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QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN THE NOVEL *THE HOUSEHOLDER*

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ABSTRACT

As Ruth Praver Jhabvala's literary career advanced, her narrative tone also changes, becoming darker and darker with each successive novel. 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 which are easily identified. The break-up of the joint family and mushrooming of nuclear units that followed created a need for new adaptations and adjustments. This phenomenon is characteristic feature of the new India as the decay of the aristocracy and the emergence of the business class enters Praver Jhabvala's fiction for the first time.....

**Key words:** Identity, adjustment

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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.

Prem, the central figure of the novel is an underpaid Hindi Lecturer at a private college in Delhi. He is newly married and he scarcely knows Indu, his young wife. Having recently arrived in Delhi, he lives in a small flat for which he is paying quarter of what he earns from his job. Apart from Prem and Indu, a single domestic servant also lives in the flat, the novel's title provides its own frame of reference as we see Prem entering the second stage of a traditional Hindu life, that 'of a Householder.' We see Prem explaining to Mr. Seigal, his landlord.

"... there are four stages to a man's life. When he is young, he is a student, he is a student, learning from his father and his teachers... After that comes the life of Householder" Prem said "In this stage a man must raise a family and see to their needs... The third stage is when a man retires from his duties as a householder and spends his time in contemplation. (40)

Mathematics remarks convey deep-reaching criticism, not only of the Indian system of early arranged marriage which has deprived him of freedom to live the spiritual life of his liking, but of the Hindu view of life, of which such marriage is a part:

... Here in our India.... It is so that while we are still children and know nothing of what we want, they take as and tie us up with a wife and children... so... when we are old enough to know what the world

is and God is, then it is too late, for we have a burden on our back which we cannot shake off for the rest of our days (27).

Prem is not a good degree holder and is lucky to have got a job. The college where he teaches is owned by the snobbish Mr. Khanna and his even more despicable wife who do not pay their staff well, but lives on the profits that the college fetches. They also treat their stays with scant respect. Prem who belongs to lower middle class milieu, is obviously exploited by Mr. Khanna the principal of the college and Mr. Seigal, and his landlord. Consequently he is in severe financial crisis throughout the novel. He plans to ask for a rise in salary and reduction in rent but never succeeds in his attempt.

'My salary is not very big and 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 of ending particle; ... 'let us hope for a boy'... very nice he said again and went indoors.

That landlord even doesn't care about Prem's situation. Prem is economically deprived in the traditional role of being a householder. He feels genuinely unhappy and also lonely. He longs to talk to someone, to share and discuss his problems, but ironically he does not turn to Indu, who is equally lonely and unhappy.

At the same time misunderstanding takes place in the early months of their life when he returns home rather late, he finds the house dark and silent and his wife already asleep, he reflects that :

... it was not right for a wife to go to sleep before she had served her husband however late he night come. He considered for a moment whether to wake her up and tell her so. Be he did not feel angry enough for that (46).

Prem's expectations of Indu are whimsically erratic. He wants her to be 'remote and sowlful' 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. At the same time he expects a complete obliteration of personality and subordination of all her wishes to those of her husband. But 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 succeeding her individuality and that her obligations to others need not blind her to her own needs.

Besides this, Prem's mother creates a sense of frustration and irritation in Indu by passing comments on Indu. Indu goes to bed early as a way of avoiding her mother-in-law's critical comments and glances. The maladjustment in the context of Indian family system between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law is portrayed by Jhabvala very effectively in the novel. The mother-in-law throws accusations at the daughter-in-law, who bears them in silent or at the most, indirectly expressing her rage on the servant boy. At this the mother-in-law again feels sorry for her son and remarks. 'She has bad temper also my poor son', As a result of these unfavourable situations, Indu suddenly goes to her mother's house without intimating Prem, this hurts him a lot but also he doesn't show this to his mother and after spending some time her absence makes Prem realize how much he values her presence, it is a necessary stage in Prem's development. He realizes that he wanted to be looked after not by his mother but by Indu. And he wanted to look after her.

In the course of time. Prem is insecure of his profession as a lecturer, once he thinks about government job also Prem's complete urge is not towards success so much as towards security and government is the only institution that spells out the kind of security.

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 feat. And are belonged somewhere, one was part of something bigger than oneself. That was just what Prem wanted : he felt a great need to be absorbed. (138)

Struggling to secure his life and at the house in the absence of his wife Indu, his mother serving him, 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 (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 householder'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 has lost interest in his mother and in her cooking and in talk of Ankhapur. But what was he instead? Where did he belong? It seemed to him that he belonged nowhere, was nothing, was nobody. (127)

One afternoon Prem was amazed to see Indu in his house, she comes back to him and he was so happy. Prem's new found maturity emerges as he decisively arranged for his mother's tactful removal from his house to that of his sister; He writes a letter to his sister in Bangalore asking her to invite their mother to spend the summer with her as the Delhi heat is likely to undermine her health. In due course invitation comes. Prem's mother leaves for Bangalore to join her daughter, she is profusely apologetic about leaving him so soon, but he is transcendently happy because he will now be 'alone and supreme' with Indu.

Prem for the first time that she loves him. On the night of his mother's departure. They sleep on the roof of their apartment building. The couple's wish to sleep outside is indicative of their new relationship. Now they are at ease with each other and are not alone as oriented individuals anymore. With these changed in their feelings, Indu becomes Prem's main source of consolation. He feels he has achieved something as a husband. Now his status in the college does not matter very much. He is matured enough to find happiness in what he has and in his confidence as a householder.

In the end when Raj comes with his family to have a dinner at Prem's house on his invitation and comments, "it seems your wife is a very good cook" both Indu and Prem feel a sense of achievement. Thus the newly married Prem and Indu who start with the rudimentary cross-fire are finally at home. Jhabvala shows that irritations like not having enough money or the presence of mother-in-law can be overcome in course of time, especially when people are young and the future is all before them,

*The householder*, however is marked by a seeming gap in tone and content and an ambivalence in Ruth Praver 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 a serious account of a young man's confrontation with a hard adult world or a comic extravaganza. He may even attribute the novelist attitude to a superior western consciousness that finds the problems of a middle class Indian college teacher laughable and paltry.

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