

Oppression and Tyranny in Munshi Premchand's '*A Night in Poos*'

Navita

Assistant Professor of English

Baba Sahib Bhim Rao Ambedkar Government Co Education College

Jalandhar, Punjab

Abstract

The present paper intends to explore themes of tyranny and oppression in Munshi Premchand's story 'A Night in Poos'. The paper discusses how poor labourers are victims of social injustice and inequality. There is no hope or relief even for the hard workers. They are caught in such a system that they not only bear physical hardships but also undergo mental agony and trauma. The protagonist of the story Halku tries hard to shield himself from the chill of the coldest month of the year. At the same time he and his wife Munni find their mind obsessed with the inability of repaying debt to money lenders. The paper analyses the hardships and difficulties faced by the poor labourers on one hand and their plight and helplessness in the journey of their struggle for survival.

Keywords: oppression, injustice, poverty, debt, hardships, helplessness

Introduction

Munshi Premchand is a prolific writer of Hindi fiction and has fourteen novels and about three hundred stories to his credit. His works have been translated into several languages of the world. The highlighting feature of his writings is simplicity and stark social realism. Munshi Premchand in his stories frequently focuses on the exploitation of the poor. He portrays the suffering and hardships of poor labourers and peasants by landlords and people in position of power. In his novels and stories Premchand explores tyrannical and oppressive attitude and behaviour of zamindars. Poor labourers have to bear this injustice and cruelty. Moneylenders exploit them and trap them in the vicious cycle of debt and poverty. The poor and marginalized spend their life in misery, helplessness and struggle. Despite living a life of continuous struggle, they hardly get even the bare necessities of life. For this reason, they don't find any motivation to follow the moral ideals in their life.

The story 'A Night in Poos' is about the plight of a poor farm labourer, Halku who gets surrounded by difficulties and hardships. Already trapped in debt, he undergoes a saga of suffering when he has to spend a night of the coldest month of the year in a field without a blanket. Poos is the coldest month of a year especially in Northern India one shivers in open at night. It is really difficult to bear the chilly weather in open in the coldest month of the year. In such a chilly weather Halku had to take care of the crop of the landlord. He had saved three rupees to buy a blanket but paid that money to clear the debt. Halku accompanied by his

loyal dog tries hard to keep himself warm but in vain. At the end of the story, not only he spent a miserable night but has additional loss as the crop is eaten by the animals.

The very beginning of the story speaks of the debt on Halku. Their moneylender has come to get the payment. Although they don't have enough money, Halku is keen to get rid of the debt. Halku and his wife Munni have saved three rupees for a blanket to use in the upcoming winters. Halku has to sleep in the open field. He dreads to face the chilly weather without a blanket but also feels threatened by the abuses of the landlord and choosing the lesser evil decides to get rid of the debt. This led to a heated argument between the husband and wife. Munni is not ready to give the money that she has saved for the blanket. Her words speak of their burden of debts and the hard life they spend. They see harvest season as a symbol of hope in their life but that also is spent in debt clearing. Munni speaks these words in utter hopelessness and frustration.

' I don't know how many debts you owe which we are unable to pay back by any means. I say, why don't you give up farming? Toil hard in the field and when harvest comes, spend it in debt clearing and then we are off. As if we are born to return loans. And for two meals work as labourers. To hell with such farming. I won't give you money ,no.'"(Greatest 92)

Premchand often in his stories presents situations of abject poverty. We find his characters miserably caught in dilemmas. We find Halku in such a dilemma as he is threatened by the intimidation and abuses of landlord and at the same time he fears the harsh winter and longs to have a blanket to keep himself warm but his plan to buy one has been unsuccessful.

' With each step his head was bending low with his overbearing sense of penury'.(Greatest 93)

The description of the 'dark night ' by Premchand is heart-rending. It was the month of Poos, the coldest month in northern India. Halku, shivering in his old coarse shawl sitting on a bamboo cot in an open field gets ready to brave the chill of January night. His pet dog Jabara accompanies him in this venture. Halku and Jabara , both are concerned for each other. Halku rebukes Jabara for not staying at home and following him in bitter cold. Jabara reciprocates his love and care for the master. Halku while facing the bitterly cold night gets frustrated with the hardships faced by the poor labourers. He becomes the mouthpiece of the oppressed and speaks of the unjust social system where the landlords spend the winter chill in warm and cosy blankets and hard workers lead a difficult life full of challenges.

'This is the pleasure of farming! And there are so many lords where if winter comes, it runs away in fright of heat. Thick mattresses, quilt blanket. What power winter has to survive there! This is the irony of fate! We do the labour and others reap the fruit. '(Greatest 94)

The story depicts in detail how poor struggle hard to survive while facing hardships in their life. Halku smokes Chillum to get some comfort and lessen the cold but he gets little relief. Then he put Jabara in his arms. Jabara also feels elated in his master's arms. It gave them comfort for a while. After an hour the chill aggravates and Halku clasps his both knees to his chest to get some warmth but it is of no use. The blood in Halku's body was freezing. At this

point it was still midnight and there were almost three more hours to go and Halku have not had even a little sleep.

'Chill was further aggravated by cold wind. Halku got up and clasped his both knees to his chest and dug his face in it. But there was no respite from cold. It seemed as if his whole blood was frozen, and instead of blood, snow was flowing in his veins.

Bending down he looked up towards the sky to assess how far the night was left. Saptarshi (a constellation of seven stars) had not even come half way in the sky. When it comes on the horizon it will be dawn. It is still more than three hours left'. (Greatest 95)

Halku then, thinks of collecting some leaves from the next field and getting some warmth. Collecting leaves in the darkness at this hour made his hands and bare feet numb. At last he got successful in lighting fire. Halku was excited to get the warmth of burning fire. But his every attempt to beat the cold was temporary and the cold and chilly wind returned with double power. He struggled throughout the night to beat the cold but all his efforts went futile. Halku's inactivity in saving the crop of the field was caused by the hopelessness the poor feel when they are unable to live a dignified life despite their hard work. In such cases there is no motivation for them to work. While living such hard life full of continuous struggle they hardly get encouraged to follow the moral ideals that a normal person sets in his life. When the crop was being devoured by the animals, Halku thinks of doing his duty but the fatigue of the night, dread of chilly wind and lack of motivation held him back.

' Halku, with a determined effort, got up and moved two- three footsteps, but a sudden waft of chilly wind piercing like the stings of a scorpion stuck him so hard that he went back to the dying fire and sat down raking up the ashes and warming up his cold body. Jabara continued howling and antelopes devouring the standing crop in the field while Halku remained calmly glued to warm ashes as idleness had chained him. He slept there on the warm ground by the side of the ashes covering himself with a shawl'. (Greatest 97)

The story ends with another trouble in the life of Halku. The animals entered in the field in the wee hours when Halku after spending a dreadful night got a little cosy near the warm ashes, chained in indolence, lost the agility to run after the animals. He got up late in the morning when his wife Munni came running to him. The crop has been ravaged by the animals and Halku will have to compensate the loss by doing daily wages. His dog Jabara is also dead. Munni is also upset and angry as there is no end to their miseries. Readers feel pity for the loss and physical hardship Halku had to undergo. It is strange that Halku was happy. He does not mind the loss as long as he will not have to sleep in the open field in the chill of night. Although Halku's happiness is not easily digested by the readers but after speculation it seems to be justifying his thinking. His ordeal of the last night has frightened him so much that he does not want to face that again. He is relieved that he will not have to face the cold and piercing wafts of chill again.

Halku's life seems to be the typical life of a poor labourer burdened with debt, facing physical hardships and struggling to survive in a world in which opposing forces of oppression and tyranny continue to exploit them. It is really pitiable that while living in such harsh struggle of life they remain devoid of the basic necessities of life. Halku faced the biting chill of the

Poor night without a warm covering. This shows the contrast of the life style of the people living in our society. There are many who enjoy the luxuries of life and have surplus things whereas life of poor labourers like Halku yearn for the basic necessities like food, clothing and shelter. This seems all the more ironical when we see that these deprived people work themselves to death. Working so hard throughout their life, they are never able to get themselves freed from the web of the debt. They spend their whole life facing physical hardships and living in mortal terror of repaying the debt. Halku's condition truly reveals the exploitation of the poor labourers by the callous landlords. They make use of their service but never bother to provide them the basic necessities of life. The story truly expresses such conditions of victims of tyranny and oppression.

Work Cited

Gopal, Madan. My life and times: Munshi Premchand. Roli Books Private Limited, 2006.

GUPTA, AKANKSHA, and Ranjana Mehrotra. "Delineation Of Marginalized Society In The Works Of Munshi Premchand And Its Impact On Contemporary India." Think India Journal 22.4 (2019): 2295-2301.

PREMCHAND, MUNSHI. "LIFE AND WORKS OF MUNSHI PREMCHAND." WELCOME MESSAGE (2024): 7.

Nandaniya, Nilesh. "Indian Ethos in the Selected Works of RK Narayana and Munshi Premchand: A Comparative Study." Vidhyayana-An International Multidisciplinary PeerReviewed E-Journal-ISSN 2454-8596 8.1 (2022).

Singh Ram Bhagwan ,C.L khatr. "Greatest Short Stories of Premchand" Aadi Publications 2019.