
विनोद कुमार शुक्ल – दीवार में एक खिड़की रहती थी

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Vinod Kumar Shukla's first novel was the widely acclaimed *Naukar kī kamīz* (1975), which has been translated into many languages (including English: *The Servant's Shirt*, trans. Satti Khanna 1999) and made into a film by Mani Kaul (also 1999). *Dīvār mē ek khīṛkī rahtī thī*, Shukla's fourth novel, was published in 1997 and is successfully translated by Khanna as *A Window Lived in a Wall* (2005). It is a story of subaltern life in a dateless but contemporary India. Its primary character, Raghuvar Prasad (never just "Raghuvar"; and always honorific plural) is a young man who teaches mathematics at a private college in a nearby town; he is in his early twenties, perhaps 22 or 23. Recently married, he and his wife Sonasi live in one of a row of modest houses near a main road — a friendly place with bicycles, mango and neem trees, charpoys for dozing out front, and neighbours' children coming and going like little harbingers of future family life. Though the home itself is unexceptional in its quotidian ordinariness, the eponymous "window" in its rear wall leads to an open area of land and a small lake, the locus for new perceptions and romantic interludes that are narrated in a style lightly touched by magical realism. A similar mood, in which mundane everyday moments are perceived with an often surreal vision of the extraordinary, infuses Raghuvar Prasad's daily life. Though technically a third-person narrative, the story is mostly seen from Raghuvar Prasad's perspective, and the reader quickly develops a sympathy for this ordinary and yet extraordinary individual. This short article looks at the opening pages of the novel, reproduced below.

Shukla favours a comfortably domestic register of Hindi, perfectly suited to the subaltern character of his protagonists. The few tatsama words tend to relate to institutions rather than private individuals: *mahāvīdyālay*, *vyākhyātā*, *rāṣṭrīy rājīmārg*: the pristinely Sanskritic tone of these words contrasts sharply with the comfortably eclectic Hindustani of the surrounding sentences, marking out the grandiose pretensions of the state and suggesting an irony in the juxtapositioning of vernacular and *sarkārī* identities. Yet this "marking" is a very different thing from, say, the mocking satire of Shrilal Shukla's *Rāg Darbārī*: Raghuvar Prasad is no mere pawn in a political and social game in the manner of that novel's hero Rangnath, but rather is portrayed with a deep understanding and sympathy — though always without

sentimentality. This is a novel about the dignity and joy of ordinary human experience. Life-confirming, gentle, and upbeat, the story finds meaning and depth in the smallest things, and transforms the events and artifacts of everyday life into a sequence of magical potentialities.

The novel opens with a long descriptive paragraph which alerts us to an unconventionality of narrative style. The opening is like this:

आज की सुबह थी | सूर्योदय पूर्व की दिशा में था | दिशा वही रही आई थी,
बदली नहीं थी | ऐसा नहीं था कि सूर्य घोखे से निकलता था, उसके निकलने
पर सबको विश्वास था | (p.1)

It was this morning, today's morning. Sunrise came in the east:
the same direction as always; it hadn't changed. It wasn't as if
the sun came out deceitfully; everyone could depend on it.¹

The narration then ponders the darkness of night and the light of day, and the reader encounters Raghuvar Prasad's first introspection on his own complexion (*kālā*) before moving on to a lyrical but naturalistic description of the morning scene. Again the matter-of-fact tone is offset by a quirkiness bordering on the surreal:

पेड़ों में इतनी बौर लगी थी कि जितनी बौर निकलनी थी सब निकल गई,
जिन्हें अगले वर्ष निकलना था, घोखे से इसी वर्ष निकल गई थीं | (p.2)

The trees bore so many blossoms, it seemed all that were to
bloom had done so, and even the ones due to bloom next year
had mistakenly come out this year instead.

Thus the natural landscape plays a part in establishing Raghuvar Prasad's persona as someone who is poetically and creatively observant of the world around him.

Soon we see the appearance of another major character: an elephant that passes by as Raghuvar Prasad waits for an auto to take him down the national highway to his college in the town. The descriptions of the elephant, and of his mahout — a handsome and fair young sadhu — continue the "colour" references that we had encountered in the daybreak scenes earlier: it is as if Raghuvar Prasad or the narrator (it is increasingly difficult to draw a line between them) were gradually assembling the palette with which to depict the novel's events.

An important difference between Hindi and English lies in the matter of definite and indefinite articles. In English, we must specify either "*the* elephant" or "*an* elephant"; but in Hindi, a language having no definite article and no distinction of upper/lower case in typesetting, the simple word *hāthī* (or "Hāthī") has the potential

¹ Translations here are mine, and differ slightly from Satti Khanna's published version.

to function exactly like a name, denoting an individual like any human character; furthermore, pronouns such as *vah* and *uskā* require no distinction between “he” and “it”, or “his” and “its” when referring to the animal kingdom. (Given this dissolving of distinctions between animal and human, animate and inanimate, Satti Khanna’s use of the verb “lived”, in translating the title *Dīvār mē ek khiṛkī rahtī thī* as “A window lived in a wall” is appropriate and discerning.) Shukla’s world is alive with such possibilities: it is a poetic vision in which all things may appear animate and animated. As the narrative unfolds, we are given further impressions of the semi-rural scene from Raghuvar Prasad’s perspective: details about the elephant gradually accrue, like sketches in an artist’s notebook, or notes for a poem — हाथी युवा होगा । खूबसूरत था । काला हाथी था । The tiny sentences also resemble examples in a child’s language primer, their simplicity forming an important part of Shukla’s sharp focus on everyday detail as a record of existential “truth”, a concept that crops up frequently in these opening pages. “The elephant must be youthful. It was beautiful. It was a dark elephant.” The adjective *yuvā* is one that conventionally belongs to a human rather than animal context: this feature is almost impossibly difficult to maintain in translation; perhaps a reference to the elephant’s “boyhood” might work here?

Raghuvar Prasad begins to fantasize about what it would be like to ride (the) Hāthī to college. The depiction of the roadside where he waits, with its tea-stall, paan-stand and bicycle-puncture repairman, beautifully captures the ordinariness of the scene; and here too, the most ordinary things are enlivened, animated: two old wooden benches seem like living things, grown organically from a tree and then planted in the ground; and contrariwise, the distant elephant looks like a stand of four palm trees. The description here alternates between two words in particular, used with varying syntax: *ātā* “coming” and *kharā* “standing”, juxtaposing the moving and the stationary: to a Hindi learner the passage might read like an exercise in participles. Soon, Raghuvar Prasad’s fantasy seems suddenly closer to reality when the mahout stops at the roadside — for tea? for paan or tobacco? surely not to repair a puncture in Hāthī’s foot? — and strikes up a conversation with him. Raghuvar Prasad is invited to take a ride, but he hesitates, unprepared for such drama: “He was afraid of climbing on and off the elephant, though he had never climbed on and off one”; with assiduously precise wording that mirrors Raghuvar Prasad’s fastidious care in his actions, Shukla repeats the verbs (हाथी पर चढ़ने और उतरने का भय उन्हें हुआ जबकि वह चढ़े उतरे नहीं थे) rather than substitute a generalised, superordinate statement (i.e he does not say “though he had never done so”). Shukla’s focus on the small detail of experience constantly comes to the fore, and even such a mundane action as waiting for an auto becomes playful in his account: the auto would not come while he was actually and deliberately *waiting* for an auto, but it might come while he was having a paan; time was something that could be tricked, or at least

one's apprehension of it could be played with and fooled. And even such a routine action as eating a paan would send ripples of causality into future time:

अभी पान के ठेले वाला आदमी रघुवर प्रसाद को इस नजर से देख रहा था कि रघुवर प्रसाद पान खाएँगे । आज पान खा लेंगे तो कल से रोज, रघुवर प्रसाद पान खाते हैं या नहीं की नजर से देखेगा । (p.16)

The man with the paan cart was looking at Raghuvar Prasad to see if he would have a paan. If he has one today, then every day from tomorrow he would look at Raghuvar Prasad with a does-Raghuvar-Prasad-want-a-paan-or-not glance.

This last sentence includes a signature trope in Shukla's style and is found in his poetry also; we are frequently reminded that Shukla the novelist is also a poet. Instead of governing a noun or pronoun as in normal syntax, the possessive *kā/kī/ke* governs an entire clause: रघुवर प्रसाद पान खाते हैं या नहीं की नजर से देखेगा. A similar structure appears twice in a later paragraph, the governed clauses being shown in bold face in this transcription:

हाथी पर बैठे युवा साधु ने रघुवर प्रसाद को **कल उनसे बातचीत हो चुकी थी** के परिचय की दृष्टि से देखा । साधु को रघुवर प्रसाद का नाम नहीं मालूम था । अगर मालूम होता तो देखने के परिचय में **नाम मालूम है** की भी दृष्टि होती । (pp.16-17)

The sadhu riding the elephant looked at Raghuvar Prasad with a we-met-and-talked-yesterday kind of look. The sadhu did not know Raghuvar Prasad's name. If he knew it, his glance would have had an I-know-your-name look too.

A final example of Shukla's brilliantly idiosyncratic style comes in the description of Raghuvar Prasad's ambidextrous blackboard-writing in which the right hand takes over seamlessly from the left midway in the journey across the board. Here too an ordinary scene is elevated into something both touching and humorous: the simple act of writing mathematical problems on a blackboard assumes the fascination of a circus act. But there is no foolish clowning here: Shukla's protagonists are never ridiculed, rather they are allowed to think their thoughts and live their lives with a dignity portrayed with a quiet gentleness reminiscent of that found in R.K. Narayan's Malgudi characters. Comedy abounds, but it is that of the empathetic smile, not the belly-laugh. The transfer of Raghuvar Prasad's chalk from left to right hand is achieved without the students noticing it: and "new students only became aware of it when they became old students; old students became so accustomed to it that they neglected to tell the new ones".

When the elephant appears again the following day, Raghuvar Prasad feels that his fantasy will never become reality: it would be inappropriate to ride to college on a beast of burden or conveyance (*savārī*) that is like a coin that still “exists” but is no longer in currency (एक सिक्का जिसका चलन बन्द है, पर है). The narrative, and hence Raghuvar Prasad himself, ponders the absurdity of riding an elephant like a maharaja in today’s mundane context — as if going to the market to buy vegetables. The pragmatics of such a venture are the basis for a new and richly detailed fantasy, shortly to be transposed into reality when Raghuvar Prasad will indeed ride the once-regal conveyance to his college gate. Through the interplay of the real and the surreal, Shukla achieves a touching, wistful and serious comedy that constantly affirms the priceless value of the ordinary.

