



DOI: 10.17846/aa-2026-18-1-134-153

Magical realism, regionalism, and liminal spaces: A chronotope of the Indian Postcolonial Village in Vinod Kumar Shukla's *A Window Lived in a Wall*

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Abstract:

Shukla's narrative, in A Window Lived in a Wall, deviates greatly from the prevailing tradition of social realism in modern Hindi literature, demonstrating a bold transition marked by the novel's storytelling approaches and a deliberate defiance of conventional literary rules. Such regional narratives from India vividly depict the contradictions of regional social dynamics and global capitalist modernity, culminating in a style akin to the formalism often associated with magical realism. This study examines Vinod Kumar Shukla's regionalist approach and its intersection with liminal modes of magical realism. By closely analysing the novel, particularly the author's juxtaposition of tradition versus modernity via an unconventional mode of magical realism, it will be argued that Shukla creates a spatial-temporal liminality within his regional narrative. This liminality transforms the novel into a chronotope of the Indian Postcolonial Village, reflecting complex layers of socio-cultural change and continuity. This analysis seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of Shukla's narrative innovation and its broader implications within contemporary Indian literature.

Introduction

Regional Indian literature exploring the lives and cultures of rural areas is usually characterized by a conflicting encounter between indigenous reality and colonial capitalist modernity, capturing the tensions and transitions that arise from it (Semwal, Jha, 2023, p. 03). Rural cultures, with their deep-rooted traditions, customs, and communal ways of living, often find themselves at odds with the rapid changes brought about by the exploitative ways of capitalistic modernity. The encroachment of capitalist modernity often leads to cultural displacement, as indigenous communities are forced to adapt to widely different social realities. The contradiction manifests itself primarily in aesthetic gaps or breakthroughs, such as mythical plots, supernatural characters, episodic narratives, and overdramatic writing, among others. This results in an aesthetics that was fundamentally liminal, ambiguous, and uncanny. The narrative structure of these works is, thus, convoluted, allowing the coexistence of both natural and supernatural facets of regional reality. Ulka Anjaria says that Indian regional writers dealt with and represented the socio-political issues of the time by using “metafictionality” in the form of allegory, symbolism, mysticism, and supernaturalism, hence breaking up the nationalistic hegemonies of discourse that obscured critical and analytical judgment. (Anjaria, 2012, p. 15). These stylistic “breakthroughs”, as Sisir Kumar Das termed them, can be read as, and have close parallels with, magical realism. (Das, 2015, p. 297, 298) Magical realism can be defined as a literary mode of narration that establishes the harmonic coexistence of the supernatural and the natural in an ordinary and mundane realistic setting. As a narrative mode, it offers a means to explore different approaches to expressing reality. Christopher Warnes explains it as “a mode in which real and fantastic, natural, and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence. On the level of the text, neither has a greater claim to truth or referentiality” (Warnes, 2014, p. 03). Magical realism’s multifaceted narrative aesthetics, with both natural and supernatural elements coexisting, resembles the stylistic framework of regional Indian novels and the lived experiences of rural Indian societies struggling to adapt to the ways of modernity.

While understood as a vernacular version of magic realism, in *Magical Realism and Hindi Prose Fiction*, Vinod Kumar Shukla’s novels have been pointed out and discussed as magical realist (Shree, 2013, p. 50). Thus, this study endeavours to undertake a thorough exploration of Vinod Kumar Shukla’s novel *Deewar Mein Ek Khidki Rehti Thi*, translated as *A Window Lived in a Wall* by Sati Khanna in 1999. The author’s literary acumen has garnered him prestigious honours such as the Sahitya Akademi award for this novel. *A Window Lived in a Wall* intricately depicts both the ordinary and extraordinary dimensions of rural Indian life.

Hindi literature, particularly within the *Nayī kahānī* genre, highlights the remote or peripheral North Indian villages, exploring their unique socio-cultural fabric. This emphasis underscores the enduring significance of the village as a microcosm of Indian society, inviting reflection on its evolving dynamics amidst modernization (Singh, 2016, p. 327). Writers like Vinod Kumar Shukla deliberately turn their gaze towards small, remote, and often overlooked villages, using them as microcosms to depict the ordinary and extraordinary realities of postcolonial India. The novel *A Window Lived in a Wall* captures the unhurried rhythms and intimate complexities of small-village existence in India, unveiling the trials and aspirations of its characters who often find themselves caught in a liminal space between the natural and the supernatural.

Indu Prakash Pandey posits regionalism in Hindi literature as primarily an “artistic device” (*śilpavidhi*), instrumental in constructing and elaborating upon two pivotal elements: “space” and “time”. Within this framework, “space” is localized and concentrated, delineating a specific region or area with precision and authenticity. Concurrently, “time”, although deemed less significant than space, remains essential for situating the narrative within a distinct temporal context, thereby facilitating the portrayal of developmental processes and contextualizing the region’s peculiarities. Pandey contends that it is not solely the thematic content but rather the technique employed in narrative construction that determines regional authenticity (Pandey, 2020, p. 15). Hence, a work’s regional character is contingent upon its adept utilization of space and time. So, the examination of spatial dynamics emerges as imperative in deciphering Shukla’s regional writings, elucidating the nuanced interplay between geographical locales and temporal contexts within his narratives.

Shukla’s narrative invites readers to reconsider the postcolonial village not as a mere deviation from Western metropolitan norms, but rather as a unique and extraordinary space in its own way. Within the framework of Indian regional literature, the encounter between indigenous cultures and colonial capitalist modernity is a recurrent theme, revealing the tensions and transitions inherent in such interactions. Indigenous communities, steeped in deep-rooted traditions and communal lifestyles, often grapple with the disruptive forces of exploitative colonial capitalist modernity, leading to cultural displacement and adaptation to unfamiliar social realities. In literature depicting rural spaces, this creates a spatial ambiguity wherein the native communal worldview intersects with the transformative effects of modernity. Shukla adeptly navigates this spatial ambiguity by crafting a liminal space within his novel, where there is an evident clash of worldviews and the boundaries between the real and the imagined are blurred.

Liminality of space in *A Window Lived in a Wall*

The theory of liminal space, originating from anthropological discourse and subsequently influential across interdisciplinary fields such as literature, sociology, psychology, and cultural studies, is primarily attributed to Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. Liminal space denotes a transitional phase within rites-of-passage rituals where individuals or groups experience ambiguity and suspension from ordinary social norms and structures. This period is marked by the temporary suspension of customary rules, facilitating the emergence of new perspectives, insights, and transformative experiences (Gennep, 1960, p. 53) (Turner, 1969, p. 95). In literary and cultural studies, liminality is applied to spaces, times, or states that exist between established categories or boundaries. These liminal spaces serve as fertile ground for exploration, transformation, and the subversion of norms, manifesting as physical thresholds, transitional zones, or metaphorical states such as psychological transitions or hybrid cultural identities (Thomassen, 2018, p. 14). In his book *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer*, Richard Rohr emphasizes the significance of liminal spaces as transformative realms. He defines these spaces as where “we have to... remain on the ‘threshold’... where we are betwixt and between” the familiar and the unknown (Rohr, 1999, p. 155). Here, individuals exist in a state where “the old world is left behind, but we’re not yet sure of the new one yet” (ibid., p. 155), highlighting the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in such transitional phases.

While Rohr’s exploration centres on a theocentric perspective, his concept of liminal space resonates universally. It is a place that “pre-empt[s] the possibility of speaking from a single, undivided site” (Chang, 1991, p. 17), suggesting that it challenges fixed perspectives and demands openness to multiple viewpoints. The postcolonial societies, navigating this liminal state, experience a state of limbo “between the habits of home and the habits of the mainstream” (Chang, 1991, p. 217). This metaphorical limbo underscores the tension and potential for growth in embracing ambiguity and navigating transitions. Together, these perspectives deepen our understanding of liminal spaces as essential arenas for personal and spiritual development, where individuals confront uncertainty and potential transformation, ultimately transcending fixed boundaries and embracing new possibilities. Shukla’s exploration of liminal space in his novel resonates with broader theoretical discussions on liminality in cultural studies. The novel richly depicts spaces, both real and imaginative, within the postcolonial village setting. Shukla’s distinct poetics emphasizes detailed descriptions of rural spaces where characters navigate complex social relations amidst ambiguity. This portrayal of space not only captures the physical environments but also uses spatial metaphors to illuminate deeper societal dynamics. According to Kirby:

It is as if by foregrounding metaphors of space, the gap between metaphor and reality narrows, the bridge is shortened, the interchange takes place that much more quickly: space itself is the aperture through which discourse can affect reality. (Kirby, 1996, p. 110)

By blending real and imaginative spaces, Shukla creates a liminal realm where boundaries between reality and fantasy blur, reflecting the hybridity and fluidity of identities and experiences in postcolonial India.

A Window Lived in a Wall centres around a newlywed couple – Raghuvar and Sonsi – and it is their relationship with one another that opens up a different spatial understanding of the small village and space in general. Raghuvar works as a mathematics teacher at a mofussil village nearby. His usual commute to work is in a jitney. He cramps himself up in the little space left by other passengers, their milk cans, winter blankets and vegetable baskets.

As usual, the jitney was packed with village women and elderly men. An old man sat holding a long rod... The jitney driver asked his passengers to make space, but there was no space to be made. Simply adding space from an open field into the jitney was not a possibility. So, Raghuvar Prasad squeezed in where there was no space for him. Only when the jitney moved off did he discover he didn't die off suffocation. (Shukla, 2005, p. 13)

This passage evokes a striking image of cramped and crowded space, underscoring the physical constraints and the everyday reality of communal travel in rural India. The specificity of detail – mentioning milk cans, winter blankets, and vegetable baskets – paints a scene rich in texture and atmosphere. The phrase “cramps himself up” suggests a sense of discomfort and confinement, emphasizing the lack of personal space amidst communal belongings. This description not only conveys the physical dimensions of the setting but also hints at the communal and shared nature of transportation and daily life in a village, where individuals coexist in tight quarters, navigating their lives amidst a landscape filled with everyday objects that define their routines and interactions.

On certain occasions, Raghuvar Prasad found himself unable to secure even a modest space amidst the crowded transportation options available, prompting him to resort to an unconventional mode of travel – an elephant. This incident coincided with the arrival of his new wife, Sonsi, into the village, where Raghuvar Prasad's arrival astride an elephant left her envisioning elephants as a regular part of his lifestyle. The introduction of the elephant into their lives serves as a narrative motif linking idyllic vignettes, juxtaposed against the modern modes of transportation such as the jitney, bicycle and moped.

Riding an elephant was like using an out-of-date coin... Once upon a time, maharajas and princes rode on elephants. If royalty travelled by elephant now, they would be laughed at. (Shukla, 2005, p. 12)

The statement suggests a shift in societal norms and perceptions, where the practicalities and modernity of transportation methods like automobiles have replaced traditional modes like elephants, rendering them archaic and subject to amusement rather than reverence.

In the days of the old, when the world moved at a slower pace, the elephant's swaying gait could keep up. The elephant was no longer in step with the world, but it ported a world of its own, into which Raghuvar Prasad was gradually gaining entrance. (Shukla, 2005, p. 17)

In an era typified by a slower pace of life, the elephant's deliberate and swaying gait seemed harmonious with its surroundings. However, as the world around it accelerated, the elephant's pace became an anachronism. Despite this, the elephant embodied a distinct world of its own, one that Raghuvar Prasad found himself gradually entering. This juxtaposition highlights not only the elephant's role as a relic of a bygone time but also its potential to serve as a gateway to a realm untouched by the rapid changes of modernity, offering Raghuvar a unique perspective and escape. Similar is the juxtaposition between the Sadhu offering Raghuvar a daily ride on an elephant and the college department head recommending he get a bicycle for his commute. It highlights the clash between traditional and modern modes of transportation. The Sadhu's use of an elephant harks back to traditional and perhaps spiritual values, symbolizing a slower, more contemplative pace of life. In contrast, the department head's suggestion of a bicycle represents modernity and efficiency, reflecting the shift towards practicality and technological advancement in contemporary society. This contrast underscores the evolving societal attitudes towards transportation and daily life in the narrative.

The unnamed small village is depicted as functionally interconnected with neighbouring locations, emphasizing the brevity rather than the expansiveness of distances to underscore its diminutive scale. As Doreen Massey, in *Space, Place, and Gender*, explains, “[t]he identity of a place does not only derive from some internalized history” but rather, “in large part, precisely from the specificity of its interactions with ‘the outside’” (Massey, 1994, p. 169). The villagers' capacity to traverse the entire space on foot further underscores the compactness of the village.

‘Will you ride the elephant to other places?’ ‘No, we’ll walk,’ Raghuvar Prasad replied. The college was eight kilometres away—that is why an elephant, or a

jitney was needed. For Raghuvar Prasad and Sonsi, 'other places' weren't places that were too far to walk. (Shukla, 2005, p. 123)

The depiction of the small village emphasizes its diminutive scale through various textual references. By illustrating the village's diminutive size amidst the sweeping changes of modernity, the author aims to depict its spatial liminality, where traditional worldviews coexist with modern lifestyles. The daily traversal of eight kilometres between the village and the nearby small village for livelihood, despite the population of seventy thousand, underscores the village's localised and compact nature. The cramped conditions within the jitney, where the protagonist struggles to find space, further accentuate the village's limited physical dimensions. Although strategically located along National Highway No. 6, which facilitates mobility, the village is portrayed as somewhat isolated from the broader urban centres it connects to. The highway serves more as a backdrop of chance rather than a conduit of significant economic or social interaction with the small village, highlighting the village's peripheral position amidst the bustling traffic it accommodates. Even as the highway reaps the benefits of the mobility it allows, the narrative laments the crowdedness of this highway: "[a] stream of trucks, buses and three-wheeled jitneys flowed day and night along National Highway No. 6" (Shukla, 2005, p. 07).

In depicting the village's diminutive size against the backdrop of modernity's colossal transformations, the author captures a portrayal of spatial liminality. Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, explains liminal space as "in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference..." (Bhabha, 1994, p. 04). Bhabha's concept of liminality also underscores the complexity of identity formation in postcolonial societies, where individuals and communities navigate multiple cultural influences and negotiate their sense of self. The liminality of the village in the novel reflects the coexistence of traditional worldviews rooted in customs, beliefs, and communal bonds with the advent of modernity, embodied by technological advancements, changing social norms, and economic shifts. The juxtaposition of these elements within the village's spatial confines highlights its dynamic and evolving nature, where age-old traditions intersect with contemporary aspirations and challenges. This narrative approach not only enriches our understanding of rural life but also underscores the complexities inherent in navigating cultural continuity amidst rapid social change.

The novel recurrently explores the concept of space, weaving a discourse where the ordinary and the extraordinary intersect seamlessly. For instance, the elephant is initially portrayed as a lumbering and gentle creature, devoid of any extraordinary attributes. However,

through Shukla's masterful storytelling, he transforms this seemingly mundane presence into something magical and evocative.

A large empty space appeared when the elephant had gone. It was a fact that as the elephant moved ahead, an empty space was left behind. (Shukla, 2005, p. 29)

The description of the elephant's departure, leaving behind a large empty space, underscores this transformation. Shukla's approach avoids embellishment or exaggeration; instead, he focuses on presenting factual observations that evoke a sense of wonder and contemplation. This juxtaposition of the elephant's physical presence and the emptiness it leaves behind highlights Shukla's ability to infuse ordinary elements with poetic resonance, inviting readers to perceive the world through a lens that captures both the tangible and the intangible aspects of existence.

The mundane occurrences, like the departure of an elephant, create profound impacts on the narrative's spatial dynamics. Shukla's skill lies in enriching the novel with layers of meaning that resonate beyond surface-level descriptions of space. The space left behind by the elephant serves as a metaphorical representation of liminality, signifying a threshold between traditional and modern ways of existence. As the lumbering elephant moves through the village, it leaves behind a tangible emptiness that metaphorically symbolizes the departure from longstanding customs and practices. This empty space evokes a sense of transition and transformation, where the village's conventional norms and routines are momentarily disrupted by the presence of a creature traditionally associated with royalty and grandeur. Shukla's narrative uses this imagery to highlight the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity within the village milieu, suggesting that even seemingly mundane occurrences can carry deeper symbolic meanings of societal change and adaptation. Therefore, the space left by the elephant becomes a poignant reminder of the village's evolving identity and its negotiation between past and present values.

A Window Lived in a Wall explores the concept of liminality through its depiction of space, both physical and imagined, shaping the perceptions and experiences of Raghuvar Prasad and Sonsi. The novel portrays how the material constraints of their environment influence their understanding of space, yet simultaneously, their mental imagery and imagination allow them to challenge and transcend these limitations. The unnamed space accessed through the window in Raghuvar's house serves as a prime example of this liminal space. It exists neither fully within the tangible world nor entirely in the realm of fantasy but occupies a boundary between the two. Raghuvar and Sonsi frequently visit this fantastical

realm, enriching its details and expanding its possibilities through their interactions and perceptions. According to Victor Turner, “It is on the margins, from within the imaginative potentiality of the liminal space/state, that ‘myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works of art’ are brought into creation, and which allows for the generative possibilities of new ideas, forms, and states of being” (Turner, 1969, p. 116).

Following Sonsi’s arrival, Raghuvar Prasad discovers that climbing out of the window transports them into a picturesque realm, the window world. This space is portrayed by a serene stream flowing between two majestic banyan trees, bustling with monkeys and birds. Below Raghuvar Prasad’s window, three paths converge, meticulously adorned with traditional “rangoli” patterns crafted from cow dung. When the couple visits at night, the area is illuminated by the shimmering presence of fireflies. This window world epitomizes a conventional depiction of nature, abundant with wildlife and lush vegetation, and populated by children revelling in its idyllic beauty. It serves as a utopian retreat, offering Raghuvar and Sonsi respite from the confines of their modest home, economic limitations, and lack of privacy.

The metaphor of the window in the wall in Shukla’s narrative functions as more than just a physical opening; it serves as a symbolic gateway to a liminal realm where imagination and the extraordinary flourish simultaneously. By framing the window as both a device and a threshold, Shukla allows his characters to transcend societal constraints and delve into a poetic landscape of boundless possibility. Here, desires are explored without inhibition, abundance is celebrated, and freedom is experienced in its purest form. Shukla’s use of playful language and vivid imagery imbues the mundane with a sense of magic, encouraging readers to perceive everyday life through a renewed perspective that is both enchanting and transformative.

The window world depicted by Shukla is portrayed as a highly privatized enclave within Raghuvar, Sonsi, and their family’s household. Despite its utopian allure, this space remains complicatedly linked to its residents, symbolizing their affinity with nature and their retreat from societal norms. The enchanting effect of this space becomes pronounced when Raghuvar escorts the department head there, underscoring its exclusivity while allowing intermittent access through his window. The department head, mistakenly perceiving it as a public domain, attempts to return with his family on another occasion but struggles to locate it, prompting him to redirect his children to the “public gardens” instead (Shukla, 2005, p. 58).

In a pivotal scene, when the department head ventures out to find the elusive window world beyond Raghuvar Prasad’s window, he encounters only disappointment. This episode underscores the author’s portrayal of the superiority of the window world over the harsh

realities of the external world. The department head, assuming the space to be a public attraction, brings his family to experience its purported enchantment, only to face confusion and the inability to locate it. This serves as a narrative device to highlight the transcendental qualities of the window world within the novel – an idyllic realm of beauty and wonder that stands apart from the complexities and disappointments of the mundane world outside.

The postcolonial village depicted in the novel, thus, occupies a liminal space, positioned between the idealized ontological worldview of the utopian window world and the harsh realities of the external world, undergoing the profound impact of colonial modernity. The window world symbolizes a sanctuary where Raghuvār Prasad and Sonsi can escape the constraints of their cramped house and mundane existence, finding solace and beauty in a natural landscape untouched by modernity's disruptions. In contrast, the external world outside the window is depicted as grappling with the transformative forces of colonial modernity, characterized by rapid urbanization, societal upheavals, and economic disparities. This juxtaposition underscores the novel's exploration of how individuals negotiate their identities and aspirations within the shifting dynamics of postcolonial Indian society, navigating between tradition and modernity, utopia, and reality.

Window of imagination as site of resistance

A Window Lived in a Wall employs fantastical elements to cast a deceptive simplicity over the small village setting. This section aims to explore the novel's portrayal of both real and imagined spaces, examining how they function as sites of resistance within the narrative. It is also in this observation of space that the novel locates the possibility of resistance to the mundane modes of everyday oppression, in the form of a window of imagination.

The narrative of the novel initially establishes a dichotomy between urban and rural landscapes, often depicting cities as symbols of progress and advancement, contrasting with villages portrayed as stagnant and oppressed locales. However, scholarly discourse has largely overlooked the realities of non-Western, post-colonial small villages, distinct from the urban centres typically scrutinized in literature and cultural studies. This gap becomes evident in the novel's meticulous portrayal of everyday life within the village, bridging the divide between tangible rural realities and the imaginative dimensions embedded in cultural narratives. While the novel grounds itself in the ordinariness of village existence, it avoids reducing this milieu to mere banality or monotony. Instead, it presents the village as a fertile ground where extraordinary events can unfold in the form of resistance. Shukla employs a narrative strategy that infuses the mundane with a sense of wonder, persistently seeking to transform everyday

occurrences into moments of revelation and potential. This approach not only enriches the narrative texture but also underscores the village as a dynamic space capable of challenging and redefining societal norms and expectations. Through this lens, Shukla's work invites readers to reconsider their perceptions of rural life and contemplate the transformative power inherent in the ordinary fabric of village existence.

Through his skilful use of language and narrative technique, Shukla imbues the seemingly mundane scenes with a sense of wonder and marvel. This transformation is particularly evident in moments such as when Raghuvar Prasad saw the elephant left outside of his house by the Sadhu.

That darkness under the margosa tree bore resemblance to the shape of an elephant. As the night passed, some of its darkness may have got left behind in the form of an elephant. When the morning broke, the elephant of the darkness would turn into an elephant of light and blend into the day. But Raghuvar Prasad noticed that as the morning came and light grew, the darkness in elephant form became more distinct. The morning forgot to light up this piece of darkness. Should Raghuvar Prasad shout out to the morning that it had forgotten something? While Raghuvar Prasad pondered the question, the sun rose up in the sky. In the bright sunlight, it became clear that the elephant was real. (Shukla, 2005, p. 152)

Shukla's descriptive prowess not only elevates ordinary interactions into moments of revelation but also invites readers to reconsider familiar settings through a lens that highlights the extraordinary within the ordinary. Thus, he transcends the limitations of mere realism, infusing his portrayal of small-village life with a richness that resonates with deeper layers of human experience and perception.

Raghuvar Prasad, in the novel, explicitly draws a connection between the oppressive monotony of daily life and the confined environment of the small village where he resides. Vinod Kumar Shukla describes the daily activities and unique rhythms of life in this village, investing considerable attention in portraying small incidents that hold profound significance for its inhabitants. This detailed narrative approach strikingly animates the village's atmosphere, capturing its vibrant essence. Central to this portrayal is Shukla's exploration of the everyday – the ordinary activities and routines that define life in the village. Rather than portraying continuity over time, Shukla emphasizes the perpetual recurrence of these everyday experiences.

When Raghuvar Prasad woke up, he could not remember which day of the week it was. In a seven-day week, there'd always be one or two days that could only be defined as 'which day.' The witch day of the week was sometimes fulfilling sometimes less so. The day's work got done without a person being aware whether

it was a Tuesday or a Thursday. Even if the which day of the week was like any other day, it was today. It was this morning of the witch day of the week. It was today's trees. But today's trees were the same trees. Everything was the same, and the day was invisible. (Shukla, 2005, p. 112)

This depiction suggests that the small village is not symbolized by enduring stability but by a relentless cycle of daily occurrences, reinforcing a sense of unchanging repetitiveness. Thus, through the lens of the everyday, the novel highlights how the village's inhabitants navigate and perceive their constrained environment, where routine and repetition shape their lives in profound yet often overlooked ways.

Central to this exploration is the novel's crucial focus on understanding resistance against the ordinary forms of daily oppression. The window of imagination metaphorically encapsulates this resistance, offering a gateway through which characters transcend the limitations of their physical and social environments. In doing so, Shukla not only highlights the transformative potential of imagination but also underscores the resilience and agency of individuals within marginalized communities.

In Raghuvar Prasad's perception, the smallness and enduring repetitiveness of his surroundings are initially viewed as constraining. However, this very sense of confinement compels him to turn to his imagination as a refuge – a space where he can find solace and resistance against the monotony of everyday life. The physical confines of his home and the small village prompt him to embark on imaginative journeys through the window. With no other apparent escape, Raghuvar repeatedly ventures out and returns, gradually developing a heightened awareness of space and social critique along the way. This unique characteristic of the small village environment fosters a profound spatial consciousness among its inhabitants. It also catalyses the creation of fantastical realms that offer an alternative to the village's confinement and routine. Thus, the village's distinct features not only shape Raghuvar's imaginative pursuits but also contribute to the supernatural and transformative elements that provide avenues for transcending the limits of everyday existence. The passage below depicts a scene from the window world where a sacred rangoli, crafted with white clay, adorns the edge of a pond. Miraculously, the drawn fish transform into living creatures, the red-dyed fish now swimming freely in the water.

The moist glance dimmed the sun, turning it into the moon. The sacred rangoli floated into the water... She looked into the still water. She saw the swastika, conch, chakra, and fish painted in red dye. A sacred fish drawn in white clay swam in the water. The fish must have rescued the bar of soap. Raghuvar Prasad was

astonished to see it... 'It must be the fish in the sacred drawing that found the soap. I saw the red-dye fish in the stream.' (Shukla, 2005, p. 65)

The act of imagination here transcends mere escapism from everyday reality; it serves as a catalyst for the development of Raghuvar Prasad's agency. Rather than simply seeking refuge from oppressive mundanity, the creative use of imagination empowers him to carve out a distinct space for himself and assert his individuality. Through this imaginative lens, the protagonist not only gains a new perspective on the world but also recognizes the inherent potential to shape his destiny. This transformation is pivotal as it allows Raghuvar Prasad to envision alternatives, make autonomous choices, and ultimately take ownership of his life's trajectory. Thus, the novel portrays imagination not just as a flight from reality but as a transformative force that liberates and empowers the protagonist to assert his agency and authorship over his own existence.

The act of imagining a utopian world through the window also symbolizes Raghuvar's navigation through the profound changes brought about by capitalist modernity. In Shukla's narrative, Raghuvar's imaginative flights through the window serve as a counterpoint to the disruptive forces of modernization and globalization that have reshaped rural landscapes and traditional ways of life. By envisioning an idealized realm beyond the confines of his small-town existence, Raghuvar not only seeks refuge from the harsh realities of capitalist development but also critiques its impact on social structures and individual agency. Through this lens, the window becomes a metaphorical gateway where Raghuvar negotiates his identity and aspirations amidst the transformative currents of contemporary Indian society. The following two abstracts from the text show how neither the elephant nor the bicycle can be taken through the window. Both modes of transportation cannot be a part of the utopian window of imagination.

Raghuvar Prasad heard, 'How will the elephant go through the window to the other side?' 'The elephant can't go through the window,' Sonsi said. 'True,' Raghuvar Prasad replied. She heard, 'The window is in the mind. Why can't the elephant go through?' She said, 'It would be good if the mind's window were a little wider. The elephant of the mind is huge.' (Shukla, 2005, p. 67)

Raghuvar Prasad wondered if the bicycle could be taken to the other side. He carried the bicycle over to the window to see if it would pass through... 'The window should have been wider,' Raghuvar Prasad said. (Shukla, 2005, p. 123)

These two extracts from the text highlight a deliberate exclusion of modern modes of transportation, such as the elephant and the bicycle, from the utopian window of imagination.

Despite their practical roles in everyday life, these vehicles are symbolically barred from entering this idealized realm. This exclusion suggests a rejection of modernity's influence within the utopian space depicted in the novel. Instead of embracing contemporary means of transport, the narrative reinforces a preference for more traditional or fantastical elements that align with a nostalgic or idyllic vision. By delineating this boundary, the text underscores a critique of modernity's encroachment into rural or traditional settings, championing a return to simpler, perhaps more authentic forms of existence symbolized by the utopian window. Thus, the window of imagination in Shukla's narrative functions not only as a resistance to mundane existence but also challenges the modern urban living represented by metropolitan cities. It offers a dual critique: on one hand, it provides an escape from the stifling routine and ordinary constraints of rural life, where Raghuvar Prasad seeks solace and creative freedom; on the other hand, it questions the glorification of urban progress and development by presenting an alternative worldview rooted in simplicity, authenticity, and connection to nature. Through the imaginative journeys facilitated by this window, Shukla juxtaposes the bustling, mechanized life of metropolitan cities with the idyllic, community-oriented values of rural existence. Thus, the window of imagination serves as a narrative device that not only resists the mundane but also offers a critical perspective on the societal aspirations and values associated with modern urban lifestyles.

In the window world, a place situated not far from the stream, resides an elderly woman known as Old Amma, who is often seen brewing tea. Her role extends beyond mere tea-making; she serves as a catalyst for communal cohesion within her environment. Old Amma's response of anger reveals her discordance with the harmonious ambience of the window world whenever disruptions occur in this idealized realm. Old Amma demonstrates her earnest commitment to stewarding this place.

A bird dropping fell splat on the rock. Old Mother looked angrily at the birds flying overhead. The birds she looked at knew they had erred. She washed away the bird dropping with water from a rocky hollow. No bird soiled the black rock thereafter. (Shukla, 2005, p. 127)

The bird dropping falling on the rock serves as a disruption within the otherwise idyllic scene. It introduces a moment of conflict or disturbance into the tranquil setting, suggesting that even in this utopian-like space, imperfections and disruptions can occur. Old Mother's reaction to the bird dropping is notable for several reasons. Her angry gaze towards the birds flying overhead suggests a sense of authority or control over her immediate environment. Despite her role in facilitating communal bonds through her labour, such as making tea, this moment

reveals her assertiveness in asserting boundaries and maintaining cleanliness within the window world. The birds' reaction to Old Mother's anger, as described by the narrative ("The birds she looked at knew they had erred"), implies a recognition of her authority or displeasure. This interaction underscores a subtle power dynamic where Old Mother's actions influence the behaviour of the birds, symbolizing a form of control over the natural elements within the window world.

Despite her pivotal role in nurturing community ties through her laborious efforts, she remains somewhat marginalized within the community. Her presence symbolizes a form of communal belonging that transcends mere physical participation; it is rooted in her contribution to the social fabric through her labour. This depiction underscores the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within the small village, where individuals like Old Amma contribute significantly to communal life while simultaneously occupying a liminal space in terms of social recognition and belonging.

On his way back, Raghuvar Prasad said, "Old Mother, I haven't had any tea yet."
But she heard Raghuvar Prasad say, "Ask Sonsi to give you a hand for an hour or two every day." (Shukla, 2005, p. 90)

Old Mother's enterprise to foster a community of labour around her is not merely about physical support; it also seeks acknowledgement and recognition for her contributions. Despite her efforts to engage in productive activities that benefit the community, her labour often goes unrecognized or is undervalued. In the context of the narrative, her work may no longer be perceived as conventional "work" due to its informal or communal nature. This challenges the conventional definitions of labour within the social framework of the village. Her struggle highlights the disparity between the tangible efforts she puts into communal activities and the acknowledgement or appreciation she receives in return. Thus, Old Mother's plight underlines broader themes of labour, recognition, and social dynamics within the community, reflecting the complex interplay between work, identity, and communal cohesion in the narrative.

Old Mother was sweeping the ground outside her hut with a bristle broom. When one hand grew tired, she switched the broom to the other. Raghuvar Prasad said nothing as he ran. But she heard him say, "You work very hard, Old Mother."
(Shukla, 2005, p. 90)

The disappearance of work within the narrative points to a broader theme of labour's diminishing recognition and its transformation within the context of capitalistic development. This transformation extracts surplus value from what appears to be a transcendent and abstract realm. In the narrative, the privatized image of nature, often associated with utopia, retains a

trace of idealism amidst the realities of modernity and urbanization. The stylistic shift of Hindi literature towards uncanny narratives is evident in how the small town is portrayed, reflecting a transition influenced by the harsh realities of colonial modernity. This transition complicates community relations, rendering them less knowable and more fragmented. The narrative thus critiques the implications of capitalistic development, highlighting its impact on labour distribution, community dynamics, and the representation of nature as both a privatized ideal and a site of contested resistance.

Chronotope of the Indian Postcolonial Village

In Hindi literature, the prevalence of unnamed small villages as settings serves a significant role, particularly influenced by the *Nayī Kahānī* movement. This literary movement, prominent in the 1950s and 1960s, was embodied by its focus on contemporary social and political issues, often portraying a sense of alienation and uprootedness among individuals. One of the notable features of *Nayī Kahānī* literature is its deliberate use of unnamed small villages as settings for narratives. The choice of an unnamed village underscores the disconnect between traditional rural life and the modern urbanised world, reflecting the existential crises and identity struggles faced by characters in *Nayī Kahānī* literature.

The novel, thus, operates within its spatio-temporal framework, guiding the internal coherence of its narrative and facilitating the creation of the distinct type of “knowledge” it conveys. In understanding the novel’s narrative structure and the specific form of knowledge it constructs, Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “chronotope” becomes pivotal. The term “chronotope” refers to the intrinsic interconnectedness of time and space within a literary work, shaping the narrative’s coherence and enabling the portrayal of various societal and individual dynamics. “All the novel’s abstract elements—philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect—gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 70). According to Bakhtin, the chronotope is not merely a backdrop but a dynamic force that imbues the abstract elements of the novel – philosophical reflections, social critiques, and analytical insights – with tangible reality, but it grounds the novel’s ideas and themes in concrete experiences, allowing the imaginative power of literature to lucidly depict the complexities of life within the postcolonial small village.

A Window Lived in a Wall transforms its village setting into the quintessential chronotope of the postcolonial village, embodying and weaving together the temporal and spatial dimensions that define the lived experiences, cultural dynamics, and historical legacies

unique to such communities. The geographical distance of the village from urban centres or colonial influences situates it within its socio-cultural context, distinct yet deeply interconnected with broader historical and political dynamics.

Farming land surrounded the town on all sides. The oldest neighbourhood was to be found in the town center. The houses at the edge of town had been built much later. A few buildings on the outskirts were of the same period as the old neighbourhood. This was not the kind of town where brick buildings stood next to mud huts. (Shukla, 2005, p. 05)

Despite this physical remoteness, the emotional and spatial closeness among its inhabitants—forged through shared histories, familial ties, and communal activities – creates a cohesive social fabric that defines their interactions and identities. Moreover, the spatial organization of the village, including its physical layout, landmarks, and communal spaces, serves as a visual and structural representation of social hierarchies and power dynamics.

There are generational conflicts and shifts in social norms, which are biting illustrated through special detailing. For instance, Raghuvar’s decision to rent an outhouse, which costs “an extra eight rupees” per month, whereas Raghuvar’s father is unsettled by both the ambitions toward social advancement implied in renting accommodations and his son’s capability to undertake such actions:

“Renting an outhouse! Tomorrow it’ll be a bathroom, and the day after, a complete kitchen. Learn to manage. If you exhaust your entire salary on rent, what will remain for us to send home?” (Shukla, 2005, p. 29)

This becomes a focal point for exploring themes of privacy, modernisation, and the evolving socio-economic landscape of postcolonial India. Raghuvar, a young man navigating his way through a transforming world, represents a bridge between tradition and modernity. His desire for privacy and autonomy, symbolized by his decision to rent an outhouse, marks a departure from the communal and often public aspects of village life. The outhouse becomes a tangible symbol of Raghuvar’s aspiration for personal space and independence within the village. His father’s objection to this decision underscores the clash between traditional values of communal living and the emerging individualistic aspirations of the younger generation. The cost implications – specifically the additional eight rupees per month – highlight economic disparities and the changing financial dynamics within rural communities undergoing urbanization and modernization. The privatization of basic amenities such as toilets reflects broader socio-economic shifts where access to private facilities becomes a marker of social

status and personal dignity. Raghuvar's justification for renting the outhouse – “There's often a long line at the public toilets isn't always free when you need to go” (Shukla, 2005, p. 30) – reveals the practical necessity and symbolic importance of such a decision. It not only addresses the inconvenience of shared public facilities but also asserts his right to personal space and convenience in an increasingly crowded and changing environment. The village functions as a chronotope that encapsulates both continuity and change within postcolonial India. It serves as a symbolic space where historical legacies, cultural traditions, and modern influences converge and collide. The rental of the outhouse, therefore, becomes a pivotal moment that illuminates these tensions and highlights the village as a site of negotiation between tradition and modernity.

The village is depicted as both real and imagined because it is convoluted with elements that reflect genuine rural settings and experiences, yet it also serves as a canvas for the author's artistic interpretation and narrative purposes. This dual nature allows the village to transcend mere geographical boundaries, becoming a symbolic landscape where broader social, cultural, and historical themes unfold. When Sonsi leaves to visit her parents' house, they write each other letters with stars over the sky.

Through my window I will view the sky you will have seen. Raghuvar Prasad's looking at the sky will be his letter. The moon would be his form of address for Sonsi. The stars would be his handwriting which Sonsi would be able to decipher instantly. Raghuvar lying on the touchstone rock would see the vast sky. The vast sky would be a long letter. Sonsi looking out the window would see a small sky. Her letter would be smaller. The sky would be the letter they had written to each other. (Shukla, 2005, p. 209)

Central to this depiction is the self-awareness of the village's social constructedness and its geographical remoteness. The novel deliberately explores how the village's spatial confinement and enduring qualities – such as its isolation or specific location – contribute to its character as a postcolonial small village. This exploration not only shapes the narrative's setting but also prompts a critical examination of the village's contingent existence within the larger socio-political context. The protagonist's spatial analysis within this chronotope becomes essential as it mirrors and interacts with the village's constructed reality. Their experiences and interactions within the village serve to illuminate its complexities and contradictions, revealing how societal norms, power dynamics, and historical legacies manifest within its confined space.

The fictitious village in the novel is not merely a backdrop but a dynamic and self-reflexive entity that embodies a specific chronotope of the postcolonial small village. Its imagined qualities enable a profound examination of its own constructed nature and the social realities that define it, making it a rich and integral component of the narrative's thematic exploration and character development.

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