CHAPTER V

THE HOUSEHOLDER

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'After that comes the life of the householder,' Prem said. 'In this stage a man must raise a family and see to their needs...' 

_The Householder_ is unique among Jhabvala's novels. It is her only novel about lower-middle class people. Jhabvala does introduce characters from this class and background in her stories and later novels but in _The Householder_ it is the exclusive setting. It is also unique in that the pervasive atmosphere is one of humour and sympathy rather than that of irony, though the latter is not totally absent. _The Householder_ is the story of an ordinary young man's slow attainment of status of the householder, the second of the _ashrams_ in the traditional social structure according to the Hindu conception. Its strength lies in its faithful exemplification of the process in terms of authentic character and situation.

Prem, the protagonist of the novel, is a young teacher in Mr. Khanna's private college. He is a B.A. (Second Class), who teaches Hindi and is married to Indu, a plain girl chosen by his parents. He is weak
and diffident but by no means unintelligent. He is aware of his precarious financial position (he gets Rs. 175/- per month out of which Rs. 45/- go to meet the rent of the house) but knows he cannot get a better job because of his poor qualifications. His position becomes even more precarious when he realizes that his wife is with child. He, therefore, wants to improve his condition by either getting a raise in his salary or a reduction in rent. He is aware of the painful fact that he is not qualified and experienced enough to get a raise as a matter of right. Moreover, he is not good at keeping discipline in his class. So when he approaches the Principal, he feels terribly diffident and does not know how to put forth his claim. After a great deal of hesitation he finally decides to see the Principal at his residence. He is soon overwhelmed by the authority of the Principal and the intolerance of his officious wife and returns home without ever uttering a word about his salary. Jhabvala's description of this meeting brings out the comedy of the situation:

Prem stood hesitating outside the sitting-room door, but he made himself be brave and entered.
Mr. Khanna was sitting eating his breakfast. 'Yes, come in!' he called. 'Don't be shy!' But Prem was shy; he hovered by the door and kept his eyes lowered. 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. Prem nodded again. He could not speak, he was so overwhelmed with shyness. Not only because of what he had come to say, but also because the Principal's sitting-room always made him feel shy. Everything was new and opulent and comfortable — plump cushions and flowered curtains and a big shiny radio-set: and Mr. Khanna himself so cheerful and self-confident, wearing a nicely laundered shirt and mopping up his egg with a piece of toast. You see,' explained Mr. Khanna, 'the gastric juices must be allowed to flow from early morning, otherwise they become clogged and nasty indigestions follow.' Quite reasonably, Prem thought of Sohan Lal eating his first humble meal perched on a little bench in the staff room. And this thought made him say quite the wrong thing: 'Please Sir,' he said, Mr. Sohan Lal lives in Mehrauli.'²
The dialogue is a good example of Jhabvala's art of comic juxtaposition. When Prem reaches home he finds his wife talking with Mr. Seigal, his landlord. When Mr. Seigal sees Prem he says, 'Why do you keep your wife locked up all the time?' 'I?' says Prem and is about to start defending himself when he realizes it to be a joke. At this point Prem is so preoccupied with his own problems that he hardly shows awareness of his wife as a human being with desires and aspirations of her own. The Seigals go out and meet people, invite them, entertain them and spend money lavishly. This sort of life-style is not possible for him, and it often disturbs him. He approaches the Seigals with a determination to ask them to reduce his rent but comes back without doing so. This situation is as comic as Prem's meeting with Mr. Khanna. Raj studied with him at Ankhpur college and was, at the moment, a government servant in Delhi. Prem longs for his company and wants to meet him and discuss his problems with him. But when they actually meet there is hardly any communication in the real sense. In his immaturity Prem does not take cognizance of the inevitability of change in human relations. For example, he believes that the relationship which he had with Raj, his collegemate, would
continue unchanged for ever. Their conversation is like two streams running in two different directions without any hope of their converging at any point:

'Nice smell,' said Raj, referring to the fish-cakes. Prem swallowed hard and led up to the subject at present closest to his heart: 'Today I went to see my Principal.'

'I don't usually eat fish at this time of day, otherwise I might try some.' Things are rather difficult for me now,' Prem said. 'You see, I pay 45 rupees rent---' 'I also pay 25 rupees. And don't forget I have a baby to support.'

'As a matter of fact ---' Prem slowly began. His ears grew hot.

'You have no idea how expensive a baby can be. It drinks so much milk and then it needs clothes ---' 'I know. That is why I went to see the Principal. But I don't think he understood what I meant to say.'

Prem is not on any surer footing at home. He loves his wife in a way and wants her to help him in his problems. But he finds her uncooperative and sulking all the time. Their love-making is confined to the
darkness of the night. Prem's problems acquire 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 Principal of a college in Ankhpur and commanded unquestioning obedience both at house and at College. When his mother arrives, she overwhelms with her concern for him. She has brought with her all the dishes Prem likes, and she wants him to eat them in her presence. Late in the evening she wants him to sit near her and talk to her. The more the mother starts caring for her son, the more Indu starts fretting and fuming. One day when Prem returns home after a very tedious day at the college, he finds Indu gone without even leaving a note for him. Prem feels unhappy. The increasing indiscipline in his class, his anxiety about his financial problems and about his wife render him totally helpless. It is at this time
that Sohan Lal, one of his colleagues in the college, an older man with a family living far away in Mehruali takes him to a swami. Prem and other people like to go to the swami to escape from their worries and problems. But the swami has little to offer Prem. Once, when Prem was waiting for Raj at an appointed place, he comes across a German youth called Hans Loewe. Hans is in India because of a dream in which he saw a palm tree and a temple. Under the palm tree sat a sadhu naked except for a piece of cloth. There was 'such pity, such kindness and such love' in his eyes, and they invited him 'come, Hans' and he came here. Hans makes an eager attempt to relate to Prem because he is still in a state of total enchantment with India. All Indian men have spiritual faces and all women beautiful. He mistakes Prem's emptiness for a meditative mind and wants to be friends with him. In his desperate attempts to establish connections, because Raj has his own family and is rather annoyed with Prem for his persistent attempts to invade him in frequent meetings with him, Prem allows Hans' misunderstanding to continue and even visits him in his room. It is here that he meets Kitty, Hans's landlady, who also likes meditation and spiritual exercises. Hans is an innocent abroad and is presented
with a light and delicate irony which does not, however, miss essential distinctions. Consider, for example, the following passage where the difference between Hans and Kitty is indicated. Hans says of Mohammed Ali, a house-servant "The man's eyes! All eternity is there seen like in a mirror!" "Yes, well, that's what I used to think," Kitty said. "Now, I am not so sure." It may be recalled that in Esmond in India, Esmond had found that Gulab's eyes were deep, 'sad eyes full of all the wisdom and the sorrow of the East' when he first met her. Later, he saw that they were just blank.

Till this point in the story, Prem is shown/incapable of relating with people, first with his own wife and then with the others who enter his orbit, Mr. Khanna, the Principal, his colleagues, Mr. Chaddha and Sohan Lal, and Raj who is engrossed with his own family and no longer the old collegemate who met him regularly on Mondays at the Regal Cinema house, and finally Hans, the strange European, who leaves Delhi to seek a guru in the south. The turning-point occurs when Indu, his wife returns after her visit to her parents. The mother's exit, which leaves the husband and the wife alone together,
creates the atmosphere for a recognition of the changed relationship:

In the night they went to sleep out on the roof. They felt both alone and supreme. The sky, vaulting huge and black above them, nailed with silver points of stars and a slice of moon, seemed closer than the earth. Sounds of cars, the bark of a dog, a distant train reached them faint and filtered and far-off. He tried to persuade her to take off all her clothes and show herself naked to him. She blushed, giggled, clutched the sari defensively to her breast, while he tried to pull it off. They struggled together and then they loved one another. Never had they known such an excess of sweetness. Cloyed and sated, they slept together on the bed. Later they woke up again and loved some more. After that they did not go to sleep for a long time; the night was large and silent and empty, and they did not want to lose a moment of the feeling of space and solitude it gave them.

In describing love-scenes between Prem and Indu Jhabvala's style becomes free from the pressures of her ironic observations. Consequently, the love-scenes in
The Householder suggest a real sense of joy, harmony and companionship:

The evening before they were to go to Sohan Lal's brother's wedding, the rains broke. Prem and Indu flung open all their windows and then they ran up on the roof to bathe in the rain. Water trickled from their hair and down their faces and soaked into their clothes. They laughed and ran round and round the roof and flapped their arms. Afterwards they rubbed themselves with towels, laughing and panting, their eyes and noses glistening, their hair clinging to wet coils.

Jhabvala creates a number of incidents which mark Prem's graduation to the status of a householder. He attends a marriage of Sohan Lal's relative with his wife and feels quite happy. He also invites Raj and his wife for lunch. Indu prepares the food and makes elaborate preparations to receive the guests. The visit is a total success:

'Ah', said Raj. Steam and delicious smells came floating out of the little bowls. Indu looked anxious as her guests began to eat.
'Very nice,' Raj's wife pronounced after her first few mouthfuls, swaying her head from side to side in appreciation. Indu glowed, but she murmured, 'It is only our plain home food.' Raj had his mouth full of rice. He said, 'It seems your wife is a very good cook,' Then Prem felt really proud. 9

He has now fully attained the status of a householder. 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 relationships in the Indian context. Consider, for example, the subtle presentation of the relationships between Prem, his mother and Indu in Prem's household. Prem's mother loves Prem, her only son, and she believes that she alone knows what he likes and what is good for him. Prem is pleased by his mother's attitudes but wants to be with his wife, which the mother resents. This results in Indu's going away to her parents without even asking for her husband's permission, an act of defiance which baffles Prem. Prem's predicament is beautifully illustrated through an incident. His wife's absence makes Prem realize how much he has been neglecting her. In a
sudden mood of contrition he buys a piece of pink satin for his wife and hides it in the house, but later, when he finds his mother in one of her complaining moods, he makes an offer of it to her, without realizing that the material is absolutely unsuited to her. The situations in Prem's household are brought out through ordinary incidents without the least degree of exaggeration or falsification.

Though *The Householder* is a novel about lower middle-class people, money plays an important part in it by its absence. The world of Amrita, Lalaji and Shakuntala is the world of the rich. Money is the medium that, for good or bad, makes for affluent society. It is mostly for bad in Jhabvala's novels. But even then, its presence helps an easier movement. In *The Householder* Jhabvala shows how Prem's world is jaded for want of it. At every stage, it is money that preoccupies him. He is unable to ask for a raise in his salary because he is overwhelmed by Mr. Khanna's opulence.

Just as in her other novels, in this novel too Jhabvala juxtaposes the rich and the poor and shows how abundance of money makes the rich crude, insensitive and
hypocritical, and how the absence of money makes people shy and diffident. In The Householder Jhabvala shows how money results in a loss of dignity. The Householder reminds one of Kingsley Amis's Lucky Jim. Incidentally, Amis reviewed it for The Observer. The Householder has also been filmed.

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