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Problems of Women's Life in Premchand's Literature

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Abstract

In ancient India, women held a respected place in society. However, as time progressed, socio-cultural practices constrained their autonomy. With the advent of modern education, these barriers began to be questioned. Munshi Premchand, a pioneering literary figure, addressed women's issues in his fiction, providing a realist depiction of their societal struggles – pre-marital, marital, and post-marital. His works such as *Prema*, *Sevasadan*, *Gaban*, and *Godan* serve as profound critiques of dowry, child marriage, character doubt, and gender inequality. Premchand's empathetic vision and reformist zeal advocated equal rights and dignity for women, asserting that societal progress is only possible when both genders walk in harmony.

Keywords: Women, Society, Marriage, Dowry, Premchand, Literature

Introduction

Society is a complex web of relationships where balance is maintained through mutual cooperation. The role of women in maintaining this balance is paramount. However, in the context of Indian society during Premchand's era, this cooperation was marred by gender inequality and patriarchal domination. Premchand critically examined these inequalities and brought to light the suffering endured by women due to traditional ideals and societal norms. His literary works effectively categorize women's problems into three stages: pre-marital, marital, and post-marital issues.

Pre-Marital Issues

In Indian tradition, the birth of a girl was once considered auspicious – symbolic of the divine feminine. Over time, however, societal perceptions shifted. The birth of a girl came to be viewed as burdensome. Premchand portrays this societal decline vividly in his early novels such as *Prema* and *Sevasadan*ⁱ. In these works, he explores how societal judgments impact women's identity and autonomy even before marriage.

For instance, in *Sevasadan*, the protagonist Suman's experiences highlight how pre-marital circumstances and societal pressure influence her futureⁱⁱ. Similarly, *Gaban* presents Jalpa's journey,

ⁱ Premchand, *Prema*, trans. David Rubin (Sahitya Akademi, 1987).

ⁱⁱ Premchand, *Sevasadan*, trans. Snehal Shingavi (Penguin Books, 2005).

reflecting the restrictions and expectations imposed upon women. Premchand's treatment of love is elevated – separating romantic ideals from physical desire – yet he does not shy away from portraying the consequences when social standards collide with human emotion.

Issues in Marital Life

Premchand believed marriage should be a journey of mutual development. Unfortunately, the institution became a ground for systemic injustice during his time. He dissected several marital challenges:

- **Dowry System:** In *Godan*, Premchand explores the financial and emotional burden dowry imposes on familiesⁱⁱⁱ. He reveals the despair of parents, particularly fathers, struggling to marry off daughters under economic strain.
- **Child Marriage:** Although not frequent in his works, *Nirasleela* offers a poignant depiction of child marriage, emphasizing the need for reforms and widow remarriage as a corrective measure^{iv}.
- **Suspicion of Women's Character:** In *Sevasadan*, Suman's character is subjected to unfair scrutiny when she returns late one night. Her husband's reaction, accusing her of impropriety, reflects how societal norms limit a woman's freedom and voice^v.

Through such narratives, Premchand lays bare the emotional and psychological torment women face in marriage. His empathy for their plight and call for introspection resonate throughout his works.

Post-Marital Issues and Divorce

The stigma surrounding divorce in traditional Indian society further complicated women's lives. Premchand advocated that divorce, when necessary, should not be seen as shameful but as a means to restore dignity and freedom to oppressed women. His narratives often hint at the need for compassionate reform, without directly confronting divorce laws due to the constraints of his era.

Conclusion

Premchand's literature stands as a social document that captures the layered challenges women face at different stages of life. Whether as daughters, wives, or widows, they are often victims of regressive practices. His storytelling not only mirrors their suffering but also proposes moral and social reform. According to him, societal progress is only achievable when women are granted equal status and freedom. His works urge for balance—both metaphorically and literally—between the two genders, stressing that societal development requires both wheels to move in harmony.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Premchand, *Godan*, trans. Jai Ratan and P. Lal (Jaico, 2006).

^{iv} Premchand, "Nirasleela," in *Mansarovar*, Vol. 3 (Lokbharti, 1955).

^v Harish Trivedi, "Premchand and Social Realism in Indian Fiction," *Indian Literature* 45, no. 3 (2001)