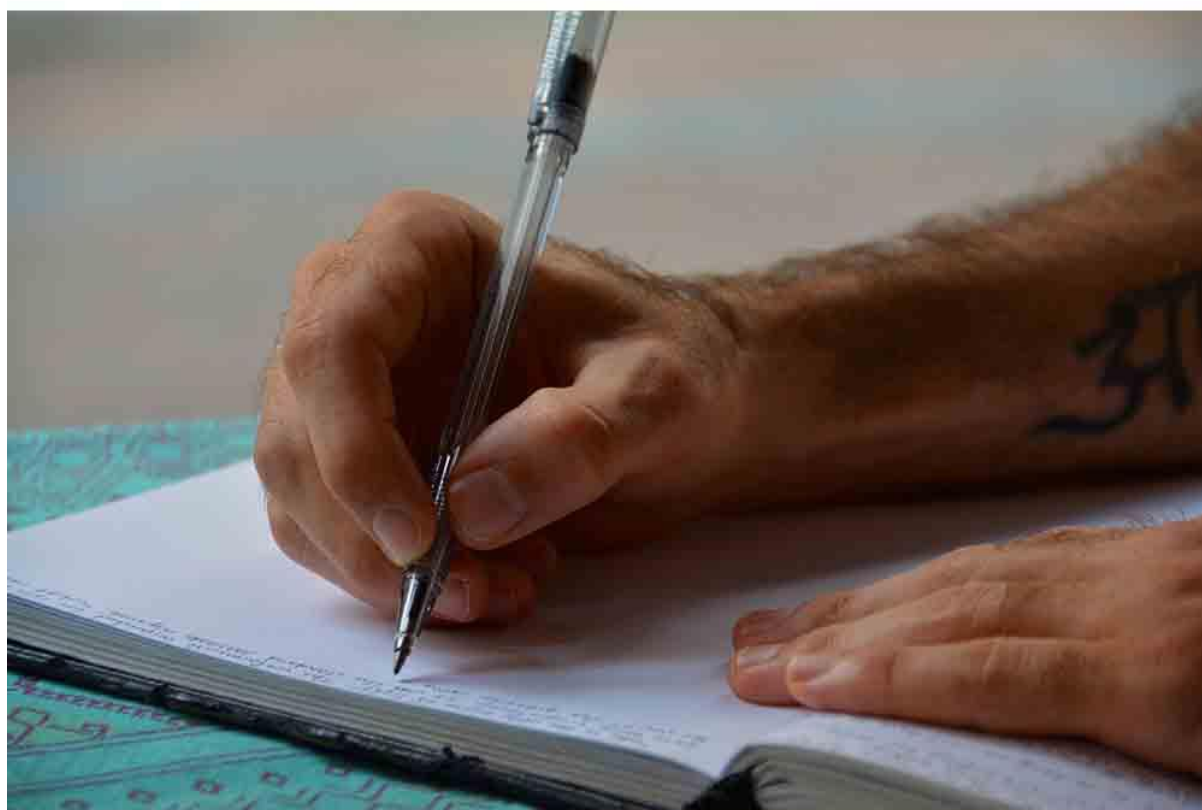


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Portrayal of Animals in Premchand's Short Stories

Abstract

Premchand, is largely remembered as an author of the downtrodden; who successfully penned the desires, agony and misery of the marginalized sections of the society. It was his sheer tact, the way he immortalized the characters he encountered in his surroundings. The names, the physical descriptions, the settings all are so real. He is equally dexterous in portraying his animal characters. A considerable number of his stories offer us deep insight into animal behaviour. The paper attempts to show the portrayal of animals in the short stories of Premchand.

Keywords: downtrodden, immortalized, animal behaviour.

1. The Animal Question:

Just like blacks, dalits, and women, animals too remained silent in literature for quite a long period. Although, the difference between animal studies and women or ethnic studies lies in the fact that they cannot speak for themselves. Again, quite similar to other polemics, animal studies also tend to overlook the differences among animals; and when it does acknowledge, it tends to privilege certain animals while excluding

others. In his influential book, 'Thinking Animals Why Animal Studies Now' Kari Weil talks at length about the under representation and misrepresentation of animals so far. They have either being used as edifying entities or as furnishing utilities in literature: "Animals too have been either invisible or locked in representations that moreover have justified their use and abuse by humans." [2] This paper analyses the representation of animals in literature while focusing on the realistic portrayal of animals' consciousness in Premchand's short stories.

1. The Portrayal of Animals in Ancient Indian Literature:

As far as Indian literary and cultural scenario is concerned animals have been a part and parcel of almost every household. This was because animals were given importance in Hinduism. It is believed that Brahma hid a specific secret in each animal during the process of creation, in order to ensure their spiritual importance. Almost all the deities appear with some or the other animal. Lord Shiva has a bull, Lord Vishnu resides on sheshnaag, and Goddess Durga appears with a lion, while Saraswati has a swan. In fact, Lord Ganesha, who is worshipped across India as the abolisher of obstacles, has an elephants head and rides on a mouse (signifying the efficacy of both big and small) and of course, there is Hanuman, the Monkey God. Animals, therefore, have had an extremely auspicious status in Indian society. Dr. Kumud Kanitkar underlines this feature when he says: "Romans saw animals as fierce creatures which had to be killed or controlled for human survival. The Greeks saw them as symbols of power living in a separate world of their own. But the ancient Indians saw them as they should be seen- friendly loyal and graceful." [4] No wonder that the animals, birds and sea creatures have been woven into so many fables and stories. That is why, the animal question came late and as a surprise in India. Here also, women and animals somehow shared the same fate. They both were degraded from a divine presence to a commodity. Although

there are several socio-economic factors behind this degradation, still one cannot deny the fact.

2. Premchand's Perception of Animals:

Premchand, who initially started writing in Urdu became an unparalleled short story writer in Hindi. He is generally perceived as a writer of the suppressed, underprivileged lot: "No writer before him in Urdu or Hindi, and possibly other Indian literatures, had depicted the lives of the underdogs, the untouchables and the marginalized with such depth and empathy." (1) Hailing from a small village Lamhi near Benaras he had a strong penchant for the varied country life, which is evident in the majority of his fictional pursuits. He had the firsthand experience of the village dwellers especially the ones who were destitute and survived on the margins. Animals are an integral part of village life and therefore, they received Premchand's attention quite naturally and he portrayed them as meticulously as he had portrayed his human characters. Animals in Premchand's stories have their own point of view, their individual will and they are as conscious about their role in the society as their human counterparts. "Premchand depicts animals as endowed with emotions just as human beings are, responding to love and affection just as human beings do, and are fully deserving of human compassion. Often, the duplicity, cruelty and betrayal in the human world is contrasted with the unconditional love and loyalty displayed by animals towards their masters." While reading the animal centered stories of Premchand, one is reminded of Rousseau's 'noble savage' because of the contrast drawn between the animal world and the human society; where animals are more humane as compared to their human counterparts. Although Premchand never went to the extreme of establishing the natural order above the so-called civilized order in the vein of Rousseau but his stories do serve to highlight this aspect. For example I quote from his story entitled 'The Story of Two Bullocks': "They must have been endowed with a secret power, unknown to human beings who claim to be the

noblest of all beings”(p2) Premchand’s keen observation and minute speculation is exhibited in the way he portrays the animal’s consciousness. The animals in Premchand’s stories are as alive as any other character and follow their individual will.

2.1 The Question of Animal’s Individual Will in ‘The Story of Two Bullocks’ and ‘Defending One’s Liberty’:

The story is outstanding in many ways; the precision of expression, the underlying sarcasm, minute observation and the flawless delineation of animal language are to name a few. It is a touching story of two bullocks, who follow their consciousness, and individual will. The beginning sets the tone of the entire story. It should rather be read as an animal’s manifesto. The keen and penetrating observation could be witnessed in the opening paragraph where Premchand quite eloquently delineates the simplicity of a jack ass as compared to other animals: “The jackass is taken to be the most stupid of animals. Whenever we want to say that someone is a fool of the first order we call him a jackass. One cannot really say whether the jackass is stupid or his harmless nature has earned him this title.”(p1) This statement carries the main argument of the story where Premchand posits that one should take a stand for oneself be it a human being or an animal. The bullocks in this story are disciplined, loving and caring. They are devoted to their master. But then they are sold off to Gaya. Here Premchand underlines the question of the absence of animal language as no one even bothers to know the desire of the bullocks: “If God had given them speech they would have asked Jhuri, ‘Why are you driving us, poor wretches away? We have tried our best to serve you’.... We would have preferred to die in your service.”(p3) They do not possess a language but they do speak. They express their refusal and rebellion by not taking the food given by new master, by running from his house etc. Premchand questions the fatalist attitude that justifies the maltreatment of the underprivileged.

Earlier Hira says, “We were born bullocks, how long can we escape beating” (p6) same Hira tries to knock down the wall of the pound where the two of them were locked along with other animals. They keep trying until they are reunited with their master.

The question of animal’s will is underlined even more strongly in ‘Defending One’s Liberty’ wherein a horse establishes his right to rest on Sunday against all odds. The horse had full dedication towards his master Mir Sahib in spite of getting exceptionally meager amounts of food. However, it has a sense of self-respect: “Engaging it against its will or securing its services for demeaning tasks was simply out of the question.” (p88) So when Munshiji tries to engage him on Sunday, it revolts. No force, no punishment or thrashing could make him work on his rest day and finally the groom has to walk to the bride’s house.

2.2 The fellowship between human beings and animals in The Roaming Monkey, The Price of Milk and The Money For Deliverance:

The stories, ‘The Roaming Monkey’, and ‘The Price of Milk’, underpin and fictionalize the blurring of demarcation between human beings and animals as the former being rational and the latter as irrational. Panchtantra as well as Jataka Tales depicted monkeys as irresponsible, mischevious and fickle minded but in Ramayana, Hanuman (monkey God) is presented as an epitome of virtue, righteousness, and wisdom, in fact, the monkeys aid Lord Rama in defeating Ravana. Premchand’s Mannu also helps his owner’s wife in getting back the reins of her life. In ‘The Roaming Monkey’ mannun monkey is more of a member of family. It receives special attention in the household. That is why, when the family loses its ground, shelter,

sanity and the meaning of life once they lose their monkey who was more of a son to them. The juggler dies and his wife becomes mad. She redeems herself only after rejoining with Mannu. Mannu takes her responsibility like a dutiful son. People who see them praise the monkey so much so that they start calling him a deity. The entire description is a testimony to the bond between animals and human beings: "He'd leave the shelter in the morning and return home with some vegetables and bread that he'd earned showing off his acrobatics or simply begging. Even if Budhiya had a son, he wouldn't have showed his mother the kind of love that Manu showed. People were delighted by his acts and gave him money in return for the entertainment. Budhiya bought food from the market with this money. (p.58) 'The Price of Milk' strikes the same chord. Bhungi who had been a midwife as well as a wet nurse at Maheshnath's house dies leaving her only child in doldrums. Mangal being a bhangi's son is treated as an outcaste. A bhangi could feed her master's son with her milk but her son could not be allowed to enter the master's household. He has no friend to play with. He befriends Tommy, a dog. Both of them are under dogs: "He grew stronger than ever and if there was someone he could call his own, it was pariah dog of the village who, tired of being picked on by his fellow dogs, had taken refuge with him. Both of them shared the same food, slept on the same rag, they even had similar temperaments and understood each other pretty well." (p.81). Tommy shares the same affinity with Mangal as exists between Jhabra and Halku in the story 'On a Winters Night'. Jhabra is a source of companionship for Halku in the dead of winter. It gives him warmth and even tries to carry out his responsibility in his absence. They are more like brothers, unwanted and invisible. They share the same rag and the same fate. In 'Money For Deliverance' Rehman is so concerned about his cow that he would not sell her to butchers despite being in utter duress: "All those people are merciless; I wouldn't

have sold it to them for even fifty rupees.”(p.20) it tears his heart to part away from his cow. Premchand is a prolific writer and he is at his best when he displays the soft emotions of his characters. He is expert at capturing minute nuances both in terms of thought and physical description. Notice her description of cow: “The cow was a beauty. She had a slender neck, heavy haunches and milk-filled udders. A beautiful, sturdy calf stood by glued to its mother.... The Muslim man seemed extremely agitated and sad. He was looking at the cow with compassion-filled eyes, trying to contain his emotions.”(p.19) more than his own troubles Rehman is concerned about the welfare of the cow. Premchand hammers the fact that this kind of harmony is indispensable for the progress of the society. The story also establishes the fact that village dwellers were far more aware of the efficacy of animals than any environmentalist today poses to be. Whether he is a juggler, or a farmer like Halku, Rehman or Hori or an orphan like Mangal, they understand the efficacy of animals in their life.

2.3 Animals as a symbol of Affluence and Prosperity:

The story ‘The Bookbinder’ shows how the wellbeing of the animals ensures the happiness of the household. Rafaqat owned several pets and loved them more than anything in his life. His love for animals was selfless. He didn’t keep them for monetary benefits: “Nobody saw him selling the eggs laid by his hens. He never sold any of his goats to the butchers. His mare was never bridled. The cow’s milk was consumed by his dog. The goat’s milk was meant for the cat. Rafaqat would drink only the leftover milk.”(p.108) Rafaqat’s household is no less than an idyllic space where animals are not treated as the other. They do not exist on the periphery. This is what earns him a happy peaceful life. His wife is equally concerned about them. She would feed, clean and cuddle them like her own children. The degradation in

Rafaqat's stature is portrayed through the deterioration in the status of his pets. His second wife destroys the sanctity of his household and as a result, both Rafaqat and his pets get in trouble. He is overburdened with debts and loses his charm, respect and dignity. The animals are taken away while he remains a non-existent.

2.4 The Relationship between Jawahir and Ram Tahal in 'Reincarnation':

The relationship between Ramtahal and Jawahir (a bull) is extraordinary. Even the birth of Jawahir receives a special rendering by the author. An aura is created before his birth as if it is ordained to be special by God. His mother is a special one. She didn't hurt anyone ever even when children grabbed her hands. Ramtahal served her personally sometimes feeding her all by his own hands. Jawahir's birthday is celebrated pompously and Ramtahal even gets an astrologer to draw his birth chart. Jawahir followed his master wherever he went: "This father-and- son relationship between a man and an animal was so unique that everybody was surprised by it." (p.64)

3. Conclusion

As is evident from the above discussion, Premchand is a master craftsman. His portrayal of animals is as convincing and realistic as his human characters. He uses his surroundings to craft his stories and this is what lends a realistic touch to his fiction. His animal characters are unique in a way as they have their own will and they even assert their individuality.

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Nature Animals, Hindu Muslim Unity: Premchand would have been trolled today for the things he cared about. <https://scroll.in>