Western Influences in 'Agyeya's' *Shekhar Ek Jeevani*

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S H Vatsyayan "Agyeya," a pioneer in introducing modern sensibility to post-Chhayawadi Hindi literature, is heavily influenced by Western literary aesthetics, fiction, poetry, and ideology. In his first and most famous novel *Shekhar Ek Jeevani* (Shekhar: A Biography) the influence of the West is sufficiently evident. The shades, contradictions, and enrichment that is born from this literary union are explored. Also examined is whether the influence of the West on Agyeya leads to assimilation into the mainstream Hindi novel writing, or if this venture by the author leads to a separate/parallel stream created by subverting the former.

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Sachchidananda Hirananda Vatsyayan "Agyeya" (1911–87), a pioneer among Indian writers who introduced modern sensibility to post-Chhayawadi Hindi literature (1936 onwards), is deeply influenced by Western literary aesthetics, novels, poetry, and ideology. In his first and most famous novel *Shekhar Ek Jeevani* (Shekhar: A Biography) the influence of the West is sufficiently evident. *Shekhar Ek Jeevani* is not a complete novel, its two parts (Part I in 1941; Part II in 1944) being parts of a trilogy whose third part, according to the author, was apparently composed but never published. Thanks to certain climactic episodes which are "pre-viewed" in the "Pravesh" section (a kind of prelude) by the execution-awaiting hero, one can roughly visualise the pattern that would follow in the third part.

When Agyeya, the prominent Hindi writer, reveals such an acute and multilayered 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 Jeevani* leads to assimilation into mainstream Hindi novel writing, or if 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 Luigi 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 André Gide.

In the Pravesh (Agyeya 1975: 15–43) to the novel, one notices an obvious influence of existential thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Marquis de Sade and others. The mention and influence of civilisation 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 earlier, several Romantic/lyrical poets like Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti, Edna Vincent Millay, Alfred Tennyson, William Wordsworth, Shelley, George Byron, John Keats, and Walter 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* (1904–12 in 10 volumes) on *Shekhar Ek Jeevani*. He, however, does not accept the influence of Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1862) 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 for hatred, but he simultaneously condemns them for their incapacity to love. The Western influence on *Shekhar Ek Jeevani* is multiple, complex, and sometimes self-contradictory.

In the Preface to *Shekhar Ek Jeevani*, Agyeya cautions the reader of his times against the risks of casual or naive literary consumption. The novel is not an autobiography, therefore any effort 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 reader to misunderstand the very fundamentals of the 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 an 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. He 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 his brave-new-novel vis-à-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 the artist being god-like and impersonal and detached as in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) 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* (1922–31) 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 Pravesh 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 a 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 Jeevani* (Singh 2000: 23–24).

The hero of *Shekhar Ek Jeevani* 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 metamorphosed into an artist. The method is reminiscent of a book like *Pointed Roof* (1915) by Dorothy Richardson and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), 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 sociopolitical 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 achieves this through modernism, the other through his innovative morality and lifestyle. 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 characterisation is imbued with rejectionism one associates, say, with Stephen Dedalus's rejection of all given patterns—like family, race, religion—for the sake of 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.

A Rebel

There is no difficulty in accepting Shekhar as the embodiment of three distinct but interrelated 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 18th 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 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 legitimising 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 characterisation 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.

Growth of a Self

Critics have already noted Agyeya's reception of Romain Rolland and Turgenev (Agarwal 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. Though 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 artefact. 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 kinds of potentials in him waiting to be realised: 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 appears 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 naysayer. 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 Jeevani*: 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 stylisation, when it occurs, is Joyce's means of pointing to Stephen's, the artist–saint's, immaturity. *Shekhar Ek Jeevani*, by contrast, is lavish in its stylisation; 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 they occur only as a judgment on Stephen the pretentious aesthete. In Agyeya, there is a 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 himself. 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 characterisation as a ruthless, hate-filled revolutionary.

A Mythic Personality

There is no evolvement 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 privatise the social institution of language as if he had the freedom to use the words the way he decided to. Whether the mythic pretentions appear anomalous or not, they go well with his youth, unreflective mind, and ingrained romanticism. He builds a grant persona of himself as a latter-day Prometheus, but the basic need in him is to see himself 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 a 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 lesions for revolution as a praxis.

Stephen brings no revolutionary pretentions. 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 emphasised 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 finds 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 up such ideas but since he cannot, or does not, bother about his own tradition in India, he instead yokes them with 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: Part 2, p 21).

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: Part 1, p 37). 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, epical, 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 based on this commitment to art and aestheticism—as opposed to morality, society, institutions, others—that *Shekhar Ek Jeevani* at the time of its publication in the beginning of 1940s 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 institutionalised 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 the 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-à-vis the Western tradition. Agyeya, in fact, writes *Shekhar Ek Jeevani* 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 existing 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 Jeevani* was written, and establishes that novels such as *Terhe Merhe Raste* (1946) by Bhagwati Charan Verma, *Girti Deewarein* (1947) by Upendranath Ashk, *Nirvasit* (1946) by Ila Chandra Joshi, *Deshdrohi* (1943) by Yashpal, *Tyagpatra* (1937), *Sunita* (1935) by Jainendra Kumar gained significance which they do not deserve. According to him, these novels gained literary weightage due to their overemphasis 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 Eliot, but the context/location of tradition that also comes with it, and the making of individual talent, eager to carve a place in that tradition, has also been accomplished by the Western aesthetics and creative fervour.

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