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Caste Consciousness in *Shekhar: Ek Jeevani*

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to understand the Hindi literary sphere during the later phase of the Independence struggle. The nationalist struggle and the simultaneous reformist movements had made a large number of writers of the time conscious of the social disparities. Subsequently, they attempted to portray it in their works. I intend to read into the politics of this portrayal. How caste issues are negotiated within the literary landscape of the novels of the time, or even the politics of its inclusion and exclusion are vital questions that need to be understood in order to theorise the corpus of Modern Hindi literature, which was predominantly upper caste. In this regard, my paper would attempt to understand the purportedly progressive space of Modern Hindi Literature by closely reading Sachchidanand Hiranand Vatsyayan's *Shekhar: Ek Jeevani*.

Key Words:

Caste consciousness, Politics of representation, Hindi Modernism, Agyeya, Prose.

I

Modernism as an ideology and aesthetics is borrowed from Europe. Despite its assertion as an essentially Western category “opposed both to tradition and to national or local experience,”ⁱ there were ‘alternative modernities’ⁱⁱ that gave rise to corresponding aesthetic forms. This development was apparent in the case of India where it emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century, and was confined within a particular class and, quite automatically, caste. Many cultural critics have attempted to establish the exact nature of modernism in the Indian context. Supriya Chaudhuri cites Geeta Kapur, the noted cultural critic who points out the avowedly social and historical overtones instead of the Western conception of Modernism as “a hypostasis of the new.”ⁱⁱⁱ She notices the highly educated bourgeoisie that rallied behind it with its endeavour to respond to the changes in international politics and find a modern identity of their own, as well as to satisfy its urge to contribute to the national struggle. It manifested itself in the domain of literatures from various regions. This paper proposes to understand it in the context of Hindi literature.

Chaudhuri writes,

The break with the pre-modern, already experienced as a form of trauma by the colonial subject, and requiring the reconstitution of vernacular literary^{iv} traditions, is compounded in the twentieth century by a new sense of the gap between urban and rural, literary and oral cultures, split further by caste and class divisions, and by political ideologies. (944)

The literature that sought to occupy this vacuum and address this trauma adequately then experimented with myriad modes of expressions and forms. It started with the Progressive Writers' Movement that posited social realism as one solution. Popular figures included Premchand, Sajjad Zaheer, Krishan Chander, Ismat Chughtai, Saadat Hasan Manto, Sahir Ludhianvi, Amrita Pritam etc. It failed, however, to address the “internal contradictions of realism,”^v which according to John Frow constitutes one of the major questions of modernism. The next phase of Hindi literature attempted to address (but not resolve) these internal contradictions. Sachidananda Hirananda Vatsyayan, popularly known as Agyeya, is considered to be the pioneer of modernist Hindi

literature. The publication of his first *Tar Saptak* – the first of three collections, an anthology of poems by seven writers with a preface written by him in 1943 heralded the arrival of modernism. The poets in these anthologies drew on multiple traditions and experimented with varied forms. Just like Europe, myths emerged as a rich source of inspirational material for both style and content. Writers like Dharmveer Bharati, Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh, Agyeya etc. used them prolifically in their plays, poems and novels.^{vi} It stayed, however, in the hands of the elites. They talked about the issues that haunted the social and personal spheres of the writers but stayed away from issues like untouchability and caste discrimination. Numerous critics have pointed out the abundance of class disparities in the novels of the time as opposed to the caste conflicts that was rarely registered personally by their authors. Unlike Marathi literary culture where Dalit literature formally emerged in the late 1950s and “social protest became inseparable from an avant-garde aesthetic seeking to radicalise the very language of utterance,” (Chaudhuri 957) no such course is visible in modernist Hindi literature. There was no questioning of the casteist art and traditions; no challenge to “a history of violence and injustice that had denied representation, identity, and personhood to the dispossessed.” (957)

This lack is particularly conspicuous when we take a look at the political events of the twentieth century. Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890) established the first school for untouchable children in Poona in 1852. In 1873, he founded the Satya- Shodhak Samaj for the welfare of the underprivileged, and published *Ghulamgiri* (Slavery), which was a fierce attack on the upper castes for their role in the continuance of untouchability. There already was a considerable discussion around the rights and position of the Depressed Classes in the Indian social structure, which prompted the 1917 Congress Session under the presidency of Annie Besant in Calcutta to pass the following resolution:

This Congress urges upon the people of India the necessity, justice and righteousness of removing all disabilities imposed by custom upon the Depressed Classes...^{vii}

Congress stressed the importance of removing untouchability in order to achieve self-governance. The Imperial government, following the Constitution of 1919, also gave token representation to the Depressed Classes in the legislatures. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar pointed out the flaw that did not provide any safeguard for their protection against the tyranny of the caste Hindus, and submitted a memorandum to the Minorities Committee of the Round Table Conference. He put the cause of the untouchables on the forefront of national politics. He started multiple papers and journals for the same. The Bardoli Programme of Congress (1922) re-stressed the need

To organise the Depressed Classes for a better life, to improve their social, mental and moral condition, to induce them to send their children to national schools and to provide for them the ordinary facilities which the other citizens enjoy. (Ambedkar 23)

In North India, Swami Achhootanand started the Adi Hindu Movement in 1922. He claimed that the Depressed Classes were the original inhabitants of India. He organised many conventions between 1922 and 1930 across the country. In 1924, Ambedkar formed the *Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha* for the Depressed Classes with the motto “Educate, Agitate, Organise.” He famously led Mahad Satyagraha on 20 March, 1927 to ensure the use of public tank for the untouchables in Mahad, Maharashtra. December 24th, 1927 also witnessed the public burning of the *Manusmriti*. 1932 marked the year of the infamous Poona Pact when M. K. Gandhi went on a fast unto death and Ambedkar lost the battle to procure separate electorates for the Depressed Classes. In 1936, the Maharaja of Travancore opened the gates of temples for the Depressed Classes. The year is doubly significant because it also witnessed the publication of *Annihilation of Caste*. Both Swami Achhootanand and Ambedkar published profusely for the cause until their deaths. The former even established his own Adi Hindu Press in Kanpur because the other presses owned by caste Hindus

refused to publish his compositions.^{viii} In 1942, Ambedkar founded Scheduled Caste Federation in Nagpur to represent the Depressed Classes in the elections. Demands were also raised from certain sections for the formation of an independent country of the untouchables: Achhutistan.^{ix} On 26th November, 1949, two years after the Independence, Constitution was adopted. Article 11 formally abolished untouchability in India.

This extremely compressed account of the national politics surrounding caste impresses its marked presence in the first half of the twentieth century. Yet, it is conspicuously scanty in the literature of the time. An overwhelming number of writers refrained from addressing the topic. Those who did write about it often fell into the category of those giving token representation, not unlike the political leaders. It will be wise to point out the presence of Premchand in this context. One of the most loved and popular writers of Hindi, Premchand, in his Gandhian spirit included many characters from the lower castes in his novels. Later Dalit critics, however, have criticised the delineation of his characters. They assert the importance of celebrating a Dalit consciousness in characters, of celebrating rebellion and the rejection of established norms instead of portraying their abject subjectivity. Except few writers like Premchand, and later Phanishwar Nath Renu, writers refrained from delving into “the conflict between civil society and Dalit society.”^x In this context, the noted critic D. R. Nagaraj points out the difficulty of being able to create the other side of the experience with sympathy and identification while staying on the opposite side and asserts that only those with “critical humanism” can one achieve it. (141) In this essay, I intend to look at Agyeya’s portrayal of Dalit politics in his novel *Shekhar: Ek Jeevani*, (1941) in the same vein.

II

There are two ways of capturing the origin of a movement or a phenomenon: one, the historical way of locating the specific point of birth in a single moment or a cluster of such moments. Second, focusing on the moment of metaphorical birth, where the motif and images that went into the making of a movement surface in a dramatic way. – the movement in literature. (Nagaraj, 61)

Agyeya published *Shekhar* in 1941. The novel meanders through the socio-political scene of contemporary India through the eyes of an intensely self-reflective eponymous protagonist. It starts with an imprisoned Shekhar at the brink of execution. He reflects back to the moments that contributed to his life and brought him to that point in the prison. As a pioneer of Modern Hindi literature, Agyeya attempts to situate the individual in a social setting without compromising his individuality. The protagonist Shekhar is deeply introspective but this does not rob him of the understanding of the social forces that shape him. This is asserted when he underlines three important moments of his life and considers them to be the decisive factors that made him – not just as an individual with his own subjectivities but also as an interpellated^{xi} subject.

The consciousness of caste plays an important part in Shekhar’s psychological development. It is manifested right from the moment of his birth. Born amidst the ruins of a *Baudh Vihar*, Shekhar is blessed by the *bhikshus* who believed him to be an incarnation of Gautam Buddha because his birthday coincided with the day a chest of Buddha’s bones were unearthed from those ruins. The author, rather sardonically, declares that the infant was bathed and given a body appropriate for a Brahmin child – “*Brahmankumar ke urpyukt sharir diya jane laga.*”^{xii}

Shekhar’s first direct encounter with caste takes place in his childhood in a surrounding which is ostensibly beyond politics because of its composition. It happens when he is with his friends. “There was also a girl among his playmates whose name no one knew – everyone used to refer to her by Phoola.” (Agyeya 96) A few things strike us about this incident. First is the absent name. She did

not have a name, or no one knew it – a sign that her identity was not important. She was the daughter of a widow.

Phoolan used to participate in all his plays, and in the process they used to enter each other houses as well...but one day he got the command from his family that even if he went to her house, he must not eat anything there because they were from a lower caste...he asked (out of curiosity) if others did not eat with them either, to which he got the reply, “No, no one from good castes eat with them.” “Then why do we play or talk with them?,” at that no answer was forthcoming. He asked again, and was rebuffed, “Don’t eat my head. Accept what you are told. Do not question so much.”

The kid went away. He started to dissociate from plays, especially when Phoola was around. Not because he had been particularly obedient but because he wanted to reach a solution, a decision regarding the situation. (Agyeya 95)

It tormented little Shekhar because for the first time he perceived an imbalance, an unfairness in his world, especially an unfairness which did not concern him. Before this, all his worries surrounded his own self. He resented people, was violent against some, was dismissive of some more but for the first time, someone else’s situation touched him. The incident is one of the very first instances that inform the richness of his perception. It would be difficult to remark that he was concerned about Phoola’s claim to space, or the way its lack may affect her subjectivity. He was a child. His tender brain attempted to analyse his own existence vis a vis Phoola’s location within the social fabric. He did not understand why he could play with Phoola but not eat or drink with her family. The reticence of his parents perplexed him further. He silently disagreed with their logic that obliged him to accept everything without questioning it or understanding it completely. His inability to arrive at a conclusion disturbed him and further alienated him from the society of his peers. His sensitivity towards the unexplained location of someone who looked and acted like him paves the way for his reception of the later events of his life.

Also interesting is the portrayal of the relationship between Phoola and her mother. They were Shekhar’s immediate neighbours so he could listen to their daily interactions. “Sometimes, the mother would ask the daughter, ‘Phoola, who are we?’ and at her laughter or the answer of ‘don’t know,’ explain, ‘you say, we are _____.’” Agyeya, inexplicably, does not mention their caste name. Or maybe, we get an inkling in the next sentence Shekhar asks his mother what _____ means and is told that it was a lower caste. Shekhar wonders that if they were from a lower caste, why they would not hide it. “What is the reason that the mother continually reminds her daughter, and with a proud voice?” (98)

The narrative tells us that Shekhar’s question remained unresolved. “He started worshipping that widow who could be proud of it, from afar. Phoola, too, turned into a downtrodden goddess for him but he could not go to their house.” (98) He wanted to be a part of their lives but for some inexplicable reason, “don’t know why” (98) was unable to enter their house. Nonetheless, this episode gave him an exemplar of people being happy and proud despite being aware of others’ disdain. It helped him later when as an adult he decided to follow his principles in the face of ridicule and rejection. It helped him when he was trying to theorise his own definition of a revolutionary while in prison and mused the importance of conviction for a revolutionary.

Reflecting on the incident later in the prison, Shekhar not only acknowledges the debt of that experience on his psychological development but also identifies with the “terrible agony” that drove the widowed mother to use her *pride* as an armour and a weapon. “...he could also understand the contempt with which she would have taught that pride to Phoola...” (98) He reflects later that this

pride was wrong because it was entirely ineffectual as a solution to their problem, nonetheless he commiserates with her powerlessness. His dismissal couched in sympathy is peculiar. He admires the woman's pride because he could imagine her suffering but also finds it utterly useless as a tool to alleviate or even negotiate with the situation. He ends up sounding condescending like a distant reformer who claims to understand the situation citing his own miseries as examples. His childhood dejection turns into a misguided admiration of their apparent indestructibility.

The birth of a political Shekhar again witnesses caste politics at its centre. In the fourth chapter 'Man and Situation,' (*Purush aur Paristhiti*) Shekhar goes to Madras for further studies where he stays in a hostel meant only for Brahmin boys. For the first time, he is allowed to experience and analyse the world on his own when he enters college at the age of 15. He realises that there is a material reality outside his own intense inner world; a world that deals with the living habits of the people. Until then, he was tortured by the perception of the world's impact on the psyche of others. Now, he sees the impact it can have on the physical realities. He was worried about Phoola's emotions. In Madras, he saw the discrimination in a more stringent manner. He was admitted to a hostel, which was strictly for the upper castes. He is questioned there because of the absence of his Brahminical markers like the topknot of hair or the sacred thread. Other residents ostracise him by refusing to eat with him because of his wayward behaviour. He wins; ultimately, because the college principal decides in his favour as despite his behaviour he was born a Brahmin but disgusted by the hypocrisy and shallowness, he leaves for Malabar. The choice of this place is deliberate because his experience inspires him to find similar instances of discrimination.

Malabar is a beautiful country but Shekhar did not go there to appreciate its beauty. In college, he had heard stories of untouchability – for him those things were so improbable that he did not see them as more than stories – he had heard, and for that he was attracted. (322-323)

The narrator goes on to talk about the social status of the untouchables of the region.

The untouchables there – *Pancham* – could not come within a specific ambit of a *kulin* Brahmin – they have to stay a few yards away; there are different roads for the Brahmins on which *Panchams* cannot walk; *Panchams* have to cross rivers on a boat or through some other means because bridges are reserved for the upper castes; untouchables cannot buy land in a Brahmin neighbourhood ; and if somehow the Brahmins and the *Panchams* come face to face, then the *Panchams* have to declare their *Panchamatv* so that his shadow does not fall inadvertently on the Brahmin. (323)

Shekhar had heard all this but could not believe it. When he got into a conflict in college over the issue of untouchability, he left to see the situation in Malabar. It is a journey that becomes crucial for his character development. There he witnesses the incidents of untouchability that were unthinkable for him. In fact, these stories had “attracted” him to the Malabar region. He perceives the predicament of the *Pancham* – the untouchables- who were not allowed within a certain distance of a Brahmin. They were not allowed on common roads, bridges, the land around the upper castes' homes, and had to announce to the world their caste status to prevent any case of mistaken identity. He sees the biased State mechanism that attempts to justify the murder of a woman because her injured body was found on a road reserved only for Brahmins. This last incident shakes Shekhar because he was the one who had found her and took her to the hospital.

Shekhar remembered how his clothes and body were soaked with that woman's blood and mud and a shiver ran through his limbs...she was an untouchable, and he was a Brahmin, and he was soaked with her blood...and her murderers were Brahmins...Brahmins...the same as him...(325)

It is a heart-rending portrayal of Shekhar's tortured psyche. He feels implicated by association. This experience motivates him to shift to a different hostel which is run and inhabited by untouchables. He is seen with suspicion at first but soon he became a part of it. He identifies with them because he feels that the society he was expected to belong to treated him as an untouchable, "and he could not bear to it be in any other way." His empathy because of his own experiences inspires him to turn a new leaf as a reformer. Shekhar's character clearly is Gandhian as it exemplifies an upper caste reformer who realises the flaws of the social structure and tries his best, even at the cost of sacrificing associations, which are paramount to one's caste identity to alleviate the situation. Shekhar's admiration of Gandhi nurtures his perception of caste and seeps unnoticed into his actions as opposed to his very conscious emulation of the Mahatma during his childhood. He borrows Gandhi's language, as well to theorise a world from where "ignorance would slowly go away, this fog from the soul would be clear." (325) He befriends the residents of the untouchable hostel, forms an unofficial association, and takes up the mantle of the leader, albeit unconsciously. Later, while conversing with his friends he endorses an understanding of religion and culture that was very similar to Gandhi's. According to Shekhar, we must be a part of this culture to improve it. (328)^{xiii}

The portrayal of other residents of the hostel is important. Except a few who are closer to Shekhar, everyone else is disinclined or is stirred only when something happens. Sadashiv, Raghavan and Devadas are the only regular members of Shekhar's group. They are sufficiently urbanised. "*Shahar ki chaap unke upar paryapt maatra me thi*" (327) Agyeya has given all of them their own personalities and opinions. Shekhar is suspicious of fundamental changes – *aamool parivartan*. His idealism is apparent when he says that there should not be any distinction between personal and general welfare. Sadashiv wants to prevent the conditions that lead to the germination of societal shortcomings. He is more practical because instead of using platitudes, he situates the individual in the centre and therefore denies the possibility of an objective outlook. Devdas prefers action to words. Together, they decide to establish a school for the untouchables. The image of an elevated reformer coming to rescue the poor hapless masses is used in the narrative to describe Shekhar and the untouchables, respectively. Shekhar sees the terrible living conditions in the untouchables' colony and suddenly the figure of John, the Baptist presents itself to him – the one who calls on the masses to anoint them with the water of life. He finds it fitting that the thought comes to him not on the shores of rivers with obsolete values but while surrounded with the reeking drains. He decides to start his school within the week. His speech at the end of the term is moving where he emphatically identifies with them. "Somewhere inside I am also an untouchable, your brother." (355)

It is interesting that this emphasis on caste politics, which is very much visible in the first book disappears completely in the second book. Something that concerns Shekhar in his childhood and adolescent years finds no mention later on when he arrives in Lahore for his higher education. This abrupt and rather curious absence raises questions regarding the writer's motive. Why did he choose caste politics as a trope for his protagonist's political awakening? Was it just a plot point to propel his narrative further, and if not why does he not see it anywhere in Lahore? It is not surprising as Shekhar's characterisation is of a restless soul on a quest to find himself by selectively obliterating the world around him and at the same time investing in the social issues that touch his psyche.

He wanted work, so much work that it would become impossible for him to breathe – so much of it that the thoughts in his mind, suspicions, the impossible dreams that tortured him – all that would wither because of the unavailability of time....the questions rising within him were also there so that at some point they cease to be questions and become solution, instead; all his motion was there to reach at that 'point.' (332)

Therefore, it is imperative to consider and understand not just the politics of representation but also the implications and nuances of the same. Nagaraj has talked about the concept of *intimate enmity* to explain this phenomenon. Intimate enmity, he writes, “denotes states of interdependence at many levels – emotional, intellectual, and material states – between different groups and communities.” (43) What is interesting is his proposition where he contends that these “existential bond makes its presence felt by feelings of intense dislike towards each other.” (43) Even though they live in “insulated and isolated universes,” their lives are intertwined. He further writes, “In the contexts of intimate enmity the protagonist, who wants to identify with the other, either as an idea or a real human being, has to undertake a journey more difficult and tortuous than the one who feels for real strangers.” (45) This is particularly demonstrated in Shekhar’s case. The epistemological separation of the enemy signified by the lower castes clashes with the material closeness. The resultant chaos perturbs Shekhar and motivates him to address these gaps in his own idealistic ways.^{xiv}

Shekhar vocalises Agyeya’s stand on caste politics at a time when other writers were possibly apprehensive or unaware. He has attempted a very sympathetic portrayal of the lower castes. However, the instances of casual casteism cannot be ignored in his language, itself. In one of the episodes, while talking about the spirit of revolution, the writer draws parallel between Albert Einstein and Joseph Stalin. He asserts that it is not the age that shapes a revolutionary. Einstein had this spirit despite the adversarial currents of his age, whereas Stalin did not even when he lived in the midst of the transformative Russian Revolution. Agyeya uses a very curious metaphor for the latter. Stalin stayed, according to the author, “*joothan-binane wala hi.*” (43) *Binana* means to put something together. It has very overt casteist overtones as this expression has always been used for the untouchables who were expected to collect leftover food from the upper-caste Hindu households. This was their only way to feed themselves and their families. The use of this expression, then, in a statement to casually disparage someone reveals a deeper entrenchment of caste system, which often manifests itself unwittingly and detrimentally.

Many critics have also questioned Agyeya’s language. His is a very sanskritised vocabulary. While it can be argued that he is writing within the framework of a different age and political currents, it cannot be denied that there were others writing at the same time in a language that was much closer to the language spoken by the ordinary people. Nikhil Govind lauds Agyeya’s vocabulary that “due to modern punctuation can capture a mood deeply opportune to the political present” but he also points out its relation to regressive Brahminism. “It was not considered progressive to use Sanskrit hindi. The trend was in the opposite direction, leaning toward the colloquial yet lively, everyday, easily understood Hindustani that Premchand promoted as modernising and egalitarian.” (112) One wonders if it is possible to understand and express the culture of the untouchables in a language which is not only distant but also overtly inimical to them.

Meenakshi Mukherjee, in her book *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India* has pointed out that novels in India are “the product of configurations in philosophical, aesthetic, economic and political forces in the larger life of the country.” (viii) It is not possible to conceptualise Indian society and ignore caste. It is further impossible to ignore its presence in the literary testimonies of the time – both in the terms of content and the language. *Shekhar* helps us to understand one of the facets of this nexus.

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ⁱ Chaudhuri, Supriya. Pp. 942

ⁱⁱ See Dilip Gaonkar edited *Alternative Modernities*. The term challenges the idea of a universal Western Modernity and argues for manifold interpretations and transformations based on the geographical, cultural, political qualities of the societies in question.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cited in Chaudhuri

^v Frow, John. *Marxism and Literary History*. 1986. Pdf. Pp. 152

^{vi} Bharti's *Kanupriya* and *Andha Yug* is drawn from *Mahabharata*; Agyeya's eponymous character in his novels *Shekhar I* and *II* echoes the heroic struggle of an alienated protagonist; Muktibodh draws inspiration from the stories in the two Indian epics.

^{vii} *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*. Pp. 1

^{viii} <https://www.forwardpress.in/2016/09/swami-achhootanand-progenitor-of-north-indias-dalit-movement/>

^{ix} In her pioneering book *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) Urvashi Butalia mentions the founding of the All India Achhutistan Movement in 1946 under the leadership of Mr. Beah Lall who raised a demand for the same.

^x Nagaraj, D. R. *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays*. 2012. pp. 134

^{xi} Consider Althusser

^{xii} All translations are mine.

^{xiii} For example, Gandhi refused to allow Christians to participate in the temple entry movements. He believed that the inspiration of change should come from the community itself.

^{xiv} This concept can be understood, for example, through the character of Chander in Dharmveer Bharti's *Gunhon ka Devta*. He lives with an upper caste family and is an honorary member, as well but he still cannot make the *roti-beti* connection. He cannot eat with them in their kitchen, and the tragedy of the novel emanates from the fact that he is unable to marry Sudha, the daughter of his Brahmin professor.

BIO-NOTE

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