



The Politics of Absence: Gender, Caste, and Subalternity in Munshi Premchand's "The Shroud"

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Abstract

Munshi Premchand's "The Shroud" ("Kafan") establishes moral disturbance mostly via the actions of Ghisu and Madhav. While the focus on Ghisu and Madhav results in the neglect of Budhiya, the focus on Budhiya and her absence from direct speech helps bring into view the formal and the political. Budhiya's presence via her work and her child and her death and her corpse help structure the story. Yet, she remains outside the story in the absence of an articulated perspective. Using social reproductive theory, along with an intersectional, Dalit feminist, and subaltern perspective, the absence of Budhiya as a speaking subject and her presence as a laboring body are analyzed. Gender, caste, and class are not problematized separately. Ghisu and Madhav occupy an inferior position in the village caste hierarchy, but their relative marginalization does not erase the unequal control of work, movement, speech, and hierarchy in the home. The absence of direct speech along with the unequal distribution of direct speech confirms the concentration of speech around the two men with Budhiya receiving none. The analysis then follows the movement of Budhiya's body from domestic work and the act of reproduction to death and the subsequent male consumption of the charity and ritual obligation she served. The shroud comes to represent much more than the dualism of poverty or ceremonial hypocrisy. Her silence is not a void. It is produced by narrative form, along with the intersecting pressures of gender, caste, poverty, and ritual. Reading this absence reveals the gendered cost of the celebrated ambiguity of the story.

Keywords: Premchand; "The Shroud"; Budhiya; narrative absence; gendered labour; caste; subalternity; intersectionality.

1. Introduction

Premchand's "The Shroud" becomes a cognitive challenge because the reader cannot pin the author down to a specific viewpoint. The men are hanging out in their hut while Madhav's wife Budhiya gives birth to their child. In the process, the men are eating potatoes that they stole, reminiscing about the good days when they had a feast, and talking about work and hunger and the customs that follow these things. Budhiya and her baby die by the time morning comes. Ghisu and Madhav take the money to buy Budhiya's shroud, but use the money to buy food and alcohol instead. This story is short, but the ethical dilemmas that it raises are vaster than the length of the narrative. Irony in the response to the story is more illustrative of the socio-economic theater in which the response is situated, rather than the individual character of the response. The focus of most of the analysis has been on the two male characters. This analysis is crucial because of the way the narrative links ethics with structure. Premchand's brand of realism does not give them a free-pass, but their actions cannot be reduced to the stereotypical view of the 'poor and lazy' that is so often presented.

Ghisu and Madhav's focus can repeat focus patterns from the story. Budhiya can be included in every major event, unsanctioned to explain any. She provides sustenance to the family. She provides the crisis. She has the men go to the village. Her corpse requires the shroud. Her name gives charity. The meal is paid for with the collected charity money. Everything else remains unsaid for her. The readers know her physical state, and the movements

of her death, but never her thoughts. She is reason and cause for everything, and doesn't show any growth in her commentary or thoughts.

Budhiya is in the plot, her silence is not to be confused with unimportance. Absence in the narrative refers to the presence of a character, but the character does not represent that presence in the story. A character can be the reason for the plot, but the story does not explain the character's purpose or reason. In "The Shroud," Budhiya's silence is measured against the narration of the men. The difference between a cry and speech is important. A cry can show pain, but gives no explanation for the pain, and leaves the character unable to demand care or explain the pain.

This distinction explains the research gap. Premchand studies have explored many topics: realism, poverty, rural/urban dichotomy, peasantry, caste, social reform, and the moral contradictions of rural society (Orsini, 2004; Rai, 2002). These studies of caste and subalternism have complicated the interpretation of marginalized characters as mere examples of individual failures. Nevertheless, less analytical focus has been given to the void left by Budhiya's absence when compared to the analysis of Ghisu and Madhav and the symbolism of the shroud. One-dimensional interpretations, which consider Budhiya as a mere victim, do advance a certain degree of sympathy to the analysis, but not a fully developed one. The question is more centered on the transformation in the discourse, where the narrative of a woman's labor and death is recast in the vocabulary of men, while her perspective is fully silenced.

This argument necessitates an intersectional approach. Gender is insufficient to explain Budhiya's victimization as the family also experiences exclusion, hunger and a lack of basic social services. Caste and poverty also are insufficient because the men have forms of social and verbal mobility that are denied to Budhiya. According to Crenshaw, intersectionality tackles the analytic void that is created when systems of power are regarded in isolation (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). In India, Rege's Dalit feminist standpoint also critiques the blind approaches to caste and gender (Rege, 1998). Ghisu and Madhav can be placed in these approaches because of their social subordination, but it does not justify the masculine entitlement to the household.

The article advances three claims. One claim argues that Budhiya's silence should be interpreted as a formal structure, not a missing detail. Another claim states that her hidden work and suffering show that the household work vital for survival does not give the worker any authority. The final claim states that her shroud converts her death into a resource that is both a ritual and an economy that is under men's control. The focus of these claims is not to come up with an imagination frame for Budhiya. Giving Budhiya imagined thoughts would replace one form of mediation for another. The focus is now on understanding the boundaries of representation. This means understanding what the narrative shows, what it conceals, and how this impacts the way people judge morality.

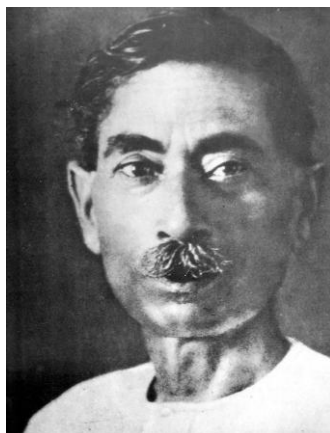
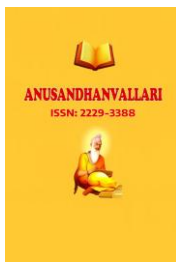


Figure 1. Munshi Premchand



2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The study is mainly based on close reading. The main text is the English version of “The Shroud” in M. Asaduddin’s edition of Premchand’s collected short fiction (Premchand, 2018). The analysis focuses on narrative voice and focalisation, as well as direct speech and reported action, including physical description and spatial separation, as well as the movement and flow of money and objects. I pay special attention to the hut and the village, the contrast of Budhiya’s wails to the men’s speech, and the changing of her body from being a functional body of labor in the household to a body that is a corpse of ritual. I refrain from using any contemporary statistics to discuss the labor market or the poverty level. I will try to answer the social questions the story poses through literary and critical theory, rather than using a fictional household as a case in the social sciences.

A brief summary of the counts of direct speech in a dialogue helps in the understanding of the arrangement of a narrative. A turn is counted when a named speaker begins a new unit of direct speech, and the collective speech is counted as one turn. Based on the segmentation of the working English text, Ghisu has 27 direct speech turns, Madhav has 22, the landlord has 1, 1 turn is accounted for the collective song, and Budhiya has none. According to the translator’s interpretation, punctuation, and editorial segmentation, the total may change, so the count is not regarded as evidence and is of limited use without detailed examination. The single speech of the landlord is powerful because of his status and property. The numerous speeches of the men do not give them equal status in the village. The count shows the distinction between the characters who have the ability to provide logic and articulations to the reason of their actions, and the character, who in the absence of speech, expresses her suffering only through physical sounds and representation.

Feminist literary criticism is the first framework established here. The article considers domestic and reproductive labor as part of the narrative economy of the story. Feminist critiques of social reproduction argue that the activities and tasks of cooking, cleaning, shopping, caring, giving birth to and sustaining everyday life, are seen as natural, and not as social or as necessary work (Federici, 2012; Fraser, 2016; Mies, 1986; Molyneux, 1979). These texts will not be used to make a labor economics case out of “The Shroud.” Their relevance is in literature: they will help elucidate the work that is essential to the plot, but that is not represented in the narrative; that is, Budhiya’s labor of grinding grain, cutting grass, arranging food, and also carrying a pregnancy, creates the material circumstances that make possible the speech of Ghisu and Madhav.

The distinction of labor and recognition is of particular importance here. In a patriarchal household, work does not confer power. Walby’s account of patriarchy suggests that in an interconnected system of household work, paid work, culture, and the state, and in all social domination of the genders, Walby’s account of Patriarchy suggests that Gender Domination works through interconnected sites of household production, paid work, culture, and the State (Walby, 1990). In Budhiya’s Premchand’s story, Budhiya’s work makes the household production stable, but she does not have control over the time, resources, and movement of the household. The narrative emphasizes her usefulness most clearly when that usefulness has ended. The death of Budhiya makes the household acknowledge the loss of her work, but the recognition is too late to turn into care.

The second basis is intersectionality. Crenshaw created the idea to illustrate how experiences developed at multiple social category intersections can vanish when separate categories are examined (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). When applied to “The Shroud,” intersectionality stops us from viewing Budhiya as just a poor woman or just a woman from a caste-marginalised family. Her position is the outcome of domestic expectations, reproductive vulnerability, hunger and caste, and dependence on the village’s social hierarchy. The theory also stops reverse simplification, where caste and class marginality of Ghisu and Madhav erase the power they maintain in relation to Budhiya.

This is where Dalit feminist theory comes in. Rege argues that the experiences of Dalit women cannot be collapsed into an allembicing category of women or into caste politics that are focused on the experiences of men (Rege, 1998). Paik’s research on the history of Dalit women’s education shows that discrimination can be both

institutional and personal, and can occur in the combination of both caste and gender (Paik, 2014). Guru's critique of Indian social sciences also raises the issue of who has the right to create knowledge and whose experiences are transformed to be the subject of knowledge (Guru, 2002; Guru & Sarukkai, 2012). These issues are especially significant in relation to Budhiya, as the narrative of the story is able to present Budhiya's experiences, but does not grant her the right to an authoritative narrative of her experiences.

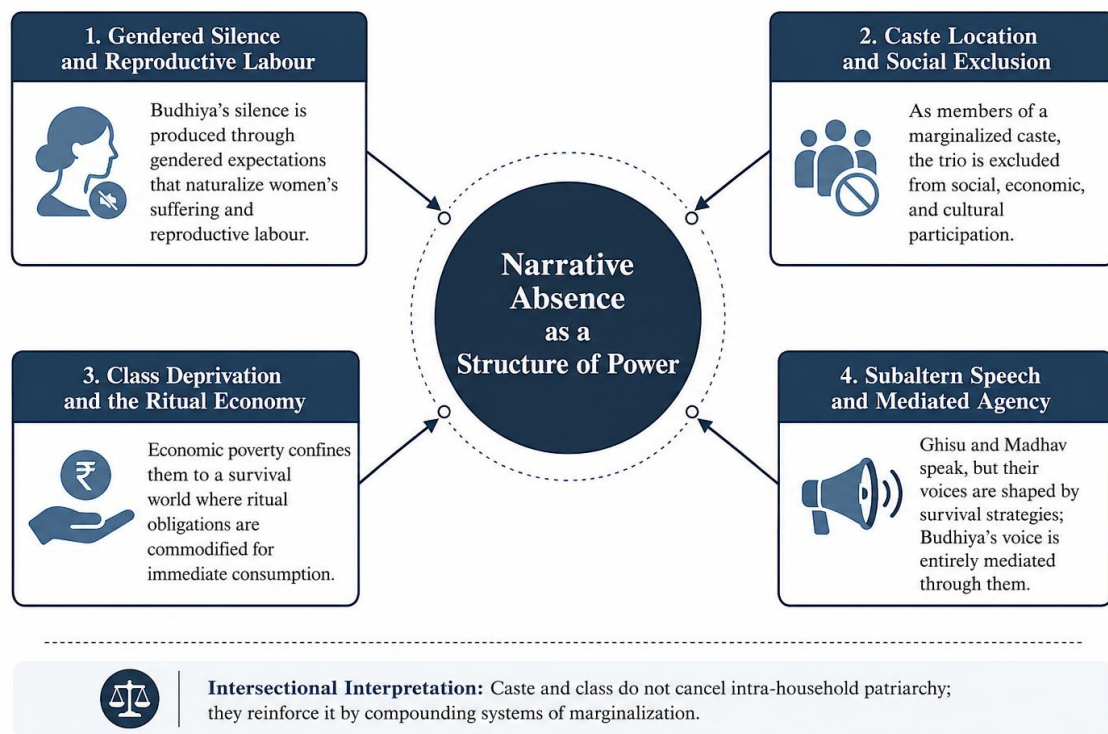


Figure 2. Conceptual framework for reading narrative absence

The third pillar is Subaltern Studies. Guha focused on the political actions of people from the less privileged classes that were ignored by elite historiography (Guha, 1982). Spivak's query "Can the subaltern speak?" focuses on the contexts in which speech is acknowledged and the concern that intellectual representation may echo the silencing that they are trying to address (Spivak, 1988, 1999). Budhiya's 'speech' is an illustration of her consciousness and cannot be replaced by her confident representation. The 'speech' is mediated. There are many layers that separate her bodily existence from any conclusions that we may make about her experiences. These layers include the narrator, male characters, the village, the translator and the critic.

The theoretical framework therefore joins four elements: Reproductive labor and caste placement involve social exclusion. There are also connections evident between poverty and ritual obligation, as well as between subaltern speech and mediated agency. The focus of this framework is narrative absence, as form is where these forces are most evident. The narrative in question does not provide separate examples of caste, class, and gender. It provides examples through the organization of space, voice, time, and things. The framework also maintains the narrative's ambivalence. It does not simplify Ghisu and Madhav into two-dimensional villains and it does not simplify their taking of the shroud into uncomplicated acts of resistance. Their actions reveal the social order's hypocrisy, but this is made possible through the social order's possession of Budhiya's death.



3. The Politics of Narrative Absence

The story hierarchy is spatially illustrated in the opening scene. Budhiya is in the hut giving birth. Ghisu and Madhav are outside by the fire. This spatial division is more than just design. The inner space of the hut contains the pain of childbirth and the reproductive risk and labor that support the family unit, while the outer space contains food, conversation, and memories and male camaraderie. The men hear Budhiya, but the narrative is with them. The cries of pain are passing the walls, but her perspective is not. The hut then, is both a shelter and a cage, hiding the woman in labor from the public and social world and separating the pain from the world in which it could be resolved.

Premchand's opening description condenses Budhiya's experience into the bodily phrase "*writhing with pain*" (Premchand, 1936/2020, section 1a). The phrasing emphasizes the pain without showing the awareness: the reader finds a body in distress but does not find the woman's explanation of that distress. Premchand does not show the men to be completely ignorant of the situation. They wonder if it is their turn to go in, and they deliberate on the possibility of finding someone to help. Their delay is due to both hunger and a lack of trust. All three men expect the others will eat more of the potatoes if no one is watching. In this case, a lack of sufficient food is causing obligation to turn into competition, and the possession of food is more important than the obligation to help. This line of thinking is socially more important than the other things mentioned, but is more applicable to the men. The labor of Budhiya is treated as something that is a part of her and therefore something that must be endured by herself. The men are able to discuss her condition without having to be part of the space in which she is suffering.

Madhav asks, "*What's the use of going to see?*" (Premchand, 1936/2020, section 1a). The option evaluates the possibility for care in terms of utility. His capability to describe neglect is in stark contrast to Budhiya's / her inability to describe pain in verbal terms. Ghisu and Madhav are given a variety of mental and verbal activities in the story. They remember, add, make jokes, hurl accusations, speculate, form ideas, and imagine what comes next. Though they often engage in grotesque speech, it gives them personality. Budhiya is not given a comparable range of activities. The story has her working, bringing some order to the house, and helping to supplement the household food. These details give her a pragmatic value, but are given as a summary instead of a lived scene. The men's remembered feast is given more narrative time than Budhiya's. This is an example of how time and value relate. What is narrated at length becomes available for the psyche, and what is condensed remains a function.

Naming does not resolve the problem. The name "Budhiya" gives her a name from a nameless figure in the story, but does not grant her an interior. Budhiya shows up as a wife, a worker, a laboring woman, a dead mother, a corpse, and a reason for charity. There is nothing about her relations with other women, her hopes for marriage, her fears for childbirth, or her thoughts of the two men. The article does not claim the story is obligated to provide any of these. But the absence of these details does have an effect. The readers are asked to evaluate a household through male speech, while the woman who has contributed to the household's survival the most is unable to provide her own thoughts.

This structure becomes clear with the direct-speech pattern. In the working text, Ghisu and Madhav account for 49 of 51 coded turns. The landlord has one, as does the collective song, and Budhiya has none. The gap in numbers should not be interpreted but should direct focus on language diversity among characters. Ghisu speaks about many things, including labor and the social hierarchy, and Madhav speaks about more abstract things, such as fear, and about being inebriated. The landlord's speech is short and has little impact, but is backed by power, so it has some effect. Budhiya is in pain and cries, but her wails have no impact on the order of the speech. She is not recognized as a participant in the speech.

Sympathy is also influenced by the absence of direct speech. Ghisu and Madhav can explain themselves, and this can be interpreted in many ways. Budhiya's pain is mostly unsaid. Without the ability to speak, Budhiya cannot challenge the reader's moral interpretations. She is portrayed with little complexity, whereas the men are portrayed

with more complexity. This effect is counteracted by feminist close reading, which interprets the absence of the female voice as a consideration of the female voice in the overall structure of the narrative.

Gap-filling should be avoided by a responsible reading. Creating thoughts for Budhiya would provide a voice to our imagination that the text lacks. Here, Spivak's caution about representation helps: by claiming to have clear access to a subaltern thought, the critic can imitate the reproducing of silencing (Spivak, 1988). It is not about retrieving a genuine voice, which is concealed behind the text. It is to illustrate the text that situates Budhiya in the middle of the material deeds and on the outskirts of the verbal power. Her silence is critical as it is structured, repeated and is needed for the narrative that is least privileged for the others.

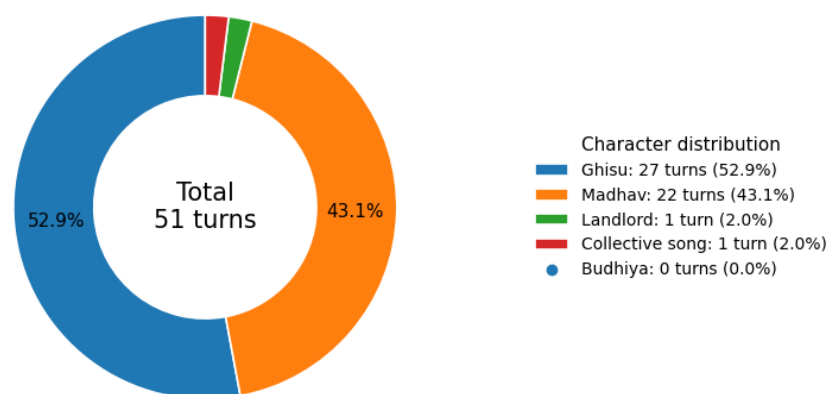


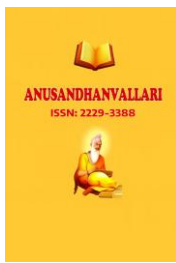
Figure 3. Distribution of direct-speech turns in “The Shroud”

Note. The count is a descriptive aid based on dialogue segmentation in the working English text; translation and punctuation may alter the exact number of turns.

4. Gendered Labour, Reproduction, and Domestic Survival

Labour brings out Budhiya's character in a broader sense. Her contribution extends beyond a single task or even a single payment. She completes a multitude of tasks ranging from grinding grain, obtaining flour, cutting grass, to organizing and performing the daily tasks necessary for the household to function. This kind of labour is physically and mentally exhausting, however it is unobtrusive and unnoticeable. It is mostly reported as a background task, rather than something that is the main focus of the work. Federici and Mies explain that work that is necessary to maintain everyday life is often assumed to be a duty of women and is therefore separated from work that is recognized socially (Federici, 2012; Mies, 1986). “The Shroud” puts this to text: Budhiya's work is vital for the functioning of the household, while the narrative is more focused on the men's refusal to perform work.

The contrast is important because it changes how we interpret idleness. The irregular labour of Ghisu and Madhav has often been the focal point of the story's economy. Budhiya's regular labour provides insight into another economy of the same household. This labour partially compensates for the men's refusal to participate in full-time work. The family's survival is the result of a transfer of responsibility. However, the person carrying out this work does not gain control over the benefits of this work (food, money, or care). The work that Budhiya does creates a dependence on her, however it does not create a sense of responsibility toward her. The later statement “*She whose earnings these are has died*” (Premchand, 1936/2020, section 3c) makes this appropriation explicit. Even in death, the distribution, consumption, and conversion of earnings (which men feel is some form of moral credit) can identify Budhiya.



Childbirth contributes to this imbalanced system. Reproductive labor is framed as a private bodily experience that occurs without prior preparation, nourishment, medical care, or even care from other women. Ghisu and Madhav are left to wait outside, and the village only springs into action after a death occurs. The narrative reveals a stark contrast between the care extended to the living and the care and/or respect extended to the dead. While Budhiya receives no planned social care during her labor, the dead Budhiya receives an immediate and socially recognized ritual claim. Fraser's analysis of the contradiction between economic systems and the work of care serves to elaborate: societies rely on the work of care to sustain life and yet constantly devalue the work of care (Fraser, 2016). In Premchand's narrative, the contradiction is not represented through the absence of numbers, but through the absence of time. It is only after care is rendered useless that recognition is granted.

Illustration is the key to this representation. Budhiya's body, prior to death, is laboring: it performs work to procure food for and sustain the household, and it carries a child. During the act of labor, the body becomes a site of externalized suffering. Post death, the body becomes an object of external gaze and ritual control. The transition is jarring, for the narrative does not restore personhood between the stages. The laboring woman becomes a corpse, and the corpse becomes a social obligation. The woman's social identity transforms into what others are obligated to do with her body.

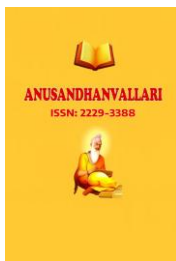
Feminist literary criticism shows how the story differentiates between work and memory. Ghisu's memory of the feast is detailed, rich, and full of pleasure. Budhiya's memory of work is short and compressed. The imbalance in memory is intentional. Memory gives Ghisu a private relationship with plenty and a connection with the past. Budhiya's work gives her no memory or relationship with the past. She is remembered mostly by her function. This narrative structure makes male appetite reflective and female work a means of subsistence. An intersectional perspective stops the argument from being a broad account of all women's domestic work. Budhiya's lack of memory is worsened by her poverty and being of lower caste. A woman from a higher caste household would still be under patriarchal control, however, the material risk would be less severe considering she would have a greater means to help. A man of the same caste would also experience public degradation and economic hardship, however, he would not experience the same confinement and control. Intersectionality provides the specific context of suffering.

5. Caste, Poverty, and the Problem of Subaltern Representation

Any reading of Budhiya must be sensitive to the caste and class position of the household. Ghisu and Madhav are among the lower echelons of the village. They rely on irregular work from the better-off and are subject to a social stereotype that associates caste, poverty, and the amoral. Ambedkar critiques caste by explaining that social hierarchy is not merely the result of unequal remuneration, but is characterized by assessed social worth and restricted interactions between the unequal groups (Ambedkar, 2014). Dumont's discussion of hierarchy and his critics also illustrate how caste is beyond social structure and the market (Dumont, 1980). The social and economic degradation of the men cannot be explained solely by the absence of wealth.

Premchand's narrator complicates the village's assessment. The story shows that within the village order, hard work and discipline do not equate to financial security. Ghisu and Madhav's refusal to do regular work can be seen as a response to the system that equates work with no dignity. Omvedt's analysis of the Dalit movement fits here because it locates the responsiveness within the long-standing systems of exclusion, and not random acts of misconduct (Omvedt, 1994). The behavior of the men is not resistance, but the story within the social order of exploitation, makes the men's refusal of work comprehensible.

Structural explanation cannot lead to moral immunity. Families have internal hierarchies. Even though all family members are subordinated, Ghisu and Madhav are able to go out into the public domain, approach the landlord, collect alms, go to the market, buy liquor, and talk as much as they like. While she's alive, Budhiya stays in the hut, and when she's dead, she only then becomes significant in the public domain. The effects of shared caste marginality are different for men and women. At this point, I think it is important to use the Dalit feminist



standpoint of Rege, as it denies that the experience of caste is only represented by men (Rege, 1998). The issue is also about representation. Premchand writes a story about a community placed outside his caste, and the story has been praised for showing the rural caste system as brutal. But, at the same time, the critical focus has to be how a community that is marginalized is represented. Guru and Sarukkai's debate on experience and theory has been helpful because it fails to give a quick answer to the relationship of representation and lived experience (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012). Literary representation can challenge the prevailing assumptions, and can also sustain the same forms of prejudice. In "The Shroud," the men have the privilege of having lengthy dialogue and having ironic complexity, whereas Budhiya is more completely expressed through others.

Subalternity is a relation to recognized agency, not merely to absence or poverty. Ghisu and Madhav talk a lot, but their words carry little meaning in the larger scheme of things in their village. They need to act out their sorrow and dependency in order to receive money. The landlord's single act carries a lot of weight because it is backed by his money and social capital. Budhiya is again in a different situation. Like the men, she does not have the long but ineffective speech, and like the landlord, she does not have the short but effective speech. People hear her suffering, but no one interprets her pain as a demand that requires a response.

Spivak helps understand the distinction between the utterance and the response. The main question is not whether a subordinated person has the capacity to speak, but whether the existing systems and modes of representation can support that speech without distorting it to serve the purpose of others (Spivak, 1988). Budhiya's silence is the most profound because in this story we do not even have the scene of a failed demand. Her screams are translated by men to convey messages, and the meaning is decided outside of her. It is left to the men to interpret her wishes, her destination, and how they can benefit her.

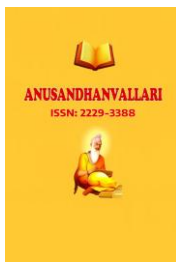
Mohanty warns against creating a singular 'Third World Woman.' Applying this on Budhiya, she must not become an eternal symbol of the passive Indian woman. Budhiya must be located both historically and textually. Budhiya belongs to a certain impoverished family in Premchand's rural India. She is part of caste and gender systems but she is not to be subsumed by them. Lack of detail about her life allows for the creation of a universal identity about her. It is not the 'permission' to do so.

Budhiya must also be located in the victim category with caution. Although Budhiya is victimized by both neglect and representational erasure, victimization must not erase her labor. The little bit of detail that is provided in the story, Budhiya demonstrates a lot of skill, endurance, and responsibility. Her agency is not absent, but her agency is constrained. She demonstrates agency through the sustenance of the family. Although the narrative does not allow her to speak, or to make decisions, she is still constrained. Centering the narrative on her absence does not allow us to construct a complete and heroic figure. Instead, it demonstrates the conditions under which agency is restrained.

6. The Dead Woman and the Political Economy of Ritual

Budhiya's death reconfigures the social positioning of her body. In her lifetime, there is no structured response to hunger, pregnancy, or childbirth. In contrast, when she is dead, the village feels a responsibility. The shroud, which belongs to a known ritual, allows Ghisu and Madhav to legitimately ask for money. The contrast reveals a moral economy in which caring for the living is more difficult to organize compared to the public display of care for the dead. Charity manifests itself when it is accompanied by a visible ritual and when the expected use of the donation is clear to the donor.

The shroud, then, is a social and a cloth sign. It has no use for the dead body once the cremation is done, a fact that Ghisu and Madhav take advantage of continuously. However, its ritual value is derived from its uselessness. The cloth denotes respectability, mourning, and social order. It enables the village to acknowledge Budhiya, the woman whose death must be covered, despite the fact that her life was full of exposure to risk and toil. The shroud is a symbol of the community's postponed compassion.



The act of collecting money reveals different dynamics of power. Ghisu and Madhav act as if they have no rights over resources and thus have to beg the landlord and villagers. With the landlord's gift legitimizing the collection, the rest donate in the spirit of charity, compelled by the hierarchy to 'volunteer' resources. Beverley's analysis of subalternity fits in here, since usually unrepresented subjects are forced to be visible in channels dominated by institutions or sponsors (Beverley, 1999). In the narrative, the men make Budhiya visible by claiming the right to her funeral.

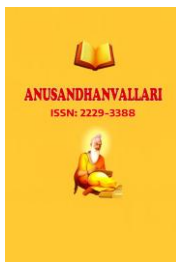
She loses control over the money collected in her name. This episode clearly demonstrates her gendered powerlessness; the dead woman gives value to the collection, while men decide how to spend it. Ghisu and Madhav spend the expected shroud money on food and liquor. Their act reveals the contradiction of spending money on something that will be consumed by fire, but also serves to reinforce the unequal control of household resources. This decision was made over Budhiya's body, and was justified with arguments about what she would actually want. Budhiya's silence allowed the men to rationalize her consent to their decision. Madhav imagines Budhiya asking "*why we didn't give her a shroud*" (Premchand, 1936/2020, section 3c). The question exposes the ethical gap intoxication suppresses. Budhiya's anticipated future speech is still voiced by Madhav and is answered by Ghisu, so even fantasy accountability is still in the hands of men.

The liquor-shop scene is viewed as the most radical example within the narrative. The men do not conform to the village standards, and use ritual money to buy something for their body. The men are starving, and it makes their meal understandable. There is a lack of food that causes the father-son relationship to become strained in the beginning of the narrative. There is a brief period of abundance at the end of the narrative. Their actions shine a light on a society that chooses to use their money to pay for people to die, rather than to pay for people to live. Because charity is given with an expectation, the actions of the society also demonstrate that the gift can become something else completely.

Celebrating the act as a form of pure resistance is also misguided. Resistance becomes ethically problematic when its freedom relies on the dispossession of another person. Ghisu and Madhav use money from Budhiya's death to gain pleasure, freedom, and movement. Their rejection of ordinary ritual is in contradiction to the value of her labor. The protest is not accountable, and it challenges the village while sustaining the inequality. The men's ideas of Budhiya's afterlife complicate the situation. They think she will go to heaven, and that their satisfaction will somehow honor her. This kind of thinking turns appropriation into positive reinforcement. Because Budhiya is silent, her supposed wishes can be used to justify any action. This connects back to Spivak. The representation of the subalterns is a projection of the speakers' will. Here, the woman's silence serves male self-justification.

The last song and dance finalize the transformation. Budhiya's suffering has gone through many different forms, each moving farther away from her experience. This transformation is more aesthetic than economic as the story concludes with the transformation of the woman whose death made it possible, into an aesthetically pleasing representation of performative intoxication. The title can be understood by two omissions. The first is the purchased shroud's literal absence. The second is the absence of care, nourishment, safety, and voice. The absence of the cloth is noticeable due to the broken ritual expectation. However, Budhiya's life was already marked by more significant omissions. Ghisu and Madhav see one contradiction. The dead receive a ceremonial object that the living cannot use. The feminist critique adds another contradiction: even the critique of the ritual can reinforce the omissions of the woman in whose name the ritual is conducted.

The double structure illustrates the story's persistent discomfort. The villagers' charity does little good. The landlord's authority looks down upon. The men's refusal is both understandable and exploitative. The solutions all fall short. With this unresolved moral paradox, Premchand's irony allows some criticism of the social order while not sanctifying social deprivation. The absence of Budhiya deepens the paradox, as the reader has no means to check their interpretation against her judgment. The silence of Budhiya is the backdrop upon which the conflicting moral strivings of men play out.



7. Conclusion

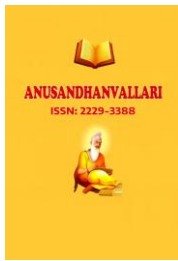
A reading of “The Shroud” that puts Budhiya at the center alters the ethical distribution of the story. While Ghisu and Madhav are still necessary characters, they no longer hold the full scope of meaning of poverty, defiance, or ritual. Her labor sustains the family. The lack of care is evident in her childbirth. Her death brings charity to the village, and her corpse is the foundation of male spending. She is the main character in the material logic of the story, and she is not present in the order of the spoken. Moreover, Prechand’s narration on Budhiya’s act to civilize Gheesu and Madho and working for them shows the way she is portrayed as a voiceless force of resistance against patriarchy.

Absence is not the same as emptiness. This is the combination of the structure of the story, gender, caste, and different levels of inequality and poverty. Feminism of social reproduction speaks to the invisibility of valuable labor. Intersectional and Dalit feminism argue that within a marginalized family, the combination of caste holdings and patriarchy must be analyzed together. Subaltern theory explains that the issue is not how few words a character is given. The real issue is the context in which the character finally gets to speak and it is agreed that they have a right to do so.

The analysis aims to maintain the ambivalence of the story. While Ghisu and Madhav are denied dignity by a certain caste and class system, at the same time, they possess power over Budhiya. As for misuse of the funeral donation, the ritualistic charity is hypocritical, and it is dependent on their control of the identity of a dead woman. So, while they exploit Budhiya, there is some level of resistance. It’s essential to consider poverty and gender or class and deprivation, instead of just one or the other; it would create a contradiction. We shouldn’t try to ‘fix’ the silence of Budhiya and give her a voice. What is more appropriate is to understand how the system sees her work only as function and her suffering only as sound. The strongest critique of the story is not about the men failing to buy a shroud. It asks, how can a woman work and suffer and die before society gives her value? “The Shroud” remains intense and powerful, because it exposes this recognition and shows how it is appropriated so quickly.

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