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Treatment of Dalits in Premchand's 'The Shroud' (Kafan)

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Abstract:

*The present paper is an attempt to bring into discussion and point out the grey areas in the portrayal of Dalit by Premchand (1880–1936) in his short story *The Shroud (Kafan)*. Dalit means broken or crushed people. In modern sense it means the Shudra and untouchable. Dalits are at the bottom pedestal of Hindu social hierarchy. Dalits were made practically invisible from the main stream art and literature. They are shown in poor light. Sometime they are presented mere as a thing of ridicule, as Gheesu and Madhav are portrayed in the short story *The Shroud (Kafan)*. Characterization of Dalit by Premchand is not justified, as in the line of mainstream literature. It is more painful that story like 'The Shroud' (Kafan) is from the pen of a literary figure that cannot be classified in a class, who is a class by himself.*

Keywords: Dalit characterization, Mainstream literature, Biased, Lopsided

Dalit means broken or crushed people. In modern sense it means the Shudra and untouchable (officially abolished), it is common term used for SCs, STs (and OBCs). Dalits are at the bottom pedestal of Hindu social hierarchy. They were (and are) considered lesser human beings and many times even worse than beast. Dalit came officially in usage at the first conference on Dalit Literature in Mumbai, Maharashtra 1958. The emergence of the Dalit Panther (a political organization formed in Maharashtra in early 1970's) is a significant in popularizing this terms in place of other terms used at different times.

Dalits were made practically invisible from the main stream art and literature. Wherever they appear, they are shown in poor light. They are projected as they are born to be doomed, damned, thrash, and crush. They are shown as just a thing of utility which is to be used when required to be discarded and ultimately. They are shown as thing of pity, like the dumb animal who cannot utter a word. If somewhere they try asserting themselves their assertion is limited up to pleading, as *Selia* is portrayed in the novel *Godan*. Sometime they are presented mere as a thing of ridicule to make a thing of fun as *Gheesu* and *Madhav* are portrayed in the short story in *The Shroud (Kafan)*.

The present paper is an attempt to bring into discussion and point out the grey areas in the portrayal of Dalit by Premchand (1880–1936) in his short story *The Shroud (Kafan)*. Premchand is well known novelist and story writer of Urdu and Hindi. Though there is considerable discussion and debate of Premchand's novels in Hindi literary circles, but much is desired to bring it in national and international literary circles. Premchand wrote fourteen novels, over three hundred short stories, many essays and letters, plays and translation. Many of his works are translated into English and other Indian languages.

The short story *The Shroud (Kafan)*, is about the father *Gheesu* and his son *Madav*. Both are poor and belong to the community of *Chamar* [an untouchable community] and are lethargic, slothful, workshy and notorious. The story is about father son duo wait outside, while *Budhia*, wife of *Madhav* is undergoing labour pain. They are indifferent towards her pain. They were reluctant to see her; least other would eat the larger share from the potatoes they have. They even curse her to die soon, if she would have to die. They do not see her; had their potato and sleep without bothering about her. In morning they find her and child in her womb to be dead. They start lamenting. Shamelessly they went to landlord (*Zamindar*) who gave them two rupees for cremation of dead body. Other villagers also contributed and they manage to collect five rupees. They both left to buy shroud. They roamed in market till evening but not able to buy it. Finally, they went to liquor shop, drank had stomach full of *puries* and other things. They know no one would believe them; if they have been asked for the reason for not buying shroud, they would say that the money slipped from their pocket. They talk shamelessly got intoxicated and fell there forgetting about everything.

Though it is not essential to reveal the caste in background of story, the incident can happen with anyone in remote village in any community. The Dalit characters are shown in poor light but, it has been tried to project them as stereotype or representative of whole community. The caste is deliberately imposed on character. It is being tried to portray that being from cobbler community, it explains that they are lethargic, slothful, workshy, and notorious. In his words, "It was the community of cobblers [*chamar*] and notorious in whole village." (Mazumdar: 2012, 119)

Secondly, their poverty is shown as self inflicted rather than situational or otherwise. It is not that he (author) is not sympathetic towards poverty. He was quite sympathetic towards poverty of other castes, if they happen from Non-Dalit Caste. The poverty is portrayed according to caste. On one side poverty is thing of ridicule as in case of *Gheesu* and *Madhav*,

It was the community of cobblers [*chamar*, the tanners] and notorious in whole village. Gheesu would work for one day and rest for three days. Madhav was such a shirker, that if he worked for half an hour, he would smoke a *chilam* (earthen pot on the top of hubble-bubble) for one hour. That is why they did not get jobs anywhere. (Mazumdar: 2012,119)

On the other hand poor of other caste are shown with sympathy and dignity. He can be raised from poverty and earn his livelihood comfortably if he belongs to higher caste. How *Magan of Secret Treasure (Gupt Dhan)* is portrayed.

...a small boy who would always carry double the number of bricks that a boy of his age would carry and would work patiently throughout the day.....His body was so weak, that it aroused pity for him....He was *Thakur* by birth. (Mazumdar: 2012, pp 88-89)

Thirdly, both father and son duos are portrayed very indifferent towards *Budhiya*. This can be accepted both are very lethargic, slothful, workshy and indifferent towards *Budhiya*. But it is very improbable they will eat and slept at hut's doorstep and *Budhiya* was moaning and groaning in labour pain inside, until and unless they were drunk. It seems biased in portraying them. He even not spared the death in childbirth, to make butt of fun. He did not portray any of his non-Dalit characters like this. In his words, "They both ate potatoes, drink water, covered themselves with their *Dhotis* (loincloth) and slept like crocodiles. *Budhiya* was still moaning and groaning." (Mazumdar: 2012, 121)

Fourthly, Dalits are being portrayed as if they don't have affections at all with other family members. *Madhav's* wife was in labour pain and both (father and son) are sitting outside indifferently and gossiping the last time they have good food. They are shown as that they are waiting her to die, least their sleep won't be bothered. And the reason of being not going to see her wife inside the hut was that his father would devour the major share of potatoes. *Madhav* got irritated been asked by his father to see the condition of his wife who in. In his words, "If she has to die, why doesn't she die soon? What will I do seeing her?" (Mazumdar: 2012, 119)

It is quite obvious that portrayal of Dalit characters is lopsided and biased. Nowhere so injustice had been done portrayal of characters. Premchand is not only one of the greatest story teller and novelist of world class, that he himself is a class in Hindi literature. But in making butt of joke of Dalit characters he seems to have sidelined his faculty of story writing. The story has many fundamental flaws which makes it unsound on technically ground but mars it free flow. It makes the story artificial and unnatural characterization. Few of these are mentioned below.

Firstly, when *Budhia* is undergoing labour pain, no women of the community was with her. Though, it is very remote to accept a husband is so indifferent to her wife in labour pain, but still can be accepted. But in any part of India and in any society a women in labour pain is not left alone, even if doctor or midwife are not available other women of neighbour or community helps her and support her. Not only of the community only, if there were women who are totally stranger support and assist woman at this time. It was not that they have been excommunicated, living alone or otherwise. In his own words when they saw her dead body, they start crying in his words, "When they heard this the neighbours came rushing, and according to old tradition, started consoling them" (Mazumdar: 2012, 121)

Secondly, not all members of family leave the dead body alone and go to buy shroud. Even if it is not possible to all members to stay with dead body, at least one member stays back with dead body. It is very improbable and unusual. This artificiality mars the free and natural flow of story. They were also not been excommunicated, as mentioned above. And in any case dead body would not left by with other people society, and all family members went to buy shroud.

Thirdly, It is very painful that in demeaning a community he (author) has forgetting the basic humanity, that no normal human being will sit idle and wait and wish his wife to die who in labour pain. The characters hardly seem to be human or anywhere near humanity. *The Shroud (Kafan)* cannot be called as satire, as satire is covert, a satire is healthy, it is for the constructive purpose and nowhere their caste or creed of characters is revealed overtly. It is healthy to point out any wrong practice, custom, habit or whatever, but it is unjust to hurt or make butt of jokes, targeting a particular community overtly. To target a particular community cannot be called as intellectual endeavor; it is propaganda machinery or rather be called as sharp lampoon targeting particular caste. It is very unfortunate that this endeavor is from the pen of the literary figure who cannot be classified in class who himself is a class.

So concluding the discussion, it has been pointed out that portrayal of Dalit in mainstream literature is hardly justified. Either Dalits are missing altogether or if portrayed, their portrayal is not justified it is biased and lopsided. Premchand is no exception to it. He has portrayed *Gheesu* and *Madhav* both Dalit characters (including whole community) in a very poor light. It has been tried to portrayed that being Dalit itself implied that they are lethargic, slothful, workshy and notorious. Not only both are individually but whole community is portrayed as stereotype. All these characters could be at one time accepted, but portraying them (father and son) indifferent when *Budhia* is in labour pain is very painful. On to that he (*Madhav*) wishes her to die soon so they could sleep freely. The reason for not going to see her as his father will devour major share of potatoes is inhuman and pitiable. Having slept carelessly at hut's doorstep of after having potatoes and their daughter in law and wife (*Budhiya*) moaning in labour pain inside is highly improbable. Drinking liquor from the money collected for shroud is inhuman and portrayal of such situation shows the prejudice of author. The story has some technical flaws which mar the free flow of story. First that there was no one in community and neighbour in assisting *Budhiya* in her labour pain, but when she dies all came to consoles father and son. Secondly after collecting money, both men (all male members and happens to be only kin) left buying shroud leaving dead body with neighbors (?).

So it can be said that characterization of Dalit by Pramchand is not justified, as in the line of mainstream literature. It is more painful that story like '*The Shroud*' (*Kafan*) is from the pen of a literary figure that cannot be classified in a class, who is a class by himself.

Reference

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