



## Exploring Satire in Premchand's *Nirmala: The Second Wife*

**Dr. Shailesh Kumar Gupta**

Assistant Professor, Department of English  
Bareilly College, Bareilly

### Abstract

Premchand is known as a Hindi novelist and short story writer. His real name is Dhanpat Rai. He is a writer of 12 novels and 300 short stories. He served as an assistant teacher, Inspector of Schools, founder of Saraswati Press and editor of *Hans* magazine. This paper attempts to read Premchand's *The Second Wife* as a satire. It is a satire on hypocrisy, child marriage, dowry system, mismatched marriage and related issues. It explores how social evils prevail in the Indian society. Premchand has highlighted the issues of women in Indian society. *The Second Wife* represents a high watermark of Premchand's genius as a creator of realistic novel. He is regarded as the spokesman of the downtrodden.

**Key words:** Hypocrisy, social satire, greed, religion, realistic novel

*The Second Wife* is a realistic novel originally published in Hindi as *Nirmala*. *Nirmala* was published serially in a women's magazine *Chand* between November 1925 and November 1926. It was published in book form (novel) in 1928. It is divided into 27 chapters. The theme of the novel is plight of the women of Indian society. It was first translated into English by David Rubin and his book was published as *The Second Wife* in 1988 by Oxford University Press. Premchand's grandson Alok Rai translated *Nirmala* and his translated book published in 1999 by Oxford University Press. In 2004, it was telecasted as a part of 27 episodes TV Serial titled *Tehreer Munshi Prem Chand Ki*.

Satire is form of literature that exposes the vices, follies and foibles of an individual, institution or society with an aim to reform. It attacks on hypocrisy, greed, bigotry, falling of moral values etc. *Nirmala* is a satire on child marriage, ostentation or show off, greed, dowry system, hypocrisy, mismatched marriage, jealousy, superstition and religious conversation.

*Nirmala* is one of the daughters of Babu Udaybhanulal and Kalyani. Babu Udaybhanulal is a reputed and wealthy lawyer of Banaras. *Nirmala* has a younger sister Krishna (ten years old) and two younger brothers Chanderbhanu (twelve years old) and Suryabhanu. She is fifteen years old and is considered to be of marriageable age by her parents. Her father searches for a suitable groom for her and finds a suitable match. He fixes her marriage with Bhuvan Mohan Sinha, the elder son of Babu Balchandra Sinha. Balchandra Sinha holds a high position in Excise Department in Lucknow. *Nirmala* plays with dolls and does not know the concept of marriage. She is about to get married at a tender age. She talks to her sister:

'Why don't you just tell Ammaji you won't go?'

'That's what I've been saying, but who listens to me?'

'But isn't this your house?'

'No – if it were, would they be forcing me to leave it?'

'And will I too then be made to go away some day?' Krishna asked.

‘If you’re not, will you just stay here doing nothing? We are girls, we don’t have a home anywhere.’ (Premchand 15)

Her father is murdered by a criminal named Matai. After her father’s murder, Bhalchandra and Bhuvan Mohan withdraw from the marriage due to dowry. She is forced to marry a widower, Munshi Totaram. He is a middle-aged man and of her father’s age. He is a lawyer by profession. At an early age, Nirmala is married to a man much older than her. This shows that there is lack of consideration for the daughter’s welfare in the society and the societal expectation that daughters should be married off at early age. The age gap between husband and wife in child marriage and the awkwardness created by it, serves as a satirical remark on the absurdity of child marriages. The text has depicted the child marriage as a common practice in the Indian society.

Ostentation refers to false display of wealth, knowledge or luxury. It intends to attract admiration or envy and impress others. Sometimes such kind of display is beyond the income of a person. *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* defines ostentation as ‘an exaggerated display of wealth, knowledge or skill that is made in order to impress others.’ Bhalchandra tells Udaybhanulal that he does not care whether he will be given dowry or not. He demands for the customary respect and better facility for the members of his side in the marriage ceremony to impress the guests. Although Udaybhanulal has no savings, he tries to manage better facilities for the guests of the groom’s side. He says, “Being laughed at is no good either. If they’re not satisfied, people will say, ‘Big name but a poor show.’ And since they are not demanding even a paisa for dowry it is my duty to do my best to provide hospitality to the guests” (Premchand 20). His wife Kalyani suggests him to spend money according to income and tells him that it is impossible for everyone to satisfy the wedding guests. They always complain and criticise the facilities. She says:

Since the day Brahma created the world to this day no one’s ever been able to satisfy a wedding guest. They always find some opportunity or other to find fault and criticise. One who can’t afford a dry piece of bread at home becomes a lord at the wedding party. “The oil doesn’t smell right,” he says, “God knows where they got this cheap soap, the servants don’t pay attention, the lantern’s smoky. There are bed-bugs in the chairs, the charpoys sag, the guest rooms have no ventilation...” They are always complaints like that by the thousand. If it is not that, then it is something else. “My friend, this oil is fit for the whores, we require plain oil; Sir this soap is fancy, you’re showing off your wealth as though we’ve never seen soap; these servants aren’t servants but friends from hell, they never leave you in peace...” (Premchand 20-21)

Premchand has satirized the greedy people in the text. The relatives of Udaybhanulal are greedy. They stay at his house. They eat, drink and enjoy. The narrator says, “Although there were scores of relatives living in Udaybhanu’s household – maternal and paternal uncles, nephews and nieces...” (Premchand 13). But after the death of Udaybhanu, all of these relatives disappear because they know that they will not eat, drink and enjoy now. Kalyani says, “When there is no one to provide, how can the spongers hang around? Gradually, within a month, all of those maternal and paternal nephews and nieces had taken their leave” (Premchand 29). Bhalchandra and his son Bhuvan Mohan are also greedy. Their family never demands for dowry but expects a good amount from Udaybhanu:

Why be embarrassed about telling the truth? Our wish is not to have it. Have we accepted anything from anybody? When we can get ten thousand cash from another match why should we go ahead with this one? The lawyer’s daughter’s is not made of gold, is she? If he’d stayed alive, then we could have shamed him into forking over fifteen or twenty thousand, but now – what do they have left with? (Premchand 35)

Bhalchandra works in Excise Department and earns 500 rupees a month. Because of his greed, he took bribes from contractors. The narrator says, “He held a high position in the Excise Department with a salary of 500 rupees. He took huge bribes from the contractors. The contractors could sell water as wine and keep their shops open twenty four hours a day just by keeping him pleased, for his pleasure was the only law” (Premchand 30).

The impact of dowry system on the lives of women in Indian society has been satirised in the novel. This system has been highlighted as a major social evil as it leads to injustice and exploitation. The text also shows how the brides’ families are pressured to give dowry. After Udaybhanu’s death, Bhalchandra refuses to get his son married to Nirmala because of dowry because he knows that he will not be given dowry. He says that it is God’s will to withdraw this marriage. He says:

‘God did not wish that Lakshmi to enter my house, for otherwise would this thunderbolt have fallen? All our plans have come crashing to the ground! I have scarcely been able to contain my joy that this auspicious occasion was drawing nigh, but how could I know in God’s house a conspiracy was being hatched? The very memory of those who have died is enough to make us weep, so just to see this girl would reopen the wound. In such a state I don’t know what foolish thing I might do. Consider it a fault or a virtue in me, but once I have established a close bond with someone, his memory will never leave my mind. So the thing is now Udaybhanu’s image keeps dancing before my eyes. But if that girl came into this house, it would be difficult for me to survive it! Believe me I’d go blind from continual weeping...my heart would break just to see that orphaned girl. (Premchand 32-33)

Bhuvan Mohan refuses to marry Nirmala because he also wants dowry. He says, “‘I’ll marry anyone you arrange for me so long as it brings us lots of money. But nobody else, definitely. Where there’s a chance of hundred thousand – but what does she have saved up? Now that lawyer is no longer alive how much could the old woman have?’” (Premchand 38). When his mother Rangili tells him that he should be ashamed of his thinking, he again says:

‘What’s there to be ashamed of? Did rupees ever bite anybody? In a hundred thousand lives I could never pile up a hundred thousand rupees. I’ve only just pass my exams this year, so far at least five years I won’t even get a glimpse of any money. Then I’ll start earning one or two hundred a month. Three quarters of my life will be over by the time I earn five or six hundred. I’m never going to get another chance to gather in a pile. I won’t be able to enjoy the world. But if I should marry some rich girl I’ll get along without any worries. This is all I want. A hundred thousand in cash, or else if we find some widow with a heap of property who’s got just one daughter – that would do the trick.’ (Premchand 38-39)

His mother again tells him to see the nature of the girl but he does not care for it. He only wants money. He says, “‘Money wipes away any and all defects. Even if I get reviled for it, I won’t have any objections. If a cow gives a lot of milk who minds if she kicks’” (Premchand 39)? Nirmala’s mother Kalyani is helpless and not able to give dowry. She is forced to get Nirmala married to a widower, Totaram who is a middle-aged man.

The novel satirizes the hypocrisy of the wealthy and influential people like Bhalchandra and Bhuvan Mohan. Bhalchandra shows himself as a virtuous person but he is not so. He tells Pandit Moteram that he hates the people who give and take dowry. He gives importance to relation not money. He addresses dowry as a social evil custom and says that a person should not sell his son by taking dowry. He says:

‘Dowry is not discussed among such honest people. To be related to them is worth a hundred thousand rupees. I consider such a relationship my great good fortune. Yes! What a generous soul he was, he held money to be of no importance at all, he cared not a whit for it. It’s an evil custom, excessively evil! If I had my way, I’d have anybody who took a dowry (or who give either) shot, even if I’m hanged for it. I ask you, does one marry one’s son off or sell him? If you have an itch to spend extravagantly for the boy’s wedding, well, do so and enjoy it; but whatever you do, let it be according to your capacity! And what is this now, when they go murder the girl’s father. How vicious, how dreadfully vicious! If I had my way I’d shoot the rascals.’ (Premchand 32)

But, on the other hand, he himself expects dowry and withdraws his son’s marriage with Nirmala when he comes to know that Nirmala’s mother is not able to give dowry after her husband’s death. He does so by pretending that Udaybhanu’s death is a warning to withdraw the marriage. He tells that he loves Nirmala more than his own daughter but her marriage with his son will not prove happy. He tries to show himself as unselfish but actually he is selfish. He says that he does not want to do injustice with Nirmala’s family but he does so. He says:

‘Panditji, I swear, I love this girl more than my own daughter. But if God has not willed it, what can I do about it? This death is a kind of warning from the Almighty, it’s a prophecy of still worse things to come. The Lord is telling us that this marriage won’t prove happy. In such a situation, just think, can something that’s started out inauspiciously end in happiness? Of course not, one doesn’t deliberately do something that is wrong, does one? Tell my respected sister-in-law that of course I would be ready to carry out her demand, but the result cannot be good, I wouldn’t want to cause such an injustice to my closest friend’s child simply because I was blinded by selfishness’. (Premchand 33)

Bhuvan Mohan tries to show himself virtuous by fixing his younger brother’s marriage with Nirmala’s sister Krishna without dowry. He also sends money to Nirmala’s mother in the name of her. But his intention is to molest her. He says, “Don’t go now. You come here and visit everyday for the sake of Sudha, today do it for mine. Tell me, how long must I burn in this fire? Nirmala, I’m telling the truth...”(Premchand 197).

Udaybhanu’s relatives, who live in his household, claim that they can sacrifice their lives for his family. But after his death all of them leave his house within a month. The narrator says, “The ones who used to claim that they lived with the people for whom they were ready to give not just water but their very life’s blood, now took to their heels without so much as a backward glance” (Premchand 29). They claim that they have been turned out of Udaybhanu’s house so, they have to leave. Kalyani says, “The relatives who were staying here eating and drinking have vanished. Not a single person comes to show he cares for us, in fact, they all resent me, they feel I’ve thrown them out” (Premchand 49).

This novel satirizes mismatched marriages also. Because of such tradition eligible girls are forced to marry ineligible men. Nirmala is married to a man who is twenty years older than her. He has already three sons by his first wife. The eldest son Mansaram is sixteen years old, Jiyaram is twelve years old and the youngest son Siyaram is seven years old. She is expected to be mother of the child of about her own age and wife of a man who is of her father’s age. She feels neglected in her house and is blamed every time. She suffers from her marriage till her death. Totaram blames her:

Get away from me or I’ll regret it, I can’t guarantee that I’ll control myself. This is your doing. It’s only because of you that this has happened to me now. Was this house in a state like this six years

ago? This I worked to build you've spoiled, you've laid waste a flourishing garden. Only one stump was left, and now that you've wiped out every trace of him you can be content. I didn't bring you to my home to destroy me. I wanted to make a happy life even happier. (Premchand 191)

It is ironical that Totaram marries Nirmala to make a happy life but due to mismatched marriage his life becomes worse. Her husband suspects that she has illicit love relationship with her step-son Mansaram (who is one year older than Nirmala) and this suspect leads Mansaram's death as well as tragic end of the family. He loses his two sons also. Before her death, Nirmala requests Rukmini that her daughter Asha should not get married to an ineligible man because she does not want Asha to suffer the pain of a mismatch marriage like her. She says, "When I die I leave the child to you. If she survives, marry her into a decent family. I couldn't do anything for her in my own life. I'm guilty only of bringing her into the world. Let her be an old maid, or kill her with poison rather than trying her to an unworthy man, that's all I ask of you" (Premchand 205).

Jealousy has been satirized in the narrative. Rukmini is the widowed sister of Munshi Totaram. She feels jealous of Nirmala. Nirmala gets the control over the house while earlier she has the control. She tries to create a misunderstanding between Nirmala and her step-children. She says, "Money can be found for having jewellery made, but for a boy's shoes the rupees have all gone in smoke. Two of them have already gone – is it your intention to finish the third one off by making him cry himself to nothing" (Premchand 175). At the end of the novel Rukmini confesses that she has always misbehaved with Nirmala, "Bahu, you have committed no mistake. I say to God in my heart there is no ill-will toward you. But I was never honest with you, and I'll regret that till my dying day" (Premchand 205).

Premchand has attacked on superstition and religious conversation in the text because they prevent the Indian society from progressing. Sudha is an educated woman but she loses her son because of superstition. Premchand has expressed sarcasm in the statement of Pandit Moteram, "There can be no well-being where the Brahmin isn't honoured" (43).

To sum up it may be said that Premchand's *Nirmala: The Second Wife* is a satire on the social evils of the Indian society such as child marriage, ostentation or show off, greed, dowry system, hypocrisy, mismatched marriage, jealousy, superstition and religious conversation. The tragic story serves as a critique of the practices of such evils in the society. It also highlights the suffering and pain caused by such social evils. The text is thought-provoking and inspires the readers to be aware of such social problems.

### Works Cited

- Ahmed, Farooq. "Munshi Premchand's *Nirmala* as a Symbol of Female Predicament." *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, vol. 5, issue 3, 2018, pp. 365-368.
- Hornby, A.S. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*. OUP, 2010.
- Pant, Megha. "Unmasking Social Realities: Premchand's *Nirmala* as a Mirror of Its Time." *Shodh Sanchar*, vol. 10, issue 37, 2020, pp. 41-44.
- Premchand. *The Second Wife*. Translated by David Rubin. Orient Paperbacks, 2010.
- Rai, Amrit. *Premchand: A life*. Translated by Harish Trivedi. People's Publishing House, 1982.