



STEREOTYPING IN PREMCHAND'S *THE SHROUD*

DR. BALKRISHNA WAGHMARE

Krantiagrani G. D. Bapu Lad
Mahavidyalaya, Kundal
Tal-Plaus, Dist- Sangli
(MS) INDIA

ABSTRACT

In post-colonial theory, the term, 'stereotype' refers to the generalized views of the colonizers about the colonized. They are negative, debasing, humiliating, and mostly based on a racist or prejudiced view of the colonized people. This term can be applied to Premchand's short story, The Shroud. Premchand has associated Dalits with qualities like lazy, work shirkers, inhuman, thieves etc. Hence, this paper tries to explore the unintentional stereotyping of Dalits during colonial period.

Keywords: Stereotypes, Dalits.

INTRODUCTION

In post-colonial theory, 'stereotype' refers to the generalized views of the colonizers about the colonized. They are negative, debasing, humiliating, and mostly based on a racist or prejudiced view of the colonized people. Colonizers stereotypical views about the natives consider colonised as work shirkers, liars, corrupt, weak, inferior, uncivilized, impotent, cruel, lazy, irrational, violent and disorganized. Stereotyping can be defined as a negative image of a person in relation with a group or society. Edger and Sedgwick define the concept in these words:

"a stereotype is an oversimplified and usually value-laden view of the attitudes, behaviour and expectations of a group or individual. Such views, which may be deeply embedded in sexist, racist or otherwise prejudiced cultures, are typically highly resistant to change" (380-1).

In 1978, Edward Said, a noted post-colonial critic, published his most famous work *Orientalism*. He made a ground-breaking analysis of the stereotypes and colonial assumptions



that are abundant in Western representations of the 'Orient'. The 'Orient' for him stands for the North African Arab and Middle-Eastern peoples and cultures. He argues that the Orient is represented as the binary opposite of the West or occident. Here, the Orient is seen as the occident's other. In *Orientalism*, he describes "the Orient" as a semi-mythical construct which is an integral part of European material civilization and culture. Said calls "Orientalism", the Western dominative mode of discourse, as a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and "the Occident" in which the former is inferior and the latter superior.

John McLeod has discussed the negative representations or stereotypes outlined by Said in his introductory study, *Beginning Post-Colonialism*. The Middle-East is represented in 'orientalist' representations in the following negative ways. The 'Orient' is 'timeless', which means that it is without a concept of history until given one by the West. The 'Orient' is 'strange' that is odd, bizarre and weirdly irrational whereas the West has the 'rational normality'. The Orient is 'feminine'. It is possessive and submissive in opposition to the West's 'masculine' features of activity and domination. The Orient is degenerate or lazy, weak, lustful and peopled by criminals and shady immoral characters. In short, the East is everything morally negative in comparison to the West's moral superiority. Said also argues that orientalist forms of representation constructs racial and sexual stereotypes. For example, the Arab male is represented as lazy and murderously violent, while the Arab female is promiscuous, immodest and sexual licentious. The examples such stereotyping can be found in Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*. The native black people "move about like ants" (11), and pass Marlow "without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages" (11). They are not human beings; they are only "black shapes" (12) and nothing more than "black shadows of disease and starvation" (12). Their starved bodies look like "bundles of acute angles sat with their legs drawn up" (12). These stereotyped images of the natives horrify the reader. They raise a storm of pathos together with a hatred for the hegemonic imperial Othering of the natives which was carried out during the colonial era.

The post-colonial term "stereotyping" can be applied to Indian literature and that is too literature written during colonial period. But here instead of racial stereotyping, caste based stereotyping is at work. Munshi Premchand (1880-1936) was a prominent Hindi/Urdu writer of the 20th Century. He has exposed the socio-economic deprivation of the downtrodden class of Indian society. His social realistic mode has offended many upper castes during his time. The short story, *The Shroud* records the extreme poverty and pitiable condition of Dalits during 1930's. They were unable get enough food for living and enough cloths to cover their bodies. Against this backdrop, laboring Budhia, wife of Mahav is presented. Ghisu and his son Madhav belong to the Chamar community, the lowest among the untouchable castes. They sat at the door of their hut, beside a dead fire, roasting potatoes. It was their only food since two days. Inside Madhav's wife laboured in pain. They could hear Budhia screaming and thrashing, yet refused to go inside. They feared that other person

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would finish off the potatoes. Probably they were waiting for her to die, so that they could go to sleep in peace and quiet. As expected, Budhia was found dead in the next morning.

This story has more to convey that the poverty of Dalits. It portrays Dalits in negative colours. Negative images are associated with them. To begin with, Ghisu and Madhav are described from the upper caste point of view and branded as useless fellows. They are work-shirkers. Premchand describes them as,

And these two had earned a particularly bad name for themselves in the entire village. Ghisu was notorious for working for one day and taking off for three days. Madhav was such a shirker that if he worked for half an hour, he would stop and smoke his pipe for an hour. So the two of them seldom found work. If they had even a handful of grain in the house, they would swear off work. A couple of days' starvation would induce Ghisu to climb a tree and break some twigs for firewood, which Madhav would sell in the market. After this the two would loiter about for as long as the money would last (Premchand 45).

The story also records also the dehumanizing effect of poverty. Ghisu and Madhav are not able to get medicine for Budhia. Yet, they know, the double standards of the society which refuses them money now would help, if a child is born or Budhia is died. So they wait for either of the two to happen and as expected Budhia dies. Here Ghisu and Madhav are presented as inhumans. They are described as duo who enjoys their life on earnings of Budhia, even her death is a profit to them. After her death they rush to the Zamindar for help for Budhia's cremation. Ghisu and Madhav then extract money from other villagers for her funeral. At the market, they ditch the idea of buying a shroud and indulge themselves in a rare feast of food and drink and dance. Soon after, they break into a dancing. When Madhav questions Ghisu for failing to provide Budhia a shroud even, Ghisu assures him: "I tell you, she will get the shroud. Why don't you believe me?"(53). He gives the reason for their failure as, "Hell, we'll say the money slipped and fell from our waist-bands. We searched all over but couldn't find it. They might not believe us but the same people will again give us the money" (52). Here Premchand went far in portrayal and give extreme negatives regarding Dalits. This portrayal suggests that Dalits are inhuman. They don't have family bondage and love care for other family members. They are presenting as opportunists who won't let event go exploited, even the death of their relatives. Premchand, here fails to sympathise his readers. This portrayal creates a feeling of disgust towards Dalits. There isn't any heroic fight by Dalits against oddities and we can't blame poverty alone. It makes readers to blame Ghisu and Madhav and gives impression that Dalits are without human feelings.

To conclude, it can be said that Premchand has associated Dalits with negative qualities and images. It seems that he tried to get his readers sympathetic with Dalits. But here, he has failed to show the heroic fight of Dalits to get that sympathy. Instead he portrayed them in

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negative colours and tried to show poverty as an affecting factor for all this. But he went too far to reduce Dalits to inhuman qualities where they feel the burden of others and wait for their death.

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