

*Research*

**FAMILY AND CULTURE AS ENDEMIC  
DETERANTS TILTING THE GENDER  
EQUILIBRIUM –  
THE CASE OF AJAY MOHAN JAIN’S  
NOVEL “NOTHING CAN BE AS CRAZY...”<sup>1)</sup>**

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**Abstract.** Identity politics and a politics of culture have largely preempted South Asian literary studies since the days of post-colonial theory. While proactive attitudes to development have substantiated the conventional modes of thinking responsible for shaping the contemporary Indian society, the history of the subcontinent has been contoured by visions of nativism in turn formed by the cultural ethos of the land. As the new nation matured, the earliest national leaders along with Mahatma Gandhi worked hard at creating an environment of cosmopolitan liberalism. Today, with intrepid globalization, the South Asian community and more closely, the Indian psyche has acquired an interface of healthy multiculturalism, which in its turn has evolved out of an assertive attitude of political correctness. All this has grown over a period of time and the Indian society has assumed identities compatible with

its consciousness; as that of nationalism, multiculturalism, cosmopolitan liberalism and religious secularism. Spatial boundaries within the nation often determined the typical nature of the identity. My attempt will be to study Ajay Mohan Jain's, "Nothing can be as crazy..." in the light of the above hypothesis.

*Keywords:* cosmopolitan liberalism, healthy multiculturalism, identity politics, issues of 'identity' compatible with one's consciousness, gender bias

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Identity politics and a politics of culture have largely preempted South Asian literary studies since the days of post-colonial theory. While proactive attitudes to development have substantiated the conventional modes of thinking responsible for shaping the contemporary Indian society, the history of the subcontinent has been contoured by visions of nativism in turn formed by the cultural ethos of the land. As the new nation matured, the earliest national leaders along with Mahatma Gandhi worked hard at creating an environment of cosmopolitan liberalism. Today, with intrepid globalization, the South Asian community and more closely, the Indian psyche has acquired an interface of healthy multiculturalism, which in its turn has evolved out of an assertive attitude of political correctness. All this has grown over a period of time and the Indian society has assumed identities compatible with its consciousness as that of nationalism, multiculturalism, cosmopolitan liberalism and religious secularism. Spatial boundaries within the nation often determined the typical nature of the identity. As these identities assumed dimensions, often as a result of foregrounding efforts on the part of activists, hegemonic<sup>2)</sup> powers were also romancing notions of a culture code or ethos that was endemic to family traditions. As ideologies developed and the world moved ahead, several factors prompted the Indian psyche to internalize cultural domination both through 'consent as much as coercion.'<sup>3)</sup> Where multiculturalism became the

reigning ideology, hegemonic powers continued with the monoculture of their own ways of life (social, religious, political, economic, etc).<sup>4)</sup> The way a given collectivity lives, the way it performs its normal chores like eating, drinking, sleeping, walking, etc are all influenced by its culture. Within this given collectivity there is a 'subaltern'<sup>5)</sup> that squeaks in an attempt to be heard and it is in its vindication that a status quo is achieved.

This 'subaltern' and marginalized group is, unfortunately for the progressive society, Shakespeare's 'weaker sex': the women mainly. Even today, despite the strides taken by women in capturing major areas of economic power positions and intellectual discourse, societal human mechanism attributes social power and authority to men with women still remaining the coerced, the cowed and the supposedly condescending lot. All this, despite the fact that Adam and Eve were co-equals in Paradise and where the anthropologists' claim of the sustainability and progression of the human race has been credited to the co-existence of the genders as two sides of the same coin. While both are equal partners in sustenance, historical practices have shown strong evidence of masculine hegemony responsible for the gender bias. Culture is a very important construct that impacts differences in gender. Different social roles attributed in some societies to men and women create differences in the expression of emotions. From this also accrues a difference in the power quotient of men and women in world demographics. The philosopher Simone de Beauvoir said: "One is not born a woman, one becomes one."<sup>6)</sup> Gender is a physical concept, a concept that refers "to the social and cultural constructions of masculinities and femininities, not to the state of being male or female in its entirety."<sup>7)</sup> It is the construct of the 'family' and 'culture' that generates this awareness in the Indian context. Gender-bias is the unhealthy offshoot of the conduit of this culture. Aggressive feminism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and still further into the second half of the twentieth century sought to address issues of gender inequality and fought for

women's rights. But today, gender issues are not scripted by extremists to fan combustible issues. Women today accept their feminism with a pride and a consciousness that their 'existential' being is of paramount significance. They also accept notional generic differences like colour, ethnicity, etc. The global woman today believes in her capability in finding her own way to create an individual identity for herself.

Cultural practices rooted in history are difficult to give up. In India, 'feminism' as an ideology is practically non-existent. While demographers have listed powerful matriarchal societies, there are also patriarchal societies where the picture of 'woman' as a glorified and powerful embodiment is accommodated into life through religion. "Historical circumstances and values in India make women's issues different from the western feminist rhetoric."<sup>8)</sup> "While in the West the notion of "self" rests in competitive individualism where people are described as "born free yet everywhere in chains", by contrast in India the individual is usually considered to be just one part of the larger social collective, dependent for its survival upon cooperation and self-denial for the greater good."<sup>8)</sup> Women in India are inexplicably bound with their cultural heritage, which has assigned specific 'spaces' to them, traditionally called "cultural spaces".

"Indian women negotiate survival through an array of oppressive patriarchal family structures: age, ordinal status, relationship to men through family of origin, marriage and procreation as well as patriarchal attributes - dowry, siring sons, kinship, caste, community, village, market and the state. It should however be noted that several communities in India, such as the Nairs of Kerala, certain Maratha clans, and Bengali families exhibit matriarchal tendencies, with the head of the family being the oldest woman rather than the oldest man. Sikh culture is also regarded as relatively gender-neutral."<sup>8)</sup>

Fortunately the ‘modern’ urban Indian woman, who is no longer the conventional ‘woman’ looking after the home and the hearth, but a multi-tasking, multi-faceted conscious identity, is not inclined to grapple with issues of aggressive feminism. Rather, she has succeeded in the construction of an Indian womanhood that has an equitable role in existential philosophy. With independence and post-colonialism, with globalization and the newly available international intellectual nourishment that she has (thanks to the international degrees that are available to her and thanks also to the burst of information available through the internet), feminism in India today, is a panegyric to her new status and contribution to Indian society. Notwithstanding her new role of an equal contributor, she balances a tight rope walk between economic freedom and domestic responsibilities and liabilities that still remain her functionaries. Unfortunately for her, the Indian Constitution also refers to women as the ‘weaker section of the population’ and ‘therefore requires adequate assistance to function as equals’. This certainly serves as a backlash in the face of achievers like Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, Kiran Bedi, and Nirupama Rao and innumerable others who have overridden hurdles related to sexist attitudes to create a niche for themselves.

Culture and family traditions that are endemic to the Indian psyche cause a flexing of the gender balance often resulting in unpleasantness caused by the disequilibrium. Traditions and customs have been a huge part of India and its people for hundreds of years. “Religious laws and expectations, or “personal laws” enumerated by each specific religion, often conflict with the Indian Constitution, eliminating rights and powers women legally should have. Despite these crossovers in legality, the Indian government does not interfere with religion and the personal laws they hold.<sup>9)</sup>

“Religions like Hinduism, call for women to be faithful servants to God and their husbands. They have a term called *pativrata* that describes a wife who has accepted service and devotion to her husband

and her family as her ultimate religion and duty. Indian society is highly composed of hierarchical systems within families and communities...When hierarchies emerge within the family based on social convention and economic need, girls in poorer families suffer twice the impact of vulnerability and stability. From birth, girls are automatically entitled to less; from playtime, to food, to education, girls can expect to always be entitled to less than their brothers. Girls also have less access to their family's income and assets, which is exacerbated among poor, rural Indian families. From the start, it is understood that females will be burdened with strenuous work and exhausting responsibilities for the rest of their lives, always with little to no compensation or recognition.<sup>10)</sup>

In the patriarchal families in India, “males as fathers or husbands are assumed to be in charge and the official heads of household. The descent and inheritance are traced through the male line, known as a matrilineal system, and they are generally in control of the distribution of family resources.”<sup>8)</sup> “These traditions and ways of Indian life have been in effect for so long, that this type of lifestyle is what women expect and are accustomed to. Indian women do not take full advantage of their constitutional rights because they are not properly aware or informed of them.”<sup>11)</sup>

Ajay Mohan Jain's<sup>12)</sup> maiden novel, “Nothing can be as crazy...” is

“A masterful first novel; the book compares to the ‘speaking tree’ that encourages looking within. Family history unfolds social history in an interesting trajectory. Ajay deftly illustrates how Suresh's life intersects with society's events... He takes the reader on an emotional journey into how family and traditions define individual choices in

life. It's a fast read, but its deeper meaning resonates long after the last page."<sup>13)</sup>

These are some of the factors that contribute to the novel being listed as a best seller. But underlying the novel's claim of addressing the problems of debutante officers caught in the mushy whirlwind of officialdom, inadvertently, the novel spills the beans on the dichotomy as far as attitudes towards gender are concerned. The novel is a study in clinical approaches to human behavioral patterns, patterns that man is slave to, irrespective of all claims to there being a paradigm shift in his attitude to an egalitarian view of 'man-woman' specific relations. The protagonist of the novel is party to all the desires, lusts and fantasies that the modern man is heir to, to all the voyeurisms of the contemporary 'global Indian' male. But this so called modern Indian man who has suddenly discovered virtual 'independence' for the first time, is the atypical middle class Indian male, who grants sanctions for voyeurisms, as prerogatives meant only for men; has a conservative mind in a world in transition, a prude in a discovery mode in a metro. Perhaps it is this dichotomy that causes the unmaking of the protagonist in the public sphere. And his misogynist orientation proved the proverbial icing on the cake.

The novel opens with the highly qualified Suresh travelling to Hyderabad, to join the bank's training academy. The journey<sup>1)</sup> (pp. 3-7) is a rediscovery of his gregarious skills as he meets co-probationers who are also proceeding to the bank's staff training academy for the orientation programme. Suresh also learns to experience the pleasures of independence, of being able to breathe freely without the added baggage of 'studies' that had trailed him until then.<sup>1)</sup> He mingles with his colleagues and here begins the training of officers for whom work is mixed with pleasure. Though Suresh is a highly qualified technical graduate from one of the best engineering schools in the country, the ubiquitous constructs of 'family' and 'culture' that give every

individual a sense of belonging to a collective and so are positive constructs in developing a sound personality, are damaging constructs when they overwhelm, as perceived in the case of the protagonist, Suresh. In the case of Suresh, both these constructs subscribe to the theory, which sees gender as socially constructed; which probably had Simone de Beauvoir comment; ‘One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.’<sup>6)</sup>

“Psychoanalytical feminists believe that gender inequality comes from early childhood experiences, which lead men to believe themselves to be masculine, and women to believe themselves feminine. It is further maintained that gender leads to a social system that is dominated by males, which in turn influences the individual psycho-sexual development.”<sup>14)</sup>

They have embedded in his psyche notions of a strong man-woman divide; implying that as they are physiologically different it follows that there ought to be a biological basis for attributing differences that determine lifestyles, rights and responsibilities. Most male characters including the hero have been nurtured in the socio-cultural concept of the distinctive role of both the sexes in a family and their role in the expression and transfer of culture.

Suresh meets Phillipose in the train and interacts with him casually. They both are happy as they ‘discover’ another probationer, Monalika, who boards their train at Bhopal. But his social skills are restricted when he interacts with Monalika in the train. Here is a man who had never opened up, never genuinely socialized. As the three-some converse with each other, Suresh is ‘conscious’ of his mind wandering along a different path altogether.



“As she was spelling out her background, I was already busy scanning her figure. She was a bit heavy on the hips, but her height covered up for that, giving the impression of an evenly figured body.”<sup>1)</sup>

Circumstances so develop that place Suresh in juxtaposition with men of different temperaments and more importantly he has his first brush with women outside his home. Again (it is perhaps the way he has been brought up that brings out) his manly high-handedness, though subtle, is explicit nevertheless, at the end of the first chapter: ‘All Roads Lead to Hyderabad’, where, as an afterthought as an aside he writes:

“...This happens often with me and that is why I never say unless asked, that I am an IITian. I don’t know why but people start looking at you differently.”

Suresh is on a high and finds him drawing closer to a lady colleague. His predicament can be compared to the Duke in Shakespeare’s ‘Twelfth Night’, who, when ‘feeling’ he is in love, says: “If music be the food of love play on. Give me excess of it” and Suresh too begins to have this excess until his chauvinism gets the better of him. Artfully he contrives to have him and Monalika travel by train and further arranges to have a two-berth coupe for that ‘extra’ closeness and the excess of the ‘food of love’; but at the same time the thought of losing his manful ways in the company of his macho friends worries him.

“So far so good, but many thoughts were crowding my mind. I was worried about losing my ‘stag group’ in the process of getting closer to Monalika. Female company was enticing, but the stag sessions had their own charm”<sup>1)</sup> (p. 21).

Referring to a lady outside the family as 'female' in a strictly biological sense causes a gender divide in favour of androcy. It also restricts the underlying purpose of human behaviour for promoting social ties as those based solely for purposes of cohabitation with consent or with coercion and so anti-feministic. Ajay Mohan Jain takes his characters (men) on several sorties and pleasure rides afforded to them by women and all along it is the word 'female' (pp. 36, 37, etc) that is repeatedly used. His protagonist Suresh is a machist in part I of the novel called - Crazy Days; surely his bible on machismo. Suresh's encounters in 'The Ultimate Journey (pp. 53-68), 'Flights of Fantasies' (pp. 69-75), 'Exploring Cal' (pp. 94-106) and 'In Search Of...' (pp. 107-114) are all tales that epitomize the hyper-masculine alpha male, who adopts a socially and physically dominating mien, imposing his will upon his environment.

Life moves on and Suresh gets his first posting in the bank. Through the novel there is a quest for 'identity' that dogs Suresh. 'Who Am I', pp. 80-86 deals with the complexities generated by identity issues. The author narrates the tale about the birth and the early upbringing of his hero. The hero appears obsessed with his 'identity'; assumes he has an identity that is both complex (p. 85) and 'special' in the family. Such assumptions often jeopardize a man's social skills. He is then either a loner in life or his 'attitude' sours his relations with people. He faces stiff flak as his mind struggles to experience a permissible encounter with the bold and 'liberated' colleague Monalika. Monalika's upbringing has been vastly different from that of the protagonist. Her boldness is taken for a ride by the writer who is brought up to believe that feminism is a synonym for discipline, docility, coyness, womanliness and muliebrity and that there is a power hierarchy which puts the 'man' before the 'woman' who is eternally subservient to the man.<sup>15)</sup> This attitude is the reason that creates the rift between him and Monalika. His desires con-

cerning Monalika remain unrealized and the entire episode, a case of grapes turning sour. His behaviour with her and other women reveals his underlying belief that "Women are less than shallow"<sup>16)</sup> Like Weininger, who says, "No men who really think deeply about women retain a high opinion of them; men either despise women or they have never thought seriously about them."<sup>17)</sup>

In due course Suresh meets a 'homely self-respecting' girl, Malini and is married. Malini, much to the author's disbelief, is a strong woman who has partially achieved what maturity has equipped her with; the ability to tame an alpha-male. There are however, occasions when he succeeds in conveying to Malini that life will follow his dictum. Destiny has a lot of drama in store for the banker. The novel spills a lot of beans about the working of banks, the approach of the officers, red-tapism and several gory details. The novel interestingly shows a drama in his professional life that corresponds to a growing drama in his personal life. The paper ethically attempts to resurrect the idea to the protagonist (or the author) that the subalterns (women in this case) have their own politics, their own lifestyles and preferences beside a satisfaction of their biological needs as distinct as those of men and that there is nothing morally, socially or culturally wrong with accepting this idea. Critical research has shown that everyday meanings and practices in life are governed by the culture and the influence of family as in the case of Ajay Mohan Jain's 'Nothing can be as crazy...'

#### NOTES:

1. Jain, A.M. (2009). *Nothing can be as crazy...* Delhi: Rupa & Co.
2. "Leadership" or "hegemon" for "leader" is the political, economic, ideological or cultural power exerted by a dominant group over other groups, regardless of the explicit consent of the latter:  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hegemony>

3. Sociologist Scott Lash has recently put the idea that cultural studies are entering a new phase. Arguing that the political and economic milieu has fundamentally altered from that of the 1970s, he writes, "I want to suggest that power now... is largely *post-hegemonic*... Hegemony was the concept that de facto crystallized cultural studies as a discipline. Hegemony means domination through consent as much as coercion. It has meant domination through ideology or discourse..." In response, however, Richard Johnson argues that Lash appears to have misunderstood the most basic concept of the discipline. 'Hegemony', even in the writings of Antonio Gramsci, is not understood as a mode of domination at all, but as a form of political leadership which involves a complex set of relationships between various groups and individuals and which always proceeds from the immanence of power to all social relations. This complex understanding has been taken much further in the work of Stuart Hall and that of political theorist Ernesto Laclau, who has had some influence on Cultural Studies: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural\\_studies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_studies)
4. Pearson, Noel. "Radical hope: education and equality in Australia" *The Free Library* 01 September 2009. 24 August 2011 <[http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Radical hope: education and equality in Australia.-a0209795324](http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Radical+hope:+education+and+equality+in+Australia.-a0209795324): 'Plural monoculturalism occurs where a policy of multiculturalism promotes culture as the dominant singular affiliation and ends up in a situation where there is a plurality of monocultures.'
5. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subaltern> (The term subaltern is used in postcolonial theory. The exact meaning of the term in current philosophical and critical usage is disputed. Some thinkers use it in a general sense to refer to marginalized groups and the lower classes - a person rendered without agency by his or her social status. Others, such as Gayatri

Chakravorty Spivak use it in a more specific sense. She argues that subaltern is not: “just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie...In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern - a space of difference. Now who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It is not subaltern...Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus, they don't need the word ‘subaltern’...They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern.”)

6. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley. New York: Vintage Books, 1989. [Book II begins with Beauvoir’s most famous assertion, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” By this, Beauvoir means to destroy the essentialism, which claims that women are born “feminine” (according to whatever the culture and time define it to be) but are rather constructed to be such through social indoctrination.]
7. Garrett, S. (1992). *Gender*, p. vii.
8. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminism\\_in\\_India](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminism_in_India)
9. Narain, V. (2008). *Reclaiming the nation: Muslim women and the law in India*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
10. Bhatt, E.R. *We are poor but so many: the story of self-employed women in India*. New York: Oxford University Press.
11. Chaudhuri, M. (2005). *Feminism in India issues in contemporary Indian feminism*. New York: Zed Books.
12. Ajay Mohan Jain (a B.Tech. from I.I.T. Kanpur and trained at I.I.M. Ahmadabad, he worked with a leading commercial bank of the country where he got the opportunity to see life very closely through various

phases and at various places all over India. The entire revelation was so compelling that he 'dropped-out' to pen these down)-  
<http://www.ajaymohanjain.com/about.php>-

13. <http://www.ajaymohanjain.com/comments.php>
14. Chodorow, N. (1989). *Feminism and psychoanalytic theory*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
15. <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Alpha+%28biology%29>  
(In the power hierarchy of the human group, two other roles also are defined and named. First, the *beta* ( $\beta$ ) male or female, which is the contender, subservient to the alpha male or female, but only after testing. The *betas* act as second-in-command and can either be dethroned *alpha* ( $\alpha$ ) male or females or future alphas if they persist in challenging the regnant alpha male or female. The term *omega* ( $\omega$ ) is an antonym often used in a deprecating or self-deprecating manner to refer to member at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The omega is subservient to all members).
16. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Misogyny>
17. <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Masogyny>

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