Exploitation and Conscience in Premchand

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In two of premchand's short stories, "The Power of a Curse"[1] and "The Shroud,"[2] we find main characters who skillfully eke out a living by exploiting the sensibilities of a well-established, stratified society. These sensibilities are not necessarily sound or reasonable ones, but neither are they absolutely damnable. Their important characteristic lies in the fact that within the framework of the stories they are static, and therefore they preclude the society's interaction with these characters on any level that would supersede the social structure to form a more personal, genuine human contact unmindful of arbitrary social stigmas. This very distance which society itself maintains in the structure of its sensibilities allows these characters—Ghisu and Madhav in "The Shroud," and Munshi Ramsevak in "The Power of a Curse"—to exploit those members of society bound by its sensibilities without feeling remorse or guilt. Guilt only surfaces when the structure itself is challenged or disrupted.

The conflict in both stories arises when the main characters break or consider breaking a social precept etched permanently upon the minds of their fellow villagers. The villagers consider the breaking of such a precept an unforgivable offense completely independent of, and unconditioned by, the previously demonstrated moral character of the offenders. The irony that Premchand tries to bring out in both of these stories hinges on the greater importance attributed in the minds of the villagers to these particular precepts rather than to the moral character of the offenders. They have desensitized themselves to moral character where it does not concern these precepts in order to avoid responsibility for the society as a whole. Yet in the case of nominal infractions, they readily lend judgment in order to maintain the illusion of responsibility.

Munshi Ramsevak draws the condemnation of his village when

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[1]In Premchand, *The World of Premchand: Selected Stories*, tr. David Rubin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), pp. 36–47. Henceforward cited in the text.

[2]*Ibid.*, pp. 186–94. Henceforward cited in the text.

Munga the Brahman widow dies on his doorstep, leaving a visual image implying Ramsevak's responsibility for the death that is too striking to ignore. The killing of a Brahman in their society is a grave offense, and since Ramsevak, by cheating her, provoked her to hound and threaten him at the price of her health and sanity, he is technically at fault. The same people who ridicule her in her pursuit of justice, knowing that she had, in fact, been cheated, are now compelled to act when, and only when, there is an ostensible sign that propriety has been neglected. Prior to this, his dishonest business transactions are well-known to the people of the village, but they prefer to maintain the illusion of his respectability for the sake of their own collective self-image. In fact, they cling to this illusion even more than he does: "Nobody had ever seen him presenting a brief before the tribunal or arguing a case; but everyone called him 'attorney' … Whenever he made his way to the open court the villagers crowded after him" (p. 36). The uselessness of a widow in the self-image of the society renders her a poor match for Ramsevak before the panchayat, nor can she counter the effect of his bribes. Her rights do not merit concern until their abuse results in visible disregard for traditional propriety.

Because the villagers encourage Ramsevak's constant deception, his conscience is only responsive to issues involving a break with visible propriety. He views the outrage of people whom he cheats as unjustified slander and an impediment to the fulfillment of his prescribed role in society. Munga, however, at the outset, presents no real impediment of this sort. For this reason Munga's invectives and ravings against him, and the sorry state to which he has reduced her, inspire neither fear of social disgrace nor remorse for the widow herself. They do, however, fill him with a dread completely foreign to him—dread of some consequence beyond that which he ordinarily considers: "We may not be afraid of human justice but the fear of God's justice resides by nature in every man's heart" (p. 39). The village's precepts, supposedly in accordance with God's justice, have placed the fear of this absolute justice so far from his consciousness that Munga presents something completely new to him. It is so foreign to his wife, whose character mirrors that of Ramsevak's, that she drops dead of fright.

When this fear is realized in the death of Munga, his conscience is still subject to the molding of society. The deeper reality she presented to him flees his mind as quickly as it entered, leaving his reputation and livelihood as his primary concerns once again. His ostracization compels him to act as someone ostracized has traditionally acted: he becomes a

hermit. No further indication of his character follows. Rather, the final insight of the story is reserved for the people of the village. When fire burns away the last vestige of Ramsevak's previous life, the villagers come to watch not out of concern, but for sheer amusement.

The situation of the main characters in "The Shroud" is somewhat different by virtue of their position in society. Ramsevak has been born into the position of the exploiter. It is the "family tradition." Ghisu and Madhav, on the other hand, have been born into the position of the exploited, the low-caste laborers who work only to subsist. Only by their own cleverness have they reversed this exploitation to benefit themselves. Ramsevak visibly conforms to social precepts in order to divert attention from his misdeeds; Ghisu and Madhav make little effort to conceal their misdeeds, but they draw attention to these precepts whenever it may help them to extort their petty livelihood from the other villagers. In the case suggested by the title, these two loafers, knowing that cremating Madhav's dead wife without a shroud would be a sign of impiety reflecting upon the entire village, solicit money from the rest of the villagers. They know that it makes little difference how these people judge them, because the pressure to maintain this particular show of propriety is too strong to refuse their request. The zamindar's behavior is most telling: he, perhaps more than anyone else, has witnessed Ghisu and Madhav's sponging and unreliability every time he has asked them to work. Yet he cannot bring himself to refuse them now no matter how little he cares for their loss, for his role dictates that he set an example of generosity in the village. The rest is easy for father and son: "Ghisu knew how to trumpet the zamindar's name around" (p. 190). Producing evidence that a powerful member of the village conformed to customary propriety, no one else can refuse him. Even after they have squandered the money, Ghisu and Madhav trust that the villagers will provide a shroud once again, so compelled are they by their self-image.

As in "The Power of a Curse," Premchand seems to pass a harsher judgment upon the society of the village than he does upon the main characters. His narration in some places breaks off into undisguised social criticism. For example: "In a society where the condition of people who toiled day and night was not much better than [Ghisu and Madhav's] and where, on the other hand, those who knew how to profit from the weaknesses of the peasants were infinitely richer, it's no wonder they felt like this" (p. 188). The narrator goes on to cite their cleverness in circumventing the tedious life that would otherwise be their lot. He treats these characters with as much, if not more, sympathy than Ramsevak, calling

judgment into play only when the villagers may be scrutinized as well.

The conscience of these two leeches, which we may treat as a single aspect due to the similarity of their characters, works on an even shallower level than that of Ramsevak. Ramsevak does not fear the justice of man because it never touches him; Ghisu and Madhav do not fear it because it has touched them so often. They have received beatings and invectives with such regularity that the prospect does not frighten them. Where Ramsevak hides behind his name, these two hide behind the fact that they have no name, at least none worth saving. They are every bit as cold as Ramsevak; all three characters sit in their houses listening to the agony of a dying woman, thinking only of the social obstacles the death will create. The fear of God's justice does present an obstacle to Ghisu and Madhav, but one that is easily overcome by drunken rationalizing. Madhav's concern about meeting his dead wife Budhiya in heaven represents a brief show of independence in his character, but again it is a whimsical fear stemming from popular religious imagery, quickly forgotten. Premchand seems to throw this in almost as a mockery of such ideas among these villagers.

Premchand adeptly demonstrates the poverty of conscience created by easily exploited pressures to maintain a society's self-image. His characters lack only freedom from his formulas for this type of social interaction. ❐