Introduction

During the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries, Hindi literature was heavily influenced by realism. In an important way, the shift towards realistic writing was a result of the diffusion of print culture, and the growing influence of nationalist ideologies. Although Premchand was not the first realist writer in Hindi literature, but his realistic writing was indeed far more influential than any other Hindi writer of the period. Several scholars have noticed the influence of Dickens, Tolstoy, Chekhov and Marx on Premchand’s writings. While this is indeed true, it should be borne in mind that his writings were still rooted in the Indian environment, and were marked by a strong sense of attachment to the Indian culture. The central concerns of his work were the oppression of the lower classes and women. Stories like ‘Idgah’ painfully depict the woeful plight of children afflicted by poverty in our society. Along with the concern for the oppressed, his writings were heavily influenced by nationalist feeling; this is, for example, evident in his short story, \textit{soz-i watan}, which had to be banned by the British Government.

Premchand was born on 31 July 1880 in the village Lamahi near Benares.\footnote{For his biography, see Amrit ray, \textit{Kalam ka Sipahi}, Hans Prakashan, Allahabad, 2005.} He wrote fourteen novels, about 300 short stories, countless
letters, editorials, and essays, several plays and screens plays, and number of translations from English adaptation of European novels. He also had a busy career as editor and publisher.

As the noted scholar of Hindi, Amrit Rai, puts it, Premchand "created the genre of the serious novel and the serious short story in two languages, Hindi and Urdu." His magnum opus is considered to be the novel, *Godaan* (now published in English as *The Gift of a Cow* in UNESCO's Asian Literature Series). Premchand chaired the first All-India conference of the Indian Progressive Writers' Association in April 1936 at Lucknow. The initiative for starting an All India forum for left leaning writers was taken by a group of Urdu-speaking intellectuals, headed by Sajjad Zaheer, who drew up a manifesto in 1935, while still studying in London, which urged the intellectuals to realise the necessity, “to bring the arts into the closest touch with the people” by focussing on “the problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjugation”.

The work of Premchand, indeed, one of the pioneers in nationalist Hindi writings, and a tall figure in progressive writers movement, forms a fascinating theme for study. Interestingly, his writings are one of the most popular readings in Hindi, but owing to their extraordinary influence they
have been translated by such distinguished scholars as Amrit Rai, Alok Ray, Orsini Francesca, Vasudha Dalmiya, etc.

In an important study, Jagdish Lal Dawar (1996) worked on the representation of popular culture in Premchand’s writings. His work actually brings out the representation of popular culture in Premchand’s writings, but, in an interesting observation, Dawar, also suggests that for Premchand, the site of the ‘popular’ was also the site of resistance. Drawing out the ambiguity in Premchand’s position over the popular culture, Dawar points out that he saw the popular culture not only as an element of exploitation of lower class, but also a powerful source of their agency. Premchand could see the regulation of popular culture by the elite society, and it is here that he saw its exploitative potential. At the same time, he also noticed the spaces that it afforded to the lower classes to exercise their agency.

Premchand’s devotion towards the peasantry has been studied by Geetanjali Panday and Sudhir Chandra. Geetanjali Panday, in her article, ‘Premchand and Peasantry: Constant Radicalism’, has studied the roots of Premchand’s agrarian radicalism. She argues that Premchand saw the colonial agrarian society as marked by a ‘primary contradiction’ between the zamindar and the peasant. He therefore believes that the feudal order,
marked by zamindari exploitation, was the source of peasant oppression. At the same time, Geetanjali finds Premchand providing solution in divine retribution to the exploiter. She finds twofold depiction of the zamindar’s and the peasant’s social and personal performance and occasions of change of heart of the exploitative zamindars.

Sudhir Chandra in his paper ‘Premchand: A Historiographic View’ has also studied Premchand’s view on peasant society in a diachronic frame of reference. He points out that Premchand viewed zamindar-peasant contradiction as autonomous of colonial state. He believed, points out Chandra, that freedom from colonial yoke would not alleviate the sufferings of the peasants in India.

Michael Sprinkler wrote an article, ‘Marxism and Nationalism: Ideology and Class struggle in Premchand’s Godan’, in which he highlights the influence of Marxism and Nationalism on Premchand’s fiction. He also discusses elements of caste-class intersectionality in Premchand’s writings, as well.

While all these studies on Premchand’s work highlight the complexities of his thought, and the radical influences over his work, they are all marked by one notable absence: gender. My work seeks to examine the representation of women and gender in Premchand’s writings. While
doing so, I also look at the connecting issues between gender, class and caste in his work. It is one of the main arguments of my study that caste-class-gender intersectionality was the central paradigm that formed his work.

The first chapter, ‘gender in domestic domain’, deals with gender relations in the domestic domain, and the kind of agency he provides to his woman characters in the domestic domains. Interestingly women in Premchand writing appropriate their domestic traditional work for their agency.

My second chapter, ‘Gender, Nation and Nationalist Politics in Premchand’s writing’, discusses gender-nation intersectionality, as this was the period when Indian national movement was a reckoning force, and Premchand was influenced by women’s participation in the same. In Premchand’s writings, women were not treated as a liability or passive citizen. Premchand’s women can not only protect their honour but can fight bravely for their nation. The influence of Gandhi is also evident from his writings. His women characters are imbued with the Gandhian idealism and shakti.

‘Class, class conflict and colonial state’ is the next chapter that deals with the portrayal of marginalised social groups in Premchand’s writings.
Premchand’s concern for the lower classes is well-known, and I examine his treatment of marginlised social groups in this chapter.

The last chapter, ‘class and gender intersectionality’ deals with the portrayal of the relationship between middle-class women and labouring class men, and between the middle class men and lower class women. It is interesting to see Premchand showing upper class women in love with lower class men. The sexuality of lower class women is an important problem posed in Premchand’s work, and he repeatedly describes the violation of their body by the upper classes and the complicity of the state.