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Structural Violence: A Tool of Oppression in Munshi Premchand's *Nirmala*

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Abstract

Munshi Premchand was a progressive writer in India during nineteenth century. His writings revolve round the social themes such as caste, class, women's rights, poverty, superstitions, feudalism and onslaught of capitalism on the middle and lower class people. Due to his utmost attachment with the commoners, he is regarded as the Charles Dickens of India. He has written almost more than a dozen novels and three hundred short stories in Hindi and Urdu. His works; *Gaban*, *Godan*, *Karmbhoomi*, *Sewasadan*, *Mantra*, *Namak Ka Daroga*, *Idgah* etc. highlight his social and reformative concerns. His novel, *Nirmala*, which underscores the constant oppression of young girls as a result of mismatched marriages, is quite popular among readers. It weaves its plot around the exploitation of a sixteen-year-old girl named Nirmala and depicts how ill-matched marriages caused by the lack of suitable dowry bring downfall of families in general and emotionally shatter young girls in particular. The heroine of the novel is driven to her plight not out of her free choice but due to the compulsions a society imposed upon newly married young girls. The laws, norms and rules a patriarchal society creates, legitimizes and maintains for its smooth functioning become oppressive in many cases for the women and girls as they are trained to follow these norms since childhood their childhood. Violence caused by the odd and biased structures of any given society is called structural violence. Its covert form prohibits people to meet the most basic needs of their life/existence. Johan Galtung, a Norwegian sociologist, theorizes this form of violence by pointing out towards various socio-

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cultural norms/structures which restrict the freedom of such people who fail to fit themselves into these structures. The present research paper is a genuine endeavor to highlight those subtle and systemic ways through which the protagonist of the novel, *Nirmala*, is made the victim of a number of unfair socio-cultural norms.

Keywords- Violence, Oppression, Marginalized, Progressive, Structural, Compulsion, Cultural Artefacts, Social changes, Cultural identities

Manusmiriti, an ancient legal text or *Manava Dharmasastra* for millions of Hindus, states, “yatn naryasto pojyantay, ramantay tatr devta [3/56] (where women are provided place of honor, gods are pleased and reside there in that household)”. This idea is so lofty that anyone who has not read other Shloks of the same text may find it mesmerizing and would fail to grasp the ambivalent position of this text about the status of women in India. This single Shloka is maximally preached with special emphasis on it during a variety of religious gatherings such as Katha, Pravachan or any other such sorts of socio-religious celebrations which are organized to worship a variety of gods and goddesses in Hindu culture. Thus, an ideal image of women’s condition in the country is created. But the ground root reality is stark opposite of what is generally preached as the same law book consists of a number of other Shlokas such as Shloka number 2.213-2.215, 3.8 to 3.11, 3.12, 3-15 to 3-18, 5.150, 5.151, 5.157, 5.158, 5.160, 5.167 and 8.369 in which women are subjected to those ideas and ideals which make them subservient and second-class citizens throughout their life. Such Shlokas create an image of how an ideal woman should be. What should she do? How should she behave? Whom should she marry to? And failing in observing these laws would bring public infamy to such an extent to such a one that it may convert her from a goddess to a witch within seconds.

Under such circumstances, women especially those who are well educated and fail to see the ideological implications of their slavery are left with no option but to follow the rules if they are not educated to the level of knowing their constitutional rights. Social and religious norms, at times, take an upper hand over constitutional rights in the lack of good education.

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People in India are usually ruled by two ideologies; one that is provided to them in the constitution and other that their religion teaches to them. Under the condition of contradiction, maximum of them would go with their socio-cultural laws even if they defy those rights which are granted to them in the constitution. They seem to be regulated more by the fear of life hereafter than life in this world. In a patriarchal society, usually socio-cultural norms are created seeing the welfare of the men rather than the women. So many of these laws get oppressive for womenfolk and they can't escape because these are ordained in such a way that they look like sacred laws. Any effort to escape from these oppressive laws would categorize them opposite of an ideal woman. Thus, it is clear that multiple socio-cultural structures which are found in any society in the forms of rules and laws since centuries are not always favorable to all.

For writing this article, the researcher may be denigrated for establishing relationship between different far-fetched ideas together as most of the educated people living in good urbane social spaces may think that Indians today are ruled by their constitutional rights and not by their societal and religious laws; and women are educated to the level of holding the top-notch posts in almost every single area of development in the country. That's also true but a few women can hardly be the sole representative of more than fifty corers of women who come from different socio-cultural backgrounds in the country. The condition of women especially those who are facing multiple layers of marginalization are still not satisfactory. Many of them are still not educated or semi-educated who only know how to read and write in the name of education but hardly know what ideas are to be received; what laws are to be followed and what are to be left or opposed. They only keep on following them till the last days of their life with the conviction that they are doing their best in upholding and maintaining the rule of God. Man made laws are accepted as God made laws even if they are heavily inequitable and pernicious for them. They internalize these socio-cultural norms since their childhood through social conditioning to the level that they start thinking about them to be real and owing to this reason; they should be followed without any opposition. In this way, they become the

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tool of their own oppression when they keep on adhering such atrocious norms at the cost of their life.

Structural violence refers to a form of violence in which social and religious institutions or structures prohibit people to meet the most basic needs of their life/existence. Although, it is less visible or rather invisible form of violence from outside but deadliest in its effects. Its foundation is laid on such unequal structures of any society which create binaries of standard and non-standard. Johan Galtung, a Norwegian sociologist and the principal founder of the discipline of the *Peace and Conflict Studies*, points out towards various socio-cultural structures which curtail the freedom of those people who fail to adjust themselves according to the standard norms of their society. Thus, these structures play an instrumental role in causing physical and emotional violence on such people. The limitations which are caused by unfair structures of any given society are naturalized through their legitimization. When once they are legitimized, oppression due to these norms seems natural to most of the people. They tend to look towards them as nothing more than the ordinary predicaments of their daily life and severity in many cases get diluted. Its theorization would help to highlight the ways it takes place and in turn would also help to lessen it.

Munshi Premchand, a prolific Hindi and Urdu writer, has very boldly raised the issues of women and other marginalized classes through his progressive writing during the first three decades of nineteenth century India. He was born on July 31, 1880 in Lamhi village of Benaras city. He has extensively highlighted the caste hierarchies and its repercussions, class prejudices, problems of laborers, plights of women etc. by means of his literary oeuvres. Owing to his love and affection for these marginal people, he is known as the Charles Dickens of India. He was very well aware of how women are subjected to multiple forms of tortures owing to the structural imbalances in the society. He was also aware of the fact that these imbalances are created by the men in a patriarchal society and women have to suffer not due to their intrinsic weakness but because of the reason that they accept those unjust structures as being natural and true. He attacks on such notions, ideas and ideals by means of his reformatory writing. *Nirmala* is one of the best novels which narrates how a woman gets tortured in a traditional society

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owing to the unfair socio-cultural structures of that very society. It is a timeless story of the victimization of women in the early twentieth-century colonial India. This research paper is a genuine endeavor of the researcher to highlight the ways women are pushed to peripheries in a traditional set-up and become victims of endless tortures due to those imbalances which are created by these unjust laws in the name of standard and non-standard.

The story begins with the search for a suitable match for the eponymous heroine of the novel. Marriage is a very important institution of any society and several rules and laws are laid down for it in ancient India scriptures. Maximum of them are patriarchal in nature and assign more freedom to men than to women. The marriage of Nirmala, Udayabhanu Lal's fifteen-year-old daughter, is fixed with Bhuvanmohan Sinha, son of Bhalchadra Sinha. The father of Nirmala wanted to make it a memorable marriage by spending as much money as he was able to spend; but her mother was not ready for it. She also wanted to save money for the marriage of her second daughter and her apprehension was not without reason. Needless to say, that dowry in Indian Hindu marriages has been a necessary part and those who fail to provide it get less guarantee of the welfare of their daughters than those who sufficiently provide it. One has to pay the same or somewhat same or a little more dowry in the marriages of the subsequent daughters after the marriage of their first daughter. Thinking about these harmful but important socio-cultural structures of the society, she tried to persuade her husband that he should save some amount for the marriage of their second daughter, Krishna. This scuffle annoyed Mr. Lal and he decided to teach a lesson to Nirmala's mother, Kalyani, by leaving his old clothes at the river bank and going to the next village in order to make her convinced that he was drowned in the river. Meanwhile, he was killed by his rival, Mr. Mathayi, whom he once tried in law court and got him punished.

The real character of Shinas got clear after the death of Mr. Lal as they withdrew from the marriage proposal. It becomes pertinent here to cast a look on how dowry, a social evil, deeply embedded in the institution of marriage and influences it. Suitability plays subservient role to dowry in maximum of such cases. A beautiful, talented and obedient girl like Nirmala was denied a matching groom because her family failed to provide expected dowry. Men of

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the Sinha family were not ready despite knowing it that Nirmala's father was killed. She was then married to Totaram, a twenty-year older person than her. He tried his best to persuade her post marriage that he was the best suit for her but miserably failed. His appearance produced only respect in her mind. In the initial years of her marriage, she found him to be like her father. It did not only shatter all her innocence but also depress Totaram when his desires remained unfulfilled despite his best efforts of pleasing her. Premchand states in the novel, "...Nirmala felt shy about chatting and joking with Totaram. It may have been that her father had been so much like him, that is, a man before whom she was accustomed to lower her gaze and conceal her body" (Premchand 43).

Modern romanticized idea of marriage has been heavily criticized in this novel. There is no price of the feelings and emotions of the women and romanticism gets lost instantly when the family members fail to provide the required dowry in the marriage of their daughters. The slow but steady castration of the emotions of Nirmala is the supreme example of this. Totaram might have brought her to fulfill his wishes of making her a good life-partner but incompatibility arising out of a big age-gap between both of them subsequently caused him nothing but anxiety, jealousy, frustration and depression. The fact that a man is free to marry in his old age to a very young lady of the age of his own son without much trouble has been very well highlighted here. These mismatch marriages take place in the society only because of the existence of unfair, unjust socio-cultural norms which do not disparage such matches. Later on, Nirmala realized her fate and started molding herself according to the need of her wifely duties which again multiplied her oppression in the coming days.

Totaram had three sons from his first wife namely; Mansaram, Jiyaram and Siyaram. They were consecutively sixteen years, twelve years and seven years old. Rukmini, Totaram's fifty years old widow sister also lived with them. By degrees, Nirmala made her place in the family by cultivating bonds with her stepsons despite Rukmini's jealous nature. She was always full of maternal affection for her stepsons. Children were also very fond of her. This intimacy was despised by Rukmini as it might have overturned her position in that house so she furnished spiced information to Totaram about the intimacy between Nirmala and his eldest

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son, Mansaram, who was of her age. When Jealousy and suspicion grew, he was sent away to live in the hostel where he fell ill. Nirmala too was bound, under these circumstances, not to speak anything as that might have caused more doubts in the mind of Totaram.

He provided his son the best medical care but his apathetic attitude and Nirmala's apparently unaffectionate behavior further deteriorated his son's condition and he lost his interest in life to such an extent that one day he died of tuberculosis. The death of the eldest son of the house left Totaram completely shattered. His legal practice dwindled. Nirmala gave birth to a baby daughter. Fissures had been created between her and her stepsons. One of them, Siyaram, one day ran away by stealing all her jewelry from the home. Finally, he committed suicide owing to the fear of being caught by police. And the third son of Totaram became a sanyasi and left home. Miseries multiplied multifold in his life and there was no escape. Under frustration, one day, when Totaram comes back home after a futile search of his disappeared son, he vents his fury out on her saying:

Get out of my sight or I won't be answerable for what I do! All this is your doing. It's entirely because of you that I have been reduced to this condition. Was this the state of my home six years ago? You have destroyed my well-established home, uprooted my flourishing garden... I didn't bring you into this house to have my whole world destroyed. I wanted to make my happy existence even happier. And this is the price I am paying. (Premchand 181)

Nirmala is alleged to be the sole reason behind all these tragic events in the life of Totaram. She seems to be a guiltless guilty woman as it was not under his control to save the life of her father or to fix her marriage with an old man of her father's age. Hence, she could not be held responsible for the catastrophic happenings in her and her husband's life; rather these are the men centered marital laws/structures of the society that allow even an old man to marry a young girl in a absence of proper dowry. Looking from outside, it seems that these are the natural calamities in her family but reality is different. It is the silences of people, it is patriarchal mindset, it the legitimacy of those diseased socio-cultural laws/structures of the society that could be held responsible behind the downfall of Totaram's family. There was no

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compatibility; be it physical or emotional or any other, between both of them; still she was forced into this marriage only because of the reason that her family was unable to provide ample dowry and a girl is supposed to be a liability and was to be married as soon as possible after puberty. Sudha, her friend and wife of Mr. Sinha, supported her in the absence of her stepsons but the lecherous eyes and ill-intention of Mr. Sinha had ended all the relations between them. Mr. Sinha dared to look at her with malafied intensions only because of the reason that he knew it better that she had not anyone to support her in the absence of her stepsons and presence of badly broken husband. It was the last fatal blow and Nirmala could not survive it. Munshi Premchand states, "...having endured a lifetime of the darts and arrows of clever huntsmen and the claws of clever predators, and having been buffeted mercilessly by gusts of wind till it could endure no more, flew off to its eternal home" (Premchand, 196). Munshi Premchand, a hugely progressive writer during the first quarter of the twentieth century, criticizes thus the institution of marriage to the extent of making necessary changes into it so that other Nirmalas in the society can be saved from the demon of dowry in future.

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