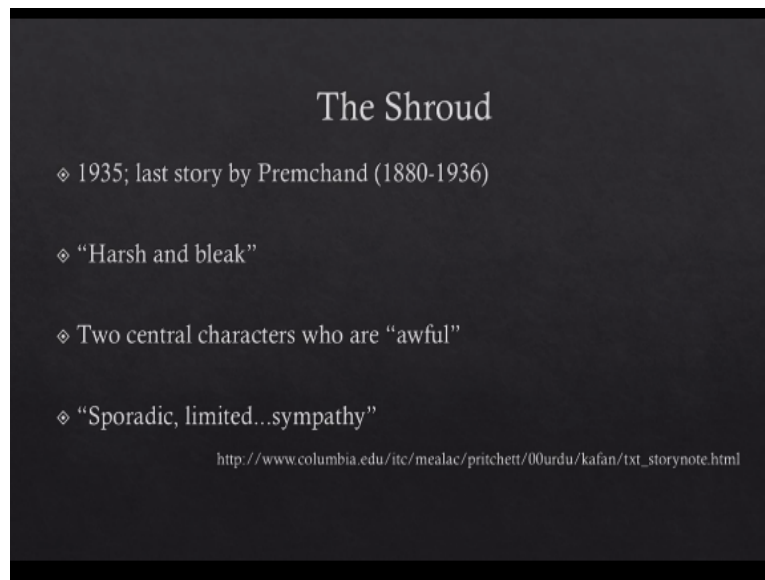


Short Fiction in Indian Literature
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Lecture – 07
Psychological Climax in Premchand's The Shroud

Hello and welcome to this lecture on Premchand's The Shroud. The point of entry for this story of Premchand is once again about plot structure and especially about the psychological climax that Premchand arrives at in this particular story just as he did with the previous story that we looked at The Chess Players.

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Now this story was published in 1935 and it was the last story by Premchand who lived between 1880 and 1936 and most critics argue that it is a very, very harsh and bleak story and the readers would agree with these critics. There are 2 central characters who are extremely awful in the attitude towards not only their family members, but also towards the rest of the society.

And whatever sympathy that we manage to kind of form for these 2 characters can only be sporadic every now and then and our sympathy is limited, but we do get moments of sympathy for these 2 characters who occupy the narrative world of The Shroud. So it is an extremely pessimistic story, cynical story and it is difficult to enjoy this particular episode that Premchand has imaginatively created from the landscape of the Indian subcontinent.

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Final Scene

- ◇ “Extraordinary final scene
- ◇ “Whole human condition”
- ◇ “Longings, cynicism, compassion”
- ◇ “Absurdity, wild mood swings of intoxication”

http://www.columbia.edu/ite/mealac/pritchett/00urdu/kafan/txt_storynote.html

So this story is especially powerful for its final scene and many critics call the scene as extraordinary and some of them call it as notorious because the depiction of the human condition, the whole human condition in this particular narrative landscape is extremely pessimistic and bleak and harsh as I mentioned a short while ago and there are longings in the story, but those longings are mixed with a big dose of cynicism.

Therefore, the compassion that we can feel for these 2 male characters is kind of surprised in this particular story and some critics also look at the story as absurd and almost bizarre and there are wild mood swings of intoxication on the part of the central characters and they behave in a very, very erratic manner but despite all these erratic attitudes and absurd viewpoints there is a kind of a coherent philosophy of life that these 2 characters have in their minds.

And that becomes evident through their behaviour towards the only female character in the story and the rest of the society of that particular village. Now this story begins in medias res.

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The Beginning in The Shroud

◆ Medias res

◆ **In medias res**, (Latin: "in the midst of things") the practice of beginning an epic or other narrative by plunging into a crucial situation that is part of a related chain of events; the situation is an extension of previous events and will be developed in later action. The narrative then goes directly forward, and exposition of earlier events is supplied by flashbacks.

It begins in the middle. So let us have a quick look at what exactly is medias res and in Latin it means in the midst of things something that begins in the middle not at the beginning and the practice of beginning an epic or other narrative by plunging into a crucial situation that is part of a related chain of events, the situation is an extension of previous events and will be developed in later action.

The narrative then goes directly forward and exposition of earlier events is supplied by flashbacks and this particular idea of medias res is very suitable to look at the beginning of this particular story because when The Shroud begins we have a woman dying in childbirth. So it begins at a very critical point in the narrative of these 2 central characters Ghisu and Madhav and it is Madhav's wife who is thrashing about in the throes of labour and there is no help to be given to her.

So this is a vital, critical, crucial point in the life story of these 2 characters and the story begins there and as the story gradually moves we get a sense of the nature, the attitude, the social and cultural context of these 2 central characters and their relationships with those around them. So we do get a sort of flashbacks offered by the narrator about these 2 characters after the story begins in medias res.

(Refer Slide Time: 05:52)

The Shroud

◇ Outside the hut, father and son sat before the dying embers in silence.

Inside, the son's young wife, Budhiya, was thrashing about in labour.

Every now and then, a blood-curdling shriek emerged from her mouth

and they felt their hearts stop. It was a winter night, the earth was

sunk in silence and the whole village had dissolved into the darkness.

So this is the beginning of this particular story, The Shroud. Outside the hut, father and son sat before the dying embers in silence. Inside, the son's young wife, Budhiya, was thrashing about in labour. Every now and then a blood-curdling shriek emerged from her mouth and they felt their hearts stop. It was a winter night, the earth was sunk in silence and the whole village had dissolved into the darkness.

It is a very, very atmospheric opening for this particular story. We have a young woman who is shrieking and the shriek is called blood-curdling shriek and the setting is a village at night. So we have an almost gothic atmosphere that has been created by this opening image in this story by The Shroud and this comment that they felt the heart stop is very interesting as well because there are layers to how we need to understand this emotion and I will come to that in a minute.

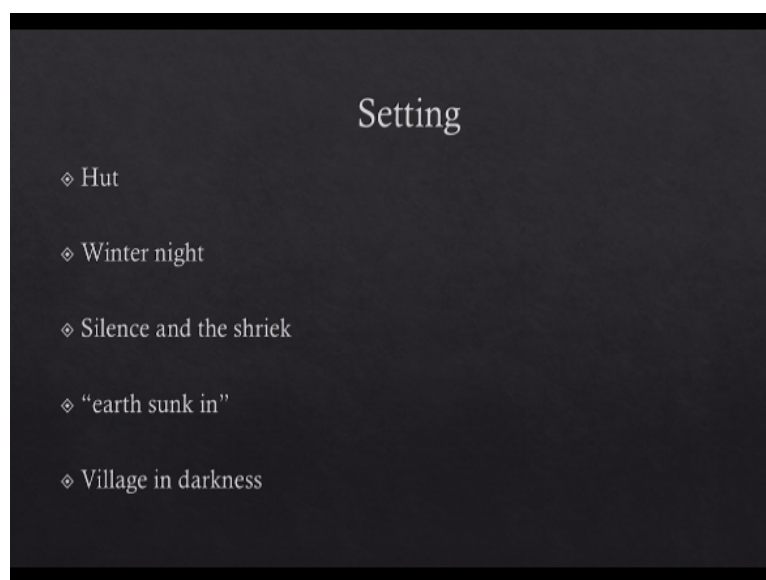
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So the 2 men, who kind of occupy or dominate the landscape of the village in this story are Ghisu, the old father who is about 60 years old and his son Madhav and Budhiya is the wife, the young wife of Madhav who is dying and as I just mentioned before when they hear the cry, the blood-curdling shriek of Budhiya, they felt their heart stop. So immediately our impression or our sense is to understand that they are feeling extremely sorry for her.

Therefore, they felt their heart stop, but that does not seem to be the case as we read the story further. So let us go back to the setting that this opening sentence is creating in our minds.

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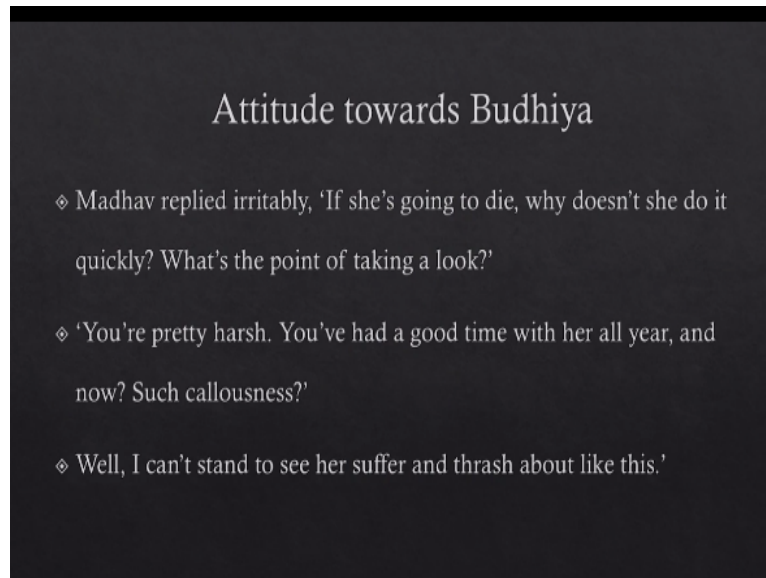


So the setting is in front of a hut and it is winter night. So the idea of cold and the idea of people shivering in this particular weather is indicated there and as I said it is very, very silent. The village is silent at night and the shriek is the only sound that breaks the quite of the

village scene and it is very interesting to see that the narrator uses the words sunk in, the earth seems to be submerged in a particular state and that state is the state of darkness.

And darkness itself can be very, very symbolic about the attitude of these 2 central characters and society in general as well so there is a kind of a symbolic atmospheric character to this particular setting of The Shroud.

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So let us explore the attitudes that these men have towards the woman who is inside the hut and who is dying of because she has had no help to relieve her problem. Madhav replied irritably, so this is the response to her condition. Madhav replied irritably, if she is going to die why does not she do it quickly? What is the point of taking a look? So the father Ghisu says why do not you go inside and take a look at your wife and he says what is the point of taking a look because if she is going to die why does not she hurry up and do it promptly.

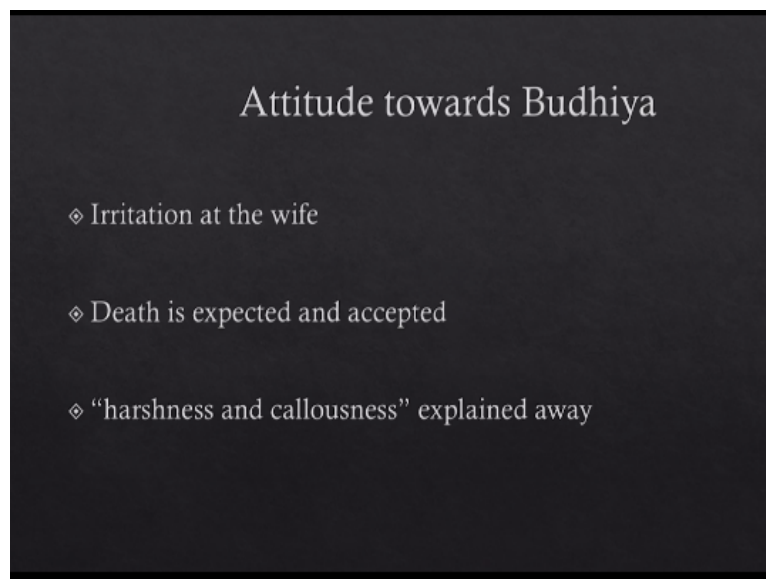
And the father response you are pretty harsh. You have had a good time with her all year and now such callousness and he replies well, I cannot stand to see her suffer and thrash about like this. So there are several ideas that can be elicited from this conversation. We can see that the father Ghisu is taking the moral high ground here and that is something that is ironical as we can find out as we read the story.

So he says you are very, very harsh you had a good time and there is a slight suggestion of the sexual relationship that Madhav and Budhiya had. So he says you had a good time with her and now you are being very, very ungrateful and extremely harsh and look at the response

of Madhav. He is very, very shrewd and his answer which gets him out of that accusation of harshness is that I cannot stand to see her suffer and trash about like this.

So I just want her to end her suffering and which is why I want her to die quickly. There are other reasons as well as to why these 2 men do not want to go and sit beside Budhiya and be at least comforting to her by their physical presence. So as I said that there is irritation at the wife who seems to be intervening in their life at this moment and she seems to kind of bother them and not let them you know go to bed at peace.

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And these 2 men expect death and that death is expected and accepted. They have made up their minds almost that she is going to die and they are okay with that and as I said the harshness and the callousness are explained away by pointing a finger at this notion of being helpless. So the implication or the subtext is that we are helpless therefore what can we do so it is better that she puts an end to her suffering herself pretty quickly.

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Background

- ◊ Clan of cobblers
- ◊ “shirker”
- ◊ “never hired”
- ◊ ‘If Ghisu worked a day, he would rest for three. Madhav was such a shirker that if he worked for half an hour, he’d smoke dope for one.

“notorious”

Now let us look at the background, the social background of these 2 male characters, they belong to this clan of cobblers and they are occupying a position in society which is among the lowest of the low and obviously they are not wealthy and the other important characteristic is that they are shirkers, that is what the narrative says about them. They do not accept or commit to any kind of responsibility.

They shirk their jobs, they do not undergo any kind of hard work to make ends meet and therefore because they are never responsible they never get hired by the people who can employ them. So they are very, very notorious in this particular village that is the label that they have that they are notorious for shirking responsibilities for not doing any work and this is the comment that the narrator has about the son and the father.

If Ghisu worked a day, he would rest for 3. Madhav was such a shirker that if he worked for half an hour, he would smoke dope for one. So they rest quite a bit to put it modestly, they even if they work for a little bit they take more than they need to rest and enjoy their free time. So they are very, very notorious and nobody hires them if they can help it.

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Background

- ◊ Subsisted on the bare minimum
- ◊ When they starved they sold tree branches in the market
- ◊ “There was no shortage of work in the village, it was a village of farmers and there were at least fifty jobs for a hard-working man .”

So they also subsist on the bare minimum, their subsistence is very, very meagre stuff. So when they starved what they did was they broke off the branches of the trees and sold them in the market and with that money they subsisted for a good number of days and when they starved again they did the same thing, but it is very interesting that they go for this kind of labour where they do not interact much with the rest of the society.

So breaking branches and selling them in the market is a very independent sort of labour. It is a very interesting labour that we need to make note of and the narrator says that there was no shortage of work in the village. Work was to be had in the village for the asking. It was a village of farmers and there were at least 50 jobs for a hardworking man. So there were plenty of jobs, but then those jobs were for hardworking men and obviously since these 2 are shirkers and since these two would prefer to rest for a longer period and smoke dope.

And these jobs are not for them. So what did they do it is also very significant that they do not make any elaborate meals, we do not have any references in the story which point to the idea of cooking being done in their household.

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Meagre Subsistence

- ◇ Peas; Potatoes; Suck on sugarcane
- ◇ Few mud pots; no material possessions
- ◇ Rags; no cares; “burdened with debt”

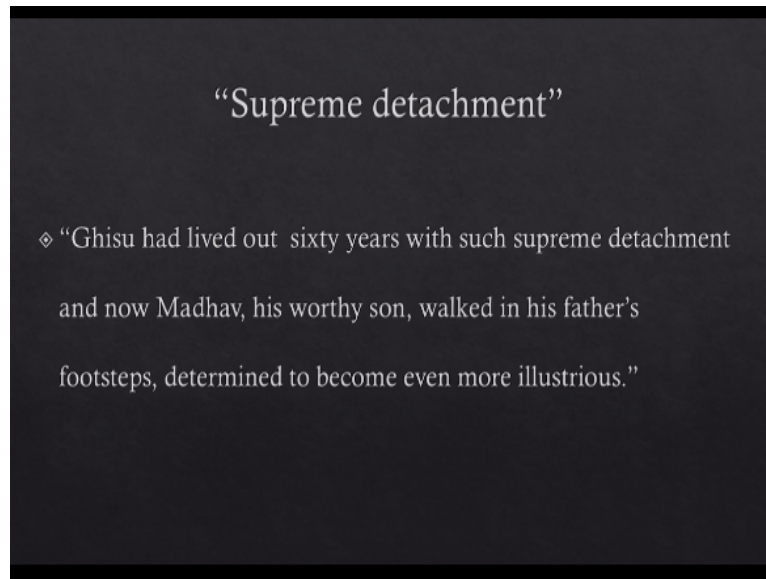
So they use to kind of eat some peas and potatoes which are rudimentary which they cook in a very rudimentary fashion and sometimes they also suck on sugarcane and get by. So as I said they it is a very, very meagre subsistence they subsets or exist on the bare minimum and no elaborate cooking happens in their homes and the narrator also suggest that they had only a few mud pots and there were hardly any material possessions in their home.

They clothed in rags and they had no cares and they were hugely in (()) (16:37) to the rest of the village and most probably to the land owners. So we get a picture of a home which is very sparse, we get a picture of these 2 characters who almost like nomads in the manner in which they get by in their lives. So as I said even this you know plucking out potatoes from the fields of someone and taking out piece from somebody else fields.

And then again eating these sugarcanes from someone else land, this has a very, very nomadic setting in our mind. So they are not part of this kind of agricultural economy where they till the soil and do some hard work and get the production out of it so they are literally on the margins of civilized society. So that is the picture that we get, that they are in the margins of society. The way they make money as well as the way they eat their food give us these 2 indications.

So the source of food and then the labour that they are engaged in when it becomes absolutely necessary for them to make money and as I said again there are no proper clothing and they have no cares and they do not care about even repaying the debts. So they are very, very marginalised.

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So this idea of supreme detachment comes into minds when we look at these 2 characters who have as part an existence not out of some kind of philosophy of life, but based on their need and the narrator says that Ghisu had lived out 60 years with such supreme detachment and now Madhav, his worthy son walked in his father's footsteps determined to become even more illustrious.

There is a lot of irony in this comment made by the narrator and we will see what they are. So the phrase worthy son is mentioned there very ironically. He is not a worthy son.

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The father himself is not a worthy person. He is not noble. He does not do any hard work. He does not look after his family and there is no discipline, there is no order in the household.

There is no responsibility to anyone and everyone in the society that he is in. So the word illustrious in this particular context is again very, very ironical. He is not a shining example a good or a disciplined human being.

Anyway so Madhav has only his father to look up to. So he follows in the footsteps of his father and he is becoming even more supremely detached as his father is from the rest of the society and the cares of life. So the father and the son are a kind of very, very a complements of each other in some sense they think alike, they act alike, they do things together as a unit. So there is a share understanding about life and how they should live out their lives on a daily basis.

So the logic or the philosophy behind the lifestyle will become clear as we read the story. So the third person narrator is very, very critical about the attitude of these 2 central characters and so we can see a biased narrative in some sense that comes out from the viewpoints of this third person narrator and there is again no positive progression on the character trajectory of either Madhav or Ghisu.

There is no change whatsoever in the attitudes. So it is a very, very linear and expected trajectory of characterization and at one point in the narrator the third person narrator says that they have shameless stomachs, you know, that is a very strong condemnation that is given to the 2 men in the story and will come to the context of the shameless stomach in a minute.

So we get a picture of these 2 men who are loath not only by the rest of the society but also by the narrator himself, who is telling the story. So this is another comment made by the narrator about the relationship between Madhav and Ghisu and the other people in the village.

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Important gesture

◇ “They were so wretched that even though there was no hope of being repaid, people always loaned them something.”

Humanitarian gesture?

Village as a security blanket?

The narrator says they were so wretched that even though there was no hope of being repaid people always loaned them something. It is a very significant attitude something that we need to think about a little bit deeply. So even though the people knew that these 2 men would never repay the money that they give them on loan they still you know they still continue to give them something or the other.

So should we see this just as a humanitarian one in which the village has a kind of a security blanket, a safety blanket for these 2 marginalized characters. The village does not simply let them die. They do, the people in the village do take care of these 2 figures despite the fact that there is no productive relationship or no bond between the 2 men and the rest of the village society. Now we should look at the trajectory of the narrator in terms of plot structure.

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Plot Structure

- ◇ Setting
- ◇ Characterisation
- ◇ Complication

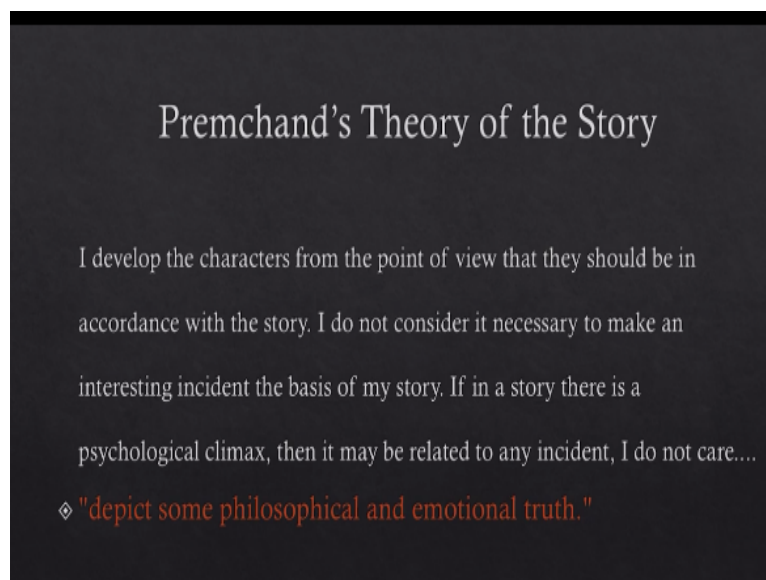
Incident

So we have a setting of the village and we have the hut as the setting at the beginning of the story, the hut of Ghisu and Madhav and these 2 men are sitting outside. We should also remember that they are not within the confines of their hut, they are on the outside again even in relationship to that particular speciality these 2 figures are outsiders. So there is a sort of symbolic suggestion that Madhav and Ghisu are outside of the confines of domesticity itself.

And that setting is very interesting because of this thematic connection something that we need to keep in mind the characterization that is done through the narrative. It is a very, very strong characterization that has been orchestrated by Premchand here and there is a complication that arises out of the nature of these 2 central characters. So it is the idea or the nature of these 2 men that brings about the particular crisis in the story.

So it is the theme or the major philosophical point the profound idea that kind of exhibits itself through a particular incident and Premchand weaves that incident in the story to elicit or bring out the essential characteristics of these 2 men who are driven by a particular notion about life. So we can see how the story has been woven by Premchand and this relates to Premchand's theory of the story.

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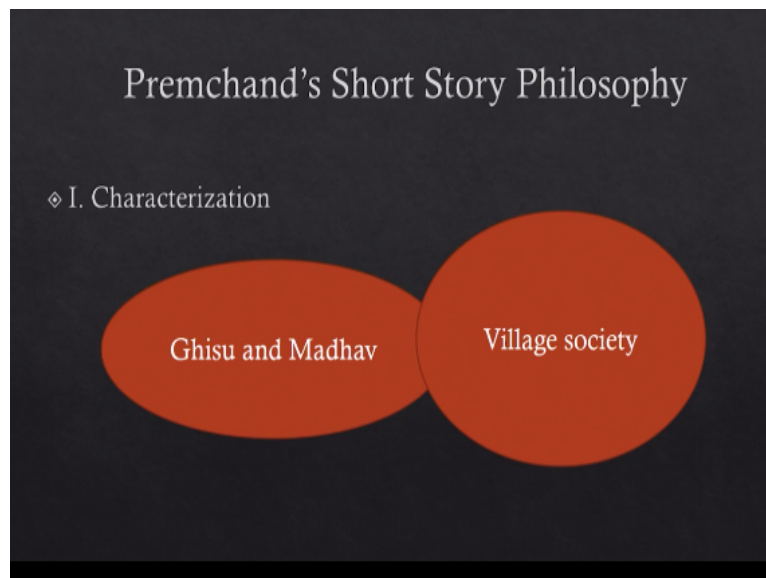
This is a theory which I did mention in the context of the previous story that we looked at the chess players and how you know the psychological climaxes arrived at in that particular story and the same philosophy is applied in terms of the plot structure of the story in this particular story to The Shroud. So this is the comment of Premchand I am bringing this to your attention again so that we can understand his philosophy of short story.

So he says I developed the characters from the point of view that they should be in accordance with the story. I do not consider it necessary to make an interesting incident the basis of my story if in a story there is a psychological climax then it may be related to any incident I do not care. So the point that he is making here is as I said before that the theme or the profound idea or the philosophical perspective is more important and that is the story.

And that particular idea will be brought to the reader's attention through the activities of the characters or through some kind of interesting incident. So the incident in itself is not important, it is the idea that motivates the characters to create interesting incidents for the benefit of the readers. So his story should depict some kind of philosophical and emotional truth for the benefit of the readers.

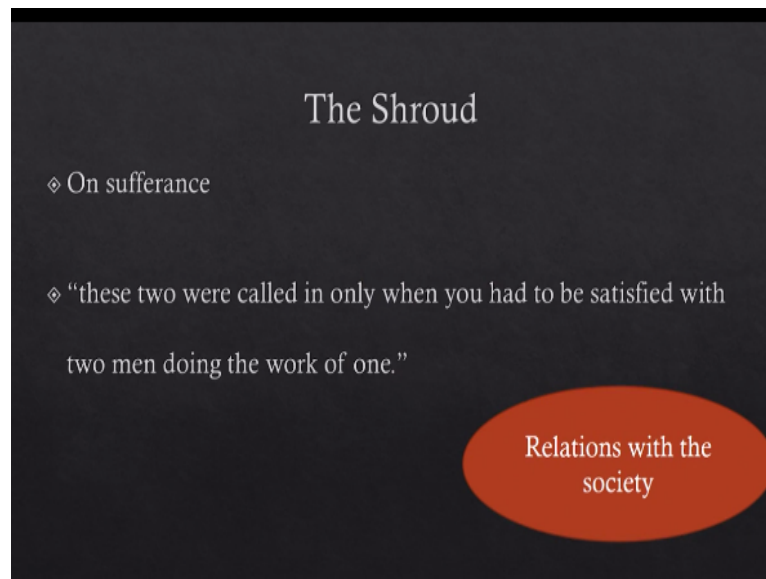
And this idea, this philosophical and emotional truth is the driving point of any incident. So once the writer has an idea about this particular truth this particular sentiment, he can pick any incident and make that incident apply or show this particular point about philosophy or truth. So how does this theory apply in The Shroud. So he does this through throwing a lot of attention in terms of the relationship between Ghisu and Madhav and the village society.

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So the narrator tells us how these 2 men behave with the people around them and through that relationship, through a description of that relationship we get a sense of the philosophy that motivates the lifestyle of Ghisu and Madhav. So basically these 2 characters are on sufferance in this particular village.

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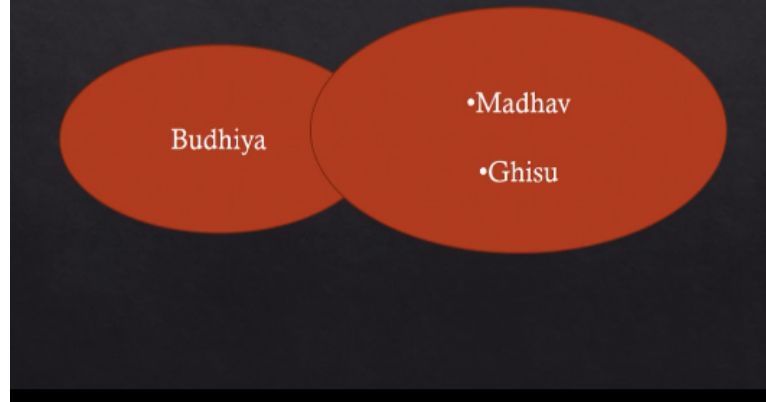
The village people just bear with the activities of these 2 characters and the narrator says that these 2 men were called in only when you had to be satisfied with two men doing the work of one. So this gives a sense of how much exploitation that these 2 characters' kind of ditch to the other people around them.

So this is also a sort of exploitation that we need to keep in mind there are other kinds of exploitation on the part of the land owners and the masters and the employers which are there but this is another kind of exploitation that these 2 men adopt perhaps to meet out the other exploitation. So we need to be very, very aware of the different kinds of exploitation, the different kinds of repartee, symbolic repartee that happen here.

So this relationship is an elicitation of their philosophy of life. There being Ghisu and Madhav. So we have the relationship between the men and the society and we have the relationship between the men and the only female character who is dying and who dies in the story.

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II. Characterization



So again this relationship once again shows the attitude of these 2 men and their perspective on life itself and it shows the detachment that they have not only with the rest of the village society, but also towards the only female character, the only women in the family, the one who kind of takes care of them, but despite that care that she showers on these two, there is no reciprocity.

There is no reciprocal relation between these two men and Budhiya and I will continue with this discussion in relation to Budhiya in the next session. Thank you for watching, I will catch up with you soon.