

The Investigation of Domestic Life in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's
The Householder and Heat and Dust

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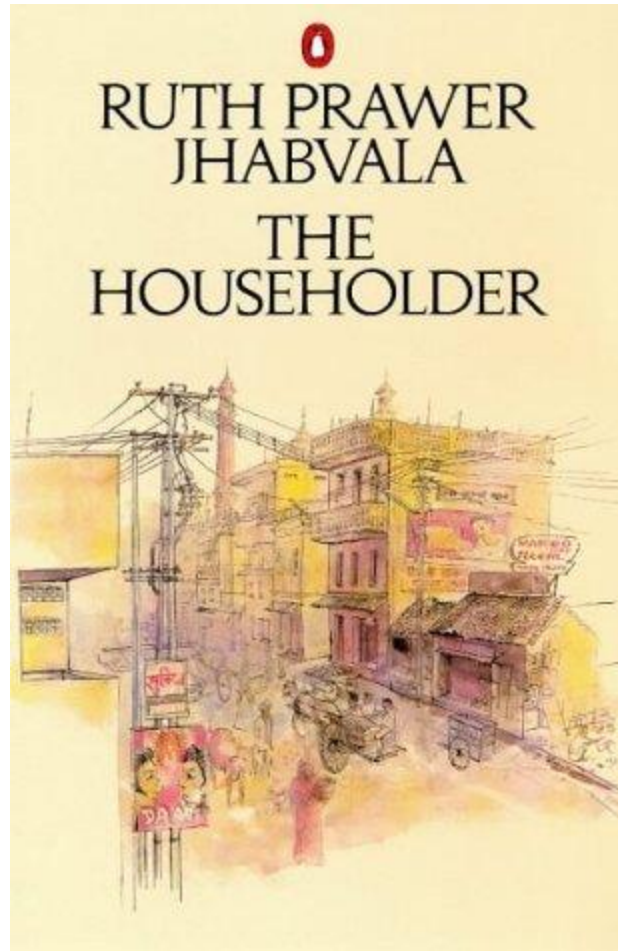
Ruth Praver Jhabvala

Ruth Praver Jhabvala is a world class fiction writer and storyteller of the present century. She has distinctive achievements as a literary artist. She was born on 7 May 1927 in Cologne in Germany of Polish-Jewish parents and escaped to England in 1939. Ruth Praver Jhabvala married a Parsi gentleman and in 1951 she came to India as a young and beautiful wife of Cyrus Jhabvala, a young Parsi architect. Ruth Praver Jhabvala is endowed with the gift of presenting minute details of social fabric and blessed with the power of keeping perception as such, her presentation of the phenomena of Indian life and her close observation of social realism is not only accurate and exact but also meaningful. She has a prying eye for the problems which are very common in the Indian society. Some of such problems are East- west encounter, Westernization, education, sex and marriage, exploitation and democracy.

Writing about India's Customs and Traditions

Jhabvala has been writing about India's customs and traditions, its caste system and backwardness, its hot and heavy climate, its dire system and backwardness, poverty and dirt and drudgery, its disease and illiteracy, its beggars and paupers, its sadhus and saints, and its child marriage system etc. She has also written a number of scripts for film and television, many with Merchant Ivory.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala has chosen the aspect of marriage without love and love without marriage in the contemporary Indian life as the subject matter of her novel. Jhabvala has recollected her sweet bitter experience during her stay in India and has reproduced them in her works. She has passed twenty four years of life in India and also established herself as a great personality of India in the field of fiction. Her marriage to Mr. Cyrus Jhabvala, an Indian architect is the result of her love-hate relationship with India.



On Marital Dissonance

Jhabvala dealt with the theme of marital dissonance in her novel *The Householder*. The difference in attitude between Prem and Indu, the hero and heroine of the novel, leads to their unhappy marital life but at the end they developed a sense of coexistence. In *The Householder* the protagonist, Prem, who was under the influence of traditional family structure, suffers a lot in his conjugal relationship; but later the sense of modernisation lifts his feelings of reciprocity for a better and happy life with total understanding and reconciliation.

In *The Householder* there is a link between the life of Prem, the householder and the ancient scriptural tradition. However, Jhabvala does not, rightly, play up the Hindu tradition. She concentrates on exploring the householder's economic, educational, familial and social predicaments in a middle class urban social setting in Delhi and creates in the process an excellent, entertaining social comedy. Prem always lives worried about marital dissonance and his mother compounds the problems between Prem and Indu.

Indu's absence makes Prem realize how much he values her presence. He cannot talk about how he feels about her and he makes gestures that signify his love. He buys for her a glittering and beautiful blouse – piece, and writes a letter where he expresses his passion for her:

Why did you go away from me? I long for you and sometimes I feel like crying with tears because you are not there. I think of you so often. The house is empty without you and my heart is empty...I want to stroke you and kiss you everywhere with my Mouth and then I want to be inside you. When I think of this I feel I shall die with longing so much for you. (TH 142)

Now Prem realizes that the reconciliation for a happy adjustment in married life is only through mutual affection. And he finds in such a relationship is not only affection but sympathy, care, love, and psychological security work together in the family and by sharing other's joys and sorrows.

Marital Dissonance – Various Stages and Reasons

The issue of marriage without love and love without marriage that Jhabvala has taken is one of the burning problems in modern India. Her theme is on a different plane in the sense that both the hero and the heroine are from the same culture, same religion, and same social and educational background. Still there is marital dissonance. The strong reason for the marital dissonance is emotional dissatisfaction. They are married but they do not have the emotional bonding between them. They are not made for each other. The women's happiness depends not just on providing everything in the terms of comforts, luxuries but there is something beyond materialistic comforts that she needs. This affection can be gained only with love but not with money or material comforts.

Mostly Ruth Praver Jhabvala's novels deal with the initial marital dissonance. This is a stage which needs proper adjustment though it is not always easy, as two grown up people, brought up in different circumstances and situations, come together and want to establish their identity. Each wants to dominate the other; unless there is a proper understanding, marital harmony cannot be achieved. The Protagonist in both the novels moves together obviously with a belief that marital life is nothing but a mutual adjustment.

Quest for Identity - Drama of Conflict and Resolution

The quest for identity emphasizes the importance of communal belonging, but rejects the view that one ought to belong to the community one was born to. It suggests that the quest for identity may lead individuals to follow many avenues: while some individuals might affirm their “inherent” affiliations and traditions, others may remain within their community of origin and strive to change its ways, or choose to leave their social group and opt for membership in a new one. This analysis suggests that choice, characteristic of the liberal conception of the person, and rootedness, characteristic of the communitarian conception of the person, play an important role in the formation of personal identity.

Jhabvala in her literary career presents a drama of conflict and resolution in terms of quest for identity. In the novel *Householder* Jhabvala deals with the dominant Hindu view of life. The Indian joint family is essentially patriarchal in character, which is kept 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 the family, the system enabled young men to marry and raise a family before attaining financial independence. In perpetuation of the male line being a primary goal of the joint family, early marriage and reproduction were encouraged. By 1960 the structure was crumbling and the pattern of Indian life was changing, but many of the tradition that it had built it up, among them the tradition of early marriage has remained.

In *The Householder*, Prem’s entire journey of attaining manhood can be seen as a process of replacing his mother by his wife as a subject of desire and finally, he learns to love his wife as a man. His troubles increase as he also finds it difficult to control his students. His inability to control his students, his feeling of homesickness and his expectation regarding how should Indu, treat him like the way his mother is used to treat her husband show that he is yet to grow as a man. In the novel *The Householder*, Jhabvala has given an insightful portrayal of Prem’s character, his psychological problems, the way he grapples with his psychological complexes, his difficulty in coming to terms with the outside how he and finally, attains manhood.

Poverty and Want

‘Poverty’ and ‘want’ seem to have haunted Mrs. Jhabvala’s own thoughts throughout her stay in India. She just could not reconcile with the enormous giant of poverty and here Prem appears to be a mouth piece of what Mrs. Jhabvala wanted to tell this world: and hence it is not only Prem’s problem, but of the entire lower middle class Indian society and particularly the youth. They

constantly struggle to conquer this enormous curse of want which mars their happiness. They know no pleasure in their lives; marriage, baby and the other responsibilities come to them as extra expenses. Prem is no exception. His basic problem is poverty and want and it is this curse which makes him a coward and which makes him an all-around failure as husband, teacher and father.

In the end when Prem's friend Raj comes with his family to have dinner at Prem's house on his invitation and comments, "it seems your wife is a very good cook" (TH 168), both Indu and Prem feels a sense of achievement. The fate of a true seeker is fraught with alienation. As Ruth Praver Jhabvala's literary career advances, this conviction crystallises. Her narrative tone also changes and becomes darker and darker with each successive novel.



Heat and Dust

Jhabvala's novel *Heat and Dust* won the famous Booker prize in 1975. She has taken the marital discontentment issue as one of the burning problems of India. The novel *Heat and Dust* is on a different plane in the sense that both the hero, and the heroine, Douglas and Olivia, are from the same culture, same religion, same social and educational background; in spite of these facts, there is

a lack of love between the wife and the husband. The strong reason for Olivia's emotional dissatisfaction is that they are married but they do not share emotional bond between them. So they feel that they are not made for each other. A woman's happiness does not depend upon getting everything in terms of comforts and luxuries. There is something beyond materialistic needs and that is psychological need for affection. Olivia lacks this affection from her husband, and so she is disappointed and that leads to their married life being loveless.

In *Heat and Dust*, Douglas is always busy with his official duties. He has little time to spare for his wife who is all the time waiting for him. His superiors applaud him for his sincerity and honesty that he handles the administration in the district effectively: "Douglas worked like a Trojan and never ceased to be calm and controlled, so that he was very much esteemed both by his colleagues and by the Indian. He was upright and just" (HD 18).

Douglas loves his wife Olivia and tries to provide her all sorts of comforts but never feel that his company is necessary for her. She always hopes and waits but fails to get his company and love. She wants her husband's love instead of his material richness. She gets irritated whenever she feels that her husband has neglected her. The fortitude with which an English man bears the heat while on duty in the plains is related to the strength, and uprightness of this character. This, in fact is one aspect of the general image of an Anglo-Indian. Douglas is a prime example of such an image in the novel. He loves his wife very much. After that Douglas respects her feeling and he is very much worried about Olivia as most of the Anglo-Indian women become often irritable and quarrelsome due to the effect of heat and dust.

Jhabvala very carefully observes the behaviour of the Anglo-Indians and says the effect of heat and dust on them is such that they often become irritable and quarrelsome. The escape for them is to go to some hill station like Shimla.

Douglas decides to send his wife to Shimla with other European ladies but Olivia refuses to go to Shimla and says, "You don't for one moment think that I would go without you" (HD 41). This conversation between Olivia and Douglas makes it clear that marital dissonance in them is at its peak. Douglas plans something for Olivia but she has different ideas. He wants to provide a comfortable journey for Shimla but she is not ready and reacts in a negative way. This lack of mutual understanding and settlement strikes a chord of dissonance between them.

Douglas does everything for Olivia he is so busy and he does not have the time to talk to his wife leisurely and pleasantly. He does the work mechanically. He does not take care of her psychological views for making life more life pleasant, more enjoyable by going for outings, picnics and pastime activities. Thus Douglas absence of feelings towards the emotional feelings of Olivia creates a gulf between wife and husband. Laurie Sucher, a prominent critic on the works of Jhabvala, opines that this “Novel is rich in nature imaginary. It contrasts the heat and dust of the plains which signify at once an obsessive sexuality and the absence of feeling with the life giving moisture on the Himalayas” (99).

Olivia’s tragedy is due to her marriage with Douglas without love and her love with the Nawab of Khatm without marriage. Olivia’s delusion of dissatisfaction and emotional behaviour lead her towards destructive sexual passion for which she is responsible. Her obsession with the romantic eastern view makes her a tragic victim.

The dissonance may be owing to the characters to different attitudes towards life. Douglas has a practical bend of mind, whereas Olivia is the creature of emotions. It is the crucial period where adjustment is needed in life. However, due to the lack of mutual understanding and settlement, a chord of dissonance prevails. When everything becomes public, she straight away goes to the palace of Nawab who in turn provides her accommodation at the Himalayas. She breathes her last there only.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala’s novel *Heat and Dust* focuses on the quest for identity of the narrator-protagonist, who is also the grand-daughter of Olivia by her husband’s second wife Tessie. Her quest for identity is examined from the perspective of psychology, with special reference to Jungian analytical psychology. It happens many a time that the quest for identity begins with curiosity regarding another person from whom one is seeking answers. In the novel *Heat and Dust* the narrator-protagonist is trying to find out the life history of her grandmother, Olivia. Olivia came to India with her husband Douglas, and at the later stage in her life, she developed extra-marital relationship with an Indian prince Nawab. Since Olivia has caught between two cultures, her own British culture and the Nawab’s Muslim culture. Olivia decided to leave Douglas and ran away with the Nawab. Olivia found that life is totally different with the Nawab.

In the beginning of the novel *Heat and Dust*, the narrator-protagonist says: “India always changes people and I have been no exception” (HD 2). The person from whom one is seeking answer, about one is curious could be a guru, a teacher, or even someone from within one’s own family, someone who represents ego ideals. Usually such a relationship begins from the unconscious side. This unconscious relationship in the novel *Heat and Dust* comes from the fact that narrator-protagonist and Olivia have a granddaughter and grandmother relationship. It is the only reason that the narrator-protagonist sees the letter written by Olivia to her sister. This letter kindles her interest in the past life of Olivia. So she decides to visit India and to reconstruct the past life of her grandmother.

Art of Ruth Praver Jhabvala

Ruth Praver Jhabvala has achieved an international reputation as an Indian English novelist. Her eight novels which appeared in quick succession, deal with the theme such as love and marriage in the bourgeois society, East–West encounter, pseudo-modernism in Indian society, the post-independence Indian ethos, affectation and hypocrisy in the Indian middle class society. She handles her themes with dazzling assurance and presents penetrating and compassionate picture of human relationship ironically and realistically. Though Ruth Jhabvala has made a significant contribution to the Indian English fiction, she has not received proper attention from the critics of literature. Jhabvala’s works abound with female characters who, on being displaced, struggle to survive in the unfamiliar surroundings they are entangled in. Her works dealt with the common motif of exclusion, loneliness and the search for an identity and fulfilment.

Jhabvala project herself and her personality through her writings. The subjects she chooses, the characters she invents and her own attitude towards them are conditioned by what she has herself known and felt. Her portrait of India is redeemed with intermittent touches of sympathy, but is devoid of empathy.

While summing up the course of argument, the entire thought is recapitulated to analyse the investigation of domestic life in Ruth Praver Jhabvala’s fiction. Jhabvala has presented India in different shades and her own response towards India and Indians has changed with the passage of time.

To Conclude

Jhabvala is pre-eminently a novelist of domestic life. Jhabvala uses the novels *The Householder* and *Heat and Dust*, to explore its joys and sorrows, its harmony and friction, its fulfilment and frustration.

Mostly her novels deal with the initial experiences of married life. This is a stage which needs proper adjustment though it is not always easy, as two grown-up people, brought up in different circumstances and situations, come together and want to establish their identity. Each wants to dominate. Unless there is proper understanding, marital harmony cannot be achieved. All her novels create a macro world, a world fully familiar to many Indians. The world has been recreated and represented through the medium of the absurd and the humorous. Jhabvala's novels have always dealt with disillusionment and compromise or acceptance of the truth. Hence there is a massive scope for further research in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's novels.

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