
Body to Body : A Feminist analysis of Munshi Premchand's short story The Shroud or Kafan (1936)

Sanchari NiyogiUndergraduate Student, Department of English (Hooghly Mohsin College)
The University of Burdwan

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Abstract

Munshi Premchand (1880-1936) born as Dhanpat Rai Srivastava near Varanasi is widely regarded as the founding father of modern Hindi and Urdu prose. His literary career spanned over three decades during which he produced more than three hundred short stories and dozens of novels and extensive essays on politics and society writing in both Hindi and Urdu. Under the pen name of Premchand, he brought the lives of peasants, women, and lower caste community to the centre of Indian literary consciousness during a time when these subjects were considered beneath and not deserving of dignity of a place in literature. Premchand's association with the All India Progressive Writers Association in 1935 and the Lucknow Progressive Writers Conference in 1936, situated within a broader transactional context of the National Literary Movement, is significant. His presidential address at the first progressive writers conference in April 1936, delivered just months before his death in October, called upon Indian writers in the service of the people and was published in the same year and is considered his final master work.

Keywords: Kafan, Feminist, Premchand, Subaltern, Intersectionality, Dignity.**Introduction:**

Kafan (The Shroud) was first published in 1936 in the Hindi literary journal Chand and later in Urdu. It is a short story of a father-son duo belonging to a lower caste — Ghisu, an elderly father, and Madhav, his adult son, who are members of the chamar community, one of the historically marginalized and untouchable castes in the Hindu social hierarchy. The story opens with Madhav's young wife *Budhiya* lying in labour inside a dark hut while the two men sit outside warming themselves at a fire. It ends with them spending the charity

money that was originally meant for her burial shroud on food and alcohol at a roadside tavern.

The story's devastating irony is that the men eulogize Budhiya while drinking away the money that was to cloth her corpse with dignity. The men's actions have deprived Budhiya of it even during the time of death. It has generated a significant body of critical debate about whether Premchand's condemnation of these men and the caste system is the indirect result of the moral order of the feudal and colonial Indian society or is it a result of blatant misogyny ?

Historical Context:

Any feminist reading of *Kafan* must be grounded in the specific historical conditions of women in lower caste communities in colonial India of the 1930s. Maternal mortality rates among impoverished rural women were catastrophically high; the colonial powers limited investment in public health disproportionately and it affected mostly those outside of the upper caste and class society . Women from untouchable communities faced a lot more burden and pressure added to their already economic destitution and ritual pollution as defined by the caste system's patriarchal control within their own community and colonial administrative neglect. The nationalist movement of the period, though increasingly vocal about women's participation, largely framed female emancipation in the terms of educated middle and upper caste and class women. *Partha Chatterjee* argues in his essay *The Nation and Its Fragments (1993)*, the nationalist construction of Indian women being centred on the spiritual ,domestic ,higher caste women, leaves Dalit and lower caste women structurally invisible in both colonial and nationalist discourse. Thus , Budhiya, dying in agony and silence is perhaps the literary figure who starkly embodies this double burden of invisibility.

Narrative Presence and Strategic Absence:

Budhiya , Madhav's young wife, is the sole female character in *Kafan*. She is not given a name until a few paragraphs in; she is the first introduced simply as women or . This linguistic deferral of her name is in itself significant. She is first a category before she is a person her identity is it is even before she began her name does not appear it carries ironic weight – ‘ Budhiya ’ derives from female version of the word “buddha” meaning old or aged ,a name given to girl born to lower caste households with little ceremony or thought , highlighting the dominant misogyny in a patriarchal society like ours . She is young but her name already marks age and use ,spent without a thought about her future, Budhiya is described as having worked hard through the pregnancy ,she cultivated labour and maintained the household economy to the very end of the pregnancy until her eventual demise . This detail as it is critical establishes her as an economic agent , a worker before positioning her as an individual with identity. Her death during childbirth is not only a domestic tragedy but the eraser of her labour before the productive outcome , the child . In a

single night the household loses its only economically productive member, a fact that the story does not develop on but which feminist readers have recovered as central .

Budhiya speaks no words in the text , her cries of labour pain drift out from the dark hut and into the pilot scene where the father and son duo are seated outside in front of the fire eating stolen potatoes, but these are not language or communication on narrative basis , their sounds are, amplified unlike Budhiya’s cries which are dulled down to a background noise. The story’s character Madhav does not enter the hut with sympathy rather with impatience at his discomfort. The other male character, Ghisu, is patient outside . Madhu receives the body as suffering as Ghisu does too , but the impact of it remains indifferent to them. The model positioning by aligning the narrative lens with Ghisu and Madhav ,Premchand forces the reader into analysing complexity with the very indifference between two, sided by the fire . We do not enter the heart of the story's moral charge , it depends on the reader's eventual recognition of this complexity but it is a recognition that the text cannot guarantee some aspects without questioning it .

“The woman's screams from within the heart were becoming loud, Madhav got up and went inside. He came back immediately and said ‘ I don't know what happening. ’ ” – Premchand, Kafan (David Rubina , 1969)

This passage encapsulates the storage gender epistemology. Madhav's brief futile entry into the heart and his inability to comprehend what is happening to a woman in labour encapsulates the broader male in capacity or refusal to attend to female suffering. He returns to the fire and the narrative returns with him, Budhiya however remains textually and spectacularly in the dark, in agony.

In a deeply ironic formal move, but against narrative presence only after her death. It is a curse that generates blood, the collection of the shout money, the journey through the village interactions with neighbours and the landlord. In death she becomes instrumental and significant not as a subject pretext for social and economic transactions. This reverse cell of the living women who is absent from the narrative but the dead woman drives it is one of Kafan’s most devastating formal ironies.

Social context of the female body:

Feminist literary theory has long attended to the ways in which female bodies function as sides of cultural inscriptions on which social meaning hierarchy and anxieties are written. In Kafan, Budhiya’s body operates on several semiotic registers simultaneously.

Budhiya's body in labour is a body engaging in the labour of reproduction, the hardest and most dangerous labour available to women not only in rural colonial Indian

context but worldwide. The story refuses to romanticize or sentimentalize the syllabus there is no midwife no community of women attending to no rich was support they live happiness and isolation in darkness without care this is not naturalistic detail but a social indictment the conditions of dying at the condition produced structural and systematic lead due to ask poverty and patriarchal in difference. After budhiya's death her cause became the occasion for economic profit. Ghisu and Madhav solicit money from the village for a burial shroud (*kafan*). The Shroud is a material object with profound symbolic charge in Hindu funeral practice. It marks the dignity of the dead and enables the proper message from the world of the living to deny a shroud is not nearly a practical failure but a spiritual and social one, a refusal of a dead person's dignity and humanity. Ghisu and Madhav collect the shroud money and spend it on food and alcohol at a roadside tavern, their eventual drunken eulogy for Budhiya is not entirely cynical, although disrespectful, it is also a kind of brief, distorted by poverty and alcohol into something that mimics and mocks mourning simultaneously. The structural result is clear: her corpse has generated economic value for the men and the value has been extracted and consumed while her body is commodified, as her labour was during her very short life.

Perhaps most strikingly, Budhiya's body is never described. The narrator tells us she is young and that she suffered and that she died and the child also did not survive but there is no physical description of Budhiya— no face, no form, no presence in space. This is the ultimate eraser; she is not even granted the textual material of a body which is visible.

Labour, Reproduction and Invisibility :

Silvia Federici's work in *Caliban and the witch (2004)* noted that Reproductive labour – pregnancy, childbirth, childcare and domestic work is not outside of the economy but central to it. Though rendered systematically invisible by capitalist and patriarchal structures in the colonial Indian context, this invisibility was compounded by caste: dalit and lower caste women's reproductive and domestic labour was highly devalued, regarded as both naturally servile and naturally feminine.

Budhiya's death due to labour embodies this double devaluation. The story makes clear that she worked throughout her pregnancy. Her death is not only a natural event but a social one, a woman's body exhausted by labour without adequate nutrition, rest or medical care. The men's indifference historically read as laziness or moral failure can be read through a feminist lens as a learned structural indifference man who have been so third early dispossessed by the caste system that they are incapable of attending to the disposition of women around them. The juxtaposition of Budhiya's agony with the men's consumption of stolen potatoes is not only ironic but structurally diagnostic. It reveals a household economy

in which women's needs are always subordinated. This indifference of the father and son is not only individual failure but also a systemic one.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's landmark essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" (1988) provides one of the most powerful theoretical frameworks under which Budhiya's Character in *Kafan* can be analysed. Spivak argues that the Subaltern occupies a position of double engagement – she is erased both by colonial or dominant class space and by nationalist or progressive discourse that claims to speak on her behalf

Even sympathetic representation, Spivak suggests, may reproduce the Subaltern's silence by speaking for her rather than with her. Budhiya, here, is the Subaltern who cannot speak. She screams but her cries carry no propositional content, it makes no demands or raises a public discourse. The story's sympathetic narrator does not grant her speech, the progressive politics the story ostensibly embodies do not give her voice. She is the absent ground of text. The woman who suffers makes the story possible and who silence makes the story possible to tell in a way it is impactful. We cannot that Premchand narrative mode realist third person and male focalised in itself is a part of Western derived literary apparatus that he inherited and naturalised through this essay the very form of the modern Hindi short story with his individualised consciousness its ironic distance its secular rational narration maybe inadequate to the task of rendering budhiya's experience.

A feminist reading situates *Kafan* within the political economy of colonial India attending to the intersections of caste class and gender. Such a reading rejects the humanist tendency to read the story as primarily about individual moral failure, that is Ghisu and Madhav are responsible and indifferent. Instead it asks what structure conditions produce a situation in which a woman can die in labour without care and in which the man around her has been so dehumanised by caste and poverty that they cannot respond to her need? From this perspective *Kafan* is not primarily a story about the moral failure of two individuals but about the violent social system that has stripped these men of resources, dignity and the capacity of solidarity including solidarity with the women of their own household. Budhiya's death is the system's doing and not only the men of her family.

Gerard Genette's narratological framework, particularly his concept of focalisation, offers a precise formal vocabulary for analysing budhiya's position in the text. Focalisation refers to the perspective from which narrative events are perceived, who sees, whose consciousness filters the story's world. Budhiya is focalised externally throughout the text, we receive no access to her thoughts, her fears, her memories or desires. This showcases her social conditions.

Anupama Rao in *The Caste Questions: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (2009) argues about the experiences of Dalit women and how it cannot be adequately captured by either feminist works that center gender alone or caste alone. It requires multiple views and analysis that holds caste, gender and class simultaneously.

Budhiya's situation embodies this intersection precisely. Her death is over-determined, she passes away due to no medical care or support, because of her caste identity (*chamar*) and lack of social and economic resources and lastly her gender— as a woman whose husband is too indifferent to her sufferings. Thus, all views must be analysed simultaneously to understand this intersection.

Symbolic significance of the shroud

The shroud (*kafan*) that gives the story its title is one of the most densely layered symbols in Premchand's stories. According to Hindu Funeral rituals, the shroud is a marker of acknowledgement that the deceased was a person deserving of dignity and peace and mourning. To be buried without a shroud is not just denying the dead of dignity but also a symbolic erasure from the community's grief. Budhiya here is denied her shroud and this act carries gendered disrespect. Throughout her life she was given minimal recognition for her labour. The shroud money that is given because of her death is consumed by the father and son, while she never benefited from the men while she was alive. Her news of death generated social capital which she couldn't consume but is in fact used up by her male counterparts in leisure.

We might consider the title *Kafan* as ironic, as the story is named after an object that never appears. The shroud that should clothe Budhiya's body with dignity is absent from the story's ending, just as Budhiya herself has always been absent as a subject in her own story.

Critical Debate

If we were to compare and contrast Premchand's other female characters we can see the contrast between Budhiya and Dhania in *Godan* (1936) we find that both are published in the same year. Dhania is vocal, morally assertive, and actively resistant to the forces that press her family. She in contrast with the men challenges authority and functions as the text's moral conscience. Budhiya, her exact contemporary in Premchand's imagination, a photographic negative— voiceless, invisible and denied of dignity even in death. This contrast raises important questions about Premchand's representation. Critic *Alok Rai* has argued that *kafan* represents a 'crisis' in Premchand's usual reformist humanism, a moment in which his earlier faith in individual moral agency collapses before the weight of structural violence.

An unresolved critical debate around *Kafan* concerns the question of Premchand's intentions behind his female characters. The debate can be divided into 3 broad projections each with its own methodological assumptions and commitments

Position A: It can be assumed that Premchand uses Budhiya silence and suffering to indirect the men and the social system the stories growth desk irony of the drunk eulogy the devastating position of the potato eating of the man while budhiya's price of labour pain is died in the background is designed to generate outrage. The reader supplies the moral response the characters cannot, does one deserve care and understanding even though there were economic constants ? That is the question. She receives none of the proponents of this rating including David Ruben who in his *Introduction to the World of Premchand* gives that *Kafan* is “ *one of the most devastating indictments of social indifference in Indian literature* ” , a text that uses formal restraint to amplify moral outrage.

Position B: Another position can be considered in regard to Spivak's theories, we can see regardless of Premchand's initial intentions that a lot of the text reproduces the very eraser it claims to critic. By maintaining budhiya's voicelessness throughout the narrative and never granting her interior access but we are making her visible only through her function as a victim, an instrument and pretext to the men's economic availability, the story formally enacts the patriarchal logic . Vasudha Dalmia cautions against too easily assimilating Premchand into a feminist or progressive tradition. His representation of women is “ *deeply complex and often contradictory* ”, shaped by his own position as a male author writing within social conventions even as he sought to challenge them.

Position C: Lastly, Premchand's initial intentions do not matter more than what the text structure says about the possible conditions for female representation in the 1930s Indian literature. The silence on female suffering and subjugation in *Kafan* are not unique to Premchand, but are rather widespread.

This paper neither rehabilitates Premchand (position A) not condemns him (position B) but rather holds the text's formal conservatism and its sympathies through a feminist lens. It is a text that wants to critique a social order that destroys women but fails to do so considering its limits of its form , it analyses the constraints under which progressive representation operates in colonial era South Asian literature .

Conclusion

This paper aimed at arguing Budhiya's position in *Kafan* not as a peripheral or incidental feature of the text as a background to its larger critique of the caste system in colonial India but its constitutive problem and erasure of the sole female character based on

whose life events the story progresses. Budhiya's death makes the story possible, her passing generates the plot and whose absence organized Premchand's sequence of events to showcase his social critique . The comparative analysis with *Godan* establishes that this double labour is specific in stories like *Kafan* only , and not a common recurrent theme in Premchand's Writings . Dhania's vocal presence directly contrasts to that of Budhiya's.

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