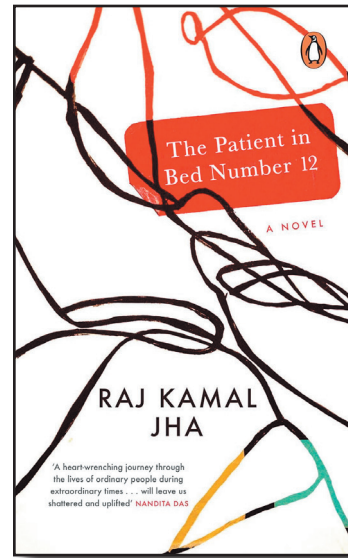


Raj Kamal Jha's *The Patient in Bed Number 12*

Review by Ramlal Agarwal

Raj Kamal Jha is an IIT student and holds a Master's from the University of Southern California. He is the chief editor at *The Indian Express*, the largest newspaper in India. He appeared on the literary scene in 1996 with his debut novel, *The Blue Bedsprad*, and has so far written six novels. His latest, *The Patient in Bed Number 12*, is about social, economic, and cultural issues of the recent past that have smeared our lives—in the form of a series of stories. Most of them deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, large-scale turbulence and loss of lives, lockdown and unemployment, staggering migration of workers, the travails and tragedies of workers heading home on foot, isolation camps, and the psychological turmoil of patients languishing in hospitals. Besides, there are stories that deal with another equally dangerous virus of communal violence and mass lynchings. Jha tells them very clinically, cryptically, and economically. Moreover, he hides the identities of most of his characters.



Jha starts the novel with the story of a Sanskrit scholar in the ICU at COVID-19 hospital. He had lost his wife earlier and given up on his only daughter, Nisha, as she married a Muslim boy, much against his wishes. Incapacitated and isolated, he longs to meet his daughter. He writes to her that not much time is left for him and that he makes no bones about telling people around him that his daughter is known as Nisha Kumar Rahman. Nisha also writes to him and sends him her photograph of her daughter Una, which he keeps close to him. The scholar wants to keep his granddaughter away from him as he is affected.

Another story is about a mathematics teacher. His school is shut down because of COVID-19, and he is without a job. He tries to get a job as a security guard. He gets it on the condition that either he keeps clear of women or goes to jail. There is a woman working a few meters away. One day, he is shocked to see her weeping. He wants to talk to her but refrains because of the warning. His colleague tells him that she lost her mother a few days ago. He wants her woman to help her lift the ice-cream boxes, which she finds difficult to do, but he cannot get out of the radius of 3 meters to which he is bound.

Another story is the story of a mother and her son. The mother is affected by COVID-19, is kept in isolation, and cannot meet her son. So, she talks to him on the phone. Unfortunately, she could not be saved, and as per the protocol of the hospital, she was wrapped in a plastic bag and taken to the crematorium. The son could not see her dead body.

Then there is the story of a doctor who goes about meeting patients and encouraging them. One night, he comes to bed no. 12 and tells the patient that he must not give up. He knew how bravely he had snapped

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relations with his daughter, as she had brought shame to their society by marrying a Muslim youth. But now he is disturbed. to see him relating to and longing to meet her. He advises him to take hold of himself and not succumb to weakness.

This story is followed by another story. A crowd of 10–15 people enter a house carrying slicks and shouting slogans. They get hold of the owner, accuse him of eating and trading beef, and start beating him recklessly till the poor fellow dies.

COVID-19 has spawned countless stories of meaningless deaths. One such is the story of a young laborer returning home with his young child. The child enjoys the freedom of empty streets. On their way, they come to a bridge. The child wants to see the flowing waters under the bridge, and in his eagerness, he gets his head and body out of the steel frame and trips into the gushing waters.

Another young man working hard for a better future is home for a few days. He takes his old car, goes out for a ride, crosses the boundary of his state, is surrounded by a mob, and is killed. The mob keeps shouting that he needs to be punished for stealing their young children.

Nisha writes to her father that she was well-settled and forwarding a photograph of her daughter Una and was looking forward to visiting him soon. However, she was anxious to know why a scholar like him and a father who loved his daughter so profoundly could not accept her marriage to a Muslim boy.

When COVID-19 began to subside and the lockdown eased, she and her family planned a visit to a beach. Una took to playing on the beach, and Nisha and Rahman found a comfortable rock to rest on. Suddenly, an unruly mob appears on the beach and asks Una where her parents are. Una takes them to her parents. The mob starts hurling abuses and starts beating them. Rahman is beaten to pulp, and Nisha and Una sustain a number of grievous injuries. They come to know that this is for their inter-faith marriage.

When Nisha, Una, and Rahman finally visit the hospital, Rahman is in a shop-new wheelchair, and Nisha walks with great difficulty. Nisha's father tells her to keep the child away from him as he is infected. Nisha says so does she. She probably means another kind of infection.

The novel is undergoing a sea change, and it is difficult to define it with any assurance. Many novelists are making all sorts of experiments with it, and Raj Kamal Jha is no exception. He presents a series of events during COVID 19, which he calls stories, and a bunch of them are novels. However, *The Patient in Bed Number 12* is a searing account of the coronavirus pandemic.