

Kunapipi

Volume 1 | Issue 1

Article 14

1979

Ruth Jhabvala: Generating Heat and Light

Yasmine Gooneratne

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gooneratne, Yasmine, Ruth Jhabvala: Generating Heat and Light, *Kunapipi*, 1(1), 1979.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol1/iss1/14>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Ruth Jhabvala: Generating Heat and Light

Abstract

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, whose Polish roots have penetrated deeply into the Indian soil during the twenty-four years that she has lived and written in Delhi, works chiefly in two genres of fiction: novels and stories set in middle-class Delhi (or, more recently, Bombay) whose characters are chiefly Indian by birth, and whose themes centre upon the conflicts generated in every-day life by such Indian institutions as the joint-family system or the Indian version of such others as the commercial establishment or the bureaucracy; and others that focus on the experiences of foreigners visiting or living permanently in India. *How I Became a Holy Mother* includes examples of both genres, while *Heat and Dust* belongs to the second. The reader who is familiar with Mrs Jhabvala's earlier work will be aware of the immense advances she has made in her art of seemingly artless story-telling, with no sacrifice of subtlety or seriousness and a significant increase in the tolerance and understanding that has always accompanied even her most mordant satire.

Ruth Jhabvala: Generating Heat and Light

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, *Heat and Dust* (John Murray, 1975, 181 pp., £3.95)

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, *How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories* (John Murray, 1976, 203 pp.)

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, whose Polish roots have penetrated deeply

into the Indian soil during the twenty-four years that she has lived and written in Delhi, works chiefly in two genres of fiction: novels and stories set in middle-class Delhi (or, more recently, Bombay) whose characters are chiefly Indian by birth, and whose themes centre upon the conflicts generated in every-day life by such Indian institutions as the joint-family system or the Indian version of such others as the commercial establishment or the bureaucracy; and others that focus on the experiences of foreigners visiting or living permanently in India. *How I Became a Holy Mother* includes examples of both genres, while *Heat and Dust* belongs to the second. The reader who is familiar with Mrs Jhabvala's earlier work will be aware of the immense advances she has made in her art of seemingly artless story-telling, with no sacrifice of subtlety or seriousness and a significant increase in the tolerance and understanding that has always accompanied even her most mordant satire.

For it was as a satirist with a sharp eye for hypocrisy and inconsistency in middle-class Indian life that Ruth Jhabvala first made her mark. As an expatriate writer determined to keep her moral and cultural balance she appears to have taken naturally to an ironic mode; first, of observing what was about her, and then, of expressing in art the essence of what she had observed. A habit of ironic under-cutting within a sentence in her early work led critics to link her with the youthful Jane Austen; for example, the following extract from *Get Ready For Battle*:

These being modern times, many people had brought their wives, who sat in a semi-circle at one end of the room and sipped pineapple juice.

As H. M. Williams has noted in his study of her work, *The Fiction of Ruth Praver Jhabvala*, such irony can become a most efficient satiric weapon:

Three groups are the targets of her most pungent revelations. There are the *nouveaux riches* . . . corrupt and ruthless men. A second group is the wester-

nized young sophisticates who dance, drink and flirt in the clubs and restaurants of Delhi, expatiating at length on the necessity for modernization and socialism but doing exactly nothing about it . . . The third group excites Jhabvala's most acid treatment, the rich Indian woman who sets up as 'do-gooders'. With a total lack of charity and no interest in real people, they are Chairman of Boards, social reformers, politicians, presidents of cultural organizations.

To these three I would add a fourth and most important estate: the temporary visitors to India who fail to understand but seek to interpret her mysteries. The closing pages of *A Backward Place* contain, in one of the finest examples of sustained satiric writing in Mrs Jhabvala's early manner, a double-portrait of two prize specimens of such misplaced intellectualism – Dr Franz Hochstadt and his wife. Returning home from 'the world premiere of Ibsen's *Doll's House* in Hindi' (another neat splicing together of incompatibles in the Austen manner), Dr Hochstadt and his wife meditate on the event:

Here was a true attempt, on the one hand, to revive the theatre and rekindle in the people a love of that great art which they had lost but which had once, in ancient days, been so triumphantly theirs; and, on the other, to weld this ancient heritage to what had since been achieved in countries of the West and so bring about a synthesis not only of old and new but also – and what could be culturally more fertile? – of East and West . . .

As the familiar platitudes boom relentlessly on, the Hochstadts' habitual reliance on them reveals their own inadequacies. They are 'cultured', knowledgeable people who have conscientiously prepared themselves for India. They determinedly appreciate everything, see the best side of everything (even of the ludicrous and futile, of which the dramatic performance they have just been witnessing is a good example), categorise everything and everyone, and believe they know all the answers. They are unfailingly courteous, magnificently self-controlled – and yet, India eludes them. They have not the least affection for the place, or for a single person in it. At the novel's end they are 'not sorry' to leave

this 'fabled land', with which (as the reader is aware, although they are not) they have never really made contact.

In her most recent work, the foreign 'expert' on India makes his voice heard again, and receives Mrs Jhabvala's best ironic treatment. Major Minnies, the old Indian hand of *Heat and Dust*

had been in India for over twenty years and knew all there was to know about it; so did his wife.

He is but a minor character in the drama surrounding the elopement in the 1920's of an English civil servant's wife with an Indian prince, that forms the tale-within-a-tale recorded in her journal by the narrator of *Heat and Dust*. But his meditations (as published in a monograph) upon the recurring problem: how does a foreigner open himself to the Indian experience without sacrificing his individuality and the distinctive virtues of his own nature? are central to the novel and, indeed, to a good deal of Mrs Jhabvala's fiction. Her presentation of the Major leaves satire, amusing and justified though it is in her work, far behind. His meditations are treated with understanding, and although their value is undermined by Olivia Rivers' experience, in contrast with the opinions of another British official – Dr Saunders – they seem positively liberal:

India always, he said, finds out the weak spot and presses on it. Both Dr Saunders and Major Minnies spoke of the weak spot. But whereas for Dr Saunders it is something, or someone, rotten, for the Major this weak spot is to be found in the most sensitive, often the finest people – and moreover, in their finest feelings. It is there that India seeks them out and pulls them over into what the Major called the other dimension. He also referred to it as another element, one in which the European is not accustomed to live so that by immersion in it he becomes debilitated, or even (like Olivia) destroyed.

These are representative voices, and by their verdict Olivia Rivers is judged and condemned – as something rotten, as someone sen-

sitive but unguarded and weak. Theirs is not, however, the last word on the subject. It is given the lie by the young English narrator of the novel who believes – and her own experience as she deliberately follows in Olivia's footsteps seems to confirm – that India has inspired Olivia to discover in herself a new strength and health and spirit. An investigation into the circumstances surrounding Olivia's elopement with the Nawab turns into a pilgrimage, for it becomes evident to the narrator that Olivia has undergone some kind of spiritual rebirth that has led her to lasting contentment and peace:

To have done what she did – and then to have stuck to it all her life long – she couldn't have remained the same person she had been.

To find out what Olivia became, and if possible achieve a similar contentment, the narrator must go Olivia's way. The novel leaves her an altered person indeed, half-way up the mountain that was Olivia's last home, looking forward and upward to

mountain peaks higher than any I've ever dreamed of; the snow on them is also whiter than all other snow – so white it is luminous and shines against a sky which is of a deeper blue than any yet known to me. That is what I expect to see. Perhaps it is also what Olivia saw: the view – or vision – that filled her eyes all those years and suffused her soul.

In turning from social satire to the theme of spiritual hunger and psychological change, Ruth Jhabvala is not making a break with her literary past, but developing interests that were always present in her work while letting others – now, perhaps, worked on sufficiently in her opinion – go. Loneliness and isolation are recurrent themes in her fiction, and always have been though in earlier work they received comic treatment (one recalls *The Householder*, in which Prem – immature husband and ineffective teacher – sits alone and weeps for loneliness in one room of his tiny flat while his young wife Indu sits alone and weeps in the other) or co-existed with satire and social criticism: in *A Backward Place*, for instance,

Etta's loneliness and sense of alienation eat into her spirit until she attempts suicide, but the reader is not so much invited to pity her as to connect her disturbed state of mind with the inadequacy revealed by her dismissive view of India. In *Get Ready For Battle* Mrs Jhabvala's treatment of this theme took a new direction. Amid all the amusement generated by her ironic presentation of the business mogul, Gulzari Lal, and his kittenish mistress Kusum, one character stands out whose personal dilemma links her with the two 'heroines' of *Heat and Dust*, Sarla Devi's isolation is self-chosen, a luxury and a source of delight to her. She is driven neither by conscience nor by a love for humanity to give up her wealth, but by her fierce desire to be alone and uninvolved. Her occasional forays in support of one social cause or another are in the nature of penance for such self-indulgence; one day she hopes never to have to 'engage' herself in battle again. It is significant that the two most self-centred characters in the novel (her brother and her daughter-in-law) call Sarla Devi a 'mad woman'. Yet she alone knows what it is to be 'most intensely alive', and in contrast with her, nearly every other character in *Get Ready For Battle* lives a mere half-life of pettiness and spiritual limitation.

The themes of isolation and of the effects of isolation upon the human spirit that hungers for fulfilment are taken up again and again in both Mrs Jhabvala's new books, and looked at from different angles, but always with deep seriousness and concern. In *Heat and Dust* the enervating dust-storms of the plains and the consequent annual retreat from them by English families to the cooler hill-stations serve to detach certain characters from their customary Indian or British identification and re-group them according to their individual or secret desires. Olivia's friendship with the Nawab and his English companion Harry grows as a result of her isolation (the other wives have left for the hills, and her husband Douglas is stoically keeping office-hours in the sweltering summer heat). In her early days in India Olivia had barricaded herself in, 'alone in her big house with all the doors and windows shut to keep out the heat and the dust'. Meeting the

Nawab, she realises that she had been excluding life and freshness from her experience; and the idea that spiritual refreshment is to be found in personal relationships between 'special' people, kindred spirits who (as a faqir from Ajmere had once told the Nawab) have 'sat close to each other once in Paradise', is symbolised in a magical little spring of perennially cool water that flows in a green grove Olivia visits with the Nawab. The mere thought of the Nawab makes Olivia feel physically and mentally well –

entirely untroubled by the heat or the murky atmosphere. It was as if there were a little spring welling up inside her that kept her fresh and gay.

Such a symbolic use as this of a spring (or, in the passage already quoted, a mountain) illustrates the manner in which Mrs Jhabvala has retained and developed certain artistic devices she tried out in earlier writing. There, effects were occasionally too contrived sometimes, and her use of the symbolic possibilities of object, incident and setting somewhat strained; as in the following passage from *Get Ready For Battle* –

'I think we ought to concentrate more on our cottage industries', said Premola Singh, a very intelligent and well-educated girl (she had a higher degree in Home Science). 'I was reading such an interesting article the other day on village handicrafts'.

'Village fiddle-sticks', said Pitu. 'That's all sentimental rubbish'. He made a sound of disgust, waved his hand in the air and stumbled over a hand-loomed rug.

The mountain and the spring of *Heat and Dust* are as real as a hand-loomed rug, but their use as symbols of spiritual achievement and refreshment represents a significant advance on the technical virtues of the passage above, while still being of a piece with those parts of Mrs Jhabvala's early fiction in which landscape and sky, even when violated by ugliness and man's misuse, could hold possibilities and hope of regeneration; as in *A Backward Place*, where the sun setting on an abandoned slum colony created

a sky

blazing with the most splendid, the most royal of colours and everything – the old woman, the ashes, the rags, the broken bricks, the split old bicycle tyres – everything burst into glory.

A related use of landscape as a symbol of a fulfilling spiritual life occurs in two stories in *How I Became a Holy Mother*. 'In the Mountains' concerns the self-chosen isolation in a tiny mountain dwelling of a young woman from a conventional Indian middle-class home. Her relations who (according to her) spend their time 'eating and making money' regard her as eccentric, and believe her to be lonely. Like Olivia and Sarla Devi, she has her own pleasures. Her companion, a reject from 'respectable' Indian society, is a derelict philosopher who possesses no identifiable degree but is called 'Doctor Sahib' and is 'as nimble as herself' in clambering up and down the mountain upon which they choose to live. In contrast to them both, Bobby (an associate of an earlier, romantic period in her life) is 'in very poor condition', agility in mountain-climbing thus being made analogous with spiritual freedom. In the volume's title-story, on the other hand, may be found an ironic use of such symbolism: an ex-model from London who seeks a mountain refuge as do so many of Jhabvala's expatriate characters 'to find peace' finds instead that the ashram of her choice turns into a launching-pad for a new career as a female yogi or 'holy mother'. Appetisingly dressed and served up for western consumption, shuttled hurriedly from one western city to another, she looks longingly back between 'engagements' to the India she has left, and concludes her sad (and immensely funny) story with the words 'I seem to *see* those mountains and the river and temples; and then I long to be there'. Such use of a setting links Ruth Jhabvala with other Indian novelists such as Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan who, though writing very different kinds of fiction, draw in particular ways upon India's distinctive landscape and topography for both symbolism and structure.

The most striking feature of *Heat and Dust* from a technical point of view is Mrs Jhabvala's use of a cutting and splicing technique developed (as she herself disclosed, in an interview with Anna Rutherford last year) in writing for the cinema. The story moves backwards and forwards in the telling, linking the 1920's with the present day and Olivia's experiences with the narrator's by using certain objects (an Italian angel in a British cemetery, the spring in the grove, the miniature paintings in the Palace at Satipur) or events (the Festival of the Husband's Wedding Day, an excursion and a picnic, the sickness of a friend, a pregnancy and its termination) as fixed points upon which parallels between characters and incidents in the two different eras can be established. The effect of this is to emphasise, but very delicately indeed, the novel's main theme: of human nature and the possibility of spiritual regeneration as constants unaffected by the flow of time and history. It is worth noting that Mrs Jhabvala used a related method in earlier work, but for the more limited purposes of satire. *Get Ready For Battle* provides a good illustration of disconnected conversation as Vishnu and Mala, making love, display their capacity to selfishly exploit one another:

Then he told her, briefly and in short disconnected sentences with his face still pressed into her, about Joginder and his factory at Chandnipat.

'Chandnipat', she said.

'It will be very dull and there will be nobody'.

But she was smiling. She thought of the three of them, he and she and Pritti, in a dull place. There would be nowhere for him to go. . .

'And the house we shall live in will be nothing like this. No comforts, nothing'.

But she was hardly listening, thinking only of how completely she would possess him there.

The vicious little story 'The Aliens' (published in a collection titled *Like Birds Like Fishes*) was another early piece that most precisely exposed selfishness and self-interest through stop-and-start conversation; in this case, the setting is the dining room of an

Indian businessman's house as the family (complete with wife, mother, brother, English sister-in-law, and the lively children of the joint family with all their conflicting interests and desires) settles down to its ritual mid-day meal. *Heat and Dust* extends the method beyond conversations, cutting short and linking together incidents as well, and whole sections of writing. For example, immediately after the section describing the narrator's visit to a suttee shrine dating back to 1823 there follows Olivia's experience of the actual incident, and an illuminating sidelight on her relationship with her husband. As a conversation begun in the 70's leads back to another that took place in the Civil Lines at Satipur, and returns to the 70's, one is struck repeatedly by the suitability of the mode to cinematic presentation – and is thankful for the directness and economy that the technique encourages. Mrs Jhabvala takes the fullest advantage of these and other possibilities, revealing herself as not merely the most compelling Indian writer of her day, but potentially one of the great writers of our time.

'How, one wonders, do India's thin-skinned intellectuals react to Miss (sic) Jhabvala?' inquired Christopher Wordsworth in a recent review of *Heat and Dust*. The answer to that question is simple, but regrettable: her novels and stories, invariably first published abroad (she can have little reason to complain of the reception she has had from publishers and reviewers in Britain and America) and later reprinted in India, have never received there the serious critical attention they deserve. Although she has been writing fiction for over twenty years, Mrs Jhabvala's Polish-Jewish origins appear to make even the most objective among Indian critics and reviewers doubt the authenticity and worth of her view of Indian society. Her refusal to take up 'social' themes irritates some critics, her coolly ironic presentation of different aspects of that most sacred of Indian institutions, the joint or extended family, disturbs and outrages others. The elder statesman among Indian academics try to pretend that she does not exist, and either forget to include her novels in lists of texts for university study (it is perhaps of some significance that they are

taught as literature texts at Australia's Macquarie University and at other universities outside India, but neglected by India's academic establishment), or deliberately exclude her from published critical studies of Indian fiction as a foreigner who does not conveniently fit into the category of 'Indo-Anglian' or 'English Indian' writing. I have suggested elsewhere¹ that her fiction gets closer to the truth about India than many of her critics have perceived, or wished to perceive. The award to her in 1975 of the Booker Prize for *Heat and Dust* appears to have made her the target of resentment, rather than a subject for responsible assessment.

At the recent Commonwealth Literature Conference in Delhi (the city that is Mrs Jhabvala's Indian home, and which has provided the constant setting for her early work), the conference papers that considered her novels had little to say in their support and praise, and astonishingly little reference was made to her writing in a general way that was not frivolous or superficial. One point of view (expressed in a paper – and I trust I am quoting correctly, since my copy of it is still in transit between Delhi and Sydney) was that Mrs Jhabvala's work has developed a superficiality and flippancy that disappoint the reader of her early novels: major issues seem to have been neglected for minor and more limited concerns. Another and more extreme criticism was that Ruth Jhabvala seems incapable of drawing Indian characters who are not comic, stupid or self-seeking; the mere idea that anything valuable could be learned about India from the fictions of an European expatriate – and one, moreover, who had chosen in recent years to isolate herself more and more from Indian social life – was found ludicrous. It appears that there is a blind spot in even the best Indian criticism when Ruth Jhabvala's work is under consideration. Nor is this really surprising; India has for so long been a focal point for western fantasising (Scott and Moore began the habit, and there was no lack of novelists and minor poets to carry it on) that her critics can scarcely be blamed for reacting with some impatience and hostility to what they doubtless see as a new and impertinent invasion of the dignity of their

society. And since Mrs Jhabvala writes from within India, her opinions cannot be dismissed as an outsider's unresearched or ignorant impressions. The sympathy with which she invariably strives to present a picture as a whole and not merely in part is brushed aside, and the irony with which she highlights particular features of that picture is regarded as irresponsible, disloyal, and even a shade traitorous.

But the failure to grant Mrs Jhabvala a just and responsible assessment is not, one should note, an Indian failure only. A British academic's reference some years ago to what he termed the 'pedestrian' quality of her prose should rank high in collections of critical statements their authors fervently wish had never been uttered. Only slightly less unfortunate, in the context of the artistic achievement of *Heat and Dust*, was another British complaint (made at the Delhi conference) that the novel seemed to suffer from a faded quality resembling the sepia portraits of the 1920's as they appear to us today! Mrs Jhabvala's inclination towards understatement and the use of ten words where other writers might use a hundred certainly do not help careless readers to appreciate her art. But for those who do pay her the compliment of careful reading, there has always been a special delight in her management of a narrative voice that slips slyly in and out of a character's thoughts: for instance in *The Householder* we have this –

Prem frowned, for he did not like girls to be indelicate. They should be remote and soulful; *like Goddesses they should be.*

or

Soon he would have a family and his expenses would mount; but his salary at Mr Khanna's college was only 175 rupees a month. *How to manage on that?*
(My italics)

Such passages could appear 'pedestrian' to a reader unprepared to adjust his expectations to accommodate a writer who is honest

rather than consciously literary; or to one unaware of the rich variety of English speech that is to be found in India. And on the latter count who, after reading Nissim Ezekiel or hearing Peter Sellers, can claim such ignorance? In *Heat and Dust* Mrs Jhabvala's talent for capturing the comic or endearing aspects of Indian English in the speech or thoughts of her characters is, however, subordinated to the novel's more important interests. 'You'll really do this for me? How brave you are!' cries Douglas Rivers, when Olivia tells him of her pregnancy. Both Rivers and the Nawab are presented in the novel as men of character, who recall a heroic ancestry with pride, and love and appreciate Olivia very much although in different ways. In their respective reaction to Olivia's announcement, it is an identity of feeling that catches the reader's attention: for the Nawab's response is identical in spirit to Douglas's although the words and word-order are, as is to be expected, rather different – 'Really you will do this for me?' says the Nawab to Olivia. 'Oh how brave you are!' The extreme delicacy and unobtrusiveness with which the necessary distinction between English and Indian speech has been made indicates that the interest of the passage lies elsewhere than in a comic comparison of 'pukka sahib' speech with a Peter Sellers characterisation – and Mrs Jhabvala's precise and gentle art points her reader in the right direction.

For Ruth Jhabvala's fiction is as much about universal human experience as it is 'about' India, or 'about' an Englishwoman's scandalous indiscretion. Her characters travel towards a better knowledge of the mind and the heart, although they journey through an Indian landscape, though ashrams and holy mountains are to be met with on the way, and though her Vanity Fair is recognisably the city of Delhi. 'India always changes people, and I have been no exception', states the narrator of *Heat and Dust*, thereby initiating the most deep-reading and moving study to date of a theme that has been at the heart of every one of this author's novels and stories that takes up the subject of individuals uprooted from one society and planted in another. For those who

have read Jhabvala over the years of her remarkably rapid and continuous development, it is hard to avoid a growing conviction that in her exploration of such characters the author is externalising through fiction certain aspects, painful, exhilarating, or puzzling, of her own relationship with the country of her adoption. Judy in *A Backward Place* was, like Sudhir Bannerjee, one of those who accepted India

and rejoiced in it and gave (herself) over to it, the way a lover might.

Major Minnies in *Heat and Dust* regards India 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.

Between these extremes there exist innumerable attitudes, and Ruth Jhabvala explores a good many in her fiction having, doubtless, experienced them all at first or at second hand during her years in India. She avoids romanticising or sentimentalising her subject; indeed, the matter-of-fact spareness of her style is the outward manifestation of a determined honesty. She does not strive to give the foreign reader glimpses of exotic interiors and quaint rural customs, nor does she plunge him in a philosophic mist; but India loses none of its mystery in her analysis. Rather there emerges from Mrs Jhabvala's fiction a sense of an ancient, settled society that is itself unchanging or changing very slowly, possessed of the power to alter permanently for good or evil and direct towards joy or misery the personalities of those who come into close contact with it.

It is to be hoped that the present atmosphere of dislike and deliberate or unconscious undervaluation in which Mrs Jhabvala's writing is received in India will soon change for the better. By turning from satire to deeper and more personal themes, and by showing that she possesses and has developed the technical

skill to do such themes justice, she fills the reader with expectation and hope for the future. She is not the first, nor will she be the last, writer for whom India has provided inspiration, experience, and a starting-point; for perhaps her 'Indian' novel will, in the final count, represent merely a milestone along her path to the greatness for which she has the potential, and on which one can only hope that time and strength will allow her to journey without interruption. To turn the personal into the impersonal, the immediate into the universal, and the ephemeral into the permanent – as she does – take courage and artistic self-discipline of a rare kind. These two new books confirm the first and develop the second in writing that will be, for me, a source of lasting admiration and pleasure.

NOTES

1. Cf. "“Traditional” Elements in the Fiction of Markandaya, Narayan and Jhabvala". In *World Literature Written in English*, XV, 1 (April 1976), pp. 121-34.