

Caste Hierarchies, Peasant Hardships and Narrating Marginalisation in Munshi Premchand's Writings

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Abstract

Munshi Premchand (1880-1936) occupies a central position in Hindi and Urdu literature and can be regarded as one of the pioneering and revolutionary writers of social realism in India. His writings have a national and global appeal. His fiction novels such as *Godaan* (1936), *Karmabhoomi* (1932), *Rangabhoomi* (1924), *Sevasadan* (1918) and hundreds of short stories highlight the moral, economic, social and political life of rural India under colonial rule. Scholars like S. B. Upadhyay writes that Premchand's peasant narratives can be fruitfully understood in terms of the "moral economy" of peasants in colonial North India, in which peasants, landlords and colonial state structures are in continual tension. Similarly, S. Rai writes "His is one of the most powerful and authentic accounts of the national movement and people's life: their aspirations, struggles, victories and defeats, injustice, exploitation, courage, cowardice and in particular the community life of rural India, peasant commonsense, non-conformism and sacrifice all these have been etched with a keen sense of realism."¹ In this article, I attempt to interrogate how Premchand represents three interlinked dimensions of the poor's socio-politico-economic life: (1) caste and how it structures power relations, (2) peasantry and agrarian struggles in colonial North India, and (3) marginalisation of women in society, in his writings. It will be my endeavour to engage with his major novels and selected stories and exhibit how characters, narrative structure and symbolic details contribute to his critique of caste hierarchy, feudalism and gender discrimination.

Keywords

Peasantry, Feudalism, Social Realism, Moral Economy, Marginalisation, Gender

Introduction

Munshi Premchand, born in 1880 as Dhanpat Rai Srivastava in Lamhi, near Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, began his writing career in Urdu and later in Hindi in response to rising nationalist currents and the call for the spread of regional languages. His writings are marked by agrarian distress and trauma, the rise of nationalist politics like the Non-Cooperation movement, the Civil Disobedience movement and intensifying critique of colonial economic structures, caste oppression and gender injustice. The shift from Urdu to Hindi is noted by Vasudha Dalmia²

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¹ Rai, S. (1979). Realism as a creative process: Features of Munshi Premchand's ideology. *Social Scientist*, 7(12), 32-42.

² Dalmia, V. (1997). *The nationalization of Hindu traditions: Bharatendu Harishchandra and nineteenth-century Banaras*. Oxford University Press.

and reflects the emerging tensions of “linguistic nationalism, print modernity, and Hindi literary public sphere formation.” He helped create an aesthetic of “everyday realism” that influenced later writers of the Nai Kahani movement.

His writings also marked the beginning of reading and writing in simple Hindi, carrying deep meaning and interpretations. They have a mass appeal till date because they were written with the purpose of educating the common man apart from being scholarly phenomenal. The stories are simple, realistic, awakening and enlightening in nature. They had the potential to bring the spirit of enquiry amongst general public. He became the go-to-reader of the majority of the Indians. H.S. Gill emphasises Premchand’s mastery over colloquial Hindustani, calling his language a “democratic medium” capable of representing peasants, artisans, women and low-caste characters authentically.³ He emphasises on how Premchand introduced dialogic realism replacing Sanskritised moral narration with living, spoken idiom.

His short stories and novels give mediated voice to peasants, workers, lower-caste women and Dalits (though he doesn’t always employ the term “Dalit”) whose voices were otherwise seldom recorded. For example, an article states that his fiction captures “peasants, workers, lower caste women and Dalits whose voices were seldom recorded before in history”⁴ and thereby offers a subaltern perspective.

In his lifetime, he witnessed serious peasant unrest, especially in North India, arising from land revenue hikes, tenancy exploitation, indebtedness and the overlapping of caste and class conflicts. Scholars have pointed out that the region of Awadh, in which many of his settings are located, was marked by particularly inequitable agrarian relationships. Because of this, his works are not simply rural melodrama but deeply political in nature. They engage with how the poor attempted to live and sometimes resist under colonial, feudal lords and patriarchal constraints. His works bring to light the multilayered and multi-structured inequalities, trauma and pain points of the poor people during his times which are visible till today in different forms in Indian society.

Caste: A Structuring Principle

Premchand’s fictions repeatedly show caste as a structuring principle of rural society. “Throughout his works, Premchand challenged the rigid caste hierarchy, showing how it perpetuated injustice and limited human potential.”⁵

For instance, in *Godaan*⁶ we find characters such as Hori, is a *Kurmi*, a middle-ranking cultivating caste and his entire social identity revolves around being an “honest peasant” because he offers unconditional loyalty to the norms established by the Upper castes of that time. Hori’s struggle for a cow is also a struggle for recognition within his caste. It symbolises an ask for cultural dignity and agrarian identity. It was an attempt of upward mobility within his community. The so-called lower castes live an extremely restricted life where they are

³ Gill, H. S. (1975). Language and realism in Premchand’s fiction. *Indian Literature*, 18(3), 45–58.

⁴ Rathod, J. Voicing the Voiceless: A Study of the Subaltern in the Select Novels of Munshi Premchand.

⁵ Classic Pages. (n.d.). *Best of Premchand: Top Novels & Stories – Complete Guide*. Retrieved from ClassicPages.in

⁶ Premchand, M. (1936). *Godaan* (Hindi original). Saraswati Press.

bound to show respect towards the priestly caste and feudal landlord, both in terms of gesture and attitude. They are often put under elaborate debt traps by zamindars and are charged with high interests on petty amounts taken by the poor and lower castes like Hori took in order to arrange two times meal for their family, getting his daughters married and for medical emergencies.

In the novel, it is mentioned that “Hori sat under the tree; his face lined with worry. The revenue-tax collector was coming tomorrow; the Brahmin priest had already demanded his share; and yet the cow still remained unpaid.” Here, we can sense that the cow (a symbol) is entangled in caste, ritual, economy and debt: Hori’s desire for the cow is socially respectable (a traditional duty) but becomes impossible given his caste/class position.

The castes of *Chamars* (leather workers) and *Pasi* labourers perform menial work, remain landless and are economically vulnerable. The *Pandit* and *Brahmin* characters like Dattadin maintain ritual and social authority by enforcing caste rules, each of them carrying the caste identity as their social identity; shaping power relations, promoting exploitation and humiliation. Dattadin often exploits the lower caste villagers with his various religious sanctions. Each caste has inherited occupations, values, roles and allotted places in the village. Caste determines who tills the land, who owns it, who performs ritual duties and who commands respect. Individuals do not choose their economic position, caste ascribes it.

Also, the narrative repeatedly presents moments where Hori is shamed and humiliated before the village panchayat dominated by higher-caste persons for sheltering Jhunia, a low-caste daughter-in-law, or where the Brahmin priest Dattadin uses his ritual authority to fine or humiliate Hori. These episodes show the overlapping of caste and economic power. E.P. Thompson’s ‘moral-economy’ lens helps highlight how peasants’ behaviour and their expectations of justice are shaped by caste and the interplay of religious-ritual vs economic demands. Peasants expect that certain social obligations like a just wage, the ability to keep the cow they purchased and the fairness of village-law will hold. When these break, revolt or despair follows.

In *Kafan*⁷, Premchand uses powerful irony to critique ritual and caste oppression through characters like Ghisu, Madhav (father-son) and Budhia (Madhav’s wife). They are landless Dalit labourers who receive no help when Budhia goes into labour. Their social position places them outside all networks of empathy. They seem to be the victim of poverty and caste. Ghisu says, “What a rotten custom it is that somebody who didn’t even have rags to cover herself while she was alive has to have a new shroud when she dies!” They use the money collected for Budhia’s Kafan to drink, exposing how caste and poverty create moral paralysis. Here, the ritual (shroud) is shown as absurd when the person alive lacked basic dignity, struggled to eat and live. The writer highlights the hypocrisy of the society. In the same story, the villagers remark “people like Ghisu and Madhav are born to suffer,” exposing caste-coded fatalism.

⁷ Premchand, M. (1936). *Kafan* [Short story]. In *Mansarovar* (Vol. 8). Lokbharti Prakashan

In *Sadgati*⁸, Dukhi, a Dalit, does hours of unpaid labour for Pandit Ghasi Ram to secure an auspicious date for his daughter's wedding. He collapses and dies from exhaustion and the *Brahmin* refuses to touch his corpse. Someone says, "He was an untouchable; the Pandit could not defile himself by touching his corpse." The village wrestlers drag his body away with a rope revealing radical caste-based dehumanization.

Another short story of Premchand, *Pus Ki Raat*⁹, Halku, a poor and low caste tenant, depicts how his caste and class position force him into bonded labor with no control over harvests. Many cold nights he spends guarding the field symbolizes the harshness of agrarian caste order. Even after being extremely ill, he doesn't get any relief from work. His master's disdain reflects caste-coded superiority

*Thakur Ka Kuan*¹⁰ mentions about Gangi, a dalit woman, risks her life to draw water from the Thakur's well which was reserved for the upper castes when his husband, Jhinguri, fell ill. The upper castes believed that their well would get contaminated if Dalits used it. Even the fear of death is considered preferable to violating caste boundaries.

In *Gareeb Ki Haay*,¹¹ Premchand explores the dehumanizing effects of poverty and how suffering is gendered even when borne by men. The story portrays Gangu, a poor farmer who sells his oxen to pay off debt. His helplessness is depicted with maternal tenderness and he weeps for his animals as if for children. "When Gangu saw the empty shed, he felt as though his own heart had been taken away."¹² Here, he blurs the emotional line between masculine endurance and feminine empathy.

Scholars like Gopal¹³ and Orsini¹⁴ note that caste in Premchand is not simply represented as social background but functions as a 'structuring force' shaping labour, morality, mobility and human relationships. Thus, caste and poverty seem overlapping and structuring principle in colonial India which is evident till date. The poor and dalits lacked self-esteem, dignity and were exploited in all the wrong ways. They had no option to step out of this trap and it got carried on for generations.

Peasantry, Agrarian Distress and Political Life

A central theme in Premchand's fictions is the condition of the peasantry under colonial agrarian system which is entwined with indebtedness, high interests, exploitative landlords, tenancy insecurity, cash-crop pressure and migration. Premchand situates his village worlds

⁸ Premchand, M. (1931). *Sadgati* [Short story]. In *Mansarovar* (Vol. 3). Saraswati Press.

⁹ Premchand, M. (1930). *Pūs kī rāt* [Short story]. In *Mansarovar* (Vol. 3). Saraswati Press.

¹⁰ Premchand, M. (1958). *Thakur ka Kuan* [Short story]. In *Mansarovar* (Vol. 2). Saraswati Press. (Original work published 1925)

¹¹ Premchand, M. (2005). *Gareeb ki Haay*. In *Mansarovar, Part 3* (pp. xx–xx). Rajkamal Prakashan. (Original work published 1917)

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Gopal, P. (2010). *The Indian novel in English: Nation, history, and narration*. Oxford University Press.

¹⁴ Orsini, F. (2002). *The Hindi public sphere, 1920–1940: Language and literature in the age of nationalism*. Oxford University Press.

not as idyllic pastoral but as economically precarious zones where the peasant is mostly a subject to multiple overlords (landlord, moneylender and the state) and entangled in debt.

For instance, Meghna Kantharia writes of *Godaan*, “Peasants are the backbone of Indian economy. These peasants have always been treated as outsiders who are destined to live in material and cultural margins.”¹⁵ Thus Premchand’s focus is explicitly on the poor peasants, dalits, women and randomly on the emerging urban bourgeoisie.

In *Karmabhoomi*¹⁶ and *Rangabhoomi*¹⁷, the peasant is made the site of potential resistance. In *Karmabhoomi*, the characters are drawn into a struggle against a callous landlord and the dispossession of roots, here is a stronger political edge. S.B. Upadhyay’s article argues that “in Premchand’s view, peasantry and its modes of existence are ... several ideological currents.”¹⁸ This suggests that for Premchand, peasants are not just passive victims; their moral economy may harbour impulses of revolt, though it is bounded by social/caste constraints. In the same story, the hero Amarkant returns to his village from an educated background and becomes part of peasant movement. He identifies himself with labourers and peasants and challenges the feudal landlord.

In this novel, social change is more consciously political. The novel engages with the discourse of labour, peasants and nationalism. “Amarkant looked at the sugar-cane fields bending under the weight of the landlord’s claim; the peasants bent still more- with rent, tax, debt, ritual and yet no one asked why.” This shows how tolerance was made part of peasants’ behaviour and suffered immense agrarian exploitation. Upadhyay writes, “the concept of moral economy ... can be usefully employed to analyse the peasant narratives of Premchand ... but such an application is possible only if the concept is expanded further.”¹⁹

Soordas, in *Rangabhoomi*, a blind beggar, whose ancestral land is being acquired for an industrial plant. He represents the face of dispossessed peasant/worker class and raises issues of land, labour and industrialisation in colonial India. Munshi Premchand constructs Soordas as one of his most powerful symbols of state-capital nexus and caste-class marginalisation as well. Though he is blind, his social blindness (caste) and economic blindness (poverty) matter more than his physical blindness. His misery is layered and structural.

Another example can be considered of Hori in *Godaan* does not lead a peasant uprising, his moral stance, his suffering, his death and the symbolism of his incomplete dream of owning a cow become a larger allegory of agrarian injustice. For some critics, that is itself a political gesture.

¹⁵ Kantharia, M. (2020). *Plight of Indian farmers depicted through Premchand’s “Godaan”*. International Journal of Reviews and Research in Social Sciences, 8(1). Retrieved from <https://www.ijrsonline.in>

¹⁶ Premchand, M. (1932). *Karmabhūmi*. Saraswati Press.

¹⁷ Premchand, M. (2002). *Rangbhūmi*. Lokbharti Prakashan.

¹⁸ Upadhyay, S. B. (1982). Social realism in Premchand’s novels. *Indian Literature*, 25(1), 55–66.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 60

Throughout Premchand's fiction, feudal and urban elites preach virtue while practicing oppression. In *Gaban*,²⁰ the bourgeois respectability of Ramnath's world reveals the moral double standard that governs class and gender. The wealthy maintain moral façades through donations, religious rituals, and public respectability — even as they exploit labourers, mistreat women, and accumulate ill-gotten wealth. “Ramanath feared society more than conscience. The world would forgive deceit if wrapped in honour.” This hypocrisy mirrors what Premchand saw as the ‘dual morality of colonial India’: one for public virtue, another for private gain. The poor internalize this duplicity, learning that morality is a luxury of the privileged.

Scholars like Nandini Sundar²¹ and S.B. Upadhyay throws light on how Premchand provides a socioeconomic map of rural India, making visible the structural nature of poverty and exploitation. In his novels, the peasant is sometimes implicitly the ‘nation-maker.’ For example, the hard labour of peasants, their debt, their humiliation, are part of the national story of India under colonialism. By bringing their story into literature, Premchand validates the peasant as key to Indian society. Thus, his fiction links peasant politics to nationalism.

Other Layers of Marginalisation

While much criticism of Premchand has focused on caste and peasants, his gender representations also require detailed attention. Several scholars have pointed out that women peasants or lower-caste or class women in his fictions become sites of defiance and protest. The voice of defiance and protest becomes much more vocal and effective when Premchand talks of peasant or low-caste women. Charu Gupta's article²² emphasises that while in many stories women are depicted within entrenched patriarchy, there are notable moments in which they break the pattern by refusing subordination, demanding justice and asserting agency.

In Premchand's rural worlds, the woman's role is doubly determined: by her gender and by her caste or class position. A peasant woman is not only exploited as a woman but also as a member of a lower caste and this multiplies her burdens. She works in the fields, does domestic labour, is subject to ritual norms and has limited social mobility. Yet Premchand often gives her moments of resistance. For example, in *Godaan*, Dhaniam (Hori's wife) is described as bold, fiery, refusing humiliation though living in hardship. The Wikipedia summary notes her as “Dhaniam ... she is bold and fiery and cannot tolerate injustice... Unlike him (Hori), she is not lost in rigmarole of clichés and ideals ... She is strong and irrespective of caste or creed helps the needy.”²³

In *Godaan*, Premchand writes “Dhaniam laid down the vessel, raised her voice: ‘Why should I see Bholam's daughter go hungry while I remain silent when she has done nothing wrong?’ Hori,

²⁰ Premchand, M. (2009). *Gaban: The Stolen Jewels* (trans. P. Lal). New Delhi: Penguin Books.

²¹ Sundar, N. (2010). Peasant struggles and the moral economy. In *The state, society and land in India* (pp. 87–112). Permanent Black.

²² Gupta, Charu. (1991). “Portrayal of Women in Premchand's Stories: A Critique.” *Social Scientist*, 19(5-6), 88–113.

²³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Godaan>

startled, said nothing.”²⁴Such a moment displays a woman stepping beyond her domestic role into moral confrontation. Though she does not lead a revolt but she indeed disrupts the static order.

In *Nirmala*,²⁵ Premchand treats the longer novel form to explore middle-class and upper-peasant women’s lives, marriage, dowry and suspicion. It revolves around Nirmala, a young girl, she was forced to marry a widower of her father’s age and the novel uses fiction to highlight the evils of the dowry system. The novel carries social-reformist intent, deep in gender critique. Moreover, this is slightly different in class positioning- middle class rather than peasant which expands Premchand’s gender critique beyond rural peasantry.

In *Bade Ghar Ki Beti*,²⁶ through the character of Anandi, Premchand exposes how women, especially those married into wealthy households, bear emotional, physical and moral suffering to preserve family honour. Even her virtues like gentleness, restraint and forgiveness become the very reasons of her exploitation. He frames this as a moral tragedy- the more patient a woman is, the more she suffers in a patriarchal household.

Premchand portrays Budhia, in *Kafan*, as the central figure of silent, unacknowledged suffering, exposing the brutality of poverty, patriarchy and social apathy. Though she barely speaks in the story, Budhia’s pain forms the moral core of the narrative. She dies suffering but doesn’t get even dignified farewell either by her family or society.

Moreover, Premchand’s *Sevasadan*²⁷ is one of the earliest Indian novels to engage deeply with women’s oppression through themes of marriage, prostitution, moral hypocrisy, gendered law, colonial policing and social stigma. Women’s suffering in the novel is structural, not personal, rooted in patriarchy, caste-morality, and economic injustice. In the novel, Suman’s life illustrates the tragic consequences of child marriage and unequal marital power. At a young age, Suman is married to a much older, widowed, strict clerk, Gajadhar. She suffers lack of companionship, affection, harsh discipline in the responsibilities of household chores, constant shortage of money and pressure to maintain respectability despite deprivation. It very well throws light on the theme of emotional starvation and loneliness.

His female characters reveal what Spivak²⁸ calls the *subaltern’s dilemma*: they “speak” through moral example, not direct voice. Yet, through their endurance, they expose the ethical bankruptcy of male and elite authority.

This aligns with Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s²⁹ critique that Third World women are often portrayed as “always resilient, never rebellious,” yet Premchand’s empathy transforms

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Premchand, M. (1927/2018). *Nirmalā*. Lucknow: Lokbharti Prakashan.

²⁶ Premchand, M. (1910/2016). *Bāde ghar kī betī*. In *Mansarovar (Vol. 1)*. Lucknow: Lokbharti Prakashan.

²⁷ Premchand, M. (2012). *Sevasadan* (Samikshit Sanskritan). New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan.

²⁸ Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.

²⁹ Mohanty, C. T. (1984). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Boundary 2*, 12(3), 333–358.

endurance into moral power rather than mere submission. His realism captures the emotional labour that sustains the moral universe of the poor.

In *Stree aur Purush*³⁰, an essayistic story written in the 1920s, articulates Premchand's philosophy of gender complementarity. Rejecting Western notions of gender conflict, he envisions moral equality through cooperation, not competition. "Woman is not the shadow of man, but his equal partner. If man is the intellect, woman is the heart; and without the heart, intellect turns cruel."³¹ He adopts a humanist feminism arguing that the subjugation of women diminishes humanity itself. His tone, however, remains paternalistic—he celebrates women's moral superiority but confines it to emotional realms.

Premchand's treatment of women is complex and anticipates feminist concerns. His women characters Suman (*Sevasadan*), Sarbajaya (*Premashram*), Malati (*Rangabhoomi*), Dhaniya (*Godaan*) and the others navigate domestic, moral and political spaces often denied to them.

Conclusion

Premchand is thought of primarily as a nationalist writer, his fiction is deeply suffused with nationalist concerns especially the question of what kind of India is being built, whose India and how peasants fit into it. The language shift from Urdu to Hindi by him has also been interpreted as a nationalist gesture in favour of Hindi.

Premchand's portrayal of poor peasants, often lower-caste, is not simply an economic subject but social, ritual, moral, gendered and national. The poor live within multiple relations of power: caste hierarchies, landlord/moneylender dominion, colonial state, patriarchal family, and community ritual. In other words, Premchand's poor are political beings though rarely formal 'political actors' in the sense of parties or movements.

In addition to this, he shows that caste, class and gender are not separable axes but deeply intertwined. For instance, a peasant woman suffers not only because she is a woman but also because she is poor and possibly lower caste. A landlord's landlordism is reinforced by caste, ritual authority and state backing. The debt trap of peasants is worsened by caste disqualification which includes lack of rights, inability to litigate and ritual/humiliation burdens. Hence Premchand's social realism is intersectional before the term became academic. His realism does not treat the peasant as class-only, he treats peasants with caste location, gendered subjectivity and moral agency. His realistic portrayal of rural life can be read as building the cultural base for a nationalist future in which the poor are not invisible but central. Aijaz Ahmad³² observes, Premchand's realism³² is not mere documentation but a "*critique of ideology*" exposing the contradictions of modernity and nationalism as lived by the poor.

To sum up, Munshi Premchand's writings offer a richly textured portrayal of the political life of the poor, especially peasants, lower castes and women in colonial North India. Therefore,

³⁰ Premchand. (2005). *Stree aur Purush*. In *Mansarovar, Part 4*. Rajkamal Prakashan. (Original work published 1920s)

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ahmad, A. (1992). *In theory: Classes, nations, literatures*. Verso.

he is rightly called as “Upanyas Samrat” (Emperor of Novels) and will always be relevant in reading and understanding the cultural and political imagination of modern India.

