

POVERTY, DISPARITY AND CASTEISM IN PREMCHAND’S SHORT STORY “THE SHROUD”

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Abstract

The paper investigates the harsh themes of poverty and social inequality in Munshi Premchand’s short story “Kafan” (The Shroud). The study aims to depict how disparity impacted human relations and the intricate fabric of the society, by understanding the characters, socio-economic conditions, and moral conflicts in the story. This paper places Premchand’s kafan into the context of early 20th century India and demonstrates the vibrant landscape of disparity which still thrives in the contemporary world, alongside the thoughts of poverty and casteism.

Keywords: Socioeconomic, shroud, subaltern, gender dynamics, moral conflict, hunger, caste, poverty.

Introduction

Munshi Premchand, a seminal figure and an ardent philosopher, is celebrated for his honest illustration of the struggles and injustices faced by marginalized communities in early 20th-century India. Premchand’s short story Kafan offers a powerful portrayal of poverty and inequality, revealing the harsh conditions faced by the lower classes under colonial rule and feudal oppression. Following the lives of Ghisu and Madhav, belonging from a backward Chamar community, an ‘unholy’ caste of the earlier times, were vividly highlighted by Premchand. They represent the severe trials of poverty and the ethical struggles forced upon them by their dire conditions.

The story entails a poignant tale which showcases the community's constrained bringing and sufferings. As Madhav and Ghisu deal with the death of Budhiya, Madhav's wife, they are confronted with a severe choice; They must decide between their own survival or adhering to the societal norms regarding death and mourning. By opting to feed their stomach's rather than spending the alms money on a shroud for Budhiya, depicts how deeply poverty can shape human relations.

A similar instance even before her death both the protagonists wait for Budhiya to die helplessly, coins the moral dilemma of people living under economic atrocities The tale heavily critiques the socio-economic structure which eternalizes disparity, and also stimulates the psychological effects of such deprivation, confiding under hunger and desperation.

Literature Review

Various scholars have collected their thoughts, in regard to the topics of poverty and disparity, of the story, "Kafan". Their major focal point has been understanding Premchand's thoughts towards the backward community and their social and economic lifestyle. Pundits like Donatella Dolcini elucidate about the role of hunger and how it influenced Ghisu and Madhav to behave against the morale and spiritual aspects of the society. (Dolcini, 2018, pp. 271–277).

The gluttony displayed by the characters in the face of death reveals the absurd nature of their situation. It shows how their urgent need for food outweighs any sense of moral obligation. The impact of poverty in Premchand's penned ideas, specifically in the short story "kafan", was vigorously highlighted in Deshpande's study, the disproportionate weight of poverty in the Indian household, which spreads across class, creed and caste. Meanwhile, Dalit literature has become an emerging tool for expressing the tormenting situations of long-silenced discrimination, poverty and the hunt of social upbringing and dignity. (Bama, 2012).

In addition, the subaltern resistance and manipulation tactics of the hegemonic system in "kafan" against the need of survival are expressed by Chaithanya, while exploring the hardships of the backward classes with a humorous undertone. (Chaithanya, 2019, pp. 266–270). The change of tone provides an amalgam of humour and seriousness amongst battling the tragic situations faced by the characters and their resilience in the face of adversity.

Munshi Premchand's works, along with "Kafan", have been evaluated through several literary theories, including Marxist and feminist perspectives. In his study of Premchand's narratives, Dr. Brijesh Kumar discussed the theme of structural violence. He reveals how socio-cultural norms confine marginalized individuals, with women being particularly affected. (Kumar, 2022).

In the context of "Kafan", the analysis imposes relevancy towards Budhiya's role which embodies the unspoken pain beside a woman's life, particularly in a patriarchal society. Shailendra Kumar Singh's research of nationalism and civil resistance in Premchand's works further depicts the socio-political map of colonial India, illustrating how poverty and societal injustices are connected within the broader themes of resistance to identity. (Singh, 2019, pp. 171–194). The intersection of these themes adds depth to our reading of Kafan. It critiques the socio-economic structures that maintain cycles of poverty and disparity.

Analysis of Poverty and Disparity in "The Shroud"

Socio-Economic Context

The story is staged around the period of colonized India, where inequalities within the communities were at their peak. Ghisu and Madhav belonged to the same depressed class, namely the Chamar community, which are subjugated and differentiated by systemic discrimination. The struggles of lower-caste communities, especially their economic exploitation is emblematic as their desperate lives.

The zamindar's indifference to their struggles paints a clear picture of the class divides that dictate their existence. The writer's portrayal of zamindar as an authoritative and pride figure showcases the power dynamics of the story. His casual dismissal of Ghisu and Madhav's plight reflected a broader indifference faced by the poor on daily basis. It does not merely reveals character disorientation's but a vast in-rooted ideology of barriers inherited by the people of that time. Zamindar and the other upper class locals were separated from the harsh reality of the poor in such a way that the recovery seems a broader issue, with a societal hierarchy of unchanged mind.

Moral Dilemmas

Understanding the moral conflicts faced by our protagonists, to know how the narrative critiques poverty. Ghisu and Madhav's drive towards hunger while neglecting human

obligations displays the depriving effects of poverty. Ignoring to purchase a shroud for a family member and using the same amount to fill their stomachs questions the lifeless condition of poverty ridden people, and their need of survival. It points a direct finger towards systemic injustices and outclass norms, which confronts certain individuals under grueling dilemmas. They are the one suffering due to the society's failure, who could've helped the inferiors to a larger extent.

In the ending, where Ghisu and Madhav enjoys their time of relief from temporary desires, choosing to ignore the loss of a family member, serves as a powerful commentary of dehumanizing conditions. It demonstrates how extreme poverty can break moral values and force individuals to choose against the social norms. Premchand has always used character's with moral vagueness and odd behaviors, where they are caught in a web of socio-economic problems that make them choose un-ethical lives.

Gender Dynamics

"Kafan" by Premchand has explored gender dynamics which complicate the analysis of poverty and inequality. Women were sidelined from the narrative, starking deep irony towards their role in the earlier time period, it is brightly portrayed by Budhiya's character. She was often overlooked as her life was not considered to be a living soul. The way her life ends depicts lifelong abuse and indifference faced by women, whose struggles are often sidelined in male-focused narratives.

Budhiya was shown as a mere shadow, driven by the narrative of male character flaws, which eventually marginalized Budhiya. She was cast aside as a passive victim, with the author drawing attention to the lack of independence women have in a male-dominated society. Budhiya's death is not just a personal tragedy but a collective failure of the society to which she belonged, one that witnessed her suffering and plight without taking action. Gender dynamics, along with social and economic disparity, demonstrated the male character's focus on themselves and their failure to recognize Budhiya's pain, reveals the reality of gender roles and socio-economic system.

Thematic Exploration of Hunger

Premchand has used Hunger as the central theme of 'Kafan', deeply exploring its physical and metaphorical aspects. The character's gluttony in front of adversity contrasts against their absurd situation, where the need of fulfilling hunger overrides any moral responsibility. This theme stands parallel with contemporary studies concerning food security and moral ethics of the society. Author's narrative of hunger drives a character's traits and flaws, influenced by the socio-economic conditions, further revealing the complexities of human existence within a poised society.

In Premchand's work, hunger isn't just about the need for food—it also speaks to a deeper revival of dignity, respect, and social relationships and Madhav's neglect of moral responsibilities to satisfy their immediate cravings was a result of a harsh and unbearable environment. This showcase of hunger as a vital compound in controlling human behaviour openly display the ways in which socio-economic conditions can influence a character's choices and moral attributes

Contemporary Relevance

In our contemporary era, the themes of poverty and disparity remains highly relevant, as economic hardships continue to affect a large portion of society. Premchand's plot highlights the dilemmas of poverty and moral attitude caused by systemic injustices. In the current times, where financial disparities are often disposed by globalization and neoliberalism, fuels debates on social justice and the pressing need for a structural reform.

The abysmal situations in the life of Ghisa and Madhav can be easily related with contemporary moral conversations around poverty and social awareness. Furthermore, the decisions and actions of characters demonstrate a broader societal pattern of prioritizing immediate needs over ethical concerns, a theme that remains alive in the current socio-economic landscape. This exploration of hunger and desperation in the narrative brings a strong reminder to the world's eyes, of the human toll facing economic disparity and the importance of emphasizing in tackling such issues.

Conclusion

Premchand's "Kafan" provides powerful insights into poverty and disparity, focusing on moral obstructions faced by individuals in a context of financial deprivation. The characters of Ghisu

and Madhav allow the narrative, which shows how poverty strips away humanity, the complex nature of gender, and the recurring theme of hunger. By situating "Kafan" within the broader socio-economic landscape of early 20th-century India, this paper underscores the enduring relevance of Premchand's work in contemporary discussions on social justice and economic inequality.

By placing "Kafan" alongside the widespread socio-economic landscape of colonized India, this paper reveals the perennial relevance of Premchand's work in modern times, disclosing keen topics of social justice and economic hardships. It not only reveals the situation of the marginalized but raises questions towards addressing these systemic injustices which constantly influence poverty and indifference in the world.

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