

Socio-cultural and Psychological Aspects of Violence in Godan: A Study of Caste, Class and Gender

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Article Received: 04/07/2026

Article Accepted:06/08/2026

Published Online:07/08/2026

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.08.123

Abstract:

This paper explores the socio-cultural and psychological aspects of violence in Munshi Premchand's seminal novel *Godan* (1936). It argues that violence in the text is not merely physical coercion but a pervasive structural phenomenon inscribed in the intersecting hierarchies of caste, class and gender. The analysis, using Pierre Bourdieu's idea of symbolic violence with feminist and Marxist theories, shows how Premchand depicts the insidious kinds of violence that have been naturalised by societal systems and patriarchal ideology. The book takes place in the impoverished village of Belari in pre-independence Uttar Pradesh and exposes how violence is systematically reproduced through economic exploitation, caste-based discrimination, gendered subordination and internalisation of repressive norms. Through a close reading of the key characters—Hori, Dhania, Gobar, Jhunia and Selia—the paper traces the multiple registers of violence that shape their lives: the structural violence of the zamindari system, the symbolic violence of Brahminical hegemony, the domestic violence of patriarchal household relations and the psychological violence of internalised oppression. The study indicates that Premchand's realist tale is diagnostic of structural injustices, illustrating the way in which violence acts as a web of interconnected oppressions trapping individuals across caste, class and gender positions.

Keywords: violence, symbolic violence, caste, class, gender, patriarchy, Premchand, *Godan*, structural violence, peasantry

Introduction:

Munshi Premchand's *Godan* (1936), the last and most ambitious novel of the Hindi literary giant, is a colossal critique of the social, economic and political forces that ruled rural India in the twilight of colonial authority. Premchand uses the tragic fate of Hori, a farmer who wants to fulfil the sacred Hindu rite of *godan* (gift of a cow), to highlight the systematic exploitation that is woven into the fabric of Indian village life. But behind the tale of Hori's

economic despair comes a more unsettling picture: a culture filled with violence, a violence that is not always physical, not always obvious, but constantly there.

Premchand's art is his ability to capture those nuances of violence which have been normalised by patriarchal ideology and preserved by oppressive social institutions. Violence in Godan is systemic, not simply episodic. It is part of the architecture of social connections. It manifests as economic extraction by zamindars and money lenders, caste based humiliation by higher caste elites, gendered subordination within the household, and psychological internalisation of inferiority by the oppressed themselves. Violence in Godan is not an exception but a system. It is a system that Premchand lays bare through his brutal factual picture of village life.

This research contends that comprehending violence in Godan necessitates a comprehensive analytical approach that considers the intersections of caste, class and gender. The study is based on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence, feminist criticisms of patriarchy and Marxist analyses of class exploitation to investigate how Premchand's work demonstrates violence as a consequence of interdependent systems of dominance. The approach is structured around four major dimensions: the structural violence of economic exploitation; the symbolic violence of caste-based hegemony; the home and gendered violence of patriarchal interactions; and the psychological violence of internalised oppression. This thesis, via a thorough reading of the characters and their difficulties in the novel, shows how Godan offers a social critique and psychological portrayal of the personal costs of systematic injustice.

Theoretical Framework: Violence as a Physical Dimension and Beyond

To study violence in Godan, we need a theoretical framework that goes beyond common-sense understandings of violence as only physical or psychological. As Brijesh Kumar in his study of symbolic violence in the novel observes "Many of us are usually mistaken about the notion of violence when we see it to be either physical or psychological. This tendency almost obliterates many hidden forms of violence which emerge from the ruling class ideologies".

The idea of symbolic violence, from Pierre Bourdieu, is particularly valuable as an analytical tool. For Bourdieu, symbolic violence is the violence that is exercised on a social agent with his/her consent – a violence that proceeds through a misrecognition of domination as natural or normal. It is a product of symbolic capital. It operates by imposing systems of meaning that serve the interests of dominant groups but are seen as self-evident by the subordinated. In Godan, symbolic violence works through the internalisation of caste systems, the acceptance of Brahminical religious authority and the naturalisation of patriarchal standards.

This is a good complement to Bourdieu's framework because it's centred on how social structures (economic systems, political institutions, legal structures) systematically oppress

people by restricting their capacity to satisfy their basic needs. Johan Galtung and others developed this notion of structural violence. The zamindari system, the loan economy and the caste hierarchy create a reality in Godan where Hori's poverty is not an accident but a systematic effect of entrenched exploitation.

The gendered features of violence in the narrative are further illuminated through feminist theoretical viewpoints. As historians have pointed out, Premchand portrays 'those shades of violence that have been normalised by patriarchal ideology'. This normalisation happens in the everyday practices of domestic interactions, the division of labour, the regulation of women's bodies and sexuality and the refusal of women's agency.

Caste and the Site of Violence

Caste is a major axis of violence in Godan. In Premchand's story, caste defines not just social status, but also access to dignity, economic opportunity and basic humanity. Caste violence works on different levels: physical humiliation, economic exploitation, social isolation and psychological internalisation of inferiority.

Brahminical Hegemony and Symbolic Violence

The most common type of caste violence in Godan is exercised through the symbolic power of Brahminical ideology. The whole story of the novel is based around Hori's desire to give godan - the gift of a cow to a Brahmin — which is considered the highest religious virtue. But rather than an act of individual piety, this act is revealed to be a system of symbolic violence that supports Brahminical power. As one study says, 'In the caste-driven village Belari, the most virtuous act is to offer a cow to a Brahmin for it absolves the gift-giver of all his past sins'. The Brahmins undertake the rites and get the gifts. They are in a position of symbolic authority which allows them to tap the resources of the peasantry and legitimise their own domination.

The novelist condemns Sanskritized Brahminical religion as a system that fosters inequality and at the same time claims to be the defender of moral order. In Godan, the Brahmins are not portrayed as spiritual teachers, but as parasites who feed on the labour of the peasantry while establishing their own social supremacy through religious authority. This is symbolic violence in its most vicious form: the oppressed engage in their own subordination by acknowledging the legitimacy of the system that abuses them.

Dalit Oppression and Untouchability Violence

Premchand's depiction of Dalit characters in Godan exposes the harsh truth of untouchability and caste-based oppression. The story shows Dalits as victims of systemic exploitation – exploited "in all possible ways: socially, economically and physically". Selia, a Dalit woman, is a character who is in the nexus of caste and gender oppression. Her suffering at the hands of upper-caste men shows that caste violence is not simply an issue of social distance, but of the direct violation of Dalit bodies and dignity.

Godan's brutality on Dalits is both overt and implicit. Violence, when overt, encompasses physical humiliation, verbal abuse and economic exploitation. Subtle violence is present in quotidian acts of exclusion: the denial of access to public spaces, the imposition of demeaning labour, the very presumption of inferiority internalised by Dalit characters themselves. As historians have highlighted, "Premchand can be entitled as the precursor of Dalit Literature" for his realistic portrayal of "the sufferings and oppression of Dalits".

But Premchand's depiction of Dalits has also been challenged. Some detractors say that he "presented downtrodden/untouchables as idiots, insensitive and lazy". But, a deeper examination shows that Premchand "used different mode to depict the caste based society, their suffering and revolt". The limits of Dalit characters in the novel may not be caused by Premchand's bigotry but rather accurate depiction of a society in which systemic oppression has deprived Dalits of the resources and possibilities for resistance.

The Relationship between Caste and Class

Godan caste and class are inseparably intertwined. The upper castes, viz. the Brahmins, Thakurs and other dominating groups are also the propertied classes controlling land, credit and political power. The landless labourers and renters, who are the lower castes, carry the brunt of economic exploitation. This intersection is such that caste violence is also class violence. The extraction of surplus labour from the peasantry is legitimised through caste ideology, while caste supremacy is strengthened by economic dependency.

Hori is a Kurmi peasant, who is neither upper-caste nor Dalit, but in the middle of the caste hierarchy. His misery shows how caste violence functions on individuals who aren't at the bottom of the hierarchy. His place in the caste hierarchy, inferior as it is, adds to his servitude to the zamindar and the moneylender, denying him the social capital that could have allowed resistance.

Economic and Social Violence

The economic brutality in Godan is ceaseless and systemic. The novel portrays a world in which the peasants is locked into a cycle of debt, exploitation and dispossession. The zamindars, the money-lenders and the merchants form a class which survives on the labour of the peasantry and maintains its domination by economic pressure and legal manipulation.

Zamindari System and Structural Violence

The zamindari system is the principal institution through which the economic violence is committed, and Premchand presents it with an unflinching reality. The zamindars take rent, taxes and unpaid labour from the peasants, leaving them with nothing to live on. This is structural violence at its finest. A system of economic relations that systematically deprives one class of means of subsistence while enriches another.

Premchand "has stated that he believes that our social relations are determined by our economic position". It is this materialist conception of social relations which underlies

his representation of class violence. Zamindars are not just wicked people who are harsh, they are actors of a system that requires exploitation to keep itself going. The violence of the system is personified by the zamindar, Rai Saheb. His wickedness is not personal but systemic, a function of a position that allows and promotes exploitation.

The Debt Economy:

Godan's debt economy is a mechanism of systematic brutality. Moneylenders lend peasants money at usurious rates, knowing that peasants will not be able to pay them back. The debt becomes an instrument of control: the peasant who owes money must work for the creditor, sell crops at unfavourable prices, and accept any terms the creditor dictates. This debt economy is the engine of Hori's fall into poverty, a trap of borrowing and repayment from which he can never escape.

The cruelty of debt is economic as well as psychological. All sorts of psychological assault -- the constant fear of owing money, the humiliation of not being able to repay, the loss of dignity that comes with dependency -- are recorded with terrible realism by Premchand. Hori's desperation, his concessions, his loss of self-respect--all are consequences of a system that utilises debt as a form of control.

The Justice Failure

In Godan, the judicial system is not a shield against violence, but a weapon of it. The courts, the police and the legal apparatus serve the propertied classes. When Hori is falsely accused. When his property is seized. When he is harassed by the law. These are not failures of justice, but expressions of a system in which justice is available only to those who can afford it. The violence of the legal system is the brutality of a state that privileges property above humans, that imposes the demands of creditors over the needs of the poor.

Gender and Violence Against Women

Violence in Godan has gendered aspects that are widespread and rooted in the social order. Premchand exposes "those nuances of violence that have been normalised by patriarchal ideology", exposing how patriarchy operates through the quotidian practices of home interactions, the control over women's bodies and labour and the denial of women's agency.

Domestic Violence and the Normalisation of Abuse

Domestic violence in Godan is shown as a regularity—so regular it has become normalised. Women are subjected to physical, verbal and emotional violence in the home. The violence is not extraordinary; it is routine, part of the fabric of everyday existence. As one research states "domestic violence against women is depicted as a routine occurrence".

The character of Jhunia, a young lady who becomes connected with Gobar, undergoes domestic violence that leaves her badly damaged. Gobar 'makes Jhunia the victim of his physical and sexual abuse' and her experience of violence'makes her retreat inside herself and behave, 'outwardly, little more than an automaton'. This portrayal of withdrawal

lays bare the destructive effect of assault on women's psyches. Jhuniah's metamorphosis from a living, feeling being to an automaton is proof of the harm done to her.

The brutality that women undergo in Godan is not only physical. This includes verbal abuse, economic hardship, denial of autonomy, and the continual threat of violence that controls women's behaviour. In the story women are supposed to be humble, obedient and self-sacrificing. If they do not meet these standards they are punished. This is psychological violence. It is the brutality of constant monitoring, constant judgement, constant limitation.

Gender and Caste Intersection

The assault against Dalit women in Godan is especially savage, showing the nexus between caste and gender oppression. Dalit women are physically and verbally abused by their spouses, lovers or upper caste males. Dalit women are sexually objectified by caste-Hindu men who see them as available for their pleasure. They are publically dishonoured, economically unpaid and systematically hounded.

Selia's character represents this multidimensional oppression. She is a Dalit woman, placed at the bottom of the caste and gender hierarchy. Her misery is doubled: as a Dalit she is exploited, and as a woman she is exploited, both by the brutality of caste and by the violence of patriarchy. As one academic points out, 'Dalit women are subjected to physical and verbal abuse by their husbands, lovers or upper caste males'. They are "alienated at three levels - caste, class and gender positions which makes the violence against them unbridled".

Women's Resistance and Boundaries

The women of Godan are not only passive victims of the widespread abuse they endure. Dhania, Hori's wife, is a character of a kind of resistance that is forceful but also confined. Dhania's wrath is, in the words of Lalita Pandit Hogan, "the anger of the oppressed, an anger which gives hope that the conditions of oppression will change". Dhania's rage is not just personal, it is political, a response to the systemic inequalities that govern her life. Yet Dhania's resistance is constrained by the mechanisms within which she functions. She can protest, she can dispute, she can will inside the household, but she cannot escape the wider institutions of caste and class and gender which govern her status. Her rage, however intense, is ultimately controlled by a system that allows for no fundamental change.

The Psychological Dimensions of Violence

The psychological aspects of violence in Godan are equally significant as the structural and physical ones. Premchand's novel shows that violence works not just through external coercion, but also through the internalisation of oppressive norms.

Internalised oppression"

In Godan characters are complicit in their own subjugation through internalisation of the values and beliefs of the ruling groups. This is a form of symbolic violence in the meaning of Bourdieu: the downtrodden accept the legitimacy of the system that oppresses them. For example, Hori submits to the zamindar, the moneylender and the Brahmin even

when these people exploit him. He accepts the legitimacy of the caste structure, despite it keeps him down. He wants to do godan, but the rite only makes the Brahmins more powerful. This internalisation is a form of mental violence. It denies the oppressed the power to see their oppression and to envisage alternatives. It produces a kind of self-violence – the violence of accepting one's own inferiority, of internalising the judgements of the dominant, of engaging in one's own subjection. According to one academic, the characters are "sufferers of self-inflicted violence, because of their submission to social malpractices".

The Psychological Toll of Economic Violence

The economic trauma that Hori and his family have suffered has deep psychological consequences. The eternal dread of debt, the shame of dependence, the despair of poverty – these are types of psychological abuse that Premchand conveys with striking accuracy. Hori's slow erosion of self-respect, his compromises, his acceptance of humiliation - all these are the result of a system that applies economic pressure as a method of control.

The psychological effects of economic violence are not just on the person, but also on the family. The pressure of poverty breeds conflict in the household, as family members vie for scant resources. The violence in the family is not just personal, but the result of economic stress that makes cooperation hard and confrontation inevitable.

Trauma and Aftermath

The experience of violence is a permanent trauma for Godan. Jhunias becoming a "automaton," her psychological disengagement, is a picture of what trauma does. She has been so raped that she can't feel anymore, can't respond anymore, can't be human anymore. This is ultimate violence. The destruction of the individual, the reduction of a human being to an object.

The characters of Godan not only suffer from individual but also from collective pain. The violence of the system traumatises the whole community – the persistent fear of dispossession, the everyday sensation of humiliation, the certainty that there is no escape. The shared experience of pain breeds a culture of resignation, extinguishing hope and making resistance appear pointless.

The interlocking of violence: Caste, class and gender

The violence in Godan is not performed through independent systems of caste, class and gender but through their junction. The protagonists are not experiencing violence as a collective of people, but as individuals who are positioned at the crossroads of many hierarchies. Hori is a peasant (class) and a kurmi (caste) and a male (gender). All three roles contribute to his experience of violence: he is exploited as a peasant, subordinated as a middle-caste and privileged as a man. Dhanias is a Kurmi (caste) and a peasant woman (class and gender). Her experience of violence is mediated by the intersection of class exploitation, caste subordination and gender oppression.

The Dalit women in the story – Selia, Jhunias – are in the most vulnerable position, at the junction of caste, class and gender oppression. They are used as Dalits, as labourers,

as women. Their experience of violence is uncurbed by any social standing from which to resist.

Premchand's critique is rooted in this intersectional view of violence. Caste, class and gender in the story are not shown as independent systems but as linked elements that create a web of oppression. To comprehend violence in Godan is to understand how these systems function together, reinforcing and amplifying each other.

Summary

Premchand's Godan is a striking condemnation of the violence inherent in the social fabric of rural India. The novel's brutal realist account of rural life shows violence as a systemic phenomena – violence that works through overlapping hierarchies of caste, class and gender. This violence is not just physical but also structural, symbolic, psychological and systemic.

The analysis in this paper has mapped out the multiple registers of violence in Godan: structural violence of economic exploitation, symbolic violence of Brahminical hegemony, domestic and gendered violence of patriarchal relations, and psychological violence of internalised oppression. The study has shown through a thorough reading of important characters—Hori, Dhanai, Gobar, Jhunai and Selia—how Premchand portrays the details of violence that have been normalised by oppressive societal systems.

Premchand's novel is a diagnostic instrument to detect structural inequalities. It shows how violence acts not as an exception but as a system, a system that ensnares people in webs of exploitation and oppression that have no clear way out. The tragedy of Godan is not just that

Hori dies before he achieves his aim, but that his death is the result of a system that relentlessly destroys people it exploits. The importance of Godan is not only historical. The novel's indictment of caste, class and gender violence is still relevant in India today, where these structures continue to influence lives and constrain options. Premchand's achievement is not only literary but political: he has made a book that reveals violence in all its manifestations and dares readers to see and oppose the systems that support it.

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