



## ‘Realism’ in the short stories of Munshi Premchand.

**Nurjahan Rahmatullah**

Department of Hindi, Cotton University, Guwahati, India

### Abstract

The striking depiction of socio-economic conditions of contemporary world and portrayal of inherent human nature in the short stories, novels and other works of Munshi Premchand deserves appreciation for being the first realistic writer of the soil. The simplicity in his writings is his indelible strength. The unembellished and stark sketch of characters in the short stories with a sudden culmination of the progress leave a hangover of thoughts in the minds of the readers which perhaps makes him one of the most celebrated indigenous writers with an own style of writing. The touch of social values, the imitation of heart and mind of a common man next door, the plot and the surroundings brew the theme of ‘realism’ in the writings of this great Indian literary figure. Premchand had observed life from close quarters and transmuted his experiences through imagination and innovative style which not only attracts the attention of a particular period or class but of masses of every generation.

**Keywords:** Short stories, realism, characters, Munshi Premchand

### 1. Introduction

William Harmon and Hugh Holman in ‘*A Handbook to Literature*’ put, “Where romanticists transcend the immediate to find the ideal, and naturalists plumb the actual or superficial to find the scientific laws that control its actions, realists centre their attention to a remarkable degree on the immediate, the here and now, the specific action, and the verifiable consequence.” The realism movement that began in mid-nineteenth century sought to revolt the exotic ‘Romanticism’ or ‘Idealism’ and put forward the real and typical contemporary world and situation with accuracy and truth which could be unpleasant and sordid facets of life where people of all classes in ordinary life situation were portrayed. ‘Realism’ may broadly be defined as “the faithful representation of reality” or “verisimilitude.”

Munshi Premchand adopted similar style of writing with bare truth where he painted his own world of imagination and fit the characters from contemporary

India of his time. Moreover, the span of nearly three hundred short stories written by the writer engulfs the entire human nature under its embrace. A reader in any corner of the globe may find himself or herself somewhere within the characters of the ‘Upanyas Samrat’ as he is fondly honoured among the fraternity of literary scholars.

The Press Information Bureau, Government of India pronounces, “*Premchand was the first Hindi author to introduce realism in his writings. He pioneered the new form - fiction with a social purpose. He supplemented Gandhiji’s work in the political and social fields by adopting his revolutionary ideas as themes for his literary writings.*”<sup>1</sup> The greatness of Premchand lies in the style of embodiment of social purposes and social criticism in his writings besides entertainment. He took literature as a powerful tool to educate people on public opinion.

The hard hitting naked truths of life can be easily visualized from the intrinsic weaving of the plot with

the characters of the short stories. The protagonist or antagonist of the stories are nothing different but is someone from among us. If one of us is Budhia, the other one is Alga Choudhory, another is Jhingur, Shyama, Gangi, Dhania, Balraj, Ghisu, Madhav, Jumman Sheikh, Motaram Shastri, Hamid and more. The actions of such characters tinker the inner conscience of the reader to visualize the narrative. It is as if the framework is happening somewhere near the reader in front of his or her eyes. The innocent yet convincing portrait of the traits of human nature in the characters enable a reader to finish the stories at one go without a deviation of mind.

Premchand had the gift of creating 'provocation of thoughts' in the minds of the reader. He wrote nothing larger than life. He simply penned down the imaginations running through his mind and here lies the real strength of the writer which he developed over the ages. With all the characters in his short stories, novels and other works, Munshi Premchand had created a world of his own and he himself became an age in the annals of Modern Hindi Literature. Shri Vijaydan Detha rightly puts, "*Whether it was the courage of Premchand or honesty or attitude or was it his art of story-telling that the way he picked up the names of the characters from his surroundings and he so diligently used them in his literary works.*"<sup>22</sup>

## 2. Objective

This study is a humble attempt to shed light on the spectacular writing style of Munshi Premchand who in his works sincerely attempted to point out the socio-political and cultural issues of India. His plots revolve around contemporary society of lower-middle class, farmers, peasants, and backward classes without any hyperbole and try to create an awareness in the minds of his contemporary readers on the exploitation by the capitalists, the zamindar-farmer relationship, class biased social system, religious consideration, money-lending practice, poverty, family incidents, natural human emotions, indiscipline lifestyle, English speaking Indian people and their role in the society etc. The study is a sincere attempt to understand how Premchand had tried to interpret the individual problems, psychology and feelings of the people in the context of the prevailing social environment with his keen vision.

## 3. Analysis

Premchand gave his readers the taste of real

picture of a bygone era through his writings but the basic human emotions, behaviours, characters and extent of human depravity is still applicable and timeless. The master's empathy and knowledge of human nature are nicely represented in his well-crafted stories in simple dialect without any floral language. Every single story written by the author is pleasing, palpable and plying. His deliberate inconclusive style of writing is open to interpretation and few are completed in a way where the reader is left unsatisfied with the catastrophe inflicted by the god in his own creations. It was a difficult task to choose among the fine lot of stories written by the master of Hindi Literature, yet, a benevolent approach has been made to pick few among the lot to justify the theme of 'Realism' in the short stories of Premchand.

### 3.1 The inhuman 'Ghishu and Madhav' – a blatant portray of innate barbarism

The short story 'Kafan' is often regarded as one of the masterpieces of Hindi Literature where the writer very boldly portrays two characters – the father and son duo (Ghishu and Madhav), who not only ignite a sense of hatred for them in the minds of the reader but also make one question whether such kind of people do really exist in the society who don't even have respect for the dead! Can a human being become such selfish that the money received as help for performing last rituals of his dead wife can be consumed with liquor and food without performing the rites of the dead? What is the cause behind such barbaric mentality of the duo who are not only lazy to work but also don't have any basic humane sensitivity in them? The backdrop of the story itself speaks the truth that Premchand wishes to tell his readers about the socio-economic conditions which make Ghishu and Madhav insane, inhuman, insensitive and glutton. They belong to strata of society where there are no rooms for moral values of life and there are hundreds and thousands of 'Madhavs and Ghishus' prevailing all over the country landless, moneyless, uneducated, unsecured and immune to the basics of life.

The memory of Ghishu having a pleasant and fulfilling dinner twenty years ago in the marriage of the Zamindar of the village is touching. He considers himself blessed to have tasted such relishing dishes in his lifetime whereas his son Madhav is not blessed to have such food yet. A full belly meal is the utmost luxury for them. What sins have they done that their fates are such where they are not supposed to taste the very basics of life – food, shelter and clean clothing?

There lies the underline theme of 'realism' in the story telling style of Premchand. He presents before us the reality of which we are unaware, the reality which exists in society where people still behave worse than animals for their circumstances. No matter he also tries to counter the fate with the feasibility and ability. Ghishu and Madhavare the laziest creatures on earth. Perhaps their trait of laziness, escapist and day dreaming are responsible for their dilapidated conditions. Such is the magic of Premchand where the readers are left with trains of thoughts –why, which, how, what could be, who is responsible; after going through the short story 'Kafan.'

### 3.2 The simpleton Halku and his freedom from biting cold at the fields

How can a farmer be delighted at the destroyed crops of his field? Halku murmured with a gleam in his eyes, "But, I won't have to sleep nights out here in the cold!" when his wife in the morning wake him up and showed the flattened fields by *Nilgais* or some bovines the previous night. Another masterpiece 'Pooski Raat' by Premchand depicts the life of Halku and Munni, a landless couple who cultivate crops for the Zamindars and pay every pie of money to them only to find the credit ledger credited with more debts and taxes. It is simple yet very much thought provoking story of a person who gave the last pie of his savings as taxes to the Zamindar waiting outside his home and sacrificed his wish to buy a blanket for the coming cold to guard the fields at night.

The story develops with a natural narration which is the style of 'Realism' and the reader gets absorbed completely in the struggle of Halku managing to keep himself warm with his pet dog *Jabra* in the open fields on that chilling cold night of January (Poos month). After few attempts to sleep with the tattered blanket around, the duo managed to light a fire with the dried leaves. The warmth from the fire made him so comfortable that he did not wish to move and find out the noise happening in the field. In the morning the wife finds Halku sleeping late under the sun to her astonishment when the ready to harvest field is flattened by the wild *Nilgais* the previous night. She was very much worried and lost in the thought on how they could pay the taxes to the Zamindar this season. On the other hand the destroyed crops in front bring a content relief in the eyes of Halku who is happy at the thought of not spending more nights out in the cold. Perhaps, any mortal in similar situation would have been happy to avoid the uncomfortable chilling night

rather than worry about the taxes to be paid.

### 3.3 The failure of rebellious Gangi against the strong walls of division

The writings of Premchand highlighted diversified problems of the society and he wanted to create a mass awareness through his imaginary world of sufferings which happened in his contemporary world unnoticed by the common. "He always had empathy for the sufferer and deprived class of the society. His keen observation of the sufferings of the people around him mad him an atheist,"<sup>3</sup> puts, Dr.Saiful Islam. The story 'Thakur ka Kuan' portrays a dreadful division in the society where people like Gangi and Jhoku did not have even the right to drink potable water. Gangi fetches water from the regular well outside the village from where people like her bring water for daily usage only to find that night Jhoku complaining of foul smell in the water he picks for drinking. Jhoku is not well and cannot bear the dry throat anymore. Gangi realizes that some kind of animal might have died inside the well which contaminated the water and if Jhoku drinks the water he would fell more ill. She asks Jhoku not to drink the smelling water and that she will fetch clean water for him from the well inside the village. The pathetic situation of Gangi and Jhoku is heart touching.

Premchand developed the mastery of this art of putting his readers in the dilemma of thoughts. Whether Gangi would succeed or fail in fetching the water from the well inside the village is the dilemma. The rebellious mood of Gangi is the personification of the revolt buried in the hearts of the people of lower caste in the society. It reflects a feeling of breaking the shackles of atrocities the people like Gangi and Jhoku face every day. Are they responsible for taking birth as *Dalits*? But her failure to get water from the well and running for her life back to her home only to find Jhoku quenching his thirst with the contaminated water is dramatic and lively in the eyes of the readers.

### 3.4 The inquisitive Keshav and Shyama and their universal innocence

'Realism' is not only confined to the social problems of the society but in the art of writing which makes the reader feel as if the reader too had similar experience in his or her life. Premchand with his versatility of plots in his short stories proves this. 'Nadaan Dost' is one such story of two little siblings whose inquisitive and childlike activities make every reader nostalgic of childhood memories.

Keshav and Shyama did everything to know about the nest of the birds in the cornice of their home. The innocent questions of Shyama and Keshav's 'pretending to be mature' activities undoubtedly keeps a reader thoroughly engaged till the end to rediscover the lost childhood. The brother and sister together very silently manage to come out from home while their mother was asleep under the sun in the afternoon and try all their best to make the nest comfortable for the eggs to hatch. But, the birds leave the cornice forever and never come back to their nest. The way Keshav and Shyama tries to move light footed to avoid the attention of their sleeping mother in the afternoon to complete the work of making the nest comfortable and the way Shyama discloses everything to her mother with tears in her eyes out of discontentment over Keshav is appealing to the reader. Such realistic description of childhood enables a reader to feel the nostalgia of the lost childhood and remember the best days of one's life.

### 3.5 The mad mob and their leader Shastriji

The aura of a mob is such that no one remains senses when in mob! As stated there are perhaps no field left by Munshi Premchand where he did not explore his writing skills. A keen observer of the society, the happenings around and the behaviour of people perhaps made this great writer write effortlessly his stories with optimum accuracy. 'Motor ke Chiinte' which means splash of mud from a running motor vehicle introduces us to the wit and humour in the stories of Premchand. The dressing up for a programme and glutton nature of Pundit Shastriji at the beginning of the story already paints the environment in the mind of the reader. The rest of the story is visualized in the mind simultaneously as one turns the pages of the story. We can experience the same nature of a mob in contemporary world also when we see how people in the streets behave when something untoward happens to someone.

A splash of mud by a speeding car filths the countenance and the finest dress of Pundit Shastriji one fine day when he was heading to 'settle a right day of wedding.' He became the laughing stock for few in the street instead of extending help to clean him. Luckily he spots the same car returning and in vengeance he stops and gives a good thrashing to the owner of the car along with the driver with an agitated mob around him abusing the car owners and drivers of the cars.

Premchand very beautifully depicts the sway of a mob and how even a rationale man loses his senses

when moved by the irresistible charm of a mob. All at one go start shouting their opinions in varied forms. The same public which laughed at Shastriji started giving opinions on the drivers and the car owners on finding Panditji beating black and blue the owner and the driver of the car. 'Tell him to admit he's wrong,' said another. 'No, no, make him hold on to his ears and do knee-bend,' came another voice. In all such encouraging gestures the hero of the mob didn't spare other vehicles coming the way. One after another he stopped two more cars and Pundit Shastriji made the owners of the cars taste the prowess of his hand and blow of stick. Suddenly the cry from one among the mob, 'The Police are coming!' made each take to his heels including the powerful leader of the 'moral brigade' disappearing in one of the narrow lanes of the town. Such simplistic, humorous and thought provoking narrative in 'Motor ke Chiinte' definitely sprouts 'realism' in the style of writing. The ridiculous behaviour of the people when in mob and the fleeing from the spot in no time sensing proximity of some danger shows the keen observation and experience of the author which he transmuted with honesty in his writings.

### 4. 'Fallibility' of humanity and catharsis

It has become convenient to ascertain from the present study that Munshi Premchand in a very extraordinary way portrayed the 'fallible' nature of human beings, the ugliness in them, the cruelty faced and the real experience people of his time faced in his stories. His plot develops effortlessly and the characters are the natural part of the plot with no hyperbole. Whether it is 'Hamid' in the 'Idgaah' where he becomes mature than his age to buy a pair of tongs for his old grandmother instead of sweets and toys on the day of Eid or it is 'Mangu' in 'Garibki Hai' who doesn't stop cursing Munshi Ramsevak even in her insane condition for being cheated by Ramsevak of her money or it is 'Jhingur' in 'Mukti Marg' who does not forget and forgive 'Buddhu' for causing his harm and both confessing to each other at one point or it is 'Vikram' and 'the teacher' in 'Lottery' where friends turn foe in distrust or it is 'Jhumman Sheikh' who in 'Panch Parmeshwar' expects his friend 'Algu Choudhory' to speak in favour of him in the *panchayat*; we find the touch of reality in the characterization with fallibility.

'Catharsis' or purgation of soul or purification of emotions is a state achieved when the reader feels deeply sorry for the characters of the plot succumbing

into tragedy due to 'fallibility.' In 'literary realism' the authors depend a lot on the reality of contemporary world and on the reaction of the characters to the stimuli of surroundings. The tragedy met due to circumstances and fallibility fixes the emotions of the readers. It is the human fallible nature which becomes responsible for the tragedy.

Therefore, there is no scope for any romanticism in their writings because 'reality' is not 'Utopic.' Reality is hard, candid and bitter. Premchand mastered the art of 'realism' in unadorned style of writing and gifted his readers of all generations a powerful bundle of short stories. His stories shall ever remain a subject of discussion among the scholars and his common readers.

## 5. Conclusion

Premchand himself said, "...the way we are influenced by the joy and sadness of characters of stories, hardly such happenings around us tweak our emotions. The stories take hardly two minutes to make a reader find him or her similar with the characters and we start laughing and

*crying with them. Their happiness and sadness becomes our happiness or sadness.*"<sup>4</sup> His view on characterization and plot easily indicate that he wishes to write thought provoking subjects. The author didn't confine himself to short stories only, his novels and other pieces of work also carried the impression of 'realism' that cast an impact on the minds of the readers. Rekha Sigi rightly comments on Premchand style, "Premchand had the courage and will power to understand risk"

It is the skill of Premchand that he elevates his readers with his realistic writing through which he portrayed the conflict between the forces of good and evil. He had the faith that truth would triumph over the bad which could be ascertained from his stories 'Vidhwans' and 'Garibki Hai' in which he demonstrated goodness overcoming the malevolent and wicked in the plot. Though author chose his medium of writing specially the short stories to highlight the diversified undercurrents of Indian society of his time but his natural characters in the stories shall ever remain buoyant in all ages.

## References

- Jesse, Astbury. "Exploitation and Conscience in Premchand", 2011: The Annual of Urdu Studies N. D. Vol. 26, 266-73.
- Gupta, Churu. "Portrayal of Women in Premchand's Stories, May June 1991: A Critique". Social Scientist, 88-113.
- Mahendran, R. "A Critical Note on a Short Story of Premchand The Holy Panchayat", June 2012 : Language in India, 200-204.
- Sigi, Rekha. Munshi Premchand. New Delhi, 2006 : Diamond Pocket Books Ltd.
- Detha, Vijaydan. Premchandki Basti. New Delhi, 2009: Bani Prakashan.

## End notes

1. Press Bureau of India, Munshi Premchand: The Great Novelist;
2. Detha, Vijaydan, Premchandki Basti: Bani Prakashan, 2009, P 24
3. Islam, Dr Saiful, Byaktityaabam Krititya: Annapurna Prakashan, 2016, P 76
4. Detha, Vijaydan, Premchandki Basti: Bani Prakashan, 2009, P 269

