

**BRUNT OF MISMATCHED MARRIAGES IN
PREMCHAND'S NIRMALA AND DICKENS' HARD TIMES:
A FEMINIST READING**

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ABSTRACT

Premchand, a leading Hindi novelist of the 20th century depicted in his novel, 'Nirmala' (1927) the wretched mental condition of a teen aged girl named Nirmala married to a lawyer Munshi Totaram, aged more than thirty five. The impact of mismatched marriage on the manas of Nirmala leaves her inconsolable and dismal, continually reminding of her poverty-stricken parental house responsible for her current state of despair.

Another eminent novelist of England Charles Dickens (1812-1870) focused his novel 'Hard Times' on the mismatched marriage of Thomas Gradgrind's daughter Louisa with her father's friend Bounderby. In economic terms, it was a good match. But the marriage of teen aged Louisa with a man aged above forty proves to be a complete failure.

The purpose of the paper is to look at both the novels from feminist point of view and assess the psychological condition of Nirmala and Louisa who carry out their roles as wife, mother and daughter, all of which solely dependent on the dominance of their male counterparts. The paper centers on the comparative study of impact of mismatched marriages on the psyche of women and the depiction of trauma caused due to inequitable relationship between genders in British and Indian cultures.

Keywords: *Nirmala (virtuous or pure), sexism, feminism, oppression, mismatched marriage, utilitarianism, tangible facts.*

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Background:

Dhanpat Rai (1880-1936), known by the pen-name of 'Premchand' dominated the landscape of modern Hindi literature by writing a number of novels, short stories, letters, editorials, essays, plays and translations from English into Hindi language. His chief aim was to reform the society through his works of art. His fiction was directed mainly towards inhumanity of caste hierarchies and the plight of women in the patriarchal Indian society. His novels evolved the rigid and cruel social structure where women were the victims of oppressive, indignant and forbidding customs of society that left them helpless and desolate. In his novel *Nirmala*, Premchand narrates the agony of a teenager Nirmala married to a man twenty years older than her. Her psychological condition due to the mismatched marriage is poignantly depicted by Premchand in the novel.

Another novelist of identical stature, Charles Dickens (1812-1870), a Victorian English novelist depicted in his novels, the social evils prevalent in his times. In the novel *Hard Times*, Dickens has evolved the helplessness and anguish of a teen ager Louisa who is forced to suppress her emotions, inhibit her natural aspirations and stifle her sensibilities while staying as wife with her aged husband Bounderby. She has disliked Bounderby ever since her childhood and being compelled to lead the rest of her life with a man like him, leaves her desolate and crushed.

***Nirmala* – an Indian Novel Mirroring Pre- Independent Era**

Nirmala (1927), a Hindi novel written by Munshi Premchand deals with the question of dowry, mismatched marriages and other related issues. The novel was first translated in 1988 as *The Second Wife* by David Rubin and in 1999 as *Nirmala* by Alok Rai, Premchand's grandson. The novel is set against a backdrop of pre-independent India and presents a realistic, picturesque description of the Indian society of 1920s. It characterizes the evils of

dowry system prevalent during the times. The novel brings out the author's desire to impart a dignified status to woman by narrating heartrending experiences of the heroine Nirmala. The author paints a picture of rural India recounting the exploitation and oppression of women due to poverty and social evils rampant in the society. The early years of the 20th century was a period when a young girl's greatest challenge was to get a husband without a dowry. But in doing so, she had to bear the onslaughts of the highly insensitive society. Her fragile, loving heart turned into a miserable, dismal soul struggling to resist the detrimental customs of the society. The novel *Nirmala* aims at awakening the slumbering souls of the society and elevate the status of woman by according her dignified status that she deserves. Francesca Orsin points out,

Premchand explored the social and psychological conditions of an unprecedented range of women characters: widows, wronged or adjusting wives, political activists and sympathizers, actresses and prostitutes, educated women and female labourers, superstitious wives and troubled reformers, women against women and women against men. (xxiii)

***Nirmala*– A Woman Centric Novel**

The novel is centered on Nirmala, a young girl of fifteen years who is forced to marry a widower Totaram, a lawyer twenty years her senior. She is initially engaged to Bhalchandra Sinha's son Bhuvanmohan, but due to her father Udayabhanu Lal's death, Bhalchandra calls off the marriage of Nirmala and Bhuvanmohan. This is because there is no longer a possibility of getting a large dowry as anticipated prior to Udayabhanu's (Nirmala's father) death. Nirmala's mother Kalyani says,

If she (girl) doesn't bring a dowry, all her good qualities are just so many disabilities. With a dowry, disabilities are transformed into virtues. The bride herself may be worth nothing, her dowry is all that matters. (34)

Financial hardship forces Nirmala's mother Kalyani to marry her off to Totaram, a widower of 35 years of age. Totaram tries in many different ways to make his beautiful young wife Nirmala happy but of no avail. She respects him but does not love him as a husband which leaves him desolate and dejected. She talks to herself,

I can look after him, respect him, devote my entire life to his service, but I cannot do that which I cannot do. It's not in my power to wipe out the difference between our ages. (52)

Moreover Totaram has three sons – Mansaram, Jiyaram and Siyaram from his first marriage. His eldest son Mansaram is only a year older than Nirmala. It takes lots of patience on her part to accept her destiny as a step mother of grown up children; her balding husband and foul- mouthed, harsh spoken sister-in-law Rukhmini.

Nirmala develops a friendly relationship with the eldest son Mansaram, starts spending time with him, making her husband suspicious of her having illicit relationship with him. Jealousy and suspicion causes Totaram to send his son Mansaram away to live in a hostel. The dutiful son is intensely hurt by his father's baseless allegations. He is unable to deal with this strange turn of events; his health starts deteriorating in the hostel environment and he dies prematurely of tuberculosis. Totaram is heartbroken and guilt ridden over his role in his son's death. It isn't a long after that his second son Jiyaram absconds with Nirmala's jewels and runs away from his house. He later commits suicide. Totaram's third son Siyaram is lured by a false saint and flees from home. Meanwhile, Bhuvanmohan is back in Nirmala's life as the husband of her friend Sudha. He tries to seduce Nirmala but his wife learns of it and quarrels with him. Bhuvanmohan is depressed and emotionally distressed out of his love for Nirmala. He commits suicide. Nirmala also dies due to her failing health after handing over her daughter Asha to her sister-in-law Rukhmini. Premchand poignantly describes the last moments of Nirmala's life,

"... Nirmala's soul, having endured a lifetime of the darts and arrows of clever huntsmen and the claws of predators, and having been buffeted mercilessly by gusts of wind till it could endure no more, flew off to its eternal home." (196)

A much older Totaram is left in the world with shattered dreams and dispirited heart.

The novel *Nirmala* describes how the evil of dowry leads a girl pulsating with youthful emotions to lead an arduous life as she is forced to marry a person much older than her in age. Nirmala is bound to tie a knot with elderly person Totaram, which makes her life utterly meaningless. Through the novel, Premchand presents a nuanced mockery of the institution of marriage focusing on the patriarchal society with a high degree of reformist attitude. Alok Rai remarks,

The 'mismatch' between Nirmala and her husband is, most crucially, a sexual mismatch. The sexual buzz between Nirmala and her adolescent stepsons, between her and Sudha's husband – just as much as Totaram's

pathetic attempts to win her favours and her revulsion against his attempts to do so – all this is what constitutes the substance of the novel. (207)

Exploitation and Lack of Freedom for Women

The women, by and large of the pre- independence era were compelled to follow a strict social code. They were supposed to be morally upright, demure but had no voice of their own. They were destined to carry out all the house hold chores, sacrifice their desires and resist all the unfairness done to them by the patriarchal society. The women who did not subscribe to the oppressive notions of the society were looked down as morally delinquent beings. It is to highlight this state of women that Premchandendeavoured to portray them in his novels.

Hard Times – The Novel Mirroring Victorian England

The novel *Hard Times* is based on the age of rapidly growing industries and machinery in England owing to the industrial revolution. The Victorian age is also a period when snobbery and hypocrisy held a sway over the minds of the upper class people. Dickens gives a powerful expression to the evils and abuses of the Victorian industrial and utilitarian life. He also emphasizes the educational theory based primarily on facts, figures and statistics. Of this, Gradgrind is the principal champion who wants his children Louisa and Tom to be taught nothing but facts. He asserts,

Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. (1)

The sad consequences of utilitarianism are evident in the fate which Louisa meets in her married life and her return to her father's house in a distraught and inconsolable state of mind. Through the novel, Dickens has criticized a general notion that advocates a common practice in schools to concentrate on the mind and memory instead of developing the overall personality of the child. He has centered the novel on expressing the predicament of women who are treated as things rather than beings of intellect and emotions.

Plight of Louisa in *Hard Times* (1853)

The novel *Hard Times* is centered on Louisa, a pretty young girl of fifteen who is married much against her wish to Mr. Bounderby, a man in forties. Her father Mr. Gradgrind sees to it that her imagination and emotions do not develop, since he is a believer in facts and only

facts. Mr. Bounderby being the regular visitor at Mr. Gradgrind's house gets many opportunities of talking to Louisa. From the very beginning, he has eyes upon her as his would-be-wife. He feels physically attracted towards her. On the other hand, Louisa does not have a least liking for this man. Like her brother Tom, she is extremely unhappy in her house because of the manner in which all kinds of restraints are imposed upon both of them by their father. They are not allowed to 'imagine' things or 'wonder' at things or to have any kind of curiosity.

Louisa has a great affection for her brother Tom and it is partly for his career that she agrees to marry Bounderby whom she otherwise hates with all her heart. She has a great respect for her father in spite of the fact that she is opposed to the manner in which he has brought her up. When he proposes that she should marry Mr. Bounderby, she knows that her father is doing a great injustice to her, and yet she does not resist him on this occasion. She simply says,

What do I know, father, of tastes and fancies, of aspirations and affections?...You have dealt so wisely with me, father, from my cradle to this hour, that I never had a child's belief or a child's fear.(114)

This utterance of Louisa is full of bitterness, but her father fails to understand the inherent meaning of it. Her father's utilitarian philosophy based on '*tangible facts*' and '*statistics*' that show the cases of young girls marrying much older men, Louisa is forced to marry Bounderby, a man of her father's age. After the marriage, she remains faithful to Bounderby till Harthouse appears on the scene. Even at this stage, she does not deviate from the path of wifely virtue in spite of Harthouse's persistence.

Louisa feels attracted towards Harthouse because of his '*assumed honesty in dishonesty*.' (40) She feels drawn towards him because he appears to her a man free from pretensions and hypocrisy. Since she is leading a loveless life with her husband that has been thrust upon her, she experiences a pull towards Harthouse. In spite of the subtle ways in which Harthouse tries to acquire a hold upon her affections, she does not give her consent. She is in fact torn between the claims of her heart and that of her conscience. She immediately rushes to her father's house and tells him of her predicament. She succeeds in resisting the temptation of falling prey to Harthouse's desires. But she expresses her unhappiness to her father by holding him responsible for suppressing her emotions and rendering her incapable of behaving like a normal girl. She also reminds him of how he prevailed upon her to get married to a man whom she never loved. She tells him that she is

almost in love with another man who wants to take her away, and she seeks her father's help in saving her from taking such a step. She tells her father,

This minute he [Harhouse] expects me, for I could release myself of his presence by no other means. I do not know that I am sorry, I do not know that I am ashamed, I do not know that I am degraded in my own esteem. All that I know is, your philosophy and your teaching will not save me. Now, father, you have brought me to this. Save me by some other means! (248)

Having said this, Louisa collapses and sinks to the ground unconscious. Her husband Mr. Bounderby adopts a matter-of-fact attitude towards Louisa and does not bother about her feelings and sentiments. Ultimately he loses his wife forever, and resumes a bachelor's life.

Nirmala and Hard Times – A Feminist Reading

In Premchand's *Nirmala* and Dickens' *Hard Times*, Nirmala and Louisa, the chief women characters of the novels respectively are the victims of patriarchal society. Their personal likings and desires are not taken into account as they are forced to lead their lives with a partner more than double their age. Nirmala, a woman of fifteen years of age has to adopt the role of a mother of three young sons of her husband Totaram from his previous marriage. The irony is that the eldest son of her husband is one year older than Nirmala. She is compelled to sacrifice all her happiness, mental peace and desires for the sake of her family. It is only her body towards which Totaram is attracted as he does not pay any heed to her inner state of mind. She is reduced to an object rather than a woman of flesh and blood. Similarly Louisa, the woman protagonist of Dickens' novel *Hard Times* also suffers immeasurably due to her marriage with a man thirty years older than she. He is a man whom she has hated since her very childhood. On account of her father's insistence, she gets married to him but in return faces immense boredom and immeasurable agony. Susan Bordo, a modern feminist philosopher point out,

While men have historically been associated with the intellect and the mind or spirit, women have long been associated with the body, the subordinated, negatively imbued term in the mind/body dichotomy. (Bordo 4)

In western ideology, the body is associated solely with women whereas men are associated with the mind. The notion of the body and not the mind being associated with women reduces the stature of women as property and mere objects. The feminist theory therefore

focusses on the gender inequality that includes discrimination, sexual objectification, oppression, patriarchy and the inferior status given to women.

Women in Contemporary Age

Though the urbanized sector of Indian society is attempting to make a sincere effort to impart respectable social status to women by appreciating her skills and abilities to manage even the most complex issues, yet the evil has not wiped off from the society. Girls are married off with good matches only if their parents are capable of providing sufficient dowry. If they are unable to do so, the girls are married to aged widowers or disabled men without taking cognizance of their opinions or wish. The truth is that a woman who belongs to an impoverished family is bound to be a victim of a patriarchal set-up and has to resign to her fate. She is ridiculed endlessly not only by her husband but also by the individuals of her own sex. Chris Beasley considers feminism as a crusade to 'achieve equal political, economic, cultural, personal, and social rights for women.' The time is now ripe when the women are empowered, looked with dignity and imparted equal status to that of a man. Only then, it is possible that the country can progress and attain the status of a developed nation. Premchand and Dickens, both have proved to be the progressive writers as their chief aims is to reform the society of their respective periods and countries and make the world worthy to live for women.

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