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Domestic Violence on Indian Women in Premchand's Select Novels: An Existential Feminist Perspective

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Abstract : The present research project entitled Domestic Violence on Indian Women in select Novels of Premchand: An existentialist Feminist perspective, attempts to critically examine the representations of violence directed against women in a selection of Indian fiction. The basis of this investigation is the idea of violence as a complex phenomenon which takes a range of colours depending upon the situation in which it takes place. But they have failed to take into account the role played by every person's gender, race, religion and class in her or his experience of violence. It undertakes a study of the complexities of Indian woman's experience of violence. The paper examines the portrayal of violence in selected Indian literary texts translated into English. This theorization of violence is also brought to bear on the violence against women in particular representations in the selected texts in order to pinpoint and articulate various subtle and overt instances of violence.

Keywords: Existential feminism, Domestic violence, Internalization, Ideal women

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1. Introduction

In the marriage hymn RV 10.85.26, the wife "should address the assembly as a commander." A Rig Veda hymn says "I am the banner and the head, a mighty arbitress am I: I am Victorious, and my Lord shall be submissive to my will" (qtd. in: sharma). This is probably the earliest reference to the position of women in the Hindu society. Women used to have equal participation in the decision making process at home and

outside the home. They used to enjoy the rights of property and had equal status to men in every respect. With the passing of time, the status of women in the society started diminishing. After that, the evolution of a certain phenomenon like sati etc. led to the oppression of women and the men grew more dominating. It led to the social construct that women are biologically, socially and politically weaker than men which led to increased cases of domestic violence against women in India. Domestic Violence has no universally accepted definition but it cuts across all religion, castes, ethnic groups, backgrounds, and countries and is a global phenomenon.

Anyone of any age group from children to old people could be victims of domestic violence. The legal, everyday definition may change in different parts of the world but in its most basic form, domestic violence could be said to be a behaviour by a person, which is coercive in nature, towards any other family member, partner, ex-partner, children which are intended to dominate and gain power and control of the other party. It can be done against any sex, in any relation, marital or non-marital, Heterosexual and same-sex.

2. The Second Sex: An Existentialist Feminist Ideology

In 1940 Simone de Beauvoir published what was to become a definitive statement of the contemporary feminist movement: *The Second Sex*. This magnum opus, with its critical analysis of the situation of women hitherto unprecedented in history, filled the gap between the first two waves of feminism.

One of the important insights given by Beauvoir is that woman is the product of civilization. In her own words: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in the society. "It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature"(301). Beauvoir claims that there is no unchangeable feminine essence. There is no essential feminine character which is predetermined, but a woman is the product of a civilization. A woman, from the very beginning, is taught that to be valuable she must try to please, she must make herself an object for men and so she should renounce her autonomy. She is treated like a live doll and is refused liberty. The mother while treating daughter saddles the child with her own destiny. The mother applies herself to changing the child into a woman like her. The treasures of female wisdom are poured into girl's ears; feminine virtues are instilled in her heart.

In her family life, she is introduced to the relative rank and the hierarchy of the sexes. She is made to realize that she is to become one day a woman like her mother and she will never be the sovereign father.

The historical and literary culture to which she belongs, and the songs and legends with which she is lulled to sleep help to confirm the superiority of the male in the eyes of the little girl. It is stamped on her mind that her supreme necessity is to charm the masculine heart. She equips herself for this by adorning herself. The delights of passivity are made to seem desirable to the young girl by parents and educators and through books and myths. This indoctrination even seems to continue in her marriage and sexual initiation.

According to Beauvoir, "Reared by women within a feminine world, a woman's normal destiny is marriage"(368). An important point that Beauvoir wants to make here, as she does throughout the second part of *The Second Sex*, is that the resignation of a woman to man does not come from any predetermined inferiority. On the contrary, this resignation has its source in the adolescent girl's past, in the society around her and particularly in the future assigned to her. In short, Beauvoir insisted that womanhood, as we know it today, is a social contract. That is, the subordination of female to male does not represent an immutable state of nature, but is the result of various social forces. . At the same time, by asserting that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, Beauvoir hints at the importance of human intervention and action in becoming a person. This enables one to counter the determination of simple biological or cultural explanations.

The subordination of woman is explained in *The Second Sex* not only as a social and historical phenomenon but also from an existentialist perspective. Influenced by Sartre, she explains the oppression and submission of women, using many of the existentialist notions. It is widely known that though at the time of her writing *The Second Sex*, she did not like to be called a feminist, but she reluctantly accepted the label of being called an existentialist. So, it is clear through *The Second Sex* Beauvoir was moving towards an existentialist feminism.

In the introduction to *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir explicitly positioned herself not as a woman or feminist, but as an existentialist. In *The Second Sex*, there is always palpably present in each chapter—whether on a woman's sex life, her professional life, her religiosity, or her household duties—the framing metaphysics of the human condition as laid out by Sartre.

De Beauvoir views Freud's explanation for a woman having a feeling of "otherness", (feelings of being the other sex, instead of one of the two sexes), as incomplete. De Beauvoir also disagrees with the Marxist idea that because woman performs tasks such as cleaning, cooking, and childbearing and men

perform tasks of hunting and fishing, men represented the class of "bourgeois" and woman represented the "proletariat". She also believes that men have created myths about women. In sum, the ideal woman is a woman who believes it is her duty to sacrifice herself for her man.

3. Domestic Violence against Women

One of the reasons for it being so prevalent is the orthodox mindset of the society that women are physically and emotionally weaker than the males. Though women today have proved themselves in almost every field of life-affirming that they are no less than men, the reports of violence against them are much larger in number than against men. The possible reasons are many and are diversified over the length and breadth of the country. According to United Nation Population Fund Report, around two-third of married Indian women are victims of domestic violence and as many as 70 percents of married women in India between the age of 15 and 49 are victims of beating, rape or forced sex. In India, more than 55 percent of the women suffer from domestic violence, especially in the states of Bihar, U.P., M.P. and other northern states.

Premchand in *Godaan*, *Nirmala* and *Sevasadan* depicts the domestic violence perpetrated on women which are supported by patriarchal ideology.

Premchand's view of the Ideal woman, her role, and position among men, also varies somewhat in the two worlds. Once again he seems much surer of himself in the context of rural society than with the educated, sophisticated world of the city. In the village the Ideal woman is the wife and mother, constantly likened to a goddess- the goddess Lakshmi. "When a good wife enters a home it is like the goddess Lakshmi herself coming in (34)", says Bhola the herdsman to Dhaniya, paying her a compliment. However, the Ideal woman, goddess though she be, is not just to be worshiped or treated as the romantic object of adoration. In the village context, she is not the recipient of devotion but must, instead, possess an extraordinary humanity. Her goddess-like attributes require that she brings good luck and prosperity to her husband and family, be dutiful as a wife, modest, faithful, generous and good-neighbourly, know "how to respect both the high and the low"(qtd. in Swan) and, above all, be long- suffering, devoted, and capable of great self-sacrifice in the interests of husband and family. This is the traditional Indian Ideal, exemplified in Sita and the many heroines of myth, legend, and literature. Datadin, the village brahman priest, underlines this last aspect when he tells Dhaniya, "It is a woman's duty to be long-suffering" (Premchand 61). In the central character of Dhaniya, wife of Hori, a courageous, honest, generous,

self-sacrificing and devoted wife, and mother, Premchand has come very close to embodying this ideal. She is not, however, in any sense a pasteboard ideal. She is a creature of flesh and blood, with a fiery temper, a quick wit, and sharp Intelligence; a woman who refuses to be manipulated by the village elders, who can fight like a lioness and take on the world to protect her husband and family. She lives according to a code of morality that does not believe in mere service to the demands of caste, tradition, religious ritual, or the accepted social norms of family, reputation, and honour. When Gobar, her son, leaves Jhuniya pregnant and runs away to the city, Dhaniya takes her in. "How could she protect her own reputation at the cost of a life- or rather, of two lives?" (154) By accepting Jhuniya into her home, Dhaniya validates the illegitimate union of her son with a lower- caste girl, a widow at that, and flouts society represented, on the one hand, by the girl's Irate father, Bhola, out to beat his daughter to death for ruining his reputation, and, on the other, the caste elders of the village, who promptly excommunicate Dhaniya and her family for casting aside accepted social norms, "This husband and wife seemed to be daring society to take action against them. Well, society would prove that those who violate Its rules cannot be left to sleep in peace"(156). Premchand is clearly critical of the self-righteous, sanctimonious, and conventional morality of the village elders. His sympathetic rendering of Dhaniya's bitter struggle against them, her constant affirmation of a simple morality above that of social convention, underscores what Premchand believes to be the true tradition of Indian womanhood. She is long-suffering like Sita and capable of undergoing intense physical hardship and deprivation for the sake of her loved ones. But, like so many of Premchand's heroines, she is also cast in the mode of Draupadi of the Mahabharata-an equally Indian ideal, but that of a strong female, often more courageous and stronger than her male counterpart.

In Dhaniya we are presented with the embodiment of the traditional Indian virtues associated with the role of wife and mother. Unlike Govindi of the middle-class world, Dhaniya is not passive and self-effacing, nor is she totally subservient to her husband and elders. She is quick to argue, protest, and stand up for her rights, though in the final analysis she accepts and stands by her husband's decision. This is well illustrated in the incident concerning the payment of a fine to get back into the caste. Dhaniya realizes the injustice of it and would rather not pay and continue to live outside the community. But once Hori decides to pay up, she reluctantly goes along with his decision, making a desperate fight only to retain a little grain to feed the family (Premchand 159-60). Again, in the last scene of the novel, distraught

and grief-stricken at the deathbed of her beloved husband, pressured by her kinsmen and friends to make a gift of a cow to a brahman- the final ritual act expected of a dying man she refuses to be pushed into a further cycle of debt and humiliation. Instead, in a gesture of simple dignity, she places her last few coppers in the dying man's grasp and addresses the brahman to whom the cow should be given, "Maharaj, there is no cow nor calf nor money in the house. There are only these few coins. This is his Godaan, his gift of a cow"(Premchand437). Her simple, searing words take on a tragic resonance and become the anguished cry of all of India's poverty-stricken, debt-ridden, rural poor.

The other village women also conform to these Ideals and expectations. The notions of "devotion and self-sacrifice" (Premchand 116). Can be predicated not only of Dhaniya but of Jhuniya, the young widow engaged in an illegitimate union with Gobar. She too is long-suffering, first deserted by Gobar and left alone to face the wrath of his parents and hers alone. Then when she joins him in the city, she is treated merely as the object of his sexual needs, and finally, when she resentfully withdraws into her own Inner world, apathetic and uncaring, she is beaten and further abused by him.

Like Jhuniya, Siliya, the girl from the chamar, or leather-worker, caste, mistress of the Brahman Matadin, is dutiful and devoted to her lover even when rejected by him. She assumes the characteristics and expectations attached to the role of a wife, even though she knows that he will never marry her.

In such a context wife-beating is an everyday aspect of village life. Punni is beaten by Hira, Dhaniya by Hori, Jhuniya by Gobar. It is only Dhaniya who has the courage to stand up to her husband:

You can't be called brave just for beating up the wife you took by the arm and brought home to cherish. You must think you can do whatever you like, just because you feed me and clothe me. Well from now on you can take care of the house yourself. I'll stay right here in the village and shame you -just you wait and see. And I'll be better fed and dressed than ever before(Premchand 141).

Her threat to shame Hori by continuing to live in the village as a whore leaves Hori completely defeated, "realizing the weakness and helplessness of a man when confronted by a woman" (Premchand 141). Wife-beating may not always be condoned but it is certainly accepted in the village as a fact of life. When the woman beats a man, however, as in the case of Nohri and Bhola, then society is truly disturbed. Hori realizes that "In all his life he'd never heard of a wife giving her husband a shoe-beating. In fact, he couldn't recall even a case of a slap or a blow much less a shoe-beating, the supreme humiliation"(Premchand 363). This horrified reaction to what was considered a scandalous incident

underlines the male perspective that dominates Indian rural society. Wife-beating, by contrast, is a daily occurrence.

Nothing of this clarity and assurance appears in Premchand's handling of the question with regard to his educated city characters. The major female characters of the middle-class world are Govindi and Malti. They represent the traditional oppositions: those of wife/mother and courtesan/mistress. Premchand seems to have some difficulty, however, in maintaining the traditional attitudes and expectations generally associated with these roles. Malti, the westernized, sexually uninhibited, modern woman, is seen initially in the role of the traditional courtesan. She was the living Image of modernity- expertly made up, delicate but full of life, lacking any trace of hesitation or shyness, a wizard at sharp repartee, an expert in male psychology, a connoisseur of the pleasures of life, and master In the art of charm and enticement. (Premchand 77).

Malti is clearly intended as a foil to the devoted wife and mother, Govindi. She is arepresentative of the new India and symbolizes the changing roles that woman was being expected to play in the changing political and social framework of the twentieth century. It is a role advocated by, Gandhi, who campaigned for education and equality for women and encouraged them to engage in professional and public service. An ardent Gandhian, Premchand seems to see the need for such changed roles and yet seems unable to quell certain ambivalence towards women who adopt them an ambivalence not entirely absent In Gandhi's writings on feminism. Thus, Malti is cast as the modern version of the traditional archetypal courtesan.

Govindi also sees Malti in this role and appeals to Dr. Mehta to save her husband from Malti 's destructive power. While Premchand can readily channel his ambivalence by casting the modern, liberated female in the traditional role of courtesan and seductress, fascinating but destructive, he cannot as easily make the value judgment's generally associated with the role. Being a Liberal and a progressive, he is aware of the positive Implications of education and liberation for women and the tremendous resources thereby released for social progress. This awareness he expresses through Malti's comments on the villagers. She is impressed and chastened by the devotion of the peasant women to their husbands and families, but also sees the deeper repercussions of that devotion and self-abnegation:

Why was it that women didn't teach their sons to show reverence for mothers and all women? Was it because the mothers had completely effaced themselves, losing all Individuality, and didn't know how to

give such instruction (377)?

The sentiments are Malti's, but Premchand undoubtedly endorses them. Premchand the progressive, the social reformer, sees the long-term debilitating effects of excessive saintliness and excessive self-effacement, whether it be in women or in the countless generations of peasant farmers who have allowed themselves to be exploited. It is this side of him that is attracted by Malti 's confidence and independence, and that revels in Dhaniya's fierce fight for her rights.

However, Premchand the nationalist and traditionalist is understandably hesitant to endorse the overthrow of the old morality, the old ideal. Such attempts, he feels, might totally undermine the traditional basis of Indian society, which he believes still has a great deal of positive value. In an interview with I. N. Madan in 1934 Premchand states on the question of social reform and revolution, "I do want to overhaul but not to destroy. If I had some prescience and knew that destruction would lead us to heaven I would not mind destroying even"(Premchand: An Interpretation 64). So Gobar's revolt against the village elders and his refusal to pay their exorbitant fines is portrayed as being slightly insolent, the headstrong reactions of youth and immaturity. Similarly Malti, the spirited and independent young woman, is initially cast in the role of the seductress, while the pallid and passive Govindi is eulogized as the ideal Indian woman. His ambivalence surfaces, however, even with Govindi. During a conversation with Dr. Mehta in which he is waxing eloquent on her goddess-like qualities, Govindi interrupts with irony and some degree of psychological insight:

What kind of woman is someone who can't keep her husband happy, who can't win a place in his heart? . . . Where I'm a failure, she's a success. I can't even win over those who belong to me, while she wins over outsiders also (Premchand 176).

In the village situation, Norhi clearly plays the role of 'courtesan,' using her charms with the village officials in order to obtain favours. Her actions are tolerated or accepted by everybody in the village world, as they are in keeping with the role she has chosen to play. Yet they are also clearly 'placed in a moral context. Her city counterpart, Malti, cannot be as easily categorized or judged. It is perhaps this conflict, this ambivalence, that forces Premchand into making his character undergo a drastic transformation at the end of the novel. The seductress who relentlessly pursued the men she desired now rejects the offer of marriage from the very man she most wanted. She settles, instead, for a platonic relationship with him and for a career of social service and humanitarian acts. What makes the change

seem even more an external Imposition (as so many of Premchand's dramatic transformations are) is their decision to live under one roof, loving and caring for each other but refraining from a sexual relationship. Malti's transformation, so out of character as to be highly unrealistic and not very convincing, is the result of Premchand's desperate effort to fuse the Indian traditional ideal of devotion and self-sacrifice with the equally necessary ideal of modern Indian womanhood -that of education, Independence, and the freedom to engage in professional or public roles on an equal footing with men. The only way he could achieve this fusion within the context of the still -traditional world of India in the thirties was to inflict on Malti eternal spinsterhood, together with the exalted role of goddess and mother-figure for Dr. Mehta, while he, in turn, becomes her guru and protector. Malti makes a page-long speech on the subject:

No Mehta, I've been thinking about this question for months and I've finally decided that there's greater happiness in being friends than in being husband and wife. You love me, you believe in me, and I'm confident that, if the occasion arose, you would protect me with your life. I've found not only a guide but also a protector in you. I love you too, and I believe in you, and there's no sacrifice that I couldn't make for you. . . . Your life so far has been one of sacrifice, in which there's little room for selfishness. I'm not going to drag it down. The world needs dedicated men like you (Premchand 412).

She refuses his offer of marriage and suggests they both devote themselves to the service of humanity. Mehta's response is equally interesting:

Mehta listened with head bowed. Each word opened up his Inner vision as though he had been completely blind until now. Emotions which previously had appeared to be dream fantasies now became pulsating life truths. Light and exaltation seemed to pour through him. . . . Mehta suddenly recalled the sweet days when he had known great happiness resting in the arms of his widowed mother. Where was that mother now? . .

Taking Malti's feet in both hands, he trembled and said, 'I'll do as you suggest.' Separated though they were, the two were joined in the close embrace. Both were in tears (Premchand 412-13).

Mehta, therefore, has discovered the Ideal he was seeking. He has his goddess and mother-figure combined, the epitome of devotion and self-sacrifice; and Premchand has solved the problem of his ambivalence towards the modern educated female. Malti, the liberated woman, does not have to be confined to the role of the modern equivalent of the traditional courtesan, nor does she have to be forced into the role of the passive and self-sacrificing wife. She has now an even more exalted role- a goddess

like creature, a caring mother- figure, and her sexual needs sublimated in the services of Dr. Mehta and humanity. One wonders if there is not a touch of the Influence of post-colonial Victorian values here since sexual abstinence was not a characteristic of Indian deities. Fortunately for the reader, Premchand shifts the scene back to the world of the village and the novel ends with the moving, totally authentic, completely unsentimental scene of Hori's death and Dhaniya's dignified act of Godaan.

However, it is in the figure of Nirmala, the character from Premchand's eponymous novel, that it attains a certain kind of apotheosis; as the one "wronged but unharmed"; in need of salvation and deserving one. It revolves around the character of Nirmala, a young woman married to an elderly widower with three sons. Caught in a complex situation where desire, guilt, and suspicion, aggravate the situation to such an extent that the entire family falls apart, it is Nirmala's reticence which seems to be responsible for the disintegration of the family. Though, Nirmala on her part tries her best to save the situation each time.

"Despite all my care and caution, the blame has finally fallen on me!" (Premchand 163).

As the second wife, Nirmala already feels hemmed in when she enters the household. With a domineering sister-in-law who does not wish for her hold on the family to be undermined, she finds herself lost with no assailable role to play at hand. Towards the end of Chapter five, she consciously chooses to devote herself to the upbringing of the children. This decision to adopt the maternal role is a product of the prevalent images of ideal women put forward by the male society. Lefebvre has written critically of the obscuring of the materiality of space and the social relations of production in the discussion of domestic space by writers like Bachelard:

Confining women within domesticity naturalizes their labor and erases their individuality. It turns them into "ghostly figure of desire with no place to occupy in the social order." It erases their suffering and even, eulogizes their drudgery (*The Poetics of Space* 91).

However, the adoption of the role does not bring peace in the household. Her inability to feel any sexual attraction towards a man her father's age and, a natural affinity that she feels towards the eldest son, Mansaram because they are relatively of the same age causes Totaram to develop suspicions regarding them. In order to allay his fears, she begins confining herself to her own room and stops taking the lessons in English from Mansaram as she was earlier. She begins devoting greater time and attention to Totaram's needs but has to now hear jibes about her neglect of the children. Typecast, as the evil step-mother, she is allowed no room for individual action which induces passivity.

If I've ever said anything to him, may my tongue fall off, Of course, as a step-mother all kinds of blame attaches to me by rights? I beg you, please ask him to come in (*Premchand*77).

It is only after the loss of the first two sons, that she decides to take the reins of the household into her own hands but the overwhelming anxiety for the future makes her insensitive to the needs of the remaining members of the family and leads to further loss and bereavement.

She begins to adapt herself in the realm of Totaram's house:

Slowly the intensity of her anguish begun to wane. She had accepted that "there was no happiness for her in life, so why would she ruin her existence by dreaming of happiness?" (*Premchand*65)

Moreover, it provides an insight into the prehistory of feminism in India. An Indian critic named Harish Trivedi says that *Nirmala* presents an "exceptionally fine psychologisation of the ill-married and sexually anguished heroine" (*The Power of Premchand* 231).

4. Conclusion

Thus in his novels, Premchand skillfully captures those nuances of violence that have been normalized by the myth about ideal women. Premchand lays bare the misery which is a permanent fixture in the lives of people who belong to the different ends of the social spectrum. It lays bare the peripheral situation of women caught in the traps of poverty, feminine ideals (qtd. in .Sharma). In Harish Trivedi's view, the text highlights Premchand's recognition of its characters deep, unresisting and often thoughtless allegiance to as well as their "uninterrogated internalization" of the violence situated in traditional and social values (*The Power of Premchand* 55).

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