

The theme of hunger in *Kafan*, a short story by Prem Chand

Donatella Dolcini
Università degli Studi di Milano

Kafan (*Shroud*) is the most famous of the about three hundred short stories written by the great Hindi author Prem Chand (1880–1936).¹ Wherever in the world Hindi language is studied and wherever modern Indian literary works are spoken of, it has been translated and appreciated for the sake of its narrative structure, the vividness of its images, the suffused irony, and its absolutely masterful psychological introspection.

The plot is fairly straightforward: an idle father and his idle son are cooking their meagre meal by the door of the hut, where the young man's wife is in labour. The woman dies and the two have to seek a loan to buy a shroud for her burial. While they are out looking for one in the bazaar, they let themselves be tempted by the food in a tavern² and spend their whole store of rupees there, ending up drunk.

The characters in the story are few: father and son (Ghīsū, the shoemaker, and young Mādhav), the *zamīndār*,³ who reluctantly lends them some money, a small crowd of villagers, an equally small crowd of patrons of the tavern, and a beggar. The whole story actually unfolds under the influence of the wife, who, both when alive and dead, casts her beneficent shadow over her father-in-law and husband.

The different phases of the story are however linked together by hunger, explored and represented in a variety of nuances, that is indeed remarkable in the space of such a short exposition (eight pages). In fact hunger is absent from only two of the about twelve scenes⁴ into which the story is divided, while in the other occupies at times a leading role, at others a supporting one, or else it

1. On Prem Chand see among others Pisani–Mishra 1970, 353–55, etc., Sarma 1989, Sarma 1992, Dolcini 1997.

2. *madhusālā*.

3. The official in charge of collecting the land taxes under the Mughals, who then becomes the land owner under the British.

4. Actually Prem Chand organized his story in only three sections, based on the location of the characters: namely, the cooking and eating of the potatoes outside the hut, the meeting with the *zamīndār* and the getting the village's solidarity, and the foolish behaving in the bazaar.

appears as a background presence. It should also be noted that the intensity with which hunger is described in detail or simply suggested is not expounded in a logical crescendo or decrescendo, but varies from one passage to another, underscoring the actions of the characters or serving as a veiled counterpoint to them. Therefore, in relation to hunger, the story can be divided into a dozen sub-scenes, each of which expresses, as it were, a different type of hunger.

Twelve types of hunger

The story begins with a description of a father and son who are so indolent that, if they have nothing to fill their stomachs with, they generally do not trouble themselves greatly, provided that they can avoid having to work:

After going hungry for three or four days, Ghīsū would go out to collect firewood and Mādhav would sell it at the market. As long as the money earned lasted, they would never do a hand's turn. If there was some wheat in the house neither of them would lift a finger, as if they had sworn off working. (Prem Chand 2002, 214)⁵

So this is **hunger** described as more or less **routine**, and accepted passively, as happens in relation to a situation that one might think was decreed by fate (*karma*): 'They lived with the aid of heaven' (215), observes the author ironically.

On this particular evening, however, they have scraped together a few potatoes, which they are roasting in the embers outside the hut. This is another aspect of the **same routine**: on certain days they go hungry, on others they manage to pick up something to eat.

Sometimes they would steal potatoes and peas from the fields and cook them to eat or steal a half dozen stalks of sugar cane and suck them at night. (215)

On the contrary, at this moment they are so famished that they devour the potatoes while they are still burning hot. Here, **hunger** is **impatient**:

They had gone hungry since the day before, they could not wait for them to cool, so they both gulped them down, even though their eyes watered at the effort. (215)

5. The text of the story is taken from a collection of Prem Chand's most important works. Since it is the source of nearly all the quotations in the text, only the page number is given hereafter. The translation from Hindi is by D. Dolcini.

Their meagre meal revives the father's distant memories of a wedding banquet, where the courses that followed each other were so numerous and abundant that even voracious diners like himself were unable to eat them all. 'We were stuffed so full that we could not even take a sip of water' (216). To his son, however, the nostalgic story evokes images of a chimeric gorgeous satiety which is never attained and quite unattainable:

With his mouth watering, Mādhav said: 'Now there is nobody to invite us. How many *pūrīs*⁶ did you eat? About a score? I could swallow fifty'. (216-17)

This is **hunger** satisfied only with words, in the total lack of the concreteness which is characteristic of **memory** or **illusion**.

Distressed by the screaming of his daughter-in-law, Ghīsū seeks to persuade his son to stay with his wife:

Ghīsū took out a potato and peeling it said: 'Go inside and see how she is!'.
Mādhav replied: 'I'm afraid to go there'. (215)

Neither of them really wants to move away from the stove, out of fear that the other will eat all the potatoes once he is left alone. And this is **hunger as a necessity**, that which allows for no delays or reductions in its fulfilment.

The following morning the woman is found dead with her baby. It is what father and son were expecting and what in their cynicism they perhaps wished to happen, so that they would no longer have to submit to the rules that the poor woman had laid down at home. A little later, after getting help and comfort from their fellow villagers and the *zamīndār*,⁷ the two go to the market. In their wanderings they are irresistibly attracted to a tavern, 'as if a quasi-religious inspiration were guiding them' (218). **Hunger** here turns into **gluttony**.

The temptation is too strong, but before yielding to it the pair has to come up with an excuse that will appease their guilt. And what better excuse than to see the poor dead woman as a kind of tutelary deity,⁸ who, having been lavish in procuring them food in her lifetime, even now from heaven, certainly looks down with joy on the pair of them enjoying a good meal, as it is still (indirectly) procured by her? The father-in-law is moved at the thought of what she had always done for the men of the house and pronounces a kind of funeral oration in her honour, acknowledging her merit in having devoted herself to feeding her family day by day, earning a little money by her work as a cleaning woman, and using it to procure food and prepare meals. Through the woman, **hunger**

6. Unleavened bread fried in butter.

7. The *zamīndār* feels only scorn and resentment for them, but he 'was pitiful, [although] he had to make an effort to feel pity for Ghīsū' (217).

8. We infer that this deity is Annapūrṇā, the 'Full with food', the goddess responsible for feeding the living.

appears as a **hunger to be satisfied for others**: ‘She was very good, poor woman, and even in death she has given us something to eat and drink’ (220).

Nor could a touch of spirituality be omitted here, imbued with that sense of religiosity inseparable from every manifestation of the soul of India, even where it is entrenched behind a proclaimed atheism:⁹

God, you are omniscient! Take her with you into paradise, we all bless her in our hearts. We have never seen a meal like this in all our lives. (220)

In the tavern, the father and son eat greedily with abundant libations – a whole bottle – amidst the envy of the other patrons, who are less flush with money, and the imploring glances of a beggar. And this is **hunger** that comes to be **greed** in the case of the two main characters, whereas, when Mādhav is so full that he cannot eat any more, it is regarded by the onlookers as their own form **of defeat**: ‘All of them gazed with envy: “Oh, how lucky they are!”’ (219).

Then the pair experiences the unusual satisfaction of giving their leftovers to the beggar, who is gazing longingly at them: the **hunger of others** interpreted as an impulse to exercise an unprecedented **generosity**:

He gave the leftovers on his dish to the beggar and for the first time in his life he had the satisfaction of experiencing the pride of those who give. (220)

They are therefore moved to bless the dead woman who constantly watches over them:

‘Eat and bless, the one who has given us this food is dead but will go to heaven. By her death she has fulfilled the strongest desire of our lives’. (220)

They exalt the significance of the gift she has bestowed upon them, reinforcing the image of the deity that provides for all without distinction by bestowing that same gift of food.

Finally, father and son, now sated and completely drunk, dance like dervishes, spinning around and eventually collapsing on the floor, beside themselves. This is **hunger** seen as the peak of **gluttony**, uncontrolled **guzzling**, in a perfectly inverted companion piece to the **miserably satisfied hunger** in the first scene of the story:

Completely inebriated they began to dance, jumping and wriggling, stumbling and getting up again, until both collapsed. (221)

9. As was the case with Prem Chand himself.

The lack of starvation to death

One should note, however, that, even amidst the variety of all the different kinds of hunger described, we fail to find the tragic aspect of that lack of food which inevitably and painfully leads to death; that hunger, for instance, which has been imputed to India as an endemic and irremediable plague, until it has become a true, unjustified commonplace.¹⁰

Now, in the first half of the twentieth century, when Prem Chand wrote his works, a large proportion of the Indian population¹¹ were suffering from this lack of food, a suffering which was to continue for decades¹² and even after the obtaining of independence (1947). Therefore it is hard to imagine that an author like this, such a keen observer of the reality around him, was unaware of this situation, and all the more so, since his own family, although not starving, was however in difficult straits.¹³ It is surprising that in this story, which is built to such a large extent on hunger in its most disparate forms, there is either no mention of the hunger that rages in famine or that which leads to the deaths of poor malnourished human beings, or that which is suffered in conditions of absolute poverty. Yet around Prem Chand – who lived in Benares (Varanasi), a city visited by large numbers of pilgrims, many of whom are very poor¹⁴ and who arrive in that sacred place with the desire to die there¹⁵ – there must certainly have been scenes of the lack of food, some of them very acute. Nevertheless, in *Kafan* there are no characters starving to the ultimate extent and the only death happens because of childbirth.

And so, in this story, considered his masterpiece, hence in a certain sense the culmination of his principles in terms of literature, this aspect of hunger unexpectedly does not appear. And this is for a good reason, we think. In fact, the realism (*yathārthavāḍ*) which constitutes the framework of his poetic, in the version that the writer adopted, envisages an attenuation produced by idealism (*adarśavāḍ*).

This is because, according to the author, whenever a note of optimism is lacking, literature no longer fulfils its fundamental mission of making readers

10. Today the Indian Union exports cereals to countries in Central Asia.

11. According to reports of the time, the total Indian population amounted to less than three hundred million people

12. Up until the 1990s.

13. His father was a postman and from his first boyhood, Dhanpat Rai (that is the writer's real name, whereas Prem Chand – Moon of Love – is his pen name) had to earn his salary to allow him to study and, later, to support his family.

14. Many of these pilgrim-mendicants are actually people who have voluntarily renounced all the privileges of their former lives and have reduced themselves to living on alms outside the temples, in accordance with the principle of the four ages of man – *varṇāśramadharmā* – which prescribe the duty of detachment from all worldly things to old age.

15. Dying in Varanasi ensures immediate release from the cycle of reincarnation (*saṃsāra*).

aware of the problems of everyday reality, but without depriving them of hope in a possible future improvement of the various situations:

No doubt realism is extremely useful in directing [the reader's] attention to the evil customs of society. (...) But he wonders what sense it can have for him to read a book of stories and tales centred on the very people with whom he necessarily has to deal every hour of the day. (...) While, on the one hand, realism makes us open our eyes, on the other idealism raises us higher to a more pleasant place.¹⁶ (Prem Chand 1965a, 49-50)

16. Moreover, Indian literatures always avoid providing a narrative – be it epic, theatrical or fictional – with a tragic ending, given the certainty of a possible better rebirth after death.

References

- Dolcini 1997 = Donatella Dolcini, *Nazionalismo, ideologia gandhiana, nuova estetica letteraria: la teoria del genere narrativo in Prem Cand*, in *Bandhu. Scritti in onore di Carlo Della Casa*, ed. by R. Arena, M. P. Bologna, M. L. Mayer Modena, A. Passi, Ed. Dell'Orso, Alessandria 1997, Vol. I, 95-107.
- Pisani–Mishra 1970 = V. Pisani, L. P. Mishra, *Le letterature dell'India. Con un profilo della letteratura del Tibet di Giuseppe Tucci*, Sansoni–Nuova Accademia, Firenze–Milano 1970.
- Prem Chand 1965a = Prem Cand, *Kuch Vicār*, Saraswati Press, Ilahabad 1965.
- Prem Chand 1965b = Prem Cand, *Lo scrigno. Racconti di vita indiana*, ed. by L. P. Mishra, Leonardo da Vinci Ed., Bari 1965.
- Prem Chand 2002 = Prem Cand, *Racnā Saṃcayan*, Sampādan N. Varma, K. K. Goyanaka, Sahitya Akademi, Nai Dilli 2002.
- Sarma 1989 = R. V. Sarma, *Prem Cand aur unkā yug*, Rajkamal Prakasan, Nai Dilli 1989.
- Sarma 1992 = S. K. Sarma, *Hindī sāhitya: yug aur pravṛttiyām*, Asok Prakasan, Dilli 1992.

