

Pragmatism and Social Realism in *Godaan*: A Philosophical Reading in the Light of William James, John Dewey, and Charles Sanders Peirce

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Abstract

Godaan is one of the well-known Novels by Munshi Premchand which was written before independence. This paper studies through the lens of classical American pragmatism. The paper claims that *Godaan* portrays not only the picture of social realism but it also expresses as a pragmatic philosophy. This paper analyses with the thoughts of William James, John Dewey, and Charles Sanders Peirce, how Premchand deals truth, morality, and social institutions of his time in live manner. This novel is a real image of the contemporary society and it was the sickness not only for pre independent era where religious rituals, caste structures, and moral traditions were very deep rooted in the society but they are present today also in the same manner in different forms. This paper examines how Premchand dealt with poverty, exploitation, and human suffering. Hori's craving to offer the ritual of cow donation which is called *Godaan* becomes a powerful example of how the prevalent belief system was. It was a harsh reality that rich and the poor had to perform the same rituals when the belief is concerned. This research mirrors the pragmatic view that ideas must be judged by their outcomes. The paper concludes that *Godaan* unites Indian social context with universal philosophical inquiry, presenting literature as a space where social values are examined through experience. In doing so, Premchand's novel demonstrates the enduring relevance of pragmatic thought in understanding and reforming society.

Keywords: *Pragmatism, Social Realism, Literary Ethics, Rural India, Premchand, Philosophical Criticism*

Introduction

Pragmatism is a philosophical movement which emerged in America during late nineteenth-century. The main aim of this thought was to merge action and thought, theory and life and belief and consequence. The philosophers like William James, John Dewey, and Charles Sanders Peirce broke the traditional epistemological theory by propagating the idea that truth is not a static property but rather arises from experiential consequences. Pragmatic theory claims that ideas become meaningful only when it has practical bearing of life. This theory has been very well used in literary texts specially in novels to show the ground realities of society.

The late nineteenth century saw the emergence of the American philosophical movement known as pragmatism. Combining action and thought, theory and life belief and consequences was the primary goal of this idea. Philosophers such as William James, John Dewey, and Charles Sanders Peirce disrupted conventional epistemological theory by promoting the notion that truth is the result of experience rather than a static attribute. According to pragmatic theory concept only acquire significance when they have real-world applications. This theory has been effectively applied in literary works particularly in novels to depict societal realities on the ground.

Well known Indian novelist, Munshi Premchand has throughout his life written stories and novels based on the social evils prevalent in those times and yet is relevant for this modern era. His reforms are a towering figure in modern literature, celebrated for his empathetic portrayals of rural life and commitment to

social reform. All his novels are based on true human conditions like hunger poverty, caste, gender, corruption and religion. His characters are simple people who face challenges of their life. His novels are the dignified proclamation of lived human conditions. Premchand has shown his artistic maturity in *Godaan* (1936), which becomes as moral seriousness. *Godaan* which is the master piece set against the rural background of India speaks about the life of Hori Mahato, a poor peasant whose yearning for dignity becomes entangled with debt, social pressure, and moral compromise.

The major argument of this research is that *Godaan* can be read as a work of literary pragmatism because it evaluates social values not through idealistic doctrine but through their practical consequences. Under the shadow of philosophical frameworks of James, Dewey, and Peirce, this study shows that Premchand's narrative method aligns with pragmatic criteria — truth tested in experience, ideas judged by their effects, and ethical concerns rooted in human welfare.

Objectives of the Research

The major objectives of the study is to analyse how the pragmatic ideas of William James, John Dewey, and Charles Sanders Peirce have been applied in the novel *Godaan* and also to examine how Premchand deals the society's evil nature through their practical consequences in the lives of characters. Further this research also shows how *Godaan* function as the mirror of society where the treatment of truth, belief, morality, and social institutions embodies pragmatic inquiry by grounding ideas in lived experience.

Pragmatism in Philosophy

Pragmatism in Philosophy: James, Dewey, and Peirce

William James: Truth in Experience

William James shakes up the old idea that truth just sits there, locked inside an idea. He says, "Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events" (James 97). For James, truth doesn't just match up with reality in some frozen way. Instead, it shows itself out in the world, through what happens. If a belief works—if it actually helps us live better or solves real problems—then it's true. Or, as James himself puts it: "By their fruits ye shall know them." He's all about judging ideas by what they actually do, not how they sound in theory.

John Dewey: Reconstruction of Experience

John Dewey takes pragmatism in a new direction, throwing it right into the middle of social and ethical life. In *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey argues that philosophy shouldn't just be a private playground for philosophers. It ought to tackle real human problems (Dewey 46). For Dewey, thought and action go hand in hand. Meaning comes from what we do and what we experience, not just what we say or write. He's clear about his vision: "Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself." Dewey grounds knowledge in social usefulness and aims it toward making life better. That makes his ideas especially meaningful when we analyse literature that deals with society and real people, not just abstract ideas.

Charles Sanders Peirce: The Pragmatic Maxim

Charles Sanders Peirce, usually called the founder of pragmatism, sets out his famous maxim: "Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object" (Peirce 293). For Peirce, meaning isn't some cloudy thing—it's tied directly to what a concept actually does, or could do, in real life. You only really understand an idea when you know its practical effects.

Godaan: Social Realism and Rural India

Context and Plot Overview

The novel *Godaan* is picturized in a remote village of North India. The main character Hori is a small farmer of the village. Keeping cows in those days was considered as the symbol of respect and religious dignity. To maintain his dignity the protagonist yearned to own a cow. His wish to keep a cow put him into debt and spoiled his life and family. The novel begins with the wish of cow and he was trapped by the society's evil practices. The novel reveals the consequences of personal aspiration and the weakness of the society's evil practice which commonly results in caste discrimination. The novelist does not draw the picture of the village as to show the beauty of the village as the romantic writers did but, it offers a meticulous depiction of agrarian society, exposing its economic exploitation and moral contradictions. For example, when Hori tries to fulfill his social and religious duties, he finds that these very duties trap him in a cycle of debt: "*karz vah mehmaan hai jo ek baar ane ke bad jane ka naam nahi leta hai*" (Premchand 145) Here debt is metaphorically defined as a visitor that refuses to leave — a pragmatic expression of economic reality.

Realism through Character and Environment

The realism of Premchand does not come from any ornamental description of the person or the situation but through deep involvement with everyday life. Every problem of Hori's life which emerged from economic such as his interactions with his friend, his son, his wife, moneylenders, landlords, and relatives reveal economic structures that operate beyond individual moral agency. The scene of the village fields, markets, temples, village pathways shows clearly the human struggle such as, "*Jeevan Sangharsh Hai aur sangharsh hi jeevan hai*" (Premchand 23) This phrase resonates with pragmatic sensibilities: life is defined by lived struggle, not abstract ideals.

Pragmatism and Godaan

Truth and Consequence: Jamesian Insight

applying James's criterion of truth to *Godaan*, we consider Hori's perception of and belief in the caste system, the role of the religious rite, and the social obligation. His beliefs are brought to the test due to the consequences. From *Godaan*, the socially revered merit of ritualistic giving of a cow (*godaan*) becomes an economic liability and increases Hori's misery. It makes the reader question the belief. Does the belief in the ritual 'godaan' bring about spiritual reward and true satisfaction in the lives of people? From Hori's experience, Premchand seems to answer the question in a practical sense: the belief in the merit of a cow donation must be evaluated by the result of that belief.

James shifts the emphasis of the *Godaan* truth test from social custom to the people. His test is realistic and accurate to experience. Social Reform and Experience: Deweyan Reading Premchand's narrative approach is closely aligned with Dewey's insistence that philosophy must address actual human problems. *Godaan* uses a thorough depiction of lived experience rather than didactic moralizing to address social suffering and encourage introspection. The predicament of the peasantry, the weight of debt, and the subtle violence of social norms become problems that call for change—not in theory but in actuality. Characters such as Dhaniya articulate practical moral insight when she says: "*Annyay sahna bhi annyay ke Barabar hai*" (Premchand 289) This assertion does not emerge from theological abstraction but from practical confrontation with injustice. Dewey's notion that knowledge must contribute to improved human conditions finds resonance here.

Pragmatic Maxim and Practical Meaning: Peircean Application

The symbolic and material parts of Godaan are made clearer by Peirce's pragmatic precept, which states that ideas should be understood by their practical applications. In Hindu religion, the titular act of godaan, or the donation of a cow, has profound sacred significance. However, a pragmatic study reveals that its practical impact on Hori's life is financial struggle and ultimately disappointment. This disparity prompts readers to reconsider the true implications of religious behavior. Premchand's approach is consistent with Peirce's dictum, which maintains that meaning results from actual effects. Consequences challenge the traditional understanding of rituals, caste responsibilities, and social honor.

Ethical Humanism and Social Utility

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Urban–Rural Contrast and Structural Forces

Godaan really leans into the differences between village and town life. The city folks? They love to debate politics and talk about social change. Most of them have good educations and act a bit distant. But they don't see the bigger issues that shape Hori's world. You get this clash—ideas versus real life. All that big talk in town doesn't touch the real problems farmers face every day. Premchand uses this gap to take aim at both the empty talk of city people and the stuck-in-place ways of the countryside.

Conclusion-

Premchand's narrative aligns with the pragmatic criteria of James, Dewey, and Peirce by testing social values through real-life effects. His simple life portraying of Premchand is very close to the reality where characters have to undergo the real challenges of life. The outcome of the novel is that it portrays not only rural India with precision but also invites critical thinking on belief, meaning, tradition, and reform. The research reveals that Godaan is not merely a realist novel but as a text that engages with universal philosophical concerns. Its relevance persists because pragmatic inquiry — testing ideas through consequences — remains essential to both literature and life. The novel Godaan is one of the best examples of pragmatic philosophy where the characters had to face their challenges not as an accident but as the practical way of life.

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