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The Perished Ideal: Navigating the Tension Between Dharma and Survival in Munshi Premchand's *Kafan (The Shroud)*

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Abstract: This paper explores the deconstruction of the traditional Indian worldview – encapsulated by the four 'Purusharthas' (Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha) – within Munshi Premchand's short story *The Shroud*. While the 'Purusharthas' provide a blueprint for a balanced and righteous life, Premchand presents a harrowing reality where systematic poverty renders these spiritual and social obligations obsolete. The paper focuses on the protagonists, Ghusu and Madhav, whose apparent moral decay is examined not as a character flaw, but as a survival response to an exploitative socio-economic structure. By diverting the money intended for a funeral shroud (a ritual/ Dharma), towards immediate hunger and intoxication (Artha and Kama), the characters subvert the traditional path to liberation (Moksha).

Key Words: Purusharthas, Dharma, Artha, Poverty, Social Realism

Introduction

The ancient Indian worldview is traditionally harmonized through the Purusharthas—the four legitimate aims of human existence: Dharma (moral duty), Artha (material prosperity), Kama (sensual desire), and Moksha (spiritual liberation). This teleological framework suggests that a life well-lived is one where these four goals are pursued in a balanced, hierarchical order. However, in the brutal socio-economic landscape of pre-independence India, Munshi Premchand's *Kafan (The Shroud)* acts as a subversive critique of this idealistic structure. Published in 1936, the story provides a harrowing look at the lives of Ghusu and Madhav, two "untouchable" leather-workers whose existence is defined by chronic hunger and systemic exclusion. Munshi Premchand, often called the Upanyas Samrat (Emperor of Novels), transitioned from "Idealistic Realism" to "Pure Realism" toward the end of his life. *Kafan* is the pinnacle of this shift. The Purusharthas—Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha—were designed for a stable, agrarian, and spiritually integrated society. However, under British colonial rule and the internal decay of the Zamindari (landlord) system, the economic base of rural India collapsed. For the Dalit community, to which Ghusu and Madhav belong, the "Social Contract" of Dharma was a one-way street. They were expected to perform the "Dharma" of labor for the higher castes, but they were denied the "Artha" (wealth) that should have been their reward.

The paper argues that *Kafan* represents the total decomposition of the Purushartha framework. Premchand demonstrates that when Artha (wealth) is stripped away by systemic oppression, Dharma (duty) becomes a hollow performance, Kama (desire) turns into a desperate animalistic urge, and Moksha (liberation) is reduced to a drunken stupor. Through the characters of Ghusu



and Madhav, Premchand challenges the reader to consider whether morality is a universal constant or a luxury afforded only to those whose stomachs are full.

Dharma vs. Survival

In the traditional Vedic hierarchy, Dharma is the foundational pillar. It dictates one's duty to family, society, and the deceased. In *Kafan*, the most immediate "Dharmic" duty is the proper cremation and shrouding of Budhiya, Madhav's wife, who dies in childbirth. To the village society, leaving a body without a shroud is the ultimate sacrilege. However, for Ghisu and Madhav, who have spent their lives as "idle" laborers on the fringes of starvation, Dharma has become an abstraction.

Premchand highlights this tension when the two men successfully beg for five rupees from the landlord to buy a shroud. As they reach the market, the biological imperative of hunger overrides the social imperative of ritual. They realize that a shroud—a piece of cloth that will merely burn to ashes—is a waste of resources that could sustain their living bodies. By choosing to spend the funeral money on food and liquor, Ghisu and Madhav do not simply commit a sin; they perform a rational economic act in an irrational social system. As Premchand notes through Ghisu's logic, the "Dharma" of the poor is a performance for the benefit of the rich (Premchand 3).

However, Premchand highlights the hypocrisy of this Dharma. While Budhiya was alive and screaming in pain, no one in the village came to help. Once she is dead, the village's sense of "duty" suddenly awakens, but only in the form of a ritualistic burial. Premchand uses the character of the Zamindar (landlord) to illustrate this. The landlord gives Ghisu two rupees not out of genuine compassion, but to maintain the outward appearance of his own "Dharma" as a protector. He feels a "disgust" for them, yet he contributes to the burial fund because the social code demands it. Here, the "Ideal" has already begun to perish; charity is no longer an act of love, but a transaction to maintain social status. Ghisu mocks this irony: "What a bad custom it is that someone who didn't even get a rag to cover her body while she was alive, needs a new shroud when she's dead" (Premchand 5).

When the two men collect five rupees for the shroud—a significant amount of Artha—they face a choice: satisfy the social Dharma of a burial or satisfy the biological Dharma of hunger. By choosing the latter, they perform a radical re-evaluation of values. They realize that the shroud is for the "eyes of others," whereas the food is for their own survival. Their decision to spend the funeral money on puris and liquor is a direct assault on the concept of ritualistic Dharma. Premchand suggests that when Dharma becomes disconnected from human empathy and survival, it becomes a "perished ideal."

The Distortion of Artha and Kama

Artha (the pursuit of wealth) and Kama (the pursuit of pleasure) are typically seen as the "worldly" goals that must be managed by Dharma. In the lives of Ghisu and Madhav, Artha is non-existent. They possess no land, no tools, and no social capital. Because they cannot achieve legitimate Artha, their experience of Kama—the fulfillment of desire—is reduced to the most primal level: the consumption of fried snacks and wine.



In the Indian worldview, Artha is not merely the pursuit of greed; it is the "means of life"—the material security required to fulfill one's duties to family and society. Without Artha, the other three goals lack a physical foundation. In *Kafan*, the absence of Artha is absolute. Ghisu and Madhav are described as being "lazy" by the village standards, yet Premchand clarifies that their laziness is a rational response to an exploitative system: "In a society where the lot of those who labored night and day was not much better than theirs... it's no wonder they were more inclined towards laziness" (Premchand 1). The lack of Artha creates a vacuum where traditional values cannot survive. The protagonists do not own land, they do not own tools, and they have no savings. When Madhav's wife, Budhiya, is dying in childbirth, they cannot afford a doctor or even a lamp for light. Their poverty has reached a "terminal" stage where they have ceased to care about the future. For them, the "material prosperity" of the Purusharthas is a cruel joke. By depicting their extreme deprivation, Premchand argues that a society that denies its members the means of Artha essentially forfeits the right to demand Dharma from them.

When the duo enters the tavern, they experience a distorted version of the "balanced life." For a few hours, the money intended for the dead provides them with the only "Kama" they have known in years. They treat the beggar with the remains of their food, mimicking the "Artha-driven" charity of the wealthy. This scene is a scathing critique of the Indian worldview; Premchand suggests that when the state of Artha is one of permanent deprivation, the pursuit of Kama becomes a desperate, almost violent act of rebellion against the self-denial demanded by society.

The Paradox of Moksha

The final goal of the Indian worldview is Moksha, or liberation from the cycle of suffering and rebirth. Traditionally, Moksha is achieved through the fulfillment of the previous three goals. However, the ending of *Kafan* presents a dark, satirical version of liberation. As Ghisu and Madhav become intoxicated, they reach a state of "ecstasy" (Premchand 8). They dance, sing, and eventually fall into a stupor. This is not the spiritual Moksha of the Upanishads, but a "nihilistic Moksha." It is a temporary escape from the "suffering" of being poor, low-caste, and hungry. They are liberated from the guilt of Budhiya's death and the pressures of the landlord's expectations. By portraying their drunken collapse as a form of peace, Premchand suggests that for the untouchables and the impoverished of India, the only available "liberation" is the loss of consciousness. The ideal of a soul transcending the world is replaced by a body escaping the world through intoxication.

However, this is a "Sarcastic Moksha." It is not a liberation through knowledge or virtue, but a liberation through intoxication and the total abandonment of responsibility. For a few hours, they are "free" from the debt they owe the landlord, free from the grief of Budhiya's death, and free from the hunger that gnaws at their vitals. Premchand's genius lies in showing that for the most oppressed members of society, the only way to achieve "peace" is to lose consciousness entirely. The Moksha of the tavern is the only salvation the world of *Kafan* allows.

Conclusion

Through *Kafan*, Premchand does not merely tell a story of two immoral men; he conducts a philosophical autopsy of a dying society. By framing the narrative through the tension between



the Purusharthas and the reality of poverty, he reveals that the Indian worldview—Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha—is structurally dependent on economic dignity.

When the "Ideal" perishes, what remains is a raw, nihilistic struggle for survival. Ghisu and Madhav are not the villains of the story; they are the ghosts of a system that has failed. Their rejection of the shroud is a rejection of a society that cares more for the dead than the living. Ultimately, Kafan challenges the reader to rebuild a worldview where Dharma is not a ritual, but a commitment to the living, and where Artha is distributed fairly enough to make a good life possible for all.

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