

# Domestic issues in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's "The Householder" A critical study

Ruth Praver Jhabvala

## CASE STUDY:

Ruth praver jhabvala born in cologne, Germany on May 7,1927. Her father, Marcus Praver was Polish Jewish lawyer, and her mother Eleanora had Russian background. She and her elder brother Siebert Soloman Praver, attended segregated Jewish schools before the family moved from Nevi Germany to England as refugees in April 1939. After the family settled in Hendon, a suburb of London, she went to Hendon country school and then to Queen Mary college, London university, where she majored in English literature and wrote a titled 'The story in England' for her M.A. degree, which she earned in 1951. She married on June 16,1951 and went to live in India. She had three daughters, Reena, Firoza and Ava.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala's writing career spans almost forty years and has so far produced ten novels, five volumes of short stories and seventeen screenplays. Her in film began in 1961, when she met James Ivory and Ismail Merchant who proposed her to write a screen play based on her fourth novel, "The householder". Since the she has worked on a further of sixteen screenplays mostly in association with Merchant and Ivory. Her last two Indian novels 'A new dominion' and 'Heat and dust' and her two American novel's 'Three continents' and 'In search of love and beauty' depicts how she has been influenced by technique, she learnt from her involvement with script writing. Jhabvala has been the recipient of major awards and prizes. In 1975 her novel 'Heat and dust' won Britain's prestigious booker prize. The following year she received a John Simon Guggenheim memorial fellowship. Three years later in 1979, she was awarded the Neil Gunn international fellowship and in 1986, she was offered a Mac author foundation award. Ruth Praver Jhabvala's screenplay for the Merchant- Ivory film of E.M.Forster's novel, 'A room with a view' won an academy award in 1987.

'The householder' mainly examines her understanding of social pretensions, snobbery, and immaturity. Jhabvala had inclination to sympathetic and ironically beliefs that young middle class Indians mindset to make a go for marriages and profession. The householder, Prem is in the householder stage but his marriage seems to be

failing and his career as a teacher is beset with pitfalls. At times he aspires to live like a hermit or a sanyasi under the influence of a foreign hippy – like wanderer, who profess to be an explorer of spiritual India. In the end pre-discovers the true value of his young wife and attains the status of householder in a more practical and mature way. It is unique, because the pervasive atmosphere is one of humor and sympathy rather than irony, though the latter is not totally absent. A youth, newly married learns through trial and error about privileges and pains of becoming a 'grihastha'. As Linda Warly mentioned: " In Jhabvala's novels the manner in which her characters are house – where they live, how they live and how they feel about their homes – is integral to the construction of the fiction". 1

Prem, the protagonist of the novel, is a young teacher in Mr. Khanna's private college. He is B.A. (second class), who teaches Hindi and married to Indu, a plain girl chosen by his parents. He is aware of his precarious financial position, but knows that he cannot get a better job because of his poor qualifications. He feels insecure about his new role as a husband and provider. He and Indu cannot settle down into a comfortable relationship. His position becomes more precarious, when he realizes that his wife is pregnant and also feels inadequate as a teacher and again the problem is out of control. Prem cannot a control class as Mr. Chaddha can command silence and attention in the classroom. His students generally ignore him ,all in all, Prem is in a bad way. His sense of self is on a shaky ground, Prem is uncertain, even resentful of his position, when he compares himself with his friend Raj an old school friend, who is now firmly in service of government. He feels totally useless " where did he belonged nowhere, was nothing, was nobody". 2

Prem's unhappy condition is emphasized in the opening scene. External realities mirror his internal condition. Prem is marking student essay, an activity he finds unsuitable for a Sunday night's occupation. The table at which he sits is a frail and shaky one, made of thin cane, the kitchen is 'bare and empty' the bedroom is not good enough in the house and most of valued possession, the material bed. Indu's presence in the flat is irritating, and so is the noise that comes from the Seigal's flat downstairs. Prem and Indu are alienated from each other:

**International Journal of Science, Engineering and Management (IJSEM)**  
**Vol 2, Issue 10, October 2017**

“ He felt so alone and lonely, shut up in this small ugly flat with Indu who carried by herself in the sitting room while he had tied and cry by himself in the bedroom”.<sup>3</sup>

The atmosphere inside the flat is thick, unease and unhappiness. This house is not warm and protective place. Prem plans to go and ask the principal, he feels terribly diffident and does not know how to put forth his claim. After a great deals of hesitation, he finally decides to see the principal at his residence. He is soon overwhelmed by the authority of the principal and the intolerance of his wife and returns home without uttering a word about his salary. “ He could speak, he was so overwhelmed with shyness. Not only because of what he had some to say, but also because the principal’s sitting room always made him feel shy- Everything was new and opulent and comfortable; plump cushions and flowered curtains and a big shiny radio set: Mr. Khanna himself so cheerful and self-confident wearing a nicely launched shirt and mapping up his egg with a piece of toast.”<sup>4</sup>

Here the fact that Indians are inherently weak and passive is stressed as a key theme. The novel also presents the theme of moral squalor among the newly rich in the form of Prem’s landlord Mr. Seigal and his wife. They go out and meet people, invite them entertain them and spend money lavishly. This sort of life style is not possible them and spend money lavishly. This sort of life style is not possible for Prem, and it often disturbs him. He approach the Seigals with a determination to ask them to reduce his rent, but comes back without doing, so Indian poverty is one of the central themes in Jhabvala’s novels. Loneliness, frustration, humiliation, degradation are some of major themes in her novel. Prem is not on any surer footing at home. He loves his wife in a way to help her to solve her problems. While, Prem and Indu’s flat is empty and silent, the Seigal’s flat is full of people and noise: “ They were jolly people, and every evening they had visitors. Mr. Seigal played cards with the men, they all sat round a little card table under the lamp, drank whisky and slammed down their cards with gusto; sometimes they laughed and made jokes, sometimes they shouted and quarreled”.<sup>5</sup>

Their neighbor’s flat is characterized as an open, bright, inviting place. Indu can easily feel at home there but when Prem finds her in Seigal’s, he is surprised to see her looking happy. Indu also plans to go home to her parent’s house. The double meaning of home is significant here and this slippage of language reveals the problem, for neither Indu nor Prem has fully accepted their flat, and by implication, their married life, as their true home. They are quite sure, where home is and Indu insists that all pregnant women go home to their mothers, but Prem forbids her to leave. The novel highlights the male chauvinism in most of the Indian husbands like Prem ,which is prime factor, disturbing harmony. The

archetypal image of the wife is that of the submissive, obedient housekeeper, whose sole obligation lies in looking after the welfare of her husband and marriage. There is the myth of Sita and Savitri. After all, in well being of a marriage, “ why should the women alone make sacrifices, why not men too”? Indu seems the echo of this question, when she refused to abide by the whims and fancies of her husband or mother in law. Prem attempt to exercise authority over her is a misguided blunder, and ignores him. The arrival of Prem’s mother increas the problems between Prem and Indu. It widens the chasm of insecurity between them. Space, specially the ownership of private space, is at issues. Prem’s mother has literally barged into their lives and makes her presence the atmosphere strained. But worse of this, Indu and Prem no longer move freely in their house. Indu takes to going to bed early as a way of avoiding her mother-in-law’s critical comments and glances. When Indu accidentally walks in on her in the bathroom, the mother is not one who feels deprived of privacy. When Indu accidentally walks in her bathroom, the mother cries, sulks and complains that she is treated unkindly that same evening , Indu’s uncle arrives to fetch her home. When Indu leaves, Prem perception of their home is profoundly affected. Suddenly the flat seems so much emptier. Her favorite picture, which represents their future, since it depicts mother and child, is gone. Her wardrobe is empty and so is the space in the bed beside him. His mothe anxiously waits for him to come home, so that she can cook his food and thus, normalize their relationship: mother and dependent son. But Prem tries to think of excuses not to have to go home. It is this that Sohanlal, one his colleagues in the college, an older man with family living far away, takes him to swami, Prem and other people like to go to swami to escape from their worries and problems. But the swami has little to offer to Prem. Once, when Prem was waiting for Raj at an appointed place, he comes across a German youth called Hans Loewe. Hans is in India, because of a dream in which he saw a palm tree and temple. Under the palm tree sat a Sahu naked except for a piece of cloth. There was such ‘pity’ ‘kindness’ and such love that his eyes invited Hans to come here, come here. All Indian men have spiritual faces and all women are beautiful. He mistakes Prem’s emptiness for a meditative mind and wants to be friend with him. In his desperate attempts to establish connections Prem allows Hans misunderstanding to continue and even visits his room. It is here that he meets kitty Hans landlady, who also likes meditation and spiritual exercises.

Till this point, Prem is shown as incapable of relating with people, first with his wife and then with others, who enter his orbit, MR. khanna, the principal, his colleagues, Mr. Chaddha, sohanial, Raj and finally Hans. The turning points occurs when Indu his wife returns after her visit to

**International Journal of Science, Engineering and Management (IJSEM)**  
**Vol 2, Issue 10, October 2017**

---

her parents. Prem engineer's his mother's departure quickly and effectively. She is never aware of the real reason. She is leaving and her manner remains unchanged and even in the train compartment she is spreading her belonging out, taking up too much space and causing other passengers to complain without sentiment, Prem quickly sees her off and hurries home to Indu. On night of his mother leave, Prem and Indu sleep on the roof of their apartment building. Although the roof is technically outside, it can be understood as an extension of the house. The couple's wish to sleep outside is indicative of their relationship. Now they are at ease with each other and the roof top signifies a new higher level of understanding between them. "They are not alone as alienate individuals anymore; they belong to a relationship marriage which can itself be ideally described as a place where individual can simultaneously experience feelings of treasured solitude and feeling of complete union with the other. This new, strong relationship gives them confidence and the novel ends on a note of optimism and expectation".<sup>6</sup> Prem learns in an adult way to bear the responsibilities of householder: "The novel is remarkable not only for its masterly exemplification of slow and painful process of Prem's growth to maturity, but also for its handling of relationship in Indian context".<sup>7</sup>

When Jhabvala wrote this novel, she was enthralled with India and the novel reveals how important house and home to be writer is not completing accepting all aspects of Indian family life. She is not unaware of her character's individual faults nor is she naïve enough to believe that the Indian family is the ideal social arrangement. We also find, in the novel a view of the world in which dictates among other things, that one does not leave one's place is emphasized. Belonging is the most important thing in life through careful manipulation of characters are brought to a position from which they can see that the choice family and by extension, the culture made for them is right one.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Linda Warley: ' House and home in two early Novels by R.P.Jhabvala in the passages to Ruth Prawar Jhabvala ed. Ralph Crane ( New Dehli: sterling publishers 1991) p-15.
- [2] Ruth Prawar Jhabvala : The householder ( London John Mray, 1960) p-92.
- [3] IBID; P-24.

[4] IBID: P-14.

[5] IBID: P-9.

[6] IBID: P-25.

[7] R.G.Agarwal : ' Ruth Prawar Jhabvala – a study of her fiction' ( New Dehli: Sterling publisher, 1990) p-46.