

## Disillusionment With More Than India

Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust*

D.C.R.A. GOONETILLEKE

A POLISH-JEWISH ESCAPEE from Germany to England at the age of twelve, Ruth Praver Jhabvala nourished a deep-rooted literary ambition (it inspired her as a child to write stories in German and pick "The Short Story in England 1700–1750" as the topic of her M.A. thesis) which burgeoned when she gained an entrée into Indian life as the wife of a Parsi architect. In her early novels, especially in *To Whom She Will* (1955) and *The Nature of Passion* (1956), she was critical of India like an outsider, yet she seemed an insider, in that she was inward with Indian realities and appreciative. *Heat and Dust* (1995) marks her disillusionment both with India and with more than India, intimating the new directions and emphases of her later novels (which travel through time as well as space and in which the Western psyche occupies more of her attention) and employing an innovative, radical departure in narrative technique.

Jhabvala has a woman's perspective, natural and inevitable, given that she is a female writer. It is obvious in *Heat and Dust*, because it focuses on two (English) women and because, given the fact that these two are fifty years apart, women are important, perhaps more important than men, as signifiers of change. The narrative is double-layered. The "I" of the narrative set in post-Independence India, in 1973, is Miss Rivers, though she does not carry her name as such in the novel, thereby widening its significance (in the film version of the novel, directed by James Ivory, and produced by Ismail Merchant in 1983, she is named Anne). She is also the narrator of the first story – of Olivia, who came to live in India in 1923, when it was a British colony, yet not in Victorian times and so not too distant from us. Olivia is the first wife of Douglas Rivers. Miss Rivers is the grand-daughter of his second wife, Tessie Crawford. Miss Rivers stays in India to unravel the mystery surrounding Olivia; the gothic element in the novel creeps in:

I don't remember Douglas at all – he died when I was three – but I remember Grandmother Tessie and Great-Aunt Beth very well. They were cheerful women with a sensible and modern outlook on life: but nevertheless, so my parents told me, for years they could

not be induced to talk about Olivia. They shied away from her memory as from something dark and terrible.<sup>1</sup> (my emphasis)

Miss Rivers' account of her story in India is revealed through a diary she kept at that time. We learn of Olivia through her letters written to her sister Marcia – as narrated by Miss Rivers. Olivia writes to Marcia “as if it was a relief to have someone to confide in” (47–48). Miss Rivers notes:

Olivia's handwriting is clear and graceful, even though she seems to have written very fast just as the thoughts and feelings came to her. Her letters are all addressed to Marcia, but really they sound as if she is communing with herself, they are so intensely personal. (94)

*Heat and Dust* anticipates postmodernism though without fantasy. Its structure is that of an artefact. John Updike objected: “the alternation between plots drains both of momentum, or of the substance that lends momentum.”<sup>2</sup> This alleged flaw, the cross-cutting, is really a postmodernist virtue: it prevents the reader from getting too absorbed in the worlds of the novel and thereby keeps him/her alert and critical, like the Brechtian alienation effect. The novel is written in an almost flat, bare style so as to focus the reader's attention on the content. There is no attempt to create character as in realist fiction. Comparisons to Jane Austen or Chekhov, usually made in regard to Jhabvala's novels, are inappropriate and inapplicable, given that *Heat and Dust* is very postmodern. The opening sentence states that “Olivia went away with the Nawab”: Jhabvala is now capable of sacrificing the surprise and suspense this central fact could evoke.

Laurie Sucher remarks: “the words of the title, *Heat and Dust*, in addition to describing the climatic conditions in which Olivia's story is set, signify the largest literary themes: love and death, passion and the obscurity of the past.”<sup>3</sup> “The climatic conditions” apply in both Olivia's and Miss Rivers' stories and function as real, not orientalist, ingredients. The symbolic significations of the title are generated as Sucher sees them. The “love” and “passion” of Olivia and Miss Rivers are central. Olivia's story is of the past and Miss Rivers tries to penetrate “the obscurity of the past.” “Death” is not a symbolic pole of either narrative but graves are prominent in both. Yet these symbolic significations do not represent the themes of the novel as such. The theme is the quest for fulfilment – on the part of the individuals, projected through Olivia and Miss Rivers. Unlike *Get Ready for Battle*, this novel is not concerned with the country, India, as such.

At the beginning, Olivia is in love with her husband, Douglas. He was a personable, upright, capable, industrious administrator – manly yet unable to make her pregnant, though both he and Olivia feel that a child will end their respective dissatisfactions. He was a sahib but she thought that he was different from the Crawfords and the Minnies, whom she found boring. Olivia is placed in a situation typical of the memsahib: as Charles Allen notes,

<sup>1</sup> Ruth Praver Jhabvala, *Heat and Dust* (1975; London: Futura, 1983): 1–2. Further page references are in the main text.

<sup>2</sup> John Updike, *Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism* (London: André Deutsch, 1983): 714.

<sup>3</sup> Laurie Sucher, *The Fiction of Ruth Praver Jhabvala: The Politics of Passion* (London: Macmillan, 1989): 104.

Once her husband had left the bungalow in the morning she was alone, surrounded by servants with whom she could not communicate and by a complexity of Indian conventions – summed up in the word *dastur* – ‘the stifling, enervating atmosphere of customs, against which energy beats itself unavailingly, as against a feather bed’ – that far exceeded anything Anglo-India could come up with. She had precious little alternative but to turn to other memsahibs and adopt their standards.<sup>4</sup>

Olivia does not wish “to turn to other memsahibs and adopt their standards.” In the hot season, she refuses to spend four months in Simla, the cool hill station, both because she dislikes the company of the memsahibs and their social round and because she does not want to be separated from Douglas, who will be toiling in the plains of Satipur. Olivia suffers from a sense of routine and boredom – while Douglas was at work, but her main dissatisfaction is sexual and with him. She wants to be the slave of his day and the queen of his night. Her romantic intensity finds no answering quality in Douglas. So she looks for it in the Nawab of the neighbouring princely state of Khatm. Indeed, given the male population in the area, he appears the only alternative.

The Nawab is, for Olivia, the exotic Other. He holds a Laurance Hope-ish attraction for her – as if he were The Sheik. E.M. Hull's novel of that name was published in 1921 and was as popular a success in book form as it was on the silent screen in the motion picture starring Rudolph Valentino. Jhabvala has an extraordinary sense of the period in which Olivia's narrative is set. Olivia is, certainly, naive, but this is understandable, perhaps inevitable, for one of her age, placed as she was, and not to be condemned for this – in Jhabvala's, and our, eyes. She does not seek the “real India” as Adela Quested did in Forster's *A Passage to India* but is attracted to an individual, a dark idol. The Nawab possesses a certain magnetism: when she visits him in his palace,

She followed him wherever he called her and did whatever he wanted. She too made no secret of anything. She remembered how Harry had once told her ‘You don't say no to a person like him’ and found it to be true. (152)

Harry the Englishman in the Palace is unable to leave the Nawab despite complaints of ill-health, being homesick and despite a desire to see his mother, alone in a little flat in South Kensington and not keeping too well. Olivia visits the Nawab regularly, though she is risking her marriage and reputation. She is so daring and independent as to break through the racial, social and gender restrictions of the colonial milieu. Even Fielding in *A Passage to India* does not sleep with India as she does. “Satipur” means “place/city of Sati”; the name is ironic. In the act of sati / suttee, the widow sacrifices herself on the pyre of her husband out of fidelity and loyalty, yet Olivia sacrifices herself in her liaison with the Nawab, but not for the sake of her husband, violating fidelity and loyalty. Ironically, the Nawab and Douglas are of the same height and almost the same build.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Allen, *Raj: A Scrapbook of British India 1877–1947* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984): 18.

Yasmine Gooneratne observes of *Heat and Dust*: “the British Raj is seen to have been dishonest and deceitful, encouraging a similar dishonesty and deceit in its subjects.”<sup>5</sup> When the local rich men come to pay their respects to Douglas the sahib, he speaks to them as if he “were playing a musical instrument of which he had entirely mastered the stops” (37). But, soon after they leave, he calls them a “pack of rogues” (37). Jhabvala’s satire suggests that both parties are putting on an act. The same sort of thing happens when the sahibs and the Nawab meet or when the memsahibs meet Indian women: when Beth Crawford calls on the Nawab’s mother, the Begum, at the Palace, “Everyone played their part well – the Palace ladies as well as Mrs Crawford – and gave evidence of having frequently played it before” (29).

To the British, the Indians are “lesser breeds without the Law” (to use Kipling’s notorious phrase). The Indians are outside the pale of civilized order – even the Nawab and the Begum, though they enjoy positions to be reckoned with. The British are the norm of a people within the Law, uniquely endowed to carry out best the tasks of imperialism, a chosen race. Racism is in-built into their attitudes towards the Indians, and Jhabvala shows them up as desiccated, too. Jhabvala is particularly subversive of the British colonialists when she exposes what E.M. Forster noted in 1920, their “unconscious hypocrisy,”<sup>6</sup> and when she shows how the sahibs and memsahibs think the Indians are under their thumb but that this is not really the case, how the Indians (the Nawab included) use their humility, their powerlessness, to manipulate the British, to exercise a measure of power over them. In the latter instance, Jhabvala is dramatizing the trope of “sly civility” as explained by Homi K. Bhabha; this trope situates the slippages of colonial authority in a native appropriation of its signs, and points to both the excesses a discourse of presence cannot contain and to “the native refusal to satisfy the colonizer’s narrative demand.”<sup>7</sup> Jhabvala’s larger image and the reality, however, are more complex, and in her depiction of Olivia and the Nawab she adds further dimensions. Olivia plays a double game with the other members of the English community in Satipur and with her husband. Amidst the subterfuges, including her own, the sincerity of her feelings for the Nawab stands out by contrast.

In presenting *Khatm*, Jhabvala does not consider the princely state in colonial India as such, but, rather, the personality of the ruler, the Nawab, though the political position of his state matters in that, under the British administration, his power has diminished. The emphasis is not so much on the smallness of the Nawab’s state as on his powerlessness compared to his ancestors. He is chafing under, and complains about, the restrictions imposed on him by the British. He would love to be an autocrat like Amanullah Khan, whom he recalls, and who was the first to enjoy the title of the Nawab of *Khatm*, conceded by the British in 1817; he tells Olivia that he envies the kind of life Amanullah Khan led (135). The Nawab’s Palace is grand, which thrills Olivia. But, ironically, the

town in its shadow consisted of nothing but slummy lanes and ramshackle houses (165), its villages impoverished; the state without interesting ruins or hunting country (15); and, it is stressed, the Nawab is in want of money. “*Khatm*” means “finished”: the name is appropriate.

The Nawab has something in common with Charlotte Brontë’s Rochester and Emily Brontë’s Heathcliff, gloomy dominant gothic heroes who ultimately trace their ancestry to Byron’s heroes. (The Nawab’s mad wife is an echo of Rochester’s.) The Nawab’s character is invested with a gothic sense of mystery, which later disappears. Jhabvala shows many aspects to him, a complexity in him. The British criticize him for extorting money, encouraging communal friction which leads to an annual slaughter of Hindus by Muslims on Husband’s Wedding Day, and allying himself with dacoits. The criticisms have substance, are admitted by Harry, and convince the reader, but Olivia refuses to believe these, and her view of the Nawab is ironically shown up as an idealization. But there is an added subtlety. What Jhabvala is, at bottom, projecting in the case of the Nawab is the different morality that belongs to a different kind of man, a morality alien to the British, to the West – a case of “East is East and West is West” (to quote Kipling’s famous line). For such a man, a ruler to boot, the entertainment provided by *hijras* (male eunuchs) is perfectly normal and not a sign of a cad.

Ralph J. Crane’s view that “the Nawab is bored by his routine and sees his days with Olivia as a pleasant diversion,”<sup>8</sup> is over-simple and indicates the least of his motives. Olivia does stimulate genuine emotional excitement in the Nawab; at the same time, he sees his affair with Olivia as a power ploy and a device to humiliate the British. Jhabvala is both understanding about and critical of the Nawab. His rotting pianos signify an empty attachment to Western symbols of class, leisure and culture. His unmusicality further indicates a lack of sensibility (for Jhabvala, musical sensitivity usually stands for emotional intensity and depth). By the same token, Olivia’s playing the piano and musicality signify those virtues. The Nawab ill-treats Olivia at times. But they do share a certain togetherness, as when they dip their fingers in the little spring at Baba Firdaus’ shrine while on a picnic (46) – a positive touch in the novel. Significantly, the water is shallow – like their feelings.

Jhabvala seems to have had E.M. Forster and his novel *A Passage to India* in mind when writing *Heat and Dust*, though *A Passage to India* is not an intertext of *Heat and Dust* as Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is of V.S. Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River*. (Jhabvala has stated that she read Forster’s novel before she went to India.<sup>9</sup>) *A Passage to India* (first published in 1924) is about race and personal relations in colonial India in the first quarter of this century, and this is the basis for Jhabvala’s 1923 narrative. The stirrings of nationalist consciousness in Forster’s novel,<sup>10</sup> too, are reflected in *Heat and Dust* where Olivia expresses anxiety that ‘things’ may change with “Mr Gandhi and these

<sup>8</sup> Ralph J. Crane, *Inventing India: A History of India in English-Language Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1993): 90.

<sup>9</sup> “Ruth Praver Jhabvala,” in *World Authors 1950–1970* (1975), quoted from *Current Biography*, ed. Maxine Block (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1977): 222.

<sup>10</sup> See D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, *Developing Countries in British Fiction* (London: Macmillan & Totowa NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1977): 251.

<sup>5</sup> Yasmine Gooneratne, *Silence, Exile and Cunning: The Fiction of Ruth Praver Jhabvala* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1983): 213.

<sup>6</sup> E.M. Forster, “Notes on the English Character,” in *Abinger Harvest* (1936; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967): 22.

<sup>7</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “Sly Civility” (1985), in *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994): 99.

people" (89) and the Nawab is unhappy with the diminution of his power under the British and British control. Ralph J. Crane thinks that "there are obvious parallels to be drawn between Olivia Rivers and Adela Quested, as well as between Douglas Rivers and Ronny Heaslop."<sup>11</sup> To me, there seems to be no resemblance between frivolous, feminine, fluttering Olivia and the unromantic, plain, earnest, flat-chested, politically conscious Adela. It is arguable that there is a similarity between Douglas and Ronny, since they are both Empire-builders, but it seems to me that they constitute a type and, therefore, do not imply conscious intertextuality on Jhabvala's part.

Harry is a homosexual in the Nawab's court – as Forster was when he was Secretary to the Maharaj of Dewas State Senior. Laurie Sucher rightly points out the parallel and possible influence.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the Nawab is using Harry to humiliate the British as "H.H." did Forster. I think it is possible that Jhabvala is alluding to this aspect of Forster's experience, too, *pace* Sucher's view.<sup>13</sup> This aspect may have been current in oral tradition in India before "Kanaya" was published in 1983, and Jhabvala may have had access to the oral source when she wrote *Heat and Dust* (1975).

Olivia becomes pregnant and the Nawab is sure that he is the father. Olivia decides to have an abortion and flees to the Palace after it:

It isn't so very far from Satipur to Khatm – about 15 miles – and it was a journey that she had been doing daily by one of the Nawab's cars. But that time when she ran away from the hospital there was no car. Harry never knew how she came but presumed it was by what he called some native mode of transport. She was also in native dress – a servant's coarse sari – so that she reminded him of a print he had seen called *Mrs Secombe in Flight from the Mutineers*. Mrs Secombe was also in native dress and in a state of great agitation, with her hair awry and smears of dirt on her face: naturally, since she was flying for her life from the mutineers at Sikora to the safety of the British Residency at Lucknow. Olivia was also in flight – but, as Harry pointed out, in the opposite direction. (171–72)

The "Mutiny" of 1857 was a watershed in British-Indian relations: it marked the estrangement of the races and undermined British confidence. It was invoked in times of unrest, as reflected not only in *Heat and Dust* but in Rudyard Kipling's story "The Man Who Would Be King," in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and in Paul Scott's *The Raj Quartet*. Harry points out the irony of Olivia's flight. She has ruined herself and cannot stay either in British Satipur or in the Nawab's Khatm. She has to be put away, and the Nawab shows his real consideration and attachment when he provides her with a cottage and a piano in the Himalayas, and, though not affluent, even visits her. The coolness of the Himalayas suits Olivia's Europeanness. Symbolically, she is away from the passion, the heat, on the plains, and has access to the spirituality associated with heights, the Himalayas, as Miss Rivers sees it. The image of Olivia in the mountains is of her playing the *same* music and doing the *same* embroidery. Her disappointment has shocked her into stagnancy. Her window is befogged. Yet spiritual fulfilment cannot be completely ruled out.

<sup>11</sup> Ralph J. Crane, *Ruth Praver Jhabvala* (New York: Twayne, 1999): 81.

<sup>12</sup> Laurie Sucher, *The Fiction of Ruth Praver Jhabvala*, 136–39.

<sup>13</sup> Sucher, *The Fiction of Ruth Praver Jhabvala*, 131.

The final impression of the Nawab in London is pathetic. He has lost his magnetism, naturally, with the years. There is no air or mystery about him. In fact, he seems prematurely aged – flabby, soft and mild. He has developed a sweet tooth and has got into the habit of devouring cream pastries. He is losing his memory and is begging for funds from the British authorities. Even in his heyday, the Nawab was chafing, because he was unable to cut a figure like his ancestor Amanullah Khan.

Olivia was beautiful and feminine. Miss Rivers typifies the gender blurring of recent times. She wears loose-fitting Indian clothes and men's sandals (women's do not fit her). She is much taller than Inder Lal, her landlord and partner, she walks with long strides, and keeps forgetting that this makes it difficult for him to keep up with her (49). Because she is not only tall but flat-chested (the gender difference is thus minimal), the Indians often call after her: *hijra*.

In colonial India, the English were the cynosure of all eyes – as in the 1923 narrative. Olivia's affair with the Nawab had political and social significance. In the modern narrative and modern India, the English are insignificant. Paul Scott's observation in Calcutta when he visited India few years earlier, in 1964, confirms this: "There was a [English] girl then, and an anglicized Indian. They were having an affair, as it was said. No one cares much these days, especially in Calcutta, about that sort of thing. It was simply part of the scene."<sup>14</sup> Therefore, Miss Rivers living among the Indians, her connection with Chid the British hippy (she allows him to sleep in her room and use her sexually with his monstrous erections) and her affair with Inder Lal, an Indian and married, are of no consequence. Indeed, there is a tendency to merge with the Indians – via clothes, food, love and spiritual experience; and this tendency is not confined to the narrator. She notes in her diary:

[...] we must look strange to them, and what must also be strange is the way we are living among them – no longer apart, but eating their food and often wearing Indian clothes because they are cooler and cheaper. (9)

It is significant that she uses "we," not "I." From another perspective, the colonial restrictions have disappeared. Satipur itself is different from what it was fifty years earlier. The building that Olivia and Douglas occupied now houses the Water Board, the municipal Health Department, and a sub-post office. The bastions of privilege in colonial times have fallen and democratization has taken place.

There are similarities and parallels between the narrative in the past and that in the present. Olivia has two sex partners, one British (her husband) and one Indian (her lover); so does the narrator (two lovers). Olivia visits the shrine of Baba Firdaus twice, the second time alone with the Nawab when he seduces her; the narrator also visits the shrine twice, the second time alone with Inder Lal when she seduces him. The contrast suggests how gender relations have changed between colonial and post-Independence times, and adds to the emphasis in the text on the gender blurring of recent times. The character of the Nawab's wife, "Sandy," is a parallel to that of Inder Lal's wife, Ritu.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Scott, "Method: The Mystery and the Mechanics" (1969), in Scott, *My Appointment with the Muse: Essays 1961–75*, ed. Shelley C. Reece (London: Heinemann, 1986): 59.

Both suffer from mental problems which negate their worth; they are put on the shelf by their husbands. Olivia's abortion is counterbalanced by the narrator's failed abortion – she changes her mind halfway through the process. Both ascend to the Himalayas. Olivia's discovery of herself, of India, parallels the narrator's discovery of Olivia, of India and herself.

These similarities, contrasts and parallels seem to me to constitute a (successful) post-modernist attempt to impose the writer's vision on the reader, and to exploit intratextuality which goes back to the ancient literary device of palimpsesting. When the Nawab's words to Olivia with reference to her pregnancy – "Really you will do this for me? You are not afraid? Oh how brave you are!" (152) – are used by Douglas too (154–55), the emphasis is, surely, non-realistic.

The final impression created by the novel is ambiguous. Olivia is a shadowy presence at the end. This is necessary. It is part of the poignancy and the sense of her failure. Her spiritual yearnings may have been a fact or merely imagined by Miss Rivers, reflecting her own. In any case, Olivia's success is doubtful. Ralph J. Crane's view that the narrator's quest is successfully fulfilled, that she "appears to merge with India successfully, probably because she has a purpose for being in India and is prepared to accept India as it is, to surrender herself to India without needing to throw off her own identity," that she "learns to swim in the flowing tide of India,"<sup>15</sup> is over-simple. So is Laurie Sucher's complementary view that when Miss Rivers "ascends to the Himalayas with a child within her: in the realm of the imagination and biology, her visit has borne fruit."<sup>16</sup> Miss Rivers is a representative figure as a seeker and she does fare better than numerous other seekers such as Chid and his two companions, who end up as derelicts. But pregnancy does not necessarily lead to a satisfactory issue; the ascent to the Himalayas is not necessarily going to result in spiritual fulfilment. The ultimate fate of Miss Rivers, too, is ambiguous.

Maji, however, is a positive figure. Her name in Hindi means 'mother' in a honorific sense, and, indeed, she measures up to her name. Her wide-ranging compassion is remarkable. It extends to the beggar woman, Leelavati, who dies in her arms. Maji recommends a pilgrimage as a solution to Ritu's mental problem. It seems positive, coming from her. But Chid has been left a nervous wreck as a consequence of his spiritual quest. Miss Rivers observes:

The question as to whether Chid is holy may remain open, but as far as the town is concerned, he has made a promising first step in shaving his head and throwing away his clothes. For this they seem ready to give him the benefit of many doubts. I've seen them do the same with Indian holy men who often pass through the town with their ochre robes and beads and begging bowls. On the whole they look a sturdy set of rascals to me – some of them heavily drugged, others randy as can be, all it seems to me with shrewd and greedy faces. (63–64)

Even the swamis in the Himalayas raised doubts in the reader's mind as to their holiness: they "are cheerful men and they laugh and joke in booming voices with the people

<sup>15</sup> Ralph J. Crane, *Ruth Praver Jhabvala*, 88–89.

<sup>16</sup> Laurie Sucher, *The Fiction of Ruth Praver Jhabvala*, 134.

in the bazaar" (181). All this adds to the doubt as to whether Olivia succeeded in her quest and whether Miss Rivers will. The doubt is left unresolved; Jhabvala's novel is open-ended, a modernistic fictional innovation.

*Heat and Dust* is thus a disillusioned book – in regard to both the past and the present, in regard to India and more than India. Both its outlook and technique are in keeping with our postmodernist times. It is a considerable achievement – so much so, that its comparative brevity is hardly noticeable. It certainly deserved to win the Booker Prize.

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ASNEL Papers appear under the auspices of the  
Gesellschaft für die Neuen Englischsprachigen Literaturen e.V. (GNEL)  
Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English (ASNEL)

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Formatting and layout: Gordon Collier

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Rodopi

Amsterdam - New York, NY 2005

N 13.2005