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Heat and Dust: Social Predicament in Colonial Situation

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Abstract:

Literature, being a representation of life, presents physical as well as psychological condition of the characters that inhabit its pages. This paper seeks to analyse the predicament of the colonizer as well as the colonized in pre-independence and post independence phase of India. It explores the plight of the colonizers who, despite being rulers, feel alienated and the colonized, who being suppressed adopt subversive methods to survive.

Keywords: Predicament, disenchanted, colonizer, colonized, revenge, representative etc.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala is a familiar name in Indo-English fiction. Her novel *Heat and Dust* deals with Indian background but in a different way, that is, Indians' concern with Europeans in India. She shows the complex relationship between East and West. That is why Jayanti Bailur remarks in this regard, "She differs from contemporary Indian writers, in doing so because, as a westerner she is able to view India objectively." (85)

Heat and Dust won Booker prize in 1975 and went on to achieve a second greater success as a film. Hayden M Williams aptly points out, "Its symbolism, the complexity of the double narrative, the theme of destructive sexual passion, the stress on human self-delusive tragedy make it a novel of a very different kind." (22) Using double narrative technique, Ruth Jhabvala shows that Europeans come to India in the hope of discovering new way of life, for the realization of their being, but they face only frustration because they discover that in India, everything from physical environment to the spiritual reality, seems hostile to them.

Heat and Dust shows social predicament in colonial situation of both the sides, i.e. of the colonizers and the colonized. Though the colonizers are in a dominating position because they are the rulers, yet they have their own problems which spring up due to a change in culture, social background, way of living and the feeling of superior and inferior. But despite these differences, *Heat and Dust*, squalor and dirt, flies and beggars, the colonized India or the newly Independent India, which still carries all the socio-political cultural traces of the colonized past, exercises an irresistible attraction on the mind of the white colonizer.

The novel is set both in pre-Independence British India of 1923 and post-Independence India. Through its double narrative, which is centered around two European women, Jhabvala describes, "how India overwhelms two English women who are sensitive and receptive

to it.”(Agarwal 34) The first narrative is structured around the disenchantment of Olivia, wife of an Indian civil servant, with the life of Britishers, leading to her elopement with an Indian prince, whereas the second narrative is woven around Olivia’s step grand-daughter who, fifty years later, comes to India to explore the mystery of Olivia’s scandal. However, the present paper is an attempt to show the social predicament in colonial situation during British rule that is dealt within the first narrative centered around Olivia. In fact, the novel “is an attempt to study the predicament of a European woman who, alienated from her own culture, strives to build a relationship with the unknown world of Indian reality.”(Sohi 13) But it also shows the predicament of the colonized too.

The setting of the novel is Satipur, a small town in Rajasthan, where incessant dust storms rage throughout the summer. In such environment is placed the protagonist of the first narrative, Olivia, a young European woman. She is a sensitive girl who is married to a typical Britisher in India, who remains busy most of the time with his work in the district. Since there can be no social interaction between the colonizers and the natives, the only people she meets occasionally on Sunday evening are Mr. Crawford, the district collector, and his wife, Mr. Saunders, the medical superintendent, and his wife, Major Minnies, political adviser to the Nawab of Khatm, and his wife. Due to different cultural backgrounds, geographical conditions, different religions and status variations, the Britisher feel alien in India. Ruth Jhabvala portrays the petrification and fatuity of life of these families, especially of memsahibs. Mrs. Saunders is shown ill throughout the novel. Though other English women learn what not to expect in India, yet Olivia insists on the realisation of a fuller life. She feels bored and lonely with the life which she is leading. At such a juncture, she meets the handsome Nawab of Khatm, at the palace dinner party. She finds herself attracted to him. The Nawab is the native ruler of Khatm, who cannot fight out the British who have usurped his right with cunningness and force. Though he becomes their ally, yet the hatred towards the British still rages in his heart, as is pointed out by Harinder K. Sohi: “The dinner party, and occasion of eating together in a community, signifying sharing and coming together, ironic contrast, brings out the tensions and conflicts between the Nawab and the British rulers.”(17)

The dinner party of Nawab is an event of excitement for Olivia. Her husband, Douglas, always remains busy in his district work and Olivia remains lonely in her house, all the doors and windows shut to keep out the heat and dust. So the Nawab’s party gives her a chance to wear her fine evening dress and jewellery. She thinks, “soon she would be wearing them and people would see her” (Jhabvala 14). When Olivia first sees the Nawab’s grand palace her reaction is that “she felt she had, at last in India, come to the right place”(Jhabvala15). Harry, whom she met in party, is another Englishman who is fed up with the kind of life which the British lead in India. He is permanent house-guest of the Nawab. Both Olivia and Harry find that they do not belong to the British community. The Crawfords and Minnies have god-like confidence, which is derived from their political position. Their experience is narrow, limited and distorted, for it is constituted on the basis of their role as foreign rulers in India.

When Major Minnies narrates some story about “a devilish clever Hindu moneylender”(Jhabvala 16) who tried to outwit the Major many, many years ago, the Nawab pretends to listen to this guest attentively but Olivia knows that he is putting on a face. In the party, the Nawab’s special attention to Olivia makes her happy and she thinks that at least there is

one person in India who is interested in her the way she was used to. The process of her estrangement from her husband Douglas can be traced back to this meeting with the Nawab.

Jhabvala presents the plight of the colonizers, especially of women, in colonial situation, As their husbands are busy in tackling the native problems, the English women lead a boring and dull life. They lead a sterile and barren existence, devoid of any meaning. Mrs. Saunders gives birth to a baby but the child does not survive. That is why she remains ill throughout the novel. Olivia also longs to have a baby but fears that she along with the child will die. Though some women reconcile themselves to the situation, yet Olivia refuses to do so. Douglas tries his best to persuade Olivia to be realistic and not to aspire for the things which cannot to be realised in India.

Mrs. Crawford and Mrs. Minnies tell Olivia about the mysteries of Indian life and instruct her how to behave in India. For example, how to put *khas tattti* screens for hot summer and how to instruct the ayah to wash her crepe-de-chine blouses which never should be given to *dhobi*. But when heat becomes intolerable, the *memsahibs* go Simla, leaving the poor sahibs sweating out in the plains. Mrs. Saunders is depicted as ailing and sick and living in a dary, gloomy, slovenly house to emphasise the miserable condition of the English women. The disenchantment of Olivia with this kind of life, her estrangement from her husband and the entry of a fascinating Nawab at this juncture when her whole being is in turmoil, put her in such a frame of mind that she can perceive the alien and unknown world of Indian reality with sympathy.

It is at this time of growing friendship with the Nawab that Olivia and Douglas start talking seriously about having children. Olivia is, however, strongly affected by the newly constructed grave of Saunders' baby with Italian angel in it and fears that if she gives birth to a baby in India, she and baby will certainly die. She loves Douglas for his English solidness and strength and his manliness. But now she thinks, "What manliness, he cannot get me pregnant" (Jhabvala 116). Though she makes every effort to be nearer to Douglas and refuses to accompany the other English women, Beth Crawford and Mary Minnies, to the mountain but day-by day the gap between them is increasing. Douglas tries to persuade her that no English women can stand the maddening heat but Olivia requests him not to send her away. She makes every effort to be lovely and gay to him but despite her desperate efforts to be closer to Douglas, she faces an eventual break with her husband who appears to her a callous Englishman in dinner party. For the first time she realizes that Douglas and other English guests are discussing the Nawab's involvement with dacoits and his state's financial condition-which is bankrupt. At this Olivia feels very bad and leaves the party.

To show the psychological gap that has been created between Olivia and the british, Ruth Jhabvala shows Olivia leaving the company and looking at the three men in dinner jackets as outsider. Alienated from the world to which she belongs, she feels strange. Now she looks at the same and familiar things from a different perspective and, "she felt strange, strange. She looked beyond the little tableau in her garden of three Englishmen in dinner jackets..." (Jhabvala 93) because her husband no longer exists for her and just dissolves into an ordinary Englishman.

Cultural and religious variations can be seen in the incidence of the *suttee* when a grain merchant dies, his son and relatives compel his wife to commit *suttee*. Other Britishers appreciate Douglas who handled the situation very well. They call *suttee* a savagery like everything else in this country but hearing Olivia's reaction, they remain dumbfounded. According to Olivia, *suttee* is a noble idea for one should follow the person one cares for the most in the world. Moreover, she asserts that *suttee* is a part of Hindu religion and apart from religion, "It is their culture and who are we to interfere with anyone's culture especially an ancient one like theirs" (p.58). This shows that she is defending the identity of the native religion and sanctity of their culture which the colonizer is out to destroy to consolidate and perpetuate his rule.

The shrine of Baba Firdaus shows how legends are formed. One day the Nawab invites Olivia to a little picnic party in a shady spot in the desert. The journey towards the shrine is shown as if Olivia is going beyond the world of the British to which she belongs: "They drove past the Crawford house, past the Saunders', past the church and country." (Jhabvala 41). The Nawab tells Olivia that the shrine has been built by his ancestor in honour of Baba Firdaus who lived at this spot and because the Baba saved and nursed his ancestor whose life was in danger at that time. So, when he regained his power, he built this shrine in his honour. This is the place where the relationship of the Nawab and Olivia is intensified and here the Nawab feels close to Olivia and says to her, "I feel I can tell you anything at all and you will understand. It is very rare to have this feeling with another person. But with you I have it" (Jhabvala 46). When the Nawab and Olivia revisit this place, Olivia comes to know about the Nawab's involvement with the dacoits. The Nawab tells about the cunningness of the British people, as to how they trapped his ancestor whom they could not subdue with power. The Nawab and Olivia develop physical intimacy at this place. He laughingly asserts that this is the secret of his wedding day. This shows how the shrine of Baba Firdaus becomes a place for consummation of love.

The Nawab's relationship with Olivia, in fact, shows as to how the Nawab takes revenge at the British. The battle between the colonizers and the natives is fought at many levels, and one such sensitive domain is the woman. The colonizer has the right to access to all native women. They think that assaulting native women is a weapon to insult, humiliate and break down the natives morally. But if a native does the same act, it is considered an act of revolt. The Nawab and the British understand the situation very well. When Olivia shares the secret of her pregnancy with the Nawab first, the Nawab feels overjoyed and tells Harry, "Wait till my son is born, the British will laugh from the other side of their mouth" (Jhabvala 161). Though he loves Olivia, yet, it makes no difference because Dr. Saunders as well as other Britishers know that the Nawab has used Olivia as a means of revenge.

In colonial situation, the Nawab becomes the representative of the predicament of the colonized. He represents those kings and princes who, though lost power and name and their states became bankrupt, yet they try to show that they are rulers. The Nawab, who is a born ruler, cannot bear Major Minnie who is appointed a political adviser of his state. His meeting with Major Minnie makes him acutely aware of his predicament. He tells Olivia about the cunningness of the British, as to how they trapped his ancestor whom they cannot subdue by force and made him their ally. In exchange, they offered him lands and revenues of Khatm and title of the Nawab. The Nawab's deep-rooted hatred can be seen when he treats Dr. Saunders with exaggerated

courtesy and Olivia very well recognizes his way of expressing contempt. When Dr. Saunders is paid by the servants, Olivia calls this behavior, “cruelty to animal”. At this the Nawab replies, “But he calls us animals” (Jhabvala 170).

The antagonism between the worlds of the natives and the colonizers can be seen in the antagonism between the Nawab and Major Minnies, the British. That is why, it is not insignificant that Harry, despite the intimate relationship with the Nawab, goes back to England like other Britishers in 1947. Though Olivia stays on with the Nawab, yet she lives all alone among the mountains, virtually cut off from the Indian social reality. The Nawab’s contempt for the British finds the clearest expression in his dream about Mrs. Crawford as a hizra. Underlining the point, Harinder K. Sohi remarks: “The transformation of the British into eunuchs signifying perversion and abnormality represents the Nawab’s conception of them.” (19)

As the natives cannot accept the coloniser’s rule as legitimate and human, they devise means to sabotage it from within before they take up arms in resistance. The Nawab, who is a ruler only in name, cannot fight out the foreign invaders openly and that is why he shows sympathy with the dacoits, who take law into their own hands. But for the British, the Nawab is a ruler who is turning into a dacoit and it enrages them.

But, for the colonizer, the most disturbing thing is that when their own people start disassociating themselves from the colonial class and start joining the ranks of the natives. Harry, who is a permanent house-guest of the Nawab, makes Douglas unhappy. When during the riots Harry comes to stay with them, Douglas feels relaxed that at least an Englishman is staying with another Englishman. He makes all arrangements for Harry’s return to England but when he goes back with the Nawab, Douglas feels defeated. But the Nawab’s love for Harry does not alter the situation for Douglas. India has a great impact on the consciousness of the colonizer. Major Minnies, who writes a monograph on the influence of India on the European consciousness and character, loves India and chooses to stay on in 1947, but he writes in monograph that India is dangerously beautiful in its scenery, its history, poetry, music and physical beauty of men and women but only to those who let themselves go. He says that one should love India intellectually, aesthetically, that is always with a kind of detachment, but one should never, he warns, involve oneself completely, “allow oneself to become softened in India by an excess of feeling” (Jhabvala 171) because that will drag one into an alien region of human mind that is “other dimension” which is unknown to the Europeans. Mrs. Crawford and the other British know very well where to draw lines not only in speech and behavior but also in thought. That is why she never lets her imagination roam about the world in the purdah quarter at the Nawab’s palace which she calls an unknown world of Indian mysteries and a European should not try to meddle with it. But once Olivia crossed over the other dimension she spent the rest of her life in a lonely and secluded place among the mountains.

Thus, Ruth Jhabvala, through the westerner character of Olivia, brings out the social predicament of the British colonisers and natives in pre-Independence India. Though the colonisers are in a dominant position of power, yet they find it difficult to adjust themselves in

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India because of environmental, cultural and religious conditions. If they reconcile themselves to the inherent situation, it is right, but who are more emotional and cannot adjust, suffer like Olivia. They become detached not from their own community and also from the community to which, they think, they belong. The condition of the colonized is also contradictory because they are not in position to revolt, so they show their hatred and revenge in other ways.

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