

## The Sari Shop: A Microcosm of Society

**Dr. Neelam Bhardwaj**

Assistant Professor  
S.C.D. Govt. College  
Ludhiana

### Abstract

Rupa Bajwa is cent-percent Indian rather Amritsari and has not seen beyond Amritsar. Rupa Bajwa has roamed in the lanes and by-lanes of Amritsar only and her novel *The Sari Shop* is about Indian way of life even when dealing with rich and elite. Her description of the streets, the life styles and common people's indulgences and the glittery world of socialites, with bustling Amritsar as the backdrop, is believable. With beautiful prose and compassion for her characters, Ms Bajwa has crafted a lyrical examination of not only Indian society but also that which drives human nature at its core. The wonderful juxtaposition of Ramchand's English, mainly composed of letters between members of British Society discussing their club membership of invitations to month longer motor tours of the English country side, enhances the universality to the author's chosen microcosm. It is a testament to Ms Bajwa's talent that these stories, so rich with the everyday details of life dance of the page with exquisite details and insight. A colourful world is coaxed from the cramped ghettos, tea-stalls and shops of Amritsar with Bajwa's unpretentious writing. Her ability to animate every detail is a rare talent, and one which compliments this story well.

**Key Words:** Indian Society, Hypocrisy, Reality, Characters, Upper Strata, Lower Strata

## The Sari Shop: A Microcosm of Society

**Dr. Neelam Bhardwaj**  
Assistant Professor  
S.C.D. Govt. College  
Ludhiana

Novels about India are typically described as lush, sweeping and exotic but there is another perhaps trivial tradition. Writers such as R. K. Narayan or Manish Suri, who observe the everyday world of unremarkable people, have more in common with Jane Austen than with the Bollywood extravaganza. Rupa Bajwa joins this illustrious company of Indian miniaturists with her debut novel *The Sari Shop* as this novel is ranked with increasingly popular South Asian Fiction. She belongs to the new generation of novelist who grapple with urgent social issues as well as the hidden psychic forces in a bold manner and through bold daring narrative techniques. Being an Indian and a Punjabi girl at that Rupa Bajwa has handled Indian life and situations in her novel as deftly as if it is her first nature. All the incidents, circumstances and characters are undoubtedly Indian. From the beginning to the end the whole of the novel is strewn with Indianness and serves as microcosm of Indian Society. This is the kind of book which can be read cover, without a pause setting it aside, impressed but discontent, hoping that Ramchand had come away with something more.

*The Sari Shop* is a realistic work that holds a mirror to society and ultimately to all of us who comprise that society. Bajwa dramatically illustrates the class gap in the contemporary India in this novel, focusing on her home town and the class dynamics of India. The novel opens with Ramchand, a lowly and disaffected clerk in a popular sari shop, going about his shop's mostly upper-class clients. One is reminded of the typical existential protagonist whose efforts and endeavours almost always end in futility and he has to ultimately compromise with the situation. And in Ramchand's case the visit to Kapoor House excites his imagination enough to revive his childhood dreams but the cruel realities of life prove too powerful for him to confront and defy.

Most of the characterization is based on easily recognizable types we see in our day-to-day life. The shop owner of Sewak Sari Shop has no other work except counting money with his thick stubby fingers and expecting for more money in a greedy manner. And Shilpa, the daughter of the shop-owner, is a college left out. She is always with the dream of her would-be prince charming and the wonderful marriage her parents would arrange for her. On the contrary, Rina Kapoor, the daughter of Amritsar's biggest industrialist, chooses for her an army officer and wants a love marriage. The character of Ramchand is very nicely sketched. From the beginning of the novel, he begins to open his eyes to different levels of human society. He is fully aware of the reality that every coin has two sides. As he comes across the most influential family of Amritsar the Kapoors, he is forced to confront the other side of the society when Kamla and her husband Chander narrate him the heinous crime meted to her. The almost matter of fact way in which the heinous act is narrated becomes a foil for Kamla's piteous cry, "He did this with a lathi because I kicked him in the stomach" (Bajwa 94). Later, an extract from an essay on the police which Ramchand is struggling to read ironically tells him: "A policeman is a very useful and important public servant... he guards our life and property" (Bajwa 98).

Domestic violence among the lower strata of society is taken to be something for granted. This is poignantly illustrated by Bajwa in the following passage:

He came late, even more drunk than usual. She told him everything gulping to steady her voice—a voice that did not breakdown once, though it trembled often. She longed to cry on his shoulder and he would comfort her....he did not mention her miscarriage. Instead he rambled on in a slurred voice about how they would soon be on the streets (Bajwa156).

Marriages in India are contrasting in nature and opulence depending upon the financial position of the persons concerned. The marriage of Kamla and Chander is an excellent example of a poor marriage:

Yellow, sweet laddus piled into neat pyramids on steel plates, being offered to gaudily dressed guests, being stolen by the children in the neighborhood ..... given

to god as offerings and being packed in red card board boxes to be given away to relatives.... Kamla was dressed in red; examining her henna-decorated palms....there was a smell of the laddus everywhere in the air of the house (Bajwa 148).

On the other hand, the marriage of Rina Kapoor, daughter of an influential businessman is described very minutely by the novelist. The grandeur and opulence that go with marriages of the rich in India can be very well visualized from the following passage:

And so it came about that Ramchand ended up enjoying Rina Kapoor's wedding thoroughly....Head of the wedding procession there were widely dancing relatives, then came the groom on his horse with a little decorated silk umbrella over his head.....The guests were offered delicacies on silver platters....Ramchand was mystified...What one did with these beautiful folded papers (Bajwa 129).

The status of the modern Indian has improved a lot since a few decades. He tries to live in style trying to ape the standard of living of his western counterpart. With the abundance of money even if it is by unfair means, upper middle class of society lives a life of style. We get a peep into the household of Mrs. Gupta, Mrs. Bhandari and Ms. Rina Kapoor:

After a minute to two, a surly looking maid in a mauve sari opened the door and ushered Ramchand into a big room with grand looking sofas lining the walls and glass topped table in the middle. A thick blue carpet... painting and brass antiques hanging on the walls (Bajwa 61).

However, much India advances the lifestyle of the poor remains in a deplorable state even today. The poverty and squalor in which Ramchand leads his life in a tiny apartment is splendidly described by Bajwa in the following manner:

He had a saucepan, two steel plates, two steel tumblers, a few spoons, a ladle and a knife...his cot was by the front window. By the back window....he had placed

his trunk and covered with a piece of cloth. He would often sit on the trunk... he looked around at the messy, neglected room. This was his world, He thought in disgust. No wonder his life was such a pothole. Shop, room,shop, room,shop, room (Bajwa 74).

Bajwa in a humorous aside also parodies novelists who romanticize India. Rina Kapoor finds inspiration in Ramchand's antics to write a novel with all the stock 'exotic' features – a village girl with almond-shaped, kohl-lined eyes and an old Sadhu who helps a young man called Sitaram win her hand with the help of magic herbs.

In the crowded lanes and by-lanes of Amritsar city, fights are a common and everyday occurrence. No one can escape them and no description of life of Amritsar can be complete without a special mention of these petty street fights. These street fights represent India in its most original form:

The other woman had a firm and hand clasped on the tap. She shouted back, you don't have to act as if you are a clean Brahmin or something. You throw your garbage all over the street. The two women were screaming at the top of their lungs now. At least my husband does not bow to other women. I also know lots of things about your household, so you keep your filthy mouth shut (Bajwa 180).

The bridal gown of Rina Kapoor, her lehnga, its colour and hue, its embroidery, her jewelry have been given a very minute description by Bajwa giving us an insight for detail. The way Indian brides are bedecked on their wedding night gets a beautiful description in the following lines:

Rina was, indeed, looking different from most brides. The lehnga she wore was...designed especially for her by a famous fashion designer based in Bombay....the designer had delicately incorporated silk, net, brocade and real gold thread.... She wore a single hand crafted gold necklace, exquisitely made and beautifully embellished with rubies and diamonds. Matching earrings... a

matching tikka... hair parting, is lighting up her forehead. Expensive kaleere hung from the chooda that was made of real ivory. Two days ago, a Rajasthanimehndiwalihad made a lovely henna design on her hands.... feet and ankles with the same design ...of flowers, peacocks, leaves, palanquins and other motives (Bajwa127).

For Ramchand and his co-workers, Hindi films are the only source of entertainment and escape. They occasionally frequent cinemas even if it is to watch a re-run of a successful movie. The novel is rife with mention of popular film heroes from Sunny Deol to Anil Kapoor to Hritik Roshan. Ramchand and the other shop assistant always go for a movie on Sundays:

Ramchand wavered for moment and then remembered all his virtuous resolutions. Also, he knew most Sunny Deol's films were very violent. 'No, no, both of you go for Gaddar and meet me outside Sangam for Kaho Na Pyar Hai, Okay? I will just watch that one.' 'Okay', Hari said 'you are sure? Gaddar is bit hit, and you have already seen Kaho Na PyarHai once' (Bajwa 95)

The marriage of convenience and the dowry system still exist rampantly in the Indian society. Not only the poor but the rich are inflicted by this dreadful disease. Even the rich and influential Mrs. Bhandari is not averse to accepting dowry in disguise as gifts such as an expensive car and other things from her daughter-in-law Shilpa's parents. Giving and receiving dowry has been glorified as a status symbol by Bajwa in the following lines:

Shilpa's parents had given Tarun a white Opel Astra, and had got an interior decorator to do up the couple's bedroom at their own expense. The decorator had done it up in the latest fashion, copied from a magazine, in cream and pale pistachio green. The bedspread and the curtains were also in the same colours. Wall to wall carpeting, a luxurious sofa with the cream and green coloured cushions and a wrought iron table with a glass top completed the décor (Bajwa, 163).

Even in the twenty first century India, sons are considered necessary for continuing the family. The preference of a male child over a female is poignantly depicted by Bajwa:

Shilpa fervently hoped it would be a boy. That would forever consolidate her position in the family....Shilpa went into a reverie. How did one behave when expecting a child... she had enough female cousins to know that.... in her parents' family, they had the Godbharai ceremony. She wondered if they would have it here. If they did, then she did get new clothes, a couple of jewellery sets, it had to be a boy that would make things a lot easier for her, she did not want a daughter(Bajwa,167)

Ramchand works in a shop which deals not only in saris but also stocks chunnis. The length in which the length, width, colours and embroidery of chunnis is dealt with is possible only through a pen whose writer has lived all her life the Indian (Punjabi) way:

All of them were two and a half meters in length... no well-dressed sardaarni liked a chunni shorter or narrower than that; they thought those kind of chunnis were for Hindu women or for very young girls..... There were pure chiffon chunnis, ....gold edged bridal odhnis in red, pink and maroon....there were the colourful ones embroidered with traditional phulkari work (Bajwa 9).

The habit of bargaining or haggling over prices even by the well-to-do is another habit that is typically Indian:

And in every case, there would be the bargaining-the gentle bargaining that regular customers did,...the loud haggling that aggressive women did out of sheer habit ... the coaxing, cajoling kind of bargaining that inexperienced customers indulged ....it happened in different forms but it always happened (Bajwa65-66).

We find a colourful description of saris, the traditional costume of Indian. All kind of saris can be found in the Sewak Sari House. The ritual of buying a sari is used to give an insight to the female psyche:

Packed from shelf to shelf with crisp Bangladeshi cottons, dazzling kanjeevarams, Banaras silks, chiffons, crepes and satins...it was because of the hues success...that Sewak Sari House had been known for decades as the best sari shop in the Amritsar (Bajwa 5).

Shopping is a passion for most women they can go on shopping for hours at length without getting tired. While shopping for saris, women gossip relentlessly and mercilessly. The conversations may occur between women within the shop. Ramchand and his colleagues expect the quick barbs and insults uttered about a woman immediately upon her exit by those left behind. But appearances are maintained civility extended shopping for sari:

I am such a lucky woman. I know I should also try to do something for others. I was talking to Mrs. Bhandari, and she really encouraged me to do something for the poor. .. I sometimes feel she is a little snooty, may be because her English is so good....'. 'Oh, who cares?' Mrs. Sandhu said, beginning to examine a beautiful pale yellow sari with a tasseled border (Bajwa 26).

The obsession of Indians with the English language and how it has become a yardstick to judge a person's knowledge and place in society is satirized brilliantly by Bajwa. The English conversations about wealth, intellect and self expression, Ramchand overhears while in the Kapoor house plant the seeds of change and he is motivated to alter his life in deeply significant ways. He glimpses a new world full of possibility. He wants to better himself by attempting to learn English with *The Complete Letter Writer* and *Radiant Essays for School Children* and by memorizing every word of *English Dictionary*. In all his efforts to educate himself from the dictionary and the books he brought to learn English was his wish to understand people and so, armed with a second-hand English Grammar Book and a battered Oxford Dictionary, a fresh pair of socks and a bar of Lifebuoy Soap Ramchand attempts to realize the dream that his childhood



promised. But soon these efforts turn his life upside down, bringing him face to face with the cruel reality of his very existence.

To sum-up, we can say that *The Sari Shop* meticulously examines Indian society through the tight lens of the Sewak Sari Shop in Amritsar, India. Bajwa's understanding of the human situation is reflected in her choice of Ramchand, a male narrator, a salesman in a sari shop. Thus, just as a monsoon cleanses the stagnant air, Ramchand's confrontation with the reality of Indian society is equally explosive. Ramchand becomes an everyman for anyone who cannot comprehend the complicated interaction within his or her society or who did not want to face the injustice of life. Thus, dealing with all levels of society and different cultures, Bajwa shows life's humour and brutality, its whimsy harshness, its delicate emotions and passionate commitments.

### **Works Cited**

Bajwa, Rupa. *The Sari Shop*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2004. Print.

Gokak, V.K. *Indian Literature*. New Delhi: Jain Publisher, 1990. Print.

Evans, Mary. *Introducing Contemporary Feminist Thought*. Cambridge:

Kaur, Rupinder. "The Stuff of Human Life: Rupa Bajwa's *The Sari Shop*". *Humanism in Indian English Fiction*. Edited by Anand, T.S. New Delhi: Creative Books, 2005. Print.

<<http://www.wwnorton.com/rgguides/sarishop.rgg.html>>25-3-05

<<http://powells.com/cgi-bin/biblio?inkey=1-0393059227>>25-3-05

<<http://archive.tehelka.com/storymain.asp?filename=hub031304review.asp>>12-06-16