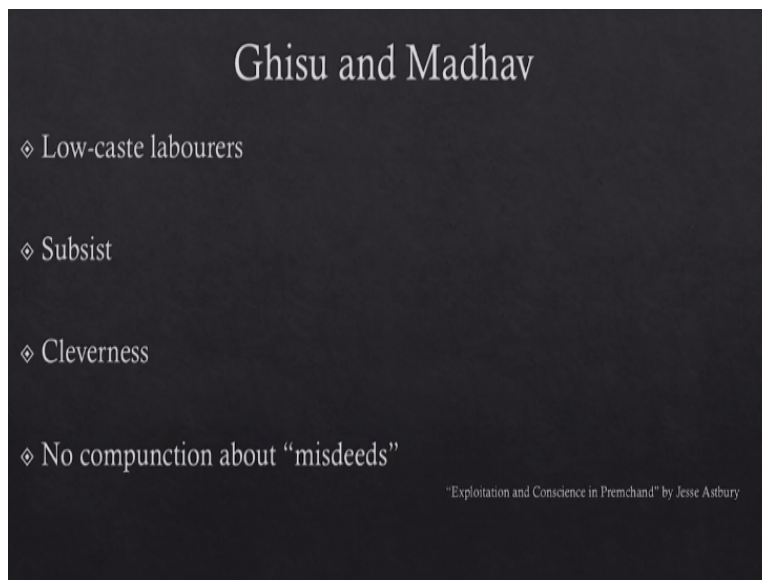


Short Fiction in Indian Literature
Prof. Divya A
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology – Madras

Lecture – 07C
Premchand's The Shroud

Hello and welcome to this lecture on Premchand's The Shroud. In our previous sessions, I did a discussion which ended with a close analysis of the psychological climax in this particular story and in this particular session I am going to pick up on those threads which need highlighting and reinforcing. So we will begin once again with these 2 central characters Ghisu and Madhav.

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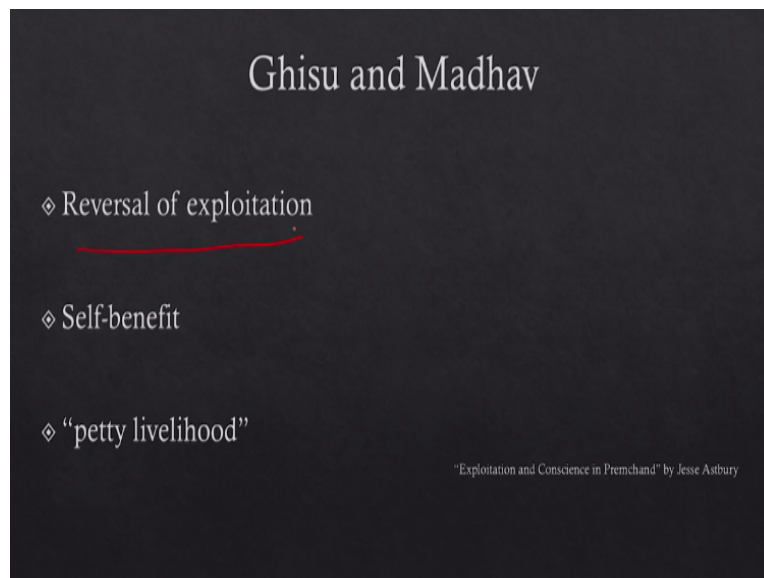
The social background for these 2 characters is the fact that they are low-caste labourers and they subsist on the barest of the minimum and if you recall in the previous lectures I mentioned how a Spartan existence they led in their village. They hardly had any material possessions and they were clothed in rags and they ate once in few days and how did they get by in their lives. They got by through an application of their cleverness.

They knew how the system work and they tried to manipulate the system to a certain extend in order to get their petty livelihood and the most important quality about these 2 characters is the fact that they had no compunction about misdeeds. They had no sympathy or empathy towards anyone else except their own self. So that is something we need to keep note of and we need to

do a close analysis of the narrative to understand the social cultural context which produced all these abnormal psyche which are brilliantly represented in Premchand's, The Shroud.

So as I mentioned just a little while ago they used their shrewdness and cleverness and they do a sort of a reversal of the exploitation.

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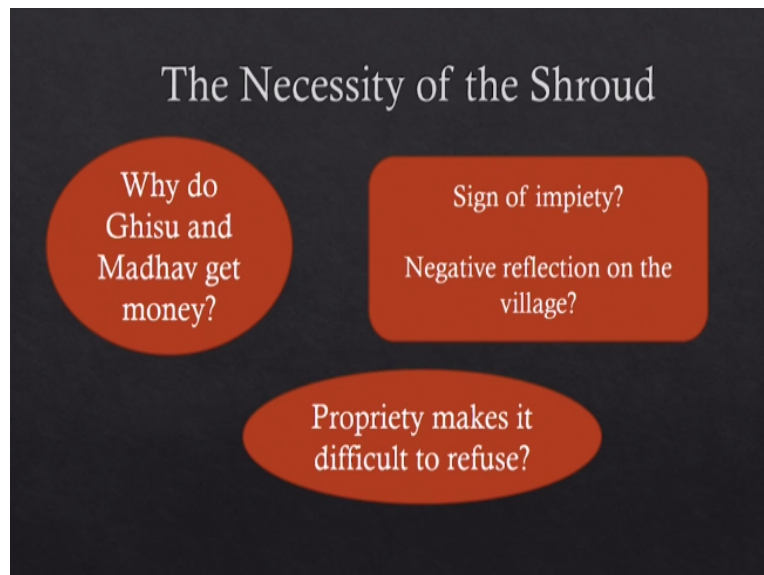
Of those who are comfortable in society. Those who have the power to share their wealth even in a little way towards these 2 characters. So this reversal of exploitation is something that is very significant in the context of these 2 characters Ghisu and Madhav. So usually we have these hierarchical positions where the land owners or the wealthy exploit those who are beneath them socially and culturally and now we have a picture or a slice of life where the people who are at the bottom most runs of society kind of handle the exploitation.

They kind of manipulate the land owners and the people around them in some way so that they can get by with the day today lifestyle. So we see some self benefit being occlude and this self-benefit is not something which is a materially considerable, but as I mentioned a little while ago is a petty livelihood that they managed to leave and if you remember the beginning of the story we see these 2 men are sleeping outside their huts like pythons, well fed pythons.

And if you remember the food that they ate those foods are nothing but potatoes that they have plucked from somebody else fields and they roast it and they eat those potato fry. And it is a bare minimum and in that context the image of well fed python is pretty interesting perhaps the symbolic context there is the idea that they have exploited the maximum from the women who is beneath them socially and culturally.

And perhaps that exploitation is also the food that fed these 2 men and they have enjoyed that meal and their kind of sleeping because of that satiation. So there are several symbolic levels through their personalities and identities and we need to kind of unravel these characters' layer by layer to see the associations with different social trends.

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Now let us come back to this problem of the Shroud. Why is the shroud absolutely necessary to send off a woman who is on the margins of society? This particular woman, Budhiya is the wife of a man called Madhav and he is extremely marginalized. He lives on the fringes of society and why should we care if she gets a shroud or not at the end of the day. So, but there is this fact that as soon as her death becomes communicated to the rest of the society.

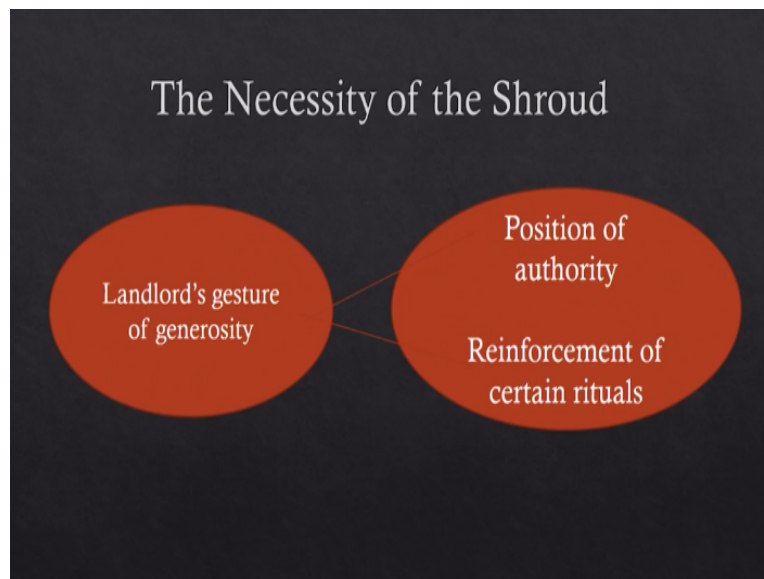
It gets the attention of everyone and the end of the day Ghisu and Madhav do get some money which they blow on alcohol and food and they are also convinced that they will get more money and this time that money will be used for buying the shroud which will be part of the funeral rites

of Budhiya. So where did you get the money and the answer to that question according to some critics is that if the women does not get a shroud as part of a funeral rites.

Then it will become a sign of the impiety of the entire village. So it will be a negative reflection on the religious associations of the members of the village which is where everybody is concerned that she should get a decent funeral. So if you recall the story wood comes from somewhere, grain comes from somewhere, everybody pulls together to make sure that this death is kind of you know carry to its last or final conclusions in a decent way.

So, critics suggest that social propriety, religious propriety makes it difficult for the people who have the power to share the money to refuse a shroud to Budhiya. So this is one of the interpretations of the necessity of the shroud and as we see Ghisu and Madhav exploit that idea of propriety and a petty on the part of the villages. So let us come back to this.

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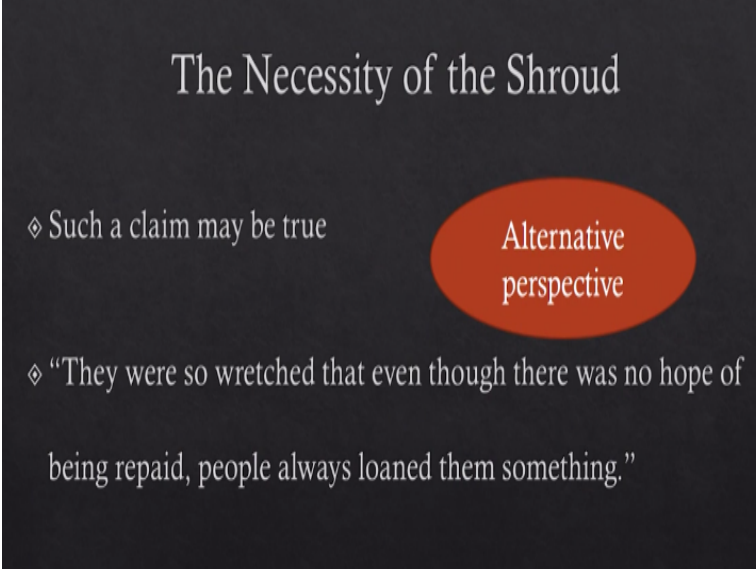


Landlord's gesture of generosity. If you read that particular narrative which talks about the relationship between the landlord and these 2 central male characters, we can clearly see that the landlord cannot bare the site of these 2 men who are shockers who hardly do any physical labor in order to lead their live. So he hates their God but at the same time when Ghisu goes to the landlord begging for money he does give him money for the shroud.

And he is glad to get rid of them that way, but important thing to note here is that he is in a position of authority and his gesture will be mirrored will be a model for the others to pick up on and to follow and that is what Ghisu knows precisely. So he uses the money that the landlord has given him and then advertises the fact and gets a healthy sum of 5 rupees and he uses the 5 rupees to kind of eat, drink and make merry at the end of the day.

So the landlord even though he hates these 2 individuals he has a role to play within the system and his gestures reinforce certain cultural and social rules so we need to kind of also see his gesture in that particular context and his act makes it possible for certain rituals to be carried out. So if he denies the money then obviously all these funeral rites will come to a stop and he knows that so perhaps that is the reason for him to behave in the way he does. So this is one way of looking at it.

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The Necessity of the Shroud

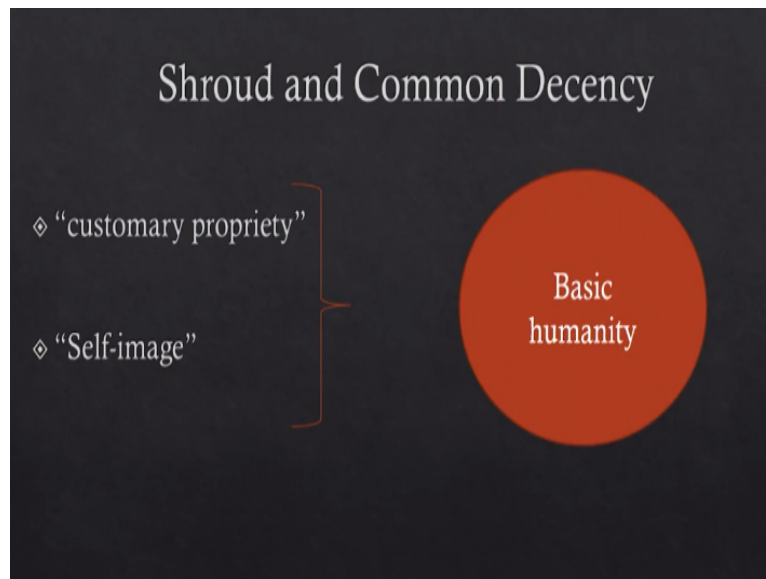
- ◆ Such a claim may be true
- ◆ “They were so wretched that even though there was no hope of being repaid, people always loaned them something.”

Alternative perspective

But there is an alternative perspective true to the claim that I have guessed mentioned a second before and that is the alternative perspective is this. I am going to read the extract for you and then we will go on to an analysis of the alternative way of looking at it. This comes the early part of the story before there is even top of the death of Budhiya or the shroud that she needs. So the narrator says the third person narrator says they were so wretched that even though there was no hope of being repaid, people always loaned them something.

This is a crucial statement because the money that the landlord gives Ghisu and Madhav is not the first time, it is not the first time he has come to the rescue or it is not the first time that somebody in the village has come to the rescue and evidence for this is right before in the narrator and the narrator says that they were wretched that people only gave the money despite the fact that they knew that they are not going to pay them back. So this is a very, very interesting characteristic of the village why do they do this. What is the reason behind it?

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Why should they offer money to these almost scavenger people who just you know pluck out food stuffs from somebody's else fields like thieves and they you know eat those sugarcanes and another edible vegetable so what is the logic or the rational is it about basic humanity is it about customary propriety that you cannot see in a fellow human begins you know die for what the food in front of you it is about the self image of the village.

So we need to ask all these questions because otherwise it will be a one-sided response to the attitude of the landlords in terms of offering money. So it is not only about social responsibility. It is not only about impiety or impiety it is about humanitarian issues as well that is what becomes evident if you do a close reading of the story. So that is one idea in relation to Ghisu and Madhav and the rest of the village society.

Now let us come to these 2 figures and how they form attitudes about the rest of the village. So some critics suggest that their philosophies the philosophies of Ghisu and Madhav is about drunken rationalizing.

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“Drunken rationalizing”

- ◇ Is it mere “drunken rationalizing”
- ◇ Rationalizing is continuous; consistent
- ◇ “Beatings and invectives” and starvation

Construct such psyches
“poverty of conscience”

If you look closely at the finale to the story they come up with also to philosophies about rich going to hell and the poor like Budhiya going to heaven and all these sort of which have the money so they can blow money on funeral accessories so to speak and other things. So that critics see this kind of language as drunken rationalizing, but I have a different alternative perspective as well.

If you notice the story from the beginning the rationalizing of Ghisu and Madhav is continuous it is a consistent and that is very interesting. So we need to realize that the attitudes of Ghisu and Madhav is something that happens in a bizarre 1 fine night at the death of a "beloved" one. So they do have a persistent philosophy which dictates their lifestyle which dictates the way they make money which dictates the way they eat and how often and that is the subtext to these 2 characters' lives.

So we need to keep that in mind even the fact that they refused to go and work like other works in the fields of the landlord of the wealthy is an indication that they do not want to participate in the economy in that work economy and if you notice as I mentioned before they just break off

branches and then they go sell those branches in the market and then they turn that wood into money and then they live for a few days and once they starve they start to go back to the same thing.

So that refusal to participate in the regular lifestyle of the village is telling about the philosophy of these 2 characters Ghisu and Madhav and we cannot write them off as drunken wretched poor. So we need to keep that in mind. So we also need to remember all those beatings and invectives, the slanders, all the you know hard dealing that they have received from the masters and as well as the prolonged regular starvation that they have undergone throughout their lives.

So we need to remember this particular context and just suppose this context with their refusal to participate in the village economy. So this is something which needs to be analyzed consistently and thoroughly and if we do that we also might realize that these psyches are the construct of such activities such a negative way of life that they have undergone for a long time and we also realize that such psyches will be empty of conscience.

There is a poverty of conscience on the part of Ghisu and Madhav which cannot be pardoned but which can be understood in terms of their social cultural background. So that is something we need to take note of.

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Exploitation and Conscience in Premchand by Jesse Astbury

◇ "Their important characteristic lies in the fact that within the framework of the stories they are static, and therefore they preclude the society's interaction with these characters on any level that would supersede the social structure to form a more personal, genuine human contact unmindful of arbitrary social stigmas."

I would like to bring in attention to this particular set of ideas made by Jesse Astbury in her essay exploitation and conscience in Premchand and it is a very interesting set of ideas which we can analyze and see whether it works when we read the story. So she says the important characteristic there being Premchand's works important characteristic lies in the fact that within the framework of the stories they are static.

And therefore they preclude the society's interaction with these characters on any level that would supersede the social structure to form a more personal, genuine human contact unmindful of arbitrary social stigmas. Let me clarify the first phrase the important characteristics is reference to the characters of Premchand and she says that they are very static. They do not change much they are not characters who undergo a massive transformation.

And since they do not change they do not have the interaction with the society as well. So there is a lack of a personal genuine human contact between the characters of Premchand and those around them. So that is clear according to this particular critic.

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The Shroud

- ◊ Static but act within a particular philosophy
- ◊ Genuine human contact made impossible
- ◊ Narrative—the reaction of the oppressed against the exploiter

Manifestation of monstrosity

Now let us see if it works in relation to the shroud. I would see these characters as static on 1 level they have a set philosophy of life and that philosophy is connected to the self interest pure self interest at the cost of anything and everybody. So that static attitude is there, but the philosophy the way that philosophy is made manifest in different situations also very, very

interesting and how they try to explain away any kind of moral quandary is a very, very interesting attribute to notice in Premchand's stories and especially in the shroud.

So if you recall Madhav's worries about his wife who would be in heaven and how she might ask him why he had not provided her with the shroud all these questions and how Ghisu response to that. So you can see Ghisu acting on his feed and responding to every question that might come at him and that shows how he puts his philosophy into practice. He becomes arrogant when he is really pushed into a corner.

He becomes very, very he becomes like a supplicant when there is need to be especially when he is faced with the landlord so all these are very interesting to observe. So though they are static their behaviour is very, very interesting and that makes the story work at a very important level. So I agreed that those a lack of genuine human contact and it is because of that philosophy that they have in life which dictates all of their activities and that lack of human contact is what makes these 2 characters almost monstrosities in their attitudes.

And especially in relation to Budhiya which I come to in a minute that human contact is an area that we need to pay very close attention to and if you look at the last one in this particular narrative as I said before we do not see the exploiter at work. We see the reaction of the exploited at work against the exploiter. So it is a very, very reverse narrative it is a narrative that in the tells the ways in which the suppressed way acts and it reacts sometimes in monstrous way that is something we need to make note of.

So we also need to know that Ghisu and Madhav are exceptions.

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The Shroud

- ◊ Ghisu and Madhav are exceptions; abnormal
- ◊ The majority of the poor as hard workers

Material poverty

Poverty of
conscience

They are the abnormal characters. They do not resemble anybody else in the village even though most of the workers work really hard and hardly have any material possession and they hardly realize any kind of happiness in their lives in the village. Even though they are poor they do not act like Ghisu and Madhav. So we need to make note of that particular difference as well. Not every exploited man becomes an exploiter in return.

So that is something that we need to note and again the story also hints that the majority of the workers are poor and they are hard worker. So despite the you know amount of work that they put in they hardly get any returns materially or spiritually, but lack of material poverty does not always mean a poverty of conscious. They are not equal.

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Unusual References

- ◇ Ghisu makes reference to his sons
- ◇ “I’ve had nine sons, there was never anything in the house, but god got us through the mess somehow”

What was the mess?

Where are the sons?

Why was the house empty?

Now let us look at some of the unusual references in the story. We can speculate about some of these references and the presence itself is very interesting and one such reference is about Ghisu's son. He says that I have had 9 sons. There was never anything in the house, but God got us through the mess somehow but the story shows that just 1 son who is Madhav, what happened to the others.

That is the question that we can ask if we do a close reading of the story we might ask these questions where are the other sons? Are they alive are they dead. If they are alive why do not have any more references to them in the story did they migrate so these are some of the speculations that we can make and he says that there was never anything in the house, but God had got us through the mess somehow.

So what was the mess? It is the mess a reference to a large family what about the wife. There is no reference of the wife did she die when does she die, how does she die, what she left to die just as Budhiya was left to die in the story. So many questions can be asked. The very fact that the story gives us the scope to ask all these questions is what makes it a great story, the fact that you can ask so many questions and we should also realize that this is a short story is not it?

And short stories always give brief glimpses into somebody's life. We do not get the full picture as we mostly do with a long fiction with novels. So other questions that we can ask as why was

the house empty was Ghisu a shirker even then as he is now who was the provider so other questions can be asked as I said.

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Budhiya

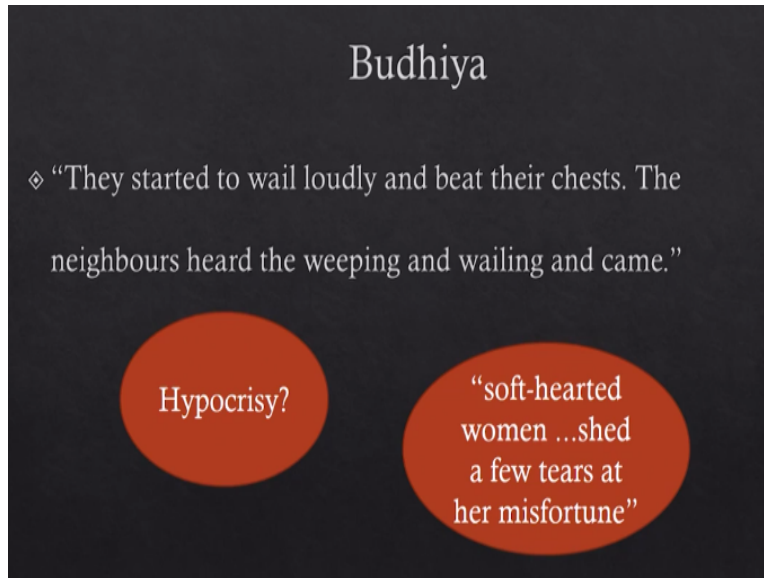
- ◇ How did she come to marry Madhav?
- ◇ If Budhiya was shrieking, didn't any village women attend to her?
- ◇ Was the hut away from the rest of village?

Notorious

Now certain questions can be asked about Budhiya to a significant question. The first one is how did you come to marry Madhav. Who on earth would offer the daughter to Madhav and send the daughter of to this particular family and so why. So these questions also can be raised. Is she part of the village or did she come from elsewhere. Where she an orphan? What is here family background?

So all these questions can be again asked and the second unusual thing to notice is the fact that nobody comes to her rescue. I made a mention of this in my previous sessions and one of the first references that we get about Budhiya is the fact that she is making bloodcurdling shrieks so if Budhiya was shrieking why did not any village women run to attend to her why was it because the hut was far away from the rest of the village, but that does not seem to be the case as well because the following lines tell us that.

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The rest of the neighbourhood is not far off because if you read these lines on the slide from the story it is as they started to wail loudly and beat their chests. The neighbours heard the weeping and wailing and came. So the neighbours were close enough to hear the weeping and they come at once. So when Budhiya is screaming nobody comes, but once she is dead we have the people come back is there are structural is this a structural issue some laps on Premchand's part.

Or is it a because there is some kind of deliberate distancing between the villages and this family because they seemed to be notorious. Ghisu and Madhav seemed to be notorious and nobody wants to do anything with them, but if they deliberately kept themselves away then the villages also do not come of where you were because they become hypocritical or is not it I mean why do not they come to a woman at that time and she is really in need.

And there was again another reference in the story where they narrator says that soft hearted women shed a few tears at her misfortune. So again the question is where were these soft-hearted women when Budhiya was dying in labour. So again another question is so how being married to these men was sympathized by the village fold, but at the same time they were not able to help her to. So all these questions can be raised and some critics do again ask this question.

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Budhiya

- ◆ Why did not she have a “support network”?
- ◆ “Her need of help in her terrible, isolated situation should surely have evoked at least as much compassion and support from the women as her need of funeral rites did from the men.”

<http://www.rupkatha.com/0102preenchandishoristorytheshroud.pdf>

Why did Budhiya not have a support network? Apparently, she is the one who is you know feeding these men you know that is also a reference to this men as shameful stomachs. So if she is the one who goes outer into the village and participates in the village economy then it is likely that she would have formed some kind of social support group that would have helped her what is then preventing such help from getting across to her is it because of reasons of community, is it because of reasons of Madhav and Ghisu's character and at the thing.

So we can ask all these questions to so this is the quotations from one such criticism. The critics says how need of help in her terrible isolated situation should surely have evoked at least as much compassion and support from the women as her need of funeral rites did from the men. So, just as the men were eager to help get a shroud for Budhiya when she is dead these women, these soft hearted women of the village should have supported her in her terrible and isolated situation and that did not happen for mysterious reasons and that is again very disturbing.

So ultimately how should we see over these lapses and all these gaps all these should have been, but they will happen how do we approach that as I said we need to see this story as a kind of a window a brief window in someone's else lives and we really get only a bits and pieces of their life styles. We do not get a complete picture and this short fiction does not give us the entire narrative of the past and the present in a complete manner.

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The Shroud

- ◇ Glimpse of their lives
- ◇ Narrative of past and the present incomplete
- ◇ Speculation of their predicament

What we do have is incomplete. So we are trying to work out the puzzles from the narrative that we do get in this particular short fiction. So while we do have some concrete ideas that we can form based on the narratives that we do have we can only speculate about the rest of the narrative pieces that puzzle us because of the predicament of the human beings who were described in them. Thank you for watching. I will continue in the next session.