

The Status of Indian Women and Prem Chand

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Abstract

Most striking feature of Prem Chand's literary works is their responsiveness to the conditions and demands of his times. As a social realist, he was deeply aware of the evils prevailing in the Indian society – the religious dogmas, superstitions, exploitation of the peasantry, inhuman treatment of the untouchables, and, above all, the miserable condition of women. These social conditions decided his literary objectives. Prem Chand presented of the Indian society in that part of the 20th century when a new social consciousness against the social and religious evils of society was emerging.

Introduction

The Conservative Indian society and culture assigned an inferior status to women and untouchables to maintain the status quo. The women were subjected to the purdah system, rigid code of chastity, illiteracy and a hard and rigorous life after the death of their husbands. The society took extreme care to keep its women backward and-traditional with a view to containing every process of change this attitude to women meant to keep the society static, and the "inferior status of women in society was further made sacrosanct by religious ordinances."¹

Prem Chand was deeply moved by the deplorable condition of women and their helplessness and sufferings. He criticized society for reducing women to children producing machines and objects of men's lust. With all his might, he pleaded for social rights for women and their protection against exploitation by men.

This captive status of Indian women disturbed the sensitive artist in Prem Chand and he highlighted every form of oppression of the Indian women. His stories depict incompatible marriages, sufferings of widows, evils of the dowry system, and the sufferings inflicted by the British soldiers on women. Before Prem Chand, literature was viewed as a means to create a world of make-believe for aesthetic pleasure. He was one of the early Indian writers to make art an instrument of social change. His concern was with social realities and he wanted to create the ground for social renewal. As regards women, he wanted to make the society aware of the excesses it had been doing to its women for long, so that it could take steps to undo the injustice being done to women.

During Prem Chand's time, the condition of Indian women was very miserable. The birth of a girl in the family was considered unlucky. Between the age of 12 and 14, these girls were married to unknown persons. At times they were married

to men much older than them, provided such men had wealth and prestige. On many occasions, an innocent young woman was forced to marry an aged person who was wealthy, and she had to suffer throughout her life. The prevailing marriage system shows that the status of women in the family was not superior to that of a maid servant. They had no right to property, they were victims of oppression. The widows in particular were branded as a separate class, were considered as creatures of bad women and were not allowed to participate in social life. This humiliation and exploitation compelled some of them to commit suicide or take to prostitution. One striking thing was that this violation of the humanity of women was more prevalent in the upper castes than in the lower castes. The reason for this advantage to the lower caste women was economic. In the lower caste families, women participated in agricultural work along with men, besides doing the domestic chores, and, thus, they were an asset to the family. As compared to the women of the upper castes, they were economically more self-reliant and therefore more independent. As a result of the important role of the lower caste woman in the family's economy, the conservative customs were not as rigid in the lower classes as in the upper classes. There were widow remarriages among the lower caste women and, if they were dissatisfied with their husbands, some of them even deserted to the latter and started living with the persons of their choice. Their society did not stifle them with restriction.

For Prem Chand, emancipation of women meant that they should be allowed opportunities for self-improvement and progress, and should be enabled to think independently. He saw in them potentialities and spirit to fight against their exploitation and oppression. Throughout his literary career, Prem Chand continued to have a deep concern for women. He fought social conservatism to pave the way for the emancipation of women. At the political plane, he emphasised their actual participation in the national struggle and established their politic initiative, so that the society began to think in terms of the equality of sexes.

Prem Chand's women characters belong to both the higher and the lower castes, but his emphasis is on the latter who struggled against their exploitation. Women from all sections of society were victims of exploitation and torture and Prem Chand's main aim was to develop in them consciousness of their condition. To achieve this aim, he presented women who were socially and politically conscious. In fact, his fiction depicts the continuously widening consciousness of women. In his earlier writings, his women characters fight against personal disabilities, subsequently, they stand up to family and social taboos, and ultimately they blossom into patriots and fight for the freedom of the country. In his works, the woman progressively achieves self-emancipation, which raises her status in society, proves her cultural prestige and enables her to participate in public affairs and political life of the country. Such portrayal of women aimed at motivating women to fight against their exploitation, as also to provide inspiration to the other exploited sections of society to do the same.

In Prem Chand, women feel concerned with the country's problems and protest against the widespread superstitions in the village, but they are also mindful of the country's freedom. Jalpa in *Godan*, Sukdhin karambhumu Sheelwati in 'Ahuthi' foresee their emancipation in terms of the country's freedom. Prem Chand had a high opinion about the Indian women and his "ideal women" are the embodiments of sacrifice, selfless service and purity. Jalpa is one such woman. About such women, Prem Chand says: "My ideal women represent at one-point sacrifice, selfless service and purity."² His good women face the hard realities of life which induce in her self-confidence. It is this self-confidence born of her struggle that motivates play an active role in the freedom struggle and loves her country. "Besides, she has moral courage, so much so that she would not give a false evidence to save her husband and send an innocent person to the gallows."² Prem Chand not only presents the plight of women with sensitivity but he also underlines that the Indian women possesses qualities which would help solve her problems. A look at his women characters would show that he was one of the finest feminists and used his literary skill to bring about the emancipation of women.

The above-mentioned opinion of Prem Chand about women is reflected in almost each of his major work. In *Karambhumi*, Saloni, a poor labourer and peasant has enough social consciousness to enable her to fight for her rights. Subsequently, she links herself to the struggle for the country's freedom. In "Sukda", the woman is presented as a source of initiative and inspiration. She participates in the political struggle to end the foreign rule, and she is brave, dedicated and straightforward. According to Prem Chand, "suppressed manhood is virginity,"³ and he assigns a leading role to the women of his times in the Indian national freedom struggle, so that she could inspire the men. This is perhaps why Sukda is shown vigorously protesting against the tortures, immorality and corruption of the police, and the police conceding victory to the masses. Prem Chand had a deep sympathy for the exploited. Sukda listens to the demands of people rather than resorting to political expediency. Thus, the women in Prem Chand represent humane values and make him a writer of lasting significance.

As a social realist, Prem Chand successfully presents the various problems of the Indian women of his times. As a social reformer, he suggests several ways to emancipate them. His works depict the condition and attitudes of women sympathetically. The various aspects of the problems confronting the women projected in his fiction can be divided into the following categories:

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1. Women and their love for ornaments;
2. Love relations before marriage;
3. Dowry system and women;
4. Incompatible marriages; the problems of widows;
5. Prostitution and women; and
6. Women and the national movement

Conclusion

To conclude, Prem Chand's ideas on the status of women suggest that he had a deep understanding of the problems of women and was confident that the Indian women had the capacity to put an end to their humiliation, oppression and exploitation. For him, those who were oppressed and suppressed had a tremendous capacity to protest against these humiliations with vigour and strength.

To conclude the discussion on the status and life of women and their problems in Prem Chand's literary works, the author presents his women fighting against their social domination which caused many a problem of women, as well as trying hard to become economically self-reliant. The writer believes that cooperation between man and woman is essential for the growth of society. According to him, "without the woman's cooperation man cannot do anything alone." No work will be completed until women involve in that work.

References

1. A. R. Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan Ltd., 1981), p. 274.
2. Prem Chand, *Gaban* (Allahabad; Hans Publication, 1978), p. 137.
3. Prem Chand, *Karambhumi* (Allahabad; Hans Publication, 1978), pp. 221-222.
