

Representation of Caste, Class and Gender in Indian Novel: *Godaan*

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ABSTRACT

A well-known twentieth century author who wrote both in Hindi and Urdu, Munshi Premchand has been often referred to as the “Tolstoy of India” by several critics. His collection includes several novels and more than three hundred short stories. The focus of his writings has always been the depiction of ordinary man and his struggles. The present paper aims to capture the essence of caste, class and gender as portrayed in the novel *Godaan*. Premchand was the precursor of progressive writing in India which started a new literary era and is one of the most important literary figures of India.

Keywords: Caste, Gender . Premchand , *Godaan*.

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Premchand was the precursor of progressive writing in India which started a new literary era and is one of the most important literary figures of India. According to Jack Lindsay:

“Premchand’s passionate sympathy, his closeness to the sufferings of people and his sense of urgent historical issue initiated him into penning the socio realistic picture of humanity.”

In the novel *Godaan* Premchand has skillfully captured the misery which is a permanent trait in the lives of people who belong to the lower strata of the society. The novel portrays a poverty ridden, small village named Belari near Avadh in Uttar Pradesh and further several incidents are portrayed to bring forth the vein of hypocrisy, corruption and manipulation prevalent in the society. The victims of patriarchy, class and caste oppression are laid bare to face the powerful and humiliating social standards as well as practices. The story chronicles the struggle of a poor peasant Hori, who wishes to own a cow, trapped in a vicious circle of ever increasing debt and the consequences that follow. Several other characters in the novel are used to attack the unjust social class and caste system prevalent in the country.

In the novel, the Brahmin priest of the village Datadin presides over all the religious functions of the upper caste families. His religious zealotry is heightened by the belief that his upper caste endows him with the power to “chastise the sick peasants”. “Mumbling prayers, parroting the holy books, observing fasts and eating food cooked with pure hands” is his essence of pure religion. Datadin, like a cunning man squeezes money from the illiterate, gullible and low caste people in the guise of absolving their sins. He treats the lower castes with disregard. He even turns a blind eye to his son Matadin’s illicit love affair with a low caste woman Selia until it remains a secret. As the plot progresses, Matadin’s love affair becomes public and he refuses to accept Selia on the grounds of her low caste. According to the hypocritical norms of the society, a man can make love to a low caste woman but cannot

eat the food cooked by her nor can marry her. Matadin completely rejects her love in order to remain “pure”. However, Selia’s family is highly infuriated at their daughter’s obvious exploitation by the “upper caste Brahmin boy, Matadin”. The cobbler community avenges this by placing a bone inside Matadin’s mouth forcefully to taint his dharma. In order to gain acceptance in his Brahmin community Matadin undergoes various rituals but is ultimately rejected. The statement given by the cobbler community says a lot about the evil caste system:

“If you cannot make us Brahmins, we can make you cobblers.” (*Godaan, p-52*)

Gender discrimination is also well presented in the novel’s power politics of daily life. For certain women’s representation within the social milieu is tied to their castes. The women in the novel seem to be “double- victimized” thus. Selia is one victim of such oppression, while others being Jhunia, Dhania, Roopa and Sona. Jhunia the widowed daughter of cowherd Bholu develops a relationship with Hori’s son, Gobar who impregnates her and ultimately abandons her in front of his parent’s house. Gobar himself runs away to the city abandoning the responsibility of Jhunia and their unborn child. Jhunia is forced to take protection with Hori and his family as she is disowned by her family and relatives. Finally Gobar returns to take Jhunia and their two year son Lallu to the city, but this also shatters soon. Jhunia realizes that the “romantic picture” of city life as showed by Gobar is actually a “dismal dungeon”. She feels trapped in such atmosphere and has no one by her side except her husband Gobar, who shows only sexual interest in her. Situation worsens and her son dies due to illness, Gobar turns to alcohol and politics which finally leads her to depression. It is after Gobar’s accident that she steps out to work and gains a sense of self respect and worth.

Hori's wife Dhania is a practical, up righteous and self aware woman. She fully understands that it is nearly impossible to liquidate the debt of the zamindar, even if they work twenty four seven and thus she does not play sycophant or touch the zamindar's feet, unlike Hori. When Heera poisons their cow she decides to have him punished, but on the opposite she is beaten publicly and is silenced by her husband at the arrival of the police in the matter. Though criticized by all, she continues to stand by what she thinks is right. Her acceptance of the low caste pregnant Jhunia as her daughter-in-law displays her role as an emancipated women who wishes for a casteless society. Thus, she is one strong and devoted women character of the novel. She in a way represents hope for women, though forced to face misery till her last days.

The study of *Godaan* portrays the violence, injustice that lies beneath the social codes formulated on the grounds of class, caste and gender. It also perfectly captures the position of women, trapped in the chains of patriarchy and other humiliating practices. Harish Trivedi rightly points out that the text highlights the author's recognition of its character's penetrating, unresisting and often thoughtless allegiance to several social institutions. The psychological violence that culminates from the roots of caste, class, power and gender discrimination even today continue to dominate the society. *Godaan* successfully enhances the understanding of the reader and compels him to think about such issues.

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