

PREMCHAND'S KARMABHOOMI: A POLEMICAL DELINEATION OF INDIAN NATIONALISM AND WOMEN

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According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “Nationalism” means the desire by a group of people who share the same race, culture, language, etc. to form an independent country. In its more general sense, it's a feeling of love for and pride in our country; a feeling that our country is better than any other. The age of Premchand extends from 1880 to 1936. It was this phase of transition in Indian politics and movements for independence that had fired the imagination of Indian writers. In the first half of the twentieth century the Congress Party had become a major political party under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Premchand always kept in touch with the contemporary national parties and the freedom struggle. The mutiny of 1857 had shaken the sensibility of Indian people, and “thinkers now rose from the slumber of idealism” (Sharma, 2003:3). It paved the way for modernism in Indian social and literary life. Ram Krishna Mukherjee, a famous sociologist, says that modernization is “not universalistic, non-ideological, transethnic and pan-humanistic, it is variable” (1975:101).

India emerged into the light of modernism. There was a vallation between the medieval and the modern. The all round development in India provided new perspectives to Indian ethos. But in rural India, there were still many problems like untouchability, rigid caste system, communal feelings and orthodox way of life. As a realist and a progressive writer, Premchand has portrayed different shades of Indian life and the problems of Indian peasantry. Premchand is opposed to the mere imitation of the ways of alien cultures. He is deeply attached to the Indian people. He can indeed be called the first literary exponent of Indian peasantry in Indian literature. He is fully aware of the dangers of colonialism and industrial growth.

Premchand's Karmabhoomi makes an enduring impact on the

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reader's mind in its delineation of the nationalist movement. A. D. Smith, a renowned historian, says, "Nationalism is really only anti-colonialism" (qtd. in Grover & Grover, 2004:292). But it would be more correct to say that "Indian nationalism was partly the product of a world-wide upsurge of the concepts of nationalism and right of self-determination initiated by the French Revolution, partly the result of Indian Renaissance, partly the offshoot of modernization initiated by British in India and partly developed as a strong reaction to British imperial policies in India" (Grover & Grover, 2004:292-93).

This paper is an attempt to examine the themes of violence, non-violence, commercialized education, corruption, the image of women, the struggle against the bureaucracy, against caste and community oppression and against the exploitation of the peasants by the zamindar in the light of Indian Nationalism. The development of a powerful nationalist movement and of a consistent nationalist critique of colonialism is clearly reflected in the writings of Premchand. Rabindranath Tagore also portrays a new vision of Indian Nationalism in his novels Gora and The Home and the World. Gora has contemporary relevance because of its theme of the concept of nationalism in a multi-racial and multi-religious community like India. It exemplifies Tagore's vision of a new, syncretistic India, rising above the considerations of caste, community and race. The novel also can be read as a historical document that brings before us how the British imperialists dominated the Indians by their callous, exploitative, tyrannical strategies of nation-ruling. As Edward Said says in his article, "Culture *and Imperialism*", "Domination and inequalities of power and wealth are perennial facts of human society. But in today's global setting they are also interpretable as having something to do with imperialism" (2002: 369). The Home and the World, as indicated above, operates as a fictional assessment of the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal. Tagore depicts here how unscrupulous politicians, by their artful talk on patriotism, mislead the people to satisfy their greed and lust. He considers this as a form of social tyranny. He says in his book Nationalism that our real problem in India is not political. It is social.

During the decade before Karmabhoomi's publication,

Premchand had been very much influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's satyagraha movement, and his writings, stories, and essays clearly reflected his sympathies with India's poor and the fight for India's freedom. India of the early 1900s consisted of a great mass of poor and illiterate people who were exploited by some privileged people. Peasants in the villages were cheated by moneylenders and landlords and the poor of all castes in the cities were exploited by the rich and powerful. The untouchable classes were treated "as pariahs by their own upper-caste Hindu brethren" (ix). I. N. Madan says:

In addition to these specimens of the feudal world, there is another variety of landlords who exploit the masses in the name of religion. . . . The custodians of religion exploit the ignorance of the poor people. They themselves loll in luxuries, while their 'subjects' sweat for them in the hope that they would be allowed to enter heaven (1946:73-4).

Like Mahant Ramdas in Sevasadan, Mahant Asharam Giri, in Karmabhoomi, is a typical representative of this group. Shri Thakurji is the presiding deity whom he worships in the temple owned by him. In a period of economic depression too, he issues every decree through the mouth of this God and takes a huge amount of tax from his tenants. The poor and ignorant people have no other course but to obey implicitly the divine commands otherwise the heavenly wrath will visit on them. Bhola Chaudhary who was one of the worst victims of this depression and "his cruelty died of his ruthless treatment" (Madan, 1946:74).

Lalit Srivastava, in the Introduction to the novel, writes:

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the two religions, Islam and Hinduism, had coexisted in India for more than a thousand years (viii).

These two communities, except some sort of violence, lived together in harmony. They not only tolerated each other but there were numerous instances of friendship such as that between Amarkant, the Hindu character of Karmabhoomi, and Salim, the Muslim character and strong social bonds, excluding marriage, between the two communities. I. N. Madan gives a very emphatic view about this. He

says, “Premchand does not bring about Amarkant and Sakina's marriage for two reasons: a marriage between persons of different faiths is anti-social and they are so deeply engrossed in social work that their love is sublimated into a higher ideal of life” (1946:94).

Karmabhoomi was published in 1932. The title is highly suggestive and indicates that the novel is action-oriented. The main protagonists too dedicate themselves to a life of action. The story begins in the city, moves on to the country-side, and is then resumed in such a way that the rural and the urban environments become equally important. The atmosphere of struggle is maintained throughout – the struggle against the bureaucracy, against caste oppression and against the exploitation of the peasants by the zamindar. Mahatma Gandhi changed the course of Premchand's life, affecting his thought and vision, as no one else did before. And this is clearly manifested in his writings in the twenties, most conspicuous of them being Rangbhumi (1925). A critic, Jagdamda Prasad Dixit, enumerates some of the issues that engaged Premchand throughout his life: the miseries of the people, peaceful protests against injustice, 'a change of heart' in the exploiters, idealist characters giving away their land to the tilling farmers. Premshankar, of Premashram (1921), originally converted to revolutionary ideology escaped to the USA, eventually returned home as a satyagrahi. This transformation of role, however, continued to be a feature of the Indian political novel in general. The peasants of Lakhanpur in Premashram change their path from violence to non-violence and Premshankar declares that 'the land belongs to tiller'. The most significant character showing the Gandhian impact is of course the blind beggar Surdas in Rangbhumi. He is “an ideal Satyagrahi”, points out Amrit Rai :

not merely in the limited political sense but in the wider context of all the aspects of life . . . the simple, meek, fearless truth-loving Surdas can be identified in his quotidian aspect with Premchand, and in his sublimer aspect with Gandhi. For it was as a sublime manifestation of all his own virtues that Premchand had ever regarded and idolized Gandhi, and it is not

unlikely that he might have had him in mind while delineating the character of Surdas (2002:197-198).

Karmabhoomi shows the rivalry of two leaders of peasants, Amarkant and Atmananda. The former takes a moderate and the latter an extremist position on the peasant's struggle. In view of Premchand's practice of drawing his main characters from real life, it seems reasonable to speculate that these two protagonists "represented the Congress and the Kisan Sabha positions respectively" (Pandey, 1989:175). Atmananda, the fictional representation of a radical sadhu-turned-peasant leader, had eventually to accept the dominance of Amarkant, suggests "a literary replication of the actual dominance of the Congress over the Kisan Sabhas" (Pandey, 1989:175). In fact, Premchand made Amarkant the more cunning and selfish of the two leaders, concerned primarily for his name and fame. Yet the final withdrawal of the movement in accordance with Amarkant's way of thinking is described in terms that distinctly suggest approval. It is true that Premchand approved of Mahatma Gandhi's withdrawal of Civil Disobedience as well. He [Premchand], in a different tone, reveals himself here. As it is he idealized Amar's struggle. Ranajit Guha opines, "There is another dimension to this question as well. If, as much recent research has suggested, there was considerable evidence of independent initiatives and independent struggles on the part of the peasantry in the nineteen twenties and thirties, in eastern Uttar Pradesh as elsewhere, it is significant that a sensitive writer like Premchand took as little note of this as did most of the Congress leaders" (1:220).

The novel, as the title signifies, deals with life's inaction. The characters breathe and grow in action. Amarkant and Salim, the two chamberfellow, gradually become more and more involved in the national movement. They begin to spin, give up using mill-made cloth, and often go to the village for constructive work. They are encouraged in their work by one of their teachers, Shanti Kumar. Unlike other teachers, Shanti Kumar attaches little importance to academic learning. He is convinced that the prevalent system of education has become completely commercialized. He wants his students to think independently and expose themselves to the new social and political

forces that were sweeping across the country. Amarkant's young half-sister Naina, sometimes goes with him to attend lectures of Congress leaders. Amarkant becomes convinced that foreign domination is a curse for India. It has destroyed the sense of self-respect of the Indian people. There is a small incident in Karmabhoomi that constitutes one of the most damaging exposures of the educated middle classes' concern for the oppressed, to be found in Premchand's fiction. The incident involves a band of European soldiers who rape Munni, an Indian woman. Obviously intended as a specimen of the kind of incidents common throughout British rule which made Indians increasingly conscious of European racialism, Premchand's depiction also adds to this a few strokes in which the guilty soldiers are beaten for their action. Amarkant and his friends teach this 'lesson' to the soldiers but thereafter their conscience is satisfied as if they have avenged the wrong. Not once do they care to enquire as to what happened to the helpless victim of this rape. It is left to Amarkant's wife Sukhada to chide them:

Why don't you people go and find out some day, or do you think that giving speeches frees you of any obligation? (27).

This incident occurs fairly early in the narrative. Premchand has portrayed very deftly the duality of the nationalist protagonist's personality. On the one hand, Amarkant is inspired by his concern for the suffering poor to move away from the comforts of his family to court the hardships of the countryside; yet on the other hand, his behaviour continues, almost till the end, to be governed by the anxiety to maintain his leadership.

The major theme of the novel thus deals with the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930-32 in a disguised form. Amarkant and Sukhada are the national leaders of the movement. Premchand who has always reflected the different phases of the national struggle in his previous novels does not ignore the economic depression of 1929 which adversely affected the lot of Indian peasantry. It leads to mass struggle all over the country for affording economic relief to tillers of the soil. It is in the light and experience of this social and political

upsurge that the theme of the novel has been conceived and executed with remarkable realism and power. It is a deeply moving study of the peasant's poverty and courage. It is also a vivid picture of the terrible scene of repression and destruction of life and property in the villages. Premchand repeats his favourite theme by revealing how Western Civilization enters on the stage to disrupt the social and economic life of a village, how the peasants are thrown into a state of confusion and how they can again mobilize their strength for building a new home in a new village for themselves.

Premchand's treatment of the caste and the suffering of the untouchable are intimately connected with his relationship with Mahatma Gandhi on the one hand and his own experience of the Indian village reality on the other. *Karmabhoomi* presents the problem of the untouchable with a remarkable sense of realism. Amarkant's first reaction to the pitiable condition of the Harijan village is that "of a shock and fear without the slightest traces of hollow idealism and sickening romanticism. A sense of fright rudely awakes the romantic young man to the realisation that the greatest stumbling block for the educated upper caste in its understanding of the untouchables is the lack of actual experience of the rural society" (Das, 1991:318). Amarkant is fascinated by the simplicity, generosity, affection, and contentment of the villagers. To see these simple guileless people being subjected to daily persecution makes him sad. His views are similar to Mahatma Gandhi. Thus, he delivers the message of Gandhiji to the villagers in *Karmabhoomi*. He says:

I don't believe in the caste system, Mataji. A Chamaar is worthy of respect if he is honest; whereas a Brahman, if he is deceitful, false, and licentious, is not worthy of respect (122).

Premchand realises that compassion and sympathy are not enough, and individual protests are too feeble to demolish the fortress of tradition. Organized protests with a clear political and social agenda are the only weapons to fight against the caste and rural poverty. He was the first to analyse the causes of the economic privations of the Harijans and their social indignities. The slow change in Amarkant brought by

this actual experience of the Harijan life leads him towards political action. Once Amarkant saw several low caste people being beaten up by the Brahmins because they dared to attend a religious meeting where passages from the scriptures were being recited. According to the Brahmins, the 'untouchables' have no right to hear Vedic hymns. When report of this incident reaches the city, Sukhada also joins the struggle which is being waged under Amarkant's leadership. The Satyagraha is successful. Brahmins have to yield. Harijans are now free to attend religious meetings and to offer prayers inside the temple.

Sukhada, a new woman, is the first among Premchand's female characters who takes up the leadership of a mass movement. She is joined by the old Pathan woman and her grand-daughter Sakina. At first, we see a deep contrast between Sukhada and Sakina. The former is shallow, smug, and proud of her wealth; the latter is thoughtful, gentle and patient. Premchand gives a clear description of both the women. He says:

Sakina's wisdom, reasoning, perception, and fearlessness had astonished him [Amar] and captivated him. The more he knew Sakina, the deeper her influence became. Sukhada dominated him with her brilliance and passion, a domination that he chafed against. Sakina dominated him with her softness and grace, a domination that he liked. Sukhada had the pride of possession. Sakina had the humility of surrender. Sukhada thought herself wiser and abler than her husband. Sakina thought herself nothing in comparison to Amar (95).

But in the course of events Sukhada is transformed. She sheds many of her limitations and comes forward to lead the struggle. While Harijans are asserting their rights in the village, the workers in the city wage their struggle on the issue of the housing colony. Sukhada supports the workers' movement actively and after a while comes to be regarded as one of their leaders. The only member of the family, who opposes the workers, is Naina's husband. This opposition culminates in Naina's tragic death in a violent encounter with her own husband. The

Municipal Board finally yields. The land which the workers are demanding is handed over to them for their quarters.

Sarala Jag Mohan, a Gujarati critic, says:

The Indian novels of the twenties and early thirties had feminine characters, who stood side by side with their male counterparts in the freedom struggle, faced lathi blows and went to jails, with babes in arms. They also picketted the liquor shops and boycotted foreign goods and participated in movements aimed at helping women come out of their social disabilities and stand on their own feet (Mohan, in Bhat, 1993:45).

Premchand's novels are filled with such women characters, whose mental horizons have widened, but are still firmly rooted to homeliness. Generally speaking, this is the image of the woman in the Indian fiction of this time, whether written by men or woman. It is the woman seeking wider field for herself, retaining at the same time her traditionally ascribed role and giving a high premium to feminine virtues, and looking beyond the home at the same time.

Premchand says that women are in no way behind their male counterparts. Sukhada and Naina are its beautiful examples. Sukhada questions the ideals of her husband initially but in the course of time she leaves the house with him. She, however, returns home to serve her ailing father-in-law, and then participates in the movement. Her view about women is that they have never been behind men either in suffering or in protecting principles. She is clear in her views about man's attitude towards woman. While Amar thinks that she loves ornaments but Sukhada before leaving her in-law's house with him, gives up all ornaments.

Premchand is not a feminist but he is clear in his perception that without women's participation no society can ever progress. Even Shantikumar acknowledges the fact that within a year Sukhada had done so much that if Amarkant returns, he would find no space for him because what she had done was unimaginable.

The Gandhian whirlwind and the Freedom Movement catapulted Indian women into the forefront. A. R. Desai says, "This was

unique in the history of India, the spectacle of hundreds of women taking part in political mass movement, picketing of liquor shops, marching in demonstration, courting jails, facing lathi charges and bullets” (1976:279). Women came to the front and the four walls of the home widened and broadened into the boundaries of the country. Literature written at the time of the Freedom Movement projects a new image of the Indian woman. The work of Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand could not have been possible without it. Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography and Pandit Nehru's writings give short sketches of brave women fighters. The influence of Gandhian philosophy gave rise to a new humanism and a new morality based on human values rather than religious orthodoxy. The trend was towards a positive, brave and outspoken effort to find out a new way of life for women.

Premchand exposes a gross inequality of life of the prison in Karmabhoomi and highlights the forces of exploitation. According to him, at last human goodness and truth always win. The independence movement in India was not merely a political struggle, but an all-pervasive emotional experience for all Indians in the 1920s and 30s. No Indian writer, writing in those decades or writing about them, could avoid reflecting this upsurge in his work so as Premchand did. However, the greatest strength of his novel Karmabhoomi lies in its capturing the mood of this period and its authentic depiction of the ethos of an era of Indian History. Ever since it was written, Karmabhoomi has been acknowledged as the most remarkable specimen of Premchand's unique creative genius.

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