

AGYEYA'S 'SHEKHAR EK JIVANI': THE WESTERN INFLUENCE

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Abstract

S.H. Vatsyayan Agyeya, a pioneer in introducing modern sensibility to the post Chhayawadi Hindi literature, is heavily influenced by Western literary aesthetics, fiction, poetry and ideologies. In his first and most famous novel Shekhar Ek Jivani (Shekhar : A Biography) the influence of the West is sufficiently evident. (This novel has been translated into Bulgarian). When a prominent Indian writer like Agyeya reveals such an acute consciousness of the Western influence in his writing process, it leads to various possibilities. In this article an attempt is made to explore the shades, contradictions and enrichment that is born from this literary union. I have also examined whether the influence of the West on Agyeya leads to assimilation into the mainstream Hindi novel writing or this venture by the author leads to a separate/parallel stream created by subverting the former.

Sachchidananda Hirananda Vatsyayan Agyeya (1911-1987), a pioneer among the Indian writers who introduced the modern sensibility to the post Chhayawadi Hindi literature (1936 onwards), is deeply influenced by Western literary aesthetics, novels, poetry and ideologies. In his first and most famous novel *Shekhar Ek Jivani* (*Shekhar : A Biography*) the influence of the West is sufficiently evident. *Shekhar Ek Jivani* is not a complete novel, its two parts (Part I, 1941, Part II, 1944) being parts of a trilogy whose third part, according to the author, was apparently composed but never show publication. Thanks to a certain climactic episodes which are 'pre-viewed' in the Pravesh section (a kind of prelude) by the execution-waiting hero, one can roughly visualize the pattern that would be executed in the third part.

When Agyeya, the prominent Hindi writer, reveals such an acute and multi-layered consciousness of the Western influence in his writing process, it leads to various possibilities. In this article I have made an attempt to explore the shades, contradictions, and enrichment that is born from this literary union. I have also examined whether the influence of the West on *Shekhar Ek Jivani* leads to assimilation into the mainstream Hindi novel writing or this venture by the author leads to a separate/parallel stream created by subverting the former.

In his Preface (Agyeya, 1975 : 7-12) to the novel, Agyeya makes specific references to T.S. Eliot and Pirandello; and to the literary formulations of other Modernist Western writers like

James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Marcel Proust, Henry James, Lionel Trilling, Dorothy Richardson and Andre Gide.

In the *Pravesh* (Agyeya, 1975 : 15-43) to the novel one notices an obvious influence of existential thinkers like Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Marquis de Sade and others. The mention and influence of civilization-thinkers in the West like Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Leonardo da Vinci, Albert Einstein, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Sigmund Freud, Leon Trotsky and others too is clearly visible. In the novel, besides the influence of Western Modernist novelists mentioned above, several Romantic/lyrical poets like Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Kristina Rossetti, Edna Vincent Millay, Tennyson, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, Keats, Scott are quoted or mentioned at several points to delineate the solitary agony of the three main characters – Shekhar, Shashi and Manika.

Agyeya himself writes about the influence of Romain Rolland's *Jean Christophe* on *Shekhar Ek Jivani*. He, however, does not accept the influence of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* on the novel but considers Bazarov, the nihilist protagonist, to be a strong character (Agyeya, 1960 : 64). In the *Pravesh*, Shekhar, the narrator-hero, talks about nihilists and admires them for their capacity to hatred but he simultaneously condemns them for their incapacity to love. The Western influence on *Shekhar Ek Jivani* is multiple, complex and some time self-contradictory.

In the Preface to *Shekhar Ek Jivani*, Agyeya cautions the reader of his times against the risks of casual or naïveté literary consumption. The novel is not an autobiography; therefore any efforts to read Shekhar as Agyeya would be an error although he declares that the novel's genesis lies in the intense personal experience he went through on a particular night. He confesses that the novel is based on that intense, lucid 'vision' he experienced in that single night although it took him years to articulate and shape that 'vision' into words. All these statements are valuable, considering the possibility of the casual/ naïve readers to misunderstand the very fundamentals of novel genre.

A more interesting aspect of the Preface relates to its tone. Agyeya's tone resembles that of a grand revolutionary. It however reveals something of the god-like-author's ego, who fears that as the innovative artist he might be martyred because of the doubtful comprehensions of his readers. Agyeya appears to be overtly conscious that as a writer steeped in Western aesthetics, he is offering something so new, radical and individualistic, that the Indian readers will need to be initiated into the terms required and appropriate for its appreciation. Agyeya seems to be

apprehensive that as the innovative novelist, well-read in Western art, he is likely to be misunderstood. Therefore the indigenous, Indian readers need to be tutored and corrected in their understanding of the brave-new-novel vis-a-vis the novels by earlier Hindi writers.

Agyeya the theoretician's cautionary words are a mélange of statements made by T. S. Eliot in his famous essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", of the famous one about trusting the tale and not the teller made by D. H. Lawrence, of the several about artist being god-like and impersonal and detached in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Youngman* as well as Joyce's complaint that many readers ignored the 'as a Young Man' of his novel's title, and Proust's insistence that Marcel in *Remembrance of Things Past* is not himself. One is not at all worried by them, except for the fact that soon, within the first few pages of the novel, we discover an identical tone being used by the narrator-hero with regards to an altogether different kind of revolutionary project. In fact, like Agyeya in the Preface, Shekhar in the Pravesha also quotes Eliot's statement about the man who suffers and the artist who creates. Both use 'Sidhi' (achievement) and 'Sutra' (source) identically. Apparently, there is much truth in Agyeya's statement that the 'Vedna' (agony) and 'Anubhuti' (experience) of Shekhar are identical to his own.

Let me elaborate a bit. The Preface posits Agyeya as a Modernist, self-conscious, and revolutionary writer keen to subvert the tradition in order to carve out space for his individual talent. His aestheticism, his commitment to style and form, and his anxiety to differentiate the artist who creates and the man who suffers - all connect him with Western Modernism. In the context of the Hindi novel, such an aesthetic project claims to be examined and appreciated as 'revolutionary' and innovative. This is interesting that most of the critics have followed this forceful dictate of the author in their critical appreciation of *Shekhar Ek Jivani* (Singh 2000 : P. 23-24) .

The hero of *Shekhar Ek Jivani*, too, has literary ambitions but his fate is different. In the absence of the third part of the novel, we can only speculate as to how the confessional book takes shape. Yet there seems to be no harm in speculating that Agyeya has been a Jamesian narrator, recording all that passes through the consciousness of the hero on that fateful night – including his recalls, memories of both voluntary and involuntary kinds, associations, and insights. The suggestion is that Agyeya's narrator is an impersonal but efficient agency recording all that would have become a first-person confessional narrative, if only Shekhar would have

survived and metamorphose into an artist. The method is reminiscent of a book like *Pointed Roof* by Dorothy Richardson and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, although Joyce's narrator is not all that neutral.

Even if we were to leave aside Shekhar's definition/idea of true revolution or a true revolutionary, and his grand claims about a socio-political revolution, there is perfect compatibility between the artistic avant-gardism of Agyeya, the artist, and the aesthetic (including sexual) radicalism of Shekhar, the narrator hero. Both are revolutionary : one achieve this through Modernism, the other through his innovative morality and life-style. Shekhar is a rebel right from childhood; irrespective of whether the inspiration for it comes from Kierkegaard's denunciation of all institutions, from Nietzsche's Nay-saying stance, or from Sade's celebration of cruelty and hatred, or Agyeya's own predilections, his characterization is imbued with rejectionism one associates, say, with Stephen Dedalus's rejection of all given patterns – like family, race, religion – for the sake his authentic vocation. The problem in his case has been the same as in the case of Stephen : the individual finds himself surrounded by all kinds of 'given' nets, and requires all his private, self-developed resources to escape them. Stephen's "silence, exile, cunning" are the inspiration behind Shekhar's project of self-begetting, of begetting an authentic self for himself, although he improvises his own devices. Using Lionel Trilling's term, we can say that he rejects the social concept of sincerity in favour of the individual oriented authenticity.

There is no difficulty in accepting Shekhar as the embodiment of three distinct but inter-related romantic impulses : existentialism, aesthetic modernism, and rebellion. He is a rebel both as an individual and as an artist : as an individual he is existentialist and as an aesthete he is a Modernist. The semiological universe is the same both for Modernism and existentialism, and indeed Modernism has been seen as the "philosophical correlate of existentialism." In fact, now it is also commonly accepted that both existentialism and Modernism are genealogically related to the romanticism of the eighteenth century. Before further discussion into this matter, it is fit to conclude that between Agyeya's decision to garnish his Preface with quotes from Modernists and Shekhar's decision to act like an arch-individualist and romantic-existentialist rebel, there is no contradiction.

The existentialist revolt or rebellion is easily reconciled with individualistic Modernism with its emphasis on the individual talent and the individual's right to define the tradition as he

or she wishes to. Tradition in Modernism is not any objective, universally agreed tradition : it is, in fact, 'selected' by the individual talent, often for the sake of legitimizing its own artistic agenda. To that extent, Agyeya and Shekhar can be seen as closely related, without one resorting to building connections between the personalities. The novel is not Agyeya's autobiography; one should trust the tale only; and Agyeya the man is irrelevant insofar as the text is concerned. One may nevertheless add the observation that Agyeya the author of the Preface is very compatible with the characterization of Shekhar. The claim of objectivity and distance between Agyeya, the writer, and Shekhar, the narrator-hero, remains merely a statement.

The text of the Pravesh section, as it comes to us is an overly edited (occasionally it appears that it is also an unnecessarily over-edited one) text, for not only does Agyeya introduce himself as the imaginative editor of all those thoughts and memories which flitted through his consciousness on the fateful night when he was wrongly led to believe that his end was imminent, but Shekhar also, towards the conclusion of the Pravesh, finds himself divided into two personalities : one of the man who suffers and the other that of the present recorder, an artist of sorts whose swan song the book is going to be.

Such framed narratives are not an unfamiliar phenomenon to a culture which produced, say, the Mahabharata. Yet considering the issue in its overall textual context, the inspiration for introducing the Chinese-box narratives comes from Proust and other Modernist authors (including Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*) rather than from native sources. In itself, this procedure is not problematic. What makes it baffling is the amount of inconsistency and contradictoriness the Pravesh section carries within it. Many, many contradictory positions are picked from Western art and philosophy and, while Agyeya escapes by attributing all of them to the involved hero's state, the hero himself, writing as he is with the benefit of hindsight, does not appear to be bothered about the attitudinal salad he is offering in the name of his painfully-earned wisdom. The idea of revolution itself offers a very strong example of this confusion.

Critics have already noted Agyeya's reception of Romain Rolland and Turgenev (Agrwal, 1971 : 142). Agyeya himself refers to T.S. Eliot's famous essay. The novel, no matter where its inspiration lies, is a typical 'bildungsroman' in that it describes the growth of a self from its beginning to maturity. It is also a 'künstlerroman' in that the self here is an aesthetic self, and the novel reads well as the portrait of an artist as a young man. Joyce's influence is central here, although Agyeya does not admit it. Although it is overdone somewhat, the entire

debate inside Shekhar over which point of view (I, you, or he) to use while writing the narrative is suggestive of self-consciousness associated with Modernism. Equally self-conscious is the issue of objectivity/subjectivity in the Pravesh section : a literary theory is being offered when subjectivity is experienced but observed and recorded with objectivity and neutrality from the outside, as it were. Indeed, the Pravesh section itself looks very modernist and self-conscious in its conception, although unfortunately, like its verbosity, Agyeya's chronological muddle with regard to Shekhar's mother's death, with regard to Shekhar's age take away some glory from it as a formalist artifact. The novel, including the Pravesh section, has many self-reflexive details, including the debate on the point of view, pre-views calculated to rouse the reader's curiosity, fragmentation of chronology, a general feeling that the whole language here is literary, especial, self-referential as distinguished from the metonymic prose. In fact, it has many a reference to the aesthetic activity of Shekhar : he composes a spoof text in childhood, composes poems afterwards, writes stories, and at one point it is suggested that he is writing like mad.

It is probable that the third part was to have Shashi's story as well, the story which must be her confession. In any case, the text is concerned to make us aware that Shekhar has two kind of potentials in him waiting to be realized : the revolutionary and the aesthete. It is not at all accidental that his inspiration, for all its contradictions, is attributed to a single figure namely Shashi. Her laughter inspires him into creativity and her song inspires him into revolution. Shekhar, of course, invokes some other Muse as well, but this must be Agyeya's use of the rather archaic epic convention. Shashi is the effective Muse, and Shekhar begins by formally seeking her permission to remember her. In short, the novel is both about themes and actions and about the processes that have gone into its own making. It is also a self-conscious and self-reflexive text, in that it seeks to influence the reader about the terms most appropriate for its appreciation. It is concerned that the reader should not misread it.

It is at this self-reflexive 'künstlerroman' level that Shekhar appear to be least problematic as a revolutionary. He is a revolutionary artist, in fact quite like Agyeya of the Preface. Like the Stephen Dedalus before him, he is imaginative, observes fine nuances like smile, laughter, and voice tone. Although he does not say much, he is as much against his received literary tradition as against all moral traditions. Stephen rejects his home, Irish politics, progressivism, church and a religious vocation. His growth is in terms of rejections. He is a nay-sayer. At the end, he not only knows that his vocation is literature but also offers his own

versions of literary concepts like pity and terror, three artistic modes, and the importance of objectivity. It is unlikely that Agyeya who knew so much of Nietzsche, Lawrence, Pirandello, Romain Rolland and Turgenev, was not familiar with *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In fact, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* might well have been a conscious model for *Shekhar Ek Jivani*: the latter's inflation-deflation rhythm, its rejectionism, its self-reflexivity, its moving portraiture of a baffled child in the company of adults, its invocation, its point of view, its experiments with chronology – all are there in Joyce. There are important differences, too, and they are symptomatic of Agyeya's 'original' romantic talent.

These differences are worth considering. Joyce presents Stephen as obsessed with the sounds that words make. Words are going to be his chief tool, and he treats them as sacred. There is never an extra word, and stylization, when it occurs, is Joyce's means of pointing to Stephen's, the artist-saint's, immaturity. *Shekhar Ek Jivani*, by contrast, is lavish in its stylization; the prose is lush, metaphors abound, and adjectives are virtually paraded. This kind of verbal promiscuity is entirely Agyeya's own. There is an abandon about the use of language which suggests that words are all Shekhar has, that words become a substitute for, if not an escape from, action. Such exultation in adjectives, purple patches, and colourful adjectives occur at some places in Joyce, but it occurs only as a judgment on Stephen the pretentious aesthete. In Agyeya, there is loss of control over the hero, so that Agyeya is obliged to follow Shekhar. Irony as intellectual control is conspicuous by its absence, in spite of Agyeya's efforts to claim aloofness for him-self. Irony is replaced by sentimentalism, and while in India sentimentalism is not without appeal, it leads to one becoming disillusioned with the text in later years. Sentimentalism is also a problem because proportions are lost, because truth is often covered up under rhetoric. Finally, in the context of the novel's revolutionism, sentimentalism clashes with the hero's characterization as a ruthless, hate-filled revolutionary.

There is no evolvment or growth of Shekhar's character in the novel. Agyeya, in fact, has demonstrated him as a mythic personality by weaving disparate myths of Buddha, Jesus (like Jesus and the three magi, Shekhar's birth is blessed and celebrated by two Buddhist monks), John the Baptist, and Satan. He also contains the powers of chaos – the entire existing order must be exploded. The myth is pompous, inflated and is occasionally comic, as in his effort to privatize the social institution of language as if he had the freedom to use the words the way he decided to. Whether the mythic pretensions appear anomalous or not, they go well with his

youth, unreflective mind, and ingrained romanticism. He builds a grand persona of himself as a latter-day Prometheus, but the basic need in him is to see him-self as unique, heroic, extraordinary. This need disqualifies him from understanding or altering any reality beyond his own and of those few who have the misfortune to come under his spell. Indeed it is likely that others do not exist for him; that Shashi, Sharda, Sheela, Saraswati are all his internal projections. In this sense, too, he is romantic keen to construct his own alternative world better than the one in which he has fallen by accident of birth. This mythic creator goes in harmony with the text as a formalist, imaginative, romantic text – but not as one that hold any meaningful lessons for revolution as a praxis.

Stephen brings no revolutionary pretensions. More modest than Shekhar, he has no desire to be a grand lover or a grand, total revolutionary so that his progress has a consistency about it that is non-available in the case of Shekhar. In fact, it is emphasized in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* that Stephen's devotion to art entails sacrifices of worldly sexual love. He too goes to a brothel, decides to stop going there, but again the fountain fills up and he visits the brothel. Shekhar finds no satisfaction around a brothel – partly because ordinary people throng the place. He instead has love affairs, the more revolutionary because they are either near-incestuous or adulterous, although they are made safe because sexuality here is subliminal and abstract. The lore of romanticism, symbolism and immoralism haunts Agyeya with the result that he can think of sex only in taboo terms.

The point is that all such unconventional desires in Shekhar can be legitimate grist to the mill of his creativity. Even his failures as a reformist, a rebel, a revolutionary, and a political activist can go into the making of the artist. In other words, his failures have been false starts; and eventually, presumably after his failure to act with revolutionaries in the third part, he achieves composure, almost a saintliness, that comes from the discovery of his true vocation. So that, unlike the other aesthete whose name also owes to a saint (Agyeya, 1975 : 77, Part 2), this latter-day Buddha find enlightenment and salvation in art, although by the time the discovery is made, the logic of his former, subversive acts has caught up with him. In any case, as with many Modernist artist-heroes, the end of life is also the recovery of the authentic, aesthetic self, its true begetting. The self in life is facing cancellation – a variation of Keats's "My name is writ on water" occurs here as "My name is writ on the wind" (Agyeya, 1975 : 36, Part 1) – but is at the same time being re-established in art. Shekhar ends up as a solitary aesthete, his composure

presumably grounded in his conviction that art and life are polar opposites. Life like a work of art – has been the creed of much existential aestheticism from Kierkegaard to Sartre.

In this context, Agyeya's acknowledged debt to T. S. Eliot assumes a new significance. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and his statements on the metaphysical poets contain statements which have been converted into revolutionary rhetoric by Agyeya, even though they are chiefly aesthetic in intention. The operation is double : Eliot talks of his 'revolutionary' authors against a literary context, so that tradition is largely literary. Agyeya picks such ideas but since he cannot, or does not, bother about his own tradition in India, he instead yoke them to revolutionism. What Eliot has said of literary phenomena must also be true of revolution everywhere. Shekhar's revolutionary tradition is more eccentric, not just more eclectic, than Eliot's literary tradition. To be precise, Eliot's views on unified and dissociated sensibilities are very accurate descriptions of Shekhar's split personality which from the outside appears contradictory but which gets integrated within his inner being. Like an individual talent in Eliot, Shekhar's revolutionary 'loses' his personality only because he has a personality to lose, in the first place (Agyeya, 1975 : 21, Part 2). For Eliot change in literature is never-ending, for even while tradition alters the talent, the latter also alters it. The revolutionary, too, is not entirely original. In a self-reflexive detail, Shekhar introduces himself as a new, revised, and annotated edition of an ancient text ((Agyeya, 1975 : 37, Part 1). There is no need to stretch this point, but it does not look very unlikely that the inspiration behind Shekhar's revolutionism is less political or social and more literary via Eliot and western literary tradition. In fact, even the choices Shekhar feels he has in techniques of narration are a variation on Stephen Dedalus's three modes – lyrical, epic, dramatic – in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the three modes differing in term of objectivity. Even though neither Agyeya nor Shekhar is objective, both expatiate a great deal on objectivity being essential, exactly as Eliot, Pound and Joyce do.

It is this commitment to art and aestheticism – as opposed to morality, society, institutions, others – that *Shekhar Ek Jivani* at the time of its publication in the beginning of nineteen forties must have aspired to a revolutionary status, and it is safe to argue that in order to make its hero a revolutionary aesthete, the book must have discredited political and revolutionary activity. The issue, like those of reformist parties, must have been debated; just as the value of other institutionalized activities like formal education, marriage, home and community life. The

suggestion would be that Shekhar chooses art only after trying out all available options for his revolutionary energy and finding them disappointing.

Let me conclude. The Preface, the Pravesh and the main text of the novel overtly suggest that Agyeya does not foresee, even remotely, a possibility of assimilation of the Western influence on him/his novel in relation to existing tradition of the Hindi novel. Armed with the rich Western tradition(s) of novel writing, Agyeya does not find the tradition of Hindi/Indian novel writing worthwhile vis-a-vis the Western tradition. Agyeya, in fact, writes *Shekhar Ek Jivani* with an intension to establish a new stream of novel writing. In order to create a space for this new stream he, obviously, tends to subvert the existed tradition.

In one of his critical essays Agyeya has examined certain post-Prem Chand and pre-Independence Hindi novels, that is the period when *Shekhar Ek Jivani* was written, and establishes that novels such as *Terhe Merhe Raste* (1946) by Bhagawati Charan Verma, *Girti Deevarien* (1947) by Upendranath Ashk, *Nirvasit* (1946) by Ila Chandra Joshi, *Deshdrohi* (1943) by Yashpal, Tyagpatra (1937) *Sunita* (1935) by Jainendra gained the significance for which they do not deserve. According to him, these novels gained literary weightage due to their over-emphasis on the form. While explaining the various shortcomings of these novels Agyeya finds 'fault' even in the novels of Prem Chand (Agyeya, 1976 : 92).

Agyeya, one might suggest, has not only borrowed the metaphor/allegory of 'tradition and individual talent' from T.S. Eliot, but the context/location of tradition also comes with it; and the making of the individual talent, eager to carve a place in that tradition, has also been accomplished by the Western aesthetics and creative fervor.

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