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Agrarian Misfortunes in Premchand's *Godan*



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ABSTRACT

Literature serves as a reflection of society by drawing inspiration from various aspects of human life, such as persons, places, and events. Among the diverse genres, drama holds significant popularity, with movies being an evolved form of dramatic expression. Bollywood, in particular, often adapts novels and plays into cinematic narratives, showcasing different facets of Indian life. Rabindranath Tagore stands out as a prominent figure in Indian English literature, known for translating his Bengali works into English. In Hindi literature and its translated English counterparts, Munshi Premchand holds a preeminent position. He is considered to be the great creator of the lives of peasants, reflecting his keen nationalistic concerns. Premchand's works portray the struggles and hardships faced by marginalized groups like Dalits, women, and farmers, underscoring the need for

societal harmony for resolving national issues. During Premchand's era, farmers endured dire circumstances, caught between British colonialism and oppressive landlords, often losing their hard-earned income. Premchand, in his writings like *Hatbhage Kisan* from December 1932, highlighted that farming was the livelihood of a significant portion of India's populace. His novels, including *Godan*, have been adapted into English and featured in Bollywood films like *Godaan* (1963), *Gaban* (1966), *Shatranj Ke Khilari* (1977), *Sadgati* (1981), and *Heera Moti* (1959), showcasing the enduring relevance of his narratives. This paper aims to focus on the Agricultural misfortunes in the novel *Godan* written by Munshi Premchand.

KEY WORDS

Agrarian community, exploitation, tradition, sacrifice, land, nature, poverty, novel, film, misfortunes of Indian Farmer etc.



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RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction:

Human beings are the part of society. Human cannot live without society. It is said that literature is the true reflection of society. The writer is considered as the keen observer of society who observes people, incidents and places of the society as an object of writing. The special feature of Munshi Premchand's writing is that he observed the incidents of contemporary Indian society, especially on the life of farmers of India and their living in rural area during the British rules. Born in an era marked by socio-religious orthodoxy, Premchand was deeply impacted by these norms. When he started the journey of his fiction, he pledged to liberate the society which is suffering from many types of orthodoxy with the weapons of art as much as possible, declaring his independence from restrictive stereotypes and bonds.

Godan is the best example of it which is published in the year 1936. It is called as immortal novel because in this novel Munshi Premchand has highlighted many aspects of poor farmer life that were living in rural area during British rule. He focuses on many social issues of Indian contemporary society such as exploitation, Untouchability, poverty, hunger, illiteracy etc. He has beautifully highlighted the helplessness of a poor farmer. There are two parallel stories in *Godan* through which Premchand maintains a balance while addressing social, economic, and political concerns of the time. *Godan* vividly exposes the exploitation endured by farmers at the hands of British colonizers and local landlords during that era. It portrays the grim realities of agricultural life, characterized by extreme poverty, relentless exploitation, and chronic hunger. The novel serves as a powerful commentary on the harsh socio-economic conditions prevalent during British rule in India. During that time, agricultural life had several characteristics:

- a. Farmers were extremely impoverished.
- b. They felt powerless and unable to change their situation.



- c. There was a lack of support or assistance available to them.
- d. Poor farmers were forced to bear the tyranny of the British rule.
- e. *Godan* depicts a tale of severe poverty, relentless exploitation, and hunger during that period.

Summary of the Novel:

The novel *Godan*, which means “the gift of a cow,” centres around themes of love, beauty, hatred, family dynamics, financial struggles, and the harsh realities of agrarian life. The protagonist, Hori, dreams of improving his circumstances but faces numerous tragic events, ultimately leading to his death. His family, unable to afford the traditional Godan offering for his soul's peace, reflects the ongoing hardships faced by rural Indian farmers. Several tragic incidents of contemporary Indian farmers are portrayed by Munshi Premchand in his novel *Godan*, few of them are given below:

Hori - Tragic Agrarian Hero of The Novel:

Hori, the tragic agrarian hero of the novel, is introduced as a poor farmer with a family consisting of his wife Dhaniam, son Gobar, and two daughters named Rupa and Sona. At the beginning of the story, Hori is summoned by the landlord, Rai Shaib, who asks him to convey a message to other farmers about contributing Rs. 500 for an upcoming event. This request puts Hori in a difficult position, causing him extreme anxiety about how to manage the money. Despite his family's open opposition to the demand, Hori chooses to remain quiet, realizing the futility of resisting the powerful landlord, likening it to not being able to fight a crocodile while in the water.

Bhola:

In Munshi Premchand's novel *Godan*, two farmer families are depicted: one is the protagonist Hori's family, and the other is Bhola's family. Bhola, a kind-hearted and noble man belonging to a lower caste, is around 50 years old and earns a living through milk and cow farming. His wife has passed away, and he is considering a second marriage. Bhola has three children: two sons and a daughter named Jhuniam, who unfortunately is a widow.



Hori's scheme to Trick Bhola:

The close friendship of Hori and Bhola becomes closer due to Hori's plan to trick Bhola by virtue of clever policy. He plans to trick Bhola on his desire of getting remarried and fulfil self-desire of cow in his own house.

The Love Affair of Jhunia and Gobar:

The growing bond between Bhola and Hori is also fuelled by the love affair between Jhunia and Gobar. During a visit to Bhola's house to acquire a cow, Gobar and Jhunia develop feelings for each other. Despite Hori and Dhania disapproving of their relationship, Gobar brings Jhunia to their home. Gobar, not supportive of the landlord, decides to go to Lucknow to earn money for his family. However, this decision leads to trouble for Hori, as he is held responsible for Gobar's actions and has to pay a fine of Rs. 100 to the village community. With financial troubles already looming over him, Hori finds himself in a difficult situation due to Gobar's actions.

Hori's Dream of Cow:

Hori made a promise to Bhola, assuring him that he would assist in fulfilling Bhola's desire to remarry. However, instead of pursuing Bhola's marital aspirations, Bhola offered Hori a cow as a gesture of gratitude. Overjoyed by this unexpected gift, Hori and his family welcomed the cow into their lives with great excitement and hope. The presence of the cow brought a sense of prosperity and fulfilment to Hori's household, symbolizing a dream realized.

Unfortunately, this newfound happiness was short-lived, marred by the envy and resentment of Hori's brother and his family. Their jealousy over Hori's possession of the cow turned into a matter of contention within the community, fuelling animosity and rivalry. This escalating tension culminated in a heated altercation between Dhania, Hori's wife, and Heera, Hori's brother, resulting in a malicious act of poisoning the cow. This malicious deed not only destroyed Hori's cherished dream of owning a cow but also brought immense sorrow and upheaval to his entire life and family.

The incident serves as a poignant reminder of the fragile nature of dreams and the destructive impact of jealousy and animosity within close-knit communities. It



reflects the harsh realities faced by individuals like Hori, whose aspirations are often thwarted by external conflicts and internal strife, leading to profound despair and disillusionment.

Hori encountered a multitude of serious problems that eventually led to his demise. These major challenges included:

- Financial Struggles: Hori faced financial hardship and lacked sufficient money.
- Son's Departure: His only son, Gobar, left for Lucknow.
- Fine Imposed: Hori was fined Rs. 100 by the village community for bringing Jhunia home and Gobar's actions.
- Contribution Demand: The Zamindar demanded a contribution of Rs. 500 for a future program.
- Pressure from Bhola: Bhola pressured Hori to pay for the cow.
- Loss of Livestock: Bhola took away Hori's two bullocks in exchange for the poisoned cow.
- Forced Labor: Hori was compelled to work on road construction.
- Caste Segregation: Hori faced challenges due to caste segregation.
- Exploitation of Lower Castes: The novel depicts the exploitation of lower castes by upper castes, highlighting hierarchical structures in India's caste system.
- Peasant Exploitation: The story realistically portrays poor peasants being exploited by the village Zamindar and greedy moneylenders.
- Revenue Collection: The Zamindars collected revenue and imposed fines.
- Cow Poisoning: The cow was poisoned due to jealousy.
- Exploitation of Women: Women like Dhania, Jhunia, Seliya, and Roopa are portrayed as victims of exploitation.
- Urban Migration: Youngsters migrated to cities due to exploitation by village moneylenders.
- Struggle for Independence: The narrative reflects the fight for liberation from colonial rule in the country.



Plot:

Understanding the historical context of India during the period depicted in *Godan* is crucial before delving into the novel. The protagonist, Hori, embodies the struggles and anguish of the era, particularly the challenges faced by farmers under colonial rule and the Mahajani system, leading to conflicts and enmities. Hori's unfulfilled desire for a cow symbolizes the continuous exploitation experienced by the peasant class.

Godan narrates Hori's lifelong hardships and his relentless pursuit to maintain his dignity amidst adversity. Despite his efforts to keep others happy, he ultimately sacrifices his dignity, leading to a life of spiritual contemplation. Hori's story mirrors the experiences of countless Indian farmers during that period, capturing the essence of their struggle for survival.

The novel skilfully intertwines rural and urban narratives, presenting a realistic portrayal of both settings. Premchand's storytelling prowess shines through in the seamless organization of these dual narratives, maintaining a consistent flow throughout the narrative. This ability to blend contrasting stories is a hallmark of Premchand's writing style.

The Rituals and Social Traditions of India:

The novel's title, *Godan*, is deeply rooted in the ritual and social traditions of India. Godan refers to the Hindu ritual where a cow is gifted to a Brahmin after someone's death, believed to bring peace to the deceased's soul. Hori, the protagonist of the novel, harboured a lifelong desire to own a cow, a symbol of prosperity and fulfilment in his life. However, despite his friend offering him a cow on credit, Hori's dream remained unfulfilled until his death.

Tragically, Hori and his family's joy from owning the cow was short-lived as it was soon killed, revealing a dark truth. The cow's murder was orchestrated by Hori's own brother, who poisoned the cow, leading to devastation and loss for Hori and his family. This event serves as a stark reflection of the complexities and challenges within familial and societal dynamics portrayed in the novel.



Hori's Tragic Fate as an Indian Farmer:

Hori's life embodies the struggles of Indian farmers, culminating in his untimely death. Following his passing, according to the customs of contemporary Indian society, Hori's wife, Dhania, was expected to donate a cow to the priest as a charitable act known as "Godan," aimed at bringing peace to Hori's soul. However, Dhania lacked the means to afford a cow and could only offer 1 rupee 25 paise for her husband's funeral rites, highlighting the significance of the Godan ritual.

Premchand's novel *Godan* encompasses a wide range of themes, including satire, humour, anguish, rebellion, and social commentary. While some critics find the novel unsettling due to its dramatic plot shifts and apparent lack of control, a closer examination reveals the author's adept storytelling skills. Through meticulous attention to detail, psychological depth, and eloquent language, Premchand skilfully conveys the complexities of Indian rural life and the challenges faced by farmers.

In *Godan*, Premchand also reflects his disillusionment with Gandhian ideals, opting instead for a more realistic portrayal of societal issues. The novel has been praised by many as an epic work that captures the essence of the era and sheds light on the plight of farmers during Premchand's time. Through characters like Bhola, who questions the very essence of humanity in the face of adversity, and through vivid descriptions of the agricultural landscape, Premchand paints a poignant picture of the struggles and aspirations of Indian farmers.

Farmers' Development and Livelihoods in the Indian Context:

Premchand strongly advocated for the development and well-being of farmers and workers, believing it to be crucial for the nation's progress. He expressed deep sorrow over the fact that a small fraction of the population was exploiting the vast majority, with hardworking individuals struggling while a privileged few enjoyed luxury. In an article from October 1932, Premchand highlighted the dire financial situation of Indian farmers, who relied heavily on loans for almost every aspect of their lives, from agricultural necessities to personal ceremonies like marriages and pilgrimages. Landlords and moneylenders perpetuated this cycle of debt, often trapping farmers and labourers in a cycle of poverty. Even after the death of a father, the burden



fell on the son to continue working without respite, reflecting a harsh reality where societal norms and exploitation overshadowed compassion and ethical considerations.

Premchand vividly portrayed the dire circumstances faced by Indian farmers in his writings. He described their situation as beyond words, where they struggled to feed landlords on time, meet government dues, and provide for their basic needs of food and clothing. Natural disasters like frost, excessive rain, and storms ravaged their crops, while diseases such as plague, cholera, and smallpox claimed the lives of young farmers in their prime. The burden of debt was overwhelming, with farmers barely able to afford essentials, let alone luxuries. Children, once sheltered in rags during winter, now wore their fathers' worn-out clothes for warmth.

The exploitation didn't end there; moneylenders seized whatever little wealth the farmers had, leaving them in perpetual poverty. Even during the harvest season, farmers faced losses as their crops were destroyed by animals or seized by landlords and moneylenders. Despite such hardships, the landlords remained indifferent, demanding wages and further adding to the farmers' misery.

Premchand's character Hori, symbolizing the Indian farmer, lamented the harsh reality where hard work often led to starvation and suffering. The farmer's life was depicted as a constant struggle against nature, exploitation, and societal indifference, leaving little hope for a better future.

Conclusion:

Thus, *Godan* is considered as the masterpiece of Munshi Premchand, encapsulating the misfortunes and tragic existence of Indian peasants during the contemporary period. The novel intricately portrays the ongoing struggle between peasants and moneylenders, offering a poignant depiction of the agricultural community's plight and suffering. Through its narrative, *Godan* vividly showcases the hard work and simplistic lifestyles of Indian farmers, highlighting their exploitation and hardships. It serves as a reflection of the frustrations and aspirations prevalent among Indian farmers, showcasing Premchand's unparalleled literary skill in Hindi literature. *Godan* emerges as a compelling representation of the entire spectrum of an Indian farmer's life, encompassing their aspirations, struggles, religious beliefs, conflicts with



greed, and their inherent innocence and vulnerability. As a literary work, *Godan* achieves the pinnacle of Premchand's artistic expression, providing a vivid and authentic portrayal of India during the tumultuous third and fourth decades of the 20th century, offering a rare insight into the socio-economic conditions of that era.

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