



A BRIEF STUDY ABOUT THE CULTURAL CONFLICTS IN THE WRITINGS OF RUTH PRAWER JHABVALA'S , " HEAT & DUST"

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ABSTRACT

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. "Culture is the sum total of everything that is created, as modified through conscious or unconscious behaviour of two or more interacting individuals." 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 Indo-English novel. Mulk Raj Anand's fiction has been shaped by what he himself refers to as double burden on my shoulders, the Alps of the European tradition and the Himalayas of Indian past. Raja Rao in The Serpent and the Rope contrasts oriental and occidental world views in respect of basic issues such as sex, marriage, society, religion etc. a theme of East-West encounter while in Nayantara Sahgal's, A Time to be Happy Meenakshi Mukherjee sees the conflict between the East and the West very obviously spelled out. Kamala Markandaya's fiction probes the conflict between two modes of life, the Western and the Oriental. The paper showers light on the themes of cultural conflicts in the major works of Ruth Praver Jhabvala's , "Heat & Dust", where , Olivia's cultural encounters in India .

INTRODUCTION

Jhabvala in the introduction to *An Experience of India* records three types of reactions of the Europeans to Indian setup. The first stage is tremendous enthusiasm about India and

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everything Indian, the second stage that everything Indian is not so marvelous and the third stage that everything Indian is abominable.

“Heat & Dust” presents the conflict of cultures at political and racial level with emphasis on the difference between past and present. The 1923 chunk of the novel seems to be superficially moving around a racio-politic conflict where Douglas, Crawfords, Saunders and Major Minnie’s make one group; Nawab and his retinue the other, Harry and Olivia remain at hinges as orientals and occidentals both. On this part of the story, set in India of British Raj, Yasmine Gooneratne comments upon the destructive effects of the imposition of one culture upon the other. 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 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 mesmerizes Olivia and when he informs her that the Nawab ⁴“most particularly wants you to come/⁷ Olivia's mind is psychologically conditioned. And when she visits the Nawab's house for the first time she feels that⁴⁴she had, at last come to the right place.” (19) 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.

Olivia is invited again and again to Chat, a car is sent by the Nawab to fetch her. Douglas, her husband, is ignorant about her visits to the palace, though her love, affection and regard for him are intact, in spite of her attraction to the Nawab. Her dislike of Anglo-Indian official stereotypes is apparent. She does not go to Simla along with Mrs. Crawford and Mrs. Minnies to escape the heat and dust of the unbearable Indian summers because she wants to be with her husband and also to attend the Nawab's parties. After a picnic at the shrine of Baba Firdaus she finds herself irresistibly attached to the young Nawab, thereafter she is ever eager to go to the palace. One day Harry arrived with the car sent for Olivia. He deliberately delays her but Olivia ⁴“was impatient to be off.” (132-33) The dilatory tactics on Harry's part to hold her proved irritating to Olivia, she was agitated, and something disturbed her. She was seized by an irrepressible passion for the Nawab. It brings them together; it is the common ground for the interaction of the two cultures. In spite of her admiration for Douglas for his English solidness and strength, his manliness, she wonders ⁴“he can't even get me pregnant.. .. No English woman is meant to stand it.” (121) It is the inborn maternal instinct that drives her to the arms of the Nawab.



The Nawab's attraction to Olivia is based on his passion and his revengeful attitude towards British officialdom. It seems on different occasions that he made Olivia a tool in his hands and seduced her. He felt delighted with her pregnancy and often stroked her slender hips, her small flat unmarked abdomen and wondered if she would do that for him. But there was hardly any doubt in his mind that the child was not his. His distrust of the English is complete and irrevocable. He strongly feels that they are very cunning and conspirators. On the other hand everybody in the European camp forms the opinion that the Nawab had used Olivia as a means of revenge. Even the most liberal and sympathetic Anglo-Indian, as Major Minnies, was convinced of it.

The narrator, an English woman in her twenties, who has come to India in the hope of finding out more about life led in India by her grandfather's wife, is at stage one. She accepts the sick and deformed citizens of Satipur as part of the landscape. Olivia who is at stage one accepts drumming and chanting as a part of Indian life whereas Harry begins to see like brain fever and feels he cannot stand it another day. Mrs. Saunders is clearly at stage three. She nourishes sexual fantasies about her Indian servants and cultivates an abnormal fear of Indian sexuality.

There are many other things which attract and disturb Europeans about India. They feel intrigued over Indian's response to magical incantations, superstitions, Suttee system and sturdy-looking sadhus. The narrator is surprised to see people's habit of sleeping outside, 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. As her intimacy with Inder Lai grows, the Cupid strikes, they tie strings, the narrator gets pregnant like Olivia. Unlike Olivia, the young narrator is determined to have her baby after which she hopes to go upto the mountains and join an Ashram provides a flimsy meeting ground of two cultures, it creates a temporal and temporary relation. Olivia seeks merger 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 the resolution of 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. One learns that Chid wants to go back, Harry returns to England.

The inability of the Europeans to create lasting ties with the Indians and vice versa, their distrust of each other's intentions, their misreading of each other's motives, their predilection with their notions of ethnic superiority and above all their differing 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, in spite of Ruth Praver Jhabvala's stature as "outsider-insider."

'Heat' and 'Dust' seem to have become Ruth Praver Jhabvala's major obsession, also the source and substance of her creative imagination. The India of her fictional cosmos seems to be almost an objective correlative of her aesthetic emotions, the central concern of her creative imagination.

In this context Jhabvala's knowledge and awareness of the Indian character, the Indian family, the Indian society and the Indian sensibility assume great significance.

She is in a way unique and the advantages as well as disadvantages of her literary situation are particular to her. The advantage lies in her special position of being a European living in India; the disadvantage, too, lies in her not being a genuine, grass rooted Indian.

This confessional mood paves the way for outlining the process of her creativity and the way it transforms life into art. Jhabvala echoes the sentiments of Virginia Woolf in relation to 'a room' of one's own:

So I am back again alone in my room with the blinds drawn and the air conditioner on. Sometimes, when I think of my life, it seems to have contracted to this one point and to be concentrated in this one room, and it is always a very hot, very long afternoon when the air conditioner has failed. I cannot describe the oppression of such afternoons. It is a physical oppression—heat pressing down on me and pressing in the walls and the ceiling and congealing together with time which has stood still and will never move again. And it is not only those two—heat and time—that are laying their weight on me but behind them, or held within them, there is something more which I can only describe as the whole of India.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala does not refer only to orthodoxy in religion but superstitions and other customs also. With the advent of science and technology, the views of people have changed but orthodox ideas still command credibility from the Indians and the Westerners. In fact, most of the Indo-English novelists have dealt with the theme of orthodoxy in the Indian as well as the western society But Jhabvala in Heat and Dust gives the darker side of the Indian society, thus ignoring the brighter side. She has treated the theme in her own way and is vehemently critical of orthodox ideas.

Neither heat nor dust could keep Douglas away from duty but it is said after returning home even he likes to be just with Olivia "leaving outside all the heat and problems he had to contend with the whole day long." (85) Chid is absolutely unaffected by the weather as long



as he has a purpose to stay on. But with the disillusionment setting in, heat and dust become nauseating aspects for him.

The narrator comes to India to remove the dust that has settled on the memory of Olivia. Unlike the heavily curtained Olivia, she prefers not to have a curtain between herself and her Indian experience. She sees how people become restless and irritable in summer. Though she wishes she could be in the hills when she experiences the dust storm, she begins to find the positive side of the cast—the mangoes are sweeter, jasmine pungent. Like a native she wants it to be as hot as possible so that there will be good monsoon. But once she is on the ascending journey it is said she never looks down/" Does she ascend to have a better understanding of India? Life in the hills, the ashram sheltering sincere seekers, etc., is so vague. Despite her claim to be changed, it is hard to associate change with her decision to stay on": I myself am no longer the same. India always changes people, and I have been no exception." . The narrator wonders if Olivia's decision to stay on is due to the inescapable metamorphosis she undergoes and she tests the proposition. Staying on need not necessarily guarantee change. Like Major Minnies who stays on, she loves and admires India intellectually with a virile, measured, *European* feeling. She could never be dragged over to "the other dimension" in a trance as in the case of Olivia. She crosses over with her eyes wide open and mind fully alert. Neither heat nor dust could keep Douglas away from duty but it is said after returning home even he likes to be just with Olivia leaving outside all the heat and problems he had to contend with the whole day long." Chid is absolutely unaffected by the weather as long as he has a purpose to stay on. But with the disillusionment setting in, heat and dust become nauseating aspects for him.

This anxiety that lurks behind seems to undermine the fictional pattern. Though the pattern of the alternation of letters and journal entries is conducive to the introduction of authorial comments, the novel often The narrator comes to India to remove the dust that has settled on the memory of Olivia. Unlike the heavily curtained Olivia, she prefers not to have a curtain between herself and her Indian experience. She sees how people become restless and irritable in summer. The whole novel has an artificial premise and the carefully worked out parallelism gives it a labored and contrived effect .

Jhabvala has not missed the heat of the sun and the heat of the human blood and has raised dust about them. But if India means nothing else or nothing more for her, the fault is not that of the country. The biographical details about Jhabvala may be an extra-literary consideration but still that alone can explain the ambiguity in the novel. *Heat and Dust* is Jhabvala's genuine attempt to clarify her own responses to India. It is a valuable document for the insights it provides into the novelist's troubled psyche, if not for her own insights into the essential Indian experience.



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