
Research Papers



**Ruth Prawar Jhabvala's Heat and Dust: A Lacanian Study
of Desire and Erotica**

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Abstract

Desire is the desire of the Other - Lacan

Our desires, beliefs, biases, and so forth are constructed for us as a result of our immersion in the Symbolic Order, especially as that immersion is carried out by our parents and influenced by their own responses to the Symbolic Order. This is what Lacan means by his claim that "desire is always the desire of the other"

– Jacques Lacan

Ruth Prawar Jhabvala, a 20th century expatriate, is Polish by origin, English by upbringing and Indian by marriage. Though she wrote about East-West encounter yet the central character in almost all her novels is India and Indian society. In her novels, India reacts heavily on her Western characters. She describes the experiences of Westerners in India and their interaction with Indians. Her fiction undoubtedly revolves around the cross-cultural eroticism, desire and moral values. She is believed by many critics excellent in recording their manners, desire and behaviour. Her *Heat and Dust* forwards two parallel stories. Both of these stories are highly pregnant with Lacanian Desire Domain. Both Olivia and the narrator find their lost object a *petit* – one in Nawab and the other in Inder Lal. This paper will make an endeavour to look for Lacanian notion of desire and *Jouissance* in *Heat & Dust*.

Desire has been identified as a philosophical problem since antiquity. Plato

argues in his *Republic* that individual desires must be postponed in the name of the higher ideal. Unlike him, Lacan remarks that desire, a function central to all human experience and behaviour, makes life meaningful. He strongly believes that desire is everything. In fact, he states that desire is always the desire of the other, nothing nameable (See, Lacan, Seminar2:38 and Seminar Bk. XI: 235).

We know that Language is empty because it is an endless process of difference and absence: instead of being able to possess anything in its fullness, the child simply moves from one to another, along a linguistic chain which is potentially infinite. One signifier implies another and that another, and so on *ad infinitum*: the 'metaphorical' world of the mirror has yielded ground to the metonymic chain of signifiers, meanings, or signifieds will be produced; but no object or person can ever be fully 'present' in this chain. This endless movement from one signifier

to another is what Lacan means by desire. All desire springs from lack, which it strives continually to fill. Human world revolves round this lack: the absence of the real objects designated by signs point to the fact that words have meaning only by virtue of the absence and exclusion of others. To enter language, then, is to become a prey to desire: language, Lacan remarks, is what hollows being into desire.

Tyson very rightly points out that “in entering the Symbolic Order - the world of language - we're entering a world of loss and lack” (Tyson 2006: 30). However, we desire what we are taught to desire. We know that it is repression that first creates the unconscious. Indeed, Lacan's famous statement that “the unconscious is structured like a language” implies among other things, “the way in which unconscious desire is always seeking our lost object of desire, the fantasy mother of our preverbal experience, just as language is always seeking ways to put into words the world of objects we inhabit as adults that didn't need words when we felt as preverbal infants, one with them”. (See, Lacan *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book VII). It is only in the absence of a desired object that language becomes necessary, and through the use of language that a desiring self comes into existence.

Therefore, we must remember that in any Lacanian reading, to write or to read is to enter a symbolic order where meaning and desire are mediated through trans-individual structures of otherness which both possess and dispossess us at the same time. Language constructs a relation of being loss, loss of meaning which symbolizes a loss of primary unity with the first 'Other', the mother, in the Oedipal Complex. Invariably desire follows the direction of signification – ever onwards that which escapes it (Gounelas 2001). Lacan believes that Psychoanalytical notion of desire is radically different. It is concerned with feelings, attitudes, emotions, performance, orgasmic intensity, etc. It deals only with speech, the analysand's discourse, and the demands and also symbolic expressions which the analysand talks is in fact desire manifested by and hidden in language. Psychoanalysis functions to restore the analysand to his or her desire, which lies unacknowledged with his or her demands. In fact, he also argues that it is the signifier which is actually the cause of *Jouissance* (Lacan 1977).

In *Heat and Dust*, we come across two English women – Olive and the narrator. Both fall prey to Lacanian desire domain in their own

respective periods. The overpowering sexuality of the Nawab of Khatm led Olivia to earn her object *petit*. Desire, we know, is an important urge, an inner force in one's life. It is expression of one's inward i.e., inner joy and demands reciprocity. Similar experience is realized by the narrator, young Olivia fifty years later in modern India. Olivia Rivers, young and beautiful wife of Douglas, was seduced by a fading bankrupt dynamic Nawab in whose pursuit she became the fallen Eve of the high English society.

The novel brings forth Olivia's personal attachments with the Nawab who gets fully caught by her beauty. He provides her with happiness, balance and yearning. We find that Lacanian desire and *Jouissance*, a libidinal imperative, which lies at the heart of human suffering, is at work throughout the novel. Pertinently, 'the subject does not simply satisfy a desire, he enjoys desiring. In lacking the satisfying object, desire endlessly pursues a phantom satisfaction, deriving *Jouissance* only from the pursuit' (Parkin-Gounelas 2003: 81). We shall look at the different kinds of passions which resemble the Lacanian notion of desire and is reflected in the novel.

The Nawab of Khatm, an Indian Prince and Olivia Douglas, the English woman come across only to win their yearnings. The novel clearly exposes how Olivia transcends chastity to satisfy her starved sex and finds its possibility in an equally recalcitrant Nawab. While searching for her 'Other', Olivia finds in Prince an ardent admirer of her beauty and lover who emboldened her for realizing in him her lost desire. He fulfills her long cherished dreams and hence she 'visited him' (Jhabvala 2003:101). However, she suffers from noticeable pangs of guilt and appears mostly sure about what she wants from life. We know that she herself even knew that her relationship with Nawab is a sinful one but she couldn't do anything. A thorough study shows that *Heat and Dust* is fully pregnant with Lacanian desire domain which becomes evident in the different scenes and dialogues of the novel. Olivia would suffer from loneliness:

The rest of the time Olivia was alone in her big house 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 work in the district (Jhabvala 2003:14).

Thus, she would look for such moments which would enable to see Nawab, the prince again and again. This speaks of her inner desire. She is

once invited by the Nawab to a picnic and a visit to the shrine of Baba Firdaus. They sit by a little spring of bubbling water between two rocks amidst a green grove in a desert, and talks of miracles. They play the game of musical chairs and Olivia is irresistibly attracted to the young Nawab. Soon they feel each other and both earn Lacanian Jouissance.

It is well known fact that when a man and a woman come together on the basis of blinding intimacy for satiating their desires, yearnings or longings for each other, there is a strong urge to create an emotional bond. In *Heat and Dust*, Olivia and Douglas were married before they came to India? Their marriage was not a loveless one but drifted apart for reasons which could have been controlled by both. The Indian heat kept Olivia indoors making her lead a life of sheer loneliness which compelled her to look for lost other. She starts imagining her lost other in the Nawab who meets her first in a party and later she welcomes his visits to her house. She tried; she couldn't help being drawn magnetically to the deadly Nawab, like a victim in a whirlpool. The attraction was very strong and fatal. Being young and enthusiastic, Olivia finds the company of the English boring and calls the women old hens. One must not forget that the environment Olivia was wrapped in would want anyone to find an outlet. Though she loved Douglas deeply, her inner conscience rebelled against his stereotyped routine life. With the passage of time, their relation became uncommunicative. The 'prim' 'straight nose' 'high forehead' 'the noble' 'fair' Douglas started becoming a non-entity to Olivia. Douglas overlooked the desires of his wife and cared more for the pat on his back from his seniors. Love was a form of energy and due to the inner loneliness. Olivia considers Nawab 'a modern person...He is entirely emancipated' (Jhabvala 2003:70). She sublimates her passion and her emotional dependence on the Nawab who emerges for her Lacanian Other. Earlier, she had adored Douglas for his idealistic boyish blue eyes. In due course her role of a wife fades and the role of the lover dominates. This is because Douglas spends more at the office and at home he is busy with his files, hence neglecting Olivia who found her love with the Nawab more secure- as he gave her more time and thus enabled her realize her desire and the Other. The Nawab encroaches on her weak point and moulds her according to his wishes and desires. Moreover, Olivia's feminine quality drives the Nawab towards her. The only attraction

towards each other is that one is extremely masculine and the other intensely feminine. They were attracted to each other like a helpless moth to a flame. Her love for the Nawab is genuine and does not suspect the Nawab of being evil, weird or licentious. Yet at the same time we see her feelings for Douglas, when she wants to have his child.

They clung to each other, she whispered "I don't want anything to change—I don't want you to change.

"I am not," she said.

"No, you are not." But she clung to him tighter. She longed to be pregnant; everything would be all right then – he would not change, she would not change, they would be as planned. (Jhabvala 2003:117).

We realize that though Olivia is in love with the rakish qualities of the Nawab, the idea of her own marriage breaking up is a threat to her, and she depends entirely on the emotional security of marital bliss. Olivia's frequent visits to the palace were not known to Douglas and when he did come to know about these, he did nothing to stop her because he trusted her. She and Nawab at the Shrine realized much of their Lacanian pleasure. In fact, 'the Nawab's overwhelming presence was concentrated now on her alone' telling her: 'Come, "he said. "Sit with me" (Jhabvala 2003:134). Soon 'she put out her hand and laid it on her chest as if to soothe him... She could not escape him now... He laughed and laughed, well pleased with her (Jhabvala 2003: 136 – 137). Even after pregnancy, Nawab would experience Lacanian pleasure principle when 'he often stroked her slender hips, her small flat unmarked abdomen ...' (Jhabvala 2003:152). This all fully corresponds Lacanian Desire Domain and eroticism.

Heat and Dust has a parallel plot structure. Douglas divorces Olivia and marries Tessie. Their grand-daughter (Olivia Junior) is the narrator who comes to India with Olivia's letters and diaries in search of Olivia's romantic past. The young Olivia's actions go hand in hand with Olivia's past. Her lifestyle runs parallel to that of Olivia's though both have different personalities. The narrator lacked the docile and domestic expertise and the feminine tenderness, gentleness and womanliness like Olivia.

Olivia and the narrator were two different entities having different characteristics; their ways of living and dressing up were different. Olivia was more homely and well dressed, the narrator was comfortable with her rented out room by the government clerk Inder Lal, and lived a life of a

traveler. She shocked Inder by doing manly deeds of carrying her own luggage up to her own room. She was not impressed by the disorganized way of living when she saw Inder Lal's untidy house.

In the narrator's life, Inder Lal fell in the shadow of the Nawab of Khatm; the relationship between the two was very free. Initially Inder Lal felt odd moving with her – 'I suppose we do make a strange couple' (Jhabvala 2003: 49) – but later on with their excursions of the town, their friendship grew. Maybe at first his kind gestures brought out the Indian attitude of being hospitable. Just as the Nawab glorified about his ancestors to Olivia, similarly Inder Lal told about the past from a historical point of view. Inder Lal finds a friend, a confidant in the narrator and she tries to win her more and more. Inder Lal's wife Ritu is a mentally unfit woman. The suffocating relationship with Ritu leads him to find sexual and social asylum in the narrator. The Nawab's wife, Sandy, was declared unfit and he finds solace in Olivia. The relation between Olivia Junior and Inder becomes stronger and more intimate and she wants to disclose the contents of her heart to Inder Lal. She lays her hand on his and then looks at her in an entirely different way:

...he was healthy young man – his wife was away we were alone in a romantic spot (getting more romantic every moment as the sun began to set) (Jhabvala 2003: 27)

Inder Lal's frequent night visits to the narrator make him a dark lover. Both realize the Lacanian Other in each other. She says:

Inder Lal and I lie on my bedding on the opposite side; it is more and more delightful to be with him. He thrusts me now completely and has become affectionate. I think he prefers to be with me when it is dark. Then everything is hidden and private between us two alone.

(Jhabvala 2003: 140)

On the whole, we find that the novel is heavily loaded with the Lacanian notion of desire, eroticism and pleasure principle.

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