

Portrayal of India in Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's Heat and Dust.

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[https://doi.org/ 10.61410/had.v21i1.272](https://doi.org/10.61410/had.v21i1.272)

Abstract:

R.P. Jhabvala tried to provide a representative picture of the country through her novel Heat and Dust. With her keen insight she had portrayed two different points of time, one of colonial India and the other of after Independence. She described Indian society and culture with her poverty, superstitions, illiteracy, dirt and squalor, food habits, customs like sati, the condition of widows and the role of females in the family. She had also highlighted the problem of fake spiritualism in the country. She tried to highlight how freedom from foreign rule could not bring the desired changes in the realities of the country. She also talked about the traditional taboos of Indian society. Each and every aspect of reality is caught quite convincingly by the author. This paper is an attempt to discuss the portrayal of India by R.P. Jhabvala in her Booker Prize winning novel Heat and Dust. The research being qualitative in nature, the researcher has used descriptive, analytical and interpretive methods in his research.

Key Words: Colonial, culture, poverty, superstitions, sati, widows, traditional taboos, spiritualism.

Introduction-

R.P. Jhabvala is a well-known name in Indo-English fiction. She has a deep interest in the dynamics between western and Indian society. She has a vast experience of three cultures because of her birth in Germany, marriage to an Indian where she lived for 24 years before her final settlement in the United States. Because of her varied experiences she had unusual access to social, cultural and religious dimensions of different cultures. She wrote 12 novels, eight short story collections and 23 screenplays in her life. Jhabvala earned international fame for her novel Heat and Dust which was published in 1975. She got the Booker Prize for this novel.

She is a writer of post-colonial India having a close acquaintance with the life of East and West. In her novel Heat and Dust there is a clash of orthodox traditional Indian society and modern and materialistic western society. In the novel two narratives, one of 1923 and the other of 1970's are intertwined beautifully. This novel

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offers an image of India and the inter-cultural relations between the English people and Indian people both during the period of British Raj in India and India after independence. The influence of the cinematic writings of Jhabvala can be noticed in *Heat and Dust*. The description of India in two time frames running parallel to each other and sometimes merging into each other makes the novel unique in itself.

H.M. Williams says, “Its symbolism, the complexity of double narrative, the theme of destructive sexual passion, the stress on human self-delusive tragedy makes it a novel of different kind”(22)

The novel gives insight into the psychology of the expatriate as both the women Olivia as well as the Narrator are dislocated from their native land and have their romantic encounters in India, a foreign land. In *Heat and Dust* India is presented as a paradise on earth as well as a place full of poverty, corruption, scorching heat and dust. The physical and topographical conditions of India affect the nerve of British officials and their wives. Olivia suffers due to the heat and feels irritated with the climatic condition of Satipur. The author describes India in the following words:

“Dust storms have started blowing all day, all night. Hot winds whistle columns of dust out of the desert into the town, the air is choked with dust and so are all one’s senses. Leaves that were once green are now ashen and they toss around as in a dervish dance. Everyone is restless, irritable, on the edge of something. It is impossible to sit, stand, lie, every position is uncomfortable, and one’s mind is in turmoil”. HD 80-81

The novel covers the life of two women from different generations. Both of them came to India under the spell of this country that it has on many westerners. The first narrative of this profound novel is about Olivia Rivers. She is the wife of Douglas, the sub collector of Satipur, an English ICS officer. Olivia, a beautiful and spirited young woman finds it difficult to adjust in her life as her husband remains busy in his official duties and does not give time to her. Though Olivia loves her husband but feels suffocated by the constraints of her position and needs a baby in her life. Douglas is not able to impregnate her. When she meets the Nawab of Khatm in a dinner party organised at the palace of Nawab in which Douglas was invited with her, she feels that she has ‘at last reached to the right place in India’. After some more visits to the palace she is drawn to the spell of Nawab who has an extremely attractive personality. Being an aesthetic woman Olivia feels highly obsessed with the

stereotypical image of princely India. The handsome, charismatic Nawab intrigues her and in one of her visits to Baba Firdaus's Shrine they have indulged in sexual relationship. Olivia becomes pregnant due to her illicit relationship with the Nawab. Douglas divorces her when he comes to know about the truth. After that he remarries and goes back to his country but Olivia has to remain in India for the rest of her life as the mistress of the Nawab in the Himalayas.

In the first narrative of the novel, Jhabvala describes India before independence. The sadistic violence of princely India is portrayed beautifully by the author through the horrifying tale told by the Nawab to Olivia about his ancestor Amanulla Khan in which he killed a Marwar prince. The corruption and crime of princely India is described through the life of the Nawab of Khatm, who is a bankrupt ruler of a state and is deeply involved in criminal activities to support his lavish style of living. The author also describes the system of sati in India in the first narrative. Douglas and other English people strongly condemn the savage system of sati in India but Olivia defends it saying,

“It is part of their religion, is not it? I thought one was not supposed to meddle with that. Now she looked down in her Windsor soup and not at all at Douglas ; but she went on stubbornly: and quite apart from religion , it is their culture and who are we to interfere with anyone's culture, especially an ancient one like theirs.” HD 60

The narrator of this novel is the granddaughter of Douglas and Jessie, She came to India to learn about Olivia, the first wife of her grandfather Douglas .In the words of Yasmine Gooneratne,

“The Narrator belongs to a new generation of liberal- minded educated travellers from the west who consciously strive to communicate with India.”(Gooneratne, 22)

On her arrival in India, the narrator stayed in a women's hostel in Bombay where she had the first experience of unhygienic conditions and stark poverty on Indian streets. She comes across another European lady, who has been living in India for the last three decades. She advises the narrator to be very careful of the Indian food. The narrator started living in a small rented room of Inder Lal, a government official who acts as her guide to the places around Satipur. Here she meets Chid who has taken the Indian name Chidananda. Chid comes to India in search of spiritual experiences under the influence of Hindu scriptures. He has to face many hardships

during his stay in India in his search of spiritual sublimity. The narrator allows him to stay in her room. Later from a Hindu ascetic once again he became a Christian.

Inder Lal belongs to the lower middle class and in his role he represents India after the independence. He stands in contrast to the Nawab of British India. He considers himself poor before the narrator and has many grudges and dissatisfactions in his life. He is not happy with his job and most of the time is busy in telling his endless woes to the narrator. The condition of Indian offices is presented by Inder Lal where people are busy in corruption and a sincere man cannot do his duties sincerely tell about the condition of office-workers in India. Inder Lal says,

“There is a lot of intrigue and jealousy ... all he asks is to be allowed to do his duties but this is impossible, people will not let him alone, one is forced to take sides...fellow officers would do anything...to pull him down.”HD14 The living conditions of Inder Lal are representative of the living conditions of the middle class in India.

The narrator describes the over-crowded buses with the hot wind coming with sand and dust when she goes to the Nawab's palace with Inder Lal. The passengers were stuffed in the the bus like animals. Jhabvala presents the negative and horrible experiences of the Europeans who come to India for spiritual awakening when she tells about the Swamis of India. They are liars and dishonest. She tells how these Europeans are robbed, cheated and sometimes even molested. They had to suffer from jaundice, dysentery and ringworm due to the unhygienic food and contaminated water.

Jhabvala has a vast experience of life and condition of cities in India. She talks of slum -like cities of India in many of her novels and short stories. The Narrator in Heat and Dust describes Satipur and Khatm in this way:

“Satipur also had its slummy lanes, but Khatm had nothing else. The town huddled in the shadow of the Palace walls in a tight knot of dirty alleys with ramshackle houses leaning over them. There were open gutters flowing through the streets. They often overflowed, especially during the rains, and probably the cause, or one of them, of frequent epidemics that broke out in Khatm. If it rained rather more heavily, some of the older houses would collapse and bury the people inside them. This happened regularly every year.”HD 166

Jhabvala also talks of the marriage system in India in her novel *Heat and Dust*. In the male dominated society of India, marriage is a compromise, not a union of a male and a female. The marriage of Inder Lal and Ritu represents the Indian marriages where parents decide and settle the whole matter and no consent was taken from the bride. Ritu was uneducated but according to the mother of Inder Lal she was beautiful and therefore a perfect match for him. After the marriage she has to spend her whole life inside the house as Inder Lal never takes her out with him. Ritu has to suffer a lot due to the ignorance from her husband.

Jhabvala describes the belief of Indians in ghosts through an incident in the novel in which Inder Lal hears a groaning sound when he passes a graveyard. He thinks it might be a ghost and asks the Narrator to be careful but the narrator easily identifies that it is of Chid or Chidananda whom she knew very well.

The condition of the widows in the country has also been handled by Jhabvala in this novel. The beggar woman's life is clear evidence of the pathetic and remorseful condition of the widows in Indian society. She was driven out of her house by the in-laws and had no choice but to be in the streets. The Narrator describes the hospitals in India which have no facilities for the patients. These Govt. hospitals are extremely dirty and the staff is very careless. The quality of food served to the patients is of very poor quality. The Medical Superintendent of the hospital tells the narrator that the beggar woman dying without getting the treatment is quite common and a normal incident and it is not an emergency case in this country and hence there is no need to arrange an ambulance for her.

Jhabvala condemns the people's belief in supernatural things when she describes the treatment of Ritu to cure her of her epilepsy. Her mother in law holds her fast and treats her in a most unusual way. The method was absolutely primitive as there was no involvement of a doctor in the treatment. For her problem she needed psychiatric treatment but red and hot iron was applied to various parts of her body to take away the evil spirit.

The method of aborting a child in both the narratives of the novel gives clear indications of the unscientific ways existing in the pre-independent as well as the post independent Indian society. The author's description of Olivia's abortion in the first narrative is painful. This practice can cause the death of many pregnant women. The

same kind of treatment was given to the narrator in the second narrative after 50 years when a lot of medical advancement was made.

The prejudices of the narrator against India are clear when she says about her impressions of India. She describes India as corrupting and disfiguring land when she says that the longer she stays in India, the more her face would be drenched.

Though *Heat and Dust* was acclaimed as a great literary achievement of the writer in the West, in India it provoked negative response. In an article entitled, "Cross Cultural Encounter in Literature" Nissim Ezekiel says, "I found *Heat and Dust* worthless as literature, contrived in its narrative structure, obtrusive in its authorial point of view, weak in style stereotyped in its characters and viciously prejudiced in its version of Indian scene."

Heat and Dust provides a comprehensive study of Indian society first of pre-independence India and the second of post-independence phase of India. In the novel, India is portrayed through the descriptions of heaps of rubbish, dry and parched land, mud houses, beggars lying by the side of the streets and the government hospitals which were overcrowded and had less amenities. According to Pankaj Bhan, "While *Heat and Dust* marks the pinnacle of Ruth Jhabvala's literary achievement, it also registers an apotheosis in terms of her negative vision of India"(216)

Conclusion-

In *Heat and Dust* the author presents a complex image of India of the colonial period of 1920s and the post-colonial period of 1970s. The novel gives the repetition of experiences of Olivia and the Narrator with a gap of fifty years which suggest that while the nation has changed politically yet it retains a persistent cultural enigma. Olivia crosses the cultural ethos and boundaries in her affair with the Nawab. The narrator's journey in postcolonial India with her relations to Inder Lal is a parallel to her grandmother's association with the Nawab in the colonial period. The novel gives a dual picture of the country, one of fascination and the other of repulsion. This may be due to Jhabvala's ambivalent relationship with India in which she has shown her love for the nation in her early years and exasperation in the later years of her stay in the country. For the author the country is not merely a geographical land but a psychological and cultural landscape. Jhabvala's outsider detachment can be noticed clearly in her portrayal of India in this novel. Jayanti Bailur says, "She differs from contemporary Indian writers, in doing so because as a westerner she is able to view

India objectively.”(85)The juxtaposition of two time periods in the novel suggest that while political situations are changed in India, the deeper patterns of perception often persist.

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