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

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**Abstract :** This work shall seek 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 aims to examine the ‘subjectivity and positioning of women’, which is in contrast to the delineation of the male voices in the novel. The work aims to foreground the current readings of the text, which focus on the satirical aspect of the novel. The major investigation here devotes to the sheer ignorance of the autonomy of women and their role play in the novel by locating them in the corpus of Anchalik Literature. The paper aims to do a textual analysis by doing a feminist reading of the novel. This task shall be accomplished, keeping in mind the Feminist Mystique theory of Betty Friedan and Patricia Collins’ and Dorothy Smith’s Feminist Standpoint Theory. The murkiness of the feminine identity amidst domesticity shall get resolved by working on the specifics of these theories. In the end, the reader can locate the urgency of the issue, i.e., the ‘misrepresentation’ of feminine ideals. The work invites the reader to shift their lenses from considering it as the satiric trend of male-dominated society to the complete ignorance of the gender struggles. As a result, female autonomy will become an urgent area of interest for future observations.

**Keywords:** Positioning of women, Lack of Agency, Domesticity, Subjectivity, Female role play.

Raag Darbari, since its publication in 1968, has achieved such immense international repute till date that it has made Shrilal Shukla the recipient of Sahitya Academy Award within the year. The excellence of the work lies in its exposure of ‘village’ or ‘provincial’ ideals, which are artistically linked with politics, economy and education in the larger framework. The major criticism of the work falls on it being considered as a “Satirical” masterpiece. Gillian Wrights has pointed out the ‘foppishness’ of the rustic village and its relation to the corporative life. The story of an urban man, Rangnath, who gets entangled with his ill health and takes the 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



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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. Yoshita Singh takes forward the Wrights’ argument and points out the impact of corporate ills on males in 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This serves as a new line of inquiry for some critics, who points 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 major criticisms of this novel are still mired in the ‘webs’ of males and their totalitarian regime. The issue of female voices 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.

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 male patriarchy. They are made subject to witness inequality not only in the 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 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. The era is already reshaping its structure and giving autonomy to female voices. ‘Bimla’ of Tagore’s “Home and the World” is the perfect example to substantiate this point. If we look at another novel of Shrilal Shukla, “Raag Virag” the protagonist ‘Sukanya’ is the female voice narrating the tale. Even in other novels like “Aagyatvas”, we find many female characters whose presence becomes a pivotal instance for the novel’s subjective formation.

The first section of this Paper will try to locate the possible presence and absence of women in the novel. Further on, the paper will try to relate those references with marriage, education and politics of Shivpalganj. The final point of inquiry would be to look at the women’s positioning and their underplay throughout the novel by critical infusion of feminist critical studies. This shall be done by



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looking at other texts of Shrilal Shukla and other writers of Indian fiction who have depicted female voices in their novels.

Someone's presence and absence on the stage is highlighted heavily by the dialogues in the drama. But when it comes to novels, the dialogue articulation 'onstage' and 'offstage' changes its definition. 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, and their features, which becomes the main focus of 'male gaze' in Shivpalganj. Some critics comment on the fierce 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 actual voice of women in the novel is depicted either as "buffalo voice" or like the "bleating of the goats". These onomatopoeic voices dehumanise 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), "Washerman's daughter" (Shukla 83) and "Principal's wife" all suggest the lack of naming them and erasure of their identity. The identity of women 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. Therefore, to expect the nomenclature autonomy from Indian writers would not hold any water.



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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, who has a little bit of autonomy at the end. The Bela of “Raag Darbari” is the withered branch of Shivpalganj. We do not hear her 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 trope in the novel corrupts her presence, leading to the ultimate epiphany that she is being regarded by Chote Wrestler as a “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 “Soonni Ghati ka Sooraj” and ‘Dr. Sita’ in “Aagyatvas”. 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 a democratic to disguise his political motive, “arrange intercaste marriage, someone has to take step forward” (Shukla 306).

The great point of inquiry in the field of women’s education in the Shivpalganj can be witnessed by looking at the functioning of college on gender basis. In Changamal Intermediate College, we 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. If ‘Chand’ in “Simaye Tuthti Hai” can pursue her thesis work, ‘Sita’ in ‘Soonni 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



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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' by Fakir 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. Shivpalganj is still under the garb 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.

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" (Shukla 146) 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 Wrights does not take this observation forward. Shukla's remarks to Wrights' inquiry hold a major question: - "I do not think a lady would have behaved like Vaidyaji" (Shukla xxvii). Like most of the Dickensian heroines, 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 garbed 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. 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 of "Rajmohan's Wife", who was depicted as an ideal homemaker.

The positionality of the women within the male domain thus becomes the centre of enquiry for critics. Male-female inequality 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 the Betty Friedan's



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idea of 'Feminist Mystique', the mystique of the society in which only possible way for women to fulfil their needs is 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, introduces a whole turnaround of looking at women in a different light through the lens of marginal violence. This shall in a way lessen the myopic vision of society. This theory will try to restore the standpoint of 'Bela' and other women of Shivpalganj who were pushed down to the edges of the society. The standpoint of women will make us rectify our vision and let us shift the situation of women from the 'edges' to the 'centre' of narrative.

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 role playing of women in "Raag Darbari", clearly separates them from Shukla's other novels. The serenity of the provincial countryside does tempt the reader to experience bliss. But this "Bliss", is like an onion, which, after unravelling each layer gives nothing concrete about the women's position.

'She' in the novel becomes the third person "they" and further paves the way for "nothing of significance" by the end. This paper limits itself to the major issue of the liminality in 'the role-play' of 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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