

## **CROSS- CULTURAL ENCOUNTER: MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVES IN JHABVALA'S *HEAT AND DUST***

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### **Abstract**

The British rule has been an important interlude in the long history of India. It influenced the institutions, practices and approaches to many facets of Indian way of life. It gives a glimpse of a fascinating social setting and the ferment therein. Above all, the Raj literature has always held a fascination for the writers and it evokes the smell and sounds of a bygone era. Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust*, a déjà vu inducing novel which won the prestigious Booker Prize in 1975, presents the wider circles of humanity in pre as well as post-independence India. This research article explores the cross- cultural relationship or interaction and sheds light on the encounter between the Orient and the Occident .It traces out the multicultural perspectives and tries to maintain a compromise between the East and the West.

**Keywords:** Cultural, Multiculturalism, Occident, Orient, Raj.

## Introduction

The last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a creative surge in Indian writing in English in general and women's writing in particular. After the writings of the triumvirate comprising Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand, the second generation that contributed to the works of their preceding counterparts includes some eminent women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy and Suguna Iyer.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, a Polish Jew refugee, brought up in Germany, educated in England and married to an Indian reveals a strange love-hate relationship with India in her fictive role as an outsider- insider. She deals with the social and economic problems of the society and writes about the social segment of urban India that she knows well. Jhabvala's novels fall into two distinct and evenly matched groups- viz. comedies of urban middle class Indian life, especially in undivided Hindu families and ironic studies of the East - West encounter. The first group comprises novels like *To Whom She Will* (1955), *The Nature of Passion* (1956), *The Householder* (1960) etc. To the second group belong other novels like *A Backward Place* (1965), *A New Dominion* (1973), and *Heat and Dust* (1975). Her first novel *To Whom She Will* focuses on corruption in Indian public life. *The Nature of Passion* narrates the story of an Englishman stranded in India. Her novel *Get Ready for Battle* condemns dishonesty, hypocrisy and exploitation of the poor. *A Dominion* satirizes the chauvinism of independent India and her Booker prize winning novel *Heat and Dust* contrasts East - West relationships. Jhabvala uses fiction as a powerful tool for presenting the problems of the Indian society and suggesting ways and means to solve these problems.

The West has produced a substantial amount of materials on and about India. The attitude to bring everything western under scrutiny has been known as post colonialism. Post colonialism is a broad umbrella term which deals with the colonial connection or power relation between the ruler and the ruled. Post-colonial literature can be clearly distinguished from colonial literature. Colonial writings are the kind of writings, produced by authors who belonged to the colonizing power, say, white writings about India during the British Raj. For example, the Anglo- Indian writings of the Raj era are colonial writings or white writings. Colonial writings act as backdrops highlighting the particular concerns of the postcolonial authors.

Multiculturalism is derived from the word 'culture'. It is a dynamic process in which the interacting communities undergo an identity modification or refashioning. Multiculturalism became an official and de jure policy aimed at recognizing, celebrating and maintaining the different cultures or cultural identities within a society. Due to the impact of globalization, mass scale immigration, increase in diasporic population, increased incidences of racial violence and religious animosities, multiculturalism becomes a way of life whereby one can acknowledge differences and peacefully co-exist. It focuses on a society which provides equitable status to distinct cultural and religious groups with no one predominating. As a philosophy, it began as a part of the pragmatist movement at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe and in the United States and later took the shape of political and cultural pluralism at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was primarily in response to the massive immigration to the United States. Historians and sociologists like Charles Sanders Pierce, William James, George Santayana, Horace Kallen, John Dewey, W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke developed concepts of cultural pluralism. It has been celebrated in the West as a gateway to liberal epoch, a permissive modal vehicle ideal for not only the sustenance but also for the encouragement of social heterogeneity. It becomes the current ideology to freely express one's culture and core values while honouring the others.

Many post-independence novelists endeavour to explore the theme of encounter between the East and the West. The theme has been explored in Kamala Markandaya's *Possession* (1963), Balchandra Rajan's *The Dark Dances* (1959), Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Esmond in India* (1958), and *Heat and Dust* (1975), Santa Rama Rao's *Remember the House* (1956), Nayantara Sahgal's *Bye Bye Blackbird* (1978). Growing cultural interaction between the East and the West and the consequently changing social ethos has given an added impetus to the writing of novels on the theme of East –West confrontation.

The East- West encounter in its divergence is the essence of Ruth Praver Jhabvala's writing. Living in her adopted country with her innate beliefs, she realizes the difficulties and impossibilities of a complete absorption. Her experience of living in India has exposed her to the Indian community and the expatriates living in India. It has brought her into contact with people of another culture. It is the interaction between the two cultures that she transforms into art. The result of this experience is evident in her works and this provides her with the raw material for all her fictional works. In an autobiographical essay published in *The London* magazine, she writes: "I have lived in India for most of my adult life. My husband is Indian. I am not and less so every

year...However, I must admit that I am no longer interested in India. What I am interested in now is myself in India” (41).

### **Multicultural Perspectives in *Heat and Dust***

In *Heat and Dust*, there are two time zones- the 1920s and the 1970s, both of which witness two cultures, the British and the Indian. *Heat and Dust* tells two parallel stories about two ladies in different time spans and their adventures in India. Olivia Rivers is a young lady from London who has accompanied her husband Douglas to British colonial India and the narrator is the other lady in the novel who knows Olivia as the first wife of her grandfather Douglas. She has come to India in order to find out more about Olivia. It is a touching portrayal of an interaction of two different people coming from different cultures, world views, civilizations, motives and power structures.

*Heat and Dust* bears semblance with the tradition of Raj novels which suggests the incompatibility and compatibility of two cultures i.e. English and Indian. It has two narrative levels-the intra diegetic level is situated in colonial India of 1923 while the extra diegetic level is situated in independent India. The intra diegetic level is about Olivia while the extra diegetic level is about the anonymous narrator. The narrator acts as the focalizing agent in both the levels. Jhabvala draws parallel between Olivia and the narrator as both are shown apparently sympathetic towards Indians.

Olivia proves herself capable of negotiating the alien world. She has not much ideological foundation to be different in her attitude to India. She strongly holds an antithetical perspective on India. No racial or political consideration overshadows her broad and optimistic views about human relationship. She says: “I don’t know India. It’s true I don’t, but what’s that got to do with it? People can still be friends, can’t they, even if it is India” (103). Olivia, to the surprise of Douglas and fellow diners naively defends *suttee*: “It’s part of their religion, isn’t? I thought one wasn’t supposed to meddle with that...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”(58). Olivia challenges the very foundation of the British policy on India and questions the authority of the British to anglicize the country. Major Minnies’ position is in between two extremes- between the Saunders’ and Olivia’s. He is candidly outspoken in his attitude to India. He believes: “There are many ways of loving India, many things to love her for-the scenery, the history, the poetry, the music and indeed the physical beauty of the men and women” (170). He says:

He who loved India so much, knew her so well, chose to spend the end of his days here! But she always remained for him an opponent, even sometimes an enemy, to be guarded and if necessary fought against from without and, especially, from within: from within one's own being. (171)

It is through the narrator that the second phase of the Indo- British encounter during the post-Independence era has been seen in *Heat and Dust*. She stays in the midst of the crowded lanes and bazars and has no objection to abide by Indian norms and customs. The cross-cultural theoretical discourses have observed that “people are active processors of information and do not simply surrender themselves to the situations they encounter. Rather they modify their behaviour to cope with the sorts of new problems they will inevitably encounter as part of their cross- cultural experience” (Brislin 15).

In due course of time, Inder Lal, the narrator's host and Maji, a spiritual woman become the narrator's friends. Despite rampant poverty, human suffering, human callousness, heat and dust, the narrator discovers the way people live together and safe guard themselves from loneliness and boredom. While sleeping on the roof top she discovers herself and India together:

I have never known such a sense of communion. Lying like this under the open sky there is a feeling of being immersed in space-though not in empty space, for there are all these people sleeping all around me, the whole town and I am part of it. How different from my often very lonely room in London with only my own walls to look at and my books to read. (52)

She offers an image of India which contrasts the fragmentation and alienation of the West. To her, India is a big country that accommodates many ideas and things which are incompatible in nature. “Town is used to accepting and merging all sorts of different elements-for instance, the grand old tombs of Mohammedan royalty on the one hand and the little grey suttee stones on the other. There are also the town's cripples, idiots and resident beggars” (78-79).

The Nawab's reaction to the British is not at all encouraging. Although perturbed by the presence of Major Minnies, the Nawab speaks of the British in general to Harry and Olivia.

How different from these terrible orientals. Olivia, do you also hate and despise orientals? Ofcourse you do. And you are right, I think. Because you are very stupid

people with feelings that we let others trample on and hurt to their hearts' content. English people are so lucky- they have no feelings at all..... He (Harry) has been with me so many years but what does he care for me?. (144-145)

He does not hold good opinion of the British. But he maintains a cordial relationship with Harry and Olivia. His attitude can be seen on two levels-political and personal. His political views do not affect his personal relationship with Harry and Olivia.

Chid's spiritual attraction towards the East in the novel has drawn him to India and has made him an Indian pilgrim with the Indian name Chidananda. He leaves India only to return as a metamorphosed Christian. The narrator has been portrayed as an alien in India but later she absorbs Olivia's state of mind. She imbues the spirit of India and is attracted by the impersonality, simplicity and spirituality of India. Like Jhabvala, Olivia too embarks on a journey towards India. Her passion for sexuality and spiritual challenge finds expression in her urge to understand the country.

### **Conclusion**

Jhabvala tactfully depicts the need for preserving the relic of the union of the East and the West. Heat and Dust explores the different facets of India. Self-sacrifice and renunciation from the outer ambience attracts the West and when taken to the depths India becomes a threat to the sanctity and chastity of the same. India attracts as well as poses signs of danger to those who are attracted to it. Jhabvala with her dual concern for India as an outsider and insider builds a curious notion of the West. She brings in two types of characters- the Easterners and the Westerners and her text allows neither gods nor devils. India is both the home and exile to the Westerners. The West loves India but their tradition and culture come on their way to accept India wholeheartedly. They try to defend themselves and make a compromise and the same compromise we perceive from the part of the East too. Though there are barriers, the East tries to cope and adjust themselves to the western society. Like Stanley Fish, Jhabvala appreciates strong rather than boutique multiculturalism. We have to accord a deep respect to all cultures at their core, respect the Other's identity and conceive the other as a self-enclosed authentic community. The novel is symbolic of the personal relationships that offer sanctuary to both the East and the West across the barriers of political and social prejudices. The multicultural aspects of the novel reiterate the fact that East is east and West is west but there is a place where East meets West.

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