



THE SHROUD
- MUNSHI PREMCHAND
(TRANSLATED FROM URDU BY FRANCES W. PRITCHETT)

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, We shall

- Learn famous story of the prominent Writer Munshi Premchand
- Themes, style, tone and critical analysis of the story
- Cultural elements of the story

6.1 ABOUT THE SHORT STORY WRITER

Munshi Premchand whose original name was Dhanpat Rai was born on 31 July 1886 in a village Lamhi near Varanasi in the present state of Uttar Pradesh. His father was a clerk in the post office. Premchand's parents died young: his mother died when Dhanpat was seven and his father died when he was fourteen. Premchand was left responsible for his stepmother and step siblings. He was married at the age of fifteen but the marriage did not succeed. His wife and his step mother quarreled frequently. His stepmother was also very quarrelsome and she created discord in the family.

As Premchand's first marriage failed, he married again to a child widow named Shivarani. She supported Premchand in his struggles for life and creative writing. Premchand faced financial problems all his life. He tutored students and worked as a teacher in different schools in various towns and cities. He passed his B.A. with English, Persian and history. Later, he worked as a school inspector.

Premchand wrote in Urdu contributing to various magazines and literary journals. He was a voracious reader and also worked as a book seller, editor

and press owner. He began to write under the pen name *Nawab Rai* in Urdu but in 1909, his book *Soz-e-Watan* was banned by the British Government as a seditious work. Then he started writing under the pen name 'Premchand'. In 1914, he switched to Hindi from Urdu writing as it was difficult to find publishers in Urdu.

By 1919, Premchand had published four novels which included his first novel *Seva Sadan*. In 1921 he attended a meeting at Gorakhpur where Mahatma Gandhi asked people to resign from government jobs as protest against the British rule.

In 1923, he quit his job and decided to focus on his literary career. He started a printing press called *Sarswati Press*. In 1924, his novel *Rangbhumi* was published, followed by *Nirmala* in 1925, *Pratigya* in 1927 and *Gaban* in 1928. As his printing press suffered a great financial loss, he went to Bombay to try his luck in Hindi Film Industry. He wrote script for the film *Mazdoor* but he did not like commercial environment of Bombay Film Industry. He therefore left Mumbai and returned to Banaras. Premchand was elected as the first President of the Progressive writers Association in Lucknow in 1936. He died on October 8, 1936.

Munshi Premchand wrote more than three hundred short-stories, fourteen novels many essays, letters, plays and translated works. Some of his works have been translated into English and Russian after his death. His major works include: *Seva Sadan*, *Rangbhumi*, *Nirmala*, *Gaban*, *Karmabhoomi*, *Godan* and collection of short stories. His notable short stories include *Kafan*, *Gupt Dhan*, *Poos ki Raat*, *Lottery*, *Do Bail ki Katha*, *Idgah*, *Thakur ka Kuan*, *Boodhi Kaaki*, *Namak Ka Daroga*, *Bade Bhai Sahab*, *Nasha*, *Panch Parmeshwar* etc.

Premchand's works are marked by his profound social concern and social realism. His works depict a rationalistic outlook. He exposed so-called religious hypocrites and wealthy exploiters of Indian society. His novels and short stories focused on national and social issues like child widows, prostitution, poverty, feudal system, corruption and freedom movement. He was influenced by Gopal Krishna Gokhle, Lok Manya Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi.

Munshi Premchand lifted contemporary literature from emotionalism and romanticism to realistic representation of social problems of rural India.

6.2 ABOUT THE STORY

The Shroud (1936) is the last story by Munshi Premchand. The title of the story is *Kafan* in original Hindi story. The story we shall study here is translated version in English by Frances W. Pritchett. This is one of the most appealing stories by Premchand that depicts the harshness and morbid comic effect. The story is about two Dalits Ghisu, the father and his son Madhav. The only female character is Budhia, Madhav's pregnant wife who undergoes intense labour pain and dies. This Dalit family is utterly poor and suffers from abject poverty and starvation. Premchand has presented a vivid heart rending picture of rural India which is devastated by cruel, inhuman caste system and untouchability.

The story starts with conversation between Ghisu and Madhav who are utterly lazy pain idlers. They are talking about Budhia who is undergoing a severe labour pain inside the hut. Ghisu and Madhav are sitting outside the

hut greedily devouring stolen potatoes. Madhav is unwilling to go inside the hut and help his wife fearing that his father might devour a larger share of roasted potatoes. Ghisu then recounts in detail a feast that he had attended twenty years ago at a landowner's house. It was a wedding procession of the landowner's daughter. The family fed all invitees with puris, raita, chutney, vegetables, sweets, yogurt and paan at the end. Ghisu had eaten so much that he could not stand up and staggered off lying on his blanket. Ghisu remarks that new people do not spend much on weddings and religious festivals as they have turned economic and thrifty.

Madhav listens to his father's vivid account of the feast with vicarious pleasure. Budhia writhes in pain while the father son duo sleeps unconcerned about her. The next morning Budhia dies and both start crying. The arrangements for the cremation are to be made but they had no money to arrange for the funeral rites. They go to the zamindar who gives them two rupees contemptuously deriding them for their laziness. The landlord flung money towards Ghisu without even looking at him. Other people also gave them some money for cremation and the amount went up to five rupees.

They went to buy the cloth to wrap the dead body of Budhia for cremation but they thought that it was of no use to burn the shroud with the dead body, as when she was alive, she did not have even a rag to cover her body. They went to a wine shop, ordered for puris, meat stew, spiced liver and fried fish along with a bottle of wine. They drank a lot getting fully intoxicated. They said that Budhia would certainly go to heaven because even though she died, she fulfilled the greatest desire of their lives, the desire of drinking wine and eating the best food. Ghisu consoled his son by saying that Budhia was liberated from the net of illusion of worldly pain and pleasures.

At the end, they start singing, dancing and then collapse on the ground due to over drunkenness.

The Shroud is a controversial story that has been interpreted from different perspectives. Munshi Premchand understates the miseries of the down trodden hiding his own personal opinions. The story is descriptive and analytical rather than prescriptive and didactic.

6.3 TEXT OF THE STORY

At the door of the hut father and son sat silently by a burnt-out fire; inside, the son's young wife Budhiya lay in labor, writhing with pain. And from time to time such a heart-rending scream emerged from her lips that they both pressed their hands to their hearts. It was a winter night; everything was drowned in desolation. The whole village had been absorbed into the darkness.

Ghisu said, "It seems she won't live. She's been writhing in pain the whole day. Go on – see how she is."

Madhav said in a pained tone, "If she's going to die, then why doesn't she go ahead and die? What's the use of going to see?"

"You're pretty hard-hearted! You've enjoyed life with her for a whole year – such faithlessness to her?"

"Well, I can't stand to see her writhing and thrashing around."

It was a family of Chamars, and notorious in the whole village. If Ghisu

worked for one day, then he rested for three. Madhav was such a slacker that if he worked for an hour, then he smoked his chilam for an hour. Thus nobody hired them on. If there was even a handful of grain in the house, they both swore off working. When they'd fasted for a couple of days, then Ghisu climbed trees and broke off branches, and Madhav sold the wood in the market; and as long as that money lasted, they both spent their time wandering idly around. *When their hunger grew intense, they again broke off branches, or looked for some work.* There was no shortage of work in the village. It was a village of farmers; for a hard-working man there were fifty jobs. But people only sent for those two when they were forced to content themselves with getting out of two men the work of one.

If only the two had been ascetics, then they wouldn't have needed any exercises in self-discipline to achieve contentment and patience. This was their very nature. Theirs was a strange life. Except for two or three clay pots, they had no goods at all in the house. Covering their nakedness with torn rags, free from the cares of the world, laden with debt – they suffered abuse, they suffered blows too, but not grief. They were so poor that without the smallest hope of repayment, people used to lend them something or other. When peas or potatoes were in season, they would dig up peas or potatoes from the fields and roast and eat them, or break off five or ten stalks of sugarcane and suck them at night. Ghisu had spent 60 years of his life in this pious manner, and Madhav, like a dutiful son, was following in his father's footsteps – or rather, was making his name even more radiant.

This time too, both were seated by the fire, roasting potatoes that they had dug up from somebody's field. Ghisu's wife had passed away long ago. Madhav's marriage had taken place the year before. Since this woman had come, she had laid the foundations of civilization in the family. *Grinding grain, cutting grass, she arranged for a couple of pounds of flour,* and kept filling the stomachs of those two shameless ones. After she came, they both grew even more lazy and indolent; indeed, they even began to swagger a bit. If someone sent for them to work, then with splendid indifference they demanded double wages. That woman was dying today in childbirth. And these two were perhaps waiting for her to die, so they could sleep in peace.

Pulling out a potato and peeling it, Ghisu said, "Go see what shape she's in. We'll have the fuss over a ghost-witch – what else! And here even the exorcist demands a rupee – *from whose house would we get one?*"

Madhav suspected that if he went into the hut, Ghisu would finish off most of the potatoes. He said, "I'm afraid to go in."

"What are you afraid of? I'm here, after all."

"Then you go and see, all right?"

"When my wife died, for three days I never even left her side. And then, won't she be ashamed in front of me? I've never seen her face – and today I should see her naked body? She won't even have bodily ease: if she sees me, she won't be able to thrash around freely."

"I'm thinking, if a child is born – what then? Dried ginger, brown sugar, oil – there's nothing at all in the house."

"Everything will come. If Bhagwan gives a child – those people who now aren't giving a paisa, will send for us and give us things. I've had nine sons.

There was never anything in the house, but this is how we managed every time.”

A society in which those who labored night and day were not in much better shape than these two; a society in which compared to the peasants, those who knew how to exploit the peasants’ weaknesses were much better off – in such a society, the birth of this kind of mentality was no cause for surprise. We’ll say that compared to the peasants, Ghisu was more insightful; and instead of joining the mindless group of peasants, he had joined the group of clever, scheming tricksters. Though indeed, he wasn’t skillful in following the rules and customs of the tricksters. Thus while other members of his group became chiefs and headmen of villages, at him the whole village wagged its finger. But still, he did have the consolation that if he was in bad shape, at least he wasn’t forced to do the back-breaking labor of the peasants, and others didn’t take improper advantage of his simplicity and voicelessness.

Pulling out the potatoes, they both began to eat them burning hot. They had eaten nothing since the day before. They were too impatient to wait till the potatoes cooled. Both burned their tongues repeatedly. When the potatoes were peeled, their outer parts didn’t seem so extremely hot. But the moment the teeth bit into them, the inner part burned the tongue and throat and roof of the mouth. Rather than keep that ember in the mouth, it was better to send it quickly along inward, where there was plenty of equipment for cooling it down. So they both swallowed very fast, although the attempt brought tears to their eyes.

Then Ghisu remembered a landowner’s wedding procession, in which he had taken part 20 years before. The repletion that had been vouchsafed to him in that feast was a memorable event in his life, and even today its memory was fresh. He said, “I’ll never forget that feast. Never since then have I had that kind of food, or such a full stomach. The girl’s family fed puris to everyone. As much as they wanted! Great and small, everyone ate puris – ones made with real ghi! Chutney, raita, three kinds of green vegetables, a flavorful stew, yoghurt, chutney, sweets. How can I tell you now what relish there was in that feast! There was no limit. Whatever thing you want, just ask! And however much you want, eat! People ate so much, ate so much, that nobody could even drink any water. And there the servers were setting hot, round, sweet-smelling pastries before you! You refuse, saying you don’t want it. You push away the tray with your hand. But that’s how they are – they just keep on giving it. And when everybody had wiped their mouths, then everybody got a pan as well. But how could I be in any shape for a pan? I couldn’t stand up. I just staggered off and lay down on my blanket. He had a heart as big as the ocean, that landowner!”

Enjoying the story of these grand festivities, Madhav said, “If only somebody would give us such a feast now!”

“As if anybody would feast anybody now! That was a different time. Now everybody thinks about economy – ‘don’t spend money on weddings, don’t spend money on religious festivals!’. Ask them – what’s this ‘saving’ of the poor people’s wealth? There’s no lack of ‘saving’. But when it comes to spending, they think about economy!”

“You must have eaten 20 or so puris?”

“I ate more than 20.”

“I would have eaten up 50.”

“I couldn’t have eaten less than 50. I was hale and hearty. You’re not half of what I was!”

After eating, they drank some water, covered themselves with their dhotis, curled up, and went to sleep right there by the fire, as if two gigantic serpents lay coiled there.

And Budhiya was still moaning.

In the morning, when Madhav went into the hut and looked, his wife had grown cold. Flies were buzzing on her face. Her stony eyes had rolled upward. Her whole body was covered with dust. In her stomach, the baby had died.

Madhav came running to Ghisu. Then they both together began loudly lamenting and beating their breasts. When the neighbors heard the weeping and wailing, they came running. And following the ancient custom, they began to console the bereaved.

But this wasn’t the occasion for an excessive show of grief. They had to worry about the shroud, and the wood. Money was as scarce in their house as meat in a raptor’s nest.

Father and son went weeping to the village landlord. He hated the very sight of their faces. A number of times he had beaten them with his own hands – for theft, or for not coming to work as they had promised. He asked, “What is it, Ghisu, why do you weep? Nowadays we don’t even see you around. It seems that you no longer want to live in the village.”

Ghisu fell prostrate on the ground, and said with tear-filled eyes, “Master, I’m in great trouble! Madhav’s wife passed away last night. All day she was writhing in pain, Master; we two sat by her bed till midnight. Whatever medicines we could give her, we did. But she slipped away. Now we have no one to care for us, Master – we’re devastated – our house is destroyed! I’m your slave. Now who but you will take care of her final rites? Whatever money we had at hand was used up on medicines. If the Master will show mercy, then she’ll have the proper rites. To whose door should I come except yours?”

The Landlord Sahib was a compassionate man. But to show compassion to Ghisu was to try to dye a black blanket. He felt like saying, “Get out of here! *Keep the corpse in your house and let it rot!* Usually you don’t come even when you’re called – now when you want something, you come and flatter me! You treacherous bastard! You villain!” But this was not the occasion for anger or revenge. Willingly or not, he pulled out two rupees and flung them down. But he didn’t open his lips to say a single word of consolation. He didn’t even look in Ghisu’s direction – as if he’d discharged a duty.

When the Landlord Sahib gave two rupees, then how could the village merchants and money-lenders have the nerve to refuse? Ghisu knew how to beat the drum of the landlord’s name. One gave two paisas, another gave four paisas. In an hour, Ghisu had collected the sum of five rupees in ready cash. Someone gave grain, someone else gave wood. And in the afternoon Ghisu and Madhav went to the market to get a shroud. Meanwhile, people began to cut the bamboo poles, and so on.

The sensitive-hearted women of the village came and looked at the body. They shed a few tears at its helplessness, and went away.

When they reached the market, Ghisu said, “We’ve got enough wood to burn her, haven’t we, Madhav?”

Madhav said, “Yes, there’s plenty of wood. Now we need a shroud.”

“So let’s buy a light kind of shroud.”

“Sure, what else! While the body is being carried along, night will come. At night, who sees a shroud?”

“What a bad custom it is that someone who didn’t even get a rag to cover her body when she was alive, needs a new shroud when she’s dead.”

“After all, the shroud burns along with the body.”

“What else is it good for? If we’d had these five rupees earlier, we would have given her some medicine.”

Each of them inwardly guessed what the other was thinking. They kept wandering here and there in the market, until eventually evening came. [Sometimes they went to one cloth-seller’s shop, sometimes to another. They looked at various kinds of fabric, they looked at silk and cotton, but nothing suited them.] The two arrived, by chance or deliberately, before a wine-house; and as if according to some prearranged decision, they went inside. For a little while they both stood there in a state of uncertainty. [Then Ghisu went to the counter and said, “Sir, please give us a bottle too.”] *Ghisu bought one bottle of liquor, and some sesame sweets.* [After this some snacks came, fried fish came]. And they both sat down on the verandah and [peacefully] began to drink.

After drinking a number of cups in a row, both became elevated.

Ghisu said, “What’s the use of wrapping her in a shroud? After all, it would only be burned. Nothing would go with her.”

Looking toward the sky as if persuading the angels of his innocence, Madhav said, “It’s the custom of the world – why do these same people give thousands of rupees to the Brahmins? Who can tell whether a reward does or doesn’t reach them in another world?”

“Rich people have wealth – let them waste it! What do we have to waste?”

“But what will you tell people? Won’t people ask where the shroud is?”

Ghisu laughed. “We’ll say the money slipped out of my waistband – we searched and searched for it, but it didn’t turn up. [People won’t believe it, but they’ll still give the same sum again.]”

Madhav too laughed at this unexpected good fortune, *at defeating destiny in this way*. He said, “She was very good, the poor thing. Even as she died, she gave us a fine meal.”

More than half the bottle had been finished. Ghisu ordered two sers of puris, a meat stew, and spiced liver and fried fish. There was a shop right next to the wine-house. Madhav ran over and brought everything back on two leaf-plates. The cost was fully one and a half rupees. Only a few paisa were left.

Both then sat eating puris, with all the majesty of a tiger in the jungle pursuing his prey. They had no fear of being called to account, nor any concern about disgrace. They had passed through these stages of weakness long ago.

Ghisu said in a philosophical manner, “If my soul is being pleased, then won’t she receive religious merit?”

Madhav bowed his head in pious confirmation. “Certainly she’ll certainly receive it. Bhagwan, you are the knower of hearts – take her to Heaven! We’re both giving her our heartfelt blessing. The feast I’ve had today – I haven’t had its equal in my whole life!”

After a moment a doubt arose in Madhav’s heart. He said, “How about it – we’ll go there too someday, won’t we?”

Ghisu gave no answer to this childish question. *He looked reproachfully at Madhav.* [He didn’t want the thought of heavenly matters to interfere with this bliss.]

“When she asks us, there, why we didn’t give her a shroud, what will you say?”

“Oh, shut up!”

“She’ll certainly ask.”

“How do you know that she won’t get a shroud? Do you consider me such a donkey? I’ve lived in this world for 60 years – and have I just been loitering around? She’ll get a shroud, and [a very good one] – *a much better than we would have given*.”

Madhav was not convinced. He said, “Who will give it? You’ve gobbled up the rupees! [It’s me she’ll ask – I’m the one who put the sindur in the parting of her hair.]”

Ghisu grew irritated. “I tell you, she’ll get a shroud. Why don’t you believe me?”

“Who will give the money – why don’t you tell me?”

“The same people will give it who gave it this time. But they won’t put the rupees into our hands. *And if somehow we get our hands on them, we’ll sit here and drink again just like this, and they’ll give the shroud a third time.*”

As the darkness deepened and the stars glittered more sharply, the tumult in the wine-house also increased. One person sang, another babbled, another embraced his companion, another pressed a glass to his friend’s lips. Joy was in the atmosphere there. Intoxication was in the air. How many people becomes “an ass with a glass”! *They came here only to taste the pleasure of self-forgetfulness.* More than liquor, the air here elevated their spirits. The disaster of life seized them and dragged them here. And for a while they forgot whether they were alive or dead – or half-alive.

And these two, father and son, were still sipping with relish. Everyone’s eyes had settled on them. How fortunate they were! They had a whole bottle between them.

After he had finished eating, Madhav picked up the leaf-plate of leftover puris and gave it to a beggar who was standing there looking at them with hungry eyes. And for the first time in his life he felt the pride and delight and thrill of giving.

Ghisu said, “Take it – eat your fill, and give her your blessing. She whose earnings these are has died, but your blessing will certainly reach her. Bless her with every hair on your body – these are the payment for very hard labor.”

Madhav again looked toward the sky and said, “She’ll go to Heaven – she’ll become the Queen of Heaven!”

Ghisu stood up, and as if swimming in waves of joy he said, “Yes, son, she’ll go to Heaven! She never tormented anyone, she never oppressed anyone; even while dying, she fulfilled the greatest desire of our lives. If she doesn’t go to Heaven, then will those fat rich people go – who loot the poor with both hands, and go to the Ganges to wash away their sin, and offer holy water in temples?”

This mood of piety too changed; variability is the special quality of intoxication. It was the turn of despair and grief. Madhav said, “But the poor thing suffered a great deal in her life. Even her death was so painful!” Covering his eyes with his hands, he began to weep, [and sobbed loudly].

Ghisu consoled him: “Why do you weep, son? Be happy that she’s been liberated from this net of illusion. She’s escaped from the snare; she was very fortunate that she was able to break the bonds of worldly illusion so quickly.”

And both, standing there, began to sing, “Temptress! Why do your eyes flash, temptress?”

The whole wine-house was absorbed in the spectacle, and these two drinkers, deep in intoxication, kept on singing. Then they both began to dance – they leaped and jumped, fell down, flounced about, gesticulated, [strutted around]; and finally, overcome by drunkenness, they collapsed.

- Translated by Frances. W. Pritchett

6.4 KEY WORDS

Writhe	: Wriggle, jolt, make twisting of body (in pain)
Desolation	: a state of complete emptiness, barrenness
Absorbed	: engrossed, fully occupied, gripped
Hard-hearted	: cruel, merciless
Notorious	: infamous, ill-famed, known for bad qualities
Slacker	: idler, one who avoids work, lazybone
Chilam	: smoking pipe made of clay
Swear off	: abjure, promise to abstain from
Idly	: lazily/ in an aimless, lazy manner
Intense	: very powerful, acute, potent, profound
Ascetic	: austere, self-denying, non-indulgent, self-disciplined, self-controlled, one who controls one’s feelings in contentment, satisfaction
Laden with debt	: debt-ridden, burdened with debt
Stalks	: stems, twigs (To stalk: pursue stealthily)
Pious	: sacred, holy, virtuous
Radiant	: brilliant, illuminated, shining, luminous
Roast	: cook by prolonged exposure to heat in an oven or over fire
Shameless	: barefaced, brazen
Swagger	: stride, walk or behave in an arrogant manner

Exorcist	: one who is able to cast out the evil
Suspect	: doubt, have suspicion, to be skeptical
Thrash ground	: to make wild movements
Peasant	: farmer, farm-worker
Insightful	: perceptive, intuitive, penetrative
Trickster	: A person who cheats or swindles other
Consolation	: give condolences to, comfort at a time of grief
Peel	: remove the outer cover of fruit, vegetables etc.
Ember	: live coal, cinder, burning coal or wood
Swallow	: gulp down, gobble up, stuff down
Repletion	: the state of being full, well supplied
Vouchsafe	: give someone in a gracious manner, favour with
Stew	: a dish of meat or vegetables cooked in liquid.
Yogurt	: semi solid Souris food prepared from milk fermented
Relish	: enjoy, delight in, be pleased by
Pastries	: baked dishes of cream, flour, jam, fruits etc.
Stagger off	: lurch, walk unsteadily, stumble, falter
Feast	: celebration meal, banquet, large celebratory meal
Moan	: groan, cry in pain, lament
Buzz	: low humming, continuous sound, murmuring sound
Wail	: lament, cry loudly, whine, high-pitched sound
Lament	: cry loudly, a passionate expression of sorrow
Bereaved	: to be deprived of a close relation or friend though death
Prostrate	: lying stretched on the ground with face downward
Corpse	: dead body of a human being
Flatter	: over-praise, lavish praise or compliments to some one
Rag	: torn piece of cloth, old tattered clothes
Fabric	: cloth, textile material
Liquor	: wine spirit, alcoholic beverage
Snacks	: small quick meal or something eaten between meals
Waistband	: a strip of cloth round the waist sewn on trousers or skirt, girdle, sash
Ser	: old weight measurement of almost half a kilo
Pursue	: follow, chase, trail, track
Prey	: quarry, game, kill
Confirmation	: verification, testimony, authentication
Reproachfully	: disappointedly, disparagingly
Interfere	: get in the way of, disrupt, stand in the way of

Gobble up	: eat greedily or hastily in large pieces
Sindur	: Red lead powder applied on forehead and on the partings of hair by Hindu woman
Tumult	: disorderly agitation, hubbub, din, confused state.
Intoxication	: a strong feeling of excitement or happiness the condition of being drunk
Sip	: drink slowly in small portions
Thrill	: excitement, exhilaration, stimulation
Torment	: agony, suffering, torture, anguish, distress
Oppress	: maltreat, abuse, tyrannize, persecute
Variability	: lack of consistency or fixed pattern
Liberate	: make free, emancipate, rescue, release from slavery
Illusion	: hallucination, fantasy, deceptive appearance
Flounce	: March, strut, move in exaggerated manner
Gesticulate	: Use gestures, make signs or signals
Strut around	: walk around in a stiff manner swagger
Overcome	: to conquer, win, overpower
Collapse	: fall down, crumble, slump down

6.5 SUMMARY OF THE STORY

The Shroud is a famous story by Munshi Premchand. It is about two chamars (Dalits) Ghisu and Madhav. Ghisu is the father and Madhav is the son. Both are great idlers who do not like to work. They always avoided work and rested all the time. Madhav's wife Budhia was pregnant and suddenly she had the labour pain that made her cry loudly whole night. Ghisu and Madhav sat outside the hut eating stolen potatoes after roasting them in fire. They had no money or food or clothes. They were clad in rags. Poverty had made them quite indifferent and insensitive. Budhia's constant whining did not affect them much. In fact they thought that her death would liberate her from suffering. They probably thought that her death would also relieve them from their problems.

The next morning, Budhia died and they began to lament loudly. Soon, people came to console them. Ghisu and Madhav had no money to arrange for Budhia's funeral rites. They went to the local Zamindar to beg money. The Zamindar reproached them for their laziness but gave them two rupees. Other people also gave some money. Thus they could collect five rupees which was quite a good amount for them. They went to purchase Kafan (shroud) but they found it quite costly and unnecessary. They thought that it was an evil custom to wrap a dead woman in such a cloth who had not been able to wear any proper clothes all her life.

So, they decided to spend money on wine and food. They drank a lot of wine and ate nice food which they had never enjoyed during their life. They ate puris, meat stew spiced liver and fried fish. Intoxicated and over-drunk, they sang, danced and collapsed on the ground. They said that Budhia's soul would

go to heaven as she had earned great punya (virtue or merit) by providing them the best food and drink at the time of her death. Though she died, it was due to her death that they could enjoy the most delicious food and strong intoxicating wine that made them forget all the miseries of the world.

The story ends in a shocking manner depicting the realistic picture of poverty-ridden people of rural India. Poverty is a curse that makes people cruel, heartless and inhuman. In Sanskrit, it is said “Budhukshito Kim Na Karoti Paapam” (The hungry and starving people commit heinous crimes)

6.6 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE STORY

The Shroud (Kafan) was the last story written by Munshi Premchand. It was published in 1936. The story we are dealing with is a translated version in English by Frances W. Pritchett. Frances W. Pritchett has taught South Asia Literature at Columbia University since 1982. She had taught and written about South Asian literature especially Urdu poetry. She has written about Ghalib of Mirza Ghalib and Urdu poetry. There are several English translation of *Kafan* by Munshi Premchand but Frances W. Pritchett’s translation is more authentic which does justice to the original short story.

Translation is a complex process and it involves translating cultural elements like proverbs, idioms, metaphor, colloquial language etc. of the source language to the target language. Premchand’s writing style is simple and he used dialect and colloquial expressions. Most of his stories deal with rural India and the poor, deprived people that inhabit there. Pritchett’s translation has succeeded in carrying the cultural elements of the original story *Kafan*. The characters of the story are from deprived class called charmars. They were treated as untouchables who lived in a small hut outside the village. They were poverty ridden and sustained themselves by begging left over food.

Though they were poor and starving, they did not like to work. They worked very little resting all the time. The farmers of the village needed them for labour work in their fields. They were ready to pay reasonable charges but they shunned work by making some excuses. Probably, utter poverty had made them quite indifferent, careless and insensitive Ghisu and Madhav are father son duo. They are very lazy and negligent. They are victims of caste discrimination which is the greatest evil in India. Their poverty is the result of this evil. Munshi Premchand has presented social reality of India dispassionately without censoring or favoring anyone or anything.

The story begins with Madhav’s wife Budhia writhing in labour pain inside the hut while Ghisu and Madhav are sitting outside the hut talking and devouring roasted potatoes which they have stolen from someone’s field. Ghisu recalls and recounts a wonderful feast he had enjoyed twenty years ago. While Budhia is crying in unbearable agony, Madhav and Ghisu are lost in the world of vicarious pleasure.

The next morning, they find Budhia dead with flies buzzing around her dead body. Ghisu and Madhav start lamenting loudly. The neighbours come and console them. Ghisu and Madhav have no money to arrange for Budhia’s funeral. Therefore they go to Zamindar to beg for money. The Zamindar gives them two rupees deriding their laziness contemptuously. Other people also give them some money for Budhia’s cremation. The amount they receive goes up to five rupees and they go to purchase the shroud. They look for

cheap shroud but they feel that it was no use to waste money on shroud as it was to be burnt with the dead body of Budhia who had always covered her body in rags all her life.

In the evening, they go to a wine shop and buy a bottle of liquor and snacks. They sat down on the verandah and began to drink. They ate puris, meat stew, spiced liver and fried fish relishing delicious spicy food with strong, intoxicating liquor.

Madhav remarked that even as she died, she gave them a nice meal. Ghisu remarked in a philosophical manner that Buddha had earned religions merit (punya) by feeding them after the end of her life and therefore her soul would certainly go to heaven. Soon darkness descended and stars began to shine in the sky. The father son duo sang, danced and babbled out of intoxication. Ghisu said that Budhia had liberated herself from the net of illusion of worldly sufferings. The people witnessed the spectacle absorbingly as the duo leaped and jumped madly. Finally, they collapsed on the ground losing their consciousness in inebriated state.

Kafan (The Shroud) is the most controversial story that invited numerous interpretations by the critics. Premchand keeps his own opinions hidden. His objective and impassioned outlook makes the story highly impressive. The story raises questions that go unanswered. The story is more descriptive than prescriptive. There is no derision of Ghisu and Madhav's laziness because in a caste ridden society, hard work and honest labour do not raise the depressed people from animal level. Readers dare not condemn them because their behavior and attitude are shaped by the evils of caste system and exploitative society. There is bestiality on one side and hypocrisy on the other. Premchand's style is totally devoid of poetic quality. It is full of colonialism and slangs. Bhisma Sahni finds the story as one that strikes "the note of deep anguish and tragedy" Premchand's stories depict stark realities of oppressed classes of rural India. There are no comments, sermons or rhetorical embellishments. The story is both realistic as well as symbolic. It raises several questions about contemporary social economic and cultural systems that prevailed in India.

Munshi Premchand's stories depict the oppressed lives of the Dalits have been interpreted by Dalit writers and critics from the Dalit point of view. Like Mahatma Gandhi, Premchand had profound sympathy for the deprived people but at the same time he favoured 'Varna' (caste) system which was the root cause of untouchability and exploitation of the oppressed people. Many Dalit critics feel that *Kafan* was an anti-Dalit story which derided and ridiculed the life of Dalits in the story. During 1930's North India was amply influenced by Gandhian ideology rather than Ambedkar's discourse on Dalits and caste system. Munshi Premchand was profoundly influenced by Gandhian ideology of political liberation and social equality. Mahatma Gandhi prescribed transformation of hearts to remove untouchability and inequality. He made untouchability a moral issue rather than social and political issue.

However Munshi Premchand was the first writer among the upper caste writers who voiced the sufferings of the Dalits and their liberation from the evil of untouchability and poverty. *Kafan* (the shroud) depicts exploitation, dehumanization and isolation suffered by the Dalits in rural India. Their weaknesses were the result of stark poverty and starvation they underwent rather

than vices nurtured deliberately. Their laziness and insensitivity can be juxtaposed with the hypocrisy and exploitative attitude of the upper-class Hindu society. In *Kafan* the responsibility towards Budhia is bracketed against hunger and desire for intoxication and drunkenness. Ghisu and Madhav forget all sufferings and miseries of their life as they sing and dance in abandoned manner with amnesia caused by heavy drinking.

Munshi Premchand presented his views on fiction in his essay *Upanyas* in 1925. His views reflect the naturalistic views of Balzac the famous French writer. Premchand believed that fiction as a form of literature explores the variety of human species. He said that all human beings are made from the same mould but environment creates a variety. Individuals differ from one another in degrees. A fiction writer needs to understand human psychology and represent their peculiarities. He remarked, "The splendor of the novelist lies in the creation of characters that captivate readers with their good conduct and ideas."

For Munshi Premchand plot is equally important as characters. An ideal character is not just an abstraction but real and life-like. The ideal character must have a realistic narrative that constitutes a good coherent plot. Therefore an ideal must exist beside the real on a parallel ground. Though Ghisu and Madhav are low caste people, they are also the part of Hindu Caste system. Premchand has used religious vocabulary in the story in the conversation between Ghisu and Madhav. They refer to heaven (swarg), religious merit (punya), Bhagwan (God) etc. in their conversation. Even the name *Madhav* is the name of Lord Krishna according to the Hindu customs and rituals. All these things show that the Dalits were the part of the Hindu society but the caste hierarchy placed them at the lowest level turning them into untouchable outcast. The satiric barbs are not directed only at Hindu religious hypocrisy and exploitation but at religious hypocrisy and exploitation in general.

Munshi Premchand gives a vivid picture of the poverty-ridden family of Ghisu, Madhav and Budhia. He avoids sentimentalism in his description of their poverty, starvation and miserable life. There is a realistic blending of tragic and comic elements in the story that make the readers spell-bound.

6.7 TONE OF THE STORY

Tone in literature refers to the attitude of the writer towards the subject and audience (readers). Tone is generally conveyed through the choice of words or the view point of a writer on a particular subject. The tone can be formal, informal, serious, comic, sarcastic, sad or cheerful. Premchand's general tone is realistic and sarcastic. In the story *Kafan* (The shroud) the tone is morbid and borders on disgusting. From the point of view of the famous Indian theory of 'Rasa' the story is dominated by Bibhatsa Rasa (the emotion of disgust), Karuna Rasa (Tragic) and Hasya (comic). Munshi Premchand is a realistic writer who always avoided emotionalism and imagination in his writing. He dealt with realities of life of the poor and the deprived. Ghisu and Madhav are low caste father and son who do not like to work. They suffer from poverty and starvation. Madhav's wife dies of labour pain because of the negligence of her husband and her father-in-law. While she was dying, they were talking about food. After Budhia's death they beg for money to arrange for her funeral rites. They get five rupees which they spend on food and wine. Budhia's dead body lay unattended inside the hut and Ghisu and Madhav sign and

dance in drunken state. At the end of the story, they collapse on the ground unconsciously falling in an abyss of amnesia of the miseries they experienced throughout their life.

6.8 THEMES OF THE STORY

The themes of *The Shroud* are poverty starvation inhuman caste system, untouchability, feudalism, hypocrisy of the upper-class people, indolence and idleness of the poor people etc. Munshi Premchand presents the vivid picture of rural India where caste system dominates lives of the people. Ghisu and Madhav are Chamars-the low caste people who live in a hut outside the village. The author depicts them as slothful duo who always shirks work and labour. The upper caste people always exploited the poor low caste people by paying them cheap wages for their Ghisu and Madhav were labeled as useless crooked fellows as they defied the upper caste people's demand for their labour work.

Even if they had a handful of grain in the house, they swore off work. After spending two or three days without food, Ghisu would climb a tree and break some twigs for firewood. Madhav would go into the village and sell it to arrange for some food. Ghisu and Madhav never worried about future. Ghisu said that the peasants exploited them more if they surrendered to them in a servile manner therefore; they never allowed the peasants to take undue advantage of their simplicity and innocence. They suffered from poverty and deprivation but they were free from worries and wants. They had nothing except two pots of clay as worldly possessions in their house. They covered nakedness of their bodies with tattered rags. Madhav was married a year ago and his wife Budhia was pregnant. She suffered from labour pain thrashing and screaming in intense agony. Ghisu and Madhav sat outside the hut eating roasted potatoes without caring for Budhia who writhed in pain inside the hut. Even Madhav did not go inside the hut to see his wife thinking that his father would devour his share of roasted potatoes. Here we can see the de-humanizing effect of poverty.

While they were eating potatoes, Ghisu described his memorable experience of eating delicious dishes twenty years ago in a wedding party of a wealthy man's daughter. He had entered so much that he collapsed on the ground at the end. Food is a source of pleasure for everyone. Even the description of food by Ghisu made Madhav's mouth water giving him a vicarious pleasure. Food and drink, always made them forget all the miseries of their life. Poverty is directly connected with lack of food and starvation. Ghisu and Madhav had become negligent and insensitive because of starvation and hunger. Their attitude is inhuman and beastly but Munshi Premchand does not condemn their animalistic behavior as their vice. He treats it as the inscrutable outcome of poverty and starvation. Thus, food and hunger also constitute an important theme of the story.

Caste system is the greatest evil India has been facing for thousands of years. In India, caste system is not based on occupation or work but on birth. A son of a Brahmin is entitled to social prestige and reputation while the son of a shudra (low caste) has to suffer from social discrimination, public humiliation or even untouchability. As the low caste people were denied education and opportunities for growth, they remained poor and oppressed. They faced poverty, deprivation and starvation. They were ostracized from the main-

stream society. Munshi Premchand depicts the social evil of caste system in India quite vividly and dispassionately. He treats the theme of caste system without favoring or condemning it. The upper caste people were often cruel, exploitative and insensitive. They oppressed the low caste people treating them as subalterns. The low caste people could never rise above their dismal position and therefore they became lazy, dirty and depressive. They ate dirty food like flesh of dead animals or left-over given by the upper class people. The rich people were often hypocritical snobs with arrogant attitude, loose character and immoral practices. Indolence of the lower caste people kept them in poverty and servility. Munshi Premchand in many of his stories has successfully presented this evil of caste system very realistically.

Munshi Premchand was a progressive writer who was against imperialistic exploitation and colonialism. He also fought against poverty and caste system that plagued the oppressed people. Some of his later writings show the influences of Gandhian ideology and the Russian Revolution. He often dealt with the themes of corruption, caste system, problem of the landless labourers and social and economic inequalities in his stories and novels. Munshi Premchand was elected as the first president of all India writers' body of Progressive Writers. He believed that good literature should be the vehicle of truth, beauty, freedom and humanity. True literature should reflect present society and the age.

6.9 STYLE AND DICTION IN THE STORY

Premchand wrote in Hindi and Urdu. His language and diction are quite simple and lucid. He used slangs and colloquial diction in his dialogues. His power of description is quite vivid and realistic. In translation too, the language is quite simple and descriptive. Premchand's narration is quite engrossing. The readers are lost in rapt attention as the story moves on *The Shroud* is a story with a sarcastic and comic tone and therefore there is ironic stance in his diction. As he believed in realism, he avoided romantic, imaginative and poetic language and style of narration.

6.10 THE TITLE OF THE STORY

The title of the original story by Premchand is *Kafan* ('The Shroud'). It is an Urdu word derived from Persian and Arabian languages. It refers to a cloth wrapped round the dead body for burial or cremation. In English, it is called *Shroud*. Munshi Premchand's original story has the title *Kafan* and in English it is *The Shroud*. The title epitomizes the tragi-comic story that deals with a low caste woman who dies of labour pain. Her husband Madhav and his father Ghisu are negligent, insensitive idlers. They collect money for her shroud from the Zamindar and other people of the village and instead of buying the shroud, they buy food and a bottle of wine. They gorge food madly and get overdrunk. Finally, they collapse on the ground in drunken state. The story has a morbid and yet comical stance that depicts the tragic fact that for the poor people, life and death are synonymous. The entire story is wrapped in the shroud of poverty and starvation.

Check Your Progress: 1

6.11 ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS IN BRIEF.

1. Why was Budhia waiting with pain?
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2. Why did Madhav not go inside the hut to help his wife?
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3. Discuss the indolent nature of Ghisu and Madhav briefly.
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4. Describe the poverty of Ghisu and Madhav.
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5. How did Budhia help the family?
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6. What did Ghisu tell Madhav about food he had enjoyed twenty years ago at a wedding procession of landowner's daughter?

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7. What happened to Budhia next morning?

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8. Whom did Ghisu and Madhav approach for money to arrange the funeral rite for Budhia?

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9. Describe the landlord's attitude towards Ghisu and Madhav.

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10. What did Ghisu say about buying the shroud? Discuss his remark about the useless custom.

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11. What did Ghisu and Madhav buy instead of shroud?

12. Why did Madhav and Ghisu believe that Budhia would go to heaven?

13. Describe the end of the story *The Shroud*.

14. Discuss briefly Munshi Premchand's attitude towards the down trodden.

Check Your Progress: 2

6.12 CHOOSE THE CORRECT OPTION FROM GIVEN BELOW.

- (1) Munshi Premchand was a _____ writer.
 (a) Realistic (b) Romantic
 (c) Surrealist (d) Classical
- (2) *The Shroud* focuses on
 (a) the condition of women
 (b) the condition of old people
 (c) caste system and poverty (d) corrupt society

- (3) Ghisu and Madhav were
- (a) land lords (b) poor peasants
(c) corrupt people (d) low caste chamar
- (4) Budhia was writhing in the pain of
- (a) stomach (b) labour
(c) fever (d) pneumonia
- (5) Ghisu and Madhav were
- (a) hard working (b) honest
(c) lazy (d) skilled workers
- (6) Ghisu and Madhav sat outside the hut and ate.
- (a) Sweets (b) Sweet potatoes
(c) Puris (d) Roasted potatoes
- (7) Madhav did not go inside the hut because
- (a) he thought that his father would eat his share of potatoes.
(b) he thought that his father would hide potatoes.
(c) he thought that his wife would have died
(d) he thought that his father would leave him
- (8) Ghisu worked for a day and rested for
- (a) three days (b) one day
(c) a week (d) five days
- (9) Madhav and Ghisu went to _____ for money to buy shroud for Budhia.
- (a) Tehsildar (b) Money lender
(c) land lord (d) Goldsmith
- (10) Ghisu remembered a great feast at a landowner's daughter's wedding procession Ghisu
- (a) ten years ago (b) twenty years ago
(c) one year ago (d) five years ago
- (11) Ghisu said to Madhav that people did not spend money on feasts because of
- (a) poverty (b) miserliness
(c) lack of saving (d) economy
- (12) The Zamindar gave _____ rupees to Ghisu and Madhav for buying the shroud.
- (a) five (b) three
(c) two (d) ten
- (13) Ghisu remarked that it was no use to cover Budhia's dead body in the shroud as
- (a) they had enough wood to burn her dead body.
(b) they had no money
(c) they did not want to spend money on it.
(d) she did not get a rag to cover her body when she was alive

- (14) Ghisu and Madhav spent money for.
- (a) the shroud (b) the funeral rites
(c) feeding poor people (d) wine and food
- (15) At the end of the story Ghisu and Madhav
- (a) sing bhajans (b) lament loudly
(c) collapse in drunken state (d) fall and die

6.13 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have studied Munshi Premchand's famous story *Kafan* translated into English by Frances. W. Pritchett titled *The Shroud*. Premchand was a progressive writer profoundly influenced by socialist ideology and Gandhian values. He has presented a very realistic picture of Indian caste system poverty, social and economic condition of rural India.

Translation by Frances Pritchett is quite effective as it provides realistic picture of the poor and deprived Dalits who suffer from poverty and exploitation but they do not suffer mutely. They protest in their own way subverting the general expectation of the upper class people.

You are advised to see the film based on Premchand's famous story *Kafan*. You can also watch the videos on 'YouTube' related to the story.

6.15 BOOKS SUGGESTED

1. Plot & Structure: Techniques and Exercises for Crafting a Plot that Grips Readers from Start to Finish By James Scott Bell
2. On Writing Well: An Informal Guide to Writing Nonfiction By William Zinsser
3. <http://www.columbia.edu>

Answers

Check Your Progress: 2

1. (A), 2. (C), 3. (D), 4. (B), 5. (C), 6. (D), 7. (A), 8. (A), 9. (C),
10. (B), 11. (A), 12. (B), 13. (D), 14. (D), 15. (C)