A mirror for their times: A Comparative analysis of Dickens and Premchand

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Introduction

At first glance a comparison between Charles Dickens and Munshi Premchand would seems such an obvious choice for a comparative study that one is led to believe that there must already be considerable critical attention devoted to it. But a search through various repositories surprisingly proves that this is not the case. Although, quite expectedly, both authors have received copious critical attention in their own right, works comparing their oeuvres are rare. In fact a search of *Shodhganga* threw up only two PhD theses devoted to the topic, and both of them proved, as they necessarily have to be, rather limited in their scope. Dr Ram Vilas Vimal, the author of the first, limits himself to a preliminary comments about the thematic and stylistic features of the works of these two authors ("the characters of these two authors are both flat and round" he notes as one of the findings of his research), while Dr Yusuf Arun makes detailed comparisons between three novels each for a one to one comparison between them. Thus he compares *Oliver Twist* with *Sevasadan*, *Bleak House* with *Karambhumi* and *Hard Times* with *Godaan* respectively. These are both worthy efforts in their own right. However, they leave major aspects of the works of these two literary giants unexplored and there is scope for subsequent research to fill this gap.

Consider for example, just the similarities between the two at the most superficial level. Both between professional writers, in the sense that they strove to earn a living with their pen. Both had a keen sense of their audiences tastes and both were prolific in their output. Dickens wrote fifteen major novels, while Premchand wrote a dozen. Dickens wrote a few short stories as well, but Premchand wrote two hundred and fifty short stories. It goes without saying that both of them have had an outsized impact on their respective literatures; Dickens on English Literature and Premchand on Hindi and Urdu literature. Both of them made social realism the defining characteristic of their works, and both tended to make a sharp use of humour to both liven up their stories and drive home their social criticism. This extensive similarity should itself be fertile ground for a detailed comparison between the two. But then their are also revealing differences between their works, which is natural given that they are separated by about seventy years. There is also the difference of place, language, culture, and the colonial experience. One wonders what each would have thought of the work of the other had they the opportunity to read them. This paper seeks to elaborate in the similarities and the differences between the two authors that have been stated here.

Context

Charles Dickens was born on February 7, 1812, in Portsmouth, England. The England that Dickens grew up in was rapidly industrialising, and bringing attendant problems and social tensions in its wake. His society was marked by rapid industrialization, social upheaval, and stark class divisions. Dickens had first hand experience of the industrial system and poverty, and he used his experience to telling effect in his novels like *Hard Times* and *Oliver Twist*.

He worked as a child laborer in a boot-blacking factory when his father was imprisoned for debt. These early experiences instilled in him a keen sense of empathy for the plight of the poor and a lifelong commitment to social reform.

His literary career took off with the serialized publication of *The Pickwick Papers* in 1836, and he went on to produce a remarkable body of work that includes iconic novels such as *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*.

The Victorian era, which coincided with Dickens' life, was marked by both great prosperity and abject poverty, creating stark inequalities in his society. The Industrial Revolution brought economic growth but also exploitation of the working class. Dickens' novels often critiqued the social injustices and harsh living conditions of the time.

Class and social inequality is something that Munshi Premchand was also intimately aware of. Like Dickens, he too had grown up in poverty. Both Dickens and Premchand were products of societies rife with glaring inequalities and social issues. But the nature of the poverty in Premchand's India, which was India of the pre-independence era, was rooted in different social causes. The zamindari system, in which landlords controlled large tracts of land and owned the produce, while the farmer who actually worked the land got very little, had created a strata of extreme poverty in rural India. Predatory moneylenders lent money to these already poor people in their time of need, but at such exorbitant rates that it often resulted in fire sales of their land and property. Even though India had, by the time of Premchand, set itself on the path to industrialisation, it was still very much a pre-industrial society. Premchand speaks of this society and its problems. In work after work, in most of his short stories, he paints a poignant, often tragic picture of rural India, grappling not just with extortionate taxes, predatory moneylenders and cruel landlords, but also with onerous and often oppressive social customs. Winds of change had begun to blow through Premchand's India. The struggle for Independence had become an all consuming movement, and western education was challenging traditional social customs, setting up a generational clash.

Charles Dickens, through seminal works like *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*, offers a biting critique of Victorian England—a society marked by industrialization, class stratification, and a social welfare system that was, to put it mi. Similarly, Munshi Premchand, especially through his works *Godaan* and *Nirmala*, paints a detailed picture of rural India, foregrounding issues of caste and class discrimination, oppressive social norms, and the secondary effects of colonial rule.

Similarities and differences

Stylistically, it is interesting to note, that despite the half century separating them, and the widely different social contexts, both authors could be seen as sentimentalists. Their stories, specific scenes, specific characters, not only depict tragic situations, but these situations are often exaggerated, the better to tug at the heartstrings of the readers. Dickens, as has been widely noted, leans towards caricature; towards an exaggeration of personal quicks, that serve to throw his characters into sharp relief. The most striking thing about his protagonists, in this sea of caricatures, is their normalcy. Nothing that they do sticks out.

Whereas it is the very opposite with Premchand. His secondary characters are all "normal". But the normalcy they represent is itself discriminatory and oppressive. Surrounded by this society, his protagonists stick out by virtue of their high idealism, and decency.

Dickens' portrayal of Victorian England often leans towards melodrama and satire. This exaggerated representation, while lacking subtlety, ensures that the message is delivered with impact. The plight of Oliver in the workhouse, or David Copperfield's trials as a child laborer, are drawn in broad strokes to capture the audience's attention.

Premchand, on the other hand, offers a more nuanced and delicate portrayal of social realities. In *Godaan*, the protagonist Hori is an archetype of the Indian peasant, but Premchand adds layers of complexity to his life. Unlike Dickens, who often isolates characters from their social settings to make a point, Premchand ensures that the societal milieu is intricately tied to the individual narratives of his characters. This could be seen as an extension of the collectivist ethos that is often associated with Indian society.

Both of them have an eye for small details. The act of washing of the hands in Dickens (*Great Expectations*) say, or the morning bathing ritual of a character in Premchand's *Karmabhoomi*. Both portray their characters as caught in the large currents of society, and both show their characters grow and evolve and perhaps this is one of the most endearing characteristics of their works. The enduring popularity of *A Christmas Carol*, in which a miser has a change of heart, shows the power they can invest into their stories by showing this growth and change.

The approach to humor in the works of Dickens and Premchand provides another intriguing point of comparison. In Dickens' world, humor is often a device to exaggerate societal shortcomings for the sake of critique. Characters like Mr. Micawber in "David Copperfield" or the Sowerberries in "Oliver Twist" are laced with comedic elements.

These characters, while contributing to the plot, also serve as vessels to mock the idiosyncrasies and hypocrisies of Victorian society.

Premchand's approach to humor is far more subdued, often serving as a coping mechanism for his characters rather than a tool for societal critique. The humorous moments in his works are generally steeped in irony, subtly underlining the tragic circumstances that envelop the lives of his characters.

Another area worthy of exploration is the emotional depth and psychological realism in the characters created by these literary giants. Dickens was a master at weaving intricate psychological portraits, as can be seen in his characters like Pip from *Great Expectations* or Sydney Carton from *A Tale of Two Cities*. However, Dickens often paints these emotional landscapes in isolation from the overarching societal structures. This could be attributed to the individualistic tendencies in Western society, where the "self" is often seen as autonomous and separate from the "collective."

In contrast, Premchand incorporates the emotional and psychological make-up of his characters within the fabric of their social roles and communities. In *Godaan*, for instance, the character of Hori is deeply embedded in his societal context; his emotional complexities arise from his struggles with landownership, caste, and poverty. The emotional landscapes of Premchand's characters are not individual islands but parts of a larger socio-cultural mainland.

Characterization forms a crucial part of any literary work, and both Dickens and Premchand have distinct styles. Dickens has a penchant for creating memorable caricatures—characters like Uriah Heep or Mr. Bumble serve as over-the-top representations of certain traits. These characters often function as symbols, embodying specific vices or virtues, making them easily identifiable within the larger story. This tendency towards caricature can be seen as an extension of the broader theatrical and melodramatic traditions prevalent in Victorian England, as well as, perhaps, as an influence of Hogarth, who

Premchand, however, takes a different approach. His characters are often grounded in reality, reflecting the diverse human emotions and ethical ambiguities that one encounters in day-to-day life. There's a level of realism and restraint in his characterization that is missing in Dickens' larger-than-life figures. The characters in works like "Nirmala" and "Godan" are complicated individuals, shaped by their ethical choices and societal constraints, providing a more nuanced view of human nature.

Conclusions

Both authors were deeply influenced by the times and societies they lived in. Dickens was a product of the Industrial Revolution and Victorian ethics, whereas Premchand lived through a period of social and political upheaval in India, including the freedom struggle against British rule. These influences are deeply embedded in their works and contribute significantly to their styles of social realism and characterization.

The impact of these authors on literature and society at large is monumental. Dickens' works have been subject to countless adaptations and are still widely read, echoing George Orwell's claim that Dickens was a writer who had "created the modern idea of 'the novel.'" Similarly, Premchand's contribution to Hindi and Urdu literature has established him as one of the greatest literary figures in Indian history. His works are an integral part of the academic curriculum and continue to be adapted into various art forms.

The reception of Dickens and Premchand within literary circles and among critics also provides a valuable lens for comparison. Dickens was often critiqued for his melodramatic style and the episodic structure of his novels, which were initially published as serials. Literary critic F.R. Leavis argued that Dickens belongs to the "entertainment tradition," indicating a snub at his purported lack of 'serious' content. However, scholars like Peter Ackroyd counter that Dickens 'so-called melodrama is a complex narrative device that adds depth and intensity to his social criticism.

Premchand's works, by contrast, were initially criticized for their overtly social themes and were considered less 'literary 'compared to the ornate Persian-influenced Urdu literature of his time. However, post-independence critics like Namvar Singh have lauded him for bringing 'literature closer to the soil,' emphasizing his role in making literature a tool for social change in India.

In summary, while Charles Dickens and Munshi Premchand operated in different cultural milieus and historical contexts, their works exhibit fascinating similarities and contrasts. Both were masters of social realism, yet their narrative techniques differed considerably, reflecting the cultural specificities of their respective societies. Dickens used satire and melodrama to critique the Victorian social order, while Premchand utilized a more nuanced and grounded narrative style, deeply embedded in the socio-cultural complexities of rural India.

Similarly, their approaches to humor, emotional complexity, and psychological realism vary but are instructive in understanding their societies. Dickens 'often exaggerated characters serve as vehicles for broader social commentary, shaped by Victorian norms and the melodramatic traditions of his time. Premchand's nuanced characters, on the other hand, serve as individual voices within a collective narrative, reflecting the social awakening and political changes of his era.

The differences and similarities in their works not only offer a nuanced view of how individual and societal factors can influence literary output, but also how literature itself can serve as a powerful tool for cultural documentation and social critique.

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