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## Deconstructing Power Structures in Premchand's "Thakur's Well"

Ashok Verma

Gulab Singh



**Premchand**

With thanks to en.wikipedia.org

### Denial of Place and Rights for Dalits and Women in Indian Society

One of the most significant achievements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Indian context has been the ever growing consciousness for and the resultant recognition of the rights of those who had for centuries been living on the margins after having been pushed out of the mainstream of society by the prevailing power structures. Since Indian society has

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 7 July 2011

Ashok Verma and Gulab Singh

Deconstructing Power Structures in Premchand's "Thakur's Well"

been patriarchal for centuries, women were denied treatment on a par with the males and hence remained on the margins. Similarly, the Dalits were reduced to a sub-human level because of the rigid *varna* system. Both these sections of the Indian society were systematically denied their rights and choices and were relegated to the marginal position.

Though there has been considerable change for the better in recent times, their journey from marginality to centrality is still on. One thing common about their pitiful plight is the existing power structures. They have been made to suffer because of their peripheral existence. Since the power/authority is not in their hands, they face exploitation at the hands of those who control power.

### **Deconstruction of the Power Structures – Prem Chand’s “Thakur’s Well”**

The purpose of this research paper is to deconstruct the power structures in Premchand’s story “Thakur’s Well”. The story exhibits the writer’s deft handling of the problem of untouchability in a short, terse narrative. The entire social hierarchy, the exploitation of one section by the other simply because of its privileged position, various levels of exploitation – all have been put into a single narrative.

The paper also attempts to analyze the story from the level of consciousness gained by the suffering class and what more can be done to ameliorate the position of the marginalized. In this attempt, however, the first requirement is to understand the terms ‘power structure’ and ‘power’ as such.

### **Meaning of the Term *Power Structure***

To understand the term ‘power structure’ in its very basic form, it refers to an elite group constituted by people holding influential positions within a government, society, or organization. As is obvious from the definition, the group enjoys power and exercises it on others. Further, the term ‘power’ is defined as “a measure of an entity’s ability to control its environment, including the behavior of other entities” (Wikipedia 24 Jan. 2011).

Friedrich Nietzsche disseminated ideas on the will to power which he saw as the domination of other humans as much as the exercise of control over one’s environment. To him, this will to power is “akin to a life force, a monistic tenet that is the ultimate source of all organic and inorganic activity” (Holub 54). This idea underlies much 20th century analysis of power. The followers of Alfred Adler place power dynamics at the core of psychoanalytical theory as against orthodox Freudians who give this place to sexuality (Wikipedia 24 Jan. 2011).

### **Many Facets of Power**

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 7 July 2011

Ashok Verma and Gulab Singh

Deconstructing Power Structures in Premchand’s “Thakur’s Well”

Power can be seen as evil, a corrupting agent but the desire to exercise power over others is accepted as endemic to human beings. The social structures, in a way, legitimize it. Be it any time or clime, power structures have been there in society. The form may have changed over the centuries but such elite groups have been there. The power structure of Bronze Age society was based on social networks rather than on permanently established institutions. Society was organized into small and medium-sized chiefdoms that were typically involved in ongoing struggles for dominance between various powerful families (Artursson). Thus power has always been central to human behaviour.

### **Power Structure Based on *Varna***

The power structure in contention here emanates from the institution of caste system in Indian society. The first three *varnas* i.e., Brahmana, Kshatriya and Vaishya enjoy the religious, political and money power respectively and thus form a nexus to exploit those who are powerless. This power dynamics leaves no scope for the lowest strata to lead a respectable life. With the growing consciousness, however, the so-called untouchables now want equal share in power and hence the clash as the present power structure would not yield to their demands so easily.

### **Legal, Religious and Social Props**

Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar in his thought-provoking essay “Untouchability and Caste System” relates the plight of the untouchables with the institution of caste system and talks about three kinds of sanctions that provide life force to any institution. These sanctions are legal, religious and social. When only one of these can sustain an institution, it is really unfortunate that caste system has got all the three sanctions; religious – since religion promotes caste divisions thus making an average Hindu consider his caste sacred; social – as the society recognizes the caste and finally up to some extent legal – as the government has also made provisions for particular castes.

### **Questions Raised by Premchand**

Premchand, a keen observer of social life, comes down heavily upon the inhuman tendencies of Indian society and raises certain relevant questions related to the lives of the downtrodden. A deft handler of irony, he is able to distance himself from the actual scene and attains rare artistic detachment.

### **Thakur’s Well**

“Thakur’s Well” begins on a dismal note with Jokhu who is an untouchable and has been ill for some days, complaining of foul smell in the drinking water. Gangi, his wife, having ascertained the fact, cannot give him the water to drink lest his illness should

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 7 July 2011

Ashok Verma and Gulab Singh

Deconstructing Power Structures in Premchand’s “Thakur’s Well”

aggravate. But what is the way out, none of them has any clue. Jokhu tries to suppress his thirst for some time but in vain. His thirst has rendered him helpless and he says: "I'm so thirsty I can't stand it. Bring me the water, I'll hold my nose and drink a little" (TW 83) This lays bare before the reader the height of oppression which makes people like Jokhu drink water that even animals would not drink. This thought of drinking filthy water emanates from a sense of helplessness accumulated through actual life experiences. Gangi, like a caring wife, would simply not let him drink it. She asks him to wait till she gets fresh water from the well. However, both of them know very well that getting water from either of the wells in the village belonging to the Thakur and the Sahu respectively, is something next to impossible.

Gangi is hoping against hope that the so-called *swarnas* would take pity on her plight and let her draw water from their wells: "The Thakur and the shopkeeper both have wells. Won't they let me fill just one lota?" (TW 83) While speaking thus, Gangi may try to assure her husband but she, in her heart of hearts, is well aware that any such move on her part would bear serious consequences. The society depicted is dehumanized indeed where there is no place for compassion and sympathy for the fellow human beings. The following reaction of Jokhu explicitly presents the intricately woven, prevailing power structures in the contemporary society:

'You'll come back with your arms and legs broken, that's all. You'd better just sit down and keep quiet. The Brahman will give a curse, the Thakur will beat you with a stick, and that money-lending shopkeeper takes five for every one he gives. Who cares what people like us go through? Whatever they say about giving some help, we can just die and nobody will even come to this door to have a look. Do you think people like that are going to let you draw water from their well?' (TW 83-84)

### **Insight into Traditional Caste Roles**

The above comment provides an insight into the traditional caste roles according to the *varna vyavastha* with the Brahman being at the top, the Kshatriya (Thakur) in the second place, the Vaisya (Sahu) taking the third place, then the Shudra and at last the Untouchable. All of them enjoy power in one form or the other.

The Brahman enjoys religious power (or what they prefer to call, the power of knowledge) and as such he is considered to be sacred. The Thakur has political power and the Vaishya is invested with the power of money. Even the Shudras have some privileges and power to enjoy.

However, the untouchables are destined to lead a sub-human life of deprivation, humiliation and oppression, being at the lowest rung. This concept of graded inequality is in consonance with Ambedkar's interpretation.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 7 July 2011

Ashok Verma and Gulab Singh

Deconstructing Power Structures in Premchand's "Thakur's Well"

## **The Swarnas**

However our contention in this paper is limited to four levels of the social hierarchy as discussed in the story. In this hierarchal structure, the *swarnas* like Thakur and Sahu are positioned at the top. Then come the womenfolk of these *swarnas* who are victims of gender oppression. They are oppressed by their men but otherwise are themselves oppressors. Premchand has dexterously brought this segregation to the fore by giving space to *swarna* women also in the narrative.

‘There they were eating and they order us to get more water. There is no money for a jug.’

‘The menfolk get jealous if they think they see us sitting around taking it easy.’

‘That's right, and you'll never see them pick up the pitcher and fetch it themselves. They just order us to get it as though we were slaves.’

‘If you are not a slave, what are you? You work for food and clothes and even to get nothing more than five or six rupees you have to snatch it on the sly. What's that if it isn't being a slave?’

‘Don't shame me, sister! All I do is long for just a second's rest. If I did this much work for somebody else's family I'd have an easier time, and they might even be grateful. But here you could drop dead from overwork and they'd all just frown.’ (TW 85)

## **Reading along Feminist Lines**

In fact the above conversation between two upper caste women could be read along feminist lines. These women no doubt command respect because of their caste but being women they are oppressed by their male counterparts. The grudge of one woman and the piercing, satirical observations by the other stand testimony to gender oppression which perhaps is the oldest form of oppression known to human beings. As a result of this, woman has become, more than anything else, a device to hold the traditional order in place.

After the *swarna* women, the third category comprises the male dalits like Jokhu and Mahngu who face incessant oppression from the high caste people but have some authority over their women back home. Thus the dalit women form the lowest rung of this hierarchy who are in fact doubly oppressed both on account of their caste and gender.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 7 July 2011

Ashok Verma and Gulab Singh

Deconstructing Power Structures in Premchand's "Thakur's Well"

## Capturing Discontent

By making Gangi the central protagonist, Premchand perhaps aims at capturing the growing sense of discontent and rebellion in dalit women thus showing that the consciousness towards their rights as human beings has reached down to the bottom. Interestingly, the author does not show this woman as a victim of gender oppression. He deliberately portrays her as a strong character. Gangi, with this consciousness, is able to see through the hypocrisy and sham supremacy of the *swarnas*. The author has done exceptionally well to capture the inner state of Gangi's mind:

Gangi's resentful heart cried out against the restraints and bars of the custom. Why was she so low and those others so high? Because they wore a thread around their necks? There wasn't one of them in the village who wasn't rotten. They stole, they cheated, they lied in court... Whenever she came into the village they looked at her with eyes full of lust, they were on fire with lust, every one of them, but they bragged that they were better than people like her. (TW 84)

Gangi may feel a sense of rebellion towards the gross injustice meted out to her, she has not reached a stage where she can openly flout the customs and raise the banner of revolt against the prevailing power structures. Her sense of care for and devotion to the ailing husband has drawn her to the Thakur's well but at the same time, she is apprehensive. Centuries of oppression have crushed her spirit to the extent that she cannot demand her rightful share. She takes every precaution not to catch anyone's eye. She is intensely scared. Premchand creates a wonderful atmosphere of suspense, fear and uncertainty as to what would Gangi's attempts finally come to. Consider the author's use of following expressions:

Even the prince who set out to steal the nectar from the gods could not have moved more warily....

Gangi tiptoed up on to the well platform...  
Like some soldier stealing into the enemy's fortress at night she peered cautiously on every side....

No strong-armed athlete could have dragged it up more swiftly....  
... suddenly the Thakur's door opened. The jaws of a tiger could not have terrified her more. (TW 85-86)

## The Terror

Such expressions show the amount of terror that has been created among the downtrodden. Again this is something done intentionally so that no untouchable can ever

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 7 July 2011

Ashok Verma and Gulab Singh

Deconstructing Power Structures in Premchand's "Thakur's Well"

dare challenge the authority of the high caste people. Gangi's attempt to get a little water from the Thakur's well thus is thwarted and she has to flee from the spot instantly to escape punishment and torture. "Yelling 'Who's there?' the Thakur came toward the well and Gangi jumped from the platform and ran away as fast as she could. When she reached home, Jokhu, with the *lota* at his mouth, was drinking that filthy, stinking water" (TW 86)

### **Symbolic Function**

Thakur's well again has been used symbolically. It symbolizes the power structure which makes the *swarnas* privileged and the dalits the have-nots. Gangi's attempt at drawing a *lota* of water from the well symbolizes her desire to get equal share in power. Her *lota* thus becomes a symbol of her accumulated awareness. Jokhu's drinking of stinking water is not merely an act performed by Jokhu alone but a potent way to depict the humiliation and shame; oppression and torture inflicted upon all like him by the upper castes. The ending thus has much to convey.

### **Premchand among Other Writers**

Premchand perhaps concludes that in spite of the growing awareness and discontent among the dalits, they have to go a long way before they can really assert themselves. Writers like Mulk Raj Anand have always won acclaims both in India and abroad for having championed the cause of the untouchables. It is, however, writers like Premchand who sound more authentic and genuine for their first-hand experience of the problem of untouchability in India. Truly, he emerges as a genuine interpreter of the emotional angst of the oppressed.

This sympathy for the downtrodden makes a critic like Dr Nagendra acknowledge Premchand's contribution to the world of letters thus:

The most obvious quality of Premchand's literature is his unbounded sympathy. The human aspect of his personality was highly developed. The downtrodden people of India – the illiterate peasant in the village, exploited labourer in the town, victims of caste-system everywhere and the oppressed women-folk, of course, are the natural and legitimate objects of his affection. (1)

### **Any Amelioration?**

Now the question is how can the situation be ameliorated for the oppressed? The answer to this question is in no way simple but definitely possible. The prevailing power structures are to be modified if not subverted altogether. Awareness through education, both to the dalits as well as the *swarnas* is the key to it. Exclusive approach on the part of

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 7 July 2011

Ashok Verma and Gulab Singh

Deconstructing Power Structures in Premchand's "Thakur's Well"

the Dalits would lead our society nowhere. It will further aggravate the situation leading to violent clashes between different castes and classes. Perpetuation of caste as a social institution will be further strengthened on both the sides if exclusive approach is resorted to.

The *swarnas* will have to adopt a rational, humanistic approach giving due respect to the rights of the downtrodden and the dalits will have to be careful not to overdo in their endeavour to get their rights. A similar approach has to be adopted for gender oppression as well. The power structures of a gendered society would give way only by the way of “male self-deconstruction and ...female self assertion” (Samir Dayal 47). This is where education becomes important for both sections so that they can really shed their misconceptions and work towards the goal of a true egalitarian society.

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Ashok Verma  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English

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11 : 7 July 2011

Ashok Verma and Gulab Singh

Deconstructing Power Structures in Premchand’s “Thakur’s Well”



Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya, Khanpur Kalan,  
Sonipat (Haryana) -131305  
Haryana  
India  
[ashokgverma@gmail.com](mailto:ashokgverma@gmail.com)

Gulab Singh  
Dean  
Faculty of Arts and Languages  
Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya, Khanpur Kalan,  
Sonipat (Haryana) -131305  
Haryana, India  
[gulabchillar@gmail.com](mailto:gulabchillar@gmail.com)

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11 : 7 July 2011

Ashok Verma and Gulab Singh

Deconstructing Power Structures in Premchand's "Thakur's Well"