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## Delineation of Indian Reality in *Raag Darbari* and *The White Tiger*

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This paper looks at two novels- Sahitya Academy Award winning *Raag Darbari* by Shrilal Shukla, originally published in Hindi in 1968 and then translated into English by Gillian Wright twenty four years later in 1992 and *The White Tiger* by Arvind Adiga which won the Man Booker Prize in 2008. A common thread that runs in both the novels is the depiction of the Indian realities of life which are sordid, shocking and frustrating without showing any sign of change and improvement. The paper intends to highlight the fact that though our country is now marching on the path of progress and development, it is enmeshed deep in corruption and the picture is unfortunately more or less the same as one moves from the rural to the urban spaces.

The locale of *Raag Darbari* is a village, Shivpalganj, somewhere in Uttar Pradesh. The novel portrays life in the village from the point of view of Rangnath, a research scholar in History, who comes to stay in the village to recuperate from illness. His uncle Vaidyaji happens to be the one who rules the village in a very subtle and covert way with the help of his sons Badri and Ruppan and his many henchmen who assist him in maintaining his control and authority on the Co-operative union, the village Council and the College. Rangnath is badly disillusioned. The image of the idyllic and peaceful life that he always associated with the village is badly mutilated and disfigured to find the unpleasant reality glaring him in the face: "The absurd and complex world of Shivpalganj which though rural is neither pastoral nor innocent" (Mukherjee150). He registers his discomfiture and disapproval of the state of affairs in the village but his voice is subdued in the din and clamour of corruption and degradation echoing in all the directions and deafening the ears. There is a character, the cripple Langar, whose entire energy is spent trying to get a copy of the documents of land from the court without paying a bribe for it. He is not only unsuccessful but also made fun of by others. Within the microcosm of the village, Shukla has created the macrocosm of the country. Born and brought up in a village and familiar with the village life, he could have easily painted the image of the countryside with the brushstrokes of a painter but what gives a new angle to his observation is his job as an administrator. His postings in many villages of U.P. provided him with an opportunity to observe the village life in terms of its socio-political reality. The picture of Post-Independence India that emerges is abhorring and disgusting to look at. The nexus between men of power creates a power structure which becomes so rigid that no amount of energy can break it. Highly sarcastic and steeped in wry humour and satire the novel describes politics at the village level in a realistic manner uncovering the picture of corruption and degradation which has taken the whole village in its sweep. The institutions of progress and empowerment have been captured by those who wield power by virtue of their caste and social status which give them a privileged position. The notion of the awakening of India into a new era of progress and prosperity after independence seems to be betrayed when one comes face to face with the grim realities of life the way they have been portrayed in the novel. Shukla believes in giving the true picture without trying to smooth down the distortions and draw a veil over the ugliness which may be too horrible to look at. He considers it the primary duty of the artist to lay bare the reality in

its naked form however shocking and unsettling it may be. According to Gillian Wright, the translator of the novel, no novel that she ever read in English “comes close to capturing life in an ordinary north Indian village, whereas the smell of the earth of Uttar Pradesh emanates from every page of *Raag Darbari*” (v).

The spirit of the nationalist movement which was intense during the struggle for freedom of India from the British yoke started gradually losing its force and by the seventies the force of the wave was entirely gone. Its ideals failed to materialise into reality. The picture of the post-colonial India proved no different from its earlier version rather it turned more disgusting and frightening. Ulka Anjaria in her essay “Satire, Literary Realism and the Indian Sate: *Six Acres and a Third* and *Raag Darbari*”, says:

While Nehru’s charismatic leadership had carried much of the excitement culminating in 1947 to the post-colonial state, ingrained in large part in the promises held out by heavy industrial development, large scale reform projects in the agriculture sector and the goal of socio-economic equality, it was increasingly clear by the 1960’s to India’s average citizens, the supposed beneficiaries of these measures, that the realities on the ground were less and less like the ideals which had served as the ideological engine of the anti-colonial movement only a few decades earlier. (4797)

Meenakshi Mukherjee in her essay “Narrating the Nation” says that the term Post-colonial should not be used for a novel like *Raag Darbari* because “the colonising ‘Other’ has assumed other forms, and is no longer the major point of reference; the conflicts are located elsewhere” (141). There are factions in the village, Shivpalganj with their own vested interests. Conspiring, backbiting and scheming people move around with their hidden sinister intentions. Vaidyaji has a crowd of yes-men and flatters around him. In the Akhara Badri wrestler, the elder son of Vaidyaji, and others practice fighting and Bhaang is ground. It is the meeting point of these men where from village issues to the world politics, everything is discussed. Nobody can challenge a wrestler because he has got a sturdy body and has the free will and robust energy to assault anyone with punches as well as invectives. The principal of the college, a flatterer of the highest degree manipulates the power and name of Vaidyaji to have his indirect control over the college. Rupan Babu, the younger son of Vaidyaji is a student leader and basks in the glory of his own power zone that he has created coupled with the authority and influence of his father. Among many hangers-on and cronies of Vaidyaji is Sanicher who is uncouth clumsy and illiterate but promoted to the position of the head of the village council. The adversaries of Vaidyaji include Ramadhin, an opium dealer and Khanna Master who is not happy with the fact that Vaidyaji continues to be the manager of the college. Another teacher, Motiram Master at the college is more interested in his flour mill than in teaching his students. The principal bosses over them as if they are not teachers but his bonded labourers. In order to be promoted one needs to please the principal who in turn will convince Vaidyaji about the merit of the aspirant really deserving the position he is seeking. And one who dares to challenge the authority of either the principal or Vaidyaji has to pay the price.

The bitter sarcasm and angst of Shukla is directed against the unhealthy mindset of the inhabitants of the village whose level of degradation and debasement has hit an all time low. The idea of ethics and morality is thrown to the wind and they have no qualm in taking pride in their wrongful deeds and the shameless exercise of offering the twisted justification of the same. The words of wisdom spoken to Master Malaviya by Gayadin, the village usurer and the vice-president of the college reflect this depravity:

Don't talk about morality, Master Sahib, someone might hear you he'll file a case against you...Morality--- consider it to be like this seat. Lying in a corner. At the time of council and society meetings it is covered with a sheet. Then it looks very fine. Speakers stand on it to deliver lectures and rebukes. It is for that purpose. (100)

Like Shukla's administrative postings in and around different rural areas gave him a new perspective to look at the political situation at the grass root level, and the misuse of the government policies of progress and development, Adiga's journalistic experiences with the *Time* allowed him to visit India and witness the dark and seamy side of realities which stand in sharp contrast to the shining and glamorous world of the globalised metropolitan cities. Although the novel got the most prestigious award i.e. the Booker prize, it could not escape the scathing criticism and condemnation from a group of critics who were not comfortable with the depiction of Indian realities that Adiga lays bare so nonchalantly. Being an expatriate writer writing about India and its problems, he faces the usual disapproval of many who accuse him of painting a distorted image of the country with which he seems to be least familiar. They believe that Adiga's account of India is no different from Naipaul's as expressed in *India: A Wounded Civilization* which paints India as a country without any ideology of regeneration despite being under foreign rule for centuries together and his *An Area of Darkness* which fails to discover any hope and light for India's underclass grappling with "rigid caste distinctions" (53) and its miserable existence with no access to the privileges of health and hygiene is reduced to the image of Indians who "defecate everywhere" (70). Adiga's eyes can explore only the murky and dismal corners which are not characteristically Indian alone but could be found in any developed country of the world. Such critics think that Adiga's portrayal of India smacks of a politics of the publishing strategy where he wants to reach his western readers with a tale from the darkness of India to cater to their taste:

Adiga aims at selling the dirty India to the western world. He is very cleverly raising the issue of Indian poverty, orthodoxy, child labour and the rivalry among the petty workers. He also focuses at the disdain of the city-born for the Arcadian folk, with the purpose of sheer publicity. (117)

According to the head of the jury of the Booker Committee, Michel Portillio, *The White Tiger* shows "dark side of India-a new territory" ( Sunday Times of India, Oct. 19, 2008). To him the dark side of India may be a new territory but to Indians this reality is not some kind of a discovery. When Indian readers go through *The White Tiger*, they are quick to identify with the realities that the novelist uncovers but at the same time an unsettling feeling of shock and disturbance grips their hearts to realise that the mirror projecting these images is in a western hand. Why should only the dark side of India be fascinating to a Jury that determines the standard of a literary work in terms of exploring some larger and significant issue related to human life from a wider perspective? This doubt on the part of Indian readers puts them on their guard against corroborating the views of the novelist and forces them to adopt the strategy of a deliberate disapproval of the work. Of course, there cannot be only one side to any story. India with its cultural and linguistic diversity has always defied a simple and straightforward portrayal of its variegated and multi-layered realities in a fictional form. The writers have to be very cautious and to have a sense of what constitutes the Indian reality. They should not give in to the pressures of the market and demands of commodification while they imagine the "imagined community" (Anderson 6), that is India and in the process disfigure it to suit the interests of a Western eye. Indian realities with the Indian ways of perceiving them should be portrayed with genuine concerns on the part of the novelists.

Adiga's *The White Tiger* has as its focus both the village life as well as life in a metro but the focus is mainly on the underclass struggling to shed their miserable existence and participate in the benefits of the modern globalised world. The story of Balram Halwai, the son of a rickshaw puller who moves from his village Luxmangarh in Bihar to Delhi to become a taxi driver and through a series of experiences that the city makes him pass through, to carve his own destiny as a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore, is deeply fascinating as it is utterly immoral. His eagerness to come out of the Darkness of his miserable existence at any cost leads him to those intricate webs of criminal alleys of the underbelly of the city which has its own code of conducts and its own lessons of practical wisdom to success and achievement in a corruption ridden atmosphere. He kills his own master to write his destiny of success and achievement. With the corruption rife in every walk of life, the country can produce only "half-baked" (10) Indians and the lessons that their circumstances teach them are the lessons of pure success- a success that has to be achieved at any cost. The idea of morality has been reduced to a commodity which can be used only to suit the interest of the individual. While in *Raag Darbari* morality has been compared to a stool which is used only on certain specific occasion, in *The White Tiger*, the protagonist Balram tries to justify his crime on the basis of his own depraved version of morality that the city has cultivated in him:

Yet even if all my chandeliers come crashing down to the floor-even if they throw me in jail and have all the other prisoners dip their beaks into me-even if they make me walk the wooden stairs to the hangman's noose- I'll never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master's throat. (320-21)

. The picture that we have of a village in *Raag Darbari* is one which does not promise any idyllic and scenic beauty to the beholder that can refresh the mind and delight the soul. On both sides of a road "women sitting in rows, talking contentedly and at the same time relieving themselves" (7) is a common sight. In Shivpalganj Police Station the Sub-Inspector sits on an old and broken chair like a king without having to do anything because "there was so much work that all work had come to a standstill!"(8). The Changamal Vidyalaya Intermediate College tries its level best to impart 'quality' education to its students who have a feeling that they are learning in the Indian tradition and are very close to nature with a freedom to "pee on tree trunks" and an aversion to "relieve" in "enclosed spaces" (14). The teacher is fond of giving a local flavour to his language in order to emphasize his point and wonders how a student can learn "*saala* (bloody) science without English" (15). As one walks along the streets one can see "heaps of rubbish, shops worse than rubbish heaps" (25). There is no deliberate attempt on the part of the novelist to idealise or romanticize the village. He lays bare the reality as he finds it. The pervasive images of dirt, filth, scum and muck in the village have a physical existence while at the same time they symbolically represent the squalor and filth gathered in the hearts of people reducing them to the level of beasts without a sense of morality. The description of the pond in the village is really disgusting but it tells us a lot about the life of the village:

The pond was dirty, full of mud, stinking and very small. Horses, donkeys, dogs and pigs were overjoyed at the sight of it. Worms and maggots, flies and mosquitoes- all oblivious of family planning-flourished there in billions, teaching us that if we learnt to live like them, the country's rising population would no longer be a problem.

To make up for any lack of filth, a couple of dozen boys, following the dictates of their stomachs, came regularly to the banks of the pond every

morning and evening, and irregularly at any hour of the day, to surrender gas, liquids and solids-all three states of matter-and return lighter. (198)

Balram's Luxmangarh is not different from Shivpalganj. Starting with post Independence India in the sixties to greatly transformed India in the wake of the globalization with the culture of malls and call centres in the twenty first century, things have little changed for the underclass. The villages have shown no sign of development. In Luxmangarh also we have a school with the same set of unruly students and reckless teachers the kind of which added to our sense of shock in Shivpalganj College. Here we have a teacher who will chew betel leaves in the class room with utmost freedom and colour "the ground of the classroom" with the splash of "red *paan*" (15). There are shopkeepers who sell "adulterated and stale items of rice, cooking oil, kerosene, biscuits, cigarettes, and jaggery". As one walks along the road, one can see "down the middle of the main road, families of pigs" freely "sniffing through sewage" (20). The village has no hospital "although there are three different foundation stones for a hospital laid by three different politicians before three different elections" (47). When Balram's father is gravely ill and he is rushed to a charity hospital, the scene that one comes across speaks volumes about the policies and schemes of the government and the way they come into effect or fail to ever materialize into reality. The hospital runs with all facilities only in the paper. In its physical picture it could be the most dirty, unhygienic and forsaken place. The wards have ramshackle beds with no attendants and pet animals like cats have freedom to roam about everywhere. The patients keep waiting but doctors have the predictable records of not turning up and the government ledgers shamelessly record deaths like one of Balram's father who dies waiting in anticipation for medical health to arrive. Like Vaidyaji and his henchmen in Shivpalganj, Balram's Luxmangarh has quite a number of men of power like whom the narrator likes to call by the name of animals. They are people who have under their control the agricultural land, the dry land, the river, the roads and the money. With no human attributes to display they are known as Buffalo, Stork, Wild Boar and Raven. They have created the shackle of a power structure with such a firm grip on the have-nots that they can hardly escape. They are out there to torture and exploit those who are already under extremely miserable conditions. Exposed to extreme poverty and deprived of any healthy source of income, either the helpless unemployed villagers are forced to do menial jobs or move to cities in order to eke out their livelihood. It is ironical that the freedom of India did not bring equal opportunities for its people. There is one class with access to every source of luxury and entitled to a privileged existence and there is the other pushed to the margin with a constant struggle for survival as its fate. Thus an India emerged which as one came closer and closer showed itself as two Indias- one of light and the other of darkness.

Like Shukla, Adiga also does not romanticise the images of the village or the city that he portrays in his novel. As his protagonist moves from the village to the city, his eyes catch all the sordid details of the realities of life that often go unnoticed or are deliberately avoided to pull a curtain over the glaring incongruities and discrepancies that help bring the lion's share to a select few and to cause the lot of the weak and the powerless to remain hungry. In the introductory chapter of the novel as Balram is writing his first letter to the Chinese Premier, he draws the image of filth and squalor of the country through the picture of the river Ganga much in the same way as Rangnathan discovers the dirty pond in Shivpalganj. The warning of Balram is highly suggestive and tells that we as Indians cannot sit complacent and comfortable with the way things are going:

No!-Mr. Jiabao, I urge you not to dip in the Ganga, unless you want your mouth full of faeces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids. (15)

In terms of thematic preoccupation *The White Tiger* could be read as an extension of *Raag Darbari*. The former begins at a point where the latter comes to a close. *Raag Darbari* came twenty years after the Independence and the white Tiger saw the light of the day forty years after *Raag Darbari* and still both the novels carry the darkness from which our country shows no sign of coming out. Hidden under the facade of glamour and dazzle of modern shining world of opportunity and success are the gaping wounds of the underclass life which are left to degenerate into rotteness removed from the prospects of any remedy:

While the novel moves from the country to the city, the whole world of the underclass also migrates-their exploitation and sufferings. With the labourers working in the industrial set-up, taxi and auto drivers, servants, prostitutes, beggars, poor and shivering lots hiding under flyovers, slum-dwellers, corrupt police, legal and administrative structure, unfriendly master-servant relationship the underclass emerges. (Singh 111)

The endings of *Raag Darbari* and *The White Tiger* are very significant. In *Raag Darbari* when the principal of the college offers Rangnath the job of a teacher after Khanna is forcibly made to resign from his job, Rangnath's sense of morality is scandalised. He is furious and asks the Principal to shut up but he knows that he cannot fight the system. The very day Khanna lost his job, Rangnath couldn't sleep in the night. But he has no heart to talk to Vaidyaji unnaturally. "He told himself that he had collapsed at his first attempt at opposition, and that now he should leave this place even before his uncle returned" (339). The voice inside his heart finds him utterly helpless in the face of the circumstances and the only way out is to escape:

You are an average human being, and are stuck in the mud of humanity. You are surrounded by mud and mud alone.  
Don't extol mud. Don't be under the impression that lotuses grow from it.  
Only mud flourishes in mud. Mud spreads mud, and throws up mud.  
Save yourself from mud. Leave this place. Escape. (340)

While Rangnath feels it right to escape the snare of evil, Balram goes a step further and embraces it and with full conviction that he has done nothing wrong. The note of pessimism on which *Raag Darbari* ends and the note of rebellion transforming into a depraved moral belief manifested through Balram's justification of his act of murdering his own master for money and success are pointers to serious pondering how our country is shaping up.

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