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Short Stories of Premchand: A Reflection of his Nationalist Fervor

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Abstract

Premchand reflects his nationalist fervor unabashedly in many of his short stories. These include *Soze Watan* his first collection of five stories of which four were ardently patriotic. The Government declared it seditious, ceased the rest of the copies from Premchand's home and burnt them. He was also warned of grave consequences if he continued to write such stories. Hence, Nawab Rai started writing as Premchand, his new pseudonym. Under the influence of Gandhiji, Premchand continued to write on freedom struggle. Beginning from 'Upadesh' in 1917 to 'Katil ki Maa' in 1935 he wrote several short stories on varied themes of non-cooperation, civil Disobedience, swadeshi, hindu-muslim unity, satyagraha and eradication of untouchability. We notice a gradual growth of Premchand's ideology from patriotism to nationalism. Some such stories are 'Samar-Yatra' on salt satyagraha followed by 'Sharab ki Dukan', 'Dussahas' and 'Maiku'on abstaining from liquor. He revealed the seamy side of nationalism through these stories. The cowardice and selfish attitude of the middle class educated Indians who led the freedom struggle in the beginning, the weaknesses of the Indian National Congress and the laxity and callousness of its leaders. Premchand encouraged the participation and involvement of the farmers and labourers in the freedom struggle and looked at the national movement from the point of view of the oppressed and deprived. His other stories 'Suhag ki Sari' and 'Holi ka Upahar' based on Swadeshi movement exhibit the passion and commitment of women for freedom struggle. Other powerful stories being 'Ahuti', 'Tavan' and 'Chakma' which reveal Premchand as a true and committed soldier of freedom struggle for whom nationalism was all inclusive and nation meant equal opportunity and rights for all.

Keywords: Nationalist, Soze-Watan, seditious, seamy side, satyagraha, swadeshi, all inclusive

Introduction

My attempt in this paper is to analyze and elucidate the contribution of Munshi Premchand (pseudonym) in the Indian National Freedom Movement through his short stories. The real name of Premchand was Sri Dhanpat Rai Srivastava. (31st July 1880-8th October 1936) He was one of the foremost Hindi writers of the early twentieth century known for his famous Hindustani Literature. He wrote in Hindi and Urdu. In a long literary career that spanned for more than three decades he has more than a dozen novels, around three hundred short stories, several essays and translations of many foreign literary works into Hindi, to his credit. In a letter written to his friend and editor of Zamana, Dayanarayan Nigam, Premchand wrote that he desired to participate in the freedom struggle through his writings. Premchand's nationalist fervor apart from his works can be gauged from the fact that he resigned from his government job at the insistence of Mahatma Gandhi in a meeting held on 8th February 1921, in which he implored people to resign from their government jobs as part of the non-cooperation movement. Although Premchand was physically unwell and had to support his two kids and a pregnant wife but after contemplating for five days he finally resigned from his government job with the consent of his wife, in spite being well aware of the severe financial difficulties he would face ahead in life. Indeed an incredible act on the part of a patriot like Premchand.

Progressive Writers' Association was formed in 1936. Association is a modern concept. The writers often came together on certain issues but an association could not be formed earlier. For example, one can notice the coming together of nineteenth century Hindi writers on the issue of language but it cannot be given a name of association. The formation of Progressive Writers Association can be understood in the context of Indian national movement. It was

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formed by Sajjad Zahir and Mulk Raj Anand in London on the basis of Paris Pen Conference. Allahabad became the centre of PWA and its first session was held at Lucknow in 1936. Premchand became the president of the first session and in his Presidential address he expressed his views on the purpose of literature. He believed that language is merely a means and not an end in itself and that the initial literature in Hindi and Urdu emphasized more on the formation of language rather than influence the thoughts and emotions of the people. Premchand too like Gandhi emphasized on the widespread usage of Hindustani, a language somewhere between Hindi and Urdu. He further asserted in his presidential address that literature should play a pivotal role in educating and generating awareness amongst common masses of the current social and political situations of the country. Especially in a subject country like India it was the moral responsibility of every writer to write with a social purpose. He emphatically mentioned all that is written is not literature. The composition which exhibits reality of life, leaves an impression on our mind and soul and has matured and grave expression can be regarded as part of literature. Premchand's Literature comprising of essays, short stories, novels and poetries can be best defined as 'Criticism of Life'. According to him, literature could not only be a depiction of *sringara rasa* or man woman love and relationship but it had a social responsibility as well and had to be much more than that. Premchand believed that literature should be didactic in nature. It is the duty of a litterateur to depict and advocate the cause of the deprived and the persecuted. It should be a reflection of social and political issues and should delve upon the vices of the society with a motive to find its solutions. If any form of writing fails to inspire us in our adverse situations, fails to provide us mental and spiritual gratification, fails to arouse us from our slumber and make us progressive and determined then it cannot be called literature. He had a talent and an insight to see the demands of literature which could not vary from the demands of the society. Our country was already under the clutches of British rule and the national freedom struggle had begun when Premchand started writing. Premchand was confronted with two challenges when he started writing. Firstly, the independence of the nation and secondly, spreading the awareness of the genres of short story and novel and their establishment amongst the literate Indian masses. Though these two genres were introduced in the west but in order to make them more adaptable and popular amongst Indians they had to be transformed in accordance to Indian mindset and culture. As mentioned above, literature for Premchand could not remain untouched by current issues.

Premchand published his first collection of five short stories in 1907 in a book called

Soz-e-Watan. Four of the five stories in the volume had patriotic overtone. Such stories on freedom struggle had not been written till date by any Hindi or Urdu writer, hence were considered seditious by the district authorities. Premchand was a Sub-deputy Inspector of Schools initially at Mahoba, later at Hamirpur. Around this time, the officials of the British Government noticed *Soz-e-Watan* and banned it as a seditious work. The British Collector of the Hamirpur District ordered a raid on Premchand's house where around five hundred copies of *Soz-e-Watan* were confiscated and burnt. Premchand, deeply affected by the execution of young Khudiram Bose, impulsively wrote during this time.

At the same time he was equally afraid to lose his job as the British magistrate warned him to abstain from such seditious deeds. And that, it was very kind of them to have only confiscated and burnt his books, had it been Mughals they would have chopped his hands. This reveals the power of the so called "vernacular languages". The mighty British Empire which ruled half the world got afraid of a small man who was lean, dark, weak and who published his first story in *Zamana* in 1907 'Duniya ka Sabse Anmol Ratan' ("The most precious Jewel in the World") one of the five stories of *Soze Watan* which had patriotic overtones and seemed to be influenced by the Indian Independence Movement. The protagonist of the story is Dildareb, which means someone who is not true but flirt. We would not delve into the feminist perspective of the name as at present we need to look at the story from the nationalist perspective only. The girl is an extremely beautiful princess. Premchand calls her 'Husn ki Mallika'. A boy called Dildigaar (someone whose heart is shattered) goes to propose her when he comes to know of her beauty. The princess remains veiled and mentions two preconditions for her marriage. She would marry a person who would bring the most precious jewel for her ('Duniya ka sabse anmol ratan'). She being the princess, her word is law. She further exclaims if he fails to get the most precious jewel he should not return to her otherwise he would be hanged till death. He goes in search of the jewel and comes across a cold murderer who had brutally killed several people. He demands to be set free for sometime as his last wish. He notices a child playing innocently with a wooden horse as if a real horse. He goes and loves the child who reminds him of his family and his childhood. He becomes nostalgic and cries bitterly. Dildigaar takes out his handkerchief immediately, collects his tears on it and rushes to Dildareb with an explanation that these droplets of tears are priceless as they are the tears of repentance. Dildareb rejects saying that though precious but still not most precious. Few years later he notices how a sixteen year old girl burns herself alive on the funeral pyre of her husband. Dildigaar is not aware of the custom of Sati, which was prevalent in some areas among Brahmins and kshatriyas. He is astonished to see that a person can love someone to an extent that she burns herself alive for a dead person. He collects the dust of the two corpses and rushes to Dildareb who again rejects it. I would reiterate that the story is to be looked from nationalist perspective and not feminine or modernist perspective. Dildigaar gets very disappointed. Following a prophecy he reaches a country called Hindustan and notices thousands of dead bodies lying around except one man who is alive and groaning for water. Dildigaar offers him water who in return attacks him thinking he is one of the enemies. The dying man informs him that he is a rajput soldier fighting for the freedom of his country, whose duty is to either fight for his motherland and set her free or die fighting for her. Ultimately he dies and Dildigaar rushes to Dildareb with the blood of this martyr which is happily accepted by Dildareb. She emphatically claims that the last droplet of blood of a martyr dropped in protecting his country is the most precious jewel. ('Watan ki Hifazat mei gira hua akhri katra Duniya ka sabse anmol ratan hai'). Thus the story ends with these powerful words which provoke the masses to arouse from their slumber and think and work towards national freedom struggle. Hence this story like others became a threat to the British Empire who burnt

almost five hundred copies of Premchand's collection of stories *Soze Watan*.

After this incident, Nawab Rai (pseudonym) started writing as Premchand. One can notice the change in the tone and outlook of Premchand from his first story published under this new pseudonym 'Upadesh' in 1917 to 'Katil ki Maa' in 1935. Some stories directly deal with freedom struggle while others have different themes but were written in the backdrop of freedom struggle. Many of the plots of his stories were based on true incidents published in newspapers. He was often criticized for it. Nand Dulare Bajpai criticized him by calling him a story writer of current affairs. Whereas Ilachandra Joshi and Hemchandra Joshi did not consider him as a great writer and believed that soon his stories would lose public interest and become stale. He would not be remembered for too long. But the popularity of his stories speaks for him. If one goes through these stories one can notice a natural growth and change in the ideology and thought process of Premchand. In *Soze-Watan* he portrayed patriotism whereas in 'Upadesh' he tried to raise the question of nationalism which was missing in his stories before 1917. Hence, this journey from patriotism to nationalism gives him wider scope and perspective. Before 1917, Premchand was inspired by the ideology and extremist measures of Bal Gangadhar Tilak hence he criticized Gopal Krishna Gokhale in *Zamana* in 1905 for the methods adopted by him to achieve political freedom. But after Gandhi entered active politics in 1917 many middle class intellectuals along with Premchand got influenced by him. Though Premchand called himself a natural disciple of Gandhi but he would not hesitate in showing his disagreement on issues of national movement under Gandhi's leadership. Premchand raised a very pertinent question in his story 'Upadesh'. He raised questions on the class and character of the leadership of the freedom struggle, their limitations and further who would benefit from this movement. Before 1920, only the upper middle class educated Indians actively participated in the freedom struggle who did not have the will power to make sacrifices or stretch themselves beyond an extent. Premchand highlights the contradictions inherent in the character of these Indians. He reveals the false idealism and pretence of advocate Pundit Devratan Sharma in 'Upadesh'. Hence by doing so, he starts looking at Freedom struggle critically from the point of view of farmers and criticizes the leadership of middle class educated Indians. In Premchand's view welfare of the farmers was inherent in the freedom struggle. It could not be ignored or segregated from the freedom struggle.

In 1920, Mahatma Gandhi initiated a process of induction of common people in the Indian National Congress (INC) by reducing the membership fee to 25 paise which was called "Chavanni Sadasya". Before 1920, INC and nationalism were restricted to a handful of educated people as the membership fee was too high. Gandhi insisted that if the freedom struggle was to be extended to the villages and common masses then INC must include peasants, labourers and youth of the country so that people from different strata of the society join the national movement. Otherwise INC would be reduced to the upper class club which would lead to the failure of the national movement. Further, Gandhi introduced and established Satyagraha as a weapon of freedom struggle. It was only after listening to Gandhi for the first time on 8th February 1921 at Gorakhpur that

Premchand's dilemma came to an end. Gandhi's profound influence not only inspired Premchand to resign from his job but also to write the first set of his nationalist short stories in which he was unabashedly nationalist and anti-imperialist. These stories continued to enrich Hindi Literature for almost a decade and a half though the stress in his stories kept on changing from non-cooperation to Hindu-Muslim unity further to eradication of untouchability as per the changing demands of the situation. Till now he was vacillating between class and nationalism prevalent in the Indian society but now he found an anchor and guide in Gandhi and found a justification for Nationalism. He wrote six short stories on non-cooperation but continued to write Nationalist stories even after Chauri-Chaura incident. His second set of nationalist stories came up during the Civil Disobedience Act and of the ten short stories that he wrote in 1930, the year of Dandi March, six had the theme of Satyagraha and freedom. The subject and the tone of the stories were suitable for the times and must have inspired many to join the national movement. One such story was 'Samar-Yatra' which was written in the backdrop of Salt Satyagraha. It reveals the mindset of the village folks, their fear and pessimism which led to their slavery whereas the liberated ones amongst them joined the army of Gandhi's Satyagrahis. 'Samar-Yatra' is a story par excellence which well portrays Gandhi's ideology and his analysis of India's slavery, a unique blend of philosophy and the hardcore reality of the village folk. In 'Samar-Yatra' Premchand reveals his faith in farmers and downtrodden through the character of Nohri, a poor old widow who yearns to sacrifice everything for independence. We see how she throws away her supporting stick, looks at satyagrahis, draws strength from them and dances enthusiastically visualizing independence. Through characters like Nohri, Premchand tries to exhibit that independence would not bring about a major change in the lives of rich who are still leading a comfortable life under British Raj. In reality, it is the poor farmers whose lives would be transformed with independence. The definition of Swaraj given in this story makes it all the more appealing that "Swaraj is a state of mind...Fear is subjection, fearlessness Swaraj". Therefore from 1920 onwards, one notices the presence of lower class in the stories of Premchand. But a major difference from 1924-25, which needs to be noticed is that the lower class (labourers and peasants) start questioning the upper class in the stories of Premchand which had still not begun in the national movement. Hence, Premchand was a soldier of national movement in a real sense and was propagating nationalism through his short stories and novels. Hence, in Premchand's nationalism rich could not exploit the poor which was something different and new from the early nationalism practiced till date. Gandhiji had insisted the masses to abstain from liquor and any kind of intoxication in non-cooperation movement. The activists of the freedom struggle would demonstrate in front of the liquor selling shops and blockade people from going inside. Stories like 'Sharab ki Dukan', 'Dussahas', 'Maiku' are based on these themes. These stories show how there is a change of heart and transformation of drunkards like Maiku and Munshi Maikulal when they refuse to drink even when they are served free liquor by the liquor shopkeepers. 'Sharab ki Dukan' reveals the weaknesses of the congress leadership when they show their unwillingness for vigilance and picketing in front of these liquor shops located at filthy

places with a strong stench of liquor. In order to hide their weakness, Congress leadership takes the support of the opinion of Gandhiji. Ultimately a lady member Mrs. Saxena and a youth Jairam go to the shop.

Stories like 'Akhiri Tohfa', 'Holi ka Upahaar' 'Suhag ki Sari' were based on the themes of Swadeshi Movement on the boycott of foreign cloth and use of indigenous goods. In 'Holi ka Upahaar' Amarkant has to go to meet his wife for the first time to his in-law's place and desires to take a fancy sari for her. When he goes to buy a saree of foreign cloth in a shop he gets embarrassed and ashamed to see that his wife, Sukhada Devi was picketing against foreign goods in the same shop. Ultimately, he too joins the Swadeshi Movement. The insistence of the girl friend to buy a sari of foreign cloth leads to her separation from her beloved in 'Akhiri Tohfa'. In 'Suhag ki Sari' we see how women are seen sacrificing their mangalsutra or wedding saris for the national movement. Those conventional women who stayed in "purdah" for ages, who remained unheard and marginalised for so long got so overwhelmed with the patriotic fervor of the nationalist movement that they came out in public to make these sacrifices. Another story of Premchand which needs to be mentioned here is 'Chakma'. Gandhiji emphasized on the sale of swadeshi goods. People started buying and selling indigenous goods. The self centered Indian merchants afraid of undergoing losses acted shrewd. They applied swadeshi stamp on their foreign cloth, wore Gandhi caps and shouted slogans in favour of swadeshi movement as a result all their goods were sold. Premchand has highlighted and warned against these anti-nationalist practices of the Indian businessmen in 'Chakma'. Hence, Premchand tries to highlight the seamy side of nationalism and emphasized that national movement should be marked by parity; no class should exist in it. In another story 'Tavan' Premchand reveals the ordeals of a middle class Indian merchant who is banned from selling foreign cloth, hence suffers at the hands of the Congressmen. His wife's statement makes one contemplate at the seamy side of nationalism when she remarks that if these congressmen are so brutal as activists what would be their attitude when they would come to power. Premchand in his another story 'Ahuri' exhibits a beautiful, talented college going girl 'Roopmani' as protagonist. A boy named Anand, is a son of zamindar and loves Roopmani. She on the other hand is attracted towards another classmate "Vishambhar" who is poor and who unlike Anand decides to go to villages to propagate the awareness of the national movement. Roopmani appreciates him for this gesture and gives him a send off by garlanding him. What is to be noted here is that the most beautiful girl of Premchand's story considers a poor and less intelligent boy as a hero and eulogizes him not Anand who is rich and intelligent. Just because Nation comes first for Vishambhar, above everything else who sacrifices his studies for his complete involvement in the national movement and decides to go to villages. A middle class girl counters Anand, the son of a zamindar who emphasizes that rich and educated would always have hegemony over weak and uneducated. Could be possible that during those times any Roopmani might not counter any Anand but Premchand's imagination is incredible that he makes a subaltern question a rich patriarch. She asserts that if property even after the attainment of Swaraj, retains its supremacy and the educated community remains blindfolded by selfishness, she would rather wish Swaraj

would not be attained. She further asserts that to her at least Swaraj did not mean the replacement of John by Govind. She would wish to see an organization of society that permits minimal inequality. Therefore Premchand dreams of such a nation where all are given equal opportunities and rights and where rich and educated Indians do not thrive at the cost of poor and downtrodden. In a letter written to Banarsi Das Chaturvedi, Premchand mentioned that his only ambition was to see the success of Swaraj Movement and to write a few good books, the purpose of which would be the attainment of freedom.

Frantz Fanon, a French political thinker had said that while fighting against imperialism if we are not aware of its evils then even though imperialism would disappear but leave behind its evils like injustice, exploitation and racism. Hence, it can be said that Premchand was probably the first writer who simultaneously challenged Imperialism, untouchability and patriarchy and altered the theory of nationalism through his short stories and novels. He dreamt of a nation where all are given equal opportunity and rights and where rich and educated Indians do not thrive at the cost of poor and downtrodden. Since he criticized Brahmins and upper castes and classes in his stories, they strongly criticized him and denounced him as a propagator of hatred. He questioned such people in his essay "Are we actually nationalist?" Hence Premchand's Nationalism had no place for any kind of exploitation. His nationalism was all inclusive. In thinking about the poorest person of the society he is a true follower of Gandhi. Therefore, instead of looking at Nationalism from the viewpoint of elite and rich he viewed it from the eyes of downtrodden. He has rightly been called "Swadhinta Andolan ka kathakar" by Dr. Ram Vilas Sharma and "Kalam ka Sipahi" by Amrit Rai.

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