

Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *The Householder*: A Study of Personal Exile and the Predicament of Female Characters.

Shashi Kant Mishra

Ruth praver Jhabvala's novels may be convincingly divided in to three phases focusing on the issues of romantic idealism and the search for womanhood. Her fiction centres on women and there is a portrayal of feminine sensibility and quest for identity in the patriarchal society. The paper is the discussion of Jhabvala's *The Housholder* in the light of portrayal of women characters. Jhabvala deals with female problems in an evolving pattern. Her women characters develop from excitement to indifference, from indifference to boredom and from boredom to brokenness. The present paper is an attempt to discuss the development of female characters from excitement to maturity in the canvas of male authoritative society.

The novels of the early phase tend to present an analytical portrayal of the feminine sensibilities of Indian women and conservative social system. These novels are focusing on Indian families and their predicament.

The fourth novel of Ruth Jhabvala is *The Householder* published in 1960, dominates the Hindu view of life, which took shape during the tenth century. It is believed that the composition of Upanishads and the codes of Manu and Kautilya, classifies the life of the householder as the second of four Ashramas or stages in Aryan life proceeded by the period of the studentship and followed by the retirement of the duties as a householder and finally the renunciation of all worldly interests. The novel focuses the institution of marriage and tremendous responsibility of the householder. It is the most comic and tender novel. Ruth Jhabvala's first two novels, *To Whom She Will* and *The Nature of Passion* deal with the event and misunderstandings that finally lead to the prospect of happy marriage but *The Householder* is the study of an arranged marriage that has already taken place. The novel is a projection of familial, social and personal predicament of the characters.

The Householder deals with exclusively with one young man rather than with several families. The novel attempts to trace the development or progression of a single personality. Prem is a Lecturer in Hindi at Khanna Private College in Delhi. He is newly married. He lives with his wife Indu and a domestic servant in a small flat for which he is paying more rent than he can afford. His employer and his landlord are exploiting him. Even his students do not pay him proper respect and his friend, Raj, appears to have outgrown the interests they shared in earlier days. His wife, Indu, seems not only bored and unhappy but inclined to deliberately thwart his wishes. To make both ends meet, he must get more salary and he must get his house-rent reduced. But in both of these, he fails miserably. Prem finds himself alone in his new situation. His difficulties in coping spring from the diffidence of a particular personality, but also an experience. Prem has to deliberately resort to his own father's hand of stern authoritarianism in order to disguise his own weakness. Lacking any firm sense of self, he has no means of protecting himself in difficult encounters.

Prem is unable to communicate with his wife whom he hardly knows. Burdened by the teaching profession, he can hardly think of anything. His paramount problem is self identity. Prem is almost the perfect victim of the society. Surrounded by so many problems at home and at work, Prem desires for a parent or its equivalent. He wants to confront his landlord and says to him.... 'You are my father', and stands before him, humble and submissive, like a child (*The Householder* 52). Prem thinks that his boss, Mr Khanna, is a man who should take a fatherly interest in him. Prem tries to find the solution out of taking solace in spiritual things. And so, he goes to Swamiji for relief. Jhabvala wants to say that religion exists as the last resort for those who have no other way out of their difficulties. Prem also goes to the house of a European couple. All this is meant as an escape from the worries of the day-to-day life as a householder. But ultimately, Prem adjusts himself to the new situation and learns in an adult way to bear the responsibilities as a householder. He comes to realize that some problems simply cannot be solved and are better not thought about. There is a kind of personal exile which can occur in Indian society when a young man is married and has to leave home for the first time to set up independently for himself and his new wife. There are number of societies presented in Jhabvala's *The Householder*. First, there is the English society of the Khanna Private College, or rather pseudo-English in its mimicry of English public school manners and affections. Secondly, the society concerned with respectability and class consciousness. Mr Khanna's evening social gathering is characterised by such type of society. Thirdly, we have the society of Prem's young wife and his mother. His mother and wife tend to prickle and bristle. Besides English and Indian societies, Jhabvala has also presented the German society. Hans Loewe and his friend Kitty represent this society. Just as some Indians try to be European, so some European try to be Indian. In Loewe and Kitty, Jhabvala satirises the hippies of the late 1950s and the 1960s in *To Whom She Will*, *The Nature of Passion* and *Esmond in India*, certain oblique criticisms of Indian society are expressed in *The Householder*.

The novel begins with Prem and his newly-wed wife Indu in a newly occupied flat due to personal exile which generally occurs in Indian society to lead a life of independent household. At this juncture of life Prem finds himself lacking the financial resources to prove self-sufficiency and identity as an honourable householder. Prem is a child by experience and wisdom of life. Indu discerns this lacking of Purushartha in the personality of her husband. Prem is burdened with a teaching job and he is aware of his inferior position in dealing with the college principal, the colleagues, the students and the people. But inside the house in order to maintain his father's brand of stern authoritarianism he disguises his weakness and vulnerability. Indu understands this behaviour of her husband who has no means of protecting himself in difficult encounters of life. Prem is almost the perfect victim, a plaything, for the people and an inadequate husband for Indu. He suffers from a complex of unsuitability and inability in facing the new challenges of his life. Prem is struggling to his principal for a raise in his salary, or his landlord for a reduction of his house rent.

Indu's enthusiasm for a new married life has evaporated and she feels fatigued and tired due to the haplessness and hopelessness of her household life. Prem realizes that Indu is miserable only due to his inability to provide her those resources which give a woman a sense of self-blossoming. Moreover, already insufficient as a

householder, he feels embarrassed when Indu gets pregnant. Prem suffers from the terrible sense of insecurity as he lacks self-confidence, self-defense, self-assertion and all heroic traits for which a wife worships or at least honours her husband in traditional set up of Indian society. But he is unable to collect courage for any action and faces great embarrassment on every occasion. Ruth Jhabvala remarks in the novel *The Householder*, -Prem is always haunted with a feeling of failure. He felt himself to be terrible inadequate as a husband, a teacher and as an adult altogether (53).

The bickering in the household of Indu and Prem begins with the appearance of Prem's mother. The middle-aged widow pays her attention to her only son and her dominating presence makes it impossible for Prem and Indu to have private conversation and to take harmonious decisions. Due to this intrusion, Indu finds herself trapped and harassed even at emotional level. Indu even at this moment does not find her husband mature and she finds him like a child of his obsessive mother, Indu becomes offensive against the presence of her mother-in-law. After a feud with Prem's mother, Indu leaves for her parents' house and Prem finds himself in the state of utter failure. Ruth Jhabvala says in the novel:

In his present mood it gave him a grim satisfaction to count up his various failures; he could not earn sufficient money; his career as a teacher was turning out to be unpromising; he had no real friend-even Raj, who had once been a real friend, had deserted him; he was not a successful husband.... It was because he was not a successful husband that she had gone away; he had not been able to make her obedient and respectful; if she had been obedient and respectful, she would not have dared to go away. Or if she had liked him better, she would not have wanted to go away (85).

Prem's separation to his wife Indu relapses him into the stage of his bachelor-life days. At one time he aspires to live like a hermit and visits a swami for religious consolation for his failure. But the world forces him to be back on himself to discover himself. This is the process of diversion which characterizes the adult world at large.

When Indu from her parents' house she finds that in her absence her mother-in-law has usurped her position as the lady of the house. But she does not show her feelings and remains quite submissive. She does not even make any demand whether physical or emotional to her husband. But she is determined to take full hold and her feelings get too strong to respect the traditional rules and regulations. Prem also realises the damaging effect of his obedience to mother. He also realizes that he wants to be looked after by a beloved wife full of mutual love and not by mother. The intensity of Prem and Indu's mutual emotional and sexual love can be seen in the novel *The Householder* when both lovers have the bliss of reunion:

In the night they went to sleep out on the roof. They felt both alone and supreme. Prem, forgetting all his failures and anxieties, persuades Indu to take off all her clothes and show herself naked to him. She blushed, giggled, clutched the sari defensively to her breast while he tried to pull it off. They struggled together and then they loved together, never had they know such an excess of sweetness (118).

Their growing sympathy and glowing affection for each other help them to sustain their sexual relationship which is the first cementing force of a household. Both accepted the tradition of the household. Prem's new incarnation as a mature man

emerges and he tactfully arranges his mother's removal from his home to that of his sister. This gives Indu a great relief and she is eager to repossess her whole share in her husband's house. Prem discovers the true value of his young wife and thus of marriage and suppresses his own snobbery when faced with other girl due to lack of education and culture.

The novel moves towards a resolution that woman is the central figure in a household and man proves his manliness in managing resources, fulfilling sexual needs and catering to emotional desires without any authoritarian hold on her. Prem and Indu feel the need of mutual belonging for an integrated existence. The novel is a story dealing with youthful vitality, idealism, fancies and frustration of middle-class couple but on the surface the novel confirms a comic pattern of Indian middle-class householder. In the novel *The Householder* Jhabvala presents her male character rather passive than her female character. Prem is trying to cope up with his wife Indu, for instance, he is trying to hide his weakness by showing his own father's brand of stern authoritarianism. He simply cannot identify his self to communicate with her on equal terms. The newly married couple starts with usual cross-fire in the novel *The Householder*; when Prem says, 'I have forbidden you', (50). Indu flares up, 'who are you to forbid me?' (50) Indu's out-burst is the manifestation of her feminist predilection. Mr. Chaddha, the principal of the college considers woman as a inferior sex. Mr. Chaddha says:

The society of the ladies is said to have a very softening effect... It is not for nothing, suggested Mr Khanna, that they are known as the gentle sex ...It is good sometime to break off in the midst of toil, ...

And enjoy an hour's leisure and ease in their charming company. As our heroes of old, said Mr Chaddha, withdrew for respite from their battles to have their wounds dressed and their brows soothed by the hands of their consorts (*The Householder* 72).

Prem's authoritarian and male chauvinism is clearly seen when he returns home rather late and finds 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 (*The Householder* 62).

Jhabvala's *The Householder* concentrates on marriage negotiation and the newly married couple who either struggle within the cage for better understanding or break loose to live their life separately. Jhabvala relates the story of Prem and Indu in the Indian middle class family where they face the problems of money and adjustment due to early exile to lead the life of independence. Prem's treatment of his wife might be viewed by the feminist as harsh, cruel and inhuman at times but in defence of Prem it can be said that his behaviour is spontaneous and natural as a member of patriarchal Hindu family.

The novel marks a transition of Indu's movement from excitement to indifference when Indu, disappointed with the failure of her husband as a householder, leaves for paternal house with the intention to never come back but finally she surrenders herself to the tradition. With his mother gone, Prem and Indu start to enjoy their marriage. But outside, the problems are getting worse. Prem fails to get his salary increased and to get his rent lowered. In spite of his failure as a teacher and his failure to lower the rent,

Prem has at least found himself a real householder at the end of the novel. Indu also gets the right status and hence Jhabvala presents, through Indu, the psychology of Indian Women in a typical Hindu family. The novel also shows Indu's development from excitement to maturity.

Work Cited

Jhabvala, Ruth Praver. *The Householder*. London: John Murray, 1960. Print.