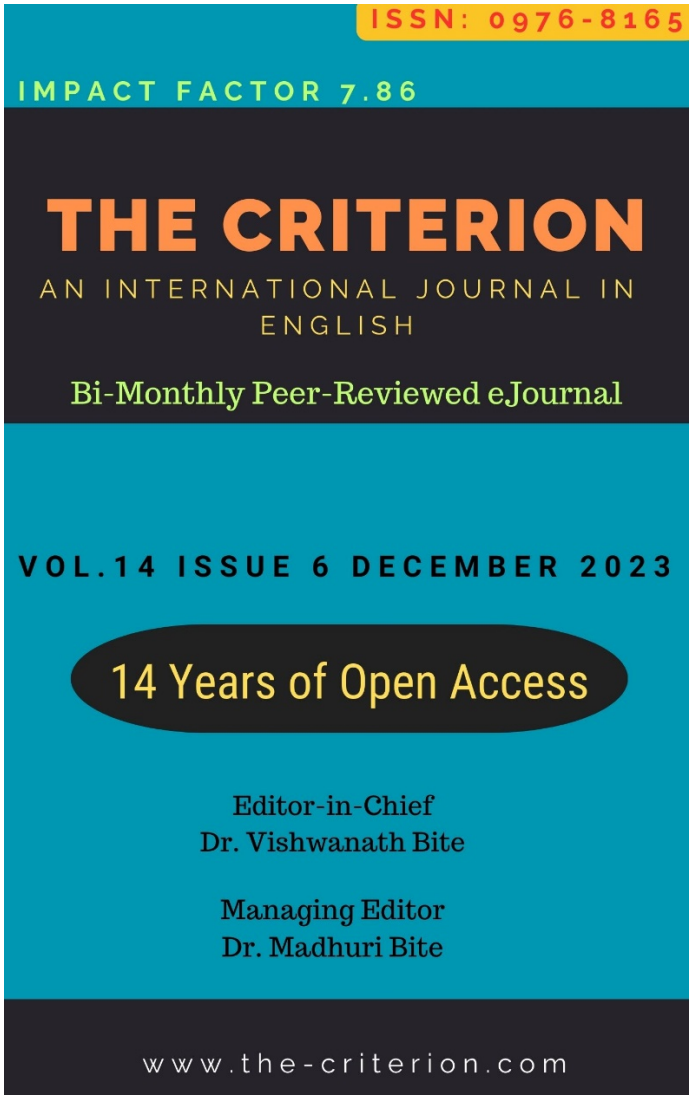

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The Search for Womanhood in *Heat and Dust*

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Abstract:

It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness (Karl Marx)

Heat and Dust by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala paints the story of a lady who journeys to India to discover her stepmother, Olivia. The lady has a couple of letters from her stepmother. The journey offers insight into numerous aspects of Olivia's life, particularly her time in India during British rule. This study aims to identify the womanhood in Jhabvala's Heat and Dust.

Keywords: Women, Womanhood, History, Identity, Heat, Dust.

Introduction:

"She (Ruth Prawer Jhabvala) was probably the first writer in English to see that India's Westernising middle class…," said Pankaj Mishra. (*The New York Times*, 2004)

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala (1927-2013) was a novelist, screenwriter, and Booker Prize winner. She was born in Germany to Polish parents and moved to England when she was twelve years old. She attended Queen Mary College, University of London, and married an Indian architect. From 1951 to 1975, Jhabvala and her husband lived in Delhi. They subsequently split their time between Delhi, New York, and London.

Jhabvala is well known for her work Heat and Dust, which won the Booker Prize in 1975. Her writings dealt with household realities, love, marriage, gender identity, and other topics. Many of her literary works depict her time in India, particularly the romance and turbulence of her early years in Independent India. Her characters were drawn from everyday life in India. Her early novels included To Whom She Will (1955), The Householder (1960) which was filmed in 1963; An Experience of India (1971), and Heat and Dust (1975), which was adapted for the screen. 'Myself in India' is an autobiographical essay,

followed by a collection of stories and autobiographical essays titled Out of India: Selected Stories (1986), The Teacher (2008), and A Judge's Will (2013).

According to Lawyeraau, in her review of Heat and Dust, "… a well-written book that explores Anglo-Indian relations through the power of romance set in two distinct eras, colonial India of the nineteen twenties, during the time of Raj and the independent, freewheeling India of the seventies, … when India was a Mecca for disenfranchised youth it tells the story of two women."

Jhabvala's journey through Time intertwines the stories of two women, Olivia in the 1920s and an anonymous narrator in the 1970s. Such chronological dualism enables an investigation of women's shifting positions in colonial and post-colonial India. Olivia's problems with societal expectations, as well as the anonymous narrator's quest for freedom, provide a contrasting study of changing female roles. Jhabvala depicts the societal limits placed on women during both periods. Women are supposed to follow traditional rules, yet rebellion against these rules becomes a key motif. Olivia violates social norms by engaging in an unconventional relationship, while the anonymous narrator defies conventions by pursuing her desires.

The novel explores the intersection of Western and Indian cultures, impacting the roles and expectations for women. Female relationships become a lens through which cultural clashes and adaptations are observed, particularly the interactions between Olivia and her Indian relatives. The unnamed narrator's connections with local women, highlight cultural nuances that shape female experiences. Above all, Jhabvala delves into power dynamics within relationships, reflecting on how women navigate a complex web of familial, societal, and personal expectations. Independence emerges as a key theme, with the character of the Nawab exercises power over Olivia, influencing her decisions. In contrast, the unnamed narrator seeks personal agency and independence in her own relationships.

Every individual's consciousness remains intricately linked to the current social ethos, giving rise to irrevocable disparities in the definitions of men and women. As Patricia Spacks asserts, "there seems to be something we might call a woman's point of view, ... an outlook sufficiently distinct to be recognizable through the centuries" (Gupta, 179). Women, dancing to different 'logical imperatives,' experience the world uniquely, with distinct feelings, desires, hatreds, and sympathies, shaping their writing from a different perspective. Their search for

selfhood becomes, in context, a search for womanhood. This study critically examines the search for womanhood in Jhabvala's Heat and Dust.

Heat and Dust unfolds as a double-layered narrative, chronicling the lives of two female characters in India, separated by fifty years. The two storylines echo and mirror each other, emerging from the shared experiences of two women. The common narrator 'I' links these parallel tales. Heat and Dust explores the options available to women seekers, contemplating both societal conventions and the rejection of Western and Oriental norms. The consideration of sexual exploitation as a potential means of escape is also measured." As the critic Sukrita Paul Kumar says, "The fluidity of woman's identity is (in the novel) presented in the delineation of herself as formulated externally by cultural heritage on one hand and on the other hand through an internal process of redefinition and discovery" (26).

The narrator, who remains 'I' throughout the novel, is on a quest. Initially, she believes, and we believe with her, that it is merely an attempt to trace the mysterious life of an ancestor. She states in the very beginning, "But this is not my story, it is Olivia's as far as I can follow it" (H&D, 2). As the story progresses, it becomes impossible to ignore the resemblances between the two women. The scrutiny of the past becomes an imaginative act of identification, besides being an interpretation of history. History begins to repeat itself in the same spatial reality. The narrator's search is validated by the fact that she is following the grooves left behind by Olivia and unconsciously stepping into them. Olivia lived in India, the narrator lives in India; Olivia is a woman, the narrator is a woman. These facts link the two women in a commonality of experience and bind them into a single experiential framework. Olivia's experience becomes the springboard from which proceeds the narrator's sublime pursuit of her womanhood. When one reads Julia Esquivel's verses, "From it I was reborn, a new path opened up, And the darkness became light for me."

Overall, the two plots revolve around a similar Hindu/Muslim celebration day – the spouse's big day and Baba Firdaus' sanctuary. Significant and urgent events occur on that day and place, marked in time. Using these themes, the author weaves into the novel a variety of overlapping references to a male-centric territory, the social debasement of marriage, and an incendiary yet essential strain of resistance in both Hindu and Occidental style.

The following of the strain of resistance is fundamental to the novel. As a young bride, Olivia admires Douglas Rivers' noble course and optimism. However, with the passage of time and the closer perspective of spousehood, the vigor fades. Domesticity offers fewer

opportunities for success or distraction, especially for the wife of a civil service officer cooped up in a city that was always 'hot and dusty.' Around her are examples of what incarceration and passive domesticity have done to women – Mr. Crawford's wife, Major Minnie's wife, and Dr. Saunder's wife. Olivia tells Harry, the Nawab's assistant:

> And you don't think I like sitting around here all day, day after day, staring at the wall and waiting for Douglas to come home, do you? I can well see how people can go batty that way… like Mrs. Saunders. Just sitting inside the house and imagining things. I don't want to become like Mrs. Saunders. But if I go on sitting here by myself, I shall. (H&D,130)

Olivia must navigate the grim political reality unique to her role as the wife of an ICS Officer, tasked with safeguarding the nation's moral integrity. Living in a phallocratic society, she wearies of conforming to prescribed gender norms, challenging the elevated status of her husband and his male peers. Her reluctance to join Beth and Mary on a summer mountain trip signifies not just a desire to stay with her spouse but a deliberate act of disobedience.

Olivia confronts the limitations imposed by male traditionalism, evident in her defence of the controversial Sati practice. Despite acknowledging Douglas's disapproval, Olivia rejects the societal certainty surrounding widow-burning, driven by a need to resist conformity. "She had no desire to recommend widow – burning but it was everyone else being so sure - tolerant and smiling but sure - that made her want to take another stand" (H&D, 59).

Recognizing her decorative role in her husband's life, she channels her desire for self-discovery and fulfilment through a liaison with the Nawab of Khatm, finding solace in a connection that transcends mere friendship. The Nawab's magnetic allure captivates Olivia, leading to a love that disrupts her carefully constructed societal image. Balancing her expected wifely duties with the secret pleasure derived from the Nawab becomes a delicate juggling act. "She felt drawn to him by a strength, a magnetism that she had never yet in all her life experienced with anyone" (H&D,136).

She begins living this double life, trying to balance the ritual pampering expected of a wife, with the secret pleasure she derives from her association with the Nawab. With the sexual consummation of their relationship, she disposes of carefully constructed male myths and establishes personally preferred parameters. James Ivory of the Merchant-Ivory-Jhabvala fame describes the situation as a 'fallen European woman' confronting challenge in his book 'Autobiography of Princess': "Any European woman who lived with a Maharaja was asking

for trouble sooner or later. She got it from his wives and female relatives who schemed for her removal. She got it from the official British who snubbed and despised her and tended to regard her as unsettling...” (H&D, 36). Dr. Saunders validates this perceptive observation. “…but Dr. Saunders was somewhat triumphant as well, having been proved right. He had always known there was something rotten about Olivia: something weak and rotten…” (H&D 170).

The author herself seems to believe that Olivia was seduced by the Nawab. However, wouldn’t it be more accurate to view her as a willing participant in the affair and the act itself? The Nawab’s motive for courting her is seen as a personal vendetta against the British. To interpret the events in this light is to undermine Olivia’s ultimate act of rebellion. Though the consequences terrify her, Olivia has significantly broken away from the oppressive straitjacket. Caught in a peculiarly female dilemma—a trap set by her biology and patriarchy—Olivia panics and hastily takes action that disfigures her socially and physically.

Forced into solitude amidst the peaks of the Himalayas, she lives there as a recluse. The narrative is unclear about what happens further. One is led to assume that Olivia remains in the mountains (that she refused to go to earlier) forever. Is it a fall or a soaring (symbolized by the physical ascent up the mountains), a new beginning, and positive isolationism? Is Olivia reached womanhood? the author leaves it to the quintessential women reader: “Are those dewdrops on the rose, or are they tears?” (H&D, 171).

One cannot ignore the profound connection between the Himalayas and spiritual transcendence. For Olivia, in the bosom of the mountains, there is a heavy association. Is it a step forward or a regression? Penitence or boon? Are there teardrops or dewdrops? It is positive to believe there were dewdrops; it is comforting to believe there were dewdrops; it is regenerative to believe there were dewdrops. So let us believe there were dewdrops, not tears.

Composing Olivia’s story, the storyteller encounters her own ‘new’ story and simultaneously delves into the past from which the present arises. It is possible to see the writer and woman as ostensibly two entities, but the writer is so because she is a woman. The narrator's cornucopia of experience derives from her essential womanhood or lack of it.

Times have changed. “Everything is different now,” the storyteller says simply. Sexual folklore has been tested, and it no longer holds the force it once did—at least for the storyteller. The political reality has also undergone a significant shift. The quintessential Briton in India is no longer Douglas Rivers or Major Minnie’s, but a sedated, out schizophrenic wavering youngster—Chid.

The bi-temporal structure allows us to see deeper into the obscurity. The dust is brushed away, and things become clearer. The narrator can venture into India, risking less. Olivia risked all and was swept up in the passion of her non-confirmation. This passion eludes the narrator as she goes through similar experiences with much less emotional inclination. She has the wisdom of time behind her.

This striking impassivity perhaps also enables her to experience life differently from Olivia. She is now in tune with rhythm as Olivia never was: "Chid and I have now both merged into the landscape: we are part of the town, part of people's lives here, and have been completely accepted" (H&D 78). The sense of closeness with the land makes her, a supposedly liberated woman, more sympathetic. She finds she can sympathize with Chid, the two youngsters in search of peace, the beggar woman, Leelavati, the anonymous Indian at the hospital, why even the missionary at S.M. Hostel whose warning voice no longer applies to her.

Sexuality comes into question here. Femininity is disposable: the vapidity circulating around the narrator unsexes her. Even in Chid's sexual advances, the narrator is only a passive receptacle – an indifferent onlooker.

> He is always hungry, and not only for food. He also needs sex very badly and seems to take it for granted that I will give it to him the same way I give him my food. I have never had such a feeling of being used. In fact, he admits that this is what he is doing - using me to reach a higher plane of consciousness through the powers of sex that we are engendering between us. I don't really know why I let him go ahead. I'm much bigger and stronger than he is and could easily keep him off. (H&D, 65)

The narrator has to navigate this to consummate her relationship with Inder Lal. She makes the initial move, and Inder Lal complies at the very same site that stood witness to the consummation between Olivia and the Nawab. She moves away from sexlessness to join what Spivak calls 'the uterine social organization.' The affair with Inder Lal produces results, and the narrator conceives. In a rash move, she tries to abort the baby, but it is not to be so.

If patriarchal systems punish and castigate a woman with sin and shame in sex and childbirth in the former story, the mystical Maji through the narrator restores female sexuality – sex and childbirth – to its sacred pace in the latter. Femininity is restored. The narrator finds her lost womanhood in Satipur, under the hands of a "former mid-wife": "And again I had the feeling of her transmitting something to me – not taking away but giving" (H&D 164-165),

and "Above all I wanted nothing to happen – that her efforts should not prove successful. It was absolutely clear to me now that I wanted my pregnancy and the completely new feeling – of rapture – of which it was the cause" (H&D 165).

The narrator has reached selfhood. Dormant femininity has been awakened in her as life energy flows from Maji's hands onto her womb. She then goes away to the mountains on a self-willed exile, much like Olivia did. Both have sought and found, at least in part, the pinnacle point of transcendence, edge, and vivacity of experience. They stand united in womanhood: "That is what I expect to see. Perhaps it is also what Olivia saw: the view – or vision – that filled her eyes all those years and suffused her soul" (H&D 180).

In Heat and Dust, Jhabvala skilfully addresses the evolving roles of women, examining the impact of cultural dynamics, societal expectations, and personal choices. Through her characters, Jhabvala engages readers in a nuanced exploration of female experiences in a changing India.

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Note:

All successive references to this novel are given parenthetically with abbreviation as “H&D” and the concerned page numbers.