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Domestic Violence, Incest, Trauma, Alienation, Guilt and Redemption: A Thematic Study of Raj Kamal Jha's *The Blue Bedspread*

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Abstract:

Raj Kamal Jha is an acclaimed Indian journalist and prolific novelist. He has so far published five novels besides other works of journalistic writings. His novels have created a distinctive place for themselves in the realm of Indian English fiction and the decent accolades that he has won for his novels are ample proofs of this fact. Raj Kamal Jha's much critically acclaimed debut novel *The Blue Bedspread: A Novel* (1999) is a complicated and disturbing narrative of modern urban India. This novel is about a middle-class urban Indian family where the lack of sensitivity and domestic violence breed incest and which in turn results in more domestic violence, psychological trauma and guilt. The events of the novel and their outcome seem to suggest that hatred and violence can only be conquered through love and hope and it is these virtues along with non-violence, tolerance, forgiveness, compassion, and communication which are the ultimate tools to inclusive and healthy human progress. It is these humanitarian ideas under the light of which the researcher proposes to make a critical study of the various themes present in the above-mentioned novel.

Keywords: Domestic violence, incest, trauma, alienation, guilt, confession, redemption.

Introduction to the Novelist:

Raj Kamal Jha born in Bhagalpur, Bihar and brought up in Kolkata is the Editor-in-Chief on *The Indian Express*, the prestigious national daily English newspaper. Besides his occupation as a journalist, Raj Kamal Jha also has recognition of being an internationally acclaimed novelist. He is a notable author of five brilliant novels. Among his five novels are:

The Blue Bedspread (1999), *If You Are Afraid of Heights* (2003) *Fireproof* (2006), *She Will Build Him a City* (2015) and *The City and the Sea* (2019). Jha's fiction is immersed in contemporary issues and problems of Indian society. He writes about the stark and grim realities of twenty-first century urban and metropolitan India in a highly experimental, varied and involved prose which at times incorporates magical realist and surrealist elements into its fold which also makes Jha's writing appear "cinematic" (Chaudhuri). The various thematic concerns of his novels are taboo issues like incest, lesbian feminism and sexual violence. His novels also deal with communal hatred and violence, condition of the metropolitan poor, middle class and even the rich. They are also about the aspirations of new emerging India but they also portray the failure of those aspirations. Jha's fiction particularly foregrounds the plight of vulnerable individuals, especially children, women and people from minorities. It was his first novel, *The Blue Bedspread* which shot him into fame and won him the much coveted Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book from Eurasia Region for the year 2000.

Introduction to the novel

The Blue Bedspread (1999) is a complicated and disturbing narrative of modern urban India. This novel is about a "lonely, jarring" (Kapur) middle-class urban Indian family where the lack of sensitivity and domestic violence breed "incest" (Shukla 109) and "alienation" (Singh 97) which in turn results in more domestic violence, psychological trauma and guilt. With regard to the theme of this novel Sudip Bose writes "Not all that long ago, a novel like '*The Blue Bedspread*' would have been unthinkable in polite Indian society" (Bose). It is true that the theme of incest in Indian English novel is not very old as other recent novels have also dealt with this and such other themes. Novelists like Khushwant Singh wrote *Delhi: A Novel* (1990) featuring a trans-gender and Arundhati Roy had already explored the theme of incest in *The God of Small Things* (1997) (Shukla, 110).

A novel about family relationships

The epigraph prefixed to *The Blue Bedspread*, "Sometimes I have to console myself with the fact that he who has lived a lie loves the truth." which has been taken from Ingmar Bergman's autobiography, *The Magic Lantern*, (qtd. in *The Blue Bedspread*) suggests the principal occupation of this novel, which is uncovering the dark familial secrets, and thereby in a confessional tone articulating guilt. This guilt resulting from the "traumatic experiences"

of the narrator's past "proves to be the complete sealing of the overall growth of his personality" (S. Jha 143).

The Blue Bedspread is "a series of imagistic short stories" which make up a complete novel (Rastogi 115). The novel begins with a story, titled; "First Story". This novel has been written in postmodernist self-reflexive narrative mode which is all pervading in the novel from the very beginning to the very end. The unnamed narrator of this novel wonders from where he should start his narrative: "I could begin with my name but forget it, why waste time, it doesn't matter in this city of twelve million names" (R. Jha 1). The phrase, "this city of twelve million names" suggests that the tragedy which occurs with the characters of this novel is the tragedy of common individuals, who are very much the part of the crowd.

The first section is a group of four stories. Rest of the five parts are titled as "Father", "Mother", "Sister", "Visitors" and "Brother" which further foreground the fact that this novel is about familial relationships. The novel starts with a sense of great anxiety and urgency. The narrator is in a hurry to get over with some stories before the baby girl is taken away. The narrator receives a telephone call from Mr MK Chatterjee, the Superintendent of Police, who tells him in a sad voice that his sister has died while giving birth to a baby girl. But the baby is alive and he, as baby's maternal uncle, is obliged to take custody of the baby from the hospital at least for a night, before it can be handed over to a couple who want to adopt a baby. The narrator, after the cremation of his sister with the help of hospital staff, brings the baby home and lays down the baby on a "blue bedspread", which is also the object of thematic focalization of this novel.

Memory, trauma and confession

The inner anxiety of the narrator persuades him to write down everything what goes on his mind. He promises the baby that he would tell her many stories which he needs to tell. In other words, he wants to make a confession and lay bare the tragedy he had undergone which still haunts his mind and soul both. The narrative of the novel moves back and forth in time and space. Most of the time, the narrator goes into flashbacks as the whole narrative emanates from his traumatic memory.

Domestic violence on children

Among all the family relationships, the relationship of Sister and Brother is central to understanding the narrative of this novel. They go to school together in the same bus. They eat their meals together. They sleep together and play their "Night Game" (109) together in

the blue bedspread. Sister is four years older than her brother. They receive little pocket money from their father. Whatever little amount they are able to save from the meagre change from the bus fare every day, they save it and at the weekend they buy a vanilla ice cream for each of them. Like her brother Sister is so sensitive that she always protects him, even if he ever made any mistake. This is what happens in the incident of "One Rupee" (36) episode. One day when both children return from their school, their father asks for the change as he had given a five-rupee note that day than the usual two-rupee note. His sister gives all the coins she had but one rupee was missing. The one rupee was in her brother's pocket and out of his innocence and ignorance he had thrown it away in the school playground feeling that it was bad to keep money with oneself as money was a bad thing and his father would beat him if he came to know that he had a one-rupee coin from any unknown source. While throwing the coin away, scared as he was, he forgot that it was the same coin from the amount of money that he had received from the bus conductor as change. One can notice the innocence, ignorance, a vague sense of social morality and parental fear of being beaten by them in a child's mind. In sharp contrast to it, the insensitivity in father grows so violent that he starts beating his daughter violently for a one-rupee coin: "Bhabani, the maid, and I are standing outside the door which Father has locked from the inside and we can hear him beating my sister" (36). The impact of domestic violence on children is further foregrounded in the following lines:

But father is so angry and I am so scared that I can't tell him all this now. Not once does sister tell him that it was I who got the change from the conductor today. She remembers everything by heart, she doesn't remember I could have made a mistake...there are marks on her face where father hit her. She will now have to stay home for a few days until the marks disappear. I also don't eat dinner, I say my stomach hurts, that's the least I can do. (45)

Trauma

This passage shows the helpless condition of two innocent children thrashed and wounded by domestic violence one physically and the other mentally. Domestic violence builds up a state of "claustrophobia" (Rastogi 116) for them in which they are not able to articulate their innocence.

Domestic violence on mother

The father in the novel is not just cruel and violent towards his children but also towards his wife. In an argument between Father and Mother the narrator as a child observes

that his father beats his mother “The child watches the hand rise, Mother not move, the book come crashing against her head. She lurches back, half stumbles, balances herself. Father steps back, doesn’t throw the book at the wall, just lets it fall. His hand now free, he moves closer, pulls mother up by her hair”(R. Jha 51).

Incest

It is incidents, such as these, of domestic violence, which create an environment of terror and repression in the minds of the children. For children, the only way out of this ‘claustrophobia’ is to create a healing space for themselves in which they could compensate themselves for the lack of parental love which most of the time is grievously missing from their lives. The compensation comes in the form of “Night Game” on the blue bedspread. Under the blanket, with refracted light they make a “light garden” of their own imagination:

We then imagine that we have built our own light garden, its floor the blue bedspread, its roof the blanket and its flowers the red flowers on my sister’s white nightdress, the checks and stripes on my shirt. There are several smells in our garden. The earth is the blanket, musty and warm; the grass is our clothes, smelling of water and soap and sun, the blue bedspread is the night, the flowers are my sister’s shampoo, the wind is the breath of approaching sleep. (109-110)

In utter ignorance of growing sexual consciousness, this “night game” of the children inadvertently turns into incestuous relationship and the children’s game takes the form of sexual pleasure and inquisitiveness: “She was fourteen, I was ten, and it was on our ninety square feet of fabric sky that we first kissed and, later, touched each other in what then we thought were the wrong places. And it was this daily theatre of pleasure and fear, played out on our blue bedspread that carried us as if on a wave from one night to the next”(56-57).

Although in every society incest is thought of as something improper, undesirable, unsocial and even sinful, yet the role of incest in this novel can be comprehended as a liberating option from the claustrophobia of domestic violence as the narrator himself deems his incestuous relation with his sister as “moments that were key to our survival” (63). In the case of both children, on the one hand, it is the sexual inquisitiveness of two growing individuals of different sexes. Their growing sexual consciousness finds a source of fulfilment in the form of incest. On the other hand, incest in this novel can be viewed as displacement of missing parental love which is clear from the following line in which the narrator talks about his father, “I want him to help me understand why he failed as a father”(63). This idea is further consolidated by the fact that “The blue bedspread represents a

safe harbour from the domestic and sexual abuse that the children endure on a daily basis” (Rastogi 116).

Sexual molestation and trauma

This “daily theatre of pleasure and fear” does not last long and the secret of the children comes in Father’s notice. In place of using non-violence as a method of making his children understand the sanctity of a brother and sister’s relationship, Father on the other hand violently and sexually molests his son, which fills his son with a great sense of shame and psychological trauma along with physical pain.

Alienation

At the age of nineteen sister eloped with someone and brother is left alone to lead his own life. Brother feels very alienated as his companion in their survival has left him. But as he grows mature, he begins to understand that their incestuous relationship would have become a matter of shame and embarrassment for both of them, though his desire for her sister does not wane:

...Because in a way, it was essential that one of us should leave never to return. It saved both of us the discomfort and the pain of sitting together as adults and talking about everything except those nights on the blue bedspread, that July night on the blue bedspread, moments that were key to our survival and yet better left untouched and unsaid.(62-63)

After all three, Mother, Sister and Father have disappeared one by one from the narrator’s life; he begins to experience bouts of loneliness and alienation. It is worth noting here, that almost all characters of this novel are unnamed and they are addressed by the relationship they represent, that is, Father, Mother, Sister, Brother, Husband, and Baby, etc. It serves two purposes first it suggests that narratives as these are not uncommon in a city of twelve million people, or any city or any town and we should sincerely be more open towards accepting such narratives and feel the tragedy that lie underneath them. The second one is that it is the relationships of a family and their failures in this narrative which are central to understanding the tragedy faced by the people of this narrative.

Further, the narrator’s search and longing for the missing “integral part of himself” (S. Jha 140) continues. After this the novel narrates the married life of Sister with her husband with whom she had eloped long ago. Her husband like her father is a drunkard and beats her

during fits of uncontrolled anger. Her husband longs for a child and “the child she couldn't give him” (R. Jha 137). In fact, she had a miscarriage.

Lesbianism

To the utter surprise of the reader, the narrative reveals yet another unnatural sexual relationship, this time between narrator's sister and her mother-in-law. Both of them are in a lesbian relationship and perhaps it might be the reason of her miscarriage and the domestic violence of her husband (Sarkar 12).

Domestic violence on other women in the novel

Raj Kamal Jha is a gender-sensitive novelist as all his five novels register violence inflicted on women in Indian society frankly and without any reservation. *The Blue Bedspread* documents woman's representation, commodification as well the treatment she receives in Indian society as “Jha presents journey of an Indian woman from ‘womb to tomb’” (Sharma 119). Domestic violence, a painful and inhumane experience of a woman's life, is one such issue which is graphically foregrounded in this novel. Examples of domestic violence are also found in the story, “Girl Talk” (139). There are four women in the story including the narrator's sister. While the narrator's sister is a victim of domestic violence at the hands of her husband but treated well by her mother-in-law, the other three, who are also pregnant, are mistreated by their mothers-in-law and husbands. Sometimes, they are also slapped, their hair pulled, and they are even kicked during pregnancy.

Incest as entrapment

One night, Sister's husband when he was very drunk fell down from the terrace into the lane and immediately died of severe head injury. After the death of her husband which, in fact, was a murder committed by her, Sister comes back to her old home to meet her brother, “...the first drink must have blunted his senses since he can't hear or feel that she is only two feet away. Suddenly there is a scream which no one will hear, a body dressed in a white shirt and grey trousers, white socks and black shoes falls into the lane...” (137) and then “...my sister walks down, free at last. There is a taxi waiting and she tells the driver to take her to what was once her home, in the neighbourhood where the pigeons lie sleeping in their cage” (138).

The last line is suggestive. “The theme of entrapment” which “permeates this novel” (Rastogi 116), reveals itself here finally. The “sleeping pigeons”, here, are the pigeons of incest, that is, both brother and sister trapped in the cage of incest. To put it more clearly, the fact that both brother and sister are entrapped in incest foregrounds the theme of entrapment in this novel. This idea is further foregrounded by the image of two dead cockroaches trapped in the glass of the giant photograph of their mother.

Another perspective to this idea is that social norms of decency and civic behaviour are a cage to brother and sister and incest is there only flight to freedom. As the fulfilment of love they wanted their way, they found it in incest rather than finding it in the civic standards of love making because it was the head of the family, i.e. the law-maker of society in microcosm, who mutilated and assaulted their childhood and growth years and incest was “some love trapped in some fear” (R. Jha 110). The brother and sister meet “for one day and half a night in fifteen years” (155) and in less than a year sister gives birth to the baby girl. It further implicates that incest is a defence mechanism for the sister and brother and they use it as an opposition against the brutal intimidation of ‘domestic violence’, a weapon used by men for the consolidation of patriarchy. It brings to one’s mind Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) in which one comes across the idea of love as a social construct, a patriarchal approval, “the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much”. And, in order to sever the patriarchal connotations from the idea of love, one can like the characters of Roy’s novel break “the rules” and cross “into forbidden territory” (Roy 31).

Guilt, confession and redemption

The last story titled, “Eight Words” (223) is the climax to the suspense of the identity of the baby. The narrator is able to articulate the eight words and gives vent to his feeling of guilty conscience. The narrator openly confesses that he is the father of his sister’s child: “*I...am...the...father...of...my...sister’s...child*” (226-27). After confessing his guilt the narrator decides not to hand over the baby to the couple who wanted to adopt a baby but to keep her with him, no matter what the people will say when they will come to know the secret. Here, we see a ray of love and hope, a promise for a better life for the baby: “...it’s done, the eight words have been spoken, they have flown, each word across the city, like eight pigeons in flight, in the night, white against black, he doesn’t have to lie anymore, twist facts to flesh out his fiction...” (227).

The flight of pigeons here symbolise that the narrator has finally attained freedom from the entrapment of incest, trauma and guilt. As now a concerned father and maternal

uncle both, he will rear up the child giving her a better life that she deserves. His concern for the baby is observable in the fact that “the narrator’s relationship with the baby- via a gentle, loving, written language- contrasts fundamentally with the relationship between the narrator and his father, on the one hand, and invokes the nurturing relationship between the narrator and his sister, on the other hand” (Rastogi 116). Though there is no moralising in the novel, yet the instances of guilt, confession and the events of the novel seem to suggest that hatred and violence can only be conquered through love and hope and it is these virtues along with non-violence, tolerance, forgiveness, compassion, and communication which are the ultimate tools to inclusive and healthy human progress.

Conclusion

The Blue Bedspread written in the form of short stories for a one-day old baby girl by an unnamed narrator is a brilliant Indian English metafiction which explodes the suppression of the grim realities of jarring life in contemporary urban India. The stories told in the novel make a unified novel in which the vulnerable characters undergo various social and psychological challenges like domestic violence, trauma, incest, guilt and alienation. These are the challenges which form the various themes of this novel.

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