

# PREMCHAND'S NON-RURAL STORIES<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The main goal of this paper is to present an evidence of Premchand's writings where he meticulously portrays the urban world. Although majority of his voluminous work primarily paints rural world of middle Ganga plain, he also has written literary pieces evoking images of urban milieu with equal acumen. Many critics have paid little attention to appreciate the contribution of Premchand's depiction of urban milieu. Although Premchand is regarded as an erudite chronicler of depicting rural life in the middle Ganga plain, he has also written several short stories and a few selected novels that powerfully present various aspects of social, cultural, political and economic life of urban world. In order to build the above theorised argument this paper examines his stories, such as, "Vidroh", "Khudai Fauzdar", "Veshya", "Motor Ke Chhinte", "Quaidi", "Miss Padma", "Unmaad", "Kusum", "Chamatkaar", "Muft Ka Yash", "Daamul Ka Quaidi", "Lottery", "Riyaasat Ka Deevaan", and "Jaadu".

**Keywords:** Premchand, fiction, urban, Hindi, Ganga plain

## I

Amyriad of literary critics of Premchand's literature have talked about his perceptive observation and depiction of rural life and dynamics of social and economic structure of the middle Ganga plain. By most of them, Premchand has been crowned as the king-chronicler of the village and rural life and their main economic, social, and political nuances. In the art of evocation and portrayal of village life during the 1920s and 1930s, there is no one close to Premchand. Some critics have even gone to the extent of saying that his portrayal of rural life is much more powerful than his depiction of urban life in

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his novels, wherever he talks about urban life. According to some critics, none of his major novels is primarily based on city life, with the possible exception of the *Gaban* located in a small town. They deal largely with the day-to-day life and problems, and happiness or sorrows of the people of rural regions. Sometimes, when city life or urban scenes appear in these novels, they appear only in those contexts where they are related to the basic themes of the life of the characters of the village world.

Although Premchand is regarded as the master in depicting rural life in the middle Ganga plain, he has also written several short stories that powerfully presents various aspects of social life in his novels and short stories in the urban setting. One can get a very intimate glimpse of the social milieu of his times, that is, the first three decades of the 20th century. To name a few, some of his such short stories which powerfully depict images of urban life are “Vidroh”, “Khudai Fauzdar”, “Veshya”, “Motor Ke Chhinte”, “Quaidi”, “Miss Padma”, “Unmaad”, “Kusum”, “Chamatkaar”, “Muft Ka Yash”, “Daamul Ka Quaidi”, “Lottery”, “Riyaasat Ka Deevaana”, and “Jaadu”. Images evoked in this essay are drawn from some of the selected ones among the above-mentioned stories. Instead of highlighting a few lines from the particular stories, I focus on a holistic picture to support my point that Premchand has also written several very good stories evoking images of urban life and times and places. The approach of holistic, thematic images is more appropriate for this purpose. The following are various themes and images of some selected short stories I wish to highlight.

#### *Vidroh* (Rebellion)

The first story that made me think that Premchand did not write stories only about the rural environment, for which he is universally acclaimed, is *Vidroh*. It is primarily emotional and sentimental. The main character, Krishna, lives with his paternal uncle in the city of Lucknow. His uncle is an advocate and his father a medical doctor settled in Agra. In Lucknow, there lived a family-friend next door to his uncle. The neighbouring family had a daughter named Tara. Tara and Krishna developed a liking for each other. Both families, as well as Krishna and Tara, were almost sure that they were going to marry each other.

They used to spend time together in various ways, sometimes studying together, sometimes just talking and hanging out together. Time was passing peacefully, and both were very contented with life and with each other. Things suddenly changed one day. Krishna's

uncle was approached by a Raisaheb, a rich friend of his uncle, for his daughter's marriage with Krishna. The Raisaheb was a prominent citizen of that town. He was also a rich person. He wanted to arrange his daughter's marriage with Krishna because Krishna was a well-educated and promising young man. Krishna's uncle was happy to receive such an offer from his elite friend. He told Krishna about this offer. As Krishna was in love with Tara, he declined this offer. Krishna and Tara had already emotionally accepted each other as wife and husband. Krishna's uncle kept on persisting to pressure Krishna for marrying Raisaheb's daughter. Krishna approached his father to convince his brother (Krishna's uncle), for allowing Krishna to marry Tara, his boyhood sweetheart. Krishna's father expressed his helplessness because he had no courage to tell his brother against his brother's wish. As a result, out of desperation, Krishna leaves his uncle's home in Lucknow and joins the Army and moves to some other town. One day he receives an invitation from Tara's parents inviting him to attend Tara's marriage to someone else. Tara's parents still liked Krishna and understood his helplessness.

Krishna comes to Lucknow from his working place to attend Tara's wedding. After the wedding ceremony of Tara, he goes to Tara's home to meet her. When he enters Tara's home, Tara's mother notices Krishna and comes to him. She asks Krishna to come inside the room where Tara was sitting. In the meantime, newlywed Tara's husband enters the room. Krishna becomes a little nervous and Tara's husband notices that. He tells Krishna that he need not be embarrassed. He further says that he knows all about him. Tara had told her husband everything about Krishna. She had also told him that Krishna was a very good boy and that she knew Krishna for many years. She loved him and both wanted to get married. She also told her husband in detail the story why they could not get married. Continuing, Tara's husband told Krishna that Tara had even said that she sees Krishna in her husband. Tara's husband doesn't feel jealous of Krishna. After listening to this from the mouth of Tara's husband, the nervous Krishna is relieved and feels assured that Tara's marriage will be a happy one.

#### “Miss Padma”

This story talks about how a highly educated woman does not believe in the institution of marriage. She wants to have a relationship with an attractive man but without any commitment or responsibility, but at the end she realises that this promiscuity is not good.

This story is of a modern woman. Padma is highly educated with

MA and LLB degrees and she is a very successful lawyer living in an Indian city. She is a staunch believer in women's empowerment and individualism. She considers the institution of marriage a sort of a shackle for women. She wants to remain single and believes in living a life of freedom as a liberated woman.

Miss Padma is rich, with a good income from a profession in law. She is beautiful, young, and is very articulate in conversational skills, which make her a very successful attorney. Because of these attributes, she does not have dearth of boyfriends and playmates. Myriad of handsome young chaps desire her company and some of them are even successful ephemerally in having romantic affairs with Miss Padma.

But no relationship lasts for long as she fails to find a loyal and true romantic partner. She felt that most or all of them just wanted to have a temporary pastime relationship. Although she did not believe in the institution of marriage and its commitments, but she certainly wanted a romantic, trustworthy relationship, maintaining and respecting each other's independence and liberty. She believed in enjoyment, but with no strings attached.

One day, Miss Padma comes across a handsome young gentleman, Mr. Prasad, who is a professor in a city college. She begins to like him. He is also naturally fascinated by Miss Padma. After a few meetings, Miss Padma develops a feeling of trust towards Mr. Prasad. She is enchanted by the professor's personality. After a few romantic meetings, Miss Padma tells him that she has a very big house so why not Mr. Prasad moves in with her. This way they will be with each other all the time. Mr. Prasad, after mutual verbal agreements that both of them will not interfere in each other's lives, agrees to move into Miss Padma's house.

Now, both of them living together enjoy romantic, but at the same time, non-interfering independent lives. They continue this way for some time. In the meantime, Miss Padma becomes pregnant. After a few months of Miss Padma's pregnancy, she starts going to the court less frequently for representing her clients. The other thing that happens simultaneously is that Mr. Prasad starts staying more outside the home. His interest in Miss Padma starts diminishing. He would not return home till 11 at night or even till midnight. Looking at the neglect, Miss Padma expresses her displeasure. She asked him why he stays so late outside the home, especially when she is pregnant and needs him, his company and care. But with the passage of time, Mr. Prasad increasingly distanced himself from Miss Padma. One day, in the morning, Miss Padma noticed that Mr. Prasad did not come

home the whole night. She found out that Mr. Prasad had developed an affair with one of his students and spent most of the time and sometimes a night with her. It was beyond what Miss Padma could tolerate. But she could not do anything about it. She was pregnant and as she did not go to the court for some time, her income had also gone down.

One morning, she asked her peon-servant to go to the bank to withdraw some money for daily expenses. In the afternoon the servant came back from the bank empty handed. Upon asking where the money is, he replied that Mr. Prasad had withdrawn all the money and left for London with his lover student. Miss Padma was shocked but could not do anything about it.

After a few months, Miss Padma was standing on her verandah with her baby in her lap. She noticed an English couple walking with a baby in a perambulator. She started looking at her own baby with mixed thoughts. A successive spree of feelings of love, hate, affection, dislike, and disgust swept through her mind. The story ends.

#### *Veshya* (Prostitute)

The next story narrates how a friend who is trying to salvage his friend from the clutches of a prostitute, actually, in turn, falls himself in deep love with the same prostitute.

This is a tragedy written by Premchand portraying happenings in an urban setting. The characters of the story are Singar Singh, a rich Sikh businessman's son, Leela, Sardar Singar Singh's wife and the daughter of Subedar major, Madhuri, a prostitute and the main character of the story, and Daya Krishna, who is a very close friend of Sardar Singar Singh and his family.

Daya Krishna moved to Calcutta from his native place and started a business. Although the name of the native place is never mentioned in the story, based on the descriptions that Singar Singh frequented to a boat ride on the river, it can be deciphered that this place has some boating club facility. The other important place mentioned in the story is a *kotha*, "red light area", a part of the city, which is the dwelling and business place for prostitutes. These two landscapes are clear evidence of the setting being an urban place.

To make the story short, when Daya Krishna came to his native place from Calcutta after learning about the death of Sardar Singh's father, he found that Singar Singh was fully engrossed in drinking liquor and frequenting the *kotha* of prostitute Madhuri. Singar was not paying attention to his business and also neglected his wife. Daya

Krishna was a very good friend of Singar and his wife Leela. When Daya Krishna was visiting Sardar Singar Singh's house, Leela called Daya Krishna inside the house and narrated the whole story of how after the death of his (Singar's) father, Singar was wasting the money in merrymaking and not paying any attention to his family business. Daya Krishna became sad and promised Leela that he would do something about this and try to bring Singar back to a normal way of life.

In this attempt, he started going to prostitute Madhuri and developed a closeness with her. Learning this, Singar became very angry and became an adversary to his friend Daya Krishna. On the other hand, Daya Krishna and Madhuri continued their relationship which progressively became deeper and deeper. Suddenly one day, something happened. Madhuri left her home without telling anybody. A few days after this incidence, Daya Krishna came hurriedly to Sardar Singh's house and wailingly told him – "Have you heard that Madhuri was no more in this world" – and started lamenting with grief and sorrow. And the story ends.

#### *Unmaad (Infatuation)*

Premchand's story that follows in my narration here paints a canvas of the middle-class urban society represented by a young man named Manhar who for the sake of material success abandons his sincere, dedicated, supportive and loving wife Vagewshwari. At the end, he realises that it was a mirage and he was running after a false dream.

This story covers a large geographic and social area, from India to England and from ordinary persons to elite individuals. The main story tells us how a person of ordinary status in India aspires to achieve a high status in society. For the pursuit of his goal, he deserts his devoted wife, who actually helped him to achieve success in early life to manage to go to London, securing a scholarship to get further training in the job of investigative profession. After arriving in London, he realises that in order to attain higher status in professional life, he should have a beautiful, proficient in social behavior and highly connected wife. He develops a friendship with one such English girl. With her help, he gets a promotion and is able to achieve a lofty position which very few Indians could secure. Manhar subsequently marries this English girl, Jenny. They go to France for their honeymoon. Jenny had connections with high English officials that helped Manhar gain wealth and status in the society. With the passage of time, Manhar reaches a higher ladder in

his profession. In order to win Jenny's love, Manhar took the path of telling a lie. While dating Jenny, Manhar told her that his wife in India had expired.

After occupying and achieving a very lofty position in his profession, which Indians seldom accomplish, he and his English wife come to India and settle in Bombay (now Mumbai).

In Bombay, Manhar remained busy with his official duties. Jenny spent time in visiting Indian tourist places and enjoyed traveling to hill stations, etc. But Manhar did not even contact his family members in his native place. Now most of his friends were British officers or police officers. Jenny profoundly relished the company of these English officers. She even enjoyed flirting with these men visitors to her house, both English and Indian. She considered Manhar 'a tree that she planted and tendered, and now she is enjoying the reward of the fruit-bearing tree' (citation). Manhar slowly started realising this truth and being disappointed gradually distancing himself from Jenny. Now, they were ignoring each other. Manhar was very disenchanted and dejected beholding Jenny's behaviour. Manhar stopped going to parties with Jenny. In response, she also ignored Manhar and continued going to parties all alone and enjoyed her life with other friends. Subsequently, one day Jenny tells Manhar that she is an English woman and he should not expect from her a behaviour pattern of an Indian woman.

Days were passing with mutually silent insinuation and neglect. One day, she told Manhar that it was very hot in Bombay (Mumbai) so she wanted to go to some hill station. And without waiting for his reply, she left for Nainital the same evening.

This action of Jenny severely impacted Manhar's emotional state of mind. The shock was so debilitating that Manhar did not come out of his house for three days. He started recalling and remembering the sweet old days of village childhood, filled with love and blessings. Prompted by the current happenings, Manhar wrote two letters, one resigning his job, and another to Jenny. In the letter, Manhar informed Jenny that he was no more in a relationship with her.

To make the long story short, the main sequence of events is summarised as follows.

After receiving the letter Jenny came back from Nainital to Bombay to Manhar, with the hope that she can make the situation normal. When Jenny arrived in Bombay, she found out that Manhar had left for his native home. After finding Manhar's home address Jenny went there. But, when Jenny walked close to Manhar, he addressed her by the name of his Indian wife, Vageshwari. Manhar did not recognise

Jenny. He saw Vageshwari's face in Jenny. He remembered everybody in his childhood place. He recognised each and every landscape in the village. He did not remember anything about Jenny, London, or his job. Observing this, Jenny told the members of Manhar's family that she was Manhar's wife. Listening to this, Manhar's Indian wife, Vageshwari, vehemently opposed Jenny's claim and told that in fact it was she (Vageshwari) who was Manhar's wife. The conversation became tense and hot and turned somewhat violent. Jenny became very angry and took out a revolver from her purse and moved toward Vageshwari, apparently with the intention to shoot her. Suddenly, Manhar dashed and snatched the revolver from Jenny's hand and killed himself. The story ends.

### *Quaidi (Prisoner)*

This story transcends the geographic borders of India. It takes place in the province of Ukraine in Russia.

It is a complex story amalgamating love, sacrifice, emotions, and patriotism. The story takes place, most probably, during the time of Czar's rule in Russia, most likely before the Russian Revolution. Its main characters, Ivan and Helen, believe in the political movement that strives for the freedom of the people from the oppressions of the Czar. Ivan and Helen gradually started liking each other and were planning to marry someday. Helen was already a supporter of the nationalist movement in Ukraine. After coming in contact with Helen, Ivan also became a supporter of the movement. Ivan belonged to a very rich family. To support a people's movement was a humongous task for him. At the time of despair, Helen used to encourage and reinvigorate his spirit. One day, Helen told him that they have to do something serious to eliminate one particular government official as he is the ruthless person and killed many people involved in the revolutionary movement. He was the newly appointed governor named Romanoff who was appointed in the province of Ukraine. He was a staunch enemy of revolutionary nationalists.

Helen suggested a plan. Even though, Ivan was not a person who essentially liked revolutionary politics, yet, he patiently listened to Helen's proposal. Of course, being influenced by Helen's company, Ivan gradually had somewhat developed sympathy with the revolution. Nevertheless, he really did not want to risk his life for this plan. He did not openly object to participating in the bloody revolution, but cautiously, he warned Helen about the risks involved including shedding blood and assassinating some officers. Ivan was

not as zealous a revolutionary as Helen. She even told Ivan that if he was not ready to assassinate an officer for his heinous atrocities done to the common people, she will do it alone. She told Ivan that she was planning to do something very dangerous and consequential in this regard. She revealed her plan. She told him that in order to achieve her goal, she would have to flirt with Romanoff. She earnestly urged Ivan that it may evoke some feeling of mistrust and jealousy in Ivan's mind. So she urged him not to doubt or disbelieve her. She assured him of her true and everlasting love for Ivan. Ivan gave her his consent for the conspiracy.

After finalising the plan, Helen started looking for an opportunity and occasion of coming close to Governor Romanoff. Ultimately, Helen managed to strike an acquaintance with Romanoff. She was able to convince the governor that she was deeply in love with him. She won the governor's heart.

According to the plan, Helen and Romanoff would go to a park and spend some time together in a romantic atmosphere. Around 11:00 pm in the late evening, Ivan would come to the park with a revolver and kill governor Romanoff. Accordingly, Ivan arrived at the scene on time and fired a bullet pointing to Romanoff. But the governor escaped the assassination attempt. Before Ivan could fire another shot, Romanoff caught hold of Ivan's hand and called the security guard waiting outside the park, and arrested Ivan. Ivan was charged for attempting assassination. Helen was the eyewitness from the government side. Seeing this, Ivan felt as if the world had turned all dark and he descended into deep depression. He was sentenced to imprisonment for 14 years.

After 14 years, Ivan came out of jail and decided to meet Helen and ask her why she did betray him after all! Helen deceived him in the court trial. When he reaches Romanoff's huge palace, where Helen lived, he saw that Helen's body in coffin was being brought out from the palace. Ivan came close to the coffin. Romanoff recognised Ivan and told him how Helen was so sorry for what she did and how she always wanted Ivan to forgive her for her deadly betrayal. She always remembered Ivan and felt sad for her behaviour.

Ivan forgives her and gives his shoulder to her dead body to the funeral. After the cremation was over, all left for their homes. The next day when Romanoff came to offer his prayers to Helen's grave, he saw that Ivan was still sitting by the side of Helen's grave. Romanoff noticed that Ivan was actually dead!

Ensuing story by Premchand primarily portrays the status of women in the Indian society.

### “Kusum”

The story which follows portrays the status of women in the urban Indian society. Milieu is the cities of Lucknow and Agra. Through this story, Premchand advocates women’s empowerment and self-respect. The main theme of the story tells how men have long neglected women folks in the Indian society, and what should be the response to this social behaviour.

The story opens up with a number of letters written by an educated Indian wife to her husband. This woman, named Kusum, writes several letters one after another to her estranged husband requesting, praying to him as to why he was not replying to her letters. She writes to her husband ‘please tell me what my fault is. Why do not you ask me to come to you from my parent’s home? Whenever my brother took me to your home, you did not talk with me. You did not even look towards me. Please, you can punish me for my fault, if there is any, but please talk to me and take me home from my father’s place’ (citation).

Premchand, in this story, very poignantly describes how women are considered and treated subservient and chaffy to men by the society. Essentially, this story highlights the plight of a woman in the hands of her husband only because her father could not pay enough dowry to meet his son-in-law’s higher education expenses in London. Probably, at the time of marriage negotiation, Kusum’s father might have mentioned that he would pay for his foreign education.

Kusum’s husband neither replied to any of her letters nor did he explain why he was so upset with Kusum that he even did not talk with her whenever she went to her in-laws’ or husband’s house. And that too without any fault of hers. Towards the end of the story, when Kusum finds out the reason for her husband’s neglect of her being the dowry issue, her self-respect arose, and she decided not to go to him and remain independent and keep her self-respect and dignity, defying his indifference.

## II

Premchand was a master crafter befittingly employing metaphors, idioms, simile and local proverbs in his stories and novels. This, he used profusely in the portrayal of both rural and urban-based stories. At this point, it would be appropriate to highlight some pertinent points related to Premchand’s writings.

During 1920s and 1930s, the economic condition of majority of

rural people was miserable, much worse than it is today. *Zamindars* (landlords, large landowners) exploited the poor farmers and landless labourers. *Begaari* system was very much in vogue. In this system, zamindars took undue advantage of landless agricultural labourers, forcing them to work during festivals or familial marriages without paying any wages. Lower-caste people in the villages were treated like pariahs. Depictions, evoking such images, are in abundance in Premchand's village-based stories and novels. The social and economic fabric of the urban realm of India of his times was much different from that of the rural world. Besides better infrastructure and stronger economy, urban experiences included activities like literary movements, political movements, labour unions, impact of Western education on contemporary Indian society, slow but obvious influences of Westernization, etc.

Premchand's rural poor farmers show a deep attachment with the agricultural landscapes such as farmland, crops, cows, bullocks, domestic animals, ploughs and so on. They also are very traditional in their way of living and following social rituals religiously. Examples can be seen among the characters of the epic novel *Godaan* and stories like '*Poos Ki Raat*' and '*Kafan*', etc. His urban characters are not as traditional in their attitude towards everyday life. Such behaviour can be found in several characters in stories mentioned in this essay, such as "Miss Padma", "Manhar" and others.

Continuation and further unfolding of fiction-writing styles can be found in some contemporary and somewhat later writers. To name a few illustrious writers, these are Yashpal, Upendranath 'Ashka', Saadat Hasan Manto, Sachchidananda Hiranand Vatsyayan 'Agyeya' and others. Of course, the forte and main focus of these writers were somewhat different from that of Premchand's. Yashpal was a revolutionary active freedom fighter. Thus, his writings reveal themes related to revolutionary ideology. Upendra Nath 'Ashka', a realist who wrote about the life as it is, so that the people can relate to his stories. Premchand is also supposed to be realist; may be Ashka's realism differed in terms of subject matter. Instead of portraying the bright section of the society 'Ashka' chose to write about the depressed section of the society. Saadat Hasan Manto, another almost contemporary of Premchand, chose to write about the most deprived sections of the society, specially, those who were drastically sexually exploited. 'Agyeya' belonging to the transitional-period closer to more recent past, wrote mostly about psychologically complex characters. Shekhar of his novel *Shekhar Ek Jeevani* is such a character. In this context, once 'Agyeya' said that while Premchand's

characters are simple, his characters are complex in nature.

Thus, based on the elaboration of only a few selected stories here by me, Premchand's readers may find it revelatory that during the 1930s, he also wrote a number of short stories that were based on urban themes. Portrayal of characters in these urban stories are as powerful as we observe in his stories which depict rural characters, such as Dhania and Gobar in his novel *Godaan*, and characters like Madhav and Gheesu in '*Kafan*' and Halku and Munni in '*Poos Ki Raat*', and so on. Those, who feel that Premchand's characters are not as complex or emotional as in the writings of some other celebrated writers, they probably will reconsider their opinion after reading some of those stories of Premchand which bring to life characters rich in complexities of character and emotional depth and convolution.

#### Note

1. All the stories mentioned in this paper are taken from Premchand's *Mansarovar*, Part 2, Allahabad, Saraswati Press, 1973.