LANDSCAPES OF DECAY AND HIERARCHY IN RAAG DARBARI: ECOCRITICAL, CASTE, AND NETWORK ANALYSES

Dr Anju Gurawa,

Department of English, University of Delhi, Delhi-110007.

ABSTRACT

Raag Darbari (1968), Shrilal Shukla's satirical portrait of post-Independence rural North India, fuses environmental imagery with social critique to anatomize how institutions decay in tandem with landscapes. This article offers a close reading across three integrated frameworks. First and foremost, an ecocritical analysis argues that wells, wastelands, and failed "development" schemes materialize corruption and environmental injustice in Shivpalganj, where stagnant water and treeless plains figure a poisoned public sphere (Shukla 202). Second, a critical race and caste lens demonstrates how caste hierarchy, colorism, and spatial segregation—especially Chamrahi—are satirically naturalized, even as the novel ironizes constitutional ideals of equality (Shukla 102). The reading is placed in dialogue with Dalit literature to register differences of perspective and voice (Valmiki 25). Third, a simulated digital-humanities network analysis models character interactions to show how a hub-and-spoke patronage graph centered on Vaidyaji clarifies the mechanics of influence and exclusion (Moretti 90). Across sections, textual evidence is mobilized to show that Shukla's satire prefigures later debates on environmental justice, caste power, and the data-driven mapping of literary society. The conclusion reflects on implications for Indian literary criticism and rural studies, proposing a methodological synergy between close reading and computational imagination (Anjaria 4797).

INTRODUCTION

Among the most enduring Hindi novels of the late twentieth century, *Raag Darbari* offers neither pastoral solace nor nationalist uplift. Instead, it dissects a village polity whose institutions—school, co-operative, panchayat, and police—have been captured by cynical actors and hollowed out by procedural farce (Shukla 32). In Gillian Wright's translation, the work's tonal brilliance lies in how "the smell of the earth" is inseparable from the stink of graft: the realism is insistently material, yet persistently allegorical (Wright viii). This article advances an interdisciplinary account of the novel through three coordinated lenses.

First, an ecocritical approach reads landscapes as both literal environments and moral indices. The novel's famously "improved" well turns into a gutter of disease after a wall blocks runoff; trenches dug for afforestation become latrines; on the wasteland, a solitary banyan stands "as if raping the whole wilderness"—each scene yokes ecological failure to bureaucratic predation (Shukla 202). Second, a critical race/caste framework attends to the way caste habitus scripts posture, speech, and spatial order: Chamrahi's segregated geography survives abolitionist law; ritual greetings and patron–client performances reproduce rank; electoral calculus reduces citizenship to bloc identity (Shukla 102; Shukla 203). Placing Shukla alongside Dalit testimony foregrounds very vididly and perceptibly

the difference between satiric distance and subaltern voice (Valmiki 26). Third, a digital-humanities simulation translates the novel's social world into a character network, illuminating centrality, brokerage, and peripherality as structural correlates of corruption (Moretti 88).

Methodologically, the paper synthesizes close reading with recent debates in environmental humanities and caste studies, while demonstrating how computational metaphors—graphs, topics, sentiment—can sharpen interpretive claims without supplanting textual analysis (Anjaria 4796). The wager then become: that *Raag Darbari* not only depicts a polity in decline but also models how ecology, caste, and networked power co-produce that decline.

ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS: THE ECOLOGY OF CORRUPTION

The *Five-Year Plan* well in Shivpalganj is emblematic: a masonry wall and commemorative pillars convert a functional rain-catchment into a stagnant sump. "Now that the wall had been built, water from outside had ceased to flow in and water from inside had begun to flow out," the narrator observes, before deadpanning that the "cool, soft and fragrant" water, "standing stagnant in a large gutter," invites villagers to sample not merely worms but "a little malaria and filaria" (Shukla 202). The scene is more than a comic inversion. As infrastructure becomes monumental, hydrology is reorganized against the village: the device meant to store water bleeds it; the public inscription accrues prestige while the commons accrue pathogens. The well literalizes a theory of "developmentality" by which visibility supplants ecology, and display supplants function (Sharma 15).

The novel's wasteland dramatizes a second arc: land reform to enclosure. Land once donated under Bhoodan reverts to elite capture; afforestation trenches are dug, babool seeds sown, and nothing grows—except excrement, as the trenches become "public conveniences," converting a forest scheme into a household waste regime (Shukla 147). The satiric charge cuts two ways: at the level of project design (imported templates, absent maintenance) and at the level of commons governance, where micro-corruption metabolizes public goods into private rents (Shukla 147). The image of a banyan "raping the whole wilderness," rooted and dominating oppresively and vigorously, turns botanical iconography into a figure for feudal endurance, within an ostensibly developmental frame (Shukla 147). In each case, the environment is not a backdrop but an archive: it records the inscription of policy as material disorder.

Read against Indian environmental history, the scenes anticipate arguments about environmental injustice: degradation maps onto social vulnerability, with those least resourced bearing the greatest burden (Sharma 23). In village space, water and sanitation encode status; access routes, drainage, and proximity to polluted ponds stratify exposure. Chamrahi's token "Gandhi platform," spruced with new bricks and cement, quickly becomes another leisure surface for the idle, its commemorative surplus mocking the deficit of basic services (Shukla 202). This satiric ecology also reimagines *climate* as social atmosphere: an air of stagnation, fever, and rot saturates the narrative; even attempts at contemplative withdrawal (Rangnath by the well) yield only vistas of failed reform (Shukla 147). The ecology of corruption, then, is twofold: ecosystems are damaged by patronage rationalities, and political climates normalize damage as the "natural" condition of public life.

Finally, Shukla's water comedy anticipates the politics of water rights central to the caste struggle. The tale of the prince revived by being called "the son of a water-carrier" parodies purity logic and the social ontology of insult: to be named as springing from the "wrong" aquifer is to be struck to the core (Shukla 145). That the medical cure is a caste slur anatomizes a world where hydro-purity underwrites human hierarchy. The ecocrticality and its entailing lessons are then precise and incisive: control over water infrastructures, sources, walls,

conduits, mirrors control over persons and his comedy, therefore, preserves an indictment: institutional design that ignores local ecologies amplifies social domination and hegemony (Shukla 202).

CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND CASTE: SCRIPTS OF HIERARCHY, SCENES OF SUBSERVIENCE

Shukla's narrator, feigning detachment, writes that "Chamar is the name of a caste which is considered Untouchable, and an Untouchable is a kind of biped. Before the enforcement and codificaction of the Indian Constitution, people didn't used to touch," before concluding that the Constitution is a "poem," whereas untouchability is an "article of faith" (Shukla 102). The cruel joke, delivered in textbook cadence, signals the failure of law to re-script habitus. Read through a critical race/caste lens, the passage encodes three claims: (1) caste is reproduced in mundane definitions; (2) abolitionist legalism remains rhetorical without social enforcement; and (3) space is segregated—Chamrahi's siting records a history of instrumentalization ("very good with their lathis") rather than inclusion (Shukla 102).

The electoral sphere is no exception. Ruppan Babu's tutorial on winning—"By the Mahipalpur Method"—proceeds via parables of time manipulation and hashish-fueled sanctimony to show how consent is manufactured and procedure gamed (Shukla 203). One episode turns entirely on horology; another enthrones a Brahmin candidate by declaring that God already elected him (Shukla 211). If subjected to critical-race paradigm the novel reveals interest convergence: democratic forms are valued insofar as they can be captured by dominant groups. The joke is the ideology: caste-coded lotteries masquerade as free choice. Even the aphoristic logic—"wherever there is a bus-stand, there's filth"—ironizes the translation of classical inference ("where there is smoke…") into a modern civic tautology, as if public infrastructure presupposed pollution (Shukla 315).

Shukla's micro-ethnography of deference is equally precise. When a low-status supplicant like Langar approaches Vaidyaji, bodily comportment, speech particles, and ritualized abasement perform caste: the client's subservient squat, the honorific "father," the promise to rub one's head on the threshold belong to a script whose author is scripture—and whose stage is the patron's courtyard (Shukla 229). The narrator's caustic aside that "attempts at the eradication of caste" are "romantic gestures" is not quietism; it is a diagnosis of performative reform detached from infrastructures of equality (Shukla 229). What critical race theory names as racialization of space—redlining, environmental sacrifice zones—translates here into caste spatiality: Chamrahi's distance from resources and proximity to filth are not incidental; they are constitutive of hierarchy (Shukla 102).

Placing Shukla next to the Dalit autobiography clarifies differences of voice and angle. In *Joothan*, Om Prakash Valmiki remembers segregated hamlets, contaminated wells, and ponds used as open toilets; he records the bodily revulsion of drinking from wormy water and the rage at being barred from "clean" wells (Valmiki 25). Where Shukla satirizes how constitutional poetry fails to cancel ritual practice, Valmiki testifies to the visceral costs of that failure—shame, sickness, and exclusion. The two are not contradictory: the former maps the ideology of caste in its everyday scenes; the latter centers caste's phenomenology in a Dalit life. Reading them together exposes how language performs rank. Shukla's village idiom naturalizes abuse; colorist descriptors attach to anonymous women burdened by labor; ritual puffery cloaks patronage with saccharine benevolence (Shukla 146). If critical race theory insists on the structural law, policy, and policing, Shukla adds the performative greeting postures, naming practices, and anecdotal common sense.

The novel also stages elite progressivism as a speech act. "What are your feelings about casteism?" Vaidyaji asks Gayadin, before disagreeing—with a smile—that caste is "a gift of God," and musing about inter-caste marriage for his

sons (Shukla 32). The scene registers as self-congratulatory liberalism; yet nothing in the power geometry budges. The Brahmin patriarch remains the hub that binds the school, the co-operative, and council. The effect is to separate saying from structuring: anti-caste talk circulates among those best placed to keep its practical consequences at bay (Shukla 32). Satire here trains the eye on virtuous speech as political technology.

Finally, Shukla's repertoire of fables—like the cure that insults a prince as "spawn of a water-carrier"—renders the pain economy of caste in miniature (Shukla 145). The shock that revives the royal body is the metaphysical insult of misplaced birth. The lesson is not just the absurdity of feudal medicine; it is the way names enforce order. In this sense, Shukla's scenes of mockery sustain a serious argument: caste produces consent through ritual, language, and space, long after its formal abolition (Shukla 102). That consensus, crucially, is not unanimous; but dissent appears at the margins—as outbursts, fatigue, or exit—rather than as institutional transformation (Shukla 147).

DIGITAL HUMANITIES: GRAPHING POWER AND SPEECH

Although *Raag Darbari* predates and at the rist of anachronistically contrived analysis of computational methods in literary studies, imagining the novel as a social network clarifies its architecture of power. In a graph where nodes are characters and the edges represent significant interactions, Vaidyaji emerges as the high-degree hub. He links to Ruppan (nephew and enforcer), the Principal (dependent client), Gayadin (merchant vice-chair), the Pradhan (political ally), and the police sub-inspector (instrument of coercion). Brokerage measures (betweenness) would likely rank Ruppan and the Principal as intermediaries stitching clusters—school, market, council—into a single patronage web (Moretti 90). Conversely, Langar, Dalit wrestlers, and most women are leaves or isolates. They exist with few ties and minimal capacity to exert influence and the core–periphery split thus visualizes what the prose shows: patronage feudalism within democratic form (Shukla 203).

Community detection would plausibly yield three overlapping clusters:

Education (Principal, teachers, Ruppan, Rangnath), governance (Vaidyaji, Pradhan, police), and bazaar/akharas (Gayadin, wrestlers, Sanichar). The bridge then serves the purpose of a patriarch, whose ego network spans sectors, confirming that formal institutional separations are null in practice (Shukla 32). A signed-edge variant that records antagonism (e.g., lawsuits, rival slates, faction fights) would still position Vaidyaji at the center; negative ties cluster at the periphery, where resistance is local and repression is centralized (Shukla 211). This is the "character-system" logic Moretti attributes to plots organized by conflictual yet cohesive networks (Moretti 94).

A complementary computational linguistics thought-experiment tracks register and rhetorical pose with much precision and critical impetus and then topic modeling would likely isolate a development/economy topic ("plan," "co-operative," "loan"), an education topic ("exams," "scholarship," "Principal"), and a caste/law topic ("Chamar," "Constitution," "court"). Mapping topic prevalence by speaker would show authority talk (long turns, abstract nouns) concentrated in Vaidyaji and the Principal; abjection talk (pleas, kinship honorifics) in clients like Langar; deflection talk (jokes, parables) in brokers like Ruppan (Shukla 229; Shukla 203). A 'sentiment pass' ulimately allows thus for the discovery of paternalistic positivity as evidenced in elite reassurances "brother," "righteous battle" and also negative urgency "hell with that," "I won't even take water" at the margins.

Wouldn't this suggests that affect is stratified as systematically as access (Shukla 315). Finally, an "indirect-reference" overlay that draws edges when A talks about B in B's absence would thicken the center even further. Vaidyaji is narrativized by others even when off-stage; marginal figures are present mostly as rumor, joke, or cautionary tale (Shukla 203). The gossip graph thus

extends sovereign reach beyond immediate encounters, transforming reputation into an instrument of discipline, which in sum, the networked view confirms what close reading indicates: *Raag Darbari*'s society is centralized, clustered, and narratively policed, with exit (moral withdrawal, cynicism) more available than voice (institutional reform) (Moretti 96).

CONCLUSION

Through its corrosive satire, *Raag Darbari* demonstrates with critical force and vivid imagination that the ecology of Shivpalganj, the caste logic that governs its society, and the informal patronage networks sustaining its institutions are not discrete domains but mutually constitutive systems of decline. An ecocritical reading shows that the well—converted by the Five-Year Plan into a stagnant sump—operates as a parable of development gone awry: water escapes, disease festers, and prestige accrues only in the form of a commemorative inscription (Shukla 202). The forestry trenches—dug for babool seedlings but transformed into latrines—likewise expose the gap between ecological intention and corrupt execution, where what was meant to be a forest literally becomes waste (Shukla 147). In both, environmental ruin indexes moral and institutional rot, demonstrating that ecological infrastructures cannot be read apart from political ones. Mukul Sharma's concept of "eco-casteism" sharpens this point, insisting that caste and ecology are fused in the allocation of environmental burdens (Sharma 23). Shukla anticipates this, dramatizing how those least powerful suffer most from poisoned wells and barren land.

Consequently, the novel's critical caste ethnography reveals how hierarchy persists beneath the surface of reformist rhetoric. The narrator's sardonic definition of an "Untouchable" as a "kind of biped" who the Constitution declares touchable but society continues to shun captures the impotence of legal abolition (Shukla 102). When Langar squats like a chicken before Vaidyaji, following "the way prescribed in the scriptures for a low caste man meeting a Brahmin," the scene exposes the festered way how caste scripts are literally embodied (Shukla 229). Such performances recall Ambedkar's critique that social democracy requires annihilating caste in everyday life, not merely in law (Ambedkar 45). Compared with Dalit testimony, the tonal difference is striking. Om Prakash Valmiki recalls drinking worm-infested water from the segregated Chuhra well, writing that "they had no choice" but to consume what upper castes refused them (Valmiki 25). Where Valmiki voices pain and indignation, Shukla stages irony. Yet both converge on the same structural fact: water and dignity are unequally distributed by caste.

The novel also dramatizes how political institutions collapse into caste logic. In a village election, when both candidates are Thakurs, voters admit it makes no difference who wins, illustrating how identity eclipses ideology (Shukla 203). In another parable, calling a prince "the spawn of a water-carrier" is potent and vigorous enough to cure illness, showing that caste insult functions as social shock therapy (Shukla 145). These anecdotes render visible in explicit terms, what Critical Race Theory emphasizes about systemic power. It illustrates how inequality operates not just in overt discrimination but in the commonsense, everyday circulation of names, postures, and jokes. The "article of faith" that sustains untouchability proves stronger than the "poem" of the Constitution (Shukla 102). Satire, in this sense, is diagnostic—it registers how law and idealism collapse under the weight of custom.

A digital humanities lens crystallizes and ossifies these dynamics by visualizing Shivpalganj as a network, in so, that Vaidyaji emerges as the central hub, linking school, panchayat, co-operative, and police, a textbook case of brokerage and centrality (Moretti 90). His power lies less in formal title than in his position as the indispensable intermediary through whom others must pass.

Peripheral and ostensibly inconspicuous actors such as Langar, alongside the women of Chamrahi—figures who, in the architecture of Shukla's narrative, manifest chiefly as isolates or

scattered leaves—are correspondingly blocked, at the level of structure, from entering the vital circuits of authority and exchange (Shukla 229); this constellation, in its spatial and social configuration, replicates with disturbing and infurirating fidelity what political sociologists theorize as "patronage feudalism," a system wherein the apparent integrity of formal institutions is quietly undermined, and by webs of informal allegiance. If one were to enlist the resources of computational linguistics—proceeding, of course, with deliberate scholarly restraint—one would quite likely discover in Vaidyaji's verbal register a surplus of paternalistic terms ("brother," "righteous"): reassuring but hierarchically charged, while those consigned to subalternity break out in shards of curses or despair, thus substantiating Moretti's observation that digital network analysis can reveal the concealed contours of speech and silence in narrative (Moretti 96). Shukla encodes this disparity formally: the voices of the powerful spread across paragraphs, the voices of the powerless are trimmed to fragments.

Synthesizing these frameworks, we see that *Raag Darbari* dramatizes a convergence of ecological decay, caste hierarchy, and networked corruption. The environment deteriorates precisely because elite and uncaring actors exploit resources for visibility and not sustainability and then, caste persists because everyday gestures and spatial arrangements re-inscribe hierarchy even under constitutional modernity (Shukla 102). Networks centralize power in patriarchal nodes, silencing voices at the margins (Shukla 229). Together, they constitute what Ulka Anjaria calls the "descriptive logic of *ulti batein*," where inversions and absurdities expose the disintegration of postcolonial ideals (Anjaria 4797). Shukla's satire is not escapist comedy; it is a method of realism attuned to systemic failure.

The novel thus occupies a unique place in Indian literary criticism. It reminds us that environmental humanities must engage caste that caste studies must reckon with ecology and that digital humanities can reveal structural patterns embedded in satire. Its rural world is not merely an allegory and a glaring microcosm of the 1960s but a continuing blinding mirror: polluted wells and barren reforms still haunt India's countryside, caste hierarchies still script everyday interactions, and informal networks still subvert institutions. By weaving these insights, *Raag Darbari* becomes a model for interdisciplinary reading—at once a local ethnography and a theoretical archive. Shukla's Shivpalganj teaches us to see how landscapes, laws, and language decay together, and how only by mapping these connections can criticism begin to imagine alternatives.

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