

Heat and Dust

by Ruth Praver Jhabvala

About the Author

Ruth Praver Jhabvala is an Anglo-Indian writer who started as a novelist in the 1950s and then, in the mid-1960s, began her successful career as a screenwriter with the Merchant-Ivory team. She won her first Academy Award for the screen adaptation of EM Forster's *A Room with a View* (1985). The second came for another Forster adaptation, *Howards End* (1992).

Ruth Praver Jhabvala was born in Cologne, Germany in 1927. Her father, a lawyer, was of Polish-Jewish origin and her mother was German-Jewish. The family emigrated to Britain at the approach of World War II in 1939. In 1948 Jhabvala became a British citizen and studied English literature at the University of London, graduating with a MA in 1951. In the same year she married an Indian architect, CSH Jhabvala, with whom she moved to India. For the next twenty-four years she lived in New Delhi. Increasingly disenchanted with India, Jhabvala moved to New York in 1975, later becoming a US citizen.

Jhabvala's first novel, *To Whom She Will*, appeared in 1955. She also began to contribute short stories to *The New Yorker* magazine. The tension between Eastern and Western cultures is a recurring theme in her work and her novel, *Heat and Dust*, focuses on this idea. It won the Booker Prize in 1975. *Out of India* (1986) was chosen by *The New York Times Review of Books* as one of the Best Books of 1986.

Analysis with a Focus on Concept of Belonging

Inclusion / Exclusion

East, West and Belonging

The novel clearly juxtaposes the cultures of East and West, especially that of the Anglo-Indian Raj or at least its remnants between the two world wars before India finally gained independence, and Indian culture itself as experienced in the privileged world of the Nawab through to the other end of the social scale amongst the very poor. Further, Jhabvala repeatedly juxtaposes the past (1923) and the present, showing both continuities and discontinuities. In these ways belonging has several dimensions, in both place and time, in *Heat and Dust*. We do not only belong and are certainly not confined to our present time, as the

narrator, pursuing the fascinating story of Olivia and immersing herself in that distant world, finds out. Nor are we only part of our own culture but can, to a certain extent, become immersed in what seems to be its very contradiction. Olivia is drawn decisively and scandalously away from her British origins and conventions into the world of the Nawab. The novel explores both the immense attractions of the 'other' in cultural terms, but also the difficulties and dangers of appropriating that culture against the background of the prejudice Westerners have about Eastern peoples.

The narrator's first experience of India establishes the challenge of cultural belonging: 'Arrival in Bombay today. Not what I had imagined at all'.

She is promptly warned by seasoned Westerners of the difficulties she will encounter: 'You have to be very careful with your food in the beginning ... Afterwards you get immune ... I hate their food'.

Yet the individual who offers this information is regarded with some suspicion, as all that is keeping her in India is her missionary work of converting the Indians to Christianity. Jhabvala's point is that this is someone who will never belong as she has so certainly set herself against the current and is determined, futilely, to Westernise the local culture and furthermore to warn others off it. Nonetheless the narrator does see some off-putting sights in her early hours in the country: crippled children and beggars who, when 'off duty', are nonetheless 'light-hearted, even gay'. Jhabvala certainly does not romanticise India but neither does she indulge the 'Westerniser's' automatic assessment of the country by Western standards.

Part of belonging to a culture is accepting and participating in the physical realities of its way of life in such everyday matters as dress and food. Accordingly, the narrator tells us that 'getting myself a set of Indian clothes was one of the first things I did after settling down in Satipur'. The process itself is totally different from Western ways. She is measured 'right there and then in his open shop in full view of the street'. This is too public for a Westerner yet, on the other hand, he will not touch her as closely as a Western clothes-maker would. He keeps 'his distance', with the comical result that her clothes are not very well fitted. But that too reflects a different attitude. Ironic, too, is the observation that:

although I'm now dressed like an Indian woman, the children are still running after me; but I don't mind too much as I'm sure they will soon get used to me.

Here Jhabvala is subtly negotiating the complexities of belonging. We may think we belong and go to some lengths to achieve it but our otherness will still be apparent.

F Focus question

How does Jhabvala introduce the concept of belonging in the early stages of *Heat and Dust*?

Belonging and the English Raj

In parallel to these experiences we are taken back to Olivia's encounters with India in 1923. Her husband, Douglas, is endlessly sympathetic to her difficulties and tries to encourage her to belong to the English colony there, which preserves its customs and traditions as far as possible in essentially alien conditions. This, it should be remembered, is a form of belonging too, if a somewhat besieged sense of it. He urges Olivia to like Beth Crawford, who shares his opinion that someone of sensitivity and intelligence can learn to live in India and 'would be ... all right here'. This of course is the language of survival rather than belonging. Jhabvala indicates, appropriately at this point given Douglas' great love for Olivia, how romantic the place can be:

he hugged her tighter and could hardly stifle a small cry—as if it were too much happiness for him to have her there in his arms, flooded and shining in Indian moonlight.

The visit to Mrs Saunders in her sick-bed, on the other hand, does nothing to encourage Olivia. Deranged by her illness she lashes out at the Indian servants and tells Olivia of the squalor in which they live. Physical difficulties, heat and dust indeed, are recurring elements in the story. Mrs Saunders has pleaded with her husband to leave and Olivia recognises that the woman has been defeated by India and this, combined with Beth Crawford's brisk, bright ways, serves to encourage her to believe that she, being made of different character, might just be able to take it on.

F Focus question

How is Olivia's character introduced in terms of her capacity for belonging to India?

Olivia and Douglas belong to one another, in marriage, but the ways in which Jhabvala presents their life together, especially in dialogue, probe the pressures which challenge that dimension of belonging. Olivia

does not want to leave Douglas just because it is stiflingly hot on the plain and would be much cooler in the hills. He cites and insists upon the example of his parents:

'That's just silly, Olivia. Mother spent four months away from Father every year for years on end. From April to September. She didn't like it either, but when you're in a district, that's the way it has to be.'

'I'm not going', said Olivia.

The fact that the Nawab is having a party for them further encourages her to stay.

Changing Times, Perspectives and Belonging

The juxtaposition of the contemporary narrator's experience with those of Olivia is a study in the ways different times and perspectives shed light on each other. As Olivia becomes drawn to the Nawab's seductive world, so our narrator becomes bewitched by the otherness of Indian life:

It's amazing how *still* everything is. When Indians sleep they really do sleep ... I lie awake for hours: with happiness, actually. I have never known such a sense of communion.

The word 'communion' adds a religious dimension to this experience of belonging. Her joy is in advance of Olivia's happiness with the Nawab but it anticipates it because of the reciprocity that has been established between the two times of the novel. The narrator, indeed, contrasts her new life in India with her old existence in London and states her preference. *This* is where she belongs now:

Lying like this under the open sky there is a feeling of being immersed in space—though not in empty space, for there are all these people sleeping around me, the whole town and I am part of it. How different from my often very lonely room in London with only my own walls to look at and my books to read.

F Focus question

How does the prose style of this quoted passage emphasise and celebrate the difference between belonging and loneliness? Concentrate closely on vocabulary and imagery.

The image of Olivia in 'her shuttered bungalow' presents the resistance to belonging of colonial powers. She is on the brink of rebelling against such containment—'a certain restlessness penetrated even into her pretty yellow drawing room'—as she plays Schumann on the piano, preserving European culture in the East. That everything is shut tight is necessary to keep the dust at bay, but all these physical details

have a metaphorical resonance, not only in cultural terms but with regard to Olivia's own pent-up psychology.

In contrast, the narrator sees herself as 'merged into the landscape'. She argues that this sense of belonging has been achieved because of the receptivity of Indian culture to immense variety: it can cope with all manner of persons and behaviour, 'all sorts of different elements'. But there are always European reservations, and they usually have to do with matters of hygiene and health, as in the catalogue she gives of the dreadful diseases which have afflicted the desperately poor and insane, and the weather: 'Dust storms have started blowing all day, all night. Hot winds whistle columns of dust out of the desert into the town.'

But the dust and heat affect everybody, not only Westerners: 'everyone is restless, irritable, on the edge of something'. In a sense, part of belonging to India is experiencing extreme discomfort there. Wanting to be elsewhere is part of being there.

F Focus questions

Why do you think Jhabvala has given the title *Heat and Dust* to her novel? Are these elements only meant literally? In what way(s), if at all, might they be connected to issues of belonging?

Olivia is concerned that Douglas's sense of belonging both to her and to the little world of Englishness with which they are surrounded should not be destabilised. Outside, all is heat and dust, and the problems of his administration. This closeted world is not satirised by Jhabvala nor does she underestimate its appeal in these circumstances. She makes it perfectly comprehensible that someone like Douglas, bearing the burden and heat of the day in his job, should be drawn to the comforts of such a home and his loving wife. If a facile satire of that preservation of tastefulness and comfort were provided, the desire of Olivia to escape it and experience an entirely different mode of being would be less striking.

Harry is the conduit that leads her more deeply into the Nawab's domain. Travelling with him to the palace she starts to appreciate the landscape and, further, to imagine belonging to it:

She could even see how one could learn to like it (in fact, she was learning): the vast distances, the vast sky, the dust and sun and occasional broken fort or mosque or cluster of tombs. It was so different from what one knew that it was like being not in a different part of this world but in another world altogether, in another reality.

Like the narrator, she is learning to belong, no matter how uncongenial aspects of India may be.

Belonging and 'the Exotic'

The detail with which the palace is described and the life that is lived there represents the attraction it has for Olivia and her desire to belong to it. Its strangeness is exciting, with the 'curtained gallery' for the ladies above ('Olivia never looked up') and the 'usual young men lying around in graceful attitudes'. The air of mystery touched with decadence is palpable. Harry's incorporation into its life adds to this sense of unexplained, vague debauchery. The adornments of the palace are luxurious: 'carved sofas with brocade upholstery and a few little carved tables and a cocktail cabinet especially made for the Nawab out of an elephant's foot', but not, as that last detail indicates, without a hint of the grotesque, adding to the fascination and slight sense of threat and even danger.

That the palace is like a labyrinth, with 'various suites and passages' through which Olivia is led by the Nawab, represents the process of her being drawn into this exotic world. Finally arriving at the pianos which he had asked her to play, the Nawab, touching the cloth on one of them, frightens a squirrel from beneath which 'ran for its life'. This is another detail suggesting the oddity and perhaps precariousness of life in India—both at large and in this particular place. That the pianos are unplayable, the keys stuck and swollen, is a jarring note, literally, in the process of Olivia's seduction by the Nawab. But it is also indicative of a suspension of European values—the grand and the upright had been bought for Sandy, the Nawab's wife. She had been learning the Indian instrument, the sitar, 'but she got tired of it so I sent for the pianos'. This symbolises Sandy's tiredness with India. Will Olivia go the same way?

F Focus question

What is the significance of the Nawab and his part in the plot of the novel, especially with regard to Olivia's experience of belonging in India and to him?

The narrator explains the perennial fascination with the East, exercised over Westerners 'tired of the materialism' of their world: 'we come here in the hope of finding a simpler and more natural way of life'. From the Indians' perspective, Inder Lal indicates, this is a spurious quest as he is ashamed of the primitive aspects of his country and the way people live there. Then there are Indians who have emigrated to Britain, like Karim and Kitty in up-market Knightsbridge. The narrator presents their lives very attractively—they have a version of India in the West End of London, prospering from the sale of 'boutique clothes made exclusively of Indian materials'. There is no question of their belonging to their new world. They still want to serve India's best interests but had come to realise that it was impossible to live there.

The Complications of Belonging

This section of the novel shows how complicated the idea of belonging can become, especially with the ease of global travel today. Expatriate communities can sustain aspects of their home cultures and even yearn for their homelands yet they recognise the superiority, material and otherwise, of the new lives they have created elsewhere in essentially alien cultures. Jhabvala indicates the complexities of belonging. The narrator muses upon Karim and Kitty, in their London luxury, and notes that 'it is difficult to fit him and Kitty in either at Khatm or at Satipur; or even what I saw of Bombay'. She may be more at home in India than they would be!

Major Minnies's analysis of India, proceeding from sympathy towards it but also sounding a warning, may come close to Jhabvala's view: 'He said that one has to be very determined to withstand—to stand up to—India'.

He speaks of loving India by focusing on various aspects of its life, history and culture. But he warns the European of loving her 'too much'. This amounts to a statement of the impossibility of ever completely belonging to the country if you are a Westerner because 'India always ... finds out the weak spot and presses on it'. This is not an indictment of people who, like Olivia, succumb to the love of India but rather that that love may lead to their destruction. Even though Minnies remains in India, he always regards her as

an opponent, even sometimes an enemy, to be guarded and if necessary fought against from without and, especially, from within: from within one's own being.

Key Issues

- Consider the personal, cultural, historical and social contexts. Think about how each of these elements makes an impact upon an understanding of what belonging, or not belonging, means in the context of *Heat and Dust*. Take Olivia's story into account but also focus on the cultural challenges which India poses to the European mind, the array of cultural differences it presents, the historical reasons for the English presence there and the preservation by Anglo-Indians of English customs in that very different environment, and the social conventions which are varied or even overturned in the experience of those such as the narrator. Given all these elements, is Jhabvala suggesting that belonging is an impossible goal for a Westerner in India—indeed, as in the case of Olivia—that it may lead to the European's destruction?

- Look at the connections made with people. Think about the various relationships in the novel. A relationship, such as marriage, provides a situation of belonging. Consider the narrator's relationships with the Indians she encounters and also Olivia's with Douglas and the Nawab. What is Jhabvala saying about such connections and their stability and enduring qualities? Are such relationships as uncertain as the bond that an individual might try to forge with India?
- Examine the modification of attitudes over time. A very striking aspect of this novel is the contrast and oscillation between the past (1923, and an even more distant past) and the present. Think about how issues of belonging have changed and/or stayed the same for the Westerner in India over time.
- Consider the ways in which individuals enrich or challenge groups. Think about the various characters in the novel and the extent to which they contribute to or are critical of the cultures and societies in which they are located. Some of the Anglo-Indians are very critical or at least wary of Indian culture and the dangers it poses. Others, such as the narrator, are keen to assimilate themselves to the new culture. How does Jhabvala assess these situations and evaluations? How do you?
- Look at the assumptions underlying representations of belonging. Probe these to consider whether we take it for granted that people should attempt to assimilate new cultures. Jhabvala queries the possibility and even the wisdom of this. It is sometimes taken for granted that such assimilation should be attempted. The Anglo-Indians, generally, avoided it while still loving aspects of India. Were they necessarily wrong in this matter? Avoid automatically endorsing what might appear to be the 'correct' response to this issue. Jhabvala represents its complexities and we diminish her novel if we read it as some kind of politically correct tract.
- Think about how the novel has influenced your understanding of the concept of belonging. Remember to consider this aspect of your response to *Heat and Dust*.