

RUTH PRAWER JHABVALA'S TUSSELE WITH INDIA IN *HEAT AND DUST*: THE QUINTESSENCE OF RACIAL CHAUVINISM

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Abstract

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, a celebrated writer, having the experience of a multiple diaspora, developed a love-hate relationship with India during her 25 years' stay in India. In the second phase of her career, her essential European sensibilities overshadowed her initial enchantment for everything Indian which she also confessed time and again. In 'Heat and Dust', her personal experiences got reflected in terms of physical and psychological trauma the westerners faced who came to India under political or spiritual obligation. Here, the writer concentrated more on the seamy side of India, its culture and climate portraying, derisively, the endemic poverty, dirt, squalor, backwardness, heat and dust- its tropical hazards. Everything appeared to be coloured with the tinge of a prejudiced perspective- a purely British point of view to strengthen the traditional image of India among the Western readers.

Key Words: *Prejudiced Diaspora, Chauvinism, Supremacy, Disillusionment, superstitions, cross-cultural interaction.*

Ruth Praver Jhabvala- of Polish- of Jewish origin, migrating from Germany to England to India to America, adapting herself to each place with a "chameleon or cuckoo quality" as she confessed herself in an interview, was a celebrated "rootless intellectual" an "ever exiled" European an superb writer with an outstanding creative sensibility.

Her 25 years stay in India after getting married with an Indian Parsi, Cyrus Jhabvala, provided her ample opportunity to have access to the culture, rhythm, society and climate of India. With a perspective an ironic vision of an outsider- insider, she explores the different aspects of cross cultural assimilation in India and the typical traits of Indian though, allegedly, with the prejudiced eye of a European.

In the first phase of her literary career, she expresses her delight and enthusiasm for everything Indian in her early novels. She writes:

"I still cannot talk about the first impact India made on my innocent – meaning blank and unprepared- mind and senses. I entered a world of sense delight that perhaps children- other children enter. I remember nothing of it from my childhood" (Jhabvala testament one).

She really loved that period. She further says:

"The smells and sights and sounds of India- the mango and jasmine on hot nights –the rich spiced food- the vast sky- the sight of dawn and dusk- the birds flying about –the ruins –the music- at that time I loved everything there----" (Jhabvala testament one).

But this early charm proved to be ephemeral and her essential Europeanness took over her vision very soon. Now this was the period of disenchantment and disillusionment about everything Indian after her short trip to England back. In the second phase of her literary career which include these novels: *A Backward Place*, *A New Dominion*, *Heat and Dust*, she appears more and Imperialistic author working on the thesis of the 'white men's burden'. India's poverty, backwardness social injustices hot-dusty climate etc increasingly rankled with her, and it darkened her fiction about India. India proved too strong for her and the books during this period reflected her increasingly melancholy, alienation and feeling of being an outsider: "I am no longer interested in India. What I am interested in now is myself in India, which sometimes, in moments of despondency, I think of as my survival in India", she wrote in an autobiographical essay 'myself in India'. She wrote in 'Heat and Dust' during these moments. While writing this book, she had jaundice and then a severe asthma attack which propelled her to uproot herself once again, leaving India forever for New York. There she continued to write about India but now from a totally European point of view.

Her European sensibility asserted itself as she herself vindicated it: "I was no longer immersed in sensual delight but had to struggle against all things people do have to struggle against in India: the tide of Poverty, disease and squalor rising all around: the Heat--- the frayed nerves: the strange, alien often inexplicable, often maddening Indian character." (Testament one) The most tangible of them is the westerner's reaction to the heat and dust of India which provided the background and the title of the above novel:

"how to explain – to begin with- an Indian summer day: when inside the city walls the lanes and the alleys are packed with people and the sun dross every kind of smell out of the gutters, while outside planes of dust stretch away into the shimmering distance that may turn out to be the horizon or just a further extension of dust." (Jhabvala *New York Times* 35)

She finds it inconceivable to achieve a meaning full assimilation with India. She again writes: "---I am using these exaggerated images in order to give some idea of how intolerable India- the idea, the sensation of it- can become. A point is reached when one must escape, and if one cannot do so physically, then some other way must be found." (*Myself in India*, 14-15)

Ruth Jhabvala's assertion that all westerners suffer disenchantment as a rule in India and that it (India) inflicts physical and psychological pain on all European alike, is very well reflected in "Heat and Dust". She explains this like this:

"There is cycle that Europeans-by Europeans I mean all westerners, including Americans- tend to pass through. It goes like this: first stage, tremendous enthusiast-everything Indian is Marvelous; second stage, everything Indian not so marvelous; third stage everything Indian abominable." (quoted in *Out of India* 13-21)

In this novel two parallel stories run with gap of 50 years; one happens in free independent India and the other in Post Independent India. In 1923, the beautiful, spoiled and bored Olivia, married to a British ICS officer, Douglas Revers, outrages British community in the tiny suffocating town of Satipur by eloping with an Indian Prince. 50 Years later, her step-grand daughter, the narrator goes back to the heat the

dust and the squalor of India to solve the enigma of Oliva's scandal, and, ironically, shares the same fate by being drawn to the fussy Indian bureaucrat with whom she gets pregnant. Though the story is moving and profound, handled with dazzling assurance, there is an obvious tinge of racial chauvinism felt everywhere both in the narration and the dialogue exposing a precisely stated thesis. Here she is more interested in the effect India has on westerners who came here either under political obligation during colonial expansion or under spiritual obligation to seek enlightenment. Though the writer came here bound by marital ties, her presentation and assessment of Indo-European cultural Interaction in this novel is a one-way traffic, an estimate of India through the western eye.

The title of the novel *Heat and Dust* itself encapsulates the writer's derogatory image of the alleged suffocating atmosphere of India. She shows heat and dust as responsible for the cranky nature of white people in India. These people, here, live in their bungalows with windows shut and blind drawn all day long, making occasional trips to Shimla as if India were a cursed land thus referring contemptuously to India's topographical hazards.

Nissim Ezekiel strongly criticizes the title

In *Heat and Dust*, for example, the title itself would be subjected to an analysis more thorough than anything it has so far received. Is there not a demeaning motive in this characterizing of a country and its culture in terms of climate and the least valuable elements lying on the physical territory designated? How would an English reader respond to a novel set in England, entitled in the same spirit by an Indian writer 'cold and fog'?" (Ezekiel 138)

The title has strongly negative connotations creating the picture of India as a detestable place in the eyes of western readers. Actually, the title exemplifies the writer's intolerance for India in the later phase of her life when she developed a kind of restlessness for everything Indian. When Olivia gets batty because of boredom and long absence of her husband, Douglas, all day long, he blames Indian heat and dust responsible for that and not his coldness towards Olivia: "No English woman is meant to stand it." (*Heat and Dust*, 117)

There are two phases of India in this novel and each has been portrayed in an ironic tone tinged with obvious contempt and derision, to our dismay. In the first story, the attitude of the Britishers, who came here under political philosophy, is more of a white man's burden as if they have come here to civilise the 'wretched inhabitants of this wretched country.' (148) Douglas, Mr. and Mrs. Saunders, Major Minnie's, Crawfords etc. all are the products of colonial philosophy who treat Indians as slaves, and always try to perpetuate colonial supremacy through their disparaging remarks and behaviour towards everything Indian. Douglas considers Indians as 'a pack of rogues' (38) and does not hesitate in delivering the deadly insults cleverly in local language to these poor people upholding administrative supremacy and imperialist authority over them. Civil Lines, where these Britishers live, is inaccessible to the Indians as if they (Brits) would get ill by the mere shadows of these so called unhygienic people. Only servants with their heads down can be seen in their houses. These Britishers constantly make Indians realise through their lifestyle, demeanour and deportment that how civilised, disciplined, hygienic, well-mannered and well-arranged they are. There is an air of racial chauvinism leaving no sphere for positive

cultural interaction. Dr. Saunders, when invited at Nawab's palace, asserts, maliciously, his opinion about Indian people and their culture: "I had the fellow called to my office and, no further argument, smartly boxed his ears for him, one-two, one-two..... It's the only way to deal with them, Nawab Sahib. It's no use arguing with them, they're not amenable to reason. They haven't got it here, you see, up here, the way we have."(121). By 'up here' he means the 'head', the 'intellect'. Mrs. Saunders, also, criticises her Indian servants: "She said that these servants really were devils and that they could drive anyone crazy..... it was all done deliberately to torment their masters."

These characters seem to be the spokesmen of their writer's own estimate of India. These uncompromising and rigid British characters are one in their opinion of India, and thus appear more stereotyped than individual, expressing the authorial point of view- a prejudiced vision of Indian scenario. A desire for positive intellectual communication or intimacy is absolutely absent in their characters as they believe that a friendship or any other relationship between the ruler and the ruled might threaten the British imperial position.

In the very beginning of the novel, the writer shows her contempt for India by digging at the poverty, filth and squalor of it when the narrator is shown looking out of the window of the dormitory of Society of Missionaries Hostel she is staying at in Bombay on her first arrival in India, she speaks up that the Indians in the street looked 'like souls in hell'. (7)She(the narrator), during her stay in India, comes across many unpleasant scenes and sights of human misery, and describes, loathfully, India's crippled medical facilities, mismanaged civic amenities, crumbling religious institutions, primitive-cruel superstitions and savagery in the name of religion more than the natural beauty, simplicity and communal oneness of India. A Westerner warns her about the dangers lurking in India as if it were a damned place: ".....you can't live in India without Christ Jesus. If He's not with you every single moment of the day and night.... then you become like that poor young man with the monkey taking lice out of his hair. Because you see, dear, nothing human means anything here."(7) Ruth Jhabwala, severely, attacks different religious practices like suttee, exorcistical treatment of a patient of epilepsy etc. giving us many examples of cruelties, gruesome and horrible mutilations. In fact, she is now excited in delineating only the seamy side of Indian culture to strengthen among the western readers, the popular western image of India. She is rightly blamed for making this novel more racial and sensational, doing no justice to India and its culture.

Besides this, the disillusionment and disenchantment western-seekers visiting India for spiritual bliss highlights the writer's own delusionment which she confessed herself in 'Myself in India': ".....whether religion is such a potent source in India because life is so terrible, or so it the other way round- is life so terrible because, with the eyes of the spirit turned elsewhere, there is no incentive to improve its quality."(14-15) In this novel, Chid and two other European youths, tired of western materialism or rat-race for money, spiritual emptiness and absence of moral values, visit India in search of simple-innocent happiness and spiritual peace as the narrator herself admits:".....that many of us are tired of the materialism of the west, and even if we have no particular attraction towards the spiritual message of the East, we come here in the hope of finding a simple and more natural way of life."(95) These people forsake their own religion in the hope of re shaping their lives under India's spiritual

heritage. But the writer, having herself the experience of a multiple diaspora, shows the frustrations of these displaced Europeans in India. Contrary to their aspirations, they all become the victims of cheats, trickery, diseases and even molestation; they abandon their mission and go back home hopelessly. The European girl confesses grimly that instead of spiritual peace “all I found was dysentery.”(23) The predicament of expatriate women in India is not very satisfactory. Olivia and the Narrator, bewitched by Indian sensuality and also sexuality, both develop an illicit relationship with the Indian men, and get pregnant; the former aborts the baby while the latter gives birth, and then both go to take shelter in the mountainous region of the Himalayas. We feel, as if, everything is shown from a biased and traditional perspective- a purely defective British point of view to consolidate the notorious Indo-phobia among European readers.

However, to our respite and satisfaction, there are few instances where she is a little bit kind or positive towards the country where she stayed for 25 years and had enjoyed some very memorable moments with her family. The narrator appreciates the feeling of togetherness and oneness among the common men of Satipur when she goes to sleep on the the roof with her neighbours in a summer night: “The town has become a communal dormitory..... I have never known such a sense of communion..... How different from my often very lonely room in London with my only walls to look at and my books to read.”(52) Nawab, though his relation with Olivia was not acceptable if judged by the rigid social conduct and norms, gives full protection to her, and takes care of her till the end at a time when she was ostracised by the British community. His loyalty bespeaks reputed Indian character. The narrator befriends one Maji, an old spiritual and devoted woman whose association and teachings help her to soothe herself amidst her struggles, and find some solutions to the modern problems- prevalent in post-war western culture. However, Major Minnies’ views on India glimpses some aspects of Ruth Jhabvala’s own opinion about India: “There are many things to love her for- the scenery, the history, the poetry, the music..... but it finds out the weak spot and presses on it....therefore, one should never allow oneself to become softened (like Indians)by an excess of feeling..... it is all very well to love and admire India- intellectually, aesthetically..... but always with a virile, measured, European feeling.”(170-171)

The whole analysis shows that though the author loved India for many of its specialties and charms, her European origin, her culture, her supposed racial and imperial supremacy came in her way of accepting India wholeheartedly. She enjoys an antithetical attitude towards India instead of illuminating her understanding of the simplicity and inherent beauty of its culture. She has been rightly criticised for “attitudinising rather than being objective and dispassionate in her portrayal of India.” (Chadha, 11-12) To our dismay and chagrin, the cross- cultural discourse here disintegrates and gives place to contempt, disbelief and dissention. It, unfortunately, shows crevices in the fabric of our efforts to assimilate different cultures and races, and thus loses the charm of a creative work for Indian readers and their aesthetic taste.

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