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“MEN AND WOMEN CHARACTERS IN HEAT AND DUST”

"Men and Women Characters in Heat and Dust"

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Abstract – Heat and Dust, incidentally, is peopled with characters from two different worlds-India and England. They are, therefore, culturally different. The difference is once again accentuated by temporal factor, i.e. from Olivia to the Narrator, or from the Nawab to Inder, it is almost a gap of some fifty years that temporally separates them. This is where the novel ceases to become a novel of a particular region, nation and time. In her essay, "An experience of India," Ruth Jhabvala notes that to "live in India and be at peace one must to a very considerable extent become Indian and adopt Indian attitudes, habits, beliefs, assume if possible an Indian personality." Seen from this observation many of her western characters during the British India fail to achieve this goal. One must note that the observation, if at all valid, is valid during the post- Independence India only. The British came to India to change the country and change their future, and apparently resisted change in them. This attitude gives validity to the rigid and uncompromising British characters she portrays in the Novel. They are more real under a specific circumstances, be it Douglas or Major Minnies, or any other British character for that matter.

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Ruth Jhabvala's Indian male characters-both during the 1920s and the 1970s-are in many respects not realistically portrayed. Neither the Nawab nor Inder La1 for that matter MEN AND WOMEN IN HGIT AND DUST represents proper perspectives one is expected to do as Indian. The Nawab is an irresponsible leader of his community, hated both by the British openly, and in secret, by the Indians as well. His time was a politically turbulent time and it was not possible for any Indian to be neutral. But Ruth Jhabvala deliberately remains silent on the issue and makes her people less real in the particular political context. Inder La1 too fails to convince. He is rather an effeminate type of character. He cannot lead anybody; he is always led-first by his mother and then by the Narrator. Seriousness is something that he seriously lacks. However, it seems that women characters in Heat and Dust are more interesting than the male characters. The women-from the main characters, Olivia and the Narrator, to the minor ones, such as Beth Crawford and Maji, are all strong persons, who are not afraid to assert themselves, even if it means going against the conventions of the time. The strength and figure of the Narrator is much better than Inder, and Inder finds it difficult to keep pace with this lady while walking together. But somehow none of the two major women characters tell us much about what sort of ideals they represent, which passions move them or how they are reflecting their respective times. Olivia is clearly a neurotic woman who does not know what she wants and the nameless Narrator is just observing the time passing by in India' and, trying to understand why Olivia 'sidetracked' from her normal path to opt for a

passionate love affair with a local prince. But such love story is really sensational and silly. No characters or nothing in this novel offer a striking or haring cultural perspective which is very much expected in a work like Jhabvala's Heat and Dust. Attempts are made here to look at individual characters in terms of his/her socio-cultural contexts and circumstances in which he/she is portrayed. DOUGLAS RIVERS One of the main male characters in the first story of Heat and Dust is Douglas Rivers, Olivia's husband. Born in India, Douglas maintains the line of generations serving faithfully for the British colonial project in India. An ICS officer, he "worked like a Trojan and never ceased to be calm and controlled, so that he was very much esteemed both by his colleagues and by the Indians". A very hardworking man, Douglas is used to get up early in the morning and work till late evening. Olivia also observes his qualities: "She had always loved him for these qualities-for his imperturbability, his English solidness and strength; his manliness". Obviously, morally a most suitable soldier of the British Empire, Douglas has a matching physical and moral s t a t u r e "He was upright and just". This justness is, of course, his second wife Tessie's estimate. But in many ways Douglas is an embodiment of the British colonial ideology in action. He knows the Hindustani language very well, and knows well how mastery over the cultural components of the ruled can best be utilized to reinforce the colonial hold. It is a supreme talent of an administrator like Douglas, who does not try to appreciate the niceties of a language, but discovers a new field for its function and application: "It is the only language in which you can deliver deadly insults with the most flowery courtesy". Any Indian will be ashamed of defining an Indian

language in terms of a purely derogatory application. But this is exactly what Warren Hastings wanted. He believed that the ruler must know the culture of the ruled so that the ruling class could have better hold over the subjugated majority. In Douglas' case, therefore, knowledge and power are correlated; mastery over knowledge becomes a tool for political supremacy. He all along remains every inch a colonial burra sahib: "It was almost as if Douglas were playing a musical instrument of which he had entirely mastered the stops". However, despite his apparent principles, he does not mind receiving gifts from his subjects: The rich Indian people often come to pay him their respect and the visit would invariably bring him some offerings like "baskets of fruits and trays of sweetmeats and pistachio nuts". A product of colonial philosophy, Douglas, therefore, is more a type than an individual. In his airs there is a kind of mechanical look. Maybe, he lacks the individual human touch in him; but he appears to be quite a considerate man too.

Although he personally does not like the Nawab much, he does not mind when he comes to know that the Nawab has visited Olivia: "She was lonely, and it was decent of the Nawab to have called on her". He could be rigid too. Despite Olivia's coaxing he refuses to accept Nawab's second invitation for dinner only because his colleagues and friends, the Crawfords, are not invited. The very next moment he feels for Olivia-"He watched her turn back into the house; she was in her kimono and looked frail and unhappy: "'I'm a brute,' he thought to himself all day". When Olivia, after watching the grave of the Saunders' baby, gets emotionally disturbed, Douglas soothes her: "He had to forget his files for that one evening and devote himself entirely to her". No doubt he loves her very much: "he hugged her tighter and could hardly stifle a small cry-as if it were too much happiness for him to have her there in his arms, flobbered and shining in Indian moonlight". But so far as the conjugal relationship is concerned, he seems to be very faltering, at least outwardly: "Inarticulate by nature, sometimes he reached such a pitch of high emotion that he felt he had to express it: but his feelings were always too strong for him and made him stutter". Too busy with other things he does not have much time to give to Olivia. He cannot disown his responsibility in Olivia's frustrations. He does not mind asking Olivia to go to Simla for a change when he should know that it is his company that could restore her to normalcy. He obviously fails to look into the very innermost desires of his wife and cares more for the pat on his back from his seniors. However, there is no doubt about the fact that he loves Olivia and trusts her. But his feelings are very silent; they often misguide Olivia and others. Even when Olivia's escapade is discovered, he allows no one to guess his feelings. He too, otherwise a very responsible officer, fails to judge his wife. Marcia tries to give her estimate of Douglas, which is not in tune with the impressions he produces otherwise:

"Marcia never could understand what Olivia had seen in Douglas, as far as she, Marcia, was concerned, he was just a stick

SUMMING UP

It is true Ruth Jhabvala's characterization has often been adversely criticized. Her characters in Heat and Dust are more imaginary than real, representing preconceived images more than representing individuality. And when representing individuality, such as Olivia's or the Narrator's, things go to extremes. Maybe, Ruth Jhabvala has been guided by her notion of the two worlds and two sets of characters having cultural affiliations to respective cultures. This way her European characters are often markedly different from the Indian. In the first part of the story all the major British characters, therefore, can speak in unison on any particular Indian issue. Major Minnies, though appears to be deviating from the beaten track, cannot virtually make his position very clear. As an educated person, at best, he can be a member of the British liberal humanist tradition as formulated by the teachings of John Lock (1632-1704), John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and other European scholars, and portrayed by E.M. Forster in the form of Fielding in A Passage to India. Against his measured steps, the unmeasured one of Olivia has been totally regretted by the entire community. Harry remains unassigned all along, and he is termed as a hanger-on. Whereas Douglas, the Saunders, the Crawfords, etc who happen to be in the main action of the novel, are all of almost one opinion about India and the sympathizers toward India as well. On the Indian side it is the Nawab alone who counts in the novel's framework. He is an irresponsible man, rather reckless, neither fights for his subjects nor does he uphold the British cause. He lives for himself and his misadventures. His recklessness and irresponsibility give Douglas better political footing. On the other hand, the second part of the story has the Narrator and Inder Lal. They are in fact shadows of the past the Narrator being the modern version of Olivia and Inder the modern replica of the Nawab. There are striking similarities between these two couples. Both the women willingly accept.

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The Indians as equals; and both the men were troubled by their neurotic wives. Although without pomp and splendour of the olden days, in many ways Inder Lal seconds the old master. The second pair too has similar experience of the hijra dance and the shrine of Baba Firdous; both are responsible for giving birth to babies. The couple thus highlights certain elements of un-changeability in a changing world. Again, Ruth Jhabvala's world is infested with beggars, cheats, dirt, and many other ugly elements. Interesting thing about her world is that many of the beggars in India are white beggars, beggars by choice, not by circumstances or profession; and they are as nasty as their Indian counterparts. In her description of A.'s Hotel the narration goes on-"Eight nine of them to a room, and some of them don't even have the money for that, they just sleep on the street. They beg from each other and steal from

each other" . The condition of one of them is even worse-"He can't have been more than thirty, perhaps a German or Scandinavian-he was very fair and tall. His clothes were in tatters and you could see his white skin through them. He had long hair, all tangled and matted; there was a monkey sitting by him and the monkey was delousing him. Yes the monkey was taking the lice out of the man's hair. I looked in that man's face-in his eyes-and I tell you I saw a soul in hell . Interestingly, the free India is nastier than the British India and some European hippies have contributions to that 'hell.' Thus both European and Indian beggars (and thereby cultures as well) come under Ruth Jhabvala's scrutiny.

It must also be noted that many of the characters in the novel. are not really the products of the Narrator's personal experience. The people of the first story actually are recovered from secondary sources, Olivia's letters and interviews. However, Inder Lal, Maji, etc are the people of the present time and the Narrator knows them personally. In any case, all her characters remain a little enigmatic-many questions such as who, why and where, etc. can be raised as to the veracity of these characters. Ruth Jhabvala has mostly relied on the characters of the periphery rather than of the mainstream life of India for her novel. Maybe this was the requirement of her ironic mode of treatment. Since irony emerges from incongruity-a gap between what is and what should be, it was safer to depict these people who were somehow lacking in certain roundness somewhere in their mental make-up. But there is no doubt that the very structure of the novel makes it more of a hindrance than help to the understanding of the characters and the situations.

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