
**Moral Accountability and Ethical Crossroads in the Cultural Mosaic
in *Yashpal's Divya***

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Abstract

The intrigues of cultural disparity in the republican state of Sagal accommodated a society, structured by tradition and driven by transition. A blend of Indo – Greek culture, shadowed by slave trading as well as nuances rising out of surfacing Buddhism covers the fabric of *Divya*. The paper elucidates how culture influences one's thoughts and choices resulting in consequences which in turn bend, mould and topple nations. Yashpal's politically aware characters offer social commitment besides contending ideologies through which one can decipher how with freedom comes accountability and how our karmic actions always manifest themselves in the face of destiny. The subjectivity of justice by the council, manipulation of power through strategic alliances by Preshtha, the valuation of classical dance forms by courtesan Mallika and her pupils, the historical relevance from Menander to Pushyamitra causing the upheaval of yet impending transition, the struggle of lone women devoid of male guardianship like Dhata and Divya, the scenic beauty and turbulence of Mathura, the extravagant details of Hindu traditions, turbans, yellow sacred Janu threads, sandalwood tikas and kardhani adorning the Sagal people along with the Greek minority in their plumed hats, adopted Aryan dresses and loose trousers participating alongside them. The influence of Charvak principles through Marish, the direct proportionality of deteriorated economy singularly holding King Milinda accountable for the crippling of armed forces of Sagal; all encompasses the novel. It serves as an uncompromising realistic mirror of the first century BCE society of north western regions, particularly Sialkot lodged in the cultivation of Gandharva art style and the last trace of doomed practice of Buddhism school of philosophy with the emergence of Pushyamitra establishing the Shung dynasty.

Keywords: Power politics, Historical, Hinduism, Buddhism, Gender polarity, Slavery

Introduction

Yashpal Singh is an innovator of ideological frictions, writing the tales of politically and socially conscious characters who pose as a looking glass of the contemporary society as well as an assessment of the evolved civilisation of Indian history. The social commitment in his writings and an objective lens to the events affecting the people forms an evaluative base to assess the cultural and ideological metamorphoses throughout centuries in reference to his novel *Divya*.

The variability of culture is embedded not only in its traditions but also in economy, linguistics, education as well as its aesthetics. The government too, influences the attitudes and the social organisation of the ever-transitional society. The novel quite interestingly portrays the amalgamation of the Greco-Aryan, Hinduist, and the surfacing Buddhist lifestyles. As Raymond Williams puts it, “The dominant culture is usually in the majority and

achieves its dominance by controlling social institutions such as communicational systems, educational institutions, artistic expressions, laws, political processes and businesses.” The dominant culture establishes the norms and stratifications in the region furthering the psychological influence on its adherents. Thus, it becomes a force which drives people’s choices and forms the basis of ethical and moral values and the outward experiences of the society. It becomes the normative scale on which one’s accountability is measured. Culture is a testimony of contesting Idealism and Realism which hides the hegemony and hypocrisies of the ruling superstructures.

The town of Sagal was marked by a largely homogeneous Hindu way of life as the ‘dominant’ culture which in a true oppositional sense, diluted the ‘residual’ Greek; wherein it witnessed the adoption of an Indian way of living by the remaining Greeks that were left behind to rule over the occupied north-western lands of the Indian subcontinent. The ‘emerging’ widespread of Buddhism in the Northern regions of India after King Ashoka became its representative, could also be seen throughout the novel.

The work leaves out certain native words untranslated which adorns the cultural vitality within the text. ‘*Pushkarni*’ (1) is the lake of Lotuses on the banks of which all cultural events of Sagal are organised. Devi Mallika an esteemed Laureate of Art and illustrious court dancer held the festival of spring ‘ in the month of *Chaitra*’ (1) i.e. first month of the Hindu calendar, on the Lake’s bank. The diverse complexity of integrated cultures can be identified by their distinctive countenance and traditions such as neck decorated with ‘*rudraksh* beads and yellow sacred thread, white *dhotis* and *turbans* of gold thread, ritualistic mark of *tilak*’ (2) worn by the Brahmins; peacock feathered *Sari* flanked by the Hindu women of nobility with

waist encircling girdles, ‘*Chandrika*’ (3) circular-shaped ornaments, ‘red *Alakta* paste’ (3) painted on the feet of women; moustaches of the Kshatriyas pointed upwards like a scorpion and ‘*Uttariya*’ (6), an Indian scarf hanging from their shoulders; Rich merchants and business magnates wore conspicuously expensive clothes, the Republican Council representing the power seats mainly of upper caste nobles and rich merchants wore saffron. Most Greek aristocrats had adopted the dress of *Aryans*, showcasing the assimilation of the Greeks into the Indian tradition. Only a scattered few remained as the devout followers of Indo-Bactrian culture earlier introduced with the invasion and acquisition of the north-western provinces by King Alexander.

The mentioned routes of *Uttarpath* connoted to east-west route of northern India from Sindh to the Gangetic plains connected the trade routes into the South Asian subcontinent and the Kingdom of Magadh too, policed the region through this route. The slave traders followed this route after catching the slaves from the Kashmir regions.

“Pratool had imported one hundred and thirty-five slaves, both men and women, from Dakshinpath. There were Greeks, Kashmiris, some fair-complexioned slaves from Uttarpath, but the majority of them were female slaves from the newly conquered territory of Darva. After every battle on the frontiers, there would be a boost in the trade in slaves.” (pg. 139)

Dakshinpath from Mathura to Vindhyan Mountains witnesses the merchant dominance and the slave transportation from the south into and out of the Plains. The ancient measure of distance *yojan* i.e. roughly thirteen kilometres, was also popular among the common people.

To mark the influence of Buddhist faith primarily towards the end of the Mauryan Empire was evident by the presence of *dharma-chakra* symbol which gained accepted in the Hindu community as well. The symbol represents the path to enlightenment and ultimately, *Nirvana*. It is also often denoted as a reflection of *Sudarshan chakra* wielded by *God Vishnu*. *Rajasuya yagya* even gets worthy mention in reference to the indisputable victory and sovereignty of Pushya Mitra Sunga when he performed regicide by killing Vrihadratha officially putting an end to the Mauryan rule.

“Commander Pushya Mitra was none other than an incarnation of Kartikeya, ‘the invincible commander of the gods’, who had taken birth to rid Jambu Dweep of the lowly ‘Sudra kings of the Mauryan Dynasty’ and of the atheistic Buddhist religion, and it was for this sacred mission that the great Brahmin sage, [Patanjali, performed for him the holy Rajyasuya yajna and rendered him invincible.” (43)

The Indian musical instrument *mridang*, *veena*, flute, tambourine provide a classical native rhythm to the important events of the story. The sweet and gentle *Shataji raga* notes were sung by Devi Mallika and her pupils emanating the Hindustani classical music to entertain the audience of Sagal. When the dance routines were always begun with the recital of the *Raas dance* followed by an allegorical dance appeasing *God Indra* and her pupils personating the parched Earth. Madulika presented the dance on a maiden's rendezvous, Kusumsena performing the famous apsara *Urvashi's* love plaint and finally Divya enacting the story of *Marali Swan* and her surrender accompanied by her guru Devi Mallika.

An utmost respect was paid to *Goddess Saraswati* associated with wisdom, art of musing and learning. Hence, the performers of the ancient India were highly revered and stood high in social stature. In the dance contest, the victor was crowned as the daughter of Saraswati to honour the art form. These dance courtesans also laid the foundations of entertainment palaces booming with gatherings of noble blood who actively sought drunk evenings and informal conferences. In the background of such mosaic of cultural multiplicity rose the story of Divya.

Divya

As the title showcases, the character of Divya holds the central plot of the story and how her actions and choices, bends and transforms the narratives of other characters connected to her in some manner. On her birth, she was bestowed with the luck of wealth and a family who loved her dearly but she also was fated to face the real world waiting for her with claws of hypocrisies and precepts of inhumanity. Divya was born to the most prestigious and respected clan of Sagal in the house of the Chief Justice, Mahapandit Dev Sharma. Apple of her Great grandfather's eyes, she was the first girl child born after three successive generations. She was often called the storehouse of beauty and talent thus was raised with extra care and reverence. However, this shielding and alienation from the harsh dynamics of the world proved to be a curse for her. Divya's parents had both died shortly after her birth and thus, except for her Dhata and her friend Chhaya, on one was around to monitor her actions or teach her the ways of this world. As she grew up, she started exhibiting a penchant for dancing and music and soon became Devi Mallika's favourite pupil. The reigning dancer after observing and acknowledging her potential often praised Divya as a component of Saraswati herself.

On the day of 'Madha Parva', she won the contest and received the garland of Daughter of Saraswati from an elder named Ganapati. On the same day, the competition of weapon skills and combat among the newly returned *Kumars* also took place with the

intention of appointing the worthy into Sagal's chief army positions. These talented youngsters had completed their training in Shastras and weaponry from the then international centres of learning, Taxila and Nalanda universities. It indicated the academic prosperity of the ancient Magadh Empire attracting the able to come and partake in the Indian learning system.

The presence of social hierarchy and prejudices also pillared the decisions of the characters. When Prithusen was declared the best swordsman of Sagal in the event following his victory in the contest, he faced insults at the hands of Rudradhir being called the son of a slave and deemed unfit to lift the palanquin of Divya because of his caste. The stigma of the inferiority and impure blood of the lower classes had put them on the periphery of the social vehicles of power. During the reign of King Milinda, he was greatly influenced by the maxims of Buddhism and consequently adapted the faith and ordered for the release of the slaves in his Indo-Greek kingdom. He provided each of the newly independent slaves with sufficient money to restart their lives as self-sustaining entities. Milinda then renounced his throne to become a monk and transferred the ruling power to Mithrodus, his Commander-in-chief. As a consequence of setting the slaves free of serfdom, the treasury of the palace was emptied. This directly impacted the funding of the army and as it is noted in the novel, Sagal constantly faced external military struggles with the ruler Kendrashtha, civil war lead by Rudradhir and lastly the impending arrival of Pushya Mitra on the borders of Sagal.

Mithrodus inspired by the republican administration of eastern Jambu Dweep provinces styled his reign into a republic State. Sagal underwent a divisional change of power with Mithrodus as the hierarchical president, the Republican Council of the aristocratic upper caste clans and leaders of merchant guilds who influenced the laws of Justice and feudatory chief lords who held prominent positions in the Council.

Out of the freed slaves was a shrewd man of foresight and diligence named Preshtha. While most of the former slaves rotted away their money, Preshtha invested in breeding and rearing of pedigree horses and went on to establish his own horse-trading business. To raise his social position, he married a poor brahmin girl and purchased slaves into his new built palaces imitating the nobility. Preshtha is a pivotal character in Divya who having lived a deteriorating life understands practicality and the manipulating structures that run the country behind the ruler. He knows in order to gain fame he needs to ally with the greeks. When Prithusen returns victorious and having earned favouritism as the best warrior, Preshtha arranges for a marital alliance with the president's granddaughter, Seero.

For Prestha, "Woman is not the fulfilment of life, but only a means to fulfil life."

During the state of emergency when Sagal enters into war with the Kendras, Preshtha becomes Mithrodus' right hand and succeeds in appointing his son as the

Commander-in-chief of Sagal.

The novel also presents an anti-romantic tone when one looks at the sacrilegious union of unaware Divya and drunk Prithusen. Through them, the consequences leading to a pregnant maiden without the recognition and support of the father, the unacceptance of society and shame attached to Divya's family and how her one decision led to her fall from the palace to slavery to a courtesan hall. Divya initially felt proud and elated to be pregnant with Prithusen's son, a man she dearly loved.

"In every noble family of the Aryas there are several wives. Can't Seero accept other women as wives of th Arya?"

Upon hearing the news of Seero being betrothed to Prithusen she is forced to languish alone and ultimately leaves her home for the streets to find an ashram or a safe haven for herself and the child. This is the first incident that accelerates her latter disgraces. Divya is deceived on the pretext of sanctuary and sold to Pratool, a slave trader. The story covers the distance from Sagal of Madra republic to Mathurapuri, circling back to Sagal again. Due to her regional roots, she is named Dara, after the gotra of Jat clan and begins her as a slave in the house of a brahmin. The custom of feeding the master's child before feeding one's own tormented her when Shakul, her child is taken away until she feeds her mistress' son from her own breasts. It was

The commentary on Buddhist hypocrisy is also underlined when Dara is refused at the gates of the monastery because of the lack of a male's authorisation. Only a prostitute woman was considered independent. Here, Yashpal questions the ethics of the seemingly accepting Buddhist philosophy. Prithusen too, accepts the eightfold path to escape from the violence of war and to save his life from a vengeful Rudradhir. Cheebuk, a buddhist monk guided Prithusen, "The cause of enmity lay only in the mind, in the belief that they are your enemies. power is the cause not of fearlessness but of fear in others and in yourself."

To run away from being enlisted in the army during wars, many families sought asylum into Buddhist monasteries flowing with the patronage of the wealthy and the liberal rulers of the states.

The novel also opens up about suicide and the sheer hopelessness of Divya's conditions with a silver lining of rejuvenation of life for the character. She attempts to drown herself in the river Yamuna. Though she is saved, her child loses his life. Divya now, is reincarnated as Anshumala in the palace of Ratnaprabha, royal dancer of Mathurapuri and former pupil of Devi Mallika. Because of her dancing skills she attains swift acclaim and developed an impassive and frigid attitude to the world. Marish saw, "Divya's face, bereft of hope, overwhelmed with grief, devoid of interest, lingered before his eyes. Divya in her

white clothes, looking the very picture of sorrow, sank deep into Marish's heart." (180)

Marish is a sculptor, atheist and philosopher who follows the philosophy of Charvak principles and refuses to be subservient to anyone. He is treated as an outcaste by the society because of his seemingly unethical views on the moral preachings and social structure of the society. While he was often punished by the Chief Justice due to his capacity of offending the public, he was also welcomed in the House of Justice for open discussions on various subjects without any imposed judgement. The debates of Marish lay down Yashpal's views on the social order. It can even be designated that Marish is a manifestation of the author himself. His perception on death, "The chain of existence or the collective life is unending, even immortal, so far as man's understanding can go. Death too is a part of that process of change. It is nothing but the arrival of the new in place of the old." and his counsel to Anshumala on her misleading belief on the independence of a prostitute woman; "A prostitute is only a medium for rousing desire, but her own desire in consequence remains unfulfilled." Since, her independence becomes an object of enjoyment for the community, but not by herself. He also advocated the contentious opinion that eternal fulfilment of womanhood lies with the completion through primeval creation of life. For him, the suppression of natural instincts of procreation hindered the real responsibilities of humanity. For this reason, Marish only offers his lifelong companionship to Divya without any formal conventional customs.

Lastly, the subjectivity of justice and variability of laws is also portrayed through discourses of Mahapandit Dev Sharma with Divya. He was of a reflective bent of mind and held a liberal view that, "The wise ones say the same things in many different ways." In his Hall, there was always room for investigating the absolute truth beyond the world of appearance. Religious rituals, scriptures, logic of the vedic concepts; the cycle of birth after birth of Buddha.

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