

**RAJ KAMAL JHA'S *IF YOU ARE AFRAID OF HEIGHTS*:
DESPAIR IN THE TRAPPED HUMANITY**

*Dr. D. C. Nanaware, Associate Professor & Head, Department of English,
D. A. V. Velankar College of Commerce, Solapur*

Abstract:

Raj Kamal Jha's novel 'If you are Afried of Heights' explores the story of a meeting of a man and woman at midnight road accident and their falling in love, reporter's arrival in a small town to reveal the story of a child's rape and murder, and a young girl shaken by a series of suicides in her neighborhood worries for her parent's safety. Raj Kamal Jha brilliantly exhibits contemporary social and cultural life of the present day world.

Keywords: *Despair, Abuse, Safety, Hope.*

Introduction:

The novel 'If you are Afraid of Heights' presents the story of a meeting of a man and a woman at midnight road accident and their falling in love, reporter's arrival in a small town to reveal the story of a child's rape and murder, and a young girl shaken by a series of suicides in her neighborhood worries for her parent's safety. These three stories are inter related. The novel explores the theme of abuse, reflect and silence of secrets.

The novel is about hope and possibilities. Sushila Singh remarks:

The novelist has astonishing grip over banal urbanity and magically weaves the stories of truth, happenings all around, covered underneath, ever known and imagined but rarely entered and brought to truth-telling.

(Singh 93)

Fantasy and Reality:

Raj Kamal Jha realistically presents the contemporary social and cultural life of the world today. The novel, *If You Are Afraid of Heights* opens with the inscription from Paul Anther's Mr. Vertigo:

*Deep down, I don't believe it takes any special talent for a person to lift himself off the ground and hover in the air. We all have it in us-every man, woman, and child....
You must learn to stop being yourself. That's where it begins, and everything else follows from that.*

(IYAH 1)

Without doubt, the epilogue and the prologue beings with the same lines expressing the grief of the crying girl child:

Look at the picture on the cover, there's a child, a girl in a red dress; there's bird, a crow in a blue white sky. And then there are a few things you cannot see.

(IYAH 1)

The novel unfolds the pain and agony of a helpless girl. From the beginning to the end of the novel the situation of the girl does not improve. She is found in the world of grief. The pain of the girl is known to everybody but no one dare to look into the matter. Jha explores that the city life is unsafe for a girl. She is not safe even in her home. The life of the city of Calcutta is expressed every minutely. The life of the people

is presented very graphically. The realistic picture of the society is reflected with keen interest.

The cover page of the novel shows the theme. A child, a girl in a red dress and a crow hovering in a blue white sky are visible on the title page of the novel.

The image is symbolic. The girl child is crafted as crying. She represents crying family living in a city. The child is projected as crying and tears in her eyes reflect the sorrow of a girl.

The present story tells about the neglect and suppression of the desire of a young girl. The dream world of the girl is destroyed hence she is forced to dry. The father of the girl is a common average man. His chief occupation is to work in the city Building clearance office. His work is to get construction plans from those who ironically wish to build now houses in the old crumbling city.

We are reminded here *The Old man and the Sea* of Hemingway

"Once upon a time in the city, there lived a woman called Rima and a man named Amir. They are two faces of the common humanity: Rima becomes Amir if read oppositely. They meet in a accident: "she picked out the shards of broken glass from his face, they fell in love and just when it seemed they were setting down to live happily ever after, a strange little thing happened one night: Rima woke up hearing a child crying.

(IYAH7)

Rima could not understand if the sound of the cry is of a boy or a girl. The wail disturbed her deeply.

Despair and Fear in City Life:

The city life has been narrated very keenly. The city is considered as a city of accidents occurring everyday in our life. It is a city of anonymity, faceless and nameless people dug aged in the accidents. A number of accidents happened everyday in the city. A city is projected as an accident prone and unsafe. Jha very minutely describe the urban decay suffused with dreamy realism. The truth of life has been reflected in his novel. He presents the realities of India which the main stream media never expresses. His chief concern is contemporary Indian issues.

Continuously Rima has hearing of the cry of the child at night. She became disturbed hearing the sound. She woke up to hear the cry. She informs Amir on the seventh day but he does not take it seriously. He utters:

Tell me when you hear it, wake me up, I'll listen too"

(IYAHJ9)

Amir and Rima live in a building called Paradise Park. It was a unique place. If one was stopped and enquired about the way to paradise he too became special. It was the tallest building in the city. Many people live in this building and there are many rooms. The following paragraph tells about the paradise park:

Each floor on Paradise Park had only one apartment, and one side of its living room was a wall made entirely of glass, the kind of glass they use in telescopes. So that on nights when the sky was clear, when the wind had blown away the dust and the smoke, when the moon and the stars were in their right places,, exerting just that precise gravitational pull, you could see the Bay of Bengal, which is at least five hundred miles away, right outside the living room. So sharp was this lens-window that you could see the waves, the green foam, the white spray breaking across the shore crashing against the wall.

(IYAH 15)

Jha describes that the open space of the city is vanishing very fast.

This is the only open space there is in a city where people live, five or six to one room, fifty or sixty to a bus stop, more than a thousand to a night.

(IYAH 19)

Amir lives in a two room flat in building which looks like a crying place from outside. It is situated about forty minute bus-rides always from the maiden. As far as the meaning of Amir is concerned, it stands for a rich man. Amir is neither rich, not poor. He gets a little over five thousand rupees per month with some dearness allowance and about two hundred rupees as annual increment. About his physical personality the novel tells us:

He's medium height, medium age, medium weight, medium nose, medium eyes, everything medium. Even in colour, he's medium brown, like wood left outside for a couple of days, in the sun and rain.

(IYAH 30)

The work of Amir is to write letters for those who cannot read or write at the post office. In the first week of the month there is a huge rush at his desk-handcart pusher, rickshaw pullers carpenters-on-call, masons, maids-all are sending a part of their monthly wage to their families at home. A young man approaches desirous to write everything to his mother. Amir stops him suggesting what he would write in his next letter.

Amir has been writing from morning. He hears the voice of a man in their words:

If you are afraid of heights, brothers and sisters, I have nothing to show you, please leave, but if you don't care how high you go, if you don't mind people becoming dots moving up and down the road which becomes a ribbon, then listen to me because I will tell you how you can climb onto my crow's back and fly out of this city. Across and over, above and beyond. No pushing in buses, no shoving in trams, no saying sorry, no jumping puddles of pee, piles of shit. In short, my friends, no headacheThink it's a horse, you're the rider.

(IYAH 41)

Amir notices a woman and a child from a distance. The hands of the woman are dark and fingers wrinkled. It seems that she has just finished warming the dishes. "The child is a girl of eleven or twelve year old in a shirt and skirt. She is coming back from school pointing to the dolls of shop she is attracted towards doll in red dress with little flowers in front white and blue its sleeves with frills made of lace, white and red." (IYAS 41)

Further, Jha highlights the role of a newspaper reporter, Mala. Mala wants to know about the girl and her death. She presents a copy of the post mortem report giving bribe of fifty rupees to the hospital attendant. The girl was last seen on 14 July at night and the police got the information about the dead body on 16th July at 6:15 p.m. The girl child was sexually assaulted and raped before death. Mala wants to know the fact from the girl's mother. She directly does not ask question regarding her murder but asks about the red dress the girl was found in. The mother informs that the red dress was her favourite dress. The dress was bought by the amount sent by her son from his first salary. She narrates:

If you know my daughter, she is the type who never shouts or complains, never asks for anything, she is the perfect child, never once does she cry, sulk, make a face, but that evening when I had walked past the shop, she was behind me, and when I stopped to buy a bar of soap, she kept looking at that red dress which, even from a distance, was as bright and beautiful as when you held it in your hands. I looked at her looking at the dress, I could see her eyes and I knew I had to buy it.

(IYAH 174)

The dress suits her most. The parents decide to take a photograph. They have a desire want to make a frame of the photograph the moment the father receives his salary. Mala visits the room of the dead girl. She notices her doll and come back to her home recalling the cry of the girl's mother. Mala remembers her own mother:

The same height, the same way of sitting on the floor, with legs drawn up, chin on the knees while listening, both have the same way, nervous and clumsy, of adjusting the sari where it keeps slipping over the shoulders.

(IYAH 181)

Mala goes on bed. In her dream she finds her days of youth when she was eleven years old she wants to escape the shadow of her father and repeated molestation at her father's hands. As a young woman newspaper reporter, Mala is embarrassed as she remembers her childhood days which she tries to forget.

Summary:

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. 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. It is a story of agony and pain.

Works Cited:

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

Singh Sushila, Disquiet and Sorrow in Urban Imagination: Reading Raj Kamal Jha's *If you are Afraid of Heights*, *Points of View*, vxvii, N-I, Summer 2010. Print.

Tiwari, Shubha. "Women's Liberation Movement and Indian Women Novelists," *Indian Women Writers*. Ed. R.K. Dhawan, New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001. Print.