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Author/s: ARNAB CHATTERJEE

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Email: editor@modernresearch.in
mrsejournal@gmail.com

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On non-nationality, acculturation and the postcolonial situation in R.P. Jhavbala's *Heat and Dust*

ARNAB CHATTERJEE

Junior Research Fellow

Department of English and Culture Studies
University of Burdwan (Golapbag Academic Campus)

West Bengal, India

Email: arnabserampore2011@gmail.com

Abstract: Ruth Praver Jhavbala's [Man] Booker prize winning novel *Heat and Dust* (1975) is not only an account of a European in India after its independence, but in certain ways, is also the novelist's own story of coming to terms with the nation's social mores. The unnamed narrator of the novel has come to India trying to piece together from the letters of her step-grandmother Olivia what exactly was her tale of outraging society by eloping with the Nawab of Khatm in the tiny, suffocating town of Satipur fifty years ago. Olivia's step-granddaughter is thus on a mission to 'resurrect' Olivia's true tale, but her odyssey includes the difficult triad of cultural assimilation and its attendant alienation (hence incorporating elements of diaspora), the problem of nationality – she is essentially a European and yet she never returns (somewhat like the novelist herself who has lived successively in Germany, India, the U.K. and the U.S.A.), and that of the postcolonial situation that chronicles the tale of India from the perspective of the writer both 'writing back' and yet critical of the native impulses at work in the then milieu. This paper would thus concentrate on these aspects of the novel showing how issues of history get intersected by aspects of race and culture.

Keywords: Diaspora, acculturation, postcolonial, writing back, narrator.

Among the postcolonial writers who have in some ways registered their negative views about the Indian scenario post-independence, two names tend to shine out distinctly from the rest: Nirad C. Chaudhury and Ruth P. Jhavbala. The former often lashes out against the inherent backwardness of the Indian system after independence both as an insider/outsider and a scholar often taking controversial stands with respect to his own peculiar historiography. Even a writer like V.S. Naipaul in his *India* trilogy (1964-90) repeatedly brings home the inability of this subcontinent to fabricate any regenerative ideology of its own despite having a long history, but seems confident somehow about the capacity of this nation to 'renew' itself. This is described in the beginning of *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), wherein the killing of a pet crocodile within the precincts of a temple and the defilement of the same by British troops ultimately leads to its eventual regeneration later.

Jhavbala seems to voice the same attitude, being *made* to come to terms with the nation's socio-cultural set up and facing that peculiar predicament of both being an outsider and yet not so (Mhangore 1; Singh 102). Having married the renowned architect Cyrus Jhavbala, she came to India and lived successively in New Delhi, the UK and the USA. This aspect of having been *made* to come to terms with a nation with its variegated ways and social mores, she has recounted this fact time and again in her interviews and personal accounts. Much like the unnamed female narrator and Olivia herself in her *Heat and Dust* (1975), Jhavbala has herself remained within her posh New Delhi flat, trying to keep off the "heat" and "dust" as much as she could. Thus, in many ways, her observation is both tinged with the dispassionate observation of a sociologist and the Eurocentric bias of a Westerner in India trying to piece together the mechanics of cultural assimilation, expatriation, and the 'problem' of non-nationality. While most of her comments may seem naïve and facile, coming from the pen of a writer who has little idea of the agonizing history and the cultural metamorphosis of this subcontinent for the last five thousand years, in many ways, her fiction is also a scathing analysis of the post-independence Indian society that lies within an interminable gulf of a

new generation that is not yet fully born and the preceding not totally committed to limbo.

In novels like *A Backward Place* (1965) and *A New Dominion* (1972), we have the self-same denunciation of the Indian way of life and the novelist's scathing satire is directed towards the Swamis and their gullible European followers who take everything for granted. In the former novel, Judy an English girl marries a good-for-nothing Indian boy Bal who has splendid plans for everything but they do not come to fruition. Bal spends time in coffee-houses and meets successful actors while Judy is left to make both ends meet: it is she who struggles hard to keep the family going. In the end, she accepts her fate. Similarly, in *A New Dominion*, three European girls, Lee, Margaret and Evie come to India to have spiritual experiences but end up having a sexual affair with the Swami. Mrs. Charlotte comes as a missionary who clamours for educational reforms. In novels that deal with the new, emerging class of intelligentsia in New Delhi immediately after independence, Jhavbala is keen to point out new impulses at work that have created a new breed that believes in the enjoyment of life against the traditional point of view that will not accept this 'extravaganza' easily. This is readily discernible in the novel *The Nature of Passion* (1956) wherein the family of Lala Hardayal is beset by conflicting points of interests. Thus, novels that depict Indian society in general and the new 'cultural poetics' of the emergent generation in New Delhi in particular do not fail to show the idiosyncrasies of those who have suddenly been catapulted to fame and glory. Between these newcomers lies a small fraction of those who vividly remember the old days and cling to those values that are now relegated to the rear in an era of rampant commercialism. The conflict is not only between the old and the young, but also between what ought to be considered 'normal' and 'sane' in this new era and what may be deemed 'old-fashioned' and 'decrepit'.

What may be summed up after having taken stock of the other novels of the writer is that she is not only satirical about the Indian mores in general, but also that these views have come from an outsider who has keenly watched the silent metamorphosis on the nation's front since the nineteen-fifties, much like the unnamed narrator in *Heat and*

Dust who watches the changes and niceties on the socio-economic, cultural scenario after she comes to the same tiny, suffocating town of Satipur in the seventies. Thus, in many ways, the female protagonists in Jhabvala's novels who register a negative opinion about the Indian society may be seen to be the novelist's alter-ego herself. It is now to these twin problems of "acculturation" and "non-nationality" that we may profitably turn to with special reference to Jhabvala's Booker prize winning novel.

Heat and Dust is a story that Ruth handles with a rare skill that stitches two narratives separated by not only time but also perspectives. The story is narrated from the viewpoint of an unnamed narrator, the step-granddaughter of Olivia, the wife of the assistant collector in the 1920s of the British Raj named Douglas. Olivia has a doting husband, but her life as the wife of a colonial officer in the tiny, suffocating town of Satipur, surrounded by a retinue of servants turns her dull. This situation of being 'trapped' as the wife of a privileged colonial officer in British India has ample resonances with the character of Richard's wife Liza in Bhisma Sahni's *Tamas* (1974) who too finds similar emotional outlet in drinking and other useless pursuits.

In order to douse her dullness, she develops an affair with the young but somewhat inefficient Nawab of the princely state of Khatm, who also reciprocates his feelings. The ultimate visit to the shrine of Baba Firdaus results in physical intimacy with the Nawab and the pregnancy of Olivia. She terminates her pregnancy with the help of some local women and her relationship with Douglas turns sour: he divorces her and marries Tessie. Olivia goes away with the Nawab and is given a secluded spot high up in the mountains. She dies in the meantime and Douglas returns to England despite having spent the best of his years in India. The Nawab is finally held guilty for looting his own people, presumably being the leader of the gang of dacoits himself. He goes to England, leads a pompous life and dies, Olivia having survived him by six years.

Fifty years later, the unnamed narrator comes to the same dusty and dingy town of Satipur to find out the truth of Olivia's scandal by deciphering her letters. But that self-same abhorrence for everything

Indian still remains: she initially puts herself in a boarding house and then shifts to a small room in the town of Satipur. In many ways, the unnamed narrator's objective description of the post-independence Indian scenario is Ruth's own: while she is trying to come to terms with this subcontinent's tortured history, she nevertheless registers her 'pain' and the problematic associated with the difficult process of cultural assimilation and the subsequent 'acculturation'. While she is in full sympathy with the personal problems of the clerk InderLal with whom she later develops a sexual relationship, she cannot accept the way things are in the town. While "Maaji" visits to the Sati shrines to offer her obeisance, the unnamed narrator cannot help expressing disgust at the once revered custom. Scenes of disease and destitution fill her with sympathy for the suffering: while she helps the dying woman she finds solace during her last moments; taking help from the mother of InderLal, she nevertheless registers her protest to the medical superintendent of the hospital who expresses his genuine helplessness citing lack of medical equipment and task force to deal with such cases.

A visit to the shrine of Baba Firdaus repeats what had happened in the case of Olivia: she gets intimate with InderLal and ends up getting pregnant. Thus, incidents repeat themselves: the fate of Olivia seems to 'envelop' her step-granddaughter as well. However, she refuses to abort her child like Olivia and ends up getting high in the mountains, presumably to spend the rest of her life.

Two things become somewhat evident when it comes the 'poetics' of Mrs. Jhavbala's craft: firstly, she has been in India for a very long time, but still considers herself alien to her surroundings that seem to have been *thrust* upon her by some sort of existential workings that remain elusive to her, and secondly, it is exactly due to this "alienation effect" that she is also one of those few writers writing in English who have commented on the Indian scenario post-independence so forcefully and with a style that is objective and detached. This is seen in her portrayal of not only the Indian scenario post-independence in general in her numerous novels, but also that of the changes that have come about the tiny town of Satipur after fifty years in particular. But still, her observations are thoroughly tinged with sarcasm and irony:

After that InderLal's mother took me to see the suttee shrines. (...) They gave me an eerie feeling, but InderLal's mother devoutly joined her hands before the shrines. She decorated one of them with little strings of roses and marigolds she had brought. (...) She even seemed regretful--- this merry widow! --- that it had been discontinued (it was outlawed in 1829). (57)

This scathing satire carries within itself the much-needed message for change and re-generation. This is perceptible throughout the novel. Not only are the signs of degeneration seen through the foul-smelling bazaars of Satipur, they are also discernible in the fatalistic viewpoints of the Indians for whom the un-named narrator has the highest disregard. One of such characters is Chid. Though a foreigner who has come to India from the US to soak into its spirituality, he can neither understand its true character nor his true purpose in life. Always running short of money, he sends telegrams home and in the end, comes back from one of his mountain trips restored to his origins. While it is being remarked in the novel that he is a soul that has passed many generations who was finally destined to come here, the narrator seems to be silently skeptical about this as she strongly feels that Chid has after all gathered only a rudimentary knowledge about Indian scriptures. InderLal mentions that Chid has passed most of his previous lives in India; that is why he has come here in this birth. But again, the narrator remarks with a vein of sarcasm and wonder:

He tells me that Chid's is a very old soul which has passed through many incarnations. Most of them have been in India and that is why Chid has come back in this birth. But what InderLal doesn't understand is why I have come. He doesn't think I was Indian in any previous birth, so why should I come in this one? (96)

Stuart Hall in his seminal essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", commenting on the problematic/s of identity, remarks that identity is not a pristine and unproblematic terrain as many would think:

Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a

‘production’, *which is never complete*, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. (110; emphases added)

The unnamed narrator’s attempts to come to terms with both the past as well as the present scenario of Satipur and her desire to unravel the secret of Olivia’s elopement brings in this concept of identity that is always in a flux within this postcolonial matrix: like Ruth herself, she is both at ease with this new mental as well as physical terrain that she confronts and is not at the same time. While Chid’s ‘secret’ of having come to India finally is assimilated by InderLal and his mother, the narrator is still at odds with her final purpose in India. She cannot understand whether it is to *understand* this nation’s complex history (that she is incapable of), to be an unwilling part of this subcontinent or it is something else. Hence, she becomes acclimatized to the mores of the town, and yet does not; her love affairs veer uncertainly between that of the hopeless, would-be-saint Chid, a foreigner and the Indian clerk InderLal. If we take her but to be an alter ego of Olivia made to spend her days in amorous pursuits, then she gathers such energies both from Indian as well as non-Indian quarters: a protean figure, hanging between an explorer, a humanist and a lover. Thus, her avowed ‘aim’ to find the truth about Olivia runs into sand. Perhaps, the only ‘truth’ that she could find was that history repeats itself.

In the novel, Ruth P. Jhavbala shows the basic difference between two generations separated by a span of around half a century: while Olivia remains circumscribed within the four walls of her posh quarter, the unnamed narrator in the novel takes an un/willing part in the daily affairs of the tiny town. This involves helping out the sick in the government hospital, tending the near-dying with Maaji and also taking an interest in the daily affairs of InderLal. It is through this complex web of interaction that the narrator’s identity is both changed radically and even metamorphosed. But Olivia, being a perfect outsider to the Indian colonial situation had no idea about the native impulses at work. But the narrator understands what it means to be both an insider and outsider at the same time. Thus, her notions about the Indian scenario become inextricably bound with whatever is Indian. But the nagging questions of identity still remains that eat within her. In this connection,

Philip Gleason, in his article “Identifying Identity” comments on this disturbing question of identity formation:

In these circumstances the questions, ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Where I belong’ became inevitable. Identity was, in a sense, what the discussion was all about. As Erikson noted in 1950, ‘we begin to conceptualize identity at the very time in history when they become a problem.’ (194)

Whatever be the questions that disturb the narrator, she finally takes up a small house in an anonymous town called “Town X” in the narrative and decides to carry on with her unborn child, much unlike Olivia who went for an abortion. What becomes somewhat evident is that it is the sexual encounter with InderLal that is more instrumental in sending her up in the mountains to meditate on her condition.

Heat and Dust brings to surface many facets of Mrs. Jhavbala’s art: her unerring eye for what is naïve and immature in post-independence India, her art of masterfully telling a story and her leanings towards satire. Whatever be her notions about her in-betweenness in a nation not her own, she is a chronicler of native impulses at work in the Indian society post-independence that is interesting from the vantage point of post-colonial analysis.

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