

A Psychological Survey of Prem Chand's Famous Short Story, *Kafan*

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Abstract - Munshi Prem Chand is a well known fiction writer in Hindi language. Famous writings of this versatile genius have been translated into various languages all over the world. His short story, *Kafan* has been debated, discussed and analysed in manifold ways. It was and has been very difficult for the traditional moralists and even modern humanists to believe that a great writer like Prem Chand narrated the episode of the husband and the father-in-law of a deceased poor lady with their callousness carouse and pass the time of rapture in Epicurean felicity with the money ex-gratia collected for the *Kafan* (Shroud) for the dead body of that poor lady. Only psychological implications of what Madhav and Ghishu have thought and acted under their impulses can explain the meaning of Prem Chand's narration in the words which appear to some extent unacceptable to moralists and humanists.

Keywords - Poverty, survival, charvak, Epicureanism, belly-cheer, amoral.

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INTRODUCTION

Munshi Prem Chand is a prolific writer of Hindi literature in the early twentieth century. He was a genius in his simple creed and utmost simple expressions. He knew it for certain that in the changing times, real aim of literature was not merely entertainment through romantic stories or fairy tales, but to project the realism as part of criticism of life. He thought and announced in his convincing manner that the true spirit of literature is contained in the delineation of the realistic situations related to the lives of the poor and oppressed people with the psychological truth at the centre. Thus, the literary work of Prem Chand was a radical departure from the kind of stories that made up the bulk of Indian literature before him. In his address to PWA he daringly commented thus:

The literature which does not arouse in us a critical spirit or satisfy our spiritual and intellectual needs, which is not force-giving or dynamic, which does not awaken our sense of beauty, which does not make us face the grim realities of life in a spirit of determination has no use for us today".¹

Munshi Prem Chand based his narration on the psychological truth about the utmost poverty ridden people who generally escaped the attention of the writers waiting for their recognition in public at large. This unique literary figure did not care for his popularity or recognition among the people of upper middle class and middle class who happened to be the majority of readers. His heart melt at the type of

life the poor labour class was destined to live due to the ever increasing scarcities around them. He felt sorely about the scanty means of survival admissible to them with no significant hope of betterment and thus finding all their dreams shattered to pieces. Prem Chand tried to portray psychological realism about the hopes and desires of the poverty ridden people with all their shallow dreams leaving them to beat about the bush and attempting a wild goose chase.

Prem Chand's short story *Kafan* (Shroud) is a unique creation of psychological depth about the poverty ridden and helpless labour class beings like Ghisu and Madhav who are pushed to the corners of desperateness and therefore they do not waste their energy in struggles to improve their conditions as they know it for certain that nothing significant is going to happen around them under the prevailing circumstances. Let us mark the following extract from the story as translated –

"It was the family of Chamars and Ghisu, who was nicknamed as shirker, worked on wages for a day and avoided work for three days. Madhav was such a big shirker and was the disciple of Laziness that he worked for half an hour and passed an hour's time in cigar smoking. That is why, they were scarcely hired as labour. If they had a little corn to feed, they swore not to go for work. When they were without food for a day, Ghisu collected a few wood sticks by climbing over the trees and sold them in the village market. So long as the coins were

with them, they roamed hither and thither in idleness".2 (Kafan-Translated)

Social Issue

Behind the projection of this psychology of Ghisu and Madhav, Munshi Prem Chand keeps in his mind big social issue. The ever defeated class of the workers found themselves in quagmires. Prem Chand realized that the social power structure in the Indian society of his time was designed in stern disparities and the working class people struggled for their survival. They were landless and depended on the meagre income on hard labour. Further, customary and ritualistic needs put them in debts which they could hardly clear in their life time due to multiplicity of interest by the money-lenders. This vicious circle of less wages and more expenses on social issues did hardly allow the poor workers and farmers to have a sigh of relief despite their hard work and labour struggles. Ghisu and Madhav had come to the conclusion that whatever hard work as daily wagers did they do, their conditions were not going to change. Thus they turned their face away from the so called moral issues which degraded them in the eyes of others. Prem Chand explains it in his own way and raises a prominent social issue thus:

"In the society where sincere and honest workers who worked day and night were in no better condition than theirs and those who took advantages of the weaknesses and helpless conditions of the farmers were more prosperous, the germination of such a psychology was not astonishing".3 (Kafan translated).

Prem Chand delves deep into the psychology of a desperate and poverty ridden worker who poses himself cleverer than many others who work hard and yet remain in uttermost destitution. Let us mark what Prem Chand wants to highlight in the background of the alley of betterment for the poor farmers –

"We would like to say that Ghisu was more thoughtful than the farmers and so instead of participating in the thoughtless group of farmers, he found it better to be a part of the idle talkers and schemers. Yes, he was not having power to follow the policies of the idle talkers and schemers whereas the other people of their group were smart enough to have domineering position in the village. The whole village raised fingers on him. Even then he was contended to be a wretched fellow with the thought that he was not compelled to spent his sweat like the farmers and further that the others do not get advantage of the simplicity and helplessness as they do in case of farmers."4 (Kafan Translated).

In the light of the social issue involved in the whole matter it is difficult to decide whether the course

adopted by Ghisu is appropriate or morally degrading. It is a blatant truth of life and society of that time that the farmers, despite their hard work, were pushed to poverty due to their simplicity and manoeuvres of the money-lenders. Ghisu was well aware of the fact about the farmers and therefore he found himself pushed into the corners of helplessness and desperateness. Despite his failings everywhere he has a desire to live under the gifts of God. He rejects the social issues and accepts the God's will in his own ways. He does not reject life but rejects the social issues designed in a way in which the people like him are left with no opportunities for a respectable living. That is why he has decided to live and feed himself in his self-styled manners. He knows it for certain that all moral and social considerations are for gaining some kind of recognition among the people of the society. He has discarded all such considerations simply because they are not going to yield any result for him, nor for any hard-working farmer. So he decides to feed himself in any manner admissible to him. This raises a big social issue as all patterns of power structure prevailing in the society have left them on the margins where they can only struggle with no significant improvement in their conditions.

Epicurean Psychology

Epicureanism is a long sustained and most debated ideology emanating from the materialistic philosophy of the Greek philosopher, Epicurus. This ideology of the Epicureans is not a waste paper inscription. Even in the Indian thought we have the concept of life propagated by the Charvak philosophical concepts. Charvak originally known as Lokayat is an ancient school of Indian materialism. It embraces philosophical skepticism and rejects ritualism and related religious considerations of moral values for the life beyond the existing life upon the earth. Brahaspati, a philosopher is traditionally referred to as the founder of Charvaka or Lokayat philosophy. In this school of thought it is believed that "there is no God, no samsara, no karma, no duty, no fruits of merit, no sin"⁵ To the people who believed in "Charvak Darshan" "Pratyaksha" (Perception) was the only valid way to the knowledge of life for living. Whatever contentment one gets by confronting the circumstances designed naturally or otherwise is the end of life. Therefore one may not care for means. There should be no illusion related to moral, religious or any other kind of consideration. Therefore Charvaks ignored metaphysical concepts like reincarnation or extra-corporeal soul or religious rites for the imagined betterment of any other life beyond what is available to them on the earth. It is concluded thus:

"The fire is hot, the water cold, refreshing cool the breeze of the morn; By whom came this variety? – from their own nature was it born".6

Epicurean thought of the Hellenic Greece, which also flourished in the Roman era had almost the identical concept of life upon the earth. Epicureans also believed in the end of life upon the earth by disregarding all thoughts, all illusions about heaven and hell or reincarnation. Epicurean focuses on the importance of pleasure. If you love to have fine food for your belly-cheer and if you devote yourself to going to the symphony, it is because of your Epicureanism. The epicureans believed in simple life and quiet pleasures by keeping all cares of the world at bay. In their thoughts there was no place for pain and fear. The thought of Epicureanism developed as a reaction and challenge to Plato who announced cumbersome ideas about the purity of soul to attain the Truth of life. In the eyes of the Epicureans all such ideas were full of illusions and far removed from the Truth of the physical realities which are directly available to a human life upon the earth. A cheerful poverty is an honourable state. Epicurus said that to win freedom you must be a slave to philosophy. In his opinion, pleasure is the beginning and the end of the blessed life. The motto that is inscribed on the gate of the Epicurean school will read like this:

"Stranger, you would do good to stay awhile, for here the highest good is pleasure".⁷

Thus, the Epicureans believed in having immediate pleasure to satisfy their senses in whatever moderate manner and in their limited means admissible to them under the claims of nature and social set up whatsoever.

Ghisu and Madhav in the short story, *Kafan* are neither Epicureans nor Charvakians by way of their philosophical dictates as they are quite unknown to the philosophical enquiries and the resultant conclusions drawn by the scholars. They are simply grouted in the psychological patterns as naturally admissible to them under the natural urges. They are quite ignorant about the moral conclusions drawn by the people around them. They think only in terms of having immediate pleasure despite their poverty and limited means. They simply regard the means to have immediate pleasure by gratification of their senses. In the social setup of their time they think it utterly impossible to cope up with the economic viability for the improvement of their conditions. Therefore, they decide to live their lives in the pleasure seeking devices admissible to them under whatever they can attempt. They have no desire to have luxuries as defined by the people of the society. They find pleasure in finding an opportunity to fulfil the needs of their belly-cheer. Prem Chand keeps all the valid points of what the Epicurean or Charvakian thought dictated. The value of these thoughts lies in the fact that a deeply printed psychology of human behaviours is enshrined in them. Ghisu and Madhav have developed this kind of psychology, not by virtue of their choices but by way of having the realization of a significant chapter of human living.

At a time when Madhav's wife has been struggling in the labour pains with all complications, both Madhav and Ghisu are engaged in their belly-cheer by peeling off the roasted potatoes which they dug out from the crop field of a farmer of the village. They do not hesitate in stealing relevant material for their scanty pleasure of belly-cheer. In this respect, they have a moral attitude which is akin to the Epicureans, or Charvakians. Further, they are lost in the imaginatively recalling the time of a feast on the occasion of the Barat of the Thakur of the village about twenty years ago. Let us mark the following extract.

"In the feast what great satisfaction was got was a thing to remember in life and even today it is fresh in mind. He said that feast was unforgettable. Since then such a surfeiting feast has not been received. The bride's party served puries in plenty to all. Whether big or low, all devoured puries and that too of pure ghee. Sauce, Raita, dry vegetables of three kinds, one vegetable with gravy, curd, sweets. How can I tell what great taste was got then. There was no restriction of any kind in choosing items. Whatever in whatever quantity. The people ate so much that they could hardly drink water in the end".⁸

These ruminations of Ghisu are plain enough to indicate his Epicurean psychology. Madhav repents that he has not been able to such a great taste of sumptuous feast.

"Taking imaginative pleasure of all these items. Madhav said nowadays no body offers such a great food".

"I hope you did eat twenty puries".

"More than twenty did I eat".

"I would have eaten fifty".

In the dialogue between Ghisu and Madhav, we have scintillating smell of Epicurean cooks hovering in their imagination. Belly-cheer appears to be the supreme motto before them disregarding all other considerations whether moral or religious. They have little concern with the painful episode of Madhav's wife groaning in roaring pain inside the house.

In the morning, Madhav's wife becomes cold and lifeless. Now the question of Kafan comes. Out of sympathy people donate a few coins for the arrangement of Kafan. Ghisu seeks this opportunity to go the landlord and get a little more amount for Kafan. Now he has handsome amount in his hand. Both Ghisu and Madhav go to the nearby market to purchase Kafan. They think that it is useless to spent amount in costly Kafan because it is burnt with the dead body. They want to save money for their belly-cheer. Meanwhile they pass by a local restaurant where people are carousing and tasting spicy chips.

Both of them are unable to resist the temptation of such a great Epicurean occasion. They forget all about Kafan and sit on a table in the restaurant. Both of them drink heavily and eat sumptuously having been prompted by the Epicurean psychology.

"Both father and son were sipping in pleasure. All eyes were fixed on them. How much fortunate both of them are that the whole bottle of wine is before them".⁹

Ghisu justifies his action with all great words for Madhav's wife –

"She was really great! Died she but gave us occasion of great feasting".¹⁰

CONCLUSION

In this manner, Prem Chand has narrated a great chapter of Epicurean psychology in the background of the social issue of poverty and destitution. Both Ghisu and Madhav are not the followers of any school of thought. But they have the elements of Epicurean psychology inherent in them. It is unbelievable that a socially awakened writer like Prem Chand dwelt his imagination on creating a character who thinks and takes delight of feasting at the cost of dead body lying at the door of the house. It is socially degradable and morally depressing. But the truth remains alive and sees through all hegemony of morality or social concerns. Prem Chand really deserves credit for unveiling a psychological truth.

END NOTES

1. Prem Chand's address to PWA, Lucknow, 1936.
2. Prem Chand, *Kafan*, available at <https://w.p.nyu.edu>virtiaulhindi>
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Haribhadrasuri, *Saddarsana Samuccaya* – Translated by M. Jain, Asiatic Society, 1989.
6. Acharya, Madhav, "The Sarva Aarshan Sangrat or Review of the different Systems of Hindu Philosophy" translated by Cowell, E.B.; Cough, A.E. 1894, London, Trubner & Company, p. 10.
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8. Prem Chand, *Kafan*, available at <https://w.p.nyu.edu>virtiaulhindi>
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10. Ibid.

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