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## Ghachar Ghochar: Household Affect By Their New-Found Wealth

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### Abstract:

Indian English literature originated as a necessary outcome of the introduction of English education in India under colonial rule. In recent years it “has attracted widespread interest, both in India and abroad.”<sup>1</sup> It is now recognized that Indian English literature is not only part of Commonwealth literature, but also occupies a “great significance in the World literature.”<sup>2</sup>

Today, a number of Indian writers in English have contributed substantially to modern English literature. Ram Mohan Roy who heralded the Indian Renaissance and Macaulay who recommended English language education in India were probably aware of what was in store for the Indians in terms of literary awareness. Today it “has won for itself international acclaim and distinction.”<sup>3</sup>

Fiction, being the most powerful form of literary expression today, has acquired a prestigious position in Indian English literature. It is generally agreed that the novel is the most suitable literary form for the exploration of experiences and ideas in the context of our time, and Indian English fiction occupies its proper place in the field of literature.

There are critics and commentators in England and America who appreciate Indian English novels. Prof. M. K. Naik remarks:

*...one of the most notable gifts of English education to India is prose fiction for though India was probably a fountain head of story-telling, the novel as we know today was an importation from the West.*<sup>4</sup>

**Keywords:** Claustrophobic, Domestic Novels, Flaneurial Surveillance, Gachar Ghochar

Gachar Ghochar is the English-language debut of a writer already established as a leading figure in both the pan-Indian and Kannada-language literary scenes. Once again, reading beyond our tiny borders shows us what we’ve been missing, and it proves the necessity of translation for a dynamic literary culture: Ghachar Ghochar is both fascinatingly different from much Indian writing in English, and provides a master class in crafting, particularly on the power of leaving

things unsaid. In fewer than 28,000 words, Vivek Shanbhag weaves a web of suggestion and implication, to be read with a sense of mounting unease.

Vivek Shanbahag grew up in Ankola, a small town in coastal Karnataka. He was in that part of the country for 17 years of his life. It has made an impact on his writing and the way he looks at the world. Then he moved out to do his engineering in Mysore. It was there that he spent a lot of his time to read. It so happened that his campus was next to the Mysore University campus and he had lots of friends in the English and Kannada departments. At that time, the English department in Mysore was very rich and many writers, such as Chinua Achebe and Salman Rushdie, used to visit. He had a lot of exposure to different discussions and readings.

He was mainly reading Kannada works. But when he moved to Mysore, for those five years, He started reading different writers. He read Isaac Bashevis Singer, awarded the Noble Prize in Literature in 1978 for the first time and he kept reading him for the next 30 years. Then he read the Russians, the Europeans and it all happened because he would meet his friends and they would talk about these books. So it was like he did two degrees — one in literature and one in engineering. Needless to say, we know which he enjoyed more. He went into engineering because of a lack of exposure. He came from a small town; he got good marks in his 10th, so he went into the science stream like everybody else who got good marks. Then he got good marks again in 12th, and went for engineering. He did well there too. It was much later that he realized that he should have done something else, but, by then, he had become an engineer. He had a job with Hindustan Lever that took him to different places — Calcutta, where he lived for two years; then to the US, and to London. He travelled extensively because of his job.

He began writing in school — when he was 16 his first story got published; it won an award in a competition. It was about a person coming to a town from a small village and not liking the ways of life there. His first collection, Ankura, was published when he was 22, and it was well appreciated. The next one was published seven years later. He has written 10 books, not much, but he has got an excellent response. In the beginning, it was very challenging. In Kannada, we have an unbroken literary history of over 1,000 years. When he says unbroken, he mean that the works that were written 1,000 years ago are still accessible and people read them. Literature is not like a tennis match where we play against an opponent and try and win. Everybody from

Shakespeare to the writers from those thousands of years ago is his contemporaries. They are all writers and it is incidental that he writes in Kannada, because we didn't read only Kannada, we read everyone and everything; writers from other countries, languages, translations. He is a Kannada writer, but he is a writer first. His work will be compared to what people have read before.

He has to hear and see things to write. Many a time it will happen in Konkani, or English. But Kannada is the only language in which he can write fiction. It's not because he doesn't want to write in any other language, but because he can't. Before he writes, he thinks of the experience which he had. One understands one's experiences through certain things, and for him, that medium is Kannada. His mother tongue is Konkani and many times we will find that a character's dialogues translate perfectly into Konkani, but that's the extent to which he can go. So this process of translation happens all the time in his mind.

Ghachar Ghochar was published three years ago as part of a collection of short stories. It's a short story but it talks about human nature, society and people. His entire world is one single entity. And He thinks it's the right way of looking at one's world. They are often tempted by the material world, to use things that have already been used. So if we see our entire body of work as one single thing, then we try and not repeat ourselves.

Ghachar Ghochar is not just about wealth but it feels that wealth is something that has impacted us in the last twenty five years in India. Economic liberalization has resulted in generating money that is more than necessary. Nobody thinks that what they have is enough but there is a line beyond which wealth is not necessary. If we don't engage with that line closely and philosophically, something is going to happen which is not right. When we make more money than necessary, we lose the relationship we had with objects and people around us.

Ghachar Ghochar which has translated by Srinath Perur. In a translation, the most important thing is the tone; we have to get it right. It's the position from which we see the story and some things are visible while others are not. It's very crucial that a translator understands this. This has been a successful translation because Srinath, who is creative writer, understood and got the tone. The structure of the Kannada language is different from English. The verb comes in the end, one can easily move across tenses. Now it is the first Kannada book which published in the

US. He has transported his personal experience into a story, he has not written for one person or five people. He has written about life. His writing is more inward-looking.

Ghachar Ghochar begins with an act of understated misdirection. They are in Coffee House, a café-cum-bar-cum-restaurant, where the unnamed narrator used to meet an old blaze, Chitra. Now that he is married, he comes here “for respite from domestic skirmishes”. We are introduced to a waiter, Vincent, who responds to the narrator’s troubles with curt, enigmatic epigrams. It is difficult not to think of Coffee House as a fictionalized version of Koshy’s Parade Cafe, a sense that is confirmed when the novel’s setting is later revealed to be Bangalore.

Any impressions the reader might have form the opening about the novel and its course are soon diluted. We become skillful at little more of Vincent or Chitra. It is obvious how much he relies on the place, dominated as it is by the astute Vincent, the waiter of whom the narrator reflects: “I suspect he knows the regulars at Coffee House better than they know themselves.”

Something appalling may have happened. A sense of dread has unsettled the narrator: he wants to speak with Vincent, even confide. While he sits and waits in the cafe, aware he has never before lingered so long, a story begins to take shape in his mind. At another table is a girl, whom he has often observed as she waits for a young man. This time there is an argument and she throws a glass of water at her companion. She misses.

The scene causes the narrator to remember another young woman, strong-willed and determined. Her name was Chitra and her conversation resounded with details of the cases she happened upon through working for a woman’s welfare organisation. The narrator spends quite a few hours there each day thus:

*Once I came here when I was terribly agitated, and found myself saying out loud as he placed a cup of coffee in front of me: ‘What should I do, Vincent?’ I was mortified and about to apologize when he answered, thoughtfully: ‘Let it go, sir.’(GG p.2)*

But his time there is spent not in flaneurial surveillance but in obsessive indication, and the only subject that truly interests him is his own joint family. Domestic novels are often supposed to concern women whose lives are cramped to the home, such as Manju Kapur’s novels or the first half of Attia Hosain’s Sunlight on a Broken Column. The narrator of Ghachar Ghochar is gratis to move as he pleases, but he finds family life inexorable. Sudden wealth only makes them more

ruthless. “It’s true what they say — it’s not we who control money, it’s the money that controls us,” the nameless narrator realizes, a little late in the day. “When there’s only a little, it behaves meekly; when it grows, it becomes brash and has its way with us. Money had swept us up and flung us in the midst of a whirlwind.”

Ghachar Ghochar is as it first seems. At well under thirty thousand words, the book is apt to be considered a novella, but it has the extent and dream of a novel rather than a long story. Its concision is a function of how much Vivek Shanbhag leaves implicit, and how much is suggested or disguised. One ends the book feeling on the one hand as if one knows this family intimately and yet that all this knowledge is, at best, interim.

The novel charts the family’s itinerary from petty bourgeois simplicity, in a house “with four small rooms, one behind the other, similar to train compartments,” (GGp.35) to immense affluence and a house in which each person has their own bedroom. The evolution is rapid, almost sudden, and the unexpected merchandise of the family’s first crisis. The narrator’s father, a mid-level insurance salesman, is enforced to take voluntary retirement. The family appears plunge into near-poverty, symbolically represented by a forced return from a gas to a kerosene stove.

But the father’s younger brother — Chikkappa, to the narrator — uses his brother’s disjuncting package as start-up investment for a spice distribution business. This venture, Sona Masala, is the vehicle of the family’s societal mobility. Their elevated position allows the family to arrange profitable matches — in the social, rather than financial sagacity — for the narrator and his sister Malati. But her matrimony splinters early, a familiar story of inaptness between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, rather than a wife and husband.

And while the narrator and his wife, Anita, enjoy a honeymoon of indisputable happiness and romance, she is soon nauseated by what she finds in her new home. Chikkappa is the family’s only earning member: the father, who owns half of Sona Masala, finds the trade and Chikkappa’s methods squalid, and the narrator occupies an office while doing no actual work. Anita insists that he receive his living: he makes pretence of going to the storehouse but is unable to change his way of life. Here, too, relations between mother and daughter-in-law appear indefensible.

Two fruitless marriages, a father held in contempt by his wife and children — he commits the serious sin of laughing at his own jokes — and only tolerated as of their collective fear that he might leave his chance in Sona Masala to charity. And a capacity for petty acts of brutality that, in the case of Chikkappa and his running of the business, can make bigger to gangsterism.

Yet each family member displays a concentrated attachment to the family and distaste to any change in its daily life or interior dynamics. The stoppage of the siblings' marriages is not a denunciation of arranged marriage but a reflection of their incapability to coexist with anyone outside the family. Samuel Butler said of Thomas and Jane Carlyle that by marrying each other they had done a great repair, for only two people were miserable instead of four. This is a family of insensitive, even repellent folks, but they are best off with each other.

The narrator might assert to seek refuge in Coffee House, and cogitate half-heartedly on the corrupting influence of money, but he is not so much a self-reflecting oddity as the family's byword. His unattractive, sometimes nasty portrayals of his relatives are ultimately a form of self-indictment.

This is a superb novel, disquieting and even claustrophobic, as hermetically enclosed as the family it describes. Shanbhag can be viciously unsentimental, but also moving and legitimately funny. Srinath Perur's translation is fluent and often chic, occasional infelicities notwithstanding, and proof of the value of a translator who is an proficient writer in English — Perur is the author of the charismatic travelogue *If It's Monday it Must Be Madurai*. It is exceptional enough for a Kannada novel to appear in English, let alone in a fine translation, and in Perur ought exposé on this novel to find the wide non-Kannada audience it deserves.

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