

Godan: A Mosaic of Cultural Studies

Dr. Bhawna N. Gadhvi

Assistant Professor,

D.K.V. Arts & Science College, Jamnagar.

bhawnagadhvi@gmail.com

Abstract:

Godan is a picture of Indian agrarian society where the interplay of power, culture and social hierarchy has been depicted. Munshi Premchand has drawn the various aspects of rural India in the novel. The analysis of the novel's incidents and occurrences reveals the power dynamics, class, gender, caste, culture, and belief system of the society. It depicts the struggle of Hori, the rebellious nature of Gobar, the exploitation of Selia, the dogmatic nature of Rai Saheb, the western values of Malti, the philosophical tone of Mr Mehta and many more aspects of the rural and urban culture. The present paper studies the novel as a perfect mosaic of cultural studies, as it shows the diverse aspects of the culture within the fabric of rural and urban society. The lifelong struggle of Hori exemplifies the hegemonic power of the culture where the economic, cultural and social aspects of the society have been dominated by the upper caste and elite class. It reveals the hegemony of culture and ideologies which largely govern the lives of the characters.

Keywords: Hegemony, Culture, Ideology, Alienation, Society, Hierarchy.

Introduction:

Munshi Premchand has created a picture of Indian rural society in Godan. A critical study of the novel through the lens of cultural studies proves it as a seminal work of this area where the interplay of power dynamics, class, caste, gender dominance, ingrained conventions, culture, faith, ideologies, social hierarchy and stratification has been projected through the multiple characters and their diverse struggle. It logically delineates the nexus between elite culture and political dominance, along with the culture of the poor villagers. On the canvas of the two adjacent villages named Semari and Belari, the whole society with diverse aspects of cultural studies has been painted. It narrates the struggle saga of an Indian peasant named Hori, dogmatic life of zamindar Rai Saheb, rebellious tone of youthful Gobar, the philosophical perspectives of Mr. Mehta, western outlook of Miss Malti, caste marginalization of Selia, community banishment of pregnant Jhunia, gender dominance and oppression through the character of Dhaniya, religious segregation of Matadin and economic traps of money lender. The novel serves as an important document of cultural studies. It answers the important question of how culture can affect the lives of people and how economic dominance plays a vital role in the definition of the culture as well. The paper examined the novel on the basis of the important research tool of the cultural studies, named culture and representation, class and economy, power and identity, societal conventions and ideologies. (Nayar,16)

In Cultural studies, as Pramod K. Nayar describes in his book entitled '*An Introduction to Cultural Studies*' (2023), culture is the mode of producing meanings and ideas, and the meanings are dominated by a power nexus. The meanings and ideas are controlled by the elite and upper class as they govern the economic ways, while the non-elite culture is considered mean and useless by the upper class. (Nayar, 4) Nayar has divided the culture into two sections: high or elite culture and mass or low culture. The elite class culture is regarded as high culture, as the economic resources and means are governed by the upper classes, while the common

culture of the masses is considered low culture. It is also important to note that culture is never fixed or static; on the contrary, it is always mutable or changeable. It is a matter of debate and discussion.

The critical study of the novel from the Cultural Studies' point of view proves that Premchand has covered all the important areas of the theory in his novel. He has shown hegemonic power of culture and ideologies of elite group in the characters of Rai Saheb and Datadin; a sense of alienation of factory worker in form of Gobar, problem of untouchability in form of the relation of Matadin and Selia, the miseries and subjugation of poor in form of Hori, gender discrimination and patriarchal dominance in form of female characters such as Dhaniya, Punia, Jhunia, Selia, Govindi, Rupa and Sona, and the mutable nature of culture in form of the transformation of Miss Malti from elite outlook into adaptation of social service. Namvar Singh, in his book entitled '*Premchand and Indian Society*' (2017), has compared the two villages of the novel, '*Godan*', named Semari and Belari, with Charles Dickens' novel entitled '*A Tale of Two Cities*' (1859). Both the villages depict dissimilar views of life; Semari illustrates the life of zamindar Rai Saheb, whereas Belari shows the execution of his zamindari system. The lives of both the villages can be understood in binary position only, as the exploitation of Hori can never be understood until the readers explore the lives of those who became the cause of his sufferings and hardships. (Namvar Singh, 152) Namvar Singh further articulates that Premchand has delineated the transformation of Matadin after the death of his son. Matadin finally conquers the battle of casteism and Brahmanical sense; he openly expresses his wish to live with Selia as a Chamar person because the Brahmin community is not accepting her. Additionally, the death of Hori at the end of the novel projects the decay of passivism and conventional ideologies, while the life of Dhaniya, who is fearless and rebellious, proves the shift of the ideologies. (Namvar Singh, 156) The incident denotes that a person can change their

culture, and can have disagreement or argument against the established perceptions. Hence, it proves that the novel can be considered a perfect example of cultural studies.

The paper critically studies the novel '*Godan*' (1936) on the basis of the following research tools of the theory of Cultural Studies.

Culture and Representation: -

Diverse socio-economic aspects of culture and society have been outlined through the major characters of the novel. The characters like Rai Saheb represent the elite class with cultural dominance and economic power. As Premchand describes Rai Saheb as a person to present elite culture in the following words, "Despite being a Nationalist, Rai Saheb had kept up social intercourse with officials; customary presents were made to them and fixed annuities provided to petty government servants. He loved literature and music and was fond of the theatre; he was a fluent speaker, a forceful writer and an excellent shot." (Premchand,10) He is the zamindar of the village and has a vital position in the society. He participated in the last Satyagraha Movement and went to jail also. He represents himself as a social worker and political leader who eventually cherishes the desire to possess political power and dominance. He organises the act of Ramlila on the auspicious occasion of Dusshera to prove himself a religious person. The dogmatic Rai Saheb does not wish to lose any chance to make money from the farmers, and he instructs Hori to collect more taxes from the farmers to adjust the expenses of the Ramlila festival, despite being aware of the fact that the farmers are not in a condition to pay high taxes due to the weak monsoon season. Rai Saheb is a wealthy zamindar who always strives to save his prestige in society; he does not hesitate to perform any manipulative task, such as marrying off his son and daughter to fulfil his political aspirations. He surrounds himself with people like lawyers, journalists, professors, doctors, bankers and factory owners who project the cultural hegemonic power. These so-called educated and sophisticated friends of Rai Sahib also epitomise his cultural representation. Being an elite

person, he surrounds himself with high culture people and pretends to be a representative and well-wisher of the popular culture of the villagers. He narrates his pain and agonies before Hori and asserts that even upper-class people like him have many difficulties in their lives. He says, “Don’t go by the look of things. Our names are big. But our deeds are small...” (Premchand,12)

The analysis of Rai Saheb's character delineates the importance of culture and representation. He demonstrates the cultural dominance which always seems to be allied with economic factors. The critical analysis of the character of Rai Saheb presents multiple aspects of cultural studies, such as the caste and class stratification, the power dynamics and culture, social disparity and conflict, etc. The diverse artefacts of his life portray him as a politically influential character with social hierarchy and religious dogmas. Raymond Williams writes in his book entitled ‘*Marxism and Literature*’(1977) that “Civilisation had produced not only wealth, order, and refinement, but as a part of the same process of poverty, disorder, and degradation. It was attacked for its ‘artificiality-its glaring contrast with a ‘natural’ or ‘human’ order.” (Raymonds,18)

On the contrary, the character of Hori represents the struggles and sufferings of the agrarian society and farmers. The narration of his lifelong hardships and predicaments is very pathetic. He strives to fulfil all his social roles and responsibilities with honesty. He imbibes the ingrained conventions of the societal structure and, without any rebellion, follows the commands of the zamindar, Rai Saheb. Though Dhaniya and Gobar oppose his submissiveness and passivism against the orders of Rai Saheb. The possession of the cow remained a dream for him as he could not sustain the cow for a longer period of time, as Heera, out of jealousy, poisons it. Instead of any complaints, he juggles all his resources to save Heera’s life from the Police. To stand firmly against any social convention is not his temperament, which again forced him to live with a plethora of miseries. He shelters impregnated Jhunja and faces hard outcomes. Under the impression of social prestige, he takes on debt to buy ornaments and other

gift articles for the marriage of Sona, but could not pay the debt within the time limit and is trapped lifelong. Consequently, he married another daughter, Rupa, to a man of his age. The trap of debt entangled his life, and he could not free himself from the challenging consequences. The debt system is mentioned in detail by Munshi Premchand in the following words, "...Hori was still in debt, some three hundred rupees, and the loan was gathering interest at the rate of a hundred rupees each day. Five years ago, he had borrowed sixty rupees from Mangru, the money-lender, to buy the bullock. He had already paid sixty rupees as interest. The loan of thirty rupees, which he had taken from Pandit Datadin to plant potatoes, had now jumped to a hundred. There are other loans too, and a part of the revenue is still unpaid. ...” (Premchand, 29) Hori is seen as the victim of the feudal system, religion, class, caste system, cultural dominance and exploitative roles of elite people. The life of Hori illustrates hardships and exploitation in spite of his genuine trust and faith in the conventions, ideologies, laws, and culture of the society. His resilience, hardship, societal pressure and faith can be compared with Pannalal Patel’s character Kalu in *‘Manvi ni Bhavai’* translated as *‘Endurance: A Droll Saga’* (1947). Like Kalu, Hori presents an indomitable willpower and a sense of responsibility and respect for societal conventions and culture. Multiple predicaments and sufferings could not dissuade him from the path of culture and ideologies. Instead of having many harsh arguments and quarrels with his wife, Dhaniya and son, Gobar, he stands firmly on the path of societal norms and ingrained systems. He is a good citizen of the village ecosystem who regularly pays all the tariffs and charges without raising any question or doubt; in this context, he can be compared to the picture of an unknown citizen portrayed by W.H. Auden in his eponymous poem. On the contrary, the character of Rai Saheb can be observed as the personification of vanity, the elite class, the upper caste and dogmatic values of the society. He projects himself as a religious person who believes in the ingrained ideal culture and works for the betterment of the farmers of his area. Eventually, he organises the festival of Ramlila on the occasion of

Dussehra, which would result in the enhancement of his reputation and fame to get victory in the next election. The belief system and culture have been manipulated to achieve political aspirations. Thus, both characters represent two shades of the culture, i.e. elite culture and low culture. Here, a pertinent question can be asked: how can the culture of the zamindar, Rai Saheb, be defined as an elite or high culture while the culture of the poor peasant is shown as mass or low culture? The answer to the question is found in the theory of Antonio Gramsci's concept of Cultural Hegemony, where the political dynamics are not only operated through power, but the cultural habits, media, education, etc., have been seen as important tools to govern the masses.

The issues of societal hierarchy, stratification, caste system, untouchability, marginalization and subjugation have been displayed through multiple incidents and different characters. The relation of Selia and Matadin exemplifies the harsh division of society and the problem of untouchability. Being a girl from the lower caste, she has never been allowed to touch his utensils and belongings. Neither has she been given any right over his farms and the crops in spite of her mammoth hard work and devotion towards him. The story denotes the plight of the lower caste and discrimination in the rural society, along with this, it also reveals the marginalised position of women. The condition of Dhaniya, Jhunia, Sona, Rupa, Saroj, Govindi, and Dulari exhibits the concern as narrated by Gayatri Spivak in her text entitled '*Can the Subaltern Speak?*' She articulates that the subaltern or marginalised section of society can not present their voice as their voice is always silenced by the authoritative parts and power dynamics of the society. The life incidents of the above-mentioned female characters personified the theory of Gayatri Spivak as none of them has been seen to overpower the social and gender discrimination. Their voices have been suppressed consciously. Hori never listens to Dhaniya, nor does Gobar pay any attention to Jhunia and her condition. Saroj, Sona and Rupa have never been given freedom to express their consent on the matter of their marriage.

Govindi is also neglected by her husband, while Dulari epitomises the pain and loneliness of widowhood. Thus, these characters are shown as a subaltern or marginalised section of the societal division.

Class and Economy: -

In the feudal system, the poor and marginalised have always remained the subject of misery and hardships. Hori has been shown as an exemplification of the suffering of the peasants. He passively follows all the conventions and ideologies without raising a voice against them. Here, Hori and Gobar can be observed as proletariats who endure the predicaments due to class struggle as defined in Marxism, which states that the whole society has been divided into two classes with class-struggle. The capitalists or bourgeoisie govern the poor labourer with laws, power and also through the set of ideologies. Due to certain belief systems and ideologies, the poor sufferers legitimise the oppressive rules and raise no voice against them. Consequently, they cannot get class-consciousness and self-realisation against exploitation. This aspect of theory is perfectly found in the characters of Hori and Gobar, but in different ways. Hori blindly believes in the ideologies and hence suffers throughout his life in diverse fields, such as Rai Saheb suppresses him on the approach of duties towards the system, whereas Datadin compels him in the name of religion. Hori epitomises the suffering of the proletariat without any self-realisation or rebellion. On the contrary, Gobar feels the negative aspect of the set of those ingrained conventions and opposes it, which proves his class-consciousness. Instead of self-realisation, Gobar cannot transform his condition and surroundings, and he migrated to Lucknow. His journey from a farmer to a labourer projects various facets of capitalism and urbanisation. The hours-long hard work, competition, oppression, miseries, agony and loneliness infuse a sense of alienation into him, which again transformed an agrarian lad into an alcoholic person who expresses his frustrations and agony on Jhunia through violence and

lust. Hence, Hori and Gobar both suffer yet in dissimilar ways, but due to established ideologies, sense of alienation, capitalism and social-stratification.

Power and Identity: -

The multiple incidents and events of the novel project the authority of power in diverse forms along with the identity in society. In spite of being calculative, manipulative and dogmatic, Rai Saheb portrays himself as a spiritual and religious person; he also narrates the story of his participation in the Freedom Movement. He possesses power which enhances his identity and respect in society. On the contrary, Hori could not change his identity as a helpless farmer due to the lack of power. Similarly, in the case of Matadin and Selia, Selia could not change her identity from a poor chamar girl to a brahmin's beloved, as she does not possess the power and wealth, while Datadin arranged multiple religious tasks to purify his son after the incident of putting a bone in his mouth by Selia's father to avenge Selia's humiliation and subjugation. After being migrated to Lucknow, Gobar cannot change his status, and he remains only a proletariat and alienated person in the industrialised urban area. Though he has class-consciousness, due to the lack of power, he remains unable to change his identity. The struggle faced by Dhaniya and Jhunia also strives to transform their identity as self-identified persons, yet all the endeavours proved a failure before the established, ingrained social system, which proves stronger than their place and identity in the society. Mr Mehta is keenly interested in the philosophy and upliftment of society, and contrasts his opinion with Miss Malti, who has westernised values and etiquette in the initial phase of her life. Both intellectuals have diverse identities and power in their lives. Here, Miss Malti gradually transformed herself to serve humanity without any biasness and discrimination against the poor and marginalised section of the city, i.e. people from the slum areas. Rai Saheb's son fights to shift his identity from a zamindar into a free individual who chooses his life and values over the legacy of his reputed zamindari system. Hence, it can be stated that power and identity shift have a close connection,

as one can transform one's identity if accompanied by power and financial stability. It has been noted that economic security is always followed by identity and power in the social hierarchy and stratification.

Societal conventions and Ideologies: -

The life of the poor farmers of the agrarian society has been clouded by the societal conventions and ideologies which never seem to support their life or any hope of betterment. Hori staunchly believes in the ingrained conventions, and he said, "If we don't wait on him, life will get from bad to worse. God has made us slaves, and we have to put up with our lot..." (Premchand,14). Gobar realised the trap of such a belief system and rebelled against the demand for more bailiffs. He opposed his father's beliefs and ideologies by saying that, "These are fancies, only to console the mind. God creates us all equal. Those who have power oppress the poor and become rich." (Premchand,16) Hori's argument exemplifies his faith when he accepts that "That's not true, son. It's God who creates the high and the low. One comes into wealth after a lot of penance. It's the fruit of the deeds of our past life. We sowed nothing, and we have nothing to reap." (Premchand,16)

Furthermore, the conversation between Hori and Damri reveals an old, ill societal convention which proves a misogynistic attitude of the people that beautiful women are often not faithful. Damri told Hori, "...God should give everything to a woman, but not good looks. There's no catching her once she's good-looking." (Premchand, 24) This sort of notion against women has been illustrated by John Donne also in his famous poem entitled "*Go and Catch a Falling Star*", in which he believes that it is impossible to find both the qualities of beauty and loyalty in a woman. It is a general conception or thinking in the Indian rural society that a woman must not quarrel with a man and must keep herself far away from a low-caste person. This conception is personified when Heera gets furious at Punia for her fighting with a lower caste man named Damri. (Premchand, 25) The fights and quarrels between spouses are a simple incident, but

ironically, physical violence from the husband is also considered normal and accepted by societal conventions. This type of incident has been frequently seen in the married life of Hori and Dhaniya, Heera and Punia, Gobar and Jhunia, etc. The novel has illustrated various societal conventions and ideologies through various characters and incidents.

Conclusion: -

Hence, the novel 'Godan' illustrates the diverse facets of society and its multiple aspects. It is a perfect example of the mosaic of cultural studies. The novel delineates different characters and their predicaments, subjugation, sufferings, discrimination, marginalisation, social hierarchical division, culture, faith, norms, and societal ingrained conventions in rural and agrarian society. Through diverse incidents and occurrences, the novel has showcased the connection between class and identity, the influence of cultural hegemony, the interplay of power dynamics, the plight of poor farmers in the reign of the zamindari system, and the consequences of the religious dogmatic belief systems. It has become an immortal saga to evaluate the Indian rural and urban society and the diverse aspects of its livelihood through the theory of cultural studies.

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