



A STUDY OF AMBIVALENCES IN MODERN INDIA: MATERIALISM AND IDEALISM

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ABSTRACT

Ambivalences in the society are eternal. It is also said that unity into diversity is the beauty of India-entire society cannot be in the same situation. R.P. Jhabvala, living in the society of Delhi and being a sharp critic she reveals social dilemma.

Jhabvala's satire is directed towards the middle class attitudes that Salman Rushdie in 'Midnight's children' calls the whitening illness. Materialistic attitude of the neo-rich and middle-classes get a gentle bashing from R.P. Jhabvala for their hollowness and the aim is to make them realize and correct their folly, hollowness and false exhibition. This paper is the study of both the novels in which author has successfully shown the difference in the living way, and about two faces of society. Life is two sided coin, good and bad.

Systematically I have given the appraisal of many novels of this writer. Again this research paper is the study of two novels of R.P. Jhabvala which occurs the thirst and pain of 'have' and 'have-not'.

Keywords: Socio-economic, upper-class, middle-class, lower-strata, materialism, ambitions.

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The portrayal of socio-economic structure of Indian society of 1950's and early 1960's gets amply reflected in the early novels of Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Most of the protagonists of her novels hail from upper and middle classes and their interaction with the lower strata of society reveals the gap between the rich and the poor, While her satire is directed against the materialistic attitudes of the middle class in most of her novels. Jhabvala can not be blamed for totally ignoring the lower class. In her fourth novel, The House Holder (1960), she has projected lower strata of society on an even bigger canvas. With this novel she returns to the intra – Indian context.

The main protagonist Prem, a Hindi teacher with a second class B.A., in Mr. Khanna's private college in Delhi and the other representative of his class Sohanial confront against several social and familial realities which are the consequence of Indian planning. The break –up of the joint family and the mashrooming of nuclear family have created some problems in Indian society and then there is need for new adaptations and adjustments. This phenomenon as a feature of the new India comes in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's fiction for the first time. Choosing for her new canvas, Delhi in which independence and partition were already history, By 1960 the traditional structure was becoming weak

and the pattern of Indian life was changing but many traditions like early marriage had remained .

The House Holder comes in 1960's when the social situation was in flux. Ruth Praver Jhabvala presents a picture of conflict and resolution, materialistic will, ambitions in terms of a youth's quest for identity and also idealism. If we think about this title *The House Holder* and its meaning, We find that this is the second stage of traditional Hindu life of the four phases viz, 'Brahmacharya; 'Grihastha; 'Vanaprastha' and 'Sanyasa Ashramas'. It is the busy time which follows marriage, the time of setting – up an independent home and beginning to earn a living.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala has knit the theme of *The House Holder* around the characters mainly belonging to lower middle – class most of them living in Delhi. Hence the socio-economic conditions depicted in the novel pertain to this class. The protagonist, Prem is a teacher of Hindi – in a private college of Mr. Khanna. He draws a meager salary and one fourth of it goes into paying the rent of the house. Prem is married to Indu. How Prem comes to terms with his new destiny, the difficulties he faces and the solutions he finds make-up the backbone of **The House Holder**. His meager salary is a source of anxiety that always haunts him. Yet Prem is also conscientiously trying to fit himself into the role he is now called upon to play-that of a successful householder, housbond, teacher and would be father. Prem's paramounting problem is one of self-identity. Always he want a betterment in his life. Jhabvala describes Prem's dilemma:

“Soon he would have a family and his expenses would mount; but his salary at Mr Khanna's college was only one hundred seventy five rupees in a month. How to manage on that? His rent alone come to forty-five rupees.¹

Indu's pregnancy make Prem feel about the prospective enlargement of his family and increase in expenses. He has two options before himself – either to look for a better job with good salary or seek hike in his present salary. However he finds disappointment in his search for a better job because of his low educational qualifications. Prem's friend Raj is a government servant and Prem thinks

that whether he should secure a government job which entails economic security plus pension benefit:

He walked down the road with Raj. After a while he said; “Do you think it is possible for me to get into government service?” and he looked anxiously at Raj's stern profile. Raj parsed his lips, 'it is not easy', I know.²

Despite his few salary, Prem seems to be status conscious and likes to retain a servant as a status symbol. Prem thinks on the materialistic ground. He sees luxurious life and very materialistic world of Mr. Khanna every day and he is slowly allured by the materialistic joy and the life of luxury. Though his wife Indu feels no need for having a servant, She thinks like an ideal and traditional Indian woman. Ruth Praver Jhabvala powerfully projects Prem's feeling in this regard :

“There is not much work, We don't really need a Servant. 'of course we need a servant' Prem said. After all he was the son of principal of a college and Himself professor, a man of education and some standing : it was not right that his wife should scour pots and wash floors. He felt annoyed that she should fail to realize this, and he at once vented his annoyance : 'What do you think people will say if they come here and find we have no servant ?³

Prem feels the need of a servant, so one day comes the servant and he is maltreated all the time. Indu and Prem's mother scold him frequently. He is an easy target of every body's misbehavior. The fear of economic insecurity also haunts Prem who is anxious for a hike in his salary because he has a desire to enjoy the materialistic world. Every time prem approaches his principal for a rise in salary or his landlord for a reduction of his house – rent but is unsuccessful at the end of the novel as they were at the beginning.

The principal approaches to this quest in *The House Holder* are formed out of, what may be termed, the materialistic and the idealistic views of life. The world of the novel is rather equally divided between haves and have nots or idealists by ties of business, friendship and exploitation.

Mr. Khanna and Mrs Khanna are the chief materialists in the novel. Mr. Khanna is the Principal in his own private college. He exploits the teachers for his social and economic, upliftment. On the other hand, the chief protagonist, Prem and his wife Indu have a moral character and idealistic approach. They also want their social and economic upliftment for the material joys. Prem has few ambitions so he wants a hike in his salary. But at the same time he is afraid of losing this job. Prem's plight is portrayed by Jhabvala in this realistic manner :

"When he realized that Mr Khanna was not disposed to make allowance and that he might even dismiss him, he was very much afraid . His mind leapt to the consequences of dismissal: The difficulty – or even impossibility of finding another job, The destitution of himself, Indu and their baby. They would have to give – up their own flat and live with one after another of their relations. Perhaps they would have more children and every one would be angry with him and say : 'He earns not a pai to keep himself and still he loads his wife with children'. Indu would have to sell all her pieces of jewellery.⁴ It is the feeling of economic insecurity that makes Prem stuck to his job in Mr. Khanna's college.

Another thing in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's analysis is the cultural clash between the rich and the poor, the materialist and the idealist and the depiction of incongruities of food habits and life – styles as also of manners. The gap between two life –style, the Khanna's and their staff present an effective contrast. The novelist depicts a contrast of Prem's ugly little flat and principal's magnificent and comfortable residence. Khanna's sumptuous English breakfast eaten on a luxurious dining table and sohanlal's cycling 15 miles with an empty stomach every morning, these are the contrasting situations by which R. P. Jhabvala depicts the problems of the haves and have not. She presents an ambivalent situation in her novels because she wants to bring balance between these situations.

Prem's honest simplicity, his wife's absurdity and idealism with innocence are all the time contrasted with Mrs Khanna's expensive

"Ornaments and brightly flowered clothes". Every situation shows a contrast between materialism and idealism of upper middle class and lower middle class of modern Indian society. This novel is not merely his monetary and familial problems, but also his complexes, his sense of failure and frustration and his minor fulfilments. The blind craze for modernity without a major socio – economic break through is bound to result in hollow exhibitionism, false display, split personality, and gradual degeneration.

The foregoing analysis makes it discernible that R.P Jhabvala has portrayed materialistic and idealistic condition in **The House-Holder'** by focusing on the middle class and lower middle class. The middle class is represented by Mr Khanna and Saigals who own landed property and live a luxurious life. The people belonging to the lower strata of society are Prem Sohanlal and Raj who depend on meagre salaries and live a troublesome life. They are lured by better condition of living but their means do not permit them to do so.

On the whole, it is a study of the rich and the poor clan of society, Rich are shown as being concerned with luxuries and comforts while the poor are struggling only to makes both ends meet. India's poverty and backwardness are two salient features that frequently recure in the fiction of Jhabvala Yasmine Gooneratne rightly maintains :

"Indeed Ruth Jhabvala to seems to have set herself From the very first the pleasurable task of drawing as accurately as possible characters and situations that were part of the Indian world that immediately surrounded and so delighted"⁵

Similarly in 'Get Ready for Battle" also R.P. Jhabvala deals with marital dissonance through the portrayal of some new characters. Even Indian husbands and their Indian wives seen to fall apart in a purely Indian familial and social situation. This conflict sometimes arises out of a class of wills, personalities and also values. **Get ready for Battle** is a complex novel and structurally a domestic social comedy marked by satirical flourishes.

In '**Get Ready for Battle'**, Gulzarilal and his wife Sarla Devi, differ basically in their attitudes too, and evaluation of life. His life views is so dominantly

governed by materialism that he cannot see eye to eye with Sarla since she is a genuine idealist. The clash of wills and personalities has been dramatically portrayed in **The House Holder** by the encounter between Prem and Indu who are married only to discover that their life patterns are more contradictory than complimentary. He tries to assert his position as the dominant husband – “ I have forbidden you” while she retorts – ‘who are you to forbid me?’ This conflict between growing sense of individualism and the orthodox tradition of a man-ridden Indian society is genuinely representative of the post second phase of Indian society.

But in ‘Get Ready for Battle’ Sarla Deve presents a different identity.

The novel opens with the description of a lavish party hosted by Gulzarilal representing the ordinary ethics of big business. Kusum a widow of an army officer is concerned totally with herself and her own ambitions for her status, Gulzarilal has an affair with Kusum. She cleverly plays her cards like a shrewd player to fulfill her ambitions while Sarla Devi leads life like a yogi. Sarla Deve is inspired by Indian traditions and the Gita Specially when she faces worldly troubles. According to Lord Krishna one must do one’s duty without any attachment. Ruth Praver Jhabvala draws the title of her book from this :-

“Treating alike pleasure and pain, gain and loss,
Victory and defeat, then get ready for battle.”⁶

Through this Jhabvala shows the dilemma of alienated situations and also tells how to survive in an oppressive and fragmented world. The theme of social conservation cum idealism has superbly been knit around character of Sarla Devi by R. P. Jhabvala in the novel. An estranged wife of Gulzarilal, a businessman for whom money is everything, Sarla Devi has almost renounced the world and leads a life of contemplation. She is aptly described by Gautam, a friend of Vishnu. ‘**Get Ready for battle**’ centralizes philosophical debate. The allure of Hinduism is that it denies essential difference between the sacred and profane, money making and the self sacrifice. The novel constitutes a binary opposition of ideas. The husband Gulzarilal and wife Sarla Devi are

complete opposites. Gulzarilal is shrewd businessman, he advocates realism with materialism, he knows how to eat, how to make money, he has capacity for hand-working and earning money by any right or wrong manner. On the other hand Sarla Devi believes in “ a better and purer life”, but her husband believes in modern economic religion and declares her ot an unbalanced and impractical women. This conflict between materialism and idealism is in the center of novel. This novel is a grim tale of the exploitation of the faceless poors by the wealthy, the corrupt and the hypocritical.

Sarla Devi ponders on values of life and her dissatisfaction with it . According to her, life is a struggle between material and ideal, physical and spiritual, life also presents and conflict between freedom and incarceration. Sarla Devi’s conservatism emanates from her moral and spiritual beliefs but she does not object to or impose her code of morality on others.

Sadness and compassion are the main declarative motif in these novels. In this term, Ruth Praver Jhabvala projected a theme and much more happenings which we can see every day life in Delhi. The disintegration of moral and social norms and the sense of failure that is gradually creeping into Ruth Praver Jhabvala’s world are also reflected in the novel’s structure.

Reference:

1. R.P. Jhabvala, *The House Holder*.
2. *Ibid*.
3. *Ibid*.
4. *Ibid*.
5. *Contemporary India in the writings of R.P. Jhabvala, Westerly Vol.*
6. *Get Ready for Battle, R.P. Jhabvala.*