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Depiction of Women in Early 20th Century: A Reading of Premchand's Select Short Stories

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Abstract

In the early 20th century, India saw various nationalist movements and with that, the women's emancipation movement also caught momentum gradually. This era was a melting point of both liberal and conservative ideas. The complexity of conflict and consent on opinions concerning imperialism and traditional customs can be seen in many of the reformers, nationalists and visionaries of this period. It can be said that this era was marked with awareness but was still responding slowly to the issues of the then-patriarchal society. Dhanpat Rai Srivastava popularly known as Munshi Premchand belongs to this era. This complexity of the interplay of traditional and modern ideas, values and ways can be traced in the works of Premchand. An urge to reform and portray the plight of women in society becomes one of the key aspects of his literature. In this regard, the paper would read his select short stories to explore his portrayal of women.

Keywords: marginalisation of women, reformist approach, women's emancipation

Munshi Premchand comes from an era when child marriage, dowry, isolation of widows, and lack of education amongst women were some of the major challenges of the

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then-patriarchal society. Though the late 19th and early 20th century saw several Acts and policies such as the Abolition of Sati in 1829, the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, it was still a time that was absorbing these reformations. Reformists like Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, and Raja Ram Mohan Roy, focused on reforming the condition of women in the then India. Premchand, who is often called the Dickens of Hindi Literature, was a pioneering figure of the Indian literary scene who focused to a great extent on the atrocities faced by women. He explored the complexities of society and the paradoxical situations created by it. With these in mind, Premchand showed the interplay of ideas, values and emotions in women. Other major aspects that come to the forefront are themes of marriage and the relationship between the husband and wife. Few critics often criticise his conservative approach for not carving out liberated women characters, however, we can state that the contemporary period also influences the writer's mind, worldview and social ideology. Further, some of his works are self-explanatory of the fact that worldview, thought process and writing styles change with the evolution of an author. His works like *Seva Sadan* (published in Urdu as *Bazaar-e Husn*) in 1919 is an extremely significant work in this light that negates the criticism of Premchand for having a conservative approach. The novel encircles around a housewife, Suman, who is trapped in an unhappy marriage and decides to break free from the shackles of domesticity. Suman somehow ends up being a courtesan. In search of work, she goes on to teach religion to widows and finally becomes a teacher in a home that houses the children of courtesans. Some of his works on the theme of widow remarriage include *Prema* (published in Urdu as *Hamkhurma-o-Hamsavab*) in 1907, *Pratigya* in 1927, etc. Premchand himself married a child widow Shivarani Devi after an unsuccessful marriage with his first wife. The theme of dowry can be traced in the work *Nirmala* in 1926.

From his body of work, various facets or personalities of women can be traced. A woman who is bestowed with all feminine attributes and is quintessentially characterised as ideal. The second one is progressive in approach and is westernised in certain aspects; Premchand criticises these women and depicts them somewhat in a pejorative light. The third

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one would be a suffering and ostracised woman who faces a lot of challenges from the patriarchal society. Lastly, we can explore another type who is liberated enough to voice her opinions and on occasion also has a voice of resistance. This categorisation helps us to understand and analyse the portrayal of a woman in Premchand's works in a more structured way.

In his letter to Indernath Madan, Premchand says "meri nari ka adarshhai ek hi sthan par tyag, seva aur pavitrata. Tyagbinafal ki ashakeho aur pavitratasijar ki patni ki bhantiaisiho, jiskeliyepachtane ki avashyaktanaho" (Raibhar 231). The ideal woman is portrayed in stories like *Swarg ki Devi (Goddess of Heaven)*, *Bade Ghar ki Betiyan (Girls from Good Homes)*, *Sati, Devi*, *Suhag ka shav (Importance of marriage)*, *Shraap (Cursed)*, *Maryada ki Devi (Goddess of Dignity)*. These stories depict women as homely and docile, and thus the image of the ideal wife is created. In stories like *Maa (Mother)* and *Mandir (Temple)*, he upholds the stereotypical image of women as selfless mothers. He explains through his stories that our society idealises women as being devoted mothers and dutiful wives and to them, the family stands in the uppermost level of importance and priority.

A special focus on the story *Swarg ki devi (Goddess of Heaven)* published in 1925, enables us to understand the portrayal of the ideal woman a little better. The story revolves around Leela, who is the epitome of sacrifice, endurance and forgiveness. Her family comprises a fraud father-in-law, an uneducated drunkard husband and a cruel mother-in-law. Tragedy hovers through her life as her children die of cholera. She accepts her ill fate as God's way of examining His people and moves on in her life without complaining. Her unquestionable love for her family finally wins the heart of her husband and he quits drinking. The story ends with the husband's speech where he says that home is not a garden, but it is heaven and Leela is the goddess of this heaven. Thus, the tale ends on the note that woman is the backbone of a household and she is the one who binds the family structure as well as motivates the husband to follow the right path as he was misled somewhere in life. An image of an ideal woman is portrayed in this story through Leela who is the epitome of

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*stridharma*¹ with all righteous values and virtues. The ideal woman sacrifices or can be regarded as a universal giver and sacrificial.

Premchand's portrayal of women can be categorised into a second type wherein a woman who is modern, educated, independent, and has an urban outlook. These characters are shown as undesirable and pejorative. The approach that comes to the surface through some of his stories is that Western liberalisation has disturbed the harmonious traditional ways of society. Stories like *Miss Padma*, *Do Sakhiyan (Two Friends)*, *Prem Sutra (Manual of Love)*, *Shanti (Peace)*, and *Unmad (Lunatic)* are examples where he depicts the modern woman. The irony lies in the fact that these stories portray a negative approach to the concept of modern, middle-class and educated women. These stories provide us with apprehensions towards Western culture. A repulsive attitude to modern urban civilizational ethos as an impact of Western culture is also seen in his works. Many of his stories mirror the idea that urban women are shallow in ideals, morality and dignity, thereby giving a promiscuous picture as is given in *Miss Padma*.

Shanti (Peace) was published in 1920 and spins around the story of Shyama, who is a conventional housewife. The backdrop is that of a joint family. Her husband holds high regard for Western culture and is a lawyer by profession. He desires his wife to change consequently with the changing times. After Shyama colours herself in the Western culture, she abandons her family and husband. She loses her qualities as a good wife and mother. The husband now wants her back in her old form when she was a dedicated and devoted wife. The peace in the house is muddled. Shanti accepts her husband's views and realises that although Western culture has given her a sort of freedom but it has disturbed the peace in her family and therefore, she rectifies her ways and returns to her old self. The story also highlights the fact that women are responsible for the well-being of the household and should maintain peace in the home. The hypocrisies of the males of the society can be traced here who may talk of progressiveness but will not take it if the change began at their homes!

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Premchand talks about the marginalised woman and says “ jopirithai, vanchithai, chahe wo vyaktihoyasamuh Uskihimayat aur vakalatkarna sahitya ka farzhai,” in an ‘All India Progressive Writer’s Front’ in 1936 (Gupta 96). To translate, it can be said that it is the duty on the part of the author, to argue in favour of those people who are sufferers, oppressed and deprived, whether as a group or an individual. Therefore, he moves on to pen another image of a woman who is more powerful and is grounded more in the reality. He depicts women who are oppressed and ostracised in the hands of the patriarchal society and are dominated by filthy customs. It is here, that he also takes up the tragedies and plights of the widows. In *Beetonwali Vidhva (A Widow with Sons)*, Premchand very beautifully pictures the wrongs suffered by Phoolmati, a widow. In *Dhikkar (Vilify)* too, Mani, who is a widow, is ill-treated by her in-laws. It is worth mentioning here that Premchand, himself married a widow, Shivrani Devi, his second wife, with whom he led his life. Shivrani Devi wrote a book on Premchand after his demise, titled, *Premchand Ghar Mein*. Premchand stood for the implication of the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 also known as the Sharda Act. His stories like *Nairashya (Chaos)* deal with the unhappiness of the birth of a girl-child. Premchand also describes the hypocrisy of society while writing a story of a prostitute. They were called on to dance and sing but were openly condemned. In his story, *Veshya(Whore)*, the character of Madhuri, a prostitute moves us all. She says that if she is corrupt then the people who visit here are not pure either. *Do Kabrein (Two Graves)* deal with the life of Sulochana, a daughter of a prostitute, who is educated and is married off. But the problem emerges when the neighbours start calling her names and in humiliation, she commits suicide. *Virodhi (Non-conformist)* and *Ek Aanch Ki Kasar(By a Whisker)* show the evils of the dowry system, very much prevalent in India at that time.

A deep dive into the story *Nirvasan (Exile)* would help us understand the hollowness and void apprehension concerning honour. The saddest part is that all these stories end on a tragic note and no remedial or reformational ways and measures as such are shown. Even if he did, the reformations shown were quite mild in nature and did not break through the traditional orthodox confinements of the society. This story is about a couple named

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Parusuram and Maryada. The setting of the story is that they had gone to a fair and the wife got lost there. After some days when the wife came back, Parusuram asks her where she had been all these days. She replies that she got lost in the fair. Parusuram does not believe her; he constantly rebukes her, calling names. He furthermore reprimands her by saying that she has become impure. She narrates her dreadful experience of how she somehow managed from getting exploited in hands of some fraud men. After hearing this Parusuram abandons her and does not let her enter the house. She pleads, but he refuses. Before leaving the place, she asked her husband to call her son because she wanted to see him one last time. He refuses again and tells them he won't let his son come in contact with an impure and undignified woman. However, after she pleaded, he did let her see him from a faraway distance. Premchand beautifully satirizes the condition of society through the name of the protagonist, the wife that is Maryada which means dignity. After this Maryada feels very humiliated and decides that from now onwards she will consider herself to be a widow and an infertile woman, who never had given birth to anyone. She sets her mind and soul free from the confinement of the patriarchal orthodoxies.

Premchand does not always remain confined to the stereotypical portrayal of women but takes a step forward to represent that women are not merely objects but also have the voice to revolt and protest against the odds. According to Premchand, the ideologies of nationalism proved to be an effective force which gave women the strength to voice themselves. Characters like Mridulla and Kshamadevi come together to support the Boycott movement in the story, *Jail*. All the family members of Mridulla are shot dead in a fire, but still, she is not shattered and continues her fight for the nation. *Patni se Pati (Wife and Husband)*, *Anubhav (Experience)* and *Samar Yatra (A Walk towards Success)* are other noteworthy stories. *Aahuti (Oblation)* is another pioneering story where a woman named Shilavati gives us the true definition of freedom or liberty and raises her voice against the exploitation done to women. In *Brahm ka Swang*, the husband is shown to be very progressive outwardly but actually is not, whereas the wife practices what she preaches. The dichotomy here beautifully jeers at society.

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The story *Patni se Pati* Premchand depicts how Indian women, hand in hand with men, participated in the national movement. Godavari, the wife of Mr Dinanath Seth was a woman who was deeply moved by the nationalist movements. She saw people wearing *Khadi*² clothes, whereas she was using foreign goods since her husband wanted her to do so. She wanted to serve her countrymen but could not because of her husband, who was against the Swadeshi movement. On the auspicious day of Holi, she saw that all her neighbours burnt foreign goods, to show their protest against the Englishmen. Her husband rebuked these people by calling them uncivilised. Godavari could not take this and decided to do something on her part. One day instead of going out with her husband for a stroll in the park, Godavari chose to attend the meeting of the Congress party. There she contributed Rs. 200. She knew that this news would reach her husband and it did reach him. It not only reached him but also reached his English Officers. The next day when he reached the office the English Officers insulted him. He gave them a resignation letter and came back from the office. When he came back and told this to his wife, she was happy for nothing can bind her husband now to serve the Britishers. Dinanath was troubled by thoughts as the source of income was gone. His wife assures him that they will manage somehow. She asked her husband to join the national movement. She also said that all this while she led her life according to his will, but from now onwards she would like to take the charge. Dinanath willingly vows to follow her.

Premchand vociferously voices the theme of sexual harassment of a lower-class girl in this story, *Ghaswali-(The Grass-cutter)*. Mulia is a poor girl who is a grass-cutter in landowner Chain Singh's house. To Chain Singh, sweet faces among the peripheries of lower classes are always meant to be a plaything in the hands of upper caste men. He had sexually harassed women from the lower strata, but Mulia is the first to raise her voice and rejects his advances. She accuses him and voices herself against this suppression. She asks him to hypothetically think over a situation that if his wife talks to him in such an adulterous way, then what would his reactions be? He asks Mulia to watch her language and tone with him because she is a *chamarin*³. It is indicative of the fact that a lower-class woman is easy to win with small temptations or threats. She condemns it by saying that it is a cheap bargain.

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Moreover, she attacks him verbally and ironically tells him that being a *thakur*⁴, he is relinquishing in such cheap bargains. Chain Singh mocks at her and says that he is ready to bow his head in front of her. On hearing this, Mulia gets infuriated and asks whether he knows the meaning and significance of bowing the head. Chain Singh stands awestruck and ashamed and pledges to change himself. Mulia's rebellion against such actions showed that slowly women gained the strength to protest against the odds and voice themselves in precarious situations. *Ghaswali (The Grass-cutter)* gives us a glimpse of women who are suppressed and oppressed but are bestowed with power, courage and energy and are no longer weak, feeble and passive. Thus, Premchand tries to project that the liberation of women is no more an impossibility and they will be able to liberate themselves from the clutches of patriarchy in near future and will be granted equal rights.

Premchand creates a diverse range of women characters. Some women remain docile, some take it as their fate and some voice themselves fervently. What he does essentially, is that he holds up the mirror for readers to judge on their own, the problems which persisted in the then society. Excepting for an epoch of equalitarian position enjoyed by the Aryan women of the early Vedic Age (2,000 to 1,400 B.C.), women in India have traditionally and conventionally been both despised as well as honoured. Contrasting to the godliness of motherhood stands the wretchedness of widowhood. Ambivalent stances towards women do occur in many other cultures but are not as extreme as in India. Often Indian women are stereotyped and forced into living a certain role. An Indian woman's role in society is largely governed by incidents of life such as the caste into which she is born, whether she can bear a male child, whether her husband dies pre-maturely, or whether she is deserted by her husband or his family. Her position in the world depends largely upon these uncontrollable rudiments rather than upon any attained skills such as proper education. Indian women are expected to live a life devoted to various roles during their life span. The roles of a wife, a daughter-in-law in the husband's household, and a mother who sacrifices everything for the good of her child, are some of the stereotypes. In the early days, she is to be taken care of by her father (*Pita Rakshi Kaumarjye*), in her youth by her husband and in her old age by her son. It is also

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to be noted here that a wife is there only to produce children (*Putarathi Kriyate Verja*). A woman can never be independent and thus the conventional Indian woman has little chance for self-expression. Throughout much of her life, she is likely to be passive, servile and dependent.

The 19th and 20th-century societies had a great impact on the literature. A large chunk of the society was still yet to respond to the reformation movements in the society and did not completely support the movement of women's up rise. However, many reformist and visionary authors wrote about the plight of women and the depiction of women in literature came to the forefront. This paper tries to look back and trace the position of women in the then-patriarchal society and also looks at the stereotypes concerning women, which existed in those times. The idealised image of mothers and wives was some of the major aspects of womanhood portrayed in the literature. We can say that Premchand's stories have a mixed legacy. Different readings of his stories would claim him differently, as he idealises the role of women in some, whereas in some he shows the progressive women. To sum up, Premchand's stories, as he himself once mentioned were about literature with a purpose. In one of his letters to Vinod Shankar Vyas he writes about it and this can be looked at as a call for change in the early 20th century.

“What I want is that the plots of stories should be taken from life and that they should be such that can solve life's problems” (Goswami 107).

End Notes

1. *Stridharma* literally means the duties and responsibilities a woman should carry out in Sanskrit and Hindi.
2. *Khadiis* a hand woven fibre made used to make clothes. Gandhi advocated the use of khadi during nationalist movements such as the Swadeshi movement.
3. *Chamarin* is someone who is born of a lower caste. Ambedkar and many other nationalists and litterateurs of the then-era tried to work towards the end of casteism. However, casteism

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is still an issue in present-day India and many Dalit writers like Limbale, Bama, etc., have written openly about their experiences.

4. Thakur can be synonymously termed as a zamindar or a landlord.

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