

Challenging Tradition: Social Reforms and Widowhood in *Prema* by Munshi Premchand

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Widowhood in early 20th-century Indian society was marked by deeply ingrained sociocultural norms that dictated the lives of widows, leading to their marginalisation and stigmatisation. The period was characterised by a conservative and patriarchal social structure, heavily influenced by religious beliefs and traditional customs. In those days, the position of widows within this societal framework was particularly challenging, as they faced numerous restrictions and discriminatory practices that denied them agency, dignity, and social standing. Widows were often subjected to marginalisation and stigmatisation due to prevalent beliefs that considered them inauspicious. Widows were excluded from participating in various social and religious ceremonies. The death of a husband was seen as a result of past misdeeds or bad karma. In this context, a famous Indian social reformer, Pandita Ramabai, writes:

It is observed that throughout India, Hindu women regard widowhood as a punishment for some horrible crime or crimes committed by them in their previous birth...Widowhood, and its accompanying miserable existence, is considered an atonement for some sin committed in a previous birth (95).

A widow was viewed as an embodiment of evil due to sociocultural notions firmly ingrained in Indian women's minds regarding the association between widowhood and sin.

Widowhood as a Catastrophe in Indian Society

In traditional Indian culture, widows were often considered inauspicious and expected to lead a life of asceticism devoid of joy or personal fulfilment. A.R.Caton and E. Merielli, famous scholars, conceptualise

Hindu widowhood as a life of agony, pain, suffering and austerity. It is a life inflicted by social customs (1930,p.125). Widows were subjected to numerous social restrictions that governed their lives. They were often required to adhere to strict dress codes, which typically involved wearing plain white clothes to symbolise mourning. Widows were also expected to follow a restricted diet, abstain from certain foods, and sometimes even be limited to a single meal daily. While the practice of *sati* (self-immolation of widows on their husband's funeral pyre) had been officially abolished during British rule, child marriage remained prevalent in some parts of India. The early marriage of girls made them vulnerable to becoming child widows, trapped in widowhood from a very young age. Widows were denied access to education and intellectual growth. They were largely economically dependent and viewed as a burden on their families, particularly on their deceased husband's family. They were often denied inheritance rights, and their access to property and assets was severely limited. This economic vulnerability made widows susceptible to mistreatment and exploitation. Widows had limited legal rights and often had no say in matters concerning their own lives, property, or children. The legal system did not offer adequate protection or support to widows, leaving them at the mercy of their families and society.

Fostering Social Activism through *Prema*

In the context of the prevailing sociocultural norms and challenges, Munshi Premchand's Hindi novel *Prema* (1907) emerges as a significant literary work that sheds light on the struggles of widows and advocates for social reforms to empower them. *Prema* was initially written in Urdu under *Hum Khurma O Hum Sawab* (the best of two worlds). Its subtitle is *Do Sakhiyon ka Vivaah* (marriage of two friends). Prema and her friend Poorna's marriages are the novel's primary focus, which justifies its subtitle. Poorna, Prema's neighbour and friend, who is married to Pandit Basant Kumar, also plays a significant role in the story. The author describes Poorna, a twenty-year-old woman, as "very beautiful and intelligent." Poorna comforts Prema when her marriage is called off because they have a special bond. Basant Kumar drowns after two happy years of marriage on the day of the Holi festival. Poorna is forced

to fend for herself and endure a miserable existence as a widow. In the course of the narrative, Poorna marries Amritrai and is subject to social excommunication because social conventions forbid widow remarriage.

The English translation of *Prema* was also published in 2016; it is a classic work of Indian literature that delves into the complexities of widowhood and challenges prevalent suppressive sociocultural norms. *Prema*, set in early 20th-century India, provides a vivid portrayal of the lives of widows, shedding light on the injustices they faced within a traditional society. The early 20th century saw the beginning of social reform movements in India. Influential leaders and thinkers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Pandita Ramabai had already initiated discussions on the need to address the plight of widows and advocate for women's rights. These reform movements aimed to challenge oppressive customs and promote social changes that would empower and elevate the societal status of women, especially widows. Through the narrative of *Prema*, Premchand also challenges tradition and urges for a re-evaluation of societal attitudes towards widows. The novel ultimately contributes to the broader discourse on women's rights and empowerment in early 20th-century India.

Munshi Premchand, An Advocate of Social Reform

Premchand used his storytelling prowess to critique societal injustices and advocate for progressive social reforms. He is known as one of the most prolific and versatile spokespersons of the disadvantaged and marginalised through his novels, stories, plays, and countless essays. His writings always included a message for society, exposing the social ills, including dowry, corruption, poverty, the feudal system, *Zamindari*, *Dalits*, and women's exploitation. In her book, *Munshi Premchand (Biography of a Great Hindi Writer)*, Rekha Sigi opines that the writings of Munshi Premchand direct society on a new path, and his writings serve as a constant motivation and source of inspiration. Premchand has tried to reflect on the current societal conditions through his literary works while educating and inspiring readers. His novels and stories are still relevant today (2006,p.8). His stories and books paint a

realistic image of people's lives full of challenges and suffering. Premchand was also a social reformer, as his compositions exhibited the naturalness and idealism of the time. Premchand belongs to an age of reform movements, and his writings represent the utopian ideas that build the base for the India of tomorrow. Premchand created the character of Amritrai as an ideal character to change the perception of society towards widows. As a true believer in the liberation of widows, Amritrai is represented as a radical thinker who loses the love of his life, Prema, to marry a widow. He prioritised social services and sacrificed his fiancé to set up an example for the upliftment of the downtrodden. During his conversation with Daannath, he asserts, "I'm ready to face any difficulty for the fulfilment of my purpose; one who is ready to die for his country has no place for anything else in his heart" (57). Amritrai is presented as a social reformer who is ready to lose everything for the cause of the eradication of social evil. In Premchand's make-believe dish, social concern served as the salt; without it, the ingredients would have been lacking and bland. Prema is praised as a novel for advocating the widow's remarriage. It depicted the tragic real-life circumstances of Hindu widows crushed by social conventions.

Premchand earned accolades for writing about the emancipation of widows and practising what he preached. When his first wife deserted him, he married a widow, Shivarani Devi, to set up an example for society. Premchand faced much social criticism for this revolutionary step. Through the narrative of 'Prema,' Premchand humanises widows' experiences and advocates for their liberation from the chains of tradition. An in-depth analysis of the novel *Prema* is provided in this research paper, along with an examination of how it challenges convention, promotes widowhood-related social reforms, and advances the larger conversation in society about women's empowerment. *Prema* reflects the societal awakening during the early 20th century, which sought to challenge oppressive practices and promote progressive reforms for women's rights and social justice. *Prema* stands out for its unflinching portrayal of widowhood as an institution burdened with oppressive traditions. Premchand wrote and supported remarriage for Hindu

widows in his novels, and at that time, it was considered a progressive step for women's liberation.

The novel's setting within the context of the Indian freedom struggle adds another layer of significance. The nationalist sentiments of the time, advocating for independence from British colonial rule, also resonated with the call for social reforms and women's empowerment. Premchand incorporates nationalist elements, making *Prema* a part of the more significant movement for societal transformation. The novel invites readers to empathise with the struggles of widows, prompting a deeper understanding of their experiences and the need for social reforms. By humanising widows through the narrative, Premchand encourages readers to challenge stereotypes and work towards a more compassionate society. The novel's portrayal of widows and its advocacy for their liberation prompts readers to engage in conversations about gender equality, the role of women in society, and the necessity of breaking free from restrictive traditions. The literary analyses of *Prema* underscore its significance as a literary work that challenges tradition and advocates for social reforms. In this novel, Munshi Premchand presents widowhood as an oppressive institution. As a literary masterpiece, *Prema* inspires readers and remains relevant in advocating for positive changes in the context of social reforms.

Widowhood in Literary Discourse

Through the transformative journey of the protagonist, Poorna, and her defiance against societal constraints, the novel serves as a powerful catalyst for initiating discussions and calls for change, ultimately aiming to reshape attitudes towards widows and foster social reforms that elevate their status and rights within the broader societal landscape. Widowhood has been a recurring theme in Indian literature, and various scholars have explored its portrayal in literary works from different periods. These studies have shed light on the prevailing societal norms surrounding widowhood and the efforts made by writers to challenge oppressive customs and advocate for social reforms. The research on widowhood in Indian literature reveals the evolving representation of widows and their struggle for empowerment, reflecting the broader

societal shifts towards women's rights and dignity. Previous research has highlighted how Indian literature often portrayed widows as victims of oppressive customs and social stigmatisation. Widows were depicted as individuals burdened by their widowhood and confined to a life of seclusion and sorrow due to prevalent beliefs about their inauspiciousness. Works from earlier periods tended to reinforce these traditional societal norms, emphasising the widow's marginalised status. However, due to the impact of reformative movements, Literary works started reflecting the calls for widow remarriage, widow education, and improved rights for widows.

Recently, Indian literature has depicted widows as resilient individuals who resist societal norms and seek empowerment. Contemporary writers have presented widows as characters who challenge oppressive traditions and demand their rights to lead dignified lives. The research on widowhood in Indian literature demonstrates the dynamic portrayal of widows across different periods. Through its nuanced depiction of widowhood and advocacy for social reforms, *Prema* by Munshi Premchand adds to this rich literary discourse, advocating for the liberation and empowerment of widows in early 20th-century Indian society. The literary analyses of *Prema* highlight its significance in social reforms, particularly regarding widowhood and women's empowerment. This research paper explores *Prema's* transformative potential as a literary piece that encourages debate and demands social change in India.

Amritrai, as a Spokesperson of the Author

In the novel, the protagonist Amritrai, an idealistic character, longs to reform society and fight against the evils of widowhood through his progressive ideology. Amritrai, a professional lawyer, is inclined towards ameliorating his society. He takes a vow (Pratigya) to remarry a widow only and work to uplift widows. He breaks his engagement with Prema to fulfil his determination. He faces severe criticism from the father of Prema, Lala Badri Prasad, for his revolutionary decision to marry a widow. Lala Badri Prasad arranges Prema's marriage to Daan Naath

(a friend of Amritrai) after Amritrai refuses to marry her. Poorna, a widow, is the novel's female protagonist; she is a neighbour and a friend of Prema. Amritrai, defying all the orthodox social customs and ideology, marries Poorna with police protection as society is agitated with this marriage. Although Prema was married to Daannath, she was still fostering soft feelings for Amritrai, who had been married to Poorna. Dannath feelings of envy bring the novel's climax, where Daannath, in a fit of rage, conspires to shoot Amritrai, but in a twist, Daanaath and Poorna die in the scuffle. In the story's denouement, one more remarriage occurs in the novel between Amritrai and Prema.

The portrayal of widowhood in *Prema* by Munshi Premchand is a central theme offering a poignant critique of societal norms in early 20th-century India. Through the experiences of the protagonist, Poorna and other widow characters, the novel sheds light on the challenges, stigma, and oppression widows face while advocating for social reforms to empower them. *Prema* vividly portrays the oppressive societal norms that surround widowhood. Widows are depicted as social outcasts, burdened with the perception of being inauspicious and responsible for their husband's death. The novel underscores how these norms lead to the marginalisation and stigmatisation of widows, forcing them into a life of seclusion and sorrow. The dress codes, dietary restrictions, and limited social interactions imposed on widows serve to reinforce their subjugation. According to Gurmeet Singh *Widowhood*, "It is an event that constitutes the greatest and saddest change in the life of a woman. It also leads to the loss of status, resulting in a state of helplessness and hopelessness" (67. 20). The novel highlights the limited agency and rights granted to widows within the patriarchal society. Widows have little say in decisions concerning their lives, property, or children, and their economic dependence makes them vulnerable to mistreatment and exploitation by family members. *Prema* delves into widows' emotional struggles, showcasing their grief, loneliness, and emotional turmoil. As the protagonist, *Poorna* exemplifies resilience as she defies societal expectations and seeks to lead a life of her choosing, challenging the traditional role assigned to widows.

Religious beliefs and traditions play a significant role in shaping the portrayal of widowhood in *Prema*. *Prema* has the potential to impact readers by evoking empathy and compassion for the struggles of widows. The characters' resistance against traditional customs and their advocacy for social reforms in *Prema* will likely evoke empathy and introspection among readers. The novel's portrayal of strong, defiant characters challenges readers to reconsider their attitudes towards widowhood and societal norms. Through their acts of defiance, the characters challenge oppressive norms and call for reevaluating societal attitudes towards widows. The novel's impact on readers lies in its ability to foster empathy, promote social consciousness, and contribute to ongoing discussions on women's rights and societal transformation.

Poorna: From Widow to Wife

Through Poorna's character, the author presents the widows' emotional turmoil and struggles of widows, inviting readers to empathise with their plight. The protagonist, Poorna, emerges as a symbol of empowerment and resilience. She defies societal expectations and attempts to lead a life on her terms, challenging the oppressive customs that dictate her actions. Premchand portrays Poorna as a courageous individual who resists the limitations imposed upon her as a widow, inspiring readers to question the status quo and advocate for empowerment and dignity for widows. At the beginning of the novel, Poorna conforms to the societal expectations imposed on widows. She leads a life of seclusion, dressed in white, and follows restrictive customs. Even when Poorna visited her friend, Prema, her neighbours did not like her; even Prema's Bhabhi voiced their disapproval. Amritrai, who gave Poorna financial assistance after her husband's death when she could not make ends meet, was also disliked by her neighbours when he visited Poorna. Vighnesh N. Bhatt, in his article "Status of Widows in Karnataka: Historical Account and Analysis of Present Scenario", writes about the predicament of widows in Indian society, "In all cultures, widowhood is a crisis in a woman's life because of the economic misery it attributes and cultural seclusion it forces upon the individual"(100). The real-life depiction of

the widow's life in *Prema*, as shown by Poorn's character, supports the abovementioned statement.

However, as the story progresses, Poorna experiences a gradual awakening. She begins to question the unjust treatment of widows and her potential for a more fulfilling life beyond traditional roles. As Poorna's awareness grows, she starts to defy traditional customs and expectations. She questions the validity of practices that isolate and stigmatise widows. Poorna's defiance is evident in her refusal to accept her marginalised status and insistence on leading a life on her terms. Poorna's desire for love and companionship challenges the rigid customs surrounding widow remarriage. Her affection for Amritrai, a progressive and compassionate individual, leads her to contemplate remarrying despite societal opposition. Pursuing remarriage becomes a pivotal aspect of her journey to attain personal happiness and liberation. Poorna's journey is not without obstacles and adversity. She faces societal backlash, condemnation, and even rejection due to her defiance. However, Poorna's resilience and determination to stand up for her rights and desires drive her forward despite her hardships.

Poorna's transformation into an agent of change is evident in her willingness to challenge oppressive customs for herself and other widows. Her actions inspire fellow widows to question their circumstances and unite in pursuing dignity and liberation. By the novel's end, Poorna emerges as a symbol of empowerment and resistance. She embodies the courage to challenge tradition and advocate for social reforms concerning widowhood. Her transformative journey is a beacon of hope for widows seeking liberation from societal constraints. From conforming to societal norms, Poorna evolves into a courageous and defiant individual, challenging oppressive customs surrounding widowhood. *Prema* by Munshi Premchand resonates as a powerful call for social reforms and a celebration of the human spirit's capacity to resist oppression and pursue liberation. In *Prema*, the impact of challenging tradition and advocating for social reforms related to widowhood is both powerful and far-reaching. The novel is a significant voice in the broader movement for women's empowerment and societal transformation in

early 20th-century India. *Prema* boldly challenges the oppressive traditions and norms surrounding widowhood in Indian society. Through the character of Poorna, the novel highlights the struggles and stigmatisation faced by widows, inviting readers to empathise with their plight and question the fairness of societal expectations. The novel serves as a potent advocate for widow empowerment. *Prema* urges readers to recognise the agency and resilience of widows and their right to lead fulfilling lives beyond widowhood. The novel fosters empathy and understanding among readers, prompting them to reflect on the unjust treatment of widows and the need for social reforms to address their marginalisation. Poorna's courage and determination inspire resistance and defiance against unfair practices, encouraging readers to question and challenge established norms.

The novel highlights the importance of collective empowerment and solidarity among widows. By presenting widows as a supportive and united group, *Prema* emphasises the strength that can be gained through solidarity and challenges the notion of widows as isolated and helpless individuals. The implications of *Prema* in promoting gender equality and empowering widows are profound and multifaceted. By portraying Poorna as a strong and independent woman who defies traditional customs, the novel challenges the perception of women as passive victims. It asserts their agency in shaping their destinies. The novel serves as a powerful advocate for widow empowerment. Poorna's desire for remarriage and her rejection of societal expectations challenge the notion of widows as meek and dependent. *Prema* advocates for widows' right to make choices about their own lives and seek personal fulfilment beyond widowhood. 'Prema' humanises widows, presenting their struggles and emotions as relatable. The novel fosters empathy and understanding among readers, breaking down stereotypes and prejudices against widows. This increased empathy is crucial in promoting a more inclusive and compassionate society. *Prema* sparks conversations about the need for progressive reforms and societal change to promote the dignity and empowerment of women, especially widows. Through *Prema*'s defiance against the stigmatisation faced by widows, the novel

encourages widows to resist societal pressures and claim their rights to dignity and respect. It inspires them to challenge harmful customs and norms that perpetuate their marginalisation. The novel highlights the power of collective empowerment and solidarity among widows. By presenting widows as a united group supporting each other, *Prema* emphasises the strength of coming together and challenging oppressive norms. The novel inspires readers to question regressive customs, examine their attitudes towards women and widows, and actively advocate for gender equality and women's empowerment.

Prema by Munshi Premchand has significant implications in promoting gender equality and empowering widows. The novel challenges patriarchal norms, advocates for widow empowerment, fosters empathy and understanding and encourages resistance against oppressive customs. By advocating for women's education, inspiring collective empowerment, and sparking social discourse, *Prema* remains a powerful literary work that resonates with readers and contributes to the ongoing pursuit of gender equality and women's rights. The novel holds immense societal significance in reshaping attitudes towards widows and marginalised communities, particularly women, in early 20th-century India. Its impact extends beyond its literary merit, as it addresses pressing social issues, challenges deeply ingrained traditions, and advocates for transformative reforms. Poorna's decision not to tonsure her hair is a challenge to the patriarchy, which wanted to desexualise a woman after her spouse's death. Poorna becomes the mouthpiece of Munshi Premchand's reformative zeal and asserts:

A brahmini living in the neighbourhood, told me so many times to shave my head. A widow should not keep long hair, but still I haven't obeyed. I know, my neighbours are talking about me, everybody is saying bad things. Billo tells me everything that people say. I listen to it and cry. I know that my life is now full of grief. It is my destiny. But I will not shave my head. Let people say whatever they want. God has snatched away everything from me, now, I will not lose my hair (83).

Prema empowers widows by presenting them as strong, resilient individuals capable of making choices and asserting their rights. Poorna

strongly rejects tonsuring (shaving the head) due to societal pressure. At the beginning of the novel, Poorna even fears what her neighbour would say; she submits to social conventions and is afraid to break widows' specific social taboos. It is visible in the conversation between Poorna and Prema when Prema oils and combs Poorna's hair. Poorna says, "What are you doing, Prema. People pass comments if I comb my hair then who knows, what they will say when they see oil in it?" (Premchand, 2016, p.84). In traditional Indian society, widows were supposed to shave their heads so that they could not attract anyone because it is considered that if a widow had long, beautiful hair, she would attract men and indulge in sexual relationships. Her character would be questionable. In traditional Indian society, widows were expected to shave their heads so they could not attract anyone. It is believed that if a widow had long, beautiful hair, she would attract men and engage in sexual relationships. Due to combing and decorating her hair, even her morality would be questioned. Greg, in his article "The Elderly Widow and her Family, Neighbours and Friends", rightly said: widowhood is an event that brings about the greatest change in the status of a widow, for it is often accompanied by deleterious consequences. This is not only because of the loss of the husband but also because of the lack of clear-cut cultural expectations regarding the proper role of the widow (757).

Even Poorna's neighbour guided her conduct and asked her to follow the prescribed societal norms like shaving her head, not combing her hair, and not allowing any male to visit her as she is a young widow. Her neighbour tells her that she should tell Amritrai that he should stop visiting her. She thought, "how can I ask him not to come. He is an innocent man. If I don't feel uncomfortable when he comes here then what is their problem. No, I can't stop him. People are free to say whatever they want, I don't care" (99). Later on, she consented to marry Amritrai and faced repercussions of defying societal norms, such as marrying even after being widowed, in the form of threats and attacks at the time of her marriage. At the novel's end, she emerges so empowered that she saves her husband's life by shooting Dannath and dying herself.

Through Prema's transformative journey, the novel challenges the perception of widows as helpless victims and promotes a more empowering narrative for these marginalised women. The novel encourages readers to confront societal stigmatisation and biases against widows and marginalised communities. By portraying widows' emotional struggles and challenges, 'Prema' compels readers to reflect on their attitudes and prejudices, thus promoting a more compassionate and inclusive society. *Prema* advocates for gender equality by challenging patriarchal norms restricting women's agency and opportunities. The novel's emphasis on women's empowerment disrupts traditional gender roles and calls for equal rights and opportunities for women in society.

Prema: Catalyst of Change

The novel catalyses social reforms related to widowhood and women's rights. At its core, the novel emphasises widows' and marginalised individuals' inherent dignity and humanity. *Prema* fosters empathy and understanding of the struggles of widows and marginalised individuals. *Prema* encourages readers to come together to challenge oppressive customs, advocate for social reforms, and create a more equitable and just society. *Prema* challenges the status quo and reimagines societal norms regarding widowhood and women's roles. The novel prompts readers to question the validity of traditional customs and envision a more progressive and inclusive society that values the contributions and agency of all its members.

The widow remarriage motif that would later appear in the novelist's other works was first introduced in this book. Premchand was sure his works would raise awareness among the general public by depicting Amritrai as a responsible individual who tried to eliminate social evils. The rumour that Amritrai has converted to Christianity prevented him from getting married to Prema (the daughter of Lala Badri Prasad), and it has spread since Amritrai was linked with reformist society. Due to their strict religious beliefs, Prema's parents trivialised Amritrai's rehabilitation efforts and grew unsure of their decision to allow their daughter to marry. As they put it: "All the orthodox Hindu families of

the town were against this marriage. Amritrai has all the qualities, but he behaves like a Christian; he is not a suitable match for Prema” (60). In Hindu society, an individual is considered an outsider if they do not adhere to the socially mandated rules.

Poorna’s Defiance of Societal Norms

Premchand’s writings are praised for developing the relationship between couples, which is also reflected in the blossoming of relations between Amritrai and Poorna. As a keen observer of society, he focused on the everyday life of his characters. Meetings between Amritrai and Poorna are pretty significant. He aesthetically painted the passions of Poorna towards Amritrai and her dilemma for not being able to confess her emotions. Their feelings for each other are visible when Amritrai brings *gajra* (wreath of flowers as a hair accessory) for her hair. Tonsuring widows was common among Brahmin widows; *gajra* as a gift is a mark of condemning nefarious customs like tonsuring. After accepting this gift, Poorna has a sleepless night; she suffers from guilt and shame and thinks her liking towards Amritrai would be considered promiscuous. She is quite aware of the consequences of such relations. She knows that widows are not allowed to adorn themselves in a conventional society, and having a romantic relationship would be considered a sin. Poorna becomes the victim of harsh comments from society for retaining her long hair and even her visits to Prema’s house. The intermingling of widows with unmarried girls of her age is considered inauspicious. Prema’s mother and Bhabhi became annoyed over her intermingling with Prema, murmuring, “Prema is already in a difficult situation, and now this widow is her friend” (Premchand, 2016, p.90). In Indian society, a widow is considered inauspicious, and even her company with an unmarried and married woman is considered equally ominous. A widow is supposed to live an ascetic life without friends and visitors. If she tries to mingle in society, she is criticised for defying societal norms and questioned by society. Even Poorna’s neighbour said, “People will question your character, shave your head, don’t go to other people’s home, don’t dress up, you must obey all the rules for widows and tell Amritrai not to come and visit you” (91). A widow’s character is

susceptible to society, especially if a male person visits her alone. Widows were often secluded from society and confined to their households' margins. They were discouraged from participating in social gatherings or public events. The isolation of widows prevented them from forming connections outside their families, leading to a life of loneliness and sorrow.

Ramkali as a Social Rebel

In the same novel, Premchand depicted the hypocrisy and insensitiveness of society towards widows through the character of Ramkali, who is also a young widow of seventeen years old. She is a minor character in the novel but plays an essential role. Through the portrayal of her character, Premchand presented a rebellious widow character. She is depicted as assertive, outspoken and enthusiastic; Premchand has created her as a rhetorical device to compare and contrast the character of the chief protagonist, Poorna. Ramkali's resentment is visible in the lines:

“how can I express my distress? Sometimes I feel like consuming poison. If this continues I will definitely do it someday, I don't know why God is punishing me?... They treat me like a maidservant, they don't allow me comb my hair or wear colourful saris... I'm also young I want to laugh and talk. If you are hungry and don't get food, you have to steal food” (99- 100).

A widow has to face many restrictions, and they have to suppress their desires even if they are sixteen or seventeen years old. Continuous suppression and exploitation result in the revolt of the oppressed. The prolonged anguish transformed Ramkali into an agitator; She became used to these harsh comments and criticism. She discovered her moments of merriment by visiting temples and eating betel leaves. She finds happiness in stealing pleasurable moments, which she defends as: “I don't come here to worship. I just come here to enjoy looking at these good-looking men and talking to them makes me happy” (Premchand, 2016, p.105). As a widow, Ramkali was not allowed to visit anywhere or interact with male persons, but being only sixteen or

seventeen years old, she wanted to enjoy her life, and she fulfilled her desire when she visited the temple. The Author has described her as a beautiful young woman, and unlike Poorna, she is not shy; rather, her behaviour is somewhat coquettish; she walks provocatively to attract men while going to the temple. She even persuades Poorna to lead an insouciant life. Ramkali represents the neglected section of young widows who have never experienced the bliss of married life as she is a victim of child marriage. However, the ridiculous fact is that she has never seen her husband. Premchand raised the issue of forced asceticism upon young and teenage widows, and in the absence of remarriage, they usually get involved in an occasional dalliance with the priests. Prema sets a milestone for the theme of remarriage for widows in Indian literature. The novel sets the example for the remarriage of widows, namely the remarriage of Poorna, Ramkali, and Prema. The narrative ends on an optimistic note, indicating that the ardent efforts of the social reformers are not always doomed to failure.

Conclusion

Prema by Munshi Premchand has a profound and transformative impact on reshaping attitudes towards widows and marginalised communities. The novel's portrayal of empowerment, resistance against stigmatisation, and advocacy for social reforms contribute to the broader societal movement for gender equality and dignity for all individuals. By challenging oppressive customs and fostering empathy, *Prema* becomes a catalyst for positive societal change and is an enduring literary work that continues to inspire and enlighten readers. By analysing the novel's portrayal of widowhood and the characters' defiance against societal constraints, This research paper aims to unravel how *Prema* becomes a catalyst for reshaping attitudes towards widows and advocating for social reforms to empower widows. Through examining the transformative journey of the protagonist, Prema, and her pursuit of liberation, this research sheds light on the significance of literature as a medium to promote social reforms and empower marginalised communities. Munshi Premchand's *Prema* is a powerful literary work that advocates for change by challenging oppressive traditions

surrounding widowhood. The novel's portrayal of the protagonist, Poorna's transformative journey and critique of oppressive customs surrounding widowhood have far-reaching implications for promoting gender equality and empowering widows in early 20th-century Indian society and beyond. *Prema* challenges patriarchal norms that perpetuate gender inequality and the subjugation of women. The novel's portrayal of the characters' advocacy for social reforms emphasises the potential of literature to initiate discussions and advocate for positive societal changes. It also highlights the significance of promoting inclusivity and understanding within the larger social fabric to ensure that widows receive the support and empowerment they need to lead dignified lives beyond the constraints of tradition and belief.

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