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Dalit narratives in Premchand's select writings

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Abstract

The Paper aims to study the representation of Dalits in Premchand's work. Premchand is considered to be one of the greatest writers of modern India. His works talk about all sections of Indian society while focusing on various social problems. His take on the problem of caste hierarchy in his works has often engendered appreciation as well as criticism. The paper also discusses the appreciation and criticism of Premchand's representation of Dalits in his works.

Keywords: Caste, Indian society, modern Indian literature, humanisation

Introduction

Premchand is one of the finest Indian storywriters, who at the time of his death in 1936, was only 56. He evolved as a writer over more than three decades, writing about the grave realities of rural India at a period when a decisive battle was being led by Mahatma Gandhi against the British raj when gender and caste discrimination were rampant. Removal of communal politics and untouchability was being performed by Hindu Mahasabha and also by Muslim league. Caste oppression and realistic understanding of the lives of the 'Untouchables' and the lower caste is portrayed by Premchand in his works like "Sadgati" (Deliverance), "Kafan" (shroud). Although when alive, Premchand was the target of abusive and fierce attacks from the upper class and the Brahmins because of his sympathetic portrayal of the untouchables and the oppressed lower castes. Accused of spreading hatred against them, he was labelled as "anti-Brahmin" while many Dalit writers and critics are dubbing Premchand as "anti-Dalit", as they believe that writers belonging to the upper caste does not have the authentic experiences that is needed for Dalit writing.

Premchand enriched the Hindi literature with an openness to gender and caste inequalities through his writings. Writers like Bhartendu Harishchandra, Pratap N. Mishra and Ramchandra Shukla and others rarely mentioned the issue of caste discrimination in their writings being from the upper caste background. The subject of bhakti often dominated the Hindi literature and other than the strong voices of Rahim and Kabir, issue of biases and discrimination was rarely raised. Both of them, despite their huge popularity in literature were systemically side lined and ousted as they did not fit in the saffronisation process of Hindutva. Other authors were only concerned with the sophistry of Sanskritised Hindi although writings of Bhartendu could relate to the common man because of his attempts at establishing the national pride by encouraging the growth of own literature and language. Due to his close linkage with the 'Urdu' language, Premchand was different from the contemporaries of his times. Although, there wasn't much difference in terms of Hindu Muslim relationship, as the Hindu talukdars and Muslim zamindars were secular in their treatment of the marginalized. The focus of the writers and the authors was more on the communal amity and the issue of caste oppression and feudalism was rarely raised. The upper elite of Indian society formed a secular class of the Muslim and Hindu. The Shia Nawabs depended heavily on the Hindu bureaucracy predominated by kayastha at the time of their rule in India, one of the reasons for Premchand to understand the communalism dynamics despite of him being a kayastha himself, thus known as a progressive writer. He was very much influenced by Gandhi in his later writings. Premchand used the day today idioms and the stereotypical image of Dalit's in his writings to strengthen the plots of his stories. The portrayal of the caste characters does not do justice to his narratives. In this way, he might have hurt the sentiments of the Dalit writers and the issue of Dalit awakening rather

than helping the cause. The issue of Dalit awakening doesn't seem to concern him, neither are they reflected in his writings.

Although Premchand brought these issues to light in his writings, he cannot be called a revolutionary writer. Premchand was accused by many Dalit writers of being insensitive and rhetorical to Dalit issues in his writings and was blamed for lumpenization of Dalit characters, particularly in his story 'Kafan'. Where the bleakness and harshness can be felt in the story, the sympathy we are forced to feel for these two characters balanced with the utter awfulness of the same, and also a sort of morbidly comic effect. It paints an unflattering picture of two anti-heroes who are also untouchables. Many critics of the upper class joined in a debate where Dalits were blamed for insulting an author who raised Dalit issue in Hindi literature and called them to be caste mind. Although Premchand did bring Dalit characters in Hindi literature but the question is in what form?

Dalit movement has changed with the time. The number of Dalit writers involved in Hindi writings was very few in the past. Compared to then, there are new Dalit writers now challenging the mindset and creations of the upper caste society. In fact, writers like Om Prakash Valmiki and other Dalit writers like Suraj Pal Chauhan are challenging the Brahmanical hegemony through their story telling. The Dalit writing is being encouraged and acknowledged in the Hindi heartland whereas in the old times it was thoroughly absent from literature also new writers are emerging and new movement of different communities concerning their assertion, history and culture have also found a place in the literary writings. It is important to bring to our knowledge the fact that in languages like Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam and Bengali, Dalit writing has been very powerful and effective. Ambedkar, Namdev and Tukaram, great saints like these have made a name for them in the history of literature. Though it is ironical that only after the mainstreamification of Dalits in the form of Bahujan politics, new writers in a large number awakened their abilities to write superb narratives and description while it was absent in the Hindi heartland before. This is an example of ambition and awakening among the Dalits to question and challenge the Brahmanical hegemony.

Premchand was growing as a writer when Gandhi could be seen by the country becoming a 'spiritual' leader and he was also being called a 'progressive' writer in Gandhian mould. Premchand was unaware of the dangers of mahatamanisation and could not sense the reality underneath Gandhi's saffron and the hysteria that it was creating. Gandhi's saffron helped him in creating a halo around him and also the fact that he was a spiritual leader and not a political leader earned him a lot of respect and people came out in huge numbers to worship him. Premchand being an insightful and remarkable social analyst failed to see the hollowness of such a phony viewpoint. Even though Hindi heartland was not known for its revolutionary politics but his poor knowledge about the struggle of Swami Achhootananda for the dignity of Dalits in United Provinces and also of Baba Ramchandra Das and the Avadh struggle for peasants cannot be excused. At the time when Gandhi could be seen taking control of nation's political affairs, Ambedkar could also be seen rising on the horizon. Gandhi was a deeply orthodox and conservative Hindu who lacked statesmanship and the interaction that

took place between Ambedkar and Gandhi raising the issue of caste can still be debated about. Premchand's participation in this is still unknown, although he remained conspicuously silent on the whole debate but the papers about the debate that were published in Gandhi's Navjeevan and Harijan must have been contemplated by Premchand.

The debate over Premchand's writings and if he can be called a Dalit writer was being intensely discussed in the Dalit circle. The fact that he was not born in a Dalit family and could not see through their point of perspective is not a strong argument against him being termed as a Dalit writer. Although, this criteria can also be taken into account but also there's nothing specific in Premchand's writings which a Dalit could be proud of. Common idioms have been used by Premchand to project his point of view. His writings bring out the emotions such as pity and helplessness on certain occasions, but never has he portrayed a Dalit character in the light of heroism or as a rebel against the Brahmanical hegemony in true sense of Dalit revolt.

He portrays the Dalit characters in his stories in a very stereotypical way of having character traits like drunk, rustic and dirty. He writes about the marriage in the Pasi family of Manjhgaoon in his story 'Dono taraf se' where he portrays the Baratis demand for liquor and the tradition of women dancing with the band. In another instance he shows how an upper class woman looks down upon another woman of the same community because of the fact that her husband dine with the Chamars. It clearly reflects Premchand's notion about high class. The lead hero of this story is also a Brahmin and his way of social reform is by sitting at Chamars house.

In the 'Godan' the political consciousness among the Dalits is represented through the overlapping usages of different castes in Premchand's work. In this novel also, the caste of the protagonist, Hori is not mentioned though there are some indicators to infer his caste identity, for example, there is a reference to his caste status when Datadeen trapped him for sharing his crop and deceivingly said, "I'm not your foe. You annoy me. My good man, what was there to feel so delicate about? We are all in it together, aren't we? How does it matter if you are a low caste ('Shudra') and I am Brahmin? We are all members of one family. Oh, we all have our ups and downs. If something happens to me tomorrow, whose help will I seek if not yours?" This reference, along with some other ones, indicates that Hori belongs to the lower caste and represents those, who are poor, debt trapped and exploited. Premchand in his works also represents the contemporary political understanding prevalent in his community that was exploited in the name of religion, tradition or prestige. The protagonist in this novel is also illiterate, inarticulate, fatalistic and poor. The novel is contextualised in the Indian village, without any political leader like Ambedkar, the voice of the Dalit community was not expressed politically.

The Matadeen and Selia episode also addresses Dalit discourse. Matadeen is the son of the village priest, Selia is a Dalit woman. She loves Matadeen but he disrespects her due to her caste status and gives her no public validation despite of their physical association as Premchand mentions that Matadeen "cunningly exploited her love for him: now she was no more than a machine which worked at his bidding." This indicates humiliating treatment by the uppercastes towards oppressed Dalits. They exploited Dalits were being exploited in social, economic and physical ways.

Premchand portrays Selia's pain when he writes, "Selia looked helplessly at Matadeen like a bird which has been turned out of the cage with wings clipped. "This episode, points out the helplessness of the Dalit women, who were unable to find political ways to articulate their anger and to protest.

Inter caste marriage is shown in Premchand's story 'Saubhgya Ke Kode', between a Brahmin girl and a Dalit man who became 'acharya, a teacher of theology' but only after the Dalit has converted to upper caste philosophy. Until the end of the story the Acharya, who is really a Dalit, remains apologetic of hiding his caste from Ratna, his wife who's a brahmin he married despite of coming from lower caste himself. It is possible that Premchand never found anything positive or any remarkable achievement in Dalit culture that could be shown as history of Dalits. The Pasis, who ruled many parts of the states had participated in freedom movement. A majority of Pasis, Chamaras and Muslims had sacrificed their lives in 'Chauri Chaura' while there was very small participation of brahmins. The poor Dalits who lost their lives didn't get any mention in any works of the great writers like Premchand while Gandhi become the hero of Chauri Chaura for his so-called non-violent struggle.

Another story "Mantra' also portrays how Sanatan Dharma end in victory against the forces of evil led by the Muslim. He says that the reason for conversion of Dalits to Islam was because they could not find any respect in Hinduism and now the forces of conversions are nowhere since the upper caste priest has started sitting with the Dalits. The hero of this story is again a Brahmin and not a Dalit, whose heart changes when he sees the threat of conversion. Premchand did not condemn the caste system in his writings but only speaks of Dalits and the violence being committed against them in a very Gandhian way. He could have been strong against caste system and demolished the myth of Brahmanical tolerance. Premchand's Dalit are poor Harijans of Gandhi and upper castes have to come to their rescue and involve them in their work. Premchand only wrote from an upper caste point of view where a good man is portrayed as the one who has change of heart, visits the untouchables and dines with them. His characters rarely speak against the Brahmanical hegemony or caste system thus the revolt comes from the upper caste, who takes his own caste men mildly. It's not possible that Premchand was unaware of Ambedkar in those days but as a caste Hindu he must have also been familiar with Vivekananda's condemn of priest craft and also the Brahmanical caste system. While Premchand might have been influenced with Gandhian philosophy. But like Gandhi, he cannot be called a revolutionary writer.

The portrayal of Chamars in Premchand's 'Kafan' remains one of the foulest as far as sensitivities towards Dalits are concerned. His depiction of the Dalit characters of 'Madhav' and 'Ghisu' reveals none of Ambedkar's philosophy of struggle, which was the true criteria of Dalit literary aesthetics. Premchand is claimed to be an icon of Hindi writing but such insensitive and casteist approach depicts him as a prejudiced upper caste man in this story. Either Premchand was unaware of the various reform movements that took place during independence struggle and the strength of Dalit movement or he deliberately ignored them. The Dalit characters in his story are totally at the mercy of the 'kind' hearted people of the upper castes.

The heroes of his story are the Brahmins who glorified the 'sanatan dharma' and rarely questioned the caste system. Premchand desanskritised the Hindi language and as a story writer he remains outstanding as he disanskritised the Hindi language. The psyche of the people is understood by him very well and his stories also come close to depicting the realities of the common man of his time. He tried his best to portray the conditions of Dalits and marginalized though to change the heart of 'caste Hindus', he tried his best by portraying the conditions of marginalized and Dalits although the writings were not meant for empowering the lower castes. Premchand failed at attacking the institution of caste system and to awaken the Dalit masses against their systematic institutional oppression. He was unable to see any radical changes of revolt among the Dalits against the Varna system. Although in his novel 'Godan', evidence of radicalism and struggle against the upper caste oppression can be seen when a gang of chamars shove a cow's bone into the mouth of a Pandit after he impregnated a Dalit girl. The debate can still continue about Premchand being a Dalit writer or not. Though, it's out of synch according to me, as Premchand cannot be called a writer who wrote for Dalits. His theme is Gandhian and meant for upper caste Hindus. However, Premchand remains one of the greatest story narrators of our time.

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