

## Nirmala: A Tragedy of Gender – Discrimination

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Studies on gender have in recent years, reached a prominent focal point within the discipline of social history and cultural studies. It is to be emphatically stated that gender is an integral part of all human experiences. It is omnipresent in human life, shaping the decisions, choices and life styles of individuals. It plays a crucial role in the lives of human beings, especially women, as they are usually in a disadvantageous position *vis-à-vis* the males. Indian society is so complex that it offers various categories of women enjoying varied and, at times, even contradictory social status. The status of women may differ from region to region, from community to community, from tribe to tribe and even from caste to caste. Indian tradition regarding the social position of women has also been paradoxical. Traditionally speaking, Indian women have not enjoyed sufficient freedom; they have been assigned an inferior status, particularly during the medieval times and even subsequently. The largely held point of view is that women in the Indian social system have always been treated as inferior to men and have been given a status lower than that of men. They have, therefore, been dependent on men for whatever position they have held in the society at a given moment of time.

The fiction of Premchand has a universal social significance. The way he shares everything with the reader, the social relevance of his subject matter and the delicacy of narration – they all help to keep Hindi fiction close to the Indian tradition.

Premchand's Nirmala is a classic text of woman-as-victim. Nirmala, the female protagonist, is the central figure in the novel. The episodes present themselves in a manner that her character is revealed and illustrated at each stage of a woman as a girl, as a wife and as a mother in different shades of Indian society with its focal point of the social problem of incompatible marriage.

Nirmala is the fragile and pathetic heroine of the novel. Her life is full of struggles and miseries but she never runs away from it. Premchand himself says, "A coward is a man who runs away from struggle" (qtd. in Rahbar).

Nirmala is a story of three separate upper middle class families who are linked to one another in some way or the other. Babu Udaya Bhanulal Sinha and Kalyani with their four children – Nirmala, Krishna, Chandrabhanu and Suryabhanu – form one group; Babu Bhalchandra Sinha and Rangilibai with their two sons – Bhuwan Mohan Sinha and an unnamed second son – form another; and Munshi Totaram with three sons and a widowed sister Rukmini form the third group in the novel. They all belong to the Kayastha community except Pandit Moteram Shastri, who belongs to the Brahmin community in this novel.

From the very beginning of the novel, the anxieties of Nirmala surface as soon as she comes to know about the settlement of her marriage. She, an innocent girl of fifteen, hides her face and takes refuge in a lonely corner of the house. She is not mature enough to understand and even

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handle the new course of life. She wants to study and enjoy life as her siblings: There is a strange fear that fills her heart, a nameless dread is gathering in every fibre of her being – for what does the future hold? There is no joy in her heart, no trace of that rapture which expresses itself in the shy glances of maidens and in half smiles that play on their lips, which overcomes their limbs with a deliberate languor. No, there are no aspirations there, no fond expectations, only fears, anxieties and dark imaginings.

Krishna, her younger sister, is unable to comprehend the situation in totality. She is pleased that her sister will get all kinds of jewellery and there will be musicians and festivities, guests and dancing. But she also knows and is sad at the prospect that her sister would leave her house forever, and she would be left all alone: But she doesn't understand why all this is happening at all, nor why her mother and father are so keen to drive her sister from their home. It's not as if her sister has said anything unpleasant to anyone, nor quarreled or anything so, she thinks, will I too be turned out in this way one day? I too will sit in a corner and weep like my sister, and no one will take pity on me? That is why she too is afraid.

One evening she comes to Nirmala and asks her to enjoy fresh air. But Nirmala is not in a mood to go anywhere. She even does not want to get married yet. Her sister questions the disparity of family equations between boy and girl:

“Why don't you tell Amma you won't go anywhere?” says Krishna.

Nirmala. I'm telling them all night, but who's listening?

Krishna. So isn't this your home too?

Nirmala. It obviously isn't, or else how could I be sent away forcibly?

Krishna. Will I too be turned out this way one day?

Nirmala. So d' you expect to stay here forever? We're girls, we don't really belong anywhere.

Krishna. Will Chandar too be turned out?

Nirmala. Chandar is a boy, who'll turn him out?

Krishna. Are girls very bad then?

Nirmala. If they weren't bad, would they be thrown out like this?

Krishna. Chander is such a rascal, but he's allowed to stay. You and I, we never do anything mischievous, do we?

The dialogue cited above is a patent example of patriarchal society in which woman is forced to live on the conditions of man and he has all the luxuries to enjoy. The girls have no right to protest against the cruel practices of the society which subject them to great hardship. This is gender-discrimination which is, more or less, found in all societies, the Indian society being no exception. As V. Geetha points out of the several elements which constitute patriarchy, gender is perhaps the most significant, because it allows for the articulation of power within relationships that are fundamental and intimate. She further says: Gender is a task which is both easy and slippery. It is easy because we are doing gender all the time, and it is all around us. It is slippery because it has to do with our sense of ourselves, our roles and relationships.

Despite being engaged to a prosperous and suitable boy, Nirmala has anxious dreams. Once she sees in a dream that she is sitting on a bank and waiting for a boat to come. She is overwhelmed with

deep nervousness about when and how she will cross the river. Suddenly she sees a beautiful boat approach the bank: The boatman cries out – ‘There’s no place for you here! Again she hears a voice – ‘Stop, stop the river is deep, you’ll drown at this rate. That boat is not for you, I’m coming, come sit on my boat and I’ll take you across’. It has neither sail, nor rudder, nor paddle. Its bottom is leaking, its boards are broken, the boat is full of water and a man is patiently baling it out. The boatman replies – It has been sent for you, come and sit down! She decides she’ll take the chance. For a while the boat moves shakily; but it is taking in water rapidly. She too joins the boatman in baling out the water with both her hands. She raises her hand towards some invisible source of succour, the boat slips away from under her and she loses her footing.

Nirmala’s previous dream is indeed a prophecy for her forthcoming life. Whether she knows his or not but Premchand knows it very well. In “How do I write a story” he writes to Daya Narayan Nigam, “I cannot write a story until and unless it is fully developed from the beginning to the end in my mind” (qtd. in Rahbar. Nirmala is not a mere story, it’s a novel but it might have been conceived by Premchand entirely in his mind. That is why he could describe this dream so well. At the time when Nirmala is getting engaged to an eligible boy, Totaram is nowhere in the scene. However, because he is present in the novelist’s mind, he is subconsciously present with Nirmala too.

Father, brother, husband and son are the persons on whom a woman depends and the obvious consequence is the loss of her own identity. Men know that women are

superior to them, and, therefore, they choose the weakest or the most ignorant so that they may oppress/subjugate her. If they did not think so, they would never be afraid of women. In Nirmala, Udayabhanu Lal Sinha, Nirmala’s father, feels the same anger. After that particular incident he leaves the house in a huff. He is murdered by a previous convict Matai who was sentenced to three years imprisonment. This breaks Nirmala’s engagement with the young man because her mother is no longer in a position to offer the dowry which Bhuwan Mohan expects. He says, “Marry me some place where I get a lot of money. At least a hundred thousand may be more. There’s no hope of anything there now, is there? Vakil Sahib is no more, and you suppose the widow has put away”Nirmala’s dreams are shattered. Now she has nothing to look forward to. Later she comes to know that Dr. Bhuwan Mohan has married a girl named Sudha, whose parents have paid a dowry of five thousand rupees.

Nirmala’s tragedy occurs in such a corrupt and superstitious society, in which the generosity and honesty of her father’s becomes a curse for his children while a rogue and a corrupt official in the Excise Department Bhalchandra Sinha becomes richer day by day. It proves that humanity cannot survive for long in a corrupt atmosphere. There is a huge resentment in the mind of Premchand for this corruption, which is visible in the comic figure of Bhalchandra:

He was a tall, massive man, seemed like some dark god, or some Negro lately recruited from darkest Africa. His face was so dark that it was difficult to tell where his forehead ended and his hair began. His

salary was 500 rupees a month and he extracted huge bribes from contracted.

Now Kalyani has no option but to marry her daughter to a middle aged lawyer Munshi Totaram, although he is a widower and twenty five years older than Nirmala and have three grown up sons from his previous wife. She has to look after his young sons – Mansaram, the eldest son, is of sixteen years old; Jiyaram and Siyaram are of twelve years old and seven years old respectively. With the arrival of the young bride, Rukmini and three sons soon realize that their freedom will be seriously limited. Rukmini feels jealous of Nirmala because earlier she had been the dominating authority of the household but now Totaram has passed on this privilege to his young wife to make her happy. So she treats her with unconcealed hostility and taunts her at every opportunity.

Nirmala's sympathies are with Totaram whom she pities, and can dedicate her life to him. She can attend to him, worship him, respect him, but cannot do one thing he asks her to do - to love him. Totaram, who knows that he is aged, uses all the tricks aged men use to ensure the affection of 'a young wife'. He brings her presents and wealth; he spins yarns of his proclaimed bravery – yarns which none but the fool will believe. One day he tells her that he has single-handedly over powered three armed rogues. On the same incident Prayag Raj Mehta compares Totaram with "Sancho Panza" (Mehta, in Detha) and Ram Vilas Sharma, in his book Premchand Aur Unka Yug, compares him with Shakespeare's famous comic character "Falstaff". Like him, he too has solely vanquished three rogues armed with sword just by the help of his wooden stick.

Nirmala, like the friends of Falstaff, questions at this "There must be many sword – marks on this stick". Munshi ji replies, "I kept foiling them each time. On a couple of occasion, when they did manage to hit my stick, all they gave were glancing strokes incapable of leaving a mark". When, however, a snake appears in the house, as Rukmini tells him, he runs out to call for help and it is Mansaram, his eldest son, who in no time kills it with his hockey stick.

To impress Nirmala, Totaram even tries to improve his complexion and looks by using all kinds of medicines and tonics. But he fails to kindle the spark of love in her heart.

Marriage is one of the most important events in a woman's life. Marriage is among the Hindus, a sacrament, a religious duty. Premchand says, "I look on married life as a means to perfect each other's spiritual evolution. There is no other necessity or meaning in marriage" (qtd. in Rahbar. Munshi Totaram, by virtue of his gender, was in a position to choose his prospective bride but Nirmala, belonging to the so called weaker sex, had no such freedom. Earlier the girls had no voice in the choice of their husbands, and their opinions were seldom respected. But had Totaram wished, he could have avoided marrying a fifteen year old girl, who, ironically, was one year younger than his own son. The kind of circumstances which he had at that time, marriage was not compulsory for him. He was around forty years of age. His widowed sister Rukmini was there to take care of his sons, but nonetheless, he married again. According to Alok Rai, in the Afterword to the novel, "the subtext of Nirmala is sexuality. The 'mismatch' between Nirmala and her

husband is, most crucially, a sexual mismatch”. Here, what Premchand feels about Totaram is that he is not totally a blameworthy person but the real accused is the society, that is why he makes him both the subject of pity and mockery as well.

Due to huge age-difference between them he is unable to behave in a natural way before Nirmala and she too doesn't behave naturally before him. Premchand says: She felt angry with her mother, of course; but her greatest anger was reserved for poor Totaram. This burning resentment was always with her.

It is possible that due to this reason she gets attracted towards Mansaram. He is almost of the same age, intelligent, good looking and has a fine, sensitive nature. He is the only one who takes kindly to Nirmala. She likes him and feels happy when he sits by her side. She treats Mansaram as a good mother does. He offers to teach her English lessons, which she gratefully accepts. Totaram does not like this development and gets his son admitted to a boarding house. A very fine description of Nirmala's feelings is presented here:

Talking to Mansaram, joking with him, was strangely exciting and gratifying to her pleasure – loving temperament. Talking with him she felt a deep enjoyment, one she found impossible to describe in words. There was no improper feeling involved in this. She couldn't dream of any sort of illicit relationship with Mansaram. But every person desires the company of his fellows, harbours an indescribable longing for their companionship.

Totaram is suspicious about the growing relationship between Nirmala and Mansaram. Nirmala's efforts to remove this misunderstanding only serve to make it

deeper. When Mansaram lies on the death bed, Nirmala, like a loving mother, goes to the hospital. Totaram's suspicions are still intact. Fortunately, before Mansaram close his eyes, he falls on Nirmala's feet, pays a warm tribute to her and tells his father what a wonderful mother she has been to him. Totaram now feels very guilty for having made such terrible accusations against his own wife and son. But it is too late. His son is gone. He falls into a state of depression. After a few days Nirmala gives birth to a girl who looks exactly like Mansaram. But even this event, the arrival of a child in his old age, does not lift him out of his gloom. The shock of his son's death is too deep for him. He loses interest in his legal work. His practice declines and he faces serious financial difficulties. His house is auctioned for paying off a debt. He has to move his family into a smaller residence. His eldest son is already dead. The middle one, Jiyaram, steals Nirmala's jewellery-box to repay the debts he has incurred and then, in a fit of repentance, commits suicide. Nirmala now takes care about every penny that is spent is put only to the right use. In every phase of her life as in her childhood, after getting married and at the time of her mental turmoil too, Nirmala is still a very polite and soft spoken girl. But as the physical and social circumstances of her life turn bitter, she too changes. The death of Mansaram and Jiyaram, the theft of jewellery-box and the auction of her husband's house transform her. She knows that her husband's eyesight is failing, and Dr. Sinha has forbidden him to read at night, he has even begun to develop a little asthma too, but even then he works hard from morning till midnight: “Irrespective of whether he felt like working or not,

regardless of whether he was well or ill, work he had to all the same. Nirmala felt not the slightest twinge of sympathy for him". Premchand observes that when one's 'heart is burning', one's 'speech becomes fire-laden'. Nirmala was normally soft-spoken but now she is totally transformed: "All the usual softness of her speech seemed lost entirely. There wasn't a touch of sweetness in her now".

Totaram now feels suffocated. Man, belonging to the so called stronger sex, fails to accept his mistakes. He always puts the blame on woman. When Munshi Totaram's two sons are dead and the third one is taken away by Sadhu, he is deeply troubled and blames Nirmala.

He says to her, all this is your doing. Was this the state of my home six years ago? You've destroyed my well established home, uprooted my flourishing garden. Now only one stump remains. I didn't bring you to this house to have my whole world destroyed. I wanted to make my happy existence even happier. My darling sons who were treated with such indulgence before you came – before my very eyes you began to treat them like servants. And despite seeing it all I remained blind. Go on, get me a little arsenic.

Nirmala replied through her tears – I know I'm unfortunate. God alone knows why I was given this life to live.

Munshi Ji. Don't rub salt into my wounds. Go and celebrate the event. All your wishes have been fulfilled.

In this society women, the weaker sex, are always blamed. Nirmala gave her life to Totaram and his family and gets no reward. Nirmala feels: "She had seen Jiyaram leaving with the ornaments but kept her mouth shut. Why? Because people

would think she was being vindictive by levelling false accusations against the sons. So today she was being blamed because she'd said nothing! Suppose she had stopped Jiyaram at that moment and he'd run away from home because of a feeling of shame – would she not have been blamed then again?"

A female does not have many options. She even accepts the patriarchal structures and plays her roles as daughter, sister, and mother. In the fictional world of Shashi Desh Pande, middle class educated women's predicament is that they are trapped between two worlds – of their father or husband. They are either so used to the little comforts provided by the middle-class life that they find the world beyond too insecure and difficult to live, or they develop an ability of endurance. They cannot slam the door and leave the house of their father or husband. If they do so, they are to lead a life of emotional vacuum.

One day Totaram quietly sets out from the house to search for his youngest son. Nirmala's health declines but she acquires a new friend Sudha, who is Dr. Sinha's wife. She visits her regularly. Dr. Bhuwan Mohan, on his part, is also feeling guilty. When he sees Nirmala – so young and attractive – reduced to a state of helplessness, is tied to a man old enough to be her father, he regrets having demanded a dowry. His wife, Sudha, far from being upset by his tender feelings towards Nirmala, chides him for his past greed and heartlessness. The episode with an idealistic bias relating to the marriage of Nirmala's younger sister Krishna has been introduced with a purpose. It is an act of repentance on the part of the doctor who was previously engaged to her. Repentant of his greed for

money which has brought so much sorrow to Nirmala, and rebuked by his own wife, Bhuwan Mohan consumes poison and dies. Commenting on this statement, in the Afterword to Nirmala, Alok Rai says: Perhaps the most grotesque instance of this kind of thing occurs right at the end of the novel. Nirmala is at a moment of sheer existential revelation, when the meaning of her miserable life is suddenly clear to her: 'Anyone whose life was at all touched by mine was destroyed utterly'.

After a month Sudha is taken away by her brother-in-law to his house. Nirmala is left alone. Premchand, through the characterisation of Nirmala, throws ample light on some pertinent questions of gender discrimination. He says: "Without a man in the house, without any sons, why should one undergo the drudgery of cooking everyday? And where's the necessity for women to eat everyday? One proper meal and they were set for the next two days". On the same aspect Virginia Woolf also questions, "Why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor?"

Nirmala lies on the bed, grief-stricken, bed-ridden, uncared for and unattended to, waiting for the news from her husband, which has not come till her deliverance from her life of woes. Nirmala tells her last wish to Rukmini for her infant daughter Asha, named as hope, which becomes a great message for the society. She says:

I'll leave my daughter in your charge. If she survives, marry her off into a good family. I couldn't do anything for her – mine is only the guilt of having given birth to her. Keep her unmarried if need be, given her poison if you must, but please

don't marry her to an unsuitable husband – this I beg you.

Munshi Totaram and Nirmala, they both in their own parts, are the victims of this corrupt society. Nirmala is helpless and hence is pitiable. Having described so many emotional contexts, Premchand has aroused the sympathy of his readers towards Nirmala. The story reaches its final stage and then on the death of Nirmala Premchand says:

On the fourth day, at sunset, her sad story came to an end. At the same time that birds and animals return to their homes, their nests and hollows, Nirmala's soul, having endured a life time of the darts and arrows of clever huntsmen and the claws of predators, and having been buffeted mercilessly by gusts of wind till it could endure no more, flew off to its eternal home.

Hardayal, a Hindi critic, says, "The pathos of Nirmala's tragic end brings to mind a similar fate suffered by Thomas Hardy's famous tragic heroine Tess in Tess of the D'Urbervilles" (Hardayal, in Tiwari). As Govind Narain, a famous Hindi critic also says, "Nirmala is a very human, pathetic and touching story of one's helplessness" (qtd. in Rubin).

Nirmala is thus a vivid exposure of middle class Indian society. It presents the tragic stories of three women: Nirmala, Rukmini and Sudha. Money forms the reigning of the novel which itself emerges as a tragedy of dowry. Premchand has shown a substantial spirit of endurance and moderation in Nirmala who despite her ill treatment by Rukmini, suspicion of her husband and sufferance on account of Jiyaram's behaviour, does not revolt like Suman of Sevasadan to abandon the house and leads an independent life. Thus, we see

that all women cannot revolt and are doomed to accept a life not of their own choice. Premchand does not seek to deviate from this reality and eventually, he is more realistic than in his former novels in this regard.

In the end it may be stated that apart from being acknowledged as a classic in Hindi literature, *Nirmala* is also a milestone in the development of Premchand's creative genius. It presents social problems with deep psychological insight. So it can be called a socio-psychological novel. It is one of the best inextricably developed novels of Premchand. In spite of its slim size, it has the potential to express the strength, level, power and limit of Premchand's unique creative genius.

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