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A Marxist Discourse Analysis of Munshi Premechand's Short Story the Shroud

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Abstract

This research probed deeply in the short story The Shroud written by Munshi Premechand and focused especially on the discourse analysis from the Marxist perspective. For the textual qualitative analysis of The Shroud the Marxist theories of Dobie and Bressler were utilized. Findings of the study clearly revealed that, by scrutinizing into the area where it overlapped with the condition of utter despair, it strived to investigate the socio-economic conditions in which the characters of the story were caught up, suppressed and oppressed. It further examined the relationship of socio-political condition with economic power. Hence, it elaborated how the characters were mentally disturbed psychologically and mentally even they seemed deprived of self respect if it would come to have money. It further explored that the story is of every social setup; how the proletariat 'have nots' are brutally exploited by the bourgeoisie 'haves'.

Keywords: *Marxism, Suppression, Oppression, Proletariat, Bourgeoisie.*

Introduction

The present research comprises of a discussion on the impact of economy in creating class distinction in *The Shroud* how the "have-nots" are suffering at the hands of "haves" and that exploitation leads them to utter despair and even towards insanity. Munshi Premchand is considered to be the first literary expert hand at the art of Urdu short story writing. Although this particular genre has been introduced to Urdu fiction by English literature but it was Premchand who took the art of short story writing to the pinnacle of excellence. Singh (1976) stated, "Many critics found him to be realist, a humanist, a reformer and an idealist. This fiction is the most powerful and true to life depiction of people, their lives, their aspirations, desires, victories, injustice, defeats, courage and cowardice." All these traits of his poetry are well depicted in *The Shroud*. Malik (1967) projected, in the short stories there is the depiction of the true image of the society and the analysts' can examine it from the Marxist prospects, can evaluate it from political perspective. He is of the view that Marxist analysts probe in literature by examining dialectical materialism (p.651).

Premchand is not only considered the father of the Urdu short story but also the initiator of realism in Urdu fiction. He is fully aware of 'Life', and its organic dimensions (Amjad, 2014) . He understands the social problems and has tried to understand the complications of the social pattern on which the society has been

structured and keeps on witnessing the happenings closely (Akhtar, 2013). In his presidential address to the first Progressive Writers Association's meeting, he came up with following expression which encapsulates his approach towards life and literature: Literature has been defined many times in many different ways, but the best ever definition of literature is its quality of being a critique of life; whether it is in the form of prose, short stories or poetry, it should comment on Life (Braylvi, 1986). His progressive stance, because of which he continued to take a step forward than the rest of literary minds around him, makes him take sides with the most modern political and social movements of his time. Although initially he was inspired by the Gandhian views and he propagated the same ideas in his fiction as well but later he moved on to a larger and a vast canvas with the representation of that life and environment that he was familiar with (Ahmed, 1986). Further Braylvi (1986) endorsed the point thus: Premchand's artistic genius is important for the reason that he is known for speaking on the behalf of life and its problems. Along with the representation of the rural life, he has painted the Indian and human life too. With Premchand the predominating theme is Life and its complications (p. 153).

Another interesting aspect to his artistic mastery is his understanding of the psychological makeup of the characters he works with. He exhibits the expert skills of diving deep down into the emotional and psychological recesses of the minds and hearts of the characters. The best ever psychological portrayals of the human mind populate Premchand's fiction and short stories are loaded with the manifestations of human emotions and feelings. His short stories immersed in the themes of patriotism and national struggle, no doubt, are also considered the best ever creations on the subject. Bressler (2011) stated, that Premchand not only wanted the sub-continent to be free from the British Raj but also want the capitalist system to be ended. He wanted such a system that was based on equality and humanity where the chances for economic prosperity were equally available for everyone. Preemchand is the first ever short story writer who has come up with the most sensitively throbbing heart for the masses.

Roy (2004) remarks, subalterns are always advised to be silent; if they ever try to project their ideas they are most of the time unheard by the proletariat class. The time of Premchand is the time of bulk of enlightened ideas, a lot of revolutions were going on but hope was still glimmering (Zaheer, 2012 p.96). So, such sort of situations is projected by Premchand in his fictional writings. He has tried to unveil the social injustices prevailing in the society. Zeno (2012) proclaims, after world war II the writers were aware of social injustices, realism and social criticism, and Urdu writers have found themselves in the political storm in the prevailing society (p.41). Therefore we can note such sort of economic and social strife in the fiction of Premchand and the selected short story too.

The scope and significance of this study lies in the fact that it elaborates the economic disparity, class disparity and gender disparity prevalent in our society. So, there is a need to cope the issue and address the grievances of the lower class by providing them the necessities of life. Therefore the objective our study is to highlight the injustice prevailing in the society regarding class and economic issue in our society. Thus by pin pointing the weaknesses of our society its aim is to address the grievances of the dejected class in our society.

Research Questions

This research paper will answer these research questions.

1. How the socioeconomic aspect of Marxist theory divides the society into the 'haves' and the 'have nots' in *The Shroud* ?

2. How this class structure affects the characters morally, socially and economically?

Theoretical Frame Work and Research Methodology

The analysis of the study is based upon the theory of Marx. I have discussed what Marxism is, and provided the opinions of Bressler, Dobie and Tyson about Marxism and have applied these concepts in the qualitative textual analysis of *The Shroud*; hence how class distinction and exploitation of the lower class by the upper class a Marxist concept creates the divide in the classes. Despite that I have explained how this theoretical framework of Marxism can be used to explore the economic strife in *The Shroud.*

A Marxist literary analysis tries to depict inequities in social classes, imbalance of power among people and manipulation of the proletariat/workers at the hands of the bourgeoisie. It focuses on the formation of different classes within a community and how this difference creates problem of stat. Furthermore, it analyzes that how this friction among different social classes of the society gives rise to the construction of different identities of the characters according to the economic and social background they have. The characters are seen grappling with problems and issues having the socio-economic origins and their behaviors, thoughts and gestures are strongly influenced and conditioned by the socio-economic status they are placed in by the elite/bourgeoisie. This most of the times is accepted by them without any resistance. Whereas some cases, caused by severe oppressive control and manipulation, may come up with the fierce eruption of the inner most heartfelt emotions and sentiments in the form of strong resistance and negation.
By examining a society closely it becomes evident that it is based on a series of conflicts among various social classes. These classes are formed due to unequal distribution of means of production and unequal economic status. So, we can say the means of production generates a social setup in a society, hence introducing, "the concept of dialectical materialism"— giving the concept that the means of production controls the ethics, beliefs, and institutions wrote Dobie (2011), he further states, that who owns the means of production controls the lower class. This social setup forms the social base of a society (p.80). From this base, maintains Marxism, arises the superstructure which according to Bressler (2011) was, an amalgamation or multitude of educational institutions, political systems, ethical beliefs, economic agendas, particular theories of art and architecture, media and religious beliefs that one class grasps to control the other class (p. 119). Which suggests that norms, values, art and morality of a society is generated by different social, political and ideological institutions and systems and at its root works the base which is essentially economic. Dobie (2011) argued, because it's the dominant classes that control the superstructure, control the lower classes, this control creates class conflict in the society. (p. 85)

Results and Discussion

Individuals are controlled and manipulated by a social setup controlled by an empowered and self-perpetuating elite class (Bressler, 2011, p. 12). In this scenario people have to be subservient, meaningless and power less lives. A Marxist discourse analysis exfoliates the social inequalities, imbalance of power among classes and manipulation of the proletariat at the hands of bourgeoisie. It focuses on the formation of different class struggle among them. Furthermore, it enhances how this distinction among different social classes of the society gives rise to the formation of different identities of the characters according to the economic and social background they have.

The characters in *The Shroud* are seen caught in the whirl of problems and issues having socio economic origins and their behaviors, thoughts and actions are strongly influenced and conditioned by the socio-economic status. Ghisu and Madhav in *The Shroud* do not buy *Kafan* for Budihya instead they fulfill their stomachs with the five rupees they have gathered for her shroud. It shows their utter helplessness. Even they don't have enough money to fulfill their hunger completely. Ghisu recalled his past, how on the wedding procession of a landowner twenty years back, he ate as much *puris* as he desired. He had never eaten that much food in his life, this was the memorable event of his life

Portrayal of Master and Slave Relationship

By intruding deeply in a society, it becomes clear that it is entangled and structured on a series of running conflicts among various classes. These social classes are structured by the unequal distribution of money and the means to gain this money. Dobie (2011) gives the concept of dialectical materialism; implying the concept, the lower class is controlled by the upper class through the infrastructure of the society and further argued, this distributed the general masses into two major classes those who are the owners of the means of production called the bourgeoisie and the working class. *Chamars* a lower laboring class in India, which is suffering at the hands of landlords-who owns the means of production and are exploiting the subjected and subjugated *Chamars.* In *The Shroud* the relation of the two classes is shown of the Master and the slave. As we see Ghisue with eyes full of tears and prostrating, in a deplorable dejected condition and say, "Master I'm in great trouble! Madhav's wife passed away last night….we're devastated…our house is destroyed! I'm your slave" and the reply of The Landlord Sahib was full of contempt and of utter despair for the suffering lot, as he says, "Get out of here! Keep the corpse in your house and le it rot! ... You treacherous bastard! You villain!" This incident is not to show the contempt and hatred, so he pulled two rupees out from his pocket and gave to Ghisu. But he had not said a single word of consolation.

Bressler (2011) was of the view; a society is a whole of major two classes one who owns and controls the setup and infrastructure and through this infrastructure keep an eye on the lower class (p.13). The upper class never wants the lower class to progress and be prosperous because it is the upper class that controls the lower class for their own gains they exploit the lower class. They own the infrastructure and have an upper hand on the working class. The upper class gains economic benefit at the hands of the lower labor class. As we see in *The Shroud* the characters are not aware of the grotesque reality of economic oppression. After the death of Budhiya they were able to collect five rupees in ready cash. The characters Ghisu and Madhav went to buy the shroud for Budhiya. But there they condemn the custom to cover a dead body with a rag. Ironic statement is said by Madhav is worth mentioning here , " What a bad custom it is that someone who did not even get a rag to cover her body when she was alive, needs a new shroud when she is dead". It projects how the lower working class is deprived of their basic right to cover their bodies. Grotesque reality is projected here the deplorable condition of the lower class is projected here.

Another ironic statement is worth mentioning here, "What else is it good for? If we'd had these five rupees earlier, we would have given her some medicine". So maybe she would not die. It shows that how they are even deprived of the basic health facilities and medicine. Until the evening comes but they do not buy any shroud for the dead body, not of silk, nor even of cotton.

Marxist False Consciousness in *The Shroud*

In the Marxist perspective the dominant class utilizing all its power and resources, makes not only the running systems seem logical and natural but to be right and recognizable by the working classes, it forms the consciousness or ideology of a society. Marx calls it as false consciousness. As Dobie (2011) stated, the upper class consider it their right to utilize and exploit the lower class for their interest. Even a corrupt system seems working for them. Same is the case in *The Shroud* where lower class is not questioning the hegemony of the upper class. This privilege of the 'haves' over the 'have nots' make them hold the steering in the control of the dominating class and drive the lower class 'have nots'. This is the way how the suffering people, without having knowledge of being suffered, becomes a trap at the hands of bourgeoisie-with whom the ultimate power lies-the economic, material power, cultural hegemony, indicating the domination of a cultural hegemony, indicating the prominence of a culturally diverse society by the upper class, who manipulate the beliefs and perceptions of the labor class. We can see in *The Shroud* how the masters are controlling the fate of the slaves. Even lower class is accepting this reality and calling themselves as slaves. This false consciousness compels the lower class to think it's their fate to suffer, to be ruled by the upper class, to be governed by the elites and to be controlled by the better ones who have money in their hands. This false consciousness makes the rich richer and the poor poorer. So the systems

runs like this without change, the change is only possible when the lower class thinks about their deprivation and try to topple the regime prevailing. In the same way

Moral Bankruptcy of the Lower Class

The characters in The Shroud are prone to societal embedded class structure prevailing at that time. This social nexus has made the characters morally bankrupt. Ghisu and Madhav start taking liquor. After drink they take some snacks and fried fish. It seems insulting for humanity that they are having a party while a dead body is kept in their house for burial.. Ghisu is of the view, "what's the use of wrapping her in a shroud, after all it would only be burnt. The characters like Ghisu and Madhav are devoid of manly feelings as Mahdav was not moving to watch his wife who is dying of pain. He does not even move to give her medicine and that desolate lady dies due to their self centeredness. Such is the irony a woman is deprived of medicine on the death bed due to the inhuman attitude by her husband for whom she has sacrificed her life. And even after death she is deprived of a piece of cloth to cover her body. Such is the grotesque reality. The poor are deprived of morality when it comes to money because they have not seen enough money to fulfill their dreams, desires and needs. While the rich people are too devoid of morality because of the plenty of money, because of abundance of money they are indulged in merry making.

Hunger the Biggest Driving Force

The characters Ghisu, Madhav and Budhiya belong to the lower class. Except some necessary elements, or things needed like some clay pots they are not having anything else in their home. "Covering their nakedness with torn rags, free from cares of the world, laden with debt….they suffered abuse, and blows too, but not grief". Besides the suffering characters do not find anything to eat they eat roasted potatoes. Madhav don't go to see his dying wife because behind his back his father would eat more potatoes. Hunger becomes the bigger driving force in this story because in poverty, the hunger is the biggest problem to deal with. The characters in *The Shroud* compromise on the so called moral and social values when it comes to having a face to face with hunger. Hunger convinces them not to get bothered by their egos and self respect. They are such poor people that only have few things that can be counted on fingers. Even to cover their bodies they have 'torn rags', not complete cloths. They are suffering at the hands of the rich people. Although they are laden with debt but care free, although they are suffering from abuse but do not feel any grief because of senselessness. Hunger is the only force that is leading them.

Portrayal of the Female Characters

Female characters are financially dependent on the male members as Budhiya is dependent in *The Shroud*. Being part of the gender that is considered socially and economically week, they are further pushed at margins. Male members consider females as commodity. By considering them their property they deprive them of their basic rights of food, shelter and clothes to cover their bodies. Budhiya is deprived of her right to be treated medically while she was ill. While she is dead she is deprived of her right of a decent burial. She is dehumanized while her dead body was kept at home and her husband instead of taking shroud for her was busy in eating and marry making.

Awareness of the Marginalized Existence

Awareness of marginalization generates different sort of reactions among the suffering masses sometimes they accept the prevailing reality as in *The Shroud* but at sometimes they show resistance. The form of resistance keeps changing accordingly. Even in these deprived conditions, we see them making some very wise and sound decisions for their sustenance, which could be morally condemnable but are very practical otherwise. Ghisu and Madhav's decision to buy food and liquor instead of shroud shows they are aware of their marginalized existence and were of the view that it does not make any difference that she is given a

piece of cloth after her death or not after all she has to be burnt. They are such poverty stricken people that do not have any moral or ethical sense of a decent burial.

The Emotional Aspect of the Characters

Outwardly these characters seem to be quiet and insignificant but they have their own complete world, a world of emotions, feelings, dreams, disappointments and aspirations. Ghisu and Madhav behave inhumanly hence they deprive Budhiya of a decent burial but at the same level feel the pride of "giving alms to the beggar". Although Ghisu and Madhav know it's important for Budhiya to give burial. At moments they seem deprive of emotions they just seem selfish. Despite thinking about the dead body they are busy in eating, they are grief stricken they are such deprived that when it comes to money they forget about the ethics and morality. It is evident from the short story the upper class is behaving unethically due to the abundance of money while the lower class is behaving unethically due to the scarcity of money. So according to the Marxists a balanced society is required and for that rebellion by the lower class is necessary.

Inactive Participation in the Main Social Stream

The inactive social participation of the lower class in the mainstream social power makes them to accept that they are of no use for the society. This not only makes their life a constant journey in the dark but also strengthens the rich proletariat/haves. Ghisu and Madhav present the same scenario. The lower class follows the rules made by the upper class. They just serve as subservient whose purpose is just to serve their masters. This upper class makes the rules, sets the customs and traditions, forms aims and agendas and lower class just follows their instructions. Lower class works on the wages fixed by the upper class. Capitalists exploit the laborers.

'Haves' / Proletariat in Possession of the Key Positions

The rich, elite class occupies the key positions in the society and "have nots" followed them. This power that they have secured is because of money; make the rich imitable for the poor. When the landlord in The Shroud gives the alms for Budhiya's burial, the rest of the village follows him. Rich class owns the means of production, they are the owners, the employers, exploiters the class Carl Marx calls the 'haves' in the short story they are exploiting the lower class 'have nots'. They are deprived of ethical sense and feelings for the deprived class. They deal them like inhuman. This exploitation can lead them towards revolution that can change the scenario.

Conclusion

We can say class difference and Marxist distinction of class upon socio-economic conditions is very well depicted in *The Shroud*. To end the discussion, as Tyson (1950) stated, "Marxists today refer to socio-economic rather than economic class, when talking about the class structure". The same is the case in the story under discussion. Characters are marginalized, humiliated and manipulated at the hands of the rich, elite class. Women are also suppressed by their counter male partners. Women are exploited by their male counterparts and high class too they are under double bind. 'Have nots' are marginalized and are aware of their inferior status in the prevailing circumstances, so are away from the mainstream politics and are deprived of the key positions in the society by the "Haves" , the upper class. This system can only change if the lower class rebel against the customs, traditions, and rules set by the upper class. Due to false consciousness the elite class is successful in creating the oblivion in the lower class that they are born to rule, they are so not to be educated, they are the serving class, the labor class deem to suffer and humiliated. So they are suffering, oppressed, suppressed and are being exploited at the hands of the proletariats. The rich class is the owner, the rules maker, the controller of the means of production, former of social and ethical values, maker of customs and traditions and the poor people are their employed

workers, laborers, menial workers who can be exploited socially, morally and economically. The upper class is deprived of moral sense due to the abundance of money while the lower class is morally bankrupt because of lack of money and basic human rights important for survival. The lower class is marginalized and they know about their marginalized existence and do not think of moral and ethical values when it comes to hunger and money. Because, hunger is the biggest driving force in the story.

This analysis is limited to the Marxist discourse analysis of one short story of Munshi Premchand, for future research it can be extended to the other short stories, novels, poetry of the same author and the other authors too. Hence, it is highly recommended to explore the literature for this purpose, because there is a need to address the issue in detail so, this issue can be curtailed

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