



## FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE OF MUNSHI PREMCHAND'S GODAN

Ms. PALAK

MA English

Meerut College

C.C.S. University, Meerut

### Abstract

*Munshi Premchand's Godan is widely recognized as a seminal work of social realism in Indian literature, primarily for its inclusive depiction of the plight of farmers and peasants, and its revealing portrayal of the Indian agricultural system during the colonial era. This article offers a feminist analysis of the novel, specifically examining the position of women within colonial Indian society. By scrutinizing the roles of key female characters such as Dhaniya, Jhuniya, Malti, and Govindi, the paper critiques existing scholarship and investigates the agency of women during a period of significant social and political transformation. Dhaniya embodies the resilient strength and practical wisdom of rural women, portrayed not merely as a victim but as a resourceful strategist for survival within the text. Jhuniya, in contrast, exposes the inherent contradictions within patriarchal and caste-based ethical systems, her very presence challenging established conservative social morality.*

*Malti represents the burgeoning independent and educated urban female, a figure distinct from Govindi, who embodies silent endurance within the confines of domestic patriarchy. Furthermore, this paper analyzes how Premchand's realist narrative technique, through examining the intersectional dynamics of caste, social class, religion, and gender, illuminates the distinct individuality and profound humanity of women's experiences.*

**Keywords:** Colonial India, social realism, gender, inequality, patriarchy, rural women, caste opposition, subaltern.

Munshi Prem Chand occupies a uniquely significant position in Indian literature. He emerged as a seminal proponent of social realism, even as he embarked on his literary career in the later stages of his life. Literary scholarship often identifies Premchand as a foundational figure for this genre, with his novel Godan frequently celebrated as a classic. It is widely recognized for its profound and intricate portrayal of the socio-cultural landscape of colonial rural India. Critics of novel studies sometimes characterize Godan as a narrative primarily concerned with the peasant struggle, highlighting themes of agrarian conflict, exploitation, and class stratification. Others have viewed it as a stark depiction of unresisting subjugation, though it also engages with the lives of women. Indeed, Premchand's pivotal role in Indian literary history stems from his status as a pioneer of social realism. Among



his works, Godan frequently appears on lists of Indian literary masterpieces, valued for its incisive portrayal of rural India's socio-cultural challenges during the colonial era. Typically, novel critics classify it as a tragic rural narrative focusing on agrarian conflict and exploitation. However, there is not universal agreement that the novel's scope is limited solely to the issues faced by women. As one might expect from a work of such power, Premchand's novel offers a multifaceted and extensive depiction of rural Indian society. Beyond simply addressing agrarian struggles or political oppression, it delves into numerous layers of social inequality.

Limiting one's reading of Godan exclusively to these dimensions, however, risks obscuring significant aspects of the text. The novel also merits consideration as a powerful exploration of patriarchal dynamics and the complexities of caste. Munshi Prem Chand's importance is further underscored by his early and compelling engagement with modern Indian literary forms, a contribution that continues to be recognized. A key aspect of his legacy is the powerful realism with which Godan portrays Indian life under colonial administration. While the novel is frequently interpreted through the lens of peasant tragedy and agrarian exploitation, a closer examination also reveals a complex portrayal of women's lives within a patriarchal and caste-stratified society. Colonial rule initiated profound transformations across the entire spectrum of Indian reality, encompassing both urban and rural spheres. This metamorphosis was not without contention, generating numerous interconnected repercussions and reactions. Significantly, for many Indian writers, this shift was experienced most acutely at the individual level. Individuals found their established positions untenable, necessitating deep internal changes and societal restructuring. Consequently, numerous institutions and practices also underwent necessary transformations, often encountering considerable resistance. As this new reality solidified, other societal structures similarly experienced upheaval and reorganization, indicating that no aspect of institutional life remained untouched by this wave of reform.

While Godan indeed portrays women as primary sufferers, this depiction does not equate to a lack of moral vitality or political agency. Rather, female characters are frequently presented not only as moral and emotional anchors but also as figures of resistance. Dhaniya, Jhuniya, Malti, and Govindi, for instance, are portrayed both as victims of circumstance and as individuals who actively navigate their complex realities. They contend with an intricate nexus where class, caste, and emerging modernity converge with entrenched patriarchy.

Consequently, Godan can be effectively analyzed through a feminist lens, revealing



women's multifaceted struggles as agents, resisters, and victims within colonial Indian society. The text thus provides a rich feminist reading of women. Despite facing overwhelming societal and environmental pressures, these female characters frequently manifest as moral forces, possessing the resolve to challenge their constraints. Thus, women in the novel are not merely passive victims; their moral strength translates into acts of resistance against patriarchal systems, effectively making them political agents within their village communities. Their defiance serves as a testament to an innate political power, distinct from mere oppression, establishing them as pivotal centers of revolt. This essay will explore Premchand's portrayal of women in *Godan*, focusing on how female characters embody critical gender issues prevalent in early 20th-century North Indian rural and urban settings. The analysis will demonstrate how these women, as human subjects, simultaneously endure and actively resist the limitations imposed upon them, thereby becoming emblematic of survival and protest in oppressive social environments, and representing a clear stance against patriarchy.

Before delving into the text itself, it is necessary to contextualize the novel within its specific historical and socio-feminist frameworks, rather than imposing anachronistic contemporary paradigms. This contextualization allows for a nuanced understanding of its depiction of gender and sexuality. Feminist criticism has consistently engaged with the representation of women and the dynamics of power and control in literature, investigating how texts construct female experiences and how power structures impact these lived realities. Such critics invariably underscore inherent patriarchal structures and assumptions, particularly noting the frequent marginalization of women's voices in Indian literary traditions.

The year 1936, when *Godan* was published, offered a stark revelation of Indian society, where women's roles were predominantly confined to the domestic sphere. Within this societal framework, stereotypical norms heavily dictated women's lives, confining them to stringent boundaries. Early marriages were commonplace, establishing life trajectories and limiting choices deeply entrenched in tradition. Few women ventured beyond their household gates, and restricted access to education further constrained their perspectives. Those bound by birth and caste followed prescribed paths, their identities largely defined by duty. Economic dependence on male relatives was the norm, rendering personal choices often unheard, mere whispers in the wind. This pervasive backdrop governed every aspect of their existence, imbuing each decision and action with societal weight and scrutiny.

However, this pervasive silence did not signify an absence of struggle. Even subtle,



unspoken resistance manifested in daily life. While nascent voices of change began to emerge in urban centers, rural regions often experienced a slower, more gradual pace of transformation. Progress unfolded haltingly, akin to sporadic rain on arid land, with traditions deeply entrenched like ancient roots. New ideas, though present, often bypassed many communities, their whispers not yet amplified into widespread discourse. Yet, it was amidst this challenging era that Premchand penned his narratives. His pages portray women whose lives were burdened by the weight of tradition. These are not passive figures; their minds, though often silenced, actively engaged with their circumstances. Far from mere decorative elements, they actively influenced decisions and initiated confrontations. Their pursuit of justice, often subtle, frequently revealed a strength surpassing that of the men in their lives. The overarching societal expectation, as the text explicitly states, was encapsulated in the notion:

**“It is a women’s duty to be long suffering” [Premchand 61]**

This assertion reinforces the argument that *Godan* simultaneously depicts women as victims of societal structures and as potent figures whose resilience actively defies patriarchal injustices. Within this narrative, Dhaniya emerges as arguably the most formidable female character. Her status as Hori's wife grants her a narrative centrality that might otherwise be overlooked. Rural Indian women, often distant from mainstream national discourse, might be perceived with a certain detachment. Yet, their lives are profoundly shaped by a confluence of seemingly minor factors. Among these, the domestic sphere of the household stands as an unequivocally essential and impactful realm for the peasant woman. Hori's substantial debt, though unspecified in its precise sum, precipitates in him a desperate need to maintain an outward facade of respectability. Dhaniya, his wife, does not succumb to a similar desperation. Instead, her pragmatic logic often supersedes conventional notions of “honor.” Prioritizing survival, truth, or compassion, she is willing to be perceived as less than perfectly composed or subservient, a trait that distinguishes her from many archetypal obedient peasant wives. A particularly revealing illustration of Dhaniya’s proto-feminist stance arises from her response to Jhunia's arrival. Jhunia faces a profound crisis: she is an unmarried, lower-caste woman, pregnant by Gobar, and facing destitution. While society condemns Jhunia, and Hori expresses apprehension about tolerating her due to potential repercussions on his family, Dhaniya exhibits no such hesitation. She readily allows Jhunia to reside with them, fully aware of the social ostracization her decision would likely provoke. This action constitutes a direct rebellion against both caste prejudice and patriarchal structures. Her defiance, rooted in personal conviction rather than explicit political



ideology, presents as a form of non-violent resistance. It challenges unjust and oppressive social institutions, particularly those that impose restrictive rules on women and discriminate against lower castes. Her rebellion, therefore, can be characterized as a form of subaltern feminism, emerging from lived experience rather than formalized belief systems, yet retaining a quality of radical activism. Dhaniya, daughter of Gaya Prasad and Anandi, is consistently portrayed as a bold, fearless woman possessing a strong resolve to contend for her rights and freedom. Her determination is evident in her confrontations with moneylenders and landlords, where her unwavering resolve and spirited temperament shine through. Both Dhaniya and Jhuniya represent subaltern women in Godan; they voice their protests and engage in resistance, yet their dissent is frequently ignored or actively suppressed by prevailing societal norms. Jhunia profoundly embodies vulnerability within patriarchal structures. Her out-of-wedlock pregnancy by Gobar elicits severe societal disapproval, starkly exposing the hypocrisy embedded in village norms. Jhunia consequently endures far greater opprobrium than Gobar, a clear manifestation of how shame is unequally distributed and power operates within traditional patriarchal frameworks. From a feminist vantage point, Jhunia's character illuminates the intersectional nature of oppression, particularly the convergence of caste and gender. She experiences a form of double subordination, her vulnerability stemming from structural disadvantages inherent in her social and economic position. Yet, Jhunia is not entirely passive; her decision to choose life and integration over social death or the condition of farmer represents a distinct form of resistance. Her eventual integration into the household, where she establishes a family and home, signifies an act of adaptation that allows her to regain a sense of worth. Through sheer survival in harsh circumstances, she triumphs over one form of marginalization. Jhunia's narrative compellingly exposes the hypocrisy of a society that extols virtue while often thriving on vice; her suffering reveals how justice is often subservient to power, and how patriarchal virtue can imprison women.

**“One is not born, but rather becomes a women” [Beauvoir283]**

Simone de Beauvoir's observation resonates deeply with the condition of Malti. Despite being an educated, financially independent urban elite woman, Malti is often perceived and treated as an object of entertainment or a mere ornament by urban male elites such as Mr. Mehta and Rai Saheb. Her transformation from a perceived “coquette” to a dedicated social worker illustrates how a woman's identity in urban India is continuously constructed, deconstructed, and renegotiated under the pervasive influence of the male gaze. A comprehensive feminist reading



of Godan must also account for underlying structural forces. The oppression of women in the novel is profoundly rooted in their economic dependence. In rural settings, property rights rarely extended to women, granting them minimal economic control. Their sustenance typically derived from male relatives—husbands, brothers, or even neighbors.

Furthermore, women from less fortunate castes, such as Jhunia, faced compounded disadvantages, experiencing a double layer of discrimination within patriarchal structures. In this, Premchand anticipates what later feminist theory termed 'intersectionality,' recognizing how caste and gender discrimination operate with cumulative and distinct oppressive force. Despite this, religion and tradition often served to endorse patriarchy. The symbolic significance of the cow, central to the novel's title Godan, vividly illustrates religion's pervasive control over daily life. Ironically, this most revered animal often became an instrument in the subjugation of women, an apparent contradiction that lays bare the inherent paradoxes within societal values.

While the characters are rooted in history, their complexity adds depth to the tale. Premchand's writing adeptly unveils lived realities rather than presenting idealized fantasies. His female characters emerge from the shadows, depicted not as static icons but as dynamic individuals. His prose imbues each scene with vitality, crafting fully realized figures from the rich complexities of their environments. While deeply rooted in tradition, his representation avoids abstraction or reduction, never merely echoing conventional narratives. This nuanced approach provides depth that simpler portrayals, which might place women on pedestals or reduce them to empty archetypes, would miss. He eschews idealization, preferring to illuminate lives shaped by genuine experience, where human fragility is given ample space. A consistent thread through his narrative is the profound impact of women's lives. Dhaniya's outrage resonates with considerable weight. Jhunia's hesitation conveys a quiet, potent force. Govindi's grief is openly expressed. This nuanced portrayal of their inner lives and external struggles reveals a part of Premchand's subtle objective, hinting at perspectives conducive to social change.

Notably, Premchand does not depict women as seeking to overthrow men; rather, he portrays them as asserting their demands for fairness and equality, demonstrating resilience and controlled frustration. This firm stance aligns with the spirit of early Indian feminist reforms.

**“Everything is forgiven when you win. But if you lose, the shame of loss has to be only drunk to be forgotten” [Premchand 105].**



Adopting a feminist perspective on Godan reveals that the novel transcends a mere narrative of peasant exploitation. It offers a subtle yet profound commentary on women's lives amidst the complex political and social conditions prevalent in British colonial India. Through Dhaniya, Premchand celebrates qualities of moral strength and practical wisdom. Jhunias story, in turn, uncovers the brutal realities of patriarchal oppression. With Malti, he conceptualizes the emergent opportunities afforded by education and independence. And through Govindi, he underscores the profound capacity for emotional endurance. Premchand's significant contribution, concerning women, lies in his portrayal of them as fully realized individuals, rather than secondary figures. His narrative illuminates both their anguish and their remarkable courage. Even in contemporary discussions surrounding gender equality, Godan demonstrates that feminist thought and expression have deep historical roots within Indian literature. Premchand's female characters articulate their perspectives not through explicit slogans but through the authentic realities of their lived experiences. Their compelling voices resonate across generations. Consequently, the novel offers a distinctive lens through which to examine societal conditions, not only shedding light on the presence of feminism within Hindu society but also reflecting on fundamental human aspects: how individuals navigate profoundly dehumanizing environments, the enduring presence of dignity, the spirit of resistance, and the power of compassion. At the heart of these women lies the conviction:

**“We think these big people are very happy, but the truth is they are worse than us. We are just worried about one thing- hunger; they have a thousand worries.”[Premchand61]**

### Works Cited

- Premchand, Munshi. Godan. Translated by Jai Ratan and P. Lal, Jaico Publishing House, 1979
- Spivak, Gayatri Chkravorty. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Marxism and the interpretation of Culture, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, Macmilian1988.
- Gupta, Charu. “Portrayal of Women in Premchand Stories: A Critique. “Social Scientist vol.19, no.5\6 1991.
- Singh, Varnika. “Representation of Caste, Class and Gender in Indian novel: Godaan”. The Literary Herald, vol.6,no.4,2021



- De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Books, 2011.

