

The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English
UGC Approved- (Sr. No. 62952)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2017.2.4.36>

The Poet and the Map of Hadoti in Premji Prem's Poetic Structure *Mhari Kavitanan'*

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Abstract

Late Premji Prem was a regional poet of the Hadoti belt, geographically comprising Kota, Bundi, Baran and Jhalawar districts of today. Nature is benign here with scenic beauty; it has mineral wealth and legendary historical monuments, palaces and fortresses. Premji Prem, as a poet of the masses, concentrated on the underdog- the Adivasis, the downtrodden and the Dalits. He was not a poet of the bourgeois and aristocratic elite of Hadoti. He showed his major concern with the suffering, backward, hardworking untouchables. He exposed the diabolic orthodox psyche of the upper castes of Hadoti. Literature and its fictional spaces might serve as a fine example (but one could also think of soundscapes or emotions). Doubtlessly, the realm of fiction is defined by different 'rules' to the geography that cartography customarily addresses.

Keywords- *Legendary, Cartography, Hybrid, Foliage*

The main focuses of 'literary geography' are the manifold interactions between real and imaginary geographies in various literary genres. What happens when the 'literary world' and the real world meet or intersect? Which boundaries should be shown: one, both, or a hybrid real world / literature world demarcation? A new literary geography should first of all follow some essential thoughts, which outline something like a philosophy of this emerging field. Barbara Piatti in his article focused how 'the geography of fiction must be characterised as a rather imprecise geography. Additionally, it has to be pointed out, that there are virtually unlimited possibilities in literature - in literature you can create any space, hence there's the necessity to break these possibilities down into a coherent system....The explicit goal is to visibly render the specific geography of literature, but in a most sensible way, by paying respect to the logic of fictional space. In doing so, some parts of the geography of literature

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may prove to be un-mappable. This is a different geography to map, requiring the exploration and development of different mapping techniques.'

Premji Prem is the authentic poetic voice of Hadoti with unassuming spontaneity and naturalness of the Hadoti idiom. The poet has a larger concern with the stark realities of the marginalised communities in the Hadoti region. The translated version has luxuriance of images which stimulate our thinking. They are rather a fodder for thought. The poet takes resort to certain objects- Neem, elephant, *kareed* (tree), pigeons, roots, *pungee*, conch...- which acquire major symbolic significance. In other words: as a map reader you're able to see immediately where real and fictional space overlap.

The insignificance of human existence has been portrayed through the image of *Kareed*- a tropical tree- generally sighted in Hadoti along the banks of the Chambal. It is sustained by the moist earth. The *Kareed* prides itself of its pods, sprawling branches and thin foliage, oblivious of the fact that it is sustained by the mother earth. (*Grip*, p9) The purity of character to achieve sweet ends is stressed through the imagery of local dishes viz. sour butter milk (खाटीछयाछ) and sweet porridge (मीठीराबड़ी). By mixing the two, one can make a mess of it. It is the cook and not the cauldron which is to be blamed for offending the taste buds in the mouth. (*Character*, p5) The poem 'Heap' is specifically relevant as India is gutted in the fire of communal intolerance. The poet appeals to the intelligentsia to and meet the tormenter eye to eye:

Rub out the label

Writ large on your forehead

When the anti social elements set fire to the hut of the poor, it is easier to flee the site. The poet wills that instead of fleeing, one must resist and confront the tormenter- sooner the better- and the tables will be turned. The poet stands for revolution rather than cowardly escape. (*Heap*, pp7-8) The poet is dead against sycophants who amass wealth, power and honour. Down with sycophancy, his heart goes out for the downtrodden who must belch out their fury of generations against the appeasing lords. In 'Identity', he sympathises with the primitives and aborigines who live in abject poverty in God forsaken non-descript villages situated on the banks of the Chambal, while there is a talk about one hundred smart cities. The complacent nature of the chained and bowed Adivasis has been likened to a chained monkey dancing to the tune of a juggler (*Asset*, pp12-13) or a cobra dancing to the tune of the charmer. (*Pungee*, pp89-91)

The wrath of the generations of the have-nots subsisting on the crumbs doled out by the haves has acquired volcanic proportions and eruption is awaited anytime. A mild satirical comment on 'Clean Ganga Project' is voiced in the poem 'Company'. The poet states that cumulative pollution must be checked first. He suggests

To control the palms

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And the fingers

That mix

Betel nut with tobacco (*Company*, pp21-22)

The people of Hadoti are addicted to चूना, जर्दा, सुपारी mixture and consume it orally several times a day. It is an instant preparation by crushing tobacco and elemental calcium with the thumb on one's palm. It is like shovelling coal into a furnace.

The poet has no faith in the village *Panchas* who meet and dole injustice through corrupt practices. (*God*, pp25-26) The have-nots are now fed up with their monotonous services to the haves since time immemorial. Now it is high time they overthrew the drudgery and worked for their welfare. This is underlined in the poem '*Wicker Gate*' (टाटी) The professional bards-ढोली, चारण, भट- are tired of beating drums and singing sycophantic songs to the oligarchs. They would rather play their own tambourines now. The poet notices the vanity of sophisticated travellers of super deluxe buses. Such travellers are averse to talking to other passengers. They have plugged earphones listening to Bollywood music. They are indifferent to other fellow passengers. It is a meaningless superiority snobbery.

The poet does not endure passive living without power. He condemns the contemptible practice of the scavengers to feed themselves upon the leftovers of the platters of the last night's feast of upper class. It is high time they abandoned it. At times bitter criticism of the malaise of society is essential:

Disease is

Cured by

Neem sprouts

Not by sugar candy (*Sprouts*, p38)

Like a Neem tree, a true critic must not leave his bitterness though,

The woodcutter

May keep hitting at it

Infinitely but it won't give up (*Times*, p42)

One must not surrender or compromise one's quintessential integrity:

Never abandon

Your genetic character

Even when

The axe

Becomes blunt (*Times*, p43)

The politicians' promise of '*Achche Din*' echoes in the poem '*Moonlight*'. The moon appears and disappears again and again but the poet fails to see the moonshine. Dr. Samuel Johnson once remarked that politics is the last refuge of the scoundrels. That is why the poet finds more platforms (चून्तरा) than trees in the village (*Politics*, p47). There are apparently

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more leaders than followers. The poet appeals to the masses not to close their eyes on the sight of a crow:

The day
A pigeon
Will have courage
To lunge towards
A crow
And clasp its claws
The crow
Will die without having to be
Killed. (*Annihilation*, p56)

A great strength is needed to go against the current.

The poet points out how the communal polarisation has reared its head in terms of several temples which have been erected castewise. It is a challenge to the upper caste Hindus. There is a castewise proliferation of gods and godfathers. Every caste has a separate temple. This phenomenon of polarisation seems to have no end since the number of castes is large enough in India:

Prolification of Gods
Brought no good omen
Walls have come up
In streets
One village
Split into seventeen. (*Now*, p58)

The poet has acquired Kabiresque wisdom looking to the social and religious forces at work in contemporary society to endanger national solidarity.

He voices the regional sentiment regarding the scanty rainfall. Proper care for water resources is a must for agricultural production and civilian life:

Water respects
Those
Who respect water. (*Wait*, p61)
Before composing
Song
It's important
To respect
Letters. (*Association*, p62)

The poem '*Fodder*' hints at class struggle. In case the proletariat are deprived of their legitimate human rights, they may grow aggressive against the bourgeois class. The poem '*Culture*' posits the need for the ruling class to patronise the agricultural sector. Then alone, the bucolic culture of the region could be preserved.

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The false notions of the purity and superiority of the elite are mocked at in the poems 'Untouchable' and 'Trail'. For reasons apparent, the class of untouchables is indispensable to them. The poet is being Emily Dickinsonian in visualising another untouchable in nature- the grasshopper (रामजीकाघोड़ा). Emily Dickinson looked with equal wonder and delight in the poem 'A Bird Came Down the Walk'. The bird has the coyness of a woman while the grasshopper the strength of a horse.

The poet appreciates literary tradition. In his poem 'Painting' he identifies himself with a specimen of Fad (फड) painting. In Hadoti there is a tradition of Fad painting. Fads were large canvases on cloth / wooden planks on which a panorama of marching army, wedding processions, racing animals, scenes of epics could be painted. Famous painter M F Hussain began his career as an apprentice in Fad painting. It is the opposite of miniature painting. Both the styles prevailed in the medieval paintings and got established as separate genres. The poet inspires the mediocres in 'Art' to follow the principle of Karma Yoga to change their fate:

Do try to become
The one
Who gives away
Pearl necklaces. (Art, p117)

'Pilgrimage One' and 'Pilgrimage Two' deliver the message that the poet must be the son of the soil. He must evolve a sense of belonging to his region. It is the kind of sentiment which Nissim Ezekiel expressed in the poem 'Enterprise': 'Home is where we have to gather grace' and according to PremjiPrem it is a pilgrimage to reach home:

I reached
This place
Without any
Guidance. (Pilgrimage One, p 121)
Compared to
Indra's kingdom
And the palace of Indrani
My village
Is more attractive. (Village, p 123)

The poet conveys through several familiar images that he has his cultural roots in his immediate social environment. One must be trained and groomed in tradition which is indigenous. His sense of belonging is as integral as thorn to the *Kareed* tree:

Like roots
The thorns
Are glued
To the Mother Earth...

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The pods
Flowers
Leaves
All are stuck
To their own roots. (*Roots*, pp 32-33)

The poet harps on the idea of personal integrity:

I am
What I am. (*Worth*, p 50)
I can't be
Bought
For ages
They are bidding
To get me
But the hammer
Hasn't fallen. (*Force*, p 51)

One of the recurrent themes of his poetry has been the hopefulness of revolutionary rise of the down trodden, untouchables and dalits. Unless the proletariat class rises in revolt, no perceptible social transformation can ever be realised. The bourgeois class prospers because the proletariat class is famished. The idea has been brought home to us through the poem 'Elephant'. The 'elephant' like the 'kareed' has become a multiple symbol in Premji Prem's poetry. The poet dwells on the hiatus between the upper caste and the lower caste. In the poem 'Untouchable', Patelji asks an untouchable to keep away from him but the untouchable retorts

I'm moving away
But remember
Even the bamboo basket
Out of which you will be
Served at the feast
Has been made
With my untouchable hands. (*Untouchable*, p 78)

It expresses the futility of the untouchability in Hadoti as elsewhere. It is a blatant abuse of labour only. The Pundit walks away with contempt seeing a drummer (ढोली) lifting water from the well, since Dholis are untouchables. The poet says:

The Pandit understands
But the village well?
How will the village well understand. (*Village Well*, p 80)

The poet specifically mentions the snake charmer who has been playing upon his *Pungee* and making the hooded cobras dance to amuse the people but it has not improved his lot:

When will Pungee

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Become a conch. (*Pungee*, p 91)

The conch here is symbolically associated with Lord Krishna's '*Panchjanya*', the blowing of which heralded the battle of Kurukshetra. The snake charmer –कालबेलिया- aspires to rennovate his destiny on war footing.

PremjiPrem's overall perspective is an aspiration of a revolution by the downtrodden, dalits, Adivasis and untouchables—the wicker basket makers, drummers, scavengers, cobblers. PremjiPrem conforms to the image of a Shavian socialist of Hadoti as an intellectual. He has very illustratively drawn the cultural images of Hadoti region.

A close study of above poems in translation reveals the regional poems have the fragrance of Indianness, individual identity, regional nature, care, concern, anxiety for humans etc. Premji has touched a wide range of emotions, contemporary dilemmas of life, search of harmony and synthesis in chaotic surroundings. Despite vagaries of emotions, it can be said that his poems are a pursuit of truth and reality that gets relevance while inconsistency in distinguishing facts is eliminated. One finds a unique continuity of sublime thoughts and untainted emotions and culture glimpses in all his poems. According to Brodhead, "regionalism's representation of vernacular cultures as enclaves of tradition insulated from larger cultural contact is palpably a fiction . . . its public function was not just to mourn lost cultures but to purvey a certain story of contemporary cultures and of the relations among them" (121). In chronicling the nation's stories about its regions and mythical origins, regional literature through its presence contribute to the narrative of region. So, regional colour and dialect are two constant features of regional writings. Regional colours need not be limited to natural description, but also includes the realistic delineation of all sensory perceptions of the geographic and social milieu including mores, folklore, the economic life of the region, all the modifications of environment; and the impact of the several classes of society upon each other.

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