

**Imagination Versus Reality in Raj Kamal Jha's
*The Blue Bedspread and If You are Afraid of Heights***

A. Bharathi, M.A., M.Phil.

=====

Abstract

Raj Kamal Jha is an Indian novelist and journalist. Jha is the author of three published novels. Jha's fiction is known for its stark simplicity and ability to evoke emotion through attention to detail. This paper discusses Imagination Versus Reality in Raj Kamal Jha's *The Blue Bedspread* and *If You are Afraid of Heights*. The paper presents a brief description of Indian English Literature and gives a brief author biography and his literary works. The deals with the Transmuted Reality in Jha's first novel *The Blue Bedspread*. In this novel the protagonist's life is changed in the imagination. It is about a middle-aged man who is in frustration, isolation and guilt about his past life in the city. In addition the paper discusses the Depiction of Despondency in Jha's second novel *If You are Afraid of Heights*. This novel is about the past and present life of the central character. The paper discusses how in both the novels the protagonists defy the trend.

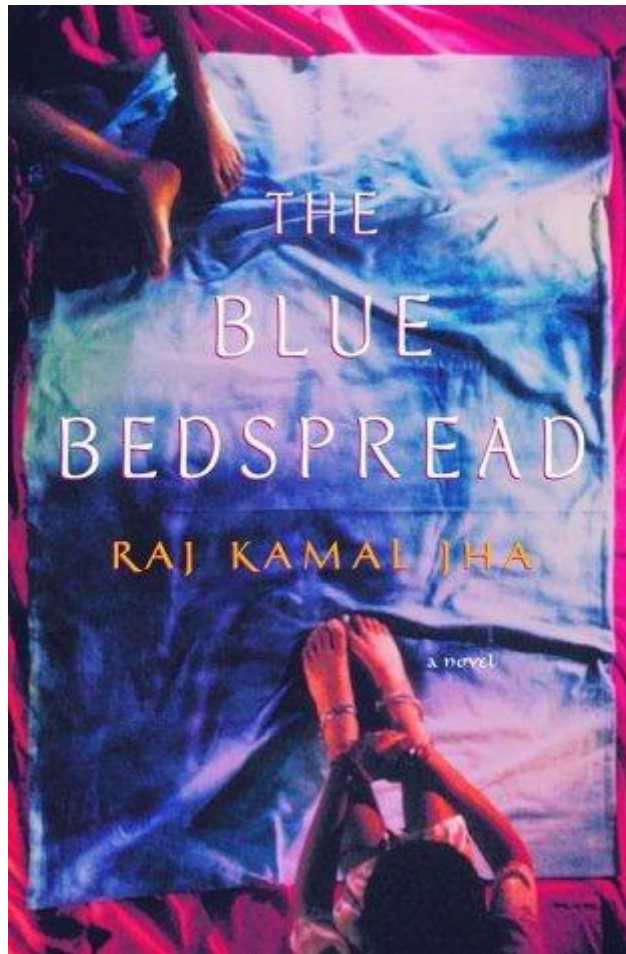
Inclusion of Commonwealth Literature in the English Curriculum

The reasons for the incorporation of Commonwealth literatures into the "English" curriculum are mixed. One reason might be described as based on literary judgment. The argument goes that there is a body of writing in English from outside the United Kingdom and the United States of American that is worthy of study. The introduction of "literary" qualities into discourse is, of course, almost always characterized by multifaceted, ambiguous, and often contradictory principles. If pressed, the proponents of this argument generally fall back on some aesthetic, structuralist, moral cultural-product, Marxist, psychoanalytic, or feminist justification.

Raj Kamal Jha

Raj Kamal Jha began his literary career with the award winning novel *The Blue Bedspread* (1999). The deals with a wide range of subjects, including domestic violence, urban-rural divide, urban decay, caste-system, family relationship, mass-violence and communal tension. As a practicing journalist he is sensitive to the reality of India since its independence. He suffers his realism with dreamy, poetic images that subtly evoke how the truth of life lies “somewhere in between” hate and love, and cruelty and kindness.

Raj Kamal Jha’s Debut Novel *The Blue Bedspread*



Postmodernist fiction has often strived to accomplish thematic and structural fluidity by laying bare the relationship between writing and reality and by questioning the validity of writing. Raj Kamal Jha’s debut novel, *The Blue Bedspread* is no exception. The novel casts

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:12 December 2017

A. Bharathi, M.A., M.Phil.

Imagination Versus Reality in Raj Kamal Jha’s *The Blue Bedspread* and *If You are Afraid of Heights*

everything into the realm of the arbitrary: the ‘truth’ that the narrator laboriously attempts to reveal. In the fictional world of the novel reality gets transmuted through the gaps in the narrative and the shifts to which it is subjected as the novel gets revamped. This paper argues that at the core of *The Blue Bedspread* is the unreliability of the narrative voice and the instability of the written word, and that it poses the question if a narrative could present reality or truth in an authoritative way.

Imagination versus Reality

This paper is given the title **Imagination Versus Reality**. Imagination is against the Reality. Reality is changed in the imaginative world. In both the novels the protagonist lives in the reality. But the reality gets changed in their imagination. They imagine that something is related to the reality of their lives. The first novel *The Blue Bedspread* the narrator is the protagonist. He tells the past life of her mother and himself. But he lives in a present life. He exaggerate the past life incidents to the one day old child.

Reasons for Non-Conformist Behavior

The chief reasons behind non-conformist behavior, as provided by the psychologists can be categorized as Biological factors, Hereditary factors, Sociological factors and Psychological factors.

The title of the first novel *The Blue Bedspread* refers to a symbol of escape into a pleasant world of imagination. Jha’s second novel *If You are Afraid of Heights* adopts the third person narration.

The Blue Bedspread

Raj Kamal Jha’s first novel is *The Blue Bedspread*, which received the Commonwealth Writer Prize for Best First Book in 2000. It is about a middle-aged man who is in frustration, isolation and guilt about his past life in the city. One midnight a sudden phone call from a police officer changed narrator’s life completely. It gives him the opportunity to start a new life with a

one day old baby girl. The novel mainly concerns about incest, lesbianism, sexual abuse, alcoholism, violence, child abuse and isolation etc.

The police officer informs the narrator about his sister's delivery and death. One couple wants to adopt the girl child on the next day and the police officer requested the narrator to take care of the girl baby for one night. So the narrator took the baby with him and he wants to convey his past life and his sister to the readres. The baby sleeps in the next room in the blue bedspread. The narrator gives a picture of the child's future. After few days the child should be aware of her identity.

When the narrator was a boy of seven years he struggled a lot in his life. The incident of their past life does not prove the reality or truth. In the novel the narrator's past life he faced many problems including the problem of homosexuality. The last story "Eight Words" conveys the bitter truth in eight words "I am the father of my sister's child". The relationship associated with the narrator includes the characters such as the police officer, the taxi driver, the three strangers, the oil mill owner, and the old man and other mill workers.

The police officer tells the narrator about the problem of his sister's death briefly. The police officer gives the dead body of his sister and the one day old baby. The childless parents want to adopt the child. But as it was midnight the narrator was requested to keep the baby for a one night. He helps the narrator to overcome the dangerous situation. The taxi driver becomes sympathetic, towards the narrator and he starts to enquire the narrator about his problems. It is the typical Indian mentality who wants to know about others problem.

The narrator is all alone in Calcutta city. The three strangers volunteered themselves to carry the narrator's sister's dead body. For the pyre the strangers helped the narrator to collect the wood and the other rituals in the burial ground. The narrator's father is very cruel and abusive. He tortures his children whenever they made mistakes. In the first chapter he beats his daughter for one rupee coin. The reason for the cruelty is psychological pressure. Another

awkward incident is when the father sexually abuses his son. The relationship of the narrator and the other character establish the psychological mistakes with his father and sister.

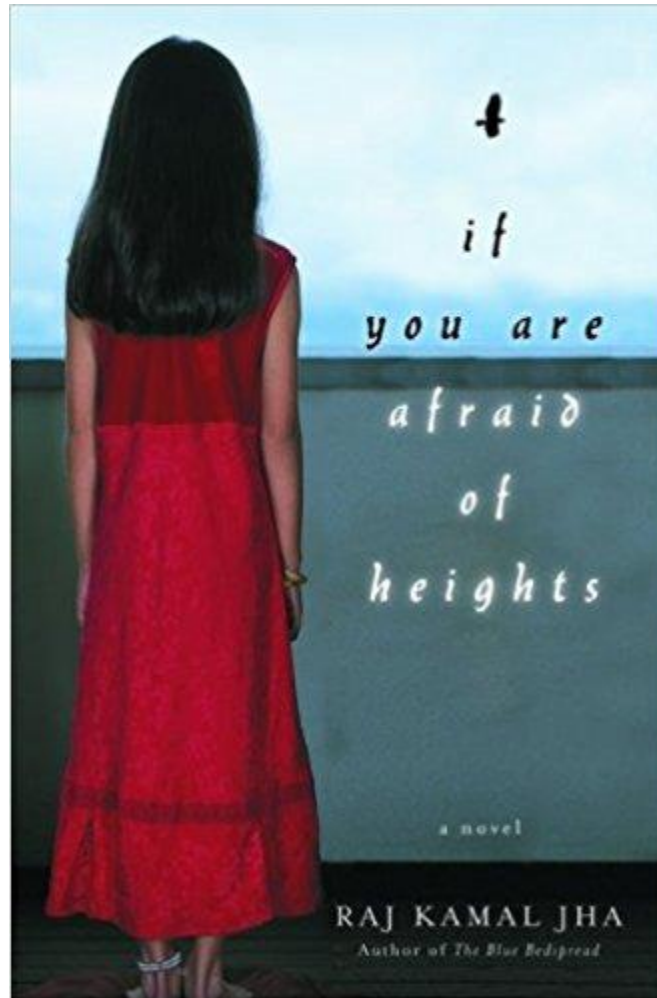
In *The Blue Bedspread*, one can perceive the dominance of ‘shadow’ in both the parents of the narrator that has hindered the grasping of the ‘persona’ and the subsequent waning of the ‘hero’ in their collective hence both Mother and Father has failed to play the ideal. The leading aroused incest has got transferred to the narrator from his immediate parent. Hence heredity has operated as a predisposing cause of the narrator’s deviation.

Again, the social and culture ambience of the narrator’s family has been such that hardly he has received demonstrational training of conventional morality; rather he became more familiarized with Father-Sister connection than Mother-Father union. Raj Kamal Jha’s dazzling revelation of the bizarre world of human psyche makes the book, as *Guardian* has justly assessed it, “incantory, audacious” yet remarkable for “great moments of poignancy”.

The Blue Bedspread is a novel about the feeling and father’s guilt pushing at him. The unnamed narrator gives an answer to the child’s future. The narrator receives a phone call from a police officer about his sister’s death and her child. The narrator keeps the child for a night she sleeps in the next room.

The narrator tells his family life to his sister’s child who she was. He tells the child “I will tell you happy stories and I will tell you sad stories, the truth lies somewhere”. The narrator lost his mother in his childhood. His father is a drunken person. His father hides his sister’s sanitary napkins and she forces to borrow her brother’s handkerchief. His father is very cruel and rude. Due to these reasons the narrator’s sister left him for the man, whom she loved. The novel is full of isolation and guilt of the narrator.

If You are Afraid of Heights



The second novel contains three prologues which establish the reality. The characters deliver their emotion in a critical situation. The characters of the novel used imagination as a tool to compare their real life situation.

The first prologue of *Heights* tells the central character of Amir falling in love with Rima. They live in an apartment called Paradise Park. One midnight they hear a sound of a crying child but there is no child crying near the apartment. In the second prologue *You Are Afraid* a news reporter Mala finds out that a girl is raped and killed by someone. When she saw the body of a girl she imagines her past life in adulthood. The third prologue *If* presents the story of the child and her true friend, who rides on the back of a crow.

The first prologue presents a city called Paradise Park, which is the heart of the city. The main character Amir is working in the post office. His job is to write a letter to those who cannot write and read. One day he met a girl called Rima and they fell in love with each other. Both of them lived together in the Paradise Park. At that time Rima at midnight hears a crying sound of a baby. After that Amir tells Rima don't disturb me in at night. Rima is very sad and she left Amir's house. Amir is very unhappy. Because he does not have parents and sibilings. So Amir developed a strong bond with Rima. When she left Amir he feels very isolated. He feels very lonely.

The opening lines of the first prologue and the epilogue are the same: "Look at the picture on the cover, there's a child, a girl in a red dress; there's a bird, a crow in a blue white sky. And then there are a few things you cannot see" (IYAH p.1and last page). The beginning and the end remain the same with the unabated grief of the crying girl child and the causes of her crying which everybody knows but doesn't seem to see. Cities are dangerous for the girl child, even her home is not a safe domain. The city in the novel is Kolkata, which Raj Kamal Jha knows best.

Fantasy and reality merge here in this city and melt into each other. The city is the metropolis Kolkata although landmark places are named but the city remains unnamed. The bizarre, absurd nature of reality today, the very truth of urbanity calls in question the realistic tradition of ordinary life. The picture on the cover page of the novel is the novel: there is a child, a girl in a red dress, a crow hovering in a blue white sky. Then there are things the varied reality of life that one cannot see or finds blurred. This child is between eleven and twelve years of age.

The man said that if you are afraid of heights don't ride on my crow's back. In these three prologues the characters imagine their past life related to the reality. The prologue conveys that imagination is against reality. In the second prologue Mala whether she is a reporter or she wants to be a housewife imagines herself as a journalist. The first prologue whether the boy is working in a post office imagines himself as a post office boy. In both the novels imagination is against reality.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:12 December 2017

A. Bharathi, M.A., M.Phil.

Imagination Versus Reality in Raj Kamal Jha's *The Blue Bedspread* and *If You are Afraid of Heights*

The second prologue is about a eleven or twelve years old girl raped by someone and throw into a canal. The mother is very sad about her daughter's death. At that time Mala, a news reporter she comes to the city and investigates the child's death and rape. Mala wants to ask the child's mother, "Who Killed your daughter"? Her mother said that she is a good girl and she is very calm and has a cool personality. The girl always wore a red colour dress. The mother assumes Mala as her daughter as she was same height same appearance. Due to this similarity Mala is reminded of her eleven years old life.

In the second prologue *You are Afraid* a news reporter, goes to investigate a eleven years old girl's death. She is raped by someone and killed and throw into a canal. While investigating the child's death Mala a news reporter grapples with her own troubled past. Mala is sexually abused when she was eleven years old. The last prologue *If a girl in a red dress* standing in her balcony. She watches a crow flying in the sky. She fears about the suicidal deaths of her neighbourhood.

The girl had a fear in her mind. She worries about her parent's safety. She is afraid due to her parent's suicide. Jha's two novels expose the life of the minor characters. They imagine their past life incident and fear the real life situation. It is based on the life and emotion and their possession in the real situation. The characters are individually affected by someone in the past and present.

In the third prologue a young girl is on her balcony. She is very depressed of the about her parents. Her friend a crow-rider flies away and gets smaller and smaller. The man said my crow is flying very high and you can sit on my crow's back. The young girl saw a death of her neighbour. So she is very afraid of her parents safety. The novel ends with the third prologue. The three stories seemingly separate stories. These interwoven themes are recurring motifs and suggest a connection between the strands: a crow flying overhead, a skyscraper larger than any building before, a dog with a missing tail, a news reporter, A girl in a red dress.

It is also remarkable for its narrative art and the novelist's pungent irony. It is written in a third person narrative technique with a difference. The narrator is endowed with some supernatural quality. He can fly on a vehicle that is a crow. He can go to anywhere and can reduce or enlarge his size. Right from the beginning he reconnoiters along with his crow. In the first two stories he stands as a detached observer. But in the final part he gets involved with the girl character and spies together to come to a resolution.

In the story he becomes a character and the girl child who is the protagonist assumes the role of a narrator. The narrative continuously moves forward through a sequence of flash back and forth. The device of dreams is brilliantly put to use in carrying on the narrative. The third person narrator is not static, brooding and recalling things while sitting at a place. He is often seen in action except in the second story where we feel oblivious of the narrator and his crow. So the three stories leave three different effects on the readers. If the first gives an effect of cosmopolitan culture and the shaky ground between the two different streams of life in a dramatic mode, the second reads more like a social document of a crime fiction in smooth narrative prose and the third leaves an imprint of a fantasy. And yet they are interwoven in a fictional paradigm.

The novel *If You are Afraid of Heights* unfolds the layers of despair in the trapped humanity. With deep understanding and unsettling insight, Jha captures the changing decaying urban India. Fantasy and reality alternate to tell the truth of the strangely familiar world's untold story. In his search for a suitable form, it seems Raj Kamal Jha is experimenting with a mix of fabulation, non-fiction and empirical style of narrative. Jha's novel *If You are Afraid of Heights* is also an example how sturdily traditional realism has survived assimilating various modes to represent the modern reality.

Yet another point of interest in this novel is the use of crow and crow rider imagery. Symbolically, the bird crow is considered as an ill omen and associated with death. It is also sometimes the harbinger of good news, the messenger. Jha brings in bird imagery to reflect on the character in his novel particularly to focus on the suffering of humanity. Jha's novel *If You*

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:12 December 2017

A. Bharathi, M.A., M.Phil.

Imagination Versus Reality in Raj Kamal Jha's *The Blue Bedspread* and *If You are Afraid of Heights*

are Afraid of Heights grapples with the problem of disquiet and sorrow in imagining urbanity and therefore, perhaps, he created the crow and the crow-rider as narrator's novel.

Works Consulted

PRIMARY SOURCES

Raj Kamal Jha, *The Blue Bedspread* (London: Picador, 1999) ..., *If You are Afraid of Heights* (London: Picador, 2003).

SECONDARY SOURCES

Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics Of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1998) 157.

Brain McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987; London: Routledge, 1996) 164.

Romen Ingarden, *The Literary Work Of Art* (1931; Evanston: North Western UP, 1973) 218.

Richard Rotry, *Contingency, Irony and Solitary* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1989) 3.

Raj Kamal Jha, *If You are Afraid of Heights* (London: Picador, 2003).

Jha Raj Kamal. *The Blue Bedspread: A Novel*. London: Picador. 2000. Print.

The Blue Bedspread. Publishers Weekly. 06 March 2013.

Ophelia Ingarden, *The Literary Work Of Art* (1931; Evanston: North Western UP, 1973) 218.

Giambattista Vico, quoted in S Ernst Von Glozersfeld, "An Introduction to Radical Constructivism", *The Invent Reality*, ed. Paul Watzlawick (New York: Norton, 1984) 27.

Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self Conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1984) 52.

Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity Rainbow* (1973; London: Vintage, 1995) 667.

Batra, Jgadish (ed). 21st Centuray Indian Novel in English: Emerging Issues and challenges. New Delhi: Prestige Books International. 2012. Print.

The Journal of Indian Writing in English. Special Issue. Vol. 40, no.2. July 2012.

Warikoo, Niraj. 'Blue Bedspread' Uncovers Haunting Details Of Urban Decay. Chicago Tribune, June 22,2000. Web, 21 March 2013.

The Blue Bedspread. Publishers Weekly. 06 March 2013.

Arvind M. Nawale 2011 Aadi Publications.

Vikram Kumar Sharma Rajdhani Printers.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:12 December 2017

A. Bharathi, M.A., M.Phil.

Imagination Versus Reality in Raj Kamal Jha's *The Blue Bedspread* and *If You are Afraid of Heights*

Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p.11

Jaques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1976), p.4.

M.K. Naik and Shyamala A. Narayan, *Indian English Literature 1980-2000: A Critical Survey* (New Delhi: Pencraft Interational, 2001), p. 247.

Richard Cronin, "India", *The Oxford Guide to Contemporary World Literature*, ed. John Sturrock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 215.

=====

A. Bharathi, M.A., M.Phil.
The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for Women
Sivakasi 626123
Tamilnadu
India
bharathimla@yahoo.in

=====

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:12 December 2017

A. Bharathi, M.A., M.Phil.

Imagination Versus Reality in Raj Kamal Jha's *The Blue Bedspread* and *If You are Afraid of Heights*