

A Critical Study of Miscellaneous Issues in Raj Kamal Jha's *Fireproof*

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Abstract

Raj Kamal Jha, an internationally acclaimed novelist and journalist, has written five novels so far. *Fireproof* (2006); his third novel is an imaginative fictional rendering of the communal violence which erupted in Gujarat in 2002. It is a highly experimental fiction as far as linguistic innovations are concerned. What is striking is that while it has been studied as a 'riot novel' dealing primarily with the subject of communal violence the other minor themes and issues of this novel which are no less important for the thematic structure of the novel have not received any significant critical attention. Therefore, it is those miscellaneous issues in this novel like the depiction of male-centered sexuality, dalit concerns, globalization of India, and corruption in public offices in India which are proposed for a critical textual study in the present research paper.

Keywords: Communal Violence, Sexuality, Corruption, Dalit Issues, Globalizing India.

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Introduction

Raj Kamal Jha (1966-) was born at Bhagalpur in Bihar and brought up in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in West Bengal. At present, he is the chief editor of *The Indian Express*, the daily national English newspaper. Jha did his schooling from Saint Joseph's College, Kolkata and graduation in Bachelors of Technology in mechanical engineering from Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur in West Bengal. He did his post-graduation in print journalism from Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California in 1990. After he came back to India, he started working with prestigious national newspapers and magazines, finally settling down in *The Indian Express*. Raj Kamal Jha is also known for his five critically appreciated novels produced over a period of two decades which are; *The Blue Bedspread* (1999), *If You Are Afraid of Heights* (2003), *Fireproof* (2006) *She Will Build Him a City* (2015) and *The City and the Sea* (2019).

Introduction to the novel and review of literature

While it his debut novel *The Blue Bedspread* which received greater attention when John Fowles called it as "Something rather remarkable, almost a coming-of-age of the Indian novel" ("Fowles, John"), it is his third novel, *Fireproof* which has established his reputation as a novelist writing serious literary fiction on issues such as communal violence and its presence in a religiously and culturally diverse and pluralist nation. Jha's distinctive imagination in the fictional rendering of the Gujarat communal violence of 2002, led this novel to be critically examined by some Indian and foreign scholars, despite the fact that Raj Kamal Jha as a novelist has still not received the kind of critical attention which his fiction deserves. In a book review of *Fireproof*, *India Today* called it "a bildungsroman that tracks the education of the crime-infested soul" (qtd. in Wikipedia Raj Kamal Jha). It certainly is a kind of bildungsroman of its own kind as the protagonist; Jay does not grow from a child into an adult learning new things and going through novel experiences but he as an individual morally grows from a perpetrator of communal violence into a guilt-stricken father of a vulnerable child. In the research that has been carried out on this novel over the years since its publication in 2006, attempts have been made to analyze its major theme that is the issue of communal violence and riots. To name a few scholars, Saman Ashfaq has studied the plight of Shabnam, a victim of communal violence in the novel, in terms of "the discourse of minority women" in the literary representations of communal violence in Indian English novels (31). Akhilesh Kumar

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Dwivedi has studied the issue of communal violence in the novel (01-08). Nora Anna Escherle has studied it as a "metahistoriographic crime novel" (155-162). Also, she has analyzed the theme of "re-individualization" (164-169) in it while Sarah Iltot has studied the elements of abjection (664-674). Maya Jaggi in her book review of *Fireproof* focuses on "poignancy" in the representation of various images of communal violence in the novel (Jaggi). Devender Kumar has studied the theme of justice in the novel (Kumar) while Bhavana Jamwal has focused on the technique of magical realism employed in reference to the larger theme of communal violence in the novel (84-91). Gabriele Rippl has critically discussed the ekphrastic implications of the photographic representation of communal violence in the novel (128-155) while Annie Cottier has focused on the use of footnotes in the novel in reference to the articulation of the voices of the dead victims of the communal violence (305-315). Thus the review of literature on *Fireproof* shows that it is mainly the theme of communal violence, which is indeed the principal occupation of the novel, which has been critically explored. Nevertheless, there are miscellaneous themes and issues in *Fireproof* some of which are integral to the broader theme of the cultural production of communal violence and some others are related to the themes of "the new urban realism" (Singh1) as reflected in the twenty-first century Indian English novel. Therefore, it is those miscellaneous issues in this novel like the depiction of men's sexuality, dalit concerns, globalization of India, and corruption in public offices in India which are proposed for a critical textual study in the present research paper.

Aim of Study

The objective of this research paper is to make a critical textual analysis of miscellaneous issues in Raj Kamal Jha's novel, *Fireproof* (2006) which mainly are: sexuality, globalization in Indian society, dalit concerns and corruption in public offices.

Exploration of men's sexuality in *Fireproof*

Exploration of sexuality which lies hidden in our public behaviour is also one of the important subjects of Raj Kamal Jha's novels. While this exploration of concealed sexuality has been rendered in a full measure in *The Blue Bedspread* and *If You Are Afraid of Heights*, in *Fireproof* also there is a little instance in which the unconscious sexuality of the narrator is explored despite the fact that it is a novel the principal subject of which is the portrayal of communal violence. When Miss Glass communicates with Jay through telephone she asks him: "You won't admit this, even to yourself, but you like this, don't you? A woman calling you, asking you to meet her?" (*Fireproof* 93), Jay denies this. But later he fancies himself conjugating with her and he himself acknowledges this fact to the reader when he says: "Yes (why should I hide it) I did imagine what was beneath, I did imagine her breasts, my chin in the hollows behind her knees, her lips, my lips, her tongue, my tongue, the roof of her mouth, the ears, their lobes between my teeth, the taste of her toes" (106). Another instance in which the sexuality of men

is manifested is seen at the cybercafé in Jay's neighbourhood which is run by Saxel Meeko, Jay's friend. His name itself expresses some kind of sexual connotations as if chosen deliberately by the author. In India, the references and connotations to sex and sexuality are not usually talked about freely, in a comfortable manner. Such issues are better avoided rather than conversed about in respectful public gatherings. It is another matter, that like many other languages Indian vernaculars and even a major national language, Hindi, are not free from slang expressions and forbidden vocabulary, which are very much part of everyday routine of Indian life. Moreover, pornography has taken the digital and cyber avatar since the revolutionary advancement and growth in the information technology and it has also impacted Indian social life. The first decade of the twenty-first century saw a sprawling rise in the number of cybercafés in India. Though uncomfortable, it is a truth nevertheless that before the arrival of the smartphone in Indian market cybercafés in India became a hotspot for watching porn films and teenagers and youngsters started visiting cybercafés frequently in order to give a vent to their suppressed sexuality. This is what is registered by Jha in a narrative chunk where he depicts this issue taking it from our contemporary social reality. Mr Meeko's cybercafé is filled with such youngsters and men in late evening:

The men walked into his cybercafé, put the money on his desk, fifty rupees an hour for broadband, including tissue paper and a glass of Coke or Pepsi. No stuttering dial-up. Instead welcome to Uninterrupted Access, Streaming Audio Video. To watch porn. Almost always, white. Once in a while, interracial, black on white, Asian, white on yellow, Indian, brown on brown, mix and match (154)

The satire in the portrayal of this contemporary social reality is to be taken note of here. Indirectly Jha refers to the act of masturbation by youngsters in the use of the word, 'tissue paper' which becomes clear at the end of the description of this scene. The mention of trade names like, 'Coke', 'Pepsi' refers to the globalizing avatar of India in the twenty-first century. The satire is further expanded in the words and phrases such as 'No stuttering dial-up'. For heightening the effect of satire Jha capitalizes the words such as, 'Uninterrupted Access, Streaming Audio Video.' Jha also shows how sexual lust like communal violence objectifies human lives. Therefore, humans are referred to in terms of their skin complexions as 'white', 'black', 'yellow', and 'brown'. This metonymic addressing of humans in terms of their skin complexions also consolidates the idea of racism which further gives rise to racial violence. Apart from this discourse of lust driven sexuality, another issue prevalent in Indian society is the obsession with the white or fair complexion especially of women "which has drastically affected the psychology of people" (Sharma 121). Jha registers the impact of this phenomenon in the phrase, 'Almost always, white' which shows how

Indian men are obsessed with the fair skin of women. Sharma explains that this is the result of cultural conditioning in India and she exemplifies it by referring to *The Blue Bedspread* in which "Jha chooses to write about the conditioning as a result of which the markets have been stacked with numerous whitening creams" (121). Although it is a minor theme in the novel, the theme of sexuality is integral to the major themes of religious alterity and communal violence in the novel as it exposes the contradictory nature of the masculinity of a society which in its sexual fantasies enjoys watching women from other races as naked but in its social life it can abuse, abhor, hate and even demonize their religions and cultures. Jha explores the issue of sexuality with greater penetration as he exposes the ugly face of the sexual perversion present in the psychology of some men as Saxeel Meeko has made it a habit to "walk around, unobtrusively, quietly, in bare feet, so his customers don't even know he's there. (He does that ever since the night he saw a customer masturbating to what looked like a naked child, on the screen barely three or four years old" (*Fireproof* 154). Things such as these become the plausible reasons of the rapes and murders of minor girls in India.

Corruption in Public Offices

Exploration of men's sexuality in this novel in the context of Indian society reveals another social evil present in Indian society which is corruption and moral degeneration of public offices. While portraying the scene at cybercafé, the narrator makes it clear that "there are laws, the Indian Information Technology Act 2000, under which his business at night (child or no child on the screen) is illegal; his cybercafé should be closed down. But Mr Meeko is practical and The Practical Mr Meeko has found a way out: a monthly pay off five thousand and one rupees to the station house officer of the local police station" (154). Laws cannot insure their implementation themselves. There must be honest citizens to implement them. But corruption in public offices tears down the very spirit of our constitution. Jha attacks the sham pretensions of morality made by people at large in Indian society when he writes "So even when internet costs have crashed, even these days when they offer PCs at slash-down prices, he knows they will come because these are images and sounds best seen and heard alone or in the company of strangers...Therefore, Mr Meeko has carefully designed his fourteen cubicles for privacy...the customers, too, are discreet. Careful of what they do" (154). Jha elaborates the satire when he shows how the station house officer also "gets three hours of surfing every week" and then he "walks away after wiping himself with a paper towel and dropping it onto the floor" (155) while Mr Meeko feels frustrated as "it makes" him "grit his teeth, the crumpled balls of tissue paper, stained with the semen of these men, but he slips on rubber gloves to clean up, putting each ball into a plastic bag which he then takes out, at the end of every night, and sets ablaze near the drain. It helps him feel clean, purified" (155).

Dalit issues in *Fireproof*

Although the dalits concerns do not form the main narrative or any major theme at all in *Fireproof*, as the novel is primarily concerned with the fictional account of the communal violence which erupted in Gujarat in 2002, yet there is a passing reference, rather an image of the 'Manhole Man' who being a sanitation worker in the municipality cleans the manholes of the city. In India, "manual scavenging" is the most dehumanising and debasing work "in which members of select Dalit communities manually remove human waste" (Nigam and Dubey). Though "the 1993 Act abolished manual scavenging" and again "a new Act had to be brought around in 2013 because the previous one could not do anything to end manual scavenging" (Nigam and Dubey) yet This stigmatic practice is a naked and horrifying reality of "the intricate caste system that still shapes most Indian lives" (Safi). For example, "In 2019, the 'model state of Gujarat' witnessed 16 deaths in manholes which was third-highest in the country in numbers of deaths after bigger states like Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra where 21 and 17 deaths, respectively, were reported. This has been stated in the figures of Union ministry of social justice and empowerment. In the entire country, 110 manhole deaths were reported in 18 states in 2019" (Chauhan). It is against this background that we can study the image of the Manhole Man as represented by Jha in *Fireproof*. Jha graphically depicts the image of the Manhole Man. This is how all his misery, all his plight has been weaved into words:

...his head rose out of the manhole. Like a swimmer emerging from a pool to catch his breath, to acknowledge the applause. I saw his bare torso, his legs bare, his feet bare, a small red towel wrapped around his waist to cover his nakedness. He climbed out, black sewage sticking to his body...in one of his hands, there was a bucket, made of aluminium, a small bucket, the kind I have in the bathroom to store water. This bucket was full of wet sewage, overflowing...the sewage water, brown, muddy, flowing down the side of its walls. Still half inside, I saw Manhole Man place the bucket out on the street and then pull himself out...Looking at Manhole Man, the dream I'd had that night, of the cricket ball and lthim in the drain, carried along by the current of sewage, suddenly seemed to appear softer, less threatening.

(*Fireproof* 140-41)

The parallel which has been drawn between the Manhole Man and a swimmer is a satire directed against Indian society as well as its public institutions as the function of a satire is to expose "the failings of individuals, institutions, or societies to ridicule or scorn" (Baldick 299). There is a huge world of difference between a sanitation worker and a swimmer. A manual scavenger has to do the most dehumanising work of going down a manhole putting his life at stake as any moment he may lose his life owing to the fatal stinking gases. And for that he receives nothing more than an insultingly meagre

amount of money. Neither does he receive any recognition in Indian society for the most hard and hazardous work that he does for the society nor does he receive any pension or any insurance for that. On the contrary dalits in India for ages have been exploited, abused, physically tortured, beaten and deprived of most privileges that the upper-caste strata of society enjoys. It is only after Independence and owing to the reservation policy for promoting them and bringing them into the mainstream society that some of them have been able to achieve educational and economic progress. But that does not mean that they have received equal social respectability and prestige that the upper-caste section of Indian society enjoys, although it is true that dalit leaders, politicians, bureaucrats, social workers, academics and scholars like Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar are publicly honoured and held in high repute. Moreover, it would not be wrong to say that certain people from the upper-caste strata of Indian society have worked for the rights of dalits and for uplifting them. Nevertheless, the constitution of India insures the equality of all citizens irrespective of caste, creed, religion, gender and very recently even sexual orientation. But what is constitutional and legal is hardly practised by some people in our country on whom the constitution works as a moral and lawful authority. On the other hand a swimmer swims for his/ her enjoyment and sport or as his/ her sporting profession. S/he receives accolades, medals, huge sums of prize money, fame, celebrity status and much more to live a comfortable life. We are not trying to belittle the labour, efforts and struggle of sports personnel. Even, we are not making any generalization as there are also many swimmers who are professional divers whose job is to save people from drowning. Also, not all swimmers are fortunate enough to enjoy a huge success in their sporting careers and many of them end up their careers failing miserably and even becoming a prey to abject poverty. But nobody can deny the fact that nobody is there to applause for a manual scavenger "when he lifts his head" from the manhole. Between the two kinds of India, one for the privileged and one for the deprived and exploited there is a world of difference. Even the semantics of same things used by both do not match at all. For Jay, the meaning of aluminium bucket is an instrument which helps in having a bath. On the contrary for the manual scavenger like the Manhole Man in this novel its meaning is an aluminium utensil to carry the dirt and waste produced and excreted by others. Jay compares the scene, in which Manhole Man is doing the work of manual scavenging, with his dream which he saw last night in which he saw himself with his son as "carried along by the current of sewage" (*Fireproof* 141). It was a very nauseating experience for Jay. But it was after all a "dream" but what the Manhole Man is doing is "reality". This is the reason, that now his dream appears "softer" and "less threatening" to Jay (141).

Globalization in *Fireproof*

Unlike *If You Are afraid of Heights*, globalization is not a theme in *Fireproof*, yet there is a light satire on the new employment trends in globalizing India. Jay before marriage, when he is still

unemployed, comes across an advertisement. He goes to an office for one of his many job interviews. The advertisement itself is a satire on the kinds of jobs that are offered nowadays to Indian youth in private sector. Most of the jobs for simple graduates and even engineering and management studies graduates are related to working in call centers and BPOs, where they have to work during day or night shifts. They have to learn artificial pronunciation. They are exploited both by management and customers. Even then they do not get good salaries and reputation and our youth feel utterly disgusted and frustrated. The paradoxical language of advertisement serves as a piece of light satire and good humour as (the original text is in italics, so we are quoting in the same style):

Join the Business Process Outsourcing boom but no night shifts, no calls, no need to learn neutral globalized accents. We need undergraduates with analytical skills but no specialized knowledge, just a meticulous disposition, a desire to find out facts and details, research, and ability to work well with others, meet deadlines, attractive commission and bonus. Work for the movers and shakers on Wall Street. (42)

Satire is reflected in the words which describe the nature of job as one which asks for working under deadlines and yet seem to refer to it as creating no stress on the employees. Satire and humour is also reflected in the words which describe the job as one which has ability to shake the global share markets in America. Satire also lies in the fact that while Jay thinks that he is "hopelessly unprepared for the next day's interview" (43) as he knows nothing about the nature of the job, he gets selected in the interview because "They saw a man, ME, sitting across the table and perhaps that's all they needed" (45). Humour and satire further heighten as Jay notices that in the office where he has come for the interview there is "a film magazine, more suited for a dentist's or a doctor's waiting room than a place where they were looking for the next generation to keep the wheels of the markets going round and round" (44). How India entered the new millennium with its new globalizing face is also reflected in the image which Jha has picked from the everyday reality of the first decade of the twenty-first century. And that image is the advertisement of a telecommunication company called "Hutch" which was in boom in the first decade of the century. Jha mention the advertisement without mentioning the name of the company in the passage in which Jay is going to hospital with his son Ithim early in the morning and Jay notices that "all the billboards on the divider were taken up by a cellphone company...The ad featured a dog following a boy wherever he goes, the dog a little pug...and the boy, about seven or eight years old. (I have seen the ad on TV as well.)" (142). The pug in the advertisement was "Cheeka" who appeared in the "You & I" advertising campaign of Hutchison Essar's cellular service in India, along with the child actor Jayaram. The dog follows the boy in unlikely locations, prompting the tagline, "Wherever you go, our network follows."

The duo first appeared on TV, billboards, newspapers and bus shelters in 2003 and became instant celebrities all over India" (Cheeka). Jay graphically narrates all the advertisements of this pug and boy and relates the duo to Ithim and himself as "And so on. Boy and dog, always together. Like Ithim and I" (*Fireproof* 143).

Conclusion

The textual discussion made above establishes that apart from the subject of communal violence and its related themes and issues, other miscellaneous themes and issues in *Fireproof*, like the portrayal of the hidden sexual behaviour of men, dalit concerns, globalization of India, and corruption in public offices in India are equally important for the critical understanding of the broader thematic structure of the novel.

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