

Social concern as a theme in the selected novels of Munshi Premchand

Vinod Kumar

Asstt. Professor, Dept. of English, M.M. (P.G.) College, Fatehabad, Haryana, India

Abstract

Novel, by and large, is considered as an imaginative story of a nation or as a prose epic of the core values of a society. These values reflect the internal conflict of men and women of a particular age and the pulls and pushes of socio-economic network lend them validity and importance. The dialects experienced by individuals provide raw material to the creative writer who with the aid of imagination turns this stuff into a work of fiction. The novel as a literary genre is new to India. As a genre it got further enriched in the hands of Premchand who made it a popular medium to entertain the people and to offer a critique of the hegemonic power structures of the society. It coincided with the emergence of middle class in India which was serving as active agents of the British commercial and bureaucratic interests in India. Premchand perfected the genre of the novel by making it a medium of radical change in man and society. It is not the reformist zeal but a serious concern for the downtrodden or the subalterns of the society of his days which makes Premchand a famous writer. No doubt, the problems of Premchand's age were different and more intricate than that of his predecessors. But Premchand not only acknowledges the existence and value of an individual in social context and environment but he also believes in a realistic portrayal and analysis of problems. His aim as a writer is the betterment of society. In this sense the social realism of Premchand is more positive and progressive than any other writer of his age.

Keywords: realism, humanitarian, progressive society, subaltern, colonialism

Introduction

Munshi Premchand is one of the leading fiction writers in Hindi literature. Before him, the novel was romantic in mode and it created to individual tastes and needs. It was Premchand who introduced the element of realism in Hindi fiction. He believed in humanitarian approach towards life. The motto of his novels was to eradicate the social evils and to establish an ideal society. Premchand's encounter with colonial subservience encouraged him for socio-political independence in the contemporary Indian literature. His novels bring alive the lives and struggles of the people belonging to lower section of Indian society and these people are oppressed in many ways. In the colonial India the prose works were mainly concerned with the theme of nationalism. Bhartendu Harishchander, Pratapnarian Misra and Radhacharan Goswami effectively explore the theme of nationalism in their works. Premchand occupies an important place among them because he presented the Indian culture in its brilliant colours, though his own lifewas colourless. Geetanjali Panday expresses Premchand's views on literature in her book *Between Two Worlds*:

Literature should criticize and analyze our life . . . The literature which does not...infuse the reins of society were controlled by religion...today literature has taken charge and its means is love for beauty. . . The downtrodden, the pained and the deprived-their protection and in us true strength and determination is worthless for us in our present times. . . In earlier age advocacy is the duty of literature. (7)

Thus, Premchand is a progressive writer who lived in an age of rapid socio-economic changes and always made the centre of social vices in his writings. He found his ideals, characters and themes from real world. He always believed that basically man is noble and good but his environment affects and corrupts him. In the field Hindi fiction, Premchand wrote many novels which revolve around social issues. His first novel *Sevasadan* (Market of Beauty), originally written in Urdu (*Bazzar-e- Husn*) was published in 1919. This novel deals with the moral degradation of prostitutes and with the circumstances in which they are compelled to resort to this heinous profession and also suggests the solution to this problem by setting up institution like Sevasadana, a secure home for the prostitutes. Instead of looking down upon these hopeless and helpless women, he tries to evoke a lot of sympathy and pity for them. The other social issues which figure prominently in his novels are corruption, communalism, defective educational system, question of lingua-franca, problems of the Indian peasants and untouchability. In fact, this novel is a saga of an unhappy woman, describing her unforgivable stances towards the harsh reality of her own society. Suman, the female protagonist of the novel, is humiliated because of dowry system. So, after leading a hellish life with her husband, she leaves the house and by chance, she comes into contact with prostitutes. She is fascinated by their glamour, easy money, luxury and participation in other programme. Here, she finds life worth living and easy going and consequently, she joins a band of prostitutes to become a part of the vicious circle. Her husband Gajadhar throws her out of the house who later repents and becomes sick of life and renounces the worldly and materialistic life to become a wandering monk, a sanyasi. He is full of regrets as he could never make his wife happy. On the contrary, Suman realizes her own mistake as the life of

prostitute is not that easy job which she has thought earlier. She has understood the meaning of being a prostitute and joins an institution Sevasadana, a charitable home for the helpless and homeless people like herself. At the deeper level, the novel can be described as a psychological anatomy of men and women living in a society which denies them respectful place under the veil of blind and obsolete tradition but this novel also projects the pain and sufferings of the other characters such as Krishnachandra, Padamsingh, Vitthaldas, Madansingh, Sadansingh, Bholibai, Subhadra and so on who feel neglected and slighted in one way or the other. Therefore, Premchand tries to explore the generation having the sense of subalternism in the socio-political scenario because he always believed in the power of art in social reformation. To him, the novelist was a missionary who had to gear his writing to the deliberate depiction of reality with the intention of reforming it. Thus, *Sevasadan* establishes not only Premchand's reputation as a successful novelist but serves as a landmark in the history of Hindi novel.

His next novel *Premashram*, the translation of *Gosa-e-Afiat*, published in 1922, portrays the relations between the farmers and the zamindars, especially, the pathos and plight of the marginalized. Gyan Shanker, the protagonist of the novel, is a zamindar of the village Lakhanpur. He is a very selfish, cruel and diplomatic man. He wants to usurp the portion of his uncle Prabha Shankar and of his elder brother Prem Shankar. Apart from this, he wants to extort unjustifiably the maximum amount of money from his farmers and also makes efforts to confiscate the wealth and property of his father-in-law. The main motif of the novel is to depict the pathetic economic conditions of the subalterns who are exploited by their masters. The novelist emphasizes the establishment of the ideal social order. In fact this novel is a saga of the toil of the Indian farmers. In other words, it is an epic which depicts their struggles against cruel and indifferent rich money-lenders. On the other hand, the novel presents the theme of the direct clash between the Eastern and the Western values of life and the victory of the farmer, symbolized by Prem Shankar over the latter represented by Gyan Shankar. The conflict between the two brothers is not political but the two cultures and ideologies. So, the entire novel is so much able to displace the veil of the contemporary cruel system of the subordination strain therein.

The novel *Ranga-Bhoomi* (1925) reflects a wide range of socio-political issues comprising rural poverty, caste discrimination, untouchability and the tension between the haves and the have-nots in the background of pre-independence India. The reaction to the industrialization is quite visible. The industrialist has been presented over-possessed and obsessed with his business interests. In order to achieve his ends, he will shift loyalties without any shame. Prabhu Sevak, an industrialist, clearly declares that business is nothing if it is not 'cannibal'. To look upon men as beasts and to treat them as beasts is the motto of the business world. One cannot succeed to be a businessman unless one is cruel to his fellow human beings. Thus, the novelist portrays a conflict between the age-old social traditions in Indian villages and the wave of new British Imperialism. The Gandhian model of local self-government at village level also forms the basis of the novel. Premchand was never in favour of complete industrialization. The main protagonist Surdas who follows the Gandhian ideals of truth and non-violence, is the

mouthpiece of the novelist. Thus Surdas is the person who prays for his living and is also the owner of a piece of land which is going to be acquired by the local industrialist in order to set up a cigarette factory. The piece of land becomes the battleground where the fight between subalterns and the dominant takes place. Surdas joins the struggle against the exploitation of the poor by the rich zamindars. For him life is not just a blood-stained battle but a stage in arena in which actors play different parts. Premchand never treats an individual as a separate entity. So, the zamindars in Premchand's novel are presented as 'yes-men' of the government due to their oppression by the dominant group. However, Raja Mahender Singh and Kunwar Bharat Singh in Rangbhumi are portrayed as shrewd politician who strive to maintain two distinct faces in order to have the best of the nationalist as well as the official world. They are genius because of their love for property. But patriotism also affects them. Their motive is noble. Mahender Singh, the head of the local Municipal Board, wants to lose the faith of government either. All this reminds of the term 'Ambivalence' given by Homi K. Bhabha.

Kayakalpa (1926) was Premchand's first novel which was originally written in Hindi and later on translated into Urdu. The word 'Kayakalpa' does not mean, a mere rejuvenation but it signifies mental as well as spiritual transformation. The author seems to warn the readers against the evil of power, sensual pleasure and wealth. The characters who indulge in sensual pleasures fail into their life. Towards the end of the novel, the protagonist, Chakradhara, frees himself from the vice of greed and commits himself to social service which is known as *Kayakalpa*. Besides these, other social and problems namely communalism, forced labour, polygamy, tyranny of landlords over tenants and lack of women education also figure prominently in the novel.

In his novelette *Nirmala* (1927), Premchand has exposed the social evils like dowry system and mismatched marriage in which the young woman is invariably a victim. In fact, this novel is a pathetic story of a young girl named, Nirmala who is married to an aged widower with many children. Suspected of infidelity by her husband, she has to undergo a lot of mental torture. The action of the novel centers around three families. The central character named Nirmala is the common link between these families.

Premchand's foremost novel *Karmabhumi* (1932) which was written in the backdrop of the national movement, projects many social evils of his contemporary period such as restriction untouchables for the entry into the temples by use of intoxications and illiteracy, the land disputes, atrocity of zamindars and the nationalistic forces among the youth under the leadership of Gandhiji. Premchand was greatly influenced by 'The Bardoli movement' of the peasants, opening of the gates of the Laksminarayana temple for the untouchables at Wardha and Gandhi Irwin pact etc. The novel clearly demonstrates the basic philosophy of Indian thought and unlocks the multiple observations of its significant title. The very word Karma, in a sense, denotes to the importance of duty, act and work in human life. The other word Bhumi' means earth, ground and field. Therefore, the novel may be regarded as 'The Field of Action' and the prime theme of the novel is to highlight, the social evils. In the very beginning of the novel Premchand highlights the atrocities in educational institutions. In the same novel, the novelist states: "Even land

taxes are probably not collected as ruthlessly as school fees are collected in our schools and colleges” (1). Thus prime motive for writing this novel was to present the cruelty of industrialists over the underprivileged section of the society. Premchand has given a solution to do away with the practices of the British through his progressive characters like Amarkant and his fellow characters such as Shantikumar, Sukhada, Naina, Gudar, Sakina and Renuka etc. The novel is mainly the story of Amarkant who is the male protagonist in every event described in the novel. All other characters centers round him. His religion is to serve the needy and the downtrodden with his health, wealth and heart. He becomes the beloved son of the whole society and wins the hearts of those who come in contact with him. But he does not like the business of his father and his adherence to the formalities of the Hindu religion. Lala Samarkant, Amarkant’s father, is a rich landlord who gives loans to the downtrodden of his village and neighboring villages. Thus, the character of Samarkant serves as a foil to the character of Amarkant. Towards the end of the novel, Samarkant comes to know that wealth and riches are not the only necessity of life. Hence, the novelist seems to suggest that human being is a rare mixture of good and bad qualities. He is neither too strong nor too weak. He is shaped and guided by the circumstances of his life. But the circumstances are man-made and these can be changed through the active participation of all the members of a society. Premchand’s novels, obviously promotes the spirit of resistance against this oppressive system. The socio-political cum economical issues of the Gandhian period, are also dealt within Karmabhumi. The impact of Gandhism on Amarkant can be clearly observed in the novel through his action of spinning cotton which was the cardinal principle of Gandhian Swaraj. Towards the end of the novel, Amarkant realizes the futility of violent action and behavior. He regrets at the killing of so many people. In this way, Amarkant’s repentance led him to be caught between the harsh nature of revolution and Gandhism. On the other hand, the novel can be read as a political novel presenting the struggle of the people against the British rule supported by the rich and the landlords, industrialists and the upper class. The tendency of social change and intellectual ferment and a transition from Premchand to Amrit Lal Nagar and Fanishwar Nath Renu has been an evolutionary one. All of them do not believe in any specific sectarian philosophy as they have a firm belief in humanitarian values. One distinct feature of the works of these novelists is that the evolution of their literary genius shows a marked movement from the concrete to the abstract and the real to the ideal. Premchand’s last novel *Godan* (1936) projects the listless life of a poor peasant in a different manner from his earlier works. With the passage of time, Premchand had become fully conscious of the evil consequences of money lending system. On the other hand, the novel came at the moment when Indian society was undergoing social, political, economic and cultural crises. At this crucial juncture, Indians were engaged in the freedom struggle. So, *Godan*, is a social document which realistically records the economic conditions of Indian peasantry. Hori, the protagonist, is a farmer who is not able to raise a voice of protest against the system and suffers throughout his life. He is entrapped in the false ideas of religion and that is why he is not able to protest against the exploitation by money lenders. He is an archetypal character who represents the essential traits of Indian

peasantry. Hori represents the peasantry which has been exploited by affluent people like Zamindars and money-lenders. Hori himself articulates in the same novel: “A man is not a man without wealth and power and education. We are no better than bullocks, born to be yoked” (21). A farmer at that time was a puppet in the hands of landlords and moneylenders. One of the striking themes in *Godan* is inter-caste marriage and ideal companionship between Mr. Mehta and Miss Malti. Through this relationship, Premchand introduces a new concept of inter-caste marriage between a Brahmin boy and a ‘Chamaar’ girl. But he does not leave any opportunity to attack the orthodox Indian society. Thus *Godan* is moving social document in which Premchand’s presentation of Indian rural society is marked by authenticity.

For Munshi Premchand, the main source of inspiration for writing social novels is his zeal for social welfare and justice. He believes that individuals in a collective form make society and the study of these individuals is the best way to understand society and its problems. The problems and social obligations belong to the individuals and Premchand does not negate the importance of an individual. He asserts that the solution to man’s problems can be found within society. Man is an integral part of society and he is safe only when society is stable. He evaluates an individual from social point of view. Premchand seems to agree with Matthew Arnold when he considers literature as a criticism of life, and life has to be lived and understood in relation to society. He considers social environment as the most crucial factor shaping human destiny. To sum up, it can be said that all the novels of Munshi Premchand reflect his enthusiasm for social change and social evils like exploitation of poor farmers, prostitution, child-marriage, the problems of widows are the subjects for study and criticism. His age was an age of political turmoil and rapid socio- economic changes which saw the emergence and flowering of the genius of Premchand. When Premchand started writing, he was dissatisfied with the prevailing social and political unrest. His aim as a writer was to make society a better place to live in. So he discusses social issues and social morality in a new light, new to contemporary society. Thus Premchand remains the representative writer of his time.

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