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Cross -Cultural Tension in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's

Heat and Dust: A Reader's Response

Abstract

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, a Polish Jew born in Germany, has made her mark as an expatriate writer in the literary world. Her expatriate experiences span across England, India and the USA. And her Indian expatriate experience has contributed remarkably to her literary career and overwhelms almost all her creations. In *Heat and Dust*, Jhabvala has tried to look into the cross-cultural tension through two English women whose lives and experiences in India follow almost the same trajectory. Jhabvala's delineation of the cross-cultural theme in the novel has given rise to two groups of critics and reviewers who are diametrically opposite to one another in their perspectives of the novel. The group of critics and reviewers who is from the east – especially from India, finds Jhabvala's novel utterly flawed and condemns it for being biased against the Indian culture and its tradition, but the other group who belongs to the west, regards it as one of the artist's greatest literary creations. This paper attempts to analyse the responses to and reviews of the novel which are quite contrasting to each other with the help of reader response theory. Thus, a

reader response critique of the text becomes necessary to tackle the contentious issue related to Jhabvala's text generating two contrasting points of views from its readers. It further, aims to provide a meaningful insight to the problem.

Key words: expatriate, cross-cultural, conflict, varying evaluations, reader-response theory

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, an expatriate writer of Polish- Jewish origins with varied expatriate experiences grapples with the intercultural theme in her novel, *Heat and Dust* (1975). The novel explores the cross-cultural conflict through the experiences of two English women in India--Olivia Rivers and her step-granddaughter (who is also the narrator of Olivia's story) across a span of half a century. Structured in the two dimensions of time—one of British India and the other of Independent one, the flashback technique of the novelist allows the narrator to reconstruct Olivia's story in the novel.

In the novel, the narrator recaptures Mrs. Olivia Rivers' married life dull and lonely in Satipur during the British Raj of the twenties. This is so because Olivia's husband, a civil servant that would remain engrossed in his work, has no time for his wife who remains shut

to her own world in their house. Besides, the British couple has a restricted community life. Moreover, the qualities of Mr. Rivers that attracts his wife are responsible for repelling his wife from him. It is at time that the bored Olivia meets the Indian Nawab who seems to provide her some excitement to her life. Their illicit affair leads to the British woman's pregnancy. However, Olivia terminates her pregnancy for fear of discovered by her British community. She finally leaves her English folk to stay as the Nawab's mistress in the mountains when Dr. Saunders discovers her scandalous abortion.

On the other hand, the novel portrays the Indian Nawab as married but does not stay with

his spouse. He is a man with many problems and negative traits. The nawab's relation with Mrs. Rivers may be related to the British woman's kind and tolerant attitude towards other people including the Indian people.

The Indian nawab-Olivia relationship stands as one of the most disputed examples of the east-west encounter. The nature of such a complicated connection may be explained by the fact that both Indian man and his British lover live in a time of imperialism that breeds an air of ill-will, animosity and extreme strain between people of the ruler race (Olivia) and that of the ruled one(nawab). In such a environment, it will not possible to forge any fruitful relationships between the Indian man and his English lover along with their different cultural affiliations. In addition, they are also already married and their respective communities are no less than the other in terms of its inflexibility or stiffness regarding their members' observance of the societal codes of conduct.

The tragic fate of Mrs. Rivers as depicted in the concerned novel seems to indicate the challenges one has to confront in trying to forge connections with folks of a different cultural background. Moreover, the imperialistic backdrop of the novel complicates the relationship between the ruled and the rulers. In a way, the Indian experience of Mrs. Rivers may be defined by Major Minnies in his monograph that warns any English man and woman from establishing relationships with the Indians. As Ruth Praver Jhabvala states,

He said that one has to be very determined to withstand -- to stand up to India. And the most vulnerable, he said, are always those who love her best. There are many ways of loving India, many things to love her for -- the scenery, the history, the poetry, the music, men and women but all said the

Major, are dangerous for the European who allows himself to love too much (*Heat and Dust*, 170).

Therefore, the monograph of the British major explains the ultimate ruin of Mrs. Rivers as attributed to her unrestrained love of the Indian nation—'the land of the enemy.' Still, the limitation of this perspective cannot be overlooked as it requires a broader examination. In addition, the interracial connection between the nawab and his English lover seems to question the Indian tradition and culture of that time quite seriously. Jhabvala's depiction of the sexual escapades of the Indian man seems to be indicative of the decline of the Indian ruling class. Also, the Indian procedure used in Olivia's abortion may be considered as the rawest and most unpleasant manifestation of orientalism. *Heat and Dust* also takes up another case of the cross-cultural comradeship between the Indian nawab and Harry, a British. The relationship between the two men is shown to be short-lived; it even makes the English man an outcaste to his own people. Moreover, the Englishman seems to regret his relationship with the Indian after his return to England.

A significant dimension of the presentation of the cross-cultural theme in Jhabvala's novel can be examined from the unnamed narrator 's (of Mrs. Rivers' story) interaction with the other Indian characters such as Inder Lal, Maji, Dr. Gopal etc. The narrator's experience in India is almost similar to that of Olivia—she (narrator) too is involved in an illicit relationship with Inder Lal, who does not have a fruitful relationship with his spouse, and gets pregnant by her Indian lover. However, the India that the narrator experiences is different from Olivia's for it is the independent India of the seventies, which promotes intermingling of people belonging to different racial backgrounds. In the novel, the narrator is portrayed as a tough and modern woman who tries to adjust herself to the demands of the new land of India.

The British woman's decision to have her child in the mountains remains somewhat

elusive and debatable as it lacks validity pragmatically. Still, some critics try to seek some valid points in the decision when viewed philosophically. In this regard, critic notes that the narrator has landed to a higher plane of her life where she transcends all the secular concerns of human life (Gooneratne, 45). Moreover, the narrator's decision seems to offer some hope of connecting the cultural values of the east and the west. As the critic states,

. . . . the narrator not only experiences the flowering of an inter-racial relationship but initiates a spontaneous acceptance of its fruit, her child of a mixed race will not be abort surreptitiously as was Olivia's, for in the new India it is neither an instrument of revenge nor a symbol of shame. Olivia's brought her a life time of isolation. It was left to her spiritual descendant to experience the joy and fulfillment of a complete merger (Chakravarti 224).

Besides, narrator's interaction with the Englishman turned Hindu (Chid) has presented the ambiguity in Indian spiritualism. Jhabvala's text depicts Chid to be a devout Hindu, but he is too weak to become vulnerable to temptations such as stealing or sex. However, Chid is forced to come back to England totally disillusioned from his Indian experience.

A remarkable facet of the cross-cultural theme is seen in the narrator's encounter with an Indian doctor. In *Heat and Dust*, the Indian doctor is depicted to be a doctor who hardly takes care of his patients. He is even unable to help the narrator to get a place for the dying beggar woman, Leelavati in his hospital. On the basis of these experiences of the narrator, Jhabvala seems to uncover the distressful condition of the India, which is characterised by corruption, deception and sordidness among its people.

A close examination of the novel divulges that the east-west encounter is portrayed in terms of a binary model. Such a model seems to reveal an unbalanced relationship between two cultures in which one culture is likely to dominate and control the other. In such a situation, one culture may be labelled as 'inferior' and the other as 'superior.' *Heat and Dust*,

renders the Indian culture inferior with all its primitiveness, harsh weather and degeneracy through its people and their social background. The Indian-British dichotomy portrayed in the text, especially in the portrayal of characters is quite obvious. The novel draws a clear line of separation between two groups of characters--the Indian group as identified with the East and the British one with the West.

The examination also indicates Jhabvala's portrayal of the Indian characters as racially biased and amounts to racial stereotyping. It is observed in the character of the Indian nawab who is shown as the exotic male of the east, 'the other' of the Englishman. The Englishwoman is, however attracted to the Indian man. As a consequence, many Indian reviewers and critics who seem to be identified with 'the inferior culture' face difficulty in evaluating the text. While critics praise the novel as one of the world's greatest literary creations of an artist in the West, with the stamp of the Booker on it for its evaluation, *Heat and Dust* becomes seriously marred at the hands of Indian critics, who denounce it as being heavily prejudiced and biased against the Indian culture.

Therefore, in order to tackle this contentious issue related to the contradictory responses to Jhabvala's novel, a reader-response critique of the text becomes crucial in delving into the problem so as to come up with some meaningful insights.

Reader-response theory as employed by Judie Newman provides an interesting perspective for *Heat and Dust*. Newman argues,

In *Heat and Dust*, therefore, Jhabvala refuses to establish a hierarchy of discourses as between plot and subplot, frame and tale, which might definitely establish the truth of events. Rather than espousing a mimetic, representational aesthetic in which a narrator can be reliable or unreliable, *Heat and Dust* insists upon the reader as productive of textual meaning and therefore, simultaneously refuses to constitute itself as hegemonic (*The*

Ballistic Bard: Post Colonial Fictions 48).

This argument proves to be more valid as compared to others for it sidesteps all the other interpretations and foregrounds the role of a reader. It attempts to answer some of the problematic questions whether it is possible to have a universal judgment in interpreting a text or that a literary evaluation depends on cultural milieu. A critical examination of the reader- response theory becomes necessary to study the varying evaluations of *Heat and Dust*

In general, reader-response theory refers to the contemporary theory that privileges reader's responses to a literary text over the text itself (Baldick 184). A reader-response theory involves two key processes: 'reading' and 'interpretation.' These processes have to wrestle with the divergence of two points of views: a divergence which is connected to the dispute between "objectivism and subjectivism" where the first stance argues the existence of one absolute inherent meaning in a literary work and second tries to put forward the presence of infinite number of meanings of a literary work depending on the number of its readers (Maclean 122-123).

It is to be noted that the theory emerged as a revolution against the former belief which legitimises the author's sole claim to his or her creative work. The shift in focus from the author to either the text or other elements began with the rise of 'New Critics', whose school gained momentum in the subsequent years. According to these critics, the emphasis is given to the work's content, rather than in its writer's intent or its reader's response (Baldick 150).

The view is attacked by the reader-response critics with their reader-oriented charges. Reader response theorist emphasises how a text's meaning is crucially determined by its reader, that is, meaning comes into existence only in the act of reading. As pointed by the critic, a work of literature is "not an artifact but an experience" (Pathak 87). In this regard, the contribution of Stanley Fish to the reader-response criticism is worth-examining. Fish's

theory attempts to explain *Heat and Dust*'s generating two kinds of critics and reviewers who are diagrammatically opposite to one another.

Stanley Fish's theory argues against the New Critics' notion that the text locates its meaning in its inherent characteristics, rather in its writer's aim or its reader's response. His claim rests on the concept that the interpretive strategy of the reader gives rise to both the aim of the author as well as the inherent traits of a text and that they do not exist beyond the experience of reading ("Interpreting the Variorum"). He defends his stance in his *Is there a text in this class?* (1980), which discusses "the status of a text, the source of interpretive authority, the nature of meaning, the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, the limits of interpretation" (Maclean 140). This dimension tries to explain how the text is born out of the experience of the reader. However, it does not imply there is infinite number of interpretations depending on the readers.

Fish uses the term "interpretive community" to indicate a class of readers who adopt almost the same strategy in evaluating a literary text ("Interpreting the Variorum"). The members within this community tend to come to a similar conclusion in validating their interpretations. Therefore, the interpreter is affected by the norms, conventions and beliefs of his or her community.

What Stanley Fish propounds as a general theory would be very apt in tackling the readers of Jhabvala's novel, who fall into two types of interpretive communities—those of the east and of the west. As he states, "The assumption in each community will be that the other is not correctly perceiving the true text, but the truth will be that each perceives the text (texts) its interpretive strategies demand and call into being" ("Interpreting the Variorum" 328). The interpretation of one group of critics (especially from India) finds fault with *Heat and Dust* and becomes anti-Jhabvala. On the other hand, the other group (generally from the

west with a few exceptions) has a high estimate of the novel and becomes pro-Jhabvala. The difference between these two views may be due to the fact that they belong to different interpretive communities depending on their cultural affiliations.

The members of the pro-Jhabvala category (of reviewers) are of one interpretive community and therefore, share a similar opinion of the text. On the other hand, the members of the anti-Jhabvala group belong to another interpretive community; as a consequence, the general view of its members is different from that of the former. However, there are some critics who do not form a part of either of these two groups; they transcend a simplistic pro-Jhabvala or anti- Jhabvala stance. Even within this group, there is a variation in the views of the critics. For instance, although Nirmal Mukherji and Judie Newman belong to this group, the former maintains a balance between the positive and the negative aspects of the novel, and the latter approaches the novel from an entirely different perspective by focusing on the role of a reader (Mukherji 126; Newman 45).

Ellen Schaubert and Ellen Spolsky also adopt a similar approach in their study of responses to Ernest Hemingway's *For whom the Bell Tolls*. Unlike *Heat and Dust* which is specifically concerned with cross-cultural encounter, Hemingway's novel is considered to be a canonical text and is not concerned with the cross-cultural issue. But the two novels seem to deal with the same problem concerning the varying responses of their reviewers. This approach is linguistic as Schaubert and Spolsky have employed some of the linguistic terms to support their arguments.

For convenience, Schaubert and Spolsky make use of what is known as the "Preference model" which "accounts for the literary competence of an experienced reader as three separate systems: (1) linguistic competence (in the narrow sense), which is described by an autonomous linguistic system, (2) pragmatic competence, described by a variety of context-based subsystems and (3) literary competence, described as various subsystems of literary

conventions” (Schauber and Spolsky 17).

The model is tested through an analysis of a number of reviewers of Hemingway’s novel, who belong to a critical community, centred in New York City, consisting mainly of academics and journalists. The analysis yields a number of varying responses from the reviewers: while a group of critics praise the text for its coherent pattern, the other group does not do so.

The significance of this approach is that it reveals how communities are “fluid, easily changed by the addition, deletion, modification, and re-weighting of typicality conditions, so that within one broad community a number of sub communities are possible” (Schauber and Spolsky 159). It also attempts to explain how a reader may belong to “a selection of partly overlapping communities (e.g., Trilling, an anti-Soviet liberal and an academic; Bessie, a communist and a journalist)(Schauber and Spolsky 159). Thus, the model is crucial in ruling out any permanent groupings among the critics or readers of a literary text for “different critical problems produce different new groups” (Schauber and Spolsky 159).

In the same way, the reviewers of *Heat and Dust* belonging to different interpretive communities observe variations within each community--thus, leading to the formation of sub communities. For instance, the reviewers who are not hostile towards Jhabvala’s novel(Nissim Ezekiel, Eunice de Douza etc.) may be further subdivided into sub communities depending on the differences in their foci: both the critics, Yasmine Gooneratne and Laurie Sucher laud the technicality of the novel (Gooneratne 47; Sucher 98); but Sucher mainly focuses on the novel’s feminist aspects (Sucher 104). On the other hand, Gooneratne’s emphasis is on the novel’s ironic elements (“Irony in Ruth Praver Jhabvala’s *Heat and Dust*” 47). Besides, there are a number of cases where the novel’s technicality serves as the point of intersection among many reviewers (even those who belong to the opposite camp).

J.R. de J. Jackson introduces another model to further examine the varying evaluations

of *Heat and Dust*. Like the earlier model, it also rests on a linguistic base and begins with the notion that humans communicate by means of a “shared language” and “a shared environment” (Jackson 15). In fact, Jackson has used the term--‘language’ and ‘environment’ in a deeper sense. According to him, the meaning of language includes non- verbal cues along with speech and writing and the meaning of environment will incorporate the physical social as well as mental aspects of human existence (*Historical Criticism and Meaning of Texts* 15).

In this model, the meaning of an ordinary speech (linguistic utterance) is between the utterer (speaker) and the hearer through what is known as the “triangle of linguistic utterance” (in Jackson’s words). The triangle of linguistic utterance shows the juxtaposition of three elements-- utterance, language and situation (Jackson 16). Co-ordination among the three elements is brought about by the speaker of the utterance, the meaning of which is transmitted to the hearer. In the absence of any of these elements, communication cannot take place.

Jackson tries to compare an utterance with a literary text in order to apply his linguistic model. Despite its drawbacks, the analogy is significant in determining the literary work’s meaning as the manners in which we understand an utterance and text are similar (Jackson 23). According to Jackson, the triangle of linguistic utterance is replaced by the “triangle of literary interpretation”(in Jackson’s terms) where a number of factors complicates the meaning of the environment. As he states,

. . . the author takes for granted an environment that a putative reader may be expected to share. This environment in turn, is contributed to by two sources of experience, one social and one literary. The social environment includes potentially all the aspects of life that are shared by both readers and non-readers. The *literary environment* includes

potentially all the aspects of life that are experienced through reading
(*Historical Criticism and Meaning of Texts* 24).

Jackson develops the point further by applying his theory to a novel. A novel can be understood with reference to its environment “which is imagined” (*Historical Criticism and Meaning of Text* 25). Thus, a proper understanding of a literary work is determined by the reader’s acquaintance with the environment or the world presented in the work, otherwise the reader will be blocked from understanding it. Further, interpretation of a text depends on both the literary as well as the social aspects of the environment shared between the writer and the reader. The argument seems to throw some light on the controversy regarding the responses of *Heat and Dust*. It tries to explain why Indian critics and reviewers have faced serious problem in interpreting and ascribing meaning to Jhabvala’s text. These critics may have shared the literary environment but do not seem to share the social background with the author. Eventually, communication cannot take place adequately between the critics and the author.

On the other hand, the critics from the West do not experience much difficulty in evaluating Jhabvala’s novel. This may be due to the fact that the western critics can communicate with the author to perceive the text’s meaning as they belong to the same literary and social environment as the author. In this context, one should not obliterate the fact that the author has stayed in India for about twenty-four years. It is possible that Jhabvala must have grown accustomed to the social milieu of the country during those years. Therefore, one wonders whether or not the Indian readers and critics share the same social environment with Jhabvala. This raises an important question--‘To what extent has the author assimilated the social milieu of the adopted place?’

The resolution of the issue becomes quite difficult and takes the nature of an ongoing debate between two opposing points of view. The debate may be linked to the relationship

between a work of literature and cultural experience--which are complementary to one another. As the critic states,

The cultural setting of a literary work can be no more meaningfully separated from the work itself than form can be separated from content within a work of artCulture should not be seen merely as a setting or an aura surrounding the work, but as much of an integrated element as the thought, the characters, the action or the language (Amrithanayagam 11-12).

The problem with *Heat and Dust* begins only when it is analysed in term of its cultural setting. The setting which is mainly Indian, seems to represent the Indian culture through its people and their environment. When such a representation is shown to be inferior, the Indian critics and reviewers who are identified with the inferior culture tend to find fault with the novel. In this regard, a critic may have put forward his stance that a success/failure of a work of literature is dependent on the extent of its involvement with its cultural milieu (Amrithanayagam 12). Therefore, Jhabvala's novel does remain controversial because of its involvement with some of the problematic cultural elements.

Conclusion: There is always a difference between novelists/writers' expression of thought and readers' responses to their(novelists') ideas. In the present study, based on the analysis of Ruth Praver Jhabvala's novel and the readers' responses to her text, it is found that due to the differences in the cultural belongingness of the writer and the readers, there could be conflicts/tensions in the absolute literary meaning. In future, more studies are required for a systematic analysis of reader's responses to different novels written by authors with multiple cultural affiliations.

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