

ISSN: 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal

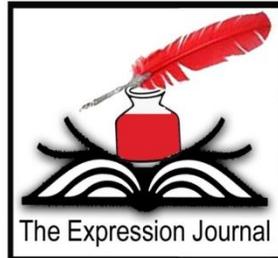


Vol.2 Issue 1 Feb. 2016

Editor-in-Chief : Bijender Singh

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THE VOICE OF THE VOICELESS IN THE SHORT-STORIES OF MUNSHI PREMCHAND

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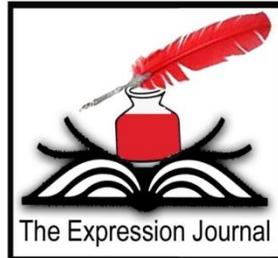
Abstract

Munshi Prem Chand was a very sensitive human being and a writer who was concerned about the nation, the society and the individuals. He was a writer with a mission to help the people to come out of the problems, superstitions and evils prevalent. Premchand left no stone unturned to achieve his goal through his fictional as well non fictional writings. Prem Chand was the front runner and flag bearer of the progressive movement in literature by Indian writers. In April 1936 Prem Chand presided over the first all-India conference of Progressive Writers Association, Lucknow. He took every problem of Indian society seriously and rendered them sensitively in his novels and short stories with aim of their solution and resolution by bringing new ideas and changes to replace the defunct and the rotten whether it is the problem of the farmer, the woman, the untouchability or Hindu – Muslim unity. No section Indian society and its problems could escape from the scanner of Prem Chand's eyes and offered solutions which are still relevant and effective even after a century. The progressive thinking of Prem Chand is clearly get reflected in the short stories of Prem Chand which I will try to analyze in this research paper.

Key-Words

Premchand, Subaltern, Spivak, Woman, Untouchables, Voiceless.





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The discourse whether the subalterns can speak or whether their voice can only be recovered with the interventions of some postcolonial writer or historian is worth arguing about. Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak is of view that subaltern cannot speak and postcolonial intellectual must represent it. She finds her subaltern in sati (a Hindu widow burnt alive on husband's pyre) and provides the air for the fire of the debate but widow remains absent. The issue has been high jacked instead of taking the issue from its roots. Subalterns has existed and represented by intellectual and writer Munsi Premchand in his novel, short stories and non-fictional writings and speeches. It is naïve to assume that there were no cases of labor peasants, Dalit, tribal and minority movements in pre-colonial, colonial post colonial period. Or to assume that lower and oppressed casts and classes were never in a position to rebel or stand against the powerful and oppressors. Though they were powerless even then could negotiate the crack of dominant people. The people rebel, resist and challenge to change their fortune and not for anybody else. On the contrary the desire of intellectual to represent sub subaltern has nothing much to change their lot but as Baudhrillard remarked "are the leitmotif if every discourse they are obsession of every social project".

Spivak's selection of the Hindu widow as the perfect choice of subaltern silence is a choice of convenience. Ania Loomba questions the representation of all the *satis* of colonial India because there were few who survived to narrate their tales of agony. Sati was a practice prevalent from medieval times. Her discourse on sati starts from British government's legislations and patriarchal narratives and did not ponder ever document and literature available in vernacular media. That's why post colonial critics and intellectuals charges of not being able to pay need to the natives and their voice. They drive

their theories from the field of psychoanalysis, post structural, and post modernism and take literature in English as the text for subaltern studies. The stories of subaltern experience and resistance representing their concerns and commitments can be better found in vernacular literature.

Munshi Premchand was the first writer who narrated and show cased the whole gist of these experiences in his short stories and novels during the first three decade of 20th century. Though his condemnation of Indian feudal and caste system is not explicit yet the gives them sufficient space to raise their voice and opportunity to register their wrath anger and frustration. His social realistic mode presents a live and vivid reality of subalterns exposing complacencies and affections of dominant, feudal and patriarchal suicide miller. In his stories '*Kafan (shroud)*', '*The Road to Salvation*', '*A Casatrophe*', '*The Thakul's Well*', '*A Desperate Case*' '*The Story of Two Bullocks*' and almost in all the stories Premchand expose and satires the philosophy of exploitation as well as the exploiters and management of situations by the subalterns.

In this story '*The Road to Salvation*'. Buddhu the shepherd belongs to an untouchable's community invites the wrath the Jhingur the farmer, who beats severely his sheep because they break into his field. Buddhu do not care about the threats of Jhingur although he speaks meekly. "He thinks! If I derive the block back for a few little threats how will I graze my sheeps?" (Rubin 20). Buddhu is a tough man, who owes 240 sheep and gets eight *annas* per night to leave then into the fields of the farmers. He sells milk as well as blankets made of sheep wool. He further thinks: "why he getting so angry? What can he do to me? I'm not his server" (Rubin20). Buddhu bits the field of Jinghur and whole village and destroys the crops of framers but nothing could be done against him without a proof.

Narrator rightly describes that "to take vengeance on the farmer is easier than slicing of banana" (Rubin 20). Premchand highlights the vulnerability that he gets his produce into the house after so many afflictions of nature and God and if a human enemy joins hands he is apt to be left nowhere. Jhingur regrets himself and other held him responsible for the ruin of the crop because if not stopped Buddhu at all, the crop would not have been ruined.

"*The Shroud*" is the story (*Kafan* original title) on which Munal Son has made a film. It is not an explicit or interventionist story condemning the caste and feudal system. Ghisu and his son Madhav who belong to *chamar* community among the untouchables sit at the door of their hut besides a dead fire eating the roasted potatoes. Budhiya, the wife of Madav is going through the theories of child birth. They do nothing to help her out of this situation but waiting for her death so that they may sleep with peace. Father and son due is more concerned about the roasted potato than her screams. Ghishu know the trick how to exploit the villager without doing any work. Clever Ghisu knows the inverted logic of society and tells Madhav: "The very people who would not give us a piece before will send for us lemon

and give us rupees” ((Rubin 234). As expected they find Budhiya dead in the morning. The go begging around the villages in the name of cremation of Budhiya and within an hour collect a sum of five rupees. They enjoy in the feast in the city instead purchasing a shroud for Budhiya because Ghishu was more than sure that villager themselves will make all the arrangement for her cremation.

Premchand begins his story with a depreciatory note castigating the father and son for their laziness. They are described as useless from upper caste point of view because upper caste people are not able to free or cheap labor out of them. The value of lower caste people in the society is measured by their utility to the upper castes. As Dubhi, a man of the same community to which Ghisu and Madav belongs follows the orders of upper caste Brahman meekly and works whole day without eating anything and dies. His body is dragged out of village by the Brahman like an animal with a noose of rope around his legs and left to be eaten by crows and dogs. The people of Dukhi’s community defy the order of the upper caste and refuse to take away the body of Dukhi. The Gond (a lower community) whose house is nearby to Pandit goes to tanner’s settlement and says: “Careful now! Don’t go to get the body. There will be a police investigation yet. It’s no joke that somebody killed this poor fellow” (Rubin 248).

But Ghisu and Madhav and Buddhu are perceptivity different from other subalterns who resist all the efforts of their exploitation rather exploit upper caste to satisfy their anger for the exploitation they are learning for centuries. Even though Ghishu and Madhav are able to resist the exploitative forces but surprisingly and tragically, Budhia the only and poor woman in the family who catapults Ghisu and Madhav to a bargaining position and herself dies without a voice. They exploit her even after her death and enjoy a sumptuous feast while she is lying dead. After her arrival in the house they stopped whatever they use to do to fill their stomach. Just like the ruling upper caste people they are also not short of justifications. Ghisu say to Madhav about her going to heaven that she never hurt a fly, never bothered any soul throughout her life and even after death fulfilled our dearest wish. If she will not go to heaven than who will? The privileged always justifies the exploitation in order to serve his self interests. Budhiya is crushed under the tripartite forces of poverty patriarchy and feudalism. The story explains the complicity of relationships in agrarian society. Premchand raises of the problems of lower cast woman more pathetically even without any word from Budhiya.

Beside these woman character there are so many other character resist and fight against the atrocities of the powerful for example Munga in “*The Power of a Curse Subagin in Subagi*”, Bhungi in “*A Catastrophe*” Padma in “*Miss Padma* etc. Padma even being and educated and open minded lawyer is being cheated and exploited by Mr. Parsad as he understands her weak points.

Women whether in the upper caste or in lower caste suffer in Indian patriarchal society? It is the woman who work day and night and treated badly because they are considered weak. It not that Premchand depicts them only in the hands of men but he also expresses their discontentment and frustration and their voice of resentment and rebellion in his short stories. We can see various instances of resentment and revolt of the women character nailing from the all sections of society. In the story "*The Desperate Case*" Nirupma with the help of his sister-in-law Sukeshi makes her in laws suffer and exploits their desire to have a male child. When Nirupma asks her sister-in-law Sukeshi whether it would be sin or not to lie before the husband. Sukeshi say " To pull the wool ever the eyes of a selfish fellow like him is a virtue" (Rubin 89) Nirupma plays the trick of boon of a saint that she will give birth to a son this time, so her in- laws leave no stone unturned to make her comfortable and happy. She leaves no opportunity to exploit their weakness. She thinks "The more I torment you selfish ones the better you honor me, don't you, only because I'm going to give birth to a child who'll carry on your name. I'm nothing, the child alone is everything. I have no importance everything hinges on your child" (Rubin 90).

In the story "*The Road to Hell*" a young girl who is also the narrator of the story is married to an old man by her parents. She suffers from the pangs of agony frustration and desire to get the true love. After sometime her husband dies and she leaves home at night and falls in the hands of a wicked woman and becomes a prostitute. She held her parents and her husband responsible for her suffering and will like life. She says: "Still the responsibility of my ruin is not on my mead but on my mother and father and that old man who wanted to be my husband" (Rubin 199). She further says that she is writing all this only because the other girls may be saved from this kind of mismatch and hell like life emerging out of such kind of mismatch.

The condition of farmer is not less miserable than the other subalterns of society. He works day and night braving all sort of whether but what he get in return is poverty, humiliation and hunger. Everybody in society exploits them whether it is landlord, moneylender, beggar and other professionals of the society. There are so many hurdles which he has to cross before reaching of the crop in the barn such as unfavorable weather, attack of insects, pests, animals and human enemies etc. Till the crop remains with the farmer the prices remain low but as soon as it goes out of hands of the farmer the prices touch the sky. The grain merchants store the crop and sell this very produce back to farmer in the form of seed at a very high rate. Being illiterate and naive he is bound in social customs and rituals that he follows them blindly without applying his own mid that he has to take the loan from the money lender on the occasion of each and every such activity. He always remains indebted without any hope of being free from it. Premchand observed all these activities of farming community very closely; hence he was able to losing the

pain, suffering and problems of the farmer or the surface in his short stories. They are people who can do anything but cannot let their self respect and dignity lower in the society. They can't leave the profession because for them to worker for other as a labor is shameful and below dignity. Premchand in his story "*A Feast for the Holy Man*" present the pathetic condition of the farmer in these words:

The crops had been cleaned out of the barn, the money lender had taken half the landowner's agent had collected other half and the chaff had been sold to get the ox trader off their backs and that was all. For themselves they had saved a small sack. By threshing it over and over again to had managed to get scarcely mound of grain out of it. Somehow or other they got into the spring, but God knows how they would go on or what the oxen would eat or even the people in the house. (Rubin 30)

The farmer had learned to face all these kind of situations from the centuries. But dilemma before Ramdhan and his wife is that how they will make the Sadhu (The holyman) who is waiting on the door for food because a farmer can't bear it that a holy man goes empty handed from his door. So Ramdhan offers the Sadhu every but which his wife had kept aside for offering of the God and they themselves sleep hungry just drinking water of dal. In another story "*Night January*" (original title: Pus ki Rat) when Halku, the farmer asks his wife Munki to give him the three rupees kept aside to purchase a blanket in order to save him from the cold in cold night in the fields, as the landlord's agent was standing on his door. His wife becomes angry and says: "God knows how many debts are always left over that we can't pay off" (Rubin 49). In his anger and frustration she advices Halku to give up the tenant farming because the overwork was killing him and all the production goes into the payment of arrears. She further says that we are born just to pay off the debts. So he should give up the farming and earn something for his own belly. In the last when Halku cannot bear the cold of January he goes to a nearby grove of trees, collects the leaves and burns them to save himself and his dog Jabra from the cold. He falls as leap there near the warn ash and the cattle's ruin the whole field she remains shocked to see the condition of the fields. She awakes is Halku and says "that now" he will have to hire himself out to earn to pay off the rent and trees. Halku answers with a contended smile: But I won't have to sleep nights out here in the cold.

It is clear from the stories and historical documents that condition of farmers in colonial India was even worse than the wage earning labouers. In the story '*Neyur*' Neyur is a wage earning labour. Through his hard work he is able to earn too much that he provide her wife all kind of comfort, cloths and jewels. She does nothing in her house hold even than Neyur has saved and deposited 25 silver coins and some silver jewellery for his wife. In a conversation about his wife his co-worker Deena says: "She tries to give young woman a run for their money. All she thinks about cinnabar, make-up and jasmine for her hair. You never see her without a fancy colored sari and what more she can't live without jewels" (Rubin 56).

Neyur only knows handwork but not the ways of the world that is why cheated by a cheat in the disguise of a Sadhu of all the money he had and the borrowed from another to make it manifold. But it is not that the condition of the worker was good during the colonial period. In the story '*The writer*' Pravin the writer is a mill worker and earn some money through his writings in magazines and newspaper even than his condition is miserable. He wears tattered Cloths, drinks tea without sugar and milk and every shopkeeper owes him. In the similar way in the story 'Penalty' both Altarakki and his husband Husaini works whole day even than they are not able to earn sufficient to eat sufficiently. They are fine for a little negligence in duty without earring for the reason of the negligence. So Husaini feels the need for the union of the workers in the story.

Children are also subalterns of the society, particularly the orphans who suffer in the hand of all in the society. In the stories of Premchand we see many examples of such children who suffer from every side in the society. In the short story "*The Price of Milk*" Mangal suffers maltreated and dejected by the other children as well as by the elders of the society. Their woes know no found because there is no one in the society to listen them. Mangal is forced to become a horse by other boys despite her in willingness. When he makes Suresh, the son of the landlord falls from the beck, he starts weeping and tells a lie to her mother that Mangal has hit him. This shows the resistance of Mangal despite all the odds. His resistance is also visible in these words of Mangl: So long as I'm not going to get a rider, I won't be a horse" (Rubin 228). Being an untouchable and orphan Suresh has to bear all humiliation and disagree because he had no other option to go anywhere but to live on the leftovers of the Jamindar whose son was fed with her milk by her mother.

The motherless girl, who gives Hira & Moti pieces of bread in the household of Gaya in the story '*The Story of Two Bullocks*', is ill-treated by her step mother. She knows the pain of being helpless that's why she sympathizes with the bullocks. It is she who set's the bull free order to save from atrocities and it is a short of resistance against the inhumanity and cruelty. There are other cases of & children ill treated and explored in the stories of Premchand like Hamid in the Story '*Idgah*'

Human beings have power of speech and they can express their disgust, pain frustration and sorrows by telling it to others but what about the animals who cannot speak. They bear all the cruelty and injustice without an expression of it. We read the cases of zoo animals killing their care takes and other whenever they find opportunity. In the story "*The Story of Two Bullocks*" Premchand in the beginning talk & about the nature of animals like dog, ass and finally starts the story of two bullocks of the vegetable farmer Jhuru named Hire & Moti Jhuri takes a great care of them and they work for him whole heartedly without and complain. An intimacy and friendship has been developed between two because they had lived together for a long time.

Once, Jhuri sends the two bullocks to his father in law. The animal think that the master has sold them, hence feel very sad and dejected. They resist Jhuri's brother-in-law

Gaya's attempts to take them away. The bull thinks if they God would have given them voice they might have asked Jhuri: "Why are you throwing us poor wretches out? We have done everything possible to serve you will. If the hard work as we did couldn't get the job done you could have made us work still warder. We are willing to die laboring for you... so why did you sell us into the hands of this tyrant" (Rubin 65).

When the two friends run from the Gaya's house and Gaya comes with a dozen of men with stick & in their hands. Moti says that we will show him a little fem if he beats me with stick. But Hira conditions him and advices him to stand still. But Moti in rebellious tone say. "If he beats me I'll knock one or two of them" (Rubin 68). Hira again cautions Moti that it is not the dharma of our community. Seeing the rage of fierce looks Gays and his helper concluded that it is best to put if off this tune and take the bullocks' home without beating them. Now they are bound with thick which they could not break even after trying their best. This time the little girls who used to give them bread comes to their rescue and emptied the ropes. They do not want to run away because it would cause problem for the girl but the girl makes a noise that the bullock have run away hence leave no choice for them but he run away. In the hurry they forget their way and taken into custody and finally sold to a cattle trader. In the way they recognize the path and reach to the housed of Jhuri. In this way through combined efforts of both patience on the part of Hira and aggression on the part of the Moti, they win their freedom.

From this story Premchand seems to support the middle path which is the golden path for success. Directionless aggression can also cause harm and with too much submissiveness you can't archive you goal. So he never supported Gandhiji's idea of complete non violence in his novels and short stories.

From the above analysis of the stories of Munshi Premchand it is evident that he was a master and champion of subalterns and presents their case before the readers in such an effective manner that they themselves might not have been successful in this manner. It shows his deep understanding of social and religious norms, rituals and traditions and psychology of the men and women, young and old, rich and poor, untouchables and upper castes of Indian society. The reader while reading his short storied feels that he is roaming in some village of India and seeing everything with his naked eyes and every word spoken by his subaltern characters telling about their wretched condition and inhuman treatment at the hand of the privileged people is more sharper than an arrow which goes through the human heart leaving a deep wound. The pain of the wound keeps the sensitive reader tickling to contribute in the solving of their problems and to give due space and respect to their legitimate rights as human beings.

The Expression: An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

www.expressionjournal.com

ISSN: 2395-4132

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Vol. 2 Issue 1 (February 2016)

Editor-in-Chief: Bijender Singh