

AZAD HIND FOUZ SMRITI MAHAVIDYALAYA
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COMPULSORY ENGLISH

UNIT 1: SHORT STORY

MUNSHI PREMCHAND: 'THE CHILD'

PREPARED BY

Dr. ADITI SENGUPTA
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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The Child

Munshi Premchand

People call Gangu a Brahmin, and Gangu behaves like one. My syce and servants salaam me from a distance. Gangu never does that. Perhaps he expects me to touch his feet. He never handles the tumbler in which I have drunk, and I have never dared to ask him to fan me. Whenever I am sweating profusely and no one is around, Gangu picks up the fan by himself. But it becomes clear from his looks that he is doing me a favour. And I don't know why I at once snatch the fan from his hands. He is short-tempered and can't stand any criticism. He thinks it is below his dignity to sit beside my syce and servants. I have never seen him socializing with anyone. What surprises me most is that he is not addicted to bhang or things like that, a habit that is a special characteristic of the people of his caste. I have never seen him performing any religious rituals or bathing in a river. He is totally illiterate; even then he is a Brahmin; and expects others to reverence and serve him. But why shouldn't he? When people are holding onto the wealth inherited from their ancestors under the belief that they themselves have created that wealth, then why should he give up the privilege and status bequeathed by his ancestors? This is his birthright.

By nature I am reserved with my servants. I don't like them to come to me unless I ask for them. I don't like to shout for them for small matters. I find it more convenient to pour from the *surahi* water for myself, or light the lamp, or put on my shoes, or take out a book from the shelf, all by myself, than ask Hingan or Maikoo to do any of that. This gives me a feeling of my independence and self-confidence. My servants too have understood my nature, and seldom come to me unless I call them. Therefore, one morning when Gangu came and stood in front of me, I didn't like it. These people come to me either to ask for an advance or to complain about one of their companions. And I don't like any of this. I pay everyone on the first of the month and whenever someone comes to ask for an advance, I get worked up. I don't like keeping account of small amounts. And then if someone has got his full salary for a month he has no business to fritter it away in fifteen days and then come and ask for an advance or a loan. And I hate listening to complaints. I look upon them as a sign of weakness or a mean attempt at flattery.

I knitted my brow and said, “What’s the matter? I didn’t call you.”

I was amazed to see a look of politeness, supplication and even unease on his proud face. It seemed he wanted to say something but was unable to find words for it.

In irritation I said, “What’s wrong? Why don’t you say something? You know it’s time for me to go for a walk. I’m getting late.”

Gangu replied in a dejected tone, “All right, you go for your walk. I’ll come again.”

This was still more worrisome. Now knowing that I don’t have much time, he would quickly blurt out all in one outburst. On another occasion, the rogue would go on bemoaning for hours. He may be regarding my reading and writing as some kind of work, but my moments of contemplation, the most crucial ones of my vocation, are mere relaxation in his eyes. And he would catch hold of me at such a time.

“Have you come to ask for an advance? I don’t give advances.” I said, rudely.

“No, *sarkar*. I have never asked for an advance.”

“Then, have you come to complain against someone? I don’t like to listen to complaints.”

“No, *sarkar*. I have never complained against anyone.”

Gangu now looked determined. From the expression on his face it seemed he was marshaling all his strength for a long hop. He spoke in an unsteady voice, “Please, relieve me of my duties. Now I won’t be able to serve under you.”

I had never before heard this kind of demand and it hurt my self-pride. I consider myself a model of humane behaviour. I don’t speak harshly to my servants and try to keep my bossy attitude sheathed in a scabbard. So I was amazed at this proposal. I said in a harsh tone, “Why? What’s your resentment?”

“Very few are as good-natured as you, *hazoor*, but I’m in a situation in which I can no longer work with you. I don’t want that your reputation should suffer because of me.”

I was perplexed and became inflamed with curiosity. I threw myself into the chair lying in the verandah and said, “Why do you talk in riddles? Tell me straight what the matter is.”

Very politely Gangu said, “The truth is the woman who has been expelled from the Widows’ Ashram, the same Gomti Devi...”

I asked impatiently, “Yes, she has been expelled. So what? What has that to do with your job?”

It was as if Gangu had unloaded a heavy burden from his head, “I want to marry her,

babuji.”

I looked at him with astonishment. This illiterate and orthodox Brahmin, untouched by new ideas, is marrying this lecherous woman, whom no one would even let into their house! Gombi had created a stir in the peaceful atmosphere of the *mohalla*. She had come to this Widows' Ashram a few years ago. The officials of the Ashram had married her off three times, and each time, she had left her husband and returned after a few weeks or a month. So much so that the secretary of the Ashram had expelled her, and now she lived in a small room in the *mohalla* and had become a source of fun for the *mohalla*'s rogues.

I was angered at Gombi's simplicity but I also pitied him. The donkey could not find any other woman except this one to marry. When she had forsaken three men how long would she stay with him? Had he had some money, she might have stayed with him for six months or a year. He is stark blind. She won't stay with him even for a week.

I asked him peremptorily, “Don't you know the stories of her misdeeds?”

Gombi spoke as if he had been an eyewitness, “These are all lies. People have maligned her for nothing.”

“What do you mean? Hasn't she left three men?”

“They drove her out. What could she do?”

“You fool! Does anyone come from so far, spend thousands of rupees just to drive away a woman?”

Gombi replied with emotion, “*Hazoor*, no woman can stay where there's no love. A wife doesn't need just food and clothing. She needs love too. They must have thought they had done a widow a great favour by marrying her. They must have expected her to surrender to them body and soul; but to do that, one has first to surrender oneself, *hazoor*. That's it. Moreover, she is suffering from a sickness. She is sometimes possessed by a spirit. Then she starts talking nonsense, and falls unconscious.”

“And you'll marry such a woman?” I asked, shaking my head in skepticism. “Take it from me; you will reap a bitter harvest.”

Gombi shook his head like a martyr and said, “Babuji, I believe it will end happily for me, God willing.”

“Then you have decided finally?” I asked him firmly.

“Yes, *hazoor*.”

“Then I accept your resignation.”

I am not a prisoner of worn-out customs and orthodoxies, but to keep in my employment a man who was marrying a slut was really a risky proposition. Every now and then, there would arise new complications and troubles; the police would come, and court cases. There might even be thefts. So it was advisable to keep off the quicksand. Gangu, like a man suffering from deprivation, is leaping for a piece of bread unmindful that the bread is old, dry and rotten. I thought it right to keep him out.

Five months went by. Gangu had married Gomti and he lived in a shack in the same *mohalla*. Now he made his living by hawking *chaat*. Whenever I met him in the bazaar, I would enquire about his well-being, for I had become deeply interested in him. His life was a testing ground for a social question, not only social, a psychological one too. I was curious to know how this would end. I always found Gangu in a happy state of mind. I could clearly see on his face the sparkle and self-confidence that is the result of happiness and contentment in life. His sale was no more than a rupee and a half, and out of this, his earnings came to about eight-to-ten annas. This was his livelihood but it seemed he was blessed by a god because there was not a trace of the shame and misfortune that is found among such people. On his face, there was a look of self-assurance and joy that comes only to a contented soul.

One day, I heard that Gomti had run away. I don't know why but I derived a strange pleasure from this news. I had become envious of Gangu's happy and contented life, and was waiting for some deadly or shameful end to it. This news softened my envy. After all the very thing I had expected had happened. The fellow was punished for his lack of foresight. Let me see how he shows his face to me. Now he would realize how right they were who had advised him against this marriage. He had thought that he had come to possess something rare, as if the doors to salvation had opened for him. People had warned him that that woman could not be trusted, that she had deceived so many, but it had all fallen on deaf ears. Now when he meets me I shall ask him how happy he was after this boon from his goddess! He used to say that people defamed her out of ill will, and let me see who was mistaken.

The same day I happened to meet Gangu in the market. He was shaken and unsettled, completely lost to himself. Tears flowed from his eyes the moment he saw me, not out of shame but pain. “*Babuji*, Gomti deceived me too.” Hiding my pleasure under an outward show of sympathy, I said, “I had warned you of this and you did not listen. Now have patience. There is nothing else you can do. Has she cleaned you out or left something behind?”

Gangu touched his heart with his hands. It seemed my speech had hurt him deeply.

“Oh *babuji*, don’t say this. She took away nothing. In fact, she left behind whatever she had. I don’t know what my fault was. May be I was not good enough for her. She was literate and I unlettered. It was enough that she stayed with me for so long. Had she stayed with me a little longer I would have become a good person. What should I tell you about her? She was like a God’s blessing for me. I don’t know where I had faulted. I swear I never saw a trace of resentment on her face. I’m nobody, *babuji*. I earn no more than ten-twelve *annas*, but she was so good at housekeeping that I never felt the shortage of anything.”

I was acutely disappointed at what he said. I had thought he would narrate the story of her infidelity and I would show my sympathy for him, but his eyes were not yet opened, the fool that he was. He was still under her spell and had become disorientated.

I began to ridicule him, “So she hasn’t carried anything with her?”

“Nothing at all, *babuji*. Not a pie.”

“And she loved you very much?”

“How should I convince you, *babuji*? That love I shall not forget till my death.”

“And even then she deserted you?”

“That’s what surprises me, *babuji*.”

“Haven’t you heard the stories of female treachery?”

“Don’t say that, *babuji*. I would keep singing her praises even if someone should threaten to slit my throat.”

“Then go and search for her.”

“Yes, master. I won’t rest till I have found her. Once I come to know where she is I shall definitely bring her back, and my heart tells me that she will come back. You’ll see. She hasn’t gone away out of any resentment. I shall search for her everywhere. And when I have found her I’ll see you again.”

Saying this, he went his way, distraught with emotion.

Just after this meeting I had to go to Nainital for some work and returned after a month. I hadn't yet changed my dress when I saw Gangu standing in front of me holding a newly born baby in his hands. Perhaps even Nand himself would not have been so overjoyed to hold the child Krishna in his lap. Gangu's whole body seemed to exude an uncontrollable joy. His face and eyes were singing with gratitude and love. He displayed the same kind of contentment that one finds on the face of a starving beggar after he had had his fill.

I said, "Tell me, great man, did you get some news of Gomti Devi?"

Gangu burst out, 'Yes, *babuji*. With your blessings I have brought her back. She was found in a hospital in Lucknow. She had confided her whereabouts to one of her female friends here. The moment I came to know, I rushed to Lucknow and dragged her back. And I got this baby, over and above.'

He lifted the baby and brought it in full view of me like a sportsman proudly displaying his medal.

I remarked mockingly, "Very fine, you got this boy, too. Perhaps that is why she had run away. Is he your son?"

"Why mine, *babuji*? He's yours. God's."

"Was he born in Lucknow?"

"Yes, *babuji*, He's just a month old."

"How long have you been married?"

"This is the seventh month."

"So he was born in the sixth month of your marriage?"

"What else."

"And even then he's yours?"

"Yes."

"You're talking nonsense."

I am not sure whether he understood what I was trying to say but he replied out of plain innocence, '*Babuji*, she nearly died giving him birth. She has got a new life. She struggled between life and death for three days and three nights.'

I taunted him. "This is the first time I hear that a baby can be born after six months of marriage."

The arrow had hit the target.

“Oh, it’s that. I didn’t even think of it. That’s why Gomti had run away.”

He continued: “I said “Gomti, if you don’t like me, you can leave me. I shall go away and never trouble you again. If you ever need my help, write to me and I shall do everything I can. I have no resentment against you. In my eyes, you are still as good as you were before. I love you as before. No, now I love you even more. And if you have not turned away from me, then come with me. Gangu would never be unfaithful to you. I married you not because you are a goddess but because I loved you and believed you also loved me. This child is my child, my own child. I took a sown field. Should I then disown the harvest just because someone else had sown it?”

Saying this, Gangu burst out into a loud laughter.

I forgot to change my dress. I don’t know why but my eyes were filled with tears. I don’t know the power that crushed my revulsion and made me open my arms. I took that immaculate child in my lap and kissed his face with the affection that perhaps I had not shown even for my own children.

Gangu said, ‘*Babuji*, you’re such a good human being. I have always sung your praises before Gomti. I keep telling her to come and meet you, but she doesn’t come out of shyness.’

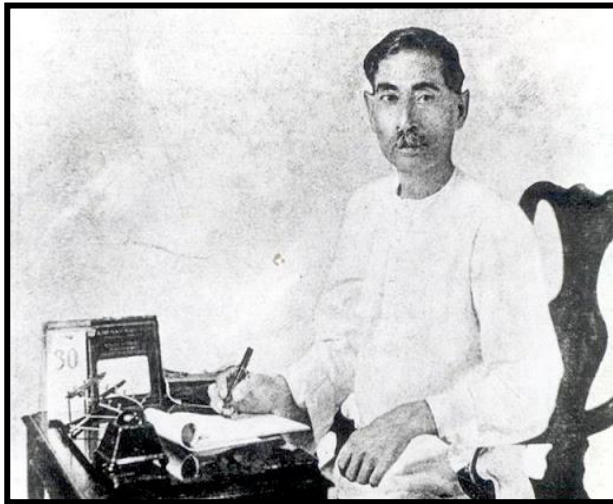
I a good human being! The veneer of goodness was gone today. I spoke to him with a heart full of devotion, “No. Why should she come to meet a black-hearted person like me? Come, take me to meet her. You say I’m a good person! No. I’m good only from outside but very mean from inside. It is you who is truly good, and this baby is a flower that radiates the fragrance of your goodness.”

I embraced the baby and walked along side Gangu.

The Author:

Munshi Premchand (1880–1936) is regarded as one of the foremost Indian writers of the early 20th century.

Munshi Premchand (Dhanpat Rai Srivastava) was born in Varanasi and he began writing under the pen name “Nawab Rai” but later changed to “Premchand”. He is also known as “Munshi Premchand” – Munshi being an honorary prefix. His works include more than a dozen novels, around 250 short stories, several essays and translations of a number of foreign literary works into Hindi. He pioneered adapting Indian themes to Western literary styles.



Premchand is considered the first Hindi author whose writings prominently featured **realism**. His novels explore the lives of the rural poor and the urban middle-class. He used literature for the purpose of generating awareness about national and social issues like corruption, child widowhood, prostitution, feudalism, poverty, colonialism and India’s freedom movement. He worked as a teacher until 1921 and then he joined M. K. Gandhi’s Non-cooperation Movement.

Premchand focused on village life to explore the complex drama in the peaceful environment, such as *Godaan* (1936) a Hindi novel and the short-story collection *Kafan* (1936). As a writer he was renowned (famous) for his Urdu-language novels and short stories. In India, except for Bengal, the short story was not accepted as a literary form until Premchand’s works appeared. Unlike other contemporary authors such as Rabindranath Tagore; Premchand was not appreciated much outside India. Siegfried Schulz believes the absence of good translations of Premchand’s work is responsible for this. Also, unlike Tagore and Muhammad Iqbal, Premchand never travelled outside India, studied abroad or mingled with the renowned foreign literary figures.

Short Questions:

1. Who is the author of *The Child*?
The author of *The Child* is Munshi Premchand.
2. To which Indian state did Premchand belong?
Munshi Premchand belonged to Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh.
3. In what language did Munshi Premchand write *The Child*?
Munshi Premchand wrote *The Child* in Hindi.
4. What is the original Hindi title of the story, *The Child*?
The original Hindi title of *The Child* is *Balak*.
5. Who is the narrator in *The Child*?
The narrator in *The Child* is a rich landlord.
6. Who is the narrator's servant in *The Child*?
The narrator's servant in *The Child* is Gangu.
7. Whom did Gangu marry in *The Child*?
Gangu married a widow, called Gomti Devi in *The Child*.
8. Who is the 'child' in Premchand's story?
The child refers to the son of Gomti Devi, a one month old boy, whom Gangu accepts as his own child.
9. To which caste did Gangu belong?
Gangu was an illiterate orthodox Brahmin who worked as a servant but maintained his dignity.
10. How was Gangu different from the other servants of the household?
Gangu did not salaam his employer or fan him in summer, never touches a tumbler used by him. He did not socialize with other servants and was not addicted to bhang or things like them. He does not perform any religious rituals or bath in a river.
11. What did the landlord dislike?
The landlord disliked people who came to ask for an advance or to complain about other servants.
12. Why did Gangu come to meet his employer?

Gangu come to meet his employer with a request to relieve him of his duties as he won't be able to serve under him anymore.

13. Why did Gangu wish to leave his job?

Gangu wish to leave his job as he was going to marry Gomti Devi, a disreputable widow, and did not want to cause problems for his employer.

14. Who was Gomti Devi?

Gomti Devi was a widow who had come to the 'Widows' Ashram' some years ago. The officials had married her off three times and each time she left her husband and returned. Finally, the secretary of the Ashram expelled her and she lived in the mohalla as a source of fun for the mohalla's rascals.

15. What does Gangu say when he employer refers to Gomti Devi's misdeeds?

Gangu dismisses Gomti Devi's ill misdeeds saying that they were spread by malicious people.

16. Why did Gomti Devi leave her three husbands?

Gangu says Gomti Devi left her three husbands as they did not love her and drove her out. She was also sick.

17. What did his employer warn Gangu about marrying Gomti Devi?

Gangu's employer warned him that he was making a mistake by marrying Gomti Devi and it will cause his ruin.

18. How did Gangu earn a living after leaving his job?

Gangu earned a living by selling *chaat* for ten-twelve *annas* after leaving his job.

19. What did Gomti Devi do after a few months of marriage to Gangu?

Gomti Devi deserted Gangu and ran away six months after marriage.

20. Why was Gangu puzzled by Gomti Devi's behaviour?

Gangu was puzzled by Gomti Devi's behaviour because he believed she loved him and had no reason to run away from him.

21. What did Gangu feel after his wife ran away?

Gangu was heart-broken after Gomti Devi ran away.

22. Why did Gomti Devi run away according to Gangu?

Gangu felt he was not good enough for Gomti Devi who was literate and he was illiterate. So she ran away.

23. What does Gangu intend to do after Gomti Devi left?

Gangu decided to look for Gomti Devi and bring her back as she was a God's blessing for him.

24. Why was Gangu confident that Gomti Devi would return to him?

Gangu was confident that Gomti Devi would return to him as she had not gone with any resentment.

25. Where did Gangu find Gomti Devi?

Gomti found Gomti Devi in a hospital in Lucknow where she had given birth to a son.

26. How did Gangu find Gomti Devi?

Gomti Devi had confided her whereabouts to one of her female friends who told Gangu where to find her.

27. Why did Gomti Devi return to Gangu?

Gomti Devi returned to Gangu as he still loved her and promised to be always there for her.

28. Why did the landlord think that the child was not Gangu's?

The landlord thought that Gomti Devi's child was not Gangu's son as the child was born six months after their marriage.

29. Whose son was the child according to Gangu?

The little boy was Gangu's son, the son of the landlord and most importantly the son of God according to Gangu.

30. Why did Gangu accept Gomti's child as his own?

Gangu perhaps knew that Gomti Devi was pregnant when he married her and hence, he accepted the child as his son.

31. How does the speaker describe Gangu's happiness when he came to visit with his child?

The speaker said Gangu looked happier than Nand holding child Krishna when he came to visit with his son.

32. Why did the speaker take the child in his arms?

The speaker realized Gangu was a better person who had accepted the child as his own and took the innocent boy in his arms.

33. How does the speaker describe himself compared to Gangu?

The speaker describes himself as a black-hearted person compared to Gangu who was truly good.

34. How does the story – *The Child* – end?

The story, *The Child* ends as the speaker carried the baby and walked with Gangu to his home to meet Gomti Devi.