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An Exploration of Symbolic Violence against the Poor in Munshi Premchand's Novel *Godan*

Abstract:

Violence happens to be one of the most serious problems of this postmodern world. Many of us are usually mistaken about the notion of violence when we perceive it to be either physical or psychological. This tendency almost obliterates many hidden forms of violence which emerge from the ruling class ideologies. The agents of such ideologies, according to the renowned French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, are those people who own capital of one or another kind which provides them symbolic power. And by virtue of this symbolic power, they exert violence upon marginalized people in the name of protecting one or other objective norms of the social sanctity. Violence is always started by the binaries of language in which something is accepted better than the other. When these artificially manufactured good norms of social behavior are encoded in law books and scriptures in the name of reality and perfect knowledge, they become more torturous, pervasive, subtle and invisible. People misrecognize the deep ideologies of ruling class behind this constructed reality and inflict violence either upon themselves or those who deviate a little from these standardized norms. One of these hidden forms of violence is symbolic violence which is perpetrated by those who hold symbolic power. Munshi Premchand's novel *Godan* has multiple such instances where the poor characters are brutally exploited because they have misrecognized the ideologies of the ruling class and support them as if they were the rules of God. Thus, they help their victimizers to victimize them. The present research paper is a serious endeavor to find out the various ways through which poor people of marginalized communities are exploited.

Keywords: Violence, Symbolic Violence, Capital, Habitus, Exploitation, Marginalization.

There is a general conception that the problem of violence is getting bigger and more subtle day by day in both local and global contexts. According to Hannah Arendt, violence is commonly believed to be a common denominator of the twentieth century which Lenin has predicted as a “century of wars and revolutions” (On Violence 83). This omnipresent nature of violence in its multiple forms makes it more complex and less visible. In the hullabaloo of physical violence, multiple forms of covert violence which work at the level of societal norms and cultural values usually remain untraced and unaddressed. Symbolic violence, which is operated with the general consensus of the victimizers, is one of these covert forms of violence. It is introduced by French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, who defines it as, “the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity” (An Invitation 167). It is an imposition of ethics, traditions, cultural norms and religious rituals by assigning them symbolic values upon those who have no option but to accept them as sanctified laws. As symbolic violence is practiced and repeated multiple times in a day, people generally do not recognize when and how they have become its victims.

Pierre Bourdieu, a professor of sociology at the College de France, has firm faith in combining theories with empirical research finding to disentangle some of the most difficult problems of sociology. He has entwined symbolic violence with many of his other key concepts such as field, habitus, and capital. Field, according to him, is a, “space in which a game takes place” (qtd. in Moi 1021). It is the game of power building among the holders of different forms of capital. Here, every agent and institution which possesses a fix quantity of specific capital (social, economic and cultural) that is adequate to hold the dominant position within any specific society, tries to maintain or transform the base of power. The powerful agents of the multiple fields support sustain or demolish this power base on account of their shared interests.

Bourdieu calls it, “a division of the work of domination” (An Invitation 76). An agent’s position in the field is the outcome of interaction between the specific rules of the field, his habitus and his social, economic and cultural capital. When an individual becomes the part of a social group, he acquires a set of dispositions and internalizes them unconsciously to the extent that he begins to perceive the social reality through them. These dispositions are shaped by the past events and structures and have power to shape the present and future tendencies. Thus, Bourdieu states that habitus is created and reproduced unconsciously, “without any deliberate pursuit of coherence... without any conscious concentration ...” (*Distinction* 173).

Symbolic violence is emanated by the holders of symbolic capital. Capital, according to Bourdieu, has three categories; economic, cultural and social and when these forms of capital are perceived and recognized as legitimate, they become symbolic capital. In his work *Distinction*, Bourdieu defines symbolic capital as: “the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honorability...” (291). Thus, it is clear that symbolic capital is not a different species of capital, but is the legitimized, recognized form of other capitals. It begets symbolic power and one receives honour, prestige and recognition within a culture on the basis of this power, and becomes a symbol of it. It requires a dominator and the dominated who accept the sanctity of symbolic laws without suspecting their artificial nature. Furthermore, it legitimizes and consolidates existing social, political, religious and economical relations and helps in the reproduction of intergenerational non-egalitarian social arrangements. In the words of Bourdieu:

Symbolic violence is a type of submission... a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition, (misrecognition), recognition or even

feeling ...(and which) grasps the logic of domination exerted in the name of symbolic principle. (*Masculine Domination* 1-2)

Munshi Premchand was a renowned 20th century novelist and story writer who is sometimes referred to as the ‘Tolstoy of India’ of India (*Essay* 17). His keen observation and subtle penetration into multiple contemporary social issues enabled him to write about the problems of people. His works became so popular that they had been translated into various leading languages of the world. Australian born author, Jack Lindsay has remarked about him that, “Premchand’s passionate sympathy, his closeness to the suffering of the people and his sense of urgent historical issues” led him to portray the realistic picture of contemporary society (*Essay* 21). His short story *Mantra* describes the indifferent behavior of an affluent doctor who does not care for the poor even if they are dying. Old Bhagat, the father of the boy, keeps on looking towards Dr. Chaddha until he disappears from his sight in the hope that he will come back; but finally his son dies of intense fever and the doctor does not come back. In another story entitled *Kafan*, he depicts how some roasted potatoes for Madhav and Ghisu become more important than Madhav’s wife who is dying with labour pain. Premchand has well documented the plights of women who are made scapegoat of multiple social rules and norms. *Nirmala*, the eponymous leading character of the novel faces consistent torture on account of her ill-matched marriage to an old widower as her parents lack handsome dowry for suitable groom. In his novel, *Sevasadan*, a married woman is forced to lead a life of courtesan despite the fact that she tries her best to remain loyal to her domestic life. Premchand’s characters are common men and women who have to battle throughout their lives for sustenance in the society.

Munshi Premchand’s novel *Godan* is set in a small poverty-stricken village, Belari in Avadh province Uttar Pradesh during pre-independent India. Premchand has depicted how the poor landless peasants of this village and their women are targeted by those who hold power of

one of other kind. The analysis of the novel lays bare the hypocritical, manipulative and corrupt practices of those who project themselves as ideals before others. It is the story of the victimization of those who remain at the extreme end of the human society and are targeted by the representatives of the powerful oppressive social institutions. It also presents the exploitation of women of marginalized sections of the society in the hands of powerful people. Self-inflicted violence to save the symbolic honour of the family is one of the major themes of the novel. The plights of a brother, a father, a lover, a mother, a daughter and a brother due to the external oppressive systems are well documented in this canonical work of Hindi literature.

Munshi Premchand's work, *Godan* highlights various instances of symbolic violence. The leading character-Hori, his wife-Dhaniam and their children-Gobar, Sona and Rupa, become the victims of symbolic violence as they are unable to recognize the deep ideologies which work under veil and dominate them. From outside, we find that the desire of Hori to own a cow leads his family's ultimate doom but in reality, it is both the prestige and the sin which are associated with the cow preservation and cow murder consecutively which bring ill-fate for the whole family. Had it been some other animal like pig or goat, Hori would not have suffered the same amount of problems. A cow is considered to be a symbol of prestige and it is supposed to be owned by those who own symbolic power of one or another kind. It, for all the powerful people of various fields in Hori's village, has become a matter of dishonour how a landless poor peasant who stands nowhere before them in terms of power and prestige can challenge their positions by buying a hefty cow. They get a golden opportunity when the cow is poisoned by his brother, Heera due to his personal enmity with his sister-in-law. Because of this circumstantial problem in Hori's life, all the concerned authorities, from priest to the police inspector including moneylender, exploit him as much as possible.

The novel focuses on the oppressive relations between the landlord and his tenants. It reveals those forms of violence which are embedded in the social laws, cultural norms and ritualistic traditions. The pain of common man is depicted through Hori who, despite being in utter debt, always tries to uphold the social and religious ethos. The primary reason of his exploitation seems to be his loans but a deeper analysis reveals that a nexus of all the powerful agents of society works behind his victimization. All these agents with symbolic powers in their specific fields eat these peasants thoroughly in the name of maintaining the holiness of social laws. In the present novel, Rai Sahab, the landlord of the village, Pateswari, the revenue clerk of Semari village, Nokhey Ram, the bailiff, the police inspector of the local police station and Datadin, a Brahmin priest all of them exploit poor farmers either individually or collectively and do not speak against each other as they know it very well that their power will remain intact as long as they are being supported by one another.

Datadin, the priest of the village, extorts money from the poor peasant to save them from the wrath of God. He holds symbolic power on account of his profession of priesthood. He believes that his birth in higher caste has given him privilege to chastise other inferior castes with the help of his knowledge of religious texts. He asserts that people must provide regular feasts to Brahmins or they should go on a pilgrimage if they want to sanctify themselves from their sins. He performs religious rituals for the villagers and provides them readymade religious solution to minimize their problems after extorting handsome amount of money from them. Apart from these big tasks, he is in the habit of doing smaller jobs such as lending money on interest, making matrimonial matches and providing medicinal help to the poor villagers for money. He does not pay his dues to the landlord and threatens the bailiff to commit suicide if he would be unduly pressurized. He terrorizes him that the death of a Brahmin by suicide would bring misfortune to the whole village. Thus, Datadin becomes a consistent perpetrator of

violence due to his cultural and symbolic capital which assigns him symbolic power in the society.

Hori is victimized again when his son, Gobar, impregnates Jhunia, Bhola's widow daughter and flees away. When she comes to his home to stay, the powerful social agents again impose heavy fine on him. Gobar who flees to the city comes into the contact of many people which almost widens his vision. Initially, he works in bits and pieces but finally he sets up a stall in the market and plans to bring his wife and son here. But when he comes to Lucknow with his family, he finds that his stall in the market has been usurped by someone else and he somehow manages to find a job in the local sugar mill for the survival of his family. He has to face multiple problems such as workers' strikes, workers' politics and their unwanted repression in the hands of police and other government officials. Under pressure, he starts consuming alcohol, abusing his wife and son and neglecting his family's welfare. This disappointment results from utter helplessness as he does not possess capital of any kind which pushes him into the position of the victim.

The most self-aware character of the novel Dhaniam, Hori's wife, has also become the victim of symbolic violence when she borrows a large amount of money to spend in her daughter's marriage to maintain her prestige. She believes that his daughter will get respectable place in her in-laws house only when she will carry a large dowry with her. Although, Sona's husband agrees to marry her without any dowry but Dhaniam declines this offer as she has faith that money comes and goes but honour lasts. Laden with ornaments and fine clothes, Sona becomes the symbol of Hori's social capital. But, it becomes possible at the cost of Hori's being a pauper and debt-ridden. By the time, Rupa, the youngest daughter of Hori and Dhaniam, is of marriageable age, they have become penniless and incapable of arranging adequate amount of dowry. As a result, they have to marry Rupa to an old widower. And thus, she turns out to be

the next victim of symbolic violence. Hori's staunch belief in *dharma* and Dhania's sensitivity towards maintaining social prestige makes both of them the perpetual victims of symbolic violence.

Selia is another victim of symbolic violence in the novel. She is a cobbler woman who is employed as an unpaid worker by Datadin. She is very strong and does more work than the work of three men together only for two meals a day. Datadin's son Matadin traps her in his false promises of making her his legal wife and sexually exploits her to a great extent. Datadin advises his son to carry on his relationship secretly as long as possible and remain loyal to his religious duties. He justifies that it is not sinful for a Brahmin to have such sexual relations with a lower caste woman as long as she avoids the kitchen of the Brahmin household. Her sexual and economical exploitation has worsened her condition when one day Matadin publicly rejects her. People of the cobbler community get angry at the public rejection of Selia therefore, they forcibly insert a piece of bone into his mouth to taint his religion. Despite these upheavals, Selia still has faith that Matadin would accept her one day. For this madness, she has been tortured by her own family members and finally she is removed from her home. She learns to live on her own when she begets her son. Matadin too comes to her when he is rejected by his own society because of his proximity to Jhunia. Here both Jhunia and Matadin both have become the victims of the rigid Brahminical rules of the society. Jhunia thought that she would be happily accepted by Matadin and Matadin thought that his community would accept him after completing the due rituals but both were mistaken because none of them held any kind of socially recognized capital which could have provided them a powerful position in the society. Matadin's victimization has brought him closer to Selia.

Towards the end of the novel, a psychically weak Hori is depicted trying consistently to earn money in order to pay off his debts and fulfill his last wish to buy a cow. He falls ill due

to the heavy work in unfavorable conditions and his health starts deteriorating rapidly. As he is bed ridden due to his serious illness, he regrets that he could not buy a cow. When Dhania is trying to prepare some medicine for her husband, Heera, her brother in law along with other villagers comes there and suggests her that she should gift a cow to the priest, Matadin if she wishes her husband's fast recovery. The novel ends with Dhania requesting the priest to accept whatever little amount of money she has saved as a substitute of cow. This clarifies how the sacred rules and norms in any caste and class based society become cruel, and the poor occur to be the consistent victims of such ruling class ideologies as they fail to recognize the reality behind these ideologies.

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