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Exploring the Dynamics of Family: A Study on Rupa Bajwa's *Tell Me a Story*

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Abstract

The winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award (2006) for her debut novel, *The Sari Shop*, Rupa Bajwa is one of the new findings in the field of contemporary Indian-English novel. Terse expression, unique narrative pattern, honest portrayal of the events and the characters are the basic traits of her creative output. After her national and inter-national fame and recognition with *The Sari Shop* (2004), she took a 'necessary' break and in 2012 appears with a ravishing one in her bag. *Tell Me a Story* is not thoroughly a 'story' of the individual(s), nor does it is based on the fairy, metaphysical and camouflaged stories Rani loves to tell; it is, in fact, an astonishing account of the slice of daily life of the major Indian middle class family with the illusion they have, with the dream they cherish and run after, and sudden uncalculating

devastation of expectation. The book tells the story of a lower middle class family from a small, buzzing town of Amritsar, living in a tiny 'L' pattern house. Bajwa within the frame of around 200 pages has successfully and sensibly constructed the characters and gives a pictorial depiction of that family. The present paper attempts to explore and expose the graphics of the inter-personal relationship by analyzing the major characters with a purpose to find out how far Bajwa can capture, feel and express their anguish, anxiety and frustration, honestly and faithfully.

Keywords

Family; Indian Tradition; Globalization; Economy; Middle Class Society.

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Moving doubtlessly within a post-modern topical arena our hitherto conception about social construction has been changing rapidly. Eminent social psychologist Kenneth Gergen phrases it as 'a formidable sea change'. It affects the interpersonal relationships among the family members and the very foundation and structure of a family along with its conceptual identity is now about to be diminished. The sociologists are trying hard to intercept a postmodern society either by positing it in an 'ideal- historical spectrum' or locating it under the umbrella term 'radical plurality', coined by Welsh (1987). Giltin by 'ideal- historical spectrum tends to focalize specially, although not exclusively on the American praxis of way of living, temperament, liking, taste and tenor of behaviorism.

Radical pluralism, on the other hand, is by nature inclusive and adheres to all kind of experience and expression. It confers pluralism to truth, justice and humanism. Omniscience of pluralism can be detected in the different levels and spheres of social, private as well as private domain. These domains exist on the basics of 'mutual interpenetration' and 'mutual interdependence'. Conclusively, in our daily routine we are relying on or depending upon other

people whom we probably even don't know. But this interdependency and co-relational sharing of emotion, sensibility and thought constitute the social formation of this world. Our so called boundaries are now over and the world becomes a 'Global Village' where even a single touch is capable to bridge friendship between any two persons despite their geographical distance. People though is harshly critical about this and terms this world a 'virtual' and the relationships as 'showy, camouflaged and phooey' none can deny the warmth it shares, the dependency it provides and the understanding it generates. Human beings, in fact, from the eve of growing consciousness to protect themselves and to secure the lives of the generations to come urged to be united. That's how tribes were formed, families were made and societies were structured. Stephen Anderson and Ronald Sabatelli in their critically acclaimed book have defined family as: "an interdependent group of individual who have a shared sense of history, experience, some degree of emotional bonding, and devise strategies for meeting the needs of individual members and the group as a whole" (16).

Though thorough out the world in different countries different systems of family structures, relationships, understanding levels and codes of behaviorism have been practiced, attitude to challenge, change and compromise remains all the same. Due to the huge impact of globalization, change in economy, in the third world countries, cultural encounter, behaviorism and the burning socio-economic-religious threat every single person has to encounter on these days, puts the validity of monolithic family in question: "Consequently, the problematic of gender, class, religion and culture form an integral part of any discourse that prioritizes the family as the agency. Globally, in all cultures, the position of the family has been redefined" (Dasgupta and Lal 12).

A country like India having charismatic cultural and civilized heritage cannot remain passive from these 'problematics' and it results in re-emergence and re-construction of a new kind of family concept which debunks previous

notions of a unitary family. However, as the Aryans are believed to be the ancestors of the Hindus, their diagram of family, internal and external prejudices, rituals and reservations come to us through the classical literatures like *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata* and these are continuously interpreted and intercepted by the Ideologists and Ideologically oriented sociologists in an analytical mode of study. They try to connect ancient Indian family with the paradigmatics of joint family. Shah notes that roughly after the end of the British Raj in India “...the emphasis on joint household was greater among higher castes and classes, who form a small section of the society, than among lower castes and classes, who constitutes the vast majority of the population” (Shah 3). Later with the change in market economy, political dimensions of power, several policies adopted and implemented by the government, encounter with the western value system, consumerism, growing industrialization and above all the scopes of earning which in most cases tears apart the innateness of a family, results in breaking of traditional joint family structures and the emergence of nuclear family. However, Shah in his book *The Family in India* mentions his preference to use ‘single’ and ‘complex’ in place of ‘nuclear’ and ‘joint’ family. William A Morrison has classified the village household (he likes household than family) into three types: Joint, Quasi-joint and Nuclear. Whereas the Joint family consists of several conjugal families in a ‘multi-generational relationship’, nuclear family consists of ‘with or without unmarried children and with or without one widowed parent, the quasi-joint family is little different in structure from the other two and is consisting of two nuclear units, with or without grandchildren. As the middle class and lower middle class section of a society are change-prone, they become emblematic of this paradigm shift as well as subject for deep analysis both in literary and non-literary domain. Under the light of this critical reference and discussion now I’m going to study the dimensions of relationship shared among the main members of the family headed by Dheeraj. The family is from a small, buzzing

town of Amritsar and lives in tiny, damp, cracked and old 'L' type house. By exploring and exposing the interpersonal relationship my focus will be on the transformation of this family from a 'Nuclear' family to a 'Quasi-nuclear' one. The relationships are heavily influenced by 'factors' like lack of money, gossip, ego, claim of superiority against submission to regret.

Dheeraj, the head of the family, is a widower and has one son, Mahesh and a daughter, Rani. Neelam is his daughter-in-law and Bittu, his grandson is the object of love, affection and indulgence. Though the novel begins with Rani, the female protagonist, capturing her frivolous gesture in monsoon morning and naughty tricks played by Bittu even an inattentive reader can sense undercurrent of tension within the family: "There is no money in the house and this prince had put the whole bar of soap into a bucket full of water to make soap bubbles" (*Tell Me a Story* 4). Or "He switched it on even though he knew Neelam frowned upon the use of lights during day time... and if she did, wouldn't comment on it" (*Tell Me a Story* 6). Gradually the things got complicated and the love, respect and affection henceforth shared by the family members turns into accusation, disbelief, haughty exchange of words and quarrel. It happens that the rigorous tension, uncertainty about desired comfortable future, and frustration germinated from insufficient family income tear apart the bonding among the family members. It ultimately results in formation of two units within this nuclear family and that makes it a quasi-nuclear one: one is consisted of Mahesh and Neelam; Rani and Dheeraj are two helpless formulators of the second. Bittu, the innocent child even can sense the prevailing tension and unbridgeable gap. Crisis in money turns out to the deciding factor along with 'accused' inefficient role played by Dheeraj. Neelam's dissatisfaction resulting eccentric behavior and Mahesh's frustration for remaining confined in the power loom factory despite his potential make the situation even more serious, gloomy and burning. One more thing, the way the characters are constructed and the plot is knitted; subtle operation of fate

cannot be over looked. The characters become victims of the tragedy played on them and as they are not inactive observers, it infuriates them, accentuates the tension and finally blows off the long-term love tinged relationships.

The head of the family Dheeraj is sensible, touchy, affectionate and humane. But his limitations include some of the basic expectations like, prudence and calculative mindset. After thirty-two years of work “as an accountant in a large general store in Guru Bazaar... within a space of one day, he was told that the store had been sold and he would have to leave” (*Tell Me a Story* 23). Due to age his efficiency as an accountant remains unevaluated as he fails to manage a new job in the newly built Super Market. This unexpected blow ruins Mahesh’s dream. His sense of failure as dutiful and responsible father is cleared in his own words, “I don’t even know whether I have been a good father, I don’t know if any act or any words of mine have had any value” (*Tell Me a Story* 88). His inability in earning and injudicious money lending to his friend’s son makes him a complete irrational person in the eyes of Mahesh and his wife. He realizes his unproductive contribution and this makes him even more morose and disturbed and consequently he begins to take tranquilizer- a solution he adopts to become oblivious of all the failures, dissatisfaction and undone measures. His ineffectiveness prompts Mahesh to react, forgetting Dheeraj’s seniority in the family and old age: “When you were kicked out of your job all those years ago, at that time had you not been weak, had you tried to speak up, to ask for your rights, then maybe...” (23). Even Neelam, unhesitantly triggers vengeance: “Are you not happy for other people? Having lost your wife, do you grudge other people their happiness that you don’t join any celebration?” (*Tell Me a Story* 65). In spite of all his faults, limitations and ineffectiveness, Dheeraj remains always caring and sympathetic to all the family members. His particular worry for Rani and affection for Bittu sometimes make the reader forgetful of the undercurrent of tension continuously flowing below the carpet. Rani heartily tries to cover up his

dishonored condition but fails to elude stigma of irresponsibility from his mind. Shah argues, “For the family is at the core of a man’s allegiance, his loyalty, his identification. It is his own gauge of his success in life, it is a main standard used by others to measure his achievement...” (Singer and Cohn 4). Under this observation Dheeraj’s failure to be a perfect and ideal head of the family both in undertaking responsibility and securing financial wretched condition let the family to roll in the pit of disastrous consequence.

The most ill-fated character in this novel, Mahesh is a mere worker in the handloom factory owned by Charan Das. As the flow of economic back up suddenly dried up (due to Dheeraj’s joblessness), he had to shift himself from the world he dreams of to the world he fears to be in. His nominal income is evidently insufficient to make a proper livelihood and to do the much needed repair to the house they live in. His father’s failure seems to him a ploy and he feels deceived. His depression results frustration directed at the family, at the society and at the world. He genuinely fears for the future that Bittu is destined to be in: “I have nightmares”, Mahesh said, “of Bittu spending his life in an airless, lightless factory, working power-looms. I want to have enough to educate him and this is how we are going about it?” (98). His psychological unrest makes him bewildered. He misses the congenial atmosphere in the house. Neelam’s eccentric behavior and Rani’s seemingly better working situation misbalances his mental calmness. As Dheeraj remains ineffective he has to take the decisions but he does so by humiliating his own father. This obliquely encourages Neelam who also does the same. After Dheeraj’s death he becomes worried about the future of his sister, “She will be twenty-two soon,” Mahesh said. “We should start looking now. It is difficult to get suitable boys these days. And she is such a difficult person at times” (*Tell Me a Story* 123). This anxiety is not, however, originated from sincere concern but from fear of pranks from the kith and kin. Ultimately he commits suicide as he fails to handle the pressure and perhaps pricks of conscience tormented his living

soul. His rigidness, insensitive attitude to his family, and continual exposure of frustration make him responsible for the disturbing orientation of the family.

Rani recounts the change that has occurred on Neelam's behavior and temperament in recent years. It is not that she completely dissuades herself from serving other members of her family apart from her husband and son. Actually here too money plays a pivotal role. Existential crisis makes her selfish and unresponsive to the duties expected from her. For the good omen of the family she almost single handedly arranges a ritual and feels humiliated and disappointed when Dheeraj explains his inability to be present on that occasion: "If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be ashamed to go to gatherings, to meet relatives and if it weren't for you, I could save this household from being sucked dry" (*Tell Me a Story* 65). She clearly criticizes Dheeraj's ineffectuality. That November night when the house was accidentally flooded she fails to retain her composure: "If we live here, then we will spend our nights here. If I hear one more taunt from anybody, I'll die. Enough is enough" (*Tell Me a Story* 95). She even jumps on Rani: "These decisions for your brother to take. All you need to do is just do as you are told" (95). Her insensible and objective behavior slowly kills Dheeraj and his death fails to move her. When she discusses with Mahesh on Rani's marriage, her words show that Rani is nothing but a burden on their shoulder. She puts extreme pressure on Mahesh and Bittu occasionally becomes object of her fiery taunting. After Mahesh's death when Rani comes to visit she humiliates her publicly, proving her entirely responsible for all the unexpected and unfortunate events so far have happened to the family. She even desperately separates Bittu from Rani. Singer and Cohn critically observe, "A woman, after she is a mother and a secure matron, does not hesitate to defend her rights in the household vigorously and loudly" (Singer and Cohn 33). When Neelam senses the wretched economic condition of the family and finds no alternative way to improve it, she becomes eccentric. She endeavors to project Mahesh as the worthy person but Mahesh too fails

leaving her in utter disposition. Had she become a little cool minded and sensible in crisis periods, the situation may not have been such unfortunate and the family may have retained its nuclear status.

Even a unskilled reader can sense that the novel projects Rani, Dheeraj's daughter not only as a female protagonist but as a woman having an active role to play, temperament to earn money and firm contending voice against the 'unjust' practiced both within her family and in the society in Delhi where she goes to make completely independent livelihood. The novel projects her as a perfect family member – sensible, sensitive, dutiful and co-operative. She manages her personal expenditure (and even contributes to the family) by working at the Eve's Beauty Parlour. After Dheeraj's death she can sense Mahesh and Neelam's attitude and goes to Delhi where she acts as a governess to Sadhna, a stalled novelist. In the end she goes back to a parlor in Delhi and got engaged to the job she likes.

Rani, the key character, becomes the parameter of the graph of tension and happiness, quarrel and friendship, stiffness and joviality experienced by the family members. She is very much passionate about her father. When Mahesh pitilessly accuses him, she furiously reacts, "Stop, Bhaiya. Please stop. This is our Papaji you are talking to. We'll manage. We'll do something" (*Tell Me a Story* 99). In Dussehra Ravan's helplessly burning effigy reminds her of Dheeraj. Despite her small income she tries to help the family and instances show that Bittu's capricious demands most of the times have been maintained by Rani. In a critical situation she says, "But what about the money I contribute, Bhaiya? Can that not help" (*Tell Me a Story* 98)? She adores Neelam despite her all time sluggish temperament, loves Bittu even more than her own life, respects and honours Dheeraj and though Mahesh saliently envies her she possesses always soft feeling in her heart. Mahesh's death carries her away to the lost child days which become only memory- sweet memory: "She remembered the games they had played together in their childhood, sitting under the neem

tree, fashioning clay toys and pans from the soil there” (*Tell Me a Story* 200). Shah Observes, “First of all, the association of individualism with the nuclear family is problematic in the context of the joint family system. A nuclear household by its mere existence cannot be considered as signifying an assertion of the ideology of individualism” (Shah 4). This thing happens in Rani’s case too. Though she is economically independent and good mannered, she ultimately fails to survive in the politics of family.

To conclude, Bajwa’s fine novel *Tell Me A Story* makes a keen and sensible study of an Indian lower middle class family, tormented by monetary problem, misunderstanding, frustration, and death of dream. In a third world country like India such picture is common. Such tragic family story is not alien in real Indian household and projection of family is not something new in the literary gamut. But the subtle depiction of each and every family member, the capturing of different dimensions with tiny details, over all faithful and authentic projection of the events and omission of melodramatic entries oblige the reader to feel the characters as next door neighbors and the family as a real Indian one, deeply engrossed in uncountable problems.

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