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The Myth of India: Oriental Image and Racism in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's

Heat and Dust

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Abstract: In the writings of occidental people, it is observed that European hegemony and racial ideologies get impetus as they orient their writings to perpetuate the colonial discourse by presenting the stereotypical oriental images and creating binary opposition. Preconceived Eurocentric temperament and conventional archetypal mindset fabricate the colonial discourse, and the old western myth of India as a land of spiritualism, exoticism, mystery, rogues, cheaters, irrational people, primitivism and hot climate. On account of their racial mindset, the occidental characters fail to accustom to the Indian culture, so ultimately their desires are deceived and disillusioned. The main focus of this paper is to document the blunt and implied colonial discourse and European hegemony embedded in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's "Heat and Dust" and how the colonial discourse impedes the occidental people to merge with Indian people and immerse in their cultures.

Key Words: European hegemony, stereotype, racism, colonial discourse, spiritualism, exoticism, cheaters, primitivism, desire, deceived.

The trend of postcolonial writings is to exhibit the colonial and postcolonial discourse prevailing in the oriental as well as in the occidental countries. Europeans' imperial oriented mindset and racial attitude are explicitly discernible in the pre- and post-independence writings. The Oriental writers orient their writings to decolonize the colonial politics by establishing the postcolonial ideologies or by decentralizing the colonial hegemony prevailing in the oriental



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countries especially in India. Writers like Raja Rao, Salman Rushdie disenchanted with the colonial hegemony establish their own Indian aesthetics and Indian discourse by the process of appropriation of language, and of image of India. But the western writers tend to present the stereotypical image of India i.e. 'spiritual' and 'full of cheaters' that comes from the age of European renaissance down to the present age. The old western myth of India as a land of spiritualism, exoticism, mystery, deception, rogues, cheaters, primitivism etc stemmed from the preconceived Eurocentric temperament and conventional archetypal mindset. In the introduction of 'Orientalism', Edward Said conspicuously describes the temperament of occidental people by defining Orientalism "as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said, 3). The tradition of writing about India remains in flux by the hands of Anglo-Indian and other European writers, but after the independence of India, the image of India and Indians is subjected to change for the colossal impact of war and decolonization; yet the western mindset and stereotypical presentation of India steadily brew. In the postcolonial era, the western writers tend to throw light in their writings on the aspects of cross-cultural encounter, interaction of Indo and Anglian people, stereotypical image of India and Indians, Europeans' long for spiritual enlightenment, and their ultimate deception. Ruth Praver Jhabvala being inextricable part of the Indo-European culture transmutes cross-cultural experiences in her fictions especially in 'Heat and Dust'.

In 'Heat and Dust', Jhabvala delineates the encounter of two cultures and stereotypical western myth of India i.e. India is a 'spiritual' land and Indians are basically 'cheaters'. Other conventional images like suttee like primitive culture, primitive equipments and technology, superstitions, exoticism, unhygienic food, uncivilized and irrational people, dusty weather etc are also minutely reflected in this novel. By the denigrated image of India, Jhabvala impliedly elicits the Eurocentric maxims of Rudyard Kipling – "East is East and West is West", and "White's Man Burden". Here the novelist tries to encompass the whole gamut of Indian life, but her negative portrayal of India i.e. exoticism, mystery, heat and dust, spirituality, communal riots, uncultured and uncivilized people, primitive medical equipments, unhygienic Indian food, fanatic Muslims,



primitive culture etc and more impetus to them explicitly express her Eurocentric and racial attitude.

Two simultaneous plots in “Heat and Dust” manifest different time zones – Raj era in 1920 and Indian era in 1970. In 1970, the narrator came to India to reconstruct the story of her step grandmother, Olivia; wife of British ICS officer, Douglas Rivers. In Raj era, Douglas had learnt the Hindustani language in order to understand the country and its people better so that he could afford to impose the imperial ideologies on the Indian people with great ease. He admitted “It’s the only language in which you can deliver deadly insults with the most flower courtesy” (38). His purpose of adopting the Indian language and culture was to govern the country more efficiently and to settle ‘a great variety of problems’ with flattery tongue. He did not allow the local rich people to enter his office but to sit on the verandah when they came for offerings of ‘baskets of fruits and trays of sweetmeats and pistachio nuts’. Douglas took the cross-cultural encounter as a strong mean to widen and strengthen the colonial regime, not to know the alien people and their culture by the process of negotiation and by a mutual exchange of various goods. The land, the Britishers shared was different from Indian’s and it was known as ‘Civil Lines’ in which Indians were not allowed to live with ‘burra sahib’. “The creatures to be seen inside are the Rivers, the Minnies, the Crawfords, the Saunders and the like, who speak differently, eat differently, think differently and in fact do everything differently. An Indian needs some sort of passport to enter into this de-indianized part of India. All the doors and windows are shut to keep out heat and dust, and metaphorically, India itself” (H-Shihan, 46). Douglas formed an imperial and superior concept of his race, so he denigrated Indians by calling them “a pack of rogues” (38). His superior and colonial attitude was reflected by his temperament and by his western discourse of civilizing “the wretched inhabitants of his wretched state” (148). The typical mindset of Douglas was also reflected by his construction of negative image of Indian Nawab. To saturate the thirst of Olivia who asked about the Nawab he said; “He is a menace to himself to himself, to us, and to the wretched inhabitants of his wretched state. The worst type of ruler – the worst type of Indian – you can have” (148).



The colonial hegemony forced the oriental people to accept the inferior identity by means of embracing the negative image of India. Like the Nawab, Inder Lal accepted that his living condition, house, food and his manner of livelihood were considered to be primitive in comparison with the western standards. He also considered himself inadequate by accepting 'his unscientific mind and ignorance of the modern world'.

On the other hand, the novelist described Major Minnies as 'fair and judicious'. Douglas also convinced Olivia that "he is a fine man. He has some fine qualities – and if only these were combined with a little self-restraint, self-disciplined" (148)

Douglas was also described as 'fair and noble' man having scientific and logical mind. To keep the European race in flux, Olivia wished to procreate many children like Douglas having the ideal and fine qualities of occidental people like handsome, noble, rational and supercilious.

"The image of Indians as 'children', so popular in Anglo-Indian fiction, continues in Ruth Jhabvala. Since children are by nature petulant, volatile and imprudent, it is essential to be strict with them and this is supposed to be in their long term interest" (Bhan, 193-94).

Here Douglas considered Indians as cunning and devious creatures like the children, and as 'a pack of rogues'. The Indians used to adopt the very filthy and mischievous devices to pester the Anglo-Indian officials like the wicked children. When a delegation of Indian merchants came to pay respects as a tribute to Douglas, he considered their requests as mere usual cunning and tricks.

Mr. and Mrs. Saunders' attitude to India, its people and culture was also denigrated one. Mr. Saunders extremely excoriated the Indian culture, and considered suttee custom as savagery like 'everything else in the country, plain savagery and barbarism'. He also cited the violence that broke out in the name of religion. Mrs. Saunders felt exasperated at the presence of Indians and formed a negative image [takes a contemptuous view] of Indian servants. She formed an opinion [is persuaded that] that Indian servants were debased by nature, sexually perverse, and had no normal



way of life, human emotions and attitudes. They were wicked by blood, and did not know how to respect their masters.

She said that these servants really were devils and that they could drive anyone crazy; that it was not stupidity on their part – on the contrary, they were clever enough when it suited their purposes – but it was all done deliberately to torment their masters. (28)

But her criticism of India was not confined only to the servants; rather she encompassed the whole India “everything was like that, everywhere the same – the whole town, the lanes and bazaars” (28). On account of her bitter experience in India, she constantly urged Mr. Saunders to leave this land of ‘heat and dust’ for England, a cool and clean land. Like Mrs. Saunders, Miss Tietz’s observation of India was imbued with utterly denigrated images such as ‘Hindu-Muslim riot, and a smallpox epidemic, and several famines’, and she found nothing worth in India but only all the inimical things that one could find on this earth. It was so rotten country that without the help of Jesus Christ, it was impossible for the Europeans to live in.

Major Minnies’ attitude to India was ambivalent– he neither completely excoriated all aspects of India nor entirely eulogized. He believed that one could love India in many ways and there were “many things to love her for – the scenery, the history, the poetry, the music, and indeed the physical beauty of the men and women” (170). At the same time, he also elicited his view that the Indians were debased in nature and had ‘weak spot’ in the finest people and even in the finest feelings, so it would be unreasonable to them to merge with the Indian culture and Indian people as it could bring debilitation and destruction. But at last his swaying attitude towards India established his third space position. He admitted:

It is all very well to love and admire India – intellectually, aesthetically, he did not mention sexually but he must have been aware of that factor too – but always with a virile, measured, European feeling. One should never, he warned, allow oneself to become soften (like Indian) by an excess of feeling; because the moment that happens – the moment one exceeds one’s measure – one is in danger of being dragged over to the other side (171).



Only one character, Olivia who succeeded in negotiating with the alien culture and people was considered by Dr. Saunders as ‘something rotten’ in her character like the uncivilized Indian. The narrator also described her “a pretty young woman, rather vain, pleasure-seeking, a little petulant” (160). With her vast arena of thinking and mind, Olivia succeeded in negotiating with the Indian culture and people with optimistic outlook. She admitted “That I don’t know India. It’s true I don’t, but what’s that got to do with it? People can still be friends, can’t they, even if it is India” (103). She defended Indian suttee custom by echoing it was the part of their religion, and was also something ancient one, so it would be a great blunder for them to meddle with that. For her oriental orientation of mindset, she was described as rotten or having frailty in character.

The narrator’s treatment of India, at first, was utterly negative one, so she deliberately avoided all Indian things especially food. She said “I hate their food, I wouldn’t touch it for anything” (3). Her depiction of Inder Lal’s house only solidified [endorses] the western myth of India. The ambient of his house could not have the salubrious effect on the people as it was messy, poky, and children were untidy. She observed that Indian streets were only full of beggars, and were ‘dense, run-down, and dirty’. But later with the changes of socio-political scenario and cultural fabric of India, the temperament of the narrator was subjected to change. She viewed “they are no longer the same because I myself am no longer the same. India always changes people, and I have been no exception” (2). Later, similar to Olivia, she decided to accept the Indian culture and people, so admitted “more and more I want to find out; but I suppose the only way I can is to do the same she did – that is, stay on” (160). She adopted Indian lifestyle so she ate Indian foods and dressed Indian clothes though she looked strange to them. She was not perturbed when people call her a ‘hijra’. On account of her love for India and Indian people, she made friendship with Inder Lal, her first host; and Maji, a spiritual woman. She tried to converse with Ritu in Hindi though she was not interested in conversation with her. She also eulogized the scenario of people sleeping in group under the open sky in India contrary to the material world of England in which people suffered from mental trauma for their spending of isolation life in their houses. She accepted that



she had developed the 'sense of communion' while sleeping at the rooftop in India, the experience that she never felt in England.

"The response of the Europeans to the Indian phenomena even in post-independence phase continues to be negative. This applies both to short-term travellers and to Europeans who, engaged in various avocations, have lived in India for long. Perhaps the most odious is the reaction of a young man and a young girl the narrator meets shortly after her arrival in Delhi" (Bhan, 203). Other western characters like Chid and two young people came to India in search of a spiritual enlightenment under the roof of Hindu religion. The girl and her boyfriend, being enchanted by the impressive lectures of the swami came to India for a pilgrimage, but fell under victim of cheaters and various diseases. They had been cheated and robbed in the most sacred places like Amritsar and Kashmir so the girl 'had developed dysentery'. They became so exasperated by these denigrated aspects that they were forced to return back England conceiving the old and conventional western image of India. Chid being led by the sparkling inner impulse of spiritual stir lived like an Indian yogi, but later being perceived the illusive nature of spiritual quest and pilgrimage, dismantled his yogi dress and Indian culture by adopting western discourse, dress and manner.

The novelist perpetuated the western discourse not only by the words of occidental characters that had by blood cynical temperament towards India but also by the words of some Indian characters especially Dr. Gopal. When the narrator met Dr. Gopal for the diagnosis of Chid's ailment she was first asked about her race, and she was informed to consult doctors in her own land in which she could have better doctors and better facility in hospitals. It was unreasonable to them to live in such climate that did not even suit Indians. In this climate, not only occidental people but even most Indians suffered from many fatal diseases. At last, he concluded his statement by uttering God never wanted that 'human beings should live in such a place'. The narrator observed the inhuman and primitive form of treatment that Ritu received for her ailments. Later she was suggested to have a pilgrimage that could restore peace and solace to the most deserted and depressed heart and mentally ill persons. By this the novelist tried to focus on the primitive medical



treatment of Indians for ailments contrary to the highly equipped western medical system. Karim, Nawab's nephew and his wife Kitty left their native land for England as to them there was nothing worth to live in India. Here people were rotten and all things were primitive, so one could not afford to lead a reasonable life in India.

The desire of Europeans was utterly deceived as there was a great disparity between appearance and reality. Chid being impressed by the words of Swami led a life like yogi by putting aside his Christian characteristics and clothes, and by wearing a dress of orange robe. He was convinced that by leading this kind of ascetic life one could get the spiritual enlightenment and mental peace. So to get his dream fulfilled, he ventured in the religious path by wielding begging bowl. But in reality, he observed that practical India was different from his dream and instructed India, so he had to constantly send telegraphic for money. In his journey to Amarnath, he was thrown stones and other missiles. He had to also bargain for cheap room to lead a reasonable life as it was impossible for him to live under the open blue sky and green trees instructed by the guru. At his time of illness towards the journey of Amarnath, nobody came to rescue him except the White colour people. On account of these incidents, he was totally disillusioned, and at last, he became pucca sahib by throwing away his orange robe dress. In similar way, the girl and her boyfriend were deceived and disillusioned in their quest for spiritual enlightenment as they also came under the victim of cheaters and robbers.

If we take a closer look at the journey undertaken by Olivia and the narrator, we may say that the former's desire to bridge the gap between East and West is only partly fulfilled, as her child, bearing the blood of two cultures, is eventually aborted.

On the other hand, the firm decision of the narrator to have a baby, and her ultimate shifting to the town of X paved the path for cross-cultural encounter, and sapped the racial tension. The narrator admitted that "Chid and I have now both merged into the landscape: we are part of the town, part of people's lives here, and have been completely accepted (78).



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The very title 'Heat and Dust' explicitly suggests the racial temperament of the writer, and forecasts the negative image of India that the novel is going to present. In apparent sense, 'heat' and 'dust' imply the external climatic condition of India in which Europeans are not accustomed to. Europeans severely excoriated the dusty hot climate of India in which they underwent many physical as well as mental problems. The hot and dust climate constantly kept the western people in exasperated and quarrelsome mood. On account of that Douglas repeatedly convinced Olivia to have a sojourn trip in the salubrious climate especially in Shimla. Most of the time, they used to keep their doors and windows close so that the hot and dust air could not enter in their rooms. "The Westerners' response to India is symbolised by 'heat' and 'dust', the two things which Europeans, used to a cool and clean climate, invariably dislike and abhor. The 'heat' and 'dust' of India are, as it were, the symbols of discomfort, dirt and disease which the Westerners must encounter and overcome" (Chadha, 106). But in metaphorical sense, it represented the murky aspects of Indian culture and society in which one had to succumb to the terrible experience. India was depicted as a land of communal riot, severe disease, hunger, poverty, destitute, primitivism, exoticism, mystery etc having nothing to praise. These oriental images of occidental people explicitly elicited their colonial and racial mentality. Olivia feared to have a child owing to her frightened by all the little babies who lied buried in the graveyard catching the diseases of smallpox, cholera, or enteric fever.

The novelist excoriated the Government of India by illustrating that India demanded licenses for everything, and later refuted to issue the licenses. If anyone went to the Secretary of India for the need of help, he only knew the word 'no'. Minor images of Indian society like use of mosquito net, crowded bus, dusty people and hot climate were so minutely pictured that they titillated western people and infuriated the oriental one. The novelist documented only one side of Indian life – in Raj era she pictured only upper class society full of parties and luxurious lifestyle, and in Indian era she pictured lower middle class society full of beggars, eunuchs, primitive customs and poor irrational people. Intentionally or unintentionally she failed to capture the whole gamut of India life, and to have insight into the inner hearts of Indian people. These images were clear incarnation of the racial temperament of the writer.



The problem of untouchable, suttee system, and communal riots was so acute almost every character that came into contact in these matters excoriated these customs. Dr. Saunders considered the suttee custom 'plain savagery and barbarism' like everything else in the country. Regarding the communal riot the Nawab said it was 'like weather in its season' which broke out naturally at one time, and after particular duration it automatically vanished. In India, the condition of lower class people was so pathetic that nobody touched their bodies if they suffered from any fatal disease or succumbed to any pathetic situation. Among the gang of dacoits, Tikku Ram asked the hangman on the gallows whether he was belonged to the "Chamar". At the time of his death, he was more concerned with the caste of hangman rather than his valuable life. The incident of beggar woman who suffered from a particular disease, and not a single Indian came to rescue her except the narrator also exemplified the problem of untouchable in India. Other incidents like performing yogi by sadhus, tied the piece of string, believing in hooting of owl as ominous before the journey suggested the exotic and superstitious mentality of Indians.

The Nawab was also very much aware of the superior and directorial mentality of the occidental people and their racial discrimination. The occidental people used to mould the identity of the oriental people, and manipulated their direction. The establishment of western discourse utterly shattered the socio-political life and cultural fabric of India. It was the occidental people who decided what Indians should do and what they should not do. There was no individual identity of the Indians. Being exasperated with western discourse and colonial hegemony, the Nawab resisted the imperial regime by raising his voice.

They make themselves into judges over others, saying this is good, this is bad, as if they are all-knowing. Who is Major Minnies that he should say to me don't do this, and don't do that, who has given him the right to say this to me? (135)

The Nawab was deceived in his desire to know the foreign culture by negotiating with the occidental people. But their fanatic racial attitude and Eurocentric temperament inhibited his intention of merging with the Europeans and their culture. He was very much conscious of the



superior mentality of the occidental people, so his opinion about the occidental people clearly threw light on the imperial temperament of the Whites and their preconceived oriental old myth. He asked a question to Olivia whether she despised Orientals or not. Later he clarified himself by convincing Olivia; “You are right. I think. Because we are very stupid people with feelings that we let others trample on and hurt to their hearts content. English people are so lucky – they have no feelings at all” (145).

Thus, it is observed the old western myth of India as a country of spiritualism, exoticism, mystery, religious gurus, diseases, awful climate, rogues, dacoits, cheaters, famines, beggars, primitivism etc was continued to brew in the Eurocentric writings of the Anglo-Indian writers. The myth of India got impetus through the images of binary opposition – Indians as rogues, cheaters, untidy, irrational, childlike, different, uncivilized and primitive; and Europeans as fair, clean, honest, virtuous, mature, normal, rational, civilized and modern. These negative images of oriental people established the colonial discourse and European hegemony, and ascertained the racial temperament of the Europeans that stemmed from their Eurocentric archetypal mindset. The lopsided depiction of India was the manifestation of novelist’s racial orientation of temperament. On account of their colonial mindset, the occidental characters failed to accustom to the Indian culture, so ultimately their desires to know the Indian culture and to attain the spiritual enlightenment were deceived and disillusioned.

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