

# Representation and Question of Dalit Identity: A Critical Study of Premchand's 'Godan' from a Dalit View-point

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“In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of ego [self] identity” (Erickson 95).

## Abstract:

The central orientation of this paper is organized around the conception of representation and the question of Dalit identity. The essence of the concept lies in understanding the complex function of language since it plays an instrumental role in knowing the fundamental question of how do we know what we know or in a more concrete term the essence of production and circulation of meanings that led to the constitution of one's identity. The constitution of one's identity is the result of representational theory of language, but sometimes this representational system becomes a subject of scrutiny when a derogatory identity is imposed on an individual or a group of individuals as in case of the Dalits in India who were formerly represented by a derogatory and abusive term- untouchable that led to the constitution of their untouchable and contemptible identity. The paper explores representation of Dalits in Premchand's classic novel *Godan* from a Dalit view-point and it also addresses the question how this representation helps imposing a fragile and a contemptible identity to the Dalit community.

**Keywords:** Representation, Dalit Identity, Representational Theory, Production of Meaning, Godan, Dalit View-point

The paper deals with an essential subject related to the pedagogy of human existence that is the subject of Dalit identity and it further analyzes the issue of how representation as its essential constituent plays an instrumental role in production of it. As Stuart Hall maintains, “concepts are problematized only when they laps into crisis” (Hall 2) and in the same line Kobena Mercer added, “identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displayed by the experience of doubts and uncertainty” (Mercer 43), so is the case with Dalit identity in India. Dalits in India, have always been neglected and exploited with the help of various mean tactics. In the beginning their mere existence was considered as a “subject of abomination” (Ambedkar, Preface to *The Untouchable: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchable* i). Though the subject is not new to Humanities and Cultural Studies, but in modern Indian literature, especially in Dalit discourse it is quite novel. The issue of identity was firstly taken up by a western philosopher Hegel in late nineteenth century. He propounds the notion that identity evolves in dialogic form with the self and the others (Jagnam,

“Politics of Identity and the Project of Writing History in Postcolonial India: A Dalit Critique” 63). The subject latterly was elaborated by a group of cultural theorists Stuart Hall, Du Gay, et.al in their theory of ‘Circuit of Culture’ while analyzing the Walkman Cassette player in 1997 (Hall 2), that led to the inclusion of Mass culture within the circumference of Cultural studies. These socio-cultural practitioners in their theory of Cultural Circuit enlisted five essential elements viz. representation, identity, production, consumption and circulation, to pay attention on while studying any cultural artifact. The present paper articulates two significant conceptions or aspects of this cultural circuit that are representation and identity. Questions such as how the concept of representation plays an instrumental role in the constitution of human identity in general and Dalit identity in particular and how the naïve modern minds are being influenced by the representational system of language will be of primal concerns in the paper.

### **Representation and Question of Dalit Identity:**

India is a homo-hierarchicus land where different stocks of people such as Aryans, Dravidians, Mangolians, and Scythians live altogether (*The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar* 242). These stocks of people with passage of time converted into several caste groups that we see now days in India. Though this co-habitation seems to be pleasant from outer appearance as it represents coherence and unity of people of here, but the irony of this co-habitation is that it is divided into power hierarchy where some people are dominant and possess all sorts of power while on the counter, some are subservient, exploited by the dominant class of people and were pushed back to a state of obscurity. The present Indian society is divided into several castes and these castes are the base root to determine the identity of people. Here one is recognized by one’s caste not by one’s deeds. In Indian society the question of identity becomes more complex as G.N. Devi remarks:

The phenomenon of caste as a status marker has probably been the most unique feature of Indian society. The origin of the notion of caste is so obscure and its manifestation in Indian social life is so complicated that it is almost impossible to think it as a ‘system’ with rules that can be articulated and reasoned out (Devi, Introduction to *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* xiv).

Following the Hegelian notion that the identity evolves in dialogical manner with the self and the other, Prof. Jagnam has articulated his notion of Dalit identity in his article “Politics of Identity and the Project of Writing History in Postcolonial India: A Dalit Critique” remarks:

Historically, Dalit identity in India evolved dialogically at two levels: first in dialogue with the Hindu Brahmanical tradition as simultaneous inner and outer struggles to retain its core of identity and self. Second, it evolved through the unique historical experience of colonial modernity as a resource for anti-caste articulations such as through Enlightenment ideas and other tools of emancipation (Jagnam 63).

According to the Hindu Brahmanical tradition, Indian society was compartmentalized into four vernas viz. Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. This classification is based on the following maxim of Purusukta of *Rigveda*:

Brahmano asya mukham asit bahu rajanayah krtah

Uru tad asya yad vaishyah padbhyam Shudro ajayata (*Purusha Sukta* 10.90.12).

With this hymn, Sage Manu hierarchized the entire Hindu civilizations into four major categories, placing the Brahmins at the top and the Shudras at the lowest rung of the power hierarchy. It is noteworthy here that he had denigrated a mass of Indian people, i.e. the Dalits, formerly known as untouchables, in the beginning and latter on appended them as an appendix into the Varna hierarchy and called them the Panchamas. This vague representation ostracized the Dalit community from Hinduism and thus their

identity lapsed into obscurity. Though the progressive writers such as Mulk Raj Anand and Munshi Premchand raised their voice against this discriminatory Brahmanical tradition that looks down on the Dalits, formerly known as untouchable, however these progressive writers could never free themselves from orthodox brahmanical beliefs that had been injected into their psyche from the very beginning.

After the two world wars, there spread a surge of despair and disappointment in the entire world and in the gloomy atmosphere every human being was trying to find out individual solace and meaning of their existence. Existential philosophers such as Fredrick Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Georg Wilhelm Fredrick Hegel and others began to ponder over the issue of human existence and paved the way to the identity quest. Following these existentialists, scholars belonging to different disciplines gave attention toward the subject and tried to apply it in their favorite disciplines. So has been the case with Dalit discourse in India which primarily deals with retention of the lost identity of the community and establishing a prestigious and equitable identity as other sects of the Indian society. The vanguards of Dalit discourse such as Namdeo Dhasal, Raja Dhale, Arjun Dangle and J.V. Pawar taking inspiration from Black Panther Movement formed an organization known as Dalit Panther Movement in 1972 which primarily aimed at combating caste discrimination in India and regain the lost identity of the Dalit community (Dangle xii). Consequently there emerged a new literature- Dalit Literature in India which was realistic in nature, full of revolt and negativism and aimed at bringing change in society (Dangle xii).

The Dalit literature primarily focuses on retaining the lost identity of the Dalit community and establishing a respected and equitable identity to the vulnerable Dalit community whose existence has been negated since centuries. The concept of Dalit identity is based on the notion of how they have been represented in literature as representation plays an instrumental role in constitution of one's identity. To understand the concept of representation and its contribution in the constitution of the Dalit identity it is requisite to understand the politics of language since it is an effective tool of representation through which identity is constituted. Stuart Hall explains the concept of representation:

Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged among members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things. But this is far from simple or straightforward process (*Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* 15).

There are two contrapuntal streams running parallel to the Dalit literature; one is the stream of Ambedkarite influence, followed by the Dalit writers and the other is the stream of Gandhian influence, followed primarily by non-Dalit writers. Munshi Premchand belongs to the Gandhian stream. His literary oeuvre is influenced by Gandhian philosophy where he deals with various social problems prevalent in his time such as a hoary institution of caste system, feudalism, capitalism, colonialism, struggle of generation gap, usury and patriarchal discrimination against Indian women. He champions the cause of underprivileged, backward class, labourers, farmers and other marginalized sects of people and raised his voice against the exploitation and oppression of these vulnerable sects of people who have been exploited socially, politically and economically since the time immemorial. Thanks to Premchand and other non-Dalit writers such as Mulk Raj Anand who at least, have shown their sympathy towards these voiceless dregs of Indian society and talk about them in their literatures. Because of the efforts of these progressive thinkers and social reformers only these wretched people of Indian society could become a subject of discussion and research in the field of literary academia. Though these non-Dalit writers have shown their concern towards the Dalits and other marginalized people of Indian society but under the garb of genuine concern towards the Dalits, they have imposed a fragile, a vulnerable and a contemptible identity on these

wretched people through the tactic of hazy and fallible representation. The present paper is an orientation of the problem of this fallible representation and the question of Dalit identity. The paper explores the tactic of Dalit representation in Premchand's iconic novel, *Godan* and how this representation helps assigning a fragile and a contemptible identity to the Dalit community. The paper also explores how the modern naïve minds are being influenced by this hazy representation.

### **Representation of Dalit in *Godan*:**

Premchand's *Godan* (1936), the greatest epical novel of Hindi language, vividly portrays the Indian society not only of its time, but also the contemporary decaying Indian rural society. Sir Philip Sidney writes, "Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; ... her [Nature's] world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden" (*The Defense of Poesy* 7-8). Premchand is undoubtedly one among those litterateurs who produce the rich tapestry of Indian culture through their literary oeuvre. He gave a new direction to the Indian novels and brought it to the status which took almost centuries for western nations to attain it. Premchand was the messiah of the poor, downtrodden and the lowest dregs of Indian society. His writings primarily deal with the cause of these dregs who have been oppressed and exploited by upper castes in the name of divinely created caste system, feudalism and Brahminism. Most of his writings are concerned with Dalit discourse where he has raised his voice against the discrimination and oppression of the Dalits. For instance, in his *Karmbhumi* a high caste character leads Dalits to enter the temple, at the cost of strong opposition of his own community. Similarly in his *Rangbhumi*, Premchand very delicately highlights the problem of the Dalit exploitation. The protagonist Surdas is of a Chamar caste, who being a blind and poor man, struggles a lot for his survival and lives on the mercy of high caste people. He suffers a great deal at the hands of feudalism and colonialism. *Sadgati* is story of the protagonist, Dukhi who is a middle-aged, poor Dalit and wants to get her daughter Rupa marry and hence he goes to a Brahmin without eating anything in order to settle the auspicious date for his daughter's marriage ceremony but the tyrant Brahmin asked him to do perform multiple domestic and agricultural chores such as to wipe the courtyard, feed his cattle, split a heavy knotted trunk of wood which was too strong for him to split it. The tyrant Brahmin priest even does not offer any thing to hungry Dukhi to eat and when he asks for a fired coal to ignite his *bidi*, wife of the Brahmin flung the fire at him, and in the process, he slightly get burnt. How insensitive a human being can be! A human being is being considered worse off an animal. What humanity is this? Though Premchand has written many novels and short stories, based on the problem of caste system but for the present study his iconic novel *Godan* has been selected as it is the finest creation where the author has tried to explore various facets of Dalit lives and ignite a sparkle of Dalit revolution.

*Godan*, published in June 1936 is a vivid portrayal of the Indian villages and its farmers, In the novel, on one hand there is rebel against the age old exploitation of poor farmers, downtrodden class of people, on the other hand there is a complete submission to the upper caste and class hegemony in the form of the protagonist Hori who has accepted all sorts of exploitations and oppressions done against him and others of his community by the feudalists, money lenders, upper caste Brahmins and capitalists considering it as the will of God or his destiny. The title *Godan* itself merits discussion as it works as totem of Brahmin cultural hegemony that has been imposed on a number voiceless and illiterate lower class of people. Literally the term 'Godan' refers to a gift of cow which the care taker of every Hindu being gifts to a Brahmin priest on his/her death. The notion behind is that this act of gifting cow to the priest leads the deceased soul to the Moksha or salvation, which according to Hindu belief system is the

ultimate goal of this life. The Brahmins had imposed this menial practice of giving gifts and alms to the Brahmin only, on all other sects of people and very cunningly codified it into religion so that they can live lavish life without doing any work. Here they themselves, the preacher of philosophy of Karma violate the philosophy of Karma. Every Hindu has to gift expensive items to a Brahmin priest on various occasions. There are sixteen Samskaras (rituals) mentioned in Hindu religion and on each ritual the Hindu fellow needs to offer various expensive gifts to a Brahmin priest. Even on death, the deceased family has to gift a cow to a priest for the sake of salvation of the deceased soul, whether s/he could not afford it during his/her life. Munshi Premchand satirizes this sort of practices prevalent in Hinduism. In the novel, the protagonist Hori has a long cherished desire of having a cow but he is too poor to purchase one. Somehow he managed to get it on loan from Bhola, who is a *gwala*- a trader of milk and ghee from a nearby village but his younger brother Heera poisoned the cow to death. Thus this long cherished desire of Hori remains unfulfilled until his death. When he dies his relatives chorused in a firm voice, "Give a cow in charity". Dhania hearing the chorus, rose like a machine and brought out twenty annas and placed the coin in the palm of dead Hori and said to the priest Brahmin priest, Datadin, "Maharaj, there is neither a cow, nor a calf, nor any money in the house. This is the all money I have. Take this in place of the cow" (*Godan* 339). Here it is noteworthy that Dhania ignited a sparkle of rebellion against the hoary and hectic Hindu tradition, as though she offered her hard earned twenty annas as the charity of cow but in a sense negated the norm through her rebellious words.

Premchand, being a progressive writer, is aware of the socio-political movements and events of his time. For instance, Premchand in *Godan*, attacks on the jinx of colonialism, capitalism and feudalism prevalent in the society through satirical description of the urban story of the novel and in his *Sevasadan* he narrates the instance of peasant movement of Russia where the farmers and labourers have dethroned the monarch from power and took over the charge. In spite of being progressive thinker Premchand could not completely detach from the evil of casteism. He is conscious of caste and class distinction in his writings. In *Godan* Hori, has been represented as a representative of a class of people from low castes who have, in spite of being exploited and oppressed by upper caste of people, submitted to the brahmanical hegemony and accepted this exploitation as the will of God or destiny. Hori in the novel has been represented as subservient to the upper caste feudalist Ray Amar Pal Singh and other high caste oppressors be it a Brahmin priest Datadin or the entire caste council which goes against Hori and imposes fines on him when his son Gobar marries secretly with Bhola's widowed daughter Jhunia and when he shelters Selia- a Dalit girl, in his home after she has been abandoned by a Brahmin Matadin who has illegal sexual relation with Selia but did not allow her to enter his house and touch anything that belong to him. He did not allow her even a sheer of grains to pay off her debt that she has taken from Dulari, though she works for him tirelessly day and night. Premchand made Selia not rebel against the injustices inflicted on her by Matadin rather abandons her own parents and defame the family prestige. She says to her father in a fainted voice, "Dada, kill me, if you like. ... But I can't give up the Pundit. Let him starve me, beat me, kill me. I can't leave him. I prefer death to becoming someone else's woman. What you did you gain by defiling the Pundit?" (*Godan* 237). Here it is surprising to know that Premchand sacrifices the prestige and dignity of his Dalit character, be it a woman or a man, for the sake of fulfilling his purpose. In the same line Premchand made two Dalit characters, Ghisu and Madhav from one of his short stories, *Kafan* [The Shroud], drink liquor and eat food in a restaurant out of the money that they have begged for performing the last ritual of the deceased soul. How insensitive and hazy representation of the Dalit has been shown by Premchand here. How a human being can be so insensitive in reality that s/he eats and drinks liquor



out of the money earned in alms for performing the last ritual even when the deceased body of wife or daughter-in-law is still to be buried as Premchand has represented in *Kafan*? Thus Premchand has imposed a weak, fragile, contemptible and a vulnerable identity to the Dalits through such insensitive and hazy representation of them in his literature.

Premchand has used the abusive and casteist words on several occasions such as Chamar without any hesitation for addressing Surdas, the protagonist of *Rangbhumi* and for Selia and her family members in *Godan*. But perhaps Premchand was ignorant of the consequences of such filthy and abusive words. Thinks for a while about those students who belong to the Chamar community, what they would have felt when their teacher uses these casteist words in the classroom and how their class mates think and behave in front of them. The students of these low castes must feel humiliated when they hear such words from the mouth of their teachers who are role model and their friends of high castes. In July, 2004 Dr. Sohanpal Sumanakshar, the president of BDSA, (Bhartiya Dalit Sahitya Akademi) and his team burnt a number of copies of Premchand's *Rangbhumi* at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, because it contains such filthy words as Chamar. The BDSA and its supporters opined:

*Rangbhumi* is offensive to Dalits and dangerous to the soft minds of young students, who may become biased against Dalits due to the novel's constant repetition of caste-specific terminology, specifically the repetitive naming of the main character of the novel, Surdas as 'Surdas Chamar' (Bruek, "the Emerging Complexity of Dalit Consciousness").

The usage of such caste-specific words by these great litterateurs, leads to the currency of these words in society and they glue with the Dalit identity and finally leads to the humiliation the Dalit community.

The Dalit identity tends to be affected by this representational system of language that Premchand and other non-Dalit have used to represent the Dalit community. Dr. Ambedkar has elaborated that the Dalits were as powerful and equal as other sect of Indian society (*The Untouchable* 25-31), but with the help of diminutive practice of fallible representation, a fragile, helpless and a contemptible identity has been imposed on them. Sage Manu represented them as servants, whose existence is merely to serve the other high caste people, and as the parasites who live on the mercy of upper caste people, thus the likewise identity has been assigned to them. Following the notion of Manu, the high priests of literatures now began to talk about the Dalits, the untouchable *others*, but with a discourse of sympathy and compassion. Alok Mukherjee in his reading of Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* writes, "Dalit are still not the speaking subject; they are not the people with 'self-pride'" (Mukherjee, "Reading Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*" 8). This representation of the Dalits as weak, broken, hapless and as an object of pity and sympathy made them a subject of abomination and thus tramples their identity into bits and pushed them back into the dark mist of obscurity. Even the contemporary radical non-Dalit scholars like Gayatri Spivak help marginalizing the Dalits by imposing a fragile and a contemptible identity upon them through their texts. Spivak opines in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* that the subalterns are voiceless; they can't express their agonies and sufferings in a true sense. She did not look for any writing by Dalits or Adivasis, but limited her study to non-Dalit writings<sup>1</sup> only while theorizing her theory of the subaltern. It is obvious here that the non-Dalit writers, though being sympathizers and allies of the Dalits, have marginalized the Dalits by using "a tactical brahmanical trick" (S. Rao 45), and thus imposed a fragile, a vulnerable and a contemptible identity on them.

<sup>1</sup> Gayatri Spivak limited herself to the exploration of writings of upper caste Bengali, writer Mahasweta Devi only for generalizing her theory of subaltern. She did not make any use of writings by Dalits, Adivasis or aboriginals.

In order to solve the problem of Dalit contemptible identity, it is imperative to understand the brahmanical culture of ‘othering’ the Dalits with the tactic of hazy representation. Stuart Hall opines, “Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render outside, abjected” (“Who Needs Identity” 17-18). In the light of above statement Dalit are the Brahmin’s other, hence it is requisite to exclude the notion of Brahminism from its binary of Dalit’s issue in order to understand the notion of Dalit identity. The concept of identity is dynamic and it mobiles as the creeping herb that moves as per the given support. A good gardener provides the creepers good supports in order to mould them in the desired direction and thus grow different desired and charming shapes by the creepers. Likewise the concept of identity functions. The identity of an individual or a group of individuals is based on the representations through which they are represented. Here it is worthy to keep in mind that the identity can be easily distorted through tactics of repetitive representations. For instance a weak, a vulnerable and a contemptible identity has been imposed on the Dalits through the tactics of hazy representation. Thus it becomes imperative to reanalyze and re-evaluate the corpus of non-Dalit writers with Dalit point of view in order to understand the intricacies of Dalit representation that is directly associated with Dalit identity and their dignity. Here it is requisite to deconstruct the matrix of Dalit narrative that they are weak, helpless, voiceless, and a subject of abomination and understand the intricacies of their representation, through which such vulnerable identity has been imposed on them, in order to emancipate them from the discriminatory practices of brahminism and hence following the same, the dignity and a reputed identity can be affirmed to them which finally will help redeeming the status quo of their existence.

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