

Role of traditions and social customs in the society: An analysis of Munshi Premchand's story 'The Shroud'

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Abstract

The present paper intends to explore the role of traditions and customs in the lives of the poor strata of the society. The compelling nature of traditions and customs affect not only particular incidences of people's lives but controls their general behaviour. The traditions and customs are entrusted on the people and dominate their lives so much that morality, wisdom and conscience take a backseat. One feels compelled to take an action when a tradition has to be observed. Traditions and customs enforces the people in the form of restrictions and compulsions. The paper analyses the irrationality of certain customs and their imposition on society especially on the people who barely earn their daily bread through Premchand's story 'The Shroud' as the main characters Gheesu and Madhav, utterly poor father and son go through the ordeal of arranging a shroud for the latter's wife. It also exposes the hypocrisy of these traditions which fail to fulfill the promise that they appear to.

Keywords: tradition, customs, society, poverty, exploitation, survival

Munshi Premchand is regarded as a great writer of Hindi fiction and has penned fourteen novels and about three hundred stories which have been translated into several languages over the world. The highlights of his writing are simplicity and stark social realism. His social concern becomes evident in his writings as he depicts the life of people affected with poverty, illiteracy and exploitation. He often depicts the plight of such people struggling for survival against the social forces. The social customs and traditions play a pivotal role in shaping the narrative and the course of the lives of his characters. He shows how the poor are forced to follow customs and rituals especially the people who hardly get food to fill their stomachs find themselves in the trap of the rituals which aim to profit a certain group of the society. They put financial burden not only on the utterly poor but also on the people who are able to make their living. There are many rituals relating to the occasion of death of which one is the use of shroud, a new piece of cloth to cover the dead body of a person which is discussed in his story 'The Shroud'. It is a typical specimen of Premchand's realism which depicts the life of two farm labourers, Gheesu and Madhav who while living in conditions of abject poverty often face starvation and find it really strange to buy shroud, as an essential part of funeral rites. They remain in a bewildered state as in utter absence of money and food, they find it difficult to compromise to the customs that seem to them sheer wastage of money. The story revolves around the death of Bhudhiya, Madhav's wife and rituals and ceremonies associated with death and cremation.

The story begins with Budhiya undergoing labour pains and suffering unattended inside a hut whereas Gheesu and Madhav are eating hot potatoes outweighing each other. They do not think seriously about her and ignore her completely making excuses and concentrate only on filling their stomachs with potatoes. It seems that they rarely find food to their heart's fill, they do not mind if their tongues are scorched. Their greed for food seems to be insatiable. Living in utter poverty and an environment of exploitation, they rarely find any motivation to work and have become shameless and have lost the moral and human values. Premchand shows that poverty has made them stubborn, shameless and inhuman. Their hardworking fellow workers who live in almost same conditions do not provide them any motivation to work hard. The social system is such that poor are helpless and feel discouraged to live a life based on moral and high ideals.

The writer introduces Budhiya as a hard working woman who earned the daily feed for the men in the house and worked herself to death. This increased the idleness of Gheesu and Madhav all the more. This was a wrong practice but there are no traditions which could come to the rescue of Budhiya. It is ironic that the lady who fed her husband and father-in-law lay helpless, unattended and in suffering when she needed them the most. When she was in pain no custom helped her but when her body is lifeless which feels no pain, the whole village makes effort to provide certain things which included a piece of new cloth to cover her lifeless body.

The main events of the story follow the death of Budhiya. When Gheesu and Madhav found her dead, they start crying and beating their chests according to immemorial custom. The neighbours come to shed a tear to show sympathy to the family. In our society the occasion of death invites sympathy from everyone related. It is ironical that the people who are crying and showing sympathy were totally indifferent to Budhiya's pain. The social custom is to pretend one's sympathy and concern for the bereaved. Budhiya died unattended due to the carelessness of the people around, but mourned by the same people. This exposes the futility and hypocrisy of certain traditions and customs.

"Hearing their weeping and crying the neighbours came and as per old tradition started giving them advice on the occasion." (Greatest 4)

There are many customs in the society which are made to provide help for the funeral rites but there are rarely any which come to help when the person is sick or in need. Most customs are hollow as they are used to make a display of emotions and feelings. The story highlights not only the futility of these social customs but also the compulsions they impose on the poor and deprived strata the best society. The neighbours who gather at Gheesu's house try to arrange the materials required for the funeral rites and cremation. They distribute the duties and Gheesu and Madhav are given the responsibility of buying a shroud.

"When Zamindar Saheb gave two rupees how would the shopkeepers and moneylenders refuse to help him? Gheesu knew to make the most of Zamindar's name. Someone gave him

two annas, someone four annas. In an hour Ghisu collected a good amount of five rupees. Someone gave him grain, somewhere he got firewood."(Greatest 5)

The rest of the story studies the reaction and behaviour of father and son to the tradition of buying a shroud. They talk about the uselessness and futility of using a new piece of cloth on the dead body. Here they become the mouthpiece of the writer as they put a relevant question that the cloth is burnt up in the end. The tradition of wrapping a dead person in new cloth seems ridiculous to them and especially in case of Budhiya who lived in rags throughout her life and had never got a new cloth. They raise a pertinent point that there are traditions of offering thousands of rupees to priests in the name of the dead thinking that these reach the dead in the other world. One is not sure that they do reach them or not, but certainly these have become a business for certain people. For the poor, who barely earn their daily bread, these rituals and customs become difficult to follow. In the case of Ghisu and Madhav, who live a life of starvation and utter poverty, the tradition to buy a new cloth when Budhiya is dead seems absurd especially when she did not get any help when she was in labour. The same people who ignored Budhiya's pain and suffering, came out with help for cremation in the form of cash or kind. This exposes the hypocrisy, pretensions and uselessness of social customs. As Ghisu says that rich can afford to follow these traditions however useless they might be. The poor have their own perspective to the traditions that involve expenditure specially in conditions where even a small penny has got its importance. They generally manage to follow such traditions for fear of society. Ghisu and Madhav who have become stubborn and obstinate and seem to have lost their wisdom and human values because of utter poverty, illiteracy and exploitation did not choose to defy the custom completely. They only delayed the custom and availed the chance of fulfilling their gluttony. In their heart of hearts, they knew that the villagers will provide shroud to cover the dead body of Budhiya. Through their behaviour the writer conveys the attitude of people towards traditions and customs and highlights the compulsive force that pressurized people living in the society.

"What an evil custom, that one who does not get rags in life, needs a new shroud after death." "And what happens to the shroud, it is burnt with the corpse."

"Does it outlast? Had we got these five rupees we would have managed her treatment." (Greatest 5)

Ghisu and Madhav eat and drink with the money they collected for the shroud. They find themselves too helpless to spend the money on shroud. The conditions of utter poverty and exploitation over the years have made them shameless. Their concern, sympathy and gratitude for Budhiya which was hidden in the wave of gluttony and idleness keep on reviving, coming to the fore, intermittently when they were eating and drinking in the public house. They realized that she was truly a great human being who never gave trouble to anyone. Comparing her to the selfish and exploiting people around, they expect her to be respected in the other world. They also feel pity for the suffering she underwent especially at the time of death.

Ghisu stood up and as if swimming on a wave of joy said, "Yes my son, she will go to heaven. She did not exploit anybody, did not cause trouble to anybody. While dying she fulfilled the greatest desire of our life. If she will not go heaven, will these fat men go who usurp the poor with both hands and to wash their sins bathe in the Ganga and offer water in temples."(8)

Munshi Premchand through his story 'The Shroud' gave us a glimpse into of the life of downtrodden and oppressed people and show how traditions and social customs present a challenge to them as they are already struggling to make a living in a society where the rich and the powerful exploit the poor. At the same time the writer through the mouth of Ghisu also talks about the rich who follow certain traditions to purge themselves of all the sins and wrong they have done in their life. Ghisu under the effect of liquor brings notice to the plight of the poor who are exploited by the 'fat' symbolic of riches. He adds that by following the tradition of taking bath in the holy water of Ganga, they take for granted that all their sins will be washed. The writer wants to point out that the people take meaning of the traditions as they suit them. They use them as an easy way to redeem all their misdeeds. Traditions came into being with some sense or significance but with the passage of time they exist in the society as a compulsion for the poor and a way to get justification and purgation for the sins for the rich. The writer also highlights the futility of these customs which are performed not out of devotion but for compulsion and fear of society. They add to the burden of poor who are already victims of exploitation by the zamindars and businessmen.

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