



MUNSHI PREMCHAND'S GODAN: AN ELEGY OF MARRIED LIFE

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Received: 17/02/2018

Edited: 26/02/2018

Accepted: 06/03/2018

Abstract: *Godan is a social tragedy caused by human cruelty, greed, selfishness, poverty and exploitation. The hero of the novel wants to live but the society does not allow him to live. He dies of in humanity, exploitation and hunger. Humanism is the remedy to the problem. If the poor are treated humanely, many of their problems can be solved easily.*

In Godan Hori's only ambition of life is to own a cow. He does a life long struggle to get a cow. Like every house holder, Hori for a long time had been cherishing this desire for a cow. It was a brightest dream of his life, his greatest ambition. But he gets a cow by deceit and selfishness. He gives a false to Bhola, the farmer of another village, that he would get him a second wife. Desire for women had made Bhola's eyes eloquent. He throws a bait to fulfill his ambition but their life time ambition remained unfulfilled but they never gave up efforts to achieve it till the last day of his life. Like Shakespearean tragedy one tragic flow each that causes their doom.

Munshi Premchand's appearance in Indian Hindi fiction created a revolution and unbearably in a new era. He has intimately studied the life of peasants and portrayed it with such powerful imagination and wonderful art that stands supreme in the History fiction. Whom fate and chance had denied their favours.

Godan appeared on the literary scene in the period of British rule when the poor and lower class Indians were suffering passively under foreign rule which denied them a life of dignity and respect. Godan also deals with the impact of industrialization on Indian villagers. To add to the misery of the poverty-stricken Indian peasants and workers, the landlords enjoyed good status, joined hands with their foreign rulers to suppress their own Indians.

Key Words: *Elegy, Absurdity, Swarthy Complexion, Canker, Rat Scurry.*

Godan (1936), Premchand's last completed novel, is a masterpiece of peasant India. It is a true and realistic picture of Indian village society, the backbone of India. It is a story of changing people, hungry and semi-starved, yet hopeful and optimistic, in the truest spirit of the age it represents. No writer in India has been such a master in the art of unbearable tragedy of Indian peasantry. He depicts with a deep understanding, the tragedy and the pathos of their dark lives, their rare smiles and unceasing sorrows, their frustrations and hopes. Munshi Premchand has shown the absurdities of feudal system, orthodox religious beliefs and villainy of the money-lenders. He attacked both the evils of landlordism as well as capitalism. Hori, the protagonist of the novel, who does not stand in revolt against the system but suffer throughout his live. In this novel, Premchand symbolized India's

sorrows in the character of the protagonist. His son Gobar, who also represents the new generation, believes in shattering everything that restricts his movement. He is in favour of a radical change in society and appears as the representative of change and modern values. He firmly believes in human freedom. He does not accept the absurdities of life in a submissive manner but believes in building his own destiny. All of Premchand's main characters are shown to be suffering and struggling against the unjust and irrational world. *Godan* is a successful depiction of social, economic, personal and intellectual absurdities of the age. According to Dr. Shailesh Zaidi, a famous critic of Premchand:

The novelist of *Godan* believes that man is condemned to be free. The reason is that values are not made by God but they refer to man. That is why they are related to

personal decisions. Firmness of decision attributes freedom to human existence. Although man is free he is forced to act in a socially acceptable mode and this is the biggest tragedy of his life. In *Godan*, Rai Saheb having accepted this fact says at one instance 'what could be more tragic in life than the fact that you have to act in a way which your conscience does not allow?' (Zaidi, 21).

In *Godan*, Hori is the protagonist. He is an incorrigible simpleton, God-fearing and tradition loving farmer who can not think of violating the traditional values and customs. Being fatalist he can not even dream of going against society, religious traditions and institutions. His simplicity and saintliness become a curse for this innocent creature. He becomes an easy prey to injustice and exploitation of the stone-hearted landlords and money-lenders, yet he can not stand against oppression.

Godan is a realistic epic of the Indian rural life. The novel opens with intense desire of Hori to feed a cow. It is the intense desire of every Indian peasant to have his own field and cattles. These are his perpetual properties. We find, how an Indian farmer being devoid of his cattles and fields, becomes economically distressed. With the passage of time, he is reduced to a labourer from a farmer. He is economically very poor and distressed. Though he has a dream of owning a cow, yet in his last moments nothing remains with Dhaniam, his wife except twenty annas. She feels sorry that she can not offer a cow to a Brahmin. There is a similar situation in T.S. Pillai's novel *Chemmeen* where the protagonist Pareekutti and the heroine Karuthamma lay in an embrace, dead on the wet sands of the sea-beach up in the sky, Arundhati, the night star, shines as a witness of their pure affection. Arundhati, a chaste lady in Hindu mythology (a sati) is brought to reference here to heighten the pathetic effect.

Dhaniam, the wife of Hori, becomes the mouthpiece of the novelist in presenting Indian women in villages. Like a true Indian woman she

bears the unbearable treatment of her husband but continues to make him realize the hard reality and truth of life. Poverty and exploitation have made her rough, average looking woman. At times, she tries her best to teach him some lesson of practical life, but her husband is not ready against his basic inborn nature. He is incorrigible and also "under the curse of saintliness."

In *Godan*, most of the incidents are depicted from the hard realities of life. Thus, while going through the novel it presents as if the realities of life roam before our eyes like a camera. Thus, when in the large crowd, Dhaniam, chiding her husband, snatches money from him; or she, by taking the sub-inspector to task, tries to safeguard her brother-in-law; then it presents as if we are part and parcel of the crowd. The village money-lenders wanted to borrow thirty rupees from them to give to the sub-inspector, Ganga Singh, Dhaniam sprang before him, snatched the scarf from his hand. She snubbed her husband Hori before all. Overjoyed, Hori tied the money in a corner of his neck-cloth and hurried back. But before the money could change hands, Dhaniam appeared from somewhere and snatched at his apron. Rupees tinkled out on the ground. "Where are you taking this money?" She said tense with snapping anger. "If you wish your good, return it immediately. So this is the price you want to pay to save your honour? Does a poverty-stricken man in whose house nothing but rats scurry about have any honour to his name? First, the loss of the cow and on top of it this additional penalty. How honourable you look, indeed!" (84).

Dhaniam was a woman of grit, determination and also of delicate emotions. She was right to say that we are starving at home, longing for just a grain of food, with nothing to eat and to wear, and you go tossing out handfuls of money just to save your honour. Thus, Dhaniam's determination and speech saved the home from paying an unnecessary fine. The hard realities of life leave deep impact on mind and heart. She could tell the sub-Inspector, "If your investigation leads you to this conclusion, arrest me. I've seen enough of your justice and intelligence"

(85). She claims that cutting the throat of the poor is easy enough but to separate milk from water, running an honest investigation, is something else. The novelist could not restrain himself from paying a tribute to bravery, broad-mindedness, large-heartedness and kindness of Dhania. When she found Jhunias, Bholas widow daughter, at the door, she welcomed her like a daughter-in-law. She did not yield before the villagers even when they imposed hundred rupees fine on her, left her penniless. It was a bold step and a lesson to society. She knows for certain that the money-lenders and landlords are heartless creatures, blind to the sufferings of others. Hori out of his simplicity bore this severe injustice too but Dhania is a rebel who fights for human existence. Hori is lonely in his struggle against the circumstances and his fear of injustice and 'adharma' has made his life miserable. He can face poverty and starvation but not a humiliating and lonely existence away from his community. The bounds of community are too strong for him to break. He does not spare community, tradition, religious beliefs, customs and the custodians of religious beliefs. He is seen frightened and awed by the dictates of his community: Hori asked Dhania to keep quiet, "It's the voice of God that speaks through the panthes," But what is written, must happen: no body quarrels with fate.

Here he was, dumping his own grain at another man's place, like a person digging his own grave. He was worried about food for his children. But the fear of the community, like the fear of a ferocious animal, goaded him on. He could not imagine life outside the fold of the community. The feeling that there could be no integration of life without the community, that marriages, religious rites, birth and death had meaning only within the community, had been deeply ingrained in him. Outcasted, he'd just disintegrate.

(97-98)

In *Godan*, Gobar is a rebellious character who does not know to bow before injustice, exploitation and

hypocrisy. He is capable of leading people against any oppression. He is attracted by the glamour of city life and reaches the busy industrial city of Lucknow and joins the mill of Mr. Khanna where he gains worldly wisdom which reshapes his entire being. He has courage to expose the villainy of the landlords, money-lenders and priests. In fact, the concept of Hori and Gobar are inversely proportional to each other. He realizes that his father is incorrigible and his sense of *dharma* will never allow him to raise his voice against inhumanity and exploitation. He shows that blind belief in destiny will only increase misery and problems. A new orientation has to be given to age-old traditions, if not total rejection. He gains a new insight. He does not hesitate to accept Jhunias as his wife openly and strongly asserts:

Gobar, groping in the dark so long, realised that he had accidentally laid his hand on exactly the thing he wanted He was ready to suffer ostracism for a sensible girl like Jhunias. Didn't Matadin, a brahmin, marry a cobbler woman? Datadin gnashed his teeth in dismay but couldn't do a thing about it. It must be said to Mata din's credit though that he didn't allow his religion to be defiled. He cooked his food himself and wouldn't eat without saying his prayers. Even Datadin had patched up with him. Again, take the case of Thakur Jhenguri Singh who kept a Brahmin woman. Had he to suffer for that? He still commanded respect; if anything, his prestige had gone up. (36)

Thus, the novelist wants the individuals also to realize that they have a duty to the society which they should perform but he does not want that the society should snatch away the wealth from the rich persons by force as communists did in Russia. The only way left to usher in socialism is to motivate the talented persons with the idea of service to the society. In *Godan*, Mehta suggests some solutions to the prevailing contemporary social problems. With the end of the capitalist system and the advent of

scientific technology, earning a living has become easier. At least in our country, if someone is poor, it is more due to his own indifference towards materialistic prosperity. The modern world's problems are not related much to poverty but to the mechanical pace of life, loss of identity, irrespective of caste, creed and religion, rootlessness, solitude and emotional degradation. The novelist takes opportunity to caution the society against suppressing the intellect in the name of equality. In *Godan*, Dr. Mehta asserts against the Marxist philosophy, he is a bit ahead of his time. He explains his views as follows:

By hook or by crook you might succeed in distributing wealth. But how can you make an equitable distribution of intelligence and character and beauty and health? It's not wealth alone that sets up the high and grades down the low. I have seen millionaires bowing to *sannyasis* and kings to dusky beauties. Isn't that strange? I know you'll bring in Russia. But Russia does not disprove my theory: there the mill owner of yesterday has become the bureaucrat of today: Intellect was supreme in the past: it is supreme today and will keep on being supreme in the future. (44)

Though the concept of socialism is a part of the message that the novelist has given in the message of love and service through Mehta and Malti affair, it is designed to give higher philosophical values of life. Both are in way idealistic characters. It appears that Premchand himself taking place of Mehta comments on the various problems of worldly life.

Dr. Mehta despite being a thinker and philosopher is truly humanistic. His speech on "The status of women in changing times" praises women for their social roles of mother, sister, wife and eulogises the quality of compassion in them; but being critical of the present new tendency of a woman being ultra-modern butterfly. He comments on the various contemporary social issues and problems. Like a true humanist, he believes in the freedom of individual. Giving his views on the

institution of marriage which delimits freedom and adds responsibilities, he believes that love is the greatest virtue and marriage is only social contract. He says: "marriage puts fences all around you". Miss Malti finds her equal mate in Mr. Mehta only and their 'hierogamos' (the union of the feminine and the masculine principles on the soul level) serves a particular purpose. Both decide not to marry and remain friends. On being asked, which he considers superior, marriage or remaining single, he replies, "From the point of view of society, marriage; from the point of view of the individual, being single"(49). It shows a healthy and positive attitude towards life.

It can be said that *Godan* is certainly an existential novel of epic dimensions as it is a realistic depiction of the relationship between individual and surrounding. It presents a criticism of society in true colours. It provides a true picture of the absurdities of the society and preaches to face the absurdities and not to run away. His presentation is so realistic and vivid that the novel assumes epic dimensions which lends the epic grandeur to the characters. The end of the life of Hori is the climax of the narrative. According to Shailesh Zaidi, an eminent critic of Premchand, Hori of *Godan* belongs to the age of Albert Camus, the age which knows that it is impossible to change the world (*Zaidi* (37)).

Hori understands the absurdities of society but finds himself incapable of changing. The tragedy of *Godan* is that Hori spends his life with the absurdities of the society. Writing about *Godan*, Dr. Shailesh Zaidi puts forth the following views:

Godan is a name of recognising the absurdities of life; of observing social reality; of a helpless restlessness to save existence; of an attempt to rise above the limitations of conflict and discover a smooth way to success. The philosophy of life in *Godan* is universal despite being Indian and Indian despite being Universal. (*Zaidi* 101)

Premchand portrays the Indian peasants and working people with their poverty, misery, starvation, poor health, death and humiliation. He presents the peasants fighting against a rigid, cruel and indifferent

social set up. Hori in *Godan* represents Indian peasantry who has to face economic crisis, death and humiliation as his present and future are equally darker. At each step, the miserable plight of his life deepens. He seems to be an easy victim of circumstances. I.N. Madan observes:

The Indian peasant has been robbed of his death, his honour, his spirit and his very life. He has been plundered and profaned,

disinherited and dispossessed by those who exploit him..... He was born, he suffered and he died. The birth and death of the Indian peasant were not significant; but the suffering did not loom large in his life. The novel does not end in the triumph of the peasant; it ends in an atmosphere of pessimism and despair.

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