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Re-Locating the Unitary National Space, Self and Consciousness: A Study of Srilal Shukla's *Raag Darbari*

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Abstract:

The continual existence of a nation as a space internalised in its, what Bachelard calls in *The Poetics of Space*, "oneiric" sense is often attached to borders and boundaries as definitive symbols, determining one's communal and social space. Just as a home is a space where personal memory and nostalgia dominate an individual selfhood, a nation as a community is a collective space where distinct selves aspire to reside together in unity and belongingness. The questioning of interdependencies between selves and spaces creates, what Homi Bhabha calls, a "Third Space" where cultural identities are fluid, with no primordial fixity, resulting in a fractured consciousness and an ambiguous national identity. Keeping these dualities and their subsequent fracturing in mind, this paper analyses the ambiguity and magic (or mystery) of the number 'two'. It focuses firstly on the 'two-ness of spaces', namely 'home' and 'community' as well as 'rural' and 'urban'. Secondly, it marks the categorisation of the 'two-ness of selves', namely 'communal' and 'individual'. Thirdly, the paper focuses on the third classification, the 'two-ness of consciousness' - 'National' and 'fractured' consciousness. The emphasis would be on these categorisations of the two-ness of spaces, selves, and consciousness, taking references from Srilal Shukla's Sahitya Academy-winning novel, *Raag Darbari* (1968).

Keywords: Space, margins, self, consciousness, home, community.

The unity and complexity attached to the idea of space and its concretisation in one's consciousness are problematised with nation and nationhood as demarcated by communal boundaries. However, before problematising the unity and complexity attached to the communal boundaries, one must first question what constitutes this idea of 'space' and how it relates to identifying the self. Is space a physical construct having substance of its own, is it an idealised psychological construct with which one connects their idea of selfhood, or is it perhaps a metaphysical construct necessary for bodies to 'co-exist' to identify with a community? For some, the conception of space is connected to memory and nostalgia, as seen in Bachelard's concept of the "house" in his *Poetics of Space*. Bachelard defines house as a "privileged entity for a phenomenological study of intimate values of inside space" (Bachelard 3). This inside space provides a protected space that is "our corner, our first universe" in the vastness of the World one inhabits, protecting the 'I' among the other pre-existing 'non-I'. Thus, within this protected universe, one tends to find 'home', not as a physical Being but as an essence connecting memory with the imagination of an ideal space, inducing feelings of belongingness and a sense of stability, thus creating an "oneiric" self. This concept of 'home' as a conglomeration of memory, nostalgia, and belongingness that creates an oneiric self can be juxtaposed with another classification of space- a 'community'. Just as a home is a protected space where one's 'I-ness' resides, dominated by personal memory and nostalgia, a community is a collective protected space dominated by interdependence and belongingness, where multiple selves exist together. In a community, multiple 'I's interact and create a sense of 'we-ness', further metamorphosing an individual self into a communal self with collective memory. Dismas A. Masolo, in his essay, 'Community, identity and the Cultural Spaces', highlights the inter-dependence of these two categories of selves- the individual and communal as residing in two further divided categories of spaces- home and community. Masolo points out that "individual and community were related in a constant mutual dependency: the specific

behaviour of individuals in various contexts gave the community its cultural boundaries just as much as the normative standards of community regulated the practices of individuals and groups within it” (Masolo 3). However, questioning these mutual dependencies is what problematises and threatens the interdependence between the community as a space and the self. The trouble primarily arises when there are conflicting elements within the space of the community, metamorphosing a once-idealised “oneiric” space into a hybrid, what Bhabha calls a “Third Space” (Bhabha 53) that is fluid in being, a metaphysical space where distinct communal identities interact but due to varying perspectives lacks homogeneity and “no primordial unity or fixity” (Bhabha 55). Through an ever-spreading morass of manipulations and incessant dominations by those in power, outside and within the internal hierarchy of power structures within these communities, the ‘we-ness’ becomes fragmented and is thereby threatened. These enquiries not only pose to interrogate the concreteness within the two-ness of spaces (community and home) and selves (individual and communal) but also their attachment with the construction of two further markers of identity- national and fractured consciousness, specifically in the context of post-Nehruvian India. Within this theoretical paradigm, this paper analyses the ambiguity and magic (or mystery) of the number ‘two.’ It focuses initially on the ‘two-ness of spaces,’ namely ‘home’ and ‘community,’ as well as ‘rural’ and ‘urban.’ Subsequently, it marks the categorisation of the ‘two-ness of selves,’ namely ‘communal’ and ‘individual’ that further results in the formation of the ‘two-ness of consciousness’—‘National’ and ‘fractured’ consciousness, taking references from Srilal Shukla’s Sahitya Academy-winning political satire, *Raag Darbari* (1968).

Two-ness of Spaces

To understand the mutual dependency between space and self from an ontological perspective, we must first question the very nature of space- its Being- that allows space and spatiality to exist with meaning or purpose attached to them. The installation of meaning and

purpose to the idea of Space initiates, as Ritwick Bhattacharjee points out in *The Humanity's Strings*, only after "human absorbs that space, is conscious of it and then, in turn, invests a part of its own self...into that space" (Bhattacharjee 142). Thus, space is a component of human consciousness and comes into being only through the dependency between humans and Space. This interdependence between the self and the 'home' with which one attaches their Being, creates an illusion of protection, comfort, and belongingness. The most proximate equivalent of finding a 'home' in the outside unknown world is a 'community'. This other category of space encompasses similar illusionary qualities that a 'home' possesses- belongingness, protection, and comfort. However, the difference originates when the individual self multiplies itself, transforming an individual 'I' into a 'we'. On the surface of it, this sense of 'we-ness' aims to promote collective identity or unity. However, the space of a community essentially reflects the internal tensions and fractured relationships, particularly in the context of post-colonial or third world nations where the ideal of nationhood is more of a 'concept' than an actual reality. Here, nation and nationhood are still developing concepts, continually being defined and re-constructed in a sense of national consciousness encompassing their sense of oneiric space and belongingness.

In the context of the post-colonial Indian community, one of the most deeply engraved obstacles in achieving this idealised unitary identity and national consciousness is the overarching grand vision of "development planning, democracy and secularism", propounded by Jawaharlal Nehru. In order to understand the problems attached to such idealised archetypes of the Nation as a communal space, one must first understand the troubles originating at the grassroots level. To understand the roots of these issues, Shrilal Shukla's 1968 political satire, *Raag Darbari*, offers an appropriate gateway. Situated in a small village called Shivpalganj in Uttar Pradesh, Shukla's *Raag Darbari* serves as a lens to expose the deep-rooted complex dynamics and connections between the state and political power. Through the microcosm of

the ordinary village, Shivpalganj, Shukla presents a macrocosm of the entire nation affected by the "utter failings of the ideals of nationalist state in their post-colonial implementation and, more drastically, in their post-Nehruvian disintegration" (Anjaria 2). These lines highlight the juxtaposition of Shivpalganj being a microcosm for the macrocosm of the entire Indian cultural unity-

[Rangnath] realised that all Indians are one and that everywhere, our minds are alike. He observed that the Indian genius for manipulation and manoeuvring existed in an unrefined form in Shivpalganj, in abundance. This was the same genius which was proclaimed by celebrated newspapers...as Rangnath realised this, his faith in Indian cultural unity was reaffirmed. (Shukla 48-49)

Thus, by satirically alluding to the idealised "Indian cultural unity", Shukla perhaps alludes to the differentiation between the ideal unified space of a Nation as opposed to the reality of the "infractions of injustice in the name of democracy and village development" (Anjaria 5), reflecting the socio-political and cultural factionalism existing within a community.

In the guise of development, one can also categorise this post-colonial village space of Shivpalganj as a magnet for ideal beneficiaries of the government. These targeted spaces comprise institutionally male-dominated spaces such as Vaidyaji's veranda (treated as the modern darbar or court), the police station, colleges, the civil court, and the panchayat, that further highlights how power dynamics operate in the public communal space of Shivpalganj, where power holders such as Vaidyaji, Ramadhin, and the Principal delude the villagers by acting as their well-wishers. In the semblance of these hollow promises, they gain absolute control over public institutions as their personal property. By using the trope of humour and

satire, Shukla juxtaposes significant events or concepts, such as power hierarchies and the government's morality, with trivial uncomplicated entities like "seat" or "gearbox", thus revealing the mundane falseness of the hyperbolised promises and "plot of conspiracies, strange alliances and corruptions" (Anjaria 4) existing within Shivpalganj, and through Shivpalganj, the entire Indian Nation. Shukla, thus, problematises the existing governmental power dynamics, specifically in the rural context dominated by the local village administration with their self-proclaimed authoritative power.

The corruption, thus, within the rural space of Shivpalganj, challenges and subverts the formerly romanticised innocent village space presented earlier as a counter-space to the corruption and immorality dominating the urban space and Western sensibility. Meenakshi Mukherjee accentuates this idea of deconstruction of the all-too-innocent rural space in her essay, 'Narrating the Nation', "Raag Darbari begins with the journey of Ranganath, a kurta-clad, 'jhola-carrying' Delhi intellectual, to the absurd and complex world of Shivpalganj which though rural is neither pastoral nor innocent" (Mukherjee 8). Contrary to the idealised conception of rural space, Rangnath discovers the topsy-turvy world of Shivpalganj to be a space where one can accomplish things not by simpleton methods and protocols but rather with the aid of connections, manipulations, and muscle power. Rangnath's experience in Shivpalganj further emphasises the hollowness attached to the satirically inverted idealised rural space. Thus, the space of community that is otherwise a counterpart of 'home'- filled with belongingness, comfort, and security- is de-idealised here. The de-idealisation of the village space juxtaposes the destabilisation of the Nehruvian state's idealism that ironically unveils the "corrupt breed of cronies and sycophants", propounding factionalism within and outside the existing spatial-cultural divisions. Therefore, amidst the paradoxes encircling Shivpalganj as a rural space, the novel's first two sentences, "This is the edge of the city. Beyond this surges the ocean of rural India" (Shukla 1), question the idea of the constrictive space that can

be called a Nation. The unknowability of the boundary determining the construction and relocation of the national unitary space is thus improbable, as also emphasised by Ruppan in Raag Darbari, "it seems to me that Shivpalganj has spread through the whole country" (Shukla 330). This illustrates the blurring of the concrete boundaries between the unitary communal or national spaces and their association with one's self, thus creating communal identities and selves that are fluid, with "no primordial unity or fixity" (Bhabha 55).

Two-ness of Selves

Owing to the blurring of boundaries between spaces depicting unknowability attached to the idea of concrete space, the question shifts to the concreteness of an individual self or the 'I' existing within these ambiguous spaces. The 'I'-ness or individuality earlier attached to the belief (or induced belief) in the promises of those in power, regarding the ideals of "development, democracy and secularism", suddenly falters, leading to the shattering of a concrete idea of selfhood that fragments into nothingness. However, this nothingness or a void can be substituted when, despite the individual's insistence on 'I', humans try to connect with another space, a community, where individual well-being is transmuted into a communal idea of Being, the 'we'. The idea of we-ness is, however, a complicated terrain. In the microcosm of Shivpalganj, manipulations induced by political kinship and nepotism contribute to defining this we-ness of the communal self. Although the idea of homogenised communal space and selfhood is propounded by the 'power-holders' by introducing elections, where every decision is taken democratically, soon one realises that all these revelations are just illusions. The predominantly existing division between the oppressors and the oppressed within the communal space leads to the vast divide within the idealised communal self. This line by Khanna Master's lawyer conspicuously depicts this divide-

Your Honour, this is a case of the 'haves' versus the 'have-nots'. On one side is the college manager, who is known as Vaidya Maharaj and who, in fact, is less of a vaid and more of a maharaj. Backing him are hundreds of his henchmen and thugs, including the Principal...and a dozen or so masters who are either his relatives or relatives of his relatives. They are well off, and if they are not, the college fund makes good what they lack... on the other side are Khanna and his dozen or so masters, who are poor and who are continually oppressed by the plots of their opponents. (Shukla 234)

Thus, these lines unclad the falseness and meaninglessness of the otherwise idealised concepts of the community by revealing the internal power divisions within the collective 'we'. The hollowness of the idealised communal self is also noticed in the psyche of the villagers who when asked for votes, say- "if you like, we'll vote for him. We'll vote for whomever you say. Your word is our command...after all, its not as if I can make pickle out of it" (Shukla 204). Thus, this ineffectual reaction of the "ikka-wallahs" of Shivpalganj concerning the election of their Pradhan shows the blurring of the boundary between the 'communal self' and the 'influenced self', constructing the 'we-ness' as an ambiguous selfhood. This blurring of concrete definitions of selfhood can also be juxtaposed with the unitary selfhood attached to idealised national consciousness. Due to the discrepancies between the illusionary idealised Nehruvian state and the real cynical post-Nehruvian state dominated by principles such as "nepotism, casteism, socialism", the "oneiric" self disintegrates into various fragmented selves. Thus, the 'we-ness' that was supposed to be the epitome of belonging to the community fractures and deteriorates into numerous factions within the spatial-cultural framework that further makes one question the idea of oneiric consciousness as attached to defining communal and national unitary identity.

Two-ness of Consciousness

The idea of oneiric space attached to the concept of 'home' creates an illusion of stability, harmonious with memories and imagination of an idealised space that encompasses one's self. Thus, space needs to exist, "especially as the consciousness of space, to hold the past and the future, and through them, the temporality of existence itself so that the human does not slip back into the void" (Bhattacharjee 147). Communal space, hence, acts as a substitute- although an illusory one- through which individuals seek a sense of stability and belongingness to shape their sense of self and reality. However, what happens when this stable communal space with its ideals of unity and socio-economic equality abruptly breaks down into multiple factions? Perhaps because of this disintegration, the void of nothingness that encompasses an individual's self resurfaces and destroys one's quintessential consciousness of unitary self, creating a fractured consciousness. Within this fractured consciousness, the promised ideals of national unity and development appear as a component of one's imagination, a fantasised ideal too far from reality. This fantasy, disguised as a false reality, is contrasted with the reality of the "mud of humanity" (Shukla 346), from which escapism is nearly impossible. Thus, the reality, irrespective of the spaces one identifies oneself with, fills with "mud and mud alone", and the attempt to escape this inundating mud, to hide "in the places [of] colour photographs of Look and Life" is meaningless. Surrounded by this reality of "mud of humanity" from all sides, one has to "create a separate make-belief world" for oneself, where one can be consciously unconscious of the gruesome reality that encompasses "infractions of justice", inescapable corruption and power dynamics. Thus, the communal consciousness that was supposed to contain the idealism of 'we-ness' becomes a fantastical entity comprising incomprehensibility and consequently culminates in forming an unstable identity with a fractured consciousness.

Therefore, depicting these various ambiguous binaries regarding the two-ness of spaces, selves, and consciousness, this paper highlights scrupulously the "hollowness of all the

enthusiasm” (Shukla 114) that was earlier attached to the illusionary ideals of unitary national identity and selfhood. Satirically, through Shukla's *Raag Darbari*, one can understand the problematic relationship between the space and the self, where the boundaries between various socio-cultural spaces and individual and communal selves are blurred. This blurring is predominantly because of the ubiquitous presence of the preponderant corruption, factionalism, and conspiracies that exist within the otherwise supposedly democratised space, such as Shivpalganj. However, democracy here is reduced to nothing but a dream. Thus, through this personification of the “dull-witted” democracy, Shukla alludes to the state of democracy in this power-driven communal space, where space is fluid, consciousness is fractured, and the self is disintegrated.

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