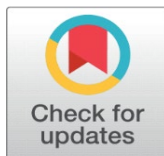
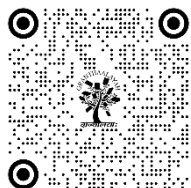


# REFLECTION OF SOCIAL REALITIES IN MUNSHI PREMCHAND'S NOVEL, PRATIGYA

Choudhurimayum Sofia Devi<sup>1</sup>✉

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, Pravabati College, Mayang Imphal



## Corresponding Author

Choudhurimayum Sofia Devi,  
[chsafia553@gmail.com](mailto:chsafia553@gmail.com)

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## ABSTRACT

This article delves deep into the social realities portrayed in Munshi Premchand's novels, focusing on themes of dowry, personal sacrifices, marriage and, societal discrimination faced by women, particularly widows in the 1st half of the early 20th century India. The narratives revolve around the lives of characters - Poorna, Kamala Prasad, Dhaannath, etc, and explored the complex social dynamics of early 20th Century rural India. Amritrai is a widower who wanted to change the society by eradicating the social evils happening during his times. He sacrifices his love for Prema and takes on the task of social reform. Prema is a young beautiful woman who embodies the symbol of an ideal woman in traditional society. She is the fiancée of Amritrai. Poorna, a widow, is the heroine of the novel Pratigya. She represents the societal discrimination and social struggles faced by a widow of that time. Dhaannath is a friend of Amritrai. He is a wealthy and influential man who marries Prema. Kamala Prasad is a morally corrupt character and a scheming villain who tries to seduce Poorna.

**Keywords:** Widow Remarriage, Discrimination, Social Reform, Ideal Woman, Dowry, Untouchable, etc.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Munshi Premchand (1880 - 1936) is regarded as one of the well known and influential writers in Indian Literature. Most of the works of Munshi Premchand deal with the conflicts faced in the middle class society and he tried to bring a solution to resolve the conflict. He has a deep intention to improve the pitiable condition of the poor middle class Indian women whose lives run subjugated to orthodox beliefs, male domination and the dreadful practices like child marriage, dowry, sex abuse and untouchability. As a result, women of those times suffer from intense agony. In the words of Pramlala Batra, the situation is described as:

Apart from dowry, another cause of suffering of Indian women was the helpless condition of widows. A widow had no right to the income of her husband. So, in a joint family, she was tortured. Even the parents of widows were not willing to accept her. [Batra, Pramila. Charles Dickens and Premchand: Novelists with a Social Purpose : 46]

Premchand strongly condemns such immoral practices and the likely dangers to our society, and he likes to reform such evil practices by depicting them through his novels. In his novel Pratigya, he has adopted the wretched condition of widowhood through a character, Poorna.

## 2. THE PLOT OF PRATIGYA

Pratigya (1927) tells the story of a widower named Amritrai who wanted to change the society by removing the evils prevailing during those times. The idea of reforming the society comes to his mind when he has attended a discourse which was held in the Arya Temple of Kashi. He is inspired by the speech of Pandit Amarnath and he decides to marry a widow so that he can save the lives of young women. Besides this, he also promises to either stay single or marry only a widow. Initially, Amritrai falls in love with Prema, a beautiful and virtuous girl who is the sister of his deceased wife. They love each other whole heartedly and everything for the wedding ceremony was fixed. However, Amritrai gives up his love for Prema and sacrifices his life and works as a social reformer with the intention that he can save the lives of young widows. So, he requests Dhaannath who really loves Prema to marry her. Dhaannath also accepts his friend's proposal and he becomes hopeful and secretly feels very happy. Amritrai faces many challenges and obstructions from the society while working for the welfare of the widows. Even he is betrayed by Dhaannath. However, he never gives up his hope. He opens "Vanita Bhawan", a home for orphan women where all widows take shelter and live happily. When Dhaannath comes to know the true colour of his friend, Amritrai, he comes to him and makes friend again. At the end of the story, Amritrai promises that he will never marry and will sacrifice his life for the welfare of the widows.

Poorna is the heroine of the novel Pratigya. She is the wife of Vasntkumar, a clerk by profession who is the neighbour of Prema and she also makes friend with Prema. Prema is the daughter of Lala Badri Prasad and Devaki. She has a brother whose name is Kamala Prasad and Sumitra is Kamala Prasad's wife. Lala Badri Prasad feels pity for Poorna's livelihood so he makes Poorna take refuge in his house after the death of Poorna's husband as he is left without any support to sustain her life. At this moment, Kamala Prasad disagrees with his father's decision but later on agrees with. Kamala Prasad in a very tactful and protective manner, invites Poorna to stay in their house after she is left vulnerable and without support after her husband's death. Poorna unwillingly leaves her husband's house and stays at Kamala Prasad's house. On many occasions, Kamala Prasad subtly tries to manipulate and seduce Poorna into becoming a victim of his desire. One day, Kamala Prasad takes Poorna with him to Prema's house. On the way Kamala Prasad takes away Poorna to an unknown destination and tries to molest her. Poorna tries to escape the situation. She picked up a chair and threw it at Kamala's face. The forceful speed of the chair hit Kamala's nose which started bleeding and broke his tooth. Kamala fell on the ground and remained unconscious. Poorna ran out of the room and she quickly went down the road and hid under the bridge. By afternoon she came out on the road and started going to the Ganga river. On the way, she encountered an old man whom she asked about the way to Ganga river. The old man understood Poorna's miserable condition and he guided Poorna to live in Vanita Bhawan, a home for orphan women, providing protection and giving a new life with dignity. Poorna stayed at Vanita Bhawan thereafter.

## 3. REFLECTION OF SOCIAL REALITIES IN PRATIGYA

Widow of the early 20th century lived in a deplorable and miserable condition. She faced societal discrimination, inequality hardships, atrocities, exploitation, etc. Poorna is a significant character who faces the plight of the Hindu widows. Her life becomes unworthy after her husband's death. She disgraces herself and thinks that her life is useless without her husband. She had a few cheap pieces of jewellery. "She brought all those jewellery to Lala Badri Prasad on the thirteenth day of her husband's death and she cried: "What will I do with them now." [Premchand, Pratigya: 20]

Poorna's actual parents are no more. She has an uncle but her uncle never turned back after she got married. Moreover, there is no blood relation on her in-law's side. She had only her husband. After her husband's death she has no one. She is all alone. She has no income on which she can live her life independently.

Kamala Prasad is totally against his father's decision of making Poorna stay in their house. He refuses because of the societal stigma attached to widows especially in the conservative families of the Indian society. Widows were often seen as burdens and were subjected to harsh societal judgments. Kamala's refusal to let Poorna stay in their house reflects the deep-rooted prejudice against widows and the class-based discrimination that prevailed in the society of that time. However, he controls his opinion and expresses his acceptance on his father's action:

God help, I wouldn't want to live to see such a day. But this much I can assure you that whatever you do, Kamala will never have any objection. You are the master of the house. All this wealth is a result of your efforts; you have full rights on it. Before deciding I may say anything but once the decision is made I'll not open my mouth. [Premchand, Pratigya: 23]

This shows the amount of love and respect showed by a son towards their father in the Indian society. In the Indian society fathers are treated to be the heads of the family in terms of decision making and their role as disciplinarian. So, Kamala Prasad could not argue against father's decision of making Poorna staying in their house even though he didn't like to let Poorna live in their house initially.

Kamala Prasad being a morally corrupt person takes a turn, after initially allowing Poorna to stay in his house in front of his father. He comes to Poorna's house with the idea of somehow asking her to abandon the place and go somewhere. He has no regards for the helplessness of Poorna. However, he is charmed by Poorna's beauty. He feels guilty at his own wickedness and says, "It will be very difficult for you to stay here alone, and at home Prema is also very lonely, so why don't you come to our house and stay with us. Is it a problem?" [Premchand, Pratigya: 25] Kamala Prasad initially refusing Poorna to stay in their house but later being charmed by her beauty he allows her to give shelter in his house. This shows the social reality of a morally corrupt individual who outwardly conforms to societal expectations but are driven by personal desires.

Poorna's heart was torn apart at the thought of leaving the house where she had enjoyed the pleasure of married life and again she saw the miseries of widowhood. She wanted to live her life independently but being a widow of a lower level clerk, she had no economic source to sustain her life. As a result, she left the house and stayed at Kamala Prasad's house and lived a life of dependent widow. This shows the miserable condition of poor widows that existed during Premchand's times.

In several ways Kamala Prasad is trying to defile Poorna's chastity of being a woman. Kamala Prasad persuaded Poorna by saying:

Love is God's call. To dishonour it is a sin. God has given me wealth. I see beautiful women everyday. With the power of wealth I can make any woman a prey to my lust. But I swear, I have never ever looked at any woman. My friends call me an 'old hog'. Sumitra has been with me for the past three years, but I have never cast a loving eye on her. But the moment I saw you I felt as if a curtain has lifted before my eyes. I felt that you were sitting in the temple of my heart ever since. But because of lack of knowledge I could not understand the reason for this pain. It was as though one suddenly remembers a forgotten thing. Now I want to forget you, to keep my mind off you, but I am helpless. You may think that my life depends on you. [Ibid.,: 106]

By this way Kamala Prasad tried to win Poorna's heart. We also come to know that during Premchand's times woman was often treated as an object, which can be bought by money when desired if a man had enough wealth. A widow could easily become a victim of such man like Kamala Prasad. Kamala Prasad symbolises the exploitative and the patriarchal norms that were existing in the society of that time, and his attitude towards Poorna represents the social injustice faced by women, most particularly the widows. Kamala Prasad looks upon Poorna in an oppressive and selfish way. He exploits her vulnerable position as a widow exhibiting little sympathy for her dignity. Kamala Prasad takes advantage of her misfortune and tries to manipulate her situation for his own interest. His behaviour towards Poorna is a vivid reflection of the systematic oppression of the widows in the society of the time.

Kamala Prasad wants to take Poorna with him to Prema's house for only to exploit her vulnerable situation. He does so under the guise of offering her help, but his real intentions are far more sinister. He takes Poorna to an unknown destination, towards his garden and attempts to spoil her purity. This shows the patriarchal structures that perpetuates the exploitation of women. However, Poorna protects her purity and is not afraid of death instead of becoming a victim in the hands of a man like Kamala Prasad.

Professor Daannath, a wealthy and influential man, is also a close friend of Amritrai. Amritrai is a man of high moral values who sacrifices his life for social equality. He fights against social injustice of women particularly the widows. He has a fiancée, Prema, whom he loves whole heartedly. But, when he sees the intense oppression and sufferings that

widows face in society, he decides to give up his fiancée, Prema and arranges for her marriage to Babu Dhaannath. He does this not out of personal desire but out of a commitment to handle the social injustice around him, most particularly those affecting women.

Prema becomes devastated in Amritrai's decision of refusing her but she understands Amritrai's decision and, in turn gives up her love for him and marries Babu Dhaannath. Prema's acceptance of Babu Dhaannath is expressed as, "Like an ideal Hindu girl, Prema accepted her husband with grace. Now Amritrai was only a dream she had once seen." [Ibid.,: 67]

Prema's acceptance of Dhaannath as her husband, despite the emotional pain, reflects the societal expectations of women in her time especially the idea that a woman should uphold her duties and make sacrifices for the greater good, even at the cost of her own happiness. This emotional resignation and acceptance of her new life with Babu Dhaannath as husband and wife highlights the theme of sacrifice and selflessness that saturated Pratigya. This moment in the story shows the complexity of female experience in a patriarchal society, where personal desires are often subordinated to social expectations.

Babu Dhaannath, despite being a friend of Amritrai, ultimately becomes an antagonist to Amritrai. He is also against Amritrai's social reformation. He makes a derogatory remark against the untouchables. He holds his views as:

There is so much noise about uplifting the lower castes. Don't stop them for coming to the wells, temples or schools. Before that it is essential to train them to be clean and well behaved, no one has thought about that! They only want to include them in our society lest they adopt Islam or Christianity. By converting such low caste corrupt people what will the Muslims or Christians gain? Lots of low castes have become Christians, in Madras. Villages have been converted, but has that brought any change in their behaviour or habits? They still worship devils. Except that they have started drinking more liquor, have become slaves of tea and wear the discarded clothes of the English, there is no other change in the society. [Ibid.,: 77]

This statement expresses frustration about the focus on improving the condition of lower classes. It is evident that during that time in the Indian caste system, the untouchables were kept at the bottom of the social hierarchy and faced several discriminations.

Dowry is an important part of the financial arrangement in the context of marriage during those days. Sumitra's reference to her father sending fifty rupees indirectly shows how families were often expected to contribute large amount of money to ensure a good match for their daughters. It also highlights the economic dependency of women as the wealth of the brides' family directly influenced by her marriage prospects. Sumitra's statement is a powerful commentary on the gender and economic inequalities that women faced in early 20<sup>th</sup> century India. Her husband's reservations about how she uses the money given by her father shows the patriarchal constraints that women were kept bounden. The fights Sumitra has with her husband over the small amount of money exhibits the larger struggles women faced in asserting their autonomy, both within their families and society. Through the character of Sumitra, Premchand critiques the deeply ingrained patriarchal values that restricted women's personal freedom and economic independence.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

To conclude, Premchand's portrayal of these characters in Pratigya shows the complexities of human behaviour and the need for social reform and highlights the importance of sympathy, equality and moral integrity in removing the societal barriers based on caste, gender, and societal status that divide individuals.

#### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

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