

Some Aspects of Nationalism as Represented in Premchand's Short Stories

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Abstract

This paper discusses some aspects of Nationalism as represented in Premchand's Short stories. Munshi Premchand (1880-1936) who is also known as Upnyaas Samraat had left behind a rich legacy of more than 300 short stories a dozen novels, few plays, and a vast corpus of journalistic writing. Nationalism as culture, and nationalism as a protest both have been conceptualized and contextualized in this paper.

Keywords: *Nationalism, Colonialism, Ideology, Law, Culture, Protest, Allegory, Protagonists, Civilization, Consciousness, WorldlyLove, Love for Motherland*

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Introduction

In this Paper different ways are discussed in which the idea of nationalism is conceptualized in Premchand's short stories. In some of them we find that the nation is a protagonist, it is a subject; in some, it is an allegory. We also see Premchand moving from the idea of nationalism as love of the motherland, to the idea of anti-colonial nationalism. In his stories written in the 1920s and 30s, the question of leadership and class becomes important. In most of these stories Gandhi appears sometimes as a text and at other times subtext. Nationalism was not an abstraction nor was it just an idea alone. It was a concrete practice too. It was the only hope in the context of the 1920s and 30s. Therefore, scholars who argue that Premchand's fiction was compromised with nationalism offer a dubious argument (Swan 1969, Chandra 1981, Talwar 2008). Even on the terrain of nationalism itself, however, realism makes its appearance. Premchand could see the limits of national movement too. Attempt is made here to unravel and interpret his few stories on Nationalism.

Nationalism as Culture

The story '*Yehi meri MatraBhaomihai*' (Premchand 1985, Vol: 6, pp- 7-12) tries to show that nationalism is not geography: it is a kind of cultural phenomenon. Or we can say it is an imbibing of the values of the nation. It is a civilization ethos of a particular country. The hero who is geographically located outside of the country does not lose his nationality: the cultural values, the cultural traits, the civilization consciousness, the base of one's longing, the ideas and spirit that are imbibed, everything may remain intact, after he comes back from America. Physically and geographically the land seems to have changed after his return. He finds drastic transformation on his arrival. All the landmarks seemed to have been erased. But his cultural and religious sentiments revive when he nears the land. A consciousness of the past, of cultural embeddedness, revives in that man. In this story, India is a civilization, deeply associated with a religious culture. The core of the civilization's value is spiritual, one that has a gravitational force. He found the country not in the physical geography of the place, but in the cultural geography: only when he heard the devotional songs, his memories of the nation and the idea of living in this country again revived. This was a kind of self-discovery. He discovers himself through spiritual experiences. Ganga appears as a river deeply rooted in Indian consciousness. The fifty years the hero spent in America get dissolved here. The river seems to become the symbolic expression of a country: but *Ganga Ma* is not just a river, it is a consciousness. The cultural uprootedness that happened in America gets dissolved. The whole cultural sub-consciousness, cultural- spiritual memories comes to the fore. Nationalism here becomes a kind of cultural nationalism, a cultural experience

of people. It is an existential construct that provides the frame through which people look at the world.

Nationalism is undoubtedly geography. It is also a political artifact, an idea affirmed by and expressed through the state. But the culture in this story is a kind of free flow of ideas, signs, sentiments, melodies, words, practices, and rituals. It is not artificial, not physical, and not external. Cultural indicators work out their implication in the mind, here in this story it defines the hero's link with the past, with tradition, and the nation. The hero hears the song that the ladies were singing "*Prabhu mere avgun chit Maduro*", he hears the familiar chanting of mantras "*har har shiv shivgange, gange*", and the *jap* of Gayatri Mantra. He jumps into the river Ganga, builds a small hut on the bank of Ganga, and starts living there. He wants to die in the *bhajan* of Ganga. He discovers himself, discovers the culture that has constituted him. This self-discovery is a process of identification of himself with the nation. Having returned from America, he realizes through this cultural process that this land of Ganga was his motherland: *yehimeromatrabhmi hai*.

Beyond worldly love: *Sansarik prem our Deshprem*

In the story '*Sansarik prem our Deshprem*' (Premchand 1986, volume: 8) Premchand shows how the love for the motherland is supreme love. Worldly love and material desires are to be placed below the love for the nation. The love between man and woman and sexual desires are to be sublimated, repressed, and ignored if necessary, to affirm the love for the nation. For Mazzini love for the country becomes the foremost identity. That is the message of the story. Mazzini would not let his love for a beautiful girl like Medline distract him, because his country is not prosperous and free. Medline loved him dearly, but Mazzini creates all kinds of diversion to negotiate this love, and extract himself from a relationship that he fears is worldly. He tries to convey to Medline through his friends that Mazzini is not a good person. But Medline's love was intense and deep. Mazzini reveals to her that the country was foremost for him. But her love too was sublime, transcending the material or physical dimension, like the love of the Gopis for Krishna. The idea of loving itself was pleasurable. Within such an idea, happiness is derived from the very fact that you love someone, and not because of any physical contact or proximity. It was like an intense emotional bonding between two persons. When Mazzini dies, Medline goes to his grave and places flowers on it. Her love, as Premchand represents it, was true and deep. It matches well with Mazzini's love for the nation. The nation here becomes an allegory for sublime love, true love: one that is pure, untainted by materiality. In this sense, the nation becomes a protagonist.

A similar idea of love is expressed in 'Duniya ka Anmol Ratna' (Giri ed. 2004). The story shows that love for the nation is the most precious. In the story, the woman protagonist wants his lover Dilfigar to bring her the greatest jewel of the world if he wants to win her love. The hero brings many different things, before he finally brings the blood of a Rajput who died saving his land, his nation. Having rejected the value of all that Dilfigar had brought earlier, the woman now says 'Yes, at last, you have got the most precious jam in the world'. The last drop of the Rajput blood comes to symbolize the selfless love for the nation.

Hilfiger had first brought the tears of a person who was hanged on the gallows. This was not considered a precious jam because they were tears for the self-signs of an emotion about what an individual was facing. Similarly, when he brought ashes of a woman who sacrifices herself on her husband's *chita*, it was seen as a personal dedication to one's near and dear, hence not a precious jam. It was also bound by social custom and convention, not individual choice. The Rajput's last blood was seen as a selfless sacrifice, a supreme sacrifice. The nation becomes an abstract entity. Nation is an idea and the Rajput gives his life for this idea. So here the cause for which the Rajput dies was something very impersonal.

In this story, dying for the nation is represented as selfless. It is the supreme sacrifice - a metaphor of the deepest love, a love that cannot be compared to any other. The drop of Rajput blood becomes a metaphor for nationalism. The sign of nationalism becomes the most precious jewel in the world. This and the other stories I discuss earlier reveal how Premchand represents the nation as a metaphor and an allegory. It also becomes a subject, a protagonist. He, who discovers the meaning of this most precious sign, deserves to win the true love of his lover.

Innocence and Negativity

Premchand did not want negativities to find a place in an innocent child's mind. He did not want idealism to die. He knew the ugly side of reality but he did not want it to be injected into an innocent child's mind. Nothing should be done to erode faith in ideals.

There is an element of criticism of the national movement built into the story. But still the leaders of the national movement working for the society - whatever luxury and comfort they had enjoyed - had dedicated their lives to the service to the country. These were the people who worked on the ground. There were no alternative leaders available despite the limits and weaknesses of the existing leaders. They could not be wished away. You cannot have pure and sacred people. Some people did engage in activities like drinking, riding in motor car, listening to *mujra* using up

people's money. But these cannot be generalized. This is bound to happen in any big social movement. Any ideal construction is not a pure thing: there has to be some kind of deviation from the ideal. For that deviation, you cannot do away with the total project itself. So, we have to put up with things that one may not ethically approve of. In Gandhian nationalism, if a few people were corrupt did not mean that the entire national movement had to be disapproved. Premchand was reluctant to vitiate the mind of the child by injecting negativity into her mind. Nationalism after all was a legitimate project. Premchand's stories should not be read-only as a critique of Nationalism. (Chandra, 1982).

The limits of the law

In the story '*KanuniKumar*' (Premchand 1978, Vol: 2, pp- 241-249) there is an inbuilt critique of patriarchal ideology. This is developed through a criticism of the gendered nature of law, and an exploration of how women are discriminated against through the process of law. *KanuniKumar* is obsessed with the law-making process. He thinks that everything could be regulated by just making some laws; he went to excessive lengths trying to regulate everything through the agency of law. Kanuni Kumar's wife realizes the foolishness of this stand. She raises questions of unequal freedoms: men could enjoy extravaganza and control wealth; they could float through life as if they were free. The wife asked her husband, Kanuni Kumar, to formulate a law that could control these male attributes. He said this could not be done since these were part of man's nature, and this intrinsic nature could not be changed through law. The wife exposes the problem with the law, the limits of its functioning, and asks Kanuni Kumar to create awareness amongst people and spread education, rather than talk about law. She says to her husband that if he did not spread education and depended only on the law then the shackles of dependence would not be loosened. It was necessary to think independently of the colonial state. Law obsessiveness would not make anyone think independently: rather, it would further the control of the alien state over society (Chandra, 1982). Freedom from colonialism could only come through awareness, through education, not through the categories of order created by colonialism.

The Making of Nationalists

In several stories Premchand maps the way nationalist selves are produced, and how nationalism ultimately triumphs over loyalism. Serving the colonial state is linked in most of these stories with the question of narrow self-interest, disregard for justice and truth; and the struggle for nationalism is associated with questions of dignity, self-respect, equity and justice.

'*Vichitra Holi*' (Premchand 1979, Vol: 3, pp- 198-202) is a story of the transformation of an individual's political subjectivity and ideology. Seth Ujagarmal was a trader who co-operated with the British, had a strong connection with British officialdom, and reaped the benefits of this cooperation. He drew close to the British bureaucracy by criticizing non-co-operators and reaped the benefits of his criticism. It is by cooperating with the British that he amassed wealth and earned a good name for himself in the eyes of British officials. This story of Premchand tells us how an ally of the British turned against them.

On the occasion of Holi, Ujagarmal was tricked into a situation by the *Khansama* of the collector Mr. Cross. The *khansamah* wanted to spoil the magistrate's drawing-room by inviting everybody to have a drink there. At the same time, he wanted Ujagarmal to have a taste of the coercive aspect of British rule. Agarwal realizes the real nature of colonial power when an enraged Mr. Cross beats him up. He now realizes his worth and joins hands with the Congress - the agency which was fighting against the colonial state. It was the festival of Holi which mediated his transformation from being pro-British to being pro-congress. Whipped by the magistrate, Ujagarmal realizes the essential character of British rule, turns nationalist, and joins the Holi festival organized by the nationalists in the Congress office. He was finally convinced that the kind of respect he received from the officialdom was false and that they were here to control the freedom of Indians. He became a committed nationalist.

Geetanjali Pandey has read this story as an irrational outburst of Premchand against the British born out of cultural nationalism. (Pandey, 1989)

In '*Lag Dant*' (Hostility) (Premchand 1985, Vol: 6, pp- 169-174) we see a portrayal of the ideological clash between two individuals, Jokhu Bhagat and Bechan Choudhari, and the final triumph of nationalism. Their families were locked in a fight for many generations. It all started with land boundary. Even the high court could not settle the dispute between the two families. Their politics differed and even the village was divided into two opposing camps. When the national movement came to the village the villagers got divided: some became Swarajists and other Loyalists. The loyalists started glorifying colonial institutions and conditions- courts, cheap availability of British cloth- and devalued the legitimacy of Swadeshi things. Swarajist used to say that you should boycott British goods and develop indigenous systems of the dispensation of justice and create an alternative authority to the British and their signs and symbols. But the loyalists on the other hand said that British courts are dispensing justice which was open to both the weak and the strong. They also said since British cloth was cheap what was the necessity of wearing Khadi clothes?

Similarly, the loyalists defended the British educational system and also the consumption of *Sharab* and *Tadi*. Gradually people got to know what the interests of loyalists were. In their houses, only the *hakim*, *policewala*, and *chaprasi* assembled. Consequently, the loyalist acceptability was eroded and the popularity of nationalists or Swarajist increased manifold. People could reason out whom to support and whom not to. The mechanical patron-client model could not work, people began to realign beyond the faction, drawn by nationalist ideals.

Premchand thus shows how nationalist ideas could gain legitimacy and acceptability in village society. In the clash of ideas, Swarajistide as gripped the masses because they were nationalist and pro-people, and anti-British. Seeing the popularity of nationalist ideas, even the loyalist turned nationalist, deciding to beat his rival by excelling in the Swarajist stream. One day he decided to go and attend a huge meeting that his nationalist rival had organized. Sharing the same platform, he embraced nationalism.

Their factionalism, Premchand says, ended with both embracing nationalism. But did it? Could it? We can safely assume that their factionalism was now expressed within the Swarajist stream. The story shows how Premchand saw nationalism to be a utopia.

In a sense, Premchand's story picks up a theme that the Cambridge School focuses on: that is, the argument that different people supported the national movement at a different time for different reasons, sometimes for purely personal interest or factional interest. But Premchand turns the story of factionalism around. He suggests that people sometimes did turn to nationalism for personal and factional reasons, but nationalism was powerful enough to absorb other interests within it, and also transform people's ideas.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one can say that Premchand both celebrates and throws light on the limitations of Nationalism. He explores the existence of Nationalism in everyday form. The argument of scholars that Premchand's fiction was compromised with nationalism is dubious and an uncomplicated and oversimplified reading of Premchand.

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