

Reflections On Cross – Culturalism: An Analysis Of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's *Heat And Dust*

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ABSTRACT

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala in all her novels brings a sharp, incisive, ironic perspective to bear in treatment of the inter-cultural and the inter-racial encounters. She highlights the incongruous blending of the modes of life of the English and the Indians and it is based on her intimate understanding of the ideas, ideals and various life styles of the Indians. As all of Jhabvala's works came out after independence and the gruelling circumstances of partition, there is keen consciousness and candid expression of the fast changing milieu.

The locale of her writing as has been seen is Delhi and neighbouring areas which have been a meeting place of people and their cultures from all parts of the country and abroad. The result was the emergence of cross-cultural tension and many cultural hybrids. This offered a great scope for ironical dissection of morals, manners and attitudes of people for a novelist who was endowed with a keen power of observation and awareness of the subtle nuances of the new aspect of the social and cultural life of Delhi. The fast changing milieu is always in conflict with the old traditional set of social and moral values. Sometimes the old ways of living and social mores are flung to the four winds in the fond hope of becoming modern and sometimes old and traditional ways reassert themselves with greater vehemence.

The present study entitled "Reflections on Cross – Culturalism: An Analysis of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust*" is based on the thematic concerns of the novel and portrays an alien's prejudiced view of Indian sensibility. It also analyses the themes of expatriates in India and the mixed

marriage of Indian and European. The novel presents the conflict between East and West in a much wider sense.

The interaction between two cultures, European and Indian, is Ruth Praver Jhabvala's forte. It forms the substances and also shapes the process by which her personal experience in India is transformed into the art of fiction. In a revealing auto biographical essay 'Living in India', Jhabvala writes, "I have lived in India for most of my adult life. My husband is Indian and so are my children. I am not, and less so every year" (Agarwal 222).

The word "culture" is derived from the word "cultivate" which means to grow, to develop and to expand. Thus growth of life according to set traditions and values of the land is the culture of the country. It is the sum total of the way of living built up by a group or groups of human beings and transferred from one generation to another. According to Sorokin, "culture is the sum total of everything that is created, as modified through conscious or unconscious behaviour of two or more interacting individuals" (42). When two human beings with diverse ethnic backdrop of heredity, conventions and a way of life, come into contact with each other they are bound to act and react with each other which can be defined as cross culture conflicts. The conflict can operate at social as well as personal level. In fact the "clash of cultures" has been quite a pronounced theme of the Indian English novels.

Heat and Dust, winner of the Booker Prize in 1975, presents the conflict of cultures at political and racial level with emphasis on the difference between past and present. The central characters are two ladies, each very English in her own time, each allowing her India to captivate her. The dilemma of these two is her own and in an Interview she admits, "I don't know India". The leading problem for her "is to show how a European adapts to India"(95). It

is possible not by conquering but by getting conquered. That is why Olivia and the narrator stay back in India.

Jhabvala employs the fictional flashbacks between 1923 and 1970 to bring out the cultural clash. The 1923 chunk of the novel seems to be superficially moving around a racio-political conflict where Douglas, Crawfords, Saunders and Major Minnies make one group; Nawab and his retinue the other; Harry and Olivia remain at hinges as both orientals and occidentals. She feels that the British way of life in India is restrictive, both of Europeans in their contact with Indians and their experience of India and of Indians such as the Nawab , inheritor of a noble and warlike tradition. The Nawab must now confine himself to orderly paths clipped for him by the British out of the scrub.

The first part of the novel shows the clash of personalities who belong to the two races and had a different cultural heritage. The Nawab has a dominating personality. None can resist him and his commands. Harry's impression of the Nawab mesmerises Olivia and when he informs her that the Nawab most particularly wants her to come. Olivia's mind is psychologically conditioned. And when she visits the Nawab's house for the first time she feels that she had, at last come to the right place. It becomes apparent that Olivia liked India and its people, the restrictive influence of the British Raj notwithstanding. She aspired to present a symbol of cultural unification and never subscribed to the opinion of other Europeans who say that they have come to India to find peace but all they find here is dysentery.

The main action of Ruth Jhabvala's novel *Heat and Dust* is situated in pre-independence British India of 1923. The social predicament of both, the British colonizers

with their neat and clean bungalows and the native Indians with their dirty houses, is constituted by the irreconcilable contradictions inherent in the political situation. There are many other things which attract and disturb Europeans about India. They feel intrigued over Indian's response to magical incantations, superstitions, sati system and sturdy-looking sadhus. The narrator is surprised to see people's habit of sleeping outside and the town seems to her a communal dormitory. In a symbolic gesture of merging with the spirit of the city, the narrator drags her bed outside in the open space.

The inability of the Europeans to create lasting ties with the Indians and vice versa, their distrust of each others' intentions, their misreading of each others' motives, their predilection with their notions of ethnic superiority and above all their different cultural modes and perceptions. All these factors inhibit a meaningful dialogue between them and the proverbial gulf between the East and the West yawns at them, inspite of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's stature as “outsider-insider”.

The impacts of Western education, science and technology, mores and modes of living have created ferment in the tradition-bound and superstition-ridden Indian society. Jhabvala seeks to project the process of this cultural and socio-economic amalgam through her novels. India, despite its poverty, its dirt and disease, its squalor and backwardness, its heat and dust and other horrifying living conditions, has a peculiar appeal for westerners. The westerners fed up with their materialistic pursuit of affluence, come here to seek peace of mind and spiritual solace in order to give meaning to their empty lives. Such efforts, however, most often end in frustration and disappointment, and as such the image of the country seem to be disintegrating.

The theme of past history has been re-evoked in terms of present happening in *Heat and Dust*. The past, thus brought close to the present, offers an inbuilt contrast between European women's response to the "heat and dust" of India and makes a significant comment on the outward heat that repels and the inward warmth that attracts. The tone of the novelist has become alternately sour and puzzled, angry and nostalgic. The life she depicts in her novels is not so much that of the Indians as of the foreigners in an alien country whose experiences are not only distasteful in some respects, but, in many others, constantly charming and fascinating.

Jhabvala's forte is the delineation of the interaction between two cultures. It is in this field that her personal experience of living in India has been transformed into the art of fiction. She is mainly concerned with the problem of alienation from and integration into a foreign society. Both Dr. Saunders and Major Minnies stress this weak spot. Dr Saunders calls this weakness rottenness. He had always known that there was something rotten about Olivia, something weak and rotten which of course the Nawab (rotten himself) had found out and used to his advantage. While the Major is less culpable in his view, the weak spot is to be found in the most sensitive, often the finest people, and more over in their finest feelings. It is here that India seeks them out and pulls them over, to which Europeans are not used. By such an immersion the European is not only debilitated, but also destroyed.

Sex and pregnancy seem to be the recurrent patterns. The past narrates how Olivia and her husband have come to India, how she succumbed to the amorous attraction of the Nawab and became pregnant. After an abortion, Olivia has to run away from the hospital, to the Nawab's palace. She is later provided a cottage in the hills and has to be satisfied with the status of a mistress of the Nawab. The present on the other hand, records the narrator's liaison

with Chid, an English man turned Hindu, who has had his brief gruelling honeymoon with Hinduism but is now demented.

In order to highlight the differences between the two protagonists, representing two generations, the writer uses the device of parallelism. The setting is strikingly the same and so are the situations. Both the pairs, Olivia and the Nawab and Inder Lal and the narrator, go to the shrine of Baba Firdaus, which is worshipped by Hindus and Muslims alike, for it is supposed to have miraculous power.

Sex provides a flimsy meeting ground of two cultures; it creates a temporal and temporary relation. Olivia seeks merge into India through sex but remains to suffer. She does not return to England but stays in a house upon hills where she hoped to find resolution of the conflict of two cultures. But the same is not true of the young narrator, though it is not the intention of the author to suggest resolution through passion. The young narrator imbibes the spirit of the land, identifies herself with India and is determined to have her baby, unlike Olivia who consents to abort the child in her.

Jhabvala, with particular understanding and insight, has portrayed different categories of Europeans who come with different purposes to India. First there are those who come with a missionary zeal and have definite plans. The only difference between this category and the other is that they are not thrown in the midst of common people, like the civil servants of the British Raj who survive happily as they stand aloof from Indian life. Second, there are those who are employed in India and live with their families, like Douglas, the Minnies and the Crawfords. Their vulnerability to Indian culture seems to be in proportion to their rootlessness and idleness. Third, there are those who come to India as they are fed up with

the materialism of the west and want to find peace, like the young girl of *Heat and Dust*. The fourth category is of those who, like Harry, live on the wealth of other people, and fifth, there are people, like the narrator, who come to India out of curiosity of the past.

Thus there are only two categories of Europeans coming to India — those who come to India for a short, limited period and those who come to stay either for a longer period or for good. For the Europeans of the first category, there is no problem as they are in India for a specific period, whereas those of the second category adapt different methods for survival: either they maintain a distance as the Saunders, Crawford and Minnies do, or they assimilate themselves as the narrator of Olivia does, or they return home as Chid and Harry do.

India, changing yet changeless, is in the real sense the true subject of both the stories: Olivia's as well as the narrator's. It is not a mere setting; it is much more than that. It gives the social and moral perspective to the two tales. Olivia feels bored and bewildered, as she is very different from the other English wives who know their roles and have no desire to step out of them. Olivia is frank and open, often taking the risk of being on the unpopular side. For instance, she takes part in the discussion on 'suttee' and says: "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" (135). Like Olivia, the narrator is also interested in their social reality of India. Her reaction to this reality is, however, different from Olivia's. She accepts it and feels a part of it.

The novel ends away from the heat and dust, in the Himalayas where the narrator keeps looking up all the time, but everything remains hidden. The image of India and its people which Jhabvala has portrayed in her novel is extremely disturbing. India is again

depicted as a backward place inhabited by poor, sensual and imbecile people. Its stronger climate is oppressive and it devours Europeans who are sensitive to it.

The story moves on two planes of the past and the present with diary and journal used as narrative techniques, adding an extra dimension of time to her fiction by going back to the past for confirmation of a pattern that she has traced so far only in terms of contemporary India. The two streams of the story are juxtaposed as if in an editing room of a film studio where the available material is cut, trimmed and shuffled to make a contrastive pattern. In *Heat and Dust*, the two blocks of time are represented by letters and journal entries. The letters were written in the heyday of the British Raj by the wife of District Magistrate, and the journal by a modern British traveller in India. The two heroines are deliberately created as total contrasts.

Thus, the novel describes the spiritual journey of a European individual, a young woman who strives to realise her being by exploring relationship with India. And, the form of the novel is aptly suited for this purpose: a novel written in the form of a spiritual journal, describing the process of change and transformation of an individual consciousness as it confronts Indian reality. *Heat and Dust* is a skillfully manipulated picture of princely India silhouetted against and equally deftly drawn picture of modern India in which both the protagonists are destroyed by their non-conformity to the codes of society.

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