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## Reflection of Social Realities in Munshi Premchand's Novel, *Nirmala*

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### Research Article

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### Abstract

**Aims:** Munshi Premchand (1880–1936) is one of the most prominent writers in modern Hindi literature. His works mainly deal with the social issues, with caste hierarchies and gender discrimination. This article deals in depth with the reflection of social realities in Munshi Premchand's novel *Nirmala*.

**Methodology and Approaches:** The societal norms, economic conditions leading to mismatched marriages, unhealthy relationship, deterioration of a harmonious family, the status of women in a male-dominated society, dowry, the harmful effects of remarriage to an underage bride and the husband's distrustful attitude towards his mismatched wife, the emotional conflict between a young step-mother and her step children, etc. are beautifully portrayed in the novel *Nirmala*.

**Outcome:** The novel narrates the heart-breaking journey of the protagonist, *Nirmala* through the dark path of life stained by dowry, mismatched marriage, suspicion, neglect, poverty, etc.

**Conclusion and Suggestions:** Through the character of *Nirmala*, Munshi Premchand vividly showcases the struggles faced by women in times when they attain the marriageable age due to the evil practice of dowry in the early part of the 1st half of 20th century Indian society and its consequences.

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The novel *Nirmala* (1928) is one of the most wonderful works of Munshi Premchand, often described as “a myriad-minded genius” (Abidi, Shuby. *Premchand on Culture & Education Translated from Hindi to English*: 13). *Nirmala* is the protagonist. She is a young girl of fifteen years of age. She is the daughter of Udayabhanulal and Kalyani. Nirmala feels prematurely aged and isolated after hearing the news of her arranged marriage. She embodies the hardship faced by women in a society where marriage is regarded as the ultimate option and duty for a woman, regardless of her personal desire. Nirmala’s internal conflict exhibits the emotional and psychological toll of societal demands on young girls. Amritrai expresses his thoughts regarding the novel, *Nirmala*: The cruel hypocrisy of society, the evil of dowry, the utter helplessness and loneliness of a widow, and the complications upon complications resulting from an incompatible match, all came vividly to life and found voice in this book. (Trivedi, Harish. *Premchand: His Life and Times. Amrit Rai with an Introduction by Alok Rai* 223)

The entire house of Babu Udayabhanulal has been turned into a market place with different trades-people like goldsmith, tailors, carpenters, etc. which shows marriage as a social event in addition to personal or familial event. The extravagant preparations and the focus on lavish hospitality highlight the importance of social reputation. The wedding turns out to be a platform for showing family status and wealth besides an intimate occasion for the bride and the groom. “Marriage even at its best, is a sort of compromise and surrender”. (Gopal, Madan. *My Life and Times: Premchand an Autobiographical Narrative* 216)

The growing financial burden of the wedding preparations for Nirmala faced by her father shows the social pressure to reach certain standards in marriage during Premchand’s times. Udayabhanulal feels compelled to spend large sums to fulfil his obligations, even though his family has no savings. This shows the societal expectations to put on a grand show of wealth even when one’s financial situation doesn’t permit it. Kalyani, the mother of Nirmala concerns about spending money not to cross over five thousand for marriage as they have no savings. Regarding this she tells her husband, Udayabhanulal as:

I'm telling you, make a firm resolve not to spend anything over five thousand. We've got no savings and we'll have to resort debt – so why should we get in so deep that we won't be able to repay it in our lifetime? After all, I have other children, I have to think about them too.”  
(Premchand. *Nirmala*, translated by Alok Rai 8)

But, Udayabhanulal reacts furiously. He does not consider his wife's words. He says to his wife that he is not her slave. Further, he says that he is not the one of those men who dance to the tune of their women and he earns the money and he will spend it in any way he pleases. Nobody has the right to say a word. So, Udayabhanulal's attitude towards his wife illustrates a patriarchal mindset where men, like him see themselves as the sole earners, thus considered that they have the right to dominate both financially and emotionally.

Udayabhanulal decides to leave the house for some days, so that his wife would realise how hard it would be if there is no man in the house. This portrays the tone of domination of Udayabhanulal over his wife Kalyani. Unfortunately, the abandonment of Udayabhanulal makes things even worse. On leaving home, he is beaten up and killed by a convict, Matai. As Kalyani has previously prophesied, the whole wedding arrangement fell apart. This ironically suggests that Udayabhanulal's refusal of Kalyani's words was short-sighted and self-destructive.

Babu Bhalchandra is the father of Nirmala's fiancée. After the death of Nirmala's father, Babu Bhalchandra and his son withdraw the wedding ceremony because of the financial reasons, particularly related to dowry. Bhuwan Mohan, driven by greed, does not want to marry Nirmala unless he gets a huge amount of dowry. In a conversation with his mother regarding the discussion of his marriage with Nirmala, he says, marry me some places where I get a lot of money. At least a hundred thousand may be more. There's no hope of anything there now, is there? Vakil Sahib is no more, and how much d'you suppose the widow has put away? (26).

This demand shows his materialistic attitude, as he sees marriage as a means to earn wealth and increase his financial position rather than husband and wife relation built on mutual love and affection. The then society regards marriage as a financial transaction rather than a personal bond, where women

were reduced to objects of trade to earn economic benefits for men. In this connection Bhuwan Mohan says to his mother: “Ah, if only I could marry some rich man’s daughter, I’d rest content. I don’t ask for too much, just one hundred thousand cash – or else find me some wealthy widow who has only one daughter.” (26)

This highlights the social reality about women being seen as a commodity. In this condition women’s worth is defined by their wealth, status, and what they can bring to the marriage in terms of material goods. This exhibits the patriarchal societal norms where women were often valued if they possessed huge wealth, money, etc. rather than their good moral characters and capabilities.

The dowry system gives a significant financial threat on families, especially the bride’s family. In the words of critic, “Dowry is a practice which has poisoned the life of Indian womanhood.” [Chandra Gupta, Prakash. *Makers of Indian Literature: Premchand*: 35] Having a young marriageable daughter for a poor widow with limited financial income becomes a major cause of distress. Kalyani arranges Nirmala’s marriage with Munshi Totaram who is twenty years older than Nirmala and who has three sons from his first marriage as the dowry demands have been too great to find a better match with Nirmala after the loss of her father. This highlights the oppressive nature of the dowry system, and the limited autonomy women had in marriage decisions. For the solution of the problem of dowry, Pramila Batra says: “The parents of the bridegroom and the bridegroom himself should renounce the greed of dowry.” (Batra, Pramila. *Charles Dickens and Premchand: Novelists with a Social Purpose* 56).

Nirmala, as a young bride married to Munshi Totaram who is much older than herself, faces a hard reality many women of her time had to face. This huge age gap between the married couple reflects the societal expectation that women, particularly young ones, should adjust to the will and authority of their husbands. Nirmala’s frustration and discomfort with her role assigned as a wife and her limited power within the household exhibits how a young bride might feel constrained and isolated in such a marriage. Nirmala is not given the authority she should get. This exhibits the traditional view of women being the main caretakers of the home, but their authority often being controlled by the male heads of the family or older women, like Rukmini Devi. The lack of emotional connection

between Nirmala and Totaram exhibits the lack of mutual affection in arranged marriage.

Nirmala feels a sense of awkwardness, shame and loss of desire whenever she had to spend time with her husband. This shows her lack of emotional connection with Munshi Totaram. But, Nirmala feels happy on the company of children and it shows societal expectations for women to be nurses, all the way. “She would find herself longing for the days when she herself played with dolls and arranged their weddings – the days which were, alas, recent and still fresh in her memory” [Premchand. *Nirmala*, translated by Alok Rai: 47] This indicates how girls are often engaged into domestic and relational duty from a tender age.

Before going anywhere, Mansaram seeks permission from his stepmother, Nirmala but Munshi Totaram does not like this behaviour as he thinks that Mansaram is one year older than Nirmala. So he gets suspicions on their relationship. As a result, Munshi Totaram wants Mansaram to stay in the hostel and the subsequent sending of Mansaram to a hostel leads to his death. Munshi Totaram’s suspicion towards his son and Nirmala exhibits the oppressive patriarchal structures in society during that era. The tragic end of Mansaram is a result of the failure to communicate openly within the family. The father’s decision to keep Mansaram in the hostel in order to isolate him from the family members can be seen as a result of lack of understanding between the father and the son. Mansaram’s death highlights the emotional alienation that many young individuals suffered in traditional families where the head of family imposed decisions without regard to personal feelings. Mansaram’s tragic death shows the broader issue of mental health and emotional neglect in traditional Indian society, where expression of opinion openly was not encouraged. Before Mansaram’s death he meets Nirmala in the hospital and weeps at Nirmala’s feet and expresses his emotions:

O mother, you have undergone so much trouble for an unfortunate being like myself. I will never ever forget the affection you gave me. I will ask the Almighty for just this one boon, that my next birth should be from your womb, so that I might repay something of what I owe you. God knows I never thought of you as a step-mother. You have always been a mother in my eyes. You weren’t all that much older than me, but you were

in the position of a mother to me, and that is exactly how I've always regarded you.... (106-107)

Mansaram's emotional expression to Nirmala shows the deep internal struggles he faced throughout his life. These struggles were likely created by societal pressures and judgements, which ultimately made him isolated and conflicted. His cry symbolizes his desire for emotional support and redemption, but he fails to attain peace due to the societal expectations placed on him. Munshi Totaram was heart-broken due to his role in his son's death. After the death of his son, he hardly smiled again. He would sit down to dinner but he would not eat more than one or two morsels. Munshi Totaram started to make a good relationship with the doctor who treated Mansaram. Sudha, the doctor's wife, came to know Nirmala's past which ultimately compelled her to marry Vakil Sahib. Nirmala gives birth to a baby girl who closely resembles Mansaram. The birth of her daughter entangles Totaram to the world again providing him a sense of continuity and legacy.

Munshi Totaram's house was auctioned off. The auction symbolizes a fall from social and financial grace, signifying the harsh realities of how wealth and social status can be unstable. The auction is both a financial loss and a loss of respect and identity in the eyes of public, thereby exhibiting how deeply individuals are tied to their material possessions and social reputations.

Jiyaram, the second son of Munshi Totaram's first wife begins to become quarrelsome towards his father and blames him for getting married for a second time. Jiyaram steals the jewels of Nirmala which is kept in a small metal case in the alcove. Out of guilt and fear, Jiyaram leaves the house and ran away. When the two sons of Munshi Totaram have gone, only Siyaram is left in the house. Rukmani and Nirmala's quarrels have become a daily affair. Nirmala's nature has changed completely ever since the theft of her jewellery. She becomes economised. Siyaram wouldn't get a single paisa for sweets. Nirmala also remains uncaring even towards her own needs. Nirmala, despite her own needs shows a disregard for her own care and wellbeing. This exhibits a condition where a woman is able to sacrifice her own comforts and health for the benefits of others particularly their families. Munshi Totaram goes to the court daily and worked hard more than a young man in order to fulfil the familial duties as a father to meet the needs of the family.

Siyaram is the third son of Munshi Totaram's first wife. He also abandons his home under the influence of a fake saint. Munshi Totaram worries about Siyaram's not returning home. He goes in search of Siyaram but, he can't find him. He blames Nirmala for she is responsible for Siyaram's departure. Munshi Totaram says to Nirmala with a fiery eye:

Get out from my sight or I won't be answerable for what I do! All this is your doing. It's entirely because of you that I've been reduced to this condition. Was this the state of my home six years ago? You've destroyed home six years ago? You've destroyed my well established home, uprooted my flourishing garden. Now only one stump remains. And you'll rest only when you've destroyed that as well. I didn't bring you to this house to have my while world destroyed. I wanted to make my happy existence even happier. And this is the price I'm paying. My daring sons who were treated with indulgence before you came – before my very eyes you began to treat them like servants. And despite seeing it all I remained blind. Go on, get me a little arsenic. That's all that remains now, we might as well get is over with!" (181)

Totaram directs his anger at Nirmala blaming her for the downfall of his home and the loss of Siyaram. He compares his current state to what it was six years ago, a time when his home was in good condition symbolized by the flourishing garden. The suffering experienced by Nirmala highlights the harsh realities faced by a woman in traditional marriage during that era. Women especially married to a widower of their father's age expected to bear the emotional and physical burdens of such unions while having little control of their own lives. Totaram's harsh treatment and emotional neglect of Nirmala exhibits the deep injustices and inequities that women suffered, as well as the broader societal flaws that perpetuated these practices.

As the story unfolds, Bhuwan Mohan becomes a doctor who is also the one who gives treatment to Mansaram, eventually turns out to be Nirmala's neighbour. His wife Sudha becomes friend with Nirmala. Bhuwan Mohan is also the former fiancée of Nirmala who rejected Nirmala for dowry issues. At a certain moment, Bhuwan Mohan attempts to seduce Nirmala. Sudha comes to know her husband's conduct and she turns furious towards her husband's behaviour to



Nirmala and the words of Sudha forces her husband to suicide. Dismayed by this situation, Nirmala stays in her bed all day, this shows her deep emotional and psychological distress. She becomes ill and takes her last breath. Before she dies, she hands over her daughter, Asha, to Rukmini. She deeply concerns about Asha's future. She takes a promise from Rukmini in the following words:

I'll leave my daughter in your charge, if she survives, marry her off into a good family. I couldn't do anything for her – mine is only the guilt of having given birth to her. Keep her unmarried if need be, give her poison if you must, but please don't marry her to an unsuitable husband – this I beg you. I was unable to be of any service to you – I regret this bitterly. I was unable to give happiness to anyone at all. Anyone whose life was at all touched by mine was destroyed utterly. And if my husband should ever return home, please beg him to forgive this unfortunate her many wrongs.  
(195)

When Munshi Totaram reaches the gate he finds Nirmala dead. The death of Nirmala symbolizes the end of her suffering and her liberation from the oppressive social and marital circumstances she has experienced throughout her life. The novel focuses on Nirmala's tragic journey, exhibiting the hardships she experiences due to her forced marriage to an aged man of her father's age and the societal pressure placed on her as a woman. To conclude, *Nirmala* is a literary masterpiece with deeper significance. It serves as a mirror reflecting the social and cultural conditions of the time. Premchand beautifully portrays the issues such as dowry, the role of women in society, mismatched-marriage and the struggles of the lower classes through his characters and plots and to bring attention to injustices and inequalities prevalent in Indian society.



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