

STUDY OF GENDER EXPLOITATION IN *VIDHWANS AND GARIB KI HAI* STORIES BY MUNSHI PREMCHAND

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Indian society has been divided on basis of *Varna system* which was the core of the social life of the society in the past. One could not think of going beyond that or violate the set norms for them. The condition of woman in particular was very pathetic and weak in this classified society. The present paper is going to discuss the oppression of the weak and poor at the hand of rich and powerful through Premchand's stories *Vidhwans (Catastrophe)* and *Garib Ki Hai (Power of Curse)*. *Vidhwans* is the story of an old childless widow named Bhungi who has to sacrifice her life in fire because of the exploitation of the village owner, Pandit Udaibhan Pandey and *Garib Ki Hai* presents the exploitation of Munga, a Brahman widow by Mushi Ramshevak. He did not return her money which leads to the miserable and untimely death of Munga. After her death, the destruction of the family of Ramsavak begins. These stories narrated the conditions of rural India where these varna system is religiously followed.

Munshi Premchand (1880-1936) was a famous writer. His real name was Dhanpat Rai Premchan started his literary carrier in Urdu. He depicted the patriotic upsurge in his early short stories. *Soze-e-Watan* (1907) is a collection of such short stories. Premchand started writing in Hindi in 1914 till then he had established his reputation as an Urdu writer. He was the first writer in Hindi who presented the contemporary problems through his writings. He presented the problem of urban middle-class and the country's village. He wrote with a purpose. He didn't follow the principle of 'art for art's sake'. But he has written with social purpose and this is the main reason that he is read by the readers of all ages. Premchand was a prolific writer who had penned a dozen novels and nearly 250 short stories. His famous novels are *Nirmla*, *Godan*, *Gaban*, *Sevasadan*, *Rangmanch*. His famous stories are *Kafan*, *Vidhwans*, *Bade Bhaiya*, *Garib Ki Hai* etc.

The first story under discussion is *Vidhwans*. A person who has the power tries his best to exploit the weak. And the weak has to bear his exploitation to lead his/ her life. This is the pivot of this story and the case of Bhungi depicted by Premchand's in *Vidhwans*. She lives in a village, Bira in Banaras district. She is an old widow without any children. She has no home and

no land. In the name of a home she has a little shack and for her livelihood, she has an oven to parch the grain. Parched grain is a famous dish in that village. Every family eat parched grain once a day. In this way Bhungi enables herself to earn her livelihood. On the other side rich and upper class Pandit Udaibhan, the owner of the village considers the villagers his property and treats them like his slaves. He wants them to work for him without any payment. Bhungi has to bring water for his house without any payment for her service. She has to go to bed without any food when she has to roast the grain for the Pandit because he does not give him any grain for her service. In his opinion, “if she received food for working him, how could it be considered as a work done without pay? He was doing her a favour, in fact, by letting her live in the village at all” (1). This statement by Pandit shows that those who are upper caste or varna are powerful. They have every right to exploit the poor or people belonging to lower strata. For them poor people are object, they have no life, desires or requirement. Charu Gupta in her article “Portrayal of women in Premchand stories: A critique writes”, “The pattern of women’s lives, their expectations and ideals, their orientations to social reality and the ‘ideals’ of womanhood are considerably shaped by the models of womanly conduct set out in stories, legends and song”(88).

A person who is unable to fulfil Panditji’s orders is punished severely. On a spring day, it is a custom to eat roasted fresh grain and give gift of grain. On this occasion, it is obvious that Bhungi will be very busy as everyone will come to her. She seems very happy but at the same time she looks at two servants coming from Pandit’s house with two baskets of grains. To see them all her happiness fades away, now she has to roast this heap of grain without any payment and even without delay. Any work takes time in completion. But the one of the servants says to Bhungi in an orderly manner, “Don’t waste any time or you’ll be sorry” (1). Bhungi tries her best to roast the grain of Pandit. Though she tries her best but at the sunset she is able to roast only half the grain. The result is that she has been punished by digging up her oven. As a result she lost with the only means of her livelihood. Pandit Udaibhan not even once thought about Bhungi’s source of livelihood. It shows the pity of poor being exploited by the hands of the feudal class. The class struggle is very clearly present here. To the pity nobody from her village stops them.

In India the real home for a woman is her in-law’s home. All the villagers suggest Bhungi to go to another place to get rid of this torment. But for Bhungi it is not easy. She has spent her fifteen years in this village and in her last days the very idea of shifting to another place struck her mind. She loves all the things related to this village. In her opinion, “Sorrow in this village was preferable to happiness in another” (2). Bhungi opinion also reflected her feeling to consider this village as her family and leaving it seems miserable to her. When Pandit Udaibhan asks her to leave the village, then she says, “How can I! I’ve grown old in this hut. My in-laws and their grand parents lived in this same hut. Expect for Yama, king of death, nobody’s force me out of it now” (3). Life becomes tough for her; it is also very difficult for her to stay in this village without any means of livelihood. Finally, she decides to rebuild her oven and challenge the upper class. She has the fear of Pandit Udaibhan’s but she has no other option left to earn her food and living. She has no way but to rebuild her oven. In this way she tried to challenge the power but here the challenge is very feeble one.

Pandit Udaibhan is a rigid person who can’t bear anyone to go to against his wish. He considers it a great crime. He does so only to create fear in the eyes of the villagers for him. He does anything to make and trigger this fear among the villagers. When Bhungi is rebuilding her oven, he destroyed it without any delay. The miserable condition of Bhungi and the cruelty of

Pandit Udaibhan become clear from the following conversation between Bhungi and Pandit Udaibhan,

‘You’re not going to built any oven here again’
‘If I don’t how am I going to be able to eat!’
‘I’m not responsible for your belly.’
‘But if I do nothing expect chores for you where will I go for food!’
‘If you’re going to stay in the village you’ll have to do my chores.’
‘I’ll do them when I’ve built my oven? I can’t do your work just for the sake of staying in the village’.
‘Then don’t just get out of the village’ (3).

The above conversation makes it clear that Pandit Udaibhan wanted from Bhungi to work for him without any payment, and at the same time he did not allow her to make her oven which is the source of her livelihood. He even once doesn’t think that how could she live without any food. He demands her work for him only on the bases that she lives in this village. Work for him is the payment for living in the village. In this state it is not possible for Bhungi to work for Panditji and for Panditji it is not possible to let her live in the village so he gives the order to his servants, “Go get a pile of leaves right away and set fire to the whole thing: we’ll show her how to make an oven” (3).

A person can’t save himself from the God’s justice. In the vain of his power and wealth, he forgets humanity and humiliates others. But he forgets that God is all powerful keeping an eye on everything. God has its own way of reprimand. Bhungi also believes in the justice of God. She says to Pandit Udaibhan, “Maharaj, you’re not afraid of anybody but you ought to fear God...For your own good, I’m telling you, don’t torment poor people, don’t be the death of me” (3).

Bhungi doesn’t want to leave the village and Pandit Udaibhan doesn’t allow her to rebuild her oven. Thus humiliation on this matter of Bhungi by Pandit becomes a part her life , when she cannot endure more she decides to end her life. And at last, when her shack is set on fire then she has left no way and hope of life. She gives herself in the hands of fire and sacrifices her life. But Pandit Udaibhan also can’t remain unaffected. With the death of Bhungi, the flames rose very high and furious. The flames have engulfed everything which came in its way- some peasant’s hut, Panditji’s barn, and then his splendid mansion. In editor note of the book *Might is Right The Logic of To-Day* editor IKatja Jlane writes , “Man and all his laws are subject to the mercilessly indomitable Laws of Nature”(XIV).

A person who tortured other people forgets that he is also a person and the God above can’t spare him. The tortures which Panditji inflicted on Bhungi made his life also miserable. In this way, we find that there is no struggle or revolt by villagers for Bhungi. Ranger Rebeard in Introductory *Might is Right The Logic of To-Day* of writes about the why a ordinary feels scares to talk about his secrets or fears about the society in open , “From his infancy he has been deliberately subjected to a continuous external pressure, especially designed to coerce his understanding into strict accord with pre-arranged views of moral, political or religious 'duty.' He has not been permitted one moment of real mental liberty”(11). This also shows that weak are exploited because they are not united. Secondly, Bhungi lost her life on the hand of Pandit a man belong to upper crust of society. Premchand very sharply or cunningly portrayed the relationships keeping in mind the Indian background and sensibilities. This story revolves around two a weak woman and a powerful man. But on the other side it is the two faces of society that is

‘Have’ and ‘Haves Not’. Premchand twisted this story by adding the powerful hand of God. Here he acts like romantic and considers Nature is all powerful. In case of Bhungi nature has taken the revenge and set everything on fire. Thus her revenge has been taken by the nature and everyone witness it. Rekha Sigi rightly comments on Premchand style, “Premchand had the courage and will power to understand risk” (63).

The other story which is in discussion in the present paper is *Garib Ki Hai*. The story takes place in a village named Chandpur. In this village Munshi Ramsevak resides who is a rich man. He is a rich so he has every right to exploits the poor. He always sits under a Neem tree on a bench which is an open court and the people followed him to this open court. However he never argued any case but people called him ‘Attorney’. He does nothing for his livelihood but spend the money of others who keep their money with him. Earlier there were no banks so money by the villagers has been kept by any reputed person of the village. This is also one of the means to exploit the poor who trust them and kept their saving with them. Some of them died before they exhaust their safe money. In this way, the money is spent by the keeper. This was one of the key features of then rural life of Indian society. In this manner he spends other money and fools them by not returning them on time.

The helpless wants to keep their money to a wealthy and reputed man for the security of the money. But this type of person always exploits these helpless people. The widows of the village put their money to Munshiji and the old men of the village who have the fear that their son will take away their money also handed their money in the custody of Munshiji. On the contrary Munshiji is that type of person who engulfed the money of these helpless people. It is clear from this line of the story, “Once any money went into his fist it forgot the way to come out again” (50). Munga is a Brahmin widow who lives in that village. Her husband was a sergeant in the Native Indian battalion in Burma. He died during in a battle. For his service, the government had given Rs. 500 to her widow, Munga. It is not safe to keep the money with her for Munga as there is a fear of theft. So she handed over all her money to Munshi Ramsavek and gets a little amount for her expenditure every month. For several years, Munshiji performs his duty well with the thought that Munga would die soon. Gradually, he finds that Munga became old but she has no sign of death. He thought that she would spend all the money till her death. He wants to usurp her remaining money. So one day, he says, “Munga, are you going to die, or aren’t you! Or just say straight out that you’ll look after your own funeral fee” (50). At this Munga realised that she is cheated and duped by the Munshi. This is the harsh reality which is being conveyed by the words of Munshi. It is very hard for her to face this betrayal by him. This left over money is the only means of her livelihood.

An illiterate person is more exploited than a literate. Munga is an illiterate. Munshiji managed his account book according to his wish because the people of the village can’t read and write. So nobody can challenge his account book or check them. According to his account book, Munga has spent all her money. On the contrary, Munga knows that her half money which is Rs. 250 remains still and she says to Munshiji, “You’ve taken Rs. 250 rupees of mine but I won’t let you keep a *piece* of it” (50). But how she can prove it? She is a widow and nobody can trust her against a respectable man of the village like Munshiji. Before the Panchayat, Munshi Ramsevak who is very articulate, addressed the people as friends and said, “You are all noble and devoted to the truth. I bow to you all. I am grateful to the core to you for your generosity and mercy, your charity and love. Do you people think I really took the money of this unfortunate widow!” (50). All the people present in the panchayat says unanimously, “No, no! you could not do such a thing”! (50). Munshiji is a man of reputation so all the people agreed with him. But not even a

single person speak a word against him. Munshiji attracted all the people of Panchayat through his decorated speech, “If you all agree that I’ve stolen her money, then there will be nothing left for me except to drown myself...Am I so petty as to steal a widow’s money!” (50). All the people affected by his speech agreed with him and said, “No, no, you couldn’t do such a thing!” (50). Munga becomes helpless because of this injustice. Nobody believes her. What could she do before the decision of the Panchayat? She said to herself, “If I’m not to get it here, then all right, I won’t, but I’ll get it back in heaven” (51). But what could she do to Munshiji? In this condition she has lost her mental balance. She has left her hut and wandered in a cremation ghat along the river. She behaves very frantically that’s why all the villagers afraid of her. The people of the village named her ‘the local mad-woman’. In the words of R.Mahendran in “A Critical Note on a Short Story of Premchand *The Holy Panchayat*” writes, “ It is a pitiable condition in our nation not only in the period of Premchand but even today. The old lady thinks that the Panchayat may settle her problem. So she approaches everyone in the village to call for the Panchayat. She receives only advice from them but no one comes forward to help her”(200).

Munshiji’s son Ramgulam was also like him. He is very cruel. All the people of the village afraid from Munga in her mad state but he tried his best to torture her. Carrying the village dogs with him, clapping his hands, he followed Munga until she would flee from the village. In her madness, she sits alone and talks to herself for hours and turn her face to Munshiji’s house and cried, “I’ll drink your blood” (51). In her madness, Munga wanders with cries and shrieks. By this behaviour of Munga , Munshiji has to think sometime, “We may not be afraid of human justice but the fear of God’s justice resides in every man’s heart” (51). One midnight Munga come before Munshiji’s house. She cries from outside. Munshiji and his wife Nagina seems terrified from this. In the morning, the villagers surround the home of Munshi . Ramgulam, the son of Munshiji crossed all the limits of humanity when he drops cow dung on Munga. She has completely covered with it. The villagers criticised Ramgulam by saying, “This is Munshi Ramgulam’s door where you can expect such fine manners!” (52). On the following day, Munga died at the doorstep of Munshi Ramsevak. Astbury Jesse writes in “Exploitation and Conscience in Premchand”, “ The same people who ridicule her in her pursuit of justice, knowing that she had, in fact, been cheated, are now compelled to act when, and only when, there is an ostensible sign that propriety has been neglected” (267).

A person who inflicts pain to others can’t live in peace himself. After the death of Munga, Munshi Ramsevak and his family have lost the peace of mind. They realise that Munga is present everywhere with them. With the death of Munga on the doorstep of Munshi people stop any interaction with them. Their family become victim in everyone’s eye. They meet with miserable end. Nagina, Munshiji’s wife died in her fear of Munga. Munshiji left the place and after months returned in a guise of saint and that very day his house is put on fire. His son Ramgulam has caught by the police for setting fire in the granary of his owner for whom he works. He has sent to the reformatory at Chinar. In this way the exploiter and the exploited both faced the bitterness of life. In this story also the supernatural element played the very role where the fear of the Munga spirit deterred the spirits of Munshi’s family.

People like Pandit Udaibhan in *Vidhwans* and Munshi Ramsevak in *Garib Ki Hai* becomes blind in the intoxication of power and wealth. They are always ready to exploit the poor. There was no loss of anything if Pandit Udaibhan allowed Bhungi to rebuild her oven. But only to maintain his fear in the hearts of the people he does it. To make his false reputation he orders to destroy her shack. Because of his decision Bhungi has to enter in fire to sacrifice her life. But how can he avoid from God’s justice. Munshi Ramsevak in *Garib Ki Hai* had made his

profession to usurp the money of the poor and helpless people like widows and old men of the village. He cheated these innocent people. But the usurping of Munga's money took away his peace of mind and it resulted in his and his wife's death. Astbury Jesse rightly comments, "As in "The Power of a Curse" Premchand seems to pass a harsher judgment upon the society of the village than he does upon the main characters"(268).

The very title of both the stories is relevant. *Vidhwans* which is catastrophe presents that how the *Vidhwans* of Bhungi's shack becomes the Vidhwans (destruction) of peasant's huts and Pandit Udaibhan's fields and Mansion. *Garib Ki Hai* which is *Power of Curse* presents how Munshiji and his family-his wife Nagina and his son Ramgulam suffers because of the curses of Munga, a helpless and old widow. Here this saying is relevant 'who sows the thorns can't get the flowers'.

R.Mahendran writes, "Premchand exalts his readers by his innate idealism and goodness. His works are a force for good in society. He favoured right and justice, and decried wrong and injustice. His descriptions of life are realistic, but he saw the conflict between the forces of good and evil. He had faith that ultimately the truth would triumph over wrong"(203). Through both the stories Premchand portrays the undercurrents of Indian society especially women.

Workcited

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