poses problems and there is room for grouding (like Laxmi's about her idealist husband Ram Nath in *Esmond in India*) even after a lifetime spent in apparent conjugal bliss. The faithfulness and loyalty to husband enshrined in marriage vows is expected from Indian women. Gulab in marrying Esmond defying her people, subjects herself to taunts and insolences heaped on her by him and bears a son to him. *The Householder* starts with usual crossfire; when he says 'I have forbidden you', she flares up, 'who are you to forbid me?', and snorts and stamps her foot. In *To Whom She Will*, Prema's marriage to Suri is not a marriage of minds and she has to seek consolations in sweets and sentimental novelties. Tarla develops a passion for Ladies
Committees and Mrs. Kaul in *A Backward Place* gets engrossed in her cultural dais.

The descriptions of nuclear families in Jhabvala’s novels have their own inner contradictions and conflicts. Prema, the housewife attempts to dominate her family discussions. She gets enraged at her parent’s insult by the Saxena’s and forgets her poor past and sees herself at par with them. Suri can be visualized as a practical husband accommodative and appreciative of other’s view point. The female characters of the extended family as Amrita’s aunt Tarla are quite audacious to impose their opinions on others notwithstanding age seniority and maturity of experience. Jhabvala takes care to widen her creative canvas by drawing characters from the rich and the middle class families. Her characters remain Indian, by birth and upbringing, but characters like Ram Bahadur Saxena, despite native values, are willing to concede to constraints of time and approve inter-caste marriage in respected families.

Nimmi and Amrita believe in women emancipation. Their feminist prejudices prompt them to disdain women of their family as
ignorant and ill-mannered. The objection of Phuphiji to her waywardness demonstrates older generation's apathy towards women's excessive exposure to the Western values.

Etta, Judy and Clarissa in *A Backward Place* have strong individualities. Clarissa's conviction- 'One either merges with Hindu civilization or is drowned by it' underlines the enveloping character of the majority Hindu tradition. Judy, Clarissa and Etta end up as misfits in their new milieu. Judy's observation is 'marriages are bound to be broken that is one of the rules of modern civilization'. The conjugal life is spoiled and there is no hope for domestic harmony. Lee, Margaret and Evie in *A New Dominion* hardly talk about marriage and settling in life though they relish sex by becoming willing victims to the great hypocrat Swamiji.

In her novels of the fifties, the novelist concentrates on conflict between views of the younger generation, that is restless to switch-over to new ideas and the older generation, that is sticking to the conventional norms. Amrita and Nimmi though protest but surrender to the wishes of their family. In the social structure of the joint and
the nuclear family, women characters share ideas of women emancipation but they are conformists by and large. The overwhelming female characters show that their feminist enlightenments are eclipsed by their instinctive weakness for sex. The image of women in this phase emerges as individually non-conformists, though with a difference on account of divergent cultural values. Her novels of American-setting explore psychological impact of sexual atrocities on women of different generations who are hypnotized by cheats and quacks. In Three Continents inner fragmentation and split in personality takes on new dimension and the meeting of several cultures results in apparent chaos and confusion. It might take many decades for Jhabvala's women characters to adopt an aggressive attitude towards their male counterparts.

Khushwant Singh calls Jhabvala the 'adopted daughter of India.' In his opinion she is sincere in resisting false labels, and desires to avoid the mere appearances. She is tempted to be 'defiant
and European’, but in the end she visualizes a possibility of merging with the Indian earth.

“Of course, this can’t go on indefinitely and in the end I’m bound to lose—if only at the point where my ashes are immersed in the Ganges to the accompaniment of Vedic hymns, and then who will say that I have not truly merged with India?”¹

Jhabvala’s reaction to Europe, the continent of her birth and upbringing has a restlessness which impels her to return to India, the country of her voluntary residence.

“I do sometimes go back to Europe. But after a time I get bored there and want to come back here. I also find it hard now to stand the European climate. I have got used to intense heat and seem to need it.”²

² Jhabvala R.P., p. 67
This transparent sincerity of Jhabvala in revealing her responses to phenomenon of India shows processes of her creativity. Her creative work provides ample evidence of her Indianness, the aesthetic design of her art, moulded by her experience of life in India.

Man and society in India in her times were involved in a change from tradition to modernity. She portrays this change with an acute awareness and sensitivity.

Jhabvala like G.V. Desani and Kamala Markandaya who feel isolated but successfully return to their grassroots, cannot achieve this objective. Her journey is not a return to the earth but her maiden attempt to have the feel of the soil itself. Jhabvala’s main obstacle as an artist writing on the Indian scene is primarily epistemological, of an inward understanding of Indian culture and tradition, a knowledge of its heritage of civilization.

Jhabvala’s literary career shows an interesting crossroad: between her firsthand experience of India and remembered and recollected India in her agony and joy. In these two phases Jhabvala,
as craftsman, tends unconsciously to identify herself with India. The correlative objective of her artistic emotions and her aesthetic identification unfold the great artist in her in relation to her experience of India and her world of fiction.

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, as a woman novelist, concerned with psychological state of Indian women’s mind portrays inexpressible sufferings of their marital life. She points out agony of these women that results from frustration in love, lack of their identification, betrayal, divorce and disintegration of marital life. Her novels Esmond in India, A Backward Place and Heat and Dust deal with themes of psychological interests.

The Indian women are caught in a flux of tradition and modernity with the burden of the past. The casting crux of aspirations constitutes the crux of feminism in Indian literature. In literary terms, it precipitates a search for identity and a quest for the definition of the self. In critical perspective, it boils down to an emphatic scrutinizing of the plight of women characters that are at the receiving end of human interaction.
The novelist explores feminine feelings, passions, hopes and fears of her sex. Her European sensibility transplanted in India and the experience of Indian essence of feminine and its final exposition in America provide a triangular mode to her perception and articulation of feminine soul and psyche. Her wide humanity, her superb theme of 'search for self-definition of woman': begins with tabooed Indian women and European expatriate women in India to the enigmatic and essenceless life of American women who make Jhabvala a distinct novelist of English language.

The novels To Whom She Will and The Nature of Passion she deals with the theme of disillusionment in its most benign form like the comic mismatching of love-pairs and difference between illusions and hard realities. Women protagonists are thwarted by their own romantic idealism, their economic realities and a social system that devalues them.

Jhabvala discovers traumatic pose of feminine sensibility being crushed and humiliated by women folk themselves. Jhabvala exposes
utter insensitivity of elders to delicate feelings of their young children.

The refined sensibility and moral truths of a female protagonist in conflict with other women of traditional society are dissected without distorting social verisimilitude or disturbing the comic equilibrium of the work as a whole. The attractive and high principled heroine ultimately finds a husband who understands her best and loves her most deeply; the rejecting and rejected Hari finds joy in his arranged marriage.

Kusum Mehra becomes an accepted fact in the honoured household of Gulzarilal quite amazing in a traditional family of Gulzarilal. Kusum realizes that mistresses and re-married widow are not socially honoured. She shuns the idea of leading a life of self-imposed penance and becoming old, wrinkled and haggard like Phuphiji in The Nature of Passion.

Jhabvala has created a fictional world of domestic comforts. Her vision is ironic and of a social realist. Her novels centre on the theme of conservatism, feminine alienation, and agony due to
suppression and exploitation in a male dominated society of patriarchal order.

The novels reveal that concepts of modernity and woman emancipation are being experienced in middle-class society. The female protagonists vehemently oppose treachery, misery and suffering caused by male characters. Jhabvala with her European background notices that issues like self-identity and recognition, equality and self-actualization make the feminists stand up in arms against the male dominated world, though it has not yet reached average Indian household.

Lourie Sucher outlines this segmentation of theme in her early novels:

"The outrage, the concern with social injustice that will appear later, is for now put aside, as if to acquaint the western audience with the urban middle class and aspects of Indian life that come less readily to mind."1

1 Lourie Sucher, op.cit., p.15.

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The protagonists of early novels show a common trait; their cry for self-realization. The cheerfulness of the early novels is continually undercut by a darker view of life. The strong household women cause stress, suppression and vulnerability to other women and indirectly execute will and wish of males in this patriarchal and traditional social setup. Women struggling for self-recognition do not get support of their own folk, and are made to suffer emotional suffocation, inconsistency, isolation and dilemma of self-pity. The traditional India places woman in a position of dependence and servitude to man. These novels portray feminist upsurge and their intent to come out of this bondage. The social documentation is precise and the Indian ethos are captured mainly through explication.

Her concerns to explore expatriate individuals especially women shifts from society to the individuals of the West in Indian background. The novelist presents India of new notes and rhythms reflecting enough change in socio-cultural perspectives.
The European women tired of western materialism and boredom come to India on a quest for self-development and spiritual rejuvenation but end up in self-destruction and self-delusion. Shahane confirms author’s tussle with multiple aspects of India,

“A New Dominion tries to grapple with a vast and varied, harmonious and discordant, noble and profane reality that is India, almost inexhaustible in its range and inscrutable in its depth.”

Jhabvala exposes moral degradation, hypocrisy and sexuality of Indian Swamiji, Gopi and Asha. The British girls in search of spiritual India find themselves in a personal predicament of hellishness quite contrary to their romantic expectations. V.A. Shahane observes:

“The Indians in this novel (New Dominion) are almost invariably sensual, sex hungry, hypocritical, pretentious, egoistic and self willed except for

1 V.A. Shahane, “Ruth Prawer Jhabvala’s A New Dominion”, The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, Vol. XII, No. 1, August 1977, p.6

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Banubai, the puzzling prophetess, and Bob, a go ahead young man.1

Her novels of Indo-European interactions focus on expatriate women in search for love, beauty and spirituality in varying degrees. Jhabvala articulates how the search of these women backfires and destroys them. The infatuating and illusionary love affairs, troubled marriages of European women and Indian men, the romantic quest of the vague and credulous self-seekers from the West, their misadventures, boredom, friction and disintegration or fight for survival are depicted through many western female protagonists in Indian society. This East-West awareness leading to conflict is exposed on the levels of the incompatibility of personal sensibility and circumstantial realities, the incongruities consequent upon inharmonious blending of two modes of life-the Eastern and the Western, and the predicament of illusion-bond women facing tragic disintegration of their personality and identity or survival by flight from this subcontinent of weird culture.

1 V.A. Shahane, "Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's A New Dominion", The Journal of Commonwealth literature, Vol. XII, No. 1, August 1977, p.52
Jhabvala, in her post Indian phase, exposes clashes of generations in the setting of racial admixture and multi-cultural confluence with all its bleak ramifications on sensibilities of womenfolk at large. There is a strange labyrinth of undefined relationships in these American novels. The milieu in them is disgusting and pessimistic in comparison to her India-based novels. The institutions of ‘home’, ‘marriage’ and ‘family’ have collapsed and women characters of mixed race, mixed sexuality and mixed culture reflect fragmented image as they desperately strive for authenticity, connectedness and spiritual transcendence.

The female friendships are obstructed by jealousy, rivalry and the basic insufficiency of woman for other woman. The males portrayed in these novels are either homosexual and uninterested in women like Mark, or heterosexual and disrespectful to women like Leo. Women are treated either sacrificial goats objects of disgust and perplexity in place of love. The self-destruction of female characters springs from self-hatred, and internal fragmented psyche which is an underlying problem and malaise of the modern times.
In *Three Continents* the traditional centres of civilization have lost their relevance as institutions of 'family', 'marriage', 'home'. The novelist portrays decline of Wishwell family and their disintegration in the stronghold of an Oriental trio of Rawul, Crishi and Renee. The parents and children of Wishwell family are all devoid of feelings for one another.

The literary endeavor of the novelist begins with ironic portrayal of womenfolk in a traditional conservative and patriarchal society of India. She focuses on predicament of enigmatic romance and unscrupulous submission of European women. The novelist on her move to New York, scans the soul and psyche of women in America suffering from their agony of boredom, psychic disintegration, abnormal sexuality and self-hatred.

The self-proclaimed Europeans of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala are moulded and enraged by her fortuitous exile and family life in urban India. These characters in their 'self-exiled' mode move to America for a greater exposure and artistic excellence. The writer's passage from Europe to India and to America has baffled historians and
critics of English literature and the novelist herself is also unable to make a final announcement about her own identity and status at last.

The Indian fiction of RP Jhabvala is spun by an initiated outsider with an unusual insight. This perspective in Indian context is not available to any other Anglo-Indian writer addressing cross-cultural issues. The authorial voice of the novelist appears like the main stream of the European writers. Her status lies of a European planted in urban middle-class Indian society where she could not get rooted. She could not peep inward realities of Indian life. Her range of knowledge remained confined to predicament of pseudo-modern middle-class women and to experiences of expatriate women in the same background. Ruth Prawer married a Parsi an outsider community in India. The Parsi community valued education, pursued their professional status and equally maintained their distinct and separate identity as a group. This aloofness from common Indians may be a cause of Jhabvala’s limited range of feminine world in Indian context.
Jhabvala portrays oddities, eccentricities of middle-class society of India and its traditional verdict for confinement, suppression and subservience of woman and fascist dominance of man. These novels expose tyranny of age-old patriarchal hegemony and subservient position of woman in Indian social system. The atmosphere is bright in the early novels where protagonists are young, educated and aspire for their emancipation and self-realisation as individual human beings.

The attempts of female protagonists to re-define the role and identity of woman are labeled as rebellion against the established code of behaviour. Jhabvala lashes at selfishness, hypocrisy and insincerity of males through the romantic extravagance of the naive lovers who surrender to the very first pressure of their families. Though Amrita and Nimmi accept decisions of their families, but they shine above their lovers-Hari and Pheroze-due to their courage and resistance against social pressures. There is no scope for individual identity. Fascistic males of the household thwart the
attempts of the modern educated protagonists to re-define their identity and achieve freedom.

In The Householder Indu’s husband resorts to his father-brand authoritarianism. His childish behavior and over-possessive intrusion of his mother leads to bickering in the household. Get Ready for Battle, the last novel of Indian phase, symbolizes the feminine call to womenfolk of India for readiness to fight their battle for their full emancipation from the time honoured patriarchal dominance over them. The Indian women take progressive steps as the novelist portrays bold women—namely Sarla, Kusum and Mala—fighting their own battles for self-actualisation and identity as individuals in their own ways. Women in Get Ready for Battle are not content with their traditional role of obedience and household chores. Divorce, remarriage, separation and moving in social circles become accepted realities of society. The novelist as a social realist presents insufficiency of feminine fights for freedom and their efforts thwarted by their male counterparts. In spite of a strong intensity of
feminine defiance and upsurge women remain in a miserable predicament of victimization.

Jhabvala criticises the fraudulent guru-cults of modern growth where, spirituality becomes a mechanism for gratification of sexual and materialistic hunger of man. Swamiji and Nawab have no moral or religious qualms and abusing women.

Jhabvala's novels constitute an exploration of feminine sensibilities and feminine quest for identity and self-actualisation as individual human beings free from any dependence syndrome. Their quest for love, beauty, bliss and identity is thwarted because women fail to come out of the shadow of man. The female protagonists, in all settings, are portrayed as frail, wily seductive and enigmatically submissive to masculine powers. The Indian women are sufferers of confinement and cruel suppression.

The novelist sweeps the whole gamut of feminine feelings and experiences with a commanding hand and from a woman's view. She treats female issues with a sense of self-awareness and
confidence to give voice to common agonizing cry of women against man made woman.