

## Indianness in R. P. Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust*

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### Abstract

Ruth Praver Jhabvala has acquired a prominent place among the Indian novelists writing in English. She has earned a rare grasp of the Indian situation by virtue of the special status of her marriage to an Indian and her stay in India. Her deep interest in representing the life around distinguishes her from those of the westerners who wrote about India. Wholly familiar with life and decency of her adopted country, Ruth Praver Jhabvala has been at the same time, influential with the western sensibility which prospers her with an incomparable sense into the peculiar qualities of Indians. She presents Indian tradition, values, culture, living pattern and systems with extreme care and sympathy. Ruth Praver Jhabvala won Booker Prize for her novel *Heat and Dust* in 1975. The theme of *Heat and Dust* is different in which the hero and the heroine are from the same culture, social and educational background still there is marital dissonance. The reason for this is heroine's emotional dissatisfaction. They do not have psychological love between them. Ruth Praver Jhabvala especially presents the European individual women suffering from the agony of a tragic fascination with India that transforms every being and everything. It is a double-layered novel portraying the fortunes of two English women with a gap of fifty years in imperial and independent India. The present Article focuses centrally at how Indianness prevails the whole of the novel '*Heat and Dust*'.

**Key Words:** Indianness, tradition, marital dissonance, obsession, living pattern.

*Heat and Dust* is a novel about India and of two women, Olivia, the heroine and the narrator. The story of the novel is about the life of these two women in India 25 years before and after independence. Lionel Trilling says that "the novel is a perpetual quest for reality, the field of its research being always manners as the Indication of the direction of man's soul."<sup>1</sup> It tells the story of a European couple in India. Mr. Douglas Rivers is a Barrister but works as Assistant collector at Satipur. Olivia his wife is a beautiful, pleasure-seeking woman. She

comes to India in 1923 with her husband Douglas whom she loves. In London Olivia had loved herself as a very introspective person but in India she suffers from alienation. She gets bored in her large house when Douglas goes out in the morning on duty and comes late at night too tired to sit for long. In order to spend her time, Olivia reads books and plays the piano but she feels that the days are long. Douglas is extremely busy with his office work and files. He is a man with a practical bend of mind. He does everything for Olivia as work mechanically

but spares not a time to talk with her pleasantly. He has little time for his wife who is all the time waiting for him. Olivia is often obsessed with the idea that Douglas has time for others and not for her. She feels that she is not an object but a human being with her own psychological and emotional desires. Douglas thinks that the closed bungalow without heat and dust, the servants to carry out orders of his wife, food to eat, books to read and piano to play is enough to stay at home and live happily. But Olivia thinks that a woman's happiness depends not just on providing everything in terms of luxuries but there is something beyond materialistic comforts that she needs. This affection can get only with love that Olivia lacks. Actually they require mutual understanding and settlement. It is obviously absent and "this dissonance may be owing to different attitudes towards life."<sup>2</sup> Douglas is worried very much about Olivia as he finds her bored. "Douglas for instance, blames the Indian heat and dust for increasing tension building up between Olivia and himself."<sup>3</sup> Douglas and Olivia are eager to have children but Olivia does not conceive. During this period Nawab of Khatm, a state few miles away from Satipur invites all the Anglo-Indian officials along with their wives for a dinner party. Olivia and Douglas also attend the dinner party. Olivia is impressed very much by the western way of life of the charming Nawab. At the first sight, the Nawab rests his eyes on her and she reacts positively. After the day of party Olivia's behaviour changes significantly. She feels better about being alone in the house all day. She develops a sense of hope that the Nawab will call on

her as she experiences friendly behaviour of him in the dinner party. Now she starts dressing in a different way and waits for the Nawab. With a rare critical probe Lourie Sucher brings out purpose of Ruth Praver Jhabvala. To quote her words:

The Nawab's creator herself is characteristically ambivalent towards him. He is one of a long line of charismatic, seductive men in her fiction who, while they cannot be trusted, represent vitality, intelligence and a certain very welcome force of opposition to the hypocritical and suffocating dullness of the world in which female protagonist finds herself.<sup>4</sup>

After four days of dinner party the Nawab visits Olivia's place and she meets the Nawab. Their meeting turns into close relationship. She likes the Nawab Sahib very much and feels that there is life in the temperament of the Nawab. She feels attracted towards him and has an affair with him. Douglas decides to send his wife to Shimla with the other European ladies for curing her loneliness but Olivia refuse to go there. Olivia makes it clear that marital dissonance in them is at peak level. Douglas plans something for Olivia but she has different ideas. She does not like to go of her growing interest in the Nawab. This attraction towards the Nawab leads her away from her family. K.P.K. Menon rightly remarks: "The attraction is mutual and culminates in her elopement with him."<sup>5</sup> Though Olivia succeeds in keeping away the heat and dust of India shutting all the doors and windows, She voices her dissatisfaction with Douglas who could not make her pregnant. She is eager to get pregnant. She surrenders to the heat of

passion in herself and becomes pregnant. But she realizes her guilt. So, hides the secret from her husband and gets her pregnancy aborted for fear that the child would be easily identified as an Indian and that might prove her disloyalty. There was no alternative option left to her but to decide to go with the Nawab. It seems Olivia has undergone the complete process of metamorphosis that India causes to its foreign visitors. Despite her intelligence and awareness of Indian cultural matters, she remains emotional towards Nawab and his crude culture. Like others of Ruth Praver Jhabvala's bored and lovely women Olivia also risked her all for love and like them also ran off with her demon-lover, who is obsessively exciting and dangerous. The Nawab is a man who appears the promising oasis for Olivia to come out of motionless boredom in British upper classes. Ronald Shepherd states: "Olivia's urges seem nothing less than her desire to be dominated by a strong man who possesses all the strength, authority and control lacking in her own life."<sup>6</sup>Therefore, she leaves her husband and becomes the mistress of the Nawab. Olivia is well received by the Nawab who buys a house for her in the Himalayan Mountains where after six years she passes away. Douglas is shocked by Olivia's this step and finally gets divorce to her. He marries Tessie.

The whole story is narrated in 1973 by the narrator, granddaughter of Douglas. She is the daughter of his son who was born by Tessie. The sensibilities and fortunes of two expatriate women are contrasted when a young happy-like girl of 1973, embracing both India and Indian lover, immerses

herself in the journal kept by her grandfather's unfaithful wife in India of 1923. It is the effect of the Indian environment on the Europeans' particularly on those of women "India always changes people and I have been no exception"<sup>7</sup> with these emphatic words the narrator of Ruth Praver Jhabvala's most celebrated novel initiates the moving study of the theme which has been at the heart of all these novels of Indo-European phase. The novelist has presented the transformation of the romantic heroine Olivia, a native and innocent victim; as the modern narrator creates her; we come to accept her as a blessed foremother. The narrator comes to India with a bunch of Olivia's letters to solve the mystery of Olivia's disgrace. She wants to know about Olivia, her way of life, her friends and finally culminate in her elopement with the young Muslim Nawab. Unlike Olivia, the narrator comes to India to seek a simpler and more natural way of life but like Olivia she also develops an affair with an Indian, Inder Lal in whose house she is a co-tenant and becomes pregnant. She decides to have the child by an Indian father and settle in India. Despite the fact that Olivia's emotional predicament with the Nawab was a result of her conjugal conflict, the narrator's decision to live in India is a matter of choice. Ruth Praver Jhabvala seems to hint at this strengthening and progressive change in the sensibilities of European women after a gap of half a century in context. David Rubin's words are worth quoting:

Olivia aborted her half-Indian baby but remains faithful to his Indian father, whereas the narrator in a more enlightened age, or

perhaps merely one more decades, though she discards her Indian lover after unsuccessfully trying to abort her child, finds rapture in the idea of having it.<sup>8</sup>

The young narrator drowns herself in this pit of self-delusion in India. Olivia's socio-psychic behaviour with the delusion of the Whiteman's righteous governance and the delusion of the romantic Eastern view of life create the spousal discord and her obsession makes her a tragic victim at the Himalayas there she breathes her last. Women characters in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's fiction represented according to the environments and human beings react to different circumstances in different ways: "a person's behaviour depends not only on the situation

in which he finds himself, but also upon the way in which he views himself and what self attitude he has."<sup>9</sup>The two plots echo and overlap each other, which enable us to see Olivia in the girl and second the narrator. Nirmal Mukherjee said, "The most serious drawback of *Heat and Dust* seems to me to be the author's inability to explore the inner life of her protagonists. We cannot identify ourselves with them; nor do we feel emotionally involved in their predicaments and conflicts."<sup>10</sup>In short *Heat and Dust* views India through the lives of two English women. Ruth Praver Jhabvala shows us both pre and post-independent India, exposing the similarities and differences of India's impact on each of these women.

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