
***Raag Darbari* as a Rural Dystopia**

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Abstract:

A dystopia is a community or society that is in some important way undesirable or ugly and frightening. Dystopias are often characterized by dehumanization, totalitarian governments, environmental disaster, or other characteristics associated with a cataclysmic decline in society. Raag Darbari is also a fine example of dystopian fiction. It is a novel on declining values in the village life of post-independence India. It exposes the powerlessness of intellectuals in the face of a strong and corrupt nexus between criminals, businessmen, police and politicians prevalent in the society. The novel is a satirical take on the plight of the common man as society is made subservient by the corruption of the people in power.

Key words: Dystopia, corruption, rural fiction, romanticism, violence, family, politics

Introduction

A dystopia is a community or society that is in some important way undesirable or ugly and frightening. Dystopias are often characterized by dehumanization, totalitarian governments, environmental disaster, or other characteristics associated with a cataclysmic decline in society.

Raag Darbari is also a fine example of dystopian fiction. It is a novel on declining values in the village life of post-independence India. It exposes the powerlessness of intellectuals in the face of a strong and corrupt nexus between criminals, businessmen, police and politicians prevalent in the society. The novel is a satirical take on the plight of the common man as society is made subservient by the corruption of the people in power.

Raag Darbari graphically presents a realistic portrayal of Indian village life. The novel is set in village called Shivpalganj, a few miles from a large town somewhere in the Awadhi-speaking region of Uttar Pradesh. The action takes place over the six months period during which Rangnath, a young research student, comes to stay with his uncle to convalesce after an illness. On the one hand, it is a novel of Indian village life which belongs to a tradition of rural fiction extending back to Premchand's generation of pre-Independence times but on the other hand it has the destructive intention of satire, aimed at ridicule rather than correction or integration and presenting a wilful obstruction to the further progress of its own genre.

Romanticising the Rural

There is an inherent tendency in literature to describe the urban space as synonymous with corruption, immorality and selfishness whereas rural is always romanticized as innocent, heavenly and a place where one can escape from the ugliness of hollow city values. Like Yeats in his poem, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" voices his innermost wish to leave the city and go to a remote place where life is simple and the beauty of mother-nature is all around. He says, "I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree" (Yeats 1190).

The poem expresses the idea that nature provides an inherently restorative place to which human beings can go to escape the chaos and corrupting influences of civilizations. The

speaker of “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” exercises this faculty by daydreaming about life in the country.

William Wordsworth also wrote in a sonnet that “the world is too much with us,” (Wordsworth 802) meaning that the human mind and heart are too preoccupied by the material or worldly seductions of urban living. He also valorised the rural space and it is only in the countryside where he experienced his moments of epiphany.

The idealization of rural space is ubiquitous not only in English Literature but also in Indian Literature. There is a yearning and desire to dwell in villages which seem innocent, honest and close to nature.

Satendra Singh in his essay, ‘The Urban Experience: The Indian Novel’ foregrounds in some urban novels a longing for the countryside where the frustrated urban dweller wants to escape the ugliness, brutality and moral corruption of cities.

The city is seen as a dinosaur swallowing and assimilating the surrounding areas for industrial expansion [Sudhin Ghose’s *And Gazelles Leaping* (1949), *Cradle of the Clouds* (1951), *The Vermillion Boat* (1953) and *Flame of the Forest* (1955)] and the rural-urban conflict is depicted as a conflict between good and innocent on the one hand and evil, lawless acquisitiveness and calculation on the other (248).

Dixit’s *Kata Hua Aasmaan* (1971) depicts Bombay, the city of Midas, as a destination for the fortune hunting migrant who from all over the country flock into it and are immediately plunged into a world of Pandora’s box with ever recurring insolvable problems that determine life and living in the city. Life is trapped in a maze of uncertainties and try as one may, there is no escape from the economics determined failures and frustrations. So pervasive is the absurdity of the relentless cut-throat competition and obsession with economic success that the hero, Nautial reflects meaningfully, “Once all lived in villages and were happy. Why don’t they listen to Gandhi baba?”(250-251)

Shrilal Shukla also in his novel *Raag Darbari* amidst sketching a harrowing portrait of the village called Shivpalganj gives a

contrasting picture of past where the village was viewed through rose-tinted glasses as a perfect setting for writing poetry- a space divorced from filth and unpleasantness.

In the days when white men ruled India, dak bungalows were built on river- banks, or in valleys, forests and mango groves- that is where the poetry of Wordsworth, Rabindranath Tagore or Sumitranandan Pant came naturally to mind. Such things as dust and bustle, cholera, small pox and plague, starvation and poverty , ugliness, bad manners and unpleasantness found it very difficult to reach them (Shukla 329).

In contrast to past idealizations Shrilal Shukla depicts the village life in Shivpalganj with extreme realism, concentrating on the gruesome physical environment where pigs, dogs and men co-exist, and life is perpetually a hellish hand-to-mouth existence.

Rural fiction and Realism

Raymond Williams, in his theoretical work *The Country and the City*, describes how the 'real history' of the country has been 'astonishingly varied' and warns against generalizations and idealizations, the same 'certain images and associations' which overlook the multiplicity and complexity of rural life (Rosie 80).

Even though the city was increasingly represented and seen as a place of ambition, dishonesty, commotion and greed, Williams argues that there is a danger in romanticizing the rural through association and comparison, and that by adhering to the country and city as polar opposites, surface similarities emerge at the expense of valid ones.

His novel, *Border Country* (1960) can be discussed as an extension of his theoretical work, in which he professes many of his ideological views concerning the rural. Williams is critical of previous novelists in their depiction of rural life, feeling the pastoral has been 'marginalized by generations of literati.' He

evidently hoped to present as truthful a representation of rural life as he could to present an honest depiction of the contemporary social community.

Indian novels too have increasingly turned to representing rural life in its stark reality. In addition to work produced by regional artists, the work of writers such as Munshi Premchand, in Hindi, and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, in Bengali, reflects the everyday problems of rural communities.

Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers* is concerned with the peasants in Bengal during the terrible famine that devastated millions. Bhattacharya envisions a new model of an ideal village that incorporates the best of both the past and present and strives to liberate villagers from the clutches of old beliefs and superstitions (Suneetha 164)

Arvind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* also depicts the darkness of villages. He "Has taken an exhilarating ride through the darkest alleys of modern India" (Prasannarajan 7). The village is depicted as 'a place where basic necessities such as clean water, a home, money and health are routinely snatched away by the wealthy, who live up there in the Light" (Rushby). Thus, the novel becomes, as its blurb tell us, "a tale of two Indias— India of Darkness and India of Light." Adiga like Shrilal Shukla in *Raag Darbaari* debunks the election process in Indian democracy. The protagonist of the novel, Balram sets out to give an account of election fever—the awe-inspiring splendour of one billion people casting their votes to determine their own future. Surprisingly the Great Socialist, against whom a total of ninety-three criminal cases—for murder, rape, grand larceny, gun smuggling, pimping, and many other minor offenses—are pending, engineers elections and remains the boss of the Darkness for decades. In Balram's own words,

He had come to clean things up, but the mud of Mother Ganga had sucked him in. Others said he was dirty from the start, but he had just fooled everyone and only now did we see him

for what he was. . . . He had ruled the Darkness, winning election after election (Adiga 97).

When the elections are held the villagers discuss them like eunuchs discussing the Kama Sutra. Election rigging is a perennial phenomenon, usually accompanied by violence.

In Rabindranath Tagore's, *Gora*, the protagonist is disillusioned after visiting the village Char-ghose-para, after realizing the meaninglessness of all his ideal expectations about the rural areas. Gora's illusion of a unified sense of community in villages is crushed when he experiences the factionalism that religion has caused there. The grim reality of villages demythologizes the idealistic rural organic community as a castle in the air.

Gora's two visits to the village of Char-ghose-para also made him aware of the absurdity of his rural nostalgia. When Gora returns to Char-ghose-para again, he realizes that the traditional values he had idealized for so long will not bear close scrutiny in real life. Religion instead of being a sustained faith is reduced to divisive pressures and stifling rituals. The organic community is an impossibly romantic dream. The village he saw was riddled with exploitation and cruelty (Mukherjee 145).

Raag Darbari and Dystopia

Famous depictions of dystopian societies include *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which takes place in a totalitarian invasive super state; *Brave New World*, where the human population is placed under a caste of psychological allocation; *Fahrenheit 451*, where the state burns books out of fear of what they may incite; *A Clockwork Orange*, where the state undertakes to reform violent youths; *Blade Runner* in which genetically engineered replicants infiltrate society and must be hunted down before they injure humans; *The Hunger Games*, in which the government controls its people by maintaining a constant state of fear through forcing randomly selected children to

participate in an annual fight to the death; *Logan's Run*, in which both population and the consumption of resources are maintained in equilibrium by requiring the death of everyone reaching a particular age; *Soylent Green*, where society suffers from pollution, overpopulation, depleted resources, poverty, dying oceans, and a hot climate. Much of the population survives on processed food rations, including "soylent green"; and "Divergent (novel)", where society loses humanity and people are sorted into five factions based on different qualities, Selflessness, Bravery, Intelligence, Honesty, and Peace and those that holds more than one quality is sort for and killed due to them not conforming and not being able to be controlled.

The title 'Raag Darbari' here is not one of the most exquisite ragas of Indian classical music but refers to the tune sung by the courtiers of a later-day-*raja*, a village politician. 'In Shivpalganj, that is Vaidyaji, who calls the tune to which everyone dances. The courtiers waltz in and waltz out, but the tune and the tone are unchanged (Sidharat).'

'*Raag Darbari* is brutal in its honesty. It shocked India. It left India naked (Sidharat)'. Every page of the book is filled with humour. Dark at times, caricature at others; dry in places, slapstick in others and sometimes both at the same time. The book is not short on Shukla's rants, but these are charming rants without moral posturing. Rants against the education system, rants against planning commissions and committees, and rants against the idea of idyllic rural atmosphere.

Dystopian works of art are significantly different across and within artistic forms and genres but there are certain commonalities that they share to show the sociopolitical dysfunction. In *Raag Darbari* there are certain themes akin to dystopian tradition and those can be overtly recognized. There are instances in the novel which find an exact parallel in other dystopian novels and the paper analyses some of the themes in the light of other such novels.

1) Politics

Fictional utopias are based on idealistic political principles and depict a healthy society whereas dystopias though based on same idealistic beliefs result in negative and devastating consequences for people.

In *When the Sleeper Wakes*, H. G. Wells depicted the governing class as hedonistic and shallow. George Orwell contrasted Wells's world to that depicted in Jack London's *The Iron Heel*, where the dystopian rulers are brutal and dedicated to the point of fanaticism, which Orwell considered more plausible.

Raag Darbari also portrays an unparallel painting of current socio-politico-economic condition of India though a small village, Shivpalganj.

Shrilal Shukla describes politics at the grass roots. U.P.'s highly developed is satirized for its irrelevance to the common man, inefficiency and close connections with politicians (Wright v).

Shukla describes Shivpalganj and its denizens layer by layer, in loving detail, and plays every note of the "Raag Darbari" with which its rulers delude them into violating the precepts of decency and self-worth. He exposes, in deadpan prose, the hollow slogans of development with which its leaders befuddle the villagers. Even in real life it would be hard to find a better example of the nexus between politicians, businessmen, criminals and police, and the way they casually eviscerate all the values that people hold dear.

Vaidyaji being the apex man of the village is most respectable and winner of all the power play and has always defeated everyone in this game whomsoever has rose against him. The respect and luxuries of life that anyone can command is through corruption, nepotism and favouritism only. All those who try to be lawful or deny the existence of any of the above three will have to pay a hefty price. Vaidyaji treats the Changaamal Inter-College management committee, the

cooperative society and the village panchayat as his personal fiefdom, but he does represent, in an intimate way, independent India's "democratic administrative culture."

The election tricks that are described in the book deride the idea of democracy and self-rule and expose it as a façade. There the three instructive tricks discussed in the novel which help in winning an election: the Ramnagar trick, the Nevada trick, the Mahipalpur trick. Ramnagar trick becomes useful when two main candidates are from the same caste and command similar respect, in the Nevada trick the Brahmin candidate uses the services of a babaji, his ganja and *bhang* to get the better of the rising Shudra.

The Mahipalpur trick started as an accident, but just like Newton found the truth of gravity in an accident, this scientific method was used extensively. The election commissioner could -- on the insistence of one of the candidates -- have his watch run fast by an hour, and the said candidate could make sure all his votes had been cast by an hour before the scheduled close, giving him a head start. In *Raag Darbari*, *Vaidya ji*, a kind of feudal lord, uses the Mahipalpur trick to beat the Nevada trick, the modern scientific philosophy to fight the winds of change.

When Vaidyaji discovers that things aren't happening as he wants because he's lost control of the village panchayat. He finds a solution right away, his bhang-maker (a drink of crushed marijuana leaves) and servant Sanichar (real name Mangaldas) as head of the village committee.

He (Sanichar) pulled himself together and said, "Arre, no, Maharaj! It is enough that you have considered this unworthy creature worthy of such a thing! But I don't deserve this honour!"

Sanichar was amazed at his own erudition. Then Badri wrestler spoke, 'Abeh, don't start blabbering now. People only talk like that after they become Pradhan. Until then, just keep your mouth shut, Sanichar! We agree that you aren't fit for the job, but what does that matter? It's not as you are making yourself Pradhan. It's the people who are making you

Pradhan. The people will do as they please. Who are you to interfere?"(Shukla 106-7)

Sanichar's elevation shows how hollow the government slogans about strengthening panchayat raj really are. As the narrative proceeds it shows the real faces and intentions behind this posturing. (Sidharat)

Also Vaidyaji winning the election for the college manager with the help of gun and muscle power ridicules the government set at micro level and invites retrospection of such possibility at the macro level as well.

2) Family

The moral theme of rebellious children denouncing their filial responsibilities is a remarkable feature of dystopian novels. Fictional dystopias, such as *Brave New World* and *Fahrenheit 451*, have eradicated the family and deploy continuing efforts to keep it from reestablishing itself as a social institution. In *Brave New World*, where children are reproduced artificially, the concepts "mother" and "father" are considered obscene. In some novels, the State is hostile to motherhood: for example, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, children are organized to spy on their parents; and in *We*, the escape of a pregnant woman from One State is a revolt.

Mostly novels set in urban space show this emotional bankruptcy where there is no place for sentimental morality. Novelists have searchingly analyzed the economic impact of urbanization on the joint family. Bhagwathicharan Varma in his *Bhoole Bisre Chitra* (1959) attributes economic reasons to its demise. He illustrates through four generations of a family how professional and physical mobility of its members give birth to individual nuclear families, with the younger generation preferring independent control over its money and property and the older generation helplessly accepting it as the inevitable new reality.

Though Raag Darbari does not explicitly shows this disintegration of family but even then the relationship between parents and children is not one of blind conformity. Badri wrestler wants to marry Bela and is least bothered about Vaidyaji's consent. The filing of complaint by Kusahar against his son Chote wrestler's violent behaviour witnesses the loss of respect and reverence one has towards his parents.

Kusahar Prasad replied, 'No, Inspector Sahib, now I'm out of shape. I don't have that wrestler's strength any more.'

'So you are suffering your son's blows in silence?'

'I've told you. I'm not up to it any more,' Kusahar Prasad addressed Vaidyaji. 'You know it in any case. Before Holi he had abused me, and I'd hit him with a cane. Then what he did was to lift me up and swing me as if he was going to throw me into the courtyard on my back. But goodness knows why, he put me down. I just collapsed onto a charpoy. Around midday he told me, "Look here, your body is weak. It doesn't have a wrestler's strength any more. When I picked you up to throw you on your back it was like lifting paddy straw. That's why I didn't throw you into the courtyard."

'From that day it's been that we don't take liberties with one another. Chote says, "If you want to die, die your own death, don't rely on me to help you. I've nothing to do with your living or dying (Shukla 281)."

This passage presents a grim picture of family life where instead of love and affection, muscle power is exercised.

3) Social Stratification

Dystopian fiction frequently draws stark contrasts between the privileges of the ruling class and the dreary existence of the working classes in societies which ironically were born out of the lofty dreams of universal equality, empowerment, and social justice of their founders, typically led astray by a hamartia within humanity itself - the inability to withstand the corrupting effects and the many seductions of wielding absolute power, to become but a perverse caricature of the founders Utopian dream.

In the novel *Brave New World*, written in 1931 by Aldous Huxley, a class system is prenatally designated in terms of Alphas, Betas, Gammas, Deltas, and Epsilons, with the lower classes having reduced brain-function and special conditioning to make them satisfied with their position in life.

In *Raag Darbari*, Langar is a character who is a representative of the hapless common man who has to bend in front of the corrupt government system even to get small things done. Langar whose face is 'weathered by dust and thunderstorms' and whose 'thin body was covered with a quilted cotton jacket stands as an epitome of dreary life of poor people under corrupt state institutions.

Langar's presence in the narrative is all-pervasive, with his "Dharmayuddh" resolve. He is everywhere, at Vaidyaji's doorstep, "Chamrahi's" porch or even standing in front of the court's notice-board.

This is the hint that precedes his first appearance in the novel:

The theory of reincarnation was invented in the civil courts so that neither plaintiff nor defendant might die regretting that his case had been left unfinished. Comforted by his theory, both could die in peace knowing they still had the next life in which to hear the judgement.(Shukla 31)

Fighting a case for seven years, Langar has been toiling for months to get one copy of a declaration. He fails to get the copy, but the oath both he and the court clerk swear to "neither take nor give" becomes the basis of the "dharmayuddh". And there's only one reason for this "dharmayuddh": that the ordinary people don't get easy victories.

Violence

Violence is prevalent in many dystopias, often in the form of war (e.g. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*), urban crimes led by (often teenager) gangs (e.g. *A Clockwork Orange*), rampant crime met

by summary justice or vigilantism (e.g. *Judge Dredd*, *Mad Max*), or blood sports (e.g. *Battle Royale*, and *The Running Man*). Also *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* are prime examples of Dystopia's that contain war and violence.

Raag Darbari is no exception to this as in Shivpaganj muscle power and violence are instrumental for winning elections, earning respect and dominating and controlling vulnerable masses. Vaidyaji was re-elected as a manager of college on gun point and there are instances in the novel when Badri threatens people to conformism using his strength and power. Also Chote wrestler's violence is manifested in his cowardly act of father beating. Vaidyaji in spite of his corrupt ways of misleading people continues to rule Shivpaganj and to some extent it is because of his son's hooliganism that it is asserted in the novel, "Vaidyaji was, is and will remain..."(Shukla 28) and "Ruppan is a born leader because his fathers name is Vaidyaji" (Shukla 13).

Khanna Master's rebellion against Vaidyaji only brings his doom and he is forced to resign. In the following passage Khanna Master's frustration against Vaidyaji's vile means of administering the college succinctly highlights the extent to which Vaidyaji exercises his power in an immoral way.

Khanna Master controlled the situation. "Don't mind his anger, we are all at our wit's end. It's very difficult. See for yourself, he appointed three of his relations masters this July. He's made them senior to us and is giving them all the responsibilities. Nepotism rules. Tell me, shouldn't feel bad?" (Shukla 101).

Conflict

There is usually a group of people in a dystopian novel somewhere in the societies who are not under the complete control of the state, and in whom the hero of the novel usually puts their hope, although often he or she still fails to change anything. In Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* they are the "proles" (Latin for "offspring", from which "proletariat" is

derived), in Huxley's *Brave New World* they are the people on the reservation, and in *We* by Zamyatin they are the people outside the walls of the One State. In *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, they are the "book people" past the river and outside the city. In the case of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* such a group is reported by the government to exist, but it is postulated that it may just be an instrument of the government, and indeed that was the case.

Likewise there are people who rebel against the atrocious regime of Vaidyaji like Khanna Master, Malaviya, Rupan Babu who rebels against his own father and even Rangnath who has pinned his hopes only to Khanna's group for the improvement of administration in the college. As village power politics surrounding Vaidyaji play out, lawsuits, vandalism, a trumped-up burglary charge, wheeling and dealing, corruption, all take centre stage and Rangnath, confronted with such chaos, finds his textbook learning irrelevant. There is an inner conflict in Rangnath's mind. His desire to find, peace, serenity and tranquility in the village life slowly falls apart. Rangnath discovers that the concept of village life being purer than city life is a myth, that's been shattered with the influx of petty politics, turf feuds and dubious morality into rural life. Rangnath is in a dilemma, he finds himself hapless and clueless in the face of rapid degradation of values.

Climax and Dénouement

The story is often (but not always) *unresolved* even if the hero manages to escape or destroy the dystopia. That is, the narrative may deal with individuals in a dystopian society who are unsatisfied, and may rebel, but ultimately fail to change anything. Sometimes they themselves end up changed to conform to the society's norms, such as in *With Folded Hands*, by Jack Williamson. This narrative arc to a sense of

hopelessness can be found in such classic dystopian works as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

“Shivpalganj also turns out to be a land of hopelessness; of feudalism, corruption and politics; of disease, desperation and deceit’ (Sidharat). Rangnath after complete disillusionment ‘felt sick and tired.” “The strings of his soul now began to resound with the full melody of escapism” (Shukla 340).

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 illusion that lotuses grow from it. Only mud flourishes in mud. Mud spreads mud, and throws up mud.

Save yourself from the mud. Leave this place. Escape (Shukla 340)

At the end Rangnath escapes to, “Live in that world, where many intellectuals lie with their eyes closed.” He is made to, ‘Run, run run! as he is “being pursued by reality”(Shukla 341).

The corruption in Shivpalganj represents the microcosm of the macrocosm India and it is hinted at the end of the novel that this dreary dystopian plight is inescapable and unchangeable. This is quite obvious in Principal's remarks at the end when he addresses Rangnath, “How long can you go on escaping from this fact, Rangnath Babu? Wherever you go you will be taking some Khanna's place.”

Also it is quite clear one who tries to bring change is no more than a fool and deviates from normalcy. “The Principal listened in surprise, and then said despondently, ‘Babu Rangnath, your ideas are very elevated. But all in all, they just prove that you're a fool”(Shukla 343).

Conclusion

“By inverting conventional descriptive logic, *Raag Darbari* represents the utter failings of the ideals of the nationalist state in their post-colonial implementation and, more drastically, in their post-Nehruvian disintegration” (Anjaria

4795). Not only is political disillusionment, moral bankruptcy and corruption evident in the novel but also the landscape, the environment depicted is hideous and unattractive. The women are always squatting in the fields to unburden themselves. Also the description of bus underlines the mucky atmosphere of the village.

In our ancient books of logic it's written that wherever there is smoke there is fire. To this should be added that wherever there is a bus stand, there's filth. The filth at the Shivpalganj bus-stand was extremely well planned. Some natural means of promoting the Filth Propagation Programme already existed...All the domestic pigs of Shivpalganj used to arrive there in the morning...they assimilated the human filth and scattered it around. The breeze blowing across the pond towards the village centre forced the passengers sitting at the bus-stand to keep clothes over their noses (Shukla 315).

Raag Darbari becomes a typical example of dystopian fiction depicting, therefore, a village divorced of all idealistic notions of tradition and innocence. Shivpalganj although having a rural setting portrays a filthy landscape without any beautiful natural setting which is untouched by human corruption.

By invoking the relationship between realist logic and the ideals of the liberal state, and then proceeding to invert such logic, the novel represents and thus critiques the collapse of nationalist idealism into manifestly dismal reality (Anjara 4798).

It exposes Indian democratic ideals, the hollow notion of rural innocence and beauty and portrays a very depressing picture of Indian bureaucracy and 'poignantly represents the extent to which the disillusionment of the era penetrates deeply into the Indian Psyche' (Anjara 4795)

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“Tribute: Shrilal Shukla’s work had shocked India, left it naked.<http://www.rediff.com/news/special/tribute-shrilal-shuklas-work-had-shocked-india-left-it-naked/20111102.htm>.