CHAPTER II

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The achievement of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala as a literary artist is distinctive, yet limited at the same time, distinctive because, she has cultivated and demonstrated the qualities of a literary artist which are her own and emerge naturally from a social and cultural milieu peculiar to herself but her distinction is modified and narrowed by rather limited quality of her literary achievement, which partly is the inevitable result of her choice and partly the artistic outcome of her creativity.

The Householder primarily deals with the life of a newly married couple, Prem and Indu, in an Indian city. Prem, a low-paid teacher in a private college in Delhi, is unable to make both ends meet with his meagre salary and with the additional burden of becoming a father of child. He is very nervous and does things which he might have easily avoided. Prem is of course a teacher, but not morally strong-willed to do what seems to be appropriate and adequate for his needs. In these circumstances his wife's pregnancy is a source of embarrassment and expenditure. He searches old papers to find
one more lucrative employment (job) with which, he can have a comfortable life with his wife and a child. He feels frustrated and dejected after going through the newspapers, which neither show an opportunity of employment nor a way to get better job than the one he has. But on occasions like this, he is reminded of his father, who says "put all your strength into doing things you don't like to do."1

He takes this lesson to his heart, and decides to ask the Principal for a rise in his salary. The class room and the student discipline are a daily problem to him and make him lose the strength of his convictions. Prem particularly feels shy and could not stand before the Principal while he is at his breakfast, which is so-costly just as the British. He thinks of Sohan Lal in his mind and mentally compares the difference of living and livelihood and manners. Prem tells the Principal, "poverty and want are terrible things. In the Panchatantra it is written, "It is better to be dead than poor."2


2Ibid., p. 15
The Principal is not only indifferent but callous in his attitude, which is positively discouraging. He reminds him of his duty saying that "I think your students must be waiting for you in class."\(^3\)

After this interview with the Principal, Prem drops the idea of asking for the enhancement of salary. He is very unhappy and he feels guilty in the sense that he had dragged somebody's name into the issue, which concerns him only. He is aware of his right to ask for a small rise in his salary for the good service he is doing, but he fails miserably to enforce his point not because he is unintelligent but because he is nervous to face a situation. Prem is virtually coward and says many a time that he lacks self confidence. He tells Sohan Lal, "When once one becomes the father of a family one has to make many sacrifices."\(^4\)

Prem narrates his difficulties to his friend Raju, who is totally reluctant to hear the sentiments echoed by Prem. Prem is not happy with himself nor with his job in


\(^4\) Ibid., p. 39.
the college. His friends seem to coldshoulder him.
Moreover, the atmosphere at home is such that it does
not mitigate the pressure of his problems as a householder.
Pram struggles hard to earn money to meet the increasing
expenditure. But at the same time he wants to see his wife
happy always. But Pram's wife is unhappy not because of her
husband gets a meagre salary but because of weariness caused
by pregnancy. On such occasion he tells his wife, "I work
so hard all day .... and when I come home, there you sit
and sigh."5

This suggests that Pram feels fatigue and is exhausted.
He does not blame his wife but her attitude. The relationship
between Pram and his wife is a commonplace comedy with which
we are quite familiar in life. But the novelist seems to
notice a tremendous significance in the atmosphere, situation,
and attitude of an ordinary householder, and transmutes them
into a social comedy of sorts. As K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar
says: "in Mrs. Jhabvala's later novels the comic spirit is
focused not on marriage negotiations, but on the trapped
married couple who either wriggle within the cage for better

5The Householder (John Murray, London, 1960), RP
1973), p. 27.
understanding (as in *The Householder* and in *A Backward-Place*) or break loose to live their separate lives as in *Get Ready for Battle*. 6

This reveals the novelist's genuine capacity for understanding Indian scene thoroughly. The socio-cultural milieu of the contemporary Indian society is such that even trivial and insignificant events assume a seriousness that makes one wonder whether actuality and art are anyway different. It is in this context that Prem's repeated explanations of his status in family and society, appear pitiable if not farcical. For example, Prem tells his wife that the house rent and servant maid consume a sizable amount of his salary. But his wife ignores his banter and minds her own business.

The domestic situation which we have just outlined is complicated by a few letters which the wife and husband receive from their near relatives. Indu receives a letter from her mother and Prem too from his mother. Indu's mother wants to take her home because the time of delivery is round the corner. But Prem is not in a position to release her from her duties; the following dialogue sums up the situation:

"Indu stood in the doorway and said shyly, 'I also had a letter today.' She was holding it out to him. 'Who is it from?"

"It is from my mother," he did not take it, through she was still holding it out to him; instead he said, 'what does she write?'

After a short pause, Indu said in a low voice, "She wants me to come home."

Pram had no comment to make. It did not, he thought, greatly matter to him whether she stayed or went.

Indu confessed, 'I wrote to her about ....' and 'yes, yes', said Pram in some irritation. 'That is why she wants me to come home,' Indu said.

'My mother is coming to visit us,' Pram said.

After thinking over for a while, Indu said, 'Then she will be able to look after you here when I am gone'.

'How can you go away when my mother is coming to visit us?'

'Why not?' Indu inquired. The innocence of her voice as she asked times made him quite angry. He shouted, what do you mean why not? Have you no sense?' She looked at him with her eyes wide in amagement. He had never before shouted at her. Now that he had started, he
rather felt like shouting some more. But he thought of Seigals downstairs and servant boy to the kitchen, and so charged to first hisher
'Don't you understand that my mother will be offended?' He hissed, supporting himself on one elbow as he ley on the bed and leaning towards her.
'Why are you whispering?' She asked.
'How stupid you are—do you want everyone to hear us quarreling?' 'I am not quarreling?'

The novelist here presents a situation which sounds authentic and which is the result of sharp observation of Indian scene. But, what is more significant is the frequency of words like 'voice' qualified words like 'low', 'innocence', 'shouted', fears, 'whisper' and 'hiss'—this suggests that while the situation is domestic common place, its representation is certainly comic as the vocabulary suggests.

Jhabvala dramatises the atmosphere of Prem's world in terms of fictional realism. In The Householder we have a typical sample of Indian domestic life turned into comedy. Jhabvala also picturises an Indian woman's feelings at the time of pregnancy and her wish to be in house of her own mother. Prem's words are unheeded by Indu as she is particularly interested in going to her mother's house. Prem

feels dissatisfied with the words of his wife and lies down on his bed and thinks in many ways. He allows his feelings roam and he considers himself that he is not efficient in maintaining a house, which is relevant to the needs of his wife. The foregoing analysis of Prem's problems suggests that Prem's not a hero even in the comic sense. He appears to be a caricature of an ordinary low-paid Indian teacher. Prem does not measure upto the standards of lower middle class. But he is amusing and in a crucial context and towards the end he throbs with pulsative ideas and emotions which lift him from the level of a caricature to that of a man, who is not different from ourselves. Talking to Prem, a westerner asks, "Do you think a westerner like me can reach the spiritual greatness of the Indian Yogies?" Prem said, "Everything is possible if one tries."\(^\text{8}\)

We can observe that Prem is of course, a man with certain conception of his own. But he could not apply his own principles to his life or to his problems which are unsolved.

Ruminating on the past and happy moments in his early life, he tells Sohan Lal, "So that when we are old enough

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to know what the world is and what God is, then it is too late, for we have a burden on our back which cannot shake off for the rest of our days.\(^9\)

The philosophy here expressed tells about the real nature of Prem and his submissive nature to the problems which he faces. *The Householder* is a fine example of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's artistic skill and her fine, explicit or vivid description of Indian family life, with meagre salary and many problems. Prem is the central figure of the novel.

At the end of the novel, we could observe neither a small rise in salary nor a solution to the problems, which Prem has been facing as a Hindi teacher. But we have to appreciate the way in which Jhabvala portrays the authentic life of an Indian through a mediocre character—Prem. The social comedy in *The Householder* arises from Prem's lack of maturity. Although he takes everything seriously, nobody considers him seriously. The comic irony of Prem's story consists in his relationship with successful and unsuccessful householders. Mr. Khanna, the Principal, Mr. Seigal, his landlord.

lord, his friend Raj and Mr. Chaddha his senior colleague at the college are successful men. When he tries to imitate any one of these characters, we find interesting comedy which has social implications. When his less successful colleague Sohan Lal introduces him to a Swamiji we find Prem the householder admiring the Swamiji and his devotees. He thinks he would have joined them if only he were free. The comic sense is not imposed but intrinsically built into the design of The Householder by a deft juxtaposition of successful and less successful members of the society. Since those who quest for success are also seekers, their triumph and failure is amusing as well as instructive as social criticism.