Premchand's shifting portrayals of womanhood in colonial North India: Between conformity and resistance

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This article examines the nuanced and open-ended representations of women in the fictional works of Premchand, one of the most versatile and popular Urdu-Hindi writers of the 1920s and 1930s. By looking into a wide range of his writings, it argues that Premchand's literary engagement with the women's question cannot be summarily understood through such binaries as 'conservative' or 'liberal/radical'. While the virtuous and compliant woman is valorised as an ideal within the domestic sphere in certain stories, Premchand's narratives in the nationalist mode foreground an alternative set of ideals for the urban, educated and middle-class Hindu woman. Far from being formulaic, Premchand's portrayals of womanhood seem to be shifting, tentative and thematically contingent.

Keywords: Premchand, women, resistance, Hindi literature, colonial North India

I
Introduction

In 1928, in one of his conversations with his wife Shivrani Devi, Premchand (1880–1936), the versatile and popular Urdu-Hindi writer of

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his times, enquired: 'Why can't women mould themselves according to this particular epoch?' (Devi 2000: 113).[1]

This question was live for him, a consequence of the disquisition on the oppressed status of women in society and concern for their self-determination. The sensitive portrayal of women, in my reading, constitutes one of the major pillars of Premchand's literary corpus, along with his rendition of peasant and nationalist discourse. Indeed, the representation of women in Premchand's fiction, in my opinion, can be viewed as a battery of creative responses to the age in which he lived and the literary traditions that he both inherited from as well as helped refashion. As Francesca Orsini succinctly puts it, 'Half of his characters were women, itself a huge novelty, and they, too, spoke vehemently, powerfully, convincingly at a time when women were just entering the public sphere' (Orsini 2004: viii). She further points out how it is only with Premchand that we have in Hindi and Urdu literature a sense that women make up half of society and that they are as varied in character and social position as men, with whom they are shown as constantly interacting (ibid.: xxii–xxiii).

However, Premchand's women-centred episodes and narratives have largely elicited conflicting responses from scholars and critics alike. The overriding emphasis is either on outlining the ideological limitations of such narratives (Gupta 1991; Pandey 1986), or valorising their literary radicalism taken at face value (Avasthi 1962; Lal 1962). As opposed to these two approaches, this article brings out the nuanced and open-ended representations of women in the fictional works of Premchand. It argues that Premchand's literary engagement with the women's question,[2] resists essentialising and therefore cannot be summarily understood through such binaries as 'conservative' or 'liberal/radical'.

[1] *The Oxford India Premchand* (hereafter OIP, 2004) along with *The Co-wife and Other Stories* (2008), Alok Rai's translation of *Nirmala* (1999), Christopher R. King's translation of *Ghaban* (2000), Snehal Shingavi's translation of *Sevasadan* (2005), Lalit Srivastava's translation of *Karmabhumi* (2006) and Gordon Roadarmel's translation of *Godaan* (2007) are the texts in English that have been used for this essay along with some of Premchand's stories translated by David Rubin in OIP. The rest of the translation of Premchand's Hindi texts is mine.

[2] The 'women's question' in the pre-Independence Indian context refers to the public and scholarly interventions concerning social reforms and education for women in 19th-century India. These were primarily on the basis of the available evidence from Bengal and northern India. See Chatterjee (1994, 2006), Mani (1998) and Sarkar (2001a, 2001b).

While the virtuous and compliant woman is valorised as an ideal within the domestic sphere, in certain stories, Premchand's narratives in the nationalist mode foreground an alternative set of ideals for the urban, educated and middle-class Hindu woman. His nationalist consciousness emphasised similar ideals (ideals such as kindness, chastity, asceticism and self-sacrifice) for both the female protagonists of his fiction as well as the male characters with whom they interact and compete in the political/public sphere. As a nationalist subject in Premchand's rendering, the woman not only subverts the prevalent assumptions and the existing stereotypes of the domestic sphere, but can also be remarkably strong-willed, tenacious, and resourceful as compared to her male counterparts. Far from being formulaic, Premchand's portrayals of womanhood can be seen to be shifting, tentative and thematically contingent.

II
Conformity as an ideal: Conjugal relationships and the domestic sphere

The question of social reform constitutes a large part of the major debates, discussions and arguments that were doing the rounds in the political landscape of 19th-century colonial India. Its manifestations also extended to the various legislative measures that were passed to that effect: the Bengal Sati Regulation (1829), the Hindu Widows Re-marriage Act (1856), the Resolution on Native Female Education (1868) and the Age of Consent Act (1891).[3] In literary circles, this meant that alongside the tales of fantasy, escapade, chivalry and courtship, there was also a proliferation of *stri-upyogi* (useful for women) literature that combined religious and moral notions and values of *stri-dharma* (women's moral duty) with Victorian ideas about domesticity and womanhood (Orsini 1999: 139–40). Deputy Nazir Ahmad's *Mirat-ul-Uroos* (The Bride's Mirror, 1869), and Pandit Gauri Dutt's *Devrani Jethani ki Kahani* (The Story of Two Sisters-in-Law, 1870), are two quintessential novels that belong to this category (Orsini 1999: 154).

Intimately linked to the idea of social reform, was the question of preserving the sanctity of marital relationships and advocating the

[3] For more on some of these Acts, see Carroll (1989), Engels (1983) and Mani (1998).

virtues of domestic bliss and conjugal harmony. Writing about the institution of marriage in colonial India, Charu Gupta comments:

> Marriage was seen as the most important social and economic institution of the family, within which individual needs and desires were secondary. It was not merely a civil contract but a religious tie for life. Any attack on the aims and ideals of marriage was seen as immoral and wrong.… Marriage formed the family and families formed the future citizens of the nation. Thus marriage was empowered with a moral vision. (2001: 125)

As a writer, Premchand shared the cultural zeitgeist of the early decades of the 20th century. In his non-nationalist narratives, women who conform to conventional concerns and expectations of the domestic sphere are valorised as ideal. The first story that 'Nawab Rai' published under the new name of 'Premchand', namely 'Bade Ghar ki Beti' (A Noble Daughter-in-Law, 1910) would corroborate this view. Anandi, the principal protagonist, prevents a family feud by ungrudgingly forgiving her brother-in-law who had otherwise hit her with his slippers. Her father-in-law effusively praises her sense of compassion, maturity, and tolerance: 'Daughters from noble families are like this. They always manage a situation pointing south' (Premchand 2004a: 108). This story, which received immediate popularity and recognition, was also reportedly Premchand's favourite (Rai 1962: 327) and in consonance with his ideal of womanhood as he revealed to his friend, Indar Nath Madan, in a letter, written in 1934: 'My ideal of a woman is a combination of sacrifice, service, and sanctity, all in one place – a sacrifice that has no end to it, a service that is forever volitional, and a sanctity that can never be doubted' (Premchand 1962a: 235). This ideal was upheld throughout his literary career, evident even in Premchand's later works such as *Godaan* (The Gift of a Cow, 1936), a novel that is otherwise a narrative of disillusionment and scepticism vis-à-vis the larger meta-narratives of social reform and nationalist aspirations.

In this novel, Govindi, the passive, patient and virtuous wife of Mr Khanna, is represented as the living embodiment of sacrifice and service. Despite being constantly mistreated by her husband, she humbly accepts her situation with remarkable fortitude. As an archetypal trophy wife, she believes, '[I]t's far better to suffer than to cause suffering' (Premchand

2007: 359). As Vasudha Dalmia points out, 'The middle-class woman, withdrawn from any participation in the productive process and with limited property rights, was confined, in whatever state of enlightenment, within the walls of the bourgeois home' (1997: 248). Both Anandi and Govindi would confirm the impression that for Premchand, the idea of a companionate marriage need not always be a model of complete equality between spouses. Tanika Sarkar observes that this view of conjugality was recurrent in colonial North India: 'Conjugality was based on the apparent absolutism of one partner and the total subordination of the other' (2001a: 39). The conventional understanding of the institution of marriage implicitly entailed a hierarchical, lopsided and inequitable arrangement characterised by adjustments and compromises.

However, Premchand's virtuosity as a creative writer can be more accurately assessed if one takes into account, the alternative subject positions that he is able to imagine for women, even in his non-nationalist narratives. For instance, in *Godaan* itself, Minakshi represents the antithesis of Govindi. She not only reads about women's rights in the papers but also participates in the activities of a women's club. Consequently, she is introduced to a notion of the 'right to feel', which in turn results in a severe thrashing of her libertine and alcoholic husband (Orsini 1999: 150). What is also remarkable is that this episode is completely divested of all traces of authorial disapprobation—a tendency that usually undergirds Premchand's peasant and women-centred episodes and narratives. It is not merely a straightforward example of a reversal in terms of gender representation. Minakshi's unsparing attitude towards her husband is contrasted with her compassionate behaviour vis-à-vis the prostitute who is entertaining Digvijay Singh. The liberated, dauntless and non-conforming wife realises only too well that the dancing girl is not at fault because 'women are all just pawns of men's pleasure' (Premchand 2007: 394).

One can almost discern a similar kind of representation in 'Kusum' (1932), a short story in which the eponymous protagonist ultimately abandons all her hopes and aspirations of an ideal and companionate marriage and decides to lead an 'independent' and unencumbered life, far removed from the constraints of domesticity and wifely devotion (Premchand 2009: 41). Like Minakshi, Kusum too is introduced to a notion of the 'right to feel', through an anonymous book that describes how '[in] the olden times, women were simply considered to be men's

property, just like the other prerogatives such as domestic animals or land assets' (Premchand 2009: 37). This newly discovered knowledge vis-à-vis the hierarchical nature of the man–woman relationship enables her to challenge, question and eventually undermine the undisputed authority of her husband, a callous and self-indulgent individual who remains conspicuous by his very absence in the story. Here, both Minakshi and Kusum act as a dialectical and discursive presence challenging Premchand's ideal of womanhood.

The writer's representation of the 'new woman', who through her acquaintance with literature, history books and journalistic writings, interrogates commonly received notions of conforming to the standards and stereotypes of marital relationships and harmonious domesticity, is quite extraordinary since it appears even in his non-nationalist stories. It foregrounds an alternative variety of stri-upyogi literature, that is, a literature that caters to the needs, aspirations and priorities of women instead of being didactic. This was in tune with the Hindi public sphere (Orsini 2002: 11–16), where journals such as *Grihalakshmi*, *Stri Darpan*, and *Chand* 'gave new meanings to the notion of "useful for women"', and 'social reform came to mean … the reform of society on women's behalf' (ibid.: 305–06).

Orsini (2004) pertinently points out that the burgeoning voices of Hindi women writers in this period like Mahadevi Varma and Subhadra Kumari Chauhan preferred the character of the silently suffering woman, attracting the reader's pity for her unjust predicament and left it to the narrator to express rage on her behalf. A male writer like Premchand, in contrast, chose women characters to voice the strongest arguments, complaints and feelings (ibid.: xxiv). Premchand's conception of womanhood could accommodate subversive formulations and contending viewpoints. While writing a review of Bhuvaneshwar Prasad's *Kaarvaa* (Caravan, 1935), a collection of one-act plays, he recalls the following aphorism from the author's text: 'Happiness in married life is nothing but a synonym for that sense of pride that a husband or wife feels on vanquishing their better half' (Premchand 1962b: 375).

Premchand was also critical of the idea that men should consider themselves superior to women simply by virtue of being breadwinners. He believed that domestic work was an unacknowledged contribution (Premchand 1962b: 266–67). This sentiment is poignantly captured through Budhiya's remarks in *Premashram* (The Sanctuary of Love,

1922): 'Poor women! We're always considered worthless despite being overwhelmed by the sheer drudgery of household chores' (Premchand 2002: 351).

Ruth Vanita points out how Premchand's sensitivity to women gives the lie to the fallacy of identity politics that would claim that only members of an oppressed group can adequately portray its suffering (2008: xvi). According to Vanita, Premchand accurately portrays male victimisation of women as universal and endemic, and his radical critique is often tinged with bitterness. But most importantly, she draws attention to the way in which the writer was keenly aware of how 'marriage may stifle a woman's creativity while autonomy can free up her potential' (Vanita 2008: xvi).

Stories such as 'Subhagi' (1930), and 'Saut' (The Co-wife, 1931) show that single women can outdo men on their own turf, thereby winning universal respect. In 'Saut', what is equally remarkable is the idea of role-reversal because of which Dasia proves to be a more desirable 'husband', to her co-wife Rajia than their spouse had ever been to either of them (Premchand 2008: 134). This role-reversal captures the nuances and subtleties of sisterhood, companionship and emotional intimacy. Thus, even though Premchand's self-declared ideal of womanhood underscores the importance of sacrifice, service and sanctity, his fictional works discursively foreground subversive female characters who lead autonomous, independent and emancipated lives, though not without being considerate towards other women. The ostensibly judgemental gaze that is seen in his representation of courtesans and the Westernised woman can again be better understood by analysing it in conjunction with the way in which the male protagonists have been sketched out vis-à-vis such so-called socially deviant figures.

III
Courtesans and the Westernised woman

Writing about the ways in which obscenity and aesthetics were being redefined in print in colonial North India, Charu Gupta comments: 'Textbook Hindi literature of the Dwivedi period [1900—1918; period is my insertion], specifically, was largely aimed at creating a new aesthetic taste wherein the chastity of the Hindu woman was an essential element' (2001: 83). She also points out how eminent poets like Maithilisharan

Gupt, in seminal and representative works such as *Bharat Bharati* (1912), lamented the overwhelming presence of obscenity in contemporary Hindi literature; a literary bête noire that was proving to be detrimental for the reading public (Gupta 2000: 101).

It is in the context of this long-standing antipathy for obscene literature that one can situate Premchand's first major novel *Sevasadan* (The House of Service, 1919). This novel, which was originally written in Urdu under the title *Bazaar-e-Husn* (Courtesans' Quarter) was also subjected to quite a few strategic mediations in order to cater to the perceived readership of Hindi literature. What is striking is the unmistakable discrepancy between the two titles, a discrepancy which is at once literal as well as semantic. M. Asaduddin rightly points out how the Urdu title conjures up the image of the mystique and romance of the courtesans' lives, as in Mirza Hadi Rusva's novel *Umrao Jan Ada* written about two decades earlier whereas its Hindi counterpart conjures up the image of a dull and uninspiring house of reform (Asaduddin 2016: 4). The divergent connotations that both the titles evoke is an index of the focalisation that Premchand intends for his Hindi readers. So, if the Urdu title focuses upon the courtesan's quarters, its Hindi variant gestures towards the reformist rhetoric that constitutes the organising principle of the novel. Slipperier still, *Sevasadan* can also be construed as the antithesis of dirty Hindi literature precisely because of the way in which the principal protagonist Suman has been characterised. In the words of M. Asaduddin: 'In the Urdu version the protagonist Suman comes across as a flirt, out to grab attention to herself, whereas in the Hindi version, she has been depicted as more restrained and her actions appear modest and demure' (ibid.). At this stage of his literary career, it seems as if Premchand's unimpeachable artistic integrity was as much a product of his astute political choices as it was of his radical reformist/nationalist predilections. The thematic constraint of playing to the gallery is a market-driven response that recognises the need to strike a neat balance between bowdlerisation and overstatement/melodrama (Shingavi 2016: 146).

It appears that Premchand, whose *Bazaar-e-Husn* had to be translated for lack of publishers, leaves no stone unturned in order to make a decisive and irreversible impact on his contemporary Hindi readers. He was yet to find a foothold in his literary career as his preliminary advances in the world of Hindi letters were at best incipient, tentative and experimental. Vasudha Dalmia's observations regarding *Sevasadan* as the new novel in Hindi bear witness to this.

> It was the era of high nationalism, Hindi was seeking to set up its own respectable literary canon, and if nation, woman, social reform, and the reordering of the city landscape could be brought together thus educatively, the novel could do none other than win public approval. (Dalmia 2006: 325)

It is important to outline the dominant historical and ideological forces of the times that had led to the crystallisation and consolidation of such a literary taste. This is because the question of prostitution had not always been debatable or a matter of controversy in colonial North India. According to Jyotsna Singh, 'Dancing girls, or courtesans, were a feature of both Hindu and Muslim society, and this tradition continued well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, till the last vestiges of the landed aristocracy were stamped out' (1996: 87). However, the public estimation, social standing and the financial autonomy of courtesans and prostitutes were also being increasingly jeopardised in the protracted aftermath of the Indian Rebellion of 1857. In the case of Banaras, the Municipal Board ruled in 1898 that a professional prostitute, or any other woman of loose character, living within the municipal limits, at whose house bad characters assembled to the annoyance of her respectable neighbours, would be called upon to vacate her house (Gupta 2001: 117). Similarly, the annual Burhwa Mangal fair of Banaras, was virtually dispensed with, by the 1920s, behind the rhetoric of preventing respectable Hindu women from the desiring gaze of Muslim men (ibid.: 88–96).

The sanitisation of women's social spaces was not merely restricted to Banaras or Lucknow but also included other urban areas of the United Provinces (UP). As Charu Gupta reveals, 'There were regular attempts to undermine and expel prostitutes from municipal limits, to ensure new norms of appropriate social conduct in respectable and civilised areas' (ibid.: 85). Thus, despite the demands and constraints of the literary marketplace Premchand's *Sevasadan* offers interesting sidelights thrown on the problems of prostitution (Jindal 1993: 212). The incipient notions of middle-class respectability, the overriding anxiety to retrieve the fallen woman within the folds of cultural nationalism, and attendant fixation to delimit urban spaces as a site of purity and innocuous exchanges—all find expression in this novel. The paradigm shift from Rusva's literary world of Lucknow to the cultural landscape of Banaras itself anticipates the kind of nationalist critique that was to follow in Premchand's mid-career works such as 'Shatranj ke Khiladi' (The Chess Players, 1924).

In *Sevasadan*, Suman's *hamartia*, that is, her fatal flaw that eventually leads to her downfall, is her overriding fascination with 'luxurious things [*vilaas ki saamagriyaan*]' (Premchand 2005: 86). It establishes a context for the dramatisation of the themes of repentance and limited redemption/rehabilitation. The housewife-turned-courtesan, almost reminds one of Valérie Marneffe in Balzac's *La Cousine Bette* (1846) even as it anticipates Rishabh Charan Jain's *Vaishya Putra* (The Prostitute's Son, 1929), Dhaniram Prem's *Vaishya ka Hriday* (A Prostitute's Heart, 1933), and the character of Mrinal, the aunt who is rejected by her husband in Jainendra Kumar's *Tyagpatra* (The Resignation, 1937). However, for Premchand, Suman's rehabilitation does not entail her relocation as a courtesan at the outskirts of the city, a relocation that is otherwise available to all the other courtesans of Dalmandi, but rather implies a categorical rejection of the courtesan's way of life altogether.

It is precisely because of such nuances that the novel has been construed as conservative even by feminist scholars. It is either read as a text in which the principal protagonist remains disaffected with the assimilative project of cultural nationalism or one in which the writer's treatment of the courtesan figure bears a striking similarity to Gandhi's attitude vis-à-vis the historical figure of the fallen woman. According to Alison Safadi (2009: 35), Suman has found the respect born out of service even to the point of glowing articles about her in the newspaper, but she has not found the happiness born of contentment. But, in one of her conversations with Padam Singh, Suman herself admits that '[r]espect produces a contentment that pleasure and luxury do not provide' (Premchand 2005: 91). Rather than being mutually exclusive, the feeling of respect and the state of contentment are shown to be inextricably intertwined.

Again, Krupa Shandilya's analysis of the novel is problematic, in my view, as she observes how, at the end of the novel, Suman's only recourse is the Gandhian nation, which promises to embrace all who have been ejected from society (Shandilya 2016: 285). This is a misreading of the Gandhian nation since courtesans and prostitutes represented the genuine limits of Gandhi's vision of social inclusiveness (Tambe 2009: 33). As opposed to this, Premchand's views were relatively tolerant and accommodating: 'A prostitute is also someone's daughter; she can also find true love, and can be a good mother to her child' (Premchand 1962b: 54). What should also be emphasised here is that, for Premchand, the themes of repentance and limited redemption/rehabilitation not only

include the figure of the courtesan but also the male protagonist in the novel. This is because Gajadhar, Suman's callous and inconsiderate husband, too has to undertake the arduous and protracted journey of introspection, sincere atonement, profound soul-searching and consequential self-discovery. More importantly though, as a wandering recluse, he too remains irreversibly excluded, like Suman, from both the domestic sphere as well as the well-defined precincts of the Municipality.

In Premchand's nationalist schema, the ideals of kindness, asceticism and self-mortification are equally indispensable for the male protagonist before he can truly become an exemplary patriotic subject. This is corroborated in 'Shatranj ke Khiladi', a story in which the connotative possibilities of 'luxurious living [*vilaasita*]' (Premchand 2004b: 182) are significantly expanded to symbolise the entire cultural ethos of the 19th-century Lucknow. There are however tangential references to the ways in which all the 'wealth of the countryside had been drawn into Lucknow to be squandered on whores, clowns and the satisfaction of every kind of vice' (Premchand 2004b: 187). Here, Premchand's nationalist critique is not completely ill-founded since British officials had indeed deployed the existence of courtesans to discredit a section of the nobility, and also as a part of their excuse to annex Awadh (Gupta 2001: 112). And yet, the focal point of authorial condemnation has perceptibly shifted from the courtesans to the two estate-holders who unapologetically shirk their patriotic commitments and indulge in playing chess, an ordinary pastime that has extraordinary political ramifications for the kingdom of Awadh.

Drawing on Partha Chatterjee's theoretical formulations regarding the conceptualisation of the Indian woman in the nationalist imaginary (1994: 6), Francesca Orsini comments: 'Debates on the "woman's question", as it was called, were also profoundly affected by the symbolic identification of womanhood with "Indianness" i.e. with India's peculiar spiritual essence, that which made it superior to and essentially different from the West' (2002: 244). In the Hindi public sphere, literary works such as Lalita Prasad Sharma's *Bharatvarsha ki Sacchi Deviyan* (The Ideal Goddesses of India, 1923), Gopal Devi's *Divya Deviyan* (Divine Goddesses, 1926), and Chandrabali Mishra's *Adarsh Hindu Nari* (The Ideal Hindu Wife, 1930) foreground a similar polemic in so far as the uniqueness and fundamental qualities of the Hindu/Indian woman are concerned (Gupta 2001: 65).

As opposed to this was the image of 'the Indian woman's bad "other": the shameless, flirtatious, and competitive western(ized) woman' (Orsini 2002: 256). Orsini further points out how the Western-educated woman was the object of disapproval and contempt: As someone who had overstepped *maryada* (modesty), she had messed up all family and social relations, was bound to end up badly and compared unfavourably with the simple but innocent illiterate girl (ibid.: 259). In Premchand's fiction too, the Westernised women follow a somewhat similar trajectory of repentance and redemption that is available to the figure of the courtesan in *Sevasadan* in 'Miss Padma' (1935), and the character of Malti in *Godaan*.

In 'Miss Padma', the female protagonist, strongly detests the idea of 'dependence' and considers 'marriage' an 'unnatural bond' (Premchand 2004b: 200). Nonetheless, she also increasingly feels a desperate need to confer meaning, purpose and direction to the otherwise overwhelming 'emptiness of life', which she constantly experiences as a young, beautiful and extremely 'intelligent' lawyer (ibid.). Consequently, she invites Mr Prasad, a college professor, to her bungalow and both of them mutually approve of a non-marital relationship. However, Prasad eventually abandons Padma and her newborn child and leaves for England with all her money and a much younger student from his college.

What is deeply ironic in this story is that despite her indiscriminate imitation of Western values and lifestyles, Padma ultimately ends up being the same traditional, submissive and dependent wife that was her bête noire in the first place. It is precisely this indiscriminate imitation and not a complete rejection of colonial modernity that becomes the focal point of Premchand's critique: 'We'll have to be very careful, selective, and prudent when it comes to emulating the Western world' (Premchand 1962b: 255). This point is further corroborated by the way in which Padma's plight is juxtaposed against an ideal and happy European couple that she notices at the end of the story. Susmita Roye perceptively points out how this problematises any claim that Premchand simply pitches Indian womanhood against Western womanhood, putting the *Bharatiya nari* model against the memsahib figure (Roye 2016: 238). The failure to tell the difference between a provisional arrangement of convenience and an oppressive relationship as well as the inability to reconcile tradition with modernity ultimately becomes the principal cause of Padma's undoing.

If the theme of repentance constitutes the organising principle of 'Miss Padma', then Malti's character in *Godaan* is sketched out with a reformist impulse that eventually foregrounds the question of redemption in the novel. From being a competitive, skittish, flirtatious and an immodest doctor to becoming the very paragon of virtue, service and sacrifice, Malti realises only too well that 'self-negation' could never be the 'ideal of womanhood in the future' because in order to 'benefit society, women would have to defend their rights' (Premchand 2007: 377). Here too, Premchand simply refuses the construction/perpetuation of untenable binaries since all her imperfections notwithstanding, Malti is still shown to be an extremely diligent, affectionate and responsible breadwinner of her family (Premchand 2007: 194–96). What is equally remarkable is that only Malti, who can strike a neat balance between tradition and modernity, becomes the ideal quasi-nationalist subject in the novel. Moreover, Premchand's representation of the Westernised woman can only be more accurately assessed when one compares it with the way in which the Westernised male protagonists have been sketched out in his fiction. For instance, in stories such as 'Suhag ka Shav' (The Corpse of a Marriage, 1928), and 'Unmaad' (Passion, 1931), Keshav and Manhar too, very much like Miss Padma, end up feeling abandoned and miserable because of their indiscriminate imitation of Western values and lifestyles.

The traps and pitfalls of modernity are articulated in the story 'Shanti' (Peace, 1920) in which an unhappy couple categorically rejects its largely Westernised lifestyle by incinerating their English books, particularly the books by Oscar Wilde. One is reminded here of the Kashi Nagari Pracharini Sabha that asked women to throw away English novels and instead read books like *Hindu Grhasthi*, *Adarsh Dampati* and *Sati Charitr Sangraha* (Gupta 2001: 171). But most importantly, Premchand's delineation of the Westernised woman in 'Laanchhan' (Stigma, 1926), unequivocally invalidates the assumption that his gender representations are formulaic, repetitive or conventional. In this story, Miss Khurshed is an educated, independent and fashionable young woman who sports an 'overcoat' over her sari, goes out with her little 'puppy' for walks, and has 'earned a name in London for her acting' (Premchand 2008: 17). Ruth Vanita (2008: xviii) cogently argues how we are never told what the real relationship is between Dr Leela and Miss Khurshed, two single women who are neighbours and intimate

friends, and who amorously kiss and embrace with the aim of playing a trick on the credulous older woman Jugnu. In her opinion, Premchand is very far from taking a Gandhian view of sexual relations (ibid. 2008: xviii). It is only through counter-narratives and alternative subject positions, that a more qualified analysis of Premchand's representation of women is possible.

IV
Widows and the child bride

On 17 May 1932, in one of his letters to Dr Raghubeer Singh, king of Sitamau, Premchand wrote with characteristic frankness:

> Both *Pratigya* and *Prema* have been authored by me. I completed *Prema* in 1905…. There a widow had been remarried, that is, Purna tied the knot with Amrit Rai…. By allowing for the possibility of widow remarriage, I had indeed compromised the ideals of the quintessential Hindu woman. I was quite young then and the reformist tendencies had been at an all-time high. I didn't like seeing the book in its original form which is why I rewrote it, making necessary changes. (Premchand 1932, cited in Goenka 1973: 545)

Premchand's change of heart has been interpreted by critics such as Geetanjali Pandey (1986: 2185) as an index of his orthodox and conservative outlook towards women in general, and widows in particular. However, the ideals of chastity and self-sacrifice are equally important moral imperatives even for the male protagonists of Premchand's fiction. In *Pratigya* (The Vow, 1927), we see that the possibilities of remarriage have not only been exhausted for the widow Purna but are similarly unavailable for Amrit Rai, a widower who also happens to be the principal character of the novel. The fact that Premchand simply refuses to equivocate or foreground double standards for men or women is quite evident in the way in which Amrit Rai reveals to his friend Dannath: 'This is the age of fidelity towards our wives [*patnivrat*]. Polygyny is now just a thing of the past' (Premchand 1998: 120).

Moreover, the representation of widows in Premchand's fiction can be understood if one situates it within the larger context of literary responses that eminent writers such as Bankim and Tagore had been

coming up with in so far as the question of widow remarriage was concerned. In her incisive study of the Hindu widow in Indian literature, Rajul Sogani (2002: 47) draws attention to the way in which Bankim's *Mrinalini* (1869), highlights the negative aspects of widow remarriage. She analyses Tagore's *Chokher Bali* (The Eyesore, 1902) and points out how even though the novel was written nearly half a century after the passing of the Hindu Widows Re-marriage Act (1856), Tagore could not conclude it with Binodini's marriage because of a moral interdiction against it, and not a social one. More importantly, she points out how Premchand's attitude towards erring widows was more charitable than that of the novelists in Bengal who, for all their apparent sympathy, often betrayed an unconscious hostility towards these women and condemned them for being passionate and rebellious (Sogani 2002: 102). Similarly, Vir Bharat Talwar (2006: 216) reveals how, around the time of World War I, the women's movement in the Hindi region was completely indifferent to the question of widow remarriage. It is only through such comparative representations and perspectives that one can make a historical assessment of Premchand's attitude regarding widow remarriage.

Critics such as Orsini point out how as a marginal character, the widow 'allowed the grey area between duty and the "right to feel" to be explored to maximum dramatic effect' (2002: 286). In *Prema* (1907), the eponymous protagonist and Purna passionately embrace and kiss each other on the lips (Premchand 2016: 32). Similarly, in *Pratigya*, the spirit of camaraderie that both Sumitra and Purna share is quite palpable. They spend a lot of time in each other's company and eat and sleep together as well (Premchand 1998: 38). This idea of sisterhood, companionship and physical intimacy is pushed to its limits in *Ghaban* (The Stolen Jewels, 1931). In this novel, the relationship between Ratan (a widow) and Zohra (a prostitute) epitomises Premchand's nuanced and multi-layered representation of women belonging to socially excluded and culturally marginalised categories. Both Ratan and Zohra work and sleep together and almost behave like a married couple: 'Sorrow and arduous labour had brought them together, and their souls were joined. This intimate love was a new experience for her [Zohra], one she had never imagined' (Premchand 2000: 297).

The figure of the Hindu widow thus becomes the ultimate source of 'the love of a husband' so that her death literally makes Zohra feel 'as if she had become a widow' (Premchand 2000: 297–98). Besides,

Premchand was unrelentingly critical of the Mitakshara school of Hindu law which allowed a widow to inherit her deceased husband's property only if he was not a member of an undivided coparcenary. This comes through in his satirical representation of Manibhushan, Ratan's opportunistic and unprincipled nephew in *Ghaban*, who heartlessly reminds his aunt how '[in] joint families a widow has no rights to the possessions of her husband' (Premchand 2000: 242). The Mitakshara school was in direct contrast to the Dayabhaga law that was quite popular in Bengal and according to which the chances of a woman inheriting property were slightly better since she could become heir to both ancestral as well as self-earned possessions (Nair 1996: 196–97). Premchand had expressed his approval of legislative measures that would enable widows to inherit their deceased husbands' property (Premchand 1962b: 249).

Furthermore, Premchand's sympathy also extends to the figure of the child bride, another marginalised member of the household whose needs, aspirations and priorities were either constantly neglected or routinely sidestepped. He had already offered his vote of confidence for the Sharda Act (Child Marriage Restraint Act) that was passed in 1929 (Premchand 1962b: 258–59). This was quite radical and heterodox for its times since a number of works such as Chetram Tripathi's *Sharda Kanoon aur Sanatan Dharma* (The Sharda Act and the Eternal Religion, 1929), Munnilal Sahu Vaishya's *Bal Vivah Nishedh Kanoon* (The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929) and Indumati Devi's 'Sharda Bill' (1929) vociferously voiced their opposition to such legislative measures (Gupta 2001: 137). More important, though, is Premchand's acutely sensitive portrayal of the child bride in his novel *Nirmala* (1927). As Ulka Anjaria succinctly puts it, 'Nirmala's knowability, contained within the promise of her novel's title, is achieved only at the expense of her character, thus exposing the hypocrisy of empowerment in a continuingly unequal society' (2011: 167). In this novel, a lot remains implicit about subversive female sexuality, ineffable aspirations and taboo relationships. It not only underscores the authorial constraint of accommodating the conventional morality of his perceived readership but also reveals the subtle heterodoxy and covert iconoclasm of the writer which communicates its message through skilfully woven insinuations and half-uttered statements.

Nirmala's revelatory remarks about her stepson Mansaram clearly corroborate this claim:

> He was just the sort of boy you couldn't help loving…. Whenever he came and sat next to me I lost all sense of myself…. If he'd had any sinful intentions, I'd have done anything at all for his sake…. Nothing can change the imperatives of human nature. (Premchand 1999: 123–24)

Here Premchand anticipates the kind of novels that Jainendra, Agyeya and Yashpal would write in the 1930s, where 'the desire of the protagonists exceeds the simple proprieties of companionship and choice, and extends rapidly into the forbidden, the extra-marital, [and] the quasi-incestuous' (Govind 2014: 4–5). As Orsini puts it,

> We feel that if Nirmala and Mansaram were to acknowledge their mutual attraction, their sense of self would be shattered: such sense of a (moral) self is predicated upon the denial of desire, though of course the novel precisely grants readers access to those desires.[4] (2004: xviii)

It is precisely this enabling portrayal that makes *Nirmala* a compelling and poignant account of the eponymous child bride, who is nevertheless also represented as a desiring subject.

V
Resistance and resourcefulness: Women in the public sphere

Writing about the significance of women's participation in the Indian nationalist movement Suruchi Thapar-Björkert comments: 'The public sphere offered a challenge and an exciting alternative to tradition-bound domestic lives and enabled women to experience a new sense of freedom' (2006: 263). This freedom had been made possible largely due to the irreversible radicalisation of politics in the immediate aftermath of the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34). The commitment, sincerity and dedication of women and teenagers had been particularly effective in relation to the boycott of foreign clothes and the picketing of

[4] The child bride as a desiring subject also constitutes the principal theme of Premchand's 'Naya Vivah' (Second Marriage, 1932).

liquor shops. Courting arrests and serving prison sentences soon became fashionable and were considered matters of great pride, nationalist honour and political integrity.

Sumit Sarkar (2002: 290) points out how, of the 29,054 prisoners on 15 November 1930, no less than 2050 were below 17, while 359 were women. Female participation and convictions had been singularly conspicuous in Bombay and the UP (Brown 1977: 292). Women from various districts in the UP such as Kanpur, Lucknow, Banaras, Gorakhpur and Allahabad formed the vanguard of peaceful demonstrations and sustained anticolonial resistance (Rao 1994: 38). This was a radical departure from the prior pattern of popular involvement in political protests. Since 1932, in the UP alone, around 545 women were convicted for their nationalist activities and enterprises. Radha Kumar (1993: 83) astutely observes how there was a sense of great achievement among women along with the new spaces that had opened up. The colonial authorities too had been compelled to take cognisance of the power and efficacy of women's contribution to the nationalist movement.

As the official report prepared by General Dodd, the UP Police Inspector, on 3 September 1930, perceptively reflects (its sexist undertones notwithstanding): 'The Indian woman is struggling for domestic and national liberty at the same time and like a woman she is utterly unreasonable and illogical in her demands and in her methods, but like a woman she has enormous influence over the stronger sex' (cited in Sarkar 2002: 290). The Commissioner of Meerut P.W. Marsh too expressed his discomfort over the nationalist sympathies of educated women in the UP (Brown 1977: 292) in 1932. The following years witnessed the establishment of the Mahila Mandal (Women's Association, 1934) in Banaras, an organisation that was largely devoted towards introducing *purdah*-clad women to social and economic activity (Thapar-Björkert 2006: 185).

In his own personal life, Premchand had experienced the overwhelming appeal and the unstoppable force of Gandhi's continental struggle, when he discovered that his wife had been arrested for picketing and was subsequently imprisoned for two months (Premchand 1962a: 10). He had also intuitively anticipated how women would completely outclass men in the political sphere (Premchand 1962b: 254). In his nationalist narratives, women are usually represented as remarkably strong-willed, tenacious and resourceful nationalist subjects who challenge and undermine the complacencies and assumptions of the male protagonists.

In *Karmabhumi* (The Field of Action, 1932), Sukhada and Amarkant are represented in terms so unconventional that it almost appears as if their gender attributes have been reversed: 'This young woman with masculine qualities was wedded to a young man with feminine traits who lacked manly virtues. If the two were to exchange clothes, they could have supplanted each other' (Premchand 2006: 7). One is invariably reminded here of Lyotard's observations regarding sexual difference: 'Sexual difference is a paradigm of an incompleteness of not just bodies, but minds too. Of course, there is masculinity in women, as well as femininity in men' (1991: 20). And yet Premchand resists essentialism to underscore the uniqueness of gender differences.

As Sukhada tells Amarkant, 'It is impossible for men to feel the agony that a woman feels in her heart for another woman' (Premchand 2006: 49). This bears a striking analogy to George Eliot's portrayal of Princess Alcharisi in *Daniel Deronda* (1876). In this novel, Daniel genuinely tries to sympathise with his mother's predicament as a young girl confronted by her father's disapproval of her art (she chooses to be an operatic diva), to which the princess replies: 'No… you are not a woman. You may try – but you can never imagine what it is to have a man's force of genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl' (Eliot 1984: 588). Here, *Karmabhumi*, very much like *Daniel Deronda*, demonstrates that '[m]oral and emotional transvestism, however valuable as a tool of imaginative understanding, can ultimately be no substitute for experience itself' (Flint 2001: 176–77). Moreover, while Sukhada's participation in the public sphere infuses new life into the dormant social, political and religious societies of Banaras, Amarkant's 'male ego' and self-respect are deeply hurt by his wife's individual actions and her patriotic accomplishments (Premchand 2006: 187). The narrator further spells out how Amarkant's idea of selfless service was in fact 'his desire for personal fame and glory, coupled with arrogance' (Premchand 2006: 305). Sukhada's unprecedented success within the public sphere is thus constantly measured against Amarkant's shallow, pretentious and impulsive attempts to emulate her political feats.

In addition, Sukhada's sympathy for Munni, a poor woman who is sexually assaulted by two British soldiers, is far more genuine than that of the male protagonists: 'Why don't you people go and find out [about Munni] someday, or do you think that giving speeches frees you of any obligation?…. She has done nothing wrong, why should she be

punished?' (Premchand 2006: 27–28). That women also represent the voices of scepticism and disillusionment vis-à-vis the complacencies and assumptions of middle-class nationalist leadership are evident in the story 'Ahuti' (Sacrifice, 1930) in which Rupmani severely rebukes Anand for his quasi-elitist convictions that political independence would simply have no impact upon the prevalent social inequalities (Premchand 2004b: 386–87).

In Premchand's nationalist narratives, the public sphere occasionally bares the patriarchal arrangement of the household and considers the possibilities of a more competent, dynamic and resourceful female nationalist subject. This is quite evident in 'Patni se Pati' (Wife into Husband, 1930), a story that predominantly engages with the theme of women's empowerment and the idea of role-reversal in conjugal relationships. Godavari, a submissive and self-effacing housewife, is ill-disposed towards foreign commodities and is keenly interested in contributing to the nationalist cause. As opposed to this, Mr Seth, her husband, vehemently disapproves of all forms of anticolonial resistance and even prevents his wife from participating in the political sphere. However, Godavari's participation in a Congress demonstration and her spirited donation of 200 rupees there compels Mr Seth to rethink his loyalty to the colonial rulers; he resigns from his government employment. When he expresses apprehensions about his future, Godavari reassuringly replies: 'Until now I've followed all your cues, from now on you'll follow mine…. Now you'll live as I do. Whatever I ask you to do, you'll do…. Until now I was your wife: but starting today, I'm going to be your husband' (Premchand 2004b: 320).

Godavari's level-headedness and dignity throws into sharp relief the diffidence and tentativeness of Mr Seth, who is completely at his wits' end and almost starts behaving like an *abala nari* (a delicate, weak and helpless woman) in the concluding sections of the story. Consequently, the female nationalist subject is represented as a more desirable alternative for both the household as well as the public sphere. In the context of how women cleverly negotiate and challenge their existing roles and contributions to nationalism, Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (1989: 11) point out how women actively participate in the process of reproducing and modifying their roles as well as being actively involved in controlling other women. Instead of simply abandoning her husband who

feels somewhat like an utterly disempowered woman, Godavari thoughtfully assumes control of the household and her new wife, Mr Seth.

The story is thus a fictional dramatisation of both Gandhian and un-Gandhian ideals of womanhood. In her blatant defiance of her husband's interdiction regarding any overt association with the nationalist movement, Godavari unreservedly follows the Gandhian principle which states that every wife 'has a perfect right to take her own course and meekly brave the consequences when she knows herself to be in the right and when her resistance is for a nobler purpose' (Gandhi 1982a: 512). This was an ideal that had already been reiterated in 'Juloos' (The Procession, 1930), another story in which a woman gets the better of her husband in the public sphere. Through 'Patni se Pati', what Premchand seems to foreground, very much like the women and girls of the Hindi public sphere, is the idea that women's emancipation could only be accomplished as a 'precondition for political independence' and not as a 'logical consequence thereof' (Nijhawan 2012: 44).

The story astutely enacts a radical as well as simultaneous demystification of the self-righteous Gandhian contention that '[in] trying to ride the horse that man rides, she [woman] brings herself and him down' (Gandhi 1982b: 208). 'Patni se Pati' acts as a reminder of recalcitrant historical figures such as Sushila Devi, whose husband Brahmdutt Misra had been arrested in 1929 and had at first turned state informer but later refused to help the British government by testifying because his wife and mother had disowned him (Thapar-Björkert 2006: 196).[5] Moreover, Premchand's radicalism can be better understood if one takes into account the fact that even Bengali literature was virtually indifferent to the 'militant woman, who leaves the household, joins turbulent demonstrations and pickets, courts arrests, and spends long stretches of time in prison' (Sarkar 2001a: 267).

Tanika Sarkar explains this fundamental asymmetry between political practice and its imaginative representation:

> The silence, the gap in articulation, indicates a failure of imagination to internalise adequately the extent of the ideological break that the movement had generated in its course, the possibilities of denying

[5] On a related note, Joane Nagel pertinently points out how '[p]atriotism is a siren call that few men can resist, particularly in the midst of a political crisis, and if they do, they risk the disdain or worse of their communities and families including their mothers' (1998: 252).

> power relations and creating new terms of human relationships that it had opened up. (2001a: 267)

By contrast, Premchand's fiction internalises the extent of the ideological break that the nationalist movement had precipitated and also visualises radical and alternative avenues and possibilities of women's empowerment even within the domestic sphere. In colonial North India, the political landscape of the early decades of the 20th century had legitimised nonconformist arrangements and unconventional modes of behaviour and relationships. For instance, Nikhil Govind draws attention to the way in which Prakasho/Rani (who later on married Yashpal) was ungrudgingly allowed to stay in Harivansh Rai's house because of her patriotic credentials. According to Govind,

> The point is that the freedom of allowing a strange, unmarried woman to live in a house with a young man was only possible due to the aura of Prakasho/Rani's revolutionary credentials, especially for Harivansh Rai's father. Hence, revolutionary activity, in the eyes of some elders at least, gave social relations a margin of freedom. (2014: 138–39)

To conclude, in Premchand's nationalist narratives, men are often found wanting in both the public sphere as well as its domestic counterpart. By contrast, women appear to be much more effective and desirable nationalist subjects who strategically negotiate patriotic enthusiasm, political participation and their personal stakes. Even the seemingly fixed ideals of womanhood that Premchand emphatically announces in one of his later letters does not correspond to the discursive and dialectical formulations of gendered subjectivities apparent in the characters of Kusum and Minakshi within the larger framework of conjugal relationships and the domestic sphere. Apart from these two ends of the spectrum, there are different categories of female characters such as courtesans and the Westernised woman who offer an alternative viewpoint on notions of indulgence, propriety and selfhood when examined with respect to the male characters around them.

Apart from Premchand's readily discernible sympathetic treatment of widows and the child-brides, he explores alternative configurations that reveal women's subversive desires and affective intimacies. And so, even though it appears as if Premchand's ideals of conformity and

resistance are largely organised around the questions of marital domesticity and the public sphere, it is his ability to intuitively anticipate and foreground the uniqueness of female experience and counter-patriarchal arrangements that reveal a fuller picture of his ideology, aesthetic and craftsmanship vis-à-vis the women's question in colonial North India.

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