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PORTRAYAL OF DALITS AND EXAGGERATING RITUALISM IN MUNSHI PREMCHAND'S *THE SHROUD*

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ABSTRACT:

Munshi Premchand is one of the most illustrious Indian modern writers in the cannon of Hindi-Urdu literature. He felt a deep affinity towards the lower strata of the society- the Dalits. Premchand's *The Shroud* not only portrays the working-class characters but also showcases social inequality prevailing in the society. Realism is a concept that was originated in 19th century which represents the life as it is in a truthful manner without any artificiality and completely avoids implausible and supernatural elements. Premchand was the first Hindi author in India who pioneered the new concept of realism with a social purpose of exposing the condition of the subalterns. *The Shroud* perfectly describes the degradation of the Dalits due to poverty and could be defined as a story of dehumanization. Misogynistic attitude of men exploits a pregnant woman and leads to her death. The short story writer tackles with a variety of themes like gender politics, social inequality and readily mocks on exaggerating age-old rituals and customs prevailing in the society. The present paper will try to emphasize on the portrayal of Dalits, misogyny and social stratification in Premchand's *The Shroud*.

Keywords: Dalits, Misogynism, Class Discrimination, exploitation, dehumanization etc.

The term 'Dalit' has its roots embedded in Sanskrit language that means scattered, broken, downtrodden, suppressed, crushed or broken into pieces. There

are innumerable incidents in the Indian history that throws light on the persecution of the Dalits or the deprived class of the society. Dalits lived a traumatic life in which they were just projected as a thing of utility and then were ultimately discarded.

Munshi Premchand wrote in the first three decades of the 20th century (1880-1936) when India was facing colonialism, imperialism and National Independence movement. “Kafan” or *The Shroud* is the last short story written by Premchand before he died in 1936. It would be important if we take a look on the social conditions and political scenario in the 20th century. The period between 1930-1940 was a crucial phase for the Dalit movement in particular. The Dalit movement was at its peak, trying to discover the possibilities for liberty, identity, mobilization and empowerment of the deprived ones under the confident leadership of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. The working class in India was highly influenced by Dr. Ambedkar’s principles of equality, humanity and fraternity. A conscious attempt was being made to challenge the Brahmanical caste system at all levels: intellectually, politically and socially. An attempt was conducted strongly to challenge the Brahmanical hegemony and caste system in all walks of life. We find that Hindi literature especially Premchand became the eminent writer who responded quite well and addressed these social issues in his literary work.

Premchand covered an array of topics that focused on the contemporary subjects like social inequality, untouchability, hypocrisy of upper cast, social disabilities imposed on Dalits, temple entry, gender politics etc. He understood that writers have a mission to envisage revolutionary changes and must perform a committed role "in nurturing the literary and artistic trend which brings awakening and freshness in society and throw light on real problems of the people."⁵ Thus, Premchand resigned from his government job in 1921 as he was influenced by

Mahatma Gandhi's Non-Cooperation movement and contributed to the freedom struggle as a writer activist. His writings are substantial which comprises of novels, plays, short stories and essays that helped to remold the structure, content and form of the Hindi literature. Initially, he wrote with the Gandhian perspective but eventually, got inspired by Dr. Ambedkar. He readily expressed in his later writings that the problem of classism can't be resolved unless the exploitative rigid caste system is neutralized.

Premchand felt a deep affinity towards the Dalit community and the lower strata of the society. We come across numerous Dalit characters in his stories that reveal the inflexible social structure in the 20th century. But one significant thing that is noticed that the term "Dalit" is not very often used in his literature. In some short stories, cast of the central characters is not mentioned but the picturesque narratives and social conditions provide an insight to their cast status. Overall the context of his novels and short stories have pastoral setting because the storyteller prefers to reflect countryside rustic life in India. Premchand severely attacked on the 'Varna System' and social hierarchy. He questions the hypocrisy of Brahmanical community and explains how they tried to dominate to sustain the suppressive caste system. His short stories like "Kafan", "Sadgati", "Mandir", "Mantra", "Muktimarg", "Dhoodh Ka Daam", "Gulli Danda" are striking examples that depict different social issues and hindrances that were faced by Dalit community. One of the trademark characteristics of Premchand's short stories is that they transcend time to convey a moral message that has the capability to transform millions of hearts.

The present paper will try to emphasize more on the story "Kafan" written by Premchand, which was later translated in English as *The Shroud* by Frances W. Pritchett and many other writers. *The Shroud* is the most celebrated and

controversial short story written by Premchand in 1936. It was the last short story inscribed by the writer before he died, so it has its own significance in the world literature. The story depicts awful life of the Dalit family who are wrecked by poverty and suffered by social hierarchy.

Premchand's *The Shroud* could be scrutinized at four different levels:

1. It is a story that represents class consciousness prevailing in the society.
2. The story could be explained as an anti-feminist story. Ghisu and Madhav are portrayed as misogynist that subjugate Budhiya and are responsible for her death.
3. *The Shroud* can be defined as a story of dehumanization.
4. Premchand mocks on the age-old ritualistic customs and superstitions practiced in the society. Hence, this narrative is a parody on exaggerated ritualism.

Munshi Premchand's range and diversity were unbounded because he handled various themes like gender discrimination, social inequality, ritualism with unmatched skill and passion. He can be deemed as the first author to practice realism in his literary work. Premchand was recognized as a socialist writer who criticized the socio-economic exploitation of the downtrodden and poor folks. He experimented innovative techniques in Hindi literature by blending social conditions and reality that can be called as socio-realism. Premchand also expresses similar opinion, when he defines literature as "critical appraisal of life"⁴. Stressing upon the role of literature in society, he further adds: "Literature does not serve the purpose of entertainment alone... it influences society and people."⁴ As a modernist writer, he develops these ideas in the story by using the third person omniscient point of view. A story written from the third-person point

of view has a narrator who is not a character but an outside observer. Sometimes this type of narrator is omniscient, or all knowing, and has the power to reveal the thoughts and feelings of more than one character.²

Victimization of Dalits due to social structure:

The characters in *The Shroud* are life like realistic sketches of human beings that we generally find around us. Especially Dalit characters: Ghisu and Madhav have different shades and colors imbibed in their personalities. The storyteller has skillfully crafted all the characters in the narrative. The father-son duo: Ghisu and Madhav could be portrayed in three different ways as the story progresses.

- a) Ghisu and Madhav as misogynist.
- b) Ghisu and Madhav as victims of class discrimination.
- c) Ghisu and Madhav as conscious and compassionate human beings.

The Dalit characters: Ghisu and Madhav are the victims of Brahmanical hegemony. The aristocratic class has always had an upper hand on the working-class characters. Subalterns are humiliated socially, politically and economically. This is evident below when Ghisu approaches landlord for monetary help after the death of Budhiya, the landlord gets furious and throws money at Ghisu with a feeling of contempt.

He asked, why are you crying Ghisu? I don't even see you these days. It feels as if you don't want to live in this village." Ghisu replied, "Sir we are in great difficulty. My daughter-in-law died. She was in pain all night! We both sat by her all night. We did all that was possible. We are ruined. I am your servant! All the money was spent on the treatment. Now only you can help us in cremation." The landlord was a kind man. But to take pity

on Ghisu was like trying to color a black cloth. He felt like throwing him out. Ghisu did not even come on being called for, but today when the need arose he had come to beg for help. But it was not the situation of anger and punishment. He gave him two rupees grudgingly. (5-6)

Misogynism is perfectly depicted in the story *The Shroud*. The father-son duo: Ghisu and Madhav are inactive, sluggish, work-shirk and lethargic personalities. They are languid creatures who are not driven to work hard and take up menial jobs once in a while when there is a need. The patriarchs of the family remain ignorant when Budhiya is undergoing pain due to her pregnancy. Sitting beside the extinct fire, they shamelessly eat the roasted potatoes and completely neglect the agony and pain through which Budhiya is going. We can notice the misogynistic attitude in the below conversation:

Ghisu said, "I think she will not survive. The whole day was wasted running here and there. Just go and check her condition."

Madhav said irritated, "If she is to die why doesn't it happen soon. What will I do seeing her now."

Ghisu, "You are a heartless man. You spent a whole year with her and now this is betrayal." (1)

Madhav had married Budhiya one year ago. Budhiya was a workaholic person and used to toil harder to meet the expectations and feed her husband and father-in-law. It was because of Budhiya that the household was well settled and Ghisu and Madhav had become lazier to earn bread for the family. Madhav remains resistant and is unable to understand his responsibilities towards his wife. The next day Budhiya dies in labor. She lies stiff and cold, flies are buzzing all over her face. Her frigid eyes are staring at the ceiling questioning Madhav for his behavior.

Of course, the baby is already dead in the womb. If we look at the story from the feministic point of view, we find *The Shroud* as an anti-feminist story. Many feminist scholars and critics blame the patriarchs- Ghisu and Madhav for the death of not only Budhiya but also the small baby. It is significant to note that a woman dies in labor. Even after her death, the woman fulfills their desire of food. Hence the men go at greater lengths to exploit a woman in every possible way.

Premchand not only presents social inequality prevailing in the society but also demonstrates the injustice given to a woman. Women are suppressed by the patriarchal dominance and are always objectified. They are just meant for reproducing babies and working hard to serve the men. The writer highlights the inhuman treatment given by a man to a woman. Premchand doesn't project the Dalits negatively, he just wants to exhibit the misogynistic attitude of a man (Madhav) towards a woman (Budhiya). Thus, the theme of gender politics and process of victimization is successfully illustrated by Premchand in the short story.

The Shroud can be perfectly defined as the story of dehumanization. Dehumanization is a process that deprives a person and compromises good human qualities. The concept of dehumanization pollutes and ruins the humanistic approach within an individual. Ghisu and Madhav or for an example any other working-class characters are affected by dehumanization. The story also transcribes the fatal effect of poverty. Ghisu and Madhav were very poor, their depths were larger than their assets. Author describes their misery as follows:

They had nothing beyond a few earthen pots by way of property. They wore torn clothes. But they were absolutely carefree. They were deep into debts but were so poor that, knowing that there would be no chance of recovery, people still lent them money. (2)

Neither Ghisu nor Madhav were able to buy medicines for Budhiya, nor could they afford a doctor for hospitalizing her during pregnancy period. But they noticed the pretentious nature of society. They knew the double standards of the society which refuses to offer them monetary help now would help readily, if a baby is born or Budhiya is died. The father-son duo remains helpless and hence they wait either of the two things to happen. Subsequently Budhiya dies in labor. The horrifying effects of poverty that dehumanize human beings is remarkably presented by the writer. Ghisu and Madhav are represented as monstrous personalities. They celebrate their life on the income of Budhiya; even in death she is beneficial to them. The father and son extract money from the landlord and other villagers for the cremation ceremony of Budhiya. At the market, they think on getting a cheap shroud. Afterwards they abandon the idea of purchasing the shroud and engage themselves in a rare grand feast of delicious supper and alcoholic beverages. Earlier the writer uses flashback technique in which Ghisu recollects nostalgic memories of the landlord's grand marriage feast. Both Ghisu and Madhav were hungry from many days and had a strong craving for fulfilling their appetite. The writer throws light on the fact that hunger, discomfort; desire to satisfy your appetite and self-interests lead to dehumanization that ultimately can also destroy human relations. "Madhav laughed at their unexpected luck and said, "She was a very good woman. She died but fed us even after her death." (8)

These dialogues also tell us that Ghisu and Madhav didn't do this deliberately. They are conscious about everything and also feel bad for Budhiya. They thank her from the bottom of their hearts because she took care of them even in her death. The father-son duo also feed the beggar who is starving of hunger and ask them to bless the dead woman. Compassionate and conscious nature of Ghisu and Madhav is evident here.

Ghisu said philosophically, “When our soul is pleased, then won’t it bless her?”

Madhav bowed his head with respect and said, “It will definitely give it’s blessings. God you can hear all our prayers. Take her to heaven. We both are blessing her with our hearts. The food that we have eaten today we have not had for ages. (8)

Ghisu and Madhav truly bless Budhiya from the bottom of their hearts and request almighty to take her to heaven. All money is spent on the food, it has satisfied their appetite. Later, both Ghisu and Madhav go dancing in the intoxicated state and fall down. Premchand has left the story incomplete as readers find it difficult to understand whether the shroud was taken to cremate Budhiya or not. The writer has left the ending to readers for exploring their interpretations on the story. I think that true blessings offered to Budhiya by Ghisu and Madhav after eating is really bidding her a good farewell, rather than spending all money on the socially accepted rituals and customs.

The Shroud is an emblematic short story that touches the reader’s heart. Premchand’s art of storytelling is prolific as it comprises of abundant symbols. Symbols are used in literature to convey specific ideologies, social structures and represent characteristics of a particular character. Thus, symbols carry different meaning depending upon its use in a particular context. There are two main symbols that are represented in the story *The Shroud*. They are as follows:

- A. The Shroud
- B. The pregnant woman- Budhiya

The title of the short story is very explicit, as it reveals the object around which the main events take place: The shroud. The shroud is probably the most significant

symbol in the short story. India is a country that is home to ample number of superstitions and age-old rituals. The ancient rituals, customs and traditions have become a cliché in the 21st century. All people especially Indians can be classified as the ‘God-fearing people’. Antiquated rituals and customs are blindly followed even in the modern era of information and technology. Death is viewed as a natural aspect of life and there are various epic tales, sacred scriptures that describe the reason for practicing the holy rituals so that the dead person’s soul gets departed to heaven or paradise. Premchand mocks on the exaggerated ritualism that exists in the country.

It is such an odd ritual, one who did not get good cloth to wear all her life needs a new shroud on death.”

“The shroud will burn with the body.”

“What else! Had we got these five rupees earlier we could have used it for her medication. (7)

These above conversation between Ghisu and Madhav clearly depict the misconceptions of holy beliefs and overuse of rituals in society. Premchand laughs on the mentality of aristocratic Brahmins and people who follow embellish rituals. These lines are symbolic and have a satirical tone which depicts the harsh ground reality that- when Budhiya was alive, and was in need, she didn’t get to wear a good sari but after her death she needs new clothes to wear. At the beginning, we denounce Ghisu and Madhav for their vicious behavior and inhumanity shown towards Budhiya. But one must remember that mourning is a luxury a starving man or a Dalit cannot afford. “Their callousness is a reflection of their helplessness, not their inhumanity. They are compelled to be insensitive”⁶

Madhav replied, “It is the way of the world. Otherwise why would people

give Brahmins hundreds of rupees? Who knows what happens in the next world?

The rich have money let them waste it. We have nothing to waste. (7)

Ghisu and Madhav knew the fact that the society had no interest in how they will bury the dead woman. In fact, they were offered monetary help not out of any sympathy or affection, but because of social obligations. The laws and doctrines of religion have compromised the scientific approach and skeptical nature of the people. The Dalit community and the lower strata of the society have been economically exploited by the “bourgeois society” at greater lengths that they can’t even afford expenses to buy the shroud. Therefore, *The Shroud* is a parody on exaggerated ritualism.

Secondly, the pregnant woman: Budhiya is a poignant character and a dominant symbol around which the whole action of the story revolves. Budhiya’s passive nature in itself is very symbolic. Budhiya doesn’t speak even a word in the story. It wouldn’t be wrong to say that her actions, sacrifice speaks louder than words. The narrator focalizes the “labor pain” of Budhiya, sounds of moaning that could be heard in the background of the story. It may be possible that Premchand had deliberately portrayed the silent character of Budhiya to demonstrate the social condition of women prevailing in India in 20th century. Women were not allowed to speak and express their views in society. Their voices were crushed by the evolving patriarchy. At the end, even death of Budhiya contributes to the men. It is because of Budhiya, that Madhav and Ghisu are able to fulfill their hunger. In spite of being silent, Budhiya says a lot to the readers. Her presence in the short story is emblematic and creates a kind of sympathy in the mind of readers.

Thus, Munshi Premchand makes use of remarkable symbols that

contributes to the success of the story. There is no doubt that Premchand's *The Shroud* is a masterpiece in the galaxy of literature which brings out the dark humor, satire, gender politics and tragedy in the life of Ghisu, Madhav and Budhiya. The economic deprivation has dehumanized the Dalits to an extent that human relations are meaningless and futile to them. Many scholars and critics identify Premchand's *The Shroud* as an "Anti-Dalit Story" on account of the negative portrayal of the Dalit characters. Kanwal Bharati, in an article, reiterates, "Kafan is an Anti-Dalit story because it has made a mockery of the Dalits through its characters who have been portrayed insensitive and inhumane"¹ (Bharati). However, *The Shroud* breaks all the social confinements and challenges the very foundation of the Caste system. The story transcends time and the readers find it quite relatable in the present scenario. Hence, it would be appropriate to treat the story as an individual creation of literature. The storyteller innovatively uses literary expressions, symbols, flashback technique as a vehicle to convey strong messages of equality and fraternity.

The Shroud is a groundbreaking piece of literature composed by Premchand that questions the sophisticated tendency of the aristocrats. At the same time, the narrative gives a moral message to treat every human being as equal irrespective of race, cast, color, sex, gender. A gesture of humanity shown by human beings towards each other would be nutritious to the mankind!

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