

## THE FAMILY AS METAPHOR FOR SOCIAL COMMENT - A SELECT STUDY OF RUTH PRAWER JHABVALA'S FICTION

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### ABSTRACT

Indian writing in English owes much to the historical phenomenon of the juxtaposition of the two diametrically opposite cultures, namely the oriental and the occidental. It is not natural that the Indo-English writers should dwell on the cultural and psychological upheavals and the reactions and responses that emerge as the result of the East-west encounter. Besides, there are writers who could neither inhabit the country nor reject it but continue to be nostalgic about it in their literature from abroad. Ruth Prawer *Jhabwala*, one of the better known women novelists of India, belongs to this category of fiction writers. She is essentially a European writer who has lived in India and given to her experience of life and society in this country as artistic expression. Mrs. Jhabwala's success as novelist of Indian social life may be partly the result of her being originally a European outsider. She usually presents the traditional undivided Hindu family as a "given" and only by implication criticizes it. The undivided family is the epitome of traditional middle-class India, the old ruling but protecting the young and the young protesting and usually yielding, though occasionally breaking away like sparks shot off from a cart-wheel. Her characters encounter variegated existential problems such as the adjustment between husband and wife, between man and society. She takes her characters from the social and familial background. She shows the way to a harmonious life by bringing to light the causes for disharmony. One of the major themes in her novels is marital dissonance which arises from mal-adjustment. She describes the marriages in India and the various complexities involved therein. This paper deals with the trapped married couple who wriggle within the cage for better understanding as in *The Householder* and in *A Backward Place*.

**Key Words:** undivided, yielding, existential, adjustment, dissonance

### INTRODUCTION

Ruth Prawer *JHABVALA* has achieved world-wide recognition as one of India's leading writers of fiction. Her novel *Heat and Dust* (1975) was awarded the Prestigious Booker Prize in London. She has her own style and technique in portraying the different aspects of Indian society. She often portrays the predicament of individuals in their relationships with their families. It is the experience of European women married to

Indian men and Indian women married to Europeans that has also been her concern as a writer. The portrayal of interaction between two cultures, European and Indian, seems to be her forte. The major themes in Jhabwala's fiction are east-west encounter and marital dissonance which are mutually interlinked in their negative context. In the positive context, these may be described as fruitful and happy amalgam of the

east and west, culminating in marital harmony and joy. The clash of wills and personalities is dramatically portrayed in *The Householder* in the encounter between Prem and Indu, who are married only to discover that their life-patterns are more contradictory than complimentary. Whereas in *A Backward place* Judy, who is married to Bal, a handsome youth dreaming of a career in films, makes an apparent success of her marriage.

#### THE HOUSEHOLDER

*The Householder* is the story of an ordinary young man's slow attainment of the status of the householder, the second of the *ashrams* in the traditional social structure according to the Hindu conceptions. It is a simple tale completely centered on the married life of Prem and his new young wife Indu, a tale told with gentle mocking irony. The reader is introduced to Prem, the hero of the novel, a married man teaching Hindi on a meager salary of Rupees one hundred and seventy five a month. He has to support himself and his wife Indu, who is pregnant, and, of course he has to run the entire household. He has rented an apartment in one of the not-so-fashionable but reasonable good areas of Delhi and is paying Rs. Forty five per month towards house-rent for the apartment. Hence, from the very beginning we find Prem beset with the problem of adjustment with a low salary. In fact, the entire story of the novel has been constructed on the basis of this problem, and, Mrs. Jhabvala has made it a point to repeat this many times, that whenever Prem says anything we anticipate beforehand, that eventually we will slide back to his basic misfortune of living on a meager income.

The householder, Prem, is married to Indu, a girl chosen by his parents. Prem, instead of enjoying the companionship of his wife finds her to be a burden on his income and Mrs. Jhabvala gives reasons for his predicament. The first and the foremost one is, of course, the early marriage system in India. Prem was married as soon as he came out of the college and before he was able to earn enough to support himself and his wife. It was only four months ago that Prem had got the job at Khanna Private College and his wife was already pregnant. The other reason for the prevailing discontentment in married life in Indian society is the arranged marriage system. Marriages are usually arranged by the parents of girl and the boy and the utmost that the parents do is to allow them adjust themselves each other, and naturally the young couple take time to develop some kind of feeling for each other. Prem is unable to appreciate his wife. He is not happy and his discontentment can be seen after a few days of his marriage.

She seems to him to be frivolous, childish, ignorant and not even pretty.

While Prem strives to establish himself in the linked roles of husband, breadwinner and householder, Indu finds some difficulty in accommodating her individual, lively outlook to the requirements of her role as a married woman and housewife. She comes from a fun-loving family, and though she wishes to be a credit to her parents and to Prem, she cannot help being amused by the very idea of herself as the dignified "lady of the household". Indian tradition lays down time-honored rules for a wife's conduct and Indu finds that there exist certain ideals to which her husband and her mother-in-law expect her to behave. She is just like a child, innocence and immaturity. Prem thinks of his glorious life-style, when he was a bachelor. But he feels everything is so different right now. He is unable to cope with the temperament of Indu. Prem is dull, prosaic and weak-willed. He is young, vain, disapproving, uncertain of himself and shy. Prem is seen as an entirely new person at home. He wants to dominate Indu completely and wants her to act according to his wishes. Prem's troubles after marriage are added not only by his low pay and tight budgeting but also by his wife's pregnancy.

Prem's problem acquires an additional dimension with the arrival of two letters. The first comes from his mother announcing her arrival in Delhi and the other comes from Indu's father asking her to be ready to be fetched home by her uncle visiting Delhi shortly. Prem tells Indu that she cannot go home since his mother is arriving but Indu says that she will go. This conflict again poses a threat to Prem because he thinks that a husband must be obeyed by his wife. His model is that of his own father who was the principal of a college in Ankhapur and commanded unquestioning obedience both at house and at college. The householder's marital relations with Indu are delicately and sensitively portrayed by Jhabvala. The problems become vigorous when Prem's mother descends upon them. Besides this problem, his standing problems of raise in salary and lowering of his house rent have not been solved. The mother-in-law's ceaseless reflections on Indu's alleged lack of good looks and education, and supposed inadequacies as a housewife create a 'rather strained' atmosphere in the small flat during her visit. Prem's mother has been successfully used by Mrs. Jhabvala to show the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in India. It is a known fact that these two are never on cordial terms and Mrs. Jhabvala has succeeded in bringing out this fact. Indu is never seen to be happy about

her mother-in-law's visit. Unable to enjoy privacy in her house, Indu wants her mother-in-law to leave the place. But later Indu only leaves her house. In Indu's absence Prem feels very depressed. He feels very much hurt and thinks that perhaps he has begun to grow fond of her. He realizes that he loves her very much. After his marriage, he had a dislike for Indu. But gradually he gets used to her presence and develops love towards Indu. For Prem, his life seems to be a complete failure. His present mood gives him a grim satisfaction to count up his various failures: unable to earn sufficient money; uncompromising teaching career etc. Above all, he feels that he is not a successful husband.

With the return of Indu from her parental home, the young couple is embarrassed in their love-making with Prem's mother's presence in the house. Finding that in her absence her mother-in-law has usurped her position as 'the lady of the household', she tries hard, by not showing her feelings, to act the part that tradition demands: quietly submissive to Prem's mother, making no demands on her husband, she is determinedly not 'angry'. Annoying as all this naturally is to Prem, it is a necessary stage in his development. He realizes that he 'wanted to be looked after not by his mother but by Indu. Prem's new-found maturity emerges as he decisively arranges for getting rid of his mother by sending to his sister's home. The mother's exit, which leaves the husband and the wife alone together, creates the atmosphere for recognition of the changed relationship. He has now fully attained the status of a householder. By the end of the book discord has been resolved in harmony. Having learned first to love and be loved Prem and Indu take their places as members of the adult society. The householder's marital relations with Indu are delicately and sensitively portrayed by Jhabvala. The apparent marital dissonance between Prem and Indu during early days of their marriage dissolves into an experience of real affection and love. The Householder is a sensitively portrayed social comedy of a lower-middle class Hindi teacher reflecting not merely his monetary and familial problems, but also his complexes, his sense of failure and frustration and his minor fulfillments. The novel is remarkable not only for its masterly exemplification of the slow and painful process of Prem's growth to maturity, but also for its handling of inter-personal relationship within the Indian context.

#### **A BACKWARD PLACE:**

The coming together of two cultures in marriage is the personal experience of Ruth Praver Jhabvala. A Polish by birth, she married an Indian architect and spent more than twenty years here in India. Besides, the historical realities of

the colonial experience make inter-racial marriages on the Indian soil a social reality. In her short stories and novels, Indians and Europeans meet, fall in love and marry and find either marital harmony or dissonance and friction. The success and failure of this marriage will also measure the individual's capacity for love, understanding and self-deception. It will mean promoting the self to come to terms with itself. One representative novel of Jhabvala that deals with this phenomenon is *A Backward Place*.

Judy marries an Indian, Bal for love, and she sticks to him in spite of the testing times they have. Judy tries her level best and almost succeeds in adapting herself to Indian ways of life. One can see that marriage of Bal and Judy is difficult not because of the difference in race so much as because of the clash in their temperaments between the dreamer and the pragmatist. Bal, Judy's husband has been portrayed by Mrs. Jhabvala as a typical Indian youth. As seen by Jhabvala, in her previous novels, Bal is a graduate, without a job, but full of plans and a dream of becoming a famous actor one day. Bal and Judy both demonstrate the sense of hope and resilience in human character, confronted with the flux of life, the sense that every dark cloud has a silver lining and that man must continue to dream and weave a web of fantasy in the hope that this dream may one day be transformed into reality. The story of the novel is simple and rotates round the lives and familial entanglement of the foreign characters of this novel. Judy and Bal occupy the central stage. Judy and Bal met in London where he came as an Indian delegate to a conference of International youth. She fell in love with his handsome face and his gay manner. Her home in England was cheerless and she was immediately taken in by Bal's blowsy spirits. She married him and settled with him in a lower middle-class joint family house in Delhi. She is already a mother of two children when the novel opens and is very deeply involved with their upbringing. Bal calls himself an artiste and is intermittently mixed with radio, stage and movies. Bal before coming to India, made many promises to Judy's parents but could never fulfill them as he never had enough money to send Judy to her parents, leave alone going to England. It is Judy who had to work and earn for their living.

Judy, the product of a lovely and tragic English middle-class home enjoys the friendly, promiscuous and comforting disorder of the joint-family, getting on well with her Indian in-laws and feeling sympathy even for the Hindu piety of the old aunt, Bhauji. Judy is the bread-winner since her handsome film actor husband is usually out of work. Judy longed for permanence and stability and hates change. Bal is certainly an

unsuitable husband for Judy. Bal hardly earns anything, he goes to the radio station, where he manages to get a small program every now and then, and the rest of the time he spends in coffee shops with his friends who are also jobless. While Bal is wasting his time in coffee shops and running after his matinee-idol Kishan Kumar, his wife Judy has been shouldering the entire responsibility of his family. She looks after the children, struggles to get a job and faces many embarrassing situations. She is bold and independent. She is optimistic with a great foresight about the needs and necessities of her family. Indeed she's a proper miser. Judy hates to be dependent on her brother-in-law Mukand, who lives upstairs, and though he considers it his duty, in a resigned sort of way, to stand by her, she does not realize her dependence. She knows that Mukand's salary is enough to provide for one family, and that his own, but not for two; and besides, she had not grown up in England with the idea that other people are there to provide one with a living, even if they are – one might even stretch a point and say especially if they are – one's relatives. Mrs. Jhabvala has very effectively juxtaposed the two worlds – the East and the West Indian idealism and Western practical attitude becomes almost jarring and at one point all our sympathies are with Judy.

Bal represents another basic trait so common to modern Indian youth i.e., dilly-dallying. Once, Bal comes up with a bright idea and it starts taking shape. But he loses interest in the project due to the influence of his matinee idol Kishan Kumar. Judy is extremely patient with Bal but his hair-brained scheme of upping and leaving upsets her house of security. When Judy explains the progress of her talks with her colleague, Sudhir about the theatre, Bal says he doesn't find much time to be very active in that venture. At this moment, Judy is totally upset. Bal is the representative of young graduates, without jobs, living in a world of make-believe and spending all their time in the coffee shops. To criticize these young men of India, Mrs. Jhabvala makes Jayakar, a revolutionary during the independence movement, her mouthpiece, and, on one occasion when Sudhir takes Jayakar to one of those coffee shops where Bal was gossiping with his friends, he expresses his disgust. Jhabvala has proved her point when we see that while Bal is wasting his time in coffee shops and running after Kishan Kumar, his wife, Judy is shouldering the entire responsibility of his family. Bal becomes ashamed when Jayakar classes him with the idlers, the "apes and loafers" in the coffee house and Judy's friend, Etta's accusation that he is living on his wife's earnings finally gets him up and out of Delhi, with a definite goal in view. Bal's

optimism finally conquers Judy's doubts and fears, and moves the family, with its tiny stock of worldly possessions and Judy's meager savings to a new life in Bombay. Judy expresses her willingness to leave for Bombay.

Judy tries her best and almost succeeds in adapting herself to Indian ways of life. Her positive attitude to life helps her accept the challenges of life. Her readiness to identify herself with the lower-middle class Indian family in which she lives gives her a sense of belonging and saves her from the theme of cultural alienation. It can be seen that the marriage of Bal and Judy is difficult not because of the difference in race as much as because of the clash in their temperaments – between the dreamer (Bal) and the pragmatist (Judy). Her adaptability to and identification with the country she chooses to live in, her realistic attitude and contentment stand her in good stead. These are the very qualities that make bring harmony into married life. Judy is Ruth Jhabvala's positive and affirmative answer to the doubts and fears that surround an inter-racial, inter-religious marriage.

#### CONCLUSION

Ruth Praver Jhabvala is essentially a European writer who has lived in India and given to her experience of life and society in this country as artistic expression. She usually presents the traditional undivided family as a "given" and only by implication criticizes it. It is the grand work of several novels and hovers on the background of the others. Sociologically, the family is the most important component of the Indian society and one of the chief guardians of social conservatism. The undivided family is the epitome of traditional middle-class, the old ruling but protecting the young and the young protesting and usually yielding, though occasionally breaking away like the sparks shot off from a cart-wheel. The major theme in her novels is marital dissonance, which arises from maladjustment. By bringing to surface the causes of dissonance, Jhabvala has tried to bring about the ways which will result in marital assonance. Mostly her novels deal with the initial experiences of married life. This is a stage which needs proper adjustment though it is not always easy, as two grown-up people, brought up in different circumstances and situations, come together and want to establish their identity. Each wants to dominate. Unless there is proper understanding, marital harmony cannot be achieved. All her novels create a macro-world, a world fully familiar to many Indians. This world has been recreated and represented through the medium of the ludicrous and the humorous. Sly

and compassionate, sad and funny, Jhabvala has been able to project the world with the sympathetic eye of a fine friend and the prying eye of a critic.

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