

# Social Conscience- An Alter Ego of Premchand

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## Abstract:

The advent of Modern period in Hindi is considered from the 1900's. In the beginning modern Hindi literature was centered on the magical and fairy tales, entertaining the readers with imagination. Born as Dhanpat Rai Srivastav, he began his career as a freelance writer under the pen name "Nawab Rai", but when his work 'Soz-e Watan', a collection of short stories was seized by the British government and burnt, after this he started writing in Hindi, with the name Mushi Premchand. Premchand usually referred to as the 'Tolstoy of India' shaped the Hindi literature into a reality. He conquered the literary genre as a novelist, story writer and as a dramatist, and is titled as the 'Upanyas Samrat' (Emperor of Novels) in Hindi Modern literature. He gave a new dimension to the Hindi literary world by depicting reality of the society to the readers. He entered the Hindi literary world in the year 1917 with his novel, 'Sevasadan'. He has penned 17 novels and more than 300 short stories which portrayed the social issues prevalent in the society during his time. He raised his voice against the feudal system, the zamindari system, poverty, communalism, caste system, and the social and economic conditions prevalent in the society. He even mentioned the discrimination the females faced in the society. He fought against the dowry system, widow marriages and opined that women have to come out and express her feelings against the social evils and discriminations showed on her. He wrote on the life around him and made the readers aware about the social structure around them. He portrayed the common man in his work's giving them the status of heroes and heroines by depicting the problems faced by them. Thus he presents to us the real India.

**Keywords:** feudal, poverty, discrimination, communalism, evils

## Introduction

Prem Chand is one of the leading writers in Hindi literature. Before him, novel was romantic in mode and it catered to individual tastes and needs. Prem Chand introduced the element of realism in Hindi novel. He is opposed to the individualistic mode of writing and favours the kind of literature which is capable of infusing a spirit of creativity among individuals. He 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. It enables an individual to develop a distinct sensibility which is capable of harmonising the common with the creative impulse. Geetanjali Panday expresses Premchand's views on literature in her book *Between Two Worlds*:

"Literature should criticize and analyze our life . . . The literature which does not...infuse the reins of society were controlled by religion...today literature has taken charge and its means is love for beauty. . . The downtrodden, the pained and the deprived-their protection and in us true strength and determination is worthless for us in our present times. . . In earlier age advocacy is the duty of literature".

Munshi Prem Chand not only acknowledges the existence and value of an individual in social context and environment but he also believes in a realistic portrayal and analysis of problems. His aim as a writer is the betterment of society. In this sense, the social realism of Prem Chand is more positive and progressive than any other writer of his age. In individualistic and psycho-analytic modes of writing, the expression of the conscious and subconscious elements is the main objective of the writers. But as far as the evolution of human consciousness is concerned, the social and collective circumstances have their significant contribution. The novelists following the social perspective in their writing visualise more clearly and effectively about the welfare of the individual and society as well. This view of life is reflected in their writing which makes their art more expressive and truthful.

In his novel *Nirmala* (1927), Premchand has exposed the social evils like dowry system and mismatched marriage in which the young woman is invariably a victim. In fact, this novel is a pathetic story of a young girl named, *Nirmala* who is married to an aged widower with many children. Suspected of infidelity by her husband, she has to undergo a lot of mental torture. The action of the novel centers around three families. The central character named *Nirmala* is the common link between these families. The novel *Ranga-Bhoomi* (1925) reflects a wide range of socio-political issues comprising rural poverty, caste discrimination, untouchability and the tension between the haves and the have-nots in the background of preindependence India. The reaction to the industrialization is quite visible. The industrialist has been presented over possessed and obsessed with his business interests. In order to achieve his ends, he will shift loyalties without any shame. *Prabhu Sevak*, an industrialist, clearly declares that business is nothing if it is not 'cannibal'. To look upon men as beasts and to treat them as beasts is the motto of the business world. One cannot succeed to be a businessman unless one is cruel to his fellow human beings. Thus, the novelist portrays a conflict between the age-old social traditions in Indian villages and the wave of new British Imperialism.

Premchand's foremost novel *Karmabhumi* (1932) which was written in the backdrop of the national movement, projects many social evils of his contemporary period such as restriction untouchables for the entry into the temples by use of intoxications and illiteracy, the land disputes, atrocity of zamindars and the nationalistic forces among the youth under the leadership of Gandhiji. Premchand was greatly influenced by 'The Bardoli movement' of the peasants, opening of the gates of the *Lakshminarayana* temple for the untouchables at Wardha and Gandhi Irwin pact etc. The novel clearly demonstrates the basic philosophy of Indian thought and unlocks the multiple observations of its significant title. The very word *Karma*, in a sense, denotes to the importance of duty, act and work in human life. The other word *Bhumi* means earth, ground and field. Therefore, the novel may be regarded as 'The Field of Action' and the prime theme of the novel is to highlight, the social evils. In the very beginning of the novel Premchand highlights the atrocities in educational institutions.

Apart from Munshi Prem Chand, many other writers like Siyaram Sharan Gupta, Vishambhar Nath Kaushik, Amrit Lal Nagar and Fanishwar Nath Renu also express their belief in the social obligation of a writer. In the writings of Prem Chand, the emphasis is more on reforms and ideals. The impact of Arya Smaaj, Gandhi, Tolstoy, the realism of Galsworthy and the progressive ideas of Marx is clearly visible in his writing. His art of writing has evolved itself out of these formative influences. The tendency of social change and intellectual ferment, and a transition from Prem Chand to Amrit Lal Nagar and Fanishwar Nath Renu has been an evolution one. All of them do not believe in any specific sectarian philosophy as they have a firm belief in humanitarian values. One distinct feature of the works of these novelists is that the evolution of their literary genius shows a marked movement from the concrete to the abstract, from the real to the ideal. In Prem Chand's novels like *Godan* and *Mangalsutra*, characterizations show a tremendous influence of psychological truths and patterns of behaviour. Though Prem Chand does not follow any psychological system, yet he uses his psychological insight for the realistic portrayal of life in his novels.

A psychological insight and a point of view are better mediums of perceiving sensibilities at the subliminal level. In *Godan*, the classification of characters is scientific rather than mere psychological. Moreover, the extensive use of psychological techniques does not make social-theme based novel a pure psychological novel. Prem Chand presents his protagonists as idealists and dreamers as they can be found aspiring for new ideals though their quest for a Utopian kingdom. For Munshi Prem Chand, the main source of inspiration for writing social novels is his zeal for social welfare. He believes that individuals in a collective form make society, and the study of these individuals is the best way to understand society and its problems. The problems and social obligations belong to the individuals and Prem Chand does not negate the importance of an individual. He asserts that the solution to man's problems can be found within society. Man is an integral part of society and he is safe only when society is stable. Prem Chand evaluates an individual from a social point. His characters are governed by age-old beliefs and social patterns, and they lack initiative and dynamism. They do not behave like the existential characters of Saul Bellow, Camus, Sartre and Beckett. The individual's personal problems are secondary and they are more concerned, rather worried about social obligations and religious considerations. One finds such types of characters in Pillai's *Chemmeen*, Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*. As a writer Prem Chand provides only that much in-depth analysis of a character which is required for the betterment of society. The dominance of individual's aspirations and passions over social set-up is not acceptable to him. His short stories and novels have characters with a responsibility. His main objective is to stimulate those tendencies which can promote the growth of a healthy society.

Prem Chand seems to agree with Mathew Arnold when he considers literature as a criticism of life, and life has to be lived and understood in relation to society. He considers social environment as the most crucial factor shaping human destiny. As a writer, he is more interested in the outer side of life and its graphic details. He is against the narrow-minded individualism. His parameter for evaluating and analysing human behaviour is a collective social effort.

According to Prem Chand, human behaviour and character has to be judged in its social context. As a true humanitarian, Prem Chand believes that every act that is against society is sinful. One should promote those factors which contribute to human happiness and welfare. At the root of his belief in social commitment and the objective of writing lies his revolutionary zeal for reform and progressive change. In his novel *Godan*, he attacks prevalent social evils and practices. He favours social change and reforms instead of a revolution. All his novels reflect his enthusiasm for social change, and social evils like exploitation of poor farmers, prostitution, child-marriage, and the problems of widows are his subjects for study and criticism. His age was the age of political turmoil and rapid socio-economic changes which saw the emergence and flowering of the genius of Prem Chand.

It can thus be concluded that all the novels of Munshi Premchand reflect his enthusiasm for social change and social evils like exploitation of poor farmers, prostitution, child marriage, the problems of widows are the subjects for study and criticism. His age was an age of political turmoil and rapid socio-economic changes which saw the emergence and flowering of the genius of Premchand. When Premchand started writing, he was dissatisfied with the prevailing social and political unrest. His aim as a writer was to make society a better place to live in. So he discusses social issues and social morality in a new light, new to contemporary society. Thus Premchand remains the representative writer of his time.

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