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**LOVE, MOTHERHOOD AND NATIONALISM: RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN
WOMEN'S PREDICAMENTS IN AJAY KAMALAKARAN'S *A WEEK IN THE
LIFE OF SVITLANA***

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Abstract:

A Week in the Life of Svitlana, the second novel by the Indo-Russian writer and novelist Ajay Kamalakaran, depicts a week-long journey of Svitlana Khristenko, a single mother, in modern-day Moscow, as she handles various roles while holding her sharp political sensibilities in the midst of the rising tension between Russia and Ukraine. This article intends to look at the interrelated issues of love, single motherhood, nationalism and multiculturalism depicted in Kamalakaran's novel. These issues, that are important and interconnected in the contemporary Russian society, are represented by the protagonist and other women in her life and are projected as common women's predicaments in contemporary Russia. The paper also investigates how these themes contribute to the novel to become a social and historical document of contemporary Russia.

Keywords: Single Motherhood, Nationalism, Multiculturalism, Racism, Russia, Ukraine, etc.

The discourses of gender, nationalism and multiculturalism play crucial parts in the contemporary Russian fiction as they are intensely embedded in the socio-political environment after the collapse of the USSR. As social beings, the authors cannot disregard these discourses and their predispositions and attitudes concerning the social, political and cultural propensities. Nila Shah comments that during the periods of important changes, the authors have a tendency to produce a literature of crisis (Shah, 19). The authors' responses affect and shape their representations of the present and are liable to produce literatures of predicament throughout the phases of historic changes.

Ajay Kamalakaran is an international writer and journalist, who has roots in India. He shows a special concern in Russia and the former Soviet Union. His fictional works include *Globetrotting for Love and Other Stories from Sakhalin Island* (2017), and *A Week in the Life of Svitlana* (2019). He also co-authored a book *A New Era: India-Russia Ties in 21st Century* with three other writers. *A Week in the Life of Svitlana* pictures a week-long journey of Svitlana Khristenko, a single mother, in modern-day Moscow, as she manages various roles while holding her sharp political sensibilities in the midst of the mounting tension between Russia and Ukraine. This paper aims to explore the major themes that are personal and universal—issues of love, single motherhood, nationalism and multiculturalism—that are important and interconnected in the contemporary Russian society, depicted in Kamalakaran's second novel *A Week in the Life of Svitlana*. These concerns, represented by the protagonist and other women in her life, are projected as the predicaments of common women in contemporary Russia. This article also inspects how these themes contribute to the novel to become a social and historical document of contemporary Russia.

Svitlana, the protagonist of the novel, is a 35-year old Ukrainian woman who has dual Russian-Ukrainian citizenship. She resides in Moscow in spite of her conflicting loyalties to her motherland



and foster land. Svitlana, who lives in the residential area of southern Moscow, always takes great pride in her Ukrainian heritage, criticizes the Russian government for its anti-Ukraine policies, and identifies herself closely with Europe. Her four-year old daughter Nelle, her friend Veronica and her mother in Ukraine form emotional relationships in her life. Others who come to her life include her second husband Danil who is Nelle's father, her new Chechen lover Marat, and her boss Misha who runs a watch boutique. There are frequent references to her first husband Ahmed, a Chechen Muslim who married her when she was 22. The novel also mentions some of Svitlana's friends and some women she meets during her travels around the city.

Being a single mother in post-USSR Russia is hard to manage since women do not receive either financial stability or social inclusiveness in the Russian society when compared to their male counterparts. Kamalakaran speaks about this issue in an interview given to *Firstpost*:

Despite the fact that several decades of socialism helped make the country a much better place for women, Russia is still largely a patriarchal society. Women bear the lion's share of responsibilities when it comes to parenting. Being a single mother is all the more difficult, if there is little support from the father. It is also a bit more difficult for a single mother to find a life partner. On top of that, a problem unique to Russia is that there are more women than men, making the dating and relationship game a lot more difficult for the fairer sex (Kamalakaran).

Svitlana, the protagonist, has not been offered a job that suits her degree and hence she is forced to work in a watch boutique in order to lead her life with her daughter. The protagonist is a law graduate, but she hasn't tried a second attempt in legal profession after a failed internship with a senior lawyer. She at times thinks about working under an advocate but she cannot suffer the massive pay cut while undertaking an internship since she lives with her daughter. Her identities as a woman and as a single parent are hindrances in such a profession.

Svitlana has divorced Ahmed and Danil for different reasons. Ahmed's over-possessiveness and stringent Islamic codes of life suffocated her, and she wanted to be free from such a marital life. On the other hand, Danil, a half ethnic Tatar and half Russian, has "a history of hooliganism and reckless behaviour" (Kamalakaran, *AWLS*, 27) and wants to live in Svitlana's home at her expense. Danil's irresponsibility and lack of discipline in life compel Svitlana to put an end to the relationship. After the divorce he only gives her a monthly allowance of three thousand rubles as child support which does not account for even a fifth of Nelle's expenses. Nelle frequently wants to visit zoos, parks and museums and also wishes to attend art and music classes and the allowance given by Danil is not at all sufficient for these additional expenses apart from food and clothing. Moreover, Danil has borrowed a huge amount of money from her. In all means, marital life is totally a failure for Svitlana. Svitlana considers herself a "classic Slavic beauty" (Kamalakaran, *AWLS*, 73) until she becomes pregnant. She often tells her friends that her daughter "spoiled" (Kamalakaran, *AWLS*, 73) her beauty. This fading of charm worries her since she is afraid that she cannot attract new men to her life. The dilemmas of love and single motherhood are quite evident in her words and thoughts.

In spite of these hardships of financial struggles and lack of career advancements, Svitlana legally chooses single motherhood for a number of reasons. Her happiness lies in the fact that she is a mother and she wants to raise her daughter in the best way even though she does not receive any



support from her husband. Svitlana has not registered Danilas Nelle's father for he is not disciplined in his life and irresponsible not only to Svitlana, but also to his daughter and to himself.

Right from the time Svitlana ensured that Danil would not be registered as the baby's father, her plan was to make sure that she raised Nelle according to her values and standards. Of course, another motivation to leave the father out of the child's life was that she could move abroad with Nelle when she wanted without any kind of permission from Danil (Kamalakaran, *AWLS*, 69).

She plans to make sure that she will raise Nelle in the best way she could. Moreover, she wants that Danil will not be there as a hindrance to her or her daughter anymore in the future. Svitlana waits for a gentle, charismatic and financially stable man who respects her in all means and ready to take the role of a father figure for her daughter.

Veronica, Svitlana's friend, also struggles to stand between two men; her old lover Anatoly and the new friend Alex. She attempts to win back Anatoly who tries to avoid her for unknown reasons. She wants to recoup Anatoly "on her own terms and conditions" (Kamalakaran, *AWLS*, 65). Veronica and Svitlana once even prepare a plan to rent out a room in Veronica's flat to an Egyptian man and use him as a "tool to make Anatoly work hard to win Veronica back" (64). They discuss this idea further and Svitlana tells her to check out the Egyptian man since, as Veronica wishes that he "could just be rich, handsome and sensitive" (Kamalakaran, *AWLS*, 64). These three qualities are the hallmarks of any man for whom women in Moscow enthusiastically wait. This shows the women's predicament in Russia where they demand financial aid, love, and kindness, and at the same time fight for freedom, identity and self-reliance. The plights of both Svitlana and Veronica ironically suggest the reality faced by the women in Russia, especially in Moscow, that they simultaneously need emancipation from the patriarchal society and a man's company to lead their domestic lives. It is quite apparent that the subversion of patriarchal power relations is already contained through the depiction of the female figures' goals and aspirations in life.

The depiction of Svitlana's one-week life shows the pathetic situation of old women in Moscow where they experience severe loneliness and lack of affection and care. Svitlana confronts an old woman in the metro. There is a visible sadness in her cold blue eyes. Svitlana thinks that the woman has a tale of some sort of longing and unfulfilled desires to tell. A man in 50s who sits beside her draws a portrait of this old woman and gifted it to her. She thankfully receives the portrait telling him that this is the kindest thing anyone has done for her in several years. Svitlana meets yet another old woman who is her neighbour. She is trying to sell roses during summer. She is virtually in tears and pleading for buying something. When Svitlana asks the poor woman what has happened to her, her answer is so heart-touching. "The woman replied that almost her entire pension was being used to pay the rising utility bills, and that she hardly had any money to buy food" (Kamalakaran, *AWLS*, 75). Svitlana wonders what the oil rich state is doing to protect old women who are the most vulnerable citizens in contemporary Russia. The two instances show the plight of old women in the Russian society and the hypocrisy of the Russian government in the matter of the welfare of women.

Svitlana is a staunch critic of Soviet government for both its internal and foreign policies, especially regarding Ukraine. She possesses an emotional affiliation with Ukraine, her homeland, and is ready to make nasty arguments against the Russian occupation of Crimea, which, she firmly believes, is very much a part of Ukraine. But she is ready to set aside her feelings for Crimea when Marat, her lover, expresses a pro-Russian attitude towards Crimea. This shows her quandary and



utmost necessity to have a man in her life who can also be a father figure for her daughter. The conflict between nationalism and motherhood is quite evident.

Her problem with foreign languages, especially with English, becomes a vital issue in her career. Svitlana does not have proficiency in English and this leads her to several problems when confronting foreign clients who visit the boutique. The novelist shares Svitlana's linguistic difficulties in order to show her troublesome situation:

Many women in Svitlana's age group set their sights on foreign men, but they were armed with conversational skills in English or some other European language. Svitlana, on the other hand, had almost no time to invest in improving her linguistic skills it required too much energy and effort, and then there was the fact that she had to overcome her psychological block when it came to English (Kamalakaran, *AWLS*, 68).

She strongly objects Russia's policy on unlearning its own citizen by imposing Russian language. She once bursts out:

We're the only damn country in Europe where educated people can't speak English. . . . They did everything in the world to keep us ignorant, while boasting about how good an educational system we had. Sure car mechanics could quote Pushkin, but they couldn't even order a cup of coffee in a foreign country! The communists wanted to ensure that we wouldn't learn English so that we would have no idea what was going on in other parts of the world (Kamalakaran, *AWLS*, 36).

Her criticisms often lead people around her to tell her to leave Russia and live in her homeland, but she decries such suggestions by asserting that it is her right as a dual citizen to live in either country according to her wish. She does not want Ukraine to be like Russia since the people in the latter being, she thinks, neither Asian nor European. Being a dual citizen, Svitlana dreams of a day that Ukraine becomes a member of the European Union. She firmly believes that a referendum will definitely prove the Ukraine people's wish to join the EU instead of being a part of Russia-backed Eurasian Economic Union (Kamalakaran, *AWLS*, 51).

The novel discusses multiculturalism and the resultant racial discrimination prevalent in contemporary Russia. The metro that Svitlana travels everyday reflects the multiplicity of the new Moscow where people from every part of the world live and make diasporas. There are people from India, Sri Lanka, other European countries, Africa and the Middle East. There exist two tiers of racism; first is the native Russians' racial segregation towards Ukraine and other neighbouring countries. The second is the ethnic issues faced by Afro-Asian people who live in Russia. Regarding the second kind of racism, Svitlana often faces allegations of being a racist. She wonders at this allegation since she has friends "of every possible colour and was once married to a practicing Muslim" (Kamalakaran, *AWLS*, 38). She explains that just the fact that she criticizes Vladimir Putin does not make her a fascist, Nazi or racist.

The novel depicts the refugee crisis of the second decade of the twenty first century after the Afghan invasion of the US and the Syrian civil war. Svitlana thinks about the quotidian practice of the state-run television channels in Moscow which show images of refugees from Syria and Afghanistan crossing the Balkans and heading towards Germany and other European lands. The arrival of the



refugees, allege the extreme nationalists and the right-wing politicians in various European countries, affect the national security and peace of the continent. Svitlana once sees three tourists come from France; a woman with visible European features, an African and an Arab. Svitlana thinks deeply about the strange group: “Did that trio represent the new Europe? Were the two men who were not ethnic Europeans truly French in everything except blood? Or were they imposing their culture on France” (Kamalakaran, *AWLS*, 52)? Here, she turns out to be the typical European citizen who is skeptical about the migrants and refugees from the African and Middle Eastern countries.

Svitlana further thinks about the policy of Russia and Ukraine regarding the refugee affair that both countries firmly reject multiculturalism. The newly arrived people from other countries must speak the national language and integrate into the indigenous society. Svitlana supports this policy since, she views, the European countries that allow multiculturalism are losing their aboriginal nature gradually. She believes that “France stopped being French, and French culture was dying” (Kamalakaran, *AWLS*, 52). Her reference about an encounter between a Russian woman and some Moroccan and Algerian men which highlights the issues of clash of cultures and fundamentalist practices, is reinforced by Islamophobia and the neo-orientalist sentiments. She elucidates her stance that she respects all cultures but hates racism. Yet again, she wants every country to remain what it is and not to be infested by other countries or cultures. She wishes that Russia permits Ukraine to preserve its culture; language and tradition, there will be a good relationship between the two countries. The contemporary clash of cultures in the European lands is brilliantly depicted in the novel.

Ajay Kamalakaran presents Svitlana as a brave, resilient and forward-thinking woman who fights back and stays strong despite all the challenges she faces in life. Laila Saein, the translator of the novel, observes the protagonist: “Svitlana is the symbol of Moscow women who, despite the city's hardships, often look only at the beautiful face of life, move forward without fail, fight hard against challenges, and seek the light of life” (Kamalakaran, *AWLS*, 23). The novelist simultaneously discusses several themes such as women in the patriarchal society, political anarchy, economic crisis, struggles in exile life, loss of values, horrendous conflicts, trepidations, severe despair, emptiness in married life, and unfulfilled dreams. The novel intensely juxtaposes the basic human emotions of love and motherhood with discourses of nationalism and multiculturalism. All these themes make the fictional artifact a historical and social document of contemporary Russia.

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