

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE WRITINGS OF MUNSHI PREMCHAND

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Abstract

My paper focuses on some of the writings of Premchand through which he subtly and provocatively highlighted some contemporary political issues of his time, which became evident and testimony during our study of modern Indian history. I want to bring to light how some of his works were running parallel or around the same time as the freedom struggle. His writings are much more than thematically arranged narratives. Some of his books like '*Karma Bhoomi, Satyagraha, Gaban, and Shatranj ke Khiladi* map a wide and often complicated terrain of historical happenings. Through his literary work Premchand strongly advocates that social reforms should precede political reforms. With this view, he comes close to the ideology of Agarkar who believed that political independence can be achieved only when society will be liberated from socio-religious evils. This movement is similar to the movement against untouchability and the entry into the temple led by workers of *Sevashram*, led by *Dr. B.R Ambedkar* in the 1930s at *Kalaram village* temple of Lord Vithal. Through this movement, the Harijans got entry into the temple. The writings of Premchand reflect the propagation of social awakening and the fight against social evils in a reformative way. He also strongly supports the non-violence, Satyagraha, strikes, and non-cooperation methods of *Mahatma Gandhi* which were applied during the Indian freedom struggle.

Keywords: Munshi Premchand, regional literature, comparative studies, history and literature, freedom movement of India, and literature

Geography and chronology are the two eyes of history, it is in this context the facts become more authentic and accepted. This paper will try to co-relate the two folds of writings i.e, historical and literary. As rightly said by the noted historian V.H Galbraith 'There can be a

history of anything and of everything and in the sense, history is a method of arriving at truth rather than a subject itself. It is just one way of explaining ourselves to ourselves.

The fraternity of historians reluctantly approved the importance of literature, written with the historical context because there is always a strong touch of fiction involved by the author while dealing with historical events. The seasonal argument is that the minute fiction is introduced, facts are compromised, so it cannot necessarily be past actuality. Whereas the study of history is an intellectual pursuit, an activity of the reasoning mind as one should expect its main service lies in its essence, the search for truth. But now the applied, auxiliary, and social sciences all help in writing history, which is becoming more rewarding and humane. It's no more just causes and effects, political genealogies, or chronological series of events. Writing history in contemporary society will be difficult by closing the available options.

My paper focuses on the writings of Premchand which he subtly and provocatively highlighted some contemporary political issues of his time, which became evident and testimony during our study of modern Indian history. I want to bring to light how some of his works were running parallel or around the same time as the Indian freedom struggle. His writings are much more than thematically arranged narratives. Some of his books like '*Karma Bhoomi*, *Satyagraha*, *Gaban*, and *Shatranj ke Khiladi* map a wide and often complicated terrain of historical happenings.

In his works, the main players like Amarkant, Dr. Shanti Kumar, Sukhada of *Karmabhoomi* or Surdas, Sophia of *Rangbhoomi* or Jalpa, and Ramnath of *Gaban* or Vishambhar of *Aahuti* in groups or as individuals enable us to see the formation of a nation or the Indian independence struggle for independence. In some of his writings like *Godan*, *Kafan*, and *Thakur ka Kuan* he projects socio-eco turbulence existing at that time. His collection of 5 stories banned and burned in 1909 was titled 'sufferings of the Motherland (*Soz- e –Watan*) the plots of these early tales were full of chivalric idealism and noble sacrifices; disguises and amazing adventure which show the influence of urban elite.

Like most of his works until about 1916 these stories were written originally in Urdu due to the dearth of Urdu publishers, he turned to writing in Hindi. As is rightly said about him 'Hindi in the morning, Urdu in the evening'. He was greatly influenced by the renowned author Charles Dickens and Leo Tolstoy, so unlike them, he also directed his fiction toward social reform. The romantic heroism in his work now started converting itself into a symbol of agitation against the British oppression with sharp satire on those Indians who set their interests above the freedom movement unlike the characters of Motiram Shastri in *Satyagraha* who goes on fasting to help a particular section of people (capitalist) or *Maiku* who in his rage slaps a social worker who was picketing against the sale of liquor or the temperance movement.

Premchand's writings which cover the rural areas and small towns around the regions of the present state of Uttar Pradesh i.e. Allahabad & Varanasi provided him the fascinating stage for the interplay of diverse characters highlighting caste hierarchy, parasitical Brahmins, exploitative and brutal landowners, the shame of widowhood and ostracism, and practice of religion which is more by fear rather than faith.

I have taken his few works to identify his application of characters in villages and cities about the historical connectivity.

The title of the book under consideration is *Karmabhoomi* written in 1932. In this work, the author shows great maturity and understanding by covering the political developments of that phase whereby he advocates issues existing then like freedom of movement, issues of untouchability, the class war between Zamindars and landless peasants, competition, etc. The character in the story very well reflects his idea of propagating the mass upheaval from the city level to the village level. The author has diligently portrayed that political freedom and a social revolution against religious evils are possible if the people at both ends take up the issue. Most of the events are centered around the freedom struggle. It also highlights the application of strikes, Satyagraha, etc to attend to the desired goals.

The issue of untouchability concerning the entry levels in the temples, the cunning and hypocritical attitude of the temple priest, wakening, and deterioration of the administrative structure. However, with many issues, the author has also clubbed many characters.

All the leaders are however kept alive till they see the realization of their dreams. All the characters are very well portrayed on the platform of national patriotism. There are many more characters in the story and all the characters contribute towards their goals. The pioneers of the revolution come through the characters of *Amarkant* and *Dr. Shanti Kumar*. They strive from beginning to end for social awakening. We also find *Sukhada (wife of Amarkant)* who symbolizes the woman, who is ready to change and give up her inhibitions of the outside world and ultimately becomes the epitome of women's participation in the freedom struggle. She is the first one, of all the women characters to be imprisoned. *Lala SamerKant (father of Amarkant)* plays the role of a capitalist in a society wherein; he initially makes a conscious effort to deprive others of their legitimate rights. But in the later phase, he also changes and joins the stream of the freedom struggle. Through this author ideates that all the strata of society are involved in the freedom struggle irrespective of their economic status. The way this character goes through his attitude of transformation somewhere gets him closer to the reader and his human side gets reflected through it.

Through his literary work Premchand strongly advocates that social reforms should precede political reforms. With this view, he comes close to the ideology of Gopal Ganesh Agarkar the great social reformer and journalist who believed that political independence can be achieved only when society will be liberated from socio-religious evils. This movement comes closer to the movement against untouchability and the entry into the temple led by workers of *Sevashram*, under the leadership of *Dr. B.R Ambedkar* in the 1930s at *Kalaram Vithal* village temple. Through this movement, the Harijans got entry into the temple.

His writing reflects the propagation of social awakening and the fight against social evils in a reformative way. He also strongly supports the non-violence, Satyagraha, strikes, and non-cooperation methods of *Mahatma Gandhi* which were applied during the freedom struggle. While portraying the roles of the priests and the grandeur of the temple the author indirectly exposes the pomp and splendor of one section of people against the condition of acute poverty and starvation of people from the marginalized section. The very concept of bathing the lord Thakurji in milk which is discussed strongly reflects the superstitious practices in our society.

His writings reflect his inclination towards socialism or a socialistic pattern of society rather than capitalism.

Another reference is the book titled *Satyagraha*, published in 1923 which portrays the character of *Raja Lalchand*, a capitalist who tries to use the weapon of fasting in another way around to oppose members of the Congress party for their protest on the arrival of the Viceroy at Banaras. Through the character of *Motiram Shastri*, Premchand exposes the hypocrisy of a section of people who misguide natives under the name of *Satyagraha*. Premchand tries to indirectly highlight the attributes of perseverance and penance, which one has to go through for the cause of a community or the nation. To validate it further we can also compare it further with the speech of Mahatma Gandhiji which he delivered on 12th September 1926 in which had stated ‘*Satyagraha can never resort for personal gains but only for the good of others. A satyagraha should always be ready to undergo suffering and particular loss*’.

The author through this work tries to get the reader close to Gandhi’s Satyagraha and non-violence. There is a provocation of rightful participation in the freedom struggle and the indicators to identify those elements which under the name of Satyagraha misguide people.

In the same line, we have another work *Sumar Yatra* in which *Nohri* the protagonist exercises her rights of freedom of speech and assembly. The story revolves around a small village where Gandhi’s followers go to address a meeting and get people involved in the Satyagraha movement, but the situation turns ugly when the local police officer interrupts their meeting and the crowd disperses. It is here that Premchand shows the exemplary role of a woman who all by herself stands against the atrocities of police and compels them to withdraw from the meeting spot after which the meeting resumes again with the slogan of *Bharat Mata Ki Jai*.

The character of *Nohri* strongly hints at the participation of women in the freedom struggle. I think the author tries to suggest that when men fail to deal with the issues, a character like *Nohri* can certainly make a difference. I would like to draw the reference of *Aruna Asaf Ali*, *Usha Mehta*, and *Sucheta Kriplani* who were instrumental during the Quit India movement of 1942 when all the prominent leaders were arrested. It was the efforts of these women that kept the movement going. It is equally apt to emphasize that during the civil disobedience in India, the participation of women was phenomenal and they for the first time came out in large numbers.

Premchand’s stories demonstrate the range of his genius in narrative techniques. His vision from idealism to social realism combines a close understanding of Indian society with a tragic sense of life. He raised various social issues right from the plight of women to the religious hypocrisy which was prevalent during that time. But one area needs special mention and that is the issue of caste compartmentalization which was strictly practiced in Indian society. His many works directly or indirectly touched upon these issues where he advocated equal rights to all as natural rights.

His portrayal of the restrictions of the temple entry in the *Karmabhoomi* novel to the inaccessibility of drinking water in *Thakkur ka Kuan* speaks volumes about his stand against the

practice of untouchability. In another work, *Thakkur ka Kuan* the character of *Gangi* from the lower caste, who attempts to get a jug of drinking water from the well of the Thakkur, displays and reflects the pitiable and inhuman conditions in which the Harijans at that time lived in our society. Her helplessness is seen after their well is polluted by the falling of an animal, she strives to get water from wells controlled by the Brahmins and Thakur. It is also a direct attack on the control of natural resources in an unjust manner. The story of *Gangi* ends tragically as she fails to get drinking water despite risking her life. When she returns home with an empty jar, she sees her husband drinking the filthy, polluted, and stinking water as he gives up control of his thirst. The story brings us closer to the *Chawdar Lake satyagraha of Dr. Ambedkar*, where Dalits claim their right to use water from a public tank in *Mahad* which was under the control of the local municipal authority. The mirroring of some of these impressions from contemporary society opens a new segment of debate on social equality.

Conclusion:

Despite the vast amount of proliferating literature written in Hindi there has been no one so coherent and indelible as Premchand. His writings show the refinement of his thoughts over many years and also the underlying consistency of his commitments and perspective. After more than 70 years after his death, Premchand remains the most outstanding figure in 20th-century Hindi literature. His greatest achievement was in the insightful representation of a dazzling variety of individual characters from every walk of life, every class, and caste in all their psychological complexity and with all their contradictions. The striking parts of his writings are the protagonist, the portrayal of women, the caste differences, and the revolutionaries of that era and their ideologies are still meaningful today.

A good poem, a good drama, and a good story will continually provoke new translations and new interpretations in confirmation of their relevance and vitality in contemporary society. The equally interesting phenomenon of Munshi Premchand's writings is that it is very subtle and equally satirical. The author gives too much discretion to the readers to draw parallels between the existing society. The socio-economic disparity is with utmost and strong reference clubbed with the gender and caste dynamics. His writings in a way paved the way for our given roles and identified roles in society. His arguments are well-balanced and the characters are true projections of different personality traits available in each individual. The psychological aspects of his characters make a good blend of studying literature through the lenses of other social sciences. The human touch of his characters keeps them grounded and realistic. The absence of any supernatural elements allows the readers to reflect and replace themselves with the characters. The absence of unnecessary literary jargon and the simplicity of the language makes it timeless in its impressions.

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