CHAPTER VI

HEAT AND DUST
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Heat and Dust may be called a family saga in which the experiences of a British Officer and his wife in India are reconstructed and interpreted by one of the family members of a later generation. It is a narrative in which the past and the present, are not fused but are made to co-exist. The narrator's main preoccupation is to unravel the oddities of Olivia's character, who was the wife of Douglas, the assistant Collector of Satipur. With the help of old letters, the narrator is in a position to perceive the difference between the past and present, which is mysterious and ever changing. When the narrator arrives in India she understands that India has changed tremendously; it is not as it was in Olivia's time. The narrator at the outset observes:

India always changes people, and I have been no exception. But this is not my story, It is Olivia's as far as I can follow it.¹

The narrator learns about Kafarabad, from a lady who shares a room in a lodge. She tells the narrator: "It is

a growing town—because of textile mills but not growing in virtue that I can tell you. Thirty years ago, I might have said there is hope; but today none. Wherever you look, it is the same story. More wages means more selfishness more country liquor, more cinema. The woman used to wear plain simple cotton dhotis, but now they all want to be shining from the outside. We won't speak about inside.²

From the above passage, we get an inkling of the way in which the average assumptions of the westerner with regard to the Indian reality are subject to a constant change. The narrator tries to understand the authentic values of the Indian scene personally.

The above passage also suggests the difference between the Kafarabad of Olivia's time and the kafarabad of narrator's time. The story of Olivia as reconstructed by the narrator is indeed a sad story, but as the narrative proceeds, we see that the reconstruction proceeds in a comic mode and an ironic tone. When the narrative reconstruction of Olivia's story begins, people are more rich because of the growth of the textile industry and their dress and habits scoff at the

receding spirituality. The novel subtly juxtaposes the rich with the traditionally poor so that poverty, hunger, and orphans and also a part of what India is. The narrator's companion tells her "I have lived among a Hindu Muslim riot, and a small pox epidemic and several famines, and I think I may rightly say I've seen everything that you can see on this earth. Through it all I've learned this one thing; you can't live in India, without Christ Jesus."³

Moreover, her observation, "Nothing human means anything here,"⁴ suggests that in the name of spirituality a deceitful atmosphere is made to emerge in which everything appears to what it is not.

From the above analysis, it can be said that saturates the Indian scene is misleading and mysterious. We can follow the lines of comedy in which appearance and reality are juxtaposed to present, an ironic perspective. This ironic perspective helps the reader to make his own evaluation of the Indian and the British opinions about what India virtually


⁴Ibid., p. 6.
was and is including the story of Olivia.

The narrator accommodates herself to the Indian situation. She improves her knowledge of Hindi so that she is able to understand and express herself in the native language. She develops her intimacy with Inder Lal and his wife, Ritu. Just as Olivia develops a kind of passion towards the Nawab, the narrator too, develops an inexplicable interest in Inder Lal's family and in his affairs. In course of time, he accompanies her to many places, in order to help her unravel the past of Olivia.

In the course of the novel the narrator also becomes a good friend of Maji—who is a friend of Inder Lal's mother. The narrator comes to believe that Maji has some inexplicable power which she always used for the benefit of others. This may be one of the reasons why the narrator is not very critical about the Indian spirituality. As seen through the eyes of the narrator Maji—is a comic character.

Viewed from the perspective of juxtaposition and incongruity the comic mode appears to be a felicitous creative choice. Heat and Dust is the story of two western women, who seem to have a temperamental affinity. One is
Olivia, who was the wife of Douglas, and the other is the narrator, who comes to know the past scandals of Olivia, in order to evaluate them. In course of time like Olivia, the narrator too, appears to be affected by the ethnic and climatic conditions of India. She fails to achieve an authentic and satisfactory evaluation of her poor relation whom, we may say, India had tempted and enslaved. The narrator seems to be puzzled by the irresistible attraction of the Nawab to Olivia and Olivia to the Nawab. She also fails to see the point in Harry's devotion to the Nawab and his dedication in servicing him.

Mrs. Jhabvala's attempt to recreate the India of the twenties and the thirties is more marked by a flair for exotic, the strange, and the odd elements of life rather than the palpable, rigid realities of the situation. The rofts at Khetan, the suttees, the dacoits and the Nawab's involvements with them, the gay parties, the hijras—all these constitute an India, which serves as a suitable scaffolding on which the lines of comedy may be intricately woven into a pleasing texture.
Heat and Dust is a novel that tells the story of two heroines simultaneously and at the same time alternating the story of Olivia and the narrator. In plotting out the scandals of Olivia, she enters many unknown areas as Olivia did at the beginning. Maji also explains to the narrator, that India is a great pilgrimage centre. As it is surmised by the westerners, there are places where they can get solace and peace to their disturbed souls. The controversial opinions expressed about the India's spirituality by the narrator and Inder Lal prove that India is a country where the Europeans can get a kind of comfort and solace to their machine-ridden souls. As far as Inder Lal's idea is concerned, it is a country, known for poverty and misery because his way of living is sub-standard while, as the narrator's is aristocratic.

In the course of the novel, we witness the change in Olivia towards the Nawab as well as a slight change in the narrator too. Olivia's love towards Douglas is sincere and authentic, but when she gets the idea of pregnancy, she feels something different about Douglas. The narrator tells us that "She had always loved him for his qualities— for his

Impetuousness, his English solidines, and strength, his manliness. But suddenly she thought what manliness? He can't even get me pregnant." Of course, there is no stain in the love of Olivia, but the narrator indirectly points out the heart of Olivia, is divided disturbed. Her admiration for the qualities of manliness and decency in Douglas is matched by her sneaking but definite realization that Douglas is too much the 'Correct man' to satisfy her passionate nature. For this passionate intensity she finds an 'objective correlative', so to speak in the Nawab. The following passage seems to clinch the point:

Not in that direction in which Douglas had left, but the other way, towards Khadam, towards the palace. It did not make any difference as everything was under the same pall of dust. But it was true that she had told Douglas; she felt time—entirely untroubled by the heart or the murky atmosphere. It was as if there were a little spring welling up inside her that kept her fresh and gay.6

This draws attention to a fact that Olivia often says to Douglas that the heat is unbearable for her.

She even says that many other westerners could not bear it. But after getting into contact with the Nawabs Olivia bears it because there is a certain relation a strange bond between Olivia and the Indian ruler. She does not feel the impact of the Indian heat because of her love for the Nawab. The way in which other English women rush to hill-places to avoid the intense heat is in contrast to the way in which Olivia keeps her cool. Therefore, the narrator seems to imply that where there is a binding link of affection—even the apparently maddening Indian reality becomes manageable.

The perspective on sex finds a variety of expression in *Heat and Dust*. For example, Mrs. Saunders, cultivates an abnormal fear of the Indian’s sexuality. She is too ill to know the truth, and yet very susceptible to the fear of an imaginary sexual onslaught. Olivia visits her to enquire about her health and finds her seated on a sofa rather than lying in bed. Olivia is surprised, but Mrs. Saunders whispers "It is not good to let them see you in bed... the servants... you do not know what goes on in their heads," and adds "They are very excitable, it is their constitution, I have heard their spicy food's got something to do with"
The conversation between Olivia and Mrs. Saunders reveals that sexual potency of the Indian is somewhat extraordinary in the eyes of the western women. Olivia believes this in case of her husband. Through Douglas is strong and healthy, he could not make her pregnant. It may be one of the reasons for her liking for the Nawab. Inder Lal's and the narrator's visit to Baba Firdaus's shrine indirectly drives home the same point. As she opens the sandwich pockets which Inder Lal had not heard about or seen, the desire and passion grew extreme in her and she places her hand on Inder Lal and she thinks, "He was a healthy young man—his wife was away—we were alone in a romantic spot, getting more romantic, every moment as the sin began to set."

The point is reinforced by the following passage:

This indulgence is a recurring feature in the Nawab's attitude and action in fact, Inder Lal made the same joke the Nawab had made, about what had happened here on the original husband wedding day to make the barren pregnant.


8 Ibid., p. 127

9 Ibid., pp 127-128.
Mrs. Jhabvala skilfully weaves an intricate design in which the experiences of two generations of English men and women and their Indian counterparts are brought into a very close association, with a view to highlight the difference between them. The characters seem to move round the same spot, the same centre, and relive that experience. And how differently they respond to situation and the spot. This demonstrates the truth of the young narrators comment that "India always changes people."  

Maji, who is a mystic-comic character, whom the narrator say whether a woman is pregnant or not by placing her hand on a woman's forehead. So Maji tells her that she is pregnant and worries about it. We come to understand the difference between the Indian opinion and the westerner's opinion about woman and her problems. 

It is a common thing to become a mother without marriage in the west. Hence narrator is not aware that people are observing her gait which changes owing to her pregnancy.

The foregoing analysis of *Heat and Dust* would be incomplete without a few observations on the comic mode which imaginatively apprehends the actualities of life in India and transmutes them into coherent and meaningful fiction. The narrative opens with the narrator telling us that she is the grand daughter of Douglas through his second wife Tessie. But Tessie never opened her mouth and talked about Olivia, the first wife of Douglas who ran away with the Nawab of Satipur. The narrator with the help of the letters, which Olivia wrote to her sister, Mercia, since the middle of 1923 tries to understand Olivia's character and the significance of her choice to leave her husband and stay with the Nawab. The interpretation and reconstruction go hand in hand so that the narrative becomes a dramatic fusion of the narrator's observation recorded in a dairy and her perusal of the letters. The cumulative result of this mode of narration consists in a subtle analysis of the freaks and foibles not only of the central character, Olivia, but the narrator and her activities in India. The narrator in her visits to various places in Satipur sees and makes the reader see a segment of the Indian actuality. But fictions emerge not from a vacuum but from the actualities of life. This dramatic
conflation of facts as Olivia presents in her letters and what the narrator beholds and observes results in a sort of deflationary irony which pricks so many bubbles about India. Olivia's attraction for the Nawab seems to lie largely in her temperament, a temperament that is valuable to all kinds of excitement, associated with the body. Her sister Mercia, we are told by the narrator, marries a French man got separated from him, led an erratic life and finally drank herself to death. This suggests that there is a streak of eccentricity in both the women. We are also told that Olivia did not inform her husband about the picnic the Nawab arranged for her pleasure and his regular visits to her when her husband was away. The Nawab himself is a comic figure and he seems to take an unjustifiable pride in his meagre achievements and character. Olivia's letters to her sister speak well of the Nawab, his palace, his furniture, his servants and his eagerness to place people and his subtlety in pressuring women like Olivia who can be preyed on their weakness and irresistibility to temptation. *Heat and Dust* may appear to be an appropriate metaphor for what India was and is. But a closer scrutiny of the novel suggests that
the metaphor applies to what human beings are within and
carnality (heat) and decay (dust) are not the monopoly
of India and the Indians. They generate from within and
spare no race or community from falling within their ambience;
and death (dust) is a part of existence. Jhabvala's mode of
apprehending the Indian actuality, is such that this thematic
complex is given a subtle spread in the novel.