

Representation Of Caste, Gender And Power Politics In Premchand's Godaan- A Gift Of A Cow

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Abstract

The politics of caste and power are tangled and lead to web of deceit. Caste is an inherent part of social and cultural fabric of Indian life. But our contradictory experience makes us thrive to trace or attempt to understand the causes of caste and gender discrimination. However, from time to time sensitive readers can analyze and interpret the representation one finds in the imaginary situations, characters and the dilemmas which are modeled after real people and places in various genres. But in due course the literary text seizes to limit itself to the time period in which it was produced. The significance of the work depends on its characteristic of shifting relevance. This paper primarily focuses on "how caste forms a criterion for development or fall of an individual in his/her own community and society?" and trace the lineage between caste and power; gender and shift in power structure in Premchand's novel Godaan. Some critics say that Premchand presented downtrodden/ untouchables as idiots, insensitive and lazy. But here I would like to argue that the writer has employed different mode to depict caste based society, their suffering and revolt. It is a natural human tendency to take it as it comes when suffering crosses the limit of tolerance. That is what is shown in the imaginary but deep rooted world of fiction of the writer.

Key Words: Gender, patriarchy, power structure, Caste, exploitation.

Godaan published in 1936 is a classic Hindi novel which crossed the limitation of language and understanding. It presents a realistic portrayal of various conflicts between landlords, agents, religious leaders and a peasant community of 1920-40s. The Awadh region often assumes the centre stage through exertion of pressure and force. The questions of exploitation of the poor and landless farmers, people of the lower caste and strata, and women by the dominant, participatory people and cultures of a region are raised. It is a poignant story of suffering agrarian populace of imaginary village Belari. As India is primarily agrarian the saga of Belari village of north India connects people of south, east and western India as well. Godaan internalizes, suggests and communicates social, cultural and economic history of Uttar Pradesh (Awadh) in a fictionalized form. It is an amalgamation of facts and concern of a serious thinker. There lies the authenticity and remarkable observation of Premchand. All the Characters try to withstand the pressure of dharma (duty) and vidroh (protest). Roland Barthes argued that any literary text has multiple meanings, and that the author was not the prime source of the work's semantic content. The "Death of the Author," Barthes maintained, was the "Birth of the Reader," as the source of the proliferation of meanings of the text. The reader can probe through the psyche of the characters which are no more under the control of the writer who created them. To prove the point let us focus on the text and the language through which it is represented.

As poetics and politics of caste is an inherent part of social, cultural and even mental set up of Indians, current hybridist culture and shifting identities of individuals make understanding caste issues more complex. Since last few decades dalits struggle for survival is noticed but not felt. The creative and humanitarian minds have documented such struggles and atrocities against fellow human beings, who suffered for being born in a particular caste which was considered inferior to other castes for reasons of their own. Much of India is rural and that which is not, for the most part, is urban. With such a drastic difference in the city and the village there is also a difference in the way caste has been interpreted and implemented over the years amongst the masses.

In classist, castist and power oriented society, it is not easy to speak or trace individual identity. However, some writers have succeeded in raising their voice against caste based bias and marginalization of women, shift in power structure and complexities of downtrodden. Premchand realistically portrayed how caste played a pivotal role in the subdued, low and inhuman status of dalits. Most of the time this impartial portrayal makes some readers feel that Premchand was blind to the suffering of downtrodden and tried to present that they themselves were responsible for their suffering and purposely portrayed them as lazy, foolish and ignorant. Often Premchand portrayed them in lighter vein for example in 'Push Ki Raat', 'Kafan' and other stories the reader laughs at the foolishness of the characters, their dialogue, their preferences but at the end of the story the laughter echoes the anguish, suffering and hunger; if one feels that the farmers are shown as lazy, greedy, careless and so inhuman that they spend the money collected for the last rites of the woman, it may be noted that when poverty and hunger attack kills the senses too. If thought rationally it indicates the anesthetic effect the hunger and poverty has on them. It is not just the poor but the rich from any high caste too will behave in the similar manner if

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they confront hunger. The plight of the poor is made crystal clear. This paper attempts to study how successful was Premchand in representing the problematic life of people especially women from lower strata and exclusively lower caste women of Awadh region during colonial period.

Sir H. Risley argues that a caste may be defined as a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name which usually denotes or is associated with specific occupation, claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine, professing to follow the same professional calling and are regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community. Senart, a French authority, believed that a caste as a close corporation, in theory at any rate is rigorously hereditary: equipped with a certain traditional and independent organization, including a chief and a council, meeting on occasion in assemblies of more or less plenary authority and joining together at certain festival, bound together by common occupations, which related more particular to marriage and to food and to question of ceremonial pollution, and ruling its members by the exercise of jurisdiction, the extent of which varies, but which succeeds in making the authority of the community more felt by the sanction of certain penalties and above all, by finding irrevocable exclusion from the group. If we focus on the two definitions the fine example for this can be traced in Gobar's intimacy with Jhuniya, it makes Gobar run away to city and despite of Dhaniya's refusal Hori had to pay fine to village Panchayat and lose his land. He thinks that after his death his body would be carried by his biradari so he would better pay the fine and follow the norms. To stay attuned to the cultural practices of the community the characters keep compromising in every walk of their life.

Gender also plays a significant role in the power dynamic of caste in daily life and politics. Women's representation within the political system seems to also be tied to their caste. Lower, more conservative castes have less female participation in social, political and economic fields than upper, more socially liberal castes. The novel clearly depicts hierarchy of caste and its role in politics and access to power and resources has created a society of patron-client relationships along caste lines. On one hand Malti stands for a woman exposed to society and has the advantage of education on the other hand Dhaniya, Juniya, Roopa, Sona; Siliya and other women of the village lack education, facilities, equal rights or any rights for that matter due to their economic conditions and the caste they were born in. Malti was spinster and remains so till the end, whereas at the beginning of the novel itself Hori was worried about Sona's marriage, the following lines highlights the gross gender discrimination against woman in the matter of marriage 'And now Sona was at the age where a husband should be found for her. If a son's marriage doesn't take place, that's one thing. But for a daughter to remain unmarried would make them the laughing stock of the community.' (Godaan -42)

Another incident for secondary position of woman can be traced in a realistic portrayal of man-woman relationship. Romantic, idealized relationship has no place, and hunger is more powerful than love. The writer succeeds in bringing out to the fore the heart of the problem through everyday arguments and debates amongst the characters. Most of the debates in both the village and the town are about status, property, gender-relations, and caste. Khanna and his wife Govindi debate what to do about a sick child; Khanna's longstanding flirtation with the beautiful and the city cultured Miss Malti makes him neglect his wife: Such quarrels may open up debates on (women's sexuality), a kind of freedom man enjoyed and a woman was denied the freedom to even speak to other man on the grounds of her being a woman.

The best example which emphasizes man-woman relationship, caste, gender, power politics and revolt in the lower groups is stated through Siliya's father Harkhu, an old man of sixty, dark and thin, wrinkled as a dried pepper and just as biting: There's no trouble, thakur. Today we'll either make a chamar out of Matadin or shed his blood along with our own. Siliya is a woman, and she has to go live with some man or other. We have no objection to that, but whoever takes her must become one of us. You can't make brahmans out of us, but we can make chamars out of you. If you're willing to make us brahmans, our whole community is agreeable. As long as that's not possible, then become chamars. Eat with us, drink with us and live with us. If you're going to take away our honour, then give us your caste. (G.D.305)

In part, this act shows revolt, the characters choose this particular kind of embodied 'pollution' as revenge for a Chamar woman being 'taken' as a mistress by a Brahmin. Nonetheless it emphasizes how women's life is considered incomplete without men. Even Dhaniya expresses similar ideas about marriage:

The dawn of married life is rosy with an intoxicating desire whose golden rays illumine the horizons of the soul. Then comes the scorching heat of noon, when whirlwinds blow and the earth begins to tremble. The golden shelter of desire melts away. Stark reality emerges. After that comes restful evening, cool and peaceful, when, like weary travellers, we discuss the day's journey with a detachment as though seated on some high mountain top removed from the clamour below. (G.D.xv)

In her encounter with the police official Dhaniya speaks of the futility of trying to gain 'suraj' as she calls it that is swaraj (self- or home- rule), on a moral basis as slim as that presented by the new leadership. Another important issue is body. Dhuniya's statement 'Hira may beat her, but he gives her lot of loving too. You have only learned how to beat a woman, not how to love her.' 'you only came to me when your own needs got too pressing, mister. It wasn't love for me' speaks of women being considered as an object of sexual gratification. Another incident where Malti and Mehta in search of prey confronts a tribal/Jangle girl, Mehta admires her concern for strangers like him and at the same time acknowledges her toned body. Malti takes Mehta's admiration for the girl as lust. Hori's sister-in-Law Punni is treated badly; even Hori treats his wife inhumanly. The women in the village are beaten, abused and neglected to the core. Gobar gets into physical relationship with Jhuniya a widow and when she gets pregnant, he escapes to Lucknow and Jhuniya is left to suffer alone. Realizing the helplessness of her, Dhaniya boldly accepts Jhuniya. Punny's husband bangs her head on the ground. Dhaniya reminds Hori how he kept beating her for silly reasons. Beating and abusing of wives by their husbands is shown as a common phenomenon, women are treated inhumanly and made to work like animals. Though they work shoulder to

shoulder with men they are paid less yet expected to work at home and take care of the family too. After losing the land Hori and his family work in the farm of Datadin and the way he treats them shows attitude of people of his class (small scale land holders). When Hori had land, he had respect but on losing it, he was reduced to a labourer. Such issues elucidate a kind of life landless people lead in general and women in particular. Men were the property holders and their women were unacknowledged labourers. Dhaniya, Jhuniya, Punni and women from dalit community speak of their husbands beating them but never desert them, even if they temporarily escape by running away to their parental house they return because of their traditional upbringing.

In the villages especially, caste dictates marriage, rituals concerning birth and death as well as occupation which all in turn have a large role in economic status. In this way the impact is tremendous although subtle and varied. There are several transgressions which cause down fall of characters and their suffering accelerates at an alarming rate, causes grief and scandal because of the inter-caste romances in the novel. Hori's son Gobar decides to marry Jhuniya a widow, who was lower in position/caste and contemplates that:

How could this work out? How could he take her as a mistress and still live at home? And there was the problem of the other caste members – the whole village would start cackling. They'd all turn against him, and his mother wouldn't even let Jhuniya set foot in the house. But if she, a woman, was not afraid, then why should he, a man, have any fears? (G.D. 64)

Another important transgression is the romance between a Brahmin named Matadin and a woman named Siliya (chamar by caste). Though their communion can be called as romance it has other facet too. Siliya is doubly marginalized, she suffers for being a woman, a low caste and a landless, powerless woman. High caste Matadin, Datadin and people like him find no issue with touching/developing intimacy with dalit woman but in broad day light their life after death also gets corrupt. Siliya's courage is appreciable; way back in 1930 she is portrayed as a single mother. She gives birth to the baby which was for her symbolized her love for Matadin—a Brahmin who rejects her for the fear of his community. Some where the issue of dalit woman being depicted as sexually attractive and the high class men desiring them, involving in illegitimate relationship is quite ironical but it is certain that they are exploited. Jhinguri Singh takes a Brahmin girl but because he was thakur and had money he wasn't questioned and rather turns out to be a money lender. Jhuniya exposes the hypocrisy of the high caste people. She relates how clerks, shop keepers, thakurs, lawyers and pundits offered her money, jewellery and swear to be her slaves forever. One of the Pandits tells her that:

You should take pity on poor men occasionally or else God will say that although he gave you beauty you wouldn't even do a favour for a Brahmin. What answer will you give then? How about a gift of beauty today? (G.D.67)

Malti the doctor questions herself:

men were heartless, granted; but they were the sons of those mothers. Why was it that women didn't teach their sons to show reverence for all women? Was it because the mothers had completely affected themselves, losing all individuality, and didn't know how to give instruction? (G.D.377).

These statements force us to ponder over gender issues knitted finely in the fabric of the novel.

The privileged upper caste groups benefit more by gaining substantially more economic and political power, while the lower caste groups have limited access to those powers. The caste system distributes to different castes different economic strength. The Panchayat is a local government unit that is in-charge of resource disbursement. Mehta, Raisab, Omkarnath and others from the city enjoy the privilege for being born in the high caste. Raisab had inherited property from his ancestors and that added weight-age to his position but due to British rule diminished and reduced to tax collector, yet he was respected and held high position amongst the villagers and at the same time he was forced to follow orders and play subordinate role in the British society (colonizers). The condition of weak feudal sect is shown empathetically. Raisab tells Hori that:

We zamindars would go to any lengths to please him ... Our parasitic existence has crippled us < sometimes I think the Government would be doing us a big favour by confiscating our lands and making us work for a living. (G.D.26)

Description of difference between old order and new system renders the text multi dimensions to the voices of the subalterns. In the text landlords collect money from the farmers for the functions, marriage, ceremonies and festivals. Gobar's comments and his refusal to appease Raisab shows protest in younger generation. These incidents show differentiations the farmers of the region met. Raisab and Mehta's dialogues emphasize a kind of relationship the farmers had with older lords before arrival of British and their policies in the Indian scene. Earlier feudal lords had been collecting tax but would relax or totally leave tax in the time of famine, flood or bad crop. They would support economically too. Some amount was to be contributed at the time of teej, festival and marriage of their daughters. But under the influence of British Government policies the new order hit the backbone of the nation. It became business and profit over took their moral responsibilities toward the peasants. Who toiled day and night and earned nothing but perspiration. Dr. Rambaksh writes that , in those days one could not find a single person in Uttar Pradesh who was not suffering from poverty, tax and interest amount. Farmers suffered to come out of debt. Their life lost essence under the pressure of net amount, interest, tax and appeasing the landlords.' A post-structural critic must be able to use a variety of perspectives to create a multifaceted interpretation of a text, even if these interpretations conflict with one another. It is particularly important to analyze how the meanings of a text shift in relation to certain variables, usually involving the identity of the reader (for example: class, racial, or sexual identity).

The characters are representative of space, time, place and inhabitant communities/populace. Issues of identity and sense of delusion which haunted the farmers of that time period also find voice in the novel and the language assumes new configuration in the light of one's geographical locale. Hypocrisy of the educated city bred people is evident in the

conversation of Malti, Khanna, Editor and Raisab. To sum up the novel rings true both in its village scenes and in its urban/high-culture passages, and many of the debates and arguments its characters have, over issues such as caste- and gender-relations remain relevant today. It's satisfying to read for its psychological insights (especially regarding relationships between men and women). It encompasses colonial taxation policies, peasant unrest, the failure of the leaders (national leaders), exploitation of the peasants by the landlords (zamindars), doublemarginalization of women viz. colonial rules, patriarchy, rural-urban clash, reality-idealization, impact of policies, religion, community, problems of migration, class and caste find expression in a local vernacular. All the issues are culture, community and region specific. It provides the reader a kaleidoscopic view of the world he/she is logically interested in. It enhances a deeper understanding of human predicament and urges the need for better understanding and love.

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