



HEROINES IN THE SHORT STORIES OF PREMCHAND

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ABSTRACT

Premchand in Hindi literature enjoys the honour of revolutionizing the Hindi novel and short story by freeing it from the grip of fantasy and romance. He took it to the level of social realism. He had a true and deep understanding of the role and position of women in Indian society. Women, to him, are as important as their male counterparts. His sensitiveness to the cause of women is so pervasive that none of his fictional creations is without the presence of women. A wonderful variety of women-educated and uneducated, rich and the poor, professionals and housewives, married and widows – with their own problems, engage our attention. The present paper undertakes to look at his heroines moving gracefully on the stage of his short stories.

Nature has very generously blessed women with all the wonderful qualities of head and heart. She has cast her personality as a curious blend of beauty charms, comeliness intricacies, mysterious and imaginative qualities. All these attributes combined together have made her a medium of aesthetic sensibility and mysterious awakening and revelation in literature. No literature produced on this earth so far has ever been spared by this spell. It would not sound improper to say that to some extent, poets and writers seem to be haunted and possessed by womanly fascination. Indian literature is not an exception. We have wonderful and memorable portraits by Indian poets and writers almost in all the languages where women have been valorized and glorified. In this paper, I am mainly concerned with the portraits of women fitted nicely within the differently designed, coloured and sized frames of Premchand's stories translated into English by David Rublin and placed under the categories entitled 'The world', and 'Widows, Wives and Other Heroines, included in 'The Oxford India, Premchand.' The introductory chapter of the book is by Francesca Orsini.

Premchand, as regards the portrayal of women, stands apart from his contemporaries. He had his own way of looking at women. His age witnessed the rise of movement of women awakening. Voices of protest against the atrocities heaped on women for an immensely long period of so many centuries were audible in the air. Farsighted and sagacious leaders and literary luminaries started emphasizing importance and role of women in society. As for Premchand, he regards woman as the nourisher and protector of work, emotion and fundamental quality of the character in human life. Unlike his contemporaries he does not confine woman to the gratification of sexual pleasure alone. To him, in her various roles daughter, sister, beloved and wife, she is the means of expressing different respective feelings and emotions.

First and foremost, Premchand, in his stories as well as in his novels, has given us a wonderful range of women characters widows, wronged and self-sacrificing wives, political activist, actresses,



prostitutes, educated women and labourers, women against women and women against men. After visiting this richly populated gallery, we feel obliged to remark 'here is God's plenty'. Moreover, they represent every class – Low, Middle and upper. Deprived of their due rights and social status, almost all of them fall prey to exploitation in their own way. Premchand has with an uncanny eye, explored the social and psychological condition of these women who despite the difference of their status, have the same tale of agony to tell. In this respect they do not represent any particular class or creed.

Now the question arises how could Premchand accomplish this task with such a mastery? Infact, Premchand in his capacity of the editor of journals 'Madhuri (1927-31)', 'Hans (1930-.....)' and 'Jagran' (1932) reported regularly on news and debates on women. He also supported reform bills like the 'Sharda Bill' (about widows' rights to their husband's property), and the 'Gaur Bill' (for divorce). All his practical experiences as a reporter to these journals proved to be a big aid when he came to treat the predicament of these women in his stories and novels.

Writing about Premchand's women Francesca Orisini makes a noteworthy observation which seems to be all-embracing:

"In Premchand's early stories, women feature mostly as figures of romantic love (with, we have seen, a new patriotic twist), as heroic warriors, viranganas, or as objects of sympathy and of reformist zeal (see Anath Larki / 'The Orphan Girl', 1914). Consistent with the nationalist valorization of Indian women as emblem of self-sacrifice and service (tyag and seva), such traits in a woman character acquire immediately an iconic quality, and she dazzles the narrator, male character and reader with her supernatural glow."

Orisini does not stop here. In his view, Premchand regarded self-sacrifice and service as the intrinsic qualities of a woman, but he 'also explored the social and psychological conditions of an unprecedented range of women characters....'

Premchand was very well familiar with the position of woman in Indian social setup and with the provisions in the religious books which put a ban on her participation in rituals and ceremonies for no solid reason other than that of being a woman. That is why he raised the point of self-identity and status of woman and her exploitation. He raised the question on all the fronts- economic, social and cultural. He believed that an educated and financially independent woman alone could be strong and powerful in the true sense of the term. Such a strong woman could rise in revolt against all sorts of injustice, exploitation and outrage in a male-dominated society. An important point closely linked to this fight of woman is that a woman's fight for self is two fold. At one evident level it was her struggle against all types of inequalities and male-domination, at the other and deeper level it was a battle to be fought against her own voluntary acceptance of womanly culture, conventionality and slavish mentality which were deeprooted within her for an inconsiderable length of time. It was only after uprooting all these, that a woman could be truly emancipated. With all this realization and human sensitiveness to a woman's issues, Premchand painted all the varieties of woman on the canvas of his stories and novels. It would not be wrong to say that woman has made her appearance in the literary world of Premchand with all the important issues related to her life, and has succeeded in winning the author's sympathy to the full.

Two stories "The Road to Hell" and 'Miss Padma' placed in the section 'The World' are based on the life and important issues of woman. The first one is the story of a fun and life-loving young woman who is married to an elderly wealthy man. She wants to keep her heart ever vibrate with sweet memories of her husband's love but her sweet longings are brutally crushed by her husband. Once she gathers courage to ask him 'why did you marry me'. Irritated and confused, he retorts, 'to look after the house, to take the job of managing it, not for anything else. Did you think it was to have a good time...'. (194) This answer comes as a big shock to her. She tries to rationalize the attitude of her husband towards her:



'Perhaps this is what happens to your mind when you try to do something beyond your powers. A beggar sitting on a king's throne can't sleep in peace; one enemy after another seems to appear on every side. I think this must be the state of an old man who marries' (195).

All her efforts to keep her life move on fail, her sense of identity is hurt and broken and she feels restless like a bird in the cage. She loses her faith in the institution of marriage. This woman once very soft-hearted, grows so hard-hearted that even the groans of her sick husband go unheard, rather as she herself says, feels 'a kind of spiteful pleasure in his illness.' And the argument she gives, sounds quite apt, 'He's kept me here in a prison. I'm not no big-hearted that I can revere someone who's kept me a prisoner or that I'll kiss the feet that kicked me'. She further thinks that 'A woman doesn't become a man's wife just by being chained to him for a marriage to become a marriage the heart has to be stirred at least once by love' (196). And she has not even once experienced any such stirrings of the heart.

The death of her husband makes no difference to her. One night in a state of restlessness she gives up the house with a thought to give up her life. On the road she suddenly meets an old woman who allures her with the promises of the bliss greater than the blessing of gods. But the old woman whom she took for a goddess of heaven, was actually a whore who shows her the wrong road. She realises her mistake but cannot do anything:

'I looked for nectar but found poison. I longed for a chaste love and I fell into a foul, poisonous ditch... I desired a bliss like Sushila's not the sensual wallowing of a whore. But once in your life a step's been taken on the wrong road, its hard to come back on the right one' (199).

For this ruin, she holds first her parents and then her husband responsible. Premchand, through her mouth, conveys a frank and open message to such parents:

"I say again, for your daughters do not look for wealth, property or prestige, look only for a husband. If you can't find the right one then let your daughter remain a spinster or poison her, strangle her but don't marry her to an ugly old man. A woman can bear the most agonizing grief, the greatest afflictions, anything, but she cannot bear the trampling down of the longings of her youth' (199).

It is more than evident her that mis-matched marriage and the resultant dissatisfaction and restlessness lie at the root of the ruin of the woman. She knows clearly well that there is no hope left for her, but this road to hell she has taken, she is not ready to leave for the one left behind. Premchand is speaking boldly against the issue of May-December marriage but he does not even seem to appreciate the choice made by the heroine of this story.

Critical circumstances created by the blind pursuit of western culture and civilization form the subject matter of many of Premchand's stories. He has often raised such problems related to the women suckled and brought up in the western ways. Undoubtedly they are educated, financially and intellectually independent, but they too don't escape exploitation. 'Miss Padma' is the story of such a woman. She is a successful lawyer. She possesses almost everything that a so-called modern woman of the world requires:

'She was young, beautiful, soft-spoken, and also extremely intelligent. There was nothing to stand in her way. Quick as a flash she left her young male colleagues far behind as she forged ahead and by now her salary was at times more than a thousand a month... She had acquired considerable confidence in her powers' (200)

Her free time she spends reading romances, going to the friends. She also develops, addiction to gaming. Still something seems to be missing in her life. Plainly speaking, she thinks of marriage as, 'an unnatural bond', so she decides to remain independent. Premchand makes her views clear:

'Padma was not averse to sexual enjoyment, what she detested was dependence and making marriage the chief occupation of life. So long as she could remain free and savour sensual pleasure why shouldn't she? She saw no moral obstacle to enjoyment since she considered it merely an appetite of the



body. This appetite could be appeased by any neat, clean shop, and Padma was always looking for a shop like that' (200)

She has a good number of lovers from almost every walk of life. And from this clean shop she picks up a handsome learned professor, Mr. Prasad. Both make a sort of deal. They take an oath to remain free in everything save this relationship and start living together. For sometime everything goes smooth. Prasad with a meagre salary of two hundred starts living lavishly. He by now has come to understand her perfectly well, and so begins to profit from her weakness. She is reduced to the level of a whore. After two years Padma gets pregnant. She no longer attracts him and is no longer prized by him. He begins to ignore her. Once she asks him why he comes so late. But instead of giving a satisfactory explanation, he threatens to leave her and this is what he really does. He leaves her when she needs him most. She gives birth to a child. She has to pay the bills of her delivery, so sends the servant with a check to the Bank. He, on his return tells her the shocking truth that Mr. Prasad took all the money out. Towards the close, we find her standing at the gate of her bungalow holding her child. Once a bold, confident and strong lawyer grows into a poor grief-stricken woman. Closing lines of the story draw her pathetic picture:

'On the road she saw a European woman going along with her husband pushing a perambulator with their child in it. She watched the lucky couple wistfully and her eyes filled with tears' (205).

This description succeeds in enlisting our sympathy for her. She seems to have realised her mistake. Premchand, at the same time, establishes the true importance of marriages in life. He seems to convey the message that to be modern, educated and independent is not bad but the blind pursuit of western culture in the name of modernity spoils the true happiness. He does not seem to approve the modern views on marriage.

Stories 'Widow with Sons', 'Secomd Marriage', 'Wife unto Husband', 'The Prostitute', 'The Actress' and 'Light' included in the section 'Windows Wives and Other Heroins' focus on the position of women in Indian patriarchal society. They make an indepth study of issues closely related to the life of various types of women – house-wife, widow, prostitute, actress, poor woman and more importantly a young woman married to an old man. With a powerful stroke of his brush Premchand paints every shade of their personality and life.

Premchand was the true supporter of exploited and afflicted humanity. So it was all but natural for him to pay attention to the most exploited and pitiable creature i.e. widow in his times. In his stories he has dealt with all the aspects of a widow's life. 'Widow with Sons' is a touching presentation of an old widow Phulmati whose life undergoes a tragic change after the death of her husband Pandit Ayodhyanath. She has four sons and one daughter. Before the death of her husband, she was the mistress of her home. The whole household was run at her command. Pandit left behind him considerable wealth in the form of a house, two orchards, jewels and twenty thousands in cash. But his sons don't like to spend money on the items to be used in the rituals on the thirteenth day and so reduce the number of items. Phulmati gets furious, when she sees that her opinion does not count for anything.

As the time passes, the realization that she no longer enjoys the position in the household which she did earlier, begins to dawn on her. Her eldest son and his wife take hold of all the matters and nobody bothers to ask Phulmati about her wishes. Her own sons whom she loved and valued more than anything else in the world, treat her badly now. The widowed mother, once proud of her sons, now feels very hurt and remorseful.

The pain of Phulmati's heart comes out in her utterance.

'I made this home, I saved up its wealth, I gave birth to you and reared you, and now I'm an outsider in this house? It's the law of Manu and you want to go by it? Fine, take your house and the lot but I won't agree to live here as your dependent. I'd rather die. Congratulations for the outrage you're committing! I planted the tree and I'm not allowed to stand in its shade. If that's the law, then let it be burned' (280)



The anger, frustration, humiliation, affliction all are present here. Her painful utterance does not at all touch the hearts of her sons. The motherhood she once counted as a blessing now seems to her 'a fiery pit in which her life was being consumed and turned to ash.' The root cause of this pitiable condition of a widow lies in the fact that she does not enjoy financial independence. A woman depends upon her husband. So when he dies, she becomes shelterless. In Premchand's times, she had no share in husband's property. So even when he left enough money and property behind, she had to depend either on her sons or on any other relative. This problem is discussed and analysed by Premchand in 'Widow with Sons'. After the death of Pt. Ayodhyanath his four sons divide the property among themselves. Whenever Phulmati expresses her anger, they try to explain to her: 'When a father dies, his property goes to his sons. A mother has a right only to food and clothing (279). When Phulmati asks who made this law, a smart reply comes from Umanath 'Lord Manu, who else?'

Dr. Raksha Puri in her analysis of the treatment of widows in Premchand's fictional creations dwells on the point that in his delineation of social problems Premchand does not show his limitations. He is not confined to any particular class. That is why while throwing light on the problems of middle class widow, he also brings to light the problems of widow of the low class. In the age of Premchand, the marriage of a widow from the low class was in practice and had also got the approval of society. The story 'Light' centres round but a young widow. After the demise of her husband, she can remarry. There are no moral or social obstacles to her remarriage. But she does not do so and Premchand seems to give an explanation:

'If she'd wanted, she could have married again, as is the custom among Ahirs. She was not bad-looking, her voice was pleasant. A couple of men were willing to accept her, but Buti was reluctant to give up the delusive pleasure of being honoured for her ritual purity' (389).

But she is not even able to accept her widowhood and conduct herself smoothly in the changed atmosphere. Her nature grows sour and bitter. She always curses her dead husband:

'You passed away leaving me, in this wretched mess! If you were to die so soon God only knows why you had to get married at, all. You didn't have any more roasted bhang in the house, so you had to go and get married (389).

Buti feels restless because of her unsatisfied longings for sensual fulfillment. She turns so ill-tempered that she wants to see every woman in her own image. She feels burdened with her three children. Her eldest son Mohan tries his best to lighten the burden, but she gives him anger in return. She even becomes jealous of the little joys of her own children. Thus, Premchand has vividly portrayed the psychological state of a widow who is forbidden to taste the delicacies and pleasures of life. Bitterness in her temper results from such restrictions. Buti, in the later half of the story changes when she feels that her sons take care of her and feel concerned for her.

'Second Marriage' is based on one of the important issues of marriage. Premchand here portrays a character Lala Dangamal who after the death of his first wife, marries a young woman Asha. The story deals with the issue of May-December marriage, marriage of a young girl with an old man and the complications arising from that relationship. Once this man gets remarried, a wonderful transformation comes in his life. Now he seems no longer interested in going to his shop. He develops the capacity to enjoy life, 'lika a drought - stricken tree which turns green agains when it is watered and puts out new springs and buds' (301)

He constantly tries to win his new wife's heart. He always insists that Asha should accompany him to the cinema, theatre, or on strolls along the river. But she for some reason or the other does not show any inclination. Lala Dangamal can not understand why her feelings are so dry and joyless. She feels inclined towards Jugal, the son of their cook. She likes his company. He tells her the shocking truth: "When he walks with you, he looks like your father". These words strike her heart forcibly and she simply says, "Still" one must reckon with one's fate".



The stories Premchand has written on the issue of National Movement present the true picture of the active contribution of women to the movement. 'Wife unto Husband' is one of such stories. Godavari hates everything foreign, while her husband Mr. Seth hates everything 'Indian'. She has to wear imported clothes while she wants to wear 'Khaddar sarees'. These differences cause a conflict between the two. She does all things as her husband likes her to do. One night she sees that a procession of impassioned women and men halts before her residence. They prepare bonfires of English clothes. Godavari too wants to pick up all foreign things of her house and to throw them on the bonfire. But the fear of her husband's displeasure holds her back.

One day supporters of the Congress hold a public demonstration. She does not care for her husband's anger and decides to go there. She thinks,

'As he has authority over his own words and deeds... so do I too over mine. Let him slave for the government, flatter them rubbing his nose on their doorstep-what's that to me, should I have to cooperate with him? It's not fault if I can't respect someone who has no self-respect, who's sold himself out of selfishness' (314).

She goes to the demonstration and even donates two hundred rupees' subscription for the rally. When Mr. Seth comes to know about this step of Godavari, he becomes angry with her. He tells her that this deed will be taken by his Sahibs as the deed of disobedience. He is questioned and ill-treated by his English boss for his wife's donating money to the congress. Unable to bear this humiliation, Mr. Seth punches his boss in the face. He writes a letter of resignation and is immediately fired from his office. When he reaches home and tells Godavari everything, she becomes glad to think that his chains of slavery have broken at last. He asks her 'But have you even thought how we're going to get along?' Godavari answers that she will manage everything:

'Until now I've followed all your cues, from now on you'll follow mine. In the past I never complained to you; I ate whatever you gave me to eat, I wore whatever you wanted me to wear... So now you'll live as I do. Whatever I ask you to do, you'll do. Then I'll see if things are working. Dignity isn't found in suits, boots and fancy clothes. Whoever has a pure heart is the one who's great. Until now I was your wife, but starting today, I'm going to be your husband' (320). This is how she changes her place and position.

The story 'Actress' is a true portrayal of Tara, the actress who plays the role of Shakuntala in a play. She is a wonderful performer with irresistible charms and wins the hearts and applause of spectators. Nirmal Kant Choudhary, a wealthy person of the city, does not leave even after the play is over. He expresses his desire to meet Tara but the manager tells him that it is against the rules of the theatre. So Kunwar Nirmal Kant leaves a note and a string of pearls for her. There develops a relationship between the two. He is seriously in love with Tara and wants to marry her even after the wishes of his family. But just before the day of marriage, she comes to realize that she is not worthy of Kunwar sahib and she doesn't want to cheat him. So she goes away leaving behind every precious gift given by him save the string of pearls. She writes a letter to him:

'... I am not worthy to be your slave. You have shown me a kind of love which I could never have hoped to find in this lifetime. That has already become everything for me. As long as I live I shall remain under the spell of your love. It seems to me that in the memory of love there is far more tenderness and bliss than in the enjoyment of it. I shall come back, I shall meet with you again, but only after you have married - that is the one condition of my return' (378).

The artificial dazzling world of glamour does not make Tara blind to her own reality.

'The Prostitute' is centred on the problem of prostitutes. There are two friends Dayakrishna and Singar Singh. Singar Singh falls in love with a prostitute, Madhuri. The revelation of the matter by Lila, Singar's wife shocks Dayakrishna and he promises to help her by all means within his power. Ultimately he succeeds in rescuing his friend. But that is not all. Dayakrishna first pretends to love Madhuri but begins to feel the impact of her. Madhuri, too falls in love with him. But when he discloses his purpose and plan



to Madhuri, she feels shattered and she leaves the town. Before Madhuri leaves, she makes clear to Dayskrishna:

'A woman doesn't take up a profession like mine of her own free will. You think that for a woman to expose her shame for money is something pleasant which she enjoys doing. You find it quite impossible to understand that there can be any womanliness in a prostitute, you can't imagine why she's not constant in her love, or how much she yearns for love, or when by good fortune she finds it, how she clings to it as for her very life' (340).

At the same time the story shows the way the males in the society treat a prostitute. Even these two friends view her differently. Singar Singh regards her merely as an object of enjoyment while Daya feels contentment only in serving her, finds pleasure simply in watching her enjoy herself. He states: 'Beauty is nothing to sneer at, Madhuri! It's the mirror of the soul (338).'

All this is more than enough to prove that Premchand was quite sensitive to the fact that women make up half of society. Without them no picture of life will sound perfect. He is all full of admiration for women, so comes to depict them in everyone of his stories. He has an exact and deep understanding of women, varied in character and social position. Women of all types with their specific problems in the context of Indian tradition and changing scenario of social values find their due in his stories.

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