

## Socio-Economic Problems in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's the Householder

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### Abstract

Ruth Praver Jhabvala was one of the most outstanding German-born-English novelists. She is essentially a European writer who had lived in India and artistically analysed Indian social life, culture and education. Ruth Praver Jhabvala holds a unique place among other English-speaking writers like Rudyard Kipling and E.M. Forster. Herself being a member of the civilized society, Jhabvala watches with keen eyes the different aspects of life around her and wants to know whether the people of the Indian society have the freedom to get education, choose a preferred profession, marry and beget children, think independently and express their thoughts in a suitable manner. Jhabvala deeply analyses the condition of Indian society and the problems faced by the individuals in it. Her fiction is confined largely to Delhi and almost entirely to middle class India.

**KEYWORDS:** Profession, Economy, Financial problem, Responsibility, Confidence

### Introduction:

The German-born English writer Ruth Praver Jhabvala's fourth novel *The Householder*, published in 1960, is a narrative of socio-economic problems in Indian society. She portrays the difficulties of a young married couple who settle in Delhi to start their new life. Jhabvala was born in Cologne, Germany, in a Jewish family. With Hitler's seizure of power, Jhabvala and her family left Germany for England in 1939. She became a British citizen in 1948. The following year, her father committed suicide after discovering that forty members of his family had died during the Holocaust. Jhabvala attended Hendon County School and then Queen Mary College, University of London, where she received an M.A. in English Literature in 1951. Jhabvala's Indian connection came from her marriage in 1951 to a Delhi-based architect, Cyrus S.H. Jhabvala. In 1975, she won the Booker prize for her novel *Heat and Dust* which was later adopted into a movie. That year, she moved to New York. Her early works in India dwell on the themes of romantic love and arranged marriages and are portraits of the social etiquette and post-colonial India's disputes.

*The Householder* is the story of Prem, a sensitive young Hindi teacher, who being confused by an early marriage, an early job and a strange city, pushes along his way to love and maturity. The theme of the novel is the financial problems of the young teacher.

Prem is a common character from Indian middle class. He suffers from insecurity and lack of self-confidence. Jhabvala points out that Prem is always worried about his failures. He feels that he is an awfully skimpy husband, teacher and adult. Prem is so

much mentally caught up of the problem with money that he is not able to involve himself fully in the teaching job and his dealings with the principal, his colleagues, his students and the people outside. He is intensely aware of his inferior position as a teacher and looks for a better a job. Prem searches some newspapers stored in the kitchen. Some papers are missing and some have already been torn for lighting the fire. But even in those in which he still finds the advertisements, there are no jobs for him. The jobs are only for engineers, draughtsmen and doctors. There is no advertisement for the Hindi Teacher, or even if they need they wanted him “to be a first-class M.A. with three years teaching experience, not a second-class B.A.”(10). Prem has had only four months teaching experience.

The tendency toward moralizing and philosophizing theidiosyncratic tradition of the Indian character is also seen in Prem’s life as a householder. Prem wants to call on the Seigals to press his need for lowering his rent and wishes to be treated ‘as another son’. Mr. Seigal pays compliments to Prem, and then assumes the role of an elderly adviser and guide.

In our ancient writings it is written,’ Prem continued, ‘that there are four stages to a man’s life. When he is young, he is a student, learning from his father and his teacher—’

‘Has the tea been brought?’ Mr. Seigal inquired of Romesh.

‘After that comes the life of the householder,’ Prem said, ‘In this stage a man must raise a family and see to their needs. . .’ He thought of Indu and the coming baby and felt instantly depressed. At this point he would like to have joined his hands in supplication and asked for a reduction in rent. But he felt shy, especially before Romesh whom he was to serve as a good example, so he continued: ‘The third stage is when a man retires from his duties as a householder and spends his time in contemplation.’(54)

But now the bearings have changed. Prem faces many problems as a teacher, as a husband, and as a father. Poverty and want are terrible things. This statement unlocks the heart of The Householder. Poverty is a visible feature of the socio-economic problems in a country.

Prem thinks of what the ancient writings say about the four stages of a man’s life. When he is young, he is a student, learning from his father and his teachers. After that comes the life of the householder. The third stage is when a man retires from his duties as a householder and spends his time in deep thoughts and planning. Prem skips the fourth stage, of which he is not sure.

The complications created by rising unemployment hide the impact of other types of economic changes upon the domestic life of an individual like Prem. The trouble of getting a good job is the instant problem of a common householder. In The Householder the novelist says that even if one were a B.A. or an M.A., it is not easy to get a job. The unemployed are condemned and called “a pack of idle loafers”(37).

The coffee house is the only centre for the jobless graduates to assemble and while away their time. There, they drink coffee, eat potato chips or nuts dipped in a lot of chutney, read and compose poetry, smoke their cigarettes and study the “Situations Vacant”. In The Householder, Jhabvala reflects on the critical situation of the youngsters and their complex life goals with their conflicts. Prem in The Householder is mentally caught up in a sense of failure. He is not able to catch up with his wife and the problems in a new phase of life such as facing his employer, the principal Mr.

Khanna, to ask for a raise in salary. When he approaches the principal at his residence he is puzzled and bewildered by the hostile attitude of the wife of his boss and returns home without uttering a word about his salary.

Prem is very close to Mr. Sohan Lal, Professor of Mathematics, with whom he exchanges his ideas, opinions, views and professional feelings. But Sohan Lal too has his own financial problems. Prem feels for him and wants to speak to Mr. Khanna for a raise in Sohan Lal's salary with the intention of giving an indirect hint for a raise in his own salary. He is worried because his wife Indu is pregnant. He feels that with a baby at home, the domestic expenses would go up. When he meets Mr Khanna, he opens the issue.

'It is very difficult for him to manage on his present salary, Prem said. 'How can he support so many people on Rs.175rupees a month?' He took another step forward and said in a voice passionate with conviction and pity, 'Poverty and want are terrible things'. In the Panchatantra, it is written, 'It is better to be dead than poor'.

Mr. Khanna said, 'It is an interesting thought.' (15)

It is shown in Prem's life that the position of householder forms a very important period in a man's life. His position is such that he cannot carry out his basic responsibilities to his wife, who is pregnant. Indu as a pregnant woman has an uncontrollable desire for sweetmeats. Prem cannot buy her even sweetmeats because he has no money left. As for his own need, on a hot summer day, when he has a great longing for a bottle of cold drink, he scolds himself for such a longing, for such an unbecoming desire. However, when he realizes his love for Indu at the moment of separation from her, he feels a sudden surge of emotion and buys a satin blouse piece as a gift. Prem's feelings troubled him much. He wants to do something which is not possible with too little wages. So he is not able to fully enjoy the sensuousness of love relationship with his sensuous wife.

Prem, who is the principal character in *The Householder*, finds himself in a strange position in the city. Deprived of all members of the family, Prem is 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. The problem of unemployment is a great challenge to India. Jhabvala explains its difficulties but suggests no remedial measures. Like an artist, she sees deeply and objectively what is going on in India and how the youth of the country remain unemployed.

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