

Middle Class Life in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *The Householder*

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Abstract: The present paper “Middle class Life in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *The Householder* focuses on Jhabvala's satire on the Indian lower middle class family life in India. The economically cramped life of the young couple, Prem and Indu is highlighted by their financial stringency. Their pitiable economic condition is the reflection of the general social situation and points to the theme of general poverty of the Indians. Jhabvala focuses on poverty in India as one of its basic realities. The Principal and Prem are the representation of two different classes of the Indian society, upper class and lower middle class.

Key Words – Humour, Patriarchal, Family, Marriage, Economy, Household

Ruth Praver Jhabvala is a mild satirist, who views the customs, conventions, poverty and penury in the middle class life minutely and portrays them ironically. In her novel *The Householder*, she explores the householder's economic, educational, familial and social predicaments in a middle class urban social setting in Delhi and creates in the process, an excellent entertaining social comedy.

In *The Householder* (1960), Jhabvala introduces an atmosphere with humour, sympathy and satire. The novel is a satire on a lower middle class man, Prem's slow attainment of the status of the householder. Prem is unable to take control of his own house and he has his difficulty in entering the stage of life associated with being a householder. The strength of the novel lies in its faithful exemplification of the process in terms of authentic characters and situations. Jhabvala shows the lower middle class life of Prem, the protagonist of the novel from the opening scene itself. “Prem sat at the only table in which he had corrected his students' essay paper. The table was a very frail and shaky one, made of thin cane, and it would have been more comfortable to sit on the floor” (7). Prem has got the influence of correcting papers at the table from his father. So he feels dignity on sitting at the table. Through this, Jhabvala satirises the wish of Prem, who is the representative of the middle class. His kitchen is bare and empty and his bed room is a “poky crooked little bedroom, which is not good enough to house their most valued possessions, the marital bed” (22).

Ruth Praver Jhabvala's treatment of middle class life in *The Householder* is a satirical portrait. Prem is newly married and a young college teacher and he feels that he is a failure as a husband and a teacher. Prem is expecting a new arrival that is his first child in the family. This expectation makes him aware of his precarious financial position. So this situation makes him plead with his principal for a rise in his salary. He gets barely Rupees One Hundred and Seventy five per month, out of which forty five rupees go for the rent of the house. He is unable to convince his principal about his authentic demands. Jhabvala satirically describes the meeting between Prem and his Principal, Mr. Khanna:

Prem stood hesitating outside the sitting-room door. But he made himself brave and entered. Mr. Khanna was sitting eating his breakfast . . . Mr. Khanna was in a jovial mood. “You see me enjoying my breakfast”, he explained. Prem looked up and nodded. He saw that Mr. Khanna was having an English breakfast of eggs and toast. “It is very important to start the day with a good breakfast”, Mr. Khanna said . . . the Principal’s sitting-room always made him feel shy. (11-12)

Prem, a man of the lower middle class family is suffering a lot to have his survival, because of his low wages, while Mr. Khanna, a man of the upper class family is enjoying the comforts of a rich life. Jhabvala through the vein of satire exposes the difference between the rich and the poor, the rich living in luxury and the poor struggling to make both ends meet.

Prem tries to establish the fact about his and his family’s needs to his principal. His attempt is futile all the time. Whenever Prem finds out proper opportunity to convey about his low wages to the Principal, he makes Prem feel disgusted. He declines his request by pointing out his inability to control his students and his ineffectiveness in teaching. The other teachers of Mr. Khanna’s college often register complaint on Prem for the disturbance and indiscipline in his class. So he is advised by the principal to mind his work in the class seriously and prepare his lessons adequately so that he might become an effective teacher.

The principal has taken much advantage on Prem because of his minor weaknesses. The principal keeps him in subjection so that he does not demand a higher wage. The Principal is hardly interested in probing the genuineness of his demand. Prem’s painful anxiety to get higher wages spotlights the hard heartedness of the upper class people like the Principal, Mr. Khanna. The Principal is happy with Prem as long as he has no demands.

The Principal invites his college lecturers along with their family members for a tea party. Jhabvala has satirised this scene thus:

The Principal came striding into the staff-room and said, Good morning, gentlemen. He always addressed his staff, when several of them were gathered together, as ‘gentlemen’; this lent dignity to the school, giving the impression that he employed real professors and paid them a high salary. (26)

The tea party scene reveals the diplomatic and calculated mind of the Principal, Mr Khanna. The Principal has a pleasant feel because he controls his employees. No other teacher except Prem has courage to ask for high wages. Even in the tea party, the teachers are not bold enough to speak on the topic of the general raise in their salary though all the teachers have secretly desired it.

The Principal and his wife are not candid and displayed themselves as superior beings to the teachers at the tea party. They have pretended as if they are interested in observing social politeness. They are outwardly a dedicated educationists but in reality, Mr. Khanna is a practical businessman who exploits the poor teachers by paying low wages and he expels no student, because he cannot bear to refund the fees. Tikoo comments on the Principal as “. . . a pseudo-intellectual whose main business in running the college is to keep up his smug living and his social image as a successful man” (217). The Principal is the representative of a man belonging to the upper class. The Principal, being an elite lives within the house and

knows nothing about the society but pretends as if he cares for the society. It is stated:

The Khanna Private College was not cheap. Mr. Khanna specialized in boys from well-off families who were not clever enough to get admission into the better colleges. He kept them for a year or so, during which time he ostensibly trained them to get pass the admission tests. Most of them who did so was perhaps due to their own hard work than to Mr. Khanna's contacts, which were very good. (36)

Thus Mr. Khanna provides easy-going education and pretends as if he cares for the social well being.

Jhabvala reveals a typical social situation such as the one faced by the couple and shows the tension in Prem's mind. Indu, the wife of Prem is passive and submissive. She accepts the dictates of the society and follows tradition. She tries to keep her husband happy and keeps her house clean and neat. Whenever Prem gets irritated, he scolds her. She tries to keep quite in his presence. "It made him uncomfortable to think of her crouching alone in there, crying quietly to herself. She always cried very quietly. He had by accident discovered her on two occasions . . ." (31). Jhabvala satirises the Indian wives who swallow their sorrows in secret. Through this scene one can understand how a wife conceals her feelings to keep up the traditional way of not being rude to her husband. Indu finds some difficulty in accommodating her individual, lively outlook to the requirements of her role as a married woman and housewife. Indian tradition lays down rules for wife's conduct and Indu finds that there exist certain ideals according to which her husband expects her to behave. Chanda comments on Indu as "one who accepts with unquestioning resignation the dictates of the society" (203).

Prem's plan to assert himself in the role of an authoritative husband collides with Indu's intention to prove herself as a model of housewife. The novelist describes:

He would have been quite pleased if his food had been slightly delayed, but Indu was very prompt with it. He cleared his throat and looked authoritative as he sat down on the floor in front of his brass tray. She kept bringing him more hot chapattis. (49-50)

When she is annoyed with Prem, Indu might serve his food to him with a defiant little slam, but will still prepare it with care and serve it to him herself. Returning home rather late to find the house dark and silent and Indu asleep, Prem states, "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" (46). These incidents exhibit the behaviour of a typical Indian husband. Shahane rightly points out that "Indian husbands and their Indian wives seems to fall apart in a purely Indian familial and social situation. Thus conflict sometimes arises out of dash of wills, personalities, temperament and also values" (28).

Prem is living in poverty, yet he asks his wife to have a servant to show his self importance. Indu is a practical lady, who does not want to have a servant because she does not believe in false pretentions. Jhabvala describes the false pretention of Prem:

What do you think people will say if they come here and find we have no servant? "But nobody comes", Indu pointed out . . . He made a

sound of impatience. How completely she missed his point! She really seemed to be rather stupid. (36-37)

Prem's immaturity makes him feel irritated. He always shows his irritation to his wife Indu. He never allows her wife, Indu to visit her maternal home. The novelist satires on the patriarchal attitude of the Indian husbands through the character of Prem.

When Prem feels the absence of his wife, Indu, he writes to her like an emotional lover:

The house is empty without you and my heart also is empty. I want to stroke you and kiss you everywhere with my mouth and then I want to be inside you, when I think of this I feel I shall die with longing so much for you. (142)

Prem expresses his love towards his wife through a letter. But he is afraid that his mother may read the letter. With this fear, Prem burns the letter. When he comes to know that his wife Indu is pregnant, he gently touches the belly and tries to feel the presence of the baby in her womb. Immediately he feels ashamed. The immature reaction of Prem is again satirised by Jhabvala in this scene.

Prem who is brought up in Indian tradition explains to Indu about how to behave. He tells her:

It's not nice to talk like that he reproved her. What did I say? Only what is true. He would have explained to her that it is not always right for a girl to say what is true; but what use was explaining? A girl should understand these things by herself. (23-24)

Both Prem and Indu have been brought up in the ancient tradition and often they display love between husband and wife. Prem sometime feels that he is married to a woman who is not only quite different from what he had wished and hoped for, but who also opposes him. Prem thinks all these things because of his immaturity in the beginning. This apparent marital dissonance later dissolves into experience of real affection and love by his maturity. After Indu's departure for her home, Prem really feels drawn to her psychologically and emotionally. Immature marital relation between Prem and Indu is satirically portrayed by Jhabvala.

Jhabvala's satirical eyes have never missed a scene in society and she also satirises a conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Prem's mother being a middle aged widow, directs towards her only son, a smothering maternal affection. Her ceaseless reflections on Indu's alleged lack of looks and education and supposed inadequacies as a housewife create a rather strained atmosphere in the small flat during her visit. Prem's mother always finds fault with her daughter-in-law and complains to her son about Indu. So it makes Prem get irritated. Her mother's presence makes even private conversation in the tiny flat impossible for Prem. He is naturally annoyed by these and he realizes that he wants to be looked after not by his mother but by his wife Indu and he wants to care for her. Jhabvala satirises the attitude of Indian mothers who never allow their boys to live a peaceful life with their wives.

Jhabvala has also noticed the early marriage system in India and satirises it through the character Sohan Lal who is a sensitive man. His early arranged marriage

has deprived him of his freedom to lead the spiritual life to which his temperament calls him. In the Hindu view of life, marriage is a part:

Who would not turn to God and take pleasure only in thinking about Him, if he could? ‘. . . It is easy for a young man whose marriage has not been made to vow himself to God’, Sohan Lal said ‘What a burdens has he, what responsibilities? He is free to do as he pleases’. . . ‘Here in our India . . .’ it is so that while we are still children and know nothing of what we want, they take us and tie us up with a wife and children. . . . So that when we are old enough to know what the world is and what God is, then it is too late, for we have a burden on our back which we can not shake off for the rest of our days. (97)

Early marriage has deprived this thoughtful, sensitive young man of all joys and of any purpose in life beyond that of deferring endlessly for security’s sake to Mr. Khanna and his wife.

Another peculiarity in Indian tradition is the attraction that the symbols of spiritual life and ideals have for the individual harassed by the struggles of existence. The Swami figure is satirised. The swami lives in a congested area of the town. He sports a beard and wears an orange robe. Always followed by a large group of people, he seems to learn the scriptures as displayed in his teaching of Vedanta. In going to the Swamis, Prem and Sohan Lal forget their worldly afflictions and merge themselves in the Swami’s world by dancing with him to the religious music that is played in the background. But the Swami’s relationship with his disciples seems to be more physical than spiritual. He remains ambivalent and falls short of carving enduring imprints in the minds of the devotees. One rather tends to suspect his spirituality when contrary to the religious principle of detachment, the Swami tends to be possessive of his devotees. Belliappa brings forth this quality:

This characteristically Indian attitude is rendered absurd in the discrepancy between Prem’s momentary God – intoxication and the consequent ascetic aspirations, and the inevitable return, the next instant to the physical reality of a young wife and mundane anxieties about rent and job. (75)

Jhabvala also satires the Indian spiritual belief of Indians. The protagonist Prem realises his failure in society as a teacher. So he becomes depressed and he feels sad. He decided to visit a Swami, to get spiritual strength. The Swami’s room stands open and Prem could see a lot of young English disciples around him. “The Swami in his orange robe was walking up and down the flagged paving with a young man on each side of him and his arm slung around their shoulders. Other young men stood round in groups” (94). When the Swami comes near Prem, he respectfully touches the feet of the Swami. When he teaches the love of God. Prem forgets all his worries and shouts, “How true”! and cries with pleasure” (94). Prem moves to the front so that he should not miss a word. Prem keenly hears the words of the Swami and forgets himself.

When the Swami sang “O God, let me drink you like wine!” (95), the visitors also started to sing, dance and clap with him in a happy mood. In this way, Prem and Sohan Lal forget their worldly afflictions and merge themselves in the Swami’s world by dancing with him to the religious music which is played in the background. The Swami’s relationship with his disciples seems to be more physical than spiritual.

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The Swami figure is powerful in the hierarchy of Indian life. The Swamis are believed to have triumphed over all desire and material pleasures through years of their victory over all senses and worldly glitter that they become Gurus, earthly incarnations of God, or a medium to establish communion with God. The Indians are considering the holymen as the spiritual torch-bearers of the society. But in Jhabvala's Swamis are loathsome. The readers cannot see nobility.

Jhabvala's satiric exposition of Raj's personality is a part of the cramping effects of Indian social convention upon the young and hopeful. Prem keeps longing for his bachelor days with his friend Raj, when they used to spend hours together at the cinema. Raj is a wrong guide to Prem and his behaviour suggests that success as a householder can turn a pleasant youth into a pompous and selfish man. Once a careless young student, Raj, now dismisses young men who have not yet found an occupation as mere loafers. He is much better than Prem, but thinks much of the price of a bus-ride, ignores the appeals of beggars and lets Prem pay for his tea.

Jhabvala has never missed to notice the penury, in India and penury is at the core of the novel. The pitiable economic condition of Prem and Indu is a reflection of the general social situation and points to the theme of general poverty in Indian people. Jhabvala's focus on Indian poverty is the basic reality. It needs to be accepted as an unavoidable fact rather than viewed with contempt. Prem states, "poverty and want are terrible things. In the *panchantantra* it is written "It is better to be dead than poor" (12).

Jhabvala is dexterous in her portrayal of middle class life with Prem as the true representative of it. With a sharp pen, the novelist satirises the superior notion of the masters and bosses who turn a deaf ear to the demands of their subordinates. Indirectly, she underscores tolerance, kindness and concern in human relationship.

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