

# “She is Present in Offstage, Absent in Mainstream”- Unheard Voices of Women in Shrilal Shukla's *Raag Darbari*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 07 Feb 2023; Received in revised form: 08 Mar 2023; Accepted: 15 Mar 2023; Available online: 23 Mar 2023</p> <p>©2023 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).</p> <p><b>Keywords— Positioning of women, Lack of Agency, Domesticity, Subjectivity, Female role-play.</b></p>	<p><i>This work seeks to constitute the unexplored area in Shrilal Shukla's Raag Darbari, which is the lack of representation and absent female voices in the novel, by looking at the liminality of their participation in the larger rubric of politics, education and economics etc. The research examines the 'subjectivity and positioning of women', which is in contrast to the delineation of the male voices in the novel. The work diverges from the current readings of the text, which focuses on the satirical aspect of the novel. The paper accentuates on the autonomy of women and their indulgence in the role play of the novel by locating them within the corpus of Anchalik Literature. The paper is doing textual analysis by aid of feminist reading of the novel. The task is accomplished, keeping in mind the Feminist Mystique theory of Betty Friedan and Patricia Collins and Dorothy Smith's Feminist Standpoint Theory. The main findings of the research demonstrate the urgency of issue where feminine ideals of women are completely out of the picture. The larger concern of this paper not only focuses on the objectivity of women but also their subjectivity. As a result, the research shifts the lens of looking at it from satirical framework to inherent gender struggles in the narrative.</i></p>

## 1. Introduction

*Raag Darbari*, since its publication in 1968, has achieved such immense international repute that it has made Shrilal Shukla the recipient of Sahitya Academy Award within a year. The excellence of the work lies in its exposure of 'village' or 'provincial' ideals, which are artistically linked with the politics, economy and education in the larger framework. The story of an urban man, Rangnath, who gets entangled with his ill health and takes vicinity of rural life to rejuvenate him but in the end, he becomes a misfit. A similar instance is analogous to Phanishwar Nath Renu's *Maila Anchal* where Doctor comes to Maryganj for some work and wants to rejuvenate his soul in this Anchalik rural setup. "Anchalik" here means the rustic

land which is considered as 'Anchal' or 'motherland' for the villagers. The critical intervention of the work lies mainly in Gillian Wright's commentary where she points out the absolute foppishness of village ideals and its relation to corporate life.

Yoshita Singh takes forward the Wrights' argument and points out the impact of corporate ills of Shivpalganj which is still relevant in 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This serves as a new line of inquiry for some critics, who point this out by highlighting the need of 'real and represented' in the novel (Anjaria 4797). But Anjaria's observation is constricted to male and their masochistic power in the village. The commentaries and reviews of this novel are still mired in the 'webs' of male and their totalitarian regime. The issue of female

voice and their subjectivity in the novel is completely isolated from the whole reading. The dynamics of domestic life and its functioning have made the situation of women deplorable. While one tries to locate the persona of women in the novel, one gets rare examples and that too from superficial references which become the only entry and exit point of their allocation in the functioning of the novel.

## 2. Rationale and Research Questions

Women's position from the period of Vedas till now has been completely altered. The role of women in the modern era deteriorated to complete state of dependence on patriarchy. They are made subject to witness the inequality not only in public sphere but also within their family. New reforms and resolutions are made every year for the protection and encouragement of women, but how much of it really goes to every part of the society? Stuck in a few corrupted hands, the provisions of benefits are way behind in reaching their destination. Eschewing this realistic approach towards life, *Raag Darbari* is set in the age of Post-Independence era of 1968 under the Indira Gandhi regime. The era is already reshaping its structure and giving autonomy to female voices. If we look a few years back we have a foreshadowing of these voices through 'Bimla' of Tagore's *Home and the World*. Considering other novel of Shrilal Shukla, *Raag Virag*, the protagonist 'Sukanya' is the female voice narrating the tale. Even in other novels like *Agyatvaas*, we find many female characters whose presence becomes a pivotal instance for the novel's subjective formation. Then the question arises why in *Raag Darbari*, the situation is completely opposite.

## 3. Roadmap of the paper

The first section of this paper focuses on the corporeal presence and agency of women in the novel. Further on, the paper substantiates the arguments by locating it with marriage, education and politics of Shivpalganj. The final point of inquiry would be to look at the women's positioning and underplay throughout the novel by the aid of feminist critical studies. This is done by looking at other texts of Shrilal Shukla such as *Agyatvas*, *Sooni Ghati Ka Sooraj*, etc., and other writers of the age have depicted female voices in their novels.

### 3.1 Nomenclature and lack of corporeal presence

Someone's presence and absence on the stage is highlighted by the dialogues in the drama. But when

it comes to novels, the dialogue articulation 'onstage' and 'offstage' shifts its whole demeanor. The tale role of women in *Raag Darbari* is succinctly disguised under the veil of domesticity, "women filling the mountains of pickle in earthen jars" (Shukla 56) or "bundles of objects sitting" (Shukla 7). The corporeality of women is put under the lens when they are just referred to by promiscuous epithets such as "milkmaids of Shivpalganj" (Shukla 54). Women are labelled on the basis of their physical countenances, their looks, their features, which becomes the main focus of 'male gaze' in Shivpalganj. Some critics comment on the rural corruption of the village. But here 'corruption' is not only on the level of politics and governance but also citizens are corrupted morally, and are lacking in their conduct of humanitarian values. The system of corruption germinates its roots from the lap of Vaidyaji to the heart of Shivpalganj where everything goes with the nod of rural head. The role of Vaidyaji is not only restricted to the Mukhiya of village but he tries to cure impotency and takes the role of doctor, he wins the election and becomes the head of institution of education in the village; he makes Sanichar head and becomes messiah for the people, he proposes the inter caste marriage and becomes socially advanced man. Every step of Vaidyaji decides the fate of Shivpalganj.

The actual voice of women in the novel is depicted either as "buffalo voice" or like the "bleating of the goats". These onomatopoeic voices dehumanize the dignity of women. The point of concern that lies here is the plight of women, which has reached an utter state of mockery by those who hold the functioning of the society. The superficial references to "Chikoo Sahib's daughter" (Shukla 56), "Night-watchman's wife" (Shukla 68), "Washerwoman's daughter" (Shukla 83) and "Principal's wife", all suggest the lack of naming them and erasure of their identity. One can also note here the way women are referred with some markers as if their identity is dependent on their husband's or father's name. This is reminiscent of Bankim's *Rajmohan's Wife*, where Mantagini's name is only known to the reader while others perceive her identity as her husband's wife. The issue of 'nomenclature' complicates the whole situation of the representation and the role play of the women. It also depicts the struggle of their own recognition in the larger politics of domestic role bound to them. In Western culture, women writers like Aphra Behn, Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot, etc. used their pen names to write their novels. Thus, the issue of naming women or expression of their independence is still way behind the thought process.

### 3.2 Issue of Marriage

The character who has been given a little importance is “Bela”. She becomes a major trope in the novel, one who changes the politics and status of those in power. But she is entangled in the ‘tendrils’ of society. As her name suggests, she is not privileged like Ashk’s Bela of *Sukhi Dali*, who has little bit of autonomy at the end. The Bela of *Raag Darbari* is the withered branch of Shivpalganj. She cannot be heard throughout the novel as if she has been intentionally made “mute”. The chance of Bela’s assertion becomes negligible as if her persona is created from the beginning of the novel as a meek, submissive woman. The letter incident in the novel corrupts her presence, leading to the ultimate epiphany that she is being regarded by Chote Wrestler as “women of low character” (Shukla 232).

Bela was forcefully married to some guy of her own “Vaishya” community, and her father ruptures her ‘free will’ in the decision making regarding her own life. The same situation of women being married because of their familial pressures can be seen in the characters like ‘Satya’ in *Sooni Ghati ka Sooraj* and ‘Dr. Sita’ in *Agyatvaas*. Sanctions from family and society become the ‘code of conduct’ for these women and thus their individual choices are pushed to the point of their transformation. The unhappy marriage life and post-marriage scenario of women can be seen in the diurnal cases of dowry and physical assault. Elisabeth Bumiller’s depiction of failed marriages of Indian wives makes us ponder over the whole debate about the functioning of Indian society, where father’s dignity becomes the ultimate verdict for the daughter. The important shift of marriages in *Raag Darbari* tends its way to the functioning of Vaidyaji, who actually pretends to be democratic to disguise his political motive, “arrange inter-caste marriage, someone has to take step forward” (Shukla 306)

### 3.3 Education of women in the novel

The great point of inquiry in the field of women’s education in Shivpalganj can be witnessed by looking at the functioning of college on gender basis. In Changamal Intermediate College, one cannot locate even a single female student. Changamal Intermediate College is equivalent to Dr. Pagan Academy in Evelyn Waugh’s “Decline and fall”, where everything is gothic and gloomy (Snell 86). The only reference of inclusion of women is of “Mahadevi’s poetry”. The disequilibrium of the male-female ratio in the college draws our attention to illiteracy of women. This is not a new point of argument but what is important here is the fact that Shrilal Shukla in his other novels has

given agency to other women. If ‘Chand’ in *Simaye Tutthi Hai* can pursue her thesis work, ‘Sita’ in *Sooni Ghati ka Sooraj* can become a Doctor, ‘Rubi’ in *Admi Ka Zeher* can become a teacher, why the women of Shivpalganj cannot pursue the path to education? The necessity of education in the rural setup of Shivpalganj becomes the poignant point of inquiry. Savitri Bai Phule’s reformation for women’s education a century ago, when the novel was published, did create a major impact on the society. But many villages like Shivpalganj were completely unexposed to such reforms.

The other proposition prevalent in the minds of people is how education of women becomes a ‘curse’ for society and for her family, which can be seen in representation of ‘Rebati’ in Fakir Mohan Senapati’s story. Bela was taught a little to read the scriptures, but when the plot of love letter was discovered, some considered that it was she who devised the plan. They called her the “hag” or “enchantress” who puts her spells on everyone. This statement reflects on the fact that if a woman dared to get herself educated she will be the cause of doom for the society. Attia Hossain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, points the same debate about women’s education where Laila’s education was always considered as the reason for her vague imagination and Zahra was always considered sane because she reads limited stuff which is related to religion. Shivpalganj is still under the veil of ignorance and superstition. Villagers believe in the authority of their Raja “Vaidyaji”, and everyone’s life is directly and indirectly controlled by him. In such a state, questioning the authority would be a futile attempt on their part.

### 3.4 Women’s relation to politics of the village

When we look at role of women in the politics of the village, such as the events when election of the new college head was held, “Vaidyaji was elected unanimously” (Shukla146) and Sanichar becomes the village head because he was the ardent devotee of Vaidyaji.

Gillian Wrights says, “Politics in the novel is male dominated despite Indira Gandhi having been the prime minister for so long”. But Wright does not take this observation forward.

Shukla's remarks to Wright’s inquiry hold a major question: “I do not think a lady would have behaved like Vaidyaji” (Shukla xxvii). Like most of the Dickensian heroines, specifically Rachael in *Hard Times* and others, the expected behaviour of the women is to be an “angel in the house”. Since almost

mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, political reforms for women's equality have started shaping up. But until the 1950s, women were not given political and legal rights (Chakravarty 160). Women in Shivpalganj were caught under the responsibilities of "housekeeping" and "child bearing", they are not allowed to demand their rights instead, they have become stoic because of their present situation. The men on the other hand have rights of discussing whom they wanted as their head of the village. They cannot be like 'Shanti' of Bankim's *Anandmath* who joins the rebel group and fights for the nation's cause. Indeed they are similar to Bankim's portrayal of Hemangini in *Rajmohan's Wife*, who was depicted as an ideal homemaker.

### 3.5 Critical theories to substantiate position of women

The positionality of the women within the male domain thus becomes the centre of enquiry for critics. Male-female inequality in every sphere of society and power of one gender over the other problematizes the situation and makes us wonder about the way in which these issues can be addressed. Pointing out Betty Friedan's idea of 'Feminist Mystique', which points out the agony of Friedan when she, after giving birth to her second child, was not allowed to work therefore, she tried to interview females and put herself in the shoes of others like how other women feel after they lost their own sense of entitlement. The mystique of the society, in which only possible way for women, is to fulfil their needs by satisfying it through household, marriage or child rearing etc. In the novel, this example aptly retains its place starting from the "pickle filling duty of women" to "marriage of Bela", the whole notion of women's surrender to the patriarchal power can be discerned. This mystique works out as an impediment; it punctures the growth of women like Bela and makes them vulnerable to suffer the angst of eternal domesticity.

The collaborative 'Feminist Standpoint Theory' of Patricia Collins and Dorothy Smith was put forward with the point that inequality between male and female disturbs the production of knowledge in the society. The standpoint of women is not only dependent on the knowledge of the society but also the knowledge of their own self. This introduces a whole turn-around of looking at women in a different light through the lens of marginal violence. The argument in a way minimizes the myopic vision of society. This theory in a way tries to restore the standpoint of 'Bela' and other women of Shivpalganj who were pushed down to the periphery of the society. The standpoint of

women rectifies ones vision and in a way tries to shift the situation of women from the 'edges' to the 'centre' of narrative.

### 4. Conclusion

Referring to all the points above, one thing can be clearly justified: it is very easy to locate the absence of the women not only on the physical level but also on the mental, societal, economical, and political level as well. Their presence in the narrative is evoked often through malicious lustful voices of males, which delimits their identity to someone's object to be "exhibited" in the market. The portrayal of women in *Raag Darbari*, clearly separates them from Shukla's other novels. The serenity of the provincial countryside of the Shivpalganj does tempt the reader to experience the bliss. This state of utmost Bliss one can ponder over through Wordsworth and other Romantic writers' poem. It gives them tranquility, happiness and a way to lead life ahead but here, this "Bliss" in *Raag Darbari* is like an onion, which, after unraveling each layer gives nothing concrete about the women's position.

'I' in the novel becomes the third person "they" and further paves the way for "nothing of significance" in the end. This paper limits itself to the major issue of the liminality in the indulgence of active role play by women and their 'positioning' in the society. The other possible areas which can intrigue the readers while revisiting the novel could be the metaphorical combination of Nature and Women. Symbol of 'Raag' and its tune throughout the novel could also be one of the possible areas of interest. However, for the present time, this work attempts to throw light on the dichotomy between visible ignorance of the "body" and "voice" of women in the novel.

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