



JHABVALA'S HEAT AND DUST: A PORTRAYAL OF STAGNANT INDIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

Heat and Dust is certainly a severe attack on the ills prevalent in the Indian society. Ruth Praver Jhabvala is known for her representative picture of the country in her novels. She, with her keen eye, digs into the depths of Indian life. The novel balances the two different points of time with nearly a gap of 50 years between them. Jhabvala exhibits Indian social set-up with its poverty, famine and epidemics, illiteracy, superstitions, food habits, widows and beggars, horrible government hospitals, overcrowded buses etc. She is concerned about the failure of marriage system, excessive male-dominance, and fake spiritualism in the country. The Narrator of the story visits India to know about her grandfather's first wife, Olivia. She finds little change in the societal attitude of the country.

Keywords: social realities, stark poverty, food habits, spiritual awakening, marriage system, insensitivity

Heat and Dust, as the title suggests, is a story of India which failed materially and morally too. Jhabvala, through her Narrator, presents India as a land of illiterate, unhygienic and morally deprived people. Through a comparative description of two times, the Narrator acquaints the readers with the little progress India had made in these years. Nagendra Kumar Singh in his book *Society and Self in the Novels of R.P. Jhabvala and Kamala Markandaya* says-

...the author thus succeeds in showing us that what is called "real India"—the India of arid, parched land and its poverty-stricken people living a horrible life of misery and degradation- has not changed during the half-century of historic changes.¹

'Heat' and 'Dust,' thus become the symbols of social realities in the country whether it is past or present. The following lines from the novel give symbolic

details of the deserted place where everything loses the hope of a blooming life.

Dust storms have started blowing all day, all night. Hot winds whistle columns of dust out of the desert into the town, the air is choked with dust and so are all one's senses. Leaves that were once green are now ashen, and they toss around as in a dervish dance. Everyone is restless, irritable, on the edge of something. It is impossible to sit, stand, lie, every position is uncomfortable; and one's mind too is in turmoil.²

The lines indeed reflect the social status of the period which seems quite hopeless. The writer wishes to throw light on the state of human existence. Life in Satipur represents the places all over India. Independence and the succeeding years could not change the grim realities of the country.

The impression of the Narrator of Indian society is of stark poverty. When she visits the streets, she sees people sleeping outside in the suffocating weather without any bed. The writer puts before us the miserable condition of the poor:

There are a number of crippled children (one boy propelling himself on his legless rump) and probably by day they beg but now they are off duty and seem to be light-hearted, even gay. People are buying from the hawkers and standing there eating, while others are looking in the gutters to find what has been thrown away.³

The people in the streets include some Europeans also and they too experience the same painful life as most of the Indians. The Narrator tells about a German young man who has tangled hair and the monkey is taking lice of it. He looks miserable and she sees in his eyes "a soul in hell." Jhabvala continues with her sarcastic tone and put it in a more horrifying way:

Oh but I have seen some terrible sights in India. I've lived through a Hindu-Muslim riot, and a smallpox epidemic, and several famines, and I think I may rightly say I've seen everything that you can see on this earth. And through it all I've learned this one thing: you can't live in India without Christ Jesus.⁴

In extreme contrast with the horrible life of the poor people suffering from famine and epidemics was the life of the Nawabs who were the great exploiters of the poor people. Extracting money from the people in the form of revenue and helping the British rule to keep a tight hold on the country had become a usual sight. Thus Nawabs lived an astonishingly lavish life as compared to the miserable life of the common people.

Jhabvala's remarks on Indian food are sufficient to throw light on the Indian eating habits. In a hostel, a woman from a neighbouring bed gives the narrator an advice:

You have to be very careful with your food in the beginning: boiled water only, and whatever you do no food from these street

stalls. Afterwards you get immune. I can eat anything now if I want to. Not that I'd want to- I hate their food, I wouldn't touch it for anything.⁵

Literary books are full of such references where English people are shown suffering from coping up with the food habits here in India

Maintaining with her satirical tone, Jhabvala presents the over-crowded buses and the streets full of beggars. While going to Nawab's Palace with Inderlal, she has an experience of the over-crowded buses with the hot wind coming and bringing with it the sand and the dust. The people were treated like animals and stuffed in the bus. The sight presented by the writer is not new to an ordinary Indian. Sadly the picture remains the same even after a gap of more than 50 years.

The picture of the offices presented by Inderlal is also a regular sight in India where people are engrossed in the corrupt practices and failed to do their duties sincerely. While narrating the attitude of the office-workers Inderlal says:

There is a lot of intrigue and jealousy....all he asks is to be allowed to do his duties- but this is impossible, people will not let him alone, one is forced to take sides....fellow officers would do anything.....to pull him down.⁶

A trio which comes to India in search of a spiritual awakening has a very horrible experience. They find that the speeches of Swamis about India, which they heard abroad, are full of lies. They find the Swamis here, liars and the Indians, dishonest. They narrate how in Amritsar, they had been robbed of their watches, cheated by the person who promised them cheap houseboat in Kashmir and how again in Delhi they were deceived while exchanging their money, the girl from the group was molested in Fatehpur Sikri, young man's pocket was picked in Goa and they also suffered from diseases like Jaundice and ringworm. Jhabvala very sharply presents the frustrating experiences of the Europeans who visit India in search of spiritual awakening. The writer's approach here certainly looks like a foreigner who is very critical of the social

life in India. Ruth Praver Jhabvala probably had a similar type of experience in India which she narrates here with the help of her characters in the novel.

The Marriage System in India is also an important issue discussed in this novel. In a male-dominated society, marriage has become a thing of compromise and not a union of two individuals. The marriages are settled by parents without any consent from the daughter particularly. Even in the scientifically developed society, the mindset remains the same. In the novel, Jhabvala peeps into the life of Inderlal and his wife Ritu whose relationship perhaps represents the numerous married couples in the country. Inderlal and Ritu's marriage was also one of those where the boy and the girl had no say in the decision. Ritu was uneducated. Inderlal's mother told him that she was beautiful but he did never admit that. So she had to spend her whole life inside the house. She could not give expression to her feelings. Ignored by the husband, detached from the father and mother, Ritu's life becomes the story of so many girls who have no option but to continue with what they have.

The early days of Ritu's married life were extremely disturbing. She was homesick and used to cry. Her less intake of food resulted in her poor health. In spite of suggestions from her husband and the mother-in-law, she could not change herself. That resulted in ignorance from the side of the husband. The illiteracy and backwardness also stopped her from mixing with the people. The Narrator tried to talk with her but Ritu was not comfortable. The Narrator's description of the lady is worth mentioning:

There is something frail, weak about her. Physically she is very thin, with thin arms on which her bangles slip about; but not only physically- I have the impression that her mind, or do I mean her will, is not strong either...⁷

She is presented as a woman who is without health, intellect and confidence. The story seems of every Indian household. Another married couple is Douglas and Olivia. The story is equally complicated of this English couple. Olivia is the victim of

boredom. Her busy husband could not spend enough time with her. Moreover, she is childless. Jhabvala beautifully portrays the life of an English lady who with a wish to kill her boredom, gets attracted towards Nawab of Khatm. In Nawab, she finds a person who listens to her, pays attention to her and takes care of her which perhaps she misses in her own husband, Douglas. Olivia could gather courage, in the end, to run away from the boredom of life but it was not so with Ritu, an Indian wife. She was completely bound by the traditional norms set by the society.

Jhabvala also handles the issue of widows in the novel. The episode of the beggar woman in the novel is clear proof of the remorseful condition of the widows in the society and the treatment they get in the male-dominated world. The beggar-woman, who was lying on the road, was a widow. She was driven out of the house by her father-in-laws. She had no choice but to beg in the streets. Jhabvala touches an important issue here and brings out the insensibility of the society where the people have lost affection for each other.

Jhabvala very seriously slaps the traditional taboos present in the society. The belief in supernatural things or fake *sadhus* invites troubles in the lives of the characters. The treatment given to Ritu to cure her of epilepsy is horrible. To cure her, her mother-in-law holds her fast and treats her in a most unusual way:

The mother went to the jars where the rice was stored and scattered a handful over Ritu's head. The grains bounced off the girl's hair though one or two got stuck there. She didn't move. The mother opened and closed her hand and circled it over that bowed head, cracking her knuckles, and she was murmuring some incantation...⁸

The primitive ways were still dominant and there was no role of a doctor in the treatment. Instead of taking her for a psychiatric treatment, they applied the red-hot iron to various parts of her body to drive out the evil spirit. The ways, adopted to abort the child in the first and the second story, are enough indications of the unscientific practices prevalent in the society. Jhabvala's description of Olivia's

abortion is extremely painful. The practice of aborting a child in the villages leads to the death of so many married girls. She was taken by the women in *burqua* to a secret place. They made her lie down on the floor and started massaging her. After Begum's arrival, they started their real work. The way the foetus aborted chills down the reader:

She saw the midwife showing the Begum a twig on to which she was rubbing some paste...The midwife with the twig came towards her, holding it. Olivia understood that it was to be introduced into herself. The two women opened Olivia's legs and one of them held on to her ankles while the other pointed the twig...the twig hurt Olivia as it entered into her. She was unable to stifle a cry.⁹

More or less similar treatment was given to the Narrator also. Jhabvala successfully brings forward the stagnation in the progress even after a gap of more than 50 years.

The reader comes to know about the Indian fear of ghosts when Inderlal passes the graveyard and hears a groaning sound. He asks the Narrator to be careful, but she well knew that it is of Chid, one of her acquaintances. A fear of ghost is a part and parcel of Indian life. The illiteracy and consequently the ignorance are at the root of it. Another instance of the superstitious mentality is given when we read that Nawab of Khatm cancelled his journey because they heard the hooting of an owl which was not considered auspicious. Jhabvala's sharp eye catches everything quite convincingly.

The writer also makes an attempt to display the slum-like cities of India. The houses are shown in collapsing conditions. Talking about Satipur and Khatm, the Narrator says:

Satipur also had its slummy lanes, but Khatm had nothing else. The town huddled in the shadow of the Palace walls in a tight knot of dirty alleys with ramshackle houses leaning over them. There were open gutters flowing through the streets. They often overflowed, especially during the rains, and were probably the cause, or one

of them, of the frequent epidemics that broke out in Khatm. If it rained rather more heavily, some of the older houses would collapse and bury the people inside them. This happened regularly every year.¹⁰

The condition of the patients described by the Narrator is even more horrific. There are no basic facilities for patients, the latrines are extremely dirty, the staff is irresponsible. Talking about the quality of the food served in the hospital, the Narrator writes:

The patients sit in rows holding out bowls into which are thrown lumps of cold rice and lentils and sometimes some vegetable all mixed up together. Only people who are completely destitute will accept this food, and it is indeed served up with the contempt reserved for those who have nothing and no hope.¹¹

Dr Gopal, the Medical Superintendent, exposes the apathy of the government. He tells the Narrator that the dying beggar woman is not an emergency in India and there is no need to send an ambulance for her. A person suffering from piles is given the medicine of gall-stones. Dr Gopal blames of negligence from the side of the government. He criticises the lack of spirit of the staff. Though he is a gentle fellow, he has no option but to go with the wave. He states:

I thought that, if one lives here, it is best to be like everyone else. Perhaps there is even no choice: everything around me- the people and the landscape, life animate and inanimate seemed to compel me into this attitude.¹²

The perfect example of socially irresponsible nature is visible in the case of the beggar woman. The Narrator used to see her every day in her rags collecting alms from different areas. One day, she sees her lying near a dump. The Narrator says:

I thought at first she was dead but realised this could not be since no one else in the lane seemed concerned. The animals snuffing around in the refuse also paid no

attention to her. Only the flies hovered above her in a cone.¹³

The writer puts forward the insensitivity of Indian people who have perhaps lost the faith in human values. Everybody seems busy in their worlds forgetting their responsibilities towards society.

It seems that the Indian society is in the state of stagnation which shows no progress in the upliftment of the suppressed lot. Everything remains the same. Jhabvala visibly portrays the Indians as illiterate and ignorant and hence suffering from poverty, hunger, evils of superstitions, devoid of human feelings and cleanliness. The picture presented by the writer in the novel is one of insensitivity and loss of values.

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