

Portrayal of Dalits in ‘The Shroud’

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Abstract

In the 20th Century India, caste and gender played a major role in forming one’s social identity. Amongst the people of various castes, Dalits were thought to be inferior in the society. Since the upper-caste people believed Dalits to be inferior, they treated Dalits in an inhumane manner. This social discrimination was challenged by Premchand in his stories. One such story is ‘Kafan’ through which Premchand tried to put forward the brutal social and political structures of a feudal-colonial society. Premchand made the use of callousness and ‘inhumanity’ of his major characters, Ghisu and Madhav, as a tool to portray it. The story emerges as a symbol which prepares the last rites for this ritualistic order. It helps one to understand the anti-human nature of the society during Premchand’s times. It goes beyond realism as well as idealism and gestures towards the foundations of a new society that is in opposition to the status quo. This paper will try to portray the difficulties faced by Dalits at the hands of upper-caste people as portrayed in Premchand’s story ‘Kafan’. It was later translated into English by Francis W. Pritchett in the year 2004 as ‘The Shroud’.

Keywords – Dalits, Ghisu, Madhav, Budhiya

Introduction

Dhanpat Rai Srivastava (1880-1936), popularly known as Munshi Premchand, was one of the luminary figures in Hindi Literature. He wrote mainly during the first half of the twentieth century, a period during which caste and gender played a very significant role in forming one’s social identity in India. The upper-caste people believed Dalits as well as other lower-caste people to be inferior and so treated them in an inhumane manner. To escape from such beliefs, Premchand realized that it was necessary for the writers to envisage revolutionary changes in their works. So, in order to bring about a revolution in the society, it became necessary for writers to criticize the society. Understanding this necessity, Premchand strongly condemned the contemporary society in his works. Among various other issues, his writings focused primarily on the prevalence of inhumanity amongst the people, gender inequality and social discrimination. Addressing of such issues by Premchand thereby nurtured “the

literary and artistic trend ... in society and throw[s] light on real problems of the people.”¹

From among many works of Premchand, this paper will focus on such issues portrayed by Premchand in his most celebrated but controversial short story “Kafan”. It was written in 1936 in Hindi and was later translated into English as “The Shroud” by Frances W. Pritchett in 2004.

The Shroud and Inhumanity

The entire plot of the story is embedded in the rural society. The story narrates life of a Dalit family that consists of Ghisu, Madhav, his son, and daughter-in-law, Budhia. It begins with “Budhia ... writhing in labour pain” (225). Although both Madhav and Ghisu watch her suffering, neither of them pays any attention to her. Ultimately, Budhia dies of pain and both Madhav as well as Ghisu go around in the village searching for a shroud. They were able to collect some money from the village but instead of getting the shroud

¹ Premchand. Sahitya Ka Uddeshya [The Purpose of Literature]. People’s Art in the

Twentieth Century: Theory and practice. Delhi: Jana Natya Manch, 2000. Pg:74–87.

they enjoyed the food. While savoring the food, both of them bless Budhia and secure her a place in heaven for her death allowed them to have such a blissful experience.

When one reads the above episode, what strikes the most is the inhumane nature of Ghisu and Madhav. While Madhav's wife was writhing in labor pain inside the hut, Madhav and his father sat outside, greedily devouring the stolen potatoes, unwilling to go and help her. It was because they believed that someone might grab a larger share from their potatoes. Thus, they remained oblivious to the feelings of Budhia - the very person who brought certain order to their home and also took great care of these two callous men.

But as a reader and critic, it becomes very difficult to condone the inhumane approach adopted by Ghisu and Madhav towards Budhia. Here, one must always remember that mourning is a luxury a starving man cannot afford. "Their callousness is a reflection of their helplessness, not their inhumanity. They are compelled to be insensitive" (Sadanand Shahi). This 'helplessness' is evident when Ghisu condoles the death of Budhia by saying that "If we'd had these five rupees earlier, we would have given her some medicine." This remark made by Ghisu brings to our attention the fact that it was the tragic death of Budhia which enabled them to collect five rupees. Nevertheless, had she been alive and writhing in pain, the same people who contributed for the preparations of her body's last rites, would have turned their backs towards them. The sole reason for it being that the sufferer was a Dalit and did not belong to the upper strata of the society.

The Shroud and Poverty

Through the depiction of 'helplessness' faced by Dalits, Premchand

very thoughtfully also underlined a fundamental aspect of the relation between class and caste. Here, it becomes essential to note how the untouchables could not escape from the poverty and also how their caste played a pivotal role in subjugating their financial stability. Premchand had identified reason behind the oppression of Dalits as the acceptance of the Varna system and therefore had struck at its very roots. Thus, Premchand provided an eventful illustration of rural life and also highlighted the state of merciless exploitation of Dalits prevalent in the contemporary society.

The Shroud and Gender

Also, the entire episode of Budhia's death and her helplessness can be viewed from the perspective of gender. In the story, Budhia is not given a voice to express herself. As a result, she had to suffer her fate silently. Yet, she offered a locus on which the binaries of subaltern and the master, the exploited and the exploiter worked out their relations amongst themselves. In order to raise money for her last rites, Budhia's name was used abusively by the same people who exploited her when she was alive. Not unlike the ruling class, they too never fell short of justifications. Consequently, Budhia became a victim of threesome forces of feudalism, patriarchy and poverty. Thus, one can argue that author makes a deliberate attempt in the story to show the plight of Dalit women by portraying the callousness and inhumanity against Budhia. Furthermore, it clearly suggests that Dalit women were suppressed doubly by their caste and also by their gender.

The Shroud and Caste Politics

Besides, the most dominant trends of Dalit literature is "to protest against the established system which is based on

injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the higher castes.”² Premchand, in ‘The Shroud’, portrayed this hypocrisy among the high castes who have become morally corrupt and failed to acknowledge the death of a lower caste. Meanwhile, Sadanand Sahi maintains that “They [Ghisu and Madhav] are revolutionary characters whose rebellion goes unnoticed by us because we are used to seeing rebellion in limiting framework. Ghisu and Madhav lead their lives as an act of rebellion. At the end when they do not cremate Budhia, they are not just questioning the futility of the act but are also simultaneously rejecting the unjust custom. The conversation between them in the final scene of Kafan frees them – and the social world they inhabit – from the burden of Brahmanical orthodoxy. Brahmanism enforces an anxiety about going to heaven after death even though life itself is hellish – without food, clothing, shelter or self-respect. The passage to heaven is regulated by the rituals performed by the priest at the cremation and the money extracted by him. But Ghisu and Madhav drink to their heart’s content in the liquor shop, stuff themselves and give away the leftovers to a beggar – confident that they were ensuring Budhia’s journey to heaven”.

This observation of Sahi is further strengthened by many critics who also opine that ‘The Shroud’ fails to communicate the message of complete disregard of brahmanical hegemony and Hinduism. In respect to the criticism within the story, one can definitely point to the fact that although one does not come across a mass uprising in the story against the Varna system, but at the same time the protagonists also does not lack the Dalit consciousness. With respect to the criticism

regarding the absence of collective uprising against social injustice, it can be argued that “such an invention requires not only an advanced awareness of social injustice, but also, crucially, a sensitivity to the tides and limits of contemporary social consciousness. The reader can be pushed – and if this is done with sensitivity and creative vivacity, might after a time even desire to be pushed – but if he is pushed too far or too fast, as Dalit ideologies may well discover, he soon ceases to be a reader at all. It is not a question of aesthetic autonomy, but rather a question of aesthetic tact” (Alok Rai).

Conclusion

Hence, Premchand’s ‘Kafan’ puts forward the brutal social and political structures of a feudal-colonial society through the callousness and ‘inhumanity’ of Ghisu and Madhav. The shroud emerges as a symbol which prepares the last rites for this ritualistic order. It helps one to understand the anti-human nature of the society during Premchand’s times. It goes beyond realism as well as idealism and gestures towards the foundations of a new society that is in opposition to the status quo. Thus, amalgamation of various facets makes ‘The Shroud’ a multi-layered story.

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²Sharankumar, Limbale. “Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature”.

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