

“Ruth Prawar Jabhvala’s Heat and Dust: Narrating Social Realism in Film Adaptations of Indian Fiction in English”

Sreenivas Andoju

Dept. of English, CBIT, Hyderabad
Chaitanya Bharathi Institute of Technology
Hyderabad, India
andoju.research@gmail.com

Dr. Suneetha Yadav

Dept. of English, RGM CET
Rajiv Gandhi Memorial College of Engineering &
Technology, Nandyal, Kurnool, India
yadavsuneetha@gmail.com

Abstract

Ruth Prawar Jabhvala a European writer settled in India perceived its society with an unorthodox, clear vision and portrayed through modern lens in cinema. She came here, tried to establish a keen relationship with India and formed a candid point of view about everything that was socially inappropriate. Ruth Jhabvala had shown Indian's misplaced faith in 'Heat and Dust', created awareness through the story of child in this novel, as if she had arrived to India to get the salvation. She says, "I have seen some terrible sight in India. I've lived through a Hindu Muslim riot, and a smallpox epidemic, and several famines, and I think I may rightly say I have been everything that you can see on this earth" (HD 23).

Ruth Prawar Jhabvala is an Indo-anglian writer. Her observation of India is clear and honest. Often the readers become uneasy reading Ruth Jhabvala's records on superstition, agreed social awkwardness, women's domination, poverty and religion etc, but she does not hesitate to reveal her views on India frankly. As a writer, she was viewed and accepted as a modern thought. In 1975, Indian government took more efforts for urbanization. So, in those periods education was concentrated on urban upliftment. So, education did not reach properly to the rural areas leading to rural unemployment. The unemployment was the reason for the poverty. Such aspects were reasoned out strategically even when this work of fiction was translated onto the the screen. Thus "Heat and Dust" is a realistic modern narrative of social circumstances of post Independent India.

Keywords: *Realism, Fiction, Adaptation, Imagery*

Introduction

Cinema theoretically holds social responsibility and each work of visual production needs to be socially viable. A UNESCO report (Dhingra 1963) quoted a speech by Prime Minister Nehru who stated, "...the influence in India of films is greater than newspapers and books combined." Even at this

early stage in cinema, the Indian film-market catered for over 25 million people a week- considered to be just a 'fringe' of the population. In line with those numbers and increasing movie going population, the content projected must add value to the society, for positive progress and its common good. In similar lines of thought, this paper aims to discuss Ruth Prawar Jabhvala's *Heat and Dust* and how its film adaptation popularized such social realistic portrayal of post independent Indian social scenario. In that light it also tries to aim at analyzing the imagery in both textual (novel) and visual (film) portrayal with literary values and how they have led to contradictory and even incompatible, but nonetheless extremely relevant interpretations of the novel in its cinematic adaptation.

Portrayal of social realism in films

Indian film history shows the progression from mythological themes of pre-independent India for cultural unification and then to social circumstances of caste, religion. Social realism and such portrayal has been keen to show the effects on society and depict the problems endured by the working class in other words masses, and 'underclass' including homelessness (*Slum Dog Millionaire*), Issues in Education, passions, unemployment and ambition (*3 Idiots*) and the inequalities of social class (*Heat and Dust*). Thus India's 100-year film history spans colonialism, independence, partition and globalisation; a realist Indian cinema emerged parallel to the mainstream as early as the 1930s. With the advance of sound, all-singing-all-dancing melodramas and religious epics grew popular with Indian audiences, but a number of "social-problem" films, naturalistic in their depiction, also found fans, and this, despite being on a less-than-equal footing. Gudavalli Ramabrahmam's "Raithu Bidda" (1939), for instance, was banned by the colonial administration for criticising the zamindars, hereditary Indian landlords who had turned tax collectors for the British. Presently, there has been deviation due the increased importance given to 'entertainment', whereas pure social cinema is mostly informative and educative than entertainment in nature.

The modern thought is to try and have a blend of social content and entertainment, at least through a gripping narration to an effective engagement of the audience.

The elements of social realism in *Heat and Dust*:

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, an Indo-Anglian wrote novels and screenplays on Indian social issues. Her observation of India is clear and honest. Often the readers become uneasy reading Ruth Jhabvala's records on superstition, women's domination, poverty and dishonest sadhus. She does not hesitate to reveal her views on India frankly. As a writer, she has rights to express her views and at the same time it should be seen and accepted as a modern thought and a work of literary expression.

The post independent India had seen utter poverty; people lived in less hope and more fear leading them to be superstitious and helpless lot. On the contrary, the systems like governance and administration could do little to address those socially affecting issues in India. That's when Ruth Pravar Jhabvala took up to writing to express the stories of the poor through fiction, novel. "Poverty puts people's lives in danger and robs them of their future or deprives people not only of safe water and adequate food, clothing and shelter, but also education and health care"(Attarchand 57). Ruth Jhabvala portrays this in her novel *Heat and Dust*.

Heat and Dust is narrated in the novel by the granddaughter (whose name is not mentioned) of Douglas and Jessie. The narrator has come to India to know about the life of Olivia, the first wife of her grandfather Douglas. When the narrator comes to India, she observes the scenes of unhygienic conditions. She builds an image of contemporary Indian reality. On the first day of her arrival in Bombay, she stays in women dormitory in S.M. Hostel where she gets a glimpse of stark poverty in Indian streets. She finds another European woman who has been staying in India for 30 years. The European woman, in the beginning advises her to be extra careful for food. That is she should exercise priority to satisfy her hunger. She has seen several famines, a small epidemic, a Hindu Muslim riot and some terrible sights. When she looks into the street, there is no place for people to sleep. "She observes many children who spend most of their time begging and involved in stealing. Some of them are very young, mere children there may be hope for them, God willing they will go home again before it is too late. But others there are, women and men, they have been here for years and every year they get worse" (HD 7)

Superstitions in India were yet another social hurdle for the progress of the society in early years of post independent India. It is the conviction (of the people) that something shall happen owing to the causes utterly disproportionate to the event. For example, the belief that there would be some trouble in the journey or pain at its end just because a cat has crossed the path is a superstition. "Superstition means a belief or notion, not based on reason or knowledge" (Bogardus 117).

In this novel, Jhabvalla asserts how superstition has taken a strong hold in the routine life of these simple folks. One night Ritu suffers some sort of a bite. She screams but her mother-in-law places her hand on her mouth. She chants some mantras. Her mother-in-law does not believe modern medical treatment. Instead of taking Ritu to doctor, she treats her by mantras and applying holy ash on her head.

Thematic adaptations of the novel into the film:

The film, "Heat and Dust" is a 1983 romantic drama film with a screenplay by Ruth Praver Jhabvala based upon her novel, *Heat and Dust*. It was directed by James Ivory and produced by Ismail Merchant. It stars Greta Scacchi, Shashi Kapoor and Julie Christie. The plot of Heat and Dust follows two intertwined stories. The first is set in the 1920s and deals with an illicit affair between Olivia, the beautiful young wife of a British colonial official, and an Indian Nawab. The second, set in 1982, deals with Anne, Olivia's great-niece, who travels to India hoping to find out about her great-aunt's life, and while there, also has an affair with a married Indian man.

The film "*Heat and Dust*" from a Booker prize-winning novel by Oscar-winning screenwriter Jhabvala, touches on themes, settings and secrets things "just not done, my dear," or things best not said out loud in the polite company of the day familiar to any Forster fan. The film came out in the flurry of British film and TV projects wallowing in the nostalgia for The British Raj, the Empire's rule of India, along with "The Jewel in the Crown" and "A Passage to India" (another Forster adaptation, this one by David Lean). And seeing "*Heat and Dust*" anew brings its contrasts with the other works sharing its setting into sharp relief, and perhaps explains why this film is lumped in with the more Indo-centric and lightly-regarded films of this famed production team. India's economic and financial centre then seemed to have simultaneously managed to appeal to large audiences all over the world doubtless attracted by this entertaining and, to all appearances, authentic view of India and to alienate the Indian's themselves who considered these representations of their country as false and symptomatic of a surviving Western desire to dominate the East by manipulating and controlling its image.

The film *Heat and Dust* touched on the too familiar themes of British racism and Indian resentment, a hatred mixed with a desire to emulate their "masters." Even the *Nawab* is sure to entertain his guests with a bagpipe corps playing "God Save the King," and it is he who makes the "To the King/Emperor" toast at dinner. In just over two meticulously detailed, leisurely hours, "Heat" takes us into the India of the past, where unhappy, bored and over-heated Olivia finds her only true connections in India are a chatty, outspoken and probably gay British "go-between" Harry (Nickolas Grace) and the ostensible ruler of this province who likes Harry. The Anglicized *Nawab* (Shashi Kapoor) is a dashing, rich and handsome man with a hint of ruthless cruelty about him. He delights in telling his English dinner guests about the

massacres his ancestors carried out while his mother (Madhur Jaffrey) and her ladies in waiting grill the new “*memsaab*” (wife of a man of authority) on her life.

Film adaptation of fiction as an approach to visual story-telling:

It is fact that the novel was so popular much before it was adapted to the screen, and that the film’s enormous success, which culminated in its Oscars—the ultimate Western consecration with the same title as “Heat and Dust”. The film is understood as a blend of mimetic art, a lot things portrayed are different from fiction. Questioning the relevance of fidelity criticism, the author closely examines the bias against adaptations. Instead of judging adaptations only for their faithfulness to the original, he argues that film adaptations of literary works must be seen as independent creative works of art, and not as derivative, and hence inferior. The relationship in general, between cinema and the literary source can be understood in terms of inter-textuality, inter-mediality and interpretation, and within the paradigm of translation. The creative collaboration of Ismail Merchant, James Ivory and Ruth Praver Jhabvala is a celebrated one in the history of film not just in India but internationally. The book focuses on Jhabvala, the novelist and screenwriter, and analyses two of her texts in fiction and film. The two novels/films under study the *Householder* and *Heat and Dust* were chosen to see how Jhabvala the novelist reinvents her own stories as the screenwriter to suit to the needs of the new medium that is visual adaptation.

They raise issues that go beyond the mere understanding and deciphering of India today. The first question which comes to mind when reading Jhabvala or seeing the film realistic renderings of social themes in Indian poor households and their occupants are whom these representations target. One may wonder who, if anyone needs visual portrayal to view and understand post independent India and why. Bearing in mind that the memory and legacy of the British Empire still

awaken mixed feelings in the Indian population, it is doubtful whether the Indians themselves unmitigatedly appreciate such references, which can be associated with the idea of British domination. In this light, the realistic interpretations from textual to visual were apt adaptations and popular, gained international appreciation.

Conclusion:

The novel *Heat and Dust* and the film with the same title were astute fusion of Indian social scenario of Jhabvala’s contemporary India and her western outlook to appreciate at the sametime feeling discomfort. references, aimed at reaching cross-cultural publics, partakes of what has been defined in film terminology as “cinematic clustering” (Cowen qtd in Pandey 87), but could also be extended to texts as “textual clustering.” In fact, the realistic allusions, the worldwide recognised quiz show—added, in the case of the film, to an international production team, which brought together a British director working in Hollywood, an Indian co-director, a British screenwriter, and Indian lead actors belonging to the India diaspora or stemming from the most cosmopolitan Indian cities (Dhume)—give the book and, to an even greater degree, the film, a truly global quality, emphasised the image of India, in spite of the country’s cultural vitality and its rapid emergence on the word stage, still seems to need the mediation of references to the work of an author from the Western canon to be relayed to the world at large.

Besides their adaptations of the basic and typical personal voyage, Jhabvala’s India is confined to Delhi which is picturized in all its beauty and diversity. The Palace cinema, radio station, the Danish Embassy, shopping centre called Cannaught Place, the Subzimandi, the Delhi Railway station and so on. Thus *Heat and Dust* is a popular work of fiction and filmic adaptation due to the personal or autobiographical narrative it has throughout.

References:

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heat_and_Dust_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heat_and_Dust_(film)).