

## Prem Chand's Karbala:

### Pluralism In And Around The Karbala Episode

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There is no shortage of writings on Karbala in Urdu, Farsi, Arabic and now in English and other European languages.

However, very little literature is known in the original Hindi language on this topic. The famous Urdu writer Prem Chand wrote a play titled Karbala. This play was originally published in the early 1900s ( I am not sure of the original exact date). This has been recently re-published in small booklet form with an introduction by Amrit Rai (Premchand's son) by Hind Pocket Books. Apparently the drama was staged somewhere under the direction of Amrit Rai. This one is a 1999 publication.



*Karbala, by Prem Chand, 1999.*

Prem Chand, though, has introduced some inaccuracies in the historical facts and has changed some of the story. For example he mentions Umar ibn Khattab as the first Khaleefa after the Prophet of Islam (who was actually the second Khaleefa after the Prophet of Islam), and he shows at the end of the play that Umar-e-Sa'ad, the commander in Yazeed's Army, commits suicide at the end of the battle.

There are certain characters that he has highlighted in the story. Among those he has given prominence are (other than Imam Husayn, Abbas ibn Ali and Zaynab bint Ali) Wahb and his wife, whom Prem Chand names as Naseema.

Prem Chand has used literary Urdu for dialogues that take place between various characters, thus subconsciously he gives the Karbala story an Indian-Muslim background rather than an Arab background. For all other text (settings and back-ground information) he uses somewhat literary Hindi with the occasional Farsi and Urdu word interspersed in the text.

I quote the first few lines from the Introduction in its original Devnagri.



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प्रायः सभी जातियों के इतिहास में कुछ ऐसी महत्व पूर्ण घटनाएँ होती हैं जो साहित्यिक कल्पना को अनन्त काल तक उत्तेजित करती रहती हैं। साहित्यिक समाज नित नए रूप में उनका उल्लेख किया करता है, छंदों में, गीतों में, निबन्धों में, लोकोक्तियों में, व्याख्यानों में, बारंबार उनकी आवृत्ति होती रहती है।

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I now give a translation of the full passage and a little more of his intro for which the Devanagari not shown here:

“In the history of every community there are always some significant events which continue to highlight the cultural and literary imagination for all time to come. With every new generation, the literary tradition documents those events in new shape – in poetic compositions, in folk-songs, in limericks, in sonnets, in lectures; they repeatedly make their appearance and re-appearance.

Still, there is always room for the new writers (to express their art on that topic).

In the Hindu history, Ramayana and Mahabharat are such stories. The story of Karbala has acquired that same stature in the history of Muslims. There are books after books (*daftar ke daftar bharai pare hain*) written on this topic in Urdu and Farsi. So much so that exactly like some Hindu poets and writers have spent their lives singing the glories of lord Krishna and Ram, very much like that many Urdu and Farsi poets have spent all their lives in writing Marsiya. However, as far as my information serves me, there are no plays written on this topic in any language. We have dared to compose this play in the Hindi language.”

With that introduction, now Prem Chand moves to the pluralistic aspects of the Karbala story.



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“It is a matter of shame and disappointment that after having lived with the Muslims for centuries, we are still totally un-informed about their history. A great cause of Hindu-Muslim indifference is the fact we, the Hindus, have no knowledge of the life-stories of the great Muslim men. As soon as we hear of any Muslim king, the image that comes to mind is that of Aurangzeb. But good and bad people are always found in every community, and that will continue to be so. There have been generous kings among Muslims, great spiritualists and men of justice and honour have also ruled among them. There is no doubt that knowing the great men of a community is conducive to building socio-cultural bridges with that community.”

This second passage is indicative of Prem Chand's concern for the indifference the Hindu Majority was showing towards Muslim traditions and culture in Indian society. That in spite of the fact that a large Hindu population of India had been participating in the Muharram processions and many non-Muslims have been building *taziyas* every year which they have always carried themselves.

What Prem Chand is lamenting about is the fact that the larger Hindu community, although participating outwardly in Muharram, remained totally unaware and unappreciative of the spiritual and political aspects of Karbala and the universal appeal in the Karbala Paradigm.

The awareness and the passion in trying to understand the historic step Husayn took against all odds back in the 61st year of Hijra, that we see among the academic elite in the United States of America was nowhere to be seen in India in the 1000 years the two communities lived side by side in the subcontinent.

In fact, during the two hundred years or so that the British community spent in India, they made great efforts in trying to understand and document the traditions, the culture and the history of the people in India. Even during that period the universal appeal carried in the Karbala paradigm did not make an impact on the British (or the European) academic elite. All we see is works such as those of Garcin de Tassy and Sir Lewis Pelly which show more of a bemused curiosity than any serious study of the underlying religious, spiritual and political aspects of the Karbala story. Even the works of Peter Chelkowsky of N.Y.U. which were produced in the 1980s and 1990s are caricatures of the passion of Karbala.

Much as the works of scholars such as Kamarn Scott Aghaie and Akbar Hyder are greatly educational and praiseworthy, it is not surprising that such scholars would produce meaningful works on Karbala, since these people are coming from a Shia Muslim background.

What is commendable is the works such as David Pinault's (he is at Santa Clara University) *Horse of Karbala*, and Professor Laura Deeb's (she is at U.C., Irvine) deep and searching study on the role women played at Karbala. David Pinault has spent time on both sides of Kashmir studying the observance of the Zuljanah procession, hence the name of his book.

Lara Deeb, on the other hand, who is actually an anthropologist and has no academic background in the study of religion per se, has spent time in Lebanon. In the course of studying the place of women in Lebanese society in general, she has come to study the role of Zaynab bint Ali. She has looked at the sacrifices and achievements made by Zaynab bint-e Ali at Karbala after the martyrdom of her brother, Husayn.

I think we have to look at Prem Chand's work on Karbala in parallel with this new interest in American universities in the Karbala paradigm – although Prem Chand's work is nearly a hundred years old.

Amrit Rai deserves our grateful thanks and our appreciation for reviving this old classic of Hindi literature and staging it as a play for public viewing. If any of our readers in India have had a chance to see the play, I request them to give us their impressions.

The significance of this work is that it was authored by a non-Muslim and it has been produced by a non-Muslim (in this case the author's son) as a stage play. Prem Chand has created a character in the play named Sahas Rai. He is an Indian Hindu who comes to Karbala, stays with Imam Husayn and gives his life fighting alongside all the other fighters who were Muslim (Except Abdullah Kalbi, who was a Christian). That is the highpoint of pluralism in the story of Karbala. And I think Prem Chand wanted to make a big thing out of it. He has used a little known report in the Karbala literature which points to the fact that the ancestors of today's Kashmiri Mohyal Brahmins actually were in Karbala and they had fought Yazeed's armies on Imam Husayn's side. They, the Mohyals, value this tradition greatly and claim that many of them actually stayed in Afghanistan on their way back from Iraq to India. There is a pocket of Mohyals living in Afghanistan even today. Readers would be advised to consult the article titled *Muharram Ceremonies In India* written by Syed Ali Husain Jafri, in the book *Taziyeh: Ritual And Drama In Iran* by Peter J. Chelkowski, New York University Press, 1979.

As I pointed out earlier, all dialogues between the various characters at Karbala are spoken in literary Urdu. However, Prem Chand made a point to write the dialogues spoken by Sahas Rai in literary Hindi.

The dialogue of various characters is interspersed with Urdu poetry which is from Mir Anees and some other poets.

When Sahas Rai and his six brothers are going to the battlefield, they are singing a song which is written in High Hindi/Sanskrit. Knowing Prem Chand's thinking it has to be significant for the occasion. I had done some Sanskrit in my younger days in school. Now, due to lack of practice, it is all gone. I started on it and then got stuck.

Here is the song:

जय भारत, जय भारत, जय मम प्राणपते  
भाल विशाल चमत्कृत सित हिमागिरि राजे  
परसत बाल प्रभाकर हेम-प्रभा ब्राजे

जय भारत,  
ऋषि-मुनि पुण्य तपो निधि तेज-पुंजधारी  
सब विधि अधम अविज्ञा भव-भय-तमहारी

जय भारत,  
जय जय देव चतुर्मुख अखिल भेद ज्ञाता

*(glory, glory to the god who has a smart face, knows all the secrets)*

सुविमल शांति सुधा-निधि मुद-मंगलदाता  
*(beautiful, clear, placid wine goblet,*

जय भारत,  
जय जय विश्व –विदांबर जय विश्रुत नामी  
जय जय धर्म-धुरंधर जय श्रुति पथगामी

जय भारत,  
अजित अजेय आलौकिक अतुलित बलधामा  
*(undefeated, undefeatable, out of this world, unparalleled, powerful)*

पूरन प्रेम-पयोनिध शुभ गुण – गुण-ग्रामा

जय भारत,  
हे प्रिय पूज्य परम मन नमो-नमो देवा,  
*(O loved one, worshipped, with all my heart I salute you)*

अधम-पापि जन ग्रहन करहु सेवा

*(this humble sinful person wants to serve you)*

जय भारत,

*(glory to India)*

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Another significant aspect of Prem Chand's depiction of Karbala is his portrayal of the women of Karbala. He has chosen the following listed characters to make his point.

(1) Zaynab binte Ali – the sister of Imam Husayn, who takes charge of the looted caravan at Karbala and turns out to be a formidable leader opposing the governor of Kufa and then Yazeed himself. However, Prem Chand omits those details because the play ends at the battlefield of Karbala. It is in the dialogue with Husayn and other members of the party that her character comes out.

(2) Shaher Banu – the wife of Imam Husayn, at one time, an Iranian princess.

(3) Naseema, the wife of Wahab, a companion of Imam Husayn. Her character is highlighted when she encourages her husband to go and fight but then she is seen lamenting with her dead husband's head in her lap.

Prem Chand has written his play on Karbala in Shakespearean style in that he has taken the basic structure of the story but he has modified the details to make certain points. If the accuracy of the story hinders him from making a point, he embellishes the story, drops some relevant details and invents new stuff in the story.

For example:

1. He describes the story of Muslim bin Aqeel (Husayn's cousin) fairly accurately. He goes to Kufa on a fact-finding mission, but he is betrayed by the Kufans. He fights single-handed, bravely against 300 armed soldiers and dies a valiant death. He keeps his proverbial chivalry to his last breath.

2. Prem Chand has shown that Hurr is having a dialogue with Yazeed in which he wants Yazeed to change his un-Islamic ways and deal with Husayn honourably. That meeting is not recorded anywhere in history.
3. While Husayn has been surrounded by Yazeed's army at Karbala, in the middle of the night he is visited by an Indian Yogi who is searching for Prophet Muhammad's gravesite. That story is not known anywhere in history. However, there is a story of a traveler who visits Husayn at Karbala who has brought a letter from Husayn's daughter who was left in Madinah. Prem Chand has modified the story and has replaced the Qasid of Madinah by an Indian Yogi to bring yet another touch towards pluralism in the story of Karbala. Apparently, the Yogi has had a vision of Prophet Muhammad and that is how he set out on his journey.
4. Prem Chand describes the breaking of the dawn on the day of Ashura:

“Morning came. The morning which has no parallel in human history.

Who has seen this otherworldly scene that 72 men who were surrounded by 22,000 soldiers, they were standing behind Husayn in morning prayers – only for the reason that this is perhaps the very last opportunity for them

to pray behind their Imam. What kind of chivalrous men are these? They know that in a moment they would all be wiped out but still they were standing firm like a mountain – no power on this earth can intimidate them. There is no sign of concern on anyone's face, no one is sad nor has anyone lost hope.” (p.31)

5. The most significant part that Prem Chand has introduced in the story is the dialogue Abbas ibn Ali (Husayn's half-brother) is having with Husayn as Sahas Rai and his six brothers have gone to the battlefield and they are falling one by one. Let me reproduce a part of that text:



“Abbas: They are great fighters! This truth has just dawned upon me that there is Islam even outside of the circle of Islam. These men are really Muslims. It is impossible that the honourable Prophet would not speak for their salvation (*shifa'at*)?”

Husayn: How bravely they are fighting!

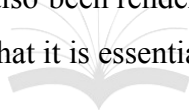
Abbas: They are really pushing right into the ranks. I have not seen anyone jumping into the jaws of death with such daring.

Ali Akbar: If we had five hundred such as these, we would have won this.

Husayn: Alas! Sahas Rai has fallen from his horse. The wretched man Shimr is attacking him from his back. These people are giving a bad name to Islam, evil ones.

Abbas: Alas, the second brother is also falling.”

This is a great piece of work. Whether or not you are involved in the story of Karbala as a religious paradigm, I recommend this work to everyone. The whole play has also been rendered in Urdu and published as part of Prem Chand's works. However, I feel that it is essential that this work is produced in Hindi.



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Complete works of Prem Chand have been published recently in 24 volumes.

As the greatest Hindi and Urdu writer of pre-independence India, Premchand had pioneered modern Hindi literature. His collected works are now being published in Urdu in 24 volumes, revised from earlier planned 22. This book, is an omnibus collection of his Fictional and non-fiction writings, essays, reportage, reminences etc.

Literary Works of Premchand have now been collected in 24 volumes and are being published under the title Kulliyat-e-Premchand. The volumes have been arranged as follows:

- Volume 1 to 8 anthologizes his novels.
- Volume 9 to 14 is a collection of his short fiction.
- Volume 15 and 16 relate to the plays authored by him.
- Volume 17 carries his letters and correspondence
- Volume 18 to 19 contain translated works
- Volume 20 and 24 are omnibus collections of his writings.



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