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Comparative Dimensions of Gendered Violence: Ideological Mystification and Symbolic Power in Premchand's *Godan* and Beyond

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Abstract:

This paper undertakes a critical comparative examination of the structural and symbolic dimensions of gendered violence in Premchand's *Godan* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, focusing on the intricate mechanisms through which patriarchal ideology is perpetuated and normalized across disparate socio-cultural milieus. It argues that violence against women in these texts transcends physical aggression, emerging instead through the subtler modalities of symbolic domination, ideological mystification, and internalized subservience. Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence alongside feminist interventions by Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Bell Hooks, the paper interrogates how language, social rituals, kinship systems, and religious codes collectively function as instruments of patriarchal control.

In *Godan*, this control is woven into the socio-religious fabric of rural, caste-bound colonial India, whereas in *The Color Purple*, it intersects with racial hierarchies and economic disenfranchisement in early twentieth-century African-American life. Despite contextual divergences, both texts expose how women are systematically silenced, commodified, and regulated through institutionalized ideologies that render their oppression both inevitable and invisible. This comparative inquiry not only illuminates the universality of symbolic violence in

patriarchal societies but also foregrounds the transformative potential of resistance through voice, solidarity, and narrative agency—especially as embodied in Walker's redemptive arc. Ultimately, the paper positions literature as a critical site of feminist epistemology, where the concealed operations of power can be exposed, theorized, and challenged.

Keywords: Gendered Violence, Symbolic Violence, Patriarchy, Ideological Mystification and Internalized Subservience.

Introduction

Violence against women, while often recognized in its physical manifestations, is far more insidious in its symbolic and ideological forms. These covert dimensions of violence operate through cultural norms, linguistic practices, institutional rituals, and deeply embedded patriarchal expectations that women are socialized to internalize from an early age. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence—defined as a "gentle, invisible form of violence, unrecognized as such, chosen as much as undergone" (Bourdieu 1)—provides a powerful analytical lens to explore the subtle mechanisms through which male dominance is maintained without overt coercion. Symbolic violence, thus, does not merely constrain women externally but infiltrates their very perception of self, duty, and social place.

This paper seeks to examine the manifestations of such violence through ideological mystification and symbolic power in two culturally and historically distinct novels: Premchand's *Godan* (1936), rooted in colonial India's feudal and casteist rural society, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), which traverses the terrains of race, gender, and socio-economic oppression in the segregated American South. Though separated by geography and temporality,

both texts expose similar patriarchal mechanisms of control that structure women's lives through invisible yet powerful norms—whether in the guise of *stridharma* in *Godan* or Christian morality and racialized patriarchy in *The Color Purple*.

In *Godan*, Premchand critiques the ideological enslavement of women like Dhaniya and Jhunia, who are either made to suffer in silence or are cast out for transgressing societal norms. The control over female sexuality, labour, and speech is enacted through tradition and social expectation rather than overt force—echoing what Judith Butler describes as the "regulatory regimes" of gender performativity, wherein identity is constructed through repetitive social practices that appear natural (Butler 179). Similarly, Walker's Celie is not just a victim of physical abuse, but also of a symbolic system that renders her voiceless and invisible. Her journey toward emancipation is a process of unlearning the ideologies that have shaped her sense of inferiority, echoing bell hooks' assertion that "patriarchy has no gender" and is upheld through the complicity of both men and women socialized into its values (Hooks 118).

By bringing these two narratives into dialogue, the paper reveals that gendered violence is a transnational phenomenon—differing in its expressions but similar in its symbolic logic. Literature, in this context, becomes a potent space for resistance and critique, illuminating the often-invisible mechanisms of power that condition women's subjugation. As Simone de Beauvoir reminds us, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 295)—a becoming that is orchestrated not only through biology but through discourse, discipline, and ideology. This comparative analysis not only underscores the global persistence of symbolic violence but also calls attention to the emancipatory possibilities that literature offers through narrative disruption, feminist consciousness, and communal solidarity.

Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Violence and Feminist Thought

The intersection of symbolic violence and feminist theory offers a vital framework for examining the complex and often invisible structures of gendered oppression portrayed in Premchand's *Godan* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence is foundational in this analysis. Defined as "violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (Bourdieu 167), symbolic violence functions not through physical coercion but through the internalization of social hierarchies and cultural norms. This complicity arises from *habitus*, the system of durable, transposable dispositions that individuals acquire through socialization. Women subjected to symbolic violence are thus not merely passive victims; they are conditioned to participate in their own subjugation, often interpreting their suffering as natural, deserved, or divinely ordained.

Bourdieu's notion is particularly significant when examining how *Godan* and *The Color Purple* represent the transmission of gendered suffering across generations. In *Godan*, Dhaniya and Jhunia embody the internalization of patriarchal expectations: Dhaniya tolerates the poverty and moral hypocrisy around her with stoic endurance, while Jhunia is ostracized for her transgressive sexual behavior but never fully challenges her marginalization. Their complicity, however unconscious, is the product of symbolic domination exercised through caste, religion, and patriarchal morality—structures that normalize their suffering as a form of *stridharma*, or righteous female duty (Premchand 184–86).

Simone de Beauvoir's feminist dictum that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (295) underscores how femininity is not biologically inherent but socially manufactured through ideological conditioning. This idea complements Bourdieu's symbolic violence by foregrounding how gender identity is an outcome of cultural construction rather than natural

difference. For de Beauvoir, the myth of womanhood sustains male superiority by situating women as "the Other," a subordinate category that exists in relation to male dominance. In *The Color Purple*, this process is exemplified by Celie's initial voicelessness and obedience; her sense of self is shaped by the men around her who define her identity and worth. Her gradual awakening reflects a disruption of symbolic violence through the assertion of narrative agency.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity extends this critique by arguing that gender is not a stable identity but an effect of "repeated stylizations of the body" within a regulatory frame (Butler 179). Gender, according to Butler, is constructed through performative acts that produce the illusion of a fixed essence. This insight is crucial for interpreting how both Dhaniya and Celie "perform" their socially prescribed roles until transformative moments disrupt those scripts. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's performative subservience begins to unravel through her relationships with Shug Avery and her discovery of writing as a form of self-actualization. Writing becomes a counter-discursive act, a feminist praxis that dismantles the symbolic order which has rendered her invisible.

While *Godan* ends in a tragic cycle of poverty and silence, *The Color Purple* offers a redemptive arc where symbolic violence is contested and partially overcome. Celie's transformation—from a passive victim to a self-aware woman who reclaims her voice and body—represents what bell hooks calls "oppositional consciousness," a critical awareness that challenges the dominant ideologies underpinning oppression (Hooks 15). In contrast, Premchand's women characters, although sympathetically drawn, remain largely confined within the parameters of suffering, underscoring the rigidity of symbolic structures in traditional Indian society.

Thus, Bourdieu, de Beauvoir, and Butler collectively illuminate how ideology, internalization, and repetition sustain gendered hierarchies in both texts. These theoretical lenses reveal the extent to which symbolic violence is embedded not only in societal institutions but in the very consciousness of its subjects—highlighting the urgency of feminist resistance through awareness, speech, and subversion of the symbolic order.

Premchand's *Godan*: A Rural Portrait of Symbolic Oppression

Premchand's *Godan* (1936) offers a penetrating critique of rural Indian society under colonial rule, where economic hardship, caste hierarchy, and patriarchal structures intersect to regulate and discipline gender roles. At the heart of this social panorama lies a symbolic system of oppression that invisibly governs women's lives. Far beyond physical violence, the novel reveals the subtler, more pervasive mechanisms of control—what Pierre Bourdieu terms *symbolic violence*, which "is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (Bourdieu 167). In *Godan*, women like Dhaniya and Jhunia internalize societal expectations, not because they are inherently submissive, but because their lifeworld is saturated with ideological norms that naturalize their subordination.

Dhaniya, the wife of Hori—the central peasant figure in the novel—is constructed as both resilient and restrained. Her strength is evident in her pragmatic attitude toward survival, her moral clarity, and her instinct for justice. However, Premchand illustrates how her strength is circumscribed by the gendered role she is expected to perform. When Hori chooses to purchase a cow, an act steeped in Hindu religious symbolism and social prestige, it is less an act of personal agency and more a response to ideological pressure. The cow, a potent symbol of piety and social legitimacy, ironically becomes the catalyst for Hori's and Dhaniya's ruin (Premchand 72–

75). Dhaniya's role in this crisis is emblematic: though she voices resistance, she ultimately suffers in silence, embodying the ideal of the sacrificial wife who bears the burden of her husband's moral decisions.

Here, Premchand critiques the patriarchal valorization of female endurance. Dhaniya is celebrated not for her insight or autonomy but for her capacity to absorb suffering—a trait idealized in traditional Indian narratives of femininity. This reflects what Simone de Beauvoir identifies as the transformation of woman into "the Other," whose existence is defined in relation to male authority (Beauvoir 295). Dhaniya's silent suffering becomes a performative enactment of *stridharma*, the gendered moral code that equates female virtue with self-abnegation, reinforcing Bourdieu's insight that symbolic violence is most effective when it aligns with the victim's belief in its legitimacy (Bourdieu 170).

The case of Jhunia, Hori's daughter-in-law, further exposes the punitive dimensions of symbolic violence in rural society. Her elopement with Gobar, Hori's son, transgresses caste boundaries and patriarchal sexual norms. The village's response—ostracism, shame, and moral condemnation—reveals how women's bodies are constructed as the symbolic site of familial and communal honor. Jhunia's "pollution" through premarital sexuality becomes not merely a personal act but a social crime that disrupts the symbolic order. Hori's decision to accept her into the household is portrayed as a quiet act of defiance, yet it costs him his social standing, underscoring the communal enforcement of patriarchal discipline (Premchand 133–136).

Jhunia's marginalization illustrates how symbolic violence operates not only through direct control but through *doxa*—the unquestioned beliefs and assumptions that shape collective morality (Bourdieu 164). Her status is not determined by law but by ideology: she is "impure," "fallen," and thus excluded from the symbolic universe of honor. This reflects Judith Butler's

theory of performativity, where gendered identities are maintained through repeated social rituals that reify norms as natural (Butler 179). Jhunia, by stepping outside this framework, is punished not by legal decree but by ideological expulsion.

Premchand does not offer simplistic resolutions for these systemic issues. Rather, his realist vision exposes how symbolic violence is sustained by the interlocking mechanisms of caste, religion, morality, and economic dependency. In *Godan*, women are not simply oppressed by men but by a symbolic structure that shapes their desires, silences their dissent, and disciplines their bodies. This portrayal aligns with bell hooks' assertion that "patriarchy has no gender," as even women can become agents of patriarchal enforcement when socialized into its norms (hooks 118). Dhaniya's internalization of duty and Jhunia's social exile illustrate this complex complicity.

To sum up, *Godan* is not merely a tale of rural hardship; it is a sophisticated narrative of how ideology produces and sustains gendered hierarchies through symbolic means. Premchand's nuanced depiction of Dhaniya and Jhunia reveals the devastating power of symbolic violence to naturalize suffering and discipline transgression, making it a critical text for understanding the entanglements of gender, ideology, and cultural power in colonial India.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*: Violence, Voice, and Liberation

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) articulates a powerful critique of gendered and racial oppression, emphasizing how symbolic violence operates within the intersecting structures of patriarchy, racism, and economic disenfranchisement in early twentieth-century African American life. The protagonist, Celie, suffers under multiple layers of systemic violence: she is sexually abused by her stepfather, socially silenced by her husband, and psychologically

conditioned to accept her inferiority. These abuses exemplify what Pierre Bourdieu identifies as symbolic violence—forms of domination that are "gentle, invisible, and insidious," precisely because they are accepted as part of the natural order (Bourdieu 170).

Unlike Premchand's *Godan*, which offers little hope for the dismantling of patriarchal ideologies, *The Color Purple* traces a journey of resistance, reclamation, and transformation. Celie begins as a character who is utterly voiceless—her letters to God are the only space in which she can confess, mourn, or question. Her language is fractured, uncertain, and dominated by the influence of her abusers. This symbolic muteness is a critical element of Walker's exploration of violence; it marks the deep internalization of gendered inferiority. As Judith Butler argues, subject formation is tied to discourse—"the subject is constituted through the reiteration of norms" (Butler 25). Celie's early letters reflect the very norms that oppress her, thus reinforcing her internalized subjugation.

However, Walker provides a counter-discourse through the characters of Shug Avery and Sofia—women who challenge patriarchal authority with unapologetic agency. Shug is especially vital in awakening Celie's subjectivity. Through their intimate relationship, Shug enables Celie to see herself as worthy of love, not because she fulfills a social role, but because she exists as an autonomous being. This process marks a turning point in Celie's subject formation. As bell hooks notes, "loving practices within feminist community empower women to create self-defined identities" (hooks 115). Shug's influence helps Celie reimagine herself outside the prescribed boundaries of daughter, wife, or mother—a fundamental challenge to the ideological constructs that had previously shaped her identity.

Sofia's resistance is even more direct and physical. She defies male authority and white domination, refusing to bow to social expectations of submission. Her punishment—

incarceration and forced labor—reveals how institutions conspire to reassert control over unruly female bodies. Yet, even in this suffering, Walker emphasizes Sofia's unbroken spirit. Her survival becomes symbolic of the collective resilience of Black women, who, despite systemic efforts to suppress them, retain a core of resistance.

One of the most significant acts of symbolic defiance in the novel is Walker's use of the epistolary form. Celie's letters are more than narrative devices—they are acts of reclamation. As she moves from addressing God to writing directly to her sister Nettie, Celie repositions herself from passive object to active subject. Her language matures, her syntax strengthens, and her thoughts become increasingly reflective and self-assured. This shift mirrors Bourdieu's assertion that symbolic violence can only be resisted through awareness and rearticulation of one's position within the social field (Bourdieu 184). Celie's linguistic empowerment thus becomes a metaphor for political and psychological liberation.

Moreover, *The Color Purple* subverts traditional narrative authority by privileging female voices and centering Black women's experiences. As Kimberlé Crenshaw argues in her foundational theory of intersectionality, the experiences of Black women cannot be understood through a singular lens of race or gender but must account for the interplay of multiple oppressions (Crenshaw 1243). Walker's text exemplifies this by refusing to isolate gendered violence from its racial and economic contexts. Celie's oppression is inseparable from her identity as a poor Black woman in the Jim Crow South, and her liberation must address all these dimensions.

While *Godan* ends in resignation to the systemic endurance of patriarchal and caste-based oppression, *The Color Purple* offers a redemptive narrative arc. Celie's reclamation of property, her successful business venture, and her eventual reunion with Nettie signify a dismantling of

symbolic structures and the building of new, woman-centered epistemologies. As bell hooks reminds us, "true resistance begins with people confronting pain and wanting to do something to change it" (*Ain't I a Woman* 222). Celie's story is ultimately one of visionary resistance, a journey from voicelessness to visionary selfhood.

In this way, Walker's novel transcends the representation of violence to chart a pathway of healing, community, and emancipation. Through sisterhood, writing, and self-love, *The Color Purple* dramatizes the possibility of overcoming symbolic violence—not through revolution, but through relational and narrative reformation.

Comparative Analysis: Contexts, Structures, and Possibilities

Though *Godan* by Munshi Premchand and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker are products of vastly different socio-historical landscapes—colonial India and segregated America respectively—both novels illuminate how patriarchal structures utilize symbolic violence to maintain gender hierarchies. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence, which reveals how dominance is rendered invisible through internalized social norms, becomes a key interpretive lens through which to understand the ideological mechanisms in both narratives. Despite their divergent cultural matrices, the novels converge on a fundamental truth: that the subjugation of women is systematically naturalized through social institutions such as family, religion, caste, and race (Bourdieu 170–75).

In *Godan*, patriarchal ideology is reinforced by Brahmanical Hindu constructs, particularly the doctrine of stridharma (the idealized duties of a woman), which mandates a woman's loyalty, silence, and endurance as the highest moral virtues. Dhaniya, although assertive and morally grounded, is ultimately bound by her identity as a wife and caregiver,

constrained by the societal expectations that equate female virtue with sacrifice and suffering. As Nandini Bhattacharya argues, the female characters in Premchand's fiction often navigate "an ethical realism where moral authority is paradoxically wielded through submission" (Bhattacharya 62). The illusion of agency in Dhaniya's character is symptomatic of symbolic violence: she resists yet never transgresses the patriarchal order in any liberatory way.

Similarly, in *The Color Purple*, the intersectionality of race and gender intensifies the symbolic violence enacted upon Black women. Celie's body is not only sexually exploited but ideologically erased. Her silence is emblematic of what Gayatri Spivak terms the "subaltern's inability to speak," a condition where systemic oppression precludes self-representation (Spivak 104). Celie's imposed muteness serves the dual function of disempowering her voice and ensuring complicity in her own subordination. The patriarchal normativity embedded in Black familial structures, shaped in part by white supremacist legacy, enforces a code wherein Black women are expected to endure without protest.

What unites the two novels is their portrayal of women's bodies as ideological terrains. In *Godan*, Jhunia's body becomes the site upon which honor and caste purity are negotiated. Her sexual autonomy results in social expulsion, demonstrating how symbolic power polices gender through notions of shame and transgression. The villagers' response to her pregnancy reveals a community more invested in preserving caste hierarchy than supporting human dignity. As Radha Chakravarty notes, "the woman's body is marked with social inscriptions—she is the bearer of honor, pollution, and control" (Chakravarty 88).

Likewise, in *The Color Purple*, Celie's lack of agency over her reproductive and sexual rights illustrates the totalizing effect of symbolic domination. Her forced motherhood and emotional detachment reflect the extent to which patriarchal ideology dehumanizes her. Her

body is not merely violated but also made meaningless—a vessel for others' needs. The transformation begins when Celie begins to articulate her experience through writing, turning private trauma into a public act of self-affirmation. bell hooks emphasizes this as central to Black feminist resistance, arguing that "speech is not merely communication, it is also a mode of empowerment" (*Talking Back* 28).

Yet, it is in their respective resolutions that the novels diverge most significantly. *Godan* culminates in the death of Hori—a man crushed under the weight of social and ideological burden—while the women, particularly Dhaniya, continue their existence within the same oppressive paradigm. The cycle of poverty, casteism, and gendered submission remains unbroken. As Meenakshi Mukherjee suggests, "Premchand's realism, though sympathetic, is ultimately fatalistic about structural change" (Mukherjee 74). The symbolic violence in *Godan* is thus portrayed as an enduring condition, reinforced generation after generation.

In contrast, *The Color Purple* offers a narrative of transformation. Celie's journey—from silence to speech, from subjugation to selfhood—demonstrates that symbolic violence can be confronted and even dismantled. The novel's emphasis on sisterhood, queer intimacy, and economic self-reliance offers an alternative epistemology rooted in collective female resistance. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity supports this transformation; by disrupting the repeated behaviors that constitute subjugation, Celie enacts a new identity that is no longer dictated by patriarchal codes (Butler 185). Walker thus imagines a space where women do not merely endure but reconstitute their identities outside oppressive frameworks.

The comparative insight here is not merely in thematic similarity but in narrative possibility. While Premchand exposes the mechanisms of ideological mystification, his narrative lacks a feminist praxis for rupture. Walker, however, not only diagnoses symbolic violence but

models its undoing. Literature, in this comparative perspective, becomes a site not only of representation but also of resistance and reimagination.

Conclusion

Premchand's *Godan* and Walker's *The Color Purple*—although produced in disparate socio-political contexts—intersect thematically through their nuanced exploration of gendered violence as symbolic and ideological. Both texts reveal that violence against women transcends the physical; it is deeply embedded in cultural codes, religious doctrines, family hierarchies, and language. As Pierre Bourdieu asserts, symbolic violence operates most insidiously when it becomes naturalized, "misrecognized as legitimate" by both the oppressor and the oppressed (Bourdieu 170). In *Godan*, the tragic fate of Hori and the continued subjugation of Dhaniya and Jhunia underscore the inescapability of these patriarchal codes. The narrative is one of resignation, where the internalization of suffering—particularly by women—is seen as a virtue. Premchand's realist vision critiques this normalization but stops short of suggesting tangible resistance or transformation.

By contrast, *The Color Purple* offers a dialectical counterpoint. Celie's initial silence reflects her symbolic entrapment within gendered and racial oppression. Yet her journey toward self-articulation through epistolary narration and her eventual economic and emotional independence suggest a pathway out of ideological bondage. Alice Walker not only reveals the mechanisms of gendered subjugation but imagines a redemptive arc wherein feminist consciousness, solidarity, and spiritual reawakening become tools of liberation. Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity—where power structures can be disrupted through subversive

repetition of norms—finds resonance in Celie's evolving identity (Butler 185). In rejecting the roles assigned to her, Celie dismantles the very foundations of symbolic violence.

The comparative framework allows us to grasp that gendered violence, though contextually specific, is globally systemic. It often resides not in overt acts of brutality but in quiet obedience, religious guilt, cultural conditioning, and the enforced muting of women's voices. As bell hooks argues, "patriarchy has no gender" (*Feminism is for Everybody* 66), and both men and women can become its enforcers through social complicity. Dhaniya's resilience, though admirable, is shaped by patriarchal expectation, whereas Celie's eventual rebellion marks a conscious break from symbolic domination.

Furthermore, literature itself emerges as a political and epistemological space—a medium where structures of oppression can be unmasked and resisted. By narrating trauma, reclaiming voice, and reimagining community, both Premchand and Walker mobilize fiction as a means of socio-cultural critique. In this sense, their works function not merely as representations but as interventions. As Gayatri Spivak reminds us, the subaltern's voice must be not only heard but actively constructed through acts of reading and writing (Spivak 108).

Thus, *Godan* and *The Color Purple* exemplify how fiction can document the oppressive architecture of gender while also challenging its permanence. While Premchand's realism closes in fatalistic stasis, Walker opens a narrative of possibility. Together, they illuminate both the universality of patriarchal control and the diverse avenues—whether tragic or triumphant—through which women navigate symbolic violence.

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