

Premchand's Idea of Progressive Literature

Abstract

In his life spanning the last two decades of the nineteenth century and about three and half decades of the twentieth century, Premchand has chosen to write about the stark realities of Indian masses – greed, poverty, subjugation, exploitation, caste system and corruption. This essay discusses his views on progressive literature.

Keywords: Progressive Literature, myriad variables, Literary Theory, literature's function

Introduction

In the introductory chapter of his book *Literary Theory*, Terry Eagleton has a passing remark on the difference in the existence of literature and insect. He furnishes this thought by bringing in myriad variables like value-judgements (which change over time), social ideologies, historical situations, power relations and class prejudices. These, he says, play a role in what constitutes literature. The aforementioned variable functions of culture, life and social forces, to a certain extent, exercise direct and indirect control over the content and form of literature being produced; by extension, it may be said so, that they represent humanity and contemporaneous times (Terry 7). According to Foucault, power relations are not rigid or irreversible. On the contrary, power relations are mobile with a certain degree of freedom. Subsequently, literature's function isn't limited to representation, it also shapes humanity and helps the reader "recognise and realise social reality". Premchand's idea of literature and its function also stands on a similar utilitarian ground which calls for the shattering of the orthodox systems and values and demands social equality, unity and liberty.

Premchand's orientation

Premchand's orientation towards socially relevant and purposeful writings becomes evident from his stewardship and association with the kind of literary movement that

was taking shape in the early 1930s. This movement came to be known as 'progressive literature'. Premchand lent his wholehearted support to 'the progressives' for the first conclave of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA) held in 1936 at Lucknow. As a matter of fact, he delivered the presidential address at AIPWA in such a meticulous way that it became the de facto manifesto for the progressive literary movement in the subcontinent. In the decades to come, his presidential address at 1936 AIPWA became a sort of torchlight for the whole generation of Indian writers.

Progressive literature, for Premchand, is a force of social, moral and aesthetic progress with a sincere connection to life. Premchand, in his All India Progressive Writers' Association's presidential address, calls for literature that offers an honest criticism and analysis of life. He adds the necessity of expressing the true and lived experiences in artistic creations. He finds it important to bring about a change in the heads and hearts of the Indian populace. Through this he aspires to address the issues of—imperialism, feudalism, incompetent religion, communalism, social inequality, lack of scientific temperament and the woeful condition of labourers and peasantry in contemporary India. The social and political unrest suffused the air in the decades prior to the independence (WW-I, non-cooperation movement of 1920s, economic miseries of 1929, civil disobedience of 1930). During this turmoil, many were stirred by the Russian Revolution, and their awakened political consciousness paved the way for various cultural movements in association with Kisan Movements and Trade Union Movements. On the literary arena, Progressive Writers were one such group. This movement revolved around the idea that literature should mirror society's key social, political and cultural aspects. Likewise, Premchand, in his presidential address to AIPWA, demands of the new writers a new literature from a revolutionary standpoint; this is clear in his concluding remarks - "new trend in literature should not put us to sleep for further slumber means death" (Premchand, *The Aim of Literature* 11).

Emperical literature

Premchand defines literature as a piece of art that must espouse the task of "spiritual and moral" guidance of the society. He has voiced a progressive view on Indian literature

that any literary work which lacks any social “utility” must be trashed. By social utility of literature he meant its capability to stir its readers’ minds, inculcate in them a desire to challenge traditional and orthodox social norms and its repressive caste and class hierarchies. In his words, “Good literature is judged by the sharpness of its perception, which stirs our feelings and thoughts into motion.” He has maintained that the main objective of literature is to shape the reader’s mind and it ought to be as useful as other valuable tangible and nontangible artefacts in the life. He pleaded the AIPWA audience to redefine the parameters of beauty by saying: “*Hamein khubsoorti ka mayaar badalna hoga.*”

Premchand has maintained highlighted the use of fear, cajolery, reward, and retribution as chief instruments by the religion. Any art created on this basis should be waning, for it was created for elites of social and political order and to legitimise the brazenly repressive social, economic and political order. For Premchand the foregoing appeal is as much relevant to literature as it is to visual and performing arts. And, that is why he dismissed the idea of literature as the means of entertainment for the oppressive elite class. With this notion in mind, Premchand argues that a writer is duty bound to rise up to the occasion for helping ‘downtrodden, oppressed and exploited’ and this a writer, argues Premchand, can do by producing realistic literature. Only the literature created around such themes has the potential to become ‘a torch-bearer to all grass-rooted progressive social movements (Premchand, *The Aim of Literature* 35-36).

According to him, beauty is not manifest in skirting the unpleasant facets of human life. A truly beautiful literature capacitates its readers to face the stark realities of human life in a spirited way. In our childhood we might have enjoyed fairy tales as much as we have enjoyed the romantic stories of princely lovers in our adolescence, but they are devoid of any real importance to us in real life. Literature that does not have any bearing on reality of human life does not mean much, and therefore the literature can be seen as the reflection of human life. However, in the not-that-distant-past the human life and literature were thought of as two almost disjoint worlds with little in common. In the words of Premchand, “The literature which does not arouse in us a critical spirit, or satisfy our spiritual and intellectual needs, which is not ‘force-giving’ and dynamic, which does not awaken our

sense of beauty, which does not make us face the grim realities of life in a spirit of determination, has no use for us today. It cannot even be termed as literature.” In Premchand’s words, “In order for literature to have an effect, it needs to mirror life’s truths.”

" साहित्य में प्रभाव उत्पन्न करने के लिए ये आवश्यक है कि वो जीवन की सच्चाई का दर्पण हो। फिर आप उसे जिस चौखटे में चाहें, लगा सकते हैं। चिड़े की कहानी और गुल-ओ-बलबुल की दास्तान भी उसके लिए उपयुक्त हो सकती है।"

Progressive literature for Premchand, embodies an urgency, a concern and a purpose: social regeneration and social commitment. Premchand also hopes to rescue the literature from the clutches of the conservative class and patrons. According to Premchand, the Indian society could no longer be entertained by magical mysteries and ascetics. Progressive literature requires sharp perceptive writers who recognise the need to break away from the regressive early literature where the magical elements are predominant. The older lyrics with narrow minded beauty standards are socially and aesthetically inadequate.

In his short story *Kafan* (The Shroud), Premchand, has addressed a larger audiences spread over towns and villages across north India while touching upon horrendous twin issues of archaic social customs and rural poverty which value a mere piece of cloth than a human life. The story brought to fore the cruelty and injustices of religious rituals which help little during the life of human but expect rites to be performed dutifully in the event of death (Premchand, *The Shroud*).

Premchand, not only wrote on progressive themes but practiced progressivism in his action which is evident from his remarriage with a widow. His first marriage lasted a decade and later Premchand got married, by his choice, to the daughter of an Arya Samaj social reformer – a widow. His remarrying with a widow, openly flouting the strict caste and social norms, marked a bold socio-political statement in those times (Prakash 10).

In his penultimate work *Godaan* (The Gift of a Cow), Premchand has depicted the endless plight of north Indian peasantry. The protagonist - a peasant named Hori and his family struggles day and night to make a meagre living and to own a cow: the peasant’s

measure of wealth. Hori believes that he has to gift a cow (godaan) to a Brahmin to ensure salvation for his family. In this pursuit he is forced to marry his young daughter to an elderly man and finds himself in moneylenders' trap (Premchand, *The Gift of a Cow*).

For Premchand, literature is a social servant and utilitarian in nature. These views of Premchand's on progressive literature seem to be inspired by the likes of Trotsky and Gorky. The idea of a new type of literature for a new class for them too was a historic demand and a necessity of the new world order. But Premchand's views are not just influenced by the duo. One sees observations of Matthew Arnold's idea of literature as a criticism of life; indifference towards Coleridge's transcendental thought; importance of immediate experience; literature as a substitute for religion. Other than that Premchand's idea of beauty, truth and emancipation of rigid aesthetic sensibilities is similar to Keats' thought. Beauty and aesthetics are indispensable to Premchand's progressive literature. He asks for a change in the standards of beauty, for that, according to him, would lead to harmony and an empathetic and egalitarian sensibility. Premchand advocated and practiced the incorporation of themes and language of common and lowly Indians and that too in their own form and expressions. He dared to choose this form of expression in times when weaving of any form of art and literature was considered too modest for contemporary textual and literary forms. Premchand's delivered his AIPWA address in heavily Urdu-laced Hindustani, but later published it in *Hans*¹, it was written in a highly Sanskritized Hindi. With this bilingual approach he was targeting both an educated Muslim elite and a rising Hindu elite. His writings were addressed to multiple audiences who somehow related themselves to the cause of elimination any forms of social disparity unleashed by both domestic elite and foreign rulers (Prabhakar 65).

“The greatest contribution of the progressive writers lay in bringing the novel nearer in focus to all-sorts-of-life in its lurid and bawdy and stripped-off form; life without frills,

¹ Hans is a magazine founded and edited by Munshi Premchand. It is a Hindi fiction monthly magazine published from Delhi, which was re-published by Rajendra Yadav from 1986 to 2013. Mahatma Gandhi and Kanhaiyalal Maniklal Munshi have also been involved in the editorial board of Hans for two years. After the death of Munshi Premchand, the editing of Hans was done by his son Amrit Rai. After Rajendra Yadav's death in 2013, Hans is being published and managed by his daughter Rachna Yadav. Sanjay Sahai, a renowned Hindi story writer, is now the editor of Hans.

embellishment or decorations; life still quivering under all feudal-medieval mass and rusted debris. The progressive fiction writer drew freely his idiom from the dialect and the spoken word as heard in the market place or sarai at the fair or in the factory, at places previously considered not worth visiting or below respectability in literary tradition (Prabhakar 110).”

Conclusion

Premchand’s progressive literature insists on the assessment and discussion of the political, social, moral and psychological aspects of daily lives of those who are deprived and oppressed. With that, it also challenges the existing notions of aesthetics. Premchand addresses the young writers, calls out to their idealism to “increase the capital of our literature”, and demands of them to not be “satisfied with eating the leftovers of other languages and literatures” (Premchand, *The Aim of Literature* 8). This view of literature is also reflected in his writings such as *Godaan*. In the end, it can be surmised that Premchand’s progressive ideas in their revolutionary zeal strive to raise the bar of expectations from literature to help serve the Indian society.

Reference:

- Majumdar, Panchali. Emergence of Progressivism in Hindi Literature: Premchand’s Short Stories of the 1930s. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 78, 2017, pp. 789–96. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26906152>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2022.
- Prabhakar Machwe. *Four Decades of Indian Literature*. New Delhi: Chetana Prakashan, 1976.
- Prakash Chandra Gupta. *Premchand, Makers of Indian Literature Series*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1968, p. 10.
- Premchand. *The Aim of Literature*. Presidential Speech given at the First Progressive Writers’ Conference, Lucknow, 9 April 1936, tr. Francesca Orsini, in *The Oxford India Premchand* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- Premchand. *The Gift of a Cow*. tr. Gordon C. Roadarmel, London: Lokamaya Press, 1987
- Premchand. *The Shroud*. in *Deliverance and other Short Stories*, tr. David Rubin, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1988, pp. 233-240.
- Terry Eagleton. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. (2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996.