CHAPTER – 4

Gender and Class Intersectionality

Premchand’s writings established him as champion of women and the lower-classes, his writings pertinently raising the issues of oppression. It would be nevertheless interesting to look at gender and class intersection in his writings as to what seemed more urgent and significant to him, given his sympathies for both. The aspects of gender and class that affected him most and the issues he took in writings would be crucial in the study but for better understanding of the progressive writing of those times and Premchand in particular, the writers specific approach to these at intersections becomes significant.

One of the beauties of Premchand’s writings lies in his multi-layered portrayal of human relationships.¹ As we have seen already, he sees more than exploitative relationships between classes. In the depiction of class relationships, the issues between men appear simpler in form with Premchand mainly looking at the socio-economic dimensions of feudal life intertwined with issues of exploitation as well as patronage, whatever approach he had at that juncture; his sympathies clearly lying with the

lower classes. In the patronage stories, he brings more of the benevolent aspect of patronage flowing from the propertied men rather than the problematically unequal and demeaning human life situations of the lower classes. However, the issues got complicated with the interjections of gender in the narrative of class oppression. Still a number of his stories took up mainly the issue of class and economic exploitation in depicting the relation between upper class men and lower class women. In a number of stories around lower class women characters perhaps it was mainly to highlight greater impoverishment and helplessness, a state associated with women. In this, the writer attempted realistic portrayal but one could still notice his subtle but definite acceptance of the traditional patriarchal set up in the narrative especially while speaking of women’s drudgery flowing from home; something which could not be simply altered.

In some of these stories, patronage from rich men to poor women was brought out as normal side of human relationship. The relation was presented as protective. In the story ‘Muth’3, the master of the house employs muth (magic) to punish the thief who had stolen his money but when he came to know that his domestic servant had stolen the money, he went back to the magician, gave him double money to take back the

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2 See chapter-4 of this thesis.
3 Pachas Kahaniyan, p.24.
magic from her. In *Juloos*, a middle class man on his wife’s insistence decided to help the lower class victim of police oppression. In ‘*Karambhumi*’ the father of the hero, Samarkant, helps a lower class woman by continuing the salary of her husband after his death. We also see Amarkant helping the same woman by taking her granddaughter’s crafts to the market and thus giving her economic assistance. The softer relationship between the rich and the poor is similarly brought out in ‘*Pisanhari Ka Kua*’

The love between upper class men and lower class women is also shown in some of the stories like ‘*Ghaswali*’, ‘*Karambhumi*’ and ‘*Devi*’. In the story *Ghaswali*, Premchand shows a rich man in love with a lower class woman. In love he decided to help her husband financially as he did not want her to expose herself to the abuses and harassment by men in public. Devi is also a love story of a rich man and poor woman. A *zamindar* fell in love with the lower class women whose husband never returned to her. In love, he transforms into a better person, yields to her advice and returns the property he had usurped from his sister-in-law. In

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6 *Karambhumi*, op.cit, p.36.

the novel *Karambhumi*, the upper class men, Amarkant and Salim both fell in love with the lower class Sakina.

Of the stories highlighting the exploitation of lower class women, the issue of class dominate in a number of the stories. In *Godan*\(^8\) lower class Dhaniya was exploited at work place by Datadeen, the landlord. He always stood behind her not to allow her rest. Similarly, in the story ‘*Jurmana,*’\(^9\) a women worker got regularly fined for resting even though she rested only after completing her work. The supervisor, however, realized his mistake in punishing her as he saw her keen commitment for work; Premchand thereby showing the nice humane side of the exploiter.

The gender aspect is brought out in ‘*Doodh Ka Dam*’\(^10\), to emphasize physical proximity between the classes in spite of the upper classes condemnation of the lower ones. The lower class women employed for nursing landlord’s son retorts at the masters comment against her class. She has the courage to answer back when he calls people of her class as filthy and dirty. She says that it is on account of us that you are clean. The plot highlights the double standard of the upper class men who keep lower caste-classes in close physical proximity for

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\(^8\) Godan, op.cit.


providing services but would continue to be arrogant and abusive towards them.

Gender intervened in obvious terms mainly over issues of sexual exploitation of working women. Besides, sexual abuse is shown only of lower class women. Rape of elite women perhaps was hardly conceived. It was mainly taken as a feature of poor women's exploitation at work place by rich men. In the story Ghaswali, a thakur keeps harassing the lower class woman, but she rejects his advancement by saying:

‘Agar mera aadami tumhari aurat se issi tarha baten karta, to tumhen kaisa lagta.’  
(If my husband has done the same thing to your wife, then what will you feel.)

The statement intends a greater assault by presenting to the thakur the prospect of their women's sexual abuse by lower class men, a situation quite threatening for the elite respectability.

In Godan, Premchand highlights the double standards of upper class morality. The men would make use of lower class women, keep them as concubines but insist on strict sexual code for the lower classes. Pandit


\[12\] Godan, op. cit. p. 156.
Matadeen openly keeps a mistress (of lower class). He also flirts with Jhuniya, the other good looking lower class woman. But a lower class family was fined because they accepted Jhuniya, a widow and pregnant by their son, as a family member. Premchand’s sympathies for lower class women are always clear and distinct.

Premchand was very first who depicts the revenge of the lower classes against rape by English men. Rape of lower class women also becomes useful in depicting nationalist resistance against the oppressive foreign rule. In this, the issues of class get moderated in nationalist solidarity. In Karambhumi, we find upper class men taking up the issue of rape of lower class women by English men and helping her in her struggle. Interestingly the rape of upper class women do not crop up anywhere in the nationalist narrative of colonial oppression. If there is an instance of rape of a high class lady, as in the story ‘Pratishodh’, the woman was shown a widow (widowhood seen as a vulnerable situation for women). Still the instance is of attempt to rape promptly rescued by another man.

Premchand’s treatment of the class and gender in such cases are quite neat, with obvious sympathies for the lower classes and more for the lower class women; the upper classes in some of his stories showing

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compassionate protective attitude towards poor women. The issues of class and gender rarely overlap to complicate the narrative.

On the other hand, one would expect the relationship between elite women and lower class men and women to bring out intersection of the class and gender more visibly. Strikingly, Premchand brings a number of stories showing the lower class men’s respect and gratitude towards the upper class women and the latter giving kind patronage to them. The relationship of exploitation of lower classes by elite propertied women does not form his main narrative in any of his stories. However, some of the stories bring out the relationship by depicting the functioning of the zamindar’s/landlord’s household where the lady appears in commanding position and equally authoritative in ordering hard work from the labourer. Some stories bring out the mistress’ aggression and moods while dealing with the servants. For instance, in stories like Pratishodh, and ‘Koi Dukh Na ho To Bakri Kharidlo’, women are particularly shown as abusive and bad tempered with their servants. The lady in ‘Koi Dukh na ho to Bakri Kharidlo’, advises her husband to be harsh with them as they only listen to abusive language.

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15 Ibid.
In a story, 'Izzat Ka Khun'\textsuperscript{17} Premchand however brings the intersection of class and gender rather sharply. A propertied woman is shown as having control over her property and the workers only through her husband, so much so that when she runs out of favour of her licentious husband, she becomes utterly powerless. The man had her beaten by his/her servants. In this, Premchand show the workers as totally loyal to the master with no relationship with the woman even though the property was in her name. At no point he shows the workers' sympathies for the woman, the ill-treated mistress. Here, Premchand though sympathetic towards woman does not blame the workers for the episode and make the woman speak the same. Both women and workers are shown as dependent and helpless categories. In the story of oppression against woman, the workers have no option but to turn hostile towards the former in the state of dependence.

Besides, in some of the stories where women provide patronage to the lower class men, the patronage appears mainly so that the worker gives his best at work.\textsuperscript{18} In 'Premashram'\textsuperscript{19} Gayatri, a women zamindar, was shown benevolent towards her labouring people. She even punishes her servants who exploit her labourers in fields. In return her farms are

\textsuperscript{17} Gupt Dhan,Vol.2, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{18} Premasharam,op.cit,pp. 131-136.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
prosperous and yielding ones. Interestingly her patronage was even hard for the labourers to understand and they imagined ulterior motives behind the benevolence.\textsuperscript{20}

Otherwise, women and the lower classes are shown generally in solidarity. In the story ‘\textit{Kazaki},\textsuperscript{21}’ Premchand depicted a servant being dismissed from duty for coming late. The wife of the officer was kind to him because of the affectionate relationship he had with their son. She intervenes on his behalf and was taken back in service. In another story, \textit{Trishul}\textsuperscript{22}, a low grade worker helped the young lady of the house in her love adventure and took her to her lover.

Interestingly, stories by Premchand also depict love relationship between the upper class women and the lower class men. ‘\textit{Swamini}\textsuperscript{23}’ is the story of the widow who manages her agricultural land with the help of her servant and finally gets attracted towards him. Premchand shows relationship of deep love between them. The story shows the women’s right to love and be loved. ‘\textit{Naya vivah}\textsuperscript{24}, another story about the marriage between aged man and young women brings out the woman’s attraction towards her domestic worker. The story does not depict any

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Pachas Kahaniyan, p.168.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Gupt Dhan, Vol.2, p. 107.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Pachas Kahaniyan, p. 523.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Rachnawali, Vol.15, p. 30.
\end{itemize}
sense of guilt in the relationship instead the relationship is beautifully portrayed.

Similarly, there are stories that bring out good relations between elite women and lower class women. Premchand speak of the conflict situation in the household, between the mistress and the domestic worker. As in ‘Khuchad’\textsuperscript{25}, the mistress turns harsh to the maid when she breaks a ghee-vessel. But Premchand, ultimately strikes a chord between them of shared oppression in womanhood. The lady forgives her but her husband appears more brutal and wanted to punish for the fault.

Premchand’s particular difference in approach is towards the treatment of women’s body and sexuality as he takes the different class categories. In his writings, we find Premchand more vivid in describing the beauty of lower class women’s body. He writes in the story ‘Ghaswali’:

\begin{quote}
‘Muliya is usar main gulab ka phul thi. Gahuan rang tha, hiran kisi aankhen neeche chichi hua chibuk, kapolon par halki lalima, badi badi nukili palken, ankho main ek wichitra adrata jismain ek spasht wedna, ek muke vyatha chalakti thi’\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

(Muliya was like rose. Gray coloured, with dear’s eyes, rosy cheeks, heavy eye lashes, looking sad through her eyes.)

\textsuperscript{25} Pachas Kahaniyan, p. 335.
\textsuperscript{26} Rachnawali, Vol.14, P.304.
Similarly, in *Godan*, Premchand depicts Jhuniya’s beauty. The
description of beautiful face or body mark the lower class woman’s
presence or availability in the public sphere, for public/male gaze or
appreciation. Such expression of beauty and body is typically
missing in description of the upper class women of decent
respectable families. Premchand would describe the ladies
differently. He would bring out the elements of the woman’s
personality, mention that she is beautiful or at best the colour of the
dress etc. but would never describe her physical beauty. Notably in
‘Kussum’

‘Aisi lajjashil, sughard, salikedar, or vinodini balika maine
dusari nahi dekhi’

(I have never seen such a shy: natured and well cultured girl.)

As we have noticed the love of upper class men for lower class
women in his writings, Premchand in some pieces also makes
comparison between the class categories of women and then
privileges the lower class women for their simplicity and devotion in
love. In *Karambhumi*, the hero Amarkant gets attracted to a lower
class women, who is portrayed not as a very beautiful person but as

attractive on account of her feminine simplicity and shyness. While the richer woman, his wife, is shown as arrogant in her beauty with little concern for her husband. Her physical beauty is unable to hold him and he gets attracted to a rather simple girl. The middle class woman in comparison to the lower class women is presented as inferior in matters of love and modesty. Premchand’s clear preferences come out here on certain specific class and gender issues in this way.

In the story ‘Selani Bander’ a lower class women is shown as loving her monkey to the extent that when he went missing she became insane losing the sense of shame altogether covering only the lower part of her body but when she found her monkey back she became conscious of her nudity, not able to stand even with the feeling of shame. These were obviously stories that for Premchand or perhaps other writings of the times could emerge only in the lower class background.

In the treatment of sexuality, he considers or even prefers stoic sexual life for middle class women. When he discusses middle class women in love, he harps more on the spiritual content of love, the yearning and its metaphysical quality rather than on its physicality; while Premchand has

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no hesitation in describing the physical aspect of lower class women’s romance. In the story ‘Balak,’ Premchand depict the women marrying three times, remarriages as if common phenomenon in lower classes. A man could also flirt with lower class women on account of her frank sensuality.

However, Premchand’s depiction of man-woman relationship within the lower classes was expectedly not marked with much conflict with clear sympathies for lower class women. He could see the oppression of the women of lower classes by the play of class and gender, and thereby their double oppression. He starkly portrays the suffering of the labouring women in his story ‘Kafan’. The women suffers in pain all the while and ultimately dies in delivery, unattended by her husband and father-in-law who were indifferent to her shrieks and cries and were busy roasting and eating potatoes earned by her hard labour. Here in the story, the ‘labour’ of all sorts by women, productive as well as reproductive, is appropriated and enjoyed by men with total indifference to the pain and sufferings involved.

At the same time, however, we find Premchand’s own middle class notions colouring the life narrative of the lower classes. The working

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31 Ibid.,p.401.
husband appears as the main bread-winner and the wife as supplementary earner. He presents the working class families’ relationship with the same sort of tensions as found in middle class households. The labouring class husband-wife relationship thereby appears as asymmetrical as that of the higher classes. The working class home, according to Premchand, is found as oppressive as any middle class home, providing no solace and support to the hard working wife, which otherwise in real life might not be the real case with labouring family also much different to the middle class family that perpetuates directly through property relations and control over women’s sexuality.

Similarly the middle class high ideals of chastity were also expected from all women. In the story ‘Sati’ (1932), as we have seen,\(^\text{32}\) Kallu, the husband does not allow her wife to go out for work as she was very beautiful and he could not trust her. But she consumes herself totally in his memory and refuses to remarry after his death – an ideal which Premchand perhaps appreciates much in women. Similarly ‘Devi’ speaks of a working woman’s complete loyalty to her husband. He also in the same way extended the notions of motherhood to working families and a working mother’s primary duty remains the child care and her work secondary to her motherly duties.

\(^{32}\)See chapter 1.
Premchand particularly brings out the working women’s plight arising out of beating and alcoholism of their husbands. Interestingly, these were somewhat also the problems of the high caste wives but the incidence was higher in case of low class women. Besides, the other difference between the middle class women and the labouring ones was also in the scope of resistance, which Premchand offered to the latter.

Premchand greatly supports the women’s resistance to the situation. As in the story ‘Souf’, we have found, Ramu, the husband taking all the earnings of his wife, Raziya, and marrying again. When she resisted he beat her brutally, still the wife kept abusing him all the time. Here he holds that a woman by working for her living, can live better on her own. Similarly in another story, ‘Agni Samadhi’ when women was brutally beaten by her husband, She kept abusing him all the time, the more he beat the more she abused him. The resistance was more violent as she torched the field he was tending in revenge. But Premchand in spite of the great sympathies for the working woman and for her resistance, he ultimately brings her back in reconciliation with the system that oppresses her (especially back home). He towards the end of the stories makes these characters resentful of resistance towards their husbands, perhaps in line with his wifehood ideal in forgiveness and sacrifice.
At the same time his stories also bring stories of survival of the lower class families; affection, sharing and sacrifice in face of problems of the hostile world. In stories like, ‘Godan’ and ‘Mritak Bhoj’, the working family appear united in their struggle and predicaments. Premchand only through such stories bring out a different nature of the labouring family where the family provides cushion against oppression.

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33 See Premchand's Godan. op.cit.