



Exploring Hypocrisy in Premchand's *Godaan: The Gift of a Cow*

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to read Premchand's *Godaan: The Gift of a Cow* as a satire. It explores how hypocrisy prevails in the Indian society. Premchand is a well known writer of novels and short stories. He is acclaimed as the chief exponent of social and satiric novel in Hindi literature. *Godaan: The Gift of a Cow* is an attack on contemporary social and political situation in India. The social and religious orthodoxy have also been attacked in the novel. It also shows the pathetic condition of Indian peasants and villagers. The text is written against the background of two poverty-ridden villages Semri and Belari in Awadh province during the pre-independence era under British colonial rule. It is a satire on social and religious hypocrisy. Premchand has emphasized the problems of peasants in Indian villages.

Key words: Hypocrisy, social satire, religious hypocrisy, social novel, political novel

Godaan: The Gift of a Cow is a political and realistic novel originally published in Hindi in 1936. It is divided into 36 chapters. The theme of the novel is socio-economic deprivation and the exploitation of poor villagers/lower class of the society. It has been translated into English by Jai Ratan and Purushottam Lal and their book was published as *Godan: A Novel of Peasant India* in 1957 by Jaico Publishing House. Gordon C. Roadarmel's translation was published as *Godaan: The Gift of a Cow* in 1968 by Permanent Black. Dinesh Kumar and A.L. Madan's translation of *Godaan* appeared in 1996 and Mohd. Mazhar's translation of *Godaan* was published in 2005. Anurag Yadav translated *Godaan* and his translated book published in 2009 by Cedar Books. It has been adapted as a Hindi movie in 1963 and telecasted as a part of 27 episodes TV Serial titled *Tehreer Munshi Prem Chand Ki* in 2004.

Godaan presents the ruthless realities faced by the poor and marginalized peasants. Their society is firmly rooted in caste-based prejudice and financial exploitation. Based on birth and occupation, the caste system divided society into hierarchical levels. The lower-caste populations experienced extreme exploitation and discrimination, which widened the gap in wealth between the rich and the poor. The landlords and moneylenders exploit the poor or lower castes and they are trapped in a cycle of oppression and debt. The caste system is a repressive force that predetermines a person's destiny from birth. The protagonist of the narrative is Hori, a peasant who belongs to the marginalized class. In spite of his hard work and sincerity he is not able to escape the cycle of discrimination and poverty because he is caught in the grip of repressive social norms. He is a symbol of collective struggle of oppressed people for attaining freedom and dignity. His ambition is to possess a cow, a symbol of wealth and social prestige. This desire represents the longing for a better life and sense of identity that is free from caste based discrimination and oppression.

Hypocrisy refers to a diverse compilation of behaviours unified by dishonesty and deception. A hypocrite person is not reliable or trustworthy. Such person exploits good intentions if he gets an opportunity. He speaks of one thing and does something different. He tries to further his own interests, frequently at the expense of others. He tries to show himself as a virtuous person but he is not a worthy person. *Godaan* exposes the vein of hypocrisy,

manipulation and corruption. It reveals the hypocrisy of the people who belong to elite and the upper caste. Such people often preach moral values but do not practice them in their own lives. Characters like the Rai Sahib (Amarpal Singh), Pandit Omkarnath, Pandit Datadinan and Matadin represent the contradictions and moral failings. The Rai Sahib is a landlord of Semri and Belari. He lives in Semri and sometimes in Lucknow. He tries to show himself as a follower of ideals of ethics and morality before Hori but actually his behaviour towards the labourers is not kind. He says that he will welcome the abolition of zamindari system as it will be a salvation for him. He shows that he has no desire for wealth and says, “We’ve fallen prey to the system, a system that’s completely destroying us. Until we’re freed from the chains of wealth, this curse will keep hanging over heads and we’ll never reach those heights of manhood which are life’s ultimate goal” (*Godaan* 27). But when the forced labourers demand food along with wages, he snaps with fire in his eyes and says, “Come with me...I’ll put those troublemakers in their place. They’ve never been given food in the past. Why this new demand today? They’ll get the anna a day they always get, and they’ll damn well do the work whether they like it or not” (*Godaan* 27). When Pandit Omkarnath praises The Rai Sahib and says that he is working for the welfare for farmers, Mr. B. Mehta is not able to digest it.

Pandit Omkarnath is an editor of a news paper titled *Lightning*. He says that he has always held his principles. He has no desire for wealth and he does not care for it. He has devoted his life to the service of Press. He has become a Media person for uprooting injustice. He says, “At least my name still comes up in the Council, whether the circumstances. Please tell the Chief Secretary that Omkarnath is not one of those who can be intimidated by his threats – that my pen will not rest until the course of my life is completed – that I’ve taken on myself the duty of uprooting and destroying injustice and despotism” (*Godaan* 79). He again says, “Those are things I could ever do...I’ve kept my ideals lofty and scared and I intend to keep them that way as long as I live. Worshipers of money can be found in every alley. I stand among the worshippers of principle” (*Godaan* 79). But he is not a man of principles. He earns money by advertising foreign goods in his paper. He does this against his sworn policy of swadeshi. Miss Malti says, “Then why do you carry advertisements for foreign goods in your paper? I’ve never seen as many in any other paper. You claim to be an idealist, a man of principle. Don’t you have any regrets at helping to send our country’s wealth abroad just so you can make a profit? You can’t possibly justify that policy by any kind of logic” (*Godaan* 79). She tells him that he has no right to promote foreign goods to publish a paper.

When the Rai Sahib asks Nokheram to explain the reason for collecting a fine from his tenant Hori without informing him, Nokheram, Pateshwari, Datadin and Jhinguri Singh feel that they may be in trouble because of this issue and to protect himself Nokheram sends an anonymous letter of complaint to Pandit Omkarnath. He has mentioned that the Rai Sahib has collected fine from his tenants. Omkarnath seeks such opportunities. So he asks the Rai Sahib whether he has taken a fine of eighty rupees from Hori. The Rai Sahib reminds him that he is given money regularly and sweets on the occasion of all festivals. He is invited to the parties, so he is expected to ignore such news. The Rai Sahib tells him that he has shown humanity only on one or two occasions but he works for his own interest not for the welfare of the public. He says:

Yes, I admit that on one or two occasions you’ve shown some manliness, but always with an eye to your own interests, not the public welfare. Now don’t start looking shocked and angry. Every campaign you’ve fought has had the same opportune results – the enhancement of your own prestige and power and income. If you are playing that old game against me now, then all right, I’m willing to go along with you somewhat. I won’t give you money – that would be a bribe. But I’ll have some piece of jewellery made up for your wife. Would that do? And now I’ll tell you the truth – the information you have received was false. I admit that, like all zamindars, I collect fines and levies which add up to a few thousand a year...you want to lead a good life and so do I. What’s the point of putting up a big show of justice and duty when it would only damage both of us? (*Godaan* 215)

Omkarnath again tells the Rai Sahib that he is not working for money but to serve the people. He says, “We manage somehow or other... And under the present circumstances, that’s all I expect. I didn’t go into this business for the sake of money or pleasure, so I’m not complaining. I wanted to serve the people, and I’m doing that to the best of my ability. My only desire is that the nation prosper. A single individual’s happiness or unhappiness is inconsequential” (*Godaan* 216). At last he receives bribe of fifteen hundred rupees from the Rai Sahib and becomes a corrupt editor. He claims his news paper to be the champion of social justice but he does not publish real news but paid advertisements and news. He says, “The first transaction this morning brought in fifteen hundred rupees. I must have seen an auspicious face when I first woke up” (*Godaan* 217).

Omkarnath believes differences in food habits. He regards himself a religious person. He takes fruit and keeps separate himself from his friends who take mutton and liquor. But when the beautiful lady Miss Malti offers him a glass of liquor, he does not refuse and drink it. He forgets his religious views like not to touch liquor:

The ice, liquor and soda had been ready for some time. Miss Malti offered Omkarnath a glass of the red poison with her own hands and gazed at him so bewitchingly that all his resolution, all his caste superiority, melted away. Religious observances depend on circumstances anyway, he told himself... If his parents and grandparents didn’t drink, they didn’t, that was all. But did they even have the opportunity? Their livelihood depended on the sacred books. Where would they have bought liquor, and what would they have done if they had? They never travelled by train either, never drank tap water, and even considered the study of English a sin. But times had changed. If a person couldn’t keep up with the times, they’d go on and leave him behind. If such a lovely lady were to offer even poison in those tender hands, one would have to accept it graciously.

Omkarnath took the glass, bowed his head in appreciation, drank down the liquor in one breath ... that no one would dare to call him a hypocrite. (*Godaan* 88-89)

Pandit Datadin is a Brahmin priest in Belari. He performs religious ceremonies held in the houses of the upper caste people. He believes that the core of religion is found reciting prayers incoherently, reciting passages from sacred texts, keeping fasts, and consuming prepared meals with their hands. He believes that because of his birth into a higher caste, he has the authority to reprimand the reactionary peasants.

Datadin is a scam artist who uses the guise of protecting lower caste people from God’s anger to collect money from illiterate and ignorant poor lower class people. He treats the lower castes with contempt due to his idea of purity but he ignores his son’s extramarital affair with a lower caste woman who works as a cobbler. Using his understanding of holy texts, Datadin uses his power to extract money from the peasants and keeps his profits safe from the landlord’s bailiff and other officials who want payment for services rendered. In order to get more money from the people, Datadin uses a number of other strategies in addition to extorting money during religious rites. He also serves the community as a doctor, matchmaker for marriages, and moneylender.

When Hori buys a cow, Pandit Datadin and the other moneylenders become angry because they believe that having a cow has made Hori and his wife Dhania less tolerant of the arrogant behaviour of the ruling class in Belari. Hori’s brother Heera commits the unforgiving act of poisoning the cow and flees after committing this crime. The village officials along with the priest Datadin impose a heavy fine on Hori for committing “cow murder.” Hori is fined heavily by the village officials and the priest Datadin for the crime of “cow murder.”

Datadin tries to show mercy towards Hori when there is no grain in his house. He tells him that he had not imposed fine on him. Lala Pateshwari and Jhinguri Singh imposed fine on him. He sat in the meeting because people instated him to do so. He tried to favour him by convincing them to reduce the fine. He tells him that they are all members of a family. He says:

Come on then... I’ll weigh out the seeds now, so you won’t have to bother with that in the morning. You’ve had your dinner, haven’t you?... Nothing to eat in the house and you didn’t even tell me? It’s not as if I were your enemy. This is what provokes me about you. My dear fellow, what’s there to be embarrassed or ashamed about? We’re all one, after all. All of us have our ups and downs. For all I know,

some disaster may strike me tomorrow, and who could I turn to if I couldn't tell my troubles to you? Well, what's past is past. Come on – in addition to the seeds I'll weigh out a bushel or two of grain for you to eat. (*Godaan* 221)

But actually he has no mercy for Hori. He just wants to get share in Hori's crops. He gives him a proposal of share of fifty percent, "How can I sit by and let your fields remained unplanted? I'll have the sowing done tomorrow. The soil is still moist. The crop will be ten days late but otherwise there's no harm done. We'll each take a half share. That way neither of us will lose out. I was just thinking about this today, and feeling very sad that good ploughed land was going to waste" (*Godaan* 221). Hori accepts the proposal because he has to pay the land rent. Datadin only provides him seeds and he works like a labourer in his own field.

Matadin, son of Datadin, does not share his meals with low caste people because he thinks that he is a Brahmin and a religious person. But he has no objection about his illicit relationship with a low caste woman Siliya. When a piece of bone is stuffed in to Matadin's mouth by two low caste people, he wanted to a handful of water to drown himself. "The ritual propriety which had allowed him to flaunt his passion and his pride has been wiped out. That piece of bone had polluted not only his mouth but also his soul. His religion depended on absolute purity in eating and drinking; now the righteousness had been cut off at the root" (*Godaan* 306).

Fine is imposed only on the poor if the same crime is committed by both the poor and the rich. In spite of the illicit relation with a low caste woman, Matadin's family is not fined and Hori's family is fined because of Gobar's relation with Jhuniah. Hori's wife Dhaniya says, "She is not married to our son, that's true, but he is responsible for her nevertheless. Rich people do the same thing and no one says anything to them. It doesn't affect their standing. It's only when the poor do something that their reputations are ruined. The rich may prefer to save face even at the cost of others' lives" (*Godaan* 154).

To sum up it may be said that Premchand has shown the hypocrisy of religious persons and of persons in power in the text. The narrative explores the complex web of the Indian caste system and its impact on people's lives. Through Hori and other characters, the text provides significant insights into the struggles of the marginalized and their pursuit of justice and dignity. Premchand depicts the difference between the social and economic status of lower castes and the privileged upper castes, like the Brahmins and Zamindars. The narrative describes in detail how the caste system upholds injustice, exploitation, and inequality. Readers are forced to consider the necessity of social reform and upliftment when they are acquainted with the brutal realities of social injustice and caste based discrimination. Premchand highlights the importance of social reform by challenging the caste system in Indian society. Dr. Mehta advocate for education and social and economic upliftment of the marginalized class. He reflects the role of social reformers for dismantling the biased social order.

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