

Feminism and Gender Issues in Some Fictional Works of Munshi Premchand

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Abstract

The current paper is an effort to examine the perspective of Munshi Premchand on women and gender justice. Premchand's artistic efforts were strongly determined with this social obligation, which possibly found the best representation in the method in which he treated the troubles of women in his fiction. In contrast to the earlier custom which placed women within the strictures of romantic archives Premchand formulated a new image of women in the perspective of the changes taking place in Indian society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The apprehension with the problem of women in Premchand's fiction can be largely described as an attempt to discover the various aspects of feminism and femininity and their drawbacks and weaknesses in the socio-cultural condition obtaining in India. The plan was not to suggest a specific resolution or substitute but to highlight the complications involved in the formation of an ideal condition for women. Even when a substitute was recommended there was significant uncertainty. What was significant in the numerous themes pertaining to women which shaped the concern of his fiction was the predicament faced by Indian women in the conventional society influenced by a strange culture. This paper is an effort to examine some of the issues arising out of Premchand's treatment of this dilemma.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Gender Justice, Patriarchy, Child Marriage, Sexual Morality, Female Education, Dowry, Unmatched Marriage, Society, Nation, Idealist, Realist etc.

Introduction:

Premchand, the literary stanch of the colonial India, besides being a nationalist and intellectual was also a social reformer, whose writings frequently meant to serve some or the other social purpose, wherein he regularly targeted various social evils widespread in the contemporary society. Thus, through his writings he intended not only to create public consciousness against the social ills but also to aware the colonial government against them, which, therefore, served as a part of the colonial discourse. However, of all the troubles he focused in his writings, one is related with women and gender justice. As a matter of fact, diverse factors contributed towards determining the ideas of Premchand turning him into a social enthusiast and the defender of women cause. Among the factors that influenced his life and works mention can be made of his family background, his individual experiences of life, and the socio-economic circumstances of his era. He is also a eye witness to colonialism and its ugly ramifications, which is characterized mainly by the exploitation and oppression of peasants and labourers under the feudalism and of women under the patriarchy. Consequently, Premchand has been able to afford a realistic account of poverty, exploitation and the plight of women. Accordingly, in his writings Premchand has often reflected the bitter experiences of his own life as also the life around him, as Orr says:

“...having spent his youth in extreme poverty in an Indian village, he had firsthand knowledge of the exploitation of the peasants by landlords and money-lenders”. (Orr 33)

II

Munshi Premchand was also influenced by the socio-political developments taking place in India during the time, characterized mainly by the rise of nationalism and the beginning of the Indian National Congress, as also the social maladies like gender inequality, illiteracy, superstitions, etc. widespread in the society. In this regard, he drew motivation from Swami Vivekanand, and other heroes of Bengal Renaissance and the National Movement, whose views on nation and society, including the sufferings of women in the male conquered society, became his guiding principle, which lead him to understand that India could not grow without addressing the women issues first. However, the most significant event in the life of Premchand was possibly the beginning of Gandhi, who was fated to emerge soon as the sole dispensator of the dealings of the Indian National Movement. Besides, Gandhi was also a social reformer and the supporter of gender justice, whose aim was to set up a counter dialogue privileging ‘naritva’ (the essence of femininity) over ‘purusatva’ (the essence of masculinity), which was in turn privileged over ‘kapursatva’ (the essence of masculinity), which was in turn privileged over kapursatva or cowardice. Accordingly, Gandhi called in question the rationale of the gender partiality that denied women their basic rights and accorded them a lower status in the society. He also upbraided men for women’s suppression and oppression and made a strong plea for their emancipation. As a means to achieve this he supported cause of women education and felt that only the education and economic independence could really empower women. However, the views of Gandhi about women seem to be ambivalent, as while supporting their freedom, he wanted them to be passive and self-sacrificing as he asserts:

“man is supreme in the extra-mural activities and that woman is supreme in intra-mural activities. Hence, education imparted to both men and women should be according to their pre-ordained stations in life.” (Nandela, [http://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/womens empowerment.htm](http://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/womens_empowerment.htm))

Strangely, Premchand was moved immensely by the political and social plan of Gandhi, chiefly those directed towards improving the lots of the poor, the subjugated and the women in the society. In fact, Gandhi’s Satyagraha was directed against the colonial rule, as it promoted male supremacy. He fully approved Gandhi’s above of women and wanted them to get proper education and gain freedom. Therefore, while opposing Purdah, child marriage and the dowry system and encouraging women to join the National movement, he viewed women primarily as a dependent being, confined to home, rather than as an independent active entity seeking actualization. It is probably because of the fact that the Indian concept of womanhood is strongly rooted in the traditional Indian culture, according to which women are unfit to enjoy liberty and are expected to remain indoors under the tutelage of their male relatives at different stages of their life, e.g. under father in the childhood, husband in the youth and son in the old age. Thus, in the Rigveda while desires have been frequently expressed to beget a son, there is no matching desire ever expressed in respect of a daughter. As a result of this, right from the Vedas girls had been destined to face discrimination in their upbringing, feeding, clothing, education, etc. and treated as

others' assets (paraya dhan), which squarely accounted for all their troubles in life. Nevertheless, in his fiction he has signified his disapproval to the gender bias, expressing deep concerns against the injustice and oppression against women in various ways. However, while articulating women problems, he frequently also give vent to his own feminist ideals and prejudices, so at times the views reflected in his works seem to be idealistic rather than realistic. The gender inequality, which is characterized by the fact that women in the society are not granted the same rights and privileges as enjoyed by men, has indeed been a popular theme of Premchand. Accordingly, his writings are marked with indignation that why should the birth of a female child be viewed with disapproval and be treated as ominous, likely to wreak misfortune to the entire family. Numerous examples can be cited from the fiction of Premchand to prove the biased attitude of the society against females, who right from the birth were exposed to gender discrimination. There can perhaps be no more glaring an example to this than the fact that an extra-marital affair, wherein men who are supposed to share an equal and greater responsibility are left scot-free and women alone are held guilty for it.

In Premchand's *Godan* Dhania holds Jhunia accountable and bails her son Gobar out, though who not only impregnates her but also flees away leaving her unto the mercy of others, saying that Gobar being a child "fell into her clutches (and) the witch has ruined my sons life" (*Godan* p,49-50) Premchand expected woman to remain loyal to her husband irrespective of any compulsion is exemplified by the case of *Nirmala*, the heroine of his novel *Nirmala*, who tried to justify her controversial relations with her stepson Mansaram, saying:

"I know that if there had been any sinful intention in his heart I could have done anything and everything for him" (*Nirmala* p, 110)

Thus, while denouncing an extra marital relation Premchand also comes down heavily upon a mismatched marriage. Infact, being tender in age the main challenge before *Nirmala* in her marital home was to adjust suitably not only with her mismatched and aged husband, but also with her disgruntled and hostile sister-in-law, and errant and cheeky stepsons. Infact, *Nirmala* all through her life remained engaged fighting various problems arising out of her mismatched marriage but she eventually failed laying down her life in the process. Similarly, *Suman's* predicament in *Savasadan* is also the result of her mismatched marriage to an older man who lives in poverty

Premchand has exemplified the hopelessness of the parents and relatives on the birth of a female child and has also revealed that girls were given a step motherly treatment in their rearing. As for instance, in *Nirmala*, *Kalyani* the mother of *Nirmala* shows this bias openly that she loves her sons more than her daughters, alleging:

"Boys are bullocks who draw the plough, the first right to fodder is theirs; whatever's leftover from their food can go to the cows." (*Nirmala* p, 38)

Premchand wanted women to achieve parity with men and pleaded for gender equality. Premchand puts full stress on the requirement of gender impartiality, as in his story '*Beton Wali Vidhava*', he describes the wretched condition of women, wherein a girl is denied even a bit from her paternal assets and a widow from that of her departed husband. Commenting on the story Gupta rightly says:

“The story reveals the inequality between the sexes (and) is also a reflection of Premchand’s anger towards this inequality.” (Gupta 97)

Reflecting yet another aspect of gender discrimination, Premchand exposes the hypocrisy of the educated middle class, which expects a very high standard of purity from a woman and scrutinizes it strictly, but it seldom applies the same standard to males. Thus, in his story ‘Nirvasan’ he tells the pathetic story of Maryada, who is lost in the crowd in a mishap at the Ganges and who after a lot of traumatic experiences reaches home safely, but her husband and his family reject her due to her ‘questionable purity’. Ironically, the only sphere where girls get precedence over the boys is marriage, as for instance, in Godan Hori decides to marry off his daughter Sona first, superseding his son Gobar, as he thinks:

“It wasn’t so bad if a son was unmarried but an unmarried daughter in the house was a calamity! Somehow or the other, Sona must be married. He would see to the rest after that.” (Godan p, 22-23)

It is not, in fact, a favour done to the girls, but a bias against them, which implies that girls are a liability that needs to be discharged at the earliest by marrying them off, lest they should go astray, but no such stigma is ever attached to unmarried boys. Curiously, women themselves perpetuate gender bias against their own selves, so much so that they would even skip cooking regular meals if there is no male member present in the house at the moment. For instance, after the death of her two stepsons and the disappearance of the third one, to look for whom her husband too goes out, Nirmala once says:

“And then there was no husband, no son, so who would bother to make a dinner? What need is there to cook everyday just for womenfolk?” (Nirmala p, 167)

III

Conclusion:

Premchand, has raised the women problems significantly in his writings, highlighting their sufferings arising from the gender bias, like female illiteracy, child marriage, early widowhood, etc. Nevertheless, his views are somewhat unbalanced, as he wanted women to be self-sacrificing, loving, submissive, mild, dutiful and kind, who also worship their husbands, love their children and give due respect to their in-laws, but don’t enforce such conditions on men. Premchand also have no kindness for women who are indifferent towards their traditional roles as mothers, wives or lovers, and are extrovert, immoral and promiscuous. Therefore, even though they support the idea of women emancipation, as conceived under the feminist ideology and want women to be self dependent and to have their own identity, yet they feel that it ought to be achieved with the consent and support of men, discharging all their familial and household obligations properly. Commenting on this male hegemony Gupta rightly remarked:

“The gender segregated environment continues under the control of the husband. The solution sought is always that of remarriage, and that also at a moral plan and more often in rural, low caste backgrounds.” (Gupta 98)

Thus, Premchand is by and large traditional in his outlooks towards women, but he appear to be fully conscious of the changing temper of the age. Accordingly, he also seems to be aware that his views are constantly losing their relevance, which can no longer be justified only by resorting to the notion of purity and morality, and other such excuses. This is, perhaps, the idea that leads Premchand to create characters like Suman (Sevasadan), Sudha (Nirmala), Malti (Godan) and many others in his short stories.

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