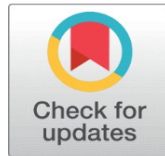
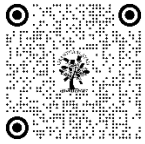


GHACHAR GHOCHAR: THE SILENT STRUGGLES OF PRIVILEGED YOUTH

Nijamol K.N¹

¹ Assistant Professor of English, Government Polytechnic College, Kalamassery



DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i1.2023.3010](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i1.2023.3010)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2023 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

This essay explores Vivek Shanbhag's novel *Ghachar Ghochar* as a nuanced depiction of the silent struggles faced by privileged youth in post-liberalisation India. Departing from the traditional archetype of the 'angry old man' often seen in post-colonial literature, the novel's narrator is a passive, introspective character who navigates a materially comfortable but emotionally hollow life. The essay contrasts this character with figures like Balram Halwai from Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, illustrating opposing relationships with wealth and social mobility. The narrator's familial and marital tensions underscore his lack of agency, as he remains entangled in generational wealth and societal expectations. Through the metaphor of the narrator's emotional inertia, the novel critiques a cultural shift where ambition is replaced by complacency and introspection by inaction. Ultimately, *Ghachar Ghochar* serves as a reflection on the evolving culture of India's middle class, highlighting the psychological burden of privilege and the loss of existential purpose in a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape.

Keywords: Narrator, Wealth, Agency, Culture, Privilege, Middle Class

The archetype of the 'angry old man' has been a potent description of the post-colonial male character that many of us have experienced in life and come to expect in literature. A typical example of the often lead characters of novels is witnessed in the character of Margayya in RK Narayan's "The Financial Expert". Margayya's character is driven by ambition and the desire for financial success, but as he is constantly pulled down by setbacks and disappointments, he becomes increasingly bitter and resentful towards society. His anger is fuelled by a sense of injustice and the perception that he has been denied the recognition and opportunities he deserves. His anger at the world at large serves as a driving force that propels him forward, but it also becomes a barrier to personal happiness and fulfilment. Vivek Shanbhag's *Ghachar Ghochar* breaks free from this stereotype and delivers a character that is neither old nor angry. Shanbhag's nameless first-person narrative is an honest and, therefore, unspectacular account of an Indian joint family that finds money post the 2008 financial crisis.

The novel presents itself as the narrator's description of his meek father, paradoxical mother, breadwinner uncle, rebellious sister and cunning wife. The story follows the family's economic uptick from renting a small house in one of Bangalore's modest localities to owning a two-floor villa in one of Bangalore's posh neighbourhoods. This paper aims to delve into the character of the narrator that is so distinct from most literature preceding it, but ever so familiar in today's society. In a Kafkaesque manner, the narrator often finds himself bereft of agency, as an observer in one's own life. Access to more wealth than he has learnt to spend has extinguished the undying flame of the young Indian. However, unlike the angry old man, the narrator is reflective, contemplative and more in tune with his feelings. Yet similar to the angry old man, he is stuck in relationships and structures that preclude him from exercising his agency and expressing his

emotions. As a result, he finds himself in a materially rich but emotionally anxious cocoon that he may break free from, but does not nevertheless.

In stark contrast to Balram Halwai from Aravind Adiga's 'The White Tiger', Shanbhag's narrator is passive, and subdued/side-character in his own story. While both characters experience a significant shift in their socioeconomic status, in "Ghachar Ghochar," the narrator's family rises from lower-middle-class to a higher social stratum as a result of his father investing his pension funds in his brother's (narrator's uncle) business acumen, while Balram's story sees him move from a socially disadvantaged background to becoming an entrepreneur. He uses his frustration as motivation to rise through the ranks in post-liberalisation India and break free from the social and material disadvantages that he was born with. Both characters display completely antagonistic relationships to wealth. Having had to pull himself out of poverty through sheer hard work and by even committing murder, Balram has an insatiable thirst for money and power. On the other hand, living off the fruits of his Uncle's labour, the narrator in Ghachar Ghochar spends his days sitting in cafes soaking in the uneasiness of spending someone else's money. Yet he could not get himself to work for his uncle's spice distribution company, where he was appointed as a Director when he had to get out of the house. The inflow of wealth from the business exonerated the narrator from being the breadwinner of the family following his father's sudden and management-imposed early retirement. Instead of providing him with the privilege of having a solid foundation to flame his spirit, he found comfort and lethargy in a bedroom in their new house that he no longer had to share with his sister. The narrator becomes a part of the same category of washed-up engineering graduates that are employed by generational wealth among today's youth. Shanbhag's masterpiece highlights the change in the issues, dreams and life goals of the Indian middle class in the last three decades. While the silent majority still goes to sleep on an empty stomach, the one per cent minority lacks the hunger to eat, work or live.

The narrator's remarks regarding his family members represent him as an individual that engages in introspection, thinking deeply about the people in his life and the effect of his actions on them. The dissonance arises when he refrains from executing actions that he believes are the right thing to do. In the tensest scene in the novel, a woman comes to the narrator's home claiming to be an acquaintance of the narrator's unmarried uncle with his favourite *masoor dal*. The narrator's mother and sister take an aggressive and hostile role towards the woman in an attempt to protect the reputation of his uncle. The two women of the family go on to humiliate and berate the innocent stranger. However, the other woman in the house - the narrator's wife, is uncomfortable with the situation. The narrator himself was moving in his chair at the dining table during the whole incident. Unlike the narrator, his wife decides to express his displeasure at the treatment of the stranger with a few snide remarks calling out the uncle during dinner that night. When the conversation gets heated, the narrator is initially conflicted as to who is right and wrong. After weighing the importance of protecting the honour of the breadwinner of the family and the need to be accountable for one's actions, the narrator decides in his head that he should ask his wife to stop to diffuse the situation. However, like a deer stuck in front of a pair of headlights, he went numb and didn't utter a single word. This single incident highlights the state of the young Indian today, docile and insulated from the realities of life. For today's youth, it is fashionable to say, "I am apolitical". They fail to realise that their ability to be indifferent to politics is a consequence of their privilege, one which is not available to everyone. As, for the rest of the nation, electing their representative is one of the few ways they can guarantee food from the ration shop and subsidies for irrigation.

Afterwards, the narrator struggles in his thoughts for not having supported his wife during the little skirmish between the members of his family. He lives as if he has no control over his relationship with his wife. The unrest within their arranged marriage stems from the difference in the economic lifestyle they were both exposed to. Anita, his wife, was the daughter of a salaried teacher. As a result, she grew up witnessing the honour of the money earned through sweat and hard work. Before marriage, she was led to believe that the narrator was indeed the director of the spice distribution company. However, the disillusionment of realising that her husband is living off of someone's else effort became a point of friction in their relationship. She even suggested the possibility of moving away from the luxuries they presently live with and starting on their own, even if that means she will have to work. Anita is unable to digest the concept of a man who just sits around all day without having to contribute in some manner. Therefore, while the narrator and his sister are careful not to pick fights with their father or uncle as they still own their inheritance, Anita is least cared about offending the elders of the family while fighting for what she believes is right.

The week following the incident with the stranger with *masoor dal*, Anita left on a pre-planned trip to her parent's house. That whole week the narrator is worried about whether his wife has decided to leave not much unlike his sister, who has left her husband. But the thought of her returning also reminds him of his distraught relationship with her and the moments he feels ashamed for not supporting her. Just like that, he spends his days in cafés juggling with emotions, yearning for some unsolicited wisdom from the waiter. Shanbhag has meticulously crafted a character with no ambition,

yet one whose emotions and feelings are ever so relatable. The narrator leads his life as an individual who has achieved nirvana and, therefore, there is nothing in this material world that is meaningful. Yet the truth is that the only thing he has achieved in life is to be his uncle's nephew. The narrator is symptomatic of the *passive young Indian* whose afflictions are not unemployment, war or hunger but the lack of someone to talk to, someone to understand and something to live for.

In *Ghachar Ghochar*, Vivek Shanbhag constructs a haunting narrative that critiques the cultural shift within India's post-liberalisation middle class. The novel's title, an untranslatable phrase that evokes the entanglement and disorder in personal relationships, reflects the narrator's inner world—a web of privilege, passivity, and emotional inertia. Unlike the archetype of the 'angry old man' driven by societal injustice, Shanbhag's protagonist embodies the silent struggles of youth cushioned by inherited wealth but devoid of purpose. This cultural transformation, marked by economic affluence yet emotional detachment, highlights a new crisis: the erosion of ambition and agency in a generation that once thrived on struggle. By portraying the narrator's passive surrender to familial and societal expectations, Shanbhag underscores the dissonance between traditional values of hard work and the contemporary comfort of inherited privilege. In doing so, *Ghachar Ghochar* becomes a cultural mirror, reflecting the complex, often paradoxical realities of India's evolving middle class—a generation caught between the hunger for meaning and the comfort of complacency.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger*. Free Press, 2008.
- Choudhury, Bibhash. R.K. Narayan: Critical Essays. Atlantic Publishers, 2006.
- Dameh, Sumit. "A Review Paper on Vivek Shanbhag's *Ghachar Ghochar*: The Impact of Translation on Vivek Shanbhag's *Ghachar Ghochar*." *Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches in Allied Education*, vol. 16, no. 1, Jan. 2019, pp. 586-587.
- Ganesh, Deepa. "Beyond Space and Self: An Analysis of Vivek Shanbhag's *Ghachar Ghochar*." *The Hindu*, March 29, 2013.
- Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna. *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English*. Permanent Black, 2003.
- Narayan, R. K. *The Financial Expert*. Indian Thought Publications, 1952.
- Shanbhag, Vivek. *Ghachar Ghochar*. Translated by Srinath Perur, Penguin Books, 2017.