



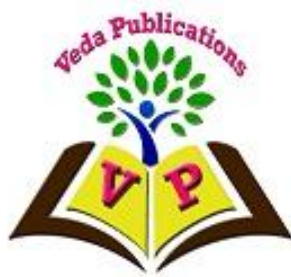
APPROACHING THE QUESTION OF CASTE SUBJUGATION IN PREMCHAND'S STORIES *KAFAN* AND *SADGATI* AND ANALYZING THEM WITH REFERENCE TO DOMINANT TRENDS NOTICED IN DALIT LITERATURE.

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ABSTRACT



The aim of the paper is to explore the question of caste subjugation in the stories *Kafan* and *Sadgati*. The Indian society has been ridden with the menace of caste oppression since centuries. Premchand has been one of the foremost writers to undertake social issues in his writings. The purpose of writing this paper is to explore how caste hierarchy and oppression has been depicted in the works of Premchand and to critically analyse whether his two stories *Kafan* and *Sadgati* fall within the genre of 'Dalit literature'. The paper deals extensively with the Dalit psyche and also the politics revolving around the concepts of purity and untouchability through the Dalit body. The significance of the paper lies in the fact that it enables one to analyse the representation of Dalits in literature by including the criticism of various writers against Premchand and decide for oneself how appropriate and extensive that representation has been.

Keywords: *Dalit, Death, Hierarchy, Women, Representation, Revolution.*

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Premchand (1880-1936) was writing during the first half of the twentieth century when India was facing colonialism, imperialism and National Liberation Movement. He wrote on a variety of subjects touching almost each and every aspect of the contemporary Indian social and political life. Right from the beginning of his creative life, he advocated the cause of peasantry, exploited and deprived sections of society. He understood that writers have a mission to envisage revolutionary changes and must perform a committed role "in nurturing the literary and artistic trend which brings awakening and freshness in society and throw light on real problems of the people." It is this understanding of literature that led Premchand to write on different contemporary issues, which were being faced by his times. He also wrote on the problems of Untouchability along with other subjects in his journalistic write-up, novels and short stories. His writings are voluminous ranging from novels, plays, short stories, essays and journalistic write-ups with extensive notes on contemporary subjects that reshaped the very course (including the content and form) of the Hindi literature, which got immensely influenced by his style and narrative.

Kafan was written in 1936, the year Premchand died and is the most famous as well as controversial story. The story narrates life of a Dalit family (Ghisu, his son, Madhav and daughter-in-law, Budhia) who are devastated by poverty. The whole plot is embedded in the rural society where this family is the poorest one. The story starts with conversation between father and son about his daughter-in-law who is pregnant and facing labour pain. There has been a new wave of interpretations of Premchand's work and, particularly this story, especially by the Dalit litterateurs. Before we dwell upon some of the recent interpretations, it is to be noted that these interpretations are taking place amidst an atmosphere characterised by the contemporary political vision that attempts to define and redefine (and sometime, evaluates and re-evaluates) the past, its histories and cultures. This also applies to literature and thus, new interpretations of the works, either done by the Dalit or non-Dalit writers are coming.

As one begins to read through the story, what strikes one the most, is Ghisu and Madhav's inhumanity. Both father and son are oblivious to Budhia- the very person who brought some order to their home and took care of these two callous men. While Madhav's wife is writhing in labour pain inside the hut, Madhav and his father sit outside, greedily devouring stolen potatoes, unwilling to go and help her because the other person might grab a larger share. Ghisu recounts in detail a feast to which he had been invited twenty years ago and Madhav listens to the vivid account of food with vicarious pleasure. The wife lies dying inside and both of them slept unconcerned about her. Next morning, Budhia is dead. Dalit writers like Shyoraj Singh 'Bechain' consider that *Kafan* is far from the realism and "completely an imaginative story to prove that Dalits are not humane ... and the purpose of this story is to portray a totally distorted picture of the Dalit community." Kanwal Bharati, in another article, reiterates, "*Kafan* is an anti-Dalit story because it has made a mockery of the Dalits through its characters who have been portrayed insensitive and inhumane."

"Premchand begins his story with a depreciatory note castigating the father and son for their laziness. They are described as useless from upper caste point of view because upper caste people are not able to free or cheap labor out of them. The value of lower caste people in the society is measured by their utility to the upper castes. When it comes to analyzing the depiction of dalits in the story, it can be argued that Ghisu and Madhav are shirkers of the first order: "For every day that Ghisu worked, he shirked duty for three." Madhav "sat and puffed at the chillum for an hour after each hour of work that he put in." Secondly, they possessed the ultimate joy, courage and patience. Premchand states, "Had the father son duo been sadhus, they wouldn't have been required to practice self-restraint for attaining contentment. It was second nature to them." Thirdly, both these characters are thinkers. They have seen the fate of their fellow labourers: "he, unlike other peasants, was able to evade their back-breaking labour and no one could take advantage of his dumb simplicity." When Madhav says, "I wonder what we will do if the child comes...we have nothing in the house", or wonders



who will give the shroud since they have blown up all the money, Ghisu declares an unshakeable faith in God and the people of the village. This faith raises Ghisu and Madhav's laziness and abjection to the mystical heights of saintliness. These two strange characters of Premchand are feckless, callous, detached but thoughtful" (Shahi).

After the death of Budhai, Ghisu and Madhav go to the Zamindar and plead for some money to carry out the process of cremation. The Zamindar gives them two rupees with contempt. Other people from the village also donate some money for cremation. Having collected some five rupees, they go to purchase the shroud. They look for a cheap shroud but fail and enter into a tavern where they drink and eat, forgetting all their responsibilities and fearing nothing. While drinking, they comment on several things including rituals, traditions and system and praised Budhia "who even in death provided them food and drink." They get heavily intoxicated and in the end, start singing, dancing and wiggling, just to fall down unconscious. The story comes to an end. The eminent writer Omprakash Valmiki was one of the first critics to call the story "anti-dalit". He has two major objections to the story. The lonely death of Budhia and the perpetuation of an upper caste prejudice by showing the dalit characters as feckless and lazy. The primary motive of dalit literature is the liberation of dalits from the brahmanical hegemony. To criticize Premchand for prejudiced portrayal of dalit in *Kafan*, is to undertake a very narrow viewpoint to analyse the story. Premchand writes, "The peasants called the duo only when they were desperate and had no option." This shows that the relatively better off class was helpless in the face of Ghisu and Madhav's indifference. Ghisu and Madhav who are chamar by caste, landless labourers who observe that back-breaking toil can't even ensure a full stomach, which is why they are lazy and shiftless. "Shirking and uselessness does not define their character. It is their strategy, a maneuver to escape the trap of exploitation. Their defiance manifests itself in laziness. They succeed in getting double the amount of wages which would otherwise be given to only one person. Ghisu and Madhav's "dalit consciousness" rejects these premises of the varna system which have perpetuated the tyranny of

the upper castes. It is a developed "dalit consciousness" which refuses them to become part of the process of hegemony" (Shahi).

However, as a reader and critic it becomes very difficult to condone Ghisu and Madhav for their inhumanity towards Budhiya. But one must remember that mourning is a luxury a starving man cannot afford. "Their callousness is a reflection of their helplessness, not their inhumanity. They are compelled to be insensitive" (Shahi). Ghisu remarks how if they had five rupees earlier they would've bought her some medicine. His remark makes one realize that it was the tragic death of Budhia which enabled them to collect five rupees and had she been alive and writhing in pain, the same people who contributed for the preparations of the last rites, would have turned their back because the sufferer was a dalit and did not belong to the social structure. Even when Ghisu and Madhav enter the liquor den and begin their merry making, Budhia is always on their mind. They curse the system that did not give them this money to save her life. They recall Budhia's toil and revere her memory. They ensure a place for her in heaven, displaying a remarkable blend of guilt and responsibility. It soon gives way to sorrow and despair. Madhav says, "how the poor thing suffered in life, and now she's dead and gone." "It should be noted that this is the same Madhav who did not even approach the pain wracked Budhia in his hunger for potatoes who is now broken with grief" (Shahi). A more appropriate analysis of the entire scene should involve a more staunch criticism of the system which renders one brutal, rather than of the characters who themselves are victims. Another way to look into this whole episode is through the question of gender. Budhia is left without a voice. She suffered silently her fate. Yet she provided the locus on which the subaltern and the master, the exploited and the exploiter worked out their relations with each other. It was in her name that the money was raised, though consumed by the same people who exploited her when she was alive. Not unlike the ruling class, they too were never short of justifications. Budhia was crushed under the threesome forces of feudalism, patriarchy and poverty. Thus, we can argue that the callousness and inhumanity portrayed in the story against Budhia is a deliberate attempt on



part of the author to highlight the plight of dalit women who are exploited not only on the basis of their caste but also their gender.

Many dalit critics have also criticized the story on the basis of it failing to posit the message of complete over-throw of brahmanical hegemony and Hinduism, both in story and among readers. In respect to the criticism within story, one can point to the fact that although one doesn't come across a mass uprising in the story against the varna system, but the protagonists aren't devoid of dalit consciousness. "They are revolutionary characters whose rebellion goes unnoticed by us because we are used to seeing rebellion in limiting framework. Ghisu and Madhav lead their lives as an act of rebellion. At the end when they do not cremate Budhia, they are not just questioning the futility of the act but are also simultaneously rejecting the unjust custom. The conversation between them in the final scene of *Kafan* frees them- and the social world they inhabit- from the burden of Brahmanical orthodoxy. Brahmanism enforces an anxiety about going to heaven after death even though life itself is hellish-without food, clothing, shelter or self-respect. The passage to heaven is regulated by the rituals performed by the priest at the cremation and the money extracted by him. But Ghisu and Madhav drink to their heart's content in the liquor shop, stuff themselves and give away the leftovers to a beggar-confident that they were ensuring Budhia's journey to heaven" (Shahi). With respect to the criticism regarding the absence of collective uprising against social injustice, it can be argued that "such an invention requires not only an advanced awareness of social injustice, but also, crucially, a sensitivity to the tides and limits of contemporary social consciousness. The reader can be pushed- and if this is done with sensitivity and creative vivacity, might after a time even desire to be pushed- but if he is pushed too far or too fast, as Dalit ideologies may well discover, he soon ceases to be a reader at all. It is not a question of aesthetic autonomy, but rather a question of aesthetic tact" (Rai).

Sadgati also echoes the same intriguing practices of Brahmanism that thrives on the empty edifice of rites, rituals and personal festivities and that makes religion, a performance, devoid of

spirituality. The introducing conversation between husband and wife in *Sadgati* expresses an anxiety and concern in showing the right hospitality to Pandit baba while maintaining the boundaries of caste hierarchy. Their first concern is to arrange a proper seat for their upper-caste guest. Jhuria's suggestion to borrow a cot from the Thakurs is no good to Dukhi: "Sometimes you say things that make my blood boil. How can we? They don't lend us even fire for lighting, and you expect them to lend us a cot! If I ask for water at the house of Kaisthas, I won't get it. No question of getting a cot. It's not like our cow-dung cakes, straw and wood; which anyone one can come and pinch. You better wash your own cot. Being summer, it'll dry up before he comes."(Premchand) Dukhi's solution is also not acceptable to Jhuria either: "why'd he sit on our cot? Don't you know how strict he is in his observances?"(Premchand). The list of offerings to appease the Pandit is also long: "They should be plentiful. One seer flour, half a seer rice, a quarter of lintels, ghee, salt, turmeric. And put a four-anna coin in one corner of the leaf-plate" (Premchand). But Dukhi reminds Jhuria not to make the offerings on a thali or everything will be lost: Baba will throw away the thali. He gets wild in no time. When angry, he doesn't spare even Panditayan. He thrashed his son so badly that he still has a broken hand. Put the offerings on a leaf-plate. And, don't you touch anything" (Premchand). Dukhi also repeatedly reminds his wife not to touch anything while buying the offerings from Bhujin, the grocer. With an introductory conversation like this between the two, the author clearly highlights the caste barriers operating in the agrarian society where common activities like sitting, eating are highly politicized and transform into signs of discrimination.

Pandit Ghasi Ram, an important character, as portrayed in the story was a great devotee of God. As soon as he woke up, he would begin his rituals. First of his acts was to grind bhang leaves. Then he would grind some sandalwood into paste; after which he would stand before the mirror and put two long paste marks on his forehead with a thin stick. And then, a round vermilion mark between the lines. Then he would draw, with the paste, roundish shapes on his chest and arms. In the socio-cultural mould of



Sanskritisation, certain exclusive symbols of power were appropriated and divested with their symbolic significance to initiate a deep-seated emulation of the upper castes: "Watching the glorious face in front, Dukhia's heart was filled up with great reverence. What a godly image! Small round and plump body, shining head, filled-up cheeks, and eyes radiating godly refulgence! The sandalwood paste and vermilion further heightened this glory" (Premchand). It's important to notice how through the mention of items such as sandalwood, vermilion, the author brings to the notice of the readers how items themselves have casteist connotations to themselves and how certain items are relegated to the sphere of the high caste, making them completely inaccessible to members of the lower or dalit communities. When the lower castes started wearing sacred threads, the most authentic symbol of social authority, the Bengali bhadralok [gentleman] began to ridicule it as siki paysar suto or a thread worth a quarter of a dime" (Bandyopadhyay 98)

Madhulika Nirmal argues," On certain occasions, Non-dalit writers try to show 'pity' on a Dalit character yet at no point their hero is a Dalit rebellion in true sense of Dalit revolt against the brahmanical hierarchy. Non-Dalit's Dalit is a victim of exploitation, most downtrodden who must not be touched and whose very shadow is polluted" (220). One has to agree with Nirmal with respect to the character of Dukhi who has internalized discrimination and exploitation meted out to him based on his caste. Wilfred also argues," The dominating exercise of power takes an insidious form when the present order is internalized by the Dalits..." (4). Similarly Dukhi seems to believe in the Brahmanical justification of punishing the Dalits for slightest transgression. When the Panditayan throws a piece of burning wood held in tongs and the splinter falls on his head, hurting him a bit, Dukhi thinks, "This is the retribution for polluting a Brahmin's house. God has sent it so fast. That's why the world is afraid of Brahmins. Everyone can be cheated of his money. But just you try to cheat a Brahmin! You'll be destroyed. Your feet will begin to rot, and then fall off" (Premchand). "Space is", therefore, "not simply a passive reality but is invested

with power. Occupation of a space and exclusion from a space are matters of power-relationships. Upper castes use spatial strategies such as appropriation, deployment and control in order to maintain hierarchical relations of caste." (Wilfred 4)

Power structures are congealed and coagulated by certain factors that ratify the power matrix. "The clever manipulation of the Dalit bodies and Dalit spaces through the casteist tools of force and constrain ensure that Dalits remain barred and humiliated but exist as a productive labour force" (Chakraborty). Dukhi, who had come to Pandit baba, asking for a suitable date to fix his daughter's engagement exerts manual labour as an advance payment for such consultation and finally pays a heavy price by dying. No sooner does he arrive at Pandit Ghasi Ram's house, than he is assigned with a long list of heavy duties –feeding the cow, sweeping, plastering the sitting room with cow-dung, chopping wood, carrying and storing four stacks of straw in the hay-store. Dukhi toils arduously, suppressing his hunger for it is a blasphemy to eat in a Brahmin's house: "Chikuri, what're you saying? Will I be able to eat from a Brahmin's house?" (Premchand). But the Gond rightly points out "how the Brahmins —know only to extract work...The landlord at least gives something to eat. The officer makes you work without wages, yet he too gives you something to eat. And these ones have beaten them all, and they call themselves men of God!" (Premchand). Hence the body-self on which society inscribes itself is expropriated and alienated by the upper caste through the taboo of purity-pollution. Caste and body are inextricably intertwined and share histories comprehending the ways in which "membership to a specific caste determines notions of stigma, bodily defiling, special segregation, etc. that are enacted within notions of purity and pollution so that caste becomes a significant reference point through which to comprehend the physicality of the body that undergoes processes of abstractions"(Kurian28).

The deva/daitya binary in the socially engraved hegemonic knowledge systems have relegated Dalit bodies as: "inherently irredeemable...Dalit body carries the scars of ontological discrimination, traces of epistemological violation, and stigmas of theological amnesia.... Dalit



body is a 'spectral body' which is not just a thing, rather; it embodies haunting histories/ memories, philosophies of relationality, politics of agonies, and theologies of 'revivifying practices'"(Vinayaraj 30). Unfortunately Dalits have been subject to continuous subordination because of a strategic "ghettoization of their communities into so-called traditional and ritually impure occupations" (Rawat 3), which is why they have been socially penalized. *Sadgati* shows how the Dalits are not even spared in death: "the cause of untouchability is a riddle to grave disability and denial of human rights and dignity" (162). Since pre-independence, Chamars have also been equally stigmatized as untouchables through a persuasive colonial discourse that have stereotyped them occupationally as labourers dealing in hides and skins of dead animals and tannery. Even in official records by George W. Briggs as early as in 1920, Chamars have been branded as leatherworkers and as early as in 1850s, they have even been correspondingly blamed as killers of cattle by poisoning animals to possess their dead bodies and skins. Such associative links to "an organized and professional crime" also demonstrates the worst effects of a "constitutive relationship between imagined occupation and the representation of Dalit identities" (Rawat 6). Presuppositions of an impure occupation and presumptuous occupational labelling have framed Dalits as untouchables.

Sadgati vividly sketches the pitiless plight of the Chamars in the discredited lives they lead and the ignominious death they face. The back-breaking toil that extracts Dukhi's life ironically places his body in a no-man's land where it lies unclaimed. The chill non-chalance in Panditayan's calm suggestion,—"Nothing. Send a message to the Chamars. They will carry away the body" signals the brutal insensibility of the upper-caste towards the Dalits (Premchand). The Dalit bodies are subject to the violence of neglect and abandonment even after death. Since the body lies on the way to the well, people face difficulty to draw water and this prompts an old woman to tell Panditji, "Why don't you have the corpse thrown away? How shall we drink water?" While the Chamars are discouraged by the Gonds to touch it since the death has occurred under mysterious circumstances and is subject to police

investigation, Pandit Ghasiram is equally demotivated: "How could a Brahmin touch a Chamar's corpse! The Shastras and Purans forbade this." Interestingly, the only possibility to topple the caste hierarchy comes through the character of Gond who again is a tribe and is outside the social circle and the Varna system. Towards the end when the stench from the dead body becomes unbearable, Pandit is shown tying a loop at the corpse's feet and dragging it out of the village into the fields and leaving it there to be ruthlessly devoured by jackals and vultures, dogs and crows. Then he comes home and bathes, recites the prayer to Goddess Durga and sprinkles the Ganges water all over in the house. Sharankumar Limbale in his book, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, argues that one of the most dominant trends in dalit literature is "to protest against the established system which is based on injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the higher castes." Premchand through the incorporation of the scene where the Pandit sprinkles Ganges water all over in the house for purification brilliantly portrays the hypocrisy among the high castes who fail to acknowledge the death of a lower caste and have become so corrupt morally, that no holy water can purify them of their evilness. The ending of the story is in stark contrast with its title which means a 'worthy death' but we can see that the ignominy of caste never leaves Dukhi even after his death. Even after dying, he receives no compassion and sympathy due to a human being and is vilified. Irony as a tool was widely used by Premchand in his works and the ending of the story is a brilliant example of one.

Through the portrayal of penury among the characters in *Kafan* and *Sadgati*, Premchand brings into notice an important factor of class and caste being related. It's essential to note how the untouchables in both the stories are poor and how their caste plays an important role in subjugating their financial stability. Both *Kafan* and *Sadgati* strike a note of deep anguish and tragedy. Premchand recognizes that the oppression of dalits was linked to an acceptance of the Varna system and therefore, strikes at its very roots in both the stories. The structures of both the stories provide an eventful illustration of rural life and also highlight the state of merciless exploitation prevalent in the society. Both



the stories, binding through common themes of hunger and burial, are realistic as well as symbolic and raise several questions valid even in contemporary socio-cultural and economic systems. Through stark realism, irony and tragic endings, Premchand shakes the readers of their ennui. His works *Kafan* and *Sadgati* have immensely contributed to the inclusion of margins of the society within the space of literature and have consequently played a pivotal role in the expansion of citizenship through the bringing of narratives which include the dalits. Through the use of aesthetic tact, he brings within the folds of the stories all spheres undergoing manipulation, exploitation and denigration, be it religion, gender, space or humanity. To dismiss the seriousness and authenticity of his work on grounds of him belonging to an upper caste, not only creates a 'reservation' within literature but also hampers the ultimate motive behind such works, which is to aware the masses of the marginalized voices, centuries of tyranny and subsequently demolishment of brahmanical hegemony and Varna system.

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