

Degradation of Human Values as Reflected in Munshi Premchand's Short Story 'The Shroud'**Mr. Dipak Sitaram Sarnobat,**

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Introduction:

'The Shroud', which was published in 1936, is the last short story of Dhanpat Rai Srivastav, who is well known by his pen name Munshi Premchand, one of the renowned novelists and short story writers. His novels and stories describe the problems of the poor and the middle-class. He used literature for creating public awareness about national and social issues and often wrote about topics related to corruption, child widowhood, prostitution, feudal system, poverty, colonialism and the India's freedom movement.

Although the story 'The Shroud' portrays the tragic incident in a family of three members yet it gives us different perspectives to look at. On the surface level it is a painful tale of Budhia's death but when we consider deeper meaning, it is the pathetic story not only of Budhia but also of Ghisu and Madho. It is the heart touching tale which makes us introspective and think about the loss of moral values. In this research paper I have focused on the degradation of human values as reflected in 'The Shroud', a short story by Munshi Premchand.

Key Words: Degradation, shroud, writhing, prostrate, cobblers, untouchables, hierarchy, despise, midwife.

The Shroud:

The Shroud' is a character study of Ghisu and Madho, a pair of father and son living at an unnamed village in India before independence. They are cobblers (chamars) by caste. There are many jobs available in the farming village where they live. However, Ghisu and Madho are lazy shirkers who prefer not to work. The two men get food by stealing potatoes, peas and sugarcane stalks from other Farmers' fields and by working only occasionally, when they need to. The reality of poverty and Zamindari system can be seen as a backdrop of the story.

Madho's wife, Budhia is pregnant and screams and moans in pain. Ghisu and Madho prefer to sit outside of the shack, beside the fire. They know she is dying but they don't go in to see her. Instead, they eat stolen potatoes. They fall asleep and in the morning they find Budhia dead.

Both Ghisu and Madho beg the village landlord and the other villagers for money for giving Budhia proper last rites. They manage to collect five rupees, and with this money they go to the market to buy a shroud for Budhia's body. At the market, they look at various cloth-sellers shops but do not buy anything. They remark that a shroud is a waste since it will only burn with the body anyway.

At evening, they arrive at a country liquor shop and go in. Eventually, they spend all of the donated money on alcohol and food rather than on a shroud for Budhia. At the liquor shop the men become increasingly elevated. They dance, sing, and say

Budhia will go to heaven. Finally, the men become so drunk that they collapse.

Cast system:

India's caste system is often seen as the most prominent global example of caste and one of the world's oldest systems of social hierarchy. It refers to a complex system for dividing people into hierarchical social groups on the basis of kinship, occupation, and religious purity.

Scholars say that the caste system is more than 2,000 years old and has its origins in ancient Hinduism, the religion of the majority of people in India. In this context some ancient texts referred to the division of Hindus into four large caste categories, or varnas: the Brahmins, who were traditionally priests and teachers; the Kshatriyas, who were rulers, warriors, and administrators; the Vaishyas, who worked as merchants, traders and farmers; and the Shudras, who were laborers and artisans. These large castes were divided into thousands of smaller sub-castes. Finally, the Dalits, known as the "untouchables," were placed outside of the varna system, since they performed tasks that were considered to be ritually impure.

In early-modern India, the castes were governed by strict rules limiting social interaction and marriage between different groups.

However, while the basis for the caste system may exist in some ancient Hindu texts, many historians say that this system of social hierarchy was far less important, and social identities were far more flexible, prior to interventions of the Mughal Empire and the British Raj. In particular, recent scholarship

shows British colonial rulers made caste into the defining feature of Indian social life. According to Sanjoy Chakravorty, the author of *The Truth About Us: The Politics of Information from Manu to Modi*, the "social categories of religion and caste as they are perceived in modern-day India were developed during the British colonial rule, at a time when information was scarce and the coloniser's power over information was absolute."

In 1950, India's caste system was constitutionally abolished. The government also created a system of affirmative action to try to create more opportunities for people from lower castes who suffered discrimination. However, according to Human Rights Watch, Dalits continue to face significant social and economic discrimination in many parts of India.

Incidents Indicating the Degradation of Human Values:

Major themes of the story are selfishness, tradition, honor, independence, guilt, self importance, gender roles and responsibilities.

A low-caste father and his son are poor labourers in a village. An emergency occurs when the son's wife dies while giving birth to a child and the family has no money to cremate the body of the dead woman. The lazy fellows ask for money from the village zamindar and other members of the society. However, they use the money they get on liquor and food instead.

- 1) This story is about Ghisu, a sixty year old man in a village and Madho, his forty year old son. This pair of father-son is not ideal to follow. They are laziest persons in the village. They certainly have no will to work or even function as a part of the society. Story begins with Madho's wife Budhia writhing in pain as she is in child labour. Ghisu and Madho sit outside the hut. Obviously Budhia needs medical help but they are not aware of her suffering. How can a husband sit calmly beside the fire, roasting potatoes, without paying any attention to his wife? Madho should have taken all care of his wife, Budhia, but it seems that he doesn't care for her. It was his moral duty to look after her in that critical situation. He doesn't feel her pain, agony and mental suffering. It indicates the degradation of human values.
- 2) When Madho says, "Why doesn't she just die, if she has to?", we feel deep sorry for the helpless and unfortunate Budhia. How can a

husband say so? It definitely indicates the degradation of human values.

- 3) When Ghisu says, "She will not last, it seems. She has been tossing and turning the whole day. Go in and see what's wrong.", Madho replies, "I can't bear to see her writhing in pain, flailing her hands and legs."

Madho should have gone inside the hut. He should have tried to ask for a doctor or a midwife. He neither goes inside nor reaches any doctor or midwife. His focus is on the roasted potatoes. He has a fear in his mind. He thinks that if he goes inside, Ghisu will finish most of the roasted potatoes. He gives priority to 'hunger' instead of 'responsibility'. Again it indicates the degradation of human values.

- 4) Every woman wants the mental support from her husband but Budhia is exemption to it. Even though she is in pain, she doesn't utter a single word for help. She doesn't appeal to her husband. She tolerates the pain of child birth. It seems that she knows both the men very well, accepts the reality of their helplessness and knows that they are hopeless fellows. She meets her tragic death but her husband and father-in-law don't know the perfect time of her death. In the morning, Madho wakes up, goes inside the hut and finds her dead. How can Madho behave irresponsibly? They got married before a year. She tries to bring some discipline in the family but all in vain. When Budhia suffers, Madho and Ghisu sleep peacefully. We can't expect such irresponsible behavior from anyone. From this point of view, it indicates the degradation of human values.

- 5) Ghisu and Madho are so lazy that they don't look for food even if they fast for a day. Then they do temporary and easy jobs to get money or food. In seasons, they steal potatoes, peas and sugarcane stalks so they don't have to work. They are immoral and dishonest in this way. Budhia was unlike them. She works hard from the day she gets married to Madho. She had brought some order into the hut and used to work in farms. That stopped these two from doing any work as she was feeding them. But when this woman suffers pain and these two have no feeling for her. Madho didn't even care for his child in Budhia's womb. They are peeling stolen potatoes while she is dying. We see that both the men are inactive and inefficient. They don't work honestly. If someone comes to them and offers some kind of work, they demand double wages. They

behave as if they were the owners. If they worked sincerely and honestly, the neighbours, peasants, and villagers would help them. They are not aware of the responsibility of the family. They lead their lives hopelessly. It indicates the degradation of human values.

- 6) Madho and Ghisu get their mouths burnt as they eat very hot potatoes. Ghisu escapes from this harsh present by remembering the past. He remembers a feast given by Thakur where he had eaten so much that he still considered it as the best meal of his life. They both eat potatoes while dreaming about the grand feast and sleep there without bothering about what happens to Budhia. She dies by the next morning. When Madho finds her dead, he is still emotionally unmoved. Ghisu and Madho start crying and lamenting over her death. They are pretending this as they want sympathy and help from other people. Other people come as they learn about death of Budhia. As custom they give consolation to both. But they start showing their worries about the lack of money for her final rites. If they asked for help from the neighbourhood, Budhia could be alive and safe with her baby. They didn't pay much attention towards her needs and situation. Madho should have worked hard to earn money for making his wife's delivery safely. But he doesn't seem to be serious about his wife's safe delivery. It indicates the degradation of human values.
- 7) After Budhia's death, Madho and Ghisu go to the landlord, who despises them very badly. He had even beaten them as they had stolen from his land. The father and the son act as if they had done everything for Budhia but couldn't save her. They plead the landlord to help them. The landlord doesn't want to help them but he has no choice as it is a matter of someone's death. He reluctantly gives them two rupees, sufficient amount for the last rites. But Ghisu and Madho have something else in their minds. They go to other people in the village and ask for money. They use the name of landlord to get more money. They get sum of five rupees in total. Other people prepare for the last rites and these two go to market with excuse of buying a shroud for Budhia. They take advantage of her death for collecting money and enjoy themselves in the country liquor house. It indicates the degradation of human values.
- 8) They spend evening there, buying nothing. Then they go in a wine house and order a whole bottle of alcohol and food items which

they never had before in life. They spend all the money for it. Madho feels bad for Budhia but Ghisu is careless and tells Madho that she will get heaven as money for her last rites has been used for their satisfaction. Madho too believes in this distorted logic. They get more intoxicated as they drink, even give some food to a beggar. They help the beggar as if they were very generous. If they can think of a beggar, why couldn't they fulfill Budhia's needs? They focus on their own need of drinking liquor. Undoubtedly, it indicates the degradation of human values.

- 9) When Madho asks how they will get a shroud, Ghisu laughs and tells him that innocent people will believe their lies and help again or will get a shroud instead. Then they both start singing and dancing and make noise and other people join them. At last, they collapse as they have consumed so much alcohol. Both the son and the father lead a life, which lacks morality and human values. They are not aware of the situation. Budhia becomes victim of their selfish nature.

Conclusion:

The Shroud is one of the beautiful stories by Munshi Premchand with a proper message to the readers. While uncovering the major incident in the life of three persons- Madho, Ghisu and Budhia, the writer makes us ponder on various things and issues. It tells the tale of a family of three people but we don't see family bonding and affection among the members of the family. The words 'Care, affection, love, duty, responsibility, belief, support, protection, inspiration, encouragement, realization, sacrifice, respect, consideration, acceptance, appreciation, gratitude, honesty, loyalty, unity, integrity, trust etc.' are related to family but we don't experience this kind relation in the family presented in this short story. Madho should have taken all the care of his wife, Budhia, but it seems that he doesn't care for her. It was his moral duty to look after her in that critical situation. He doesn't feel her pain, agony and mental suffering. Madho, Budhia's husband, gives priority to 'hunger' instead of 'responsibility'. They got married before a year. She tries to bring some discipline in the family but all in vain. When Budhia suffers, Madho and Ghisu sleep peacefully. We can't expect such irresponsible behavior from anyone. They behave as if they were the owners. If they worked sincerely and honestly, the neighbours, peasants, and villagers would help them. They are not aware of the responsibility of the family. They lead their lives hopelessly. Madho should have worked hard to earn

money for making his wife's delivery safely but he doesn't seem to be serious about his wife's safe delivery. Madho and Ghisu take advantage of her death for collecting money and enjoy themselves in the country liquor house. They forget the dead Budhia and her last rites. The short story 'The Shroud' has many scenes and incidents that imply the degradation of the human values.

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