

# Munshi Premchand's *Nirmala* as a Symbol of Female Predicament

Farooq Ahmed

English Research Scholar, Barkatullah University Bhopal (M.P), B.P.O. Kilhotran, Pin-182203

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## ABSTRACT

*Munshi Premchand was the first progressive and active writer in India who independently and boldly raised the women issues in highly orthodox society without caring for the consequences. He was of the firm view that woman is the central pillar of Indian society on which the whole structure of Indian society is standing. Premchand knew it very well that the difference between man and woman is more cultural than natural while the man enjoys both and the woman lives the life of a prisoner. The central focus of this paper is on an evaluation of Premchand's *Nirmala* vis-a-vis the female predicament reflected in it. *Nirmala* is one of the best revolutionary social novels which narrates a timeless story of the victimization of women in early twentieth-century colonial India. The protagonist of the novel, *Nirmala* has been a victim of social ills and patriarchal set up in India. In spite of all the scientific and technological development, we existed in such a society where the needle of the watch decides the character and morality of a female. The paper attempts to vouchsafe the phases as well as the faces of a wretched woman's entity through the novel *Nirmala* by Munshi Premchand. The novels can be looked at not as an individual story but a piece of story expounding the extreme sorry state of multitudes of women. The intended study affirms the fact that the heroine of the concerned novel is driven to her ordained plight due to the compulsions of the society and not out of individual choice.*

**Keywords:** Identity, realism, social norms, predicament, sexual morality, dowry, unmatched marriage, etc.

## Introduction:

Munshi Premchand's *Nirmala*, first published in 1928 is a touching tale of a sixteen-year-old girl whose life is bartered by the very hands of fate when she is made to marry an aged widower – a matchless match. Premchand presents a mockery of the institution of marriage and that of the patriarchal society with a high degree of reformist outline. The novel *Nirmala* revolves around the life and activities of the eponymous heroine. *Nirmala* as the protagonist as well as the victim leaves some sensitive issues with an undying echo in the psyche of readers. It documents a transition that was occurring in the earlier part of the nineties and is an introduction to the history of women rights and the status of women in Indian culture. In fact, this novel is a moving saga of a *Nirmala* who is married to an aged widower with many children. Suspected of infidelity by her husband, she has to undergo a lot of mental torture. The action of the novel centres around three families in which *Nirmala* is the common link. The central character named *Nirmala* is the common link between these families. The novelist has brought to limelight the social evils like dowry system and mismatched marriage in which the young *Nirmala* is consistently a victim.

## Analysis:

The status and betterment of women has been a long standing theme in Indian literature. The unhappy arranged marriages and the problem of dowry, gave rise to countless stories and novels. *Nirmala* was one such novel, a classic melodrama of the woman as victim. It was ostensibly in support of women's rights but as I will try to show in this chapter, it subtly re-entrenched the existing social norms that restricted a woman's life. *Nirmala* was first published in twelve episodes between November 1925 and November 1926 in the journal *Chand*. It was a great success and continues to be studied today as one of the canonical texts of Indian literature. It was published in the form of a novel in 1927 with a subtitle 'a revolutionary social novel.

*Nirmala* is the daughter of Babu Udayabhanulal, a successful and wealthy lawyer. Apart from *Nirmala*, he has three other children, a daughter Krishna, a son Chanderbhanu and the youngest son Suryabhanu. As was customary he is on the lookout for a suitable match for *Nirmala* and he eventually finds a suitable groom whose family does not want any dowry. This causes considerable relief to the father but the daughter, *Nirmala*, becomes quiet and withdrawn after the announcement of her marriage. Krishna and *Nirmala* have the following conversation:

Krishna- Will I too be turned out this way one day?

*Nirmala*- So you expect to stay here forever? We're girls, we don't really belong anywhere.

Krishna- Will Chander too be turned out?

Nirmala- Chander is a boy. Who'll turn him out?

Krishna- Are girls very bad then?

Nirmala- If they weren't bad, would they be thrown out like this? (Nirmala, p 3-4)

Due to unforeseen circumstances, Nirmala finally marries Munshi Totaram, a lawyer. The description that Premchand gives is as follows:

He was a dark, stout man. He wasn't much older than forty, but the hard grind of the legal profession had turned his hair grey. He never had the time to get much exercise, so much so that he scarcely ever went for a walk. As a consequence of all this he had developed a paunch. Though he was well built, he was constantly nagged by one complaint or the other. Dyspepsia and piles were of course his constant companions. (Nirmala, p 38)

Nirmala did not enjoy any kind of intimacy with her husband and found him physically repugnant. On the other hand, Totaram tried his best to win the favor of his new bride. To her (and his) dismay Nirmala found it impossible to respond favorably to his overtures. But Totaram was so fascinated with the beautiful Nirmala, that he made her the queen of his household.

From his first wife Totaram had three sons. The eldest son, Mansaram, was sixteen years old, Jiyaram was twelve years old and the youngest was seven year old Siyaram. Totaram's sister, Rukmini, a fifty year old widow too lived with them. Before Nirmala's arrival in the house, Rukmini looked after the entire household. Rukmini was jealous of Nirmala's ascendancy in the house and this was the cause of constant strife. Gradually nevertheless, Nirmala managed to make a place for herself in the household. She cultivated a bond with her stepsons and was full of maternal affection for them. Premchand writes:

Nirmala's thirsting heart, disappointed in the expectation of romantic love, turned to the children as a sort of solace. Spending time with them, taking care of them, laughing and playing with them provided some consolation to her denied maternal longings. Whenever she had to spend time with her husband Nirmala found that she was overcome with feelings of awkwardness, and shame and loss of desire, so much so that she found herself wishing to run away. But the honest simple devotion of the children gladdened her immensely. (Nirmala, p 46)

Totaram's eldest son Mansaram was sixteen years old, the same age as Nirmala. She began to take lessons in English from him and the two developed a keen fondness for each other, though there was no sexual attraction between the two. Mansaram addressed Nirmala as mother and she in turn looked after him as her own child. Totaram however began to feel jealous of their kinship and suspected otherwise. He saw the ruddy complexion of the handsome Mansaram and the beauty of Nirmala and was driven to an obsessive jealousy. He decided to send Mansaram to the hostel to separate the two. However, he was unable to do so because of some technical reasons at school. Totaram grew more and more morbid with each passing day.

Finally Mansaram does go to the hostel but falls very sick there. But the obstinate jealousy of his father would not allow him to bring his son back home. Totaram provides the best medical care in the hostel but cannot bring his son back to the house for he fears that they might revive their relationship. Nirmala, on the other hand, tries to cajole Totaram to bring him back home. She hides her concern by saying that at home Rukmini would be able to look after him better. The sick Mansaram by now sees through his father's strange behavior and Nirmala's apparently unaffectionate attitude. He is overcome with shame at being thought of as casting an evil eye on his stepmother. His father's unwarranted warped thinking makes him lose all interest in life and he begins to precipitate his own death. He eventually dies and Totaram is shattered.

Munshi Totaram, lost all interest in life, now assured of Nirmala's innocence. Shattered with the loss of his first born, he could not open his heart out to Nirmala for fear of exposing himself. So anxiety and sorrow consumed his body without any outlet. His legal practice takes a blow as he becomes disinterested in his work. His clients begin to look for younger and more efficient lawyers. His once flourishing practice begins to dwindle. Also by this time Nirmala is eight months pregnant.

Ultimately Nirmala gives birth to a daughter, Krishna is engaged to Dr. Sinha's brother and Munshi Totaram's house is sold. From this point onward the novel moves at a very fast pace. Munshi Totaram's financial woes increase with each passing day with moneylenders knocking at their door. "As for the birth of the daughter, that was the final catastrophe", the author comments. (Nirmala, p 117).

When Nirmala returns home she is blamed for the death of her stepson Mansaram. People also began to incite Jiyaram and Siyaram against Nirmala. Nirmala began to economize on the milk and fruit that was bought because of the strained circumstances but this was construed as depriving her stepsons of food. Eventually Jiyaram steals some of Nirmala's jewelry and Nirmala sees him stealthily leaving her room. The police is called and enquiries are made, but again Nirmala remains silent. This silence backfires as he instead upbraids her. He says "You were concerned about preserving your own image but gave no thought

to the consequences that would follow.” (Nirmala, p 161). Finally, afraid of getting caught Jiyaram commits suicide.

Totaram became old and raddled and also failed miserably at work. He loses all his three sons. Two to death and the third one becomes a sadhu and leaves home. When he returns after a futile search for Siyaram, Nirmala is waiting for him anxiously. When she asks him he is unable to control his fury:

Get out of my sight or I won't be answerable for what I do! All this is your doing. It's entirely because of you that I have been reduced to this condition. Was this the state of my home six years ago? You have destroyed my well-established home, uprooted my flourishing garden... I didn't bring you into this house to have my whole world destroyed. I wanted to make my happy existence even happier. And this is the price I am paying. (Nirmala, p 181)

Munshi Totaram leaves home to look for his son leaving Nirmala, her daughter and his sister Rukmini behind. Her soft speech was replaced by harsh words and vituperation. Under these circumstances her friend Sudha became her confidante. But even this friendship comes to a naught when Dr. Sinha (Sudha's husband) makes a pass at her on finding her alone in his house one day. This was the last blow to her miserable existence and Nirmala could not survive the loss of her friend. She contracts fever and dies. She lived a wretched life and died a wretched death. In the end Premchand touchingly writes: “On the fourth day, at sunset, her sad story came to an end... Nirmala's soul, having endured a lifetime of the darts and arrows of clever huntsmen and the claws of clever predators, and having been buffeted mercilessly by gusts of wind till it could endure no more, flew off to its eternal home”. (Nirmala, p 196)

Finally, there is a chilling moment towards the end of the novel: Totaram discovers that it was his second son Jiyaram who stole Nirmala's jewellery and that imminent apprehension by the police is perhaps the reason why he has run away from home, only to die by chapter-end. Nirmala's silence, her inability to speak, her stubborn refusal to speak up at critical moments, her overwhelming anxiety to appear good as distinct from being and doing good, her persistent failure to act as a morally responsible person—all this is of course a condemnation of the institutions which have made her what she is and compel her to continue to be like that. But Nirmala is actually complicit with the society that has wronged her, perhaps most crucially, by making it impossible for her to perceive the ways in which she has been 'wronged', except externally and superficially. In other words, she is so damaged that she cannot see that deep down at the level of her twisted and unacknowledged instincts she is a damaged person. But one can hardly condemn her society and its institutions without first recognizing the horror of what they have done: they have produced a moral cripple whose very passivity and timidity is pathological and immoral, but who retains through the whole grotesque sequence of events a faint halo of virtue.

Nirmala is demon of passiveness someone who demolishes through her inability to think and to act, to be a person. She destroys the same 'male' world which has made her what she is, by the simple and ruthless expedient of insisting on being that which she has been made into. The true measure of the social violence which Premchand sets out to critique in *Nirmala* is to be found not in the adolescent innocence of Nirmala prior to her traumatic marriage, nor even in the 'innocence' that survives in the form of Nirmala's quest for a condition of passive guiltlessness even as her refusal to act destroys everything around her.

## CONCLUSION:

Premchand wrote this novel at a time when role of woman was being refashioned according to new realities. Nirmala, the heroine of the eponymous novel is also entrenched in early twentieth century Hindu patriarchy and suffers thereby. Premchand's portrayal of the woman as victim is on expected lines in early twentieth century. In the novel he reveals himself to be a writer who sensitively portrays the travails of Nirmala, but is unable to question the powerful, patriarchal mindset that is the cause of her misery. In *Nirmala*, he predominantly focused women problems from socio-economic angle. Nirmala is a victim of such pathogenic misogyny. She has suffered the atrocities of men and her life is darkened by suspicions, neglect, and cruelty. Munshi Premchand had a strong antipathy to the social institution which causes cleavage between the different strata in the social structure. Premchand exhorts the need for a social revolution in order to get rid of the socio-political malaise of dowry system and mismatched marriage. Nirmala leave an inerascable impression of women bereft of a country in the mindsets of readers. She transcend all the manmade boundaries of geographical differences and distances as every woman yearns for a room of her own. Nirmala exemplify the tragic predicament of women (forceful/ feeble) in all its sense and essence.

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