



Representing Conjugal Relationship in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *The Householder*

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Abstract

The *Householder* is one of the most seminal works written by R.P Jhabvala. In her novels, she examines the social milieu of middle-class Indians who have profited from Indian's increasing urbanization and European expatriates who have married into Indian Families. The paper aims to scrutinize man –women relationship in the *Householder*. The issue is well presented through Prem, a young recently married man and Indu, an exotic and sybaritic wife. The book makes us aware of the daily routine life of the couple in a very realistic manner. The book also unfolds how trivial matters and misunderstanding create great problems in relationships. Jhabvala seems to be a great observe of man woman psyche which she has portrayed through the characters of Prem and Indu.

Keywords: *Grihashthrami in Sanskrit, Indian tradition, Family responsibility, Hindu view of life.*

Ruth Praver Jhabvala is one of the greatest Anglo Indian writers in English literature and the recipient of Booker prize for her novel *Heat and Dust* in 1975. As a novelist Jhabvala's concern is to give a true picture of middle class society in urban India. She shows her awareness of the variety and complexity of the post independence Indian society, and achieves her object by arranging incidents that through light on the essential traits of her characters.

"After that comes the life of the householder," Prem said "In this stage a man must raise a family and see to their needs." (*The Householder*, 54)

The Householder (1960) is unique among Jhabvala's novels. It is her only novel about lower middle class people. Jhabvala does introduce characters from this class and background in her stories, and in her later novels, but in *The Householder* it is the exclusive setting. It is also unique in that the pervasive atmosphere is one of humor and sympathy rather than of irony. Its setting is in Delhi, in which Independence and Partition are already history and India's industrial

development a concrete reality, Jhabvala presents a drama of conflict and resolution in terms of a youth's quest for identity. In the world her protagonist confronts several social realities that were the consequence of Indian Planning are easily identified. In the novel she deals with the strategy of the planning process devised to give India the developing infrastructure of an industrialized society. It does not explore the extent of India's modernisation of her agriculture. It uses, for a thematic purpose, the impact of National Planning on youth and many other planings to Indian constitution and the effect of planning on everyday life, and the development of India, in which younger generation from native villages and towns to the capital and industrial centers search of employment. The break-up of the joint family and the mushrooming of nuclear units that followed created a need for new adaptations and adjustments.

Jhabvala also deals with Indian joint family, basically patriarchal in character, kept itself alive by satisfying two vital needs of its male members- the patriarch's love of power and the young man's need for financial security. By undertaking to support them, the system in which young men trapped and got married and raise a family before attaining financial independence. Perpetuation of the male line being the primary goal of the joint family, early marriage and reproduction were encouraged. In 1960s the Indian condition and pattern was changing, but many of the traditions that had built it up, among them the tradition of early marriage, had remained. Thus, twenty years old Prem, the central character of *The Householder*, finds himself in the strange city of Delhi, stripped of all the loving protection he had hitherto known and burdened with new responsibilities. In his life he discovers in his first encounter with the adult world, is that he and he alone is responsible for the welfare of his wife and the child that is soon to be born, and that with his graduate degree in Hindi Literature he is dispensable in the world around him.

According to Indian Tradition a man's life is divided into four stages, the first stage is childhood and student when a person grows up, and the second stage is adulthood when he gets married, takes care of family responsibility that is householder, and preceding the last two stages associated with contemplation and withdrawal from life.

The Paper aims to show man and woman struggle in householder responsibility. Prem, the protagonist of the novel, is a young teacher in Mr. Khanna's private college. He is B.A. with second class, a Hindi teacher who earns 175 rupees only, married to Indu by his parents. He is weak and indifferent in emotions but by no means unintelligent. He is aware of his financial position, out of which Rs 45/ go to meet the rent of the house. He knows very well that he cannot get better job

because of his poor qualification and experience that is not enough to get a raise in salary. His position becomes precarious when he realizes that his wife is pregnant as he is worried about his financial condition that how he will run his family. Prem is also unsuccessful in class discipline, while on the other hand Mr. Chaddha, the Professor of History, seems utterly a figure of fun that has the gift of the gab which is cleverly utilized partly for flattering the Principal and partly for parading his own knowledge. His platitudes are legion and the way he utters them shows his utter pomposity. He pays compliments to 'the gentle sex' for making it possible for men to 'enjoy an hour's leisure and ease in their charming company'.

Prem, a teacher of Hindi is well versed in the classics, whose ideas about marriage have been shaped primarily by his mother's exemplary deference to her late husband, that applies ancient rule and childhood memory to present experience with amusing results. Returning home rather late to find the house dark and silent and Indu asleep, he reflects that:

“It was not right for a wife to go to sleep before she had served her husband however late he might come. He considered for a moment whether to wake her up and tell her so.” (*The Householder*, 62)

They neither like nor understand the other very much to begin with. Indu talks with assumed wisdom about marriage and its problems with Mrs. Seigal though married but a few months herself. *The Householder* is the busy time which follows marriage, the time of setting up an independent home and of starting to earn a living. *Householder* expresses only one young man rather than many families; It attempts to trace the development or progression of a single personality as this young man moves from childhood to adulthood, out of stage one into stage two. *The Householder* provides its own frame of reference. The dominant Hindu view of life, which took shape during the ten centuries that are generally believed to have elapsed between the composition of the Upanishads and the formulation of the codes of Manu and Kautilya roughly 500 B.C. to A.D. 500, classifies the stages in Aryan life:

The tendency toward moralizing and philosophizing a peculiarity of the Indian character is also to be seen in Prem's remarks on the householder. Prem resolves to call on the Seigals to press his need for reducing his rent and wishes to be treated 'as another son'. Instead Mr. Seigal, while paying compliments to Prem, makes him appear as a 'mentor' to Romesh. Prem, then, assumes the role of an elderly adviser and guide while in fact he wanted to look young and foolish. In that assumed role Prem comments:

“In our ancient writings it is written . . . that there are four stages to a man's life. When he is young, he is a student, learning from his father and his teachers . . .’

‘After that comes that life of the householder . . . In this stage a man must raise a family and see to their needs . . .’ (The *Householder*, 54)

These comments are self-explanatory, and have a bearing on the theme of the novel. Prem is the 'householder' (in Sanskrit, the *Grihasthashrami*) who is continually obsessed by a sense of failure. However, he too indulges in the mode of citing ancient Indian scriptures for banal causes. He continues, “The third stage is when a man retires from his duties as a householder and spends him time in contemplation’. While the samosas were served with tea, he quietly skipped the fourth stage (the Renunciation) 'of which he was not sure.” (The *Householder*, 54)

This reference to the four stages in the Hindu view of life implies a link between the life of Prem, the householder and the ancient scriptural tradition. However, Jhabvala does not, rightly, play up the Hindu tradition.

In society a young man occurs the personal exile when he is married and has to leave home for the first time to set up independently for himself and for his new wife. Prem’s paramount problem is one of self identity. His difficulties are in coping spring from the diffidence of a particular personality, but also from the fact that he is himself little more than a child by age and experience.

Prem is deliberately resorting to his own father's brand of stern authoritarianism in order to disguise his own weakness vulnerability. His father was a principal in school, he maintained a great status in school, while Prem is unable to maintain a teacher status. He faces many problems to get a good job, he sees many vacancies in newspaper but all for Engineers and draughtsman, nobody wants a Hindi teacher, and if there is any vacancy it is for first class student.

"If they did, they wanted him to be a first class M.A. with three years teaching experience, not a second class B.A. with only four-month teaching experience such as he was." (The *Householder*, 10)

Poverty and want are two terrible things – this statement that unlocks the heart of the householder It explains not only the major problems of Prem as a husband, as a father, as a teacher, as a citizen, but it is also central to the social milieu which is so realistically and skillfully portrayed in the novel. The story turns into a mirror reflecting the realistic things and the readers find

themselves enabling to discover new truths and he himself re-evaluates the existing social practice in a modern context. Prem plans throughout the novel to ask for a raise in salary, but he never succeeds in his attempts. Another aspect of his financial problem which haunts him is the house rent. Prem's mother and wife, Indu both approach the Seigals, their landlord, for a reduction of the rent. The only result of his approach is that he gets a cold reply from the landlords. Prem also has problems related to marital dissonance. He strives to establish himself in the linked roles of husband, bread winner and householder, Indu finds difficulty in accommodating her individuality, lively outlook to the requirements of her role as married woman and housewife. She comes from a fun – loving family. She wishes to be a credit to her parents and to Prem but she cannot help being amused by the very idea of herself as the dignified lady of the 'household'.

In the beginning, the relationship between Prem and Indu is rather formal and impersonal. Prem has learnt from elders that a wife should be subservient to her husband; and he expects from his wife unquestioning obedience. The actual quarrel between Prem and Indu takes place when they receive letters from their respective mothers. Referring to her mother's letter, Indu says in a low voice:

“She (Indu's mother) wants me to come home. Prem had no comments to make. It did not, he thought greatly matter to him whether she stayed or went. Indu confessed, 'I wrote to her about . . .' and Yes, Yes,' said Prem in some irritation. 'That is why she wants me to come home.'”(*The Householder*, 28)

Indu said:

“My mother is coming to visit us' Prem said. After thinking thus over for a while, Indu said, 'Then she will be able to look after you here when I am gone.' How can you go away when my mother is coming to visit us? Why not? Indu inquired. The innocence of her voice as she asked this made him quite angry. He shouted, 'what do you mean why not? Have you no sense?' She looked at him with her eyes wide in amazement. He had never before shouted at her.” (*The Householder*, 29)

Prem's mother having no knowledge of human psychology and working entirely on instinct and precedent, she tries to rationalize her presence by exercising her authority over her son and daughter-in-law and making them dependent on her. Indu feels very sad, and she leaves home without telling to Prem. He feels now so lonely and frustrated. Prem has only one or two friends with whom he wants to discuss his marital life, but the condition remains unspoken. Whenever he

meets his childhood friend Raj, he wants to discuss about his wife, but he always shows that he has also many problems and has his own family also. Prem always thinks whether other's wives behaved like this too. Marriage life was such a new and unknown thing for him. It was a serious tension to his mind:

“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 bedroom.”

(*The Householder*, 32)

Though most of the time Prem spends with his friend Raj and Sohan Lal, but he does not allow his routine schedule of attending college and of attending the domestic needs to get disturbed. Once when he gets home late in the night he feels that his wife would not sleep but he finds Indu lying on the bed fast asleep, he gets angry and in hunger he thought:

“It was not right for a wife to go to sleep before she had served her husband however late he might come.” (*The Householder*, 62)

Prem always feels irritated to see the condition of his pregnant wife. He feels that it is also another reason of his inner restlessness to provide a servant boy for her proper requirement, while his earning is only 175 rupees a month. He does not find any solution of all his problems while he loves her and wants her to help him in his problems, but he finds her uncooperative and sulking all the time. But their turning point occurs when Indu returns after the visit to her parents. The mother exit, which leaves the husband and wife alone together, creates the atmosphere for recognition of the changed relationship and love making of both makes their life happy. It is only the soothing emotion and the possibility of overcoming all the ‘via negative’ was translated into an evaporated phenomenon just because of his having submerged in the oceanic experience of love and its inner spirit.

References

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