

Prem Chand's Myth of the East and West: A Reading of *Premāshram*

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Prem Chand is generally looked upon as a social novelist whose overriding concern was with championing the cause of the oppressed and the under-privileged—widow or orphan; peasant, laborer or outcaste. This approach, though basically correct, has had some unfortunate consequences. On the one hand, it has led to neglect of the moral and cultural aspects of his work; on the other, it has encouraged the tendency to see his novels as case histories or social documents rather than as works of art. In talking about “the simple Prem Chand” which has emerged from this approach, it has neither been possible to appreciate the complexity of his social and moral outlook, nor to do justice to his ability as an artist.

Prem Chand's entire adult life was passed during the period when India was engaged not only in its great struggle for freedom from the powerful and pervasive British Empire, but also in search of its identity on which its right to freedom and nationhood could be based. This search, by its very nature, had to be more cultural, moral, and spiritual than political. The leaders of thought and opinion from Ram Mohun Roy, Dayānand and Vivekānand to Tilak, Gandhi, and Nehru are therefore preoccupied with issues of this nature, the central concern of which inevitably turns out to be the comparative merit of Western and Eastern civilizations. Prem Chand was deeply alive to the trends of thought represented by these thinkers and they become live issues in his fiction *Premāshram* is one of the best examples.

Premāshram—“The Abode of Love” (1922),¹ a novel planned on an epic scale like *Middlemarch* and *War and Peace*, is the story of an individual, a family, and a community. The individual is Gyan Shankar, the family that of the Shankars of Kashi (Benaras), and the community that of the villagers of Lakhanpur, a village 12 miles from Benaras, in whose fortunes the residents of the city also become involved. The Shankar family, whose present condition is symbolized by the delapidated old mansion in which they reside, was once prosperous and well known; however, mismanagement and extravagance have brought about this depressed state. Three generations of the family are portrayed. The first is represented by Lālā Prabhā Shankar, a kindly but impecunious old gentleman who ran the show in the time of his saintly elder brother Lālā Jatā Shankar; the second by his five children, and by Prem Shankar and Gyān Shankar, the sons of the late Jatā Shankar; the third by Māyā Shankar, the son of Gyān Shankar. The story mainly revolves around the two brothers Gyān Shankar and Prem Shankar. Prem Shankar, seeing no prospect of his family's sending him abroad for higher studies, quietly slips out and goes to America. Gyān Shankar, a well-educated, intelligent, ambitious, and ruthless young man, is bent upon restoring the family's earlier magnificence through his own advancement. It is not possible for him to get a high

¹*Premashram* was written first in Urdu probably between May 1918 and March 1920, as K. K. Goyanka suggests in his *Prem Chand's Craftsmanship in His Novels* (Delhi & Allahabad: Saraswati Press, 1973), pp. 62, 64. The Hindi version, prepared soon afterwards, was published by the Hindi Pustak Agency, Calcutta, either towards the end of 1921 or the beginning of 1922; the Urdu version in 1928 by the Darul-Ishat, Lahore, under the title *Gosh-é-Afiat*—“A Peaceful Corner.” References here, keyed into the text, are to the edition published by the Saraswati Press, Allahabad; It bears no date. This essay is partly from a book to be published by Twayne in 1978.

position in Government because, as he complains, the family, instead of using its resources to curry favor with the ruling powers, had squandered them on useless social ceremonies like marriages and funerals. He considers it below his dignity to accept a modest job. The only way to advancement is therefore through better management of the *zamindari* (the right to collect revenue). He instructs his bailiff Ghaus Khan to tighten the screw on his tenants, the peasants of Lakhanpur, by imposing all sorts of dues and increasing the rents. Ghaus Khan welcomes the opportunity and follows his master's instructions. His tyrannical rule pushes the peasants to rebellion, culminating in his murder at the hands of Balraj and his father Manohar, who subsequently takes the blame to protect his son. All the villagers are arrested and the lawsuit becomes a *cause célèbre* obliging all the gentry of Benares to choose sides. The authorities look upon the murder as a dangerous insurrection which they are determined to crush. The peasants and their supporters see it as a legitimate protest against inhuman oppression. Finally, the victory belongs to the people.

Squeezing the peasants of Lakhanpur is not enough to fulfill Gyān Shankar's dreams of grandeur. He is active on other fronts. His father-in-law Rāi Kamlānand is a rich aristocrat, a big landowner, whose daughter Gāyatri is married to another wealthy landowner. Gāyatri's husband passes away when she is only 35. Gyān Shankar makes her the target of his machinations, first by maneuvering himself in to the position of general manager of her vast estates, then laying claim to her affections. He eliminates Rāi Kamlānand by poisoning him. His schemes at first meet with great success, but ultimately they end in failure. Gāyatri, tormented by her conscience for relinquishing her *dharma* as a widow, commits suicide. Gyān Shankar's son Māyā Shankar, at the very moment of his "coronation" as the ruler of his grandfather's extensive estates, transfers the *zamindari* of these estates to the peasant themselves, resolving to lead a life of hard work. Gyān Shankar, disappointed and frustrated, drowns himself in the river.

While Gyān Shankar was planning and scheming, his elder brother Prem Shankar, having returned from America as an agricultural expert, was serving the villagers. He is the chief supporter of the peasants of Lakhanpur in their struggle against oppression. He continues to rise in public estimation and his model farm becomes an *āshram*—the Abode of Love. Quite a few of the elite of Benaras, including Māyā Shankar, settle down here, leading a life of plain living and high thinking, as in Tolstoy's Nuwara Eliya or Gandhi's Sābaramati Ashram, and residing in loving harmony with the peasants and laborers.

Most critics of the novel leave one dissatisfied because they fail to appreciate Prem Chand's complex vision and his subtle artistry. The inveterate tendency in Hindi criticism to see Prem Chand as first and last a social critic and a "progressive," ignoring other aspects of his work, is perhaps best illustrated with regard to this novel. Even two of the most respected critics—Indranāth Madān and Rāmvilās Sharmā—fail to do justice to the novel, though not for lack of enthusiasm. To Madān² it is primarily a social novel because it seeks to arouse the people against the exploitation by the *zamindars*. Sharmā³ sees it as a great novel but his emphasis is exclusively on the socio-

²Madan, while recognizing the influence of capitalism which upholds unrestrained individualism, sees hardly any difference between capitalism and liberalism. Madan's entire analysis emphasizes the social aspect of the novel. See his *Prem Chand: An Analysis*, rev. ed. (Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1968), pp. 52-63.

³See his *Prem Chand and his Age*, rev. ed. (Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1967), pp. 44-58. Hazari Prasad Dwivedi also sees the iniquity of the Zamindari system as the main theme of the novel. See Madan, ed. *Prem Chand: Thought and Art* (Benaras: Saraswati Press, n.d.), p. 38.

political aspect, with hardly any reference to the moral and cultural issues involved. The fact is that though *Premāshram* is a social and political novel, the most important dimension of the novel is the cultural and moral one. Even the social criticism is presented in the cultural garb. The main theme is introduced right at the beginning of the novel in the discussion between the illiterate peasants of Lakhanpur. "What is the use of education?" they seem to ask. "In what way is the educated man superior to those who are uneducated? Has he become more human, more just?" The questions are repeated as a leitmotif throughout the novel. Prabhā Shankar, pained by Gyān Shankar's behavior, reflects: "Education should normally have the effect of making a man more patient and contented, restraining his egoism and making him more generous rather than bringing him under the control of the demon of selfishness, meanness and unscrupulousness" (p. 38). And one could not conceive a more devastating indictment of the educated elite in India than Kadir Mian's appreciative comment to Prem Shankar: "During my long life I have seen hundreds of educated men but, except for you, I did not meet a single one who did not cut our throats. The whole world speaks highly of education. It seems to us that education makes a man a greater crook. It teaches people to squeeze the neck of the poor. God gave you true education. That is why other educated people have become hostile to you" (pp. 136-37).

Intertwined with the theme of education is that of culture, in this case that of the East and West; and the moral one—whether it is possible for a man who is ruthlessly pursuing his self-interest to be happy. There are various other dichotomies which enrich the texture of the novel and illustrate Prem Chand's adroitness and skill in keeping so many issues alive without letting them interfere with the smooth flow of the narrative or the creation of a real world of living human beings. Some of these dichotomies are between the uneducated and educated, East and West, old and new, village and town, emotion and intellect, violence and nonviolence, Marxism and Gandhism, individualism and socialism. Prem Chand's dialectical mind makes him wary of looking at one of these paired principles as the exclusive preserve of goodness and righteousness. He does take sides, but that does not make him extol or condemn the opposing principle. For instance, he is severe in his criticism of Western cultural values, but it does not mean that everything the East represents is praiseworthy.

Like the novels of George Eliot, "the organic form" of Prem Chand's novels consists of "an inner circle (a small group of individuals involved in a moral dilemma) surrounded by an outer circle (the social world within which the dilemma has to be resolved)."⁴ The plot of *Premāshram* also moves in two circles. In the inner circle it is the drama of the life of the hero Gyān Shankar and the heroine Gāyatri; in the outer circle, of the villagers of Lakhanpur in their struggle against the vested interests, both inside and outside the village. Gyān Shankar, whose actions affect the lives of practically all the characters in the novel, is the link between these two worlds. He is described as a man of great talents and considerable intellectual power. He can think as well as act, being a writer and speaker of distinction and an able administrator. Whatsoever be the challenge, Gyān Shankar never fails to rise to it, sometimes wondering at his own abilities. But his heart is not in the right place. Prem Chand's object is to show how a man so able and intelligent can utterly fail to find happiness in life when he lacks kindness and sympathy.

⁴Joan Bennett quoted by Walter Allen, *The English Novel* (London: Phoenix House, 1957), p. 211.

Gyān Shankar's shortcomings are not the result of a defective biological or social inheritance, but of a bad education—the Western system of education which was the gift of the British Raj and which was expected to civilize and enlighten the Indians. It has civilized and enlightened them, but also dehumanized them in the process. They have become clever logicians and skillful men of business, but have lost the spirit of self-denial, self-sacrifice, and compassion which constitutes the essence of Indian culture. The individual is the focus of the universe in Western liberalism, which has been more appropriately called “possessive individualism.”⁵ The practical effect of this creed is that it makes a person supremely selfish. All thought is of one's own advancement, irrespective of its effect on others. The collective good in the capitalistic economy, the form of economic organization favored most by possessive individualism, is supposed to be brought about through each individual's pursuing his own good. According to Adam Smith's celebrated theory of the natural identity of interests, the clash between different “goods” is avoided by the interposition of “the hidden hand.” The individual therefore does not have to bother about the good of society. It is his right as well as his duty to pursue his own good.

This is exactly what Gyān Shankar does. The thought of anybody else's interests never enters his mind. Wife, brother, friend; love, marriage, religion—every human being, every human relation, is used by him, in his relentless pursuit of wealth, power, and influence, as an instrument of his own advancement. Nothing is sacred or inviolable. He becomes a devotee of Krishna, the God of Love, so that Gāyatri can become his sweetheart as Rādhā, the lovelorn milkmaid of Vrindāban. He almost succeeds in his clever scheme, but it is ruined by the untimely intrusion of his wife Vidyā, who is so shocked at her husband's degradation that she dies of a broken heart. But Vidyā's death does not affect Gyān Shankar; he continues to pursue his dreams of grandeur. He achieves a remarkable degree of success, becomes a leading citizen of Lucknow, the secretary of the landlords' association, and is able to get his Excellency the Governor of the United Provinces to “crown” his son Māyā Shankar as the new landlord. At the very moment of his triumph, however, the cup turns sour on his lips through Maya Shankar's great act of renunciation. This renunciation has a significance much greater than the money-value of the estates. It is a demonstration of the fact that the gods Gyān Shankar had worshipped throughout his life were false gods, an impossible admission for a man of Gyān Shankar's supreme faith in his own intelligence and cunning. The only recourse for him is suicide.

Gyān Shankar's is a tragic story, developed in the characteristic form of a moral fable. The point which Prem Chand tries to make is that Gyān Shankar is not a foolish or a bad man. Rather he is the victim of a false set of values, the creed of materialism and unrestrained individualism which was being embraced by the educated classes with all the zeal of new converts. Instead of imbuing us with high ideals and instructing us to treat our fellow beings as brothers, this creed had turned education into the fine art of robbing the weak and defenceless. Rai Kamlanand's parting words to Gyān Shankar (p. 165) are in this respect a faithful echo of Prem Chand's own beliefs. Judged in this light, the uneducated villagers of Lakhapur are better educated than the so-called elite, for they are the inheritors of a great culture and know the secret of a simple, contented life. Though their lives are riven by petty jealousies, they can forget their differences when occasion demands and can share

⁵The phrase is C. B. MacPherson's. *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

in each other's joys and sorrows. In spite of centuries of oppression, they have enough intelligence, initiative, industry, and skill to improve their lot, enough talent and imagination to enrich their lives if only their "educated" brethren could remove the hand of oppression and exploitation from above their heads and offer, occasionally, some help, as Prem Shankar does.

However, though the West is vitiated, the East is not perfect. Lālā Prabhā Shankar with all his gentleness and goodness, is a weak and pathetic creature, utterly helpless in meeting the challenges of the new age. There is no surer proof of his incompetence than his failure to give a proper upbringing to his sons. Shraddha, Prem Shankar's deeply religious wife, is a devoted Hindu woman but she is immersed in superstition. Rāi Bahādur Kamlānand, who, at times, seems to be the author's surrogate, is the type of the old aristocrat who, while representing some of the best in Indian culture, also has the aristocracy's sense of realism which makes it come to terms with the ruling power. His intelligence and grasp of reality are impressive, but we have doubts about his courage and willpower, of which he seems to be proud to the point of vanity. Believing that music is a nation's most valuable treasure, he is prepared to spend lakhs of rupees on a musical soiree without concerning himself with the lot of the peasants from whom this money is collected. If compelled to take note of their condition, his reply would presumably have been the same as it is to Gyān Shankar in another context: "All creatures in the world obtain happiness or misery according to their *karma*. I am not the arbiter of anyone's destiny" (p. 166). Through Kamlānand's character Prem Chand exposes the great weakness in traditional Hinduism which, with all its lofty spirituality, has regarded a social conscience as an inconvenient burden.

Premashram is a work of graphic realism, the vivid portrayal of the life in Lakhanpur village being a vital part of the novel. Prem Chand has no equal among Hindi novelists in the depiction of rural life and invites comparison with his English contemporary, Thomas Hardy, with his striking picture of Wessex. But Prem Chand is also a social and political critic. He discloses the reality behind the myth of the British *Raj* and its legendary system of justice under which the high and low were supposed to be equal before the law. One sees the Imperial Grand Design in operation: how the foreign rulers win the loyalty and devotion of the vested interests by giving them complete freedom to ride on the backs of the poor peasants. Prem Chand is lenient to the British—after all they were foreigners—but he is merciless in exposing the selfishness and greed of the Indian elite. His social views, however, do not easily fit into an ideological framework. His approach is eclectic and he is prepared to take elements from disparate and even conflicting ideologies. From communism he takes its regard for the common man and for his right to a decent life, but there is no insistence on equality, no antagonism of classes, not even a thought of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The actual governing is still to be done by the classes which have traditionally enjoyed power and prestige. It is to be a paternalistic society—an aristocracy of the wise and virtuous providing the leadership and the common people gladly accepting it. In Prem Chand's Utopia, the House of Love, Prem Shankar, who gives the name to the rural commune, is the undisputed leader and governor. He earns his right to govern through his virtues—his selflessness and spirit of renunciation, his love for the poor and downtrodden, his complete freedom from guile, and his willingness to work with his own hands. This sense of the dignity of labor he has acquired during his stay in America. He is also a Gandhian who, like Prem Chand's other idealistic young heroes, abhors violence and stops it by his readiness to sacrifice himself. However, it

is necessary to remember that Prem Shankar's position—as that of the intellectuals and professionals who form part of the Utopian community—derives also from his social origin. He is the scion of a landowning family, the elder brother of Gyan Shankar. The workers and peasants of the Ashram, as of Lakhanpur, know their places when they meet with the leaders. Their lower status is not only owing to their lack of education and cultivation, but also their low social origin in the Hindu-Muslim hierarchy of caste and class. Curiously enough, Prem Chand never questions the existence of this hierarchy, though at times he might question its basis. There is not a single man from the working classes who comes to occupy a position equal to that of the elite. Even Balrāj, who is represented as the most stiff-necked, independent-minded, and audacious of the villagers and who is the actual killer of Ghaus Khān, greets Māyā Shankar by falling at his feet. It is essential to draw attention to these points because even distinguished critics like Rāmvilās Sharmā have represented Prem Chand as a very progressive, even a Marxist thinker. But evidence from his work shows that while he is an original and daring social critic, a rebel, he is not a revolutionary; at least, not yet.

There are serious weaknesses in *Premāshram*. Prem Shankar never comes to life and is oddly passive, mostly reacting to events rather than initiating them. It is difficult to accept him as the hero of the novel though it has been named after him. Gyān Shankar is the main character, a striking one at that, but Prem Chand does not succeed in his attempts to show that he is a man and not a monster. There is a wide gap between description and "enactment": with all the author's special pleading, Gyan Shankar comes very close to being an entirely evil man. Gāyatri too is vague and unsubstantial. Rāi Kamlānand promises to be lively and exciting, but Prem Chand's eagerness to make him a repository of all the accomplishments he can think of makes him an abstraction. Similarly, none of the women come to life though Vidyā is three-dimensional. But Lālā Prabhā Shankar is real; so are the peasants of Lakhanpur, beings of flesh and blood, whom we can feel and touch, and cadence of whose voices we can immediately recognize. They are a living proof of Prem Chand's stature as a great novelist. In spite of some bizarre incidents, like the deaths of Prabhā Shankar's two younger sons in their experiments with the occult, the novel portrays a convincing and real world. The Utopian ending weakens it, but "sages"⁶ have their problems and Prem Chand undoubtedly had his. After condemning the elite of Indian society so savagely, he could not leave them to think that they were beyond redemption, for the future of the country depended upon them. Prem Chand therefore could conclude the novel only on a note of faith, hope, and love.

⁶Through his moral earnestness and idealism Prem Chand invites comparison with Victorian "sages" like Carlyle, Ruskin, George Eliot, and Matthew Arnold. For a discussion of this concept see John Holloway, *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument* (London: Macmillan, 1953).