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Abstract

Munshi Premchand (1880-1936), the great Upnyas Samraat has written more than 300 short stories, a dozen novels, few plays, and journalistic articles. As a commentator, his commentary was not confined only to one segment of Indian society. He wrote extensively on the peasantry, Dalit's question as well as on Nationalism. He wrote equally, if not more, about the problem that hemmed Indian women in colonial society from childhood to their death.

This paper discusses many-sided subordinations of women under blatant structure of Patriarchy by interpreting few short stories by Premchand. How women negotiate this subordination, how unhappy they were, their indignation and protest are also talked about. Sometimes this subordination results in unhappy death, which can be interpreted as a marker of protest too.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Widowhood, Prostitutes, Despair, Death, Incompatible Marriage, Divorce, Suicide, Protest, Culture, Traditions, Erotic, Male Lust, injustice, Predicament, Sacrifice, Cowardice, Social Agency.

Reference to this paper should
be made as follows:

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Question in Premchand's
Short Stories*

Notions June 2021,
Vol. XII, No. I,
pp. 014 - 020

Article No.02

Online available at :

[https://anubooks.com/
notions-vol-xii-no-1-jan-june-
2021/](https://anubooks.com/notions-vol-xii-no-1-jan-june-2021/)

Introduction

The following text discusses manysided problems faced by women in a context where patriarchal ideology exercised hegemonic control over the mind of Premchand's heroines. The stories explore the question of dowry, the problems of widowhood, incompatible marriages, and also the life of prostitutes, lower classes, and castes. The life of women is shown to be filled with unhappiness right from childhood. Women emerge in Premchand's narrative with all their suffering and oppression. But Premchand does not glorify this suffering. He focuses on their life, their struggles, and their protests. Stories interpreted in this paper together bring the vision of Premchand to the fore. The culmination of the story reveals the tendencies of the time. Apart from reading Premchand's sympathy with his protagonists, we shall consider his heroines as in many ways independent characters with their inner tensions and problems.

Images of suffering

In this section, we discuss how Premchand represents the suffering of women. According to Premchand women's suffering was caused by male cruelty and male oppression, even when they suffer silently and do not react or protest vehemently.

'*Beto Wali Vidhwa*' (Premchand, n.d., Volume: 1, pp-54-70) is a touching story. Phoolmati was a widow and her sons were engrossed in their own self-interest. When her husband was alive her words reigned supreme, after his death her authority was progressively ignored. Her sons went to the extent of taking control of her property and even usurped her jewelry. They dispossessed her from all her inheritance. Her dream of getting her daughter married to a man from a good home was shattered. With her bereavement and total segregation from her sons, the situation became very grave. Finally, she died. What analysis one can make of this story? A lonely woman, forsaken by her own son, became the victim of the ways of the world. Her sons, drowned in self-pleasure, were unwilling to take care of their own mother. What was the woman to do? She cannot withstand or resist. But she does speak out against the injustice of tradition. Her son Uma told her that the law-giver Manu has said that the property after the death of the father belongs to his sons alone and that the mother's right is confined only to roti (bread) and kapda (cloths). If this is the law of Manu, Phoolmati says, it should be burnt. She was angry, upset, but also helpless within a male society. She had nothing to fall back upon. Could she go out and tell others of her predicament? Would they listen to her? Phoolmati remains passive. This is the pathos of the story: the predicament of the widow which Phoolmati cannot overcome.

Charu Gupta says that 'Phoolmati' was only the object of the story and not the subject. I disagree. Even if one does not react in the face of danger, one does not necessarily become the object of history. Phoolmati was a thinking being. She was emotionally tortured, socially handicapped, financially marooned. The resisting and protesting figure is not the only subject of history. Even if one is calm in face of danger, one can be an acting subject. Premchand's sympathy in this story lies with Phoolmati. It seems that he clearly supports, he brings out the injustice of the situation, the unfairness of denying to the wife a claim to her deceased husband's property.

The theme of women's predicament within patriarchal society is also explored in *Nairashya*. (Premchand 1979, Volume: 3, pp- 103-112) In such a patriarchal society, sons are most cherished. If a woman gives birth to a daughter, she is considered to be inauspicious. Nirupama in the story keeps giving birth to daughters one after another. Her husband, Ghamandilal, tortured her threatening to leave the house forever if she gave birth to another daughter. Nirupama evolved a survival strategy. She told her husband that she had got the blessings of a sadhu, and this time she would beget a boy. This strategy could bring peace to her only for nine months. She once again gave birth to a daughter. But Nirupama dies of a heart failure. Only through death could she escape harassment. She is a victim of patriarchal ideology. Premchand's sympathy clearly lies with Nirupama. He seems to be saying that Nirupama did not die due to her heart failure. She was murdered by a brutal society. This is a radical message.

'*Narak Ka Marg*' (Premchand 1979, Volume: 3, pp- 24-30) is a story through a woman's autobiography. She tells everyone in society that no one should marry their daughter to unsuitable old person, and they should not seek wealth, power, and position. They should look for a good match for their daughter. Living within a loveless marriage she contemplates suicide, but is tricked away by a wicked woman and thrown into prostitution. She bursts out in anger saying "*kisike gale bandhne se uskiauratnahihojati. Ye Kauravas hai*". That is the message here.

Through these stories of suffering Premchand explores the dilemmas and predicaments of women in a patriarchal society. He highlights the problems in women's lives, even when he does not offer radical solutions. We cannot expect from literary texts solutions to social problems.

The individual and the social

This section talks about the absence of agency of social transformation. It shows how socially conditioned thinking restricts individual freedom or happiness. Premchand provokes readers to change this ugly reality.

'*Dhikkar*' (Premchand, n. d., Volume: 1, pp- 173-187) shows the plight and predicament of a young widow Manhi who is the heroine of this story. She was treated miserably by her own uncle and aunt, considered inauspicious, and kept away from auspicious occasions. Only her cousin had some sympathy for her. Humiliated and demeaned, she contemplates suicide. Her cousin's friend Indar Nath promises to marry her and rescue her from her situation. But the society produces insurmountable hurdles. So, she marries secretly. But finally, she commits suicide because her family rebukes her, and the society reprimands her. The social milieu could not tolerate her actions. The material condition in society was not ripe for widow remarriage.

Within the society of the time, it was taken for granted that a widow ought to live an austere and chaste life. So even after having conceded to marry, Manhi is gripped with guilt. She thinks she has violated the norms of the society. She dies because she thought her life will bring trouble to her husband. Premchand tries to suggest that individual actions cannot change social situations, could not make life liveable for Many. Social conditions could not accept the legitimacy of individual action since this violated social norms (Sen, 1977). The agency of social transformation was absent in those times.

'*Nairashya Leela*' (Premchand 1979, Volume: 3, pp- 51-61) is a story about a thirteen years old widow Kailash. Societal perception about widow, how should she live and behave, intertwines in parental judgment. Society wants her to be confined to domesticity, live an austere life without joy. She had no right to pleasure. Kailash took to different activities: theatre, tuition, religious life, etc. But society did not like her being cheerful. Finally, when she grasped the implication of her being a widow she became desensitized to all criticism. She started criticizing the authority of the male world and the marriage system itself. The societal pressure continued to haunt the parents so much that her father was forced to accept that there is only one way left for her: death.

'*Manovratti*' (Premchand, n. d., Volume: 1, pp- 331-338) explores the male gaze. A woman lies in the park, on a bench. She is unwell. But every passer-by - a doctor, a lawyer, sportsmen, and several women - all condemn her. They all see her as a sexual object, comment on her physical attributes, and impute sexuality to each part of the body. They see her as either *kulbadhu* or *vaishya* - a woman who was promiscuous and of loose morals. Finally, however, it is revealed that the lady in question was the daughter-in-law of a lawyer and was the wife of Vasant, the sportsman who had passed by and made sexual comments without knowing who she was. The story reveals how women in patriarchal societies are inevitably always

subjected to male erotic gaze, masculine ridicule, and suspicion, even when they are innocent.

Heroism and cowardice

The heroines of the stories discussed in this section all commit suicide. But in each case, the death was caused by male cowardice.

'*Kaya*' (Premchand, n. d., Volume: 1, pp- 188-197) deals with the question of cowardice by looking at the dilemmas of inter-caste marriage. It is the story of love between a Brahman boy, Keshav, and a Bania girl - Prema. The boy wishes to marry, Prema is hesitant. The boy urges her to talk to her parents. The girl agrees but the boy retracts under pressure from his family. His father forces him to change his mind. He walks out of the relationship and the girl commits suicide. Premchand sees the boy as *kayar* - coward. The story looks at social attitudes, parental authority, questions of honor, and the problems of love across caste barriers. Does Premchand suggest that such unions cannot ever succeed? They will end in death? Even though the woman dies, and the ending is tragic, the object of Premchand's critique is clearly the male cowardice of the upper caste Keshav.

In the story '*Do Kabren (Two graves)*' (Premchand, 1985, Volume: 4, pp- 34-46) we find that idealism got defeated when confronted with harder realities. Professor Raminder had transcended the social taboo and married the daughter of prostitute Sulochana but finally, things came to the surface, the idea of marrying a daughter of a prostitute become predominant, this idea lingering in his unconscious, comes to the surface as a society, again and again, reminded him of the cruel fact of Sulochana being the daughter of a prostitute. Raminder finally said to her in anger that your pedigree is like that he categorizes her with the stereotype of prostitute, he also said that she was a Vaishya, can marry as many times as she wants and when Sulochana commit suicide then he repents. Raminder thought that he had married Sulochana but he was not willing to have any association with her background. This story ends in tragedy again. Not that Sulochana does not question Raminder's remarks, but her protestation and questioning had no consequence because being a daughter of a prostitute, she was tabooed, she was selfless, and decided to commit suicide. Once again, the effort to go against social norms ends with tragedy, with suicide. Raminder's cowardice comes to the fore. He knew that Sulachna was a daughter of a prostitute yet he loved her and married to her. This was the triumph of idealism. After all, he was a professor. When confronted with the boycott of society his idealism evaporates, and his cowardice resurfaces. He blames Sulachna for his social censure. He wants to control her, wishes to have no relationship with her past. The woman

has no option but to commit suicide. He was left with nothing except repentance. He was a coward who could not face society. Later he accepts his cowardice, goes every day to her grave to pay her floral tribute. Is Premchand shying away from a radical critique of society? Does this once again show that he is a reformist? It appears to me that Premchand seeks to unravel the contradictions of a society that was deeply imbued with caste values. But his object of empathy is clear: his target of critique is obvious. He does not affirm the values of the society he represents.

The story '*Vaishya*' (Premchand 1978 Volume: 2, pp- 36-53) brings out clearly the fact that human relationship is not governed by any rule of law. It cannot tell us when love would happen or when it would not. Lila's husband Singhar Singh regularly visited a prostitute, Madhuri. Lila wanted the help of Dayakrishna to bring Singhar Singh back to her. When Dayakrishna came to mediate, he himself fell in love with Madhuri. But his love for Madhuri was not decisive, despite the fact that Madhuri started loving Dayakrishna dearly. There are three kinds of relationships in the story, one is socially sanctioned relationship between Singhar Singh and Lila, the second the rather transgressive relationship between Singhar Singh and Madhuri, and the third, the love between Madhuri and Dayakrishna. Finally, when Madhuri discovers that Dayakrishna is pretending to love her, she ends her life by committing suicide.

Madhuri however raised a series of fundamental questions. She talked of the double standards of men, the permissiveness of male sexuality that was not bound by a commitment to one woman. But the woman at home is considered sacred, but not the women outside the home with whom men relate. When Madhuri died, Dayakrishna wept out of guilt because he was cowardly, and the cause of her death. Singhar Singh was in fact more courageous. He was ready to marry Madhuri. The object of the story is clearly not the emancipation of prostitutes. But the character of Madhuri is powerful and many profound questions about male values within patriarchal society are posed by Premchand through her voice. **The spiritual and the material**

The stories in this section show the triumph of ideal and platonic love. You can love even while remaining at distance without materializing love in physical form. Love knows no bounds, no limits. It has a capacity to transcend the material plane. In the dialectic between the material and the spiritual, the spiritual finally triumphs in Premchand's stories.

'*Rahasya*' (Premchand 1966, pp- 32-47) is a story about exploring the realm beyond that of mundane existence. Manjula says to Vimal that his life was spiritually based on devotion and sacrifice. It should not be shrouded with worldly desire and craving. Vimal is a selfless person who was running an NGO. Manjula could not

have a happy marriage. She has come to work in Vimal's NGO. She was looking to evolve her own personality. She did not want to entangle him in the fold of desire. Yet she wants to see herself as Sati, and was keen that Vimal sees her as Nishkalank Sati. Even when attracted to Vimal, she refrains from befriending him. To her, Vimal was a pure soul uncontaminated by worldly desire; she attributed sacredness to his character.

The dilemma between ideal and material was to be found in Vimal's character too. Vimal was frightened of the sexual desire, could not make himself available for Manjula, even for official work for many days. He was running away from her. The story thus explores the mystery (rahasya) of life, both were ideal in relation to each other, but fail to materialize their feelings. Sexual passion was sublimated. One might find Gandhi's influence here. The story can be seen as revealing the limits of Premchand's own Vision. Spirituality here is allowed to transcend the materiality of life.

Conclusion

Stories that have been interpreted here suggest the working of patriarchal ideology over the mind and the body of the women and their negotiation with this dominance by working out several strategies which sometimes result in death.

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