

"the shroud" by prem chand essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Prem Chand's *The Shroud* (translated from his short story *Kafan*) is a fine specimen of his realism. It places before us two of the most unappealing characters to be found in fiction: Gheesu and Madhav, a father and the son. They belong to the Chamar community. As the story moves on, the reader is told about their way of life marked by poverty and hunger, and also by their determination to do as little work as possible to get by. They have a predilection to enjoy their idleness at the cost of their personal and social responsibilities. This shows that they are not only uncaring of their own well-being but also of their family members. Budhia, Madhav's wife is central to the story as seen by the readers through the eyes of Gheesu and Madhav. At the opening of the story, she is in the throes of labour with no help at hand as the men of the house are busy in eating potatoes outside the hut. Though Budhia's piercing screams startle their hearts, yet they are least bothered for her. When Gheesu asks Madhav to be with Budhia, he answers in an irritated tone: "If she must die, then the sooner she dies the better. What is the good of my going in?" (Chand, 64)

Ever since Budhia has entered their house, she has established some kind of order in their disordered lives and strives to stroke the bellies of these two shameless wretches. Now the same woman is at their leniency, and they are waiting for her end so that they can have a sound sleep and a life free from all the worries and cares. This reminds me of the Manusmriti that grimly glorifies woman's suffering thereby exhorting a good woman to be heroic or stoic in the face of overwhelming obstacles in marital relationship. For example, in Indian society, a chaste woman is defined as one who surrenders all her needs, even her life at her master/husband's feet. Her sole task is his

worship in sleep, in dreams and when she is awake. Manu states that " a wife must remain devoted to her husband. Even though the husband is of bad character...he must be constantly worshipped...." (Manusmriti, 68) This is a mystical relationship of worship and surrender as if the husband is a god, and a wife his disciple. Spivak too views in this context: Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the " third-world woman" caught between tradition and modernization.... There is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak. (Spivak, 306-07)

In the morning Madhav enters the hut and sees that Budhia has died; " her limbs cold; her eyes elongated upwards and her body besmirched with dirt" (TS: 68). She has given birth to a still born child. Afterwards, Gheesu and Madhav begin to weep bitterly. Hearing them cry, the neighbours come to console them according to custom. Soon after, exploiting the sympathy and support of the landlord and villagers, they manage to collect about five rupees for Budhia's last rites. But again according to their nature, they show their insensible attitude as Gheesu remarks: " What a rotten custom to wrap a dead body in a new cloth, while the poor girl did not have even a rag given to her all her life time" and Madhav responds, " the cloth, too, is burnt up in the end" (TS: 69).

It seems both are trying to forestall each other. They go from one shop to another till evening and inspect several pieces of cotton and silk, but none of these meet their approval as they want to buy some cheap cloth. At the end of the story, they spend the money on food and wine rather than purchasing

the shroud for Budhia as Gheesu thinks that the same villagers will buy the shroud for her who earlier had given them money. After eating the food Gheesu speaks philosophically, " We are now satisfied, so her soul too is bound to be blessed with peace" (TS: 70). Madhav says: " O Lord, Thou knowest the secret working of everyone's heart. Be pleased to give her a place in Paradise. Our sincere prayers go forth with her. Never, indeed, have we had such a fine feast" (TS: 71). However, Madhav realizes in a drunken state that Budhia has suffered all along in her life, especially at the time of her death. But Gheesu cleverly diverts his mind with his words, "... she had luckily been released so soon from the web of the world's woe" (