

**“Analysing Dalit Feminist Voices in Premchand’s Creations”****Dr Surender Singh****Assistant Professor of English****Government College, Birohar (Jhajjar)****E-mail: [dr.s.singh26@gmail.com](mailto:dr.s.singh26@gmail.com)****Contact No: 9416812691****Abstract**

The present endeavour analyses the Dalit feminist voices in Premchand’s Literary World. The Dalit female characters in the works of Hindi writer, Premchand dwell on untouchables and their pitiable conditions. Many celebrated Hindi writers, including Premchand, have been discussed as writers who mirror the downtrodden figures. *Mahatma Gandhi rightly said, “Untouchability is the hate fullest expression of caste.”* The paper deals with Premchand’s writings on the basis of humanism in the early decades of 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In Premchand’s writings, Gandhian notions of the ‘*Hridya Privartan*’ was a dominant feature. It is striking that untouchable female voices are not presented as agents of change in this literature; rather their poor conditions and helplessness treat as an insurmountable obstacle; is a characteristic feature of the Hindi literature. I sincerely endeavour that all classes and categories people must have freedom- social, economic, political, intellectual and emotional- without any encroachment upon each other’s freedom to make clear the difference between the objectives of the literature.

**Keywords:** humanism, Varna System, feminism, untouchability, awakening, self-respect.**Introduction**

From the second half of the nineteenth century, quite a few writers, including Bhartendu Harischandra, started writing in the *Khari Boli* (Hindi). At the initial stage, Hindi was used in prose while *Braj* was the language of poetry. In the early twentieth century, Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi initiated the process of standardizing the Hindi language. Francesca Orsini shows how from the early twentieth century all aspects of literature and society were exposed to public discuss in the pages of journals. First time in Literature, caste system and Dalit characters are presented as protagonists and their plight are depicted in the work of Premchand. On the other hand, the growth of Indo-Anglican writings flourishes and bear fruit in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

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While English prose for social and political purposes was written by Indian from earliest times with force, eloquence and effectiveness. It was only with the Gandhian struggle for freedom that the Indo-Anglican novels really came to its own. Premchand has raised Dalit voices through his unforgettable characters and tried his best to solve the problem of caste system and untouchability.

### Dalits Feminist Voices in Premchand's Oeuvre:

There is no doubt that Premchand was the first prominent and the finest story writer who, moved by the plight of untouchables/Dalits, gave them a literary voice and in fact, mirrors the grave realities of rural India, where caste and gender discrimination were rampant. He created various immortal Dalit female characters trapped in caste system in India in his writings i.e. Madhav's Budhia in '**Kafan**', Dukhi's wife Jhuria in '**Sadgati**', Jokhu's wife Gangi in '**Thakur Ka Kuwa**', Gudar's wife Bhoongi in '**Dhudh Ka Daam**', Sukhiya in '**Mandir**', Mahavir's wife Muliya in '**Ghaswali**' and Silia in '**Godan**'. In fact, Dalit female characters are depicted and delineated in five of his novels and about fifteen of his short stories.

No doubt, credit should go to Premchand for bringing the burning social issues in his popular writings or in mainstream literature, yet they don't make him a revolutionary writer. Scholars consider that Premchand's literature is written in a sympathetic mode. The background of a powerful nationalist drive—informed by, as we see earlier, a desire to 'lift' Dalits—behind his literature cannot be seen as altogether unproblematic. Therefore, it would not be unfair to say that Premchand uses stereotyped image of Dalits females and day- today idioms used against them in the Hindi heartland to strengthen the plots of his stories.

Elaborating on this point, Kanwal Bharti writes that the "basis of Dalit literature is the philosophy of Dr Ambedkar who demanded abolition of caste and Varna system. On the other hand, Premchand was a Gandhian who believed in the Varna order... Unfortunately, Premchand was a writer of that kind whose love for the Dalit is limited for removal of untouchability only."(1) Dalit writer Omprakash Balmiki says that "Premchand wrote many stories about Dalit awareness like '*Sadgati*' (The Deliverance), '*Thakur Ka Kuwan*' (Thakur's Well), '*Doodh Ka Dam*' (The Price of Milk)... He was influenced by the ideas of Gandhi. On the one hand, he has sympathy with Dalits. On the other hand, he shows his belief in the Varna system."(2)

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Premchand has been praised by Sadanand Shahi and others, for his famous story ‘Kafan’ (The Shroud). They explain that Premchand has brought out all the sorrows of the Dalit voices in it. But some writers do not consider it a story of Dalits; rather they declared it an anti- Dalits and casteist story in which depiction of a special caste is important and the inhuman characterization of the all characters. In this story, the family characters are depicted as dirty, drunk and rustic.

In the story, Ghisu and his son Madhav belong to a Dalit family and are good for nothing fellow, the kind that would suffer hunger but would not work for a living. On the day Madhav’s wife Budhiya was crying with delivery pain, father and son were busy roasting potatoes. Both thereafter ate the roasted potatoes and go off to sleep. In the morning, Madhav finds that his wife had passed away and her unborn child too has died in her womb. They go to the Zamindar and to villagers to collect some money for her final rites. They collected five rupees and went to city to buy *Kafan*. But they do not buy the *Kafan*; rather they drink alcohol and eat up to their fill. They both begin to dance... overcome by drunkenness, they collapse.

It is beyond imagination how Ghisu’s characterization is so inhuman despite of his feminist outlook, practical wisdom, spiritual blending of mind and socialistic behaviour as he expresses these lines to his son from the story which are soaked in ‘marital femanism’:

*"Hey! You are really heartless. You have spent one year of marital bliss with her and now such faithlessness...when my wife died, I did not move away from her for three days. But won't your wife feel shy if I go in? She always veiled herself from me and now you ask me to go and see her uncovered body!"(3)*

Madhav in no way, a heartless creature; he repents and laments on his misbehaviour towards his demised wife, Budhia:

*Madhav, bowing his head in reverence to the departed soul, heartily agreed with his father-"Yes, she would be rewarded certainly. O God, you who are omniscient, gives her a place in Heaven. Our heart-felt blessings are with her. It was because of her that we could eat such food today, which we had never tested before in our lives."(4)*

Kanwal Bharti argues that in this story “Premchand is making a mockery of the Dalits. Premchand is giving the message that poverty is the major problem of the Dalits. It is only poverty which has bred many evils among Dalits and inhuman

persons like Ghisu and Madav. But Premchand forgets that the Varna system and unequal distribution of the resources was the major sources of the problems of Chamar. Why did he not explore this aspect behind their laziness?”(5)

Premchand has certainly shown the ‘degraded’ conditions of the Dalits. But, he bypassed the reasons behind it. Why exactly did the Dalits devote such obsessive attention to food even as a human being lay struggling with death in an adjacent room? It was the feudal system and the caste system which were responsible for the ‘inhuman’ behaviour of Ghisu and Madhav. There was no higher ‘human’ value invested in the Dalits; they had been normatively reduced to a poor and low status which produced no elevated ‘human’ concerns. Caste convinces them that there would be no change in their position, no matter how hard they worked. The social order denies them any option of social and economic upward mobility.

Whenever the social injunctions surrounding untouchability are not voluntarily complied with, they are violently enforced. Sukhiya, a Dalits/Chamar protagonist, (in ‘Mandir’ 1927) (6) prayed for the *darshan* of the God to save her only child who was terminally ill. Premchand raised in this story, the question of temple entry which Gandhi considered a powerful means for Dalit’s upliftment. But in real life, caste Hindus never allowed Dalits entry into ‘their temples’; even when their lives were in danger. Sukhiya knew very well that the Dalits were not allowed to enter into the temple. But she insisted on *darshan* because, she thought, the life of her child could be saved only if she worshiped *Thakurji* (God of temple). Finally, she cries in desperate anger not only against men but also against God when she is physically stopped from entering the temple and is pushed, whereby her sick child falls from her arms and dies:

*“You sinners, why are you quiet now after killing my child? Why don’t you kill me also? The Thakurji will be spoiled by my touch... Wasn’t he spoiled when he made me? Now I’ll never come to touch your Thakurji. You can put him under lock and key.... You are all so cruel.... And yet you claim to be the custodians of religion. You all are murderers, pure murderers. (7)*

In ‘Doodh ka Daam’, the Bhangi boy, Mangal is treated right from the beginning as an untouchable even by the young boys. The leftover food is thrown at and not given to him. He felt bad ‘when the food was dropped down from above into his clay bowls. Everybody ate from fine plates, and clay bowls for him!’ A sense of his lowly social position is constantly hammered into him. “There was no one who would ask him to play with him, and even the piece of canvas he slept on was untouchable.”(8) He himself deeply aware of his ‘untouchable’ position, therefore,

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when the landlord's son invites him to play, he refuses by saying, "What if the master should see? I'd get my hide skinned off, but as for you, you'd get away with it."(9)

In 'Sadgati', Dukhi, while labouring unpaid for the Brahman priest, is not properly given even the fire to light his *beedi*. The fire is thrown at his head, thereby scorching him a little. Even when they are not touching higher caste humans or eatables or the offerings to be made to God, their proximity is considered to be polluting. When a priest (in Karmabhoomi) finds the Dalits sitting at the door of the temple, he is incensed. "Why did you come here?" he says. The same mat is laid from there to here. Everything is spoiled.... Now we have to take bath in this cold winter." (10) He cannot tolerate the presence of the 'untouchables' even at the place where the shoes of the visitors are kept.

The constant fear of caste violence is starkly brought out in 'Thakur Ka Kuan'. Gangi's husband, Jokhu, is ill and the water at home is dirty and sting. She feels resentful 'against the restraints and bars of the custom': "**Why was she so low and others so high? Because they wore a thread around their necks? There wasn't one in the village who wasn't rotten. They stole, they cheated, they lied in court.**"(11)

The fact that the upper caste men consider the Dalit women's bodies as their private property in the same way as they consider their and their menfolk's ill paid or unpaid labour as their right is clear from the story 'Ghaswali'. Chain Singh, a Thakur by caste, pursues Muliya, a Dalit woman who spurns his advances. Once he comes her and says: 'Have pity on me.' Muliya feels extremely humiliated and angry. She reacts by saying: "**If my man spoke to your wife like this, how would you have felt? Then you would've cut his throat, wouldn't you? Tell me, just because Mahavir is a Chamar, do you think that he has no blood in his body, no shame, no honour! There are many and much more beautiful women around.... Why don't you go and ask for pity from them? ... But you wouldn't go to there because you're mortally scared. You demand pity from me because I'm a Chamarin, of a low caste, and a low-caste woman will fall in your lap by a little scolding or a small bribe. What an easy bargain!**" (12)

The social discrimination against the Dalits females is reinforced by economic exploitation. In fact, the two have become so enmeshed that they cannot be separated and are responsible for keeping the Dalits in poverty and degradation. The two main agencies of exploitation and oppression are the landlords and the Brahmanism. The landlords compel them to do *begaar* (forced labour), and charge high rents and impose various levies. The Brahmanism demands offerings from them and devise means to keep them socially inferior. The most lethal combination is when the person of the Brahman and the position of landlord become combined in one. Here the Dalits have

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no escape route. The weight of tradition aligns with the power of the state to extract maximum advantage from them.

Premchand's oeuvre could fill the heart with sympathy, but it would be more appropriate if he made some Chamars/ Dalit female characters wake up and take charge of their lives. Significantly, the story 'Mandir' did not show the futility of temple entry. However, in the end of the story, Sukhiya said that she would not come into the temple. She said because there was no one left for her as her husband and only child were already left for abode. But she did not actively express any faith in God. There was no change in the lives of caste Hindus; there was no feeling of repentance among them. There was no sign of the Gandhain *Hridya Parivartan* among caste Hindus. It seems that Premchand had accepted the reality that there would be no change in the caste Hindu mentality. *Guru Prasad Madan, a Dalit writer, reflecting that it was on account of the impact of the Adi Hindu movement on Premchand that he wrote about untouchables. Premchand incidentally had been living in an area where the Adi Hindu movement recorded a marked progress. (13)*

### Conclusion:

Literature has a very important and foundational role in the construction of self-respect for any human being and community. In early twentieth century, the same role was played by many Hindi and English writers, including Premchand in formulating the new identity and their issues by depicting untouchable female characters in their writings. What the paper analyses that the untouchable female characters in Premchand's oeuvre are facing inhuman treatment in so called human society. The writer has thrown lights on the lives of the untouchable female characters and their exploitation and oppression on the hand of upper strata of society. He discussed various issues with regard to temple entry, utility of rituals, treat untouchable as human being, plight conditions of the untouchables, etc. *But*, Premchand did not portray the real reasons behind their unjust exploitation and inhuman lives: the Varna system and unequal distribution of resources. In fact, Premchand created a negative image of a particular Dalit caste (Chamar) through his literary world by depicting and delineating them inhuman, idle and good-for-nothing fellows which is contrary to the supremacy of Brahmanism which is created, nurtured and maintained by Hindu scriptures and mythology. The 'negative image of Dalit females characters' is still hindered and hampered in gaining self-respect, upliftment, and social mingling in the mainstream Indian society. Moreover, he did not consider untouchables as an agent of change rather believed in the 'Gandhian notion of Hridya Privartan'. No doubt as a story writer, Premchand remains outstanding as he desanskritized the Hindi language. But, it is not satisfying merely portrayal of the untouchables. I believe that

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humanism really teaches us love of man with all his weaknesses, instincts and impulses. It may be regarded a system of thought in which human interest, values and dignity are held high and dominant. It looks for emancipation, freedom and more importantly for self-respect. I consider that the literature written by many visionary writers can lead them their desired goal i.e. Self-Respect and Freedom.

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