



## What lies beneath the Blue Bedspread

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### Abstract

**Aim:** *A comparative study of: Narration/narrative technique, with reference to Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children and Haroun and The Sea of Stories, and Sibling Relationship, with Reference to Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things.*

**Methodology and Approach:** *My paper examines the narrative technique of the novel, drawing parallels with the narration of Rushdie's self-conscious narrator, Saleem Sinai, of Midnight's Children and also with the issues of 'telling' and silence in his Haroun and The Sea of Stories. The sibling relationship of the novel is compared with the relationship of Arundhati Roy's twins, Estha and Rahel, from The God of Small Things.*

**Outcome:** *The Blue Bedspread is Raj Kamal Jha's maiden attempt at novel writing. His prose is deceptively simple and bare. Yet, the tales he weaves are dark, dense and surreal, often containing brooding, repugnant elements. The book*

*is constituted of thirty-one stories revolving around a family that has a murky history.*

**Conclusion and Suggestion:** *It is a non-linear narrative and the stories can even be shuffled and rearranged, without having a disrupting effect on the main narrative. The novel talks about the issue of narration and about the dependability of the 'truth' told. The narrator questions his own version of the tales told and introduces the reader with the possibility of many more versions of the 'truth'. The study brings out the conditions that the siblings brave as they grow up and shows how disturbing secrets of families, that are mostly kept in the closet, like abuse and incest, are frankly discussed.*

**Keywords:** Telling, Silence, Abuse, Incest, Surreal, Non-Linear and Self-conscious Narrator.

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I begin my paper with a quotation from OPEN magazine, about the content of Raj Kamal Jha's writing:

Not everyone's kind of tales, they are dense and surreal, contain dark, brooding, even repugnant elements.

Jha is called the "novelist of the newsroom". His fiction is bare, simple and its attention to detail works evocatively on the reader's emotions. His fiction is grounded in contemporary themes around change. His books engage with disturbing subjects, from domestic violence to the urban-rural divide, from inequality and intolerance to the vulnerability of the marginalized. Such subjects

are unusual in contemporary Indian fiction. His writing may appear simple but calls for a lot of reader participation.

The book has thirty-one stories about a family history filled with unresolved mysteries and dark secrets. These stories are like rooms filled with an intricate pattern of words. It is a non-linear narrative. These stories can be shuffled or rearranged in many ways, without interrupting the main story. They follow, as in the montage technique. There is a forward and backward movement in time. The book is an example of meta-fiction because of the way the narrator talks about his craft and his responsibility.

In an interview conducted by Michelle Caswell for the Asia Society in July 2001, Raj Kamal Jha was questioned about where he places himself among the current crop of Indians writing in English and whether he considered himself as part of a movement. At this the writer had preferred to call himself a lone artist. But one cannot help noticing the similarities between him and his seniors: Rushdie and Roy. The paper presents a comparative study of narration in *The Blue Bedspread* and Rushdie's works, particularly from *Midnight's Children* and *Haroun and The Sea of Stories*.

In fact, Jha has read *Midnight's Children* and seems to have been influenced by Rushdie's art of storytelling. *M.C.* presents an account of the lives of the 1001 children born on the midnight of the 14<sup>th</sup> of August 1947, or more precisely, on the eve of India's independence from the British rule. The novel, in fact, begins with the narrator struggling for accuracy in stating the details associated with his own birth. In its fictional world, there is the complexity and the stratification of several layers of reality. The novel does away with the illusion that there is only one clearly defined and objective reality. There is a new ambiguous awareness of the world and the self and of the simultaneity of past and

present and the quasi-osmotic interpretation of multiple realities in the stream of one's consciousness.

Much like *Midnight's Children*, Jha's book also uncovers the relationship between writing and reality. In doing this, such postmodernist fiction aims to seek fluidity in both theme and structure. A shadow of doubt looms large over everything. The truth that the narrator labors to reveal itself becomes questionable, as also does the story and the fictional world it builds. The chasms in the narrative transmute reality in the fictional world of the writer. It is a shifting reality, as the fictional world is repeatedly recreated by the narrator.

And once I have told you this story, I shall tell you more, as and when they come. I shall retell some stories, the ones your mother told me, even those which she said not in words, but in gestures and glances..... (T.B.B. Ch. First Story)

The novel reaffirms the postmodernist insistence on the instability and non-reliability of the narrative voice and of the content it presents. The very authority of the narrator is challengeable. The fictional world constructed by the narrator is deconstructed by his own introspection and contradiction. Plurality permeates the entire narrative.

.... I shall hold your hand, open all those rooms that need to be opened, word by word, sentence by sentence. I will keep some rooms closed until we are more ready, open others just a chink so that you take a peek. And at times, without opening a door at all, we shall imagine what lies inside.... I will tell you happy stories and I will tell you sad stories. And remember, my child, your truth lies somewhere in between (T.B.B. Ch. First Story).

The blue bedspread is reminiscent of Rushdie's holed sheet in *M.C.*, the *purdah* or veil set up between a young, Germany educated Dr. Aadam Azeez and

his nubile patient, the virginal Naseem. It is the sheet which hides her body from the gaze of an alien, male doctor, while the carefully cut out hole makes visible the part which needs medical examination. That no part of the body is finally left unseen, untouched or unexamined by the male doctor is a different matter altogether. The sheet is thus; both a veil and a simplifying aid to provide access to Naseem's body. The use of a sheet of cloth in both novels is, in my opinion, particularly interesting and noteworthy.

Throughout Rushdie's novel, the narrator, Saleem Sinai, grapples with his 'cracking-up' problem and desperately struggles to tell the story in the time he still has at hand. This absurd, self-conscious narrator is a person drifting towards disintegration. During the course of the novel, he loses finger, hair, the sense of smell and even his memory. The forced sterilization programme of the Emergency renders him impotent. Dodging an imminent annihilation, he writes feverishly.

Yes, they will trample me underfoot, reducing me to specks of Voiceless dust, because it is the privilege and the curse of Midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace. (M.C. Book Three. Ch. Abracadabra)

The nameless narrator of T.B.B. also experiences a paucity of time for his stories to be told satisfactorily, and wants to hurry. He has just one night, with the baby, before she is taken away by the adoptive parents. The telling of the stories would prove cathartic for the narrator and would also help in providing answers to the baby, regarding her own identity when she has grown into a "fine woman", "several summers and several winters" later.

The whole issue of the process of writing is brought up for discussion. We see how 'writing', for this author has its roots in his childhood visit to the psychiatrist with "arms as white as milk", who recommends writing instead of talking. The narrator, then a seven-year-old boy, finds telling or narrating a tougher option. So, he tells the one-day-old baby:

.... when you find it difficult to say something, when the words get trapped in your chest, your lips quiver, as in winter, you can always write it down. That's why, my child, I have nothing to worry about tonight, I am prepared. (T.B.B. Ch. Father)

In such experimental narration there is:

.... a radical perturbation of narration itself (Nash 1987:80)

That.... seeks to dismantle our customary expectations of narratives... (and to disrupt our 'normal' ways of reading. (Nash 1987:77)

There is discussion on the silence that engulfs the act of writing in *The Blue Bedspread*. The narrator even avoids the typewriter because of its noise. Silence is necessary so that the baby sleeps and he can finish his vignettes in the one night available to him. This silence is reminiscent of the silence that engulfs Rashid Khalifa, the story-teller father of the boy, Haroun from Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. The son attempts to get back the gift of the gab for his father, which he has lost ever since Soraya, Rashid's wife, left him. Haroun travels all the way to the valley of K i.e. Kahani, where he helps those people win a battle against the silent and cunning Chapala's. There is a character called Mudra, the Shadow Warrior, who does not wish to remain eternally silent. Just as the narrator of T.B.B. breaks his silence through writing instead of telling, Mudra also attempts to speak, but does it through the Language of Gesture or *Abhinaya*, a classical dance form used here as a language.

The self-effacing narrator denies his self from the very beginning, citing the immense number of people of Calcutta as the cause of his sheer unimportance. Instead, he shifts focus to the identity of the new-born child. And in aiding the baby to face the question “Who am i?” The self-effacing narrator denies his self from the very beginning, citing the immense number of people of Calcutta as the cause of his sheer unimportance. Instead, he shifts focus to the identity of the new-born child. And in aiding the baby to face the question “Who am I?” there is again a jump from the present and even the immediate past, to the future, thus following the postmodern, nonlinear progression of the narrative. Hence the selves of the narrator and the child are both fluids. The stories told, also have no finality of time and place.

This narrator has also had a brief love relationship which did not culminate in marriage. In a world constructed in his imagination, there are some blissful family moments, the little son playing in the garden and running back into his arms. But the sudden return to reality lays bare the unreliability of the narrator’s claims that he had not been in contact with his sister for years. This is so because he reveals how things would have been different if his love proposal were accepted. He would not have returned to that neighborhood and consequently never met his sister “on that April night” and the baby would never have come into the world.

The unusual sexual relations of the siblings are confirmed in the last story, entitled “Eight Words” where he declares, in eight words: *‘I am the father of my sister’s child’*. So, we see how events are ‘unnarrated’, the story ‘unwritten’ in parts. The truth keeps shifting, mutating and transforming. Jha is said to have written the novel over a period of one year during bouts of congenital insomnia which he suffered from. The narrator is a sagging, nameless, terrified man. The vignettes he unfolds from his pen are the secrets, some rather shameful, that the

one-day-old baby is connected with, through her parentage. The narrative method is such that the book can be picked from anywhere and each story can be read and absorbed separately. Saleem, in M.C. is a highly obtrusive narrator, distinct both from the implied author and the real author. He stands at a slight angle to external reality, as it is perceived by others. The fictional material reaches the reader via the consciousness of this narrator, which, metaphorically speaking refracts it. Rushdie's narrator also presents reality as it impinged upon him. The presentation therefore becomes slanted. The unities of time, place and action are unstable. The narrator is even criticized for exhibiting short-circuit, his habit of revealing the tricks of his trade, often combining strongly contrasting modes, the fictive and the factual.

In T.B.B., the narrator appreciates the gravity and extreme, irreplaceable relevance of his position in telling the stories. The only other person who could have told these stories just as accurately, his only sibling, his loving, immensely protective older sister, is no more. So, the onus of responsibility of handing over the truth about their deeply entwined lives to the newborn daughter rests solely on him. Similarly, in M.C., the narrator is highly self-conscious. Authorial intervention is often noticeable. He does not want to be confined to the periphery as a victim but wants to be a protagonist, at the center of things. He often makes the story move from the present to the past or future. Often, he even gives an idea of events which are to occur much later in the novel, using riddle-like references. Though eccentric, he is also aware of the notion of artistry.

The other issue to be brought up for discussion in Raj Kamal Jha's book, is the abnormal, incestuous sibling relationship in the novel. The unnamed narrator weaves stories out of his memories of their shared lives. Some parallels can be found between this and the relationship of the fraternal twins of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. To grasp the painful childhood and past of Jha's



narrator, every story needs a reading, though not necessarily in the given order. The themes are indeed daring and the novel becomes “a declaration of guilt”. Issues of ‘truth’ and ‘representation’ are pulled up for questioning. Is it possible to present a record of life by narrating any portion, any moment, separately? Or, can the feat not be achieved unless a unified, undisturbed, unbroken narrative is woven?

The sibling sets shown in Roy’s novel are those of Ammu, the twins’ mother, and Chacko and of the twins, Rahel and Estha. The novel discusses how the family sticks together and also falls apart. It shows how family love sometimes becomes a burdensome obligation. Consanguineous bonds may not necessarily imply the existence of deep love. The novel brings out how marriages are not necessarily made of love and are only a route to having children. Rahel drifted into marriage as a passenger drift towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge. With a *Sitting Down* sense. (T.G.O.S.T., Ch. Paradise Pickles and Preserves).

The fraternal twins shared a close relationship as kids. They lived through the same experiences as children and were supportive of each other. They felt something missing between them when Rahel left for Boston with her husband, and on her return, their relationship entered a new level. Before, they “who had never been shy of each other’s bodies”, and...separately, the two of them are no longer what *They* were or Ever thought *They’d* be. (T.G.O.S.T., Ch. Paradise Pickles and Preserves)

They felt so close to each other that they thought of each other “together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us”. The author describes them as two people with joint identities. Later, their relationship evolved and became more intimate. They realized how much they needed one another.

The prohibited, taboo love relationship of Ammu, an upper class Syrian Christian woman and Velutha, an untouchable, disrupts social politics. Baby Kochamma, the grand aunt frames a false rape-charge against him and legitimizes it by coercing the twins to lie to the police. Ammu is separated from Estha and banished. This results in her lonely death in penury, a few years later. Not only the central love relationship in the novel, but many others are perverted and irreparably destroyed as a result of the reinforcement of “love laws”. Romantic love and sexual desire are normally separate from familial sibling relationships. But these demarcations get blurred in the novel. The family and society may have curbed the sexuality and sexual relations of the woman, Ammu. But ultimately, the twins end up having an incestuous encounter.

The “love laws” blighted the future love relations of the twins, after they had grown up. Estha leads a socially isolated existence and never marries. Rahel also is unable to experience real, sustained love. Her marriage is meaningless and ends in divorce. She never leaves home and suffers from an acute feeling of permanent loneliness. This is very much like the sister in *The Blue Bedspread*, who, it is insinuated, goes as far as killing her husband by pushing him over the terrace wall, to free her from daily drudgery and an increasingly loveless marriage, post a miscarriage.

Even in separation the twins feel like one person. They are halves to the whole. That is why they feel an acute isolation when they are separated. Estha, who moved into a world of silence and cut himself off from other people, regained meaning for his life with his sister’s return. They think that they can understand each other perfectly. Only they appreciate what either of them has gone through. Identity fusion is witnessed in their case.

Twins are together from birth and through most of their childhood. Their bond, as a result is often stronger than that of normal siblings. In this sense, does

the bond of the brother and sister in T.B.B. fall short or appear less intense and intimate? A deep look at their relationship shows the closest possible sibling bond. The two grow up in a mostly loveless environment, in the absence of a mother, who, for the most part, looks out of a framed photograph. The father's attitude veers between violence and a manic love. The two are each other's support system. The sister gets beaten on account of the brother, unflinchingly. And the boy brave's sexual abuse. They return to comfort and console each other in bed, physically fitting together, almost as twins do in the mother's womb, and as Estha and Rahel do, in spirit. The novel portrays the helpless claustrophobia of the siblings trapped on the blue bedspread. But it is the same blue bedspread which becomes their protective haven in the face of domestic violence and sexual abuse. Just beginning to get an awareness of her sexuality, the fourteen-year-old sister draws her ten-year-old brother to herself, comforting and loving him through their traumatic childhood. In Roy's novel, the twins have their mother's love as an anchor in their early lives. But the brother-sister of T.B.B. has only each other.

But the twins's relationship is devoid of any sexual color, except at the end of the book. They also exhibit 'twin yearning', the need to reestablish the twin relationship with others in their lives. That is the reason they fail miserably at bonding with the people they come across. The depth of their relationship is impossible for anyone to fathom. Rahel's husband is shown to have totally failed in comprehending the bond between her brother and herself. He senses that something is amiss but cannot understand that Rahel is troubled because her brother is such an integral part of her being. It was almost like for each other they had a unique, unusual sixth-sense. Though they do grow up to have separate, individual identities, yet their exceptional bond survives despite all odds.

There are incest and abuse in Jha's book, though these do not constitute the central theme. The narrator has lived with painful memories for years. Also, for years, has he maintained silence about his past, regarding his intimacy with his sister, who leaves their home at the age of nineteen, probably allowing both of them the chance to distance themselves from their guilt. He must admit this secret guilt in order to survive and move towards a hopeful future. In psychoanalysis, founded by Sigmund Freud, the aim of psychoanalysis therapy is to release repressed emotions and experiences i.e., make the unconscious conscious. The patient is often asked to retrace memories from his childhood. It is commonly used to treat anxiety disorders and depression. Jha's narrator also has to move on, after acknowledging the abuse and violence that was inflicted on him. He does so through breaking his silence via writing. The book attempts to speak out against "...the silence in (Indian) families," that" becomes an accomplice in repression..." (Asia Source interview of Raj Kamal Jha).

The openness in the depiction of the incest scenes, and those of lesbian lovemaking, in *The Blue Bedspread*, goes to announce the "coming of age of the Indian novel in English" as described by John Fowles. For this brilliant first work, the author is described by Andrea Ashworth, author of *Once in a House on Fire*, as getting.... under the skin, behind the eyes, even into the hormones of his characters. And the prose is searingly simple with a beautiful edge of immediacy. It struck me as that rare treat: a truly unusual read.

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