

Treatment of Sexual Relationship in Indian Society: A Critical Analysis of Raj Kamal Jha's *The Blue Bedsread*

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Abstract

Raj Kamal Jha is an upcoming 21st Century novelist who is presently working as the Editor of *The Indian Express*. Besides his journalistic writings, Jha wrote novels like *The Blue Bedsread* (1999), *You Are Afraid of Heights* (2003), *Fireproof* (2006) and many short stories. His fiction mainly revolves round issues of the contemporary Indian society. As a journalist he has exposure to issues like domestic violence, urban-rural divide, urban decay, casteism, family relationships, mass violence and communal tension. In his novel *Blue Bedsread*, shifting to and fro in time, an unnamed middle-aged man in Calcutta (now Kolkata) narrates a series of stories to his one day old niece who came into the world "unseen and unheard". These stories largely focus on his sister and himself, and his mother whom he hardly recalls and his abusive father. Jha, presents a variety of sexual relationships throughout the novel with different characters and interprets the individual psychology and social reception to these relationships. The present article aims at analyzing and interpreting the text to provide the writer's vision of the society at personal, familial, social levels and project his views regarding the sexual relationships in the context of the ultra-modern Indian metropolis like Calcutta.

Keywords: Raj Kamal Jha, *The Blue Bedsread*, sexual relationships, family

Introduction

Raj Kamal Jha, one of the emerging 21st Century South Asian novelists, is presently working as an Editor of *The Indian Express*. Besides, his journalistic career, he has tried his hand at writing novels and short stories. His debut novel, *The Blue Bedsread*, was published in 1999, for which he received the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Best First Book (Eurasia) in the year 2000. It was also declared the New York Times Notable Book of the Year. His second novel, *If You Are Afraid of Heights* (2003), was shortlisted for the Crossword Book Award the year and also received wide critical appreciation. The German edition of his third novel, *Fireproof*, was launched at the Frankfurt Book Fair in October 2006. The story of this novel set against the backdrop of the 2002 Gujarat riots, the attack on innocent Muslim civilians after 9/11. It also received wide critical acclaim. Further, Jha has been translated into many foreign languages including French, German, Italian, Dutch, Greek, Hebrew, Turkish, Spanish and Finnish. His short stories have appeared in French and German anthologies as well. His work has been featured in several international literary festivals, including Hay-on-Wye, Munich Writers' Festival, Melbourne Writers' Festival

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and the Los Angeles Times Book Festival. Jha has also been the visiting professor of journalism at the University of California, Berkeley. He became a fellow member at the Yaddo Residency, New York, in 2005. He is recently selected as Artist-in-Residence Literature in Berlin by the German Academic Exchange Service.

Jha's fictional works basically revolve round contemporary Indian issues that he has encountered in his journalistic career: a wide range of disturbing subjects, from domestic violence to the urban-rural divide, urban decay, caste system, family relationships, sexual relationships within and outside family, mass violence and communal tension. He writes about the realities of India which the main stream media never pays any attention to. His writings wonderfully capture the disturbing details of urban decay suffused with dreamy realism. His poetic images subtly evoke the truth of life that lies somewhere between hate and love, cruelty and kindness. His writing style is very simple and sparse which helps the reader deeply engage with the subject.

The novel, *The Blue Bedspread*, concerns mainly about a family legacy of incest, lesbianism, sexual abuse, alcoholism, child abuse, violence, individualism and isolation that come under the fearless scrutiny as an unnamed middle-aged man in Calcutta (now Kolkata) who documents their family history for the future reading of his one day old niece who just came into the city 'unseen and unheard'. As he writes, the baby girl sleeps on the 'same' blue bedspread that he remembers as a talisman from his own childhood. Shifting to and fro in time, he writes a series of stories largely focusing on his sister, himself, his mother whom he hardly recalls and his abusive father. In this novel, he investigates the collective mysteries of ontology as well as dark family secrets associated with them in the congested city life. Jha, further, presents and projects a variety of sexual relationships throughout the novel with different characters and interprets the individual psychology and social reception towards these relationships which has been analyzing and interpreting from the detail contextual incidents of the text to provide the writer's vision of the society at personal, familial, social and larger world viewpoint regarding the treatment of sexual relationship both in the context of the ultra-modern Indian metropolitan like Kolkata as well as in the developing South Asian context.

Jha has dealt in this novel with a vignette of sexual relationships between the wife and husband, between the narrator's father and mother, and narrator's sister and her Husband. Besides these, he also depicts the pre-marital relationship between the narrator and his girlfriend; extra-marital relationship between the narrator's mother and a stranger; incestuous relationship between the narrator and his sister; and lesbian relationship between the narrator's sister and her mother-in-law. He further describes how these sexual relationships affect the other relationships individually at personal level, at family level, at social level and in the wider context; while the reactions take place both instantly as well as in the long run.

Sexuality and the Husband-Wife Relationship:

The narrator's sister elopes from her father's house when she is nineteen. Although she is boyish girl but she feels the need of a father-like figure in her life so that her basic needs get fulfilled and she can lead a better, safe and secure life. Hence, she finds a man as a husband who is quite like of her father, who loves her a lot, holds her hand when she needs after her elopement. Her husband has a mother and there were no other relatives in their family. They lead a happy married life but not for a long. Their relationship turns sour with her miscarriage. Notwithstanding the sorrow caused by the miscarriage, the husband drinks more than ever before. He orders his wife to prepare more drinks for him as she cannot do anything more than that: "get me another drink,' he

says 'that's the least you can do'" (Jha 136). This suggests that, perhaps, she is careless and had the miscarriage, a fact that is brought out in the episode of the 'Maternity Ward' where she remains careless about her foods, dresses, and the bed, while a good nurse helps in mending all. Further the way her husband talks and her previous attitude towards everything in life depict her insincerity towards life. Otherwise, at least her husband assumes to be so, the lesbian relationship between the narrator's sister and her mother-in law is the cause of this miscarriage.

Jha further depicts the daughter-in-law and mother-in-law relationship powerfully, with three different and distinct types of relationships that mark the basic relationship between all mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. It is unbelievable that a woman should be biased against all others except her own children. A woman as mother is extremely devoted, loving, caring, sympathetic, and compassionate, while not being so with the daughter of another mother. Why she inflicts tortures or treats her daughter-in-law so atrociously is a puzzle. As for the mother-in-law of the narrator's sister, she maintains a very cordial relationship with her daughter-in-law because she is a partner in lesbian relationship. If she treats her daughter-in-law like any other mother-in-law does, as evident in the novel, she is sure to estrange her as her partner. Hence, she creates no trouble to her daughter-in-law. Their relationship is very intimate as the following passage illustrates:

I take a deep breath and I tell them that every night while they iron clothes, do dishes, chop vegetables, bend down to look for the remote under the bed, endure the insults and the jeers, I am away, far away in my bedroom, lying alongside my mother-in-law, our bodies wrapped around each other, she between my legs wiping away, with her lips and her tongue, whatever traces lie of the intruder: her son, my husband (Jha 146).

However, how good it may be in terms of daughter-in-law and mother-in-law relationship, the lesbian relationship within a family creates problems. The narrator's brother-in-law loses all hopes of being father again in the wake of his wife and mother's unusual relationship, which leads to bitter consequences like the unnatural death of narrator's brother-in-law. Jha wants people to be more tolerant towards incest or lesbian or other forms of deviant sexual relationships, which are in opposition to the norms of the society affecting sometime human relationship adversely.

The extra-marital affair is another cause for the sour husband-wife relationship as depicted through the relationship between the narrator's parents and the stranger. Although, it is not sure whether there is any relationship or connection between the narrator's mother and the unknown man who (only) waves his hand to his mother who in response waves back her hand with a smile. There is no indication of any extra-marital affair in the family; however, his mother's response to the stranger raises a doubt. Human life finds true fulfillment in warm, friendly relationships. Moreover, such relationship can be established on the basis of love. Therefore, love is the foundational human value and the cementing force of an integrated personality. Its absence causes feelings of isolation, alienation and a sense of futile existence. Whenever a person fails to get adequate amount of love, care, attention, and affection from his/her parents or husband or wife or anybody close to, s/he starts venturing for fulfillment of his/her basic needs of love and belongingness and in the process develop friendly ties with the strangers. Perhaps, the narrator's mother was not getting sufficient love, care, attention, and affection from her husband, hence seeks the extra-marital affair with the stranger to fulfill those.

She looks out, across the roof of the shanties, over the tram wires, to the bus stop where a man stands, a tall man with glasses, and she waves to him, she lifts my hand and waves it too, the man waves back, he's smiling, she smiles back, she turns quickly, picks up the

soap, the tap running so the water by now has formed a pool near my legs, she scoops some of it, pours it onto my shoulders.

A bus stops across the street, screens the man, the bus is gone, the man is gone and my mother is back to bathing me. Under her breath, I can hear her singing, I try to recall what happens next and all I see is her giant photograph, two dead cockroaches trapped in its glass frame.

And all I remember is my resting on her head, my fingers on the red vermillion in the parting of her hair. And that the man across the street wasn't my father. (Jha 81-82)

And, perhaps, this is the probable reason of her death, although it is not directly mentioned anywhere in the text; however, the narrator's presentation of stories helps us in moving towards this interpretation.

Incestuous Relationship

The narrator and his sister who is four years older than him are very close to each other since childhood. They grow up together till the narrator is fifteen years of age. They both go to the same school together, they eat together, and they share their bed together. Although, being senior to him, she always takes the responsibility of her younger brother. She proves to be loving, caring, dutiful sister in the absence of their mother. She even tolerates her brother's misdeeds and endures all the pain inflicted on her by her father so that her only younger brother may not have to suffer. They continue to indulge in the incestuous relationship initiated by the narrator without his sister's consent. One day the narrator's father catches him playing with his sister's body while she is fast asleep and feels the urgency to stop this relationship. Instead of correcting him through corporal punishment, the father insults him by ordering him to strip so that he can see how much he had grown up. This is the way narrator's father wants to tell him that whatever he is doing is not good at all for him or for his age. Although, father could have stopped this relationship simply by providing separate room for the brother and sister, instead he smiles at the narrator and asks him to become naked as he wants to see how much he had grown up. The narrator takes it as another of his father's drunken jokes. But the father is serious and stands in the middle of the bedroom and threatens to disclose his secret night deed with his sister and make them sleep in separate rooms. The narrator yields to his father's demand because his sister is not there at home and his father is drunk. So, the narrator finds undressing as a better option. He closes his eyes and undresses and lies down on the blue bedspread.

But, when the narrator's sister becomes aware of this bizarre activity of her brother she doesn't find any other way out except leaving home like a brave girl, otherwise the feeling of guilt would weigh her down. In this regard the narrator says:

And then, slowly, like sunrise on a winter's day, it dawned on me, cold and clear, that perhaps my sister had to run away for me to carry on. 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 nights on the blue bedspread, moments that were key to our survival and yet better left untouched and unsaid. (Jha 62-63)

For the narrator, his sister is the only companion since his childhood. So, he tries all possible means like inventing entire telephone calls from police stations at night, or seeking her in the crowd on TV, or in the top right-hand corner of the screen, or looking for her with the black umbrella (a man's umbrella) in the rain in a jungle of twelve million people remain unsuccessful. But he does not lose hope altogether. Unexpectedly she returns to him (after a miscarriage and subsequent mysterious death of her husband with whom she spent these years together) one July night. In her distressed condition her brother becomes a source of comfort to her. Both come closer to each other once again. And, once again they indulge in sexual relationship which once more forces her to leave her brother's house. This time, in less than a year of her elopement, the narrator gets a call from the police station to identify a dead body of a woman who died while giving birth to a baby girl, who is still alive, and who is handed over to him. The narrator rushes to the hospital and identifies his sister and her baby girl who has taken after her mother. He brings the baby girl home after cremating his sister's body in the middle of the night. He places the baby girl wrapped in a towel on the same 'blue bedspread' which is a part of the many memories he shares with his sister. The pessimistic and silent world of the narrator becomes filled with energy with the coming of the baby girl into the house. He also gets inspiration to live again like a normal man, free from the guilt of incestuous relationship. He boldly admits this reality and plans to write every story about him and the family in detail for the baby to read in future. He declares in the last chapter of the novel that "I am the father of my sister's child" (Jha 126-127).

Pre-marital Sexual Relationship

The narrator is often seen to compare the beauty of any girl with that of his sister, as for instance of the girl named Geeti in his childhood, who is not as beautiful as his sister but he likes to watch her and thinks of her as his beloved. He also thinks and expresses that "when I get married, I want my wife to be like her" (Jha 14); he never talks with her regarding his feelings though. Rather, he buries his feelings for her until he finds an opportunity to express. He finds a similar type girl with whom he shares his feeling only when he grows up. She is an unnamed medical student. They spend a lot of time together going to cinemas, parks and other places in Calcutta. They become intimate enough to indulge in pre-marital sexual relationship as well. Their relationship was all in secret in the beginning but later it becomes more open and the narrator begins spending nights in the house of his girlfriend and her mother. This is the first girl he indulged in sexual relationship with since his sister's elopement. But this relationship does not last for long. She leaves him without much explanation and forces him know the reason. Later, this break up makes him pessimistic about life and to lead a lonely life in the crowd of twelve million people in the city. On the other hand, it is not unusual in the life of this girl to involve in pre-marital sexual relationship and subsequent break up. She leaves the narrator without any compunction. Perhaps, for this girl, involvement in pre-marital sexual relationship followed by immediate break up has no effect on the life ahead. Perhaps, it was a common matter in the Calcuttian society where people accept this reality as natural unlike the involvement in the incestuous relationship or extra-marital relationship. Therefore, she doesn't hesitate to break the relationship up.

Influence of Sexual Relationship at Personal Level

A predominant psychosexual motive in some of the characters which demands affectionate responses from other fellow beings and when driven by sexual urges, go in for affairs and exchange of love within marriage or outside marriage, lead to delinquency, immorality, drug addiction and

other forms of undesirable behavior in personal life. As a result the characters tend to become aggressive having destructive death urges like the narrator's parents. The mother of the narrator dies due to her extra-marital relationship with a stranger, and the narrator's father turns a drunkard presuming to have been betrayed by his wife. The husband of the narrator's sister becomes mentally wrecked and becomes a drunkard because of his apprehensions about lesbian relationship between his wife and his mother; and eventually meets a mysterious death. Being frustrated with the failed (sexual) relationship with a girl as well as the involvement in incestuous relationship with his own sister makes the narrator stoic and forces him to lead an isolated life.

Most of the characters of the novel are affected by their sexual relationships. The lives of these characters are affected by the assumed infidelity of their partners or for the lack of communication between them. The writer, therefore, suggests that the spouses or partners must be frank and confess to each other every detail of their suspicion. Jha believes that it is the confession that helps one to recover from depression. Through the narrator, Jha invites the future generation to confess their crimes which are repressed or suppressed for fear of the society. Therefore, the narrator confesses his repressed stories and his family secrets to the baby girl not only to provide an identity of the orphan but also to save him from the adverse effects of repressed desires and other incidents that force him to virtual insanity. Jha shows that these crimes cause a greater and long term suffering for their perpetrators due to the inner moral forces produced by the norms of the society. So, confession is the best way out for cleansing oneself for a healthy future. Therefore, the narrator confesses in the final section of the novel that "I am the father of my sister's child" (Jha 126-27).

Significance of Sexual Relationship in Familial Context

Family is a place where people are connected with each other in terms of blood relationships. They live with unconditional love, sympathy, care, and duty besides making promises and compromises. Jha depicts various familial relationships such as the ones between the husband and wife, parents and children, in-laws, etc. who are connected with each other if and only through sacrifice, compromise, honesty, compassion, care, sympathy, duty and devotion. The family of the narrator is not successful as the narrator's parents are very much quarrelling in nature. While the father is cruel enough to beat his wife every day, the mother endures everything to keep the family successfully running. But, the one mistake she makes in life is to have an extra-marital relationship which eventually results in her death. Regarding husband-wife relationship, the narrator's sister and her husband are also unsuccessful like the narrator's parents, although, the husband of the narrator's sister is not cruel like his father-in-law. They lack proper communication between each other. Both the husbands do never ask their wives the reason behind their (unusual) behavior either with the stranger or the lesbian relationship between the narrator's sister and her mother-in-law. If they had known the problem, they would have found out a solution and their marital relationship would have been stable and successful.

Sexual Relationship in the Social Context

Jha also portrays a society where women, though are still in the clutches of the traditional system, are freer in comparison with their counterparts from the orthodox society of the past. He tells us stories of women doing jobs, either living with their family or leaving their family to lead their own lives without becoming burden to others. For example, the nurse who takes care of the narrator's sister or the women at work mentioned in the section 'Girls Talk' of the novel *The Blue*

Bedspread are bold and independent. While the narrator's sister who elopes with the man of her own choice to lead life in her own way faces boldly all the struggles of life, the narrator's girlfriend leads her life in total freedom; even her pre-marital loss of virginity doesn't bother her. Although in present society, 'sex' plays a vital role in building relationships, Jha's society is still not ready to accept unorthodox sexual relationships. One may want to seek sexual pleasure in public spaces like the parks, the cinema houses and such other places, but the society does not permit it. People still cannot be open in matters of sex. The society views incestuous and lesbian relationships with disdain as can be seen from the narrator's inability to confess the crime until late in the night before the baby girl. Perhaps, Jha considers that the people of Calcutta have to be little more tolerating and open-minded to accept these realities without any inhibitions.

Sexual Relationship at Global Context

Jha is a writer with an international outlook who deals with different sexual orientations such as gay and lesbian relationships which are the burning issues at the global level and are still accepted only in a few liberal western countries. Hence, Jha's works are more acclaimed in the West than in India. Presenting those themes in this novel, Jha is perhaps inviting the new generations to accept these relationships as normal. If one can accept incest boldly, although better not to indulge in it, then people can lead a better life, or at least the people like the narrator of the novel who leads an isolated life altogether due to his incestuous relationship with his sister. If those relationships become normal conventions of the society as the other sexual relationships are, then they do not consider this relationship to be a 'crime'. The brother and sister cannot talk to each other due to their guilty feeling and feeling of shame, and therefore the sister runs away from home.

Conclusion

Many critics consider Jha as a regional writer who is limited to the depiction of life in Calcutta only. It is true that his first two novels deal with life within Calcutta, but their significance lies in the universal issues they deal with and their unrestricted appeal beyond Calcutta. In fact *The Blue Bedspread* has been much more welcomed in America rather than in India for its bold treatment of the sexual issues. Because of the frank, uninhibited and controversial depiction of incest and abuse within the family, it has been more widely accepted by American audiences (Kapur n.p.). Perhaps, Jha seems to think that the people of Calcutta, in particular and of India in general have to be little more tolerant and open-minded to accept these realities. Further, in contrast, the constructive life urges like sacrifice and devotion of Bhabani, the maid and her husband help them in reaching their goal. Therefore, Jha suggests that one need to become sacrificing and devoted in married life so that the relationships remain healthy and harmonious.

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