

Concerns and commitments about Women in the Short Stories of Munshi Premchand

Yespal Singh
Lecturer in English
Govt. College Loharu

Munshi Prem Chand both as a writer as well as an Indian took the each and every problem of Indian society seriously, whether these were the problems of women, untouchables, downtrodden, caste system or communalism. Prem Chand was the only Indian writer and thinker who had a deep knowledge, understanding and practical experience of Indian society, its customs and rituals. What he said while considering these social evils and problems have been and still proving to be correct. He took a critical stance against society and the government and suggested the measures of the resolution of these problems. Relevance of the Premchand's literature has increased more today's vicious atmosphere when the problems are demanding quick and proper treatment. Premchand was a unique writer as well as a human being. We do not find any difference between sayings and doings, this rare quality was the part and partial of his life and his literary works. He took the stand for what he described and expressed without caring for the price he had to pay for it.

Premchand wrote without any interruption between 1900 to 1936, the time when India was under the British rule. Women in Indian society were facing two level of slavery. Women were the most severely affected victims of colonialism and feudalism. It is evident from history that the women of the nation or the community under the foreign rule had to bear the most of the burden. To impose the superiority on the opponent, abduction of the ladies was the most popular and easy tool. In the history of human civilization it will be too hard to find a cast or community which had been liberal to another race under their rule. Great Hindi poet Tulsi Das who known for his severe comments on women has written very acute and sensitive lines:

Kat Vidhi Srijini Jag Mahin

Paradhin Sapnehu Sukh nhain.

These lines depict the condition and the pain of the women throughout the world and Premchand was very well aware of the pain of the women. He knew it that it was not possible to liberate the Indian society, leaving the half of the population un-liberated. He suggested that as we are concerned about our freedom and happiness, we will also have to think about the women in the similar manner and will have to enable them to take care of themselves. He used to put maximum stress on the girl education. Once talking about the dowry he says:

The only one solution of the problem in my view is that the girls should be provided the best education and let free to make their own path in the world, as we do with the boys. We should give up the wish to see them the girls married and should show the faith in them as we do in the case of boys ignoring the fear of their straying away from the path.

Here two things becomes clear one is Premchand's wish for complete eradication of dowry and second men's desire to continue the ages old male- dominance in Indian society. Man uses the physical weakness of woman as a tool to keep woman within the four walls of the house hold. Men fear that if woman come out of the household they may win the kingdom, so it is the best way to stop their exit on the very threshold of the house. A girl was used to be tied like an animal and had no right to utter a single word of her wish. Premchand knew it very well that the difference between man and woman is more cultural than natural while the man enjoys both and the woman lives the life of a prisoner.

Premchand advocates the efforts of bringing women out of this prison and let them roam freely because it is the need and demand of the time. Education and freedom to take the decisions can improve the condition of women in India. Premchand in his article "Ideal of Girl Education" writes:

This is the problem that men have tortured woman too much that they do not want to become mothers and house wives but adamant for their economic freedom. When men do not know how to cook food and rear children then why should women learn these things after getting the education men earn livelihood and treat with women as slaves, women also wants to learn the same art. Why should not they become lawyers and teachers instead of cooking at home? Our ladies should decide what shot of education their girl should get and should not accept the decision of the selfish men.

It reflects the broad and sensitive attitude of the Premchand towards the life. He clearly believed that girls should get all the right of life of human beings. He was against the mismatch marriage of girls without knowing their wishes or for dowry. Suchkind of marriages either meets the fate of 'Nirmala' or reaches in the condition of the 'Rupa'. In his short story "Widow having Sons" the brothers marry their young sister to an aged man in order to save the dowry mony. Dowry system is the result of the capitalism though it was also prevalent during period of feudalism but capitalism flared and aggrieved it. In his article 'Kayasth Conference' he writes:

Now the only solution to this problem is that girls should decide their fate themselves and should not marry till they do not get such grooms, who surrender before them out of love. The caste can rise only when the self respect is aroused among the girls.

In India Premchand was the first progressive and aware writer who freely and frankly raised the women issues in highly conservative society without caring for the consequences. In Feburary,1931 in his article "Rights of the Woman", he takes women-issues fervently and suggests some radical solutions:

1. The rule of single marriage should be applicable to both on men and women.
No one should be allowed to marry again in his life time till his first wife is alive.
2. Wife should have right on the property of the man
3. Girls should have right in the property of the father.

4. Divorce law should be made with equality for both men and women.
5. A woman should get half of the property of husband at the time of the divorce and also get the share if some moveable property is there.

We can imagine how much revolutionary and important these ideas could have been in 1931, and what reaction and response men dominated society might have given after reading and listening Premchand. We do not find such a clarity of thought and ideas in no other writer of the time except Premchand.

The Influence of feminist movements can easily be traced in the fictional and non-fictional writings of Premchand. He was of firm view that the woman is the central pillar of Indian society on which the whole structure of Indian society is standing. If this very central pillar itself become weak what will happen with Indian social structure a layman can also imagine it. Freedom of physical relations is also one of important questions raised by Premchand in his novels as well as short stories. No Indian woman wants to indulge in the profession of prostitution but the economic constrains and the lust of the man forces her to do so. The heroine of *Sevasadan* leaves it after reaching at a certain situation because without love and desire how long one can exploit the body. Premchand makes it clear through the words jhunia of the *Godan*, who says in the very beginning of her love affair:

If the man will go after second woman then the woman will also run after men. Deceit in love hurts the woman as it hurts the man. Learn it. I have made it clear to my man if he tried to go after some other woman then she will do whatever she would like to do.

Premchand felt that there is a lot of difference between the rights of men and the women. A man cannot run his life without the help the woman even than he never forgets to show his power over her. But he was against the free sexual relations because such kind of relation can never give rise to a healthy family. In any progressive society love of a man or woman should be respected but limitless freedom in the love of neither man nor woman cannot be justified. In his articles on the one side he supports love

and love marriages on the other side he justify the traditional methods of the marriage. He considers the desire to live a free life by women the blind following of the western civilization. If a woman acquires the characteristics of man she may loss the natural powers of love and care. the Whether it is Malti of the of the story 'Malti' new bride of 'Mnovirti'. In his stories Premchand show the woman characters suffering and heart-broken who decide to live their life in epicurean style. Critics criticized him for the inner conflict in him saying that on one side he advocates for love and women education on the other side he do not like the women like Malti who takes bold decisions and wants to live life on their own conditions. It becomes clear from this inner conflict that Premchand wants the solution of the woman problems within established structure of Indian society. Critics termed it the limitation of a writer as well his characters. But the condition of Indian society today itself speaking loudly that Premchand was right when pressed for the maintenance of basic womanly qualities by women. We find newspapers full with news of heinous crimes in which the women of so called open and modern society are found involved. Deviation in the behavior has led to the disintegration of families, increase in the number of suicide cases, increase in cases of psychological diseases and rise in case of general crimes. But it does not mean that Premchand wished to keep women subservient to men, he demands nowhere less than the equality in his fiction and never justifies the misdeed of men. Rather his women characters are more balanced emotionally and tough psychologically. They guide their male counterparts whenever they feel helpless and dejected. So Premchand was very well aware of the woman's role as the binding force of family as well as of society. He tried to make the people understand that if the woman gives up her this duty, no one can save the family and society from disintegration. In "Daughter –in-law from a

Noble Family” Anandi saves the family from the breakup by her acumen and timely intervention. Men instead of being indebted to women, treat them as second grade citizens.

Women each and every household face the discrimination but there some categories of women whose life is too much miserable to be described, particularly of the widows. During Premchand’s time people used to show sympathy with widows but they did not treat them sympathetically. The sensitive heart of Premchand was very hurt on miserable condition of the woman. In 1933 he wrote a comment on a child widow, in which she says: “I am a child widow. I am tired of life. I do not want to live in this world. Why are you hurting me, let me die.” In another comment “Act on the Livelihood of Widows” he says: “If main reason for fall of Hindu society is caste discrimination then the miserable condition of the women is also an important factor in it.” In his short story, “The Widow having Sons” Premchand description of the condition of Fulmati after death of her husband is heart rendering. Her sons says: “This is the law that after death of father the property goes to sons. Mother can only get only food and cloths.” In *Dhikkar* story protagonist Mani who is a child widow who out of love and desire to see her cousin sister in the attire of the bride reaches in her room. Her aunt becomes furious as soon as she see her and cries: “Who invited you here? Get out .” It puts a deep impact on her mind. In story *Partigha* the protagonist widow Purna anyhow saves herself from the clutches of the Kamlaparsad the son of her patron Badariparsad. For a young widow he beauty and body are nothing less than a bane. The society neither allows the widow to remarry nor let her live with peace. In the story *Nagpuja* Tilotama’s father Jagdishchander arrange her remarriage despite the hard opposition from society. Premchand writes: “It was not the remarriage of Tilotama but an active example of the social reform.” Premchand understand his society very

well that is why the way in which he could expose the misdeeds of the society is rare in the literature. He chooses a widow of the Hindu society because he was very well aware of their condition in the society and wished to reform it through his hard hitting words.

The miserable condition of women in Indian society was the one of the main reasons for the acts of prostitution in Indian society. In male dominated society the woman was considered as a thing of luxury and enjoyment. Prostitutes are result of such kind of thinking of men. Prostitutes either came in the form of city- bride or the temple dancers and later in the form of the women to whom society leaves no other option to earn their livelihood. Premchand ponders seriously over this utterly miserable condition of the women. In one of his article he considers that the reason for this problem is more economic then social. He writes that the main reason of this kind of problems is economic. Unemployment is increasing day by day. Laborers are not getting work, farmers are get ruined, educated people are not able to get their two ends meal and businessmen are suffering losses. In such kind of conditions what will happen if this kind of incidents do not take place.

In the story “Prostitute” Premchand holds men responsible for this problem and thinks that men might have started this profession. It is a sufficient reason for fall of any society if the women become prostitutes for satisfying the lust the men. The Protagonist Madhuri in this story says: “ A woman can never surrender herself for the money. If she is doing so it means that she has no other wayout.” In another story “Curse of Life” the protagonist Gulsan express her opinion about the men in the society: All earn the money with the help of the illegal means and live unnatural life.” She further says, “Man is too shameless that he satisfies his lust even in her worst condition of the woman and too unkind that he declares her bad character to see her die suffering helplessly.”

It becomes clear that Premchand's stories desired for such a society in which women are treated equal to men and have equal rights in each and every field. The ideal of the empowered woman in Premchand's view is that woman should equally contribute in the progress of the nation without being treated inferior, weak, soft or dependent. Rather both should work as the complementary force to increase the efficiency and commitment towards their work and duties. It may be that Premchand might have some limitations during his time but none other among his contemporaries had ideas and courage to show progressive attitude in women related matters. He was the first writer in Hindi literature who opposed the tyrannical treatment to women and kept his struggle on for the status of human being for her.

Chekhov, Anton. *Anton Chekhov's Short Stories*. Ed. Ralph E. Matlaw. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1979. Print.

---. *Anton Chekhov: Collected Works in 5 Vols. Vol. 1*. Trans. Alex Miller and Ivy Litvinov. Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1987. Print.

Premchand, Munshi. *Deliverance and Other Stories*. Trans. David Rubin. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1988. Print.

---. *The Shroud and 20 Other Stories*. Trans. Madan Gopal. New Delhi: Sagar Publications, 1972. Print.

Atkinson, G. D. *A Handbook of Social Science Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1997 Print.

Bakhtin, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981. Print.

Bartlett, Rosamund. *"About Love" and Other Stories. Translated with an introduction and notes by Rosamund Bartlett*. Oxford, N.Y.: OUP/OWC, 2004. Print.

Bassnet, Susan. *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993. Print.

Bates, H.E. *The Modern Short Story: A Critical Survey*. London: Thomas Nelson, 1941. Print.

Gottlieb, Vera; Allain, Paul. *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*. Vera Gottlieb and Paul Allain (eds). Cambridge: CUP, 2000. Print.

Gulzar. "Living with Munshi Premchand." *Indian Literature* XLIX.2 (2005): 119-25. Print.

- Gwynn, R. S. *Fiction. Compiled by R. S. Gwynn*. Second edition, 1998. N.Y.: Longman. A Longman pocket anthology, 2015. Print.
- Habib, M.R. *A History of Literary Criticism from Plato to Present*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007. Print.