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Godan: A Study of Social Realism

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Abstract

With the publication of Godan, Premchand surmounted the summit of success. Godan spurs great amount introspection, which is crucial in order to come to terms with such disturbing themes as travails of the soul of the poor Indian farmers and abject poverty. The inclusion of these problems imparts a universal appeal to his novels. Godan is not a tale of misery but it is also a realistic representation of rural India. The novelist indicts Sanskritised Brahminical religion. The main thrust of Godan is to arouse the humanitarian attitude in man so that society learns to move on the path of socialism and a happy world. The novel presents a synthesis of art and society, man and his age. The novelist has expressed his views on religion, caste, social set-up and community in realistic manner.

Keywords- Society, Realism, Family, Dalit, Tribal, Religion, Caste, Subaltern

In *Godan*, Munshi Premchand is concerned with the relationship of individual levels and collective forms. Generally, his novels show a couple of selected families engaged in common concern and their action affect each others' point of views. Through his characters Premchand highlights the contemporary social, economical, political, and religious problems. He makes the individual and the family a medium for the realistic portrait of contemporary

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social problems. In this novel, one rightly finds the beginning of the process of disintegration of the joint family system in the village. He gives the realistic picture of family life.

Literature has a social commitment and a writer should expose the social evils to reform it. The ultimate aim of any genuine literature is truth telling. If a literature piece tells to ignore this cardinal principle, it loses its sheen and become outmoded. A slew of writers like Premchand have dazzled the realm of contemporary Indian literature. Here I attempt to understand analyse and critically evaluate, *Godan*, Premchand's last novel which reflects the poverty of rural India and the social evils prevalent in the early decades of the twentieth century. Preamchand has also emerged as the crusader against the social evils like the cast system, dowry, prostitution, corruption, malpractices in temples and the lascivious misdemeanor of priests in the garb of religion. Premchand has been hailed as the father of Hindi novel in the twentieth century. His novels reflect his sympathy for the marginalized members of society. He felt inspired by humanitarian zeal and reformative fervor to combat the injustice and the oppression to which certain individuals and the segments of society were subjected in his time. He has passion and compassion for humanity. Preamchand was proficient both in Urdu and in Hindi. He started writing in Urdu under the name Nawabrai. He soon shifted to writing in Hindi.

He contributed a large number of essays, comments and reviews to various newspapers and illustrated magazines. He has three hundred short stories, about a dozen novels and two plays to his credit. It was on the advice of his friend Dayanaraian Nigam that Nawab Rai switched over to the pen name of Premchand to get around the prohibition imposed by the British Government. He was committed to the welfare of lower classes which were often exploited. What Cervantes is to the Spanish people, Tolstoy to the Russians and Shakespeare to the English, so is Premchand to the Indian literary tradition. Some disheartening allegations have been heaped upon premchand of being anti-Dalit in his writings. Unfortunately he has been roped in this controversy because of his candid portrayal of the social and lingual mechanism that works behind the exploitation of the underdogs and the marginalized. Undoubtedly Premchand stands out to be the crusader who decried against the harsh realities that the ostracized in face of Indian society.

In *Godan*, the main protagonist Hori represents the suffering Indian peasantry, tyrannized through centuries. The story of the novel begins in a village with a fanner Hori

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with his family. Hori has a firm belief in traditions and the established set-up. He is a farmer with his incorrigible faith in the sanctity of the social set-up. He accepts everything as a part of his destiny. His life has been a tale of woe, oppression and suffering as he is easily gullible. He cannot think against society and Brahmins in particular. He is so much tradition-loving that he bears the unjust exploitation by the money-lenders. Hori's simplicity and saintliness become a curse for him. He resembles Dostoevsky's hero in his novel *The Idiot*. Hori's wife Dhaniam warns him against the injustice and exploitation by the greedy money-lenders in the village. He is fully aware of their acts of villainy, yet he suffers without any sign of resistance on his part. Hori wiped the perspiration from his face. He says, "I am worried about it bhai. The grain was weighed and taken away before it reached the barn. The Zamindar took his share and the money lenders theirs. Only five seers fell to my lot. Thank God, I removed the straw secretly by night, or not a blade would have been left. The Zamindar apart, I have three moneylenders to cope with, I've not been able to pay their interest. Half the rent of the Zamindar's remains unpaid. I had again to borrow from the money-lender. I stint in every possible way. But it makes no difference. The rich advise us to be frugal. But they don't set an example. The Rai Saheb frittered away twenty thousand rupees on his son's marriage and nobody raised a finger. Mangru, the money-lender spent five thousand rupees on his father's cremation and nobody questioned him. The poor also have sons and fathers" (Lat, 20). His only destiny is to be caught in this exploitative web and be perished.

Premchand's characters do have a habitation and a local name, yet they express the universal human status and characters become representatives of universal values, the protagonist has a long-cherished dream. He does not yearn for riches and pleasures but for a cow. His only ambition is to own a cow which is a bringer of prosperity to his family. Hori doesn't aspire very high but only for a debt-free life where the money lenders do not haunt him. Throughout his life, Hori has never had moment of relief and he struggles against adverse circumstances. It is an irony of fate that in his last moments, Hori does not have a cow to offer it to a Brahmin. He is an epitome of Indian farmers. The novelist had been influenced by the Bolshevik ideas of social change. He believes in humanitarian values and his social concern aims at the welfare of the mankind. His philosophy of life is progressive and leans towards socialism. The prevailing conditions in society and its ethos are reflected in

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the lives of his characters. The protagonist Hori: the farmer turned a labourer dies of exhaustion. Throughout his life Hori has been an upright and god-fearing man. One day, he fails unconscious in the fields and he is taken to his house. He asks Dhaniam, his wife for forgiveness for his foolish acts. He realizes that much money will be spent on his last rites. Someone gives a call to bring a cow to be given to a Brahmin.

Thus, Premchand justifies the use of the title of the novel in an ironic vein. The ending of the novel is poignant and dramatic. The novelist presents two Indies - India shining in light and India of darkness, *Godan* is more concerned with darkness. Darkness in the novel is symbolic of ignorance, poverty, illiteracy and financial bankruptcy. The people living in the darkness are a subaltern group. Subaltern, an umbrella term refers to bottom layer of society, poor peasants, the underdogs, factory workers, women, tribal and Dalits. Premchand poignantly articulates the subaltern experiences through some characters in *Godan*. Dhaniam, the wife of Hori, is the mouthpiece of the novelist. She possesses a sharp sense of discrimination and fights against injustice and exploitation. She is annoyed with her husband for his lack of initiative, cowardice and blind obedience to religious belief? She advises her husband to change his way of life.

The protagonist refuses to follow the path shown by her of worldly wisdom and reality. He is lost in rigmarole of clichés and ideals. Religion and casteism have been sophisticated tools to exploit those who do not fit into its paradigm due to their caste identities. Moreover, in case of women of Indian society who had to bear the brunt of this cultural interface? Extending his full moral support to these subalterns, Premchand discards the religious notions of piety and pollution and questions the social order responsible for their dehumanization and exploitation. The novelist portrays them struggle towards the attainment of the ideals like freedom, equality and justice with their subaltern paraphernalia obstructing them. The novelist's focus was on the middle and the lower strata of society rather than the rich. He witnessed that the wave of industrialization and western values was sweeping and shaking the Indian traditional setup, and the note of revolt is clearly heard in his writings. He removed the mask of the ugly face of the middle and upper classes for their double standards. Protest against the established unjust social order and rejection of the entire hegemonic tradition done overtly or covertly, was the main thrust of the writings of Premchand.

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His fiction is the symbol of distinctive Indian creativity and thus has an easy passage to the corridors of world literature. It becomes evident from the biography of the novelist that Premchand had drunk that cup of sorrow and suffering which filled his whole life with such bitterness that he could not resist giving express to it in his works. All through his novels are expressed the sordidness and pains of life, which he suffered and became successful in awakening the conscience of the people and becoming the champion of have-nots. He championed the interests of the poor, His *Premashram* and *Godan* are regarded as epics of the peasant's life. In *Godan*, the novelist depicted the lamentable condition of villages as well as of the poor and unfortunate villagers who seem to be the living examples of poverty where we observe the life of Hori in *Godan*.

He realises the deficiencies of the farmer life. He works hard day and night but does not get milk or ghee. In her 36 years, his wife has developed wrinkles, her hair is white and her eye sight is weak. For her three sons who are unwell, she cannot buy even medicine. She had nothing but a small blanket to save Hori from the severe cold. "In his childhood, he used to sleep with his father wrapped in this blanket in young age he spent his cold nights with *Godan* in the same blanket. Now in old age this worn - out blanket was his companion. But now it was not like the teeth with which he could eat food, it was like an aching tooth. There was hardly a day in his life when he could save something after paying the taxes and to the money lender" (Lat, 119).

Premchand's heroes, protagonists are reflections of real people. He had known and seen the numerous facets of the rural life in India. He had seen the grim and sorrowful spectacle of the villagers and the bottom dogs groaning under the yoke of poverty, hunger and exploitation. He had also known and seen the humbugs and hypocrites priests, money - lenders, caste Hindus and officers who took devilish pleasure in sucking the life blood of the underdog. All his characters, both the exploiters and the exploited, are drawn from men and women he saw around him. The glaring disparities between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots compelled him.

Though, the novel *Godan* centers round social themes, yet and through his characters like Mr.Mehta, Mis Malti. Mattadean, Gobal, Seliya Hori, Dhania and Rai Saheb. The novelist projects his vision of a life where love and morality exist. The characters of Hori, Dania, Rai Saheb, Dnttadeen present the novelist's idea of morality in the Indian society,

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where as Mis Malti, Mr. Mehta, Mattadeen, Seiya and Govindi become Premchand's spokespersons to project his views on issues like love, marriage and individual freedom. Premchand launched a powerful attack on the orthodox ways of life and religion. For this reason priests and Brahmins were his major targets. That is why critics have labeled him as mill-orthodox. Premchand asserted that the religious authority also becomes a powerful tool in the hands of the rich against the poor. In *Godan*, Dattadeen is such a character who takes care of the religious needs of the villagers. He lends money to them Poor farmers like Hori are their easy victims. Premchand is not against the individuals but against corrupt practices prevalent in the name of religion. He makes his character his mouth pieces to advocate and plead his case. In the end of the novel, when Hori was about to die Dhania rose like a machine went in and brought out twenty annas that she had earned from the sale of her belonging. She, in order to fulfill the last wish of the dying man, placed the money in the icy palm of the husband. She begged Dattadeen. "Maharaj, there's neither a cow, nor a calf nor any money in the house. This is all the money I have; this is all I can give. Take this in place of the cow" (Lat, 339). Munshi Premchand believes in humanitarian approach toward life.

For him, literature is complete and meaningful only when it is capable of releasing man from individual complexes and beliefs. His aim as a writer is the betterment of society; In this the social realism of Premchand is more positive and progressive than any other writer of his age. The impact of Arya samaj, Gandhi, Tolstoy, the realism of Galsworthy and the progressive ideas of Karl Marx is clearly visible in his writings. He considers social environment as the most crucial factor shaping human destiny. He is against the narrow minded individualism. His parameter for evaluating and analyzing human behavior is a collective social effort. As a true humanitarian Premchand believes that every art that is against society is sinful. One should promote those factors which contribute to human happiness and welfare. In his novel, *Godan* he attacks the prevalent social evils and practices. He favours a social change and reforms instead of a revolution. One revolutionary theme in *Godan* is that of inter-caste marriages and an ideal companionship between Mr. Mehta and Miss. Malti. Mattadeen, the spoilt son of a money lender Dattadeen flirts with a low-caste woman Seliya, the daughter of a Chambar in the village. Through these characters the novelist introduced a new concept of inter-caste marriage between a Brahmin boy and a

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Mahar girl. But Premchand does not leave any opportunity of attacking the orthodox views and hollowness of Indian society.

To conclude, the novel presents Premchand's vision of a casteless society, a society which will have equality of sexes and economic prosperity. Premchand feels that the caste system has been the bane of Indian society since ages past. It has deformed and disintegrated the Hindu society which consists of the four Varnas. In the novel *Godan*, Premchand hits hard at out-dated conventions that mock at the miseries of the down-trodden and the subaltern. In this writing Premchand's aim is to suggest rather than to moralize directly. His characters are representatives of their respective classes. Apart from the representation of his characters they show the blend of individuality and common concern. His alienation thus makes him an insider, holy, sociological, or existential depending upon the socio-cultural milieu of his existence. Having been uprooted from his history and tradition, he is constantly in search of his roots.

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