

**Short Fiction in Indian Literature**  
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**Lecture – 07D**  
**The Shroud Overview**

Hello and welcome to the session. Today, it is going to be a conversation between me and Arya, my intern on this course and she is a MA student at the University of Pondicherry. Hello Arya, Hello Madam. So how did you find the story? The Shroud is one of the most complicated and most complex stories that I have gone through till now because as you mentioned in your lectures there are many things that are left unsaid.

There are many questions that many questions arise in my mind and in any point of any reader when I went through this one like why do people provide for them even after them being so lazy and why did she marry this man, Madhav and are they really sympathetic and what happened to the Madhav. Because he said that Ghisu when says that he attended to his wife when she was ill, but if that man was sympathetic enough he should have at least gone and looked into the condition of Budhiya.

So it left a lot of questions in my mind and I find that it is one of the stronger stories that mood my mind because I could picture that lady lying there dead with swarm of bees buzzing around her so it is one of the terrible stories. It is quite an oblique story very harsh in deed and let me pick up on a very interesting idea that you mentioned there about Ghisu tending to his wife when she was dying. Let us look at that passage and read that for the benefit of our audience.

This translation is by Shaista Aktar and this has been translated from the Hindi and this is the particular extract from the story that we are interested in. It is on page 15 in my collection of Indian master pieces and this has been edited by David Davidar. So my translation is from this collection. So on page 15 in the story Shroud he says, Ghisu says when my wife was dying I did not move from her side for 3 days and this one Budhiya she will be embarrassed in front of me will not see.

I would have never seen her face. I have never even seen her face, now to look at her uncovered body. She will be uncomfortable. If she sees me she will not be able to throw her arms and legs around so freely. So there are lots of significance stuff in here, in terms of various relationships and the character of Ghisu also kind of coming through here. So he says when my wife was dying I did tend to her, but can he believe Ghisu that is the big question that is the million-dollar question.

And I want to connect this extract with another extract in the story when the 2 men go to the landlord and tell him something let see what that something is. He says, so Ghisu touched his head to the ground. He is making a (( )) (03:29) stance to the landlord and said master I am ruined. Madhav's wife died last night. She suffered all night master. The 2 of us sat by her side half the night, we gave her all the medicines we could and this is calmly the untrue, the falsehood.

So how far can we trust the words of Ghisu is a big question? We absolutely know for sure that they did not sit with her half the night tending to her, tending to Budhiya giving her medicines. So how are we should reconcile all these claims and exaggerated statements made by Ghisu and that is very interesting.

I mean what is the truth and what is the falsehood in all these narratives that we hear from these 2 men. Madam taking a clue from your opinion I would like to ask how far can we trust the narrator of the story. That is a very good question, but the thing is that is the only window that we have. The narrator is the person who is kind of leading us by their hand through this story world and he is telling us a particular story and we need to kind of judge his statements as well.

That is what we can do as readers and I do not know where your question is heading may be I will wait for the question to come to kind of make more comments about the narrator. The Shroud can be read as a poignant short story which presence the pathetic light of a subaltern women. The only place occupied by her prominently in the narrative is the home. So it is a short story demonstration of the spatial confinement of Dalit women through the character of Budhiya.

In this particular story where in this narrative unfalsified I mean to remember that this is just a glimpse that is the term that I keep using to refer to the narratives, the short narratives that we read on this course so we just get a window, a glimpse of someone's soul, someone's life. It is just a slice of someone's life. So when this slice of life or world shown to us we see Budhiya confined to her heart.

We do not see her person until a bit later and when we do see her she is dead. So she is confined to the home literally at that opening moment in the story, but there are other suggestions in the narrator through the narrator which tells us that she did work for these men and there are some translations suggest that she went in helped grind you know grains for the village folk. So she is the one who is doing the hunting for the food.

She is sourcing the food, so she has to get out of the home to do that so literally she does go out, but metaphorically and spiritually she is somehow confined by all these rules and regulations of society. So she is bound in some ways and we see that binding somehow physically when she becomes a corpse with the flies freely moving about so there is a mobility for the animals there and we have this human being just laid out you know with no life in her so that part kind of contrast can be seen.

It is exquisitely mentioned in the story that Madhav, Ghisu and Budhiya are charmers that is one among the Dalit communities in India. Analyzing the Shroud from a Dalit perspective critics have censored Premchand's portrayal of Dalits as cunning and tricksters. So how do you analyze the Shroud using the yardsticks of Dalit aesthetics? This is a well known criticism against this particular story of Premchand and we need to kind of look at several things.

So I will begin with this issue of the idea that they are charmers that they are untouchables and they are cobblers by trade. But interestingly in this story, we do not see them engage in that particular trade per se and there is no mention anywhere in the translation that I have read and used for this particular course to suggest that, that is how the source their lifestyle. So we see them as a sort of landless laborers.

They are marginally connected to this farming world and they are not confined to this task which the caste has given to them so that bond between their caste and the workers loosened there if you kind of see what I am trying to get that here. So there are references made by the narrator we say that there are plenty of jobs in the village about 50 jobs to be had. Some people might see that is some exaggeration, but leaving that aside.

We can see that there is various sort of jobs to be had in the village and even the landlord says you know I have not see you before why did not you come to work you know. So they are not confined to that caste associated task of making shoes that is one thing. The other thing is that the issue of the narrator, how objective the narrator is in depicting these 2 characters and the other thing is how representative are Ghisu and Madhav for this particular Dalit community.

The sense that I get from reading the story is that they are seeing a particularly deviance, abnormal monstrous. There are others like them who are materially very poor you know they are as poor as the other people, but they do not seem to behave in the way that Ghisu and Madhav behave towards the others towards their own relative close relative. So let me come back to the point about the narrator. We do not get a 1-dimensional completely unsympathetic narrator.

If we do a little bit of close reading of the story we do understand that the narrator kind of sympathies with them at moments and at that kind of sympathy can be read in 1 or 2 areas. Let me read from page 18 in my collection and the narrator says in our society where people who toil day and night are not much better off than these 2 and instead of farmers it is those who exploit them that go wretch it is not supplies that attitudes like this develop.

So there are several things here the narrator suggests that rich people do exploit all these labourers and it is understandable, we can see why Madhav and Ghisu have these really abnormal psyches. That psyche has been constructed by this continuous prolonged exploitation that the society has done through these people who are occupying the upper starter of society. So we can see that the narrator has a thorough understanding in a sense about why these things seem to be you know happening in and around these 2 characters.

So we need to keep this comment in mind as well and he says that let me read further for the same extract. So he had the conflation that he means Ghisu, he had the consolation that however badly of he was he did not have to work as achingly hard as the others and that people could not take undue advantage of a simplicity and helplessness. So the implication here is that other people like Madhav and Ghisu have been unduly taken advantage of their simplicity and their helplessness have been exploited by the landlord.

So we cannot possibly see the narrator as speaking for the landlords for the rich. If you understand that you know the narrator has all these dynamics in mind that he understands how they are workings of the society is manifested and how it manifests, then we cannot possibly point the finger of blame at the narrator and we need to see these 2 figures as I said and some critics have seen them as deviance completely outside of the civilized pale of society.

So they are marginalized figures and you know some marginalized figures if you keep pushing them further and further, further this is reacting completely unexpected ways and that kind of reversal of exploitation that I was kind of discussing it in the context of the critics (( )) (12:46) as by yesterday is what we can see here that reverse exploitation is a kind of done by these 2 figures of the landlord of the people around then and of their own beloved character one who has taken care of them Budhiya.

Madam, adding on to this point. I would like to read an exempt; Father and son when weeping to the village landlord he hated the very sight of their faces. A number of times he had beaten them in with his own hands for theft or for not coming to work as they had promised. So from this exert how is the institution of feudalism manifested in the shroud? It is very clear from that you know narrative that landlord is the upholder of certain principles.

And of certain way of life and I want to connect this to another instance in the story when they go to when Ghisu and Madhav go to the landlord and asks for money and that is what this is what he says. Ghisu says page 17 in my book, he says and now there is no one to give us even a piece of bread master. We have been destroyed. Our home has been uprooted. I am your slave. There is no one but you who will organize her funeral.

So the landlord despite all the beating, despite all the invectives, the scolding, you know despite all these injustices he is the one who has to make sure that the (( )) (14:25) mother is reinforced. So he is the one who has to organize the funeral for these people who are completely penniless. So if he does not offer the money how is this funeral going to happen and that has to be done at the end of the day so despite the fact that he hates the guts of these 2 characters Ghisu and narrator just throw some money and gets them out of his way.

So he has to reinforce a particular order and the landlord does that. He is the kind of parent/guardian of the people in the village. So that funeral relationship is reinforced. Madam the Shroud is a faithful portrayal of the trials and tribulations underwent by Dalit women who are marginalized by a patriarchal society. So do you agree with this opinion? Budhiya has been exploited.

That is very clear and she is within the confines of that patriarchal, male dominated order because these men can very well you know work make a living but they refuse to do so in a sustained manner in a discipline manner so these poor women who has come into the household only a year ago. She has to go out of the house and feed the shameless stomachs. So she has to serve these men because that is her job in life. She has been ordained to do that.

That is her position in life so that kind of positioning is harmful to her and she does not get any return you know in a patriarchal society the male members of a family are supposed to protect the women and they fail in that duty and that is to be noticed as well and that should be observed too. So if the landlord beats his slave, beats his (( )) (16:18) hand, his labour, he is also the one who has to take care of him. He has to feed him.

He has to see to the funeral rites of that person's home and family members. So that job is rejected. That job of protecting the women of the household has been rejected by Ghisu and Madhav. So she contributes, but she does not get anything back from these 2 men and that is the kind of double whammy for her and I also understand that in a marginalized situation, marginalized community it is the women who is more subjected to the atrocities of casteism.

So I think she is a representative of all those ladies who had suffered along. She is at the bottom most, and she is a slave to these 2 men as just as these 2 men are slaves to the others above them so obviously the one who is at the bottom most of the pecking order will really get it you know badly from those who are higher up. Madhav was reluctant to go inside the hut to check Budhiya's condition because he was afraid that he loses what do (( )) (17:22) his father will grab it.

So this is instance point towards the fact that for a lower caste person who is struggling hard to fill his or her belly mere sustenance food is more important than anything else. In my video of the story food is at the heart of it you know the obsession about having a decent meal the obsession about enjoying your meal is what is at the heart of this particular story and if you as I mentioned in the previous lectures the narrative kind of obsesses about meals.

And if you notice the story closely you will see there is a big extended description about a wedding feast that happened ages ago you know in the context of a landlord's daughter's wedding so the narrative kind of luxuriates about it and you get all these details about the chutney, the raita, the puris, the number of puris that Ghisu ate and Madhav contemplating how may he would have eaten if he had been there.

All these I mean I wonder what is the function of this particular description in this particular story. This description is there because these 2 men are starving and they have been starving not only for this day or the previous week or for the previous month, they have been starving for a prolonged period for years together so we do get a very close description of all the meals that they eat even the potato meal let us look at that one.

I discussed that in my lecture 2 and the narrator says that when it was peeled, when the potato was peeled the outer part of the potato did not seem that hot, but as soon as it was bitten into the inner part burned the tongue, the throat, and the palate instead of holding the burning coal in once mouth it seems wise it to send it down as soon as possible so it could cool down in the stomach.

So food is compared to a burning coal and these men quickly kind of swallow these you know coals, coal pieces down into their stomach so that it can coal there. So we can see that it is a painful process as well in some respects so it does cause a lot of pain not only to them, the process of getting the food, the process of eating it, it also causes pain to a lot of other people who are around them and Budhiya is the one who is seriously affected by their you know hunt the gathering kind of activities.

They gather the potato they roasted, they eat it without caring about the women who is kind of a languishing inside the heart. You know even I was pondering about the need of such a digression describing the landlord's daughter's parents, but I consider that as a contrast to the conjugal relation between Budhiya and Madhav because on one hand we have girls who are married off in a very luxurious manner and they enjoy everything.

So can we say that it is a contrast to their relationship? Interesting you put that way, but let me address the first point that you made about the idea of the digression so in my reading this is not the digression it is almost a center piece of the story. This description of a feast that they have that Ghisu has had previously is the center piece and that is what he is aspiring towards to kind of have another meal just like this at some point in their lives.

And Budhiya makes it happen for these 2 men and there is one moment in the story towards a close effort when he says Ghisu says Ghisu stood up and there is outside the bar they are on the bar you know eating, drinking, and making merry and Ghisu stood up and swimming as he was through waves of joy said son she is going to heaven. She never bothered anyone, never hassled anyone, she fulfilled the biggest wish of our lives by dying.

By dying and getting them the money which will make it possible for them to enjoy alcohol, enjoy fried fish, and enjoy all these stuff they had eaten. This is what the story is heading towards from the moment it began with them eating a potato meal to Ghisu fantasizing about that meal that he had ages ago to this big meal they have at the end of the story so it is all very well connected if you read it very closely.



So food is a big part of this particular story and the other question that you wanted to ask me is about the relationship. The conjugal relationship between Madhav and Budhiya and the other wedding that was referred to so we do not know much about it except for this comment by Ghisu who says that you had a good time with her the previous year, so we do not know exactly what was the nature of their relationship except that there was a suggestion that it was a it was really a pleasurable for Madhav in a sexual sense that is the 1 indication that we have.

The other wedding feast that we have in the stories are reference to the wealth and the power to and the power and generosity to share that lavishness with the rest of the village that is what Ghisu says that in those days the landlords had big hearts they kind of shared they joined with the rest of the village community, but these days the landlords do not do that. They are very stingy, they do not spend.

They are very thrifty, but you know it is a big jump to make from you know a big wedding to a very happy married state of life for the girl in question because that is very complicated and many of the stories that we have read on the course do not have happy homes or happy marriages. Many of them are very dysfunctional at least when they are represented in literature. So I think there is a big castle between massive big weddings and happy married state.

The shroud reads we will say that compared to the peasants Ghisu was more insightful and instead of going the mindless instead of joining the mindless group of peasants he had joined the group of clever screaming tricksters. Does the story present the alternate reality of the world of tricksters who lives on the toil of others through the characters of Ghisu and Madhav? It is a very, very interesting point that we get in this story is in it.

It is that particular narrative that I have read before the one where he says I mean let me read my translation here. He says let us say that Ghisu was cleverer than the farmer hypothetical let us say about that is what the narrator says. That instead of joining the simple-minded peasants he had joined the company of conman if he had joined the company of conman he would have a become

a chieftain or head man of a village so there is a suggestion that all these headmen, the leaders in the villages are somehow you tricksters and criminals and not very noble people.

So they are a negotiation there which I second reflects really interestingly on the narrator the idea that he has about these all leaders and big man and the big shots in the village and he says that Ghisu is clever, clever alright, but he is not disciplined enough to become a conman because to become a conman you have to follow certain rules and regulations of your own how bad they are you need to stick to those rules and Ghisu does not do that.

So he says that that is the problem with Ghisu and we also need to remember the timeline of the story it was published in 1935 is in it? So India is still in the British rule. So this is British India we are talking about and it struck me just today when I was reading it you know perhaps the reference to company's rules and regulations was this an association to the British East India company or the Victorian empire that is there you know may be there is a kind of a subversive remark there too, to all these people as conman.

You know thieves and tricksters who have come to this country and cheated the people you know so that kind of suggestions is also there. It seems to me so that is something we can pick up on and do a bit of close reading again in connection with the historical sources. Close reading actually provides there are a lot of subtle remarks. Absolutely which is why I mean it is better to read the story once, twice, thrice for times if possible.

And then have kind of a sense of you know the theme that characterization, the motivations, then it will be better to go for other documents from sociology, from history and kind of you know keep them altogether and from some strong interpretations. It is like a detective you know case sometimes. Budhiya's neighbours they are absent when she rides in labour pain, but when she dies they immediately turn up to weep for her.

So this does incident point out the hypocrisy of that village folk. This is a topic that I had addressed time and again in my lecture videos and there is a kind of a what to say is this is a textual lap on the part of Premchand was is not careful enough when he was writing those

dialogues and narrative view points or was he deliberately making the villagers hypocritical that is a big question because if the villagers heard the crisis of Budhiya.

And did not respond to her that makes the really callous really hard hearted and the villagers come off in a really bad light and the narrator at one point in the story does also mention the fact that money comes in now but earlier money did not come in and the money was available earlier probably medicine could have been bought and spent on and given to Budhiya, but then the other questions also arise if the people had provided the money would these 2 men have offered medicine.

And we can easily think that these men would have gone off to these bars and enjoyed themselves there. So if this is a complex issue and there is a reference in the story in my translation it says that you know the soft hearted women of the village did shed a tear. They kind of commiserated about her misfortune and things like that so it is difficult to arrive at a conclusion.

They are no black and white you know judgments to be made here because we are dealing with these 2 men who are you know really callous the depth of their callousness cannot be measured at least according to the narrative that we have here and, and the narrator says that you know we can see why they are so callousness well so we can only look at different angles you know make certain observations about their lifestyles.

Ghisu once remarks, what a bad custom it is that someone who did not even get a rag to cover her body when she was alive needs a new shroud when she is dead. The shroud stands for all the basic utilities and regard that was derived to Budhiya when she was alive. Do you agree with this comment Madam? Yes, the answer was yes and in my translation that comment is made by the narrator at least it is the part of free indirect scores.

So this is what I have here on page 18 and this is what a sad custom Ghisu or Madhav does not say this. What a sad custom so it is a narrator's view point and probably he is channeling the view points of Ghisu and Madhav together. They can also interpret it that way, but it is placed in

between the exchange of Madhav and Ghisu so again it is confusing. So this particular translation let me read the particular extracts so that we can work at the interpretation there.

What a sad custom that the women who did not even have rags to cover her body while she was alive now need to shroud after all the shroud burned with the body and then what is left. If the same 5 rupees had come earlier there might have been some medicine. Ghisu and Madhav were trying to gauge each other's thoughts. So these thoughts could be the 2 men's thoughts channel through the narrator or it could be the narrator's comments themselves and then he is kind of saying that these men were trying to also find out about each other's thoughts.

So there is an ambiguity there which I second points to the cleverness as well as the shrewd perspective that the narrator has not only on these 2 characters, but also the customs and the rules and regulations of the society and how they work in every village and in every, you know region. So yes, she did not get what was due to her when she was alive and now everybody is making sure that she gets it at least when she is dead.

That is. Madam, can you comment on the aptness of the title, The Shroud? The Shroud, it is apt in some respects but I would also suggest that it is a kind of a cover for other themes that are kind of hiding their so while we can sense that the narrator or Premchand is kind of pointing the finger of blame at all these hypocritical customs I would also suggest that you know the shroud is also hiding other issues, other complexities, other problematic that are there in society.

And that big problem is the lack of food, the lack of a decent meal or at least a good meal for these men once in a while so that idea of starvation is kind of pushed under the blanket or you know blanket or under the shroud so to speak in this particular story, but a good close reading will kind of bring out this theme that is there. Thank you very much for listening, hope you enjoy the session. We will catch up with you in the next one. Thank you.