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Disillusionment With More Than India

Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust*

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A POLISH-JEWISH ESCAPEE from Germany to England at the age of twelve, Ruth Praver Jhabvala nourished a deep-rooted literary ambition (it inspired her as a child to write stories in German and pick “The Short Story in England 1700–1750” as the topic of her M.A. thesis) which burgeoned when she gained an entrée into Indian life as the wife of a Parsi architect. In her early novels, especially in *To Whom She Will* (1955) and *The Nature of Passion* (1956), she was critical of India like an outsider, yet she seemed an insider, in that she was inward with Indian realities and appreciative. *Heat and Dust* (1995) marks her disillusionment both with India and with more than India, intimating the new directions and emphases of her later novels (which travel through time as well as space and in which the Western psyche occupies more of her attention) and employing an innovative, radical departure in narrative technique.

Jhabvala has a woman's perspective, natural and inevitable, given that she is a female writer. It is obvious in *Heat and Dust*, because it focuses on two (English) women and because, given the fact that these two are fifty years apart, women are important, perhaps more important than men, as signifiers of change. The narrative is double-layered. The “T” of the narrative set in post-Independence India, in 1973, is Miss Rivers, though she does not carry her name as such in the novel, thereby widening its significance (in the film version of the novel, directed by James Ivory, and produced by Ismail Merchant in 1983, she is named Anne). She is also the narrator of the first story – of Olivia, who came to live in India in 1923, when it was a British colony, yet not in Victorian times and so not too distant from us. Olivia is the first wife of Douglas Rivers. Miss Rivers is the grand-daughter of his second wife, Tessie Crawford. Miss Rivers stays in India to unravel the mystery surrounding Olivia; the gothic element in the novel creeps in: