

The voice of the voiceless in Munshi Premchand's *Karmabhumi*

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Abstract

The prolific writer Munshi Premchand seems to be the most vocal voice of the voiceless, reason being he himself had been a victim of the so called imperial structures of the society ever since his formative years. The base behind this victimization lies in the fact that the age of Premchand was divided into different social structures. If anybody wanted to exist in that society, he had to accept it whole heartedly. But, Premchand, being the whistle-blower of the voiceless sections of the society, was the only person who resigned from his job for writing against those autocratic tendencies of the cross sectional society of the post-colonial India. His own experience of subordination process led him to understand the pain of the voiceless from multiple angles, such as social, economical, political, psychological and religious and gave vent to these aspects of subordination in his fictional works. Premchand has tried his best to project the deprivation of the voiceless sections of the colonial India, not by the colonizers but by feudal India itself. He recasts the fresh originality of the subalterns exposing pretensions and complacencies of dominant, feudal and traditional mores.

Keywords: subaltern, exploitation, untouchable, victim and colonial

Introduction

Munshi Premchand has been regarded to be one of the leading Indian English fiction writers who gave new dimensions to the large corpus of Indian English fiction by introducing the element of realism and social commitment. The emphasis of Premchand in his works has been to highlight the multiple social issues in the contemporary society. He seems to focus on the sensitizing sensibilities of characters. In other words, he was a progressive and prolific interpreter whose objective was not just to project a picture of the pathetic plight of the voiceless people but to highlight a picture of the wide gulf that is yawning between the haves and have-nots of the society. Like Mulk Raj Anand Premchand presents his belief in the Arnoldian dictum of literature 'a criticism of life' and has given more importance to the social significance of literature.

Deep rooted in the socio-political tribulations and influenced by religious prejudices, Premchand's *Karmabhumi* is a psychological analysis of human relationships in the adverse conditions of the human life. Through his characters and their leanings, the novelist brings alive the India of the early decades of the twentieth century through the story of the novel. In fact, the novel conveys an effective social and political message comprising several issues such as Hindu-Muslim unity, shared welfare of these two communities, the non-violent movement of the untouchables, peasants, and the urban poor. The novel also portrays the harmonious existence and an ultimate outburst to the Hindu with the beginning of education. The initiation old education in *Karmabhumi* is a direct satire on the social restrictions of the Hindus and the Muslims. On the surface level this novel seems to be the voice of peasantry movement and shows that these are only peasants who are subjected to marginalization in many ways. But, when it is delved in depth, this coveted work flows like a great campaign including all sorts of people who are marginalized by each other in one way or the other. Not only farmers but the untouchables, women, teachers, merchants,

landlords, labourers and even students are not able to raise their voice against the adverse conditions of their life. According to Premchand, nobody is voiceless but made. Therefore, this novel is not only the story of the voiceless people from a single angle of life but from different perspectives such as economic, social, political, religious and psychological conflicts of a particular social setup. All these social strands explore the complexities of the Indian society from multiple perspectives. In other words, as the title of the novel suggests, *Karmabhumi* is a picture of contemporary society projecting human life in action.

Right from the beginning of the novel, there seems much of economic exploitation which is considered an underlying aspect of subordination. Premchand had experienced all sorts of economic subordination and that is why *Karmabhumi* shows no exception in this respect. It portrays the pathetic plight of almost all the characters of the novel from the lower class to the upper class. Premchand highlights the negative aspects of the British monetary system over the Indian sensibility in this novel. With this, he attacks the crucial process of western education which is only based on the idea of 'business is business'. In this crucial process of education, one seems to pay one's everything in order to get education. Nobody is free from the clutches of the cruel monetary system of British educational institutions. Even, Amarkant the protagonist of the novel has to run away from the school, due to lack of money to be paid in the form of school fee. This money is not collected to educate students, but to humiliate them and to continue the cruel system of the British Raj over the voiceless sections of the society. So, all the students are the subordinates to British Education system who want to join schools but due to the lack of money, they are compelled to leave their schools. Lala Samarkant is a self-made person who tries to make money in business by any means, fair or foul. The departure of Amarkant from his house serves a turning point in his and it leads him into despair. Finally, due to his own self-introspection, he is able to know the truth behind his

son's struggle for the poor and downtrodden. Besides these, Premchand portrays the sharp differences in the plight of poor farmers and the rich *zamindars*, by projecting the enormous rent and the multiple illegal feudal levies for the feudal lord's peaceful lifestyle. Saloni Kaki, one of the representative peasants of the lower class peasants, seems to be much victimized by the powerful weapon of money. Thus, the differences between haves and the have-nots dominantly present the feudal exploitation perhaps to insist the readers to the most powerful aspect of the economic structure.

Besides condemning the economic subservience, Premchand does not spare the social subservience for its misplaced place in a society. Various social conflicts have been projected throughout *Karmabhumi*. Being a thoughtful writer of human sensibility, Premchand explores these social conflicts by both violent and non violent means because he keenly knew the impediments and problems faced by the Indian people. Premchand believed in the fact that man is able to renovate himself. To him, the personality of man is constructed by the social standards; there is probability of change and transformation by thinking. Premchand himself was in favour of good ideals and ideas in his life. He accepted his literature as a criticism of life and considered his novels as the prose epics of human life, presenting the contradictions of the contemporary society into which urban society was better than that of rural society. Therefore, the social contradictions dominate in *Karmabhumi* from the beginning to the end and almost all the characters of the novel seem to suffer through marginalization arising from the social contradictions. Premchand observed the social issues like a socialist and projected them as an artist, arousing noble emotions of love, kindness, charity and pity among others. That is why, in *Karmabhumi*, the novelist presents the varieties of people including the lower class, the untouchables and even the upper class people, who seem to be the victims of the harsh conditions of the social scenario.

At the onset of the novel, the novelist projects Lala Samarkant to be gripped within the vicious circle of the social conflicts. After the death of his wife, he wants remarry, but his social norms don't allow him to do so. When Sukhada, Amar's wife, gives birth to a boy, Lala Samarkant wants to celebrate this occasion with gusto and fervour, but Amarkant is not in favour of this celebration. Even after the objection of Amarkant, Lala Samarkant celebrates this occasion with the dance of angels because he can't go beyond social customs. Amarkant, the hero of the novel, is also subjected to the social conflicts. When he leaves the home of his father and begins to live at any other place, Sukhada insists on working along with him. But Amarkant thinks it against his social norms. Apart from this, Premchand also projects the issues of untouchability in this novel. Untouchability has been social and cultural practice in India for a long time and also comprises in oppressing, the lower-caste people. The untouchable people were not permitted to enter the temples and the houses of the other people. They had no chance to study. They were not allowed to go to city where no one would care their caste, perhaps. But they were too poor to go to cities. They were known as untouchables from the social point of view. There was no improvement in the conditions of the poor and untouchables. There is an example in this novel where the *Katha* has been going on in the Thakurdwara for a month. Pandit Madhusudan is an expert in the art of reading

katha. Amarkant's family too attends it. Renuka Devi goes to there early in the evening. Vyasji and his whole group of hymns singers are her guests. Naina also attends it. On the contrary, Sukhada is not interested in the *Katha* because the untouchables are not permitted to go there. But it is not only because of this, the low-caste people themselves are involved in bad acts of killing animals and eating them, but they have been separated from the main stream of the society. All this social camouflage Amarkant himself observed in the village near Haridwar, where he has been living for long period after breaking up his relation with Lala Samarkant who wanted to impose his own principles upon him. Amarkant makes an effort to show the people why they have been considered untouchables or low-caste people. Consequently, during the hearing of the trial of Bhikharin, when she is asked to explain herself, she thinks herself to be an underdog before the eyes of the members of her own society. She feels herself so shameful that she consider it a sin to appear before the eyes of the people of her own society. Furthermore, all the children of the hilly district village are voiceless due to the social prejudices. As a matter of fact, Premchand's aim was not to confine any person within the evil clutches of the caste-system or untouchability. Because, they are not natural phenomena, it has been the fate of the disadvantaged sections of the world. All the people of the world have a right to be learned everywhere in the world. Therefore, one should not consider of inferiority in oneself if one stays away from the bad acts. No one is far from them.

Karmabhumi can be analyzed from the political point of view as well because the novel was written during the national movement. In *Karmabhumi* the whole presentation of the novel indicates at the political oppression of Indians; because the people themselves have experienced the dominance of the British Raj. Therefore, the characters of the novel suffer duly because of the atrocities of the British Empire and the discrimination at the hands of the Indians. In other words, characters of *Karmabhumi* are sandwiched because of the duality of these two systems.

Right from the beginning of the novel, Amarkant seems to suffer much through the political conflicts. When he is able to become the member of local Congress committee and starts to participate in its affairs, he grows a proficiency in political affairs through reading the newspapers and current literature. He feels dissatisfied with the British politics, as the novelist describes: "His blood would boil at the injustices of the ruling class against his fellow countrymen. He started to sympathize with organizations that were working toward national betterment" (21). Amarkant's resistance is not only a political propaganda but a revolt to the British Raj, portraying his energies from indigenous sources. On the other hand, Amarkant's 'spinning wheel' is a heightened philosophy to revolt, counter and reject British politics. It had been modeled upon Gandhism after deep thinking and realization of inner consciousness. Furthermore, Premchand has shown the white soldiers as men of the lowest class in England. Their culture cannot be called as something superior which is able to bring out such a degraded progeny to it. These soldiers sympathize with lower class people in India but their British political subservience compels them to suppress Indians.

Prof. Shantikumar himself is not free from the conflicts arising from the British politics. On the other hand, the people of the hilly district village are not able to resist against their

political powers. When Amarkant, is arrested there, people of this village don't come out from their houses in his support.

If the researcher observes *Karmabhumi* in the light of religious canvas, there seems much of religious subordination because dharma, the very word of Hindi, occurs repeatedly in this novel. Dharma has multiple meanings, depending upon the context: religion, duty, code of action, morality, moral principles, obligation and righteousness. But, Premchand campaigned against the false ideas, which had been practiced in the name of dharma. This sort of dharma is not a dharma at all, but only something equal to the subservience which has separated itself from its originality. It proves its own ways with good reasons but having the sense of bad ideals in them. The age of Premchand was an age of social transitions into which religion was also an integral part of this transition. The people were trying to overcome from such kind of religious restriction but still there seems the supremacy of religion over their hearts, because the religious authority becomes a powerful tool in the hands of the rich against the poor. The rich people like Bramhachariji and Lala Samarkant hate the untouchables. They even do not want to see them. They think them to be impure persons. As the novel progresses, these poor people become able to enter the temple and one of them comes forward saying; "We haven't come here to incite a riot, rather we have to have darshan of Thukurji" (79). But, Lala Samarkant, a rigid follower of the traditional values of his religion, pushes that man backward and asks him: "Had your father or grandfather ever come to have a darshan or are you the first brave one?" (179). Next in the same novel, Kalekhan, a fellow prisoner of Amarkant, is beaten up by the jail officer mercilessly and is near at his death. His fellow prisoners make a plan to beat up that officer. But Kalekhan expresses his religious subordination before them in the following words: "Why do you shut the door on my redemption, brother! This life was ruined; do you want to ruin my afterlife as well? Pray to Allah that he is merciful to everyone. Have I not committed enough sins in my life that even after death my leys should be tethered! Yea, Allah, have mercy!"(313). Salim, one of the important character of the novel, even after having the good education is not free from the principles of Muslim dharma.

Not only the lower class people are exploited on their religious grounds, but the upper class people equally suffer through the rigid religious principles. It is only because of the religious subservience that Renuka, the mother in-law of Amarkant, does agree with Lala Samarkant, when he predicts that their grand-son's name would be Renukant. Lala Samarkant also seems to be a voiceless person of his own religion. However, his business is totally different from religion. But when he comes to religion, he seems completely devoted to his religion. In fact, these people want to rise up from such sorts of religious faith, but before their subservience, they seem to be helpless person.

The novel *Karmabhumi* can be analyzed in the light of psychological subordination also. Premchand practices several techniques of psychology in order to analyze the inner consciousness of his characters. Being a famous practitioner of writing novels, Premchand, makes an abundant use of the psychological theories in his works in order to know the root cause of psychological subordination. That is why, almost all the characters of the novel seem to suffer through the mental conflicts. Amarkant, the hero of the novel, is also no

exception in this respect. Sometimes, If he is late to come at home, his wife rebukes him but his psychological subservience compels him to remain silent. Furthermore, when Lala Samarkant asks Amarkant to give up his job of correspondence clerk, he is not ready for that. But, when Sukhada insists him to give up the same job, he feels to be psychologically defeated and gives up that job. It is further observed through the text of the novel that it is only because psychological conflicts, Amarkant finds himself to be caught between Sukhada and Sakina. Towards the end of the novel, Saloni Kaki of the hilly district village seems to suffer through the 'stream of consciousness'. When she is asked to share her land with Amarkant, her psychological conflict doesn't allow her for doing so.

To sum up it can be observed that in *Karmabhumi*, Premchand effectively shows the mirror of the society in general and the complexities of voicelessness in particular. Premchand's appeal is not only a single but also multiple; because dislocation of the Indian society is a heavy effect of subservience which has deprived the voiceless people from their real values. In this way, novelist suggests the means of constructing society a better place to live in harmony for the multiple sections of society without any kind of disparity of caste, creed and class. He also seems to uplift the voiceless people who are away from the main stream of the society in one way or the other. Though the protagonist occupies the central place in the novel, the novel is a symbolic poignant, defining the society as the *bhumi* and the human conduct as *karma*, the field of action which forms the basis of *Karmabhumi*.

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