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**SHEKHAR: A LIFE IN RETROSPECT, AND CONFINEMENT AS A SITE OF METAPHYSICAL
RUMINATIONS**

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ABSTRACT

Agyeya is the pen name of S.H. Vatsyayan, a modernist Hindi writer who was imprisoned by the British by an act of dissent. Agyeya's magnum opus *Shekhar: Ek Jeevani* (*Shekhar: A Life*) is a reflection of the author's revolutionary tendencies as mirrored by the titular main character Shekhar. The author attempts to record even the minutest vibration of Shekhar's impressions, as he looks back in retrospect while in prison. Shekhar straddles on the path of complete awareness, and the novel is peppered with ruminations of metaphysical and abstract nature. This paper will endeavour to showcase the aforementioned aspect in the revolutionary and political prisoner Shekhar's life.

Keywords: freedom, struggle, independence, prison, hindi, dissent

Sachchidananda Hirananda Vatsyayan, of the pen name Agyeya (the Unknowable), is a pioneer in modernism in Hindi literature with a knack for experimentation in his works. *Shekhar: Ek Jeevani* (*Shekhar: A Life*) is his magnum opus which was published in two volumes in 1941 and 1944 respectively. The two volumes in the work form a tapestry of unique experiences embedded through multihued threads. Agyeya started writing *Shekhar: Ek Jeevani* when he was imprisoned for his rebellious activities against the British colonial government, in particular, for his participation in the attempt to help Bhagat Singh, a leader of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army, to escape from jail in 1929. Agyeya wrote the first draft of the novel after being arrested, where he contemplated writing about his life before he would be executed. Therefore, we can see the parallels across the writer's and the subject's life. The subject of his much introspection, who takes the corporal shape of Shekhar, undergoes a lot of metaphysical ponderings across the breadth of the novel.

The novel is an introspective one that looks at the inside of the torments that Shekhar undergoes throughout his life including the tumultuous phase wherein he was to be hanged. It is a psychological exploration of the inner psyche of the titular character as his being is coaxed into formation. He faces existential questions regarding his life and subsequent death, which has a modernist leaning as there is no recourse to religion according to Shekhar.

It takes the form of both bildungsroman and kunstlerroman. The former because it describes the growth of a self from its beginning to maturity and the latter because the self here is an aesthetic self, and the novel reads well as the portrait of an artist as a young man. *Shekhar: A Life* is the progression of Shekhar's soul

in the metaphysical quest for perfect beauty. For this purpose, the titular main character travels across the latitudes and longitudes of colonial India. The novel also has multilingual references along with references to Western literary writers and cultural concepts. Every character in the novel is multi-faceted and composite. The novel is narrated in retrospect mode, in a non-linear format with snippets of vivid flashbacks and memory produced haphazardly, a modernist technique by all means. Shekhar's imagination is powerful and his sentence poetic.

There is a power in pain that can transform a person in torment into a visionary. A person becomes all-seeing through the intensity of suffering, that is, he becomes transcendental through agony.

Grave hopelessness makes one dispassionate and thereby readies one to be a visionary. (Agyeya xii)

The determinism factor is entrenched in the beginning of the novel wherein the author makes the statement that revolutionaries aren't made, they are born. He believes in the case of a personal destiny. Shekhar tries to understand the formulae of his destiny, to understand life itself. Shekhar tries to seek and strive for something greater than himself. A revelation or vision comes through in the end. The novel is a record of one individual's personal suffering. It is a reflection of that individual's life struggles. Not merely anecdotal, but it is totally reminiscent of one's personhood and sentimentality. Shekhar is trying to find his place in the collective experience of humanity. Shekhar is aware, awoken, independent and deeply honest- all signs of a revolutionary.

It is said in the beginning of the novel that people make their own bonds, yet their feet are bound in shackles. This signifies prison imagery wherein the human is in chains. The prologue begins with image of the gallows and man's ruthless enterprise to snuff out the rare life form through capital punishment. He was wrongfully accused of betraying the British government and arrested on false charges that resulted in him serving ten months in prison. He was levied the harshest punishment of facing the gall, but later released on vague accounts. This work is told from the point of view of Shekhar, a sensitive soul who paints rich imagery while describing his various encounters in life.

He remembers the purity and sanctity of his childhood activities. He remembers his sister's song awoke in him a certain aggression or anguish that overpowered him and left him in a trance embodying wild dreams of heroism and valour, enough circumspection to power his revolutionary identity. In another instance, a seed of self-doubt began to germinate when he recalled his mother denigrating him as untrustworthy. The natural scenery of his childhood is described with mesmerizing dexterity. The child himself was entranced by the nakedness of beauty and sought it everywhere. The child Shekhar was very introspective and quite mature for his age. He was capable of deep contemplation in his early days as he proclaimed to his father that without evil, good cannot exist.

He believed in rational hatred, an epoch-changing power that had the ability for creation. He treads the thin line between insanity and sanity.

I think that although conventional wisdom seems ready to accept the idea that every human impulse stems from a material need, I believe instead that humans have a metaphysical force within them, some kind of natural, genuine inspiration. Our biggest problem is to resolve these two mutually opposed principles. (Agyeya 25)

An encounter with a straw lion at a museum terrifies tiny Shekhar. After realizing the vacuousness of the threat, the child learned that fear comes from being afraid. It made him overconfident and destructive, enough that on future occasions he was punished for cutting through those artificial fears. The author remarks that society cannot exist without fear. So, he was a menacing antidote to conformity from the beginning. During his later life, he was awarded punishment for disregarding the greatest fear- the fear of the law. Yet, Shekhar the adult laughed at his pitiful and imprisoned condition victoriously.

The author meted out the character of Shekhar as a victor as reflected in the following lines:

Life truly belongs to those who don't follow the rules but understand the basic impulse behind the rules and create rules for themselves accordingly. (44)

Shekhar rebelled against formal education resulting in him being homeschooled. He was of the opinion that education destroyed the inherent make-up of man and rendered him a mere facsimile. That is not to say that he lacked in intellect, but that there was no force in the world to direct the course of that intellect. He exercised his own will and his mind was untamable. Shekhar had wanted a confrontation with God citing several misfortunes like death and hunger in his surroundings. He then questioned the nature of justice and benevolence of God. He began to ruminate whether punishment too was a part of God's will in the wheel of determinism.

The memory of the captive pet birds was likened to his present state in confinement. Even during his formative years, the notion of freedom, even that of birds, was important to Shekhar. He imagined an alternate world of the birds, where freedom, faith and love reign. He escaped mentally to that heaven often in his isolation. He hungered for independence, which found a metaphor in the "jungle", where he wandered often. Time and again Shekhar was shocked by inexpressible beauty and how it makes the energy of life flow through him. Sometimes his observations are so esoteric and mature, that we lose sight of the young age of Shekhar. Shekhar in his formative years, lounged in the ethereal lap of Kashmir and every memory of each incident seemed to have a lesson to teach.

Shekhar was briefly inspired by the Gandhian swadeshi movement which he later stopped following owing to his inherently dissident make-up that refused to adhere to non-violence in the face of grave political opposition.

Shekhar was of the opinion that everyone was lying to him, which further fueled his desire to know the truth. This truth he often found while reveling in the sheerness of beauty. We are temporally brought back to the present crunch of the prison. A loose collage of memories overwhelms him in the face of death, where he is to be hung in the gallows. He fears death and its heartless indifference forces him to yell at the confining bars of the prison that he wants to live.

His first budding romantic ensnarement was with the southern Indian Sharda, who grew to be a muse-like form to him for most of his adolescent life. Later after coming to know the real meaning of the lines of the *Gita Govinda* and coming across the book *What All Married People Should Know*, he felt as if bombarded by the gaping truth and knowledge, the sin of the body. After reading lines remarking the strength of the truth bearers, he realized that he had indeed crossed an ocean and came to be a complete and free man, yet his journey was still not complete.

In the fourth chapter of the first book, Shekhar comes to be imbued with the materialist aspect of culture and society, which he was restricted from, before coming to college. He began to ponder on the differences of poverty and wealth. He was a well to do Brahmin secluded and secure in the riches of his forefathers. Seeing the caste-based discrimination meted out against the lower castes such as separate hostels for Brahmins and the untouchables brushed Shekhar the wrong way. He so vehemently opposed the throngs of caste rigidity that he went on to live in the hostel for the untouchables. Earlier in his childhood days too he had seen how the neighbour Phula, her widowed lower caste mother and the cook were all given baser treatments owing to their low status of birth.

Shekhar was a reserved man, an introvert some might say, who might be half-wild and half-ascetic. He also had a bout of self-sabotaging and self-destructive behaviour dwelling on aimless wanderings and perfect vagabondage, such as his random and often visits to the beach just to experience serenity or loitering unknowingly to the brothels where he pondered on the virtues of morality.

After his estrangement from Sharda, life designed Shashi to be his muse. Shashi has been compared to a whetstone that has sharpened Shekhar's awareness, and made him feel unashamed and harness strength to stand exposed before the world. She was his partner in solidarity who supported him in arrangements of mending the nation. Shashi becomes a memory after her death, creating longing in him nevertheless.

His was not a quest for truth, knowledge nor freedom, but he was the first detective on the quest for beauty and this quest wreaked havoc in his life. He just could not find solace anywhere, so he travelled and sought new adventures to quench his growing thirst for ethereal knowlegde. He was a sojourner with a

dissatisfied soul who could not even languish in the perfect beauty of Kashmir after his momentary return. He lived in the real world yet wanted to obtain something from the metaphysical space of the otherworldly.

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