



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

(Peer-reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

DOI : 03.2021-11278686

ISSN : 2582-8568

IMPACT FACTOR : 6.865 (SJIF 2023)

PREMCHAND: A BEACON FOR THE MARGINALISED

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DOI No. **03.2021-11278686** DOI Link :: <https://doi-ds.org/doi/10.2023-76368742/IRJHIS2306008>

ABSTRACT:

Munshi Premchand, one of India's most renowned writers, used his literary works to champion the cause of the marginalized. From addressing issues of gender inequality to highlighting the struggles of peasants and Dalits, Premchand's writings give voice to those who were often silenced in Indian society. Through the analysis of select works such as Godan, Nirmala, and Kafan, this paper examines how Premchand's stories addressed the social issues of his time. For instance, in Nirmala, Premchand sheds light on the prevalent issue of child marriage, which was a common practice in rural India. The novel draws attention to the subjugation of young girls and their loss of agency, which is often overshadowed by the idea of tradition and honour. Similarly, in Godan, Premchand delves into the inequities of the caste system that perpetuate the oppression of Dalits. He depicts the harsh reality of the lives of the subaltern, showing how they are at the mercy of the dominant castes. Moreover, through his portrayal of female characters, Premchand challenges traditional gender roles and stereotypes. In his works, female characters are presented as complex individuals who have their own aspirations and desires. Overall, through his works, Premchand aimed to inspire social change by highlighting the injustices of Indian society. His writing acted as a form of commentary on the wrongdoings of power structures and his works continue to challenge readers to question their own social biases. Today, in the age of intersectionality and social justice movements, the relevance of Premchand's writings is more important than ever. The issues that he addressed are still prevalent, and his works continue to inspire people to strive towards a more inclusive and equal society.

KEYWORDS: Social Issues, Rural India, Champion of Down-trodden, Source of Inspiration.

Introduction:

Munshi Premchand, a renowned Hindi author of the 20th century, was known for his poignant portrayal of social injustice and the exploitation of marginalized communities. His works are a vibrant representation of both the social and moral values of his time, with a specific focus on the plights of the weaker sections of society. He gave voice to the voiceless by exposing the faults and failings of the Indian society, with his stories highlighting the plight of the marginalized in ways

that are still relevant today. Premchand's works not only entertained but also enlighten readers about the complex problems of Indian society. In his lifetime, the country witnessed numerous political and social upheavals that had a profound impact on various sections of society, especially the underprivileged. These people remain neglected and exploited for generations, and their pain is reflected in Premchand's stories. One of his most famous works, *Godan*, highlights the struggle of an impoverished farmer to survive in a cruel, caste-ridden rural society. The novel portrays the struggles of the marginalized in rural India, raising questions about the exploitation of farmers, the caste system, and the inequalities arising from India's colonial past. The novel highlights the importance of land ownership, economic rights, and social equality, with the hope of empowering the disadvantaged and marginalized sections against the oppressors. Furthermore, *Nirmala* depicts the pervasive problem of child marriage, where young girls are married off to much older men, often resulting in a life of misery and suffering, with no prospect of escaping their situation. The story exposes the inhumane treatment of women in patriarchal societies, often reducing them to mere objects, leading to their exploitation and degradation. Premchand highlights the devastating impact of archaic traditions that discriminate against women, resulting in social, economic, and political inequalities. *Thakur Ka Kuan* is another story where Premier Chand has sensitively portrayed the problems of the weaker sections. It shows the struggles of a village overrun by a wealthy Thakur, who has a monopoly on water resources, places the village under his rule, further exploiting the needy and vulnerable. Premchand's works challenged the social order, both in terms of the castes system and the patriarchal structure of the society. His works explore the complexities of the social system, unveiling the oppression of marginalized communities, highlighting the stark realities of their lives, that often remain invisible to those in positions of power and privilege. Premchand's works continue to be relevant as they provide a unique insight into the challenges faced by vulnerable and marginalized sections of Indian society. His stories are as vital today as they were before, as even in the twenty-first century, the plight of the marginalized remains dire. His stories have contributed to the development of a social conscience, questioning the status quo and creating a space for dialogue and progress. Thus, his works played, and continue to play a significant role in the dialogue on the problematic policies and prejudices faced by the weaker sections of society that merit attention and reform.

Munshi Premchand, one of the most respected Hindi language authors in India, used his writings to convey the social and moral values of his time. His work vividly highlights the injustices, struggles, and human dilemmas faced by people and society as a whole. A significant theme that is evident in many of Premchand's works is the theme of human rights and emotions, where he explores the importance of human dignity and the emotional impact of oppression and discrimination. *Kafan*, one of Premchand's most famous short stories, is a poignant portrayal of poverty and social

deprivation. It portrays the struggles of a lower-class family to provide a decent burial for their dead infant, highlighting the inhumane treatment that the poor receive from the dominant classes. The story vividly captures the emotional pain and suffering of the characters as they strive to preserve their dignity and honour in the face of extreme poverty and social degradation. Premchand's intent in this story is to raise awareness about the need for human rights and dignity for everyone, irrespective of their social standing. Another example of Premchand's exploration of human rights and emotions theme is reflected in the story *Thakur Ka Kuan*. This story depicts the struggle for water in a village where the powerful Thakur has a monopoly over water resources. The story highlights the emotional impact of the Thakur's actions on the villagers who are forced to depend on him for their water needs. The story emphasizes the importance of access to basic resources such as water, and the devastating emotional impact of their deprivation. Moreover, *Bade Bhaisahab* is a story in which the emotional pain of an older brother is central to the narrative. The story depicts the delicate relationship between two brothers from different social classes, one wealthy and the other poor, both of whom have deep love and respect for each other. The story showcases the emotional impact of injustice and oppression on human life, highlighting the importance of human dignity to Premchand. Lastly, *Sewa Sadan* depicts the social stigma of exploiting women in prostitution, causing emotional and physical repercussions in their lives. The story illustrates how oppressive societal norms and systems create a difficult choice for women to live with dignity or struggle to survive in life. The story explores the emotional impact of societal oppression on individual freedom, autonomy, and human dignity. Premchand, through his literary works, highlights the intrinsic connection between human rights and emotions, illustrating how deprivation of rights, and oppression cause emotional pain and suffering. His works raise awareness and advocacy for human rights, especially for the marginalized and oppressed, leading people to question the status quo and fight for change. Through his storytelling, Premchand emphasizes that dignity, autonomy, and freedom are basic human rights, and that for a society to be truly fair and just, it must respect these rights for all individuals.

Most of Premchand's stories revolve around the theme of social inequality and injustice, which brings to light various forms of resistance adopted by those suffering from the effects of the oppressive forces of society. For instance, in *Kafan*, the story of a poor family unable to afford a shroud to bury their dead, the act of refusing to provide the shroud by the village washer man, Hori Lal's family shows a form of resistance. Despite being impoverished, they refused to bow down to the might of the washerman, who was in a position of power. Another form of resistance in Premchand's works is the act of rejection, which is used to protest against oppressors or their ideologies. In *Idgah*, a young boy, Hamid, rejects the idea of buying toys with the little amount of money his grandmother gives him, in a show of resistance against the consumerist ideology that dominated society. The story highlights the power of resistance even when one is a child.

Additionally, Premchand's work also shows a form of resistance learned from the oppressed, the ability to fight back using violence if necessary. In *Shatranj Ke Khiladi*, the story of two noblemen's obsession with the game of chess at the expense of their duties, the revolutionaries' violent resistance to the British takes centre stage in the story. Premchand portrays the brutality of the British colonial rule and the madness of the aristocracy, who wasted their lives on trivial matters while the people were suffering. Furthermore, Premchand also shows forms of resistance in the process of social and personal transformation, which is evident in *Deewar*. In the story, the young protagonist, Sripati, initially conforms to the traditional norm set by his father, but he gradually starts to question the oppressive feudal systems that characterize society. This rebellion leads him to join a factory and ultimately becomes a famous labour leader. This transformation shows the power of resisting predetermined societal norms and ideologies. Munshi Premchand's works reflect the theme of resistance, highlighting the various forms of resistance that emerge as a response to the oppressive forces of society. The use of such forms of resistance, be it from the oppressed, learned from them, or transformative, shows the power of resisting the status quo and confronting oppressive forces head-on. Premchand's works present resistance as a necessary tool for the oppressed to question, challenge, and ultimately overthrow the forces oppressing them, leading to broader social changes. Premchand's work continues to inspire people to resist oppressive forces and to work towards creating a more just and equitable society.

Premchand's writings portray women as a central character in their struggles for equality, challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes. In his stories, he brings to light the significant issues that women face in Indian society, including the constraints of patriarchal norms and cultural expectations. He has portrayed women as individuals with their own agency and desire, capable of making independent choices and fighting for their rights. One of the recurring themes of Premchand's writing is the assertion of women's basic rights, including equal access to education, political and economic opportunities. In his stories, he highlights the denial of these rights to women and the impact it has on their lives. He exposes the gender differences in accessing opportunities such as education, where women's access to education is deliberately limited in Indian society. He portrays how women were perceived as inferior to men, and, therefore, it was deemed unnecessary to educate them. Step by step, in his stories, Premchand portrayed women's journey against injustice and discrimination, and their fight for empowerment. He depicted the social norms and restrictions placed on women, the pressure put by society to conform to stereotyped gender roles, and the hardships they faced in their struggle for equal rights. Premchand's works show that women continue to face significant obstacles even when they want to opt-out of traditional roles and to pursue career options. Moreover, Premchand challenges the gender-based power structures in society, where men are perceived as authority figures and women as subservient. He portrays how patriarchy inherently

subjugates women and confines them to specific roles and responsibilities, limiting their abilities, and equating their worth with their marriage ability. In his stories, women are encouraged to break free of societal norms and challenge the prevalent biases and prejudices to achieve gender equality. Feminism is a significant theme in Munshi Premchand's works, with his stories focusing on women's rights, their struggles against discrimination, and the challenges that they face in a patriarchal society.

One of the significant themes in Premchand's work is social inequality. He explored how caste, class, and gender affected the lives of people in Indian society. He revealed the social injustices that the poor and weak people were subjected to under the oppressive structures controlled by the privileged sections. He illuminated the difficulties of the lower castes and marginalized sections of society who were denied their basic rights and freedoms. Premchand's works reflect his concern for the poor and the downtrodden. He sensitively portrayed the lives of the marginalized communities such as peasants, farmers, and labourers, highlighting their struggles and aspirations. In his stories, he gave a realistic portrayal of their living conditions, economic hardships, and social oppression. His writings brought to light the poor living conditions, unequal distribution of resources, and exploitative practices that disadvantaged people were subjected to in society. Another aspect of Premchand's works is that he portrayed the humanity of the marginalized communities. He did not judge them according to their social status or economic standing. He wrote about the universal human emotions of love, longing, and despair, which transcend social differences. In doing so, he humanized the oppressed communities and challenged the notion that lower castes or the economically disadvantaged were inferior. Premchand's literature also emphasized the importance of education and the right to knowledge. His characters were shown to be self-educated and self-reliant, refusing to bow down to the oppressive structures by educating themselves. He believed that education was essential for the development of marginalized communities and could bring about social change. In conclusion, it is evident that Munshi Premchand was a champion of the weak and poor people through his literature. He wrote extensively about social inequality, the lives of the marginalized communities, and their aspirations. Through his works, he highlighted the social injustices that weakened and impoverished people were subjected to in society. He portrayed the humanity of the oppressed and the importance of education in bringing about social change. Therefore, Munshi Premchand's work continues to inspire and raise awareness about the struggles of marginalized communities even after several decades.

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