

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165



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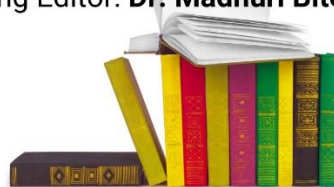
AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

**16** YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

**VOL. 16 ISSUE-1, FEBRUARY 2025**

Editor-In-Chief: **Dr. Vishwanath Bite**  
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**ISSN 2278-9529**  
**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
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## **Marriage as a Site of Struggle: Nirmala's Negotiations with Patriarchy**

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14973976>

**Article History:** Submitted-30/01/2025, Revised-07/02/2025, Accepted-23/02/2025, Published-28/02/2025.

### **Abstract:**

The 20th-century progressive author Munshi Premchand wrote the masterpiece *Nirmala*, a key piece of feminist literature. Despite being a fundamental aspect of Indian civilization, marriage is nonetheless a difficult aspect of life. The nation is alarmed by the growing problems against women. As a writer, Premchand has painted a vivid image of Indian women's predicament. This essay explores marriage's history, marital issues, and the patriarchal mentality of the country's populace. Such papers are written to raise awareness of the problem.

**Keywords:** Marriage, Patriarchy, Domestic Violence, Premchand, *Nirmala*.

### **Introduction**

The institution of marriage is socio-religious. In India, parents are expected to arrange for their children's marriages, particularly those of their daughters. In Indian society, being single is viewed as a disgrace. In India, parents or other family members arrange most marriages. Customary rites are performed to solemnize marriages. Religions view marriage as permanent and sacred. Hindus view it as a union for this life and all future ones. Separation, divorce,

remarriage, and extramarital affairs have all been denigrated. Hindu marriages have traditionally included dowries since the beginning of time. To provide a sizeable dowry for their daughters' marriages, parents spend their entire life earnings. Dowry demands are the root cause of social ills like suicide, homicide, and marital abuse. A researcher stated dowry system is, "one of the residues of evils of bourgeoisie culture" (Basnet 4).

In *Nirmala*, the title character's father, a lawyer, arranges for her to marry Bhuvanmohan Sinha. Because a younger daughter is also getting married, her mother does not want to spend a lot of money on the wedding. However, Nirmala's mother is left with little money and two daughters to marry after her father is killed by a criminal he assisted in convicting. The Sinha family leaves the arrangement, and Nirmala, who is barely fifteen, marries an elderly widower. She makes an effort to fulfill her responsibilities, but her envious husband quickly starts to think that she is seeing one of her stepsons, which causes a crisis and tragedy.

### **Marriage as a Source of Pride**

Marriage is "a socially sanctioned union of male and female or as a secondary institution devised by society to sanction the union and mating of male and female for purposes of a) establishing a household, b) entering into sex relations, c) procreating, and d) providing care for the offspring" (Gillin et al.).

In Indian families, marriage is traditionally regarded as a sacred institution. But frequently, it leaves people like me wondering what, except the rituals, is sacred about it. Even though divorce rates have been rising over time, people still think that marriages are built in heaven. In culture, marriage is regarded as the most significant event in a person's life, particularly for women, who are perceived as having no worth or existence if they do not marry. This stage of life has always

been inevitable and inescapable. Additionally, the age at which a person should get married is governed by norms that vary by society. Many Indian families view marriage as more of a social obligation and a source of pride, placing greater value on the size of the wedding and the groom's family than on the couple's sentiments. Additionally, it is more of a discharge of responsibility and load for the middle class and poorer segments of society. "Inequality and patriarchy are the two elements that never fail to live along with marital relationships from the day a match gets fixed" (Madireddy). To ensure their social and financial stability, women are nevertheless compelled to marry. For women, marriage is just one more example of "intersectionality" (Madireddy). In an attempt to follow their instincts and marry their daughters to the best families they have encountered, the majority of the women's families are seduced, who then seduce their daughters in a calculated marriage alliance. They just expect the woman to accept it as her fate, which cannot be altered when a man proves to be unsuitable with her after marriage. Compromises are inevitable in any good relationship, but it's crucial to ensure that neither party's uniqueness is compromised in the process. A large percentage of women are compelled to marry due to societally ingrained ideas about the "appropriate time" or psychological influences.

In India, child marriage was very common in the olden days; even in the present state, a few child marriages are happening. In the novel *Nirmala*, Premchand emulated the crisis that happens because of child marriage.

In India, child marriages had been banned as early as 1894, when Mysore State forbade arranging or helping to arrange the marriages of girls who had not completed 8 years of age. The Baroda Early Marriage Prevention Act of 1904 stipulated 12 years as the minimum age of the bride. Indore State in 1918 prescribed 14 years for boys and 12 years for girls as the minimum age for marriage. The British government passed the Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929,

popularly known as the Sarda Act, which prescribed 14 years for girls and 18 years for boys as the minimum age for marriage. Later, after independence, the Child Marriage Restraint Act was amended in 1949 and 1978. According to the amendment of 1978, the minimum age has been enhanced to 18 for girls and 21 years for boys. Further, the Child Marriage Restraint Act was replaced by the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 (Bhagat 2).

Any marriage that takes place before the legal age of majority is deemed a crime under the law that forbids child marriages. India still has a high rate of early marriages despite these regulatory initiatives. Given the strong correlation between marriage age and fertility, demographers are primarily interested in women's marriage ages. If contraception is not used, early marriage increases the number of children born to a woman. Marriage age, however, is more significant than demographics since it also affects women's position and life opportunities, such as access to education, financial security, and well-being.

The major issues of the Indian marriage system were child marriage and dowry. Dowry was paid in 95% of marriages in rural India (Pandey). The moment of marriage is one of the most important financial transactions for households worldwide. In many parts of Europe and Asia, dower, or the transfer of wealth from a bride's household to her groom's, has long been a feature of marriages. It is now most commonly practiced in South Asia, where over 80 percent of marriages in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan include dowry payments (Chiplunkar and Weaver 1). In 1983, India introduced a tough new law—Section 498A—to curb dowry deaths, but thousands of brides continue to be murdered every year. Police recorded 6,795 dowry deaths—or, on average, one every 77 minutes. The numbers are a 10.92% improvement over 2016 when police registered 7,628 dowry deaths.

## **Violence against Women in India**

Globally, women face epidemic levels of physical, sexual, and psychological assault. It affects every socioeconomic class, religion, race, and ethnicity. Violence against women violates their human rights in a variety of ways, including domestic abuse and rape as a weapon of war. Women's standing in India has seen significant changes over millennia. Women have held important positions in India, including President, Prime Minister, Speaker of the Lok Sabha, and Leader of the Opposition. Women in India continue to face several social difficulties.

The National Commission for Women (NCW) registered 28,811 complaints of crime against women last year and about 55 percent were from Uttar Pradesh. The highest numbers of complaints were received in the right to dignity category that involves harassment other than domestic violence, and it stood at 8,540, according to NCW data. This was followed by 6,274 complaints of domestic violence. Dowry harassment complaints stood at 4,797, molestation complaints at 2,349, police apathy against women complaints at 1,618, and rape and attempt to rape complaints at 1,537, the data showed. In 2023, of the 28,811 complaints, 6,304 were related to domestic violence. In 2021, domestic violence complaints accounted for 6,633 out of 30,864 cases. In 2022, the number of complaints rose to 30,957, including 6,970 domestic violence cases. (PTI)

Girls are particularly susceptible to being coerced into marriage at an early age. They are, "suffering from a double vulnerability: both for being a child and for being female" (Chellamuthu). The most common violent crime against women in India has always been domestic violence, which is typically documented under the legal heading of cruelty committed by a spouse or his family members. In 2021, police received complaints from 137,956 women—

which breaks down to about one every four minutes. It's an increase of 27% from 2016 when 110,434 women sought police help (Pandey). The World Health Organization reports that one in three women worldwide experience gender-based violence, and the figures for India are comparable. This type of violence is not exclusive to India.

### **Premchand: A Social Scholar**

Premchand's guardianship and affiliation with the type of literary movement that was emerging in the early 1930s make clear his commitment to writings that are purposeful and socially important. The term "progressive literature" was coined to describe this trend. When the All-India Progressive Writers' Association had its inaugural conclave in Lucknow in 1936, Premchand gave "the progressives" his full support. He was so thorough in his delivery of the presidential address at AIPWA that it ended up serving as the de facto manifesto for the subcontinent's progressive literary movement. His 1936 AIPWA presidential lecture served as a kind of beacon for the entire generation of Indian authors in the decades that followed.

According to Premchand, literature must support the goal of "spiritual and moral" societal guidance. He expresses a progressive opinion of Indian writing, holding that any piece of literature that lacks any societal "utility" ought to be disregarded. He defined the social value of literature as its capacity to arouse readers' curiosity and inspire a desire to question established social conventions, including its oppressive caste and class structures. "Good literature is judged by the sharpness of its perception, which stirs our feelings and thoughts into motion" (Singh 34).

Literature should be as beneficial as other priceless material and immaterial artifacts in life, according to Premchand, whose primary goal is to mold the reader's mentality. He upholds that the religion's primary tools are reward, retribution, coercion, and terror. Since it was produced

for the benefit of social and political elites and to justify the blatantly oppressive social, economic, and political order, any art produced on this foundation ought to be in decline. Avoiding the unpleasant aspects of human existence does not equate to beauty. Readers of exceptionally great literature can bravely confront the harsh facts of human existence.

The literature that does not arouse in us a critical spirit or satisfy our spiritual and intellectual needs, which is not 'force-giving' and dynamic, which does not awaken our sense of beauty, and which does not make us face the grim realities of life in a spirit of determination, has no use for us today. It cannot even be termed as literature. (Singh 35)

### **Patriarchy in Nirmala**

The Hindi literary journal Kavyavistar published *Nirmala* for the first time in 1927. Like many of Premchand's writings, this book expresses his profound worries about societal issues, particularly the status of women in Indian society. Patriarchy is a key issue in Premchand's *Nirmala*, and it has a significant impact on the characters' lives and the plot's development. The novel is set in colonial India and depicts the harsh social systems of the era, particularly the treatment of women.

The protagonist, *Nirmala*, is a young lady trapped in the repressive grip of a patriarchal society. Her life is shaped by the expectations and restrictions that women faced at the time. Her father, who arranges her marriage to an older man, represents the traditional standards that shape women's lives. Her spouse, who is described as unsuitable for her, contributes to *Nirmala*'s suffering by viewing her as an object to be controlled and used according to his whims rather than a person with autonomy. The economic dependence that women like *Nirmala* endure is also



criticized in the book. In this perspective, patriarchy encompasses not just gender roles but also the inability to support oneself financially, which traps women in dangerous situations. Even the most well-meaning individuals are frequently constrained by social norms. For example, Nirmala's father feels he is doing what is best for her by getting her married, even though it has a negative emotional and psychological impact on her. Nirmala's lack of agency in a patriarchal society is exemplified by her incapacity to express her wishes or make decisions about her future. Her independence is restricted by patriarchal ideals that underlie the demands made of her as a woman, especially the focus on her sacrifice, obedience, and purity. Bhuvanmohan Sinha, the son of Bhalchandra Sinha, and Nirmala, the fifteen-year-old daughter of Udayabhanu Lal, are set to get married. Nirmala's father wanted to spend as much money as he could to make the marriage special, but her mother wasn't prepared for it. Her concern was justified because she also wished to save money for her second daughter's wedding. Dowries are an essential component of Hindu marriages in India, and those who do not give them are less guaranteed to ensure their daughters' welfare than those who do. Following the marriage of their first daughter, one must give the same, almost the same, or slightly greater dowry for the successive daughters. Considering these detrimental yet significant sociocultural societal systems, she attempted to convince her spouse that he ought to set aside some money for their second daughter Krishna's wedding. Mr. Lal became enraged by this altercation and decided to teach Nirmala's mother, Kalyani, a lesson by leaving his old clothing by the river and traveling to the next town to convince her that he had drowned in the water. His rival, Mr. Mathayi, whom he had previously tried in court and had punished, killed him in the interim. Following Mr. Lal's passing, Shinas' true nature became evident when they declined the marriage proposal. Examining how the dowry, a societal ill, is ingrained in and affects the institution of marriage becomes relevant in

this context. At that time, she was wed to Totaram, who was twenty years her senior. Totaram's first wife gave birth to three sons: Mansaram, Jiyaram, and Siyaram. They were sixteen, twelve, and seven years old in succession. Totaram also had a fifty-year-old sister who was a widow. Despite Rukmini's jealousy, Nirmala gradually established relationships with her stepsons and gained acceptance in the family. She always showed her stepsons a lot of mother love. She was also quite popular with children. Rukmini detested this intimacy because she believed it would have undermined her standing in that household. As a result, she gave Totaram spicily detailed information about the intimacy between Nirmala and his oldest son, Mansaram, who was her age. He was transferred to reside in a hostel where he became ill as mistrust and jealousy increased. Given the situation, Nirmala was also obligated to keep quiet to avoid giving Totaram any more reason to disbelieve her. He gave his kid the greatest medical care available, but his lack of concern and Nirmala's seemingly callous actions made his health worse and made him lose all interest in life, which ultimately led to his death from tuberculosis. Totaram was devastated by the passing of the family's eldest son. He stopped practicing law. A daughter was born to Nirmala. Her relationship with her stepsons had become strained. One of them, Siyaram, stole all of her jewels from the house and fled. Ultimately, he killed himself out of dread of being apprehended by the authorities. Additionally, Totaram's third son fled home and became a Sanyasi. In his life, miseries compounded countless times, and there was no way out. When Totaram returns home one day after a fruitless search for his missing son, he becomes so frustrated that he lashes out at her, saying:

Was this the state of my home six years ago? You have destroyed my well-established home, uprooted my flourishing garden... I didn't bring you into this

house to have my whole world destroyed. I wanted to make my happy existence even happier. And this is the price I am paying. (Premchand 181)

It is claimed that Nirmala is the only cause of Totaram's unfortunate experiences. Since he had no control over her father's life or her marriage to an elderly man her father's age, she appears to be a guiltless lady. Although it appears that these are her family's natural disasters, the truth is different. The ruin of Totaram's family may have been caused by the silence of others, the patriarchal mentality, and the acceptance of those ill sociocultural laws of the community. After all these happenings, Nirmala could not survive; eventually, her life came to an end.

## **Conclusion**

Every person is deeply ingrained in patriarchy and gender-based duties; thus, it is vital to dismantle gender in all of its subtle manifestations. The degree of patriarchy in marriage has decreased as a result of the women who questioned the status quo and brought about change. Both men and women must take the initiative to end patriarchy in marriages. It must begin in childhood when equality must be taught to both males and girls. Instead of being compromised, women need to be urged to recognize their rights and value their dignity. The effects of domestic abuse may be more profound and far-reaching in real life. It is necessary to properly examine the correlation between the elements that lead to a specific type of domestic violence. India would be a much better place to live if this harassment could be stopped, as this would stop many forms of violence from hurting people or our society.

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