



The Blue Bedspread: A Tale Woven with the Thread of Domestic Violence & Incest

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Abstract:

In the garden now there are several sounds: the chair being pushed and then toppling over, the screech of the table's leg against the floor, Mother's bangles cracking and both father and mother crashing against the table lamp, their shadows flitting across the wall and then flowing into the ceiling.

The Blue Bedspread is the debut novel of Raj Kamal Jha. There are many novels to his credit. He has been working with a wide range of disturbing subjects from domestic violence to urban decay and family relationships.

In The Blue Bedspread the story is told from the point of view of a brother who is informed that his sister had died in a hospital during child birth. The book is his letter to the child, explaining to her, about the dysfunctional family. Each chapter is meant as a story in its own right. As Jha puts it, "you can enter the book at any stage". The narrative was conceived only while it was written.

The domestic violence that they have seen right from their childhood brings the brother and the sister closer and thus develops the incestuous relationship between the two. The blue bedspread became the shelter place for the two. In the end comes the confession. The narrator claims the child of his sister as his own. The atmosphere of the novel is that of darkness, guilt, repression, insomnia and hallucination.

The paper explores mainly about the family legacy of incest, alcoholism, child abuse, violence and isolation. Jha explores psychological behaviour of various human beings in the novel. He depicts especially the male female relationships which are mostly unhappy.

Keywords: Domestic violence, child abuse, incest, relationship.

The bedspread was ten feet by nine feet, dark blue, almost purple, but over the years it had faded until it was bluish – white, like our breakfast of milk and cornflakes. When we returned from school in the afternoon, we would lie on the bed, Sister and I, our cheeks pressed against the thick fabric, our eyes fixed along the surface, imagining we were looking at the sky At night we turned off the lights...and switched on the bedside lamp. Its shade was made of cane and through its slats the light fell in a hundred specks on the bedspread making our black sky shimmer with stars (The Blue Bedspread, pp.55-6).

Introduction

Raj Kamal Jha's journalism influences his fiction to such an extent that he is called the "novelist of the newsroom," (Wikipedia). His fictions mainly revolve around contemporary Indian themes. Jha always felt drawn to the art of writing, but did not feel secure enough in his abilities to completely abandon engineering. He began to question the path his life was taking.

The Blue Bedspread is Jha's debut novel. This novel has been much more accepted in the American press than the Indian press. Because of the frank, controversial depictions of incest and abuse within the family. It is "A ghostly, elliptical piece of prose of quite magical quality, which tells the story of one man's reconciliation with his past. Spare and yet richly patterned...undeniably powerful," writes Edward Marriott (*London Evening Standard*). Mary Mount, Picador's editor, recalls being "immediately impressed by the clarity and subtlety of the writing". Raj Kamal Jha is a creature of the night. He's not dark, sinister or otherwise evil.... He's blessed -- cursed, some would say -- with an attribute for different, writes Ashok Malik.

Jha wrote the chapters of his novel *The Blue Bedspread* as separate units. Each chapter is meant as a story in its own right.

Domestic Violence and Incest

The novel takes place over the course of one night, in Calcutta. A man is awakened by a late-night phone call. He is informed that his sister has died during childbirth and he must come pick up the orphaned child until adoptive parents can be notified.

The mother of the child was cremated. The child is brought home and the man doesn't want to waste time even telling his name instead starts picking up threads from his childhood.

We get some hint of the love the man has towards the child.



I bend down to look at you closely, the fragrance of your new life comes rushing to me, I blow gently in your two-day-old hair, you still don't move.

You are like your mother (Novel, p. 23).

While the baby sleeps in the next room, the man sets about writing down stories of his sister and their childhood. As the memories are set down "... putting the words out of the air in my room. Lining them up on my pages, like school boys and school girls waiting for drill. Telling them march, left, right, left, right, about turn, stand at ease, telling them to dismiss." (Novel, p. 220).

The man uncovers unsettling secrets of his past 'slowly, like sunrise on a winter's day, it dawned on me, cold and clear, that perhaps my sister had to runaway 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 ..., moments that were key to our survival and yet better left untouched and unsaid' (Novel, pp. 62-3).

The writer seeks to come to terms with these secrets, for his own benefit, as well as the benefit of the child.

Like someone seeking to end a habit of subconsciously forgetting a harrowing experience, the narrator has to explore the processes (and recesses) of his own memory to make sense of it and tell his tale. And this is what makes *The Blue Bedspread* so special: it attempts, to establish the truth through the telling of stories.... Unusually, this is not a novel with a non-western setting that can be read like an ethnographical introduction to a foreign culture... a powerful, haunting and sometimes shocking novel that deserves to be read at one sitting and re-read (Cormac Kinsella).

The prevailing theme of *The Blue Bedspread* is that of family relationship, the domestic violence and incest. Jha denies that the novel should be read as a portrait of a typical family. He wants to emphasize that the silence in families, the identity of the individual is always weighed down by his/her role in the family, society. The family secrets that the narrator reveals are horrifying descriptions of father- son and father- daughter.

The novel has a description of an evening when father came home, sister was away. "Father smiled- 'let's see how grown up you are now' he said." At first, the son thought it was yet another of his drunken jokes, but then he stood there in the middle of the bedroom, the smile melting away, and told him that he knew what sister and brother were up to at night.

Maybe I should have protested but that afternoon, with father drunk and laughing with sister gone and my only secret lying suddenly exposed, I closed my eyes.... What happened later is split, torn and then welded together, as if in a dream. I fell asleep (Novel, p. 59).

In divulging these secrets, the narrator prefers to use happy memories to come to terms with the painful ones, rather than let himself be overwhelmed by bitterness and hate. We get a glimpse of that happy moment in these lines –

We spend the entire day in balcony. Father in his black wedding coat which goes all the way up to the knees. My sister in her blue coat Mother wrapped in Kashmiri shawl, rests her head against father's chest, he wraps one arm around her for the first time in life and sister and I turn away slightly embarrassed but very happy as mother reaches out and draws us to her (Novel, p. 88).

The Blue Bedspread is an example of metafiction, because of its self-reflexive nature. The details and co-incidences in the novel are important reflections of Jha's personal philosophy on life. Because of that, he integrates them into his novel. He says, "... we really underestimated the power of mere co-incidences and stupid little accidents. I think they play a much, much bigger role in life, than large forces What I really feel I connect with, is not the scene [in the novel] is the small accidents, when he or she bends down to pick something up that has fallen, in that mental frame, or when you look at his shoulder to see where the shirt is crinkled -" (english. emory).

Jha's fiction is known for its stark simplicity and ability to evoke emotions through detail. Particularly the novel *The Blue Bedspread* has captured those realities which escape main-stream media. We get enough examples of domestic violence woven in the tale. The child, aged seven is in the garden. The curtain rise and fall, the wind blows. Father is standing close to mother, the book in his hand.

Father beats mother.... The child watches the hand rise, mother does 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 (Novel, p. 51).

Yet another incident recalled by the narrator. When father would hide, became violent and shave himself with neither soap nor water until he bleeds. It was at those times that the two often got frightened. His sister was a strong woman; she would grasp father's shoulders and shake him, sometimes even slap him hard. He would then start crying and slowly slide down on the sofa; his eyes would remain half-open and he would fall asleep.

On one occasion father thrashed his daughter for just one rupee. Bhabani, the maid shouts at father and tells him to feel ashamed of himself. The scene shifts to the office. It is lunch break. We get a glimpse of domestic burden and tortured souls by – husband and in-laws. "There are four of us at the office. One, two, three and myself, all pregnant, and every day, from Monday to



Saturday, at one thirty in the afternoon, we sit down in the lunch room, at the same table, unpack our steel tiffin boxes, have lunch, and tell stories of our mothers-in-law. ... Surely, there are other things happening in our lives, like favourite TV shows, our bosses' philandering's, the other women in the office. ... but the mothers-in-law sit, invisible, like three elephants in a tiny room ... their huge shadows fall across the floor and you know that there's no escaping..." (Novel, p. 144).

Jha spent much of his time in Kolkata and he admits at least some of his tale, for instance, the view from the room in which the narrator sits, is based on his memories. This leads to the inevitable question about any first novel: is it an autobiography in disguise? Not so, says Jha: "The novel is about people who create their private heaven to escape some kind of hell. Fortunately, I haven't had to do that and so the book is certainly not autobiographical. But yes, some of the images and emotions are what I have seen and felt." He further says, "I need to get this book done, because my need to write comes from a bunch of questions and insecurities. Not that the book takes care of these But just getting it over helps you take on a fresh set" (india-today.com).

The brother and sister in the novel build their own heaven because of the domestic violence they faced each day. They found solace in each other's company.

We have let the present fill us up, we have pushed the past to which ever corner we can. We have told each other about those three nights and four days when the floods came to the city. About how she couldn't run away and how I ate biscuits, did my geography homework and listened to the news on the radio. And although there's nothing common in our experiences since then, nothing that we can call shared, both of us know that both of us noticed the wind and we knew, long before the world did, that it was a strong wind.

Perhaps, it was this that finally brought us together, even if it was for a day and half a night (Novel, pp. 205-06).

In the end the narrator feels possessive of the child, the child of his sister. The new born baby with mother no more in this world. He will take charge of the child. "Before all this, before all that, I need to put your mind to rest, no one's going to take you away. I shall call up Mr. Chatterjee. Tell him that he doesn't need to wait any more. So, it shall be I who will take you to Alipore Zoo, to the Birla Planetarium I will tell you all the stories that didn't make this night." (Novel, p. 221).

The narrator tries to overcome his guilt through hallucination, the feeling of guilt of the incestuous relationship with his sister. He claims that he is the father of his sister's child.

There it's done. The eight words have been spoken, they have flown, each word across city, like eight pigeons in flight... he doesn't have to lie any more, twist facts to flesh out his fiction, he coughs once to clear his throat, ... breathes in hard the tummy doesn't droop, he adjusts his shirt, walks down the steps that lead off the stage, they are all standing now, some clapping but he doesn't hear because he has to be home in time for his daughter to wake up, to open her eyes." (Novel, pp. 227-28).

Conclusion

The Blue Bedspread is a deeply moving story of people who, through their imagination, find the escape they so desperately seek to balance the horrifying experiences of life to keep oneself sane. The depiction is gripping reflecting rare humanitarian touch. In prose that is breathless and precise, Raj Kamal Jha discovers love and hope behind the hidden violence and abuse. Jha's writing style has been called sparse, especially in comparison to other Indian writers. His writing is heavily influenced by the amount of time he spent in the United States as well by the works of twentieth century American writers Don De Lillo and Paul Auster. After reading Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children*, Jha began to see English language as more than homework, and began using as an aesthetic for his story telling.

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