

"THE BLUE BEDSPREAD": The Saga of Dark and Deeper Secrets

By

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Abstract

The cinematic debut novel "The Blue Bedspread" (1999) of Raj Kamal Jha reflects the social, individual and religious aspects of the common man living in the urban India. At the same time, this novel also puts forth the bitterness, dark ambiguities and nakedness ringing with incest and sexual molestation. Incest is not a rare thing in India or for that matter in the world. Raj Kamal Jha has given similar treatment like Arundhati Roy has treated incest or sexual molestation as a major theme in his first novel *The Blue Bedspread* which could not be sorely acceptable in the so called polite Indian social structure. Incestuous relationship and sexual molestation, the subjects of Raj Kamal Jha's first novel, simply weren't discussed in an emphatic manner. What is precise about Raj Kamal Jha's bold interest in the unspeakable realities that distinguishes his novel from what writer Amit Choudhary recently called the current, " *Jamboree of Indian Writing*". The paper explores mainly about the family legacy of incest, alcoholism, child abuse, violence and isolation. Jha's novel as a tool of revelation explores psychological behaviour of various human beings representing their marginality. He depicts especially the male female relationships which are mostly unhappily unfolding the nightmarish family secrets.

Key-words: Taboo, Incest, Consanguineous Relationship, Abuse, Molestation, Hedonistic.

Introduction

From the earliest writers of fiction-a genre heavily influenced by the British novel and British sensibility to a contemporary cadre of new writers, exploration of the taboo has been the choicest fascination. Indian writing in English now heralds some of the hardest questions in modern society; incest, rape, and pornography, are issues being explored, examined, and opened for the readers. In the place of rigid morality and seeping sense of colonial influence, writers such as Meera Nair and Akhil Sharma have texts pushing against the forbidden in sub continental values. In the post-modernist novels, so many controversial issues of typical Indian society have been discussed abundantly. 'Indian Family Lust' a novel by Vinod Nair presents a saga of Generational Incest in India. Marriage between close relatives is encouraged in many parts of India as common practice to preserve the cultural values and generational wealth.

What normally incest is considered as a sexual activity between the family members or close relatives. This tabooed relationship typically includes sexual activity between people in a consanguineous relationship i.e. blood relations, and sometimes those related by affinity. Such individuals can be from the same household, stepfamily, those related by adoption or marriage, or members of the same clan or lineage. Fundamentally Evolution is the major factor on which the entire human race is resting upon. Each and everyone's survival is dependent on the things which have to evolve from its initial stage and come out into something new and in an entirely different form. The inevitable process of evolution can never refute the fact that the traces of human history can always be ruled out from the existing scenario of living world around us. Same thing is applicable in relation to the taboos which have originated long back in the history of human being but they are still visible under the canopy of various social customs even today. The writer like Raj Kamal Jha barely manages to capture these traces of humane or inhumane activities unduly committed either knowingly or unknowingly. The fictional language here serves as the powerful medium of learning more about the weird realities exercised in the modern Indian society.

Taboos unveiled:

This novel "The Blue Bedspread" is apparently set in Calcutta- a bizarre, unrecognizable Calcutta and it commonly experiences frequent snowfall. At the very outset it is conveyed that the novel is in a confessional form. It may not be denied that Jha has dealt with numerous contemporary themes in his novel, but this fiction mainly focus on the massive societal issues and the Indian contemporary society is the focal point. Jha as a renowned journalist, has given due exposure to the deeply ingrained social issues. There are numerous aspects of modern Indian society in the form of domestic violence, urban decay, dismayed family relationships, urban-rural divide, alienation, mass violence and communal strife. Incest, child sexual abuse and sexual aberration also find sufficient space in this novel. Apprehensively, the novel projects a nameless narrator learning that his sister, whom he hasn't seen for countless years, has succumbed to death after giving birth to a baby girl. The novel opens 'with the phone ringing late at night' (Jha 5). It is a locally received phone call from Mr. M. K. Chatterjee, the superintendent of police, Lake Town, B flock, Calcutta 700089. The police officer very sorrowfully informs the quite anonymous narrator of the novel his long lost sister's death in child birth and asks him to take care of the baby at least for a night. If he is willing, the officer directs the narrator to come straight to Emergency Ward. He finds the one day old child:

"I see you there, crying in the police officer's arms, one day old,
there's a blue towel that wraps you"(Jha 6).

After taking the infant in his custody, the nameless narrator spends a dreary dreamlike night writing down his own family history filled with grubby and filthy incidents. With the very first sentence the novelist takes the readers into his confidence and tells them that he is narrating

a story. Jha has very aptly woven the fabrics of a saga of dark and deeper secrets existing in the family of those accursed and unfortunate ones representing the class called, 'Subalterns'. Jha has unfolded the existing challenges of society not getting due articulation though the picture is entirely different in rural and urban areas. The unnamed narrator sometimes imagines that he is telling these stories to the infant i.e. daughter of his sister and lays down the outline of the fractured narrative of the novel:

"I could begin with my name....

I could begin with the way I look ..." (Jha 1)

The narrator as a school going boy along with sister, shares his fond memories of his childhood. Similarly it is quite justifiable that he was interested in other girls which paved a way to his disharmonious and incestuous relationship with his own sister perpetuated by the circumstances. The narrator's interest and liking for other school girls shows that he is prone to do something despicable in future as it comes with his sister. When he compares the other girls with his sister, his immense pleasure is seen in thoughtfulness and he admits the gratifying desires of 'pleasure' quite innately. Here the narrator sometimes imagines that he is telling these stories to the infant i.e. daughter of his sister and lays down the outline of the fractured narrative of the novel. After some hesitation, the narrator decides how to begin:

"I shall begin with the phone ringing at night, the police officer

telling me that you have come into this city, unseen and unheard". (Jha5)

The narrator's prime focus in the novel, is recalling his own childhood socially banned relationship with his sister, which at once builds up an enigmatic series of uprooting the established social standards in the form of incest. At times it seems repulsive and unimaginable, but happens to be his bygone age's proofs of indecency done with his own sister. Since he has lost his mother, has seen little love to father who is rather insulated, he is naturally drawn to his sister. The lack of space in the two-room flat and the absence of mother compel her to share the same bed with her brother who is younger to her. She naturally looks after him. This physical and psychological intimacy gives ample scope to the Id to play on its pleasure principle. Further the narrative picks up continuity as the children are beaten up badly and molested by the dreadful and alcoholic father who always remains heedless of the motherless children. Subsequently, the brother and sister get indulged in despicable activity of incest. Thus, the children find no other alternative rather to seek solace in each other's arms. The children keep on going "daily theater of pleasure and fear" under the same blue bedspread which they used to share. The blue bedspread here provides ample protection for the children as they are acting out the tabooed secrecy between members of the same clan. The saga of these dark and deeper secret is further unfolded as both of them feel 'as if on a wave from one night to the next.' There is certain horrifying and unutterable past secrets of the narrator looming over in the present and they frequently keeps him haunting in his adulthood. Jha hence dramatizes the narrator's sense of being defenseless as he is

entrapped between his own past and present. The narrator's vulnerability is further raised by Jha through his ensnaring story with images as he continues:

“Dead insects trapped in the Plexiglas cover” of a streetlamp;
pigeons flying around and around in a cage, their arc of flight constrained.” (Jha 54)

Here the narrator shows his prevalent sense of acceptance about the illicit intimacy with own sister and his consensual secrets are opened up in his mind as he loiters in the fond memories of his childhood. If incest is viewed from the pleasure's perspective, it is the helplessness of the children that they enter into such kind of socially and morally restricted activity which makes us to rethink about such hedonistic approach in the modern age. Here the narrator recalls the memory of the same as he continues:

“I don't remember how long my sister and I went with this little secret game. 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.” (Jha 56)

The incidents like domestic violence, sexual abuse, patriarchal dominance and psychological tormenting leads to mental harassment of children as they are prone to sudden repression and terrifying experiences in their individual and family lives. In this novel the children find the only alternative and that is the blue bedspread that gives them the periodic feel of 'winter blues'. They themselves create their own space of seclusion wherein they timely compensate themselves due to the insufficient amount of parental love. The deplorable situation in which the children miss the affection of mother or father develops into prohibited relationship. The lack of parental love leading to immoral affinities is most of the times results into incest. The children pay off in the form of 'Night Game' on "The Blue Bedspread". There are numerous creepy secrets lying under the blanket and those are timely spoken out by the narrator. Their daily 'light garden' of their own imagination is at celebrating note with refracted light in their tiny room. Here Jha has seemingly made the reader feel authentically that the children are left for nothing but the 'pleasure-play'. The narrator recalls:

“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.” (Jha109-110)

Perhaps the children are utterly ignorant about their growing sexual consciousness where the “night game” of their own inadvertently turns into incestuous relationship. Hence knowingly or unknowingly the children’s night game takes the form of sexual pleasure and nosiness.

Usually no society of world will readily accept incest as a permissible phenomenon, rather it is considered as something improper, undesirable, unsocial and even sinful. Still the underlined role of incest in the novel “The Blue Bedspread” can be figured out as a liberating factor from the claustrophobia of domestic atrocities as the narrator himself reckons his incestuous relationship with his sister as “moments that were key to our survival”. The solely deprived two growing individuals of different sexes find the only way of venting out their isolation in the form sexual inquisitiveness on the part of both the children. The children’s growing sexual consciousness finds a hapless source of gratification in the form of incest. Moreover the absence and dislodgement of parental love in this novel moulds the children liking towards mutual collaboration and pushes them to involve in incestuous activities. What is striking about the themes in “The Blue Bedspread” is marvelous penetration of certain daring, unspoken, dissimilar facts and non-conveyable realities of so called modern Indian society. Jha has eased up his hints through so many images which are strikingly noteworthy. Jha uses an overtly self-conscious style while dealing with some abhorring issues in his novel and quite possibly it may leave overall a gutty impact. Sometimes it seems that the readers may either love the prose or hate the narrative of incest because of its unorthodox style and saddening subject-matter. Jha’s fondness for color is obvious throughout the novel, not just The Blue Bedspread. There is a plethora of colours conveyed through such as the blue towel, the blue dress, the red tiles, the red bicycle, the red handkerchief, the brown hills, the green lamps, the green window. Jha hints strikingly at the narrator’s coming to terms with the shadowy horrors of his blackened past while he meagerly attempts to make his present white hap hazardously. Jha has evenly uncovered the dark and deeper family secrets in the most vivid way where seeking everyday pleasures remains the primary thread in this fictional fabrics. The novel projects a family legacy of incest, domestic violence, instances of alcoholism and isolated experiences suddenly coming under unflinching scrutiny to which the peripherals are destined to.

Conclusion :

“The Blue Bedspread” (1999) presents in truer sense a complicated and disturbing narrative of modern and urbanizing India. A lonely and jarring middle-class urban Indian family is at the central in this novel where sexual molestation, lack of sensitivity and domestic violence breed incest and alienation which in turn results in more domestic atrocities, psychological trauma and guilt. “The Blue Bedspread” is woven of so many fragmented short stories for a one-day old baby girl by an unnamed narrator. The novel therefore proves to be a brilliant Indian English hedonistic narrative which visually presents the suppression and due expression to the grim realities of raucous life led in contemporary urban India. Considering as a unified novel, one needs to correlate the short stories told in the novel. There is the complete portrayal of some

vulnerable characters that undergo various individual, familial, social and psychological challenges like domestic violence, trauma, incest, guilt and alienation and these are the challenges which form the various themes and core of this novel. Some other major themes handled with absolute craftsmanship in the novel are secrecy, the unraveling of family myths and the immense family baggage we all inherit, even as newborn infants. This also seems to suggest that even at the heart of abuse and baggage; there can be a core of love and gentleness. It raises the apparent question how can the contradictions of love and abuse coexist in the novel and in the world in general?

How can any society be witnessed along with incest which can hamper the overall social updating? Hence the same is being the most widely talked and written about. The sternly prohibited and undesired taboo in the guise of incest is an indication of a relationship that involves sexual encounters between close family members and they may be like father-daughter, mother-son and brother-sister. Though unacceptable and hitherto in society, the same has been duly been voiced by Jha. The pin pointed portrayal of incest taboo is conspicuously seen, felt and experienced, but no one opens up the bare realities but Raj Kamal Jha through this novel has successfully captured one of the most widespread of all cultural taboos. Both the present and past societies and writers are no exception to delineate the same. Even the law fails to curtail incestuous practices in the most modern or previous societies, but fiction pro like Raj Kamal Jha closely observes through his scenic lenses and presents the related affairs. Incestuous turbulence has become a key characteristic of dwindling human existence in the modern times which aptly finds spaces on pages of novels. "The Blue Bedspread" thus by Jha juxtaposes the entire saga of 'dark and deeper secrets' which sometimes shocks all of us, but forces us to think, rethink and build our own ideologies to tackle with such gruesome social realities.

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