

Diaspora Consciousness in Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust*

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The word 'Diaspora' takes its origin from the movement of the Jews away from the Nazi-attacked provinces to various secure places around the world. Later the term has been widely used for any national group or individual spreading around the various parts of the world. The reasons for such migration especially in the 19th and 20th centuries vary. They may be education, employment, trade, marriage or any other political reason. Literature produced by such individuals is called 'Expatriate Literature' or 'Diaspora Literature'. Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* (1975) is a case in point.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala was born in Germany to a Polish-Jewish father and a German-Jewish mother in 1927. During the Nazi-Holocaust the family moved to England where Ruth was brought up. She married an Indian architect, Cyrus S.H. Jhabvala and lived in India for 24 years (1951-1975). After the divorce she moved to the U.S.A. Therefore, her whole life has become a kind of Diaspora-experience. It is interesting to observe what Jhabvala herself has to say:

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. ... However, I must admit that I am no longer interested in India What I am interested in now is myself in India –which sometimes in moment of despondency, I tend to think of as my survival in India. I had better say straightway that the reason I live in India is that my strongest human ties are here. If I hadn't married an Indian, I think I would ever have come here for I am not attracted- or used not to be attracted—to the things that usually bring people to India. I know I am the wrong type of person to love here. To stay and endure, one should have a mission and a cause, to be patient, cheerful, unselfish, strong. I am a central European with English education and deplorable tendency to constant self-analysis. I am irritable and have weak nerves....To live in India and be at peace, one must to a very considerable extent become Indian and adopt Indian attitudes, habit, beliefs, assume if possible and Indian personality. But how is this possible? And even if it were possible—without cheating oneself—would it be desirable? Should one try to become other than what one is? I don't always say no to this question. Sometimes it seems to me how pleasant it would be to say yes and give in and wear a sari and be meek and accepting and see God in cow. Other times it seems worthwhile to be defiant

and European and—all right, be crushed by one's environment, but all the same have made some attempt to remain standing. Of course, this can't go on indefinitely and in the end I'm bound to lose—if only at the point where my ashes are immersed in the Ganges to the accompaniment of Vedic hymns, and then who will say that I have not truly merged with India"¹

This sense of alienation and dislocation has a strong impact on her creative writing. "She consistently bases the conflicts that arise between Indians and Westerners in her novels upon the complexities of culture, history and psychology."²

Heat and Dust for which Jhabvala won The Booker Prize can be regarded a perfect piece of 'Diaspora Literature'. Tinniswood calls this "a superb book."³ It is set in a village named Satipur in India. The novel deals with two time-periods in India simultaneously- one with India under the British Raj (1920's) and the other with India in 1970's. The characters of Olivia, the narrator, Douglas, the Crawfords, the Saunders, Major Minnies and Harry-Hamilton Paul represent the European colonial value system where as the Nawab of Khatm, Inder Lal, Maji and others represent Indian cultural ethos.

Heat and Dust is a novel based on a family history. The source, it is believed, is a true incident. The novel is about two English women: Olivia Rivers and the narrator of the novel, who happens to be the step grand-daughter of Olivia. However there is a gap of fifty years between the lives of these two women. The first story is set in India during the British Raj around 1920. The narrator declares: "this is not my story, it is Olivia's (1)."⁴ Olivia comes to India to live with her husband Douglas Rivers an Assistant collector of Satipur, the capital of Princely state named 'Khatm'. He is sincere and dutiful in serving the British Empire's interests; a hard working ICS officer who worked "like a Trojan and... much esteemed both by his colleagues and the Indians"(1). He very skillfully uses his knowledge of Indian language, customs and traditions to underpin the colonial grip over the subjugated. The demanding situation under which he functions does not permit him to be a caring husband. Still there are instances when he inverts priorities. When Olivia gets disturbed after watching baby Saunders's grave he consoles, soothes and comforts her. He forgets his files that evening and devotes himself to his wife. To break the monotony and boredom he advises her to pay a visit to Shimla. Most often overwhelmed by the work-load, he

finds very little time to spare for Olivia. Therefore "She was lonely."(19) Her boredom was intensified due to her unfulfilled desire to conceive a child. She creates a comfortable space for herself in the company of the Nawab of Khatm.

The Nawab's palace has been the centre of action in the novel. Nawab's mother, the Begum is considered a very powerful person. The Nawab himself is in a tight corner – politically, economically and morally. His state is neither a tourist-spot nor is it a hunting-hub. Therefore, sources of revenue are very limited. The presence of colonial administration further shrink s his politico-economic liberties. He is faced with a kind of emotional and psychological bankruptcy. As Douglas symbolizes colonial temperament, Nawab stands for any other provincial ruler whose powers are stripped off. Some people believe that he is the ring-leader of underworld dons. However he maintains the aristocratic decorum in his place. It is this pomp and show that seduces Olivia. She finds a real man the Nawab. She flirts with the Nawab. She becomes a split self. She nurtures two loves in her. When Douglas leaves for the office, she "waved to him as long as she could... but she stayed looking out... not in the direction in which Douglas had left, but the other way; towards Khatm." (117). Olivia's association with the Nawab is a blot upon the moral code to which both the cultures subscribe especially it scandalizes the entire British Community. She becomes pregnant and not knowing whose child it is, she undergoes an abortion. She is abandoned by the English-clan. She deserts her husband and comes to live with the Nawab He settles her up a mountain where she lives in seclusion till the end of life. Her approach to India and her people is friendly. She admires India, the Nawab and even endorses the sati-system by saying that it is not wrong "to go with the person you care for the most in the world"(59). She is against interfering with any ancient culture or tradition.

The second story of *Heat and Dust* is set in post-independence period of India, around 1970. This time the narrator of the story is at the center of the action. She is an unnamed English woman. She comes to India to probe into the details of the scandalous story of her morally corrupt step-grandmother. She is real granddaughter of Mrs. Tessie Rivers, whom Douglas married after the departure of Olivia. The narrator gets some clues about Olivia through some letters she had written from

India to England addressing her cousin Mercia. The narrator also gather some pieces of information about Olivia from Harry Hamilton, a contemporary to Olivia in India, She arrives in Satipur, one-time capital of Nawab of Khatm where the Olivia episode took place fifty years ago. She visits and verifies the places where Olivia made her love adventures. During the course of her research she comes across an English gentleman named 'Child'. He comes to India to study Hindu religious practices. He cannot therefore returns to England. The narrator is tolerant, accommodative and pragmatic. She encounters Inder Lal, a middle class official, and his family. She becomes his tenant friend and mistress. She is seduced by Inder Lal and Olivia was by the Nawab. Therefore, Inder Lal and the narrator are modern counterparts to the Nawab and Olivia respectively. The narrator also becomes pregnant. Unlike Olivia, she has the courage to give birth to Inder's baby. She is hopeful that future will protect such a mixed-cultural-product. In her approach to the Indian atmosphere she is in perfect tune with sociological theories."⁵ She herself admits: "India always changes people, and I have been no exception" (2). She tries to learn Indian Languages, tries Indian food, wears Indian dress and practice Indian ways such as sleeping on the terrace "Lying ... under the open sky."(52)

This is an example of Indianization of a Western woman. Here it is important to notice that with the passage of time the attitudes of both the world undergo a sea-change. To Douglas, Indians were "a pack of rogues"(38) and "wretched inhabitants"(148). In Mrs. Saunder's opinion Indian Servants were "devils"(28). However, Major Minnies, who a Political Agent is appointed to advise the Nawab and some other Indian rulers around on matter of policy, holds a different view of India. He appears to be sympathetic to India. His responses to India are more aesthetic and intellectual than others. He loves Indian Art and Culture. After his retirement from Ooty he prefers to settle in India. The Nawab considers the British his enemies and opines that they were "very cunning"(135). But when we come to the Narrator's time she no longer holds the same views. She praises India by saying "I have never known such a sense of communion" (52). Unlike the Nawab, Inder Lal also, looks at the English with respect. However, Nissim Ezekiel feels that the understanding of Ms. Jhabvala pertaining to Indian character, her cultural ethos and mores is insufficient to make her writing authentic in the Indian

context. He belittles *Heat and Dust* by saying: “I found *Heat and Dust* worthless as literature, contrived in its narrative structure, obtrusive in its authorial point of view, weak in style, stereotyped in its characters, and viciously prejudiced in its vision of Indian scene.”⁶

References:

1. Ruth Praver Jhabvala, "Myself in India," qtd. I.H-Shihan, Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2006) p.137.
2. Yasmine Gooneratne, *The Fiction of Ruth Praver Jhabvala* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1983) p.4.
3. Peter Tinniswood, *The Times*, 6 Nov. 1975, p.10
4. Ruth Praver Jhabvala, *Heat and Dust*. 1975 London: John Murray Ltd, 1986. Here and henceforth figures in brackets refer to the page numbers of *Heat and Dust*.
5. I.H-Shihan, Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2006) p.51
6. Nissim Ezekiel, “Readers and their Texts” *Asian and Western Writers in Dialogue: New Cultural Identities*, ed. Guy Amirthanayagam (London:Macmillan Press 1982. p. 138.)