THE HOUSEHOLDER: AN EVALUATION
CHAPTER V

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With The Householder (1960)1 Ruth Jhabvala returns to the intra-Indian context. Choosing for her new setting a Delhi in which Independence and Partition are already history and India’s industrial development a concrete reality,2 she presents a drama of conflict and resolution in terms of a youth’s quest for identity. In the world her protagonist confronts, several social realities that were the consequence of Indian Planning are easily identified. It is not that The Householder concerns itself with the strategy of the planning process devised to give India the developing infrastructure of an industrialized society. Neither does it explore the extent of India’s modernization of her agriculture. It uses, for a thematic purpose, the impact of National Planning on everyday life. An effect of Planning that was almost pan-Indian was the movement of the males of the younger generation from native villages and towns to the capital and industrial centres in search of employment. The break-up of the joint family and the mushrooming of nuclear units that followed created a need for new adaptations and adjustments. This phenomenon—
as characteristic a feature of the new India as the decay of the aristocracy and the emergence of the business class enters Ruth Jhabvala’s fiction for the first time.

The Indian joint family, essentially patriarchal in character, kept itself alive by satisfying two vital needs of its male members—the patriarch’s love of power and the young man’s need for financial security. By undertaking to support them, the system enabled young men to marry and raise a family before attaining financial independence. Perpetuation of the male line being the primary goal of the joint family, early marriage and reproduction were encouraged. By 1960 the structure was crumbling and the pattern of Indian life changing, but many of the traditions that had built it up, among them the tradition of early marriage, had remained. Thus, twenty year old Prem, the central character of The Householder, finds himself in the strange city of Delhi, stripped of all the loving protection he had hitherto known and burdened with new responsibilities. Among the truths he discovers, in his first encounter with the adult world, is that he and he alone is responsible for the welfare of his wife and the child that is soon to be born, and that with his graduate degree in Hindi Literature he is dispensable in the world around him. For, with rapid industrialization, the needs of the nation were shifting. Looking into the Situations Vacant Column, Prem
discovers that the products of Colleges of Science and Technology are at a premium and the Arts have to take a back seat. Matters are made worse for him by the fact that his newly wedded wife and he are practically strangers to each other. He knows nothing of what she thinks or feels as she sits yawning and sighing in the little flat whose rent is over a quarter of what he earns form his job as a Hindi teacher in a private college.

Like all Hindu boys, Prem has been brought up in a tradition that sees human life as passing through four phases—*Brahmacharya*, the life of the student; *Grihastha*, the life of the householder; *Vanaprastha*, the life of contemplation; and *Sanyas*, that of renunciation. Prem is aware that he has left the first behind and that the third can only be reached after the second has been successfully passed. But the rigours of adaptation to the unfamiliar role of a *grihaswami* or householder drive him alternately in the two other directions. For a good part of the novel, Prem is seen either as eagerly regressing into the lost world of his childhood or answering to the call of a swami who promises spiritual release.

Yet Prem is also conscientiously trying to fit himself into the role he is now called upon to play—-that of a successful householder, husband, teacher and would-be father. Brought up in a family tradition in which the head
of the family was the supreme authority and exposed to a scholastic one in which the teacher was reveres, Prem tries to emulate his own father in his interactions with his wife and students. Unfortunately the values that he remembers from his boyhood have dated since. How Prem comes to terms with his new destiny, the difficulties he encounters and the solutions he seeks make up the backbone of *The Householder*. The authenticity of the world depicted indicates the novelist’s extraordinary understanding of the Indian ethos and reveals, to use Yasmine Gooneratne’s words, “how eagerly she accepted and how thoroughly she assimilated her Indian experience.”

The world Prem encounters on leaving his boyhood in Ankhpur is as sharply divided as the world of David Copperfield. Though not prompted as overtly by a moral judgment as Dickens’ novel is, the lines drawn in *The Householder* betray the novelist’s bias towards her characters. Two types, who may be roughly labeled Seekers and Keepers, inhabit this world. Among the latter are people who have survived the struggle for security and are now in positions of authority which they can exploit for their further advancement. Safely entrenched in his particular niche, each keeper guards his position jealously and selfishly. Thoroughly assimilated into the world around him, he is seen as desensitized by wealth, power and
security. Though the novel does not develop this theme with more seriousness than its light tone permits, assimilation merges in *The Householder* as synonymous with success and the assimilated are invariably seen as pompous, priggish, comic or disagreeable, often comparable to Dickensian grotesques in being larger than life. The *seekers*, like the protagonist, are still engaged in a quest for belonging and security.

The bland self-assurance of Mr. Khanna, chief among the keepers of the novel, derives from his opportunistic seizing of a situation created in the Fifties by the major thrust given to education by the Planning process. With increasing numbers seeking education and the comparatively small reserves of the Government, the time had been just ripe for the mushrooming of teaching shops. The novelist implies that, in newly Independent India, a man unfit for any other vocation might make a success of running an educational institution. There is no indication that the Principal of Khanna’s Private College has an academic background or takes an interest in the scholastic life of the institution. He is clearly only a shrewd businessman flourishing on a policy of systematic exploitation of his students and staff. He takes in more students than the college can conveniently accommodate, charges exorbitant fees and employs a band of inadequately
paid, under trained teachers whom he can intimidate. His brash loud-mouthed wife serves as a symbol of his authority as well as an extension of the material possessions acquired by him in his career as an educationist. Like Mr. Khanna’s drawing-room in which everything is “new and opulent and comfortable” (Ibid., p. 14), his wife too is resplendent with “ornaments and brightly flowered clothes” and as plump and shiny as the tea pot she holds poised in the air (Ibid., p. 16).

The gap between the life styles of the Khannas and their staff is deliberately stressed by the author. The Principal’s comfortable residence presents an effective contrast to Prem’s ugly little flat and Sohan Lal’s old house in Mehrauli, a suburb fifteen miles from Delhi. His lavish English breakfast, eaten at leisure from a smart dining table makes Prem think sorrowfully of Sohan Lal cycling fifteen miles on an empty stomach every morning, then eating “his first humble meal perched on a little bench in the staff room” (Ibid., p. 14). Mr. Khanna’s breezy confidence is set off against Sohan Lal’s self-effacing shabbiness and Prem’s nervous diffidence. The callous indifference underlying Mr. Khanna’s bonhomie is revealed when, in between theorizing about eating the right kinds of food at the right times, he listens to Prem inadvertently outlining a case for Sohan Lal. Mr. Khanna’s response to his
colleague's privations, when not totally negative, is casual and objective. Prem's passionate words: "Poverty and want are terrible things. In the Panchatantra it is written' 'It is better to be dead than poor" evokes only a nonchalant "It is an interesting thought'" (Ibid., p. 15) from Mr. Khanna. The extent to which the Principal takes the staff for granted is seen in the periodic transformation of the staff room into a guest room, which forces the legitimate occupiers to wait standing in the corridors, between classes. For a guest of the Khannas is not accommodated in their own spacious quarters. The arrival of a bed and a towel with the significant phrase Work is Worship embroidered on it affects the metamorphosis.

However, it is not the exploiting capitalist alone who is under fire in The Householder. That academic distinction and genuine scholastic purpose are not necessarily accompanied by the finest shades of feeling is exemplified in the character of Mr. Chaddha, the Principal's colleague and right hand man. Though a good teacher and a painstaking scholar, Mr. Chaddha betrays, quite blatantly, that the areas of sensitivity and success are mutually exclusive in the India of the Fifties. His humiliation of Prem and subsequent tale-bearing give the lie to his flowery speech on friendship at the conclusion of the tea-party, and reveal him to be a sycophant and hypocrite. In
her only depiction of the teaching community of Delhi in this novel, Ruth Jhabvala asserts her conviction that the desensitization that follows success is not excluded from any aspect of Indian life.

The world of the intellect and the of petty business might lie far apart but the laws that govern them are the same. The guiding principle of the keeper, whether he is a teacher, bureaucrat or businessman, is pursuit of maximum material gain with a minimum consideration for others. Another characteristic that distinguished him is the gap that he invariably presents between appearance and reality. Mr. Khanna is a cunning businessman parading as a guide and mentor of youth. Mr. Chaddha—mean and malicious—holds forth on the values of friendship and loyalty. Mr. Seigal, Prem’s landlord, exemplifies shameless profiteering masquerading in the garb of expansive warmth and hospitality. Prem’s Indu are charmed by his good humour and affection. Yet Mr. Seigal is shamelessly exploiting Prem’s ignorance of the ways of the great city by charging an exorbitant rent for a very shoddy construction. In the final scene between the two, when Prem has at last picked up the courage to tell Mr. Seigal that the rent is too high for him, Mr. Seigal’s response to Prem’s problems is as casual as Mr. Khanna’s to Sohan Lal’s Mr. Khanna was,
significantly, in the middle of breakfast and Mr. Seigal is picking his teeth after lunch:

‘My salary is not very big it is difficult for me to pay so much rent every month.’...

‘Ai,’ said Mr. Seigal in irritation at his tooth and digging deeper.

‘Especially now I expect my expenses to go up higher’...

‘Perhaps you know already—you see, I am expecting’...

‘my wife is expecting a baby’...Mr. Seigal said ‘Ah’ as he dislodged the offending particle;... ‘let us hope for a boy’... ‘Very nice’ he said again and went indoors. (Ibid p. 174)

In a world owned by the successful, the Khannas, Chaddhas and Seigals are the prime keepers. With them are other faceless characters, appearing by proxy as it were in the identities of their sons. The college students, Jauntily pushing off on shiny motor scooters, rouse conflicting emotions in the seeker Prem. Wistfully envious of their freedom from care and responsibility—his own student days being only just behind him—he is driven too, at times, to comparing them with his unborn child: “He hoped his son would grow up like them, healthy and confident and rich. Though this last was, in view of his own salary, hardly
possible. It made him feel sad to think that he would not be able to give his son a motor scooter...” (Ibid., p. 48).

However, the section of *keepers* with which Prem wishes to identify is not Delhi’s *nouveau riche* business community but the vast *babu* population which constitutes the backbone of India’s middle class. Prem’s compelling urge is not towards success so much as towards security that Prem has had and lost. “Government...was like a stern kind father who supported his children and demanded nothing in return but their subservience” (Ibid., p. 136). What Prem is still desperately seeking is what his Ankhpur friend Raj has already found. Raj has become, in the words of the Western self-seeker Hans Lowe, “‘a cog in the vast machinery of the Government’” (p. 157)—a clerk in a subdivision of the Ministry of Food. Raj shares a belief with other members of the Indian Clerical Service, that it is they and not the lofty officers of the Administrative Service who really run the government. The feeling of power such a belief engenders makes for solid security. Raj gets a small salary. He lives in a tumbledown hutment with cracked ceilings and a broken W. C. he is harassed by rising prices and quarrels between his wife and mother. But the security of his job and the prospect of gradually inching his way to the post of superintendent, then section officer, finally retiring on a small but secure pension after arranging a
similar destiny for his sons and sons-in-iaw, act as a shield that effectively protects him from life's vicissitudes. It is this kind of security that Prem—hitherto shielded by a stern authoritarian father, a fussy devoted mother and four loving elder sisters—yearns for intensely. On a visit to Raj at his office,

*Prem wanted very much to be one of them. If one succeeded in getting into government service, one's future was settled; there was nothing more to fear. And one belonged somewhere, one was part of something bigger than oneself. That was just what Prem wanted: he felt a great need to be absorbed.*

(Ibid., p. 138)

That an assimilation of this type is liable to have a sterilizing effect is exemplified in Raj who, though he lacks the suavity and composure of rich and powerful *keepers* life Mr. Seigal and Mr. Khanna, has imbibed a good deal of their pomposity and insensitivity. As a government servant and house-holder, Raj had turned his back completely on his youth. For him, the present stage is the only one that is meaningful and anyone who has not arrived at it had not proved his worth. He dismisses a group of gloomy young men in a coffee house as loafers who do no work, quite forgetting that only a little while ago he himself had been in their shoes. Prem, who is still insecure enough to
sympathies with them, comes in for a similar dismissal. Impatient with Prem whenever they meet and tired of his nostalgic conversation about their shared boyhood, Raj makes a dash for home as soon as he can manage it, though not before eating a goof deal at Prem’s expense and looking the other way when the bill is being paid.

To the community of keeper also belongs the ghost of Prem’s dead father which continually exhorts him to “strive, strive and strive again:” (Ibid., p. 49). This ghost is a thorn in Prem’s side, for it is not only a constant reminder that he is not a successful teacher and householder but also a major hurdle in his path towards a harmonious relationship with Indu. Part of the analysis undertaken in The Householder is carried forward from Ruth Jhabvala’s earlier novels in which she depicted the constraints of the family tradition on the aspirations of youth. In Prem’s initial efforts at being a good teacher, husband and householder, he uses his father as a model who, it seems to him, had been eminently successful in all these capacities. Yet, unlike the young of To Whom She Will and The Nature of Passion, Prem succeeds in the end, not by extending filial tradition but by exorcising it. He has to be himself—not his father’s son, and learn to accept Indu as an individual and not just a wife before his marriage can
become meaningful and before he can come to terms with his inadequacies as a man of the world.

Prem has to decondition himself considerably before coming to an understandings with Indu. He has to learn that the pattern of domestic living that he is setting up as a model for his own family is obsolete in the present milieu. At the beginning of the novel, when Prem is conscientiously donning his father’s grab—from sitting at a table while correcting papers when he would have been more comfortable on the floor (Ibid., p. 7) to acting the dominating husband and head of the family—his relationship with Indu is strained and precarious. Indu comes from a boisterous, free and easy household bent on having a good time—very different from Prem’s severely paternalistic one with its aura of dignity and learning and its implacable code of proprieties. The clash of cross-familial influences reveals their different personalities. Prem’s insistence on keeping a servant, in spite of his money problems, stems from his sense of self-importance as “the son of a Principal of a college and himself a professor, a man of education” (Ibid., p. 36). Indu, a practical girl with no false pretensions, sees no reason for keeping one as there is hardly any work. The gap between the two approaches is depicted with the novelist’s accustomed irony:
'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.

(Ibid., pp. 36-37)

Brought up on the ideology that it is the woman's moral duty to shed prior conditioning and adapt to the requirements of the household to which she is brought by marriage, Prem seeks to emulate his domineering father, but his efforts are continually frustrated by Indu's spirited individuality. He takes it for granted, for example, that his wife's duty to his mother will take precedence over her duty to her own. He is shocked to find her voicing exactly the opposite sentiment:

Had Prem been living in the old joint family with the traditional hierarchy, Indu might have been compelled to sacrifice her lively individuality to the constraints of her statue as a young daughter-in-law. In the nuclear set-up in which she takes her place immediately after marriage, her role is less clearly defined dependent as it is upon her husband's requirements alone. But Prem's expectations of Indu are whimsically erratic. He wants her to be "remote and soulful" like a goddess (Ibid., p. 31) and a practical and competent woman at the same time. He expects her to
accompany him to mixed parties where she must command respect and impress the assembly with her personality (Ibid., p. 47). At the same time, he expects a complete obliteraton of personality and a subordination of all her wishes to those of her husband (Ibid., p. 31). This last is the most pressing demand stemming, as it does, equally from a deeply ingrained social indoctrination⁸ as from memories of his mother’s deference to her husband:

Prem’s mother... had preaced all her remarks to Prem and his sisters with ‘Your father says,’ and to outsiders she said, ‘The Principal says’. In the house everybody had had to tiptoe past his study, and at mealtimes he always had some special dish cooked in which no one else had been allowed to share. Prem had sometimes envied him his position of comfort and dignity and had looked forward to being married himself so that he could occupy a similar one. But Indu, it seemed, was not aware of the privileges due to him. (Ibid., pp. 37-38)

Indu is aware of the tradition of subservient womanhood but has a mind of her own which refuses to tolerate oppression beyond reasonable limits. She believes that a woman can perform her traditional duties without surrendering her individuality and that her obligations to others need not blind her to her own needs. She prides
off all her clothes and show herself naked to him” (Ibid., p. 163). Her pregnancy, which had been a terrible embarrassment for him for “Now everybody would know what he did with her at night in the dark” (Ibid., p. 9), becomes a feather in his cap when he notices the ladies of Sohan Lal’s house receiving Indu “with the deference due to a pregnant woman” (Ibid., p. 182). Sexual passion become a miraculous key to self-discovery and discovery of each other. With the scene of Prem and Indu’s unabashed love-making under the open sky, when both felt “alone and supreme” (Ibid., p. 163) marital alienation is resolved by an exciting recasting of the husband-wife relationship. The resulting harmony is attuned to the spirit of a new age. Thus, one part of Prem’s quest is successfully concluded.

The other part that of improving his financial position and prospects, remains static. By the end of the novel, Prem’s efforts to get his rent lowered have drawn a blank and his hopes of getting a raise have been cruelly crushed. The promptings of his father’s spirit let him down once again, driving him towards success in a manner that does not integrate well with his personality. Prem belongs, not to that section of the middle class that is energetic and pushing but to that which is inarticulate and sensitive and which loves monotony and security and fears emotional
herself on her intelligence. Her boast—"Let me tell you, I am not stupid at all! On the contrary, when I was in school all the teachers said Indu.... Has a good brain!" (Ibid., p. 172)—sets her apart from the women of Lalaji's household for whom brains in a female consciousness that was emerging as a consequence of the breakdown of the joint family. With women achieving greater independence, considerable readjustment in marital relationships were becoming inevitable. Thus certain questions—integral in the sociological climate of India in the Fifties are being raised in *The Householder*. How far does the husband accommodate an independent wife? To what extent does the woman surrender her identity? A trend towards adapting to the new is perceived in *The Householder*. Till Prem has learned to value this new woman in Indu, their personality clash remains unresolved. Led by her Prem is able, by the end of the novel, to shed the umbilical cord of tradition and childhood memory and formulate his own ideas about the marital relationship.

The moment he can do this, Prem can also drive out the shame and guilt that had dogged him in his relationship with Indu and can enjoy his marital privileges like a mature adult. He, who had once been so ashamed of his desire to see the soft skin on the inside of Indu's arm (Ibid., p. 46), feels no guilt at all when he tries to persuade her "to take
off all her clothes and show herself naked to him” (Ibid., p. 163). Her pregnancy, which had been a terrible embarrassment for him for “Now everybody would know what he did with her at night in the dark” (Ibid., p. 9), becomes a feather in his cap when he notices the ladies of Sohan Lal’s house receiving Indu” “with the deference due to a pregnant woman” (Ibid., p. 182). Sexual passion become a miraculous key to self-discovery and discovery of each other. With the scene of Prem and Indu’s unabashed love-making under the open sky, when both felt “alone and supreme” (Ibid., p. 163) marital alienation is resolved by an exciting recasting of the husband-wife relationship. The resulting harmony is attuned to the spirit of a new age. Thus, one part of Prem’s quest is successfully concluded.

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scenes. His compulsive striving for success, therefore, results only in anguish and self-torture. At college, Prem seeks out for companionship—not Mr. Khanna and Mr. Chaddha of whom his father would have approved but Sohan Lal, who is made of the stuff of failure.

Sohan Lal is a seeker whose quest for success is now definitely in the past. Discouraged and melancholy at having lost all his life’s battles, he is now content to stagnate. Life holds out to him not much more than a hope of being allowed to keep his job till, with the stage of the householder safely behind him, he is enabled to embrace the spiritual—the only area of life in which he can be truly assimilated. The novelist’s assessment of the Indian ethos is implicit in the fate of Shoan Lal for Prem’s future is still in the balance. The shy, retiring, sensitive and considerate—the novelist seems to be saying—are misfits in the present milieu which measures worth by the yardstick of worldly success. The character of true worth—that is the one who represents his creator’s moral positives most closely—fails to adapt himself in the world around him. Failure, however, does not destroy the character of true worth. No damage is done either physical or psychic. Sohan Lal’s warmth and kindliness and his “enchanted smile” (Ibid., p. 18) indicate a hidden source of
contentment in him that is denied by the novelist to the keepers of her novel.

A factor that inadvertently brings Prem and Indu closer to each other is the presence of the little servant boy, who like his young master and mistress, is struggling to find a foothold in the new life to which he has been brought. The boy’s initial alienation, though not directly described by the novelist, is conveyed in the way he sits gloomily in the kitchen meekly submits to Indu's scoldings. He is the first of a series of little boys, brought from the hills to the great city, who appear in Ruth Jhabvala’s later novels and stories. Beaten, overworked and underfed, these dehumanized creatures initially reach out for love and security but on rejection throw in their lot with the criminal world. In her short story “Miss Sahib” written some years later. Ruth Jhabvala describes how every few years “one of them went berserk and murdered his master and ran away with the jewellery only to be caught the next day on a wild spree at cinemas and country liquor shops.” The novelist’s sensitive response to these wretched waifs and her recognition of their vulnerability is established as early as in The Householder.

Prem’s little servant boy is luckier than others in the fact that he is working for a couple almost as young and vulnerable as himself. Initially, in his lost and lonely state,
he attaches himself to his young mistress with pathetic affection. He soon realises, however, that her emotional dependence on him is no less than his on her. Overcoming his own insecurity, he constitutes himself her protector against the assaults of her husband and mother-in-law. He praises her cooking and glares at Prem when he scolds her. Indu, thought she takes out all her grievances on the boy, is quick to take his part when Prem accuses him of idleness and disrepect. After Indu’s departure, the boy attaches himself of Prem’s: “.... Somehow he made it clear that he no longer regarded Prem as enemy; and he even managed to suggest that they were allies. Allies against whom and in what common cause Prem did not wish to think ....“ (Ibid., p. 125). Prem finds the change a pleasant one, for the boy makes no demands on demands on him. He even understands that Prem has to pretend to scold him in front of his mother. The boy thus becomes Prem’s link with Indu. The assimilative process works simultaneously on all three bringing them together in the integrated household unit they represent in the final scene when, dressed in their best clothes, they entertain their guests and are complimented on their domestic arrangements (Ibid., p. 192).

The presence of Prem’s mother in the flat quickens the process. Faced with reality, nostalgia is quickly
diffused and Prem’s real needs are revealed. Prem’s retrogressive tendencies had included a passionate yearning for his mother and a looking for her in Indu. But with her actually there he realizes that the two are separate and that an adult male’s need of a wife is more compelling that his need of a mother. His initial mild exasperation changes to despair at his mother’s prolonged presence, for with her in the next he can make no contact with Indu. With Indu gone, his mother gives him back his boyhood. She cooks his favourite dishes, tidies his things, massages his temples and pampers and cossets him—everything he had longed for in the early days when he had felt sad because Indu was there. But now they bring him no satisfaction, for he realizes that it is not his boyhood that he is nostalgic for but his status as a married man:

*Now that it was gone from him, he craved again for the sensation of being a family man with duties and responsibilities. He thought almost enviously of Raj, who had a wife and daughter to look after, and was frowning and anxious with worrying about how to get the lavatory repaired or pay the school fees in the coming years when his child would have to start going to school.* (Ibid., p. 127)
In effect, Prem has come to terms with the fact that he is a boy no longer the moment he actually yearns for the house-holder’s state:

At least with such burdens one was someone—a family man, a member of society, living next to, in rows and colonies with, other such members of society who had the same worries. But Prem—what was he? He was no longer a student living in his father’s house: he had lost interest in his mother was he instead? Where did he belong? It seemed to him that he belonged nowhere, was nothing, was nobody. (Ibid., p. 127)

In this mood the realization that he wanted to be looked after, not by his mother but by Indu, comes to him and he takes a decisive step prompted, for the first time, not by the expectations of his late father but by his own inner self. He writes a letter to his sister in Bangalore, asking her to invite their mother to spend that summer with her as the Delhi heat is likely to undermine her health. In due course the invitation comes and Prem sees the old lady off at the station with solicitous care, though he “did not wait till the train was out of sight” (Ibid., p. 163)—so anxious was he to get back as quickly as possible to Indu. For the first time, Prem has risen to the occasion and his action has been deft and well-timed. He has at arrived at a mature understanding
of himself, his needs and limitations, leaving the reader convinced that he will soon shed his callow clumsiness and manage his affairs with assurance and sophistication. As it happens, the old lady leaves her son’s house “still secure in her illusions of her indispensability;”\textsuperscript{13} the sister has no inkling of the true state of affairs and even Indu is ignorant of Prem’s maneuverings.

Haydn Moore Williams describes Prem’s union with Indu as possible only after he can fight the “demon of his mother who would smother him and drive the wife away.” This remark, together with his earlier observation that “the threat to the very small family of Prem.... Comes from that oldest of all family jokes, the mother-in-law,”\textsuperscript{14} puts the entire responsibility for Prem’s estrangement from his wife on his mother. As a matter of fact the old lady, far from driving them apart, actually brings them together—though unintentionally. She herself is a \textit{seeker}—a woman who has lost her husband and an entire way of life and has no option left except to cling parasitically to her son. Although she attempts to wield parental authority, it is almost as though she seeks in her son a substitute husband.

Prem’s mother is in a vulnerable position, for she realises that she is an interloper in her daughter-in-law’s home. Having no knowledge of human psychology and working entirely on instinct and precedent, over her son
and daughter-in-law and making them dependent on her. There is something pathetic in her efforts to win back her old place in her son’s heart—for she too like him has a new role to play and a new environment. She is no longer the wife of the Principal of Ankhpur—a position she had filled admirably according to the old precepts of respectful obedience to a husband and a whole-hearted embracing of his values.15 This tradition of rigid identification she has brought with her as “the mother of her son”16 in the expectation of passing it on to her daughter-in-law. She is totally unaware that the world in which such a tradition was meaningful is disappearing, that the joint family id breaking down, and that in the newly emerging unclear family it is the old who have to make the adjustments. The novelist is anticipating, here, a social reality that has acquired frightening proportions in the Nineties. What is the unclear family doing with the generation that it has put so callously behind it? What place do the old and infirm have in it except at the periphery if at all? These are some of the questions that are of fundamental importance in today’s India in which the old have become, in a sense, the new outcasts of society. The future of Prem’s mother is clearly before us. we can see her doing a round of all her daughters’ houses before coming back to her son’s , either chastened and subdued and ready to woo her daughter-in-
law or bitter and frustrated and more self-pitying as each round is made in quicker succession.

The group of self-seekers in The Householder with whom Prem briefly comes in contact continually proclaims the fact that it is deep in a quest for synthesis with India. That the quest is a hoax and the posture of its members a sham is suggested by Prem's surprise at their spiritual talk for “he had always thought that Europeans were very materialistic” (Ibid., p. 62). His creator seems to endorse his view for she invariably puts the Westerners of her novel in situations that bring out their basic materialism and exposes the hollowness of their quest. Hans Lowe interrupts his account of a vision that brought him out to India with a curt order to the waiter for coffee with thick-whipped cream. His order and the explanation that follows, “In Germany we drink coffee with cream whipped thick” (Ibid., p. 42), are comically incongruous with the great spiritual experience he is recounting. Hans’s spiritual effusions are invariably interspersed with mundane statements like “Please ask the washerman to bring back my good shirt for this day” (Ibid., p. 62) and “How sour your tea is always, bah, that is terrible to drink” (Ibid., p. 60). His landlady Kitty, who envies all Indians for their spirituality, pursues her profession of renting out rooms like a shrewd business woman in between her talk of “God
consciousness” (Ibid., p. 59) and meeting “the Eternal and the Infinite” (Ibid., p. 58). There is no trace in these two or in the others who are seen airing their souls at the party (Ibid., p. 87) of the loneliness and frustration of the real seekers of the novel or the harrowing loss of identity experienced by the three white girls of Ruth Jhabvala’s later novel. A New Dominion.

The fate of the true seeker is fraught with alienation. As Ruth Jhabvala’s literary career advances, this conviction crystallizes. Her narrative tone also changes, becoming darker and darker with each successive novel. The Householder, however, is marked by a seeming gap in tone and content and an ambivalence in Ruth Jhabvala’s attitude to her material. The deliberate polarization of the two views of the world—Prem’s and that of his creator’s—may puzzle the reader and make him ask if the novel is a serious account of a young man’s confrontation with a hard adult world or a comic extravaganza. He may even attribute the novelist’s attitude to a superior Western consciousness that finds the problems of a middle-class Indian college teacher laughable and paltry. But in view of Ruth Jhabvala’s sensitive exploration of Prem’s psyche this theory disintegrates. Ruth Jhabvala’s ironic mode seems to be undertaken with the aim of enhancing the complexity of characters and situations and making possible a
simultaneous recognition of Prem's sensitivity and idealism on the one hand and his immaturity on the other. In a similar way Prem’s mother’s behaviour appears domineering and pathetic; Indu’s as spirited and loving and Raj’s as contemptible and pitiful at the same time.

Is the omniscient narrator, then, laughing at the folly of a boy who weeps because his finger is pricked with the glass bauble of success—unaware that he has picked up the diamond of contentment? Such an interpretation, though seemingly irreconcilable with the spirit of light comedy that characterizes The Householder, is not untenable in the light of the fact that it is effectively attuned to the spirit of her next novel, Get Ready for Battle, as we shall see in the following chapter.
REFERENCES


2. The Process of India’s industrial development was formally initiated in 1952 with the publication of the First Five Year Plan for the period 1951-56. By 1960, the Second Plan was nearing completion. The hero of Ruth Jhabvala’s novel brags about the Five Year Plans to a foreign tourist. See Ibid., p. 40.

3. Prem explains the four phases to Mr. Seigal. Ibid., p. 54.


5. To Ram Lal Aggarwal’s suggestion that her character are exaggerated, Ruth Jhabvala replied: “I think novelists can be classified into two schools or sects: (1) those whose characters are as large as life—here the high priests are writers like Tolstoy and George Eliot; (2) those whose characters are larger than life—the high priests being Dickens and Proust. I am a follower of the second school.” Ram Lal Aggarwal, “An Interview with Ruth Prawer Jhabvala,” Quest, 91, (1974), p. 36.
6. That this was equally true of England a century ago is borne out by the presence of teachers like Squeers, Creakle and Mr. Wopsle's great-aunt in Dickens' novels.

7. K. R. Sunder Rajan paints this picture of the Indian 
   *babu* in the sixties. K. R. Sunder Rajan, "India's 

8. The traditional male concept of a woman's duties and 
   obligations is seen in its most concentrated form in 
   Ramani's views in R. K. Narayan's The Dark Room.

9. Ruth Jhabvala made the following remark in her 
   interview with Ram Lal Aggarwal. Ram Lal 
   Aggarwal, *Quest*, op. cit., p. 34.

10. See A New Dominion, "Miss Sahib" and "Expiation."

11. "Miss Sahib," *A Stronger Climate* (London: John 

12. The Householder, op. cit. p. 36 and p. 64.

13. Yasmine Gooneratne makes this remark in *Silence, 
    126.

14. Haydn Moore Williams, "Strangers in a Backward 
    Place: Modern India, in the Fiction of Ruth Prawer 
    Jhabvala," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 6, 
    No. 1 (1971), 57.