"OLD INSTITUTION CAUGHT IN THE WAVE OF NEW CURRENTS":

A HOUSE FULL OF PEOPLE

A House Full of People (1968) is Romen Basu's maiden attempt at writing fiction in English. The novel deals with the struggles of a traditional joint family to maintain its integrity in a changing milieu finally leading to its disintegration. Romen Basu rightly chooses Calcutta as the setting where the social, economic and cultural life of the people was profoundly influenced by the various aspects of the British rule. The story could be seen as the struggle between the forces of unity to keep the family together and the forces of division and separation. It also presents the conflict between tradition and the changing trends of life and thinking. A reviewer says: "Disintegration of the joint family and the disparity between the older generation and youth are the conventional themes of Romen Basu's account of a middle-class Bengali household." Another reviewer points out that "the theme is authentic and the treatment down-to-earth realistic." 2

The title of the novel stands for the late Romesh Roy family which consists of six brothers, their wives, twelve children and many other relatives. The family lives in a...

sprawling house. It "was always curiosity, how, in this day and age, all the Roys still lived together under one roof."\(^3\) Romesh had moved to Calcutta from his village, Diamond Harbour in Southern Bengal, after being appointed professor of Bengali literature in the University. He built a house in a posh locality. The big house is "the family's pride and joy, a symbol of their status and security." (p. 3). At the time of his death he told his eldest son, Sudhin, to "save the house somehow." Sudhin Roy lives in the house along with his five brothers -- Saral, Kamal, Karun, Anil and Rabi. The six brothers hold respectable professions such as a doctor, a barrister, an attorney, an accountant, an engineer and so on. Except Anil, others have no salaried jobs. Being the eldest son, Sudhin inherits the burden of maintaining the big family and protecting its integrity and honour. He holds on to the tradition of joint family. His commitment to the family is total. But his brothers shirk their responsibilities and contribute nothing to meet the expenditure of such a big family. The family runs into enormous debts owing to lavish spending and luxurious life.

The novel opens with a financial crisis. Mortgaging the house, Sudhin had borrowed more than Rs. 20,000 to build an annex to the house. Now, an amount of Rs. 20,000 is to be paid immediately to Prafulla Dutt, the mortgagor, and the rest of the

\(^3\) Romen Basu, *A House Full of People* (Calcutta: Navana, 1968), p. 1. All further references are to this edition and the page numbers will be given parenthetically at the end of the quotations.
debt should be paid within ninety days. Sudhin conducts a meeting with all the brothers to discuss the crisis and seek their contributions to get over it. His brothers promise to contribute by borrowing and the crisis is conveniently forgotten.

Arun's love-affair with Sheila Malhotra takes the story further. He is the prodigal son of Saral. He follows Western manners and shows off himself as a rich man. This compulsive liar has only one grace — his good looks. Sheila, a law-graduate from a rich Punjabi family, falls a prey to his good looks and gift of the gab. At home, Arun defies the ethics of a traditional joint family. Sheila naively believes his bluff about his western background and that he had returned from England after three years of studies as an electrical engineer. Her entanglement with Arun deepens with their physical relationship. When she conceives, he suggests abortion. This reveals to her the other side of his personality. She insists on getting married with the consent of Arun's parents. He thinks he cannot show his real self to her after marriage. Nor can he convince his mother and get Sheila home. He chooses to leave her for good.

Meanwhile, the joint family is beset with another financial crisis in the context of the marriage of Arun's sister, Reba. Sudhin does not hesitate to accept a long list of demands of the bridegroom's party including a staggering dowry of Rs. 25,000. He seeks the co-operation of his brothers in getting more and more loans. The tremendous physical and mental strain in arranging the marriage further deteriorates his failing health. He dies with a
last request to his brothers not to break up the house. Kamal promises to take his place after his death. His death turns out to be the biggest crisis of the family.

Kamal faces the same non-co-operation and indifference from his brothers. Meanwhile, the new generation takes hold of the house affairs. The love-affair of Karun's son, Ranjit, with Chitra stands in contrast to that of Arun. Ranjit too fails to convince his mother for the marriage but he marries Chitra and sets up his family in Allahabad. His mother makes amends with his inter-religious marriage. She welcomes the couple home after learning that Chitra is pregnant. Ranjit gets himself transferred to Calcutta and lives with his kith and kin. He takes up the management of the house and extracts financial co-operation from his uncles. But this semblance of stability is short-lived, for, discontent grows among his uncles and their wives. The last brother, Rabi, leaves the house and lives separately after a serious quarrel with his brother, Kamal. This is the first crack of the joint family followed by the raising of walls inside the sprawling house for separate kitchens. Ranjit and Chitra remain mute spectators to the collapse of dreams and to the inevitability of it.

There are three main strands in the plot structure of the novel --- first, the effort of Sudhin and Prabha 'striving against crushing odds,' to maintain the cohesiveness and dignity of the family. The second and the third strands relate to the two kinds of love-affair, that is, of Arun and Sheila on the one hand and of
Ranjit and Chitra on the other. They contribute to the theme of the main plot and therefore remain inalienable. The two love-affairs show how the joint family can affect young lovers and contribute to their success or failure. One reason for Arun's failure is that he does not want to be separated from the joint family and from the cosy irresponsibility it allows. On the other hand, Ranjit wants to succeed in his love-affair within the context of the joint family. His comeback to the original home with his wife is a triumph of his efforts.

The story of the novel is that of two generations. There are forces of unity and cohesion and forces of division in the novel. These forces determine the fortunes of the family. Sudhin, Ranjit and Prabha are the chief forces of unity. Saral, Karun, Arun, Adip, Bismal and Chaya are the forces of division. The novel is also structured in such a way that the first part of it, till Sudhin's death, is dominated by the forces emphasizing unity and tradition while the second part of it, after Sudhin's death, is reigned by the forces of division holding tradition obsolete and countering it with convenience. The plot construction can also be seen in terms of series of setbacks or crises --- beginning with the payment of loan to the mortgagor. The raising of walls for separate kitchens is a swan-song to the unity of the family. One sees a pattern in these crises -- the tempo raising till Sudhin's death and takes a turning point from then on leading to the denouement of final separation.
Almost throughout the novel, the scene of action is the 'massive structure three stories high.' The enormous building itself becomes a character in the novel. Further, the author seems to depend on telling rather than on showing the action of the novel. Hence, the uninterrupted use of the omniscient point of view. He has access to the characters' thoughts, feelings and motives, as well as to their overt speech and actions. For instance, he probes the minds of Sudhin, Arun, Sheila and Ranjit thoroughly presenting their entire personalities leaving nothing to the imagination of the reader. The author chooses to take the role of an intrusive narrator reporting and commenting freely on his characters. His comments on Sudhin may be seen as an example:

Problems never bothered him. He accepted them as inevitable and met them with courage and compassion. (p. 59).

He was optimist by nature (p. 89).

He writes about Sudhin on his death-bed:

A lion was going to surrender but with dignity and grace. (p. 116)

Commenting on Sudhin's death scene, a reviewer writes:

Sudhin's death should have reproduced the deafening crash of an ancient banyan tree uprooted by the wind .... But Mr. Basu has failed to make him majestic in his death. Sudhin's death scene
hopelessly lacks poignancy. His dying words sound like a valedictory address.

Further, the author follows a traditional method in introducing Arun:

There was an air about Arun. He was six feet tall, black hair, milk and honey complexion and a narrowly trimmed moustache slightly lifted at both ends, which he wore beautifully. He had been accepted in many quarters without reservation because of his good looks. Undoubtedly, a ladies' man. (p. 32)

Despite this, Romen Basu chooses to dramatize a situation by probing the thoughts of some characters. For instance, Sudhin's thoughts may be seen:

As he stared at the immense portrait of his father on the wall, waves of thoughts came to his mind. What must his father be thinking from above? He had let him down badly. His father had told Sudhin time and again that building the annex was not a good idea when he didn't have enough money. He had urged Sudhin later to pay back the loan rather than go to the hills in the summer and to the sea resorts in the winter. (p. 4)

Sudhin's recapitulations take the narrative into the past for a while. The author also probes Arun's thoughts using the third-person narration.

Arun was still pacing up and down. He knew what the problems were and yet he did not have the courage to tell her. It was too late. She would

accept him if he were to admit that he had lied about his family. For Arun the stakes were too high. He could not ruin everything by confessing the truth. Pride also stood his way. He would lose her respect forever. He was in a great dilemma. If only, somehow, he could get married first. (p. 105)

Arun's reflections on himself in relation to the joint family help bring psychological realism to the character.

As Arun heard all this, he was filled with conflicting thoughts. Why was he so different from the rest? Was it because he was forward looking and had progressive ideas? He thought the real trouble with his family was that no one had any ambition. He would stifle without outside company. The sense of duty and obligation, in their terms, meant there was no time for anyone or anything other than the immediate relatives. If only they could accept him as he was, he wouldn't mind how they lived. (p. 86).

The author uses the same device to present the ambivalence in Karun's mind as to stay or not to stay in the joint family.

He listened to a song coming from a neighbour's bedroom and wondered about the same old thing. Should he give up law practice and join a business in order to make more money and should he move away from the family? What would Sudhin say? How could he do that while his mother was still alive? After all, it was his father's last wish that the family should remain together. He may
not have been successful as a lawyer, but there was no reason for him to fail his father on his last wish. He was not going to join his father-in-law's firm, even if he had to starve to death, he thought. (p. 76)

In another context, Romen Basu lays bare similar ambivalence of Sheila's mind whether or not to agree for secret marriage with Arun:

'It was not a question of how and where she got married. She loved him enough to do as he wished, no matter how much it would hurt her father, but she wanted to be sure that Arun loved her enough to be honest with her. If they ran away and got married secretly, perhaps things would not go well between them. May be he would always try to hide things from her. She had done everything to please him. It was now his turn to prove his love for her. She could not throw herself at him. (p. 106)

The author appropriately presents Sheila's fear to reveal her condition to her father.

Fear, humiliation, shame filled her heart. She also felt that it was not fair to her father, who had trusted her and given her everything, freedom, money, love and security. He couldn't possibly take the news calmly. No, it was better to take poison than to tell him. (p. 107)

Thus, the 'telling' method of narration is occasionally and judiciously interspersed with the 'showing' method.
In characterization too, the author relies more on telling method. Sudhin emerges as the predominant character in the novel both thematically and structurally. As has been said, there are forces of unity and forces of division in the novel. Sudhin symbolises the forces of unity and he is also the torch-bearer of tradition. In terms of structure too the character gains importance as he steers nearly two-thirds of the course of the novel.

Sudhin is the eldest brother in the family and a doctor by profession. He bears the burden of running the family. "He struggles continually and even in his sleep he dreams of nothing but his family." (p. 13). But his brothers are not like-minded. He admits that they are 'good-for-nothing.' As Prabha says of them, "they do what they please and have no responsibility of any kind .... With grown children of their own, they've not taken their family responsibilities seriously, not for a single day." (p. 2). Sudhin himself is responsible for them to turn so indifferent.

Adip says later:

The only reason we live together is because Jatha Sudhin supports the family. He is generous to a fault. By and large, people want more than they give and this is true even amongst brothers. (p. 70)

Prabha also blames Sudhin:

You know, most of it is your fault, you have spoiled them too much. Since your father died you have been treating the five of them as your sons .... If it weren't for you, they'd be out in the street. (p. 2)
Sudhin himself admits this later:

I have tried my best to be a good provider. In the process perhaps I have spoilt my brothers a bit, encouraged them in their weakness, but I never had any doubts that they would do everything to preserve what we cherish. (pp. 19-20).

But, all his brothers belie his hopes. They offer no financial assistance in running the family. This inevitably results in huge debts and dishonour to the family. Sudhin says:

None of us has contributed to its prestige. On the contrary, we have dragged down our father's good name with our habit of borrowing, of deceiving our friends and relatives, and of exploiting his reputation. (p. 7).

Sudhin is credulous too. He promises to provide Rs. 25,000 by loan to Arun for getting a contract. He "never refused anything to anyone if it was within his power." (p. 37). He is confident that Arun would be useful to the family. Basu writes: "He was a born optimist. It was very thrilling for him to count the chickens before they were hatched." (p. 37). He promises Sunanda to provide Rs. 25,000 for her daughter's marriage -- all by borrowing. He is also ready to meet the big list of demands put forward by the bridegroom's party. His brothers promise their contributions but do nothing. Sudhin is disillusioned of his 'infinite faith' in his brothers. His exasperated words prove prophetic:

Exploit me as long as you can, but let me warn
you that my life is very short, very short indeed. You may even regret treating me this way after I am gone. (p. 59)

As has been said, Sudhin is the predominant agent of the forces of unity in the novel. Time and again, he speaks of the virtues of a joint family and defends it. First of all, it comes to the rescue of helpless dependents. They should not be mistaken for parasites. Second, he believes that the Roy family can retain its honour and prestige only when it remains undivided. He devotes his life to keep up his promise to his father to save the house. He declares: "I swear to God that as long as there is one drop of blood in my veins I shall never let this house go out of our hands." (p. 3) Third, his last wish is only for a joint family.

I want to beg you all not to break up the family after I am gone. If you think that you would be better off each living on his own, you are mistaken. Even if that were so, who would have any respect for our departed father, if you five brothers lived in five corners of the earth? What about the twenty other members of the family for whom this has been the only home? Think of them too. They have no other place to go.
(p. 118)

He insists on a promise from Kamal: "You won't allow this family to be separated. That you will do your best to hold it together." (p. 118). Kamal has to be ready to "make the necessary sacrifices that go with it." (p. 118). For the attending doctor too "it was most touching to see a man on his death bed worrying about a family of fifty and not just about his wife and daughters." (p.116).
From this it emerges that the institution of joint family is based on the principle of sacrifice and thrives on mutual cooperation of its members. Sudhin tells Arun: "What makes us different from animals and other creatures is that they only fend for themselves, whereas human beings are sensitive enough to realise that our happiness does not rest on getting what we can, just for ourselves." (pp. 35-36).

Sudhin's commitment to the family is total. He shows parental affection to his youngest brother, Rabi. Everyday he spends some time in the assembly of the members of family. He makes no difference between his children and those of his brothers. Even when he is seriously ill, he refuses to get admitted in hospital because "no one from his family had ever set foot in a hospital." (p. 109). "As long as he was dying, he wanted to have the satisfaction of having the family near him." (p. 109).

Being a man of tradition, Sudhin runs the family with certain principles like obedience to elders. He faces defiance from Arun. Arun flaunts his cigarette-case to show disrespect for Sudhin. He gives a disobedient answer when asked why he is coming late every night: "yes, I have been coming late and why shouldn't I? I am over twenty-four years old and have a good job. I cannot be told when to come and when to go. I know very well what I am doing." (p. 21). He further infuriates Sudhin by pointing out the generation gap and ridicules the joint family system which is so dear to his heart:

.... Your time was your time, and ours is ours.
Things have changed. You cannot impose the same rules on us that were in your time. Your whole outlook is old-fashioned. Even living with fifty people in the same house, eating together, sitting on the floor in a row, four or five people bathing together in open bathrooms, it's living like a flock of sheep! (pp. 21-22).

In spite of this, Sudhin excuses him when the latter begs his pardon later. He realizes that "the younger generation seems to see things in quite a different light." (p. 20). He loses hopes on Arun that he would be his successor in running the family. Instead, he turns to Ranjit.

Ranjit is only second to Sudhin in his importance to the theme and structure of the novel. After Sudhin, he is a major force of unity in the novel. Structurally too, the second half of the novel chiefly deals with Ranjit's love-affair with Chitra followed by his marriage and his efforts to set things right in the big joint family.

Besides Arun, Ranjit enjoyed Sudhin's 'special feelings.' Sudhin had been "impressed by his sense of duty, family feeling and upright character." (p. 130). Unlike Arun, Ranjit tries" to live up to the expectations of his eldest uncle." (p. 130). Ranjit admits to Chitra that he was moulded by Sudhin:

My eldest uncle made the most lasting impressions on me. When I was a child, my uncles and father and mother used to say nasty things about him. He was irresponsible, extravagant, a
borrower, a squanderer and so on, and my impressionable mind developed a dislike for him. But as I grew older I began to see things for myself and I came to admire him greatly. To me generosity is the mother of all virtues. I never expect to be like him but you are right, I do admire him. (p. 147)

Ranjit is a product of the best of tradition and modernity. As a reviewer says, 'Ranjit's tirades against the silly conventions of his family are surprisingly free from polemic.' He is a devoted son but does not allow his parents to interfere in his love-affair. He marries Chitra without his mother's consent. But he is bent upon obtaining her consent and approval after the marriage. As a man with a progressive outlook, he feels that there should be a law against dowries. After coming back home to Calcutta, he encourages his wife to become an employee. He wants tradition be changed to suit the needs and tastes of modern days. Similarly, he encourages his cousin, Rima, to learn music and become a singer on radio. He tells Chitra: "We have got to make my parents realize, for that matter the whole family realize, that things have changed .... It will be hard, but if we win, there will be hope for the others who are doing nothing but wasting their lives because of the silly, stupid pride of our elders." (p. 160).

Though he is for change, Ranjit is strongly in favour of joint family system:

I see the value of living together. It provides the best possible sense of security for everyone within the present social system.... My honest
feeling is that this has been a happy home ever since I can remember. It was gay and cheerful, full of hospitality, culture, gaiety and laughter. (p. 164)

Ranjit very much resembles Sudhin in his views on joint family. Chitra tells him: "In so many ways you are just like your eldest uncle who died. You are too close to your family." (p. 147). Sudhin's daughter, Maya, has the same thing to say of Ranjit: "If anyone can do anything to change the situation, it is Ranjit. Everyone respects him and listens to him. He is like my father." (p. 158).

Ranjit compares the previous situation with the present one:

.... When Jatha was alive, we maintained this huge establishment with its pomp and show, as he paid for it all. Everyone accepted him as the head of the family and his decisions were final. Now, no one gets along with anyone because there are five masters. (p. 123).

He insists on equal financial responsibility. He declares:

Everyone would have to promise here and now to pay regularly, and on time, a fixed sum towards the expenses and we will run the house. (p. 124)

Thus Ranjit achieves what was not achieved by Sudhin, namely, the compulsory financial co-operation of the brothers. Once it is agreed to give the reigns of the family into his hands, Ranjit is bent upon bringing a qualitative change. He says: "If we are to live
together, things have to be done differently, both in the matter of money and in allowing more freedom for our generation." (p. 125). When he comes home with Chitra from Allahabad, he is full of hopes: "... he would run the house like a clock, he would infuse the family with new life, new attitudes and new values." (p. 159). He collects money from his uncles, distributes work and brings back normalcy. As a result, "there was a new life in the house. It looked as if, finally, their problems had been solved." (p. 160)

Before long, Ranjit notices that things are not smooth though there is a semblance of harmony:

No one could hide the fact that the two generations were living in two different worlds. Ranjit and others were satisfied with the changes. Saral and his brothers were bored and discontented. The relations between the brothers became more and more strained. (pp. 172-173).

Ranjit finds it 'more and more tiresome' to patch up small differences among his uncles. They fail to come round and appreciate his outlook and purpose. On the other hand, "they keep complaining that for the money they pay as their share in the common pool, they could live more independently and be their own masters." (p. 176). Ranjit is disillusioned but clings to a ray of hope. As an outsider, Chitra has greater objectivity. She "knew too well that one could not change or reform people who were set in their ways." (pp. 173-174).
Rabi's exit from the house after an altercation with Kamal shows 'the sighs of the first crack in the family' and encourages others to pursue the idea of leaving the home. Finally, with the raising of walls for separate kitchens, Saral and Kamal preside over the liquidation of the 'golden family.' Ranjit feels let down. He gets no comfort or sympathy from anyone, not even from Chitra. She "wanted to get him out of that soft sentimentality and bring him down to the realities in which he lived in every other respect." (p. 189). In terms of theme and structure, Ranjit's failure signifies that the forces of division gain upper hand by the end of the novel. Thus, "the family spirit is divided, many of them wishing, some because of fierce family pride, some alas, because this is the easiest life they can imagine, to continue their traditional existence. Others have grown indifferent and hostile to it." 5

The character of Ranjit has two-fold importance in the novel. Besides living up to the ideals of Sudhin, he stands as a contrast to Arun in many respects. As the eldest person in the second generation, Arun steals the show. Initially, Sudhin rests all his hopes on him. He tells Saral: "He is more than my son. I am counting on him to carry on the family name." (p. 22). But Arun lets him down by his ways. He is pampered by his mother, Sunanda. He is very handsome and employed. He acquires high-brow attitude by moving in higher circles and with English

and Anglo-Indian friends. He is accepted everywhere 'because of his looks.' Lying is his chief weakness. As Ranjit says of him, "it has become his second nature to lie." (p. 69). He lies about his background everywhere. He says he is the son of a fictitious A.K. Roy, the famous Calcutta barrister. Between A.K. Roy and his father the only common thing is the last name. He lies that he studied electrical engineering in England. He wears western clothes, speaks English always, and hates Indian food. He likes the gay and carefree life of the Europeans. While Ranjit represents the best of modernity, Arun represents its unhealthy side. Arun's modernity is a hypocrisy. He objects to Rima's singing on radio 'like a common prostitute.' He behaves insolently with his uncle and fights with his aunts. As a result, 'they avoid him like a plague.' He acts as a 'Sahib'. The neighbours mockingly call him "Prince of Wales." He is also warned by them for making passes at their daughters. Above all, he has scant respect for joint family system. He tells his cousins "how terrible it is to live in one family." (p. 22). But he borrows money from the innumerable relatives in the house.

Arun and Ranjit stand in contrast to each other even in their love-affairs. As has been said on the blurb, "their parallel love-stories, told with consummate delicacy, underscores the struggles of the two young men to reconcile their personal desires with the anti-western, conservative ways of their milieu."

Commenting on the contrast of the two pairs, a reviewer says:
Both (Arun and Sheila) are peremptorily dropped from the story when their usefulness has been extracted. By way of contrast is the relationship of Ranjit and gentle Chitra. In a family remarkably free of attractive personalities they are a refreshing change.6

The two love-affairs are qualitatively different. While Arun's love for Sheila is based on infatuation for her enormous amount of sex appeal and on his endless lies, Ranjit's love for Chitra is mature, sensitive and is based on honesty. Moreover, Arun finds himself in a fix. On one hand, he fails to convince his mother about his marriage with Sheila. On the other hand, he is not bold enough to marry Sheila for fear of revealing his true self and his background and going down in her eyes. Arun's diffidence to do either of the two is in contrast with Ranjit's confidence of his success in his love-affair. He tells Chitra, "We won't have to suffer the same fate as Arun .... Arun couldn't even have a serious discussion with the family about marrying a non-Bengali." (p. 130). A reviewer feels that "the treatment of the love affair of Ranjit and Chitra is the only sign of maturity in the novel."7

Unlike Arun, Ranjit decides to marry Chitra first and then to go and live in Allahabad for six months or a year. During that time he would plead to his mother to forgive them and take them back. He never regrets at falling in love with Chitra. He says: "In real love there is never any regret, I shall happily

7. Anath Chatterjee, rev. of _A House Full of People_.
give up the whole world for you and yet feel that I have the better bargain." (p. 141). Above all, he has no pre-marital sex with her. One of the reasons for arun's indifference to Sheila in the later days must be his pre-marital sexual relationship with her. When she is pregnant, he does not accept parenthood unlike Sheila. He tells her: "Children are such a bother. I prefer not to be tied down to the responsibilities of bringing up children." (p. 48). For Arun, life is meant for enjoyment while it has a purpose and certain ideals for Ranjit. Sheila snubs Arun for misusing his liberty. "Life should have a little more purpose than just doing what one pleases. What have you done with your freedom, Arun? Don't you ever get tired of parties, night clubs, dancing and a restless life?" (p. 100). Hence the two love-affairs draw opposite reactions from Sudhin. "Sudhin had heard about Arun's love-affair. He had also heard about Ranjit's wish to marry of his own choice. He thought that if Ranjit was serious about a girl, she must be deserving. If he was not serious, it could be no more than friendship and he wouldn't lead her on." (p. 130). Thus while Arun lets Sheila down, Ranjit does full justice to Chitra. Sudhin rightly assesses Arun as "a poor, misguided boy ... bright, although unstable." (p. 118).

Among women characters in the novel, Prabha, like Sudhin, is a strong advocate of joint family while Chaya is a bitter critic of it. All the daughters-in-law hail from rich families. Yet Sudhin and Prabha are the only pair who live without difference of opinion. "Her life revolved round her
husband." (p. 111). The author writes of her: "She was a good wife, always by his side, never flustered by excitement, of which there was plenty in the house." (p. 2). What is Sudhin among the brothers, so is Prabha among the womenfolk. Like Sudhin, she is the protector of the joint family. "She feels very proud to be part of it." (p. 13). But Chaya denies any such feeling:

I am not at all proud. What is there to be proud of, to maintain a forty bedroom house, ten servants, two cars, and all that, and not to be able to pay the bills? I would rather live like a poor woman within my means than put up this show. (p. 13).

Prabha pleads to her co-daughters-in-law to persuade their husbands to help Sudhin in running the house. She gives a simple solution for the smooth running of the family: 'If everyone would take their responsibilities seriously and contribute a small sum for the maintenance of their own wives and children, we could live handsomely.' (p. 13). She wonders why the brothers shirk their responsibilities. In the early years of her marriage, she made several sacrifices to satisfy Sudhin's brothers and their families. They all approached Sudhin through her. "Yet she looked the embodiment of happiness. All envied her capacity to be happy with so little." (p. 111).

After Sudhin's death, Prabha slips into obscurity. The forces of division obviously gain upper hand. While Saral orders the raising of walls of kitchen for each family, Chaya instigates her husband, Karun, to raise the walls to the ceiling so that there
will be no shadow of doubt that the brothers are separated. Kamal is infuriated at this and orders the length of the walls be reduced. But it no way reduces the length of the walls raised in the minds of the people.

It is interesting to see that Sheila Malhotra and Chitra offer an interesting contrast like Arun and Ranjit. They also bear a few similarities. First, neither of them comes from a Hindu family. Sheila hails from a Punjabi family where Chitra comes from a Christian family. Second, both of them are well-educated. Sheila is a lawyer whereas Chitra has completed her college education. Third, their families are not traditional as that of Arun and Ranjit. In spite of this, their ideas, ideals and feelings are surprisingly native and racy of the soil. Both of them wish for a simple, contented married life. In spite of her aristocratic background, Sheila tells Arun: "... I don't have to be a rich man's wife. We don't need two cars, a house with a swimming pool and a trip to Europe to be happy." (p. 51). Fourth, both are sensitive. They are anxious to get married but they persuade Arun and Ranjit to convince their parents for the marriage. They do not want any troubles in the Roy family because of the marriage. Chaya "wanted nothing more in the world than to marry Ranjit and yet she could not bear to think that her marriage would create such hatred and bitterness between the mother and the son. If only his mother would give her a chance." (p. 139). A reviewer feels that "the story of initial refusal and final
acceptance of Chitra in the family sound authentic which is a sign of promise.  

There are important differences too between Sheila and Chitra. First, Sheila yields to Arun's sexual desire, gets pregnant and precipitates a crisis for her. In her case, the ball is in Arun's court. In a way, she comes to feel a sense of dependence and helplessness. Second, one does not find the firmness and tact expected of a lawyer in her. She appears unduly innocent. She trembles to reveal that she is expecting. He asks for Arun's reassurance of love too many times. Above all, she looks credulous and gullible which is quite unbecoming of her law education. Her character definitely suffers in this regard. Her remarks to Bimal -- "Bimal, if for any reason I do not marry Arun, I am going to take poison and commit suicide. I can't live without him." (p. 82) -- are only a sobstuff and reflect her helplessness.

Commenting on the characters in the novel, Anath Chatterjee says:

To create a typically Indian atmosphere while using a non-Indian language is almost impossible. So Mr. Basu can hardly be blamed if most of the

9. Anath Chatterjee feels that "the abortion Sheila has to undergo could have been invested with symbolic significance as a pointer to the sheer impotency of the new generation, but the author gives no thought to it."
characters in the novel appear to move in a vacuum and, in their interaction give the impression of animated cartoons.

Sudhin, the head of the family, Arun, the first of the younger generation, Ranjit, the most finished product of the second generation, Sheila Malhotra, Arun's fiancee and Chitra, the lover-made wife of Ranjit have been drawn lifesize. But they are unfortunately not drawn in the round. They remain pathetically two-dimensional, clothed in an aura of unreality.10

But this comment cannot be applied in toto to all the characters in the novel. A close study of the novel reveals that with Basu's sure strokes, each character emerges as a separate individual with his or her own compelling problem. For instance, Sudhin is portrayed convincingly as one who belongs to a great generation and he bears clearly the stamp of a self-sacrificing and self-effacing tragic hero in the novel. Ranjit is another 'round' character portrayed in all its maturity. The other characters have a limited role to play and hence they must be viewed within their ambit.

Keeping the joint family as the focal point, Romen Basu presents social realism. His incisive observation of joint family brings out the bright and dark sides of group living in the Indian context. Commenting on this aspect, a reviewer says:

The novel gives a very accurate portrait of a Bengali joint family, or rather, the disintegration of such a family .... There is the ring of

10. Anath Chatterjee, rev. of A House Full of People.
authenticity about this book; the value of the joint family system is clearly stated and, at the same time, we are able to see the tragedy of this kind of set-up ... the strong stagger and the weak perish. 11

Another reviewer calls the novel "a first-class documentary" because every word Mr. Basu has penned rings true: one can see, hear, feel, smell and taste everything that he describes in the house; and by design to a lesser extent, in Calcutta and even for one interlude, in Bombay. 12

As has been said earlier, the joint family rises to the level of a character in the novel. It stands for tradition. Second, it consists of a large number of people of at least two generations living under the same roof. In Basu's another novel, A Gift of Love, Gopal Babu's family lives in a twenty-room house with eight servants and a chauffeur and with three brothers and their families. In A House Full of People, some fifty people live in the mansion. Third, the customs followed in the house are described with a touch of realism. For example, every evening conch shell is blown and incense burnt to give indication that each one can take time off for prayers or rest. The women folk take their food only after the male members have taken. A sister-in-law never appears before an elder brother-in-law without covering her head.

The 'grandfather clock' on the wall adds quaintness to the house. Generally, in joint families, marriage alliances are arranged keeping in view the honour of the head of the family. Thus, the popularity of late Romesh Roy was responsible for many rich and well-placed people to give their daughters in marriage to his sons. Furthermore, a person has to be purified before being accepted into the Hindu family. Thus, Chitra undergoes a purification ceremony. Fourth, Romen Basu excels in giving a realistic account of arranging a typical Hindu marriage. The conduct of the marriage must be in keeping with the prestige of the family. It is a matter of prestige to give and accept heavy dowry in aristocratic families. Thus, Sudhin accepts to give Rs. 25,000 though it is a financial burden for him. The long list of demands of the bridegroom's party includes jewellery upto 6,000 grams, one diamond necklace with matching ear-drops, gold ear-rings, a gold chain with a locket, a gold watch, a set of gold buttons with pearls, a diamond ring, clothes for the bride and groom and silver utensils. As regards furniture, the list includes a double bed, a dressing table, a writing desk, two almirahs, a wooden stand for hanging clothes, a complete sofa set and an all-wave radiogram. The list, in short, speaks of the victimisation of the bride's party by the bridegroom's party. Worshipping Saraswathi, the goddess of learning, is another favourite custom of the Hindu families.

Besides presenting a realistic picture of a typical Hindu family, Romen Basu gives a pen-picture of Calcutta with its affluent
localities, on the one hand, and messy busy localities, on the other. The late Romesh Roy's house is in a locality of middle class people although it was the most respectable locality of his time. Sheila's house is located in a posh area, "a different world altogether from Arun's surroundings. To visit Sheila was to go on a journey from the East to the West." (p. 41). The description of the area smacks of realism. Arun had "to pass the fish market, rows of grocery shops, a noisy secondary school, and a public tank for swimming. Every corner of the block was crowded with people sitting on the side walks, some naked above the waist, others wearing rags. Most of them were unemployed and their only pastime was to gossip and jeer at the passers-by." (p. 41). The picture of Central Calcutta looks entirely different: "Every house had a garden with beautiful flowers. There were shining cars in the front and liveried guards. The streets were broad and spotlessly clean." (p. 42). The lifestyle of the rickshaw pullers is realistically brought out:

The rickshaw drivers, after twelve and fifteen hours of hard work, were preparing their supper and bed on the sidewalks underneath the plush European-style hotel. They would sleep all night on the pavement and go about their business in the morning. They worked so hard in the city, hundreds of miles away from home, striving to provide enough food for their families. They were poor, but they led an uncomplicated life. (pp. 132-133).

Romen Basu's use of language is of particular interest. The language is, by and large, simple, conversational and devoid
of any ornamentation. At times he sounds lyrical as when he describes the change in Sheila due to her sexual relationship with Arun: "There was an expression of seriousness on her face. She realized that from that day on, she was a woman." (p. 45). She has attained not only womanhood but also motherhood:

.... now she was blossoming like a rose after a shower. She embodies the softness of a mother, the tenderness of a sweet heart and the firmness of a wife all wrapped up into a bundle of happiness. (p. 45).

At times, a discerning reader fails to compromise with the author's use of language. He uses certain expressions which have acquired native colour. For example, Sudhin addresses his wife as 'Mrs' instead of 'wife.' There are instances of true translation into English. Expressions such as 'the grandfather clock' (p. 11), 'a father-to-son talk' (p. 24) and sentences like "In my seven lives, I couldn't teach you anything" (p. 75) look quizzical. At times, Basu writes lengthy dialogues. Ranjit's reply to Chitra on p. 164 runs to twenty-nine lines. It robs the scene of its dramatic impact. The author also uses Bengali words to name the relationships of characters. Expressions such as Sesda, Mesda, Mejoma, Mejojatha, Didimoni may be cited here.

Romen Basu has "a beautiful sense of the situation." It is seen in the get-together scene involving Chitra, Adip, Maya, Rina and others in a rainy evening during the absence of Ranjit. The novel abounds in Indian English. For instance, Sudhin says,
"I swear to God that as long as there is one drop of blood in my veins I shall never let this house go out of our hands." (p. 3).

Here is another example:

When they were all seated Ganesh poured the tea and passed the toast around. There was pin-drop silence in the room as he went around at a snail's pace. He was hoping to stay in the room as long as possible and listen to the conversation. (p. 5).

A reviewer feels that Basu's English "reads like a painful, verbatim translation of a good Bengali novel." Yet, the style itself may be considered original.

Irony, symbol, conflict and contrast are some of the devices used by Romen Basu in building the theme and structure of the novel. The central irony operating in the novel is the gradual disintegration of the joint family against all attempts at safeguarding it. The collapse of the joint family is inevitable since it is rested on the basis of non-co-operation, selfishness, indifference and disharmony. The family receives a severe jolt whenever a crisis comes. The balance is gradually tilted towards the forces of disintegration.

Further, Sudhin's role in the joint family is steeped in irony. Among the brothers, he struggles most to prevent the disintegration of the family. He is generous to a fault in coming to the rescue of his brothers. Thus, with his unequal burden, Sudhin also feels strangely, a 'sense of guilt that he had done

more harm than good in the world.' Sudhin's realization is
harrowingly ironical.

Irony is also seen in other individual cases. For
example, Sheila Malhotra's hopes on her marriage are belied. In
the beginning of the love-affair, Arun tells her many lies to
project himself better. Ironically, the same lies come in his way
of his marriage with her as Arun is afraid of revealing his true
self. Further, while Ranjit succeeds in marrying Chitra, his hopes
of setting the joint family right are ironically negated.

The title of the novel itself is ironical. At the
beginning of the novel, the house is full of people and vibrates
with life and activity. The house is full of people even at the
end of the novel but with a difference ....... a sense of uneasy
calm pervades the house with islands of families within it.

Conflict takes place at two levels in the novel. First,
veiled conflict is seen between the forces of unity and forces of
division. Second, there is conflict between tradition and
modernity. It has been rightly pointed out that "through the
breaking-up of the Roy family Basu illustrates one of the greatest
impacts of Western education on the culture and tradition of Bengal
..... the disintegration of the collective joint family." 14

ed. Madhusudan Prasad (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1982),
p. 175.
Contrast is another important device of Romen Bobu in the novel. The contrast is seen among characters and situations. First, there is the obvious contrast between Sudhin and his 'good-for-nothing' brothers. In the second generation, the contrast is between Arun and Ranjit and also between Ranjit and his uncles. Among the women characters in the novel, contrast chiefly lies between Prabha and Chaya on one hand and between Sheila and Chitra on the other.

The chief symbol of the novel is the sprawling old mansion itself. The cracks in the walls are symbolic of the several dissident voices in the family. Similarly, the walls that are raised for individual kitchens at the end of the novel are symbolic of the walls raised in the minds of the elder generation. It is interesting to note that the novel begins with the description of the walls full of cracks and also ends with an account of the raising of walls for separate kitchens.

Summing up the novel, a reviewer says:

Mr. Basu has not perhaps been able to tell the whole truth about the joint families of the middle class. He has definitely missed the subtleties. He has taken a courageous plunge into the dark recesses of the imposing structure. He has unfortunately missed the half-lit areas where life blooms in its full glory even on the eve of its final extinction. But one thing must be said in the author's defence. He has not falsified the picture with intellectual snigger. If his treatment lacks sureness of touch, it makes up for it
with genuine concern, living sympathy, glowing tenderness.  

Another reviewer puts the same idea more succinctly:

The macrocosm of the struggle for integration against the compelling urges for disintegration and for an undefined new order are presented in this microcosm of a middle class Bengali family quite convincingly.  

15. Anath Chatterjee, rev. of A House Full of People.  