

PREMCHAND'S GODAN – A PORTRAYAL OF THE QUALITIES OF AN IDEAL INDIAN WOMAN

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ABSTRACT: *Godan* is an Indian regional novel written by Munshi Premchand, who is an Urdu and Hindi writer of progressive period. *Godan* is the last and highly acclaimed novel of Premchand. The novel set up in a small village of Uttar Pradesh named Belari. *Godan* reflects the real face of the society and various sections or communities of India. Many realistic characters belong to various classes and communities are presented in the novel. Social reality of rural India appears in the novel like a moving document. Premchand touches the emotions of common readers and creates awareness of the realistic social scene of Indian villages by portraying many male and female roles. The female characters in the novel are lively and depict the true picture of women in pre-independence period. Premchand describes a traditional house wife's life and a modern woman's nature with equal priority. With the help of a few female characters like Dhaniya, Malti etc. Premchand highlights the qualities of an ideal woman in India. In this paper, I would like to analyze the female characters and their status through the depiction of the qualities or traits of an ideal Indian woman with reference to Premchand's *Godan*.

Key words: Social reality, Female characters, Qualities of ideal woman, Modern and traditional women.

Godan is the creation of Munchi Premchand. The novel was written in Hindi and first published in 1936. Later it was translated into English in 1957 by Jai Ratan and P.Lal. All the novels and short stories of Premchand allow every reader to analyze different dimensions of each character and touch the hearts of common readers. Though he is not alive, even today also he lives in the hearts of millions. His works are thought provoking and touches everyone and especially the underprivileged. The theme of all his works is 'society', and its issues.

Premchand's *Godan* is a saga of social realism and about the miserable conditions of a peasant family. Exploitation of poor farmers by money lenders and the socio-economic affairs of the protagonist of the novel, Hori and his family narrated in the novel with realistic sense. Hori represents the Indian peasant's life and the hurdles he faces. Premchand captures life and death situations in Hori's life until his death in the novel, which purges the emotions of a common reader. The title of the novel *Godan* actually refers to, "the gift of a cow" usually given away to a Brahman by a pious Hindu as part of funeral rites, but the longing desire of Hori to buy a cow of his own during his lifetime, remains unfulfilled.

Hori for a long time had been cherishing this desire for a cow. It was the brightest dream of his life, his greatest ambition. (p.7)

Though Hori doesn't have any money to buy a cow, he gets a cow in loan from Bholu, the cowherd of the village. But he fails to protect the cow. The sacrilegious death of the cow by Heera, the brother of Hori brings all the troubles to the family. Hori's struggles to run his family, Gobar, the son of Hori departure from home; too money debts, pressure of money lenders, Sona's marriage, and social status leave the novel with tragic end. By the end of the novel, Dhaniya donates twenty annas to Datadin a Brahman, which she had earned from the sale of yarn. She requests Datadin to accept the amount in place of a cow in charity.

Dhanian rose like a machine, went in and brought out twenty annas which she had earned from the sale of yarn. Placing the coins in the icy palm of her husband, she looked at Datadin. "Maharaj, there's neither a cow, nor a calf nor any money in the house. This is all the money I have; this is all I can give. Take this in place of the cow."(p.352)

The main intention of writing this paper is to highlight the qualities of an ideal woman in Premchand's view. From here onwards we can see different situations of the novel which portray the characteristics of an ideal woman. Premchand creates many female characters in *Godan* with different social backgrounds. In fact, Premchand gives much priority to women in his novels. The concepts of ideal women dharma and comparison with men in society described through different female characters like Dhaniya - the wife of Hori, Miss Malti - the doctor, Jhunia - the wife of Gobar, Govindi –the wife of Mr.Khanna, Selia – the unacknowledged wife of Matadin, Nohri – the second wife of Bhola, Dulari – a widow, and Puniya – the wife of Heera. Premchand creates two different worlds of women in the society. One belongs to 'rural' and another from 'urban' land. Dhaniya represents the rural, and Miss Malti represents the urban worlds.

The woman is celebrated as the most powerful and the empowering force in some Hindu Upanishads, Sastras and Puranas. Particularly, the Devi Upanishad and Devi Bhagavata. According to Smritis, such as Manusmriti, the position of women in Hinduism is mixed and contradictory. Manusmriti asserts that –

“As a girl, she should obey and seek protection of her father, as a young woman her husband, and as a widow her son”. (Olivelle; p.146)

By referring to the above lines, a woman must be under protection of any of the male related to her during her life time. But the absence of 'her' makes a home the residence of ghosts. In the novel *Godan*, when Hori meets Bhola mentions that-

The old saying is true, *bhai*: Without a wife the house becomes an abode of ghosts. (p.10)

In India women are treated as goddess Laskhmi. But she must possess some good qualities as a wife. Though woman has the highest position in words, she must be a faithful wife, and possess some attributes like modesty, generosity, humanity, devotedness, self-sacrificing, interests of husband and family, and long suffering. When Bhola speaks to Hori addressing Dhuniya, he says that- “A good wife is a Lakshmi *bhai*.”(p.23)

Datadin, the village Brahman priest underlies one of the above attributes of a woman, while speaking to Dhaniya, he says that “It is a woman's duty to be long-suffering” (p.61). Among all female characters of the novel, Dhaniya stands as the central character, as the wife of a peasant named Hori. She is a courageous, honest, generous, self-sacrificing and merely a devoted and faithful wife and mother of three children namely – Sona, Rupa and Gobar. She fights like a lioness against the village heads and money lenders to protect her husband and family. Dhaniya never take care of worldly matters. She is a woman of thirty six, but appears older than her age due to her economic conditions.

Her hair had already turned grey and her face was creased with wrinkles. Her youthful body had declined; the glow of her swarthy complexion had turned sallow and her eye-sight dim. All because of the canker of poverty. (p.6)

When Gobar, her son leaves Jhunia as a pregnant and runs away to the city, Dhaniya accepts her with generosity, and treats her as equal to her two daughters. Jhunia, as a lower caste girl, and widow she under treats by the villagers. Dhaniya fights against the village elders in supporting Jhuniya all the time. Premchand presents Dhaniya as the embodiment of the traditional Indian wife and mother, possessing all the virtues attributed in Holy Scriptures.

Devotion and self – sacrifice can be predicated not only of Dhaniya, but of Jhunia, the young widow embroiled in an illegitimate union with Gobar. She too becomes a long sufferer. At first she was deserted by Gobar and left alone to face the wrath of his parents and hers alone. Then when she joins with Gobar in the city, she is treated merely as an object of his sexual needs, and loses her elder son. She is beaten and abused by her husband. When Gobar is injured, she treats him with utmost care and love which changes the heart of Gobar. Jhunia becomes the bread winner of her family and becomes active. She dedicates her life to care for her husband and her child.

Similar to Jhunia, Seliya, the daughter of a cobbler and the mistress of the Brahman Matadin, is a dutiful and devoted to her beloved even though she is rejected by him. Though she knows the fact that Matadin never marries her, she expects the role of a wife. Selia exploits by rich Brahman as a lower-caste young woman. But Matadin undergoes a change of heart and finally decides to spend his life with Selia.

Wife beating is an everyday aspect of village life. In this context, Punia by Heera, Dhaniya by Hori, Jhunia by Gobar were beaten all the time. Dhania is the only one who stands up and shows courage to her husband:

“Beet me again, if it pleases you,” Dhania said. “See how mercilessly this wretch beats me and still he’s not satisfied, the assassin!” (p.96)

But in other situation in the novel, When Nohri, beats her husband Bhola, Premchand narrates the decline of moral and social norms. The conduct of Nohri narrated negatively. A woman must be like Dhania who always a self-sacrificing, and defends her family. This is the Indian womanhood. Though Dhanya fights against the social injustice but she lives within her limitations as a traditional house wife.

On the other hand, Govindi and Miss Malti are the educated women in the novel. They represent the traditional oppositions: those of wife or mother and courtesan or mistress. Malti, the western influenced, modern woman, is seen initially in the role of the traditional courtesan: she appears as a living image of modernity. The conversation between Mehta and Mirza about the prospective marriage of Malti’s with Mehta leads to the description of a wife’s qualities:

A wife should be an embodiment of sincerity and self-abnegation who effaces her own individuality and merges herself with her husband’s personality; the body is of the husband and the soul that of the wife. (p.135)

The woman is patient like the earth, tranquil, forbearing. If a man tickly takes on the qualities of a woman he becomes a Mahatma. (p.135)

Mehta gives a speech on the powers of men and women-

Woman is as above man, and light is above darkness. Sacrifice, non-violence and forgiveness are still distant ideals for man; but the woman breathes them naturally. (p.15)

A man gets attracted to a woman only when she possesses all the essential qualities mentioned above. Miss Malti though intelligent, beautiful, broad-minded woman, she doesn’t possess the qualities of good life partner. In contrary, Govindi a middle class wife totally reverse to Malti. She loves and sacrifices her life for her husband and family sake. Mirza and Mehta discuss the situation of Khanna and Govindi.

“Khanna is unfortunate; he has gem and thinks it a piece of glass. How she loves and sacrifices for him! But she has no place in Khanna’s heart. He goes in for good looks only. (p.136)

In Premchand’s view man doesn’t want a woman to be sharp and intelligent. He needs a trustworthy and faithful wife. Mehta wants a wife who worships him. He doesn’t want a wife without the attributes of an ideal wife.

I don’t want a wife who can discuss Einstein or proof-read my books. I want a wife to elevate my soul and make my life pure. (p.136)

Malti is a liberated, independent, a professional woman, works and moves equally with the men. She is described as an untraditional woman. She is also a representative of the new India and symbolizes the changing roles of woman. She has many ideas on women-

“Women want rights so that by making proper use of them they can prevent men from abusing their rights.”(p.154)

Govindi, a dedicated and faithful wife of Mr.Khanna, faces all the troubles and departs from her husband. In a fit of emotional imbalance Govindi goes out of the house, by leaving her two kids with her husband. Like Dhania, Govindi also becomes an ideal Indian woman. When Mehta asked her – why not creating more women like you? Govindi replies with brief-stricken voice-

“You’ll find such women in every home. I can hold a candle to them. Of what worth is a woman if she cannot keep her husband happy? (p.189)

Premchand not only preaches the qualities of an ideal woman through his characters, he also narrates the roles of a mother in human life.

Motherhood enjoys the most exalted status in life. In such an exalted position, one is above insult or humiliation. A mother gives life. (p.191)

In the village, Nohri, the second wife of Bhola plays the role of ‘courtesan,’ using her charms with the village officials in order to obtain favors. Everybody in the village accepts and tolerates her actions. Nohri knows men’s nature very well. When Bhola decides to leave her, she beats him and remains him to stay back. She acts like a daring woman, who never cares about the society. By portraying the qualities of an ideal woman, Premchand uses the technique of transformation of characters in the novel. Jhunia changes herself becomes earner of her family. Malti transforms herself into an idealistic human being, imbibing the

qualities of a modern woman with a realistic ideology. Malti's transformation in turn influences Mehta, who now considers the opposite sex also as equal as his.

To conclude, this paper aimed at portrayal of ideal Indian woman qualities through Premchand's characters in the novel *Godan*. *Godan* stands as a landmark of Premchand's works. After reading the novel, everyone realizes the real nature of human being. The novel deals with different themes connected to pathetic condition of a peasant family, and the exploitation of money lenders, the mind set of rich zamindars, the condition of women in villages, and struggle for existence in rural India. Premchand has alginatte impressions in the hearts of his readers.

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