

A Review of Premchand's *Godan*

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Premchand's *Godan* is a literary exemplar which encompasses within itself all the socio-political, economic and cultural dimensions of the emerging twentieth-century modern India. The novel as a realistic depiction of that temporal slot delineates numerous societal issues related to feudalism, increasing capitalism, caste segregation and gender inequality, etc., especially in rural India. As both a progressive and idealist writer, Premchand envisages a world that would strive for human equality beyond any socio-economic constraints and materialistic pleasures. But in *Godan* he represents a socio-realistic world which stands on a liminal ground due to the pre-existing conventional and the emerging monetary institutions in a rural society.

Premchand deploys the Oudh/Awadh taluqdari region in the novel which works as a critical microcosm to bring at centre the insights from the agrarian society of India. Within this region he portrays the grim existence of the peasantry class who are being doubly exploited on a daily basis by their own internal conflicts and the Zamindari system. The text unfolds the tragic death of its protagonist Hori who is at the receiving end of this system. His desire to possess a cow only lands him in a position where is even more indebted and suppressed owing to the unfair tactics played by the zamindar, the mahajan, the hypocritical Brahmins and the "Panchas".

At that time the tenants not only had to pay the land revenue but also illegal cess like the "nazarana", unfair fines or penalties to different authorial institutions. For instance, Hori had to arrange the money for "Shagun" to be given at the religious festival held at the Raisahib's house. He also took multiple loans to bear the illegal cost given to the police inspector to save his brother Heera. He also has to pay the penalty incurred by the village panchayat when he and his wife Dhanian provide shelter to their daughter-in-law from a distinctive caste. In addition to this, there were also internal conflicts between farmers resulting from their jealousy and family disputes. For example, Hori had to leave his share of the land and house for his brothers due to their family dispute. Later, his brother Heera also poisoned his cow due to his immense jealousy for him. Through Hori, Premchand represents all the peasants who met various degrees of torture and whose desires only left them more indebted and pushed them in a severe crisis leading them to their death.

Godan as a multidimensional text does not resist itself to take up the plight of rural women. The rural women in the text are a product of doubly

marginalized oppression resulting from the patriarchal and caste-based entities. They are victims of frequent domestic violence, rejection and their own internalization of traditional feminine values. For instance, Punia is often physically abused by her husband Heera; “He made straight for Punia, dragged her away and started lashing her. Punia howled” (25). Dhanika, though vocally assertive in her marital relation with Hori, is still a victim of his indifference for her. It is evident when she says, “I’ve seen worse. If Heera beats his wife, he loves her also. You only know how to beat, not to love” (26). Then Jhunika, a widow and a lower caste “Ahiran” woman is left alone after being impregnated by Gobar to face the panchayat’s conviction. Similarly, Siliya another Dalit woman is also rejected by Matadin—a Brahmin, who fears his own community. Lastly, Rupa was given off to a middle-aged widower to compensate for Hori’s loan.

Within the complex and class-stratified structure of the Awadh villages, Premchand also takes a sharp insight into the agonies of the upper caste or the zamindars. The novel briefly explains how the lopsided capitalism implanted by the British colonialism also affected the zamindars. Rai Saheb in his conversation with Hori calls himself a “victim of circumstances” and narrates how he and other zamindars led a hypocritical lifestyle. The zamindars that sucked the blood of their own people (peasants) followed the British officials like a shadow and had to pay them revenue as well.

In his socialist vision of an emerging modern India, Premchand in *Godan* consistently uses an urban-rural critical paradigm. He saw in modern urban India a period of reformation with the arising national consciousness, education, new women, medical science and other growing sectors. Representatives of these are characters like Dr Mehta, Malti and Gobar.

Malti is the only reformist feminine persona in the entire novel. She is a well-acclaimed doctor who has received her education from Europe. Unlike the other rural women she is very assertive and independent and engages herself with Dr Mehta to perform all social activities in order to serve the poor. The awakening of the spirited questioning is first reflected in Gobar. Despite his lack of education and rural affliction, he does not believe in any traditional value system as his father Hori does. He questions the very base of this dominant Zamindari system. Premchand portrays in Gobar what he himself witnessed happening in the entire nation, the initiation of the rebelliousness but not the radical rebellion. However, Gobar flees from his own village, which was not an act of defiance but escapism. But his rebelliousness sprouts only through the urban domain, after coming to Lucknow he begins to understand the very foundation of class, nation, the power and oppression of social conventions.

Lastly, Dr. Mehta, a liberal philosopher, is probably the only character who best embodies Premchand's socialism. He is a social visionary who aims to see a classless society, free from all of the monetary constraints. For instance, he asserts critically "I believe in the theory that the rich and the poor will always be with us. And that is as it should be. Wiping out distinctions will lead to social chaos" (47).

Many critics have argued that though Premchand exposes the very exploitation carried on by the institutions like the Panchayat and Biradari, he remains associated with the idea of community and the ties of traditions. For instance, despite all the exploitations by institutions Hori dies an honourable death and Gobardhan continues to live amidst the capitalist and industrial life of the city. To this argument it can be said that Premchand had equivocal or dubious views. On one side he desired the tranquility of the rural life and on the other he was highly motivated by the reformation taking place in the urban space. His socialist concern lies deeply at the ills of the land-based property and monetary functions taking place at that time. As articulated by Geetanjali Pande, for Premchand "the need for change was imminent. His faith in utopian solutions had petered out and he knew 'a change of heart' will not work. Morals will not change till property relations do and he repeatedly talked of property being the basis of all the ills. And yet even in *Godan* change is hoped to be implemented through *administration* and *ethics*. But the administration would move only when there is pressure from below." (766-767)

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