Let Death Bear Witness: A Comparative Analysis of Surdas and Nirmala

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Abstract

This research aims: *The first,* to examine the dimensions of discrimination, humiliation, and exploitation endured by Surdas from *Rangabhumi* (1925) and Nirmala from *Nirmala* (1927), two seminal characters from Munshi Premchand's Hindi novels; *the second,* to analyze the tragic trajectories that culminate in their deaths; and *the third,* to conduct a comparative investigation of both characters through the integrated lens of Dalit consciousness and tragic aesthetics. This research is a documentaryresearch employing qualitative textual analysis through a synthesized theoretical framework of Dalit Studies and classical Tragedy Theory, drawing upon Ambedkarite thought, Sharankumar Limbale's Dalit aesthetics, Aristotelian tragic theory, and Raymond Williams's concept of modern tragedy.

The research results found that:

1) Regarding discrimination, humiliation, and exploitation, both Surdas and Nirmala, despite their disparate social positions, endure systematic oppression mediated through structures of caste, class, gender, and colonial modernity. Surdas, as a blind beggar, experiences spatial marginalization and economic dispossession through caste hierarchy and industrial capitalism. Nirmala, as a young woman without dowry, suffers commodification through the patriarchal institution of mismatched marriage. Both protagonists embody what this study terms "structural dalithood," a state of being crushed, marginalized, and rendered voiceless by hegemonic social structures.

2) Regarding the tragic trajectories culminating in their deaths, their deaths function not merely as narrative denouements but as epistemic acts exposing the violence of patriarchy,

capitalism, and caste-inflected social hierarchies. The tragic flaw (hamartia) inheres not in the protagonists but in the social architecture—the caste-class nexus for Surdas and the patriarchal dowry system for Nirmala—constituting "structural hamartia."

3) Regarding the comparative analysis, both protagonists converge as "ordinary" tragic figures whose suffering derives from structural rather than individual causes, and both texts perform a testimonial function bearing witness to violence rendered invisible by dominant discourse. However, they diverge in resistance modalities: Surdas articulates active opposition in public space, while Nirmala's resistance remains interior and confined to domestic space. This study contributes to comparative literature by proposing a methodological synthesis bridging Western tragic theory with indigenous Indian critical frameworks.

Keywords: Surdas, Nirmala, structural violence, subaltern studies, Premchand

Introduction

Munshi Premchand (1880–1936), universally acknowledged as the *Upanyās Samrāṭ* (Emperor of Novels) of Hindi literature, occupies a singular position in the literary cartography of modern India. His oeuvre, characterized by an unwavering commitment to social realism and humanistic values, constitutes an extended meditation on the structural violence embedded within Indian society—violence perpetrated through the interlocking mechanisms of caste, class, gender, and colonial exploitation. Among his prolific corpus, two novels stand as particularly trenchant critiques of systemic oppression: *Rangabhumi* (The Arena, 1925) and *Nirmala* (1927). The protagonists of these works—Surdas, a blind beggar who resists industrial capitalism, and Nirmala, a young woman destroyed by the patriarchal institution of mismatched marriage—though superficially dissimilar, are united by the common thread of their tragic destinies.

This study undertakes a comparative literary analysis of these two characters through a synthesized theoretical framework combining Dalit Studies with classical and modern Tragedy Theory. The investigation is situated within the broader field of Hindi literary criticism and comparative literature, engaging with both Western theoretical traditions (Aristotelian tragedy, Raymond Williams's modern tragedy, Terry Eagleton's political tragic theory) and indigenous Indian critical frameworks (Ambedkarite thought, Sharankumar Limbale's Dalit aesthetics, Gopal Guru's epistemology of the oppressed). Through this synthesis, the study proposes the concept of "Dalit Tragedy" as a new analytical paradigm that reconceptualizes Aristotelian hamartia as structural rather than individual, transforms catharsis from emotional

purgation into political awakening, and demonstrates how the deaths of marginalized protagonists function as epistemic acts indicting hegemonic social orders.

This methodological intervention is predicated on the recognition that conventional Western literary frameworks, when applied in isolation to South Asian texts, often fail to apprehend the specificities of caste-based oppression and indigenous modes of resistance.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the manifold forms of discrimination, humiliation, and exploitation experienced by Surdas and Nirmala within their respective narrative universes, with particular attention to how structures of caste, class, gender, and colonial modernity mediate these experiences.
2. To analyze the tragic trajectories of both protagonists, investigating how their deaths function as a narrative.
3. To conduct a comparative analysis of both characters through the lens of the Dalit framework and tragic aesthetics.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design within an interpretivist paradigm, utilizing textual analysis as its primary methodology. The primary sources comprise the original Hindi editions of Premchand's Rangabhumi (12th ed., Manoj Publications, 2024) and Nirmala (Pangram Publications, 2024). The analytical procedure proceeds through four stages: close reading of both novels to identify passages relevant to oppression, resistance, and tragic experience; thematic coding according to theoretical categories including discrimination, hamartia, catharsis, and testimonial function; theoretical application of Dalit theory and Tragedy theory to the coded passages; and comparative analysis of both protagonists across identified thematic dimensions.

Research Findings

Textual Analysis: Discrimination, Humiliation, and Exploitation

1. Surdas: The Disabled Body as Site of Resistance

The passage from *Rangabhumi* presents Surdas not merely as a character but as what Gopal Guru might term an “empirical subject” whose knowledge emerges from embodied

experience of marginalization. Premchand's spatial cartography of the city operates as a material manifestation of what Ambedkar theorized as "graded inequality":

> "शहर अमीरों के रहने और क्रय-विक्रय का स्थान है। उसके बाहर की भूमि उनके मनोरंजन और विनोद की जगह है। उसके मध्य भाग में उनके लड़कों की पाठशालाएँ और उनके मुकदमेबाजी के अखाड़े होते हैं, जहाँ न्याय के बहाने गरीबों का गला घोंटा जाता है। शहर के आस-पास गरीबों की बस्तियाँ होती हैं।"
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> Translation: The city constitutes the domain of residence and commerce for the affluent. The land beyond its boundaries serves as the site of their leisure and recreation. At its centre lie the educational institutions for their progeny and the arenas of litigation, wherein, under the guise of justice, the throats of the impoverished are throttled. People with low incomes are relegated to the city's periphery.
>
> (Premchand, 2024, 5)

The lexical choice "गला घोंटा जाता है" (throats are throttled) constitutes what Limbale identifies as the testimonial function of Dalit aesthetics—language that bears witness to violence rendered invisible by dominant discourse. The passive construction emphasizes systemic rather than individual agency, aligning with Williams's reconceptualization of tragedy as structural rather than personal. Premchand's concentric model of urban space—affluent center, recreational periphery, impoverished margins—materializes the "graded inequality" Ambedkar theorized. This spatial hierarchy corresponds to what the proposed synthesis terms structural hamartia: the tragic flaw inheres not in Surdas but in the social architecture that relegates him to the city's periphery. The phrase "न्याय के बहाने" (under the guise of justice) performs a critical unmasking function, revealing nyāya, ostensibly a universal value, as an instrument of class oppression. This aligns with Eagleton's analysis of how tragic art articulates resistance to unjust social orders by exposing the contradictions between ideological claims and material realities.

The intertextual invocation of the poet-saint Surdas establishes a paradox central to Dalit epistemology: physical blindness as the condition for spiritual and social vision. Where dominant epistemology privileges the ocular—theoretical gaze from above, Surdas's blindness necessitates knowledge through other modalities: touch, sound, spatial memory, and embodied navigation of hostile terrain. This resonates with Guru's critique of the "theoretical Brahmin/empirical Shudra" divide; Surdas possesses what Guru and Sarukkai term knowledge inaccessible to those in dominant social locations, an understanding of the city's violence that the sighted affluent cannot perceive, precisely because their privilege renders it invisible to them. Within the framework of Dalit Tragedy, the cathartic function undergoes a

significant transformation: Aristotelian catharsis presupposes an audience capable of experiencing pity and fear through identification with the tragic protagonist, yet Premchand's readers occupy heterogeneous social locations. The passage thus performs what might be termed differential catharsis: for marginalized readers, recognition and validation of lived experience; for privileged readers, the discomfort of implication in structural violence. This dual operation fulfills both the testimonial function Limbale identifies and the political potential Eagleton locates in tragic art. At the same time, the metaphor of throttling prefigures literal and figurative deaths that constitute not the resolution of individual error but an indictment of the social order.

When confronted with the demand to surrender his ancestral land, Surdas responds with a statement that crystallizes his position of principled resistance:

"हाँ हुजूर, मेरी ही है। बाप-दादों की इतनी ही तो निशानी बच रही है।"

Translation: Yes, Your Honour, it is indeed mine. This is the only memento of my forefathers that remains.

"सरकार, पुरुखों की यही निशानी है, बेचकर उन्हें कौन मुँह दिखाऊँगा?"

Translation: Sir, this is the sole inheritance from my ancestors. If I sell it, how shall I ever face them?

(Premchand, 2024, 10)

The repetition of "निशानी" (memento/inheritance) transforms land from property into embodied memory, representing what Guru (2002) terms "knowledge born of lived experience" accessible only to the oppressed, while the rhetorical question "बेचकर उन्हें कौन मुँह दिखाऊँगा?" (Having sold it, with what face would I show myself to them?) articulates a moral economy incommensurable with market rationality, demonstrating what Limbale (2004) identifies as Dalit aesthetics' testimonial function. Following Williams (1966), the tragic flaw lies not in Surdas but in the social order itself; the address terms "हुजूर" and "सरकार" mark power asymmetry where Surdas speaks with dignity yet must use the language of subordination, constituting structural hamartia—the convergence of colonial extraction and caste hierarchy that renders dignified resistance simultaneously heroic and futile. The phrase "इतनी ही तो" (only this much) performs a rhetoric of diminishment in which even the most modest claim to ancestral continuity faces annihilation, and, following Eagleton (2003), catharsis here functions as political recognition and solidarity with principled resistance rather than condescending pity. Thus, the Dalit Tragedy framework reveals Surdas's utterance as both a testimonial

witness to caste oppression and the tragic dignity of one who resists a system he cannot overcome.

2. Nirmala: Patriarchy and the Destruction of Women

Premchand's *Nirmala* (1927) presents a compelling case study for the application of the theoretical synthesis proposed as "Dalit Tragedy." While the novel's protagonist is not herself a Dalit, the structural analysis enabled by this framework illuminates how patriarchal oppression operates through mechanisms analogous to caste-based subordination. The dowry system, as depicted in the novel, functions as what Ambedkar termed "graded inequality," a hierarchical structure that assigns differential value to human beings based on material considerations rather than inherent worth.

2.1 The Commodification of Women as Structural Violence

The passage under analysis articulates with devastating precision the dehumanizing logic of the dowry system:

> "अब अच्छे घर की जरूरत न थी। अच्छे वर की जरूरत न थी। अभागिनी को अच्छा घर-वर कहाँ मिलता! अब तो किसी भांति सिर का बोझा उतारना था, किसी भांति लड़की को पार लगाना था, उसे कुएँ में झोंकना था। यह रूपवती है, गुणशीला है, चतुर है, कुलीन है, तो हुआ करे, दहेज नहीं तो उसके सारे गुण दोष हैं, दहेज हो तो सारे दोष गुण हैं। प्राणी का कोई मूल्य नहीं, केवल दहेज का मूल्य है।"
>
> Translation: Now there was no need for a good family. No need for a good groom. Where would an ill-fated girl find a good match anyway! Now the only concern was somehow to remove the burden from one's head, somehow to get the girl across to the other shore, to throw her into a well. She is beautiful, virtuous, clever, and of noble birth. So, what of it? Without dowry, all her virtues become defects; with dowry, all defects become virtues. The person herself has no value; only the dowry has value.
>
> (Premchand, 2024, 24)

The theoretical synthesis of Dalit Tragedy, bringing together Ambedkar's critique of "graded inequality," Limbale's testimonial aesthetics, and Williams's reconceptualization of modern tragedy, proves remarkably productive for analyzing Premchand's *Nirmala* (1927). The novel's opening establishes the dowry system as structural violence through a devastating passage: "यह रूपवती है, गुणशीला है, चतुर है, कुलीन है, तो हुआ करे, दहेज नहीं तो उसके सारे गुण दोष हैं... प्राणी का कोई मूल्य नहीं, केवल दहेज का मूल्य है" (She is beautiful, virtuous, clever, of noble birth—so what of it? Without dowry, all her virtues become defects... The person herself has no value; only the dowry has value). Applying Gopal Guru's critique of the "pernicious divide between theoretical Brahmins and empirical Shudras," we observe that women within the patriarchal marriage

economy occupy an analogous position to Dalits within the caste hierarchy—their intrinsic qualities rendered epistemologically invisible by a framework that recognizes only material wealth as meaningful.

This passage demands a reconceptualization of Aristotelian hamartia: the tragic flaw lies not in Nirmala but in the social structure itself. Premchand's metaphorical language is revealing—marriage is figured as "सिर का बोझा उतारना" (removing the burden from one's head) and, most strikingly, "उसे कुएँ में झोंकना" (throwing her into a well). The "well" (kuāṃ) resonates within the Indian context with both historical female infanticide and the broader metaphor of marriage as social death for women, constituting what Eagleton terms "real-life tragedy" embedded within tragic art. Williams's insistence that "the experiences of ordinary people are instances of living through tragic social blockages" finds precise expression here: Nirmala's tragedy is not the fall of the great but the systematic crushing of an ordinary woman by institutionalized patriarchal violence. Within the framework of the Dalit Tragedy, Aristotelian catharsis shifts from emotional purgation to political awakening. The passage's concluding formulation "प्राणी का कोई मूल्य नहीं, केवल दहेज का मूल्य है" functions not merely to evoke pity but to generate what we might term political catharsis: an emotional clarification enabling recognition of structural violence. The reader's response is directed not toward acceptance of fate characteristic of classical tragedy but toward rejection of the social order that produces such outcomes. The dowry system thus emerges not as a backdrop to individual tragedy but as tragedy's very substance. This structural violence reduces human beings to commodities, which Premchand's devastating metaphor reveals as disposal, a throwing into the well.

2.2 The Violence of Mismatched Marriage

Nirmala's marriage to Totaram, a middle-aged widower with children older than his new bride, exemplifies what might be termed 'reproductive violence.' Premchand captures the psychological toll of this arrangement:

> "चन्नभानू और कृष्णा चले गए, पर निर्मला अकेली बैठी रह गई। कृष्णा के चले जाने से इस समय उसे बड़ा क्षोभ हुआ। कृष्णा, जिसे वह प्राणों से भी अमिक प्यार करती थी, आज इतनी निठुर हो गई। अकेली छोड़कर चली गई। बात कोई न थी, लेकिन दु:खी हृदय दुखती हुई आँख है, जिसमें हवा से भी पीड़ा होती है। निर्मला बड़ी देर तक बैठी रोती रही। भाई-बहन, माता-पिता, सभी इसी भांति मुझे भूल जाएंगे, सबकी आँखें फिर जाएंगी, फिर शायद इन्हें देखने को भी तरस जाऊँ।"
>
> Translation: Chandrabhanu and Krishna departed, but Nirmala remained sitting alone. At this moment, she felt great anguish at Krishna's leaving. Krishna, whom she loved more than her own life, had become so heartless today. She had left her alone and gone away. There was nothing particular to speak of,

> but a sorrowful heart is like an aching eye, in which even the wind causes pain. Nirmala sat weeping for a long time. Brothers and sisters, mother and father, all will forget me in this same manner; everyone's eyes will turn away, and then perhaps I shall even long to see them.
>
> (Premchand, 2024, 23)

The passage from Premchand's *Nirmala* (1927) exemplifies what Raymond Williams (1966) terms "tragic social blockages," in which suffering arises not from individual moral failing but from systemic oppression. Nirmala's anguish, captured in Premchand's metaphor "**दुःखी हृदय दुखती हुई आँख है, जिसमें हवा से भी पीड़ा होती है**" (a sorrowful heart is like an aching eye, in which even the wind causes pain), derives from the patriarchal institution of arranged marriage that treats women as transferable commodities. The structural hamartia lies not within the protagonist but within the dowry system and mismatched marriages that render women's consent irrelevant. This reconceptualization transforms our understanding of tragedy from individual hubris to what we might term "reproductive violence," the systematic harm inflicted upon women through inequitable marital institutions.

Sharankumar Limbale's (2004) emphasis on the testimonial function of Dalit literature—bearing witness to suffering rendered invisible by dominant traditions—applies equally to Premchand's representation of gendered oppression. Nirmala's prophetic lament, "**भाई-बहन, माता-पिता, सभी इसी भांति मुझे भूल जाएंगे**" (all will forget me in this manner), articulates what Ambedkar (1936) recognized as "graded inequality" operating within gender hierarchies. Her tears constitute what Limbale might term an aesthetic of protest—a bodily inscription of structural violence. Though Nirmala belongs to a Brahmin household, her position as a woman subjected to a mismatched marriage places her within a parallel system of marginalization, demonstrating the intersection of gender and caste-based epistemic violence.

The Aristotelian concepts of catharsis and anagnorisis require substantial revision when applied to social realist texts. Following Williams (1966) and Eagleton (2003), catharsis becomes not emotional purgation restoring equilibrium but political awakening disturbing complacency. Nirmala's recognition of her social death—her gradual erasure from familial affection—offers no redemptive resolution; her anagnorisis is itself suffering rather than empowerment. This refusal of cathartic closure aligns with modern tragedy's insistence on the intractability of structural oppression. Through this synthesis of Dalit epistemology and tragic theory, Premchand achieves what Guru (2002) terms an "egalitarian" representation—one that

neither appropriates nor patronizes but bears witness to suffering those dominant literary traditions have historically rendered invisible.

Premchand further illuminates the paradoxical nature of love and suffering in marriage:

> "जैसे कोई वृक्ष जल और प्रकाश से बढ़ता है, लेकिन पवन के प्रबल झोंकों ही से सुदृढ़ होता है, उसी भांति प्रणय भी दुःख के आघातों ही से विकास पाता है। खुशी के साथ हँसने वाले बहुतेरे मिल जाते हैं, रंज में जो साथ रोये, वही हमारा सच्चा मित्र है।"
>
> Translation: Just as a tree derives its growth from water and light, but achieves its fortitude exclusively through the violent buffeting of winds, in precisely the same manner, love too achieves its development exclusively through the assaults of grief. Those who laugh alongside us in happiness are abundant; however, the one who weeps with us in times of distress is the only one who constitutes our genuine friend.

(Premchand, 2024, 97–98)

Premchand's metaphor "जैसे कोई वृक्ष जल और प्रकाश से बढ़ता है, लेकिन पवन के प्रबल झोंकों ही से सुदृढ़ होता है" (Just as a tree grows from water and light, but becomes strong only through the violent gusts of wind) encodes an epistemology of suffering that resonates profoundly with Dalit literary theory. The passage privileges experiential knowledge gained through adversity over comfortable prosperity, articulating what Gopal Guru terms "knowledge born of lived experience." The distinction between "खुशी के साथ हँसने वाले" (those who laugh with us in happiness) and "रंज में जो साथ रोये" (those who weep with us in sorrow) establishes an epistemic hierarchy wherein authentic understanding emerges exclusively from shared suffering. This formulation anticipates Limbale's testimonial aesthetics: genuine friendship, like genuine literature, must bear witness to pain rather than merely celebrate joy. Premchand, though not Dalit himself, demonstrates the "deep empathetic engagement" that Guru and Sarukkai theorize as enabling non-marginalized writers to access subaltern consciousness. Read through Raymond Williams's reconceptualization of modern tragedy, the passage relocates tragic meaning from aristocratic downfall to quotidian endurance. The violent winds "पवन के प्रबल झोंकों" (the powerful gusts of wind) represent not Aristotelian hamartia as an individual flaw but structural forces that assault ordinary lives.

Premchand's formulation "प्रणय भी दुःख के आघातों ही से विकास पाता है" (love too develops only through the blows of sorrow) suggests that love's development through suffering constitutes a form of anagnorisis. This recognition transforms ignorance into knowledge. The cathartic operation functions through the reader's identification with this universal pattern: we recognize ourselves in the tree buffeted by winds, achieving emotional clarification through

witnessing represented suffering. Eagleton's political reading illuminates how this passage resists romantic idealization, insisting that suffering is constitutive of authentic human connection. The synthesis of these frameworks reveals Premchand's passage as an articulation of what this study terms Dalit Tragedy. The metaphorical structure performs a crucial ideological operation: suffering becomes not merely an obstacle but a necessary condition for both growth "सुदृढ़ होता है" (becomes strong) and an authentic relationship "सच्चा मित्र" (faithful friend). This formulation simultaneously acknowledges structural violence—the winds that buffet, and the grief that assaults—while locating transformative potential within endurance. The passage thus occupies the theoretical intersection where Dalit epistemology meets tragic catharsis: suffering functions as both testimony and transfiguration, both indictment and transcendence. The true friend "सच्चा मित्र" who weeps alongside becomes the figure through whom structural tragedy achieves its meaning, transforming individual anguish into collective witness.

Comparative Analysis: Convergences and Divergences

1. Convergences

Both Surdas and Nirmala function as what Williams terms "ordinary" tragic protagonists whose suffering derives from structural rather than individual causes. In each case, Premchand relocates Aristotelian hamartia from character to social architecture—the caste-class nexus for Surdas, the patriarchal dowry system for Nirmala. Neither protagonist possesses a tragic flaw; instead, they inhabit systems designed to render their intrinsic worth invisible. The testimonial function identified by Limbale operates analogously in both texts. Surdas's blindness and Nirmala's commodification as a bride each constitute embodied knowledge inaccessible to dominant perspectives. Both characters articulate what Guru theorizes as experiential epistemology: Surdas perceives urban violence that the sighted cannot see; Nirmala understands marital erasure that patriarchal discourse naturalizes. Premchand employs parallel rhetorical strategies of diminishment. Surdas's "इतनी ही तो" (only this much) mirrors the systematic negation in Nirmala's passage, where virtues become defects without dowry. Both formulations expose how hegemonic systems annihilate even minimal claims to dignity.

2. Divergences

The modality of resistance differs fundamentally. Surdas articulates active, vocal opposition; his refusal to sell ancestral land constitutes principled defiance legible as heroic. Nirmala's resistance remains interior, expressed through tears and prophetic lament rather

than confrontation. This divergence reflects gendered possibilities for agency: Surdas can refuse; Nirmala can only weep. The cathartic operation bifurcates accordingly. Surdas's tragedy generates what Eagleton terms political solidarity with resistance; readers recognize heroism in futility. Nirmala's trajectory produces what we might term a melancholic catharsis—recognition without redemption, in which anagnorisis itself constitutes suffering rather than empowerment. Spatial dynamics also diverge. Surdas occupies a contested public space—the urban periphery—where economic struggle unfolds visibly. Nirmala's tragedy transpires within domestic interiors, her social death accomplished through private erasure from familial memory. This public/private distinction maps onto gendered spheres of oppression.

3. Synthesis

Together, these protagonists demonstrate Dalit Tragedy's applicability across intersecting axes of marginalization—caste, class, and gender—while revealing how structural violence adapts its mechanisms to different social locations.

Discussion

The textual analysis of Premchand's *Rangabhumi* and *Nirmala* demonstrates the analytical productivity of synthesizing Dalit literary theory with Western tragic frameworks. This discussion examines the theoretical implications, methodological contributions, and limitations of the proposed "Dalit Tragedy" paradigm.

1. Theoretical Implications

The reconceptualization of Aristotelian hamartia as a structural rather than an individual phenomenon constitutes the study's primary theoretical contribution. Classical tragic theory locates the fatal flaw within the protagonist's character; the Dalit Tragedy framework relocates it to the social architecture itself. Surdas's blindness and Nirmala's lack of dowry function not as personal deficiencies but as markers through which systemic violence operates. This reconceptualization aligns with Williams's democratization of tragedy while extending it through Ambedkar's specific analysis of graded inequality.

The concept of "differential catharsis" addresses a limitation in Aristotelian theory: its assumption of a homogeneous audience capable of unified emotional response. Premchand's readers occupy heterogeneous social locations, generating divergent cathartic experiences—recognition and validation for marginalized readers, implication and discomfort for privileged ones. This bifurcation transforms catharsis from emotional purgation into political operation, fulfilling Eagleton's criterion for tragedy's revolutionary potential.

2. Methodological Contributions

The integration of Guru and Sarukkai's epistemological critique with literary analysis enables a reading practice attentive to knowledge hierarchies within texts. Surdas's blindness-as-vision and Nirmala's experiential understanding of marital commodification exemplify what dominant epistemology cannot perceive—this methodological orientation privileges testimonial content without reducing literature to a sociological document.

The comparative analysis reveals both the framework's versatility and its limits. Dalit Tragedy proves applicable across caste, class, and gender axes. Yet, the divergent modalities of resistance—Surdas's vocal refusal versus Nirmala's interior weeping—indicate that structural violence adapts to different social locations in ways requiring differentiated analytical attention. Specifically, the framework's capacity to illuminate gendered oppression within upper-caste households demonstrates that "dalithood" as a structural condition transcends the boundaries of caste identity per se, extending to any subject position systematically rendered voiceless by hegemonic power. However, this extension also raises important questions about whether the analogy between caste-based and gender-based oppression risks flattening the distinctive historical specificities of each. Future applications of the Dalit Tragedy framework would benefit from more granular attention to how different axes of marginalization—caste, class, gender, disability, and colonial subjection—interact to produce qualitatively distinct experiences of structural violence, rather than treating them as merely parallel manifestations of a single oppressive logic.

Conclusion

The Dalit Tragedy framework demonstrates that Indian social realism requires a theoretical apparatus adequate to its specific configurations of structural violence. Neither Western tragic theory alone nor Dalit literary criticism alone suffices; their synthesis generates analytical insights inaccessible to either framework independently. Premchand's protagonists emerge not as flawed individuals meeting inevitable fates but as witnesses whose suffering indicts the social orders that produce it.

The relevance of this analytical framework extends well beyond its literary-historical context. The structural violence that Premchand depicted in the 1920s—caste-based economic dispossession, the commodification of women through dowry, and the systematic silencing of marginalized voices—continues to manifest in contemporary Indian society and, indeed, in societies globally. Despite legal prohibitions, the dowry system persists as a

significant factor in domestic violence and female suffering across South Asia; caste-based discrimination continues to shape access to education, employment, and justice; and the intersectional marginalization of those who occupy multiple subordinate social positions remains a pressing concern. The Dalit Tragedy framework, by demonstrating how structural hamartia operates across different axes of oppression, offers a critical tool not only for literary analysis but also for understanding the persistent mechanisms through which social hierarchies reproduce themselves in the contemporary era. In an age marked by rising awareness of systemic inequality and intersectional injustice, the synthesis of indigenous critical frameworks with established Western theories provides a methodologically rigorous and culturally grounded approach to interrogating the structures of power that continue to determine who is heard, who is silenced, and whose suffering is rendered visible or invisible.

Recommendation

Future research should apply the Dalit Tragedy framework to Dalit-authored texts to examine whether literature emerging directly from marginalized experience yields different analytical outcomes, thereby addressing unresolved questions of epistemic authority. Additionally, empirical reception studies investigating how readers from diverse social locations experience catharsis when encountering these texts would substantiate the concept of differential cathartic operations proposed herein.

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