

Munshi Premchand: The Emperor of Novels

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study how **Premchand**, author of novels and short stories in Hindi and Urdu pioneered in adapting Indian themes to Western literary styles. Premchand (1880-1936) wrote about things that have always existed but had hitherto been considered beyond the pale of literature – exploitation and submission, greed and corruption, the straightjacket of poverty and an unyielding caste system. Son of a post office clerk, he was named Dhanpat Rai (literally meaning the ‘master of wealth’), yet he waged a lifelong battle against unremitting genteel poverty. Reading and writing, always the stock in trade of a good *kayastha* boy, coupled with acute social consciousness and an unerring eye for detail turned him – with a literary career spanning three decades which included 14 novels, 300 short stories, several translations from English classics, innumerable essays and editorial pieces – into a *qalam ka sipahi*, a ‘soldier with the pen’.

In Premchand’s world, the bad are needed to offset the good. Self-seeking, *bhang*-drinking pandits, effete landlords, college-going newly-westernised *sahibs* and *memsahibs*, and corrupt petty officials are set against another set of characters. There is, for instance, the orphan Hamid who buys a pair of iron tongs for his grandmother instead of sweets and toys for himself, little Ladli who sets aside her share of *puris* for old Kaki, the corrupt Pandit Alopideen who shows immense generosity for a fallen but upright opponent, Jhuri who loved his oxen like his own children – all these help restore our faith that human beings can occasionally be good and kind too. Stock characters like Dukhi the tanner, Halku the peasant, Gangi the untouchable woman, Buddhu the shepherd, Bhajan Singh the hot-headed *thakur* and countless others served a useful purpose to someone of Premchand’s literary disposition: he exploited the intrinsic worth of stock characters and stock situations to portray a very real world. Like the Russian masters whom he admired so much, realism for Premchand was a *mise en scene* against which he built up the props of character and plot. “I write for only one sake: To present a human truth, or to show a new angle of looking at common things,” he wrote. A legendary figure in the space of Hindi and Urdu fiction, a social reformer and activist himself, his work went beyond entertainment and offered social criticism and was full of social purpose. Although some of his best work is a part of around 250 short stories compiled under the title *Manasarovar*, these are the five novels that embody the values and spirit he stood for and those that remain timeless, just as his writing.

Key words: novels, Hindi, Hindi literature, Urdu, premchand, criticism Policy.

Introduction

Born in Lamhi, a village near Varanasi on July 31, 1880, Dhanpat Rai Srivastav went on to become one of India’s greatest literary figures and was popularly known by his pen name Munshi Premchand. Premchand received his early education at a madrasa in Lalpur, where he learnt Urdu and Persian. Later on, he studied at a missionary school where he learnt the English language. His mother, a homemaker, passed away when he was eight years old. Nine years later, the death of Premchand’s father, who was a postal clerk, interrupted the youngster’s education.

After supporting himself by taking tuitions for a few years, he became an assistant teacher at a government school in Bahraich district in 1900. It was around this time that he also began writing fiction.

Initially, he assumed the pen name Nawab Rai for his first novel *Asrar e Ma'abid*, which focused on corruption among temple priests and exploitation of poor people.

The novel was serialised in the Varanasi-based Urdu weekly *Awaz-e-Khalk* from October 1903 to February 1905. He began his literary career in Urdu but eventually switched to writing in Hindi.

Premchand's first story, *Duniya ka Sabse Anmol Ratan (The Most Precious Jewel in the World)* was published in 1907 in *Zamana*; somewhat melodramatically it announced that the last drop of blood that would bring the country its freedom would be the most precious 'jewel'.

His first collection of short stories, *Soz-e Watan (The Dirge of the Nation)*, that followed a year later in 1908 was found to be so incendiary and seditious that not only was it banned by the imperial government, but all copies of the book were burnt. Undaunted, Premchand kept writing stories that expressed the pain and suffering of the toiling masses that had been suppressed for centuries, using stereotypes where necessary to make general observations, painting on a large canvas with broad, sweeping brushstrokes, writing stories that occasionally seem preachy or moralistic when not outright sentimental to modern readers.

Yet, for all their moralistic overtones, they appeal to all that is good and decent in us, all that is moved by exploitation, injustice and intolerance. It is this quality that has single-handedly made Premchand relevant to modern readers, even young urban readers, explaining why great stories like *Do Bailon ki Katha* or *Idgah* continue to be prescribed reading in school textbooks.

Some of his finest writings, written in the last 20 years of his life, show the influence of Mahatma Gandhi and the Russian Revolution in his choice of subjects: the need for widow remarriage, the rampant systems of dowry and untouchability, the problems of landless labourers, the urgent need for land reform, the lot of underpaid and over-worked salaried people who resort to bribery and corruption, and social and class inequalities that cause good people to do bad things. His support for the Sarda Bill, which aimed to raise the age of marriage for girls and advocated the right to give widows a share of their late husband's property, finds reflection in stories such as *Nirmala* and *Narak ka Marg*.

Interestingly enough, unlike the women writers of this period, such as Mahadevi Varma and Suhadra Kumari Chauhan, Premchand made no attempt to portray the woman as a silently suffering victim; if anything, his women voice the strongest arguments, complaints and feelings. His Gangi is willing to face the wraths of the thakurs while trying to fetch clean drinking water for her ailing husband. That she doesn't succeed is another matter; in showing a woman who is, at the very least, trying to go where she is forbidden, he was showing the way – a way that would be seized by the progressive writers who came immediately after him, a group of writers who would turn the brave but ineffectual Gangi into the torch bearer of lasting social change.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze 'Upanyas Samrat'(the king of novel writing) Prem Chands works mainly his novels. In his novels we can formulate idea about the social and political life of the pre-independent India

Premchand's literature; for a changing time

Premchand's affinity towards socially-engaged, purposive literature is evident from his espousal of a new kind of writing that was beginning to take shape in the 1930s. When a group of Young Turks in London drew up a Manifesto of what would soon become the Progressive Writers' Movement, he published it (albeit in a slightly watered-down version) in his influential Hindi journal Hans in October 1935. And when the progressives decided to hold an ambitious first-of-its-kind meeting of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) on April 9, 1936 at the Rifah-e Aam Hall in Lucknow, Premchand rose to the occasion with everything at his command as a writer. Not only did he give his whole-hearted support to this fledgling association, but his presidential address would, in later years, become a manifesto of sorts for a literary movement unlike any other in the history of this country, a movement that would shape the responses of a whole generation of Indian intelligentsia.

Unanimously elected the first president of this all-India writers' body, Premchand – by now a lion in winter, for he would die a bare five months later – wrote one of his finest pieces of non-fiction for this occasion. His speech, called Sahitya ka Uddeshya (The Aim of Literature), was heard by a rapt audience comprising both young and established writers from across the country. In simple but powerful words, the greatest storyteller of his time told his audience how good literature can only be founded on truth, beauty, freedom and humanity, and that his definition of literature was simply 'the criticism of life'. And since literature is nothing but a mirror of its age, its definition, scope and contents just as much as its aims and objectives must change with time. Given the turmoil and change in the world, his reader – and theirs – could no longer be content with the wondrous tales of love and escape that had been the staple fare of the fasana and dastan of yore.

Writing for the masses

The author was influenced by the freedom movement and his works not only entertained readers, but also conveyed social messages, and encouraged them to participate in the movement. One such work, Soz-e-Watan, published in 1907, was banned by the British rulers, which prompted him to change his pen name to Premchand.

Meanwhile, he took up the post of an assistant master at the Normal High School, Gorakhpur, in 1916. Continuing to write in his free time, Premchand wrote his first Hindi novel, Seva Sadan.

Here is a glimpse of some of his famous novels

Sevasadan (1916)

The fact that Sevasadan remains relevant 100 years after being published is a testament to not only the writing prowess of Munshi Premchand but also on Indian society. A bold, fearless commentary on the condition of women in Indian society, narrated through the life of a beautiful lady Suman who goes from a Bramhin to a vaishya, Sevasadan ripped

through the hypocrisies on display in Indian society like women's rights, the act of dowry and prostitution. Interestingly, it was written at a time when there was a lot of noise in Indian society around women reforms, and the novel also focuses on how reformists treated concubines as the scum of society and tried to eradicate them rather than understand the situations that led them to this state in the first place. Sevasadan remains a piece that is a culturally rich documentation of Indian society during that period.

Nirmala (1928)

Perhaps one of the most poignant Indian novels on the theme of an adolescent girl married to an elderly man, Nirmala was reformist to the core. Through the many troubles that befall Nirmala, the protagonist after her marriage, Premchand attacked the evil that plagued India during that time – the dowry. Dealing with the issue at hand with sensitivity, Nirmala is at once heart-rending and deeply insightful. The characters are not black or white; they have deep issues and failures of their own, making this work by the author particularly human.

Gaban (1931)

Gaban means embezzlement. A gem for anyone wanting an insight into rural India of that time, Gaban is a simple story of a man in love who strives to fulfill his wife's seemingly insatiable urge to acquire jewels. Through this story, Premchand focuses on the socio-economic problems faced by men and women in the Indian hinterland and highlights the issues of corruption and of the poor. How ordinary citizens fall to the traps of corruption is the mainstay of the story. The book still remains an excellent understanding of life under British rule and its various social issues.

Karmabhoomi (1932)

Set in the 1930s, Karmabhoomi plays out in a time of exploitation of the Hindus and Muslims of Uttar Pradesh by the British. Having co-existed peacefully for hundreds of years, the novel talks about a revolution against the British Raj. Championing the Gandhian causes of peace and ahimsa, this work evokes questions on morality through metaphors and the progression of its various characters. Social change, sacrifice, the clash of ideology and the nature of man in crisis – Karmabhoomi defined 'dharma' for the contemporary reader of those days and urged him to know the difference between real and superficial acts of religion.

Godan (1936)

Considered by many to be Premchand's best work, Godan is a story about peasant India. Also the last novel he ever wrote, Godan is an absolutely realistic depiction of the society as found in Indian villages. Focusing on myriad issues like casteism, the exploitation of women, the capitalistic exploitation of the peasant class and the socio-political environment of a time when Indians were struggling against the British rule, Godan is a masterpiece. This novel stands out because of the dexterity with which the author handles the various primary characters. It is a story of harsh circumstances, bleak optimism and hard-hitting truths. Godan is Premchand's ultimate ode to the Indian farmer.

Fighting for Freedom

“Currently, good literature,” he maintained, “is judged by the sharpness of its perception, which stirs our feelings and thoughts into motion.” The main aim of literature, then, was to ‘refine’ the mind of the readers. And while undoubtedly the aim of art was to strengthen one’s sense of beauty, art too must be weighed on the same scale of usefulness as everything else in life. The time had come, he declared with the quiet assurance of a messiah, to redefine the parameters of beauty: “*Hamein khubsoorti ka mayaar badalna hoga.*”

Calling language a means and not an end, and while conceding that a writer is born, not made, Premchand stressed that a writer’s natural gifts could be enhanced with education and curiosity about the world around him. “Literature,” he said, “is no longer limited to individualism or egotism, but tends to turn more and more towards the psychological and social. Now literature does not view the individual as separate from society; on the contrary it sees the individual as an indissoluble part of society!” Deeming “a quick mind and a fast pen” not enough, a writer must also be abreast of the latest scientific, social, historical or psychological questions – as was the case in international literary conferences. In India, Premchand maintained, we conversely shy away from such matters and thus the need for far more socially-engaged literature had become more urgent than ever:

“We will have to raise the standard of our literature, so that it can serve the society more usefully... our literature will discuss and assess every aspect of life and we will no longer be satisfied with eating the leftovers of other languages and literatures. We will ourselves increase the capital of our literature.”

Speaking not merely as president of the inaugural session, but identifying himself completely with the aims and objectives of the PWA (the address is replete with references to ‘our association’, ‘our ideal’, ‘our aim’), Premchand spoke about opening centres in ‘each province and in each language’: “To water them and to strengthen their aim is our goal.” The 14-page text is not merely an eloquent plea on behalf of the PWA; it is significant for other reasons as well. Here is the doyen of Hindi literature, rising above the thorny issue of language (Hindi-Urdu-Hindustani) and talking about what concerns, or *should* concern, all writers irrespective of language. He urged writers to discard individual and personal concerns and, instead, speak in a collective voice taking upon themselves public and political roles. Literature, which had hitherto been content to entertain or at best educate, must now, given the exigencies of the times, advance human knowledge and freedom.

Conclusion

Premchand is considered the first Hindi author whose writings prominently featured realism. His novels describe the problems of the poor and the urban middle-class. His works depict a rationalistic outlook, which views religious values as something that allows the powerful hypocrites to exploit the weak. He used literature for the purpose of arousing public awareness about national and social issues and often wrote about topics related to corruption, child widowhood, prostitution, feudal system, poverty, colonialism and on the Indian independence movement.

Premchand started taking an interest in political affairs while at Kanpur during the late 1900s, and this is reflected in his early works, which have patriotic overtones. His political thoughts were initially influenced by the moderate Indian National Congress leader Gopal Krishna Gokhale, but later, he moved towards the more extremist Bal Gangadhar Tilak. He considered the Minto–Morley Reforms and the Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms as inadequate, and supported greater

political freedom. Several of his early works, such as *A Little Trick* and *A Moral Victory*, satirised the Indians who cooperated with the British Government. He did not specifically mention the British in some of his stories, because of strong government censorship, but disguised his opposition in settings from the medieval era and the foreign history. He was also influenced by the teachings of Swami Vivekananda. In the 1920s, he was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's non-co-operation movement and the accompanying struggle for social reform. During this period, his works dealt with the social issues such as poverty, zamindari exploitation (Premashram, 1922), dowry system (Nirmala, 1925), educational reform and political oppression (Karmabhoomi, 1931). Premchand was focused on the economic liberalisation of the peasantry and the working class, and was opposed to the rapid industrialisation, which he felt would hurt the interests of the peasants and lead to oppression of the workers. Given the exigencies of *our* times, there can be no better way to celebrate Premchand's legacy on his 140th birth anniversary than to remember his words and to remind ourselves of the aim and purpose of literature.

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