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GENDER-CASTE INTERSECTION IN PREMCHAND'S *GODAAN*

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Abstract: Premchand offers a kind of contrast to English literature because English literature generally talks about two world wars. The novelists and poets generally speak about destruction and violence in these two World Wars. Premchand talked very significantly about the freedom movement, about the need for the art to wake up to reality; otherwise, it would crush them in totality. Premchand was not just a writer; but a phenomenon; an atmosphere.

Premchand, throughout his literary career, exhibited an abiding and sensitive interest in the plight of women in his fiction as well as journalistic writing. His fiction always depicted Hindu women remaining loyal to their husbands and even subservient to them. The modern women, depicted by Premchand, bear or so society thinks easy morals and shallow character. The last twenty years of his life are considered the most mature and productive, and in this duration, he produced the most mature and classic works. His short stories and novels took up the issues of women's liberation and addressed their plight.

Key Words: Caste, gender, literature, fiction, women, liberation, plight, society, etc.

1. Introduction:

Undoubtedly Premchand took progressive stances in showing modern women living life on their terms and denying marriage for the sake of serving society. Even though he sympathized with women and advocated their cause of empowerment, he cherished the ideal of a traditional Hindu woman.ⁱ He also advocated the 'divorce as a necessary step towards the liberation of women. However, at the same time, he also denied the support for legalizing abortion and felt that it could lead to licentious behaviour among young men and women, and it can destroy the very foundation of marriage.ⁱⁱ Also, Premchand could not extend his support to the cause of birth control through the means of newly developed equipment and methods. He advocated only abstinence. He was aware of the need for parents for fewer children, but he, for that purpose, advocated men and women to take recourse to *brahmacharya* for this purpose. He argued that increased use of artificial birth control measures might lead to an increase in licentiousness.ⁱⁱⁱ Premchand was quite worried about those who were not capable of practicing *brahmacharya* for lowering the birth rate and thus controlling the population. He saw the danger of comfortable living among men and women if there is unrestricted use of the means of artificial birth control.

Premchand's Concern for the Issues of Women:

Premchand was concerned with women's issues and wanted them liberated but within the framework of Hindu traditional womanhood. It leads to his ideal of a good woman that Premchand opposed the idea of indiscriminate equality between men and women. He was also not happy with the idea of women taking up the jobs that men traditionally performed.^{iv} Premchand wrote extensively on the problem of prostitution in his articles as well as fiction. In 1934, he wrote an article and admired Soviet Russia for rooting out prostitution and suggested that in some ways capitalism is responsible for such exploitation of women.^v Thus, it can be concluded that Premchand could not reflect an attitude of accepting a happy and wholehearted modern woman.^{vi} However, he accepted the modern tendencies in her and asserted the equal status of a woman with a man in public life, taking up jobs and participating in the freedom struggle. Premchand's women characters rightfully speak up for her economic, political, and social rights and privileges. They are independent, confident, and self-respecting citizens who are ready to face challenges in life. The women share responsibilities in the household and Premchand never advocated subservience to women in his articles; though 'forwardness' is relatively restricted than welcomed.

Dhaniya's Traditional Outlook:

The traditional domain of a woman's activities is limited to her exercise of power in the family. The male-female relations can be studied in this novel as novels present an intimate view of life while providing a holistic picture of perceived reality. The study of power and powerlessness of rural and urban women would be interesting in *Godaan*. This novel, being referred to as a social and historical document, depicts the corrupting effects of an unjust land tenure system reinforced by an exploitative caste system. It describes the transition period of the Indian socio-economic and political scenario. Premchand calls it 'money culture' on a human relationship where society moves from a domestic mode of production to a capitalist economy.^{vii} The protagonist of the novel, Hori and his wife Dhaniya are persecuted by the village *Brahmins*, the moneylenders, *zamindar*, and finally utterly looted by the city entrepreneur who buys the village land for cultivating a cash crop sugarcane. It is the story of Dhaniya and Hori. This

peasant couple had a tenancy over three acres of Rai Sahib Amarpal Singh's land, and both are introduced to the reader at the very beginning of the novel. Hori has planned to visit the landlord Rai Sahib, and he scolds Dhaniya for poking her nose into the matters of his domain. Hori says:

Why do you poking your nose into things you don't understand? Just hand me stick and get on with your own work. You know how many people here in the village have been thrown off their land or had their property taken away. When someone's heel is on your neck, it's best to keep licking his feet. (15)

Dhaniya's work, as a traditional Hindu woman's work, is centred in and around the house. She has to work in the house as well as in the fields. Dhaniya became the head woman of her family after her parents-in-law's death, and she preferred to stay in the house whereas her younger sisters-in-law had to work in the fields as well as in the house. Dhaniya had a privilege over them. After completing their agricultural work, women rush to their homes to do housework and domestic chores. Whereas the men most of the time loiter on the way home to have a smoke with the village males and have a general discussion over the weather. The peasant's status in the village or society is decided from his contacts with the people in power, whereas the woman's status is derived from her husband and his dominance in the society. In an agrarian society, the husband and wife comprise a unit, and the husband is the head of the family. His decision is considered final, and he receives respect in society based on his power in his own home. In *Godaan*, we learn that Hori is served his meals first and that too in the best *thali*. Sona and Rupa talk among themselves. Sona says to Rupa, "Then will you eat first too, before feeding your husband?" Rupa says it is but natural. However, Sona asks her that it is not the tradition. In our house, "Mama serves papa first." (273) Rupa answers her, "I am going to grow strong and keep my man in his place."

Dhaniya and Hori's quarrel, though their domestic affair, brings together the whole village to watch the scene. Some meddle in it, and others take sides. In fact, beating one's wives is a common thing for the villagers. Hira, Hori's brother, beat his wife Puniya every other day. Just recently, Hira beat her so hard she had been flat in bed for days. Damri, a basket weaver, had come to cut off bamboos but Puniya opposed him, and a scuffle broke out between them. Damri gave her a strong shove backwards, and Punni lost her balance and fell over. Annoyed by this, she pulled off her sandal and struck him wildly again and again. Listening to the commotion, Hira, Punni's husband, came and held Punni and pounced on her, seized her hair, and banged her head on the ground. Such a kind of violence captured by Premchand is normalized by patriarchal ideology. The peripheral situation of women, who are caught in poverty, and their double marginalization make them more pitiable. In the case of Puniya, it can be said that it is self-inflicted violence, mainly due to her submission to her husband. The violence against women in *Godaan* is the result of the feudalistic operations that control the lower castes. Premchand delineates that in beating his wife, Hira is more concerned with his reputation than anything else. "You little bastard" he shouted. "Determined to ruin my reputation, aren't you?" (45)

Malti as a Representative of New Woman:

Premchand also conceived the new image of a woman, who is highly educated from abroad, economically independent, and capable of expressing herself well in public. She has her own independent opinion. She is vocal in her demands and raises her voice against the injustice meted out to her. Malti, a practicing physician who had studied medicine in England, represents the urban elite of society. She is held as the icon of the modern age, she is a beautiful, intelligent, and socialite woman.^{viii} She is economically independent and is the sole breadwinner of her family. Her father, a paralytic, and two sisters, Saroj and Varda, are dependent on her earnings; from every angle, Malti symbolises the modern woman.^{ix} "She was the living image of modernity" (76) Premchand says of her. She is very cheerful and had free access to the mansions of *zamindars*, mixes up freely with men, shares jokes with them; she does not hesitate to discuss with men on any topic. Even the topics related to the men-women relationship are not an exception for her. She is an expert in male psychology, playful and argumentative. She takes on many persons like Khanna, Onkarnath, and Mehta. Mr. Khanna flirts with her, "hovers around her like a honeybee and wants to chat with her more than anybody else to have her eyes fixed on him alone." (78) She joins the elite social personalities in the discussion on any serious literary social and public matters. Rai Sahib, the landlord, is also one of the members of her social circle who invites her for dinner and parties in his house in a village Semari. Malti has a special affection for Mehta, a scholar and university professor of philosophy; in fact, she loves him for his various qualities, simplicity, sincerity, intelligence, and masculinity.

The writer himself observes some traits of her personality as "she is beautiful and good-natured and understanding and broad-minded, and she has lots of other virtues. (182) The author observes further, "Malti is outwardly a butterfly, but a honeybee from within; her life is not always pleasant, a subsisting on sugar alone one cannot feel contented." (227) Malti is the centre of attraction in elite society and their dinner parties where she drinks and dines with men. She is flirtatious and open-minded and witty. As an intelligent woman, her every move is calculated. "She laughs because she gains from it... she chatters and jokes because it eases the burden of her duty." (227) Malti deeply loves Mehta for his simplicity and honesty as well as intelligence and masculinity.

Premchand, through Onkarnath, puts forth his views about Malti, Onkarnath says she runs around all over the place and still calls herself a Miss. "She says she is not going to marry – that it is just a trap in which one's personality does not get a chance to develop fully." (97) She thinks that developing one's personality means going around robbing everyone and then wallowing in carefree dissipation. Onkarnath sees her as a woman who tears away only the chains that happen to interfere with her enjoyment. She does not believe in marriage and considers it a trap. As she loves Mehta genuinely, she gets jealous of the tribal girl whom they came across in a jungle on their hunting trip. When Mehta admires the tribal girl, Malti says, "Obviously you are her guest today. I suppose you are planning to spend the night here too. The hunting would be better at night of course." (107) She remarks sarcastically. Malti is critical about the views of Mehta on marriage, "I feel that free love is no hindrance to the development of mind, whereas marriage locks you in a cage." (81) Mehta's speech, in the women's league arranged by Malti, explored his views about women.

Malti found some of his views orthodox on the man-woman relationship. Mehta opined that marriage is a social contract, and neither man nor woman should have any right to break it. Before the contract, you are independent, but after that, your hands are tied. Mehta also believed that married life is socially better, but not individually. (81) Mehta outwardly opposed divorce and told Malti that who don't wish to marry to them the principle of free love applies. Malti believes that Mehta, as a philosopher, has no feelings, and it is a good thing that he never married. She also accuses him of being ignorant of women's psychology. She is somewhat suspicious of Mehta's indifference towards accepting her as a wife and Khanna's frivolous attitude towards her.

Malti warns Mehta to be cautioned by Govindi and don't be carried away by her innocent looks. When Mehta tells her about the ill-treatment of Khanna towards Govindi and his physical torture of Govindi, Malti holds Govindi equally responsible for

her cruel treatment. Mehta also asks her to speak to Khanna about his lousy behaviour towards Govindi; she refuses it by saying that clapping is not done by one hand.

Malti has enough courage to speak her intuition openly and voice her protest and asks Khanna that she misunderstood him, and she would have run away from his shadow also. She says it as:

I am an attractive woman, and you are one of my many admirers, I showed you my favour in that, whereas I turned away gifts from other people, I accepted even the most trivial things from you with gratitude. And in times of need, I even asked you for loans. If in your obsession over money, you took it to mean something else, I'll forgive you. That's only human nature. But understand this money has never yet won a woman's heart and it never will. (295)

Malti, a western-educated modern woman, certainly gets more opportunities to participate in the public sphere. She is a woman of free-thinking and modern living, and men always judge her character. Her nature of work lets her in contact with the city's wealthy and elite. She is always surrounded by newspaper editors, university professors, landlords, bankers, and industrialists. These men view her as an attractive woman and a good chit-chatter on various socio-political issues. She has a special closeness with Khanna but continues to love Mehta. When Malti shows Khanna his place, he begs her pardon. "Don't humiliate me any further, Malti, I beg of you. But, let us at least continue to be friends." She felt rather nasty when Mehta talks to her about Govindi and tells her that she is the reason for the discord in the marital relationship between Govindi and Khanna. Malti chides Mehta that he does not have a right to blame her like that. It could be sure that such things may have led her to decide between not marrying at all. However, she holds Mehta very high and a man of integrity. In the course of the novel, her character develops, and she culminates her conscious choice of being unmarried and devote her life to serve the poor and sick. Mehta's ideals impress her a lot, and in the company of Mehta, she learns and develops a lot and decides to devote her life to the poor and sick. She is now a transformed woman, and the men also cease viewing her as a sexual being and become a respectable person in their minds. She visits Hori's village and offers her medical service free of cost and impressed by the simplicity of the village's poor and resolves that she will get more involved in social activities, serving the poor and needy. Mehta gets impressed to see her changed outlook and proposes to her for marriage. However, Malti turns down his proposal by sayings:

No, Mehta, I've been thinking about this question for months and I have finally decided that there is greater happiness in being friends than in being husband and wife. You love me, you believe in me, and I'm confident that, if the occasion arose, you would protect me with your life. I've found not only a guide but also a protector in you... If we set up our small household, shutting our souls in a little cage and restricting our joys and sorrows to each other, could we ever approach the Infinite? It would just put an obstacle in our path. (412)

Mehta listens to her head down and falling on her feet; he accepts her proposition and says, "I'll do as you suggested". However, Malti agrees to stay together and remain friends forever. "Separated though they were, the two were joined in close embrace." (413) Malti's great desire for social work and her commitment to the service of the poor perhaps made her the only contended character at the end of the novel.

Govindi as a Representative of Upper Caste and Class Woman:

Govindi, an educated upper caste and class woman and a wife of a banker, industrialist Khanna, poses in front of the readers as a victim of multi-faceted violence. Govindi, along with Malti, hails from the upper class, elite social spectrum. She is the wife of one of the most distinguished men of the town. She is the mother of four children and leading a life of luxury- the most pleasant type of the bungalow, the most refined type of furniture, the finest type of car, and an infinite amount of money. She devoted all her energies to looking after the children and taking care of the household details. She never paid any attention to the nature of charm or how it can be created. Govindi lacks the self-confidence and aggressiveness that is possessed by Dhaniya with which she threatens Hori to do his daily chores like cooking and cleaning. She pretends to be happy and contended apparently but living a life of misery with a debauch and cheater husband, Mr. Khanna. He is cunning and cruel and even beats Govindi regularly. At home, Khanna is rude and hot-tempered as he is sweet and gentle at the office; a kind of dual personality he possesses. His rude and inflammable behaviour with Govindi behind closed doors made her more reticent. Often he would lash out angrily at Govindi. On such occasions, she would retreat to her room and spend the night weeping, while Khanna sat in the living room listening to the music of prostitutes or went out drinking to the club. (234) Govindi, despite harsh treatment, meted out to her, preferred to remain silent and passive and did not protest against her abusive husband. She cannot visualize her existence without him and admits that her love for Khanna has turned her into his slave, whereas Malti has turned Khanna into her slave out of love. Govindi, a victim of patriarchy, a victim of patriarchal ideology's "misrecognition," Louis Althusser equates ideology to misrecognition. She freely accepts her victimization and deceives herself by believing that she is making conscious moral binding on herself of her children and husband. She complains about Malti to Mehta as:

My life has become intolerable. So far I've put up with whatever mortification came along, but I can't stand it any longer. Malti is one to destroy me. I don't have any weapon capable of defeating her. If you can somehow free me from her claws, I'll be indebted to you for life. She's gradually stealing away my happiness and good fortune. (242)

Govindi's dependence on her husband for gold ornaments, goods, and services makes her move vulnerable than Dhaniya. Whereas Dhaniya is crucial in decision making about family's physical and social survival, Govindi lacks her presence in the decision making of a business proposal. In the household, matters also Govindi has a minimal role to play. She even cannot decide which doctor has to be called for treatment of her child's illness. Mr Khanna takes the decision. Even Govindi's participation in public function is also controlled and monitored by Khanna. When Govindi was invited to lay the foundation stone of a women's gymnasium being built in the city, Khanna disapproves of it and asks her to reject it. Govindi's assertion was "Any honour awarded her was an honour to her husband, the thought had never been crossed her mind that it might offend him in any way..." (293)

Hori and Khanna both beat their wives, but there is a fundamental difference in their psyche. Hori feels guilty after beating Dhaniya whereas Khanna neither relents nor feels guilty. Whereas in the village, wife-beating becomes a public affair where some arbitrate, some take sides, some provide support to the woman and protect her against the unfair tyrannical husband. In the city wife-beating is a private affair with the wife totally at the mercy of her stronger and more powerful husband.^x Govindi is always seen in various social functions with Mr Khanna, making it quite evident as the wife of a wealthy banker and not an individual. Ironically, her participation with Mr. Khanna brings more rewards to him as a man of modern thinking who does not lock his wife

into the four walls of the house. This modernity, a positive trait in his personality, brings him the fruits of improved public image and respect in society. Mr. Khanna's arrogance, ruthlessness, and insensitivity towards his wife and workers is the result of his wealth where he considers his workers as "just stupid, a bunch of dumb sheep" (351) and Govindi as "unqualified to judge" (354) his business affairs. Govindi thus suffers her husband's disdain and condescension, though he tortures her, she remains faithful and chaste.

2. Conclusion:

Premchand opined that the two, men and women, had to perform different functions in society and so their equality had to be proportioned with the society's functional needs. Women's education, he viewed that, should enable them to be ideal housewives and mothers. Even so, months before his death, he wrote that educated women should pattern themselves to make good mistresses of the household and not as social butterflies. Premchand has mostly botched to delineate lower caste and lower-class women true to their voices. He looks at them from middle-class moral values' spectacles and takes pride in sankritising their principles and moral values.

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