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The Quest for Identity and Existentialism in *The Blue Bedspread: A Novel*

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Raj Kamal Jha is a highly regarded Indian author and journalist, and known for his powerful and evocative writing style. His works have been widely praised for its insight into the social and cultural realities of contemporary India and for its ability to connect with readers on a universal level. His critically acclaimed debut novel, *The Blue Bedspread: A Novel*, was published in 1999 and explores India's urban lifestyle. The lack of sensitivity among members ushered in troubled relationships in the family. This research paper explores identity, alienation, existentialism, domestic violence, incest, psychological trauma, confession and redemption in a middle-class urban family in India.

Raj Kamal Jha is an Indian novelist, journalist, and writer. He was born in 1968 in Bhagalpur, Bihar, and grew up in Calcutta, West Bengal. He obtained his Bachelor of Technology with honours in Mechanical Engineering from the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur. He edited the campus magazine, *Alankar* at IIT Kharagpur. Later, in the United States, he earned a master's degree in journalism. Jha began his career as a journalist, working for several newspapers and magazines in India and the United States. He later transitioned to writing fiction, and his first novel, *The Blue Bedspread* was published in 1999. His debut novel was well received and established Jha as a major voice in Indian literature. He received the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Best Book (Eurasia) in 2000 for his debut novel, *The Blue Bedspread* (1999). His second novel, *If You Are Afraid of Heights* (2003), was shortlisted for the Crossword Book Award of the Year. His third novel, *Fireproof* (2003), is

set against the backdrop of the 2002 Gujarat riots, the attack on innocent Muslim civilians after 9/11. His other works include, *She Will Build Him A City* (2015), and *The City And The Sea* (2019), *Zwischen den Welten* (2006), short story in a German anthology, a short fiction *Es war einmal* (2013), audio book and Prose verse *Kindness* (2012). His works have been translated into many foreign languages.

Identity plays a significant role in post-colonialism, which examines the cultural, political, and economic impacts of colonialism on colonized societies. An individual's identity is shaped by a combination of nature and nurture, and can evolve and change over time. Postcolonial theory highlights the ways in which colonialism has shaped and transformed individual and collective identities, creating new forms of inequality and marginalization and challenging traditional notions of cultural authenticity and national unity. By exploring the construction and negotiation of identities in postcolonial contexts, postcolonial theory aims to shed light on the ongoing effects of colonialism and promote a more nuanced understanding of the cultural diversity of the world. The quest for existence and identity prevails in the contemporary world. One needs identity to survive in this world and without it one cannot live long. As the unnamed narrator of the novel states,

I could begin with my name but forget it, why waste time, it doesn't matter in this city of twelve million names. I could begin with the way I look but what do I say, I am not a young man any more, I wear glasses, my stomach droops over the belt of my trousers (1999: 1).

The unnamed narrator assures us that his name doesn't matter or any have importance in the city of twelve millions. The unnamed narrator's life resembles that of the common people of urban.

In Calcutta city, one person's life is quite strange to another. An old man commits suicide in his home due to his meager income.

It was one of the four suicides in the city that day; it would become, by the end of the month, one of a hundred and fifty. By the end of that year, one of over fifteen hundred. Multiply that by fifteen for fifteen years and what do you have left? (1999: 100).

Calcutta (now known as Kolkata) is a vibrant and complex city with a rich history and culture. The city serves as a backdrop for the story and is depicted as a melting pot of different cultures and communities, each with its own distinct character and history. The novel depicts the city as a place of contrasts, where poverty and wealth, tradition and modernity, and tradition and change exist side by side. The city is portrayed as a place of vitality and energy, but also of hardship and struggle.

This city likes lonely people, the city likes this man.

There's no one to walk by his side, to wait for him at a street crossing, so the city moves in to help, it slows down the traffic, parts the crowds. There's no one to talk to him, so the city speaks through its banners, its hoardings. At night, he has nothing to do, so the streets tell him their stories, street lights trap insects in their Plexiglas covers, lull him to sleep (1999: 74).

Throughout the novel, Calcutta is portrayed as a place of both inspiration and challenge for the characters, as they navigate the city's complex social and cultural landscape. The city is depicted as a place of great beauty and richness, but also of poverty, violence, and inequality. The city is full of contradictions and complexities, and it provides a vivid picture of the ways in which the city can shape and impact individual lives.

Chowringhee is where most of the buses and trams begin and end their journey. It's the heart of the city and like blood, we keep rushing there, through the veins and the arteries of the streets and the lanes. To and fro, to and fro (1999: 91).

Domestic violence:

The narrator's sister works in an office where three other women also work. They eat lunch together every day. All women have complained about their mothers-in-law except her. All these women encounter domestic violence in some way. Third's husband comes home one day and can't find the TV remote. He asks her to find out, and while Third bends down on the floor to search for the remote. He kicked her off by saying:

“Why don’t you know where the remote is? She fell, chipped her tooth, tasted her own blood and could hear mother-in-law sitting on the bed laughing, saying, Young women don’t take care of their husbands any more” (1999: 143).

Another occasion is when her husband’s friends visit their home, and her husband asks her to bring ice from the fridge. She says there was a power cut, so the ice tray had not been refilled. He hits her hard and his friends feel embarrassed. Her mother-in-law states “Take care of his son inside you, get the ice from the market” (1999: 143). They are happy at “their dream house where for an hour every day, to sound of lunch boxes being opened and closed, they live in peace, away from their mothers-in-law” (1999: 144).

After many questions about her relationship with her mother-in-law, she warns the other women not to shout because what she is about to say will shock them all. Lesbians face difficulties in finding and being accepted in a conservative and heteronormative society as a result of societal attitudes and stigma. They do what they emotionally need, and their intention is not to reveal it because others will only mock them in a judgmental and discriminatory society. She finds secure in the arms of her mother-in-law. She faces difficulties while trying to build relationships and form a sense of community. One can witness how she has a relationship with her mother-in-law.

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 (2000: 146).

The novel offers a nuanced and empathetic portrayal of the complexities of lesbian relationships and the challenges faced by those in such relationships. The novel highlights the importance of self-acceptance and the search for a sense of belonging, as well as the need for greater understanding and tolerance of diverse sexual orientations.

The father regularly drinks and doesn't care for his children. He questions his son after learning of their incestuous relationship.

Let's see how grown up you are now,' he said. At first, I 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 me that he knew what Sister and I were up to at night. If I didn't undress, he said, he would tell Sister all about it. Or better still, make us sleep in different rooms. (1999: 58-59).

The question of existence is a prominent issue in the novel. The father is the guardian and the only breadwinner of the family. He belongs to a middle class family and has difficulty to manage the family with his earnings. Existence is not an easy thing. The Father scolds to his daughter for one rupee because even one rupee values a lot for him. He is short-tempered man who gets angry quickly. The narrator witnesses,

Where is the one rupee? Father said and my sister said she didn't know. Father got angry, angrier.

First, he slapped my sister, like he often does. A slap on her cheek, my sister is a very, very brave girl and she never cries when Father beats her. This makes Father more angry and he beats her harder but she just stands there, like a statue, until he gives up and says that his hands hurt. (1999:44).

Incest is a major theme in Raj Kamal Jha's *The Blue Bedspread: A Novel*. The novel deals with the taboo subject of incestuous relationships and the psychological and emotional toll that these experiences can take on individuals. Sister is haunted by memories of her brother's incestuous relationship. The relationship has a profound impact on her sense of self and her relationships with others, and the novel explores the ways in which it has shaped her life and experiences. The sister feels lonely and finds loneliness. She finds solace with her brother, as these lines express:

Sister and I kept our legs crossed as we prayed hard hoping that we didn't spoil our pants. Later, that was to become one of our few family jokes: if we could hold our shit for two days, we could hold down anything in the world (1999: 58).

The theme of incest is depicted in a sensitive and nuanced manner, as the novel explores the psychological, emotional, and cultural factors that can lead to these kinds of experiences. The novel is a powerful and thought-provoking exploration of a complex and often taboo subject, and it sheds light on the emotional and psychological toll that these experiences can take on individuals.

The narrator plays an important role in *The Blue Bedspread*. The narrative voice is primarily third-person omniscient, which means that the narrator has access to the thoughts and feelings of all the characters in the story. The narrator uses a poetic and imaginative style to describe the events and emotions of the characters, often using rich imagery and metaphor to convey their experiences. The narrator's tone is often melancholy, reflecting the sadness and tragedy that pervade the lives of the characters in the novel. Therefore, the narrator plays a crucial role in shaping the readers' understanding of the events and emotions in the story, and helps to create a vivid and immersive reading experience.

The novel explores the theme of sexual relationships and the ways in which they can shape and impact individuals and communities. Sister is grappling with her sexuality and her relationship with her brother, the narrator states,

My sister was a strong woman; she would grasp his shoulders and shake him, sometimes even slap him hard. He would then start crying and slowly slide down the sofa; his eyes would remain half-open and he would fall asleep (1999: 58).

The narrative provides a nuanced and complex picture of the ways in which sexual relationships can impact individuals, particularly women, in Indian society. The theme of sexual relationships is depicted in a sensitive and insightful manner, as the novel explores the psychological and emotional status.

I am naked and wet, my periods have begun, my tears mix with the water and the grime, I can smell the smoke in my hair, I can see the water, mixed with the soap, my blood, glide past the white cockroach. (1999: 213-214).

Alienation is an important theme that can be traced in this novel. All of the main characters are dissatisfied with their families and relationships. The novel explores the experiences of alienation and disconnection that can arise in the context of contemporary Indian society. The characters in the novel are depicted as feeling disconnected from each other and from the broader social and cultural context in which they live. They experience feelings of isolation and loneliness, and struggle to find meaning and connection in their lives. The theme of alienation is explored in a nuanced and insightful manner, as the novel provides a vivid picture of the ways in which societal norms and attitudes can limit individual freedom and self-expression, and the ways in which these restrictions can lead to feelings of alienation and disconnection. Therefore, the novel highlights the ways in which social and cultural factors can work towards a more equitable and connected society.

The novel focuses on the themes of socio-cultural hierarchies and power dynamics within Indian society. The novel is set in Calcutta and provides a nuanced and complex picture of the various social classes and power structures that exist within the city. The novel also highlights the intersections of gender, class, and caste, and the ways in which these different factors intersect to shape individual experiences and opportunities. Sister's status as a lower-class woman limits her options and opportunities, and she is subject to oppressive expectations and judgements from those in more powerful positions.

It explores the theme of individual freedom and the search for meaning in a meaningless world. Sister seeks to define her own identity and escape the constraints of societal expectations. She struggles with questions of meaning and purpose, as she tries to find a place for herself in the world. The existentialist themes in the novel are further emphasized by the author's style and use of language. Jha employs fragmented, non-linear storytelling and fragmented, fragmented prose to convey a sense of disorientation and uncertainty, reflecting the protagonist's search for meaning in a complex and often confusing world. In many ways, *The Blue Bedspread* can be seen as a meditation on the existentialist theme of the individual's search for meaning and purpose in a world that often lacks these things.

Conclusion

The novel tells the story of a young man who comes of age in a society that is rapidly changing. The story is told through a series of interconnected narratives and deals with themes of love, loss, identity, and the search for meaning in a rapidly modernizing world. *The Blue Bedspread* of the novel's title is a metaphor for the comfort and security that the narrator seeks throughout the book.

Works Cited

Jha, Raj Kamal. *The Blue Bedspread: A Novel*, 1999 Picador India.

