



**Dalit Women in Premchand's *Godan*: Victims of the Patriarchal and
Brahminical Values of Indian Society**

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Abstract:

Munshi Premchand (1880-1936) was the most celebrated and progressive writer of modern Hindi and Urdu literature who wrote nearly 300 short stories, more than dozen novels, several essays, plays and translations of a number of foreign literary works into Hindi. Even before the term 'Dalit Literature' came in vogue in 1958, Premchand poignantly presented the agony of exclusion, discrimination and exploitation faced by Dalits in his works. His last novel 'Godan'(1936) meaning "The Gift of a Cow" is a novel of peasant India that depicts the trials and travails of farmers during the British rule. The women characters of the novel -Dhania, Jhunia and Selia are the victims of the patriarchal and brahminical values prevalent in the Indian society during this period.

The present paper centres on highlighting the appalling condition of Dalit women of rural India as described in the novel 'Godan'. The women are forced to bear the sexual and domestic

violence by men, that leaves them shattered, both physically and mentally. The focus is on the fact that during the times of crisis, these women stand tall and prove their mettle by successfully handling even the most complex of the situations.

Key words: Godan, dalit, Gobar, dhoti, Thakurs, Panditji, dharmā.

Introduction

Godan (1936), Premchand's landmark novel of Hindi literature, describes the story of a poor farmer named Hori who has a strong desire to buy a cow. He is forty years old and owns three bighas of land but he is constantly in debt to various moneylenders of the village. He lives in a small, poverty-ridden village called Belari in Avadh, Uttar Pradesh with his wife Dhanīa, son Gobardhan and two young daughters Sona and Rupa. He lives pretty much a hand-to-mouth existence. Through rather some impulsive promises, Hori acquires a cow from a villager called Bholā. It appears as if things would go well. But difficulties come in troops one after the other. Hori incessantly struggles throughout his life to clear all his multiplying debts but sinks deeper and deeper into it and ultimately meets his death due to overwork.

The Dalit women characters of the novel – Dhanīa, Jhunīa and Selīa, suffer sexual oppression, economic exploitation and socio-cultural subjugation due to unequal gender relations. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak in her essay '*Can the Subaltern Speak?*' brings forward a series of questions regarding representation, resistance, cultural subjugation of the perspectives of the marginalized, exploited and the oppressed. She says that "*The Subaltern cannot speak*". Dalit women suffer from physical and verbal abuse by their husbands, lovers or upper caste men.

They are dishonoured publicly, kept unpaid in the economic sphere and are harassed sexually. Brutal patriarchy is a major issue discussed repeatedly in Dalit feminist discourses. In *Godan*, Dalit woman called Selia is molested and raped by the upper caste Brahmin Matadin who treats her cruelly and throws her away from his house when she is pregnant and carrying his baby. It is observed that Premchand's women are the victims of society based on unjust class discrimination. They suffer humiliation, deprivation and isolation by virtue of gender. They face dual oppression: firstly being Dalit and secondly being women. Being Dalit, they suffer due to unequal caste distinctions and being a woman, they are victimized by the patriarchal social order both in their homes and in the outside world. Therefore they are alienated at three levels - caste, class and gender positions which makes the violence against them unbridled.

Dhania

Dhania is a devoted wife of the protagonist Hori, an uprighteous and God fearing man living in Belari village in Uttar Pradesh. She is thirty six years old, mother of one son, Gobar, sixteen years old and two daughters, Sona, aged twelve and Rupa, eight. Due to excessive work at home and at field, Dhania grows more her age.

“Her hair had already turned grey and her face was creased with wrinkles. Her youthful body had declined, the glow of her swarthy complexion had turned sallow and her eye-sight dim. All because of the canker of poverty”. (2)

She is a practical woman. During the twenty years of her married life, she fully understands that even if she lives a miserable life, it is impossible to liquidate the debt of the Zamindar. Therefore she does not like her husband Hori to play sycophant and touch the Zamindar's feet. On this matter, she always has differences with her husband. *“Her mind would often rebel against such a state of affairs. But a few scoldings from her husband would jolt her back into reality”*. (2)

When Hori's brother Heera poisons her cow causing its death, she is shocked as she had "*brought him [Heera] up from childhood like a mother.*"(89) She decides to teach him a lesson. But Hori starts beating her as he does not want the matter to reach the police. Every time Dhaniam abuses Hori, he hurls a few more blows at her. The villagers come to patch up the quarrel but stay away to watch the fun. Pandit Datadin, the self-appointed veterinary of the village rebukes Hori, "*Beating the Lakshmi of the house like this! Has Heera's shadow fallen on you also*"? Hori angrily replies, "*I won't rest till I set her right. The more I overlook her faults, the more she gets*". Dhaniam says with tearful eyes, "*I have ruined my whole life for his sake, and this is how he rewards me now.*"(90) Hori wants to save his brother from punishment but Dhaniam informs the police that Heera killed the cow. Hori bribes the inspector and stops the search of Heera's house. Dhaniam again objects; Hori's eyes blaze with anger and he catches hold of her hand to beat her. But Gobar steps between them and angrily asks his father to stand back. Dhaniam boldly says,

"He [Hori] feels dishonoured when they want to search his brother's house. But he feels no shame in beating his own wife before the whole village. Is this the behaviour of an honourable man?" (95)

Dhaniam stands by what she thinks is correct and her *dharma*, rather than the traditional principles of the community. She raises her voice against injustice done to her family, much against the wishes of her husband Hori. She even gets the beating from him but does not remain silent against injustice. The public beating of Dhaniam strains the relationship of Hori and Dhaniam. Even Gobar is annoyed and starts avoiding his father. After a few days, Hori falls prey to Malaria and gets bedridden for a month. The fever leaves him pale and limp. Dhaniam's heart softens; she begins nursing him. When he gets a little better, he admits that "*I was not in my senses. You can't imagine the pain I felt afterwards.*" (99) The sincerity of Dhaniam overwhelms Hori; he confesses,

"I am sorry for having beaten you, Dhania. Now you beat me, and we'll be quits". (100) Dhania is so kind hearted that she forgives Hori. In spite of being ill-treated and beaten by her husband in front of village people, she takes good care of him. Whenever he faces any problem, she always stands by his side and boosts his morale.

Though criticized by the villagers for being sharp-tongued, Dhania continues to stand up for women's rights. Her acceptance of the low caste pregnant Jhunias as her daughter-in-law anticipates the decisive role of an emancipated peasant woman in the construction of a casteless society. She knowingly accepts Jhunias into her household, a low caste girl, as her daughter-in-law. She does not blame only Jhunias for placing them in an embarrassing position. She knows that her son, Gobar, is equally responsible. She is a kind and loving mother and sacrifices much for the sake of her children.

Dhania helps all the women in distress. She willingly accommodates and shelters the pregnant Selia, the cobbler's daughter whom Matadin, a Brahmin has driven away from his house after impregnating her. She publicly holds Matadin culpable for his misdeeds against Selia. She is distressed by the asymmetry that underlies the social positions of both sexes. In her view, *"all men are alike."*

Dhania throws light on patriarchal prejudice that views woman's resistance to violence as an act in negativity. She refuses to hand over her hard-earned money and grain as a form of charity to the village officials. But she also refuses to marry her eldest daughter Sona without providing her with dowry. According to her, *"money comes and goes but prestige lasts"* (247)

Dhania's worries cease to end. The burden of debt keeps increasing day by day. Her husband Hori is forced to work more and more to settle down all the debts. But his physical energy starts

declining. He collapses due to over work. He gazes at Dhania and tears roll down from the corners of his eyes. He asks for Dhania's forgiveness, "*Forgive me, Dhania, if I've wronged you in any way. I'm ready to depart. I have no cow. Don't weep, Dhania. The worst is over. Let me die.*" (338) Dhania brings twenty annas which she had earned from the sale of yarn and gives to the Brahmin Dattadin in place of a cow. She keeps struggling till the end. She proves herself to be an emblem of devotion, sacrifice, tolerance, love and patience.

Jhunia

Jhunia is the widowed daughter of a cowherd Bhola living in Belari's neighbouring village Semari. Hori's son Gobar develops a relationship with Jhunia during his visits to Bhola's house to negotiate the sale of the cow. He is fascinated to see -

"Her lips, large and full; her cheeks well rounded, eyes small and deep-set the forehead narrow. But the full-blown grace of her bosom and resilient softness of her body gave her a seductive charm; her rose sari had an uneasy time concealing her youthfulness". (21)

He promises to remain faithful to her till the end of his life. Jhunia shares with Gobar her experiences with various "respectable" people of the village. Every day she carries milk to the market where she meets a variety of people like clerks, officers, lawyers, Thakurs, money-lenders who offer love to her. They stare at her with passion and pretend to be in deep love with her. Some of them even tempt her with money and jewels. Jhunia narrates the incident of Panditji who anoints his forehead with sandal paste but makes advancements towards her in the absence of his wife. He says, "*Jhunia my queen, Day after day you ran away carving my heart with your beauty. But today I have you*". (40) He falls at Jhunia's feet and whines:

"Have a little pity on the poor too. What will you reply when God asks; I gave you so much beauty and you didn't even look kindly at a Brahmin. Speak up, I am a Brahmin, thirsting for a word from your lips. I get money in alms every day. It's your beauty's alms that I crave for today." (40)

Jhunia hurls the pitcher containing milk at his face. He sits down, drenched in milk, badly hurt and groaning in pain. The incident proves the hypocrisy, corruption and degradation of moral

values prevalent in the society. Jhunias character also reveals the violence meted out to widows in a caste-driven society. Being a young widow, she is compelled to resist the lascivious behaviour from male folk in her village.

Gobar impregnates her, but instead of taking responsibility of her and their unborn child, he abandons five month pregnant Jhunias near his fathers hut and flees to the city. A pregnant and unmarried Jhunias is disowned by her relatives and is forced to seek shelter with Horis family. Her character is thoroughly maligned by the orthodox villagers who impose a heavy fine of Rs. 100 on Hori for providing support to a promiscuous woman. Thakur Jhenguri Singh, a man of forty five who married thrice, proclaims, *“A girl like Jhunias should have her head severed!”* He further says that, *“By giving her asylum Hori has poisoned the well-springs of society”*. (108) The Panchayat announces fine of Rs. 100 in cash and thirty maunds of grain in kind to be paid by Hori.

Jhunias gives birth to a son. She is thankful to her in-laws for providing her all the support. She tries to adjust herself in the family and behaves submissively so as not to provoke Dhania who is buried under a heap of problems. After two years, Gobar returns to Belari to convince Jhunias to elope with him along with their two year old son named Lallu. Initially full of enthusiasm for going to the city, Jhunias dreams of happiness shatter within a very short time. While staying in the city, Jhunias realizes that the *“romantic picture of city life”* presented by Gobar is actually a *“dismal dungeon.”* She is annoyed at being *“cooped up”* with their son inside their small house every day (261). She has no one to converse with except her husband who shows no interest in her besides maintaining sexual relations. Jhunias begins to suspect that Gobar does not regard her any better than a *“keep”*. Tortured mentally, she gets irritated by Lallus cries; beats him up and turns him out of the house for hours. The poor child wails miserably.

While Jhunia is finding difficult to manage her son Lallu, she realizes that she is again pregnant and expecting another baby. There is no one to look after her; she suffers from frequent headaches and lost appetite. In spite of such testing condition, Gobar continually makes physical demands on her. During the rainy season, Lallu falls sick; starts suffering from diarrhoea and within a week, dies. After Lallu's death, Jhunia is over-whelmed by a wave of guilt, stress and depression. *"His memory was now dearer to her than Lallu himself. Alive he had been more a source of annoyance than solace."*(262) Gobar turns to alcohol to drown his bodily fatigue and mental trauma from his pathetic socio-economic condition. He labels Jhunia as an *"ill-omened woman"* responsible for all his monetary problems (264). Gobar returns home late in the night boozed, abuses Jhunia on any crazy pretext, threatens to turn her out of the house and beat her. Her experience of domestic violence makes her withdraw into herself and behave, *"outwardly, no more than an automaton"* (262). She almost loses her life in child birth owing to neglect, and the abuse which Gobar metes out to her throughout her second pregnancy.

However, a marked change comes over Gobar when he is badly injured during a workers' strike. Jhunia's heart melts. She breaks down and tears starts gushing from her eyes. Gobar asks for forgiveness and admits his faults, *"Jhunia, I am dying. Forgive me. God has punished me. I treated you badly"*. He passes three days in delirium. He realizes that he has narrowly escaped death.

Jhunia steps outside her home to earn a living so as to give him Gobar ample time to regain his health and find new employment. She begins to derive the same pleasure in her work that *"a baby gets when he suddenly finds he can stand on his legs"* (271). Her decision to seek employment plays a key role in her realization that her entity constitutes more than being viewed as a sexual body by Gobar. He resolves to transform his nature *"to let humility take the place of pride and loving kindness"*

the place of rancour". (271) The realization and the respect accorded by Gobar to Jhunia highlights the feminist notion of the novel.

Selia

Selia is a lower caste woman of cobbler community residing in a village Belari. She is *"a slim, cute bundle, though not exactly a good looker, had charming laughter: her indolent sway of the body indicated a passionately cheerful disposition."*(233) She is a lowly, unpaid worker employed by a Brahmin Datadin who owns ten bighas of land. She does the work equal to that of three men but is provided with nothing more than two meals a day. She is also sexually exploited by Datadin's son Matadin who cunningly *"sworn by the sacred thread round his neck that he would always treat her as a legally wedded wife"*. (234) Even Datadin does not raise any objection till Matadin keeps the entire matter a secret. He opines that it is not sinful for a Brahmin man to indulge in sexual relations with a lower caste woman till she remains away from the kitchen of a Brahmin household.

She remembers how two years back Matadin used to chase her passionately in the fields and at the river bank, but now the same man is humiliating her publicly. When Selia's family members witness Selia's insult, they express their strong displeasure and get angered at the flagrant exploitation of her by Matadin and his father Datadin. Selia's mother shouts at her, *"If you are a keep of a Brahmin, live like a Brahmin! After bringing a bad name to our cobbler's community, what was the idea of still remaining a cobbler? Go and drown yourself for shame!"* (235) Her mother asks Matadin, *"You'll sleep with a cobbler girl, but you won't touch the food by her. It's this shameless girl that suffers all this in silence; anyone else in her place would have poisoned all of you long ago"*. (235) But Matadin rejects Selia publicly and calls her an evil.

Her father Harkhu , an old man of sixty retorts, “*If you can’t make us Brahmins we can make you cobblers*”. (235) Two cobblers thrust a big piece of bone into Matadin’s mouth, thereby blemishing his *dharma*. That piece of bone not only pollutes his mouth but also his soul. He would henceforth be considered an untouchable in the house. Selia, on the other hand is hopeful that Matadin would accept her in his life. In spite of cruel beating and kicking by her mother, she refuses to go with her family members and prefers death to becoming someone else’s woman. The helpless Selia is given refuge by Dhania in her own house. Dhania proclaims her anger and asks Hori why Matadin did not think of all this before, “*First have fun with the girl and then dump her!*” (239) The pregnant Selia gives birth to an illegitimate son. She decides to survive on her own by working in the field.

Matadin undergoes various rituals such as going on pilgrimages, and eating cow dung for purification purposes (319). Yet the upper caste community, driven by rigid ideologies, refuses to involve him in any of their religious activities. He ultimately unites with Selia but only after experiencing the rejection from the Brahmin community. He realizes the impact of the violence he inflicted on Selia only after being shunned and victimized by his own community. After some time, Selia’s son Ramu dies of pneumonia. Matadin is highly moved and he openly expresses his grief and asks forgiveness from Selia. He admits that his son’s death “*was a punishment of my sins.*” (321) He tells her that as long as he is alive, he shall live with her and worship her. When asked who would cook for him, Matadin replies that he would eat the food cooked by her. He declares, “*I want to be a cobbler, not a Brahmin. All those who fulfil their dharma are Brahmins, all those who violate their dharma are cobblers*”. (323)

Conclusion

The study of *Godan* lays bare the violence that underlines the social codes, rules and regulations formulated on the basis of ideological viewpoint of the ruling class and caste. The victimization of the individuals at the hands of powerful, oppressive social institutions form the basis of the novel. It shows the peripheral situation of women caught in the traps of poverty, feminine ideals and humiliating social practices.

The position of a woman in village patriarchies—Brahminical or feudal is still governed by defining parameters of caste, class, gender and religion. It is difficult to change the state of women unless a modification in the patriarchal attitude of the society is brought. The time is ripe when one considers woman as equal to man; impart her dignity; appreciate her abilities and accord the honour due to her. Only then it is possible that the woman can be called empowered in the true sense of the term.

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