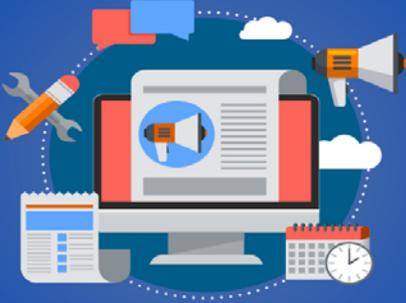


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Analyzing Dalit Characters in Short Stories of Premchand

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Abstract:

Who would narrate a tale better, ‘a victim’, ‘an oppressor’, or ‘a person who distances him/herself from the incident to give a fresh perspective’? Often criticized for being biased, can a non-dalit writer do justice to his Dalit characters? This paper analyses three short stories by Premchand to explore these questions as well as raise new ones. The pre-independence India was a broken country, marred by its socio-cultural differences. Humanists and reformers wrote and educated people about these rifts that were tearing the country apart; but how far were these measures effective? Did we develop as a country free from social evils, or are we still stuck in an age-old orthodox mindset that wouldn’t let us grow? The paper analyses the minds of those characters imagined by the writer, as well as the writer himself, to seek the answers that we still need to ponder upon.

Keywords: Dalit, Black-panther movement, casteism, freedom, dehumanize, Premchand.

A certain ‘class-consciousness’, in Dalit literature can be traced to the 1950s and 60s Marathi literature. It drew attention to a largely ignored section, which had often been pitied for the kind of treatment it had received at the hands of the so called ‘upper caste’ of Indian hierarchical caste system. Inspired by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the Black Panthers in the United States, the Dalit Panthers was founded in 1972. The founders of this organization sought liberation against the Hindu caste system. Their constant battle for freedom and equality for the Dalits is reflected in their style of writing, which is aggressive, vocal and scathingly honest. One of the

founders, Namdeo Dhasal is praised by Chitre, as having such works that reflects freedom, not bound by the traditional sacred style that appear to deliberately divide “caste culture from its non-caste contemporary” (Chitre, *Poet of the Underworld* 24). A voice that demanded years of oppression to be felt and studied, they expressed freedom and diversity through “unique ethnolinguistic cocktail. Namdeo does not shy from making this his poetic register and identity. He is clear that he would meet literature on his own terms” (Chitre, *Poet of the Underworld* 10). This sort of writing style is hailed as the style of those with ‘dalit-consciousness’ or *Dalit-chetna*. Those who have faced oppression first hand and thereby are giving an accurate account of their lived experience.

Before the advent of this dawn however, a “*Kayastha*” (an upper class) writer Premchand, is often criticized for trying, but eventually (and possibly deliberately) misrepresenting the lived experiences of the lower castes. Some decades before the ‘Panthers’, Premchand did present a pitiful picture of those at the receiving end of the caste hierarchy, but was it an accurate representation of their true nature? Can a man detached and unexperienced about the oppression he is writing about, give an accurate account of it? One such accusation of the “defaming” and “fictionalised” portrayal of dalits, is in the story ‘Kafan’, chiefly based on the author’s portrayal of the father and son as lazy bums who refuse to do ‘honest’ labour; rather than subscribing to the ethical code of living by dignified and honest labour, they resort to criminal practices such as stealing food, abusing other people’s generosity and living on the charity and philanthropy of their neighbours. They are so dehumanized, that they are literally living at the outskirts of the village, resorting to begging and petty thievery to make ends meet. Toral Gajrajwala remarks, “The pair turn to such an option, it seems, because they sense the immutability of their condition, as well as the immutability of cultural practice (no doubt, the two are intimately related). Ghisu and Madhav are the most salient examples of what Dalit critics read as Premchand 's irrevocable *kāyastha* (effectively, “upper-caste”) perspective; despite his attempts at a benevolent social realism that would incorporate the world of the peasant into the literary sphere, his upper-caste status permitted him to see the Dalit only as objects of pity and disdain.”

The second and graver crime that Ghisu and Madho are culpable of is their almost inhumane insensitivity towards Budia’s pain and their eventual unrepentant behavior after her “death”. They blatantly and quite shamelessly ‘drink’ the money away thereby denying her of even a respectable last rite. Yet another such accusation comes from the plight of Dukhi, in “Sadgati”,

Dukhi, the tanner slaves away to his ignoble death believing in the social logic that working for the Brahmin Pandit Ghasiram will earn him deliverance (freedom from the veritable cycle of birth and death). We are also reminded of Gangi in “Thakur ka Kuan”, who shows exceptional courage and goes to fill water at a ‘Thakur-owned’ well, but has to run for her life at the slightest hint of noise. So internalized and fixated is the terror which overpowers her that she does not even think of asking the help of Thakur women who are right there, and are visibly complaining against their own plight in the household. The thought does not even cross her mind because, it is the unthinkable, the Thakurs belong to another ethereal world that she dares not approach.

We encounter another ‘well’, in Arjun Dangle’s collection ‘A Corpse in the Well’, when Shankarrao Kharat narrates how his father, a ‘mahar’, was forced to go into the well to recover a corpse. The father stood his ground firmly and absolutely refused to move as recovering the corpse from the well is not his job. He leaves his ground, not just because his son is threatened, but also because he understands that the roots of this discrimination run too deep and are far too powerful to be challenged by him alone. In Dalit literature we often encounter such extraordinary cases of rebelliousness or outbursts of anger against this long incriminating system. Omprakash Valmiki in ‘Jhoothan’ fondly remembers his mother stoutly refusing to carry leftovers home for her children. It is surprising, because more often than not, we have read accounts of the downtrodden being fed on far worse than leftovers. Dangle himself, in the introduction to his book says, “How deep a chasm there is between the prose of mainstream Marathi literature and that of Dalit literature!” (Dangle, *Corpse in the Well* viii). He also comments, “Dalit poetry is the impassioned voice. It can be seen standing up against subjugation, humiliation and atrocities and can be heard singing, intoxicated of the dawn of a new life” (Dangle xi).

What Premchand lacks is this empathy or ‘Dalit consciousness’, also often referred to as ‘dalit chetna’. He tries to make up for the same by using extreme sympathy towards the treatment of the downtrodden. He is essentially a humanitarian who tries in his own way to draw the attention of his readers towards the rampant injustice. His was a voice for the unrepresented - the untouchables, the minority groups, the rejected, when there weren’t many. Perhaps in order to agitate his brahminical readership, Premchand deliberately prevented himself from inflicting poetic justice. The lack of punitive action does leave the reader in a state of discompose because injustice has reigned. The unfortunate characters do not indeed find the salvation that they so humbly work for. Gangi’s sick husband Jokhu will undeniably drink putrid water in spite of her

herculean efforts. Dukhi works tirelessly, but is left for dead with no one to preside over the daughter's marriage that prompted him to approach the Brahmin in the first place. Thus, labour doesn't offer a marginalised Dalit labourer, outside the structures of organized capitalism, any route that would assimilate him within the folds of "civil society". His untouchability remains irreversible. Work, no matter how dignified cannot alleviate the stigmatised existential sufferings of the dalit, nor can it erase the social status and position one is born into. Thus, comes the inequitable distribution of wages; a Brahmin performing religious rites gets "thousands of rupees" because it offers the heavenly certitudes of unearthly rewards in after life while a tanner performing menial labor is ostracized. Thus, brahminical orthodoxy has a monopoly over the social signification of labour- while the brahmin's labour brings transcendental rewards in heaven; a dalit's labour fails to rescue him from the state of economic dispossession and social invisibility. Only when "purified" by working for a Brahmin like Pandit Ghasiram can he find 'deliverance'. Dukhi has internalized the caste hierarchy and justifies his punishment (when a piece of burning coal hurts him) as a given by gods for his degraded birth. His absolute 'dehumanization' is complete, when his dead body is dragged into the jungle where animals feast on it. He too, like Budhiya is denied the privilege of a 'last rite'.

In *Kafan*, the two crooks Ghisu and Madho are in stark contrast to any such character ever created. They are no longer pitiable, deprived humble hardworking souls, they consciously choose a lifestyle that earns them ridicule and disgust. The focus on the low caste shows Premchand's involvement with socialism. The two crooked protagonists are almost the opposites of earlier Premchand characters who were honest, simple and gullible people concerned by poverty or injustice but who overcome the indifference of their social surroundings by preserving the innate ethical goodness of their heart and social sympathy. Perhaps this was a conscious choice too. Ghisu and Madho's abjuring of work is a conscious choice; a refusal to be exploited by a rigid and inhuman system of division of labour which promises heavenly rewards for earthly labour. It seems their rebellion is deliberate. They understand that they will live and die in poverty as have others before them. They are landless agricultural labour, falling outside organised systems of labour laws. They act as "free agents" rather than as unquestioning followers of the upper caste. They refuse work if they are not in the mood and if the terms of labour are not agreeable. Thus, their ability to enjoy as opposed to the drudgery of bonded labour can be seen as their ideological liberation from a caste deterministic world order. They cannot be "compelled" by the upper caste

to work. Omprakash Valmiki finds faults with Premchand's characterization of dalit men in Kafan in "*Premchand: Contexts of the Dalit Debate*"; he observes that the author wrongly conflates Dalits with farmers and peasants who face economic exploitation but who do not suffer from specific problems of caste inequality. Valmiki writes that "on one hand he reprimands dalit characters drinking alcohol and eating meat. The characters of Ghisu and Madho are chamaars but the story does not raise any issue that is related to the problems of chamaars and dalits. There is only a detailed depiction of their idleness and heartlessness. Many critics say that Ghisu and Madho are representatives of the agricultural class that is known as the lumpen proletariat". Thus, according to him, Premchand ignores the caste related abuse faces by dalits. Premchand puts farmers, labourers and dalits in the same category. Gajrajwala too comments on a similar vein, the dalits are represented as- "Premchand's infamous father-son pair from the 1936 story "Kafan" ("The Shroud"), using the "timeless" literary figures to characterize the material reality of a people. This is a strange rhetorical move given the controversial status the father of Hindi letters holds in Dalit literature. In 2004 members of the Bharatiya Dalita Sahitya Akademi in Delhi publicly burned copies of Premchands 1925 novel *Rangbhūmi* for its representation of Dalits, citing it as "unreal," "dishonorable," and "despicable." Premchand, a towering figure in the history of the Indian novel, has also been critiqued for his sententious, pitiful representation of the Dalit. The characters Ghisu and Madhav are unique, however, because of their unusually exploitative interpretation of the "timelessness" of their social condition."

The second crime against the dead Budhiya too seems like another individualistic deliberate attempt to undermine the same caste system. Bhudhiya has to die because she possesses the same exalted sense of righteousness that the protagonists of the other stories do. Therefore, she has to die while Ghisu and Madho live. Budhiya's funeral is the symbolic culmination of the social doctrine that the upper-class advocates. A ritual farewell is supposed to bring heavenly contentment to a dalit woman. The absurdity of this logic is brought to the forefront when Madho points out the corrupted logic and the injustice of a religious social system which emphasizes on an elaborate ritualistic celebration of death over life. "What an unjust custom. She who didn't have tattered rags to cover her body while alive must now have a new shroud". It's interesting to know that Ghisu and Madho also let go of this ritual obligation of cremating Budhiya's body as she remains uncremated even when the story ends.

Premchand understood that the historical and material conditions of poverty and untouchability have dehumanised the Dalits. Rather than upholding the illusion of a just state and a morally uncorrupted citizenry, he shows the disillusionment which the marginalised section suffers from. Premchand's earlier "good" and "suffering" characters were defined by the ideology they represented which was to find moral truth in suffering. The chameleons of *Kafan* are not idealistic, they do not swallow the scriptural logic of suffering as ennobling. Their world view is cynical, practical and realistic. There is ambivalence in the way Premchand presents them and the moral condemnation which their actions invite. Premchand gives a primacy to poverty over untouchability. Caste and their attendant problems are, according to Dalit thinking, entirely separate from economic inequality, which is a symptom of social oppression rather than its cause. Premchand was a follower of Gandhi and not Ambedkar, this is significant because according to Dalit writers Dalit consciousness was inspired solely by Ambedkar. Gandhian thought subsumed Dalit heterogeneity within a nationalist unitarianism moral virtue and sympathy. Virtue cannot survive in the world of Kafan where brute forces of physical appetite, hunger and deprivation exist. The elemental necessity of feeding oneself overcomes the moral obligations and gets the better off social sympathy. Therefore, his protagonists, although fictional and probably not justifiable in the eyes of those who have suffered atrocities first-hand, do raise fundamental questions about the condition of the society that Premchand represented.

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