



The 'Engendered' Class: Intersectionality of Gender, Class and Caste in Munshi Premchand's 'Kafan' and 'Beton Wali Vidhwa'

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Abstract— This paper aims to trace the intersectional nature of discriminations towards women in Munshi Premchand's short stories, 'Kafan' and 'Beton Wali Vidhwa'. Premchand explores various aspects of the lives of women in his stories. The suffering and plight of the women in his stories are a result of many facets of their society and surroundings. This plight can be a result of their affiliation to a certain class, their gender and their caste-based identities. In this paper, the intersectional framework will be utilized to understand women's marginalization and suppression keeping the three aspects in mind: gender, class and caste. Gender, class and caste will be taken into consideration to analyze how intersectional discrimination towards women takes place in the selected author's works.



Keywords— Intersectionality, class, gender, caste, inequality, suppression

I. INTRODUCTION

India is a diverse country with a rich and complex blend of traditions, cultures and social structures. Each individual or community is affiliated to some or other socio-economic, cultural and political institution. These affiliations work as their identity markers¹ and affect their outlook towards others and vice versa. Similarly, in the case of women's experiences and treatment towards them, these also depend greatly on socio-economic, regional and cultural contexts. In complex Indian societies, the position of women is based on various intersecting factors such as class, caste, gender, religion and other forms of identities. This intersectional nature of affiliation leads to the creation of a multi-layered and multidimensional identity for all humans in general and women in specific. These intersectional dimensions of the women's identities also help us understand how their daily

experiences and transactions take place. Their class, caste and gender, in the Indian context, would create the majority of their identities, hence creating a triangle where all three elements are interconnected. In order to understand the women's plight from a multi-dimensional perspective we need to apply intersectional approach to the selected texts. Uma Chakravarti in her book, '*Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens*' rightly points out that "Class, caste and gender are inextricably linked; they interact with and shape each other."² We cannot understand the torments and plights of women with a singular approach as women are more than just the means of reproduction or housewives or even working women. Class, caste and gender being the most prominent factors of a woman's identity play a crucial role in how they are perceived by the world around them.

¹ Identity markers are distinct features or traits that embody characteristics which have certain meaning to us and the society in which we live. These identity markers could be an individual's

age, religion, nationality and political affiliations or a mix of some or all of these traits.

² Chakravarti, Uma. *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens*, Sage Publications India Pvt.Ltd. New Delhi. 2018. p26

Before delving into the interconnected notion of class, caste and gender to study how women suffer a multi-layered suppression, let us understand what the framework of the theory of intersectionality involves in order to understand the various forms of discriminations.

Intersectionality³ is a theory in Sociology which explores how an individual or a community is subjected to multi-layered and overlapping discrimination based on their gender, class, race, ethnicity and age. Intersectionality works as a framework to study a person or a group who are affected by a set of discriminations. The overlapping and multiples identities of people are taken into consideration to understand the various kinds of discriminations. The Oxford Dictionary defines intersectionality as a 'theoretical approach' based on "the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and inter-dependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage." In simpler words, according to the theories of intersectionality, all forms of oppression and discrimination are interconnected. Intersectional theory emphasizes that people are generally disadvantaged by multiple forms and sources of oppression. This oppression could take place due to certain identity markers such as their association with a certain class, religion, race, gender identity, sexual orientation etc. Intersectional theories believe that an individual cannot be seen as just one category but a range of many of their identity markers which results in the creation of a complex human being who is influenced by a number of factors.

Intersectionality theory primarily emerged from the works of black feminists in the late 20th century. It explores how various forms of oppression and identity categories intersect and interact with one another. It highlights the interconnectedness of different social categories such as race, gender, class and sexuality and how individuals experience multiple forms of privilege as well as marginalization simultaneously.

The framework of Intersectionality theory helps in examining how social identities and structures of oppression interact with one another. In the domain of literature, this theory is used to examine how the experiences and plights of marginalized individuals and communities are represented in literary works. In the literary context of India, this theory has been used to study the various kinds of literature that explore the experiences of marginalized communities such as women and Dalits and bring them to the forefront. This theory also highlights the need for an inclusive representation of diverse identities in literature. Many Indian writers like Mahasweta Devi,⁴ Kamala Das,⁵ Arundhati Roy⁶ and Shashi Deshpande⁷ have used the framework of intersectionality theory to analyze how caste, gender, and class intersect to form different kinds of oppression for Dalit women. They have also explored the multi-layered approach of intersectionality to establish that gender along with other identities such as caste and class, shape women's experiences.

In order to understand and study the relevance of the role of women and their subjugation in a male-dominant society in terms of class and caste structures in India, firstly, it is important to comprehend the terms 'class' and 'caste' and how they coexist in the Indian context. 'Class' has always existed along with 'caste system' in India. "Caste incorporates class and class incorporates caste in Indian context."⁸ One cannot opt for 'caste alone' or 'class alone' standpoint to understand Indian society. Similarly, when the lives of women are considered in a country like India, gender plays a significant role to understand the many-faceted nature of their existence owing to their other identity markers such as caste and class. As Uma Chakravathy rightly puts it that "On the one hand, we need to examine the relationship between class and gender; on the other we need to look particularly at the relationship between caste and gender because of the manner in which these two institutions shape each other."⁹ Therefore, it is important to study all three of these factors; class, caste and gender,

³ The term, 'intersectionality' was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 essay titled "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." She highlighted intersectionality through an example that how black women face challenges and are oppressed for being women and also for being people of colour.

⁴ Mahasweta Devi was a feminist writer and an Indian activist who is known for her work on issues on social injustice, such as intersection of caste, gender, and class. Her writings explore and examine the experiences of marginalized communities, including Dalits, Adivasis, and women.

⁵ Kamala Das, also known as Kamala Surayya, was an Indian poet, novelist and short story writer. She is considered as one of the most prominent and controversial figures in Indian literature. Her unconventional themes, bold expression of

female sexuality and personal experiences challenged societal norms.

⁶ Arundhati Roy is an Indian author and a political activist. Apart from her literary work, she is also known for her advocacy of various social and political issues.

⁷ Shashi Deshpande is a renowned Indian author best known for her novels, short stories and children's books. She explores themes of family, gender, relationships and social issues in her works. Deshpande's writing depicts a realistic portrayal of women's plight and experiences and the complexities of their lives in the Indian society.

⁸ Sharma, K. L., *Social Stratification and Mobility*, Rawat Publications, Jaipur. 1997. p65

⁹ Chakravarti, Uma. *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens*, Sage Publications India Pvt.Ltd. New Delhi. 2018. P25

together to see if the intersecting nature of the identities of women play any role in determining the outcome of their experiences.

Class:

The term class in mainstream sociological writing is generally a stand-alone term. Whereas, in Marxist social analysis, 'Class' is a central concept. For Marx and Engels, class and class struggles have always been in existence during all eras and more so in the capitalist era. According to Peter Barry, "The aim of Marxism is to bring about a classless society, based on the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange".¹⁰ Class-based inequality in all societies have been there since their origin and all societies have their own different ways and "modes of exploitation; but the extraction of wealth from the labour of the many for the benefit of the few has been common to them all".¹¹ All societies have an unequal distribution of wealth and income which results in unequal distribution of power.

Class is an economic and social phenomenon where an individual or a community is marked off from another by their economic and social status. An individual's inferior or superior social position governs their status or standing. The equation of power and class are generally determined by a group or individual's economic standing in a particular society. This affiliation or desire to belong to a certain social group leads to conflicts among those groups. This conflict is generally referred to as class conflict. Class conflict has trickled down the ages in different forms and is as old as human civilization. Karl Marx believed that "society is divided into two classes, owners and workers" and "there is always a class conflict going on between the two classes".¹² There are many interpretations and definitions of the term class. Some believe that class refers to a group of people who "wield or possess unequal and unfairly distributed power or property".¹³

Class is frequently seen as an abstract concept where people are grouped together based on various parameters including their affiliations and association with a certain group or community. Class, unlike gender, is not simply based on the

physiological and physical traits of an individual. Class is often determined by the economic and social standing of an individual. Class structures "coexist with alternative structures of power"¹⁴ and exhibit various forms of complexities of class. These alternative forms of structures that create a complex web of power result into caste and gender-based structures which are equally dominant in India. Class is an in-built system in the caste system and is often influenced by the caste system in a country like India with complex social and cultural structures. According to Victor S. D'souza "Caste is attributed to variables, such as status, honour, purity and impurity, class is derived from variables of economic and political power."¹⁵

Caste:

When it comes to social stratification, caste system inevitably becomes a part of the discussion. Caste, a unique social and cultural system, is very specific to Indian society where a web of hierarchy is created among groups and communities based on "hereditary specialization, hierarchical organization, reciprocal repulsion"¹⁶ and their common understanding of religious purity and impurity. Many a times, caste is treated as an alternative system to class. Therefore, class is generally considered as a result of evident changes in the caste system. Often, class is not seen as an independent, rather seen as a co-existent system in India.

Gender:

Study of gender is one of the major foci of feminism and feminist literary criticism. Chaman Nahal defines "feminism as a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is a dependence syndrome: whether it is the husband or the father or the community or whether it is a religious group, ethnic group. When women free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materialises."

¹⁷ In this research paper, both the stories at hand, very prominently discuss the dependence syndrome as the women are at the mercy of the men of the house or seek refuge and security from the men they interact with.

¹⁰ Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 3rd ed., Manchester UP, 2013. p150.

¹¹ Foley, Barbara. *Marxist Literary Criticism Today*, Pluto Press, London. 2019. p28

¹² Ambedkar, B. R. "The Original Creed of Karl Marx" *Buddha or Karl Marx*. Sudhir Prakashan, India. 2022. p8

¹³ Resnick, Stephen, A.; Wolf, Richard, D. *Class Theory and History*, Chapter-1, A General Class Theory, Routledge, New York. 2002. p09

¹⁴ Resnick, Stephen, A.; Wolf, Richard, D. *Class Theory and History*, Chapter-2, Many Forms of Communism. Routledge, New York. 2002. p65

¹⁵ D'souza Victor S., *Inequality and its Perpetuation: A Theory of Social Stratification*, Chapter-IV, Caste is Class: A Clarification of the Theory of Caste. Manohar Publication, New Delhi. 1981. p78-79

¹⁶ Srinivas, M. N., *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India*, Clarendon Press, Oxford. 1952.

¹⁷ Nahal, Chaman. "Feminism in English Fiction-Forms and Variations." *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*, Edited by Sushila Singh, Prestige Books, 1991, p17.

Gender, according to many feminists, is a social construct which does not have any physiological or biological orientations. Generally, gender is connected with sex where sex is an indicator of a person being a male or a female whereas gender indicates masculinity and femininity. Therefore, gender is a culturally and socially established set of norms for a person to behave in a certain way. These norms are generally stereotypical and patriarchal in nature and generalizes female subordination which in turn helps men retain the power. The age-old practice of female subjugation is seen in the form of women being treated as the secondary sex and not given equal rights and power of decision making in daily walks of life.

Munshi Premchand:

Munshi Premchand was the pen-name of one of the greatest Hindi Short-story writers, Dhanpat Rai. Munshi Premchand's writing style embodied social realities of his times. His writing contained a message for its readers. He raised his voice against the prevailing social evils in the Indian society. Through his novels and short stories, he explored the themes of poverty, class, dowry, colonialism, feudalism, corruption etc.

Munshi Premchand's writing style was grounded in the social realities of his times and aimed to convey a message to his readers. He spoke out against the prevalent social evils in Indian society and explored themes through his novels and short stories. Premchand's works vividly portrayed the social scenario of 20th century India. He is known for his contribution in Hindi Literature who brought realism in it by writing on realistic issues such as corruption, poverty, colonialism, class-based issues etc. He wrote over 300 stories, a dozen novels and a couple of plays. Premchand's short stories mirrored the reality of the society of his time. His short stories have been published in eight volumes of *Maansarovar*.

1. *Kafan* (The Shroud):

The term '*Kafan*' is a Hindi word which refers to a shroud which is used to cover a dead body to perform last rites. Munshi Premchand's short story '*Kafan*' narrates the story of a duo of a father and son, Ghisu and Madhav, who belonged to the *Chamar* community.¹⁸ Madhav's wife, Budhiya, was pregnant and went into labor, but the family was impoverished with no money to afford her treatment. Both Ghisu and Madhav were lazy. Ghisu used to work only for a day and then would stop going to work for days together. His son, Madhav, on the other hand, used to work for an hour and spent the rest of his time smoking a *chillum*.

Their terrible financial situation forced them to forage and beg for food. They often relied on the kindness of strangers.

Budhiya was left alone to suffer in her room while the men of the house, Ghisu and Madhav sat outside, peeling and consuming potatoes that they had stolen from the neighbour's fields before falling asleep. By the next morning, Budhiya and her unborn child died due to lack of medical treatment. Ghisu and Madhav were disheartened, not by the fact that Budhiya died during childbirth, but due to their inability to afford to perform her last rites and cremation. They beg the village head for money to buy a shroud for Budhiya's cremation, but instead of using the money received from the village head for its intended purpose, they spend it on liquor. They sing and dance in a drunken stupor, completely forgetting about their great loss. While drinking and eating, Ghisu recounts his past experience of eating a sumptuous meal; a meal the like of which he had never had.

Among many themes like poverty, alcoholism, corruption and exploitation, the story tries to shine light on the destructive and inhuman side of human nature. Lack of desire to work and the lower social status of Ghisu and Madhav force them to perform menial jobs and endure economic hardship, ultimately leading to Budhiya's death due to lack of medical attention. Budhiya's death is a direct consequence of the caste system, which deprives Dalits, particularly women, of their basic human rights. The story highlights the intersectionality of caste and gender, showing how Dalit women face the brunt of social and economic inequality.

The intersection of gender and caste, highlights how Budhiya, a Dalit women faced compounded discrimination and marginalization because she was a woman and at the same time a Dalit. The story portrays the intersectionality of her experiences, with caste prejudices intensifying the oppression faced by her as a Dalit woman. This oppression can be seen at dual levels; her husband and father-in-law ignoring her when she was in extreme labour-pain and the villagers and village head being indifferent towards her death and very existence when Ghisu and Madhav go begging for money to buy a shroud for her. Her agency to access resources, opportunities and dignity is very limited.

Both, the caste system and class play a crucial role in determining the privileges and opportunities available to women in Indian society. They are deep-rooted in the social hierarchies and forms of discrimination in India. Dalit women and women hailing from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds often face difficulty in

¹⁸ A socially disadvantaged group in India that falls under the category of lower castes.

accessing education, healthcare and basic amenities to lead a dignified life in many cases which results in them being deprived of economic opportunities. Economic inequalities aggravate gender inequalities and limit women's agency and thus stunting their empowerment. Caste-based discrimination intersects with gender to compound the challenges faced by women in these marginalized communities. Dalit women are often more vulnerable to different forms of violence and face challenges in accessing justice due to deeply ingrained caste biases.

2. *Beton Wali Vidhwa* (Widow with Sons):

This story portrays the journey of a newly widowed wife of Pandit Ayodhyanath, Phoolmati; an upper caste *Brahman*¹⁹ woman. It explores the ways in which her authority and control over the entire household were revoked by her family members after her husband's death. She had four sons and one daughter of which the three sons were married. Pandit Ayodhyanath left behind enough property including a 'pucca house, two groves, ornaments worth a few thousands and twenty thousand in cash.'²⁰(298) Phoolmati, until her husband was alive, was the final authority in the house. Her sons and daughters-in-law were obedient and served her well. Even if Phoolmati belonged to an upper caste and was affluent, her agency of power was a result of patriarchal forces, backed by her husband's status in the family. Patriarchal norms profoundly influence the status of women in Indian societies. The gender expectations and restrictions of patriarchal norms limited Phoolmati's agency and autonomy.

Within two weeks, Phoolmati's sons and daughters-in-law started seeing her eye-to-eye and refused to obey her. The eldest son, Kamtanath went to the extent of retaliating, saying they 'know what is profitable'²¹ (299) to the brothers. Soon she completely lost control over the household matters and decision making. The eldest daughter-in-law replaced her with all the roles in the household matters as the mistress of the house. Phoolmati tried to interfere in the decisions of purchase of the quantity of vegetables and rations and the allowance to purchase them, but she was paid no heed by the family members. She tried to remain aloof but mentally she was getting tormented as she didn't have the same agency and authority anymore.

Phoolmati, trying to accustom herself to the new role, adjusted herself to the new chaotic household. The sons started fighting to gain hold of their share of the wealth left

by their father. Initially it was decided that only the cash amount of twenty thousand will be divided among the four brothers but soon they made up their mind to deceive their mother, Phoolmati and by hook or by crook, take all her jewelry using some or the other pretext. Phoolmati, by now had realized that her sons were selfish and all they cared about was their father's wealth. Her last wish of getting her daughter, Kumud married off in a grand manner with heavy jewelry could never be fulfilled.

One year passed by. Phoolmati had been working like a servant in the house. Her big, airy room was taken by the eldest daughter-in-law. She had lost all sense of happiness or sorrow. One day, during a rainy day, while fetching water from river Ganga she slipped and fell into the river and drowned. When one of the bystanders saw her drowning, asked the other who she was. The other replied, 'Widow of Pandit Ayodhyanath'.²² (313)

It is evident in the story that women are expected to behave and conduct themselves in a certain way in our society. Phoolmati was expected to live like a widow without any agency in the household by the patriarchal norms, of which she was a part once. She doesn't like the sudden withdrawal of agency and power and tries to protect it by any means. However, as she was once the mistress of the house, someone else is now, taking all the controls and decision-making powers away from her.

In a country like India, where societal structures are very complex, the impact of hierarchical structures based on class, caste, gender and religion cannot be ignored. In the Indian context, class becomes a complex mode of hierarchizing the various social and economic groups and communities. Caste system also plays a vital role in this hierarchizing as it is intricately woven into the social as well as economic structure of the Indian society. When we consider a woman who belongs to both a lower class as well as a lower caste, her trials and tribulations increase by manifolds. Women's status in a patriarchal society in general is comparatively lower than that of their male counterpart. A Dalit woman who also belongs to lower caste has to suffer not only at the hands of people from the upper caste and class but also the Dalit men of their community or households too.

An individual's position in a society affirms their influence and power and their status or position can be dependent on other factors like his affiliation to a certain caste, religion or

¹⁹ *Brahmans* are one of the upper castes in Hindu religious groups. They are considered to be learned in holy Hindu scriptures and generally use a prefix of *Pandit*.

²⁰ Premchand, Munshi. The Great Stories of Munshi Premchand. Worded by Viren Verma. Manoj Publications, Delhi. 4th Edition. 2014. p298

²¹ Premchand, Munshi. The Great Stories of Munshi Premchand. Worded by Viren Verma. Manoj Publications, Delhi. 4th Edition. 2014. P299

²² Premchand, Munshi. The Great Stories of Munshi Premchand. Worded by Viren Verma. Manoj Publications, Delhi. 4th Edition. 2014. p313

community. When we consider the power and influence of women in Indian society, it is negligible and mostly controlled by their male counterparts. Even if lower class Dalit women have it the worst, other women don't have it any better as they also have to suffer on a daily basis at the hands of men in some form or other as we saw it evidently in the selected short stories of Munshi Premchand. Budhiya being a Dalit woman, who never had any authority, has to sacrifice her life at the altar of the indifference of her husband and father-in-law as well as other upper caste people who created circumstances such that the two Dalit men chose food and enjoyment over the life of Budhiya. Phoolmati, on the other hand, belongs to a upper caste and has had the absolute say in the entire household matters, until her husband was alive. She loses the power and authority after her husband's death, leaving her miserable and at the beck and call of her sons. This shows that women, even if they belong to one or the other broadly established identity markers, are actually a new class altogether.

Intersectionality theory provides a valuable framework to understand how various forms of oppression intersect and mutually reinforce each other. It highlights the multidimensional and multi-layered nature of women's experiences by considering the intersections of caste, class, and gender. Traditional gender roles often confine women to domestic spaces and restrict their participation in decision-making processes. Patriarchal norms intersect with caste and class dynamics, and lead to varied experiences for women across various social economic and caste groups. The women have been "isolated in the home, forced to carry out work that is considered unskilled, the work of giving birth to, raising, disciplining, and servicing the worker for production."²³ Even if Phoolmati seemed to be an exception in the beginning owing to her husband's support and her caste affiliations, she loses her agency of decision making as soon as her husband died. She, like most other women, faces injustice at the hands of her sons and daughters-in-law, finally succumbing to death while serving her sons like a servant. Budhiya on the other hand, never had any agency at all, owing to her disadvantaged social standing. She lacked agency because she was the wife of a lower caste man who had no means of earning money. Budhiya, in this case, was subjugated to the torments of society in a dual sense; for being a lower-class Dalit and also for being a woman. Both Budhiya and Phoolmati are examples of the countless women who are suppressed and tormented by the patriarchal society in varying degrees depending upon their class, caste and agency including many other determining

factors and markers of their identity. But, one thing that is common among all is that they all face injustice in some or other form and they all are women; a class in the lowest rung of social hierarchy.

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