

Delineation of Dalits in the Shroud (KAFAN) and Deliverance (SADGATI)

Arvind Singh*

Associate Professor, Department of English, M. S. J. Govt. P. G. College, Bharatpur, India.

*Corresponding Author: arvindkuntal1969@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper is designed to make a comparative analysis of the delineation of Dalits in Munshi Premchand's two classical stories The Shroud (KAFAN) and Deliverance (SADGATI). The age-old caste system has been a blemish of Indian society and it has always been criticized and condemned by many a writer. A writer like Premchand could not keep himself aloof from the duties of a literary figure that he wields towards society. Consequently, he has written a lot against caste system in his novels and short stories. The stories The Shroud (KAFAN) and Deliverance (SADGATI) also aim at presenting a critique of caste system but from different perspectives. The objective of this paper is to trace out both of these perspectives.

Keywords: Shroud, Deliverance, Dalits, Indian Society, Caste System, Classical Stories.

Introduction

Dhanpat Rai Srivastava alias Munshi Premchand holds a pioneering position among the giant personalities in the field of Urdu and Hindi Fiction. His contribution is not limited only to novels but to short stories which have paved the way to the forth-coming generations of fiction writers. Prime concern of his pen lies in the portrayal of rural folk, chiefly of dalits and underdogs of Indian society during the first half of 20th century – the period during which caste played a vital role in determining one's identity and social status. Much from his personal observations and experiences Premchand realized the duty of a writer to mend the condition of the downtrodden. He deeply felt the responsibility of a literary figure to envisage a change in the structure of society. He hits the chiefest malpractice of caste genesis which has been the worst phenomenon of Indian society. It is the root cause of many social evils as is the opinion of Ainapur:

Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu's public is his caste. His responsibility is to his caste. Virtue has become caste-ridden and morality has become caste-bound.

There is no sympathy to the deserving. There is no appreciation of the meritorious.

There is no charity to the needy. (1)

His stories often reflect with the realistic portrayal of caste discrimination and havoc of economic struggle faced by the dalits during his contemporary period. Not only The Shroud (KAFAN) and Deliverance (SADGATI) but most of his stories provide ample examples of all these facts; but the present paper mainly focuses on the two.

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Dalits in the Shroud

'The shroud' is one of the immortal pieces of work in the field of short fiction. In the words of Anna Kurian: "The Shroud places before the readers two of the most unpleasing characters to be found in fiction: Ghisu and Madhav, a father and son who are poor and lazy, uncaring about their own welfare as well as that of their own family." 1 They are born in a family of caste known as chamars and belong to the class of field workers; but they are too lazy to get any work and wages. Consequently, they lead their idle life in utter poverty. Moreover, they have won the reputation of shirkers. Ghisu is a widower and Madhav has been wedded to Budhiya for one year. "As the story unfolds the reader is told about the way of life of these characters: marked by poverty, hunger and want, yet also by a determination to do as little work as possible to get by."

Premchand's narration of the plight of dalits is revealed in the idle way of carefree and insensitive life they lead or, rather, enjoy. Budhiya is in the throes of labour but without help or support of any kind. Ghisu and Madhav both remain seated by the dead fire at the door of their hut eating roasted potatoes which they had dug from someone's field. She thrashes about in agony of child birth and gives out a piercing scream from time to time. All the unbearable agony of the woman cast no effect nor create any sympathy in their unsympathetic hearts. After finishing off the potatoes both sleep right there in front of the burn-out fire, wrapped in their dhotis.

In the morning when they wake up, Budhiya had calmed down forever. Both the father and the son go from door to door crying and wailing and 'make arrangements' for her funeral and collect a sum of five rupees from the Zamindar and other villagers. With money in hand they go to the market to buy a shroud. "They went on wandering through the market, stopping at one cloth merchant's shop after another. They look at different kinds of clothes, silks and cotton – but nothing met with their approval. (3)

Dusk had fallen by this time. By some divine inspiration, they find themselves at the door of a toddy-house and enter with unspoken, mutual consent. Both of them buy a bottle of wine and enjoy it with some snakes and fried fish. After finishing off the bottle and drinking to the fullest satisfaction Ghisu asks Madhav to buy four pounds of puris and also chutney, pickles and braised liver. Madhav, as a dutiful son, runs to his father's bidding and returns with two laden leaf-plates. The two of them sit down gorging themselves on puris. But meanwhile the idea of Budhiya's death and buying a shroud finds no place in their minds. From time to time Madhav suffers from the sense of responsibility as a husband to Budhiya; but Ghisu calms him down saying: "How do you know she won't get a shroud? Do you think I am such a jackass? Have I been wasting my time in this world for sixty years? She'll have ashroud and a good one too." (4)

After eating to their fill Madhav gives the leftover puris to a beggar who had been eying them hungrily and asks him to bless her whose earning it was. Ghisu stands up and under the fits of liquor begins to sway; he also sings an old ballad. They finally fall down in a drunken stupor.

In this way it may be concluded that the story 'The Shroud' deals not only with the piece of cloth needed for covering the dead body of Budhiya. But it is, undoubtedly, the shroud of insensitivity and inhumanity under which the humanity and morality of both Ghisu and Madhav lie dead and wrapped up. The symbolic shroud may also be the poverty which covers over their humanity or it may be the social structure which renders them unfeeling even to their own kins.

Dalits in Deliverance (SADGATI)

The other story under consideration of this paper i.e. Deliverance (SADGATI) also centers round the theme of Dalits and their plight in Indian traditional society. It centers round the character of Dukhi and his wife Jhuria who belong to untouchable caste known as Chamar. Dukhi is a poor dalit who undergoes so much oppression, exploitation and inhumanity that he loses his life. He visits the house of Pandit Ghasiram for seeking his guidance regarding the propitious time and day of his daughter's engagement. On reaching the sacred abode of the Brahmin he finds Pandit Dhasiram busy with his daily routine of holy rituals and sits out. When the brahmin sees him there, he orders the poor chamar to sweep the Baithak, to plaster its floor with dung, to chop a log of wood into small pieces and to bring four sacks of straw from the field and put them in the hay store.

Dukhi, at once sets to work and sweeps the sitting room, plasters its floor and starts chopping the wood-log. There is a thick knot in it; therefore, it becomes quite difficult to chop it. Still, with hungry belly Dukhi continues his efforts in the heat of the sun. Once he gives up his efforts and goes to bring the straw. When Pandit Ghasiram finds Dukhi sleeping with the sack of straw, he scolds him for not chopping

the log. Ghasiram encourages him to do the remaining task. Though no strength is left in his body due to exertion and hunger, he takes the axe and engages himself in the task of chopping the wood. Finally he succeeds in his mission; but meanwhile his head reels and falls on the ground unconscious. The hungry, thirsty and exhausted body had given way.

When the Brahmin realizes that Dukhi has died, he goes to the colony of Chamars and asks them to lift the corpse. But none of the dalits comes. At last, "Panditji got out a rope. He made a noose and managed to get it over the dead man's feet and drew it tight. Morning mist still clouded the air. Panditji grabbed the rope and began to drag it, and he dragged it until it was out of the village." (5)

In this way both the stories The Shroud and Deliverance portray the miserable condition of the dalits in society; but both present a different perspective. The Shroud portrays the fact that though Ghisu and Madhav come from an untouchable caste, the sufferings through which they undergo are not chiefly due to their caste but because of their idleness, truancy, and corrupt nature. On the other hand, Deliverance accounts caste system solely responsible for the miseries and heart-rending death of Dukhi. Even the after-death inhuman treatment that he receives at the hands of Pandit Ghasiram is due to his caste. The Brahmin does not touch the corpse of Dukhi only because he is a Chamar (an untouchable) and touching his body is supposed to pollute a sacred person like him. That is why Pandit Ghasiram drags his dead body as if he were a dog or some other animal, not a human being.

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