

The Representation of Women in Premchand's Works: A Critical Analysis

Rajesh Kumar Mishra

Assistant Professor

PU Regional Centre, Muktsar

Abstract

Premchand was a prolific and multi-talented Urdu-Hindi writer of times. This article takes a look at his fictional works to see how he depicts women. Examining a variety of Premchand's works, it contends that the women's question in his literature defies easy categorisation into conservative or liberal. In contrast to stories that glorify the ideal of the submissive housewife, Premchand's nationalist narratives highlight a different set of values held by educated, middle-class Hindu women living in metropolitan areas. The depictions of femininity in Premchand's works appear to be dynamic, hesitant, and subject to theme shifts rather than being static and predictable.

Introduction

In my interpretation, Premchand's compassionate treatment of female characters is one of the most important aspects of his literary work, alongside his depiction of rural life and nationalist rhetoric. In fact, I think that Premchand's depiction of women in fiction is a flurry of inventive reactions to the literary traditions he inherited and helped shape, as well as the century in which he lived. Half of his characters were women, which was a great novelty at the time, and they talked aggressively, strongly, and persuasively, as Francesca Orsini so eloquently puts it (Orsini 2004, viii). She goes on to say that we only see women depicted as dynamic and diverse in character and social status alongside males in Hindi and Urdu literature with Premchand (ibid, xxii-xxiii), who are shown as constituting half of society.

Scholars and reviewers have had mixed reactions to Premchand's storylines and events that focus on women. Whether it's praising the literary radicalism of these narratives at face value (Avasthi 1962; Lal 1962) or pointing out their ideological limits (Gupta 1991; Pandey 1986), the main focus is on these works. This article contrasts these two schools of thought by highlighting Premchand's complex and open-ended depictions of women in her writings. It contends that conservative and liberal are oversimplified ways to categorise Premchand's literary work because it avoids essentializing the women's concern.

As a nationalist, Premchand's narratives highlight a different set of standards for the educated, middle-class Hindu lady in urban areas, in contrast to the home ideal of the virtuous and submissive woman. From the female protagonists to the male characters they encounter and compete with in public and politics, his nationalist awareness highlighted the same virtues such as compassion, chastity, asceticism, and self-sacrifice. In Premchand's depiction, the woman is a nationalist figure who challenges gender norms and traditional ideas about the home while simultaneously displaying remarkable strength of character, determination, and ingenuity when contrasted with men. The depictions of femininity in Premchand's works are not static but rather dynamic, uncertain, and subject to change.

Premchand embodied the spirit of the early twentieth century's cultural milieu in his writing. Optimal women, according to his non-nationalist narratives, are those who adhere to traditional gender roles within the home. "Bade Ghar ki Beti" (A Noble Daughter-in-Law, 1910), the first story published under the new name of "Premchand," would support this viewpoint. In order to avoid a family conflict, the protagonist, Anandi, forgave her brother-in-law without remorse after he threatened to attack her with his sandals. "Daughters from prestigious backgrounds are like this," her father-in-law says, gushing over her maturity, tolerance, compassion, and sense of duty. No matter what they do, the scenario always turns out badly. (Premchand, 2004, 108–109). Premchand loved this story and it was in line with his ideal of a woman, which he shared with his friend Indar Nath Madan in a 1934 letter: "My ideal of a woman is a blend of dedication, service, and purity all in one place - a sacrifice that has no end to it, a service that is forever wilful, and a sanctity that can never be doubted" (Premchand 1962, 235). Even in his later works, like *Godaan*, a story that is primarily about disappointment and cynicism towards the broader meta-narratives of social change and nationalist ambitions, Premchand maintained this ideal.

Regardless of her level of awareness, the middle-class woman remained restricted to the bourgeois household because she was withdrawn from any participation in the productive process and with limited property rights. It seems that Premchand believed that a companionate marriage did not necessarily have to be a model of total equality between the partners, as both Anandi and Govindi would attest. Conjugalinity was founded on the seeming absolutism of one spouse and the utter submission of the other, who notes that this perspective on conjugalinity was prevalent in colonial North India. For most people, marriage has always been seen as a hierarchical, unequal, and unfair institution that requires constant adjusting and compromising.

One way to evaluate Premchand's creative genius is by considering the many female protagonists he depicts in his works, including those that do not adhere to nationalist ideology. When we see Minakshi in *Godaan*, we see the polar opposite of Govindi. The topic of women's rights is one she stays informed about by both her newspaper reading and her involvement in a women's group.

And so it is that she learns about the 'right to feel,' which leads to a brutal beating of her alcoholic and libertine spouse (Orsini 1999, 150). The absence of authorial disapproval, which often supports Premchand's peasant and women-centred events and storylines, is another striking aspect of this episode. Beyond being an obvious case of gender representation being reversed, it is more complex than that. Though she treats her spouse with brutal brutality, Minakshi shows sympathy for the prostitute Digvijay Singh is entertaining. The free, fearless, and nonconforming wife knows full well that the dancer is innocent since women are all just pawns of men's pleasure.

According to Orsini, it is worth noting that during this time, prominent female Hindi writers such as Mahadevi Varma and Subhadra Kumari Chauhan favoured depictions of a helpless woman who begs the reader to feel sorry for her unfair plight while the narrator takes it upon herself to vent her anger. In contrast, a male writer such as Premchand would have female characters express their most passionate grievances, opinions, and arguments (ibid.: xxiv). Subversive formulations and competing opinions might find a home in Premchand's idea of femininity. While reviewing a collection of one-act plays by Bhuvaneshwar Prasad called *Kaarvaa*, he remembered an aphorism from the play: "Happiness in married life is nothing but a

synonym for that sense of pride that a husband or wife feels on vanquishing their better half" (Premchand, 375).

It is a myth of identity politics, as pointed out by Ruth Vanita, that only members of a marginalised group can accurately depict their plight, yet Premchand disproves this notion with his empathy for women. Vanita claims that Premchand shows the male assault of women as pervasive and chronic, and that his critical analysis is sometimes laced with animosity. Above all else, she highlights the author's acute awareness of the fact that marriage may stifle a woman's innovation while individuality can free up her capabilities.

Stories like "Subhagi" (1930) and "Saut" (The Co-wife, 1931) demonstrate that independent women may achieve more success than males in their own fields, earning them admiration from those around. Equally noteworthy in "Saut" is the concept of role-reversal, which allows Dasia to become Rajia's preferred "husband" more than their spouse ever was to any of them (Premchand 2008, 134). Sisterhood, camaraderie, and emotional closeness are shown in all their nuanced complexity in this role-reversal.

Today, women's issues are discussed with great enthusiasm. Separate departments have been set up for the study of women's consciousness and development. At such times, Premchand's writings come to mind, who even in that era created such female characters that are natural characters arising from their country, time and circumstances. He did not keep the female character in any mold, rather Premchand's female characters are natural characters born from the ups and downs of circumstances. There is a conflict between tradition and progressivism in them. He is in favour of economic independence of women, but rejects imitation of Western civilization. In the era of Premchand and before him, women were depicted either as goddesses or inferior to men. Jaishankar Prasad, the pillar writer of the era of Chhayavaad in Hindi literature of Premchand era, himself has written

"नारी तुम केवल श्रद्धा हो,
विश्वास रजत नग पग ताल में।
पीयूष स्रोत सी बहा करो
जीवन के सुंदर समतल में ॥

In the era when society was bound by superstitious beliefs and conservative traditions. The image of a woman bound in many types of bonds had become pretentious and unreasonable, in that era Premchand created such female characters which could improve the image of women. Premchand accepted women with their goodness and humane evils. He did not consider them ahead or behind men but equal to them. Premchand has many shades of female characters. His most mature and realistic novel 'Godaan' itself has characters of different types of women. Dhaniya is a lower class character. She completely rebels against the discrepancies of value arising from feudalism, capitalism, priestly and colonial culture, while Malti, a character in Godaan, is an upper middle class character. Just as Gandhiji declassified himself and associated himself with the taste, culture and work of the lower class, similarly Malti also does not work in a government job despite studying to be a doctor. Malti's concept of sex and love is influenced by the West. Premchand has given a glimpse of the complexity of the conflict between modern and mythological culture which was prevalent in the middle class at that time in the female character of Malti. Thus, Premchand's female characters include ample diversity, naturalness and realism.

Conclusion

In Premchand's fictional works, subversive female characters lead emancipated lives—though they still show consideration for other women—even though his self-declared ideal of womanhood emphasises sacrifice, service, and sanctity. Analysing his depiction of courtesans and Westernised women via the lens of the male characters' portrayal of these so-called socially aberrant people helps shed light on his seemingly critical vision.

Works Cited

Avasthi, Om. *Premchand ke Nari Patra (Premchand's Women Characters)*. Delhi: National Publishing House. 1962.

Brown, Judith. *Gandhi and Civil Disobedience: The Mahatma in Indian Politics, 1928–34*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1977.

Dalmia, Vasudha. *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu Harischandra and Nineteenth-Century Banaras*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1997.

Gupta, Charu. 'Portrayal of Women in Premchand's Stories: A Critique.' *Social Scientist* 19: 88–113, 1991.

Orsini, Francesca. 'Domesticity and Beyond: Hindi Women's Journals in the Early Twentieth Century.' *South Asia Research* 19 (2): 1999.

Premchand. *Gaban: The Stolen Jewels*. Translated by Christopher R. King. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2000.

———. *Premashram*. New Delhi: Vani Prakashan. 2002.

———. *Mansarovar, Vol. 7*. New Delhi: Prakashan Sansthan. 2004.

———. *The Oxford India Premchand*. Translated by Alok Rai, David Rubin and Christopher King. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2004.

———. *Sevasadan*. Translated by Snehal Shingavi. Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2005.

———. *Karmabhumi*. Translated by Lalit Srivastava. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2006.

———. *Godaan*. Translated by Gordon C. Roadarmel. Reprint, New Delhi: Permanent Black. 2007.

———. *The Co-Wife and Other Stories*. Translated by Ruth Vanita. New Delhi: Penguin Books. 2008.

Vanita, Ruth. 'Introduction.' In *The Co-Wife and Other Stories*, translated by Ruth Vanita, xi–xxvii. New Delhi: Penguin Books. 2008.