CHAPTER IV

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HEAT AND DUST
AND FASTING FEASTUNG: INTERCULTURAL
THEME
The aim of the chapter is to critically examine the manner of how the authors have handled the intercultural conflict presented in their novels. The necessity of such an examination is to evaluate the novels by finding out the similarities and differences between them.

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala’s *Heat and Dust* is mainly concerned with the westerners’ response to the land of India and its people. Set against the backdrop of British rule in India, Jhabvala’s novel gives an account of the life of Olivia Rivers, the wife of a British officer, who leaves her husband for the Indian Nawab. Structured into the two dimensions of time, the story of Olivia is reconstructed through the words of the narrator by means of the flashback.
Ruth Jhabvala's analysis of the alien's assimilation in India is seen in her new novel in a double perspective – as it took shape in Imperial India and as it does in the Seventies. Using as her material a packet of letters and a journal written in 1923 and 1975 respectively, she adopts the Fowlesian technique of interlocking the two planes of time for her novel's structure. A juxtaposition of the two Indias, one ruled by the ideals of separation and one characterised by the social and racial mobility to which Aziz is looking forward at the conclusion of *A Passage to India*, is achieved.¹

The narrator who is Olivia's step-grand daughter, comes to India to investigate the life of Olivia who died a long time ago. Her experience in India runs closely parallel to Olivia's. Inspite of their differences in physical appearance and temperaments, the English women share a lot of things in the alien land of India. Like the delicate and feminine Olivia whose affair with the Nawab of Khatm. takes her English folk by surprise, the rough and tough narrator has also an amorous relationship with her Indian landlord, Inder Lal.

Both the English women offer themselves to their respective Indian men at exactly the same spot, a local shrine where childless women come to pray for offspring; both get impregnated by their men and attempt abortions by native methods. While Olivia succeeds in aborting her child, her step-grand daughter draws back from repeating the same act: rather she decides to give
birth to her child and goes to the mountains to await childbirth.

Besides, even the men with whom they are associated have many similarities. Although, Inder Lal and the Nawab are separated by the barriers of time and social status, their attitudes towards their English friends are quite alike. Both are too enthusiastic to please and entertain them. Both the men have dominating mothers who exercise their control over them and also have wives who suffer from mental illness.

As retraced by the narrator through the information provided by Olivia's letter (to her sister) and the one provided by Harry (the Englishman who is a confidante of Olivia) and her (narrator's) own imaginative experience, Olivia comes to India as the wife of Douglas Rivers, a British civil servant posted in Satipur in British India of the 1920s. Douglas Rivers represents the ideal Englishman with whom Olivia falls in love and marries.

Apparently, the Rivers lead an exotic and happy life amidst the 'heat and dust' of the country. But in reality, things are quite different: while the husband is absorbed in his duty towards his government, the wife remains shut inside the house till her husband returns from his work. Moreover, the couple has a limited circle of friends who belong to the highly conservative British community of Satipur. Even then, their visit to the couple is not very frequent.

As a consequence, the sensitive and imaginative wife experiences bored and monotonous existence in her marital life. Despite being a loving husband, Douglas fails to understand his sensitive wife's unhappy state. The author aptly describes the sense of boredom and monotony which seem to overwhelm the
English woman:

She had by that time been in Satipur for several months and was already beginning to get bored... The rest of the time Olivia was alone in her big room with all the doors and windows shut to keep out the heat and dust. She read, and played the piano, but the days were long, very long. Douglas was of course extremely busy with his work in the district.  

In fact, Olivia has married Douglas for all the qualities that she had been taught to value in the British male—his "manliness" and his zeal for his duty towards his imperialist government (116). Paradoxically, it is the very qualities which she has idealised in him which alienate her from her husband. Aruna Chakravarti points out:

The deeper his immersion into the system, the more hopelessly narrow-minded and unimaginative Douglas becomes, and the more he mouths the platitudes of his community the more greatly he is estranged from his sensitive, aesthetic wife.  

It is at this critical juncture that she meets the Nawab of Khatm. The romantic and passionate Olivia is drawn towards the Nawab in their very first meeting. The Nawab seems to offer Olivia a kind of solace to her bored existence in Satipur:

... she had seen it and realised that here at last was one person in India to be interested in her the way she was used to (17).

While her unimaginative but affectionate husband is obsessed with his work.
Olivia has already established a strong bond with the Nawab.

Their liaison reaches its pinnacle when Olivia gets impregnated by her Indian lover. The Nawab becomes quite confident that Olivia will be carrying his child. On the other hand, it leads to Olivia’s fear of being discovered; she decides to save her English folk from dishonour by undergoing an abortion. Under the instruction of the Begum -- the Nawab’s mother, Olivia’s abortion of her unborn child is carried out in a very crude native way – by inserting a twig smeared with a liquid of a certain plant inside the pregnant woman, thus causing enormous pain to Olivia.

When Dr. Saunders comes to know about the abortion, Olivia flees to the Nawab in Khatm and never comes back to her English community. Afterwards, she retires in the mountains as the Nawab’s mistress. She dies a few years later after the death of the Nawab. The narrator finds out that Olivia’s dead body has been cremated according to her instructions, but it becomes a controversy for some of the Christians (ex-missionaries) who feel that she belongs to the cemetery for she has not been converted to any Hindu religion. The narrator has not been able to penetrate deeper into Olivia’s psyche during her stay in the mountains after the death of her Indian lover – the Nawab. She can only have a faint glimpse of the house where she (Olivia) has lived in X and feels that her (Olivia’s) life there seems to be similar to the one she has led in Satipur.

Looking around her house above X. it strikes me that perhaps she did not live so differently from the way she had done in Satipur . . . .(179-180).
The novel depicts the Nawab as a married man but stays separately from his wife. He happens to be a problematic figure:

He is also known for his pomp and pleasure, luxury and sloth, intrigues and hunts and his deep commitment to juedalistic ideas. It is the Nawab with his splendour and regal poise who suffers political and material ruin during the British regime. He subjects his own people to all possible kinds of oppression and cruelties, to the extent that he joins hands with the group of dacoits in robbing them.4

He seems to attract the English woman in their very first meeting. This is because she feels charmed by the warm and polite manners of the Indian Nawab and her subsequent affair with him may be explained by her very temperament which is different from that of the other English women of her community. While the others are hostile towards the natives a compassionate and sensitive Olivia adopts a tolerant and friendly attitude towards them. Aruna Chakravarti points out:

... her heart trembles in response to the sorrows of others, irrespective of class, race, colour or even legitimate claim to sympathy. Thus she is as sensitive to the suffering of morbid, vitriolic Mrs. Saunders and to that of effeminate, homosexual Harry-- the outcasts of her community-- as she is to that of one who stands totally outside it, the Nawab who organises riots, associates with dacoits and hates the British.5

The novel also portrays the friendship between the Nawab and his English
friend Harry. Their friendship renders the Englishman an outcaste to his own English community. Aruna Chakravarti remarks:

Harry’s love for the Nawab whom he sees as the ideal antitype of the public school moralist, makes him hate the Raj and its coercive tendencies. He recognizes that there is no basic difference between the way his countrymen treats Indian and the way they treat a member of their own tribe who does not conform. In reaction, Harry flouts the dividing line and firmly entrenches himself in the Indian camp.6

The interracial friendship does not last long. Harry returns to his country disillusioned. He even began to hate his Indian experience only after he had been back home in England. During his stay in India he had been under the spell of the powerful Nawab. As a result he could not nurture such negative feelings about his Indian experience during his stay in the country, India.

The narrator and her precursor (Olivia) are different in their temperament and outward appearances but their lives in India almost follow the same pattern. Besides this, the India of the narrator is different from that of Olivia in the sense that the former is a free nation of the 1970s which allows racial and social mobility among the people of different races. While in the latter, all these things have been blocked by the colonial forces.

The novel depicts the narrator as a tall, flat chested, rough and tough woman. She is a liberal and modern person who belongs to a new generation and makes herself comfortable in the land of ‘heat and dust’. In India, the
Inder Lai is a married man but does not have a healthy relation with his wife, Ritu. Thus, he is not happy with his marital life and he is unable to communicate with her for his needs and desires. This point is reflected in the text:

He told me that the only other person he can talk freely to his mother but even with her well, he said, with the mother there are certain things one cannot speak as with the friend.

Once I asked ‘what about your wife’? He said she was not intelligent. Also she had not much education--his mother had not wanted him to marry a very educated girl, . . . . His mother had told him she was pretty, but he never could make up his mind about that. Sometimes he thought yes, sometimes no . . . . She must have been so when young. Though now she is thin and worn out and her face, like his, always anxious.

He told me that during the first years of her marriage she had been so homesick that she had never stopped crying. . . . mother and I tried to explain matters to her but she did not understand. Naturally her health suffered and the child also was born weak. It was her fault. An intelligent person would understood and taken care’ (49-50).

It is at this stage of his life that Inder Lai has met the narrator whom he felt to be a friendly woman who could understand his problems.

Like Olivia, the narrator too gets involved with her married landlord Inder Lai and gets impregnated by him. Therefore, she decides to terminate
narrator becomes acquainted with the family of her landlord, Inder Lal.

Inder Lal is a married man but does not have a healthy relation with his wife, Ritu. Thus, he is not happy with his marital life and he is unable to communicate with her for his needs and desires. This point is reflected in the text:

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It is at this stage of his life that Inder Lal has met the narrator whom he felt to be a friendly woman who could understand his problems.

Like Olivia, the narrator too gets involved with her married landlord Inder Lal and gets impregnated by him. Therefore, she decides to terminate
her pregnancy in order to save herself from the social stigmatisation. However, she changes her decision under the powerful influence of ‘Maji’.

It is Inder Lal’s mother who introduces the narrator to ‘Maji’. Maji is supposed to be the ringleader of a group of widows who lead a cheerful and independent life. Inder Lal’s mother belongs to this group of widows whose lives are characterised by a sense of mutual co-operation and help among them. Unlike them, the married woman Ritu, the wife of Inder Lal, leads a very restricted life dominated by her mother-in-law. The author shows the striking contrast between the lives of Inder Lal’s wife and his mother and her widow friends:

Unlike Ritu, she doesn’t spend all her time at home but has outgoing friends who are mostly healthy widows like herself. They roam around town quite freely and don’t care at all if their saris slip down from their heads or even from their breasts. They gossip and joke and giggle like school girls, very different from their daughters-in-law who sometimes seen shuffling behind them, heavily veiled and silent and with the downcast eyes of prisoners under guard (54).

The narrator’s final decision is full of ambiguities. She decides to have her child in the mountains where she “travels upwards in search of spiritual world – one that promises her a sublime happiness”. A critic like Yasmine Gooneratne may find a positive note in the narrator’s decision in term of its loftiness at the philosophical plane. Still its validity remains open-ended. This
is because she seems to have simply drifted like many of the Europeans who come to India in their quest for salvation. Besides, the narrator does not seem respond to her Indian experience pragmatically. This point tends to weaken the story because the narrator's decision becomes impractical enough to lose in touch with reality.

The narrator's experience with Chid – the Englishman turned Hindu is significant in presenting the ambivalence in the Indian religion and its associated spiritualism. The character of Chid is confusing: he is supposed to be a holy and religious Hindu but cannot control himself from petty temptations like stealing or sexual desires. The narrator offers him food, shelter, and even sex that it helps him to achieve a higher level of thinking:

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 (65).

However, Chid has to return to England totally disillusioned and frustrated – resulting from his unhappy experience in India.

Another significant instance of the east–west encounter can be seen in the narrator's interaction with the Indian, Dr. Gopal whose hospital symbolises the depraved and backward conditions of the Indian hospital. The novel depicts
Dr. Gopal to be a doctor who hardly cares for the welfare of his patients: he
can even give a wrong medicine to the patients and will not regret it. He cannot
help the narrator in arrangement of a decent place in his hospital for the dying
beggar woman, Leelavati. Through these varied experiences of the narrator,
the author seems to expose the poor and deplorable state of the Indian society
which is littered with corruption, deceit and squalor among the people. In
short, the intercultural theme focuses on the Englishwomen’s relationships
with the Indians.

Olivia’s liaison with the Indian ruler – the Nawab, is one of the most
controversial examples of the cross-cultural interaction between the east and
the west. This is because both Olivia and the Nawab belong to a period which
bears the weight of imperialism which is marked by a sense of hostility, hatred
and distress between the races of the colonisers and that of the colonised. In
such a tense atmosphere which breeds mutual fear and doubt between two
races, a relationship between two married people belonging to two different
cultures, is ruled out. Moreover, both belong to societies which are too rigid
and strict in their views about the norms and codes of social life. The Nawab’s
Muslim community is no less than Olivia’s English community in terms of
their rigidity and conservativeness.

In the Nawab-Olivia relationship, the Nawab may be accused of using
the Englishwoman to take revenge upon his enemy -- the British. At the same
time, he does forgive Olivia for thwarting his ambition through her abortion,
unlike the British community which never does so. Olivia’s loyalty to her
people is maintained even when she has joined the enemy camp of the Nawab.
Although she has very much wanted to have babies she aborts her child (unborn)
so as to save her community from disgrace.

In a way, Olivia’s story shows the hurdles one has to cross over, in one’s attempt to establish personal relationships with people belonging to a different culture. It is made more complicated because of its context which divides the ruling race from the ruled one. On the other hand, her experience in India as defined by Major Minnies’ monograph that serves as a warning to all the other Englishmen.

He said that one has to be very determined to withstand - to stand up to India. And the most vulnerable, he said, are always those who love her best. There are many ways of loving India, many things to love her for -- the scenery, the history, the poetry, the music, men and women but all said the Major, are dangerous for the European who allows himself to love too much (170).

Thus, Olivia’s destruction is a result of her excessive love of the country in accordance with with Major Minnies’ monograph. However, this view seems to be limited in its scope and needs to be re-examined from a wider perspective. In a way, the Nawab-Olivia affair seems to raise serious questions on the Indian mores of that time. The author’s presentation of the Nawab’s sexual escapade seems to indicate the decadence of the ruling class. Also the native method employed in Olivia’s abortion may be taken as the ugliest and crudest form of orientalism. In the novel, the inter-cultural theme focuses on the Englishwomen’s relationships with the Indians - Olivia with the Nawab and the narrator with Inder Lal and the other Indians associated with his community.
On the other hand, the narrator is a woman who is from a world in which "the contemporary limits of behaviour for European women have vastly expanded, to the point where the narrator is able to create her own mores as she goes along, working on her writings, casually sleeping with two men, neither of whom is her husband and deciding to keep the pregnancy that results." Thus her knowledge about Indians is comparatively deeper than that of Olivia whose interaction with the Indians lack depth and intensity except in the case of the Nawab. Besides, the nameless narrator's experience in India, especially with the common folk who belong to the middle class, the poor and down trodden natives of India, is noteworthy.

The narrator's amorous relationship with the Indian clerk, Inder Lal is devoid of any deeper feelings or emotions. She casually sleeps with Inder Lal because she wants to console him from his unhappy marriage. When she becomes pregnant, she decides to give birth to her child in the mountains. Thus, in a way, the narrator's final decision may indicate the possibility of merging the values of the eastern and western cultures. Aruna Chakravarti comments:

.... the narrator not only experiences the flowering of an inter-racial relationship but initiates a spontaneous acceptance of its fruit, her child of a mixed race will not be aborted surreptitiously as was Olivia's, for in the new India it is neither an instrument of revenge nor a symbol of shame. Olivia's brought her a lifetime of isolation. It was left to her spiritual desendant to experience the joy and fulfilment of a complete merger.

At the same time, the decision loses its validity from the realistic point of view. Thus, the character seems to reveal the ambivalent
attitude of the westerner towards India.

Like most of her earlier fictional works, Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* is also woman-centred. Structured into two parts, the novel exquisitely carves out the bipolar world with its two poles fixed in India and in America. The first part of the novel concentrates on the life of the protagonist, Uma who presents the image of the exploited and unemancipated woman trapped within the conventional patriarchal structure of the Indian society. Uma is the eldest among the three children (Uma, Aruna and Arun) of her parents who belong to a middle class family in a North Indian town.

Uma’s family is deeply rooted in its age-old belief in patriarchy. It is under the tyrannical rule of Uma’s parents called ‘Mama Papa’ in the novel. The Mama Papa comprises of Uma’s father who is a prosperous lawyer and his wife – the daughter of a businessman. Uma’s mother is a shallow and an uneducated woman whose life is limited to the domestic areas of marriage and its related aspects. She has no mind of her own and blindly join hands with her husband in sacrificing her daughters to the needs of her family and its male members.

The educated father is kind enough to send his daughters to a convent school. This may be taken as a kind of favour that the daughters recieve from the parents. However, as female children, they have not been given much importance or significance by the parents in the family. In such a household where the parents refuse to see anything positive or productive in a female child, the lives of Uma and Aruna are destined to follow a tragic path.
Out of the two sisters, Uma is the one who suffers the most, for being an individual who is not allowed to exercise her will independently. This may be explained by the fact that the younger sister is smarter and more rebellious as compared to Uma who is innocent and plain looking. Even the parents have to accept Aruna as a full-fledged individual at last. But Uma’s life still remains chained with the scuffles of Mama Papa till the end of the novel.

The protagonist’s life is at the crossroads when her middle-aged mother gives birth to a son – Arun. The arrival of the child is celebrated with immense joy and glory by the father in the family:

All gathered at the door, and then and then saw the most astounding sight of their lives – Papa, in his elation, leaping over three chairs in the hall, one after the other, like a boy playing leap-frog, his arms flung up in the air and his hair flying. 10

Its effect on the mother is described by the author in the novel:

... what honour... Mama’s chin lifted a little into the air
... she might be wearing a medal (31).

The birth of a son makes Uma’s mother more confident of her partnership with her husband and “they were now more equal than ever” (31). It is at this point that the novelist achieves a kind of comic realism in the manner the narrow-minded parents senselessly glorify the birth of their son.

On the other hand, Uma’s degeneration into not more than an unpaid servant of the family, is complete with the arrival of Arun in the household. As
the first step of her degeneration, Uma has to surrender her school life in order to serve Arun. Uma’s mother, being uneducated cannot absorb the value and importance of education for girls. Hence, she persuades Uma to give up her studies as Uma too is unable to fare well in academic session. It is the final decision of the parents to withdraw their eldest daughter from school so that she becomes a baby-sitter for her brother, Arun.

The decision of the parents is the heaviest blow that Uma receives in her life. Despite being an ‘abject scholar’ at the school, Uma loves the order and discipline of the school which runs according to the rules of convent education. Anita Desai describes Uma’s zeal for school in the novel:

Uma was at school before any other child and every day she searched for an excuse to stay on. School was not open long enough. These were the wretched weekends when she was plucked back into the trivialities of her home, which seemed a denial, a negation of life as it ought to be, sombre and splendid, and then the endless even that pointless existence to further vacuity. She prickled with impatience for the fifteen of July when school would re-open . . . . (20-21).

Besides, she seems to be captivated by a life of devotion she sees in the lives of the nuns. In her desperate attempt to rebel against the present situation, Uma flees to the Principal and begs her to let her continue in the school:

Uma hurled herself at Mother Agnes, then threw her arms around her waist, hid her face in the starched white cotton skirts, and howled aloud . . . . All the time she howled. Mother, oh Mother, she wailed, and when mother Agnes tried to pluck she flung herself down at the nun’s sandalled feet and lay on the floor, abjectly wailing (27).
When the Principal fails to help her, she falls into her fits out of utter
grief and dismay. After this episode, she has been brought home where she
has to resign herself to her fate – to sacrifice herself to the needs of her
younger brother.

Uma’s interaction with Mira Masi– a distant relative of her family is
also significant to a considerable degree. Mira Masi is a widow who has
devoted her life to religious activities. It is through her that Uma is introduced
to the Hindu religion and its rituals with a deeper understanding. Under her
guidance, Uma along with Mira Masi make a religious trip to an ashram. The
atmosphere of the ashram seems to fill her (Uma) with a new sense of joy to
her otherwise frustrated existence. However, such a joy is short-lived and is
interrupted by Ramu – her cousin who has been sent by her parents to bring
her back home.

The role of Ramu in Uma’s life is too small but it has its own importance.
He does make an attempt to boost the pathetic Uma with the little kind of fun
and entertainment: He takes her to a restaurant where they enjoy themselves
in each other’s company. At that time only the barren Uma seems to forget
her woes. This episode too ends with Uma being rebuked by her mother as she
feels that the daughter’s act is a disgrace to the family.

When Uma attains a marriageable age as felt by her mother, Mama Papa
plans to make arrangement for the marriage of their eldest daughter.
Consequently, it reduces Uma to the position of a petty housekeeper of the
family. Twice the parents have been cheated with false promises of a marriage
for Uma. In the first case, the boy’s parents just refuse to return the dowry
after breaking the engagement. While, in the second one, Uma has to come back home in disgrace when her groom turns out to be a bigamous man. These incidents seem to be too much for Mama Papa who has lost enough in terms of money and honour because of Uma. Afterwards, they never try again to get her married. As a consequence, Uma is forced to accept herself as a failed and wronged woman and would expect to serve Mama Papa till the end of her life. She will never break herself free from the grip of Mama Papa who forbids her even to go out or to use the telephone. When Dr. Dutt (one of Uma’s acquaintances) suggests a job for Uma, Uma’s father flatly refuse to allow his daughter to go for in on the pretext of maintaining the family’s prestige:

It was Mama who spoke, however. As usual for papa. Very clearly and decisively, our daughter does not need to go out to work, Dr Dutt, she said. As long as we are here to provide for her, she will never need to go to work.

But she works all the time! Dr Dutt exclaimed on a rather sharp note. At home. Now you must give her a chance to work outside-

There is no need, Papa supported Mama’s view. In double strength, it grew formidable. Where is the need? (143).

In contrast to Uma is her younger sister Aruna who is more beautiful and clever than her elder sister. With her looks and wit, Aruna is lucky enough to get married to a suitable boy—Arvind. The novelist describes Aruna’s ability of bringing about a such significant change by her marriage:

No one was at all surprised but everyone was
gratified when Aruna brought off the marriage that Uma had dismally failed to make. As was to be expected, she took her time, showed a reluctance to decide, played choosey, but soon enough made the wisest, most expeditant choice – the handsomest, the richest, the most exciting of the suitors who presented themselves. So exciting were his dark, satirine looks, the curl of his lips and the way his sidebruns grew right down to the line of his jaw, and lavish the future predicted for him, that Mama Papa were actually a little perturbed. Prudently, they wished for someone a little less handsome, a little less showy (they were neither, after all), and bade caution, suggested waiting to see who else might turn up. But when Aruna had made up her mind, then no one could stop her, and she had her way (100-101).

The novelist describes Aruna’s wedding:

The wedding was a splendid one– not like Uma’s drab, cut-rate affair. At Aruna’s insistence, the reception was held in the lobby of the Carlton Hotel. Instead of a brass band from the bazaar, she had Tiny Lopez’s18 band play dance music. What was more, she persuaded Papa to throw what she called a cocktail party to welcome Arvind and his family the day before the wedding (101).

Thus, Aruna has a successful marriage. She and her husband are happily settled in a flat in Bombay: “…Aruna was whisked away to a life that she had said to be ‘fantastic’ and Arvind had a job in Bombay and bought a flat in a housing block in Juhu, facing the beach, and Aruna said it was ‘like a dream (103). In a way, Aruna is shown as a contrast to Uma with her beauty and brain.

Anita Desai introduces Anamika as a beautiful and intelligent cousin of Uma in the novel. Anamika has been victimised by an arranged marriage to a ‘suitable boy’. Her beauty and a scholarship to Oxford do not prevent her
from committing suicide as a result of her unhappy married life. Therefore, Uma is not the only person whose life has been mismanged or rather victimised by her own people – the parents. This strand of the plot (in the story) may be interpreted as the author’s attempt to show how good looks and excellent academic qualifications of a woman do not necessarily assure her a successful marriage.

The second part of *Fasting, Feasing* is set in Massachusetts where Arun has come to study. His study in America introduces him to an American family, the Pattons with whom he spends his vacation. Mrs. Pattons is the younger sister of Mrs. O’ Henry who is the English friend of Arun’s sister Uma in India.

The family of the Pattons includes the father Mr. Patton, Mrs. Patton – the mother, Melanie—their bulimic and rebellious daughter and their health freak son, Rod. Mrs. Patton acts as a surrogate mother for Arun. Influenced by Arun, she overwhelms her family with her guest’s vegetarianism:

‘But I think that’s wonderful— I really do. My sister told me many Indians were vegetarians. I’ve always wanted to be one myself. I’ve always hated eating meat – oh, that red, raw stuff, the smell of it! I’ve always, always liked vegetables best. My, yes, all those wonderful fresh vegetables and fruit you get in the market – they’re so pretty, they’re so good. I could—I can live on them. Look, Ahroon, you and I—we’ll be vegetarians together! I’ll cook the vegetables, and we’ll eat together—’ (179).

In this way, Mrs. Patton makes and effort to please and satisfy her Indian guest in order to make him more adjustable to their society.
Her role as a mother figure in relation to her bulimic daughter is pathetic and conflicting. She does make an effort to get through to her daughter unlike her Indian-counterpart—Uma’s mother who is totally indifferent to the feelings of her daughters, especially to Uma’s. Such a mother figure is completely absent in Arun’s family, which is in India. Uma’s mother is not visualised as a woman who would reach out to her children, especially to the daughters. She is a woman whose identity and individuality are totally eclipsed by the ever powerful and dominating image of her husband with whom she merges as one entity—’Mama Papa’.

The novelist’s satirical creation of the mother in Mama Papa seems to be abstract in terms of its existence—characterised by its unchangeability and invariability. On the other hand, her western-counterpart Mrs. Patton does exhibit some changes in her character and behaviour. With all her whims and eccentricities, she has been provided enough space (by the author) where she exercises her will freely. Formerly, it has been food which plays a significant role in shaping her beliefs in and attitudes to life. As a consequence, she becomes a compulsive shopper in the local foodmart and would overload her kitchen with vegetables and other foodstuffs. This is vividly described in the novel:

When they enter the Foodmart. she relaxes: it is as if she has come home. She tosses packets and cartons into the shopping cart lightheartedly. It is Arun who grows tense, finds his throat muscles contracting, tight with anxiety over spending so much, having so much (208).

With the change in season— as summer sets in she also metamorphoses into a sun worshipper from a kitchen lover. During the season, Arun finds her
hostess. Mrs. Patton bathing in the sun:

Mrs. Patton is there . . . . Her eyes are covered by large dark glasses. She is wearing clothes so minimal that they cover only a few inches of her chest and hips. The rest of her flesh is bared to his gaze. It seems to be frying in the sun because she has spread quantities of oil over it — a large bottle stands beside her in the grass — and it gleams brown and shiny. Her feet in sandals are stretched out in front of her: She has painted her toe nails a startling crimson. She breathes in and out deeply as if she were asleep (213).

Later on, she begins to take interest in yoga and its related subjects. This is an element of dynamism, which is completely ruled out in the character of Uma’s mother. Her presence in a mother’s role is hardly felt by the daughter Uma. In fact, the mother is very much available and present for the daughter in the American family. In this way, Uma’s dilemma is different from that of Melanie. Melanie’s is more of a teenager’s problem which makes her defiant, rebellious and cold towards her elders (especially to the mother). Thus, she has reached to such a stage where she refuses to communicate and co-operate with her mother. She would prefer to suffer in isolation till she is admitted to a rehabilitation centre to be treated of her eating disorders.

On the other hand, Melanie’s brother’s Rod is “a loutish health freak, his only interest being fitness, games, exercise and jogging”. As for Mr. Patton, he turns out to be the western-counterpart of the patriarch in Arun’s family in India. His relationship with the members of his family is of indifference to their needs and demands. His dealings with them, merely dwells on the surface.
Mr. Patton ignores her. He is getting a can of beer out of the refrigerator. Opening it with a sharp jerk of his thumb, he demands, ‘where are the kids? Are they going to be in for dinner tonight? What have they been doing all day? Are they doing any work around here?’

Mrs. Patton begins hurriedly to put away the chops. As she busies herself, she says, ‘You know Rod’s in training for the football team, Chuck. It’s what you wanted him to do yourself—’

Arun knows when to leave a family scene: .... He sidles out of the room and has his foot on the stars when he hears them starting on Melanie.

‘And Melanie? What’s she up to? What’s she in training for, huh?’ (203).

Unlike his wife, Mr. Patton hardly shows any sign of tolerance or compassion towards the eastern values represented by Arun: he feels disappointed and indignant when Arun refuses the beef served to him by Mr. Patton. He is not convinced of the fact that many of the Indians choose to be vegetarians. He even becomes sarcastic of such an idea:

‘Yeah, how they let them out on the streets because they can’t kill ‘em and don’t know what to do with ‘em. I could show ‘em. A cow is a cow, and good red meat as far as I’m concerned (166).

The novel ends with Arun going back to his dormitory where he leads an unvarying insipid life, which is marked by his isolation and loneliness. The author describes Arun’s experience during the first semester of his American
He shared it with a mostly silent student from Lousiana who would be on his back smoking an endless chain of cigarettes, filling the small concrete cell with a thick yellow smoke that brought on Arun’s asthma.

The room was at the end of a long corridor scribbled over with graffiti— in chalk, charcoal, spray paint, lipstick, possibly even odour — and its one window, an oblong of uncurtained glass, looked out onto the parking lot. From his desk Arun could look across its bleak expanse, watch students drive off in their cars, leaving behind pools of oil and grease. Friday nights even this desolation would explode – quite literally – as students hurled beer cans out of the windows, sometimes entire garbage bags filled with them, and bottles were flung down to shatter spectacularly. The emptiness of Arun’s weekends would be punctuated by sudden eruptions of music from enormous pieces of sound equipment set up or transported across the campus. These were like voices shouting out of another world, another civilization:

‘Hey, hey, baby, I can’t let you go — o-’ Don’s you mess wid me, Ah’m-a fightin’ man. ‘Boo-hoo, boo-hoo, I’m so bl—ooh, bl—ooh’

Their very volume created a fence, a barrier, separating him from them (169-170).

Before setting for his dormitory, Arun gives away the presents – a shawl and a box of tea sent by his parents from India to Mrs. Patton because he feels that they (presents) would be of no use to him, and will only burden him. Mrs Patton wants to be a good hostess to Arun and changes her non-vegetarian diet
into the vegetarian one of Arun. However, it does little good to Arun. This is because vegetarianism for Americans means raw and uncooked leaves and vegetables. Therefore, Arun is unable to relish the vegetarian food served to him by Mr. Patton for it does no good to his body and its system and does not belong to his culture. However, Mrs. Patton’s attitude to Arun may indicate the possibility of establishing a harmonious and peaceful relationship between people of different cultures and races.

Arun’s reaction to the American’s habit of sunbathing during the summer season is marked by a sense of uneasiness and awkwardness. The Indian boy is unable to confront Mrs. Patton while she is basking for a tan and good health because it is similar to facing his own mother naked: “He would like to disappear. He does not even want to glance in her direction. It is like confronting his mother naked (213).” Thus, Arun is trapped in an awkward situation as a result of the conflicting views of the eastern and the western cultures.

At the same time, in spite of the apparent polarities in the two families – the American one representing the west and the Indian family representing the east, there is not so much difference between them in the structure followed by its members.

A close scrutiny of the novels reveals that there is a vast difference between the depictions of the intercultural motif in the novels. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala’s *Heat and Dust*, the east-west theme is presented in terms of binary oppositions. The binary model seems to indicate a lopsided relationship between the two cultures, where one culture is likely to be dominated by the
other. In this case, one culture may be considered as "inferior" and the other as "superior". In the novel, the Indian culture is rendered inferior with all its backwardness, superstitions, adverse climate and decadence in terms of its natives and their social milieu. The east-west dichotomy depicted in the novel, especially in the portrayal of the characters is quite explicit. The novel draws a clear line of demarcation between two groups of characters – the Indian group as identified with the East and the British group as identified with the West.

Besides, an analysis of *Heat and Dust* seems to bring out the novelist's delineation of the Indian characters as running closely parallel to racial stereotyping. It seems to be visible in the portrayal of the Indian Nawab who is depicted as the oriental male specimen, ‘the other’ of the Englishman. The Englishwoman is, however attracted to the Indian male. This creates problems for many of the Indian reviewers and critics who seem to be identified with the “inferior” culture.

Thus, in the novel, the intercultural theme is perceived in terms of Arun’s experience in the U.S. His encounter with the western culture is conflicting. Here, he struggles to adjust with its values – educational system, food habits, living style and the alien society of Massachusetts.

During his stay of his American education, he suffers from an acute sense of loneliness and isolation. This is because he is unable to mix with the people around him for he finds them very different from him in their attitudes to life: Arun, ‘a product of overcare’, has not been trained to get used to the fast, individualistic and independent lifestyle of the west.
When the Indian boy stays with the American family of the Pattons, he is baffled by the ways of life of the western society. Andrew Marr remarks:

There, one summer, he stays with a normal American family, observing their carnivorous consumption, their weird attitudes to health and each other with a mixture of disgust and incomprehension.¹²

Arun is surprised to find that every member of the Patton household is free and independent in his or her own way. This has also been pointed out by Dr Chhote Lal Khatri,

His father has arranged his accommodation at Mrs Patton’s house in the suburbs of Massachusetts. Family life there presents a contrast to the Indian family life. In place of a close-knit patriarchal family in India the young Arun encounters a family where everyone is free and there is none to dictate, where men hang on meat and women do not appear to cook or do any household work. All this is bewildering and full of terror for the shy young Indian adolescent far from home.¹³

This is very much in contrast to Arun’s own closely knit patriarchal family in India.

Besides, being a vegetarian, Arun is repelled by the food habits of the American family who are basically meat eaters. Mr. Patton is unable to understand the problem faced by his Indian guest as far as food is concerned. He cannot believe why Arun has refused such a good food like meat. But his wife, Mrs. Patton is more liberal and considerate towards their guest. She makes an effort to join hands with him in his vegetarianism and then takes special interest in yoga and spiritual activities. Whereas, in the case of Fasting,
Feasting, Anita Desai has got only the geographical situation to differentiate the characters representing the two cultures. Both the two sets of characters become a part of the situation. Thus, they do not represent either the west or the east. Hence, neither the Pattons can be identified with the west nor Uma’s family with the east. On the whole, the novel shows the interweaving of the two worlds— that of the east and of the west. In such a situation, the bipolar character of the cross-cultural encounter loses its significance. Thus, the separate identities of the two cultures remain indistinguishable or indistinct from one another.

In short, Desai’s novel does not present a one-to-one confrontation of cultures but only a cultural web which rules out the previledging of one culture over another. As a consequence, the novel does not generate much tension or conflict as in the case of Jhabvala’s Heat and Dust which is overwhelmed with conflict between the two cultures.
NOTES


2. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, *Heat and Dust* (London: John Murray, 1975) 2. All the subsequent references are to this edition of the text.


7.


10. Anita Desai, *Fasting, Feasting* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1999) 17. All the subsequent references are to this edition of the text.

